Sexual Fantasy: The Queer Utopia of David Levithan's Boy Meets Boy

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The utopian image of the happy heterosexual union that appears at the conclusion of traditional romance novels is one that draws upon dominant discourses of gender and sexuality and serves to normalize and reinforce the acceptability of heterosexuality. Through the absence of discussions about homosexual love within the context of the romance, the traditional romantic utopia invalidates the experiences of gays and lesbians as it reifies and glorifies heterosexual romance. In her discussion of teenage girls' comics and their romantic themes, Valerie Walkerdine asks, "How might other kinds of fantasies be produced which deal differently with desires and conflicts?" and concludes, "we too must work on the production of other possible dreams and fantasies" (184). With Boy Meets Boy David Levithan begins to articulate one of many possible "other" dreams and fantasies as he recasts the teen romance with a same-sex couple. Levithan sets Boy Meets Boy in a utopian town in which gay and transgendered students are accepted and celebrated and strict boundaries of traditional gender expression have dissolved; through this use of setting, the author effectively subverts the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality in young adult fiction in general and young adult romance, specifically, and creates a new template for the gay young adult novel. Boy Meets Boy is a utopian novel: it functions effectively as a romance novel, a genre critics have called utopian, and also draws upon and extends conventions of homosexual representation found in "traditional" gay-themed young adult literature and gay pornography to depict a distinctly utopian world of sexual liberation. This comparison of Boy Meets Boy to gay pornography is not a prurient one; instead, its purpose is to compare a number of historical forms of representation of love and romance, of which gay pornography is one of few, that, in the words of Dyer, "defends the universal human practice of same-sex physical contact (which our society constructs as homosexual) ... [and] has made life bearable.

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for countless millions of gay men" (para. 10). Because utopian fiction emerges
from, as Jack Zipes observes, "a strong impulse for social change" (ix), an
examination of Levitan’s novel in this light illuminates its political message
of sexual equality.

The utopian novel does not name or describe a place that exists in the "real"
world; instead, utopian writing describes an ideal world that could exist but has
not been realized. The utopia, Ruth Levitas writes, concerns itself with "how
we would live and what kind of a world we could live in if we could do just
that" (1). In this sense, a utopia describes a social dream based on a desire to
re-imagine the status quo; Jacob Dickerson writes, "a utopian world takes into
account current social conditions and attempts to create a world of 'political
or social perfection'" (4). Utopian literature can be considered the ultimate
fiction, as it posits an ideal world that does not exist. Because utopia—as a
term used to describe an ideal community, society, or world—is not bound
by a single constitution, the definition of a literary utopia is not delimited by
any specific content. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry ask this question in the
introduction to their collection of essays about utopian and dystopian fiction
for young people: "Does a text’s utopian status lie within the form of the work,
the thematic message of the work, the intentions of the author to portray an
ideal or nightmarish world, the intentions and beliefs held by the characters
who live in the fictional society, or the response of the reader?" (2–3). Because
elements of utopia may appear in a number of creative media and because, in
the case of Boy Meets Boy, the novel’s expression of utopia draws from divergent
representations of, in Levitas’s words, "how we would live," we can conclude,
then, that utopian literature can be considered any articulation of a social or
political ideal that takes the "real" world outside of the text into consideration
as its fictional utopia is constructed. By presenting us with a fictional but rec-
ognizable ideal society, utopian fiction encourages active critique of the "real"
world outside its own literary boundaries.

Utopia and Genre

Speculative fiction that depicts utopian societies is the most obvious example of
utopian literature; however the utopian impulse touches the genre of romance
as well. Critics of romance fiction argue that the genre is invested in the depic-
tion of a utopian vision of heterosexual relationships realized at the romance
novel’s conclusion when the “utopian promise that male-female relations can
be managed successfully” is made (Radway 73). Because, as Janice Radway
in her groundbreaking study of romance readers argues, readers of romance
"believe the stories are only fantasies on one level at the very same time that
they take other aspects of them to be real" (187), romance literature has been
termed the literature of “wish-fulfillment,” a descriptor applied to utopian
literature as well. According to Jean Radford, “wish-fulfillment” narratives of
romance “represent the intrusion of ‘it might have been’ into ‘it was’” and al-
low “a certain latitude’ that dissolves the boundaries between the actual and

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the potential, offering a vision of "the possible or future ideal" (4). Radway's conclusion—that romance readers have conflicting views of the romance story's realistic potential—coincides with Radford's conception of the novels as utopias where the "actual" and the "potential" meet (within the text, at least in the minds of the readers), the romance offers an image of "the possible or future ideal" in much the same way a traditional utopian novel might draw from social reality to present an idealized world.

