

**HOMOPHOBIA IN AMERICAN GAY-THEMED YOUNG ADULT NOVELS
(2000-2010)**

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by

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Abstract

This thesis explores a selection of ten gay-themed American young adult (YA) novels published in the 2000s, starting from Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) to P.E. Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009). It examines the manifestation of homophobia and the coping strategies proffered in these books. By situating the novels as part of "problem YA fiction," which typically depicts issues that teenage characters have experienced and must deal with, I argue that although the primary texts are imbued with the representations of homophobia, they can be considered as the texts of resistance, calling for activism to challenge homophobic bigotry. This is not simply because the novels include potential tactics to cope with homophobia, but also because they point out that these strategies are the way through which omnipresence of power is managed and made use of by the gay teenage characters to resist homophobia.

In this thesis, the analysis is undertaken in four main areas in which homophobia is focalized in the texts: internalized homophobia, familial homophobia, homophobia in American high schools, and Christian-based homophobia. I explore the various strategies to deal specifically with homophobia in these domains and show how all collective power is awakened within multiple surrounding characters, who are recruited to join with the gay protagonists' activism to combat homophobia. I contend that the novels present homophobia as a problem that everybody must be aware of and which must be eradicated. In this regard, I hold that the various novels under scrutiny constitute texts of activism.

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Introduction

The late 1960s saw the first appearance of Young Adult (YA) “problem fiction” in the United States with the publication of Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman* (1968), S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1976), and Ann Head’s *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* (1976).¹ These novels were the “new realism” which is, as Christine A. Jenkins observes, characterized by “candor, unidealized characters and settings, colloquial and realistic language, and plots that portrayed realistic problems faced by contemporary young adults that did not necessarily find resolution in a happy ending.”² Alongside these pivotal YA problem novels, John Donovan’s ground-breaking *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) was published. The book is widely considered to be the first adolescent fiction to explicitly feature teenage characters’ homosexuality.³ At this point, gay-themed novels formed as a sub-category within an area of young adult literature, and since then such fiction has continuously gained popularity among American teenage readers as evidenced in the publication of more titles.⁴ Many of these books have been praised for their content as well as their literary merit and the sub-genre has found its way into many American classrooms today. They are, for instance, A.M. Homes’s *Jack* (1990), Marion Dane Bauer’s *Am I*

1. Christine A. Jenkins, “Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969-92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance,” in *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 147.

In this thesis, young adult (YA) novels are books which target teenage readers aged between 12-18 years old. This age group is a criterion set by YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association). YALSA is part of the American Library Association, which develops additional recommended reading resources of interest to library staff, educators and afterschool providers who serve teenagers. It also nominates LGBTQ-themed fiction and nonfiction for the YALSA awards. See YALSA, “YALSA’s Book Awards & Booklists,” Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), July 7, 2006, <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklistsbook>.

2. Jenkins, “Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969-92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance,” 147.

3. Don Latham, “Are We There Yet? A Retrospective Look at John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*,” *The ALAN Review* 29, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 42-47. Accessed November 11, 2013. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v29n1/pdf/latham.pdf>.

4. The statistics on the numbers of YA novels which represent homosexual characters can be found on Malinda Lo’s official website. See Malinda Lo, “I Have Numbers! Stats on LGBT Young Adult Books Published in the U.S.,” *Malinda Lo* (blog), September 14, 2011, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2011/09/i-have-numbers-stats-on-lgbt-young-adult-books-published-in-the-u-s?rq=statistics>.

Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence (1994), Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2001), to name but a few.

Originating from problem fiction—in which the plot centers around teenage characters' struggles with various life issues (family, drug addiction, pregnancy, and so on)—gay-themed YA fiction invokes issues associated with sexuality, coming out, acceptance and community. Another issue is homophobia, the appearance of which can be traced back to Donovan's *I'll Get There* which includes familial and internalized homophobia that the gay protagonist encounters.⁵ Homophobia as a theme is also prevalent in later novels—books published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Yet, in the narratives of these decades, homophobia was never positioned as the key problem the gay characters had to deal with. Instead, the main issues were homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and the revelation of homosexuality (“coming out” and “being outed”). However, since the year 2000, homophobia has come to the fore as the central theme in many YA novels.⁶ These books serve to raise public awareness of a problem which has in the past and which continues to plague the lives of young homosexual people. Moreover, it is my contention that many contemporary texts call for activism to rally against it.

Indeed, while gay-themed novels published in the 2000s extensively highlight the characters' experiences of homophobic violence, the books usually proffer potential strategies as employed by these young sexual minorities to challenge homophobia. In my opinion, such inclusion of homophobic coping strategies is, in itself, evidence to indicate that some gay YA fiction can be considered as texts of resistance. The literature does not leave homophobia unchecked. Rather it shows the young reader, in particular, those who

5. Donovan's *I'll Get There*...depicts the familial homophobia of both parents. The mother of Davy Ross, the gay protagonist, hysterically shouts at her son after witnessing Davy sleeping with his same-sex friend, Altschuler. Davy's father approaches the situation more calmly, but nonetheless expresses his disapproval of his son's homosexual orientation by admonishing him: “[You] shouldn't get involved in some special way of life which will close other ways of life to [you].” In addition to the familial homophobia, the book reveals Davy's internalized homophobia. The gay protagonist comes to believe that his homosexual behavior has caused his dog's death. See John Donovan, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* (1969; repr. Woodbury: Flux, 2010), 173.

6. Corrine M. Wickens, “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature,” *Children's Literature in Education* 42, no. 2 (March 26, 2011): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-011-9129-0>.

are facing the issue, how homophobia can be properly dealt with or, at least in some extreme cases, lessen its degree of severity. Despite this, much gay-themed adolescent fiction has received criticism from certain scholars who critique the literature for seeming to be permeated by fear and hatred.

In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate that the gay-themed YA fictions under discussion are texts of resistance. To do so, I will focus upon ten novels which were published in the 2000s. Ranging from Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) through to Patrick Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009), I will begin with a discussion of the ways in which homophobia manifests itself in these novels. I will show that homophobia might not be overt but instead can be covert or subtle. As such, it is necessary to clearly identify the form of homophobia which is expressed in order to understand how the coping strategy as proffered in the texts can challenge it. Then I will offer an in-depth analysis of the tactics which deal with the instance of homophobia as linked to the dynamics of power relations. Associated with this, I will draw on one of the key characteristics of power – its omnipresence – and my analysis will focus upon presenting how, through the implementation of such strategies, power is managed and made use of to challenge homophobia. My linkage of these coping strategies to the notion of power is inspired by Michel Foucault's observation that "Power is everywhere."⁷ His epigram is widely quoted and applied in LGBTQ activism as it encourages people to view power in a potentially positive way. Namely, power is already "there" for everybody (to resist prejudices and discrimination) and thereby power is not always an oppressive force which we cannot resist and are merely submissive to it. This radical view of power gives sexual minorities a sense of hope and further encourages them to find ways to challenge homophobia.

Prior to my analysis of the selected novels, I will offer an overview of the content and issues highlighted in gay YA literature published in each decade from the 1970s to 2000s. This is because, as already mentioned, even though homophobia is found in the early novels (books published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s), it is other issues – homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and disclosure of one's homosexual orientation – which were

7. Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1, *The History of Sexuality* (1978; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1998), 93.

prioritized in the narratives. Such differences, according to Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins's historical research on homosexual-themed YA literature, were largely influenced by what were considered to be the critical problems that homosexual people in American society were experiencing (and/or the homosexual-related problems that were receiving considerable public attention) at a given time.⁸ Cart and Jenkins reason that "GLBTQ literature for young adults—like the larger body of young adult literature to which it belongs—does not exist in a vacuum. [...] GLBTQ literature remains a reflection of [...] prevailing cultural, social, economic, and political attitudes."⁹ Thus, in order to understand why different issues are represented in each decade, it is necessary to incorporate the historical background vis-à-vis the social and political occurrences that arose across these periods, particularly those shifts and movements that affected the lives of non-heterosexual people in the United States.

The following outline will trace the major social and political events in LGBTQ history spanning from shortly before the 1969 Stonewall Riots (the year Donovan's *I'll Get There* was published) to the end of the 1970s. From this, I will turn my attention to the 1980s and 1990s. However, as homophobia became the "overarching" issue represented in LGBTQ young adult fiction published in the 2000s, and as all of the primary texts discussed in my thesis belong to the contemporary realist American genre published in this period, emphasis will be placed upon the cultural, social, and political situations that arose from the later decades of the 20th century through the first decade of the 21st century.¹⁰ Evidently, for this generation, homophobia is the pivotal issue against which homosexual characters struggle. Along with the historical background, the key problems focused upon within the homosexual-themed YA fiction published in each decade will be presented, in order to place the novels in their social context.¹¹

8. Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 82.

9. Cart and Jenkins, 82.

10. Wickens, "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia," 153.

11. The novels with gay male characters are mainly used as examples in my demonstration of the influences of American social occurrences upon American LGBTQ teen literature. This is because the majority of the books published between 1969 and the present mostly feature white middle-class gay male characters. Such

The Pivotal Issues in Gay-Themed Young Adult Literature between the 1970s and 1990s

Homosexuality as the Problem

Prior to the Stonewall Riots in 1969, an event that is now considered by many to have marked the birth of the modern homosexual liberation movement in the United States, homosexuality had long been stigmatized by many social institutions.¹² In some families, homosexuality was considered to be an aberration of nature. In psychiatry, it was listed as a mental disorder; see the second edition of The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-II) (1968). In many religions, homosexuality was declared to be a sin. Mary Bernstein postulates that these social taboos propelled North America to justify and legitimize discrimination against gays and lesbians.¹³ As her study reveals, between 1940 and 1964 the oppression of homosexuals was virulent. This can be seen in the United States State Department's declaration that homosexuality was illegal, so evicting someone from their home for being homosexual was generally acceptable.¹⁴ In addition to this, non-heterosexual people were neither allowed to form any legal organizations nor meet socially, especially in bars.¹⁵ This is because the government feared that such meetings would promote unlawful homosexual behavior.¹⁶ Police raids on homosexual bars occurred routinely, entailing scuffles between patrons and law enforcement officers.¹⁷ There is no doubt that targeted homosexual people were enraged by these injustices.

characters consist of up to fifty percent when compared to other gender and racial/ethnic groups. See Lo, "I Have Numbers! Stats on LGBT Young Adult Books Published in the U.S."

