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Girls coming of age: possibilites and potentials within young adult literature

Abbey J. Fox

DePaul University, abbeyjfox@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

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**Girls Coming of Age: Possibilities and Potentials
within Young Adult Literature**

Abbey Fox

June 2, 2010

Dr. Sandra Jackson, Chair

Dr. Amira Proweller, Committee Member

Dr. Shu-Ju Cheng, Committee Member

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Preface: To the Reader

“I guess what I’m saying is that this all feels very familiar. But it’s not mine to be familiar about. I just know another kid has felt this...And all the books you’ve read have been read by other people. And all the songs you’ve loved have been loved by other people. And that girl that’s pretty to you is pretty to other people. And you know that if you looked at these facts when you were happy, you would feel great because you were describing unity” (Chobsky, 96).

Much like many youth coming of age in the early 2000’s, my life was changed after I read the young adult novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Featuring the young male protagonist, Charlie, and writing in the form of letters to a “Dear Friend,” *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* became my bible. I don’t remember when I received a copy of this book exactly or who gave it to me, but I do know that half of it is underlined and highlighted with notes about how relatable it was to my life. I grew up in a small town, just like Charlie. I felt like an outsider, just like Charlie. I used music and mix cds to cope with the difficulties of life, just like Charlie. And, I too, was struggling with depression and anxiety, just like Charlie. Charlie became my friend, someone I would turn to for advice or at least an acknowledgment that I was not alone in my experiences.

Literature is powerful and meaningful. Giving a person the right book at the right time in their life can be completely transformative. The possibilities of the emotional and intellectual engagement with a text are hard to predict at the onset, but once the process has begun, the outcome is never forgotten. This is why it is important that we are intentional about the books we share with others; specifically young people. Young people are brilliant, interesting, and complex; and should be represented as such in the books they read.

Growing up as a young female, I do not remember reading many books that truly captured the gender-specific issues I was confronted with. For instance, how was I supposed to navigate the cultural mindset of slut-shaming and being called a bitch? That wasn’t addressed in

the novels I was reading, or the conversations I was having. Although I felt very similar to Charlie in many ways, I also felt very different. That is one of the main reasons why I decided to embark upon this project. Young people, and specifically girls, need representations of empowered young female protagonists that are brave, strong, and fierce. Representation illustrates that readers can, too, hold those qualities and values deep inside them.

The media constantly reminds us that girls live in a culture in which they are raped, beaten, and abused, (or under the threat of all three) on a daily basis. Girls suffer high rates of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. What the media does not frequently show us is that girls persevere. Girls shine bright even though they are faced with hardships. They triumph. My thesis is an ode to all girls. By analyzing select young female protagonists, I have centered on the voices and experiences of young girls, coming of age. I hope that you find Witch Baby, Raleigh, Lourdes, Holland, and Deanna as interesting, complex, and wonderful as I do. Although I am no longer an adolescent, their stories continue to inspire and remind me of what empowered females look like and how they courageously engage with the world.

Immense gratitude and thanks to: Dr. Sandra Jackson; Dr. Amira Proweller; Dr. Ada Cheng; Dr. Joseph Gardner; Dr. Dianna Taylor; Dr. Mindy Peden; The Women's and Gender Studies Department at DePaul University; Take Back the Halls; Ms. Julie Koslowsky; Mr. Brett Barbour; Ms. Melanie Pauls; Mr. Joseph Ballan; Mr. Lester Palmiano; Mr. Troy Flinn; various Chicago diners and cafes; Infuse Yoga Studio; and of course, my friends and family everywhere.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Although the primary purpose of the adolescent novel may appear to be a depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power. Without experiences gradations between power and powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow” (Seelinger-Trites, x).

The quote above asserts that an analysis of power must be considered when analyzing young adult literature. Rebecca Seelinger-Trites further explains that adolescents (in society and in literature) are both powerful and disempowered. Coming of age presents an opportunity to grow toward adulthood and gain certain power and privileges, while simultaneously losing certain power and privileges. “We judge our adulthood as well as that of others in reference to institutions and practices, mentalities, worldviews, and sensibilities that are quasi outside of ourself” (Blatterer, 2). But who defines these practices and what makes them necessary? In addition to examining powerful social structures that affect character’s experiences, I am gendering this analysis by examining how the young female protagonists explore their own power through acts of resilience and resistance, and how young female readers respond to this exploration. I will begin to answer questions such as, how does gendering this project change the kinds of power utilized? Does it? How do female characters resist oppressive power? What does a female coming of age story look like? How diverse are the voices present in young adult literature? What does empowerment and transformation mean to these characters?

Analyzing power is, and has been, an essential component of feminist theory. Feminists seek to understand how power is utilized, by whom, and under what circumstances as a way to understand the social situations that influence everyone’s lives, in varying ways. This central and important tenet of feminism makes this project on youth and young adult literature a feminist undertaking. Although feminism has been concerned about the future of women through its commitment to higher education, until recently, there has not been a specific focus on the roles of girls in the movement. The emerging field of Girls’ Studies, which arose in the 1990s with

the explosion of the riot grrl movement and the phenomenon of Girl Power, is considered a subgenre of women's and gender studies. "Girls' studies is an academic field that specifically considers the experience of gendering girls. Historically, studies that explore "childhood" broadly, have often been biased to represent the experience of boys" (Lipkin, 4) Although the study is based on representation of female identities, there is a distinct emphasis on intersectionality, which illuminates the different ways power is manifested and operates in the diverse lives of all girls.

My project is interdisciplinary. As a feminist scholar, I locate myself within the various perspectives that feminist theory has to offer, and I also employ other pertinent theories to explore issues related to transformation and empowerment in young female protagonists present in books published in the United States from 1998-2010. Utilizing interdisciplinary teachings to capture the textured nature of this undertaking, I draw from educational philosophies, sociology, literary theory, cultural studies, and the emerging field of girls' studies. In addition, as feminism and feminist literary theory incorporate aspects of postmodern theory, I examine how modernity has influenced young adult literature and how analyzing young adult literature from a postmodern framework can also address issues of identity, representation, voice, and transformation.

Defining Feminism

One of the great strengths of feminist theory is its continual evolution. Historically, feminism has been most interested in examining the experiences of women. This was important because women's voices were silenced and marginalized by patriarchy. However, issues surrounding the definition of the category of women then began to arise.

Feminism was often considered a white, middle class woman's movement, which inevitably marginalized other women outside of that exclusive group. Mainstream feminism had an exclusive focus that did not include sexual orientation, race, ability, or class and how those things affected women's lives. In response, second wave feminists of color began addressing this concern by offering the theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality argues that it is not enough to merely examine the category of gender; one must also examine how other factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation affect an individual's experiences and experiences within greater society. The connections between the public and private spheres of a person's life as well as intersectionality are some of the basic tenets for contemporary feminist literary criticism. "We use feminist theory in order to question dominant power structures – sexual, political, and literary, to suggest alternatives. This enterprise rejects formalism and seeks – in the classroom as well as in print- to make connections between texts and readers' lived experiences" (Gamel, 6). Literature can, and does, help shape our feminist consciousnesses and understandings. Books have power.

Feminist literary criticism is also an evolving field. At its inception, its focus was to analyze female characters in literature and examine their relationships to the plot and other characters. Often, these characters were stereotypically feminine and rarely protagonists. Therefore, feminist literary critics re-read the literary canon (primarily written by male authors) and developed their own, featuring works by women, people of color, and queer authors. "Feminist criticism very quickly moved beyond merely exposing sexism in one work of literature after another and promised instead that we might at last begin to record new voices in literary history" (Kolodny, 1). The voices of our society are diverse and plentiful and feminist literary theorists believe that literature should reflect this reality as well.

In addition, feminists outside of literary criticism see the possibilities of literature for the feminist project. Regarding a discussion of the problematic nature of objectivity and its emphasis on a universal, unbiased truth, feminist standpoint theorist, Uma Narayan believes that discourse seen as nonobjective (such as fiction, which I extend to young adult fiction) can provide certain opportunities for discovery that other fields of inquiry cannot. “‘Nonanalytic’ and ‘nonrational’ forms of discourse, like fiction or poetry, may be better able than other forms to convey the complex life experience of one group to members of another” (Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology,” 220). Literature can be conceptualized as a place to experiment and elaborate on personal experiences within the framework of fiction. Diversity of experience is given a place to flourish under this kind of conceptualization.

Believing in, and encouraging the power of the youth voice must be an important feminist value. This is an area that many feminists, historically, have failed to acknowledge. It is a cultural practice to treat the youth as unable to comprehend complex situation, full of protectionist rhetoric to save them for “their own good.” However, analyzing positions of power and hierarchies are core feminist tools for comprehending the larger world. Discourse and rhetoric surrounding young adult novels about socialization and the power of positionality speak to this field of study as well. In addition, the very act of embarking on this research is feminist because analyzing agency, empowerment, and resistance within the context of young adult literature foregrounding girls experiences illustrates the ideals of feminism. “Anyone in the field necessarily deals with these issues [of power]: YA novels are, by definition, outside the traditional white, male, canon” (Trites, 150). They were created for “children” and are often seen as a “bridge” to “real” literature. However, with the rise in popularity and finally receiving the critical affirmation it deserves, people are finally realizing that is not the case.

The Politics of Reading/Examining Girls' Experiences

Current studies (like those conducted by the American Association of University Women) have illustrated that currently girls are excelling in schools and often lead their peers in reading. Literacy is, of course, a positive thing, but what kinds of books are girls reading? What messages are being presented in literature written for them? In the book *Packaging Girlhood*, authors Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, argue that what kinds of books girls read is extremely important. "A constant diet of books that reinforce girl stereotypes or that have succumbed to product placement, magazines that sell image, and spin-offs from TV shows tell us that some reading can actually be harmful" (Lamb and Brown, 189). Lamb and Brown suggest that girls must have access to books that counter the harmful messages they receive from the media instead of enable that message. Girls, more than ever, are bombarded with images of skinny models that help to perpetuate pervasive body image problems, and the need to be "perfect." Books and literature can provide examples of young protagonists resisting these types of oppressions to construct their own realities through their process of coming of age.

Lamb and Brown argue that girls need mentors and role models in this process, however. "When we teach girls to express the range of anger, including their anger, when we teach them that the striving for perfection is fruitless and that growing up involves building a strong sense of self, they are less likely to cut, throw up, or starve themselves" (Lamb and Brown, 189). Characters that illustrate the types of messages we deem important to young girls can begin to serve as role models. These role models provide guides that offer examples of ways to radically love ones' self.

Feminist literary critic, Mary Kay Gamel, provides readers with some instructions on how to read texts from a feminist standpoint. She argues that the key is to focus on the text itself and look at its strategies and its silences specifically in order to truly understand the intentions and messages that the book offers. “Rather than postulate an “universal” reading experience, feminists emphasize difference between and within readers” (Gamel, 3). Feminists must also recognize that different people have different relationships to the material that is presented. This allows a further conversation on the merits (or demerits) of certain texts and how they relate to credible portrayals of transformation and empowerment.

Methods

For my master’s thesis project, I analyze the representation of young girls in select young adult novels and comics published within the last ten years in the United States. Drawing on feminist literary theory and critical analysis, I argue that because adolescence is a crucial time for identity development in a person’s life, young adult literature provides an important space for exploration of character’s narratives, and subsequently, reader’s emerging identities. I analyze select character’s reflections of agency and empowerment through their resistance to oppressive dominant cultural values and through their own construction of identity (i.e. awareness of race, gender identity, body image, spirituality, creativity, etc.)

In their important book, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature 1990-2001*, authors Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair offer a definition of empowered girls in YA fiction that will guide my research. They write,

“Within a web of network that constitutes a community, they make a place for themselves through meaningful contributions to it, nurturing others without sacrificing their own selves. They come to know themselves and they resist letting themselves be defined by others...They are courageous, enthusiastic and determined” (Brown and St. Clair, 49)

In my examination of select texts from popular young adult fiction and comics, I seek to analyze how they measure up to this definition while remaining aware of problematic false dichotomies and keeping in mind the rich complexities of many stories that can aid in the understanding of issues that often arise on the journey of empowerment and adulthood.

In addition, I situate young adult literature within a historical context. Examining the development of the genre, and general patterns found in the representation of the young protagonist's life, will help enhance an understanding of this relatively new literary field. Discussions surrounding the literary merit of young adult literature have been contentious. I argue that young adult literature is and should be considered literature in its own right, and not just a "bridge" to "real" literature - the classics. Young adult literature should have a place within classroom instruction, its own section in libraries and bookstores, as well as independently in the hands of all readers. There is something so very specific and valuable about books written specifically for youth, a population that is transitioning between childhood and adulthood, and young adult literature should be noted as such. It is important to have books that reflect experiences and also illustrate possibilities: that show girls as agents within their own creation of their identities. Michael Cart defines the kind of young adult literature to which I am referring. He states that :

"We need a new kind of problem novel that is as real as the headlines, yes; but enriched by the best means literature can offer – an expansive, fully realized setting; a memorably artful narrative voice; complex and fully realized characters, and unsparing honesty and candor in use of language and treatment of material – a young adult fiction, in short, that takes creative (and marketing) risks to present hard-edged issues of relevance so that it may offer its readers revelation and, ultimately, that elusive wisdom" (Cart, 162).

Young people deserve this kind of opportunity to explore their realities through young adult literature.

I also analyze the importance of “coming of age,” a recurrent theme found in young adult literature, and analyze how that process is addressed in the select novels and comics I have chosen. How is this process gendered? What makes it a shared experience? I want to make it explicit that this is, indeed, a feminist research project as it offers a space for feminist creativity and also a space for feminist critique of the representation of young protagonists. Asking questions for example, about the inherent power relations in young adult literature, access to these books, are also an important part of this project.

At the outset of my textual analysis, I picked books and comics from two nationally recognized book lists for young adults. The Amelia Bloomer List, which is part of the Feminist Task Force of the American Library Association, was created in 2002 and named after Amelia Bloomer, a nineteenth century feminist activist. According to their website, they select books for young people based on their representation of women. “These books provide role models of strong, capable, and creative women” (ameliabloomer.wordpress.com). They select between 10-20 books for each age group. From that list, I have picked books that sound interesting and pertinent for my own research.

In addition to the Amelia Bloomer List, I have also looked at the notable Newbery Award Winner’s list. What started for children’s book in 1922 has now expanded to young adult literature; this award was named after John Newbery who believed to be the first author of children’s books. The Newbery Award is a more traditionally based on the mechanics of literature and books are selected according to the following: the development of a plot, delineation of characters, settings, style, and the interpretation of a theme or concept (ala.org). Reading this list from the past years, I then selected five books with young female protagonists for analysis in my thesis. The books I have selected to analyze are *Dangerous Angels* by

Francesca Lia Block, *Lost at Sea* by Brian Lee O'Malley, *Story of a Girl* by Sara Zarr, *A Girl Like Che Guevara* by Teresa de la Caridad Doval and *Keeping You A Secret* by Julie Anne Peters. I think these books exemplify the transformative power of young adult literature through their characterization of three dimensional and complex young female protagonists.

