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From Homoplot to Progressive Novel: Lesbian Experience and Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels

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Teens have long sought themselves in the pages of adolescent literature, not for answers, but simply to see themselves there, to remember that they are not alone. Some teens, of course, find themselves in this literature more readily than others. Heterosexual teens, for instance, abound; as do, increasingly, uber-rich teens, teens consorting with vampires, and teens endowed with magical or other supernatural abilities. However, teens who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), magical, vampiric, or otherwise, are significantly underrepresented in young adult literature published in the United States. While increased societal awareness of the relative normalcy of nonheterosexual orientation and identification has led to increasing production and marketing of YA novels with LGBTQ characters, these exceptions remind us of the rule: queer sexual orientations are still an "issue" for publishers, booksellers, and many readers. In Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature (2011), Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd recognize that recent scholarship dealing with more contemporary "out" queer literature for children and young adults asks . . .: What are the politics of visibility and affirmation, especially in relation to childhood and adolescence? How does this literature function socially and pedagogically? What correspondences can we observe between social history and the literary record? can queer literature for young readers effect, as much as document, change? (146)

Like the scholars Abate and Kidd, I position myself as an advocate for positive, progressive portrayals of lesbian characters and experience in Young Adult (YA) literature as a force for effecting positive change for queer young people. Even though more novels are available than used to be, we must recognize that presence and inclusion are merely first steps—necessary, [End Page 74] essential, but not enough. There is still need for critical attention to the ideological work such novels accomplish. Readers and critics will be more effective in their roles as readers and critics by surfacing passive ideologies that surround LGBTQ sexualities, thus calling into question society's dominant ideological assumptions about LGBTQ individuals—particularly teens. Several critics, including Esther Saxey, Vanessa Wayne Lee, and Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, have developed schemata for assessing and categorizing texts with LGBTQ characters and content. Building on their schemata, I here consider the ways contemporary lesbian YA novels stimulate, challenge, and encourage young lesbian women to
affirm their sexual and personal growth through narrative innovation that reconfigures existing YA tropes by resisting conventional ideologies that Other nonheteronormative characters.

Being Sexual, Being Lesbian in Young Adult Literature

Sexuality itself—not simply lesbian sexuality—is an uncomfortable topic for children's and adolescent literatures. Ellis Hanson surfaces our societal discomfort by acknowledging children's "queer[ness]": "[t]heir sexual behavior and their sexual knowledge are subjected to an unusually intense normalizing surveillance, discipline, and repression of the sort familiar to any oppressed sexual minority" (110). The culture manages its discomfort by denying child sexual desire or by labeling it queer. Lce Edelman and Kathryn Bond Stockton both identify the sexually desirous child as queer, and James Kincaid notes social tendencies, in our fervor to erase sexual desire from the child, to erase the child itself. For adolescents, Roberta Trites situates sexuality as a major locus of conflict noting, "we live in a society that objectifies teen sexuality, at once glorifying and idealizing it while also stigmatizing and repressing it" (Disturbing 95). According to Trites, adolescents are simultaneously freed and restrained—while "[a]dolescents are empowered by institutions and their parents and by knowledge of their bodies, . . . [but] by offering up rules and holding repercussions over their heads that limit their newfound freedoms, these things also restrict them" ("Harry Potter Novels" 473). Both Trites and Suzanne Juhasz explore the regulation of non-normative sexual expression by disapproving societal forces (respectively, between young people and between women). Just as Juhasz stresses that romantic elements overshadow sexuality in lesbian fiction, Trites characterizes "genital sexual contact" as "more likely to be depicted interstitially than not in heterosexual YA novels" and points out that "any gay YA novel as sexually explicit as, say, Blume's Forever would likely be labeled pornography" ("Queer Discourse" 150 n. 9). Sex and sexuality clearly have a central, if uneasy, ideological role in adolescent literature, and LGBTQ sexualities are more likely than heterosexualities to be less freely represented. The writers explored here challenge the conventional attitudes toward sexuality found in much YA literature, pushing the genre toward more open expression of sexual desire as part of protagonists' subjective development.

The intersection of lesbian sexuality and YA literature presents a uniquely subversive cultural and literary moment. Both have been traditionally marginalized, both have relatively recently emerged into the mainstream, and both require active resistance to dominant ideologies to maintain integrity of identity. Traditionally, neither women nor adolescents have been understood as inherently sexual beings; in identifying their protagonists not simply as romantically inclined, but also as sexually desirous, novels of YA lesbian literature claim a relatively new space for young women. This space has not, however, opened easily for them. In her chapter on lesbian texts for younger readers, Sherrie Inness notes:

[w]hen I examined texts aimed specifically at young women, I discovered that lesbians are some of the most underrepresented and misrepresented characters in children's literature. Although there have been significant improvements in the last fifteen years [from 1982-97] and lesbians are being portrayed more frequently than ever, they still appear in only a minority of books and their depiction is apt to be stereotypical.

(103)
Until the mid-1990s, most novels about girls loving girls included often-traumatic coming-out scenarios, and/or incorporated negative (sometimes horrific) consequences to proclaiming oneself a lesbian. Some novels simply replaced a male love interest with a female one, maintaining romantic conventions of boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl, boy-loses-girl, girl-returns-to-boy. Most texts combined aspects of each of these conventions, and often included a death or serious family dysfunction, though it is debatable whether those elements function as components of the lesbian novel or of the young adult genre.