12. Ed Chamberlain, "AIDS Literature," ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary LGBTQ Literature of the United States Vol. 1: A-L* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 1.

13. Mary Bernstein, "United States: Multi-Institutional Politics, Social Movements and the State," in *The Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State: Comparative Insights into a Transformed Relationship*, ed. Manon Tremblay, David Paternotte, and Carol Johnson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 198.

14. Bernstein, 198.

15. Bernstein, 198.

16. Bernstein, 198.

17. Greta Schiller, *Before Stonewall: Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*, DVD (Peccadillo Pictures, 2009).

The ongoing tension between sexual minorities and the state reached a peak when a group of police officers burst into the Stonewall Inn, a bar in Greenwich Village, New York.¹⁸ Here, in the early morning of June 28, 1969, the police officers sought to arrest the socializing gay and lesbian clients.¹⁹ Although a mass-arrest did occur, it nevertheless became the “catalyst” for a sudden eruption of homosexual activism.²⁰ The event sparked a series of uprisings against the state by homosexuals and their allies around the country, with this further inspiring the modern LGBTQ rights movement and campaigns to end other forms of discrimination against non-heterosexual people.²¹ A significant achievement that resulted from the activism directed against the social stigmatization of homosexuality was its removal from the DSM-II, an act that had taken many years to come to fruition and finally occurring in 1973.²²

The removal of homosexuality from the DSM-II, however, invoked opposition from some conservative families and religious groups. In this regard, it was contended that the change would give way to same-sex marriage in the future, an eventuality that they believed could ultimately ruin traditional family values.²³ In the 1970s, a Christian group called “Save Our Children” was formed by Anita Bryant, a singer, entertainer, and *Miss America* runner-up.²⁴ Bryant campaigned both vigorously and publicly against any legislation that sought to protect or strengthen the rights of homosexuals, condemning them

18. Schiller.

19. Schiller.

20. Laura A. Renzi, Mark Letcher, and Kristen Miraglia, “Out of the Closet and Into the Open: LGBTQ Young Adult Literature in the Language Arts Classroom,” in *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today: Insights, Considerations, and Perspectives for the Classroom Teacher*, ed. Judith A. Hayn and Jeffrey S. Kaplan (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 117–34.

21. John D’ Emilio, “Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement after Fifty Years,” in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, ed. Craig A. Rimmerman, Kenneth D. Wald, and Clyde Wilcox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 35–36.

22. Philip Hickey, “Homosexuality: The Mental Illness That Went Away,” *Behaviorism and Mental Health: An Alternative Perspective on Psychiatry’s So Called Mental Disorders*, January 2, 2013, Accessed April 18, 2016. <http://behaviorismandmentalhealth.com/2011/10/08/homosexuality-the-mental-illness-that-went-away/>.

23. Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, ReVisioning American History (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011), EPUB e-book, chap 10.

24. Bronski, EPUB e-book, chap 10.

as seeking to abuse children.²⁵ In 1977, for instance, Bryant campaigned against the Dade County's human rights ordinance that protected homosexual people from discrimination.²⁶ She argued: "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children. If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nail biters."²⁷ As has been delineated, it is obvious that the activism of gay and lesbian individuals during this period aimed at de-problematizing homosexuality, a difficult process due to the deep-seated misunderstanding and bigotry engrained within American society prior to the end of the 1970s.

As a result of this simmering atmosphere, Donovan's *I'll Get There* which came out in 1969 and all of the novels published in the 1970s revolved exclusively around presenting the fact of homosexuality as the central issue in the gay characters' lives.²⁸ Very often, the gay characters' homosexuality (or its disclosure) results in the "loss of friends, loss of career, loss of family, and loss of community."²⁹ These characters often feel that their sexuality is something bad or wrong.³⁰ Even more concerning, by the conclusion of such narratives, almost all of the gay characters—both teenage and adult—were doomed to face calamities: accidents, physical harm, or even sudden and premature death (their own or that of others close to them). These dire outcomes were considered by many critics to be the price fictional characters were made to pay for being gay, the socially non-conforming

25. Bronski, EPUB e-book, chap 10.

26. Sherry Wolf, *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory of LGBT Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 139.

27. Wolf, 139.

28. Linda C. Salem, *Children's Literature Studies: Cases and Discussions* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006), 104. Following Donovan's *I'll Get There...* (1969), the growth of homosexual-themed juvenile novels being published in the 1970s was relatively slow. Cart and Jenkins's study highlights how, in the 1970s, only six novels were published. See the lists of the titles from Cart and Jenkins's *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, 37-38.

29. Melinda Kanner, "Young Adult Literature," in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and Their Works, from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: H. Holt, 1995), 766.

30. Nancy St. Clair, "Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel," *The ALAN Review* 23, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 39, accessed November 19, 2013, <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall95/Clair.html>.

sexual identity.³¹ Sandra Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974), for instance, includes the death of a gay character, Phil, in an automobile accident. After Phil is rumored to have kissed another boy, Jeff, both characters immediately become the target of verbal and physical homophobic abuse ("They're goddamn queers") and worse—they are almost tarred and feathered.³² Phil, in attempting to hide his true identity, invites a girl for a date. However, after becoming drunk, they both die in a car crash. A similar scene also appears in Lynn Hall's *Sticks and Stones* (1977) whereby the character of Tom is seriously injured in a car accident. And Isabelle Holland's *The Man without a Face* (1972) features an isolated gay man, Justin McLeod, and his death from a heart attack.

The trend of portraying this punishment in YA literature has been criticized for having a detrimental impact upon young readers, in particular, those who self-identify as gay and those who are perhaps questioning or confused about their sexuality. In their article "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?", Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham argue that such representations leave readers with the overall impression that homosexuality *per se* is the issue that leads to tragedy.³³ Hanckel and Cunningham's criticism is trenchant. It points directly to a serious flaw of early gay YA fiction – the problematization of homosexuality by unmistakably associating it with the misfortunes of the gay characters or those surrounding them. In doing so, these texts seem to convey that young readers will not find happiness either in the YA books or in their real lives. In reading about and relating to the doomed gay characters, they may perceive homosexuality to be the cause of such issues. For those readers who assert that their homosexuality is an innate given, *fixed*, and unmodifiable, the problematization of homosexuality and the repeated punishments portrayed in the fiction could lower their sense of self-worth. Hanckel and Cunningham focus exclusively upon gay readership, thus neglecting to

31. Kirk Fuoss, "A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay: The Politics of Male Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction," in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. Ronald Ringer (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 168; Terry L. Norton and Jonathan Vare, "Literature for Today's Gay and Lesbian Teens: Subverting the Culture of Silence," *English Journal* 94, no. 2 (November 2004): 65.

32. Sandra Scoppettone, *Trying Hard to Hear You* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 182.

33. Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham, "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 50, no. 7 (1976): 534.

consider young heterosexual readers. In response to Hanckel and Cunningham, I would like to add that the problematization of homosexuality in these early novels could mislead straight readers into perceiving that the punishment faced by those with a minority sexuality and/or the scapegoating of such individuals is acceptable.

HIV/AIDS as a Gay Disease

A decade later, in the 1980s, the outbreak of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) garnered widespread public attention across North America, with panic consequently being aimed toward HIV-positive people.³⁴ Many of those who were infected early with HIV were homosexual or had acquired the infection through tainted blood.³⁵ As awareness of HIV/AIDS was brought to the fore of public consciousness, it also became the central issue in homosexual-themed YA novels published in this decade. This was aimed to educate the teenage readership about how HIV is transmitted, how they could keep themselves safe, and how to respond sympathetically to HIV-positive (HIV+) individuals.³⁶ In these early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, six American activists formed the “Silence = Death Project,” the purpose of which was not only to attack the American government’s indifference toward the infection, but also to instigate public conversations regarding safe sex (a major HIV/AIDS prevention approach) and to combat other forms of intolerance toward homosexuals.³⁷ The campaign further drew the American public’s attention toward the visibility and power of gay people in order to challenge the existing and pervasive social injustice.

During this time, more and more homosexuals ventured to “come out of the closet.” “Coming out” or the disclosure of one’s homosexual identity was, along with HIV/AIDS, focalized on as the main problem for the LGBTQ young adult fiction’s gay characters. One

34. Diana Denza, “14 HIV-Positive Characters in Literature,” *Lambda Literary* (blog), May 10, 2011, <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/features/05/10/hiv-aids-contemporary-lit/>.

35. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, 63.

36. Melissa Gross, Annette Y. Goldsmith, and Debi Carruth, *HIV/AIDS in Young Adult Novels: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 86.

37. Raymond A. Smith, “Symbols,” in *Encyclopedia of AIDS: A Social, Political, Cultural, and Scientific Record of the HIV Epidemic* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 36.

outstanding example of a novel that features both issues is M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites* (1986), which received the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award in 1993.³⁸ Kerr's work has been praised for its honest and moving portrayal of its characters (both Peter who is gay and Erick, his younger brother coming to terms with the hitherto unsuspected homosexuality within the family) and Peter's approaching death from their incurable disease of AIDS.³⁹ Unfortunately, although a sense of warmth, love, and understanding runs throughout the novel, primarily in the way that Peter's family, and especially the maturing Erick, support him, the depiction of a dying gay character repeats the trend of earlier texts. By associating gay identity with HIV/AIDS and with death, the novel could be said to be confirming that gay men are doomed to meet tragic endings.