I am excited to share this research. This is a timely, urgent project. We are currently living in the age where popular series like *Twilight* and *Gossip Girl*, garner millions of dollars at bookstores. It is because of the appeal of these books, that I will also consider issues of audience appeal, marketing and the implications of both. True, both series have young female protagonists, but both lack depth and a complicated exploration of identity, unlike the reality of young girl's real lives. It is important that young people have access to literature like *Weetzie Bat*, *Lost at Sea*, or *A Girl Like Che*, books that address a multitude of issues from diverse perspectives and characterize young adults as interesting people with hopes and dreams, trying to come to terms with their selves and their societies.

Chapter 2: Feminist Theory and the Young Adult Novel

*Utilizing Feminist Standpoint and Postmodernist Theories to Analyze Discourses of Power and
Identity Formation of Female Characters in Young Adult Literature*

The teenage characters in young adult literature grapple with various issues in the search for their own voice and identity. In this process of coming of age, these characters are often confronted by predetermined discourses of identity (such as race, class, or gender) and must negotiate power dynamics that are defined by others, while simultaneously defining themselves. How these characters come into their identities through resilience, resistance, or acceptance of social norms in various ways are of utmost importance to examine as a feminist project because young adult literature can serve as a creative exploration of the feminist themes of power, identity, and difference. “Nonanalytic and nonrational forms of discourse, like fiction or poetry, may be better able than other forms to convey the complex life experiences of one group to members of another” (Narayan, 220). In our society, young adults (females specifically) are dealing with certain kinds of issues (such as low self esteem, eating disorders and suicide rates) that must be explored and resisted. Using young adult literature to present examples that illustrate alternatives to these oppressive issues can serve as one way to understand and eradicate them. By connecting with characters that are facing similar situations, teenagers can find solace in the act of reading.

I use various feminist perspectives drawing upon standpoint theory and postmodernism, to explore this process of young female protagonists coming of age and defining their own identities. How is the category of young female defined? What are the problems or possibilities within these definitions or categories? How can feminist scholars reconcile these contentions in ways that not only make sense, but continue to move research forward in a more useful and empowering way? These are questions I will explore in this section. Examining young adult literature from varying feminist perspectives can help illustrate the contentions and discussions in contemporary gender theorizing. The task of understanding the complexities of identity

formation and power structures is challenging. This section only begins to scratch the surface of this multifaceted and important discussion.

Defining Identity: Standpoint Theory and the Politics of Location

Standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s. Inspired by Marxist theories and critical analysis, standpoint theory offers explanatory and critical perspectives for viewing the world. Standpoint theory deconstructs theories and ways of knowing that have been heralded for their “neutrality” and “objectivity” such as mathematics and science. In doing so, standpoint theorists deconstruct the meanings of objectivity to question if pure objectivity is even attainable. Because of these central tenets, standpoint theory is often used by individuals and groups from the margins. “Standpoint theory was presented as a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences, and of pointing toward a way to develop an “oppositional consciousness” (Harding, 2). Therefore, a young female standpoint would be one that works from the perspective of young females, and that is defined and employed by them to make sense of themselves and the world in which they live. In addition, they would be the subject of research, not “the object of other’s observation, naming and management” (Harding, 3). Standpoint theory was very revolutionary for pointing out that standpoint epistemology could not only be valuable and important ways of learning about groups identities, but also empowering because the groups define themselves. Standpoint theory comes about through struggling with these identities and group dynamics, not just being born into a group.

By providing a space for groups to define themselves and their worldviews, standpoint theory created a much needed response that problematized the traditional way that research was conducted. “Androcentric, economically advantaged, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist conceptual frameworks ensured systematic ignorance and error about not only the lives of the

oppressed, but also about the lives of their oppressors and thus about how nature and social relations in general work” (Harding, 5). Standpoint theory enables the other voices (outside of the androcentric, economically advantaged voices) to speak about not only their personal experiences, but their experiences with oppressions. This analysis of oppression is of utmost importance to understanding the complexities of oppression and how to challenge and eradicate inequality and domination.

Standpoint theory has often been criticized for its’ alleged notion of arguing for universality and universal solidarity, specifically by postmodernists, who believe that there is no such thing as universal truth. However, contemporary standpoint theorists argue for a multiplicity of voices in a standpoint and that no one standpoint is universal. This makes standpoint theory more compatible with perspectives critical of monolithic thought and monist analyses. Acknowledgement of multiplicities of perspectives within a standpoint is a more recent development in standpoint theory. Historically, feminist standpoint theory constructed arguments that could be read as essentializing and in favor of “sameness.” Nancy Hartsock’s essay “The Feminist Standpoint,” which has been distributed and read widely since it was written in the 1980s, has often been read as favoring a universal experience regarding women. Utilizing Marxist theory as her foundational argument, Hartsock argues that by analyzing their particular location in the sexual division of labor, women learn about the roots of their subjugation in order to begin to theorize about how to eliminate this type of oppression. However, by focusing on the category woman (i.e. biologically capable of having children) and by lacking a consideration of issues like race and class, this essay is incomplete for examining the larger social-political picture. Just like young female protagonists look and act very

differently based on their particular locations and identities, all women are different and thus cannot be essentialized as having the same experiences and characteristics.

Uma Narayan and Chela Sandoval both do an excellent job reconciling some historical issues with standpoint theory with their own discussion of feminist standpoint. Operating from a Non Western perspective, third world feminist Chela Sandoval argues for “differential oppositional consciousness” which allows for a multiplicity of voices and experiences within one particular standpoint. Citing equal rights, revolutionary, supremacism, and separatism as four strategies through which feminist activists have responded to feminism, Sandoval is arguing for a fifth mode that shifts in between and out of strict categories. “It is the activity of weaving between and among oppositional space where another and fifth mode of oppositional consciousness can be found” (Sandoval, 202). In utilizing differential oppositional consciousness, we not only shift the categories present, but we shift ourselves in and out of categories as a better way of understanding the world around us and our complex life situations and locations.

Much like Sandoval, Uma Narayan’s essay “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a NonWestern Feminist” reminds readers of the importance of criticizing positivism and objectivity, while simultaneously being cognizant of the problems that only criticizing positivism and not looking at the larger pictures of oppression create. Defining it as epistemic advantage, Narayan states that it is the notion that an oppressed person has knowledge of both their oppression and their own life experiences. Often the voices of women in the margins (i.e. colonized women) are sometimes considered “lucky” to have experienced dual oppressions because they have experienced varying perspectives, making their voices more “rich.” Narayan argues that this view raises many problems that feminists must address. This

leads to issues in identity formation, dichotomizing one's life to fit into a specific context, and a sense of alienation (Narayan, 221). Narayan's essay provides important criticisms of standpoint theory, while also operating from a standpoint theory framework. Feminist scholars must be careful to not tokenize any one's own experiences because they seem to "understand" the experiences better. This is a slippery slope, and Narayan's essay reminds readers of the problematic consequences. Idealizing or essentializing the experiences of young female protagonists and not accounting for the rich complexities and contradictions would be a problematic way to approach my own research and would present many of the problems that Narayan presented in her article.

In Adrienne Rich's "Notes on the Politics of Location," readers begin to sense the struggles that arise in reconciling privileges and oppressions in our own personal lives as well as theoretically. Rich's piece articulates the feminist mantra of the personal also being a political endeavor. She wrestles with various theories and ideas and in the end, comes to no clear conclusion on the best way of eradicating oppression. In this reflective essay, she problematizes her past thinking on essentializing and struggles with issues of race, labor, and sexuality. "Wherever people are struggling against subjection, the specific subjection of women, through our location in a female body, from now on has to be addressed" (Rich, 230). Here, Rich offers a politics of location. Much like a standpoint, the politics of location provides a specific space for analysis. We examine where we are in order to examine where we are going. The politics of location that Rich offers speaks to the problematic of having such categories as "woman" and other identity categories such as gay, straight, white, etc. This same analysis applies to the category of young adult female. Essentializing an experience based on a specific social status (young female) argues that every girl within that category has a similar experience and

viewpoint. While there may be commonalities in experiences, approaching a situation thinking that everyone's experiences are the same because they are a woman or gay, is problematic because it discounts diversity of life experiences and social situations. Rich's politics of location offers a way out of this problem because it recognizes our diversity in our specific places, as well as our potentialities.

The various authors presented in this section provide an array of perspectives on feminist standpoint theory and the politics of location. All of these theories provide ways to analyze our social and political positions as well as the possibilities for transformation in our personal lives as well as society. Issues of exclusion and inclusion, issues of identity, issues of power imposed by others and power exercised by personal agency are at stake and are all important. In terms of the young female protagonists in her coming of age process, standpoint theory would argue that she be the central character in her own story, that she be the subject. The youth voice in feminism and within American culture is one that has not been valued historically. A feminist standpoint for the young female protagonist values her (and others like her) specific location by looking at the complexities that shape her social situation. Hartsock's piece illustrates the historicity of standpoint. Narayan and Sandoval's pieces specifically speak to the complexities that can arise in creating groups and group perspectives as well as the multiplicity of voices that can be present within a standpoint. A standpoint is achieved by an individual situated in a particular location who struggles through what it means to be in a particular situation, living in a particular socio-historical context. This is an important starting point for analysis, and much can be gained by an application of feminist standpoint theory in relation to examining the young female protagonist's coming of age experiences and identity formation. Coming of age stories

about young women show young adults going through that process and struggling to gain a standpoint themselves.

Defining Power: Postmodernism and Gender Theorizing

Postmodern theory emerged in the 1960s from the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida. Cited as the founder of postmodernism, Derrida's writings analyze the power of language and criticized the modernist approach to knowledge. This modernist approach, based on the quest for universal truth and monolithic reality, was extremely problematic to Derrida. He believes that this quest for universal truth is futile. There is no one truth for him, and it is language that normalizes the modern notion of sameness. Derrida believes that through postmodern theory and the examination of discourse this value of sameness could be eradicated (Wilchins, 43).

Postmodernism has been one of the most influential theories guiding contemporary gender theorizing. Postmodernism and gender theory are quite compatible because they both argue for dismantling "sameness" in the service of affirming different identity and gender presentations that can and would be welcomed within a more open and accepting culture. Regardless of all of the strides that feminist theory has made, gender roles are still rigid and often unforgiving.

Postmodernism illustrates to gender theorists that not only are gender categories a product of language, but also the allowance for multiple modes of truth illustrate that they are also socially constructed. As postmodern gender theorist, Ricki Wilchins notes, "not only because the gender system remains an oppressive "this box for girls" and "this box for boys" mode of thought, but because it's completely inert" (Wilchins, 97). This is important to remember when conceptualizing about the possibilities regarding sex and gender. This kind of thinking would help encourage young adults to fully explore other modes for expression and identity exploration that often get silenced if they do not conform to the established gender binary.

Foucault is another important philosopher who dealt extensively with postmodern thought. In addition to analyzing language and socially constructed and situated truths, Foucault's writings on power and the self have become foundational tenets of postmodern theory. Foucault's analysis of discourse (which he defines as a set of rules for producing knowledge) provide an important tool for dismantling problematic and oppressive discourses regarding the self and the body. For instance, author Riki Wilchins writes about specialized vocabulary, professional procedures, and methods of documentation as ways of pathologizing and medicalizing gender transgression. "These discourses do not study gender transgression; rather they create it by presenting these people [transgendered] as suspect populations. As controversial and problematic, such populations must be studied, explained, and understood..." (Wilchins, 61). Discourse is powerful and the way people use language can affect their as well as other's understanding of the world. Contemporary discourse about masculinity and femininity reinforces the gender binary and gender norms. This is why it is important to examine critically.

Foucault's dismantling of the mechanics and functions of discourse also provides an analysis of power. Foucault argues that power should no longer be conceptualized as existing from the top-down (i.e. the government having control over the citizens) but it should be conceptualized as discursive, meaning it operates from the bottom-up. "It is not central, but diffuse and capillary. It is not held by authorities and institutions; rather it is held by no one but exercised by practically everyone"(Wilchins, 63). Power is also vertical and horizontal, operating in all directions surrounding us. Thinking about power in this way serves to see it as much more pervasive and multivalent. As a society, people exert power over each other out of a fear of difference. For example, if a person presents themselves as different (e.g. a gender transgressor) they will immediately be sanctioned often through verbal harassment, or physical

harassment, by members of society for acting unlike everyone else and not conforming to social norms. Therefore, every action or inaction we take is a political decision. By deciding to remain in certain boxes, we conform to the existing norms and standards, and by resisting certain categories we are using our subjectivities to make a statement against these existing standards and norms. Utilizing Foucault's important contributions of analysis of discourse and power to postmodern theory aid in the understanding of gender theorizing and the issues surrounding difference and identity development as complicated issues worth consideration.

Rebecca Seelinger Trites expands upon Foucault's conception of power in her book on young adult literature and postmodernism, *Disturbing the Universe*. She defines power as "a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature. Teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books" (Seelinger-Trites, 7). Once again, power is not a monolithic force; rather it is something that operates within and upon a person. This complicates the theme of coming of age in young adult literature.

In addition to analyzing power in young adult literature, Seelinger-Trites argues that young adult literature is a postmodern project. Young adult literature emerged as its own field in the late 1960s, during the same time as postmodernism. "I would submit that young adult literature has exploded as an institution in the postmodern era because although it affirms modernity's belief in the power of the individual, even more it very self-consciously problematizes the relationship of the individual to the institutions that construct her subjectivity" (Seelinger-Trites, 20). One cannot analyze young adult literature without taking these tenets of postmodernism into account. Postmodernism can provide a very useful way for analyzing power and identity formation in young adult literature.

Seelinger-Trites analyzes identity politics (generally a modernist category) as a postmodern project because of the powerful institutions in which they are enacted. “How an adolescent defines herself in terms of race, gender, and class often determines her access to power in her specific situation. We can identify the myriad intricacies that affect identity politics in a YA novel if we ask ourselves “who controls the discourse in this narrative?” (Seelinger-Trites, 47). Institutional powers have a dramatic effect on identity formation and how one negotiates the discourse surrounding that power. Hegemonic gender, race, and sexuality are reinforced by discourse. Therefore an awareness of this control of discourse can lead to the first step of empowerment and dismantling of oppression and repression through language.

However, this journey to dismantling oppression is a difficult one. There are still many issues within postmodernism that must be reconciled, such as the utility of group organizing. “Along with postmodernism’s emphasis on creating room for difference is a distrust of norms as being anything but oppressive. Because social groups cannot exist without shared norms of structure and meaning, postmodernism sometimes appears reflexively suspicious of community” (Wilchins, 100). With no shared norms or ideas about structures, no coherent vision of meaningful engagement with social groups can occur. Postmodernism offers a lot of methods for deconstruction of discourses, but not many ways of constructing something different. Therefore, how can activists utilize postmodern tools for community organizing or collectivity? And how can the construction of something different occur?

In addition, Seelinger-Trites speaks to the inherent contradiction in the young adult novel: being written by adult writers, and being forced to become adults as a way of coming of age. “The only way teenagers can obtain that goal is to grow, to quit being adolescents themselves, to become more like the insiders – the adults. By that formulation young adults

automatically become outsiders in their own novels” (Trites, 79). This is the exact thing that young adult literature set out not to do.