Within the twenty-first century, most authors writing lesbian characters for young readers create an explicit link between girls' sexual subjectivity and their agency—understanding and embracing her own sexuality opens to a young woman the possibilities and potential inherent in that understanding. Accepting herself as a sexual agent, desirous and desirable, empowers a young protagonist to act on those desires, opening her not simply to the possibilities of sexual exploration and fulfillment, but also to the possibilities of knowledge, loss, and pain inherent in any relationship—in growing up. Essentially, empowering young female protagonists as sexual agents helps them become agents in the adult world. Thus, a significant element of YA lesbian novels is the protagonist's self-identification as lesbian. Because female characters tend to be limited in their representations as active and empowered sexual subjects in adolescent literature, lesbian characters frequently need a catalyst to acknowledge or understand their lesbianism—that is, they need to be outed to themselves. Girls who defy mainstream norms of heterosexual love and romance are doubly marginalized: girls who choose girls have no predetermined place in the social order. After all, "heterosexual love . . . grants a woman admittance to the 'real world' . . . a place in the culture" (Juhasz 207, 206). By contrast, lesbian love forces "one [to] assertively recognize and define her sexuality[;] the very act of 'saying' becomes a force that influences identity . . . : 'This is who I am: I am a lesbian'" (210-11), making a place for oneself rather than assuming a place that others have made. Understanding and respecting one's desire is necessary for insight into making wise and ethical choices about whether to act on attraction or to defer it; moreover, freedom comes with telling the truth to oneself. All girls' recognition of their sexual subjectivity is important, but many lesbian girls face rejection by family, friends, and their social worlds when they identify as lesbian. The progressive YA novel conveys that while the risks may be great, so also can be the rewards.

The sorts of adult gatekeepers who concern Kincaid, Stockton, and Edelman, those who wish to keep young people ignorant and innocent of sexual knowledge, are stymied by young lesbians, who do not incur the risks of sexually active heterosexual or gay male teens: no risk of pregnancy, significantly fewer chances of disease. Yet young lesbians' sexual agency, sexual intimacy, pleasure, desire—and sometimes love—are in their way even more threatening, as these queer theorists intuit. Lesbians step outside patriarchal norms and control, and when young women, particularly, move beyond those boundaries they threaten the social/sexual hegemony. Young women's expressions of sexual desire marginalize them socially because many adults are afraid to allow teenage girls to claim sexual power, even as they recognize the developmental necessity and "naturalness" of such growth. Issues of sexual awareness in novels intended for teens incite discomfort enough among many parents of teen readers; sexual desire and sexual orientation complicate these already complex issues. However, if literature for teens can ever accurately reflect and interpret teens' real lives and concerns, as Abate and Kidd suggest they
must, writers must respect and acknowledge that girls and young women are already aware of and engaged with multiple varieties of sexual desire, orientation, and choice.

Unfortunately, authors and publishers of standard YA literature have often resorted to cliché and formula rather than attempt to depict this variety. The traditional approach to such stories is summarized in Esther Saxey’s *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity* (2008). Saxey outlines the generic conventions and social intervention of the coming-out story. In the "homoplot," the protagonist is "most likely a troubled teenager" (1), and the plot, resolution, and homoplot narrative itself "create[] change" and "shape[] new identities" (7). Saxey posits that "discourses of sexual identity help to create what they purport to describe. Thus the coming out story, which purports to describe a pre-existing sexual identity, is simultaneously contributing to the cultural construction of this identity" (5). Of course, not all homoplots subscribe to similar ideologies of identity: the more traditional incarnations are texts that position lesbianism as a threat or problem [ ... and that] do not attend to the formation of a lesbian identity but are designed to educate audiences unfamiliar or uncomfortable with lesbianism and/or to "categorize the lesbian as a facet of male heterosexual pleasure" (152), in Vanessa Wayne Lee’s description. These traditional texts, as I term them, often stereotype lesbians as either butch or femme, as if those types are the only ways lesbians express themselves; they conflate issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. In traditional texts the lesbian character resists accepting or acknowledging her orientation, and she not only suffers persecution, bullying, or other harassment because of her sexual orientation, she also fails to question the injustice of that treatment; finally, the novel’s ending is more cautionary than hopeful. Traditional texts align with, but do not duplicate, Cart and Jenkins’ "homosexual visibility" category in that the absence of gay and lesbian characters is surfaced, but the manner in which they are included can be more stereotypical than enlightening. Even when traditional texts affirm lesbians, they may simply be concerned with making lesbianism "visible" and introducing it to heterosexual audiences rather than addressing the audience most invested in self-discovery.⁴