The trend of presenting HIV/AIDS together with the revelation of homosexual orientation as the key issues that the gay characters must deal with became the dominant narrative in the gay-themed adolescent novels published in the 1990s. It is interesting to note that although heterosexuals can fall prey to the infection, in these works all of the HIV-positive characters turn out to be gay. Some of these gay characters are adult—mostly *male* parents—who belatedly come out to their families. Here, the adolescent characters are their children and the texts' narrators.⁴⁰ Novels that exemplify this are Paula Fox's *The Eagle Kite* (1995) and Theresa Nelson's *Earthshine* (1996). In Fox's novel, the narrative focuses on Liam dealing with his parents' divorce and his father's decline as a result of AIDS. Liam discovers his father embracing Geoff Chaffee, his father's same-sex partner and the individual who had infected him with HIV, at the beach. The boy realizes that his father's homosexual orientation is the true reason behind the divorce and that homosexual sex was the cause of the HIV transmission, not the blood transfusion as Liam's mother had previously conveyed. Nelson's novel tells of a twelve-year-old girl, Slim, taking care of her

38. Melissa Gross, Annette Y. Goldsmith, and Debi Carruth, *HIV/AIDS in Young Adult Novels: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), x.

39. Laurel Clyde and Marjorie Lobban, *Out of the Closet and into the Classroom: Homosexuality in Books for Young People* (Deakin: ACT, 1992), 52.

40. Michel Cart's historical research on LGBTQ young adult novels highlights how, since 1981 and the emergence of AIDS, seventy five percent of HIV-positive gay characters were gay men. See Michael Cart, "Honoring Their Stories, Too: Literature for Gay and Lesbian Teens," *The ALAN Review* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1997): Accessed November 19, 2013. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall97/cart.html>.

divorced gay father Mack and his partner Larry, both of whom have AIDS. Slim decides not to stay with her uncaring mother and stepfather, but instead joins a support group that helps educate families of HIV-positive people about the illness and how to provide care. There, Slim meets a boy, Isaiah, whom she befriends. Isaiah believes that his parents can be cured by the Miracle Man who resides in the Hungry Valley north of Los Angeles. Both children and their families embark on a journey to find these miracles. *Earthshine* has been lauded as a realistic AIDS-focused YA novel, with critics noting its convincing depiction of the emotional repercussions affecting children with AIDS-afflicted parents.⁴¹

Indeed, while these books depict the gay parent characters coping with multiple issues—HIV infection and the revelation of homosexual identity—with the support of their children, it cannot be denied that in these works HIV/AIDS is homosexualized. This, as Melissa Gross, Annette Y. Goldsmith, and Debi Carruth point out, has the potential to confuse and mislead many young Americans into perceiving that HIV/AIDS is limited to a particular group of people. In other words, it may convey the notion that HIV/AIDS is a *gay disease* and is only transmitted through same-sex sexual conduct.⁴² Moreover, the homosexualization of HIV/AIDS has turned the word “gay” into a pejorative joke – for example in the offensive “GAY = Got AIDS Yet?” *backronym*.⁴³ The anti-gay remark, which undoubtedly scapegoats homosexual people, is still used today in the United States. In this sense, the novels failed (and arguably continue to fail) to serve their primary purpose, the educating of their young readership. Instead the works can be seen to have contributed to the stigmatization of gay people, leading such individuals to face social opprobrium and ostracism.

Aside from the homosexualization of HIV/AIDS, the revelation of the parent characters’ homosexuality engenders many damaging consequences, notwithstanding it being suggested in the texts as the gay characters’ attempt (or commitment) to live

41. Carly Bennett, “Guest Review: *Earthshine* - Theresa Nelson I HIV/AIDS in YA Lit Week,” *Portrait of a Woman* (blog), accessed March 31, 2016, <http://portrait-of-a-woman.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/guest-review-earthshine-theresa-nelson.html>.

42. Gross, Goldsmith, and Carruth, *HIV/AIDS in Young Adult Novels*, vii.

43. Daniel Hill, “Bug Chasers,” *Alternatives*, Spring 2010, <http://www.alternativesmagazine.com/15/hill.html>.

authentically. Here, the disclosure of homosexual orientation is a contributing factor to the respective family dysfunctionality. Again, Liam's family best exemplifies this. The narrative reveals that, following the divorce and the father's moving out to live with his same-sex partner, Liam's mother faces financial difficulties and the boy's relationship with his father turns sour. As the mother has to work harder to earn more money, Liam experiences a kaleidoscopic range of feelings – including confusion, grief, anger, fear, hatred toward his father's homosexuality and same-sex romance. Cart and Jenkins have noted that through the representations of the HIV-positive father's disclosure of his true identity – in particular, after meeting his new same-sex lover – a negative image of the gay character is unavoidably constructed.⁴⁴ Phillip's death of AIDS at the age of thirty-eight is thereby presented as retribution for choosing the younger gay man over his wife and child.⁴⁵

Homophobia as the Central Issue in Gay-Themed Young Adult Novels in the 2000s

The late 1990s to 2010 saw many positive changes regarding homosexual rights across the United States. This timespan witnessed an era of homosexual visibility and diversity, including more LGBTQ movies and films, and TV characters.⁴⁶ Celebrities began to “come out of the closet,” for instance, Ellen DeGeneres who disclosed her homosexual orientation on a prime time television show in 1997.⁴⁷ In the following year, the U.S. District Court for the District of Utah, Central Division announced that East High School could establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).⁴⁸ It ruled that a denial of this would be a violation of the Federal Equal Access Act.⁴⁹ Arguably, the increased visibility of non-

44. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, 121.

45. Cart and Jenkins, 121.

46. Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the United States*, A New Press People's History (New York: The New Press, 2008), 233.

47. C. N. N. Library, “LGBT Rights Milestones Fast Facts,” CNN, April 1, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/lgbt-rights-milestones-fast-facts/index.html>.

48. Lambda Legal, “East High Gay Straight Alliance v. Board of Education of Salt Lake City School District,” Lambda Legal, accessed June 27, 2019, <https://www.lambdalegal.org/in-court/cases/east-high-gsa-v-board-of-ed-salt-lake>.

49. Lambda Legal.

heterosexuals in the media and the formation of GSAs spurred American homosexual teenagers to come out and critics have observed that they tended to come out at younger ages.⁵⁰ Research published in 2011 showed that the average age of American homosexual people to disclose their sexuality had dropped from twenty-five in 1991 to sixteen in 2011.⁵¹

While from the outside it may have seemed that American society had become more acceptant to sexual minorities, in fact homophobia stubbornly existed and still rages in America today. Michelangelo Signorile, an American gay activist, remarks that these successes are simply “victory blindness.”⁵² Homosexuals are still the victims of discrimination, prejudices, and even hate crime. One such crime was the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay university student, in October 1998.⁵³ The incident shocked America (and LGBTQ communities around the world) as Shepard was cruelly beaten until he became unconscious and tied to a fence on a road near Laramie, Wyoming.⁵⁴ His skull was seriously injured and he died five days after the assault.⁵⁵ Shepard’s death had a considerable impact on American society, engendering a change of law. President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act into law in October 2009.⁵⁶ This law gives more power to the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate hate crimes. In addition to this, more organizations, campaigns, and anti-homophobia projects have been established, for instance, the Laramie Project, the Matthew Shepard Foundation, and LGBTQ support groups like GSAs in schools have sprung up

50. Michelangelo Signorile, *It's Not Over: Getting Beyond Tolerance, Defeating Homophobia, and Winning True Equality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 19.

51. Signorile, 47.

52. Signorile, 3.

53. Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, “Matthew Shepard: Biography, Death, Legacy, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed June 27, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthew-Shepard>.

54. Julie Bindel, “The Truth Behind America’s Most Famous Gay-Hate Murder,” *The Guardian*, October 26, 2014, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/26/the-truth-behind-americas-most-famous-gay-hate-murder-matthew-shepard>.

55. Jude Sheerin, “The Murder That Changed America,” October 26, 2018, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45968606>.

56. Associated Press, “Matthew Shepard’s Murder Still Haunts Wyoming 20 Years Later,” *latimes.com*, accessed June 27, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-wyoming-matthew-shepard-20181013-story.html>.

throughout the country. In 2019, the report of the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) shows that there are more than 6,500 GSAs in the U.S.⁵⁷

LGBTQ-themed young adult novels published from the late 1990s to 2010 closely reflected the social and political changes which occurred in the period. The books included teenage characters of various orientations and gender identities (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, queer, and transgender), as well as those with disabilities or who come from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, the genres spanned from realist to historical, magical realism, science fiction (sci-fi), and fantasy. For instance, David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) uses magic realism to present the main characters living happily as openly gay in a town free from homophobia. It depicts school cheerleaders riding motorbikes while the football team are drag queens. This normalizes rather than problematizes homosexuality. Cart and Jenkins praise *Boy Meets Boy* as being "an authentic breakthrough book in the sense that it is the first feel-good gay novel for teens."⁵⁸ Apart from the variety of orientations of homosexual characters and genres, another prominent aspect of the YA fiction in this period was the representation of the "queer community."⁵⁹ Among the popular books are, for instance, Francesca Lia Block's *I was a Teenage Fairy* (1998), Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2001), *Rainbow High* (2003), and *Rainbow Road* (2005), James Howe's *The Misfits* (2001), and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (2003). In these novels, the homosexual characters are typically represented as attempting to form a group of close friends to help support one another when facing difficulties, in particular, when confronting homophobic violence. While the "queer community" plot has become commonplace, it conveys a tactic as to how these marginalized sexual characters empower themselves in order to gain more psychological solace and physical safety from their peers within the homosexual community.

57. GLSEN, "Gender and Sexuality Alliances," GLSEN, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://www.glsen.org/participate/student-action/gsa>.

58. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, 144.

59. Cart and Jenkins, 144.

The continued prevalence of homophobia and homophobic crime has meant that homophobia has been the pivotal issue in gay-themed young adult literature of the 2000s. The majority of these works depict homophobia as the main obstacle that non-heterosexual characters had experienced and must deal with.⁶⁰ The different forms and levels of severity of homophobia in the narratives are designed to reflect actual situations which homosexual teenagers in the U.S. had encountered. Some examples of these novels are Julia Watts's *Finding H.F.* (2001), Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002), and Carol Plum-Ucci's *What Happened to Lani Garver* (2002). In Watts's *Finding H.F.*, the author includes characters from various sexual orientations, including a lesbian protagonist named H.F. (short for Heavenly Faith) who has a close gay male friend called Bo (short for Beauregard). Living in their small hometown of Morgan, Kentucky, both non-straight teenagers have encountered homophobia in their families, in their schools, and from local people. This prompts them to embark on a journey to find other homosexual-friendly places. During their journey, they meet many non-heterosexual teens who are kicked out of their families after they "come out" or are "outed" to their parents. The novel highlights the alienation, loneliness, sadness caused by homophobia. In spite of this, Watts's work provides solace for the reader. It depicts H.F. and Bo forming their "family of choice" with the homeless homosexual teenagers they meet en-route, giving them greater psychological comfort and a sense of inclusiveness as part of homosexual community.