Seelinger-Trites reconciles these discrepancies with the fact that the adolescent reader is a category that was created in relationship to the formation of young adult literature. Although young people have always been reading, there was no genre created specifically for this group before YA fiction emerged in the 1960s. And while postmodernism and poststructuralism have their flaws and problems, the very act of giving voice and offering varying perspectives to a new group of people is worthwhile. “If there is one thing poststructuralism has offered critics that most liberates the adolescent reader, it is the concept of exactly that: the adolescent reader” (Seelinger-Trites, 145). The adolescent reader deserves the best kind of literature that truly works to expand horizons and possibilities for being, in an honest, authentic way. In addition, along with the concept of the adolescent reader came the possibilities of fluid readings and interpretation of literature in classrooms that offer more than one reading as correct. Exploring deconstructive methods and analyzing history (and institutions) as socially constructed in contradictory ways leads to expanding the canon, and has led to creating the category of the adolescent reader and the adolescent novel.

Postmodern Feminism? Fusing Postmodernism and Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory and postmodernism have done tremendous things to aid in our understanding of identity and power relations within our society and culture. Both theories, although very different, challenge us to reconceptualize the ways we’ve been trained to see the world (generally through the eyes of the dominant androcentric voice) and examine knowledge and knowledge production through a different lens. This is valuable. However, one cannot help but question how these two theories work together. Are these theories really as different as

initially conceptualized? And how can we use these theories to frame our own feminist projects, like the understanding of young female protagonists coming of age processes and relationships with power?

Nancy Hirshmann seeks to answer these questions in her essay “Feminist Standpoint as a Postmodern Strategy.” Hirshmann merges standpoint theory (specifically Hartsock’s foundational piece) and postmodern theory together in order to utilize the analytical power of both. However, she does argue that there are specific dangers to feminism that can occur with defining difference and oppression solely within a postmodern framework. “...By focusing on difference and particularity at the exclusion of commonality and sharing the concept of difference becomes increasingly abstract, ill-defined, even unreal” (Hirshmann, 328). Hirshmann argues that this is where the modern project of categorizing is important and is necessary to undertake, but with much discretion and conversation.

Hirshmann also argues that feminist standpoint theory, although a modern project because it relies on categories (i.e. feminist, white, queer, etc.) can most definitely be a postmodern project through its evolving voices and perspectives. “Standpoints’ feminism suggests that the definition of “who we are” will shift and change, in postmodern fashion, in response to different material conditions, as well as the fact that each individual occupies more than one experiential identity location” (Hirshmann, 330). These multiple locations and multiple identities that shift and change remind us that monolithic truth does not exist and that the possibilities of standpoint, just like postmodernism, are limitless.

Teresa Ebert also speaks to the synthesis of feminism and postmodernism. Writing about the diversity within postmodernism, she critiques many of the theories presented. She argues that the theories of the foundational postmodernists like Derrida (which she labels as ludic

postmodernists) are incomplete when examining the social structures and the world at large today. “These strategies [posed by Derrida and Foucault] do indeed destabilize and disrupt the regime, but they do not transform it because they are essentially formalist moves based on textual notion of meaning and a panhistorical, transocial, purely formal notion of language and discourse” (Ebert, 896). While it is important to affirm the power of disrupting and dismantling, construction and transformation must be part of the picture at large, as well. Construction is key to ensuring positive social change. Ebert argues that postmodernism must be about more than just examining language. Therefore, providing youth with young adult novels that present different kinds of identities and disruptions of power can serve as a postmodern feminist project.

Ebert poses “postmodern materialist feminism” as a way to reconcile feminism and postmodernism. “A postmodern materialist feminism, based on resistance postmodernism, I contend, does not avoid the issue of totality or abandon the struggle concept of patriarchy; instead it rewrites them” (Ebert, 889). Ebert is arguing for a kind of postmodernism that incorporates the activist aspects of feminism such as rewriting. She believes that deconstruction is not enough, and the very act of rewriting is an act of construction that offers great possibility for transforming society. Ebert argues that this process must be dialectical and in conversation with other theorists and ways of thinking. She argues that this is how definitions get complicated and yet are simultaneously more helpful as well. Therefore, writing the young female into the traditional male centered process of coming of age, is a rewriting of sorts, making it a feminist postmodern project.

Henry Giroux also argues for the fusion of feminism, postmodernism, and modernity in his article, “Rethinking the Boundaries of Educational Discourse: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism.” Giroux argues that these three theories offer great strategies for radical changes

in education and democracy. Giroux emphasizes the possibilities that these three strategies offer for creating a different way of viewing the world. Giroux believes that postmodernism and modernism are often two binary terms and that postmodern feminism is a way to reconcile these categories with each other. Postmodern feminism rejects the binary and combines the two theories together to situate them critically within a feminist project (Giroux, 24). Giroux also argues “that the agency of subjects is made possible through shifting and multiple forms of consciousness, which are constructed through available discourses and practices, but are always open to interrogation” (Giroux, 33). Once again, the conversation is dialectical and ever-evolving. The postmodern feminist project incorporates the best of both worlds.

Plentiful Possibilities

Feminist standpoint theory and postmodernism are useful in examining young female protagonists negotiating power dynamics in young adult literature. Although the two theories are different, they can work simultaneously through their similarities and through the challenges they pose to one another.

Standpoints are based in complicating identity, voices, and resistance, and postmodernism is based in analyzing relationships of power. These two topics are imperative to consider when analyzing the social structures at large, and specifically through the process of coming of age narratives in young adult literature. Feminists can draw from both theories, and analyze the diversity and complexities present in both, in order to further the feminist project of understanding the world and our relations with one another. Although categories of identity have historically presented problems with exclusion of specific minority groups in particular, as long as they are willing to change and evolve, they can serve as an important starting ground to frame theoretical analysis and activism regarding issues of power and inequality. On the other

hand, it is extremely important to take the postmodern project seriously and remember that categories and labels are truly functions of language that can never fully capture the complex (and often contradictory) nature of reality. Examining the contentions and historicity provided by feminist standpoint theories and postmodernism strengthens an understanding of the category of young female protagonist and her journey of coming of age.

Chapter 3: Defining Empowerment

**You Are What You Read:
Analyzing Agency in Young Adult Literature**

Adolescence is a crucial time for identity development in a person's life. It is when a child prepares to become an adult and begins to create his or her own meaning of that important transition. Identity is discovered and created through experiences with social systems and exploring one's own belief systems and communities. Young people are exposed to conflicting messages about "appropriate" behavior and "correct" performances of gendered identities in the mass media, by their families, and in the books they read. It is in adolescence that one begins to sort through these messages of socialization to cultivate an understanding of one's identity. For these reasons, young adult literature serves as an important space to examine this navigation of identity issues. Young adult literature inherently involves the recurrent theme of "coming of age," an issue with which all young people must engage in on their road to adulthood. Different identities denote different statuses within our culture. Experiences and emerging stories are shaped by the location of selves, which are often defined for us by various social dynamics, such as gender. "Nowhere is the opportunity for dialogue about adolescence greater than in the study of literature. A number of novels written in the past 10-15 years directly address the issues of girls' development through various plot devices" (Sprague and Keeling, 19). These issues, which affect most girls in a variety of ways, include body image, self expression and self esteem, relationships with others, transformation and empowerment. Young adult literature, which contains comics and novels, can and should provide a space for exploration of character's narratives as well as a reader's emerging stories and experiences.

In this chapter, I will argue that young adult literature can have an effect on its readers' identity development and formation. Thus, I will argue in favor of books that examine ideas of empowerment and agency for young women, a population that is severely marginalized by an overarching epidemic of low self-esteem and lack of self worth within the context of the

contemporary United States society. I use the phrase young women to define women-identified teenaged persons who are unique, diverse, and between the ages of 13-18. “To a greater degree than their male counterparts, girls often suffer a lessening of self esteem at the onset of puberty, a consequence of this diminished sense of self is a lack of faith in their ability to claim what should be theirs” (Brown and St. Clair, 177). The effects of low self esteem are astounding: self mutilation as well as eating disorders, and addictions, to name a few. Exploration of empowerment and agency is specifically pertinent to this age group because the messages internalized in this time period are often long-lasting. In addition, exploration of empowerment and agency is especially relevant because even though many young women experience feelings of low self-esteem, they also experience feelings of self-worth through this very transformation into their own subjectivities. Through literature illustrating the complexities of young women’s experiences, girls are able to learn from these stories and simultaneously develop a stronger sense of self. This poses a responsibility for authors of young adult literature to recognize the potential effects of this work and write mindfully.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section will examine the value of selecting young adult literature as a field of inquiry. In doing so, I will examine the transformative power of active reading and engagement with literature. In the next section I will analyze definitions and the significance of empowerment and agency in relation to young adult literature. In the third section I will analyze themes present in young adult literature as well as two different genres that hold great possibilities for different types of stories: fantasy and manga. Finally, I will comment on my findings and then propose issues for further study.

Why Young Adult Literature?

As I stated earlier, adolescence is often a tumultuous time in a person's life. Often, adolescents feel isolated and unable to reach out to anyone. Literature can serve as a refuge from this sense of isolation. "Books can't solve the problem, but at least books can give human faces to its victims, to let real-life young people know that they are not alone, to show them a means of resolution, and above all, give them hope...*I am not alone* is a powerful medicine" (Cart, 211). Although literature has its limitations and restrictions, the power of story-telling can often be a part of the healing process from some of the more scarring and confusing aspects of growing up. Adolescents need to be reminded that they are not in isolation and that their peers often face similar problems. Engagement with honest character portrayals in young adult literature can provide an understanding of their very real situations.

The journey into adulthood can be a confusing one. Adolescents are often positioned problematically, as the eternal "other." Because they are entering their passage into adulthood, they are often viewed as incomplete, a recurrent theme in young adult literature. "Adults hold the highest goal: truth. The only way teenagers can obtain that goal is to grow, to quit being adolescents themselves, to become more like adults...by that formulation, young adults automatically become outsiders in their own novels" (Trites, 79). While mindful authors are finding ways to subvert this common problematic theme, young people (and especially young women) are positioned within a hierarchy that determines their location within the social system. Looking through the lens that feminist intersectionality provides, illustrates that young women are disadvantaged in terms of access to power. In a social structure that is patriarchal, consumerist, individualistic, and adult centered, young women's voices are often the last to be

heard. Authors must find ways to give their adolescent characters a strong voice; because that voice is one of the most suppressed in U.S. culture.

The hierarchal structure of society speaks to the power relations inherent in young adult literature. As they come into their own identities, teenagers are becoming autonomous, but simultaneously, they must also learn how to conform to the dominant cultural values in a way that constrains their autonomy. For example, although they may be garnering more freedoms that come with age (i.e. access to driving), they are still under the scrutiny of their parents, their teachers, and other authority figures. “Power is a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature, teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books” (Trites, 7) This Foucaultian analysis of power aids in the understanding of adolescent lives. Power is simultaneously being gained and taken away, and learning how to “grow up” means learning how to negotiate that power.

Although the treatment of power relations and hierarchy speak to the limitations of the genre, it provides important commentary on the reality of the situation. If the possibilities of young adult literature are limited in terms of societal restrictions, what purposes do young adult novels and comics serve? As stated earlier, young adult literature can serve as a refuge from the isolation of growing up. Also, young adult literature can serve as a guide to understanding the norms of the time in which it was written. “Young adult literature is an important source of cultural information for young readers in that it portrays adolescents negotiating the social and sexual standards of the dominant culture” (Younger, xi). Not only do the main characters look like the readers, they also are experiencing similar kinds of struggles. “Literature reflects the experiential world of its readers, and female protagonists mirror the expectations of women during the time in which their stories were written” (Brown and St. Clair, 2). Young adult

literature can serve to provide a commentary on the time period and the social expectations placed upon young people, specifically young women. This reflection of historicity has both negative and positive implications, of course. Although these stories may sometimes present stereotypes about women's particular ways of being, they can also provide a framework to be critical of that stereotype.

In addition, this refuge from isolation provided by young adult literature is also a site for information that is not often readily accessible to teenagers. Information about "controversial" topics such as sexuality can be obtained through the very act of reading. "Young adult literature provides a safe space where young people can read about [individuals like] themselves and discover options, alternatives, and information" (Younger, xiv). Using young adult literature as a site for information retrieval also illustrates the importance of accurate and thorough information about what kinds of things are pertinent to young people's experiences and inquiries. The act of reading is safe because it is done independently, and often teenagers are too embarrassed to ask important questions because they know that adults can be as equally as reluctant to talk about certain "controversial subjects." This poses an ethical responsibility for the authors of young adult literature to be mindful of this if they wish to provide teenagers with accurate and helpful information.

For this reason, authors taking risks in their writing is imperative. Looking historically at young adult fiction, books written for children often included moral lessons from adults to children. That is not the case now, nor has it been for quite some time. However, we all must remember that this is an important progression and a necessary one if we value the emerging autonomy of young adults. "It [young adult literature] must be unsparingly honest, even brutally candid if necessary, both in the choice of subjects it risks addressing and in the openness with

which it treats the material” (Cart, 270). Authors owe it to the youth to provide them with the highest quality, and most realistic representations possible.

Young adult literature can have a positive effect on identity development. “Girls’ reading can play a role in their construction of female identity” (Hubler, 90). Hubler argues that reading is not and should not be a passive activity, and because of this, it can be an important space for exploration. Hubler offers an example of one of the young women she interviewed for her study on young girls and their connection to reading young adult literature. She states the importance of being exposed to different types of young adult literature (perhaps even those that do not have strong female protagonists) because all reading can make an impact on the reader. “Her reading enabled her, to reflect upon the process of gender-role socialization, and thus to take an active role in the construction of her own identity” (Hubler, 91). Even young adult literature that might, at first glance, be considered problematic can be something to critique from a critical, if not feminist standpoint and therefore lend itself to being an important space, still, for exploration.

However such works must be analyzed and considered critically for them to be helpful. Hubler writes about the conflicting messages that stories about the individual triumphing over every inequality send to young adults. “In novels so completely lacking in social depth, then, nothing but an individual remedy can possibly be obtained” (Hubler, 86). This is problematic because it does not represent reality. While there are individual failures, there are also structural barriers which exist within our society. These structural barriers within our society are pervasive and have lasting effects. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five women struggle with eating disorders or disordered eating. Of that percentage, 90% are between the ages of 12 and 15. In addition to body image pressures, one in three high school students

will have been or will be involved in an abusive relationship. Unfortunately, just speaking out against injustices is not enough, but exploration of the power dynamics related to body image issues and sexism is equally as important to address and explore in young adult literature. Young readers do not need oversimplifications of the society and world in which they live. Young adults can handle the complexities; they are grappling with these issues outside of the books.

It is through the exploration of the complex social world that youth also begin to truly grapple with their changing identities and power structures throughout their reality. “Though factors such as race, class, ethnicity, and religion necessarily affect the shape of both her questions and her answers, each girl begins her journey unsure of how to reconcile her dreams and aspirations with the expectations of the world around her.” (Brown and St. Clair, 180). The process of coming of age is rooted in these dynamics.