Romance novels, argue critics, are "powerful purveyors of a particular ideological positioning" (Pecora 50), and, as such, they make political statements in the same way that utopian novels offer political or social critique. Radway argues that romance novels function "as a ritualistic repetition of a single, immutable cultural myth" (198) related to the naturalness and inevitability of heterosexual relationship. This myth is not without political opposition, as Linda K. Christian-Smith concludes: "these novels make a strong statement about the irreconcilability of feminine power and satisfying relationships with males" (92). As utopian novels in which, Frederic Jameson writes, "politics is supposed to be over" (para. 14), romance novels depoliticize the heterosexual romantic relationship that Christian-Smith argues is about the struggle for power between women and men by depicting the heterosexual relationship in what Radway would call mythic terms. "Romance writers," writes Radway, "supply a myth in the guise of the truly possible" (207); however, this myth may only be "truly possible" if the political questions that inspire the critique of the romance myth are considered moot. Romance novels, then, operate in the same way utopian visions operate, as "wish-fulfillment" narratives that "emerge . . . at the moment of the suspension of the political" (Jameson para. 15). That is, in Radway's terms, romance novels fulfill the reader's wish that heterosexual relationship can be effectively and even pleasurably managed by women; however, this utopian vision may only be realized if the sexual politics complicating the relationship have disappeared or been overcome.

Boy Meets Boy exhibits many of the same characteristics associated with the romance novel: it follows the narrative formula associated with the genre and concludes with an image of utopian bliss derived from a relationship similar to those found in traditional romances. While Radway argues that the traditional (adult) romance narrative is "as much about recovering motherly nurturance and affection as it is about the need to be found desirable by men" (151), and that this theme is a consistent presence in the standard and formulaic plots associated with adult romances, the teen romance novel is primarily invested in the "need to be found desirable," a theme that surfaces in a similar form of narrative iteration. Joyce A. Litton argues that two "major variations" of the teen romance plot (itself an adolescent version of the adult romance plot) guide the romance to its utopian conclusion: in the first, the heroine must "make . . . changes to her image" to be rewarded with a date and the promise of a relationship; in the second, the "heroine must decide between two boys who are interested in her" (20). Both of these teen plots, with their emphasis on
the ability of the heroine to attract heterosexual romantic attention, coincide with the “need to be found desirable by men” that Radway argues motivates the romance narrative’s action. *Boy Meets Boy* draws from Litton’s second plot variation: Paul, the novel’s narrator, falls for Noah, the sensitive artist, but is tempted to reunitewith his ex-boyfriend, a popular jock who confesses he still has feelings for Paul. The “torn between two lovers” scenario is played for laughs in *Boy Meets Boy*, as a school “bookie” sets odds on whether Paul will get back together with the jock or win Noah’s heart; however, the humor of this subplot depends somewhat on its resemblance to the traditional romantic plot. The conclusion of *Boy Meets Boy* is taken more seriously; as Paul and Noah pose for family pictures before departing as dates to a school dance, Paul has a “revelation”: “For the first time in my life, I truly feel part of a couple... It feels natural,” he thinks (Levithan 182). This feeling of “naturalness” culminates in Paul’s final musing and the novel’s last line, “What a wonderful world” (Levithan 185), a sentiment that effectively describes the romance novel’s utopian bliss of relationship.