Whereas Watts's fiction represents homophobia that does not cause death to any homosexual young characters (except ostracization and homelessness), Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* depicts the suicide attempt of Bennett, the gay protagonist, after he has endured homophobic taunts from his school peers for a long time without support from his family. I will analyze this book in greater depth in Chapter 2. Plum-Ucci's *What Happened to Lani Garver* includes extremely virulent homophobia that leads to the tragic ending of Lani who pronounces his name as "Lonny."⁶¹ Lani, a transgender person, is murdered by

60. Cart and Jenkins, 133.

61. Carol Plum-Ucci, *What Happened to Lani Garver* (2002; repr., Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), 12.

homophobic townspeople who do not understand him or his gender identity.⁶² The content of this book is very similar to Bette Greene's *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (1991) and Malorie Blackman's *Boys Don't Cry* (2010).⁶³ All these novels show, to various degrees, how homophobia can hurt adolescents and they reflect the fact that some parts of American society do not truly accept these sexual minorities. Even the family, the fundamental social unit which is supposed to be the place of nurture and loving care, can be a homophobic space.

Some books show the very dangerous aspects of homophobia. Lesléa Newman's *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (2012), as the book title suggests, was inspired by the death of Matthew Shepard.⁶⁴ The book is written in a variety of poetic forms (sonnets, haiku, sestina, and so forth) to reflect Newman's deeply personal response to the virulent homophobia which exists in American society. The author presents the night when Shepard was assaulted by deploying fictional monologs of many personified living and non-living things such as that of the fence that Matthew was tied to and left to die and the doe that keeps him company all night.⁶⁵ The fence, for example, says:

Their truck was the last thing he saw
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes
I cradled him just like a mother
I held him all night long.⁶⁶

62. By contemporary standards, Lani can be identified as gender-queer or trans; however, in the novel, his orientation is talked about in a "are they a boy or a girl" gossipy way. See Queer Books for Teens, "What Happened To Lani Garver," Queer Books for Teens, December 2017, <https://queerbooksforteens.com/2017/12/07/what-happened-to-lani-garver/>.

63. *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* is based on true story of Charlie Howard, a gay teenager who was beaten and thrown from the bridge into the river by a group of three homophobes on the night of July 7, 1984. Being sick with asthma and a non-swimmer, he drowned. See Richard R. Shaw and Brian F. Swartz, *Legendary Locals of Bangor* (Charleston: Legendary Locals, 2015), 61.

64. GLSEN, "Teacher's & Discussion Guide: October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard," 2012, <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/Teachers%20guide%20THIS%20ONE.PDF>.

65. International Reading Association, "5 Questions With...Lesléa Newman (OCTOBER MOURNING)," October 5, 2012, [https://literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2012/10/05/5-questions-with-leslea-newman-\(october-mourning\)](https://literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2012/10/05/5-questions-with-leslea-newman-(october-mourning)).

66. Lesléa Newman, *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2012), 16.

Here, the author uses the repetition of the letter “T” (“Their,” “truck,” and “Tears”) which in its form looks like the cross, suggesting that Matthew was tethered and sacrificed. This creates a contrastive picture between the homophobes (human) and the fence (object); while the group assaults Matthew, the fence shows the victim deep compassion by “hold[ing] him all night long” as if it were his own mother. Similarly, the doe laments the despicable acts inflicted upon Matthew:

I saw
a beaten up
broken down
bent over
bruised
battered
busted
boy
I felt
the two fawns
in my belly
curl into a ball
as I snuggled
beside him
and struggled
to keep him
warm.⁶⁷

The repetitive use of “b” sound (“beaten,” “broken,” “bent,” “bruised,” “battered,” “busted,” “boy”) implies the merciless assault (beating). Feeling empathetic, the doe soothes Matthew’s pain, “snuggl[ing] beside him” to give him warmth like the victim is another fawn. In short, the non-human world confers more humanity, compassion, and mercy than the human world. The different voices make the literary work look like a eulogy for the death of Matthew. The fence and the doe witness and express a deep sorrow over the vicious crime.

Newman’s work arouses the reader’s sense of empathy. It also “serve[s] as an illumination for readers too young to remember and as a powerful, enduring tribute to

67. Newman, 20–21.

Matthew Shepard's life and legacy."⁶⁸ More importantly, Newman states in the introduction to the book: "My hope is that readers of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* will be inspired to make different and honor his legacy by erasing hate and replacing it with compassion, understanding, and love."⁶⁹ This reveals that the literature performs a role of LGBTQ activism against homophobia. As such, Newman's work garnered many grand awards for YA literature including the American Library Association Stonewall Honor, the Florida Council of Teachers of English Joan F. Kaywell Books Change Lives Award, and a Nerdy Book Club Poetry Award.⁷⁰

From Watts's *Finding H.F.* to Newman's *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*, the gay adolescent literature in this period is imbued with the representation of homophobia. This, on the one hand, shifts the focus of the narratives from depicting homosexuality *per se* to the issue of homophobia – the root cause of much of the violence happening to American non-heterosexual characters and teenagers. To put it another way, these texts do not seek to normalize homosexuality, that is a given, but to make the reader aware of the fact that homophobia is still a real issue and prevalent. In this respect, the reader is encouraged to fight homophobia to make American society safer so that fewer innocent young people are victimized. However, on the other hand, homophobia as represented in this category of YA fiction has upset literary scholars such as Cart and Jenkins, Corrine M. Wickens or even writers like David Levithan and Malinda Lo. They criticize gay-themed YA literature as being overloaded with fear and hatred, failing to help challenge bigotry.

Contemporary Gay-Themed Young Adult Novels and Homophobia

In Cart and Jenkins's studies of the development of content and themes in LGBTQ young adult fiction from 2000 to 2004, the scholars remark that contemporary literary works are still replete with the representation of homophobia. They state:

68. GLSEN, "October Mourning."

69. Newman, *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*, xi.

70. Matthew Shepard Foundation, "Lesléa Newman: 2018 Award Recipient," *Matthew Shepard Foundation* (blog), accessed July 4, 2019, https://www.matthewshepard.org/gala_honoree/leslea-newman/.

Even though there is clearly more visible support for GLBTQ teens in the twenty-first century than previously, [individuals] suffering 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.⁷¹

For Cart and Jenkins, homosexual characters and homophobic violence as inflicted upon them seem inseparable. They argue that this tacitly reinforces the negative image of sexual minorities (both in fiction and in actuality) as having miserable lives, and thereby the YA fiction cannot provide bibliotherapeutic solace to the young reader, especially those who are homosexual.

The critics' views on this point are congruent with those previously proposed by Hankel and Cunningham. Returning to their article "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?", Hankel and Cunningham also raise concerns over the homophobia they see as overwhelmingly depicted in the gay-themed YA fiction published from 1969 to 1979. Hankel and Cunningham make the case that as sexual minorities are normally sensitive about their orientation and image, the fiction that highlights homophobic violence does not help in providing affirmation for them.⁷² Rather, it exacerbates their fear and promotes negative images of homosexuals as those who will have to "pay the price" for being different anyway.⁷³ In short, Cart, Jenkins, Hankel and Cunningham argue that gay-themed YA novels do not offer progress but are stuck in the continuing loop whereby gay characters are depicted as the victims of a perpetual homophobia. Wickens argues that although many YA novels, such as Watts's *Finding H.F.*, Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite*, and Hartinger's *Geography Club*, present homophobia as the "overarching problem" to resist, they in fact leave it "unchallenged."⁷⁴ Take, for example, *Finding H.F.* Wickens mentions the scene wherein H.F. and Bo joke about the hell described in the biblical scriptures which cause them trouble living in the rural Bible-belt Kentucky. She quotes the conversation between Bo and H.F.:

71. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, 134.

72. Hankel and Cunningham, "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?," 529.

73. Hankel and Cunningham, 532.

74. Wickens, "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia," 153.

Bo laughs. “You’re awful, H.F. You’re the one who’s gonna burn in hell.”

“If you’re gonna start preachin’ hellfire and brimstone, you might as well drive me home. Memew’s the one that’s stuck with the job of savin’ my soul. And besides, if what them church people say is right, you’ll be right next to me in hell, shoveling’ coal and complainin’ about how the heat makes your clothes wrinkle.”⁷⁵

Using this quotation, Wickens argues that the novel re-emphasizes the banal cliché found in much gay-themed YA fiction that homosexuality is a “sin.”⁷⁶ This is because even Bo and H.F. – who are both homosexual – confess their adoption of the Biblical scripture that condemns homosexuality, believing they will burn in hell. Again, similar criticism which targets negativity around homosexuality undertaken by the homosexual main characters *themselves* is also found in the case of Shyer’s *The Rainbow Kite*. Wickens quotes Bennett complaining to Matthew, in the presence of his homophobic father, after learning that his friend’s father prohibits Jeremy to see him at home. He shouts: “I’m contagious, see? Mr. DeWitt thinks what I’ve got is catching. And I don’t mean a virus.”⁷⁷ (I will analyze this episode further in Chapter 2: Familial Homophobia.) Clearly, Wickens objects to the language of disease deployed by Bennett. She argues that it instills and reinforces negative connotations and that Bennett is merely reiterating these. However, I believe she overlooks the irony of Bennett’s words and his appropriation of the language that would be deployed by the homophobe.