The Importance of Empowerment for Young Female Protagonists

I have used the words empowerment and agency frequently within this paper already and now intend to define clearly what they mean to me. I began constructing my definition by drawing upon the Merriam Webster Dictionary. It states that the act of *empowering* is to promote the self actualization or influence of; to enable; or give official authority to. Agency is the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power (“Empowering” and “Agency”). I agree with these definitions but also expand them further. Empowerment in characters and literature can be analyzed through their varying forms of resistance to oppressive dominant structures and cultural values and by their own construction of identity (i.e. an awareness of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, body, image, spirituality, creativity, etc). In their important book, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature 1990-2001*,

authors Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair offer a definition of empowered girls in young adult fiction that will guide my research. They write,

“Within a web or network that constitutes a community, they make a place for themselves through meaningful contributions to it, nurturing others without sacrificing their own selves. They come to know themselves and they resist letting themselves be defined by others...They are courageous, enthusiastic, and determined” (Brown and St. Clair, 49).

This definition speaks to specific experiences of characters and important ideas related to identity development. However, while I am guided by this definition I am mindful that like resistance, empowerment cannot fully be explained through one definition. Just like in life, there are often many gray areas where different types of empowerment can occur. It is important to remain cognizant of problematic false dichotomies to keep in mind the rich complexities of many stories that can aid in the understanding of tensions that often arise in issues of empowerment.

Sprague and Keeling offer an interesting set of questions to make sure books chosen for high school classes and libraries focus on the experiences of adolescent females. The questions are,

“Does the book feature a young female as a protagonist? Does the book place the girl in a position where she is being asked to conform to certain expected behaviors because she is female? Does the book illustrate forces that limit her choices, such as parents, societal expectations, or peer pressure? Does the book show the girl struggling against those forces? Does the girl define herself by the end of the book in ways that reflect her choices?” (Sprague and Keeling, 22).

Sprague and Keeling argue that even books that have limitations (in terms of identity development awareness) are of value because, if analyzed using a critical lens, they can help advance the conversation surrounding experiential learning. Different genres can be used in different ways. The important point for them is that young women are present in the narrative, and they are present in ways in which they are portrayed as strong and simultaneously female. They believe that a character should surpass traditional notions of femaleness, but do not offer

much more of a framework than that. These questions serve as a good starting place, but leave a lot to be desired in terms of actively working through complex issues of empowerment and agency. The conversations surrounding the novels are of utmost importance and must be considered when examining agency. Taking the time to listen to what young readers are saying about what they are required to read gives them a chance to exercise their voice and cultivate their opinions. In a society that often suppresses the voices of the youth, it is therefore even more important to provide a space that values the ideas of girls.

In addition, the very act of gendering the issue of empowerment makes it a bit more complicated. “Because autonomy or self reliance is empowering, all young adult protagonists can thus be said to gain a sense of ‘empowerment’ so any useful definition of ‘empowered girls’ must distinguish them from their male counterparts” (Brown and St. Clair, 26). The very act of coming of age which denotes knowledge transformation, agency, resistance and rebellion, can be seen as empowering and has been historically a male accomplishment. When thinking about young adult characters coming of age, generally the image of a Tom Sawyer like character arises: a young boy that breaks the rules, goes out on the Mississippi and then returns home wiser and more mature. Women’s coming of age has often connected to their marital status which was generally predetermined. This social norm has changed; not only in reality, but in literature as well. Many young female characters now can experience coming of age in similar ways to their male counterparts, but the very fact that characters are different based on race, gender, and social class, also means that they experience this stage of life in very diverse ways.

Hubler speaks to these complexities specifically in her pertinent article, “Beyond the Image: Adolescent Girls, Reading, and Social Reality.” Although personal transformation is an individual act, it is impossible to be fully actualized without also acknowledging the other power

structures (i.e. socialization modeled from parents and community, etc) at hand. If that is not apparent, characters are underdeveloped and the story line becomes problematic. “This implies that sexism persists because women individually have not been strong enough in the past...Implies that inequality between men and women is rooted in female personality rather than in capitalist patriarchy” (Hubler, 89). And while public opinion is changing, the debate between individual and group rights has been contentious within liberal and radical feminist ideology. What is the best way to insure that there are opportunities for agency and empowerment of all people? Individuals can illustrate agency through different means of resistance within and outside the current system. How one reacts to experiences and conducts her daily life is a beginning point of resistance to oppressive cultural norms. However, an analysis that does not include an examination of oppressive power structures and institutions is incomplete.

Hubler offers important advice as to what truly feminist young adult literature would look like and how issues of empowerment and agency would be handled in such novels. “Along with strong role models, a feminist literature for girls should provide a knowledge of the historical development of women’s subordination and represent its role in structuring social institutions, including the family, sexuality, and the economy” (Hubler, 92). This argument for a shift from presenting positive role models to the actual act of cognitive mapping provides an excellent framework from which concerned authors can begin their construction of characters and stories. Also, it is an excellent framework for concerned readers and teachers to also begin their discussion about female identities that reflect empowerment and agency

Hubler reminds us that relying solely on examples of strong female protagonists is problematic because they are incomplete. “Girls are better served by novels that offer them not

only positive role models but also a structural ‘map’ of social reality, one which reveals the historical development and interrelationship, of the institutions of gender, race, and class” (Hubler, 85). The map of social reality that Hubler refers to is much more complex than just the representation of powerful characters. It means that authors need to be aware of pre-existing power structures and social positions of their characters in order to offer ways for their characters to resist oppression, and construct their own identity. These characters are complex and diverse, similar to the girls that are reading about them.

Issues, Themes, and Genres as Revolutionary Space

There are several recurrent themes and issues that are present in young adult literature. In this section, I will briefly discuss the influence of the relationship of the protagonist to other characters in these books, and how sexuality and body image are portrayed. In addition, I will comment on the important growing genres of fantasy and comics, and what that means for young adult literature.

Young adult literature explores the relationships and pressures that one encounters when interacting with other members of society or communities. For instance, the female best friend of a protagonist is often a very important role. “Female friends can bolster a girl’s attempt to find her true voice, however most of the books we reviewed did not illustrate this type of friendship” (Sprague and Keeling, 38). In literature, the kinds of friendships that often get portrayed are the kinds that are illustrated commonly in the media: girls fighting over boyfriends, clothes, and social status. While surely this behavior does exist, rarely is the caring, helpful best friend shown that so many young females have in their lives. Illustrating only the negative friends normalizes the kinds of unhealthy and competitive friendships young women might have. This warrants attention by conscientious authors.

Another common theme found in young adult literature is sexuality and the regulation of sexuality. “Characters who have explored their sexuality usually learn something from the experience, which is why sex is a rite of passage in so many adolescent novels” (Trites, 102). At its best sex is portrayed as a learning experience. At its worst, sex is portrayed as an issue that can only be dealt with through morality. Historically in young adult fiction, a young heterosexual character will embark on a sexual experience and end up pregnant. Or a lesbian character will embark on a sexual experience and immediately get thrown out of her home when her parents find out. Rarely are conversations of choices present (i.e. abortion or adoption in the case of the pregnant character) and the character must bear the burden alone, to recognize the consequences and shoulder responsibility. These things normalize the dominant cultural view (i.e. like the Religious Right’s views on teenage sexuality), which promotes abstinence until marriage and offers no discussion of birth control or abortion.

Choice is just one aspect of sexuality that is examined in young adult literature. Younger writes extensively on other diverse aspects of female sexuality in young adult novels in her recently published book *Learning Curves*. She wrote the book to explore the U.S.’s cultural obsession with teenage bodies and how many people feel the need to control and regulate them. She also writes about the inherent sexism that occurs within conversations of sexuality. “However prevalent fictional punishment for sex is in the genre, a double standard persists when it comes to male and female sexuality: female characters are punished more often and more severely than male” (Younger, 23). This mirrors what happens within our U.S. culture. It is the young woman who gets slut-shamed for sending a revealing picture of herself to her teenage boyfriend that asks for it and simultaneously shares it with his entire football team; not the other

way around. This is a problem in our culture, and young adult literature is a great space to explore and critique traditional notions of sexuality.

Fantasy and science fiction are two very popular genres within young adult literature that provide an imaginative space for exploration of different alternatives and ways of being.

Characters in fantasy novels are strong and usually possess some sort of super-human power.

“They are able to overcome huge obstacles and in combat defeat adversaries who are far more powerful....Fantasy novels can reveal to girls the possibilities of speaking out, leading, and overcoming obstacles – even those that seem insurmountable” (Sprague and Keeling, 114).

These sorts of characters illustrate the possibilities for young women (and men) in their daily lives. Looking to these characters can provide positive examples and contributions to development of a courageous belief in one’s self.

Science fiction and fantasy can serve as an escape, but also a critique. “In addition to a mere escape from the known world, literature of the fantastic functions both as a critique and an alternative to that world” (Brown and St. Clair, 128). Providing these alternative visions are necessary in a world in which adolescents have limited voices and power. Fantasy and science fiction can utilize these alternative visions to help teenagers work to formulate a plethora of their own revelations. This is powerful, indeed.

In addition to science fiction and fantasy, comics and manga provide another important space for exploration of identity and possibilities. Comics have always been associated with youth, although that notion is rapidly changing as graphic novels begin to garner more respect in prominent book lists and on book shelves. This means that comics are also being considered more serious work worth analyzing. It is important to note that although comics can be works of fiction, they still very much have relevance to the ‘real’ world. “Comics combine pictures and

symbols in a sequence meant to communicate with and inspire an emotional response in the reader” (Pekar, x). Comics written for the adolescent audiences can do just that. There are many comics that explore coming of age themes, although the characters might be superheroes or animals (or regular people too). In fact, many independent comic authors focus on true life experiences of the adolescent reader, through a medium that offers visual creativity and expression.

Manga, which are Japanese comics, have become surprisingly popular among young females in the United States. Manga differs from American comics because of the varying story lines that often focus on romance through changing genders and having different lovers. These are the stories, written specifically for young females (unlike the comic industry in America) that have become most popular for U.S. young female audiences. “One of the most powerful messages of gender bending and boys love manga is that it is empowering to channel both the masculine and feminine; to accept one’s full identity, no matter how confusing or complex it is” (Goldstein and Phelan, 36). The exploration of identity is explored thoroughly when genders are switching or when compulsory heterosexuality is questioned. Manga gives audiences a space to explore these questions that are often swept under the rug in American culture. By not only reading descriptions, but by also viewing their illustrations, readers can really dig deep into the issues that challenge mainstream cultural assumptions. This is important in a quest for the self. The popularity of manga does not seem to be slowing down any time soon, and these books continue to sell within the U.S. context.

The different genres and themes mentioned in this section provide an important lens through which we can analyze cultural values and norms and issues related to female identities.

Themes and genres can be and should be explored in different ways that help foster the voices and experiences of young female adulthood.

Conclusion

Young adult literature provides an important space for young adults to grapple with their emerging and constantly evolving selves. “Engagement with story is life-affirming; it puts us in touch with the world, with one another, and with our essential selves” (Goldstein and Phelan, 33). This quote illustrates the importance of connection. Powerful connections with characters in literature can serve to make the tumultuous transition into adulthood less abrasive as well as provide a context to begin understanding the current location of young adulthood. Literature is powerful and should be heralded as such. Young adults are smart people and capable of engagement with complex issues.

Young adult literature has immense transformative potentials and possibilities for the reader of all ages, but especially for young women who, like the characters presented are trying to make sense of their own lives.

Chapter 4:
Reading Empowered Young Female Protagonists

Reader-Response Theory

“Through books, the reader may explore his own nature, become aware of potentialities for thought and feeling within himself, acquire clearer perspective, develop aims, and a sense of direction” (Rosenblatt, vi)

Drawing upon reader-response theory strengthens the argument that literature affects readers in various ways. Reader-response theory is a subfield of literary analysis and criticism that arose in popularity in the mid 1950s. Reader-response theory radically changed the way critics viewed literature. Previously, textual analysis that focused on literary form was of utmost importance in analyzing literature. There was little room for interpretations or exploration of how one felt when reading a particular work of literature. Reader-response theory recognizes the importance of the reader’s engagement with a text and focuses on the reader’s personal experience with the texts.

“Reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its “effects,” psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of the reader” (Tompkins, ix)

By centering the views of the reader throughout the process of literary analysis, reader response theory allows for a multiplicity of interpretations and analyses. This echoes the postmodern critique of universal truth and meanings. Allowing for difference provides different ways of seeing and understanding that are created by the person engaged in reading a text. Therefore, the reader is not passively absorbing storylines and character’s dilemma’s but “actively participating in the production of textual meaning” (Tompkins, xv). The reader is an agent, and the reader’s experience is the focus of understanding the construction of meaning in reading.

Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and Louise Rosenblatt are major proponents of reader-response theory. They write about centering the reader and favoring each reader’s potentially

various interpretations as a means of understanding literature. “Meaning is not something one extracts from a poem, like a nut from a shell, but an experience one has in the course of reading” (Fish, xvi). Once again, this creation of meaning allows engagement of subjectivities because different readers will have the different responses to a text. Fish asserts that reading is an interactive experience. Reading is not a passive activity. It requires our commitment to engage with the written word.

Holland writes about literature and identity. In Holland’s opinion, identity is something that is constantly recreated and reconfigured. Holland believes that literature can aid in this ever-evolving and shifting process of identity formation. “That is, all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation” (Holland, 124). Secondly, we all encounter texts in different ways, from the specific locations from which we, ourselves, are arriving. Certain characters and storylines can help us gain insight into our own struggles and transformations.

Writing specifically about the experience of the young adolescent reader in *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt also explores this concept of identification, and other uses of literature in this book. In her introduction she explains the importance of conceptualizing literature as an exploration (hence the title of her book). “The word exploration is designed to suggest primarily that the experience of literature, far from being for the reader a passive process of absorption, is a form of intense personal activity” (Rosenblatt, vi). Reiterating Fish’s writing on the interactive reading experience, Rosenblatt argues that reading is active, personal, and transactional; an interactive experience occurs between the reader and the text.

Literature as Exploration was written specifically for teachers of secondary students. Rosenblatt urges teachers to consider not only the traditional literary merit of select literature, but also the education that comes from life experiences that emerge through reading various works of literature. Rosenblatt argues that fiction offers a space to explore human relations, issues of morality, and societal expectations. It allows for important discussions of diversity and multiplicity of people voicing their own experiences in relation to the work they are reading.

Focusing her research on the adolescent reader, Rosenblatt writes about the different ways that a reader can connect with literature. “The reader seeks to enter into another’s experience, to glimpse the beauty and intensity that the world offers, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain understanding that will make his own experiences comprehensible.” (Rosenblatt, 8). These possibilities for connection are related to what Rosenblatt thinks is the human need to identify and connect. She cites scientific studies that illustrate this human tendency to relate to experiences (and others experiences) through art. Rosenblatt does not necessarily care about the specifics of how or why this is, but more so about the point that it is something very human to do, and therefore worth investigating. This human need is often what leads us to our reading choices and specific selections.