Ironically, in order for *Boy Meets Boy* to reach the utopian conclusion that seals its status as a romance novel, the story must be set in a utopian world. Traditional heterosexual romance novels do not require utopias to thrive; however, in literature and, arguably, in life, homosexual relationships are not as clearly sanctioned, accommodated, and encouraged such that the consistent possibility for the realization of a homosexual union is offered. In young adult literature, perhaps more so than in adult literature, homosexual romance requires a utopian setting for the romance’s conclusion to be considered genuinely blissful. Young adult romance fiction typically characterizes romantic relationships in almost exclusively heterosexual terms and underscores the “compulsory heterosexuality” present in both the genre and in the larger world outside the text. This “compulsory heterosexuality” is present in GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning) literature for teens as well; although depictions of first love and the development of same-sex romance have long been aspects of GLBTQ literature, these relationships are viewed not as utopian goals but in terms of the conflict in which the relationship places the pair within heteronormative society. In her survey of young adult literature with GLBTQ content published between 1969 and 1997, Christine Jenkins writes, “Given the gender-role restrictions, the prevalence of heterosexism and homophobia, and the perceived necessity of the closet, a YA [young adult] novel in which, say, same-sex couples could freely walk hand in hand in public would hardly be considered a work of contemporary realism” (Jenkins 311). These social barriers Jenkins identifies have historically disallowed an emergence of young adult gay or lesbian romance in which the central conflict is “merely” romantic.

Drawing from the definition of utopia posited by Levitas, and the question about the nature of utopian fiction posed by Hintz and Ostry, we may begin to determine how *Boy Meets Boy* describes “how we would live” and “what kind of world” we would live in “if we could do just that” in terms of form, thematic
message, the “intension . . . of the author to portray an ideal . . . world” (Hintz and Ostry 2–3), and potential reader response. Levithan’s novel is, essentially, a romance novel and draws its form from the genre’s characteristic structures described above; however, as a GLBTQ romance, the novel requires a utopian setting before the genre’s utopian dream may be realized. To describe the utopian world that would allow the same-sex romance depicted in Boy Meets Boy to flourish publicly, the novel draws from conventional literary depictions of utopia and manipulates paradigms of representation of GLBTQ life found in both GLBTQ-themed young adult texts and gay-themed pornography. The novel’s depictions of the social world in which Boy Meets Boy is set answers Levitas’s “what kind of world” questions, while its images of openly GLBTQ life answer the “how would we live” query. The answers to these questions are addressed through Levithan’s depictions of an ideal and GLBTQ-friendly world, the potential of which is lent credence by Levithan’s use and extension of familiar representations of sexuality.

**Utopian Setting—What Kind of World?**

If, as Jameson argues, utopian worlds or dreams are founded on the assumption that a specific “root of all evil” has been eliminated from that world (para. 4), the “evil” that has been eliminated from the world of the traditional romance is what Radway identifies as the “socializing procedures, instructional habits, and formal and informal sanctions against deviance” that lead women to define themselves in terms of their positions in heterosexual relationship (208). The “myth” of the romance, Radway argues, is that heterosexual relationship is not an “imposed necessity” for women but rather “a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice” (208). Interestingly, by eliminating a different “root of all evil” from the utopian world envisioned in its narrative, Boy Meets Boy depicts romance in the same, mythic terms envisioned by the traditional romance. Levithan’s novel, like the traditional romance, describes a primary character’s path to a romantic relationship; however, because different “socializing procedures, instructional habits and formal and informal sanctions against deviance” (Radway 208) exist in this narrative world, the romantic pairing realized at the novel’s end is not meant to symbolize essential roles for men and women in heterosexual relationships but instead to represent one of the many ways to imagine relationship. In this way, Boy Meets Boy offers a utopian vision similar to the vision Suzanne Juhasz argues is offered in the adult lesbian romance: a gesture of faith and hope, even more idealistic—and courageous—than its counterpart in the heterosexual romance. In the teeth of homophobia and sexism, the reality of the social world, lesbian romances propose that an alternative way of being, living, and especially loving exists and can flourish” (240). As a romance novel that is, by its definition, utopian but is also situated in a utopian society, Boy Meets Boy offers the same conclusion that the lesbian romance novel offers: its depiction of the male protagonist’s
relationship with another boy is described in the same terms Juhasz calls idealistic. At the end of the novel, Paul confirms, “I know this is right” (Levithan 171). The “rightness” of Paul’s relationship is acknowledged publicly, outside the context of what Juhasz calls the “teeth of homophobia and sexism” and “the reality of the social world.”