An advance on traditional depictions of LGBTQ teens, mediating texts negotiate the terrain between traditional texts of "visibility" (Cart and Jenkins) and novels that overtly advocate lesbian sexual agency. Lee’s second type of lesbian novel, which "focuses on the formation of lesbian identities" (152), is another, less detailed, articulation of what Saxey terms the "homoplot." Mediating texts acknowledge stereotypes, and often engage and occasionally dismantle stereotypes about lesbians. The lesbian character may initially resist acceptance of her orientation, but moves into or beyond acceptance by the novel’s end; while she suffers nominal harassment because of her sexual orientation, the novel’s ending is cautiously hopeful. While the LGBTQ character (frequently not the protagonist) does not fully achieve agency or subjectivity, she moves closer to a sense of her own identity and anticipates her own potential for authentic selfhood, including authentic desires. Jacqueline Woodson’s *The House You Pass on the Way* falls into this category, as does M. E. Kerr’s *Deliver Us from Evie*. Woodson’s novel features a main character who acknowledges her questioning identity, and is content with that identity, but who remains closeted for fear of her family’s response. Kerr’s [*End Page 78*] *Evie* is a secondary character whose voice is filtered through her brother’s and who must ultimately leave her community in order to be an out lesbian and have an open relationship with her girlfriend. While these protagonists are comfortable with their own sexualities, they are not comfortable being out in their familial or social contexts, necessitating a certain degree of self-censorship. These tropes
are more typical of late twentieth-century YA lesbian literature than of twenty-first century novels.

"Traditional" and "mediating" texts introduce and attempt to "normalize" lesbian identity, but essentially fail to acknowledge, explore, or advocate for lesbian identity or desire. They address the nonlesbian reader's curiosity about the lesbian Other, and thus reinscribe lesbian identity as beyond the norm rather than broadening the norm to include LGBTQ identities. Lesbians tend to be presented as types rather than individuals, and as support to the protagonist rather than as primary importance to plot or reader. Traditional and mediating novels, like Cart and Jenkins' "gay assimilation" category, ignore the unique experience of females as same-gender-loving people, including the social handicaps of youth and femaleness that situate them as passive objects rather than active subjects. Cart and Jenkins' category is framed neutrally, situating the YA novel as a "melting pot" of sexual orientation and gender identity (xx); my traditional and mediating categories more actively critique that elision of experience. Progressive novels move toward rectifying these failures and omissions, to acknowledge and celebrate the real differences in the experiences and subject-formation of lesbian teen protagonists.

Most YA novels featuring lesbian characters published in the twenty-first century fall into a category that I identify as "progressive." Progressive novels suggest Lee's third category, novels that "interrogate received wisdom about lesbianism and lesbian identity" (152) and Cart and Jenkins' "Queer Consciousness/Community." While Lee focuses on "received wisdom" and Cart and Jenkins focus on cultural and social community, I focus on individual subjectivity and identity. Progressive texts do not actively set out to normalize sexual preference—girls can engage each other romantically in almost the same sense that they do boys, without undergoing a crisis of lesbian identity. These novels celebrate individuals and relationships wherein gender and orientation are secondary to personality; a protagonist's identity-formation may incorporate sexual identification, but is fundamentally about individual truth, integrity, and joy. These novels work toward characters who develop sexual and personal agency as well as strong senses of their own subjectivity.

Lesbian protagonists continue to be more problematic for conventional readers than their straight counterparts; often the difficulties posed by their status as sexually-oriented Other enable them to become stronger, more active subjects—they are forced to stand on their own, which is fundamentally a good thing. The Heart Has Its Reasons (Cart and Jenkins) creates an indispensable typology for finding and evaluating GLBTQ literature for young adults, but Lee's focus on lesbian identity in particular highlights girls' needs to come to terms with themselves as sexual beings before they can approach sexual agency, whether lesbian or not. In focusing on sexual and lesbian subject positions, authors depict protagonists who explore their subject positions as sexually desirous rhetorically as well as (or instead of) experientially. That is, protagonists may explore their sexual impulses and desires verbally—with friends or in a journal, for instance—before (or rather than) acting on those desires. In a late 1990s survey of lesbian representations in novels, Sherrie Inness praised authors such as Jacqueline Woodson, Nancy Garden, and Stacey Donovan who "depict lesbianism in far more complex ways than could be imagined in the 1970s and 1980s. Authors are exploring the intersections between lesbianism and such issues as race, ethnicity, and social class, developing a richer and more nuanced portrait of lesbian lives" (121). As Inness suggests, enlightened societal understandings and broadened literary perception from the late 1990s on have led to novels that move beyond
the basics of a homoplots. Novels of the first decade of the twenty-first century have continued to pursue Inness' progressive program of advocacy and increasing acknowledgment of complexity and difference. They allow girls to be primary in their own, and others' lives.

Progressive Texts: Sexuality and Sexual Expression Uncloaked

The progressive texts I promote here engage the scholarly questions Abate and Kidd raise about the politics of visibility and affirmation, and do, in fact, "effect, as much as document, change" (146). When focused on lesbian experience, they share a majority of these conventions:

- The lesbian character does not hate herself as a result of her orientation:
  - If she is out when the novel opens, she is at peace with her orientation, and does not let it limit her own or others' perceptions of her as a subject;
  - If she is not out to herself or others when the novel opens, she finds comfort, relief, and/or joy in acknowledgement and acceptance of her orientation;

- The lesbian character finds jouissance in physical expressions of her desire; she is erotic;

- If the lesbian character encounters harassment because of her sexual orientation, the emphasis is on her resilience rather than her victimization;

- The novel ends by affirming the character's agency and sense of subjectivity;

- The novel offers multiple perspectives of lesbian identity, even within one character's experience.