Exploring and navigating life experiences through literature can have a direct relationship to the process of empowerment and self esteem building. “We participate in imaginary situations, we look on at characters living through crises, we explore ourselves through the medium of literature” (Rosenblatt, 45). Identifying with a character’s experience with conflict, or even merely examining the character’s experience can highlight the potential possibilities in one’s own life to resist oppression and work toward change. Relating to similar experiences

helps one feel less alone and can serve as a guide, or provide another example, of a different world and different ways to negotiate experiences.

Much like the need to connect and identify, often readers will identify with characters who possess qualities or attributes they want to attain. “The force of the reader’s emotional reactions will be channeled in ways dictated by his sense of his own lacks or weaknesses” (Rosenblatt, 49). This is why books about empowered characters from diverse perspectives are so important for young adult readers. Honest, authentic books that illustrate struggle and triumph continue to serve as a reminder of the possibilities that can be explored in the reader’s life and throughout the formation of his or her identity. “It [literature] places them [readers] outside ourselves, enables us to see them with certain detachment, and to arrive at a more objective understanding of our own situation and our own motivation” (Rosenblatt, 50). There is immense value in getting outside of one’s self in order to reassess conflicts and issues within one’s life. Literature can provide different perspectives and a new way of thinking about things.

A new perspective, offered by literature, can provide an insightful understanding of a person’s life. “Just as a profounder and more balanced sense of life can enable us to appreciate more fully the experience literature offers, so literature itself may be a powerful means of increasing that understanding of life” (Rosenblatt, 65). The purpose of reader-response theory is not just to understand what texts mean or why the reader is important, but to understand how this all can affect our construction of meaning in our own lives through engagement with literature. By decentering the texts themselves (yet never losing sight of them), these theorists examine ways in which readers not only interpret the texts, but how these texts can relate to readers’ own lives. Reader-response theory and practice challenge notions of fixed meanings and respects multiplicity in voices and experiences through this recreation of meaning in literary analysis. To

examine how these issues are addressed in contemporary young adult literature, I will examine five select novels that illustrate the potential for emotional engagement with issues of empowerment and agency.

Lost At Sea: Healthy Female Friendships as Salvation

Lost at Sea is a graphic novel by Bryan Lee O'Malley published in March 2005. The book focuses on the experiences of Raleigh, an eighteen year old female who is on a car trip with three of her classmates. The story is told from the viewpoint of Raleigh, who readers can assume is undergoing a turmoil pertaining to owning her identity and experiences. Raleigh seems confused and frustrated with her past and with the potentials for her future. This book illustrates the tensions that arise within her as she strives to come to terms with her changing identity, her past and her future.

Lost at Sea opens with the three people arguing about the rules for the car trip. Immediately readers see Raleigh who appears disinterested in the present conversation yet very deep in contemplation. Readers soon learn that the reason Raleigh is disconnected from the others is that she is dealing with the belief that she has "no soul" and is struggling to figure out if she should tell her classmates about this predicament. Raleigh thinks, "I think I have no soul. I have been thinking it for a long time, but now I'm really thinking it. Definitely no soul" (O'Malley, 5). The meaning of this assertion is unclear at the beginning of this novel. What does it mean to have no soul? And why would Raleigh be so obsessed with this thought?

Raleigh comments about knowing her car-mates from being in the same school together but that none of them are good friends. She keeps referring to an old best friend from childhood that she had and shared everything with. Her best friend embodied qualities that she thought

were important: “she was better, faster, and stronger than me” (O’Malley, 30). After her best friend moved away, Raleigh has never felt close to anyone else her age and shares that she struggles with making and keeping friends. Around the same time, Raleigh’s parents divorced, and she joined an online forum and met the love of her life, Stillman. Readers learn that Stillman is the reason for this visit to San Francisco, and that she has gotten a ride from her classmates who happened to be going to the same place.

Strangely, during the car trip Raleigh is haunted by cats. She sees cats frequently and is not sure of the significance of the sightings, but still feels as if they must mean something. During her first night on the road, Raleigh shares a room with Stephanie, a classmate and car mate of hers. She decides to share this strange phenomenon with Stephanie who offers to look for them and at them with Raleigh. Stephanie convinces the other people in the car to also help Raleigh explore this situation. Immediately Raleigh seems relieved to have someone to share this bizarre burden with, and seems slightly shocked that a stranger like Stephanie would care about her enough to do so.

Eventually the car breaks down and everyone has to stop and stay at the Snow White Inn. Raleigh cannot sleep at all in this location. She is haunted, again, by cats and wakes up screaming. Stephanie asks her again what’s wrong and Raleigh begins to share more about herself and her story. “I have no soul. I think my mom sold it when I was 14.” Stephanie asks, “To who? The devil?” Raleigh replies: “Yeah or something. In the hotel bar. At the Snow White Inn. This is the place. I have these dreams. With the “NO!” and the cats. She met him at the bar, they went back to the hotel room and she gave him my soul” (O’Malley, 109). Raleigh concludes that her soul might be in cat and that’s why she feels so inclined to them. Stephanie promises her that they will find her soul, together. They set out, that very night, to find the cat.

During the process of looking for the cat, Raleigh divulges more information about her life to her new friends. She explains her reason for traveling to California, to stay with her boyfriend she met online, while lying to her parents about visiting relatives. At the end of her trip with her boyfriend, she reads the letter he gives her at the train station that states he's questioning her love for her. Raleigh shares that she felt like she had a soul when she was with him, and now she feels like she has lost her soul again. This sense of loss is what is leading Raleigh to feel as if she experiencing a breakdown. "He might not love me?? That's the cause for a fucking breakdown?! What is this?? I'm stupid! I feel stupid! I'm horrible!" (O'Malley, 148). Readers sense that Raleigh is going through so much right now, and that this is specific moment in the book is the breaking point.

Stephanie reacts like a good, trustworthy, loyal friend should. By validating her experiencing and saying how difficult her life is, Stephanie then proceeds to compliment Raleigh on overcoming everything that she has thus far. "You're allowed to feel fucked up. You're not horrible. You're amazing. You dazzle" (O'Malley, 148). The two girls embrace and cry together. It is clear that a strong bond has been forged between the two of them, right at this very moment.

The book ends with Raleigh's inner monologue. She states that this trip has been one of the best trips of her life, albeit very difficult. She discusses the importance of vulnerability and allowing other people in her life. She meditates on living in the present moment, and the changing feelings between falling in and out of love for the first time. Raleigh struggles with coming to terms with a difficult past and what that means for the future. However, she is hopeful. The book ends with the following quote: "I am leaning back and running with it, and

staring at the stars and I'm eleven, I'm sixteen, I'm eighteen, I'm a newborn, I'm everyone everywhere with you without you unbound set free in limbo lost at sea" (O'Malley, 160).

Overall, the strongest elements of this story are O'Malley's seamless transitions between Raleigh's inner monologues and observations to the present story at hand. Readers learn what triggers Raleigh's mind and how that affects her experiences. This book tenderly explores the past and the present and the possibilities for the future in a very delicate and honest way...much like the character Raleigh. Raleigh is an undeniably strong character and representation of a young female protagonist. She does not run away from her difficult past, but instead tries to understand and come to terms with it. Through the help of her new friends, on a chance encounter, Raleigh begins to trust people again. The relationship between Stephanie and Raleigh illustrate that teenage girls can have friendships that are healthy, trustworthy, and supportive. Not every teenage girl is a "mean girl" and girls can grow in healthy ways together.

This graphic novel illustrates the complexities with growing up that many readers can relate to. Themes of alienation, isolation, and the struggles of transformation are abundant and complex. Craig Thompson, author of popular graphic novel *Blankets* writes, "O'Malley's drawings are simply *yummy*, and his book captures the clumsiness, isolation, and aimlessness of adolescence." (comments on the back of the book) This is a worthwhile graphic novel that truly depicts teenagers as agents, working toward their own empowerment through their relationships with others.

Dangerous Angels: Playing with Magic

Dangerous Angels is a collection of books following the world of Weetzie Bat, the main character in five books by young adult author Francesca Lia Block. The first book in the series,

Weetzie Bat, was originally published in 1989, and the full collection of books was published in 1998. Throughout this collection, readers witness the evolution of Weetzie Bat, from her days as a teen in L.A. to becoming a mother herself and all of the things that happen in between. Block relies heavily on the device of magical realism to convey her messages of empowerment, transformation, and hope throughout each of her stories. Characters are colorful and diverse, eccentric in their lifestyles and fashion, and usually practice magic. Block has an obvious commitment to illustrating diversity in that characters are from many different ethnicities and sexual orientations. Non traditional characters with non-traditional names like Jah Love, Duck, Ping, Witch Baby, and Weetzie Bat are found throughout these pages. Block portrays the characters in the *Dangerous Angels* series as undeniably honest and authentic people trying to come to terms with life's important issues: love, mortality, and the meaning of it all.

All of the five stories center around Weetzie Bat and her relationships with other characters. Block describes Weetzie Bat's hobbies and interests within the first few pages, in contrast to those of her peers.

“The reason Weetzie Bat hated high school was because no one understood. They didn't even realize where they were living. They didn't care that Marilyn's prints were practically in their backyard at Graumann's; that you could buy tomahawks and plastic pal tree wallets at Farmer's Markets, and the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dog...” (Block, 3).

In addition to her alternative interests, Block also describes Weetzie Bat as having a non-traditional appearance. “Under the pink Harlequin sunglasses, strawberry lipstick, earrings dangling charms, and sugar-frosted eye shadow she was really almost beautiful. Sometimes she wore Levi's with white suede fringe sewn down the legs and a feathered Indian headdress...” (Block, 4). Weetzie Bat is undeniably original in terms of her appearance and interests, and follows the beat of her own drum. This sort of expression does not come without some sort of

price, and Block also acknowledges that within these characters. Weetzie Bat feels very different from her high school peers, and is often alienated because of that. Complex characters like Weetzie Bat offer readers examples of personal expression that they themselves can embody if they do so choose. Unlike characters in popular books like *Gossip Girl*, concern for social status and wealth, are not present in this book. The main concern is the quest for love and understanding.

Readers learn of Weetzie's own struggles and triumphs in her personal life through the first three books. Coming to terms with broken hearts and disappointments, all of the characters in these novels have faced hardships and sorrows, but they all believe that love is real, and with the help of one another seek to find it. Love is the recurrent theme in the five stories in this book. In the first book, *Weetzie Bat*, Weetzie's best friend Dirk states "Love is a dangerous angel" after a conversation about having trouble finding love (Block, 11). Both Dirk and Weetzie had been in abusive partner relationships, yet have still remained hopeful in finding a healthy, suitable partner. Thus the title, *Dangerous Angels* was created. The quest for that kind of love, in their case, was dangerous. In addition, the theme of angels are also present in this book. Much of the story take place in Los Angeles, the city of Angels. And Weetzie Bat often describes friends and people she admires as angels. "Sometimes I see angels in the people I love....and angels can look like anyone" (Block, 79). Weetzie Bat believes that the magical realm is present in our every day life.

In the fourth book, *Missing Angel Juan*, Weetzie's adopted daughter Witch Baby, a character that is constantly struggling to find her place in the world, searches for her lost lover, Angel Juan. Witch Baby is a truly complex and interesting character. Part witch, Witch Baby struggles to keep her "dark side" in balance with the "good side". Witch Baby has always felt

like an outsider in her family, which makes her quest for Angel Juan, her one true love, even more important to her. After searching all through New York City to find him and employing the help of her ghost grand dad, Witch Baby has a conversation with Weetzie Bat about what to do. Witch Baby is dejected and looking for a simple answer. Magic has not saved her this time around. Weetzie offers the following advice: “I wish I could give you a lamp with a genie in it to make all your wishes come true. But you’re a genie. Your own genie. Just believe that” (Block, 263) Weetzie Bat’s message is one of personal empowerment. Although magic is an important force in this series, and magic is often associated with power from an outside force; the kind of magic Weetzie Bat is arguing for is the magic that can come from agency. Still living under the rule of their parents or authority figures, teenagers are not often told about their own personal power. This selection provides an alternative and empowering way to examine the power of youth characters. Weetzie Bat is urging Witch Baby to look within herself to find her own magic.

However, Witch Baby does not believe Weetzie Bat. Witch Baby is not buying it; not at first. All she can do is think about what she has lost: her lover, Angel Juan. “But right now, I don’t believe in that magic crap. I don’t believe in anything. All I want is find to find Angel Juan” (Block, 263). This shows the very likely response of someone’s whose heart has been broken. Witch Baby, who often feels like the outcast in the family, feels ruined by the loss of Angel Juan. She does not understand how she can function without him.

Finally, after facing her own demons (literally...she is the product of a witch!), Witch Baby realizes that the journey to find Angel Juan was one of many life lessons. She comes to believe that the search for love is worthwhile, even if it is futile. At the end of the story, she reflects upon the advice that Weetzie Bat gives her at the beginning of the journey.

“My own magic. Maybe magic is just love. Maybe genies are what love would be like if loved walked and talked and lived in a lamp. The wishes might not come true the way you think they will, not everything will be perfect, but love will come because it always does, because why else would it exist and it will make everything hurt a little less. You just have to believe in yourself. And look your demons right in the eye” (Block, 360).

It is obvious that at the completion of the physical journey, Witch Baby has also undergone a transformational experience toward personal empowerment and self esteem. This statement reflects a sense of acceptance in the often cruel ways of the world. This denotes the transformation from adolescence to adulthood that Seelinger-Trites writes about: navigating through and figuring out what social institutions and norms that one will accept as important indicators on the road to maturity.

Story of A Girl: Renaming Oneself

Story of A Girl, written by Sara Zarr and published in 2008, was a National Book Award Finalist. The story takes place in the small town of Pacifica, California where everyone is in everyone else's business and rumors tend to be perceived as truth. This first person narrative centers around Deanna Lambert, a fifteen year old, white, working class student during the summer between her sophomore and junior years of high school. It seems as if Deanna's life has been defined by one moment in her past, from two years ago. When Deanna was thirteen years old, her father caught her having sex with Tommy Webber, a seventeen year old friend of her brother. Tommy told everyone in the high school about that experience, so by the time Deanna got to high school she was labeled as a slut.

Readers learn immediately that this sexual experience is the point of departure for this novel. The first sentences in the book are as follows, “I was 13 when my dad caught me with Tommy Webber in the back of Tommy's Buick, parked next to the old Chart House down in Montara at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday night. Tommy was seventeen. I didn't love him. I'm

not even sure I liked him” (Zarr, 1) In addition, these powerful words are also on the back flap of the book. This is the story that seems to define Deanna’s life experiences at this particular moment in her life. Readers sense that this is not something she’s entirely proud of, and does not know how to process

In the first chapter, readers learn how being labeled a slut in high school can affect a girl’s life. While cleaning out her locker on the last day of school for the year, Deanna is approached by some senior boys who sexually harass her. “Tucker Bradford, flabby and red faced came close to me and said ‘I think your boobs got bigger this year’” (Zarr, 4). Deanna seems to be accustomed to this sort of harassment and shoots back her response. “‘Maybe, but they’re still not as big as yours’” (Zarr, 4). While this comment is intended to offend (i.e. a man with boobs), it is Deanna’s way of dealing with this encounter and sticking up for herself. However, the senior boys don’t take too kindly to this kind of language. “‘Why do you front, Lambert? Why pretend you’re not a skank when you know you are? We know you are. You know you are. And, um, your dad knows you are’” (Zarr, 6). Thankfully at this moment, her friend Jason, a heterosexual male, walks in and the boys stop harassing her.