Boy Meets Boy is set in a utopian town that seems to be, like the utopian that informed Thomas More’s coining of the term, no place. This familiar seeming town that exists in “no place” is a trope associated with utopian fiction, just as its accessibility by train—a point made early in the novel—evokes what Alice Jenkins would argue is a primary means of “getting to utopia” in children’s literature. Though geographical clues are given as to Boy Meets Boy’s setting—it is a reasonable ride away from a city that seems an awful lot like New York (the characters visit the Strand bookstore there)—the town’s name is never given; instead, the characters describe this place as merely “somewhere,” suggesting its “utopian” location. That the image of the train is evoked and serves as the only link to what seems like a “real” reference (or, an actual location in the real world) is important in establishing the novel’s utopian setting. Alice Jenkins argues that the railway train, “which offers the possibility of movement within a space which is itself moving,” is an especially apt vehicle for travel into utopian worlds because it links the traveling characters to both the real world departure gate and the utopian world arrival terminal (27). When Paul recalls meeting his best friend, Tony, on the train back from the city, his words seem inspired by Jenkins’s argument: “Riding the train is all about moving forward,” he observes (Levithan 36). Paul’s description of their approach to more familiar territory is infused with magic: “now the city lights ebbed in their grip over the landscape. The meadowlands waved in the darkness until the smaller cities appeared” (Levithan 36); Paul’s return home is like the return to Narnia from the light of the room through the darkness of the wardrobe to the dim glow of the woods. When Tony remarks of Paul’s town, “I like it here,” Paul wonders, “Where is here? Is it this island, this town, this world?” (Levithan 5); this exchange effectively situates the characters in the “no place” world of the utopia.

As Jan Susina describes Francesca Lia Block’s vision of Los Angeles in her “Weetzie Bat” books, Boy Meets Boy’s setting “is an eclectic . . . landscape that is simultaneously fantastic and realistic” (199). Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, too, make this connection, noting, “Like Block’s Weetzie Bat, Levithan’s novel contains elements of magical realism (or wish-fulfilling idealization)” (145). While Cart and Jenkins characterize the “wish-fulfilling idealization” of the novel as magical realism, their use of “wish-fulfillment” recalls its use in the description of the utopian vision of the romance novel and utopias in general. The fantasy and realism Susina argues characterizes Block’s novels is present in Boy Meets Boy as well; Levithan’s novel’s suburban setting is a contrast of tradition and near magical eccentricity. Levithan’s description of the residential area evokes Levittown and picket fences as Paul describes “the good things

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around him: “the older man and even older woman sitting on a park bench, sharing a blintz; the seven-year-old leaping from sidewalk square to sidewalk square, tectering and shifting to avoid stepping on a crack” (66). These more traditional (albeit romanticized) images of suburbia are contrasted with Paul’s description of the town’s more unexpected elements: “the I Scream Parlor, which shows horror movies as you wait for your double dip . . . the Pink Floyd shrine in our local barber’s back yard” and the Veggie D’s restaurant, which “used to be your usual processed-slaughterhouse fast-food joint, but a few years ago a bunch of vegetarians launched a boycott and soon the chain lost its link. A local food co-op took over the building” (Levithan 69, 55). As evidenced by the activist impulse that turned a fast-food restaurant into a vegetarian co-op, Paul’s town is a forward-thinking burg that replaced the Boy Scouts with the “Joy Scouts” because “when the Boy Scouts decided gays had no place in their ranks, our Scouts decided the organization had no place in our town” (Levithan 66). Unlike the Shangra-L.A. (Los Angeles) of Block’s “Weetzie Bat” books, which Susina suggests is an “essentially postmodern world” born of “the development of a new type of social life and economic order that has emerged in late, multinational consumer capitalism” (198), Boy Meets Boy’s setting is less a “postmodern world” and more of a utopian vision that, in Dickerson’s terms, draws from and manipulates reality to “create a world of ‘political or social perfection’” (4).