Progressive novels are well written and offer rich and nuanced portraits of all the characters; diverse characters are not essentialized into "models" of gay- or lesbian- or ethnic- or female-ness, rather, each character possesses both strengths and frailties. Through their journeys, the protagonists of progressive novels affirm the possibility of attaining personal and professional goals. While remaining accessible to their intended audience, the writing in progressive novels is complex, symbolic, and/or experimental, allowing readers to stretch and deepen their understanding of narrative or experience the pleasure of analysis. While sexual orientation is a dominant motif and self-acceptance an ongoing theme throughout these novels, the plots do not center on the anguish or confusion (or even delight) of coming out, or the anxiety of questioning one's sexuality—these elements may be components of the novels, but they are simply part of these characters' stories. The narratives encompass a variety of situations, experiences, and points of self-awareness, providing realistic depictions of teenage life. Cart and Jenkins begin their study with Lynn Crockett's premise that "A balanced [library] fiction collection should assuage the fears of gay and lesbian YAs, assuring them that they are not alone" (qtd. in Cart and Jenkins xviii). The authors continue, "This belief in the importance and value of balanced library collections for gay and lesbian teens is foundational to [this] collaborative text [. . .] we also hope to establish some useful criteria for evaluating books with GLBTQ content" (xviii). In the continuing spirit of balance, inclusion, and evaluation, I offer this detailed discussion of progressive texts about lesbian protagonists.
Fundamental qualities for progressive texts are individual integrity and jouissance, that quality of joy that comes from a mingling of pain and bliss, and often comes with the transgression of traditional norms and the unexpected thwarting of conventional expectations. Protagonists experience jouissance through understanding and embracing themselves as whole individuals, able to celebrate sexual and personal agency and subjectivity. Only through honest acceptance of one’s own sexual subjectivity—particularly though claiming one’s true orientation—can one claim full agency either sexually or personally. In these texts, the pain of identifying oneself as a lesbian in a society that still defines lesbian or gay as Other and lesser may be acute, but it is a necessary component of self-discovery, and is imbued with and overshadowed by the joy of being right with oneself and of claiming oneself in the world.

In what follows, I trace a selection of progressive lesbian texts, YA novels in which the young female protagonists gradually come to identify as bisexual or lesbian, and to understand themselves more completely and authentically as a result of this identification. I have chosen texts of the twenty-first century, and I proceed chronologically. Each author offers unique premises, unique contexts, and unique characters who engage their own sexual orientations from different places and different subject positions. In short, these novels offer microcosms of both the experiences of readers and the selection of [End Page 81] books currently available. I open with Sara Ryan’s Empress of the World (2001), the first of this trend that marks lesbian as simply another way of being in a sexual relationship. Empress explores a relationship between two young women who discover, with each other, that they are attracted to girls as well as to boys, and offers a relationship that focuses not on developing relationships acceptable to the system or categorizing one’s sexual orientation—though those issues are integral—but on loving and respecting someone else while recognizing and claiming one’s own desire.

Julie Anne Peters’s Keeping You a Secret (2003) furthers this transitional moment in lesbian YA fiction: the plot relies heavily on the 1970s and 1980s tropes of secrecy and persecution, but Peters’s characters are strong enough not just to withstand such disapproval, but also to own and celebrate their desires, their sexualities, their self-discoveries. After letting her mother make most of the important decisions about her life, Holland finally finds both the reasons and the strength to assume agency in her own life, to see herself clearly and lovingly, and to make the choices that reflect her own integrity. She progresses from a good, passive heterosexual girl to a good, active lesbian woman.

Also published in 2003, Tea Benduhn’s Gravel Queen focuses primarily on protagonist Aurin’s relationship systems rather than on her discovery of her lesbian identity; her relationship with her mother and friends Kenney (another girl) and Fred (a gay boy) are as important to the novel and to Aurin’s growth as is her new relationship with girlfriend Neila. Thus, while Benduhn recognizes Aurin’s lesbian identity as an important component of her developing subjectivity, she also emphasizes the importance of Aurin’s self-development within and beyond all of her primary relationships.

With a premise familiar to fans of Ann Brashares’s Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, Maureen Johnson’s The Bermudez Triangle (2004) offers three lifelong friends who, between their junior and senior years of high school, face their first summer-long separation. Nina falls in love with an Oregon boy, but Mel and Avery fall in love with each other. Johnson resists the impulse to
neatly tie both girls into a happily-ever homoplot; Mel's is the coming out story, Avery's is the messy and complex story that resists categorization. Mel's realization and acknowledgment of herself as lesbian is not a site of resistance or grief—rather, Mel feels relieved to understand herself more clearly, and joyful in sharing and celebrating with someone else. Her discovery of her identity with Avery, a friend who already knows and loves her, offers her a safe place to foster her newly-emerging sexual desire. All four novels qualify as progressive because they reinvent both plot and societal conventions to affirm young lesbians as complexly and fully human. [End Page 82]

Empress of the World

Rather than approaching her subject as a problem novel, as was typical from the 1970s to the 1990s, in *Empress of the World*, Sara Ryan chooses to adapt the romance convention: her girls meet, fall in love, have a misunderstanding, and ultimately work through their disconnection and reunite. Ryan alters the heteronormative trope to fit a romantic partnership rather than the more traditional pattern that offers one partner more power than the other has. Her formal subversion of the romance novel reflects her thematic resistance to categorization of characters, genre, and sexual desire.