Deanna’s friendship with Jason is one of the most important relationships to her throughout this novel. Jason is one of the only people in her life that didn’t treat her differently after she had sex with Tommy. In addition, Deanna’s other only real friend is Lee, Jason’s girlfriend. Deanna describes Lee as “cool.” “Not cool as in dressing right and knowing anything about music or whatever, but cool as in being the kind of person who doesn’t try to be someone she is not” (Zarr, 9). Although Deanna sometimes gets jealous of Jason and Lee’s relationship, she ultimately is grateful for the support she receives from them given the difficult social relations in a small town community like Pacifica.

In the first chapter readers also learn about Deanna's family. Deanna's parents are blue collar, working-class people that both work in retail. Deanna also lives with her older brother Darren, his girlfriend Stacy, and their baby April. Deanna states that her relationship with her family has never been the same after she had sex with Tommy. Her brother is overprotective of her regarding any man she is ever around, and her father still does not speak to her much. This pains Deanna, but she does not know what to do about it.

Following chapter one, is an interesting chapter One A. Chapter One A is entitled "Most Popular Versions of the Story" and includes the three most popular stories of what happened that evening Deanna's father caught her with Tommy, according to people in her small town. The first story is entitled "Deanna Lambert is a total nympho" asserting that she begged Tommy for sex because she is "such a slut." The second is entitled "Deanna Lambert is a complete psycho" who threatened to kill herself when Tommy tried to break up with her – so he had to sleep with her. The third, "Deanna Lambert is beyond pathetic" suggests that Deanna wanted Tommy so bad that she would do anything he wanted – including having sex with him at age thirteen (Zarr,14). These three stories are presented in quotations without any sort of narration. The first line of each of these stories are in bold type and they truly speak for the harmful and hurtful nature of rumors. This chapter also speaks to the persistent double standard present in our patriarchal culture: women are the ones that need to control their sexuality because men are expected to want and need sex all of the time. And if women, specifically young women, decide to have sex – they are labeled sluts and therefore not only judged, but treated poorly by others.

In addition to having to deal with a maligned reputation, Deanna must find a job for the summer. She gets hired at Picasso's Pizza, a poorly run pizza place but one of the only places

hiring in town. When she goes in to fill out her paperwork and receive her work schedule, Deanna learns that Tommy Webber is also employed by Picasso's Pizza. Immediately she is forced to confront a lot of emotions that she is already currently working through. She needs this job, but she does not want to be around this guy. She especially does not want to be around him when he is making comments about how he knows Deanna in "the biblical" sense in front of her boss. This provides a very awkward situation that she does not know how to deal with.

Throughout the rest of the book, readers see Deanna wrestle with the sexual experience that has defined her, her new strange work relationship with Tommy, as well as other people in the town that still continue to call her a slut. Deanna tries to understand her own situation and feelings towards Tommy after he gives her a ride home from work one night. "And even when he was all gross from the pizza place and stoned and driving me home from Safeway after Stacy didn't show, there was a part of me that remembered how it felt when he chose me... Me. I felt real, feeling real feelings, saying real words" (Zarr, 97). Although this situation was not ideal, and the aftermath has been very difficult to negotiate, readers learn about Deanna's initial attraction to Tommy, why she fell for him in the first place.

Half way through the novel, Stacy decides to leave home for a few nights without telling anyone where she is going. This results in chaos for the family. Darren is in charge of taking care of their baby, April, all by himself. Deanna's father, who never liked Stacy, begins to speak even more harshly about her. However, in one scene, April is crying and Deanna's father comforts her. After the incident, Deanna has never seen her father act so lovingly. This affects Deanna and stirring up emotions, she begins to cry. In her journal that evening she writes, "I, Deanna Lambert, belong to no one, and no one belongs to me. I don't know what to do" (Zarr, 115). This sets up the next event in the novel that is difficult to read.

After work the next day, Tommy asks Deanna if she wants to hang out. “Tommy didn’t scare me, I knew what he was about” (Zarr, 122) is her general attitude, so she goes. After they had smoked some pot, Tommy starts kissing her, and eventually the familiar gesture of Tommy pulling on Deanna’s hair so she will go down on him occurs. Deanna starts crying and tells him she doesn’t want to. Tommy doesn’t understand and says that she likes that though. “They never tell you this part in sex ed, how to talk about what you did and why you did it and what you thought about it, before, during, and after” (Zarr, 126). This sentence is a comment on the complexities of sexual relationships, and the amount of silence that surround meaningful conversations about consent and healthy sexual relations. Deanna, once again, is trying to navigate this system on her own, through her own intuition and guidance, without any sort of meaningful help or support from others. Deanna begins to speak to Tommy about the incident two years ago. “What was I to you, Tommy? What did you think of me? (Deanna) “What did I think of you? I liked you, didn’t I? I thought you were cute.” (Tommy) “You thought I was any easy target. That’s what you thought” (Zarr, 127). Here is another illustration of Deanna’s attempts at tackling a difficult situation, head –on, by standing up for herself and speaking her mind. Tommy eventually apologizes and they share an awkward car ride home together.

The novel ends with Stacy returning back home to her family, Deanna forgiving Tommy and letting go of the entire situation, an intense argument with her father in which declares she needs more support from him instead of disappointment, as well as some other developments with Jason and Lee. Stacy tells Deanna how much Darren truly respects her and how he can’t wait to see what happens when she goes to college. “I thought about that: me, in college, sitting there taking notes and buying take-out coffee in between classes” (Zarr, 167). This vision for the future, as well as hearing she is respected by her family members, is what helps keeps

Deanna going. She will get out of that small town eventually, but even so, she has already learned that one's past does not have to define one's future.

According to Cynthia Heitch Smith, *Story of A Girl* is considered "a heartfelt, realistic novel about being defined by one moment, one choice, and then having to reinvent who you are... an evocative, thoughtful read." It also offers one of the most courageous young female protagonists in young adult literature to date. Deanna is a three dimensional, complex character with real hopes and desires, as well as truly confronting a difficult situation that she is trying to make sense of for herself. Deanna uses journaling to process her experiences as well as to create and explore other situations in her fiction writing. She faces difficult experiences head on and refuses to let the experience with Tommy define her in the end. In addition, this book offers a discussion about slut-shaming and reputation that affect so many young girls today. For these reasons, this book is timely and important

A Girl Like Che Guevara: Identity Formation in a Repressive Culture

A Girl Like Che Guevara was written by Teresa de la Caridad Doval and published in 2004. Unlike the other books I examined for this project, *A Girl Like Che Guevara* takes place in 1982 in Cuba. The story is about a sixteen year old girl named Lourdes who is preparing for her upcoming stay at the School-In –the –Fields, which is a work camp that all secondary and high school students must attend. Lourdes comes from a middle-class family in communist Cuba and lives in a neighborhood that is considered bourgeois even though the outside exterior lacks paint (de la Caridad Doval, 20). The novel opens with a blessing from Lourdes grandmother's friend who also sees the future. She believes that Lourdes will be faced with great danger and trouble at the work camp and thus, needs to proceed with caution. Although

Lourdes considers herself atheist (just like Che – her hero), she cannot shake the words of her grandmother’s friend as they are often repeated throughout the story.

In chapter four, Lourdes boards the train to go to the School-In-the-Fields with the other young adults. Lourdes is nervous as this is the first time she has ever left home, but is also excited about fulfilling her duty to her country like her idols: Che and Castro. The night before she leaves, however, she is undoubtedly nervous. “I spent the next two hours wishing, despite my sincere desire to emulate Che Guevara, that I could stay home, that I didn’t have to face the dangers that Sabina had prophesied I’d encounter...” (de la Caridad Doval, 28). It is as if Lourdes is preparing herself for all of the changes that are about to occur in her life. She may not know exactly know what life in the work camp is like, but she knows that it will be immensely different than what she is used to living in Havana with her parents.

At the work camp, Lourdes begins to feel things she has never felt before. Having very few friends her own age in the past, Lourdes is now surrounded by teenagers like herself. Lourdes finds herself drawn to one specific young person, the gorgeous Aurora. Very early on in the book, readers learn that Lourdes is sexually attracted to Aurora, but feels conflicted about what to do. She values her as a best friend, but yearns for something more. “What did I dream of another woman? The tingling “down there” woke me up! And the electric feeling in my papaya that Aurora’s touch caused! I began to distrust myself. Something odd and dangerous incubating inside my body” (de lad Caridad, Doval, 46). Not only does she not know what to do about Aurora on a personal level, Lourdes is struggling to come to terms with her own sexuality within a culture in which homosexuals are not only stigmatized, but also not considered serious workers in the revolution.

Lourdes also experiences sexism directly during her time at the work camp. For example, the division of labor was extremely gendered. “Only girls sewed. Boys picked leaves” (de la Caridad Doval, 39). In addition, Lourdes was grappling with understanding the complex relations and politics of sexuality. Students were sleeping together, but there were also a lot of student/teacher relationships that were occurring that had a complex nature. “Sexual intercourse between teachers and students was outlawed, but because of this rule the flavor of these relationships became more spicy. A “teacher boyfriend” was a trophy” (de la Caridad Doval, 45). Lourdes’ friend Aurora was one of the students that had an illicit teacher boyfriend later on in the novel. Lourdes was there to support Aurora during this complex situation in which Aurora ended up pregnant. Once again, this was the first time that Lourdes had ever been away from home and was experiencing many things.

Throughout the course of the novel, Lourdes receives packages and visits from her parents and family. She learns that her parents are having marital problems, that Papi was cheating on her mother, and that divorce seems likely. Lourdes feels like everything is changing in her world. In addition, in an effort to try to be like other girls her age, Lourdes begins dating a young boy, Ernesto, based on the advice of Aurora. Lourdes believes that this will help her learn more about love, a topic with which she has very little experience. Aurora tells her that it is okay to use men, because men use women all the time. “Well, I would use them too. Ernesto would help me learn about love. He’d help me forget Aurora or –wouldn’t that be great- make me experienced enough so I could win her heart” (de la Caridad Doval, 137). Regardless, Ernesto becomes one of Lourdes’ very good friends, even though she is not attracted to him, sexually.

Eventually the rest of the students at the work camp find out that Aurora is pregnant by a teacher. In spite of the fact that she has been supportive of other girls, because of Aurora's many past boyfriends in the past and because of her pregnancy, she is considered a slut. "Certainly people would never treat Aurora the same. She represented an easy target for the boys, and a warning for us girls" (de la Caridad Doval, 262). However, Lourdes still loves her and wants to be with her. At the end of the novel, Lourdes decides to tell Aurora how she has been feeling about her during their four month stay. Aurora knew all along, and was flattered. She and Lourdes kiss; yet she tells Lourdes that one day she too will fall in love in a man. However, there is something undeniably special about their bond together as two female friends. "We girls understand each other better than the most sensitive guy does. We should get together and create a Papaya Federation. It'd be more powerful than the Communist Party" (de la Caridad Doval, 282). Disillusioned by the last four month's experiences, and all of the destabilizing events that occurred, Lourdes no longer idolizes Che Guevara or communism as the perfect belief system. She sets out to figure out her own ideologies and definitions for her own life and experiences.

Keeping You a Secret: Exploring Queer Identities

Keeping You a Secret was written by Julie Anne Peters and published in 2003. It was a National Book Award Finalist, ALA 2004 Stonewall Honor Book, and a Lambda Literary Award Finalist. This first person narrative focuses on lead character Holland, a high achieving senior in high school. Immediately, readers learn that Holland is the student body president, holds a part-time job, takes her classes very seriously, and is committed to swimming. She has many friends and a serious boyfriend, Seth. The book begins with Holland noticing the new girl in school, Cece. Cece is very intriguing to Holland, although she is not sure why. When Holland first

spots Cece, she is wearing a shirt that says IMRU? Holland learns that Cece is an out lesbian and becomes even more interested in her.

We learn about Holland's family relationships in the next chapter. Holland lives with her mom, step-dad Neil, half-sister baby Hannah, and step-sister, Faith. Faith is close in age to Holland, and is described by her as a "walking freakshow" because of her goth appearance and interests. Holland has a tense relationship with her mother, who seems to have Holland's life planned out for her without any consideration of what she wants to do. "She had plans for Holland Jaegar. And they didn't include what Holland Jaegar wanted" (Peters, 13). Readers learn that Holland's mother had Holland unexpectedly when she was young, and was kicked out of her house by her parents. This seems to be the driving force between Holland's mother wanting to make sure she succeeds by getting into an Ivy League College.

The entire first half of the book contains a lot of inner monologues by Holland. Holland is very attracted to Cece and is not sure why after their art class together. Cece and Holland begin a friendship that has a flirtatious tension to it. Holland acknowledges her sexual attraction to Cece for the first time on page 45. "She was such a flirt. It always made me hurl when girls acted that way. Kirsten, for example. The way she came onto guys. So obvious. With Cece, though, it was different. With her...it was sexy" (Peters, 46). Because of Holland's role on the student council, Cece seeks Holland out to support a proposal for a LGBT club in the high school. Still, Holland is convinced that Cece is one of the two gay students at the school. On the proposal form, Cece suggests that there would be roughly 15 students interested in joining a club for queer students. "Estimated number of members: Fifteen, she'd written. Fifteen? Did we have that many at our school?" (Peters, 63). The proposal and discussion of a LGBT student

club brings great controversy in the high school and readers begin to get a sense of the climate and conditions many queer students face daily in high school.

Readers learn that Cece is subjected to daily harassment and hate crimes at the high school. Holland begins to witness these events first hand. “One of the guys flattened his hand on the machine over Cece’s head and said, “Come on, one kiss. Try it, you’ll like it.” He puckered his lips and made smooching sounds” (Peters, 69). Cece tries to back away, and Holland intervenes. Eventually the boys leave her alone. One morning, Holland walks by Cece’s locker. “Someone had spray painted on her locker: Die Dyke” (Peters, 79). This incident truly shocks Holland. She begins to understand how dangerous it is to be out in a climate of homophobia and bigotry.

Cece and Holland’s friendship deepens and Holland realizes that she cannot stop thinking about Cece when she is not around. Still trying to navigate the situation, she begins to think it might just be that she admires Cece. “I’d had crushes on girls before. I mean, who hadn’t? I’d see a girl in the mall...and think wow, would I ever like to meet her. That’s what it was with Cece. An innocent crush. I admired her” (Peters, 83). However, Holland begins to pay attention to the fact that she has been spending less and less time with her boyfriend Seth. During the time that she and Seth spend together, she thinks about nothing but CeCe. She begins to come to terms with her feelings, and shares this information with Cece finally when they are hanging out one day.

Much to Holland’s anticipation, Cece feels the same way about Holland. They finally kiss during this hang out, and Cece’s reactions are as follows. “Her eyes opened. She shook her head slowly and said, “God Holland. What took you so long” (Peters, 143). The couple becomes inseparable. Holland struggles with wanting to tell the world about the love of her

life, but she is also mindful of disclosing her love affair in a homophobic climate. Therefore, as a result of Cece's urging, they decide to keep a secret for safety measures— at least until they graduate.