**Utopian Life—How Would We Live?**

While the setting of Boy Meets Boy is described in fantastic and idealistic terms, it is the social world of the novel, in which gay, straight, and bisexual relationships are equated and authorized, that distinguishes the novel’s utopian location. It is interesting to note that this utopia is not a separatist one that sanctions only homosexual congress (as in the feminist separatist utopia depicted in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland); instead it is characterized as a heterotopia. While homotopia might seem to be the appropriate term to describe a queer utopia, Wendy Pearson argues that this descriptor refers to a sense of sameness; traditionally, Pearson notes, “homotopia has tended to be used as an architectural term for an aesthetic sensibility which values order, repetition and symmetry” (86). The most sexually liberating alternative utopia is the grand heterotopia, argues Pearson, that sanctions not only the “standard deviation” of physical sex that characterizes male-female relations but all forms of sexual congress: “such a heterotopia cannot, despite the similarity of the words, be heteronormative, but must find a place for not one but many sexes and sexualities” (93). Paul’s description of his town’s singles scene represents one vision of what Pearson would call “heterotopia”:

There isn’t really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back . . . Most of the straight boys try to sneak into the Queer Beer bar. Boys who love boys flirt with girls who love girls. And whether your heart is
strictly ballroom or bluegrass punk, the dance floors are open to whatever you have to offer (Levithan 1–2).

The social “scene,” “open to whatever you have to offer” is one of what Pearson calls “many [sexual] deviations” that distinguishes the novel’s utopian world as heterotopic.

Boy Meets Boy’s characterization of sexuality reveals its utopia as a paradise of sexual liberation. Levithan’s depiction of GLBTQ life outside of the narrator’s idyllic town underscores the utopian nature of the society in which the novel is set. Interestingly, Levithan draws in part from historical literary representations of GLBTQ life to characterize the experience of sexual “difference” as lived outside the novel’s primary setting; in doing so, he criticizes the status quo reality the literature from which he draws inspiration represents. Although, as Cart and Jenkins acknowledge, “there is clearly more visible support for GLBTQ teens in the twenty-first century,” the dilemma of “whether or not to come out and suffer . . . the slings and arrows of outrageous homophobia remain as central to current YA fiction as they have been from the earliest days of the genre” (134). Cart and Jenkins identify three categories of GLBTQ literary representation present in both historical and contemporary young adult literature: “homosexual visibility, in which a character who has not previously been considered gay/lesbian comes out”; “gay assimilation,” in which “the existence—at least in the world of the story—of a ‘melting pot’ of sexual and gender identity” is assumed; and “queer consciousness,” which depicts gay and lesbian characters “in the context of their communities of GLBTQ people and their families of choice” (xx). Cart and Jenkins trace a historical progression in GLBTQ representation using this three-pronged model of gay visibility and argue that while the predominant plotlines of the earliest young adult novels with GLBTQ content involved “homosexual visibility,” as social ideas about gays and lesbians have evolved, the portrayal of GLBTQ teens in young adult literature has expanded to include representations that encompass the more liberated themes of “gay assimilation” and “queer consciousness.” Boy Meets Boy makes reference to these literary models of visibility throughout its narrative; however, a subplot set primarily outside of the novel’s utopian town more closely resembles the plotline associated with the earliest GLBTQ young adult novels and emphasizes the “slings and arrows” of homophobia in a way reminiscent of GLBTQ novels of the previous century.

Although Levithan’s depiction of sexuality in the novel’s utopian town can be considered as fantastic extensions of “gay assimilation” and “queer community,” Cart and Jenkins note, “the real world does intrude in subplots, one of which involves Paul’s best friend Tony” (145). This subplot details the conflict between Tony and his religious family with regard to his sexuality and resembles what Cart and Jenkins term the “homosexual visibility” plot. Unlike Paul, Tony is not officially “out” to his parents. When his mother discovers a copy of the Advocate under Tony’s bed, his family “prayed loudly, delivering all of their disappointment and rage and guilt to him in the form of an address to

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God” and, as a result, “Tony couldn’t trust them any longer—not with the gay part of his life” (Leviathan 96, 97). Tony’s struggle for acceptance by his family is what Cart and Jenkins might call a “stor[y] of truth, of the positive and negative results when GLBTQ characters (and people) are honest about their sexual orientation” (106). These positives and negatives are clearly articulated in Tony’s confession to Paul, near the end of the novel, that “I love being with you and Joni and the rest of the group. I love being a part of that. But I can never really enjoy it, because I know that at the end, I’ll be back here” (Leviathan 151). In Tony’s case, “here” is his home in a neighboring town, where his parents believe “that if [he doesn’t] straighten out, [he] will lose [his] soul” (Leviathan 152). That Tony can enjoy time in Paul’s town but not in his own home without feeling like he has “been pushed back into the shape of this person [he] used to be” (Leviathan 151) speaks to the conditional nature of this “homosexual visibility” struggle and serves to underscore the novel’s primary utopian setting in which Tony’s “visibility” is not an issue. The dilemma that emerges in this contrast—of “homosexuality driving families apart (at least initially)” (Leviathan 151)—is, according to Cart and Jenkins, “a more common outcome in YA novels of the nineties” (96); Leviathan’s inclusion of Tony’s parallel story is a distinct nod to this historical literary representation.

The novel’s realistic characterization of Tony is a likely function of this character’s situation outside of the primary utopian setting of the novel; within the unnamed utopian society of Boy Meets Boy, GLBTQ life is rendered in terms associated with a more underground medium: gay pornography. The comparison of Boy Meets Boy to pornography is not one related to sexual content; that is, Boy Meets Boy is neither a pornographic nor explicit novel. Just as Leviathan’s utopian (fantastic) novel presents gay characters in an imagined context of acceptance in which a spectrum of sexuality and sexual practices are acknowledged and encouraged, homosexual male pornography, according to Fred Fejes’s analysis of the genre, serves similar ends. Furthermore, if gayporn (Fejes’s term), like heterosexual porn, represents for young people one of “few glimpses of human sexuality . . . [prior to] the age of sexual experimentation” (Dalal 80), then with Boy Meets Boy, because it is one of very few young adult novels that allows more than mere “glimpses” at gay teen life, the comparison becomes more appropriate. Fejes argues that gayporn “presents alternative visions of desire and formulations of identity” (112) and, while feminist contestations of pornography continue to exist, Fejes’s is not the only voice of advocacy for gay pornography. GLBTQ: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture acknowledges the thematic liberation promised in gay pornography: “As a group that is both defined by its sexual activity and rejected by the majority culture for it, gay men have often seen in pornography an all-too-rare positive image of gay sexuality” (Thomas para 1). Furthermore, John Mercer argues, “It should be noted . . . that gay pornography occupies a central place in gay culture as perhaps the predominant expression of a gay identity, constructed by and for gay men” (286).
Because of the central place it occupies in gay culture, and because of the comparative dearth of images of same-sex sexual expression available in the wider media world, it is not surprising to find some of the same tenets of gay pornography present in *Boy Meets Boy*. In a bibliographic essay discussing Christopher N. Kendall’s *Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination*, critic William Arazia argues, “Gay pornography plays an important role in making it clear to teenagers (and adults) struggling with their sexual orientation that they are not alone,” but he also notes, “everyone would agree that it would be good if pornography was not the first point of contact between the gay community and males coming to acknowledge their homosexuality” (212–13). *Boy Meets Boy*, as one of few (if not the only) romance novels featuring a same-sex couple in which the fact of the characters’ homosexuality is not the central issue, becomes, like Fejes argues pornography has become, “one of the few explicit forms of representation of gay sexual desire available to gay males” (95). *Boy Meets Boy* is not a sexually explicit text; it is, however, one in which the central characters are motivated by a desire for one another and share this mutual understanding openly. On their first official date, Paul and Noah “relish [the] briefest of touches—brushing against each other . . . skimming hand over hand . . . pressing arm against arm”; the next day, in school, the feel of Noah’s fingers running “briefly” over Paul’s wrist “passes over [him] like air, and makes [him] shiver like a kiss” (Levithan 78, 79). While this content, particularly as it is written, seems to more closely resemble the traditional romance text, the gender of the players distinguishes it from traditional romance in a fundamental way. Just as Fejes argues that gay male pornography “cannot be simply ‘read-off’ the ‘original’ heterosexual text” (99), *Boy Meets Boy* cannot be “read-off” the “original” teen (heterosexual) romance. Fejes writes, “gay male identities and desire are defined and articulated against the backdrop of a dominant heterosexual structure of meaning and draw upon the various texts of heterosexuality as the basis for their own construction”; these elements are “deconstruct[ed] and recombine[ed]” and “reconfigured in such a way as to produce texts of identity whose meanings are very different” (99).

*Boy Meets Boy* is set in what Fejes would call a “separated utopia,” a world of sexual liberation that can be understood as a fantastic extension of what Cart and Jenkins call “gay assimilation.” The gay, lesbian, straight, and transgender characters in Levithan’s novel occupy a utopic “melting pot” in which these same characters “just happen to be” gay, lesbian, straight, and transgender. The characters’ sexualities and sexual identities are so unproblematic that they are introduced in practically banal terms, which serves to extend the narrative from “gay assimilation” to “separated utopia.” For example, as he introduces himself as the novel’s narrator, Paul remarks that he has always known he was gay, but “it wasn’t confirmed until he was in kindergarten” when he saw a comment his teacher had written on his report card: “Paul is definitely gay and has a very good sense of self” (Levithan 8). Levithan’s introduction of Infinite Darlene, a cross-dressing quarterback at Paul’s school, confirms the setting as a “sepa-
ated utopia." While a figure like Infinite Darlene would likely be an outcast in a traditional school, in the context of Levithan's novel Infinite Darlene can be introduced at a school pep rally by a "biker cheerleading team" and "stride . . . out in a pink ball gown covered in part by her quarterback jersey" (Levithan 22). This remarkable scene lifts the novel from one of mere gay assimilation to the fantasy level of what Fejes would call the "separated utopia," in which "the vision of gay desire and sexuality represented is totally separated from the problems of heterosexual/gay tension" (103). Gay assimilated or not, few heterogeneous communities would be likely to unanimously welcome an openly transgendered teen, let alone elect her homecoming queen. In Levithan's novel, however, gay sexuality and transgendered identity are lived openly in a setting that seems divorced from what Fejes calls "the problems of heterosexual/gay tension."

While Cart and Jenkins argue that Boy Meets Boy meets the criteria for both the "gay assimilation" novel and the novel of "queer consciousness" because the novel is a "story of queer community as envisioned by GLBTQ teens who would just like to hold hands or attend a school dance without getting gay-bashed" (150), with this observation the critics acknowledge the fantasy aspect of Levithan's novel that, I argue, disallows its categorization in their more realistic terms. Fejes's argument regarding the mechanics of gay pornography—which allows that "while these films draw upon [traditional] texts and heterosexual masculinity, the end result is very much a text of gay male sexuality and desire, a text that explores a wide range of positions of the sexual subject without falling into the power dynamics of a gender based structure of domination" (107)—draws attention to the ways in which Boy Meets Boy may be more closely allied with underground gay media than with historical traditions in GLBTQ young adult literature. As Fejes argues, gay pornography is "a text of gay male sexuality and desire," a statement that refers to its characterization as a utopian text of wish-fulfillment. The "queer community as envisioned by GLBTQ teens" (emphasis mine) is a statement that refers to wish-fulfillment as well. In fact, Cart and Jenkins continue, in that statement, to describe just that wish: "to hold hands or attend a school dance without getting gay-bashed." That Boy Meets Boy describes this wish and, furthermore, that this wish can only be realized in an admittedly fantastic world of as yet unimagined sexual equality places the novel firmly within the utopian tradition.

While Boy Meets Boy draws upon the "traditional" modes of GLBTQ representation found in both the GLBTQ teen novel and gay pornography, it is its refusal to commit to introducing its utopian-dwelling characters in terms of what Cart and Jenkins identify as the novel of "homosexual visibility" that confirms its status as a work of utopian fiction. Novels of homosexual visibility, "in which a character who has not previously been considered gay/lesbian comes out either voluntarily or involuntarily," characterize most of the "first wave" of GLBTQ novels for teens written in the 1980s (xx). Cart and Jenkins compare this type of GLBTQ novel to the "social conscience stories of racial integration" in which a "previously homogeneous society is interrupted by the appearance
quences of a social revolution that has created a distinctly different way of living in a sometimes radically altered world. Quoted in *Voice of Youth Advocates*, Levithan’s comments about the utopian aspects of *Boy Meets Boy* reflect this ideal: “I’m sick of reflecting reality. I wanted to create reality [in this novel]” (Murdock 187). How the different reality of *Boy Meets Boy* came about is never disclosed in the novel; Paul merely acknowledges that the separate spheres of gay and straight “scenes” in his town “got all mixed up a while back” (Levithan 1). That some kind of revolution or social change (the “mix-up” to which Paul refers) has occurred prior to the beginning of the novel is implied; how the revolution or social change was enacted is less explicitly indicated. Because this reformation is never described, *Boy Meets Boy* does not, as Levitas writes, function “as [a] political programme” (164). Levitas argues that in utopian fiction the “transition to the good society is frequently not addressed, because utopia is the expression of desire and desire may outstrip hope while not necessarily outstripping possibility” (164). Part of what a literary utopia does, then, is describe and normalize desire and, at the same time, build consensus around that desire. *Boy Meets Boy*, as an example of utopian fiction, describes and normalizes same-sex romantic relationships by manipulating and re-presenting the same conventions found in romance, GLBTQ-themed young adult literature, and gay pornography.

Utopian fictions work to critique an existing social structure or condition by, ironically, refusing to refer to the critiqued element. Instead, by describing an ideal social or political circumstance, the utopia calls attention to or makes visible the conditions that disallow the emergence of this ideal. By depicting a world in which a spectrum of romantic relationships is authorized and encouraged, *Boy Meets Boy* makes the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality “visible” in much the same way Henry Giroux argues that Whiteness may be made visible in the context of critical pedagogy. Giroux, citing bell hooks, Richard Dyer, Stuart Hall, and others, argues that, historically, “Whites see themselves as racially transparent and reinscribe Whiteness as invisible; that is, it rarely occurs to White people that they are privileged because they are white” (287). As a result, discussions of race, racism, and inequality are often grounded in this assumption and position Whiteness as the invisible norm against which concepts of difference may be measured. Giroux’s argument can be applied to sexuality and identity as well; Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” describes a phenomenon similar to the one Giroux observes. Rarely, writes Rich, “is the question ever raised as to whether, in a different context or other things being equal, [anyone] would choose heterosexual coupling and marriage; heterosexuality is presumed the ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most [people]’” (13). By constructing a fictional world in which heterosexuality is not the “presumed ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most [people],’” Levithan draws attention to this assumption and, to quote Giroux, “builds upon, but also moves beyond, the view of [heterosexuality] as simply a fixed position of domination” (293) and normalcy.
Thought Cart and Jenkins might argue that literary depictions of gay assimilation and queer consciousness are examples of the expansion of literary possibilities for gay characters and their readers, this assimilation and consciousness must be explained, constructed, or made explicit in any such narrative. That is, unlike traditional romantic fiction that portrays the heterosexually normative world as a given (as noted above, we do not require “straight” fiction to ground itself in an explanation of heterosexuality), even in GLBTQ literature of gay assimilation and queer consciousness, gay characters and their situations must always be explained in a way that renders their circumstances tenuous. Though the central figures of contemporary GLBTQ texts may find romance and relationship by the novels’ ends, the couples’ security—in terms of social acceptance—almost always hangs in the balance. Roberta Seelinger Trites’s description of the typical GLBTQ young adult novel supports this claim: these novels “seem to promise the reader freedom from past constraints, freedom from continued repression, freedom from narrow-minded discourse—but simultaneously, such books often undermine that alleged liberation, as if the very existence of the genre gay Y/A literature depended on repression” (143). That is, GLBTQ young adult novels seem to cite themselves and their existence as evidence of “freedom from past constraints”; however, because most of these novels’ conflicts encode homosexuality in terms of, as Trites argues, “negative rhetoric” (150), novels of this type imagine little in the way of liberation or possibility for their characters or even readers. With this reality noted, the utopian “strategy” may be the strongest way to imagine and perhaps even effect social change. In this light, Boy Meets Boy becomes a tool for making sexuality visible; its conventional use of codes of romance to describe a relationship outside the heterosexual union advocated by the traditional teen romance novel draws attention to both the sexually limited conventions on which the romance may be based as well as the conventions of the GLBTQ-themed young adult novel that have historically excluded “generic” romance.

Works Cited


The Queer Utopia of David Levithan’s Boy Meets Boy