Nic (short for Nicola) and Battle meet at the "Siegel Institute Summer Program for Gifted Youth" where they and three other kids (Katrina, Isaac, and Kevin) quickly become friends. Nic is there to study archaeology, because she likes, in her words, "fitting pieces together . . . Mapping it all out" (16). Her professor instructs the class to "keep scrupulous track of what you find, be cautious of your own biases—and always be ready to be surprised" (25), strategies Nic finds herself applying in her personal life.

Nic's first-person narrative is supplemented with her journal entries; the journal provides Nic with a pseudo-public voice: one that masks some intensely personal themes with her class findings and language. She uses this journal to make sense not just of her archaeological discoveries, but of her own emotional engagement with and responses to her new friends—especially Battle. Nic seems reluctant to participate in her own life; she tries to makes sense of what she does not understand by stepping objectively outside herself and analyzing, even if a particular idea or feeling is beyond analysis. She initially functions as her own repressor, a moderator resistant to experiencing life with its concomitant pleasures and pains. Objective analysis functions antithetically to jouissance, though progressivism is by definition is analytical. Thus, it might seem ironic that this progressive novel uses analysis as devices both thematic and stylistic as a point from which to grow rather than with which to grow. Yet Ryan's deft treatment of her characters suggests that each is able to transcend the mechanics of analytical language and thought, ultimately making those strategies work toward jouissance, rather than exclusively relying on them to rationalize her emotions. That is, they ultimately learn to use analysis as a strategy for realizing subjectivity, rather than relying on it to structure their responses to new experiences and feelings.

Ryan's double narration juxtaposes Nic's present-tense account with her journal's more distanced processing of the same experience. This narrative style offers readers two ways of experiencing Nic's perspective. The narration itself, in traditional texts the more distanced, objective voice, offers a sense of immediacy and intimacy lacking in Nic's journal, which gives Nic a chance to
rethink, revise, and distance herself from the events she actively experiences [End Page 83] in the narrative. Nic's first kiss with Battle exhibits the characteristic features of the device. First, Nic, as narrator, describes the experience:

Battle walks to the bed, leans over, and very carefully places the ice-filled washcloth onto my forehead. There's a small trickle of sweat running down into the hollow of her neck, and her green tank top is clinging to her. I feel something start thudding more than my headache and realize it's my pulse. I hear her breathing, and mine, and then her face is so close and I lift my head just a little and our lips touch.

I close my eyes.

I am kissing her, and she is kissing me back.

I can still feel my head throb, but the pain is very far away.

(107)

Here she participates in the experience, describing in detail Battle herself, as well as Nic's own actions and feelings. She is in the moment, symbolized by the soprano solo from Carmina Burana: "Sweetest one, I give myself to you totally" (108). Ryan's use of present tense in Nic's recounting of the moment emphasizes Nic's awareness of Battle's close proximity, her physical response to it, her own role in the kiss and her own pleasure in the moment. In contrast, Nic's journal entry, headed "field notes," does not convey her feelings about the experience or express her own delight, fear, excitement, nervousness, or anticipation. The journal, structured as if she were studying an archaeological site, further distances Nic from the experience of the kiss with phrasings like "let's discuss this matter clinically" (108). The entry instead addresses Nic's anxieties about "the next logical step in this process," and creates a category for "people's reactions" (108).

Their first fully intimate encounter occurs almost entirely off-page, as do most sexual encounters in adolescent literature, regardless of the characters' sexes. In her narration of the moment, Nic describes not actions, but feelings: "Everything we've been awkward about, all those steps we haven't taken yet, all of it gets blurry and soft until all that's left is sensations: cool night air on skin, hands and mouths moving over each other, the scent of pine mixed with lavender, the sound of breath" (131). While there is no journal entry to parallel this narrative, Nic's discussion with Battle just after the moment serves a similar purpose. Nic recounts to Battle her own process of discovery, then pelts Battle with questions about how she recognized their growing attraction. Nic starts: "When did you know? Was there a particular moment when you realized it? Were you worried? Were you happy?" Battle responds: "Why do you have to take everything apart?" then Nic: "So I can figure out how it fits together." Battle has the last word: "What if it breaks? Don't talk. Shut up and feel" (131). Nic's tendencies to take things apart, to try to explain the people and things around her cause the first rift in their relationship—Nic analyzes Battle's emotions and actions and imposes her own meanings and interpretations, which Battle resists. [End Page 84]
After they have been together two weeks, Nic crosses a line: she creates a story to fit around what little information Battle has shared with her about her abandonment by her brother (Nick with a "k") and to "fix" Battle according to Nic's own version of what her friend needs. Nic's reification of Battle into an object she has constructed breaks the trust that they have begun to build. Battle pushes Nic away, saying "Stop—stop trying to explain me. I can't take this!" (143).