Keeping an exciting and important part of her life a secret is very taxing on Holland. She begins lying to her friends and her family about where she is and who she is spending time with. She breaks up with Seth saying that she is interested in someone else (but does not say who). Her friends confront her about her distance, and she cannot say anything in her defense. Eventually, people begin to suspect something and one day when Holland returns home, she finds her mother there, fuming. "I didn't raise you to be a lesbian!" She made it sound like it was the filthiest word in the English language. 'It's sick. Perverted. You're perverted!'" (Peters, 180). Holland's mother immediately kicks her out of the house. Not knowing what to do or where to go, Holland calls Cece and she stays with her family for a few days.

Eventually, Holland must find her own housing, and she and Cece go to the local community center for queer young adults. They set her up with housing for youth that have been kicked out of their houses for being gay. Her new home is in disrepair. In addition, she must still attend school where she is barely making the grade. "Yesterday, I thought, I was Holland Jaeger, regular person, regular life. I had a home, a family, a history. Today I'm...I don't know what I am, where I am, or who I am" (Peters, 199). Obviously, being outed to her mother has caused immense stress and devastation in her life. Her relationship with Cece is one of the only things that keeps her going during this extremely difficult and emotional period.

Even though a lot of pain and difficulty is surrounding Holland's life, she still continues to finish school. However, other students, namely an old friend of hers, have now begun to treat her differently. Kirsten, a fellow student council member calls Holland a "dyke" to her face,

near the end of the novel. When Holland shares this hurtful experience with Cece, Cece states that sadly, these occurrences are things that frequently happen to out queer people and that reclaiming the words for yourself can be a powerful act. “Better get used to it. The best thing you can do is call yourself a dyke. A lezzie, a lesbo, a queer. All the hateful words, use them in fun. Claim them. Then they can’t be used against you” (Peters, 214). The act of reclaiming these words that are used to hurt can alter the meaning of their hurtful nature. This is a transformative act.

Holland eventually comes out to her friends at school, becomes even closer to Cece in their relationship, and they start planning a future together, which includes Holland attending Metro Urban College. However, Holland’s mother asks her to come back home to discuss all of the issues that have arisen over the past few weeks. When Holland returns home, she desperately wants to have a relationship with her mother again but knows that cannot be possible as long as her mother refuses to accept her as she is. “Please listen to me. You don’t know what you’re doing, honey. You haven’t thought about the consequences, what you’re throwing away. Your future. Your self-respect. I’m your mother. I know you better than you know yourself!” (Peters, 244). It is with those final words that Holland decides that she must leave her mother’s house and cut off communication with her. This decision is difficult for her, but her mother’s reaction has shown that she cannot provide support the way Holland needs and deserves.

Keeping You a Secret tells a story that has been traditionally silenced within our heterosexist society. By presenting two lesbian characters as focus and center of the story, Julie Anne Peters seeks to tell a love story about people whose experiences are rarely ever acknowledged in young adult literature. Although the story is dramatic and difficult at times, it still has a message of hope and an argument that coming out and being who you are is much better than

staying in the closet and not living out your full potential. Representation of queer characters in young adult literature is important for youth readers, regardless of their sexuality. “Holland’s experiences will inform readers who are also discovering their sexual identity. Gay or straight, they’ll identify with the excitement that accompanies that first love affair” (Kirkus review from back of the book) For these reasons, *Keeping You a Secret* is an important addition to young adult literature.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

A Comparative Analysis and the Future of Young Female Protagonists

Comparative Analysis of Five Selected Books

The five books that I have selected *Dangerous Angels*, *Lost at Sea*, *Story of a Girl*, *A Girl Like Che*, and *Keeping You a Secret* portray young female protagonists as empowered agents. Popular best-selling books like the *Twilight* series, often feature female protagonists as helpless, struggling characters that need to be saved by their male lovers. For instance, Bella, the protagonist in *Twilight*, rarely exercises agency or even expresses a thought of her own without the approval of her lover, Edward. What kind of message is this sending to the readers of young adult literature? What does the success of the series say about the representation of girls and women within popular culture? How do characters like Lourdes, Holland, or Witch Baby differ from those like Bella or Gossip Girl? Can we see them as an improvement in the representation of female identities in young adult literature?

The young female protagonists that I analyzed in this project present images of young women navigating the complicated path of adolescence. They persevere, but not without questioning and crying and breaking down. They rely on the support of their friends and family, and on journaling or music or art classes. Witch Baby, Raleigh, Deanna, Lourdes, and Holland are all working through different struggles, much like the readers they were created for. The real struggles they face provide readers something to relate to, giving them a sense that they are not alone. Adolescence can be a very challenging time in a person's life, particularly for girls. Bullying, eating disorders, suicide attempts, sexual abuse, and other horrific things are common issues. Providing readers with depictions of strong, independent, yet realistic young adult

characters illustrates possibilities and potentialities for a reader's own life experiences. The characters presented in these novels are multi-dimensional and believable.

Although they utilize varying techniques, all five books have well developed main characters (the young female protagonists) dealing with realistic issues. *Dangerous Angels* is the only book that deals with magic and the supernatural, but the personal challenges depicted through the growth of Witch Baby are easily translatable to any person that has ever experienced struggle. Block's use of magical realism provides readers access to a different world, one of the imagination that is also important to visit. Block's piece has been considered a modern day fairy tale, which is very evident in the story-telling and the situations that the characters experience. Even though at times the stories can seem too idealistic or slightly difficult to believe – they are still very important because they test our imagination and our limits about what our world could be like as well as the transformative possibilities of our relationships with other people.

I believe that the main strengths of these novels are the amount of healthy friendships depicted within the stories. All of the young female protagonists have at least one very close friend, with whom they share their experiences and secrets. For example, one of Raleigh's greatest findings in her road trip in *Lost at Sea* is her new best friend Stephanie, who is loyal, trustworthy, and supportive. Weetzie Bat and Dirk in *Dangerous Angels* have been best friends since high school and continue to be friends through adulthood. Deanna in *Story of a Girl* has best friend Jason to turn to even when it seemed like everyone else had left her.

The authors have also done an excellent job illustrating the harsh realities that many female teens face in terms of bullying and harassment. Julie Anne Peters writes about the harassment Cece faces because she is an out lesbian. Sara Zarr writes about the harassment

Deanna faces because of her perceived reputation as a slut. Teresa de la Sandoval writes about the hurtful things that people say to Aurora because she is pregnant. These high school classmates of the two characters say mean, and derogatory things to them. And then, the authors write the characters as overcoming these statements with the help of their own selves and the help of their friends.

In addition to the bullying and harassment that the characters face countered by the loyal, trustworthy friends, these bullying experiences are most definitely gendered. Just based on the examples provided above, the harassment is fueled by homophobia and slut shaming. Those are two things very specific about young girl's experiences; once again, making them feminist issues. Obviously boys get harassed, but in different ways. The kind of harassment and bullying portrayed in these books is very gender specific, very telling of the young female's experience with coming into the world.

These books also offer a realistic portrayal of the often tense relationship between adolescents and adults, which can be very challenging. Most prominent is the relationship between Holland and her mother in *Keeping You a Secret*. Holland's mother kicks Holland out of the house after finding out that she is a lesbian. This seemed like extreme behavior to me; yet it has been a very real experience, specifically historically, for many queer youth. This difficult relationship forces Holland to rely on Cece and her family, as well as the community center for queer young adults, proving that family can be larger than originally imagined. In addition, Lourdes in *A Girl Like Che Guevera* must deal with the changing nature of her parent's relationships and her attitude toward her father when she finds out that he has cheated on her mother. Lourdes feels betrayed and confused, not sure what to believe in. Deanna from *Story of a Girl* must deal with her father's uncomfortable feelings that are often manifested by completely

ignoring her after figuring out that she was having sex at age 13. These relationships between adolescents and their parents with all three of these characters are tense and uncomfortable, and reflective of actual experiences.

However, as credible and important as these five books are, they are still many issues surrounding race, class, and intersectionality that must be addressed. Four out of five of the lead protagonists are white. Only Lourdes offers an experience of a youth of color, in the form of historical biography. While there are other characters of color in these books, especially in *Dangerous Angels*, the majority of the other characters are still white. True, these five books are only a small selection of the available young adult literature; however, they reflect the pervasive racism in our society, reflected by what is published in young adult literature. This omission of characters of color silences the experiences of youth of color which is a definite and problematic shortcoming.

In addition, there is also an underrepresentation of queer characters in the field of young adult literature. *Keeping You a Secret* is the only book that actually has two lesbian main characters. And even then, the representation of Holland and Cece at times, read slightly unrealistic to me. That their relationship started very intensely from the beginning (with exchanging “I love you” immediately) seemed a bit difficult to believe. However, because there is such a paucity of books featuring lesbian and gay characters, I still find this book to be very important and necessary because it explores issues salient in our society today regarding queer identities. The author, Julie Anne Peters, is the only queer author I surveyed as well. At the end of the book there is a reading guide and also a letter to readers. I think those two things really enhance the book as a whole and help to open up a very important discussion about what it means to be a queer youth.

Lourdes's exploration of her sexuality in *A Girl Like Che Guevera* provides another important viewpoint on the representation of queer identities. Not only is Lourdes sexually attracted to her friend, Aurora, there are a few queer couples in present within the story at the work camp. Their presence in the text is important for Lourdes as she navigates her own sexuality and makes sense of her feelings for Aurora. *A Girl Like Che Guevera* is situated within the very specific context of communist Cuba, and although repression and alienation because of sexual identity can be experienced in any nation, the repercussions in communist Cuba are different from the U.S. context. Lourdes's story provides a voice within the international community. This acknowledgment promotes a global consciousness regarding gendered identities, imbedded with history, and that is important to present to youth audiences.

I believe that the five books all did a good job at dealing with issues of class, specifically *Story of a Girl*. In *Story of a Girl*, readers can really grasp the struggles that arise within a working class family and how that affects Deanna's experience. Deanna's family also consists of her adult brother, his wife, and their baby. This causes stress between her parents and between everyone else in the family. One of the main reasons Deanna gets a job is so she can save up enough money to leave her small town, which can only be achieved by raising the funds herself. This story addresses a specific socio-economic situation that is not found in popular book series like *Gossip Girl*, in which only the upper class are represented.

Finding a graphic novel that specifically speaks to the female coming of age experience was difficult. There is an immense lack of representation of young females in comics. In addition, most representation of women in comics is highly sexualized and created for male (presumed) heterosexual readers. Women read comics and must be represented. The graphic

novel provides another way of reading and thinking about literature. There are many exciting possibilities in this field that must be examined further.

All five of these stories possess outstanding literary merit and should have a permanent place in libraries and bookstores for young adults. They all present positive and authentic portrayals of young female protagonists that are multi-dimensional, complicated, and interesting. All five main characters are full of desire for their own futures, and are consistently working toward their own autonomy. In addition, empowerment in these characters is diverse and multifaceted. No one story is the same; nor should it be. The narrators and the narratives are reliable, and believable. The issues the characters face are realistic, and the solutions to these problems are not always clean-cut, much like what is found in reader's own experiences. These books offer credible storylines that can be explored within a classroom setting, a youth reading group, or as independent reading. Initially I selected these books based solely on their representation of young female protagonists; I have come to realize that they are also important works of literature in their own right.

The Future of Young Female Protagonists and Young Adult Literature

"Stories are like genies...They can carry us into and through our sorrows. Sometimes they burn, sometimes they dance, sometimes they weep, sometimes they sing. Like genies, everyone has one. Like genies, sometimes we forget that we do. Our stories can set us free...When we set them free. " (Francesca Lia Block)

The selected texts I have examined in this thesis illustrate that girls on the cusp of adulthood are powerful agents and empowered people. They are multi-dimensional people full of hopes and desires and often, their lives are complicated. They engage in struggles and challenges, sometimes in messy ways, but they each grow, develop, and come into their own. These kinds of qualities are often not one associated with girls, who are often positioned in

society as weak, scared, or catty. These representations illustrate what I find to be true in girls and young women I know and work with: they are strong, intelligent, and diverse human beings offering important perspectives to in the world about what it means to be female. My hope is that when readers encounter these stories, they will be inspired to examine their own stories. Literature can and does serve as a refuge.

Yet, more work remains to be done in the field of young adult literature on the issues of representation. There needs to be a stronger emphasis on creating diverse experiences and characters. Four out of the five books I selected have white protagonists. Given the U.S. population and the reality of this social context, this illustrated that people of color are extremely underrepresented within this field. This is a problem. In addition, a stronger analysis of queer experiences as well as spaces to explore these issues needs to be presented in the field of young adult literature and within classrooms. Queer youth have one of the highest risks of suicide and other mental health issues. This matter needs to be taken seriously, and queer characters must be represented diversely in young adult literature. I did not examine any literature that offered transgendered characters, and I think that is also a problem. We need authors willing to push boundaries and tackle issues that are considered “mature” or “controversial” for young adult readers. We need to offer representations of youth as people readily capable of negotiating and navigating social structures and situations. By empowering youth through literature, we are reiterating messages that there are options, even if they are difficult, for living their own lives. The possibilities provided by an emotional and intellectual engagement with literature are numerous, and the undertaking of that task is powerful and imperative if young adult literature is to fulfill its promise, articulated by Michael Cart: “Young adult books must constitute a realistic literature inhabited by complex characters whose lives –both exterior and interior-invite us not

only to empathize but to think” (Cart, 277). In addition to providing opportunities to empathize and think, young adult literature must also be representative of the unique experiences of diverse young people, thus articulating diverse narratives of empowerment and resilience.

Chapter 6: Proposed Thematic Unit

Empowerment and Identity Exploration:

Young Adult Literature & Creative Expression

"The people in my class, including me, do not need to be taught. we need simply to be encouraged, to be given heart, to be allowed to grow into our own hearts. We do not need to be governed by external schedules nor told what and when we need to learn, not what we need to express, but instead we need to be given time, not as a constraint, but as a gift in a supportive place where we can explore what we want and who we are, with the assistance of others who care about us also. This is true not only for me and for my students, but for all of us, including our nonhuman neighbors. We all so want to love and be loved, accept and be accepted, cherished, and celebrated simply for being who we are. And that is not so very difficult" (Jensen, 213).

It is imperative to me that this research is used in a meaningful way for young girls and their identity exploration. Therefore, in this final chapter I will provide a proposed curriculum for a week at a girl's leadership summer camp or after school program. Some of the activities I propose are taken from the Take Back the Halls curriculum, an anti-violence after school program for high school students conceived and conducted by Dr. Beth Catlett and Heather Flett, LCSW, at DePaul University. During the 2009-2010 school year, I served as the graduate assistant at Roberto Clemente High School's Take Back the Hall program. Focusing on dating violence prevention, this program is devoted to cultivating healthy relationships within ourselves and other people. This experience has been intimately connected to my thesis project.

The template I have used for planning the unit is from Robert Fried's *The Passionate Teacher*.