As well as the critics mentioned above, David Levithan and Malinda Lo, the authors of YA books, seem unhappy with the representation of homophobia in gay-themed teenage fiction. Levithan explains the reason behind his only slightly mentioning homophobia in his popular novel *Boy Meets Boy*: “[In] *Boy Meets Boy*, I basically set out to write... a book about gay teens that doesn’t conform to the old norms about gay teens in literature...[projecting] a teen who gets beaten up for being gay, or about outcasts who come out and find they’re still outcasts, albeit outcasts with their outcastedness in

75. Julia Watts, *Finding H. F.* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2001), 13.

76. Wickens, “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia,” 154.

77. Wickens, 153–54.

common.”⁷⁸ Levithan prefers not to dwell on homophobia in this novel (and in his other works). Instead he tries to create a world in which homosexuality is normal. To do so, he blurs the line between realism and fantasy. *Boy Meets Boy* thus represents a society that is not real, but the society Levithan wants it to be.⁷⁹ This book is, in short, what B. J. Epstein calls a “utopian wish-fulfillment.”⁸⁰ In congruence with Levithan, Lo makes a point that the homophobia which has featured in young adult novels actually serves to disempower homosexual characters.⁸¹ It perpetuates the idea of these sexual minorities as inevitably falling prey to violence, and submissive to a predestined fate.⁸² This, as Lo’s argument implies, is not different from the early gay-themed teen fiction which typically depicted gay characters facing tragic endings. With this in mind, both Levithan and Lo produce mostly magic realist and utopian novels which, as Thomas Crisp observes, could secure the promise of “a brighter future or a better world [...]”.⁸³ For example, in Levithan’s utopian fiction *Wide Awake* (2008), a Jewish gay character is elected the president of America and in Lo’s fantasy novels *Ash* (2010) and *Huntress* (2011), lesbian characters can fall in love without struggling against homophobia alongside other fairy characters.

Levithan and Lo avoid writing realist novels but instead shift to those in the magic-realist and utopian genre despite the fact that homophobia still exists and needs to be addressed. These narratives, which dramatically present a fun, idealized world, and the utmost happiness for everybody, seem to ignore an existing homophobia and thereby fail to offer practical solutions. Similarly, Wickens’s critique of many contemporary novels as failing to challenge homophobia has lacunae. She overlooks an important element of these novels – the strategies to deal with homophobia. I tend to disagree with these scholars and

78. Twin Cities Teen Lit Con, “David Levithan,” *Teen Lit Con* (blog), March 6, 2014, <https://teenlitcon.org/2014-teenlitcon/authors/david-levithan/>.

79. Thomas Crisp, “From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 40, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 340, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-009-9089-9>.

80. B. J. Epstein, *Are the Kids All Right? : Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (Bristol, UK: HammerOn Press, 2013), 91.

81. Malinda Lo, “Taking the Homophobia Out of Fantasy,” *Malinda Lo* (blog), April 25, 2011, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2011/04/taking-the-homophobia-out-of-fantasy?rq=taking%20homophobia>.

82. Lo.

83. Crisp, “From Romance to Magical Realism,” 344.

writers. I contend that although realist American gay-themed YA fiction is replete with the depiction of homophobia, it also offers modes of resistance. It includes means to challenge homophobia and ways through which power is managed and made use of. In other words, the literature calls for an activism to eradicate the deep-seated bigotry around sexuality in the United States.

Gay-Themed Young Adult Novels as Texts of Resistance against Homophobia

From my reading of a large number of LGBTQ adolescent novels published from 2000 and up to the present, it is evident that the books provide potential strategies which gay characters employ to challenge homophobia. I postulate that the inclusion of tactics to deal with the issue is a legacy of the so-called “problem fiction” category from which gay-themed YA novels originate. In problem fiction, it is typical to see the problem-solving strategies provided for young readers (including issues like teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and suicide). This is because adolescence is a period of turmoil for teenagers. They face changes in their lives and are exposed to a world outside their families. Therefore, it is apposite for YA fiction to educate them through suggested means to cope with issues and use the main teen characters as their role-models to give them hope and encourage them not to yield to difficulties. It must be acknowledged that the inclusion of strategies to challenge homophobia as found in some contemporary gay-themed adolescent novels inevitably produces a didactic tone.⁸⁴ However, it is important to note that the proffered means to resist homophobia makes the fiction published in the 2000s different to that of the previous decades and it is possible to read these novels as activist texts for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, because coping strategies against homophobia are employed by the gay adolescent main characters, these teens are not represented as the weak, passive, or submissive victims found in earlier texts. This contrast is evident when we compare Donovan’s *I’ll Get There* (1969) with Robin Reardon’s *Secret Edge* (2007). While the gay protagonist Davy Ross in *I’ll Get There* ends his sexual relationship with his classmate Douglas Altschuler immediately after facing parental homophobia, Jason in *Secret Edge*

84. The novels which are widely deemed as being overwhelmed with didacticism are, for instance, Alex Sanchez’s *So Hard to Say* (2004) and the *Rainbow Trilogy* series consisting of *Rainbow Boys* (2001), *Rainbow High* (2003), and *Rainbow Road* (2005).

chooses to deal with the same issue in a different way. The text suggests a solution for this problem with Jason initiating a conversation about his homosexuality with his uncle and aunt, giving them polite explanations as to why he decides to come out to them and informing them about his romantic relationship with Raj, a nice school friend. This upsets the uncle. He turns silent and begins to shun Jason at first. However, the means that Jason employs ultimately enables his uncle – who needs more time to digest this new information – to gain a better understanding of homosexuality. Further to this, it also helps Jason’s caretakers realize that their nephew places great trust in them and is honest with them (and with himself). In light of this I, unlike Cart and Jenkins, consider gay-themed young adult fiction published in the 2000s as demonstrating considerable progress to that of earlier decades. The passive gay teenagers are now more frequently activists in some ways or another, brave enough to combat homophobia and make positive changes to their lives and surroundings.

Secondly, and more importantly, as gay-themed YA fiction provides strategies to challenge homophobia, it points out that homophobia is resolvable. It urges readers to recognize an existing (but usually overlooked) truth that “power is everywhere” and it is “there” for them to make use of. To explain this point, it is necessary to distinguish the term “homophobia” as it was originally defined in comparison to our contemporary understanding of the term. According to George H. Weinberg, the gay activist and psychologist who first coined the term “homophobia” in his key psychological book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (1972), homophobia is “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals.”⁸⁵ His definition is applied to heterosexual people in the main. This definition, however, does not fully work as homophobia affects all people, of all ages, and both heterosexuals and homosexuals. More importantly, if taking the meaning of homophobia given by Weinberg *literally* (homo + phobia), the term is problematic. This is because, as David A. Haaga observes, there are many key aspects wherein *homophobia* is different from true *phobia* (as in the word “dread” Weinberg uses).⁸⁶

85. George H. Weinberg, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972), 4.

86. David A. Haaga, ““Homophobia”?,” *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality* 6, no. 1 (1991): 171–74.

The emotion that is typically (and clinically) related to phobia is fear, but homophobia is often characterized by hatred and anger. Secondly, in some cases, phobia is irrational whereas homophobia can be understood. Thirdly, phobia usually causes avoidance, e.g., arachnophobia, or fear of spiders, makes people who have this feeling stay away from them. In contrast, homophobia triggers aggression and violence against homosexual people. Fourthly, while phobia concerns personal feelings, homophobia involves political agendas and discrimination and finally, persons who suffer from a phobia often seek professional help, but homophobes tend to perceive themselves as being normal. Thus, Joanne P. Sharp, Paul Routledge, Christ Philo, and Roman Paddison propose that homophobia should be viewed as a facet of the “dominating power” due to the fact that it “discipline[s], silence[s], prohibit[s], or repress[es] difference and dissents.”⁸⁷ These scholars’ suggestions are useful because they offer a broader view of homophobia and highlight the damaging effects of homophobia upon homosexuals and homosexual allies.

If homophobia is an oppressive power, as Sharp et al state, in order to challenge such force, we need to believe that a positive/counter power also exists. The philosopher, historian, and gay activist Michel Foucault helps come to this in his seminal work *The Will to Knowledge (La Volonté de Savoir)* in *The History of Sexuality* series with his oft-quoted observation that “Power is everywhere.”⁸⁸ He contends that power is omnipresent; it can be both negative and positive. Foucault’s proposed notion of power radically disrupts the orthodox view of it. To elaborate, traditionally, power is equated to oppression that suppresses individuals who will face dreadful physical punishments if they resist it. Foucault gives a clear example of this in his 1991 work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison)* with the execution of Damians in 1757 for regicide. The first chapter opens with a detailed explanation as to how the criminal is tortured:

[...] Damians the regicide was condemned ‘to make the *amende honorable* before the main door of the Church of Paris’, where he was to be ‘taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a

87. Joanne P. Sharp et al., eds., *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance*, Critical Geographies (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

88. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1:93.

torch of burning wax weighing two pounds'; then, 'in the said cart, to the Place de Grève, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melt together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds.'⁸⁹

Here, Foucault points out that power in the traditional view is a kind of force or, as he calls it, "sovereign power."⁹⁰ It is wielded by the King who can impose a life sentence upon anybody, especially those who act against the throne like Damiens. In this sense, there is no way for individuals (laymen) to resist power in order to liberate themselves from oppression as power is a thing that is only possessed by the head of the country.

While the orthodox view of power does not give any hope to people, Foucault introduces a revolutionary concept of power. He proposes that in modern Western society, social and political situations are less draconian than in the previous centuries and power should not be considered as oppressive – this is a very limited view of it.⁹¹ This is because, from his observation, fewer horrible physical punishments from the state (like that which Damiens received) were inflicted upon people. Instead, people were controlled by other, more subtle means to be "docile" which they were more willing to comply with.⁹² To strengthen his argument, Foucault gives the example of the schools and workshops where individuals' behaviors are supervised by a "time-table."⁹³ Foucault shows that at "*École mutuelles*" (the "mutual improvement schools") students are monitored by the time schedule: "8.45 entrance of the monitor, 8.52 the monitor's summons, 8.56 entrance of the children and prayer, 9.00 the children go to their benches, 9.04 first slate, 9.08 end of

89. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1991), 3.

90. Mona Lilja and Stellan Vinthagen, "Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power and Biopower: Resisting What Power with What Resistance?," *Journal of Political Power* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2014.889403>.

91. He refers to France in the early 19th century onwards.

92. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

93. Foucault, 149.

dictation, 9.12 second slate, etc.”⁹⁴ Similarly, in workshops, the increased wages are measured by the workers’ time. This can be seen in the factories’ regulations that Foucault gives: “If workers arrive later than a quarter of an hour after the ringing of the bell...,” “if any one of the companions is asked for during work and loses more than five minutes...”⁹⁵ At this point, what Foucault attempts to inform us is that firstly, power is not always a virulent oppressive force that metes out harsh physical punishments; secondly, power does not belong to any particular person; and thirdly, individuals cannot escape from power since we – human beings – cannot totally disassociate ourselves from social institutions. In this regard, power inevitably affects us in some ways, and this re-confirms his idea that “power is everywhere.”⁹⁶

Foucault’s notion of the omnipresence of power is significant. It gives hope to people, especially those who are marginalized to see opportunities to resist discrimination – the dominating power – by recognizing that power is always “there” for everybody (including themselves) to make use of. This can be seen in American LGBTQ activists’ engagement in campaigning against homophobia and other homosexual-related issues. Take, for instance, Michelangelo Signorile, an American journalist and gay activist who joined the campaign for ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in New York in 1988. His recognition of power after reading Foucault’s works encouraged him to protest the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, New York’s City Hall and other government agencies for their not spending more on new AIDS medicine while people were dying of this fatal disease.⁹⁷ In a way, we might say that Signorile used government power to initiate new laws to benefit a marginalized community.

Foucault’s concept of power supports my contention that the anti-homophobia strategies as proffered in gay-themed YA fiction are actually a kind of management, making use of power to resist the dominating force of homophobia. From my reading of

94. Foucault, 150.

95. Foucault, 150.

96. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1:93.

97. Signorile, *It’s Not Over: Getting Beyond Tolerance, Defeating Homophobia, and Winning True Equality*, 19.

many YA authors' biographies, in particular those whose works are used as the primary texts in this thesis, I found that their recognition of the omnipresence of power is revealed through their contributions to LGBTQ activism and, of course, their writings for young adults. For instance, Alex Sanchez, a prolific YA novelist, a self-identified gay man and an activist obtained his master's degree in guidance and counseling from Old Dominion University.⁹⁸ Since then he has worked as a youth and family counselor before publishing his first gay-themed YA novel *Rainbow Boys* (2001) which received many accolades.⁹⁹ This includes a highly respected American Library Association's "Best Book for Young Adult Award" in 2002 and is recognized as a "Young Adults' Choice" by the International Reading Association.¹⁰⁰

In an interview with Malinda Lo, Sanchez reveals that because he experienced homophobia when he was young and he still finds it affecting homosexual youths today, his works resonate with this damaging issue.¹⁰¹ However, instead of simply representing homophobia as an oppressive force within the novels, he includes coping strategies (resistance/counter power) and uses the non-straight characters as role models for his young readers in challenging homophobia. Moreover, in most of his novels and on his official websites, Sanchez also gives ample useful resources for LGBTQ teen readers, especially giving them the contacts of organizations that provide assistance in solving homosexual-related problems. These are, for instance, the Trevor Helpline for Gay and Lesbian Youth (which gives consultation for LGBTQ youths who have suicidal thoughts), the National Runaway Safeline, CDC or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and so on. With his academic background in counselling and as a writer with influence, he utilizes his own personal power by applying his knowledge to craft homosexual-themed YA novels. And these novels – in which homophobia coping strategies are provided –

98. Alex Sanchez, *The God Box* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2007), n.p.

99. Alex Sanchez, "Rainbow Boys," Alex Sanchez: Award-Winning Author, Speaker, Editor, Writing Mentor, 2019, <https://www.alexsanchez.com/gay-youth-resources>.

100. coplacdigital.org, "About Rainbow Boys," Behind the Rainbow: An Investigative Look into the Webster, NY Challenging of Rainbow Boys, a LGBTQ YA Fiction Novel by Alex Sanchez, accessed September 17, 2019, <https://burn.coplacdigital.org/geneseo/about-rainbow-boys/>.

101. Malinda Lo, "YA Pride: Interview with Alex Sanchez," Malinda Lo, June 6, 2012, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2012/06/ya-pride-interview-with-alex-sanchez>.

further encourage the adolescent reader to realize that they themselves can exercise the power to challenge their problems too. Thus, I believe that the YA fiction of the 2000s which deals with gay characters and issues related to sexuality are texts which show how to utilize power, however small and local, to actively make a difference in one's life.

Terminology

Terms related to power, homophobia, homosexuality, and sexual orientation continuously change in the ways they are used, as well as in their implications, or in their connotative meanings. New terms, abbreviations, and idioms relating to them are invented to replace some previous terms which are now considered ambiguous, impolite, biased, or pejorative. Still, there is no universal agreement on terminology and as language has continuously changed, it is necessary to provide some explanation as to how each key term is used in this thesis. Similarly, information will be provided regarding different usage of terms, similar terms, etymology, and reasons as to how and why some words are preferable and used consistently throughout the research.

Power is a term which can be used in a variety of senses, and it carries both negative and positive implications such as oppression, repression, domination *versus* productivity and creativity.¹⁰² In this thesis, power refers to individuals' potential, capabilities, or abilities. This includes the influences of environments (objects, space, and so on) upon individuals, as well as relationships among people that affect and/or shape another's behaviors and attitudes. As power has negative and positive meanings, there are four expressions of power which are widely used among scholars who study the notion of power. These are:

“Power Over”: It is the most “commonly” recognized form of power which refers to “repression,” “force,” “coercion,” “discrimination,” “corruption,” and “abuse.”¹⁰³ This form of power is seen as a “win-lose” relationship.¹⁰⁴ To have such power, one must take it

102. Neil Thompson, *Power and Empowerment* (Lyme Regis, UK: Russell House, 2006), 4.

103. Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Oklahoma: World Neighbors, 2002), 45.

104. VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

from someone else and use it to dominate others; for instance, people who control resources and decision making have *power over* those who do not.¹⁰⁵ Sometimes, *power over* is used interchangeably with the term “controlling power.”¹⁰⁶

“Power With”: This refers to finding a common ground from differences to build collaboration.¹⁰⁷ *Power With* therefore has the same meaning as collective power, mutual support, and solidarity.¹⁰⁸ To exercise such power, people need to seek allies, set mutual goals, and act together to achieve.¹⁰⁹ It is “a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together.”¹¹⁰

“Power To”: This has to do with the potential of an individual to shape his own life and the world.¹¹¹ It means that s/he can create changes for a better life and environment.¹¹² *Power to* is thereby the “generative or productive power.”¹¹³ Sometimes, power to manifests itself as forms of resistance which pave the way for new possibilities and actions without domination.¹¹⁴

“Power (from) Within”: This is the inner or “spiritual strength” that resides in each person. Its base is “self-acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals.”¹¹⁵

105. VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

106. Jo Rolands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1997), 13.

107. VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 45.

108. VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

109. VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

110. Rolands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*, 13.

111. VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 45.

112. VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

113. VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

114. Rolands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*, 13.

115. Rolands, 13.

Homophobia is, as already mentioned above, a term coined by George Weinberg. The meaning of its original definition is now considered inapplicable to contemporary American society as homophobia covers a wider range of negative feelings toward non-heterosexual people, not just “fear.” Thus, attempts have been made to re-define the word homophobia. For example, at its simplest, in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, homophobia refers to “fear of or contempt for lesbians and gay men.”¹¹⁶ This understanding of homophobia is very common and can be still found prevailing in multiple educational resources and books for parents, teachers, educators, and young LGBTQs today. In *The Gallup’s Guide to Modern Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Lifestyles* (2009), homophobia is defined as “the fear and hatred of homosexuality. A homophobic person is sometimes referred to as a ‘homophobe.’”¹¹⁷ On the Planned Parenthood website, homophobia means “the fear, hatred, discomfort with, or mistrust of people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.”¹¹⁸ Clearly, these resources include other negative feelings such as “contempt,” “discomfort,” and “mistrust” into their definitions. They, however, place great emphasis upon the utmost extreme sides of human’s feelings – “fear” and “hatred” – beginning the definition with those words despite the fact that homophobia includes a myriad of unfriendly feelings and attitudes. In my thesis, I use the term homophobia in the broadest sense – homophobia is any hostile feeling or perception which one has towards homosexuality and/or homosexual people; moreover, such negativities lead to discrimination against these sexual minorities. In this sense, the word “homophobia” is congruent with what Sharpe et al already suggest: it is the “dominating power.”

Sexual orientation is “the structure or pattern of romantic, sexual, and/or emotional attractions felt by an individual toward members of the same sex, the opposite sex or both

116. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, “Homophobia,” in *The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language*, accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=homophobia>.

117. Jaime Hunt, *Homophobia: From Social Stigma to Hate Crimes*, *The Gallup’s Guide to Modern Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Lifestyle* (Broomall, PA: Mason Crest, 2011), 12.

118. Planned Parenthood, “What Is Homophobia?,” Planned Parenthood, 2019, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation-gender/sexual-orientation/what-homophobia>.

sexes.”¹¹⁹ The American Psychological Association and the Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns (CLGC) recommend that, in writing, the term “sexual preference” (which is used not just in many psychological studies but also in the media) should be replaced with “sexual orientation” on the grounds that the word “preference” suggests “a degree of voluntary choice.”¹²⁰ This has been a long-passionate debate among scholars in terms of sexual formation. Some believe that sexual orientation is not a choice, but a combination of both nature (genes, hormones, or other biological factors) and nurture (environmental factors).¹²¹ In addition, some psychological studies conclude that sexuality is not necessarily a choice, and using the word “sexual preference” is misleading.¹²² As such, I use the latest updated term – “sexual orientation” – throughout this thesis.

LGBTQ is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning. Originally, there were no letters “T” and “Q” added. This acronym was simply written as LGB which is adapted from the initialism LG (Lesbian and Gay) and LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) and used to refer to homosexual communities in the mid-to-late 1980s.¹²³ Later, some people found that the acronym LGB does not include other aspects of human sexual orientation and gender identities, so more letters were added. They are, for example, LGBTTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-spirit, Queer and Questioning), GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer), or GLBTQQ (Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Queer and Questioning).

Despite these variations of the term LGB to embrace other aspects of human sexual and gender identities, Keith W. Swain argues that there seems to be “no end” in claiming

119. Family Services à la Famille Ottawa, *Around the Rainbow: Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers Working with LGBTTQ Parents and Their Children* (Ottawa: n. p., 2010), 12.

120. The American Psychological Association, “Avoiding Heterosexual Bias in Language,” American Psychological Association, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/language>.

121. Bill Palmer, *What Causes Sexual Orientation? Genetics, Biology, Psychology*, The Gallup’s Guide to Modern Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Lifestyle (Broomall, PA: Mason Crest, 2010), 23–33.

122. Safe Schools Coalition: An international Public-Private Partnership in Support of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, “Glossary” (n. p., June 6, 2005), <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/glossary.pdf>.

123. Joe Carter, “What You Should Know About ‘LGBTQ,’” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), April 3, 2013, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-lgbtq/>.

rights to be included in non-heterosexual community.¹²⁴ The letter “U” (Unsure), for instance, can be added to form an acronym LGBTQU (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Unsure). Also, there have been attempts to coin a new term “FABGLITTER” to stand for the Fetish, Allies, Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Intersexed, Transgender, Transsexual, Engendering Revolution. This obscures the original and simple intent of the gay civil rights movements, which as Swain argues was that “it was wrong to be treated any differently than the rest of the citizenry because one was different - be it skin color, religious choice, or sexual orientation.”¹²⁵ At present, an alternative way to create inclusiveness not just for homosexual people but for all is to use plus (+) sign. The plus sign can be put after one’s preferred acronym such as LGBT⁺, LGBTQI⁺, GLBTQ⁺, and so on. Yet, in some situations, for example, in conducting research which needs precise specification of a group’s sexual orientation, this might cause confusion as to which particular group of people the researcher is referring to. Therefore, in my thesis, I use the acronym LGBTQ to refer to books in which not only gay male characters are presented but also those who are identified as having other sexual orientations and gender identities such as lesbian, trans, questioning, and so forth.

Gay (used as an adjective and a noun) refers to people whose orientation is to the same sex. This term is used instead of the word “homosexual” which, in the late 19th century, was coined by a German psychologist Karoly Maria Benkert.¹²⁶ The term “gay” embraces both men and women in the non-heterosexual community, it is thus ambiguous.¹²⁷ To avoid confusion, this research uses the term “gay” to refer to homosexual male people/characters only, as in “gay students” or “gay characters.”

124. Carter.

125. Carter.

126. Brent Pickett, “Homosexuality,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/homosexuality/>.

127. Some people use the word “gay” to refer to men, exclusively. The reason for this is still unclear. It is possible that, in the nineteenth century, the term gay comes from a French slang *gaie* for a non-heterosexual man. See Rictor Norton, “A History of ‘Gay’ and Other Queerwords,” *Gay History & Literature*, 2015, <http://rictornorton.co.uk/though23.htm>.

Lesbian is, in a similar way to the term “gay,” used as an adjective and a noun. This term is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos which was the home of the female poet Sappho who lived in the sixth century BCE.¹²⁸ Historians found that Sappho’s writings obviously express her love for girls and focus upon the beauty of women.¹²⁹ Thus, the term “lesbian” is adopted to refer to female non-heterosexuals or women “whose sexual orientations are for women.” In this thesis, I use the term “lesbian” to refer to homosexual female people/characters.

Criteria of Primary Text Selection

From 2000, LGBTQ characters have been increasingly prevalent in YA novels. LGBTQ novels for adolescents cover multiple genres and present teenage characters from various sexual orientations and gender identities, different racial and ethnic identities, and religious backgrounds. However, most of the LGBTQ-themed YA fiction continues to focus on the white, male, middle class experience (as in previous decades).¹³⁰ They make up fifty percent.¹³¹ Thus, my research focuses predominantly on this group with the exception of Alex Sanchez’s *The God Box* (2007), which presents a gay protagonist, Paul, who is of Mexican heritage.¹³² In addition to this, I selected the gay-themed adolescent novels which were published only within the first decade of the twenty-first century. Focusing on this period of ten years follows the guidance of Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins’s seminal book *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006). The study explored the historical development of pivotal issues as represented in LGBTQ-themed YA fiction – decade by decade – beginning in the year 1969 until 2004. A decade is an appropriate period to trace what LGBTQ-related issues that the novels highlight because, as the researchers note, the literature closely reflects social, cultural, and political situations

128. Lori L. Lake, “Lesbian Herstory - From When The Name Came,” Lori L. Lake: Published Author, Editor and Speaker, 2005, <http://www.lorillake.com/FromWhence.html>.

129. Malcolm Brabant, “Lesbos Islanders Dispute Gay Name,” *BBC News*, May 1, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7376919.stm>.

130. Lo, “I Have Numbers! Stats on LGBT Young Adult Books Published in the U.S.”

131. Lo.

132. The reason why this book is included in the list of primary texts and used in Chapter 4: Christian-Based Homophobia is that it is one of a very few novels which focuses on addressing faith-based homophobia.

including problems that plague the wellbeing of LGBTQ people in the US.¹³³ This means that within ten years there must be observable dynamics happening in these domains, drawing writers' attention to capture a particular critical homosexual-related issue into their novels and to suggest how to cope with it. Therefore, the selected primary texts in my PhD research range from Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) to Patrick Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009).

The limited number of gay-themed YA novels whose content and context fit into other criteria of primary text selection meant that no books published in the year 2000 and 2001 fit my selection criteria. These criteria are that the books must be realist and non-historical novels, and they must place an emphasis on depicting and resisting homophobia. Such additional criteria are applied on the grounds that in order to see more clearly how gay-themed YA novels help challenge homophobia in the twenty-first century North America, we must analyze books whose plots and settings are in the same time period rather than those dealing with a different historical period.¹³⁴

In terms of how to choose the primary texts for each different thesis chapter as the content of some books are overlapping (e.g., both Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (2003) similarly includes the gay protagonists' school life), I found that information on the novels' copyright pages is helpful. To explain, the keywords such as "[1. Homosexuality—fiction. 2. Prejudices—fiction. 3. Brother—fiction. 4. Father and sons—fiction]" from Shyer's book and "[1. Homosexuality—fiction. 2. Clubs—fiction. 3. High Schools—fiction. 4. Schools—fiction]" from Hartinger's novel indicate the different focal point of which each book exclusively revolves around. The former is thus used as one of the key primary texts for Chapter 2: Familial Homophobia while the latter is for Chapter 3: Homophobia in American High Schools. Furthermore, with regard to literary merits, most of the selected primary texts have garnered awards by

133. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, 82.

134. Examples of historical gay-themed YA novels from this period are Jean Ferris's *Eight Seconds* (2000) and Mark A. Roeder's *A Better Place* (2001). While the former is set in a rodeo countryside of the US which suggests its being a historical fiction, the latter only slightly touches upon homophobic violence and quickly shifts to romantic relationship between the gay main characters.

educational institutions, organization, and/or national reading associations. These are, for instance, the American Library Association (ALA) that has a sub-department called Rainbow Round Table. The Rainbow Round Table has responsibilities in supporting education on gender diversity by providing information about LGBTQ-themed fiction and non-fiction on its website and holding seminars.

Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of four main chapters: 1. *Internalized Homophobia*, 2. *Familial Homophobia*, 3. *Homophobia in American High Schools*, and 4. *Christian-Based Homophobia*. This division of the thesis is based on the content and context of the books discussed. Moreover, the titles and coverage derive from the empirical studies of Ann Marie Petrocelli, an American activist, whose research reveals that homophobia is usually found in these four keys domains.¹³⁵ Hence, it is apposite to apply both literary and empirical guidelines as the criteria for this division of chapters. In each chapter, I begin with a demonstration as to how homophobia manifests itself, because homophobia can be overt or covert. In the second part of each chapter, the coping strategies deployed to combat homophobia as proffered in the selected novels are analyzed. It must be noted here that not all strategies are included in my analysis and instead focus is only given to those which the primary texts focalize upon or present as having the most potential to challenge homophobia.

In *Chapter 1: Internalized Homophobia*, I begin with what I argue is the most immediate domain in which homophobia is found to exist among individuals and in contemporary gay-themed YA fiction. Internalized homophobia is typically represented as being the first issue that the gay characters encounter and must overcome before being able to advance themselves to combat the bigotry that exists in wider areas (such as the homophobia witnessed in families, schools, and religious institutions). For this chapter, I have selected two novels to analyze — David LaRochelle's *Absolutely Positively Not* (2005) and James Howe's *Totally Joe* (2005). Here, I examine how internalized

135. Ann Marie Petrocelli, *Prejudice to Pride: Moving from Homophobia to Acceptance* (Washington, D.C.: NASW Press, 2012), 9.

homophobia manifests itself. I then analyze the coping strategy as provided within the texts to see how such means can help the gay characters to overcome their self-hatred and, furthermore, how power is made use of through this strategy. To achieve this, I apply a psychological theory as proposed by Vivienne Cass in my analysis of the primary texts.

In *Chapter 2: Familial Homophobia*, I progress from self-hatred and turn to the bigotry that exists within families, especially the parental homophobia which most gay-themed YA fiction brings to the fore (although other family members can also hold such negativity). It is mostly the case that, within the family structure, parents have supreme authority over their gay children and may, therefore, stop providing financial support and shelter if they learn that their children are gay. Such parental homophobia is thus a very challenging issue to deal with. The novels which I have selected to analyze in this chapter are Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) and P.E. Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009). Both works highlight parental homophobia and the struggle of gay children to challenge it. Again, I explore how parental bigotry is demonstrated, what coping strategies the texts proffer and how the power derived from such tactics corrodes prejudices. To meet this aim, Foucault's notion of power is used as the theoretical framework for my reading.

In *Chapter 3: Homophobia in American High Schools*, exploration is undertaken on how gay teenage characters experience the world outside of the self and their family – namely in regard to the high school environment. Despite having to spend most of one's adolescence in this location, gay teenagers encounter homophobic violence at school. Thus, most gay-themed literature depicts homophobia within high schools and suggests means through which to cope with this occurrence. For this reason, four novels are analyzed in this chapter. These are Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (2003) and Kim Wallace's *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* (2004), *Erik & Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Foresthill High* (2005), *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year at Foresthill High* (2006). Here, I present the manifestation of homophobia within these educational settings and denote how the gay characters in the novels challenge this. Moreover, as these books show the management of power through the deployment of certain coping strategies, as proffered in the texts, I demonstrate how this power is managed and made use of. Again, Foucault's notion of power is found to be useful for my analysis of these novels.

In *Chapter 4: Christian-Based Homophobia*, I analyze two novels – Alex Sanchez’s *The God Box* (2007) and Robin Reardon’s *Thinking Straight* (2008). Both are among the very few LGBTQ-themed adolescent novels that position religious-based bigotry as the central issue of their narratives. Here, my selection of these primary texts has inevitably been affected and limited by the number of books available in this area. Consequently, I have included the work of Sanchez, a Mexican American novelist, and Reardon, an American author. For this chapter, I examine how homophobia manifests itself and I go on to analyze the means through which this is coped with.

Chapter 1

Internalized Homophobia

This chapter analyzes two novels: David LaRochelle's *Absolutely, Positively Not* (2005) and James Howe's *Totally Joe* (2005). Both are realist, gay-themed, American YA fictions that extensively feature the gay adolescent characters' internalized homophobia and their self-disclosure or "coming out of the closet," a strategy they use to challenge bigotry.¹ Internalized homophobia consists of the negative feelings and attitudes that non-straight people have toward their own homosexual orientation and identity.² This bigotry results from the sexual minorities' having absorbed and introjected myths, messages, and stereotypes about homosexuality from their heteronormative environments until they believe that such negativity is true.³ Their internalized homophobia can be manifested in a wide variety of forms and degrees of extremity. These range from self-questioning, discomfort, feelings of alienation, attempts to hide, deny, alter, or change one's sexual orientation, low self-esteem and body image, substance abuse, promiscuity, self-loathing

1. Some readers criticize both novels for being unrealistic because the narratives depict the gay protagonists as having very supportive families. In my view, such representation is convincing because, in the case of Joe, his parents' professions (social worker and schoolteacher), suggest it is possible for the parents to show support for their gay son. Moreover, although the narrative presents the positive responses from Joe's parents and his elder brother, it also reveals negative reactions from his grandparents, who cannot accept Joe's sexuality at first. These different reactions from the surrounding characters closely reflect actual situations which happen in American society. See more information about people's various responses to homosexual youths' coming out at Human Rights Campaign Foundation, "A Resource Guide to Coming Out," April 2014, 12, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/resource-guide-to-coming-out>.

2. Revel & Riot, "Internalized Homophobia," Revel & Riot, accessed June 25, 2019, <http://www.revelandriot.com/resources/internalized-homophobia/>. The term "internalized homophobia" is sometimes substituted with other words such as "internal-homophobia," "self-hatred," and "self-homophobia." This is because, as Martin Kantor proposes, it is the homosexual people who develop negative outlook upon themselves. However, I follow Iain R. Williamson's suggestion to use the term "internalized homophobia" throughout my thesis, because this term is "the most widely used" and appears to be a "consensus" among academicians in the field of queer studies. See Martin Kantor, *Homophobia: The State of Sexual Bigotry Today* (Westport, CT: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 31, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leicester/detail.action?docID=554296>; Iain R. Williamson, "Internalized Homophobia and Health Issues Affecting Lesbians and Gay Men," *Health Education Research* 15, no. 1 (2000): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/15.1.97>.

3. Linda Goldman, *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11–12; Rainbow Project, "Internalised Homophobia," Rainbow Project, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.rainbow-project.org/internalised-homophobia>.

and self-harming, suicidal thoughts, attempted, or even successful suicide.⁴ Such homophobia is therefore a critical issue for homosexual people and it must be challenged.

In contemporary LGBTQ teen novels that depict internalized homophobia, the homosexual characters' revelation of their true sexual identities is a key theme or narrative event, with the act of coming out often used to challenge and overcome the homophobia, in particular, that manifested in the gay characters' concealment and denial of their homosexuality. However, the literary research of B.J. Epstein, a scholar in children's and young adult literature, reveals that more than 72% of these works represent coming out as daunting.⁵ Coming out, more often than not, results in stressful aftermaths which the young homosexual characters have to cope with.⁶ Although most LGBTQ-themed adolescent novels represent internalized homophobia as being an unbeatable problem and coming out as an almost useless means to deal with it, LaRochelle and Howe's books are different. The narratives present the gay protagonists' coming out as eliciting less dramatic reactions from the surrounding characters, especially their parents and close friends.⁷ This does not mean that the gay protagonists do not face any difficulties during and after their revelation. They do. But, with their strong determination and the effort put into their fight against the internalized homophobia which has plagued their psychological well-being for years, they win. These gay characters ultimately find themselves feeling relieved from the anxiety and guilt of being dishonest to themselves and to their loved ones.

As the novels highlight the gay protagonists' exercise of power to challenge their internalized homophobia, I argue that coming out is a means whereby the gay protagonists exercise "power within" to liberate themselves from the "closet" and attain self-acceptance. This, apart from helping Steven and Joe overcome their internalized homophobia, urges

4. Revel & Riot, "Internalized Homophobia."

5. Epstein, *Are the Kids All Right?*, 74.

6. Epstein, *Are the Kids All Right?* An example of these novels given in Epstein's book is Robin Reardon's *A Secret Edge* (2007). The novel has a scene in which Jason, an orphan gay teen protagonist, comes out to his uncle and aunt who brought him up and love him like their own son. After his revelation, their relationships between Jason and the uncle turns sour. The uncle remains silent and keeps distance from his gay nephew. Still, as the story develops, both characters reconcile.

7. *Publishers Weekly*, "Children's Book Review: Totally Joe by James Howe," PublishersWeekly.com, accessed June 24, 2019, /978-0-689-83957-3.

other surrounding characters to join their activism against homophobia existing in wider society. Here, “power within” is, as Lisa VeneKlasen and Valeries Miller define, “a person’s sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. Power within is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfilment.”⁸ To put it simply, power within is, as Jo Rolands states, an individual’s inner or “spiritual strength” that resides in each individual.⁹

In this chapter, there are two main sections: the manifestation of internalized homophobia and the coping strategy (“coming out”) as proffered in the texts. In the first section, the gay protagonists’ internalized homophobia is revealed through their being “in the closet” and hiding behind the “glass closet” – the metaphors referring to homosexual people’s concealment of their true sexual identities and vigorous denial of it, respectively. The notion of the “closet” proposed by Michael P. Brown, Eve Sedgwick, and Nicholas A. Guittar is thus useful in my reading. For the second part, “coming out,” the coping strategy to deal with internalized homophobia will be analyzed. To do so, Vivienne Cass’s identity development model (self-acceptance/coming out model) will be applied as the theoretical framework, because such a psychological approach gives an importance to homosexuals’ “power within” to overcome the negative feelings toward themselves. This is congruent with the themes within both primary texts that highlight the gay main characters’ ability to exercise their power to challenge their internalized homophobia. I argue that “coming out” is presented as a coping strategy against homophobia and predominant heteronormativity. However, in the first instance, I will provide synopses of the two books.

David LaRochelle’s *Absolutely, Positively Not* features Steven DeNarski’s internal struggle to accept his homosexual identity due to internalized homophobia.¹⁰ Steven is a

8. VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 45.

9. Rolands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*, 13.

10. Rebecca Grabill, “Absolutely Positively Not, by David Larochelle,” Rebecca Grabill, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.rebeccagrabill.com/blog/2016/8/2/absolutely-positively-not-by-david-larochelle>.

sixteen-year-old boy who has two obsessions: sex and passing his driver's test.¹¹ He falls in love with Coach Bowman, a new substitute teacher whom he finds extremely attractive. The coach reminds Steven of Superman, a character he has long obsessed over in his collection of posters. Unable to accept that he is gay, Steven chooses to remain in the "closet" by seeking strategies to re-assure himself (and the world) that he is "absolutely, positively not gay" despite the fact he has observed what he regards as his own homosexual leanings for years.¹² Steven has never had a date and instead prefers hanging out with Rachel, his closest friend, and enjoys square dancing with his mother and cooking rather than playing sports.¹³

Told from a first-person point of view (Steven's), the novel offers a realistic portrayal of an adolescent who eventually comes to terms with his sexuality. The reader finds that Steven's attempts to fit into "correct" social norms involve a series of events which are hilarious but sad at the same time. The protagonist begins by throwing away the male underwear magazines he keeps in his bedroom, getting a tattoo, and buying *Playboy* at the local store. Yet, two items in his plan fail as having a tattoo proves too expensive and painful for him *and* buying an adult magazine becomes even more difficult after he runs into Miss Abbergast, his retired teacher, at the local store. Miss Abbergast warmly greets Steven before spending a long time reading the *Enquirer* and *The Weekly World News* near the adult magazine rack, thus putting Steven in an awkward situation. Steven decides to buy *New Baby*, *The Magazine for Young Mothers*, a box of diapers, plastic forks, and WD-40, while lying to the storekeeper (who begins to suspect Steven to be a shoplifter) that his girlfriend is pregnant.

LaRochelle intensifies Steven's efforts to assert his heterosexuality by making him follow Dr. Trent Beachum's guidebook which contains out-of-date information about

11. Goodreads, "Absolutely, Positively Not," Goodreads, accessed April 20, 2019, https://www.goodreads.com/work/best_book/324520-absolutely-positively-not-sid-fleischman-humor-award.

12. David LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not* (2009; repr., New York: Scholastic, 2005), 16.

13. Kirkus Reviews, "Absolutely, Positively Not by David LaRochelle," Kirkus, May 20, 2010, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/david-larochelle/absolutely-positively-not/>. One might argue that these characteristics are stereotypes. However, LaRochelle seems simply to want to show Steven as different to his heterosexual male counterparts.

homosexuality and adolescence. Steven begins to sit with the jock clique at the school lunch table in the hope that he will be able to emulate their “macho lifestyles”: “hit[ting] each other a lot,” “swear[ing] a lot,” and “belch[ing] a lot.”¹⁴ However, Steven finds this kind of