In a traditional lesbian novel this could be the end: Battle starts hanging out with Kevin, who sees her as "a babe" and does not try to psychoanalyze her (194), and Nic kisses their friend Isaac, restoring hegemonic normalcy. What makes Ryan's plot different, however, is that neither girl is running away from her attraction; rather, each is running away from the pain that she has caused the other, and from their shared inability to deal with it.

When Isaac, in his turn, tells Nic not to overanalyze him or their relationship, Nic begins to understand that "words don't always work," something Battle has told her throughout (113). Nic writes in her journal: "it's too complicated. i don't even know what i feel anymore. / so maybe i won't always be able to describe precisely what I'm feeling. maybe i can't pin my feelings to the wall with neat little labels. / maybe I have to give up on having a typology of my emotions." (165-66). With this acknowledgment that she has to simply accept some things, some feelings, some people just the way they are, she and Battle again become friends, and finally, lovers.

Even though progress still creates a realistic world in which the girls live, unlike An's Parallel World.

Ryan's setting is not entirely idyllic: there are a few homophobes, and Nic and Battle have to resist compartmentalization by their friends and even by themselves, just as Nic must learn to experience and live with her emotions rather than classify them. Their primary challenge, however, is learning how to love and respect each other, not how to confront and then "deal with" their lesbianism or how to establish their lesbian identities. After their break-up, a newly self-aware Nic realizes that the issue at hand is not whether she is straight or gay or bisexual, it is that she has lost the person she loves right now. Just as Nic steps away from her field observations and into her life, Battle learns that not thinking or talking about the things that hurt her will not make them go away, and realizes how much she values sharing those things with someone who cares about her. In the reconciliation scene, Battle acknowledges to Nic her own difficulties with emotional intimacy, and with expressing her feelings. She also shares how much she values that Nic cares enough to ask questions, to learn her history, something she has not earlier been able to do. As each young woman learns about herself, she opens that self to her partner; together they find an intimacy that honors them both and respects each one's individuality. This assumption of emotional and sexual power is the true theme in Ryan's novel, and the ideology that makes it truly, progressively, remarkable. Julie Anne Peters's 2003 novel, Keeping You a Secret, shares this ideology, but expresses it in a more conventional narrative and generic form. [End Page 85]

Keeping You a Secret

Peters's Keeping You a Secret can initially appear traditional: the protagonists, Holland and Cece, keep their relationship a secret for most of the book; Cece, an out lesbian, is sexually harassed and threatened at school, and Holland's mother, overburdened with conservative ideologies about LGBTQ people, believes that Holland will be ruining her life if she outs herself and lives as a lesbian. Because Holland will not renounce her lesbian identity, her mother condemns her and forces her out of the family home, recalling Trites's situation of adolescent sexuality as a site of
conflict between teens and their parents. While Holland has rarely challenged her mother's choices about Holland's life, her sexual orientation is so fundamental to her identity that Holland finds the impetus to stand up for herself.

Holland is a typical, if above-average high school senior. She is popular, has a boyfriend, is student council president, makes mostly A's, and has a job working with children after school. Her mother makes sure she applies to prestigious private schools rather than local or state colleges, and, in Holland's words, has "plans for Holland Jaeger. And they didn't include what Holland Jaeger wanted. Whatever that was" (13). Holland has had neither the opportunity, the impetus, nor the agency to allow herself to want things that her mother, her boyfriend, or her friends have not sanctioned. In contrast, Cece is an out-and-proud lesbian who has transferred to Holland's school, and is the only out gay or lesbian student there. She raises Holland's consciousness about the culture of ignorance and hate within the school, and, as they gradually become closer friends, helps Holland to see her own life in a different light. Holland's visceral physical response to Cece startles her so much that she needs to rationalize it: "The sensation was stirring. It aroused me in a way . . . almost as if . . . As if I was falling for her. Okay, that didn't shock me. I'd had crushes on girls before. I mean who hadn't?" (83).

Holland's recognition of her feelings for Cece force her to acknowledge that what she feels is not just a crush, that she has, finally, fallen head over heels, body and soul in love. Physical desire is an integral part of the recognition. When Cece will not make the first move, Holland finally does, moving from fear to courage, finally allowing herself to want something just for herself:

"I want—" I stopped. Couldn't say it. Couldn't take the step. [. . .]

I was shaking so hard. Do it. Do it now. "I want to kiss you." [. . .]

I closed my eyes. Opened them, reached out, and removed her hat. Slid it down her back. With my other hand, I threaded my fingers through her hair. It was all happening in slow motion. My hand caressing her head, pulling her close to me . . .

I did it.

Oh, God. Her lips were soft. She was warm, hot. I wanted all of her. I was falling, falling, with nowhere to land. I had to step away.

(142-43) [End Page 86]

Unlike earlier YA authors, Peters does not shy away from depicting the girls' physical relationship, which she writes as joyful, comforting, and empowering. Holland's desire for Cece, both physical and emotional, helps Holland to acknowledge her own lesbianism and, eventually, to come out to the people who matter most in her life, and ultimately to the world at large.

Through Cece, Holland outs herself to herself; she thus discovers and accepts the nature of her feelings for Cece on her own terms, in her own time; Holland, for the first time in her life, perhaps, understands who she is and with whom she wants to be. When, at the very end of the novel, her mother tells Holland she can come home if she just gives up Cece, Holland has no
reason to doubt herself; to accept her mother's fear and prejudice. When she rejects the offer, she feels no regret, only "sad for my mother. Sorry for her. Yeah, I'd made sacrifices; I'd experienced loss. But she had no idea what this was costing her. Because she was losing me" (245). Holland finally knows her own value.

Holland steps out of her mother's vision for her to find that a whole new world has opened up. While she is thrust into the "real" world where she must find jobs that will cover her living expenses, she finally has the chance to explore what she wants to do with her life. Her mother's machinations toward a college with a good pre-law program no longer bind her; she can think about studying art, a new discovery that her mother considers a "waste of time" (101), or teaching, or both. While she will not attend any of the prestigious schools her mother wanted, Holland's primary concern is that she controls her own decisions: where and what she will study, what she wants to do with her life. By claiming her subject position as a lesbian, Holland has discovered agency that extends far beyond her sexual choices; by the end of the novel, she has evolved from a passive "good girl" who does what her mother and friends expect of her into a strong, active, self-aware subject, a young woman who will make her life into exactly what she wants it to be. Keeping You a Secret belies its title, advocating girls as independent and active subjects, and encouraging them to own proudly their sexual identities and desires. Holland finds strength in her love for Cece, but more fundamentally in her realization that she is a woman-loving-woman. With this knowledge, she finds something in her own life worth fighting for. Peter's novel demonstrates the power of self-recognition, and suggests that young lesbians may find themselves uniquely positioned to resist adults' conventional expectations for them.

Gravel Queen

Much as Peter's Holland makes self-discoveries that give her unprecedented agency in her own life, the protagonist of Tea Benduhn's 2003 novel, Gravel [End Page 87] Queen, finds power in herself through changing relationships with friends, family, and a lover. The novel opens at that point of perpetual transition for teens: between and within the common trope of friendship in flux. As Aurin's summer winds down, she distances herself from her best friend, Kenney, finds more in common with their mutual friend, Fred, and, significantly, finds herself falling for a new friend, Neila. As Aurin realizes she is a lesbian, it is Fred, who is also gay, she wants to talk with, not Kenney. Aurin initially wishes to discount the significance of the first time Neila kisses her, saying "It could have been nothing." Fred responds, "It doesn't matter if it was nothing . . . does the truth of your reality dictate that you wanted it to happen?" (119). The realization that what matters most are your own desires and your own reality grounds Gravel Queen firmly in the progressive camp.

Aurin narrates Gravel Queen in the present tense, offering a sense of immediacy and urgency to Aurin's self-discoveries, and giving her control over her story, emphasized by Benduhn's construction of Aurin's narrative partially as a "mind-film," with Aurin as writer-producer-director-star. Having no camera, Aurin mentally frames shots, adds music (sometimes making up her own songs), develops scenarios, describes the colors, and, most importantly, manipulates events. Like the dual narrative in Empress of the World, these mind films serve the dual and perhaps contradictory purposes of creating a sense of objectivity, and giving Aurin intimate control over her worldview and idealization of life events. Initially this filmic device gives Aurin
a measure of control in her own life, since she feels, much like Peters's Holland, that when her mother is not directing it, Kenney is. In "Narrative Resolution: Photography in Adolescent Literature" Trites suggests: "[t]he metaphor of the camera bestowing on the photographer a sense of empowerment based on the communicative abilities of photographs occurs often in literature" (130). She continues: "adolescent novels employ camera metaphors as a way to explore agency, as a linguistic construct that empowers the adolescent . . . the process of photography engages the fictional adolescent's agency in a way that enables the character to embrace her or his subjectivity" (133). The camera is linguistic in that it is a semiotic system of symbols and signs, though those symbols and signs are here imagistic rather than verbal. Aurin uses her camera (real or imagined) to develop her own sense of agency, and thus her own subjectivity. Her film incorporates moving rather than still images, perhaps emphasizing agency—action and control—more than subjectivity. She may remove herself from the action of her life when she cannot cope with it; as director, she may manipulate the other actors in her life in ways she, of course, cannot in real life, enacting upon them her own variations of appropriate responses to herself and her choices.

Aurin and Neila bond over movie-making (Neila actually has a video camera), giving them a point of connection as their relationship develops. [End Page 88] Ultimately, Aurin doesn't need a movie of her life to feel that she owns it, she has learned to be an active agent, to make herself heard and known. Still, the last chapter is a movie, a happy scene where Aurin gathers and places all the important people in her life in a celebratory dance, where they are all beautiful, happy, and graceful, where they have all found someone to love. The last paragraph of the novel visually embodies this joy: "Camera pans out as a breeze swooshes in and blows around our hair and dresses. A flutter of colorful paper gets stirred up. The wind lifts the pile and releases a thousand paper metallic origami birds. They're bursting into flight all through the sky" (152).

Notably, Aurin is, herself, included in this final shot; she is part of the action, not simply an observer or manipulator; she is both subject and object, an agent engaging her subjectivity. This last chapter partly reflects Aurin's reality and partly constructs her cinematic dreamworld—everything is not perfect, of course, and Aurin realizes that. Her parents' happiness and harmony may be invented, and the tidiness of Fred and Kenney's happy endings idealized. Her own happiness is solid (with Neila and with herself), and serves as the foundation for these dreams for the others. With its protagonist's new sense of her own agency and subjectivity, with her recognition that there is no single "gay (or lesbian) experience," and with her willingness to explore the possibilities that have come with the new parity of her relationships with her mother and Kenney, and especially Neila, Gravel Queen typifies the qualities of a an effectively progressive lesbian novel.

The Bermudez Triangle

In Maureen Johnson's The Bermudez Triangle (2004), Johnson uses the question: "What are you?" to confound traditional modes of categorizing people: when Nina goes across the country to a precollege leadership program, her new roommate asks it of her. Nina, whose mother is black and father is Cuban and white, responds with "Swedish," expanding only with "Yeah" when Ashley asks "On both sides?" (12-13). Similarly, when someone from school comes across Mel and Avery in the gay and lesbian section of a bookstore, the girls must come to terms with
Avery's resistance to labeling. While Avery does not embrace an identity as she does her relationship with Mel, she has been happy to be with Mel, to share small intimacies, but all along she has "liked keeping her relationship with Mel a complete secret. She wanted to be the only one who knew what it was like to be with Mel—to be able to look at her know that Mel was all hers, and she was all Mel's, that no one else with all their posturing had any idea what that meant" (121-22). While Avery may consciously focus on the intimacy, the specialness of her relationship, the "posturing" of the out lesbians at her school, the clear subtext, which even Mel has sensed, is that Avery does not want to be known as—or even rumored to be—gay. Her resistance, however, is to the label rather than the identity or relationship. She feels trapped by the idea that she must adopt and adhere to a single identity when she intuits that there is more to her identity than her sexual orientation, and more to her sexuality than any single relationship could embody. After the first experiences of passion, desire, and intimacy, the reader realizes that, as Mel becomes increasingly comfortable in her lesbian identity and with recognizing Avery as her girlfriend, Avery is increasingly unsettled by the relationship and others' needs to define it. She finally denies that she is gay, or even bisexual:

"I'm not gay." Avery said, sticking her free hand into her pocket.

"Ave—"

"I'm not gay." Avery said it again, very clearly and sternly.

"Okay," Mel said, trying to be conciliatory. "You're bi."

"Stop trying to tell me what I am! [...] This isn't the same as other people," Avery went on. "[...] It's more serious with us. We act like lesbians. Real ones."

"I am a real one," Mel said. "But you can be whatever you want."

(151-52)

Avery's difficulties with her own orientation stem from others' perceptions of her as gay—she resists any label based on sexuality, and, predictably, acts out, cheating on Mel with a boy (Gaz), ultimately ending the relationship without even speaking to Mel (Avery lets Nina do it). When she is with Gaz, Avery recognizes that with Mel she felt a "rush [...] a deep sense of connection" that is missing with Gaz, but that "Gaz had something she needed right now" (207). As they make out, Avery keeps seeing Mel's face (as she had seen Gaz's when kissing Mel earlier in the evening), and she has an epiphany:

She understood now—she had to make everything stop. It wasn't that she didn't like Mel or even love Mel—she just couldn't date her. Something had happened between them that summer, something that had felt right and had maybe even been right. But it wasn't right anymore. It wasn't who Avery was; it wasn't what she really wanted. And now she needed to undo it all, turn things back to how they had been before.

(207)
Avery progressively resists society's labels, but her fear about society's judgments, and her consequent mistreatment of Mel keep her a realistic—and realistically flawed—teenager subject to the panopticon of high school. Avery's fear of society, in tension with her resistance to its labels and her search for sexual subjectivity, coupled with Mel's increasing confidence in her lesbian identity, and Johnson's acknowledgment of the ambiguity and fluidity of desire in all the girls, mark the novel as ultimately progressive. [End Page 90]

The "Politics of Visibility and Affirmation"

While it is an unfortunate fact of life in the twenty-first century that many LGBTQ teens are still rejected by communities, friends, and family because of their sexuality, it is no longer the only, or even dominant, reality; novels working within the genre of realistic fiction must acknowledge multiple truths about being lesbian, just as they do diverse truths about being straight. Since the 1970s, and especially in the last decade, depictions of lesbians in young adult literature have increased in number and become deeper, richer, and, most importantly, celebratory. These novels demonstrate the joy of recognizing and honoring one's own desires and integrity, and the power that comes with those acts of courage. The number of novels featuring strong, active lesbian characters continues to grow; more and more of them embody progressive ideals. Presence is not enough. Inclusion is not enough. Adolescent readers deserve the highest standards of depth, realism, and complexity in all of their fiction, including LGBTQ texts. Progressive lesbian YA novels represent sympathetically and sensibly a variety of authentic experiences of teen lesbians. They stage and meditate upon female sexuality as girls find ways to reclaim their bodies, their modes of sexual desire and expression, and their lives as active subjects—they acknowledge that these processes, are both affirming and frightening.