- I. Unit Title: **Empowerment and Identity Exploration: Young Adult Literature & Creative Expression**
- II. Age/Grade: **Grades 9-12, ages 15-18, Afterschool program or Summer camp**
- III. Subject Matter: **Literature and Creativity**
- IV. Central Ideas or Skills: **Utilizing the five books (*Dangerous Angels, Lost at Sea, Story of a Girl, A Girl Like Che Guevera, and Keeping You a Secret*) as a point of departure, students will focus on the major themes in the books: girls' coming**

- of age experiences, friendship, bullying and harassment, identity, race, class, etc. In doing so, they will connect their own life experiences to the experiences of the five young female protagonists through a creative project of journaling, zine making, spoken word or creating an art work of their choice.
- V. What is my Personal Stake? **After conducting my research on transformation and empowerment in young adult literature, I find it necessary to share these books with the young women in this summer camp. Guided by reader-response theory, I believe that reading can evoke emotional responses and can help students critically reflect on their own experiences coming of age. By creating a structured unit, students can help each other work through their experiences and share them in creative ways of their choice. It is important to me that the students pick their own creative expression so they can approach this lesson with their own agency and through their own decision making.**
- VI. How Students Work Together As a Team: **Students will be providing feedback to each other's work, and will be encouraged to work collaboratively, in small groups for creative expression (i.e. zines)**
- VII. Possible Student Performances (to a community outside of the classroom): **Students will have an open mic evening (which they take leadership in planning) to share their creative expressions and the community will be invited. This will be a celebratory party for their accomplishments, and members from community will also be invited to share and perform their own pieces**

Unit Plan

Unit Duration: 6 weeks, 2.5 hour session

(it is assumed that the five books have already been read by the students)

Note: Every session ends with free-writing journaling.

Week 1: Examine Creative Writing in *Story of a Girl*. Deanna writes short stories as a way of expression. Bring in a short story author to speak to class about the short story as a genre and writing short stories.

Assignment: Write your own creative short story. 3 pages. Describe a time when you wished you would have had super powers. What would those super powers be? How would you have used them and why?

- Workshop story. Students share and provide supportive feedback.

Week 2: Examining music in *Dangerous Angels* and *Lost at Sea*. Visit Girls Rock! Or Old Town School of Music. Talk to musicians about the reasons they play music.

Listen to selections from the following songs :

Karen O and the Kids “All is Love” (Features youth voices + prominent female vocalist)

Wilco’s “What Light” (Jeff Tweedy, lead singer is mentioned in *Lost at Sea*, alt-country)

India Arie’s “Video” (R &B, female vocalist)

Brother Ali “Forest Whitaker” (rap about body image)

Bikini Kill “Rebel Girl” (riot grrrl queer positive punk)

Assignment: Write your own lyrics to a song. Can be set to music, but not necessary.

Can use selected songs as a guide, or create your own about any topic of your choice.

- Workshop lyrics. Students share and provide supportive feedback.

Week 3: Examining art in *Keeping You a Secret*. Visit the Art Institute. Speak to youth artists.

Assignment: Create your own piece of art (collage, painting, etc) based on the question:
“Who are You?”

(To be displayed at Open Mic).

Week 4: Zine History Lesson. What is a zine? Who makes them and why? Distribute copies of zines, provide an introduction to Riot grrrl movement and music.

Assignment: In a small group, create a zine based on an (activist) issue of your choice. Select a topic related to something you want the rest of society to know about you or your community. “What our community looks like”*

Week 5: Pick one of the characters from the five selected books and write about how she is like you or how she is different from you. In what ways do you wish you were more like her? Less like her? Explain why. What do you think she could learn from you? [utilize “Circle of My Multicultural Self” for the character and for the student] Discussion on intersectionality to follow.

Week 6: Preparation for Open Mic Performance. Selecting pieces to share, inviting community members, creating a program, and selecting a moderator.

On Friday Night of Week 6: Open Mic Performance and Party. Students share their work with the larger community and their family members.

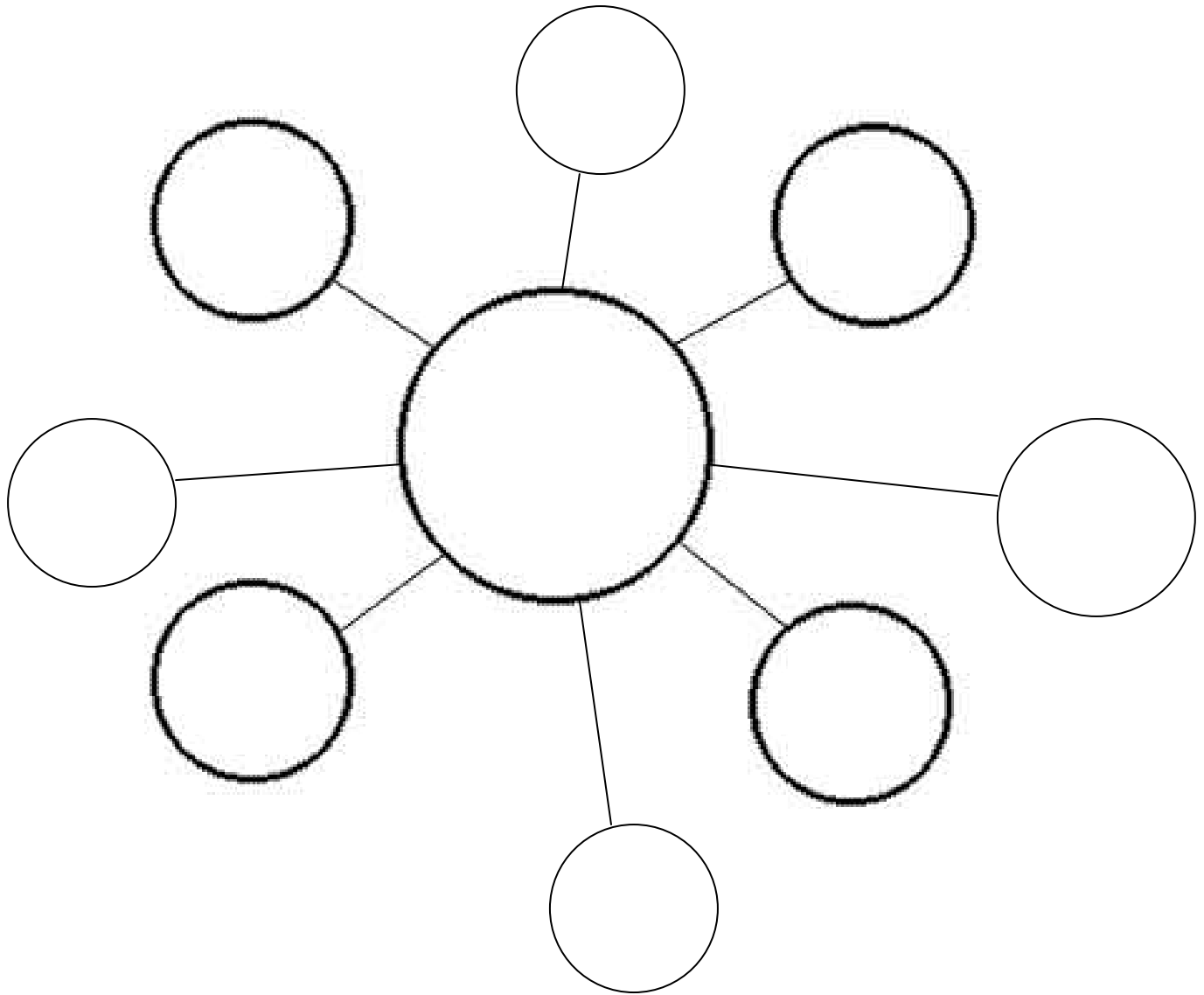
Week 4 Questions: What our Community Looks Like
(From the Take Back the Halls Curriculum)

- Ask students to define community and write the definition on the board
- Have the students make a list of the different types of communities they are involved in/ or related to (school, home, neighborhood, club/activities, church, etc)
- Write out each of these statements on an individual sheet of paper and have each student answer the questions privately:
 - My community looks like:
 - One thing I like about my community is:
 - I feel unsafe in my community when:
 - If I could change one thing about my community it would be:
- Encourage students to share their answers. What are the similarities? What are the differences? Point out what they find bothersome and ask them what their community would look like if those were not present. Ask them if these things could be changed.
- Use this exercise as a point of departure to create of a zine. Break students into small groups and have them pick a theme from the discussion to create a zine about.

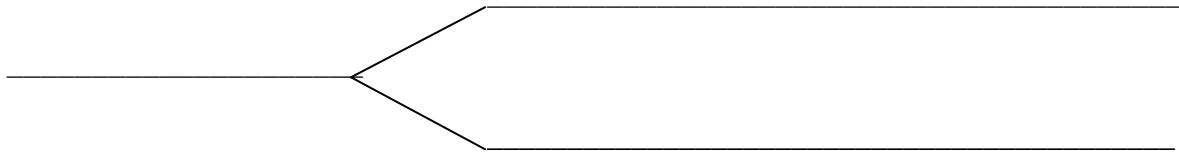
Week 5 Handout: Circles of My Multicultural Self

(thanks to Dr. Joseph Gardner for this exercise)

1. Place your name in the center circle of the structure below. Write an important aspect of your identity in each of the satellite circles -- an identifier or descriptor that you feel is important in defining you. This can include anything: Asian American, female, mother, athlete, educator, Taoist, scientist, or any descriptor with which you identify.



2. Share a story about a time you were especially proud to identify yourself with one of the descriptors you used above. Share a story about a time it was especially painful to be identified with one of your identifiers or descriptors.



3. Name a stereotype associated with one of the groups with which you identify that is not consistent with who you are. Fill in the following sentence:

I am (a/an) _____ but I am NOT (a/an) _____.

(all lyrics taken from songmeanings.net)

Week 2 Lyrics Sheet

Karen O and the Kids “All is Love”

One, two, ready, go
Grow some big feet, holes in history
Is where you'll find me, is where you'll find
All is love, is love, is love, is love

L.O.V.E, it's a mystery
Where you'll find me, where you'll find
All is Love, is love, is love, is love

Hey, ooh
Hey, ooh
Ooh ooh,
All is Love

One, two, ready, go
L.O.V.E, it's a mystery
Where you'll find me, where you'll find
All is love, is love, is love, is love
Ooh ooh,
All is Love, is love, is love, is love!

Wilco “What Light”

If you feel like singing a song
And you want other people to sing along
Then just sing what you feel
Don't let anyone say it's wrong

And if you're trying to paint a picture
But you're not sure which colors belong
Just paint what you see
Don't let anyone say it's wrong

And if you're strung out like a kite
Or stung awake in the night
It's alright to be frightened

When there's a light
What light
There's a light

What light
There's a light
White light
Inside of you

You think you might need somebody
To pick you up when you drag
Don't lose sight of yourself
Don't let anyone change you back

And if the whole world's singing your songs
And all you're paintings have been hung
Just remember what was yours is everyone's from now on

And that's not wrong or right
But you can struggle with it all you like
You'll only get uptight

When there's a light
What light
There's a light
What light
There's a light
White light

India Arie "Video"

Sometimes I shave my legs and sometimes I don't
Sometimes I comb my hair and sometimes I won't
Depend on how the wind blows I might even paint my toes
It really just depends on whatever feels good in my soul

I'm not the average girl from your video
and I ain't built like a supermodel
But, I Learned to love myself unconditionally
Because I am a queen

I'm not the average girl from your video
My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes
No matter what I'm wearing I will always be India Arie

When I look in the mirror the only one there is me
Every freckle on my face is where it's supposed to be
And I know our creator didn't make no mistakes on me
My feet, my thighs, my lips, my eyes I'm lovin' what I see

I'm not the average girl from your video
and I ain't built like a supermodel
But, I Learned to love myself unconditionally
Because I am a queen

I'm not the average girl from your video
My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes

No matter what I'm wearing I will always be India Arie

Am I less of a lady If I don't wear panty hoes?
My mama said ain't what she wears but, what she knows
But, I've drawn a conclusion, it's all and illusion confusions the name of the game
A misconception, a vast deception
Something's gotta change
Don't be offended this is all my opinion
ain't nothing that I'm sayin law
This is a true confession of a life learned lesson I was sent here to share wit ya'll
So get in where you fit in go on and shine
Free your mind, nows the time
Put your salt on the shelf
Go head and love yourself
Cuz everything's gonna be all right

I'm not the average girl from your video
and I ain't built like a supermodel
But, I Learned to love myself unconditionally
Because I am a queen
I'm not the average girl from your video
My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes
No matter what I'm wearing I will always be India Arie

Keep your fancy drinks and your expensive minks
I don't need that to have a good time
Keep your expensive car and your Caviar
All I need is my guitar
Keep your krystyle and your pistol
I'd rather have a pretty piece of Crystal
Don't need your silicon I prefer my own
What God gave me is just fine

I'm not the average girl from your video
and I ain't built like a supermodel
But, I Learned to love myself unconditionally
Because I am a queen
I'm not the average girl from your video
My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes
No matter what I'm wearing I will always be India Arie

Brother Ali "Forrest Whitaker"

And, yo, whatever comes up comes out.
We don't put our hands over our mouth.
And whatever comes up comes out.
We don't put our hands over our mouth.
Whatever comes up comes out.
Please mister bass-man lay it on me.

Hey, yo, dependin on the day, and dependin on what I ate,
I'm anywhere from 20 to 35 pounds overweight.

I got red eyes, and one of ems lazy,
and they both squint when the sun shines so I look crazy.
I'm albino man, I know I'm pink and pale,
And I'm hairy as hell, everywhere but fingernails.
I shave a cranium that ain't quite shaped right.
Face type: shiny. I stay up and write late nights.
My wardrobe is jeans and faded shirts,
A mixture of what I like, and what I wear to work.
I'm not mean and got a neck full of razor bumps.
I'm not the classic profile of what the ladies want.
You might think I'm depressed as can be,
But when I look in the mirror I see sexy-ass me.
And if that's somethin that you cant respect then that's peace.
My life's better without you actually.
To everyone out there, who's a little different,
I say, damn a magazine, these is Gods fingerprints.
You can call me ugly but cant take nothin from me.
I am what I am, doctor, you ain't gotta love me.

If you would please turn in your bible
To beauty tips according to Forest Whitaker.
In the third chapter of the third line.
Brother Ali would you please read to the choir for me son?

I'ma be all right, you ain't gotta be my friend tonight (you ain't gotta love me).
An I'ma be okay, you would probably bore me anyway (you ain't gotta love me).
I'ma be all right, you ain't gotta be my friend tonight (you ain't gotta love me).

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Tentative Timeline*

January- March 2010: Independent Study with Dr. Jackson. Structured Independent Research

Mid-February 2010: Research Proposal Defense with Committee.

March-June 2010: Independent Study with Dr. Jackson. Continued Structured Independent Research

April 6, 2010: First Working Draft of Thesis Due

April 10, 2010: Thesis Committee Meeting (with all members). Present first draft.

May 5, 2010: Second Working Draft Due

May 31, 2010: Final Draft Due

June 5, 2010: Defend to Committee

*need to check on specific dates with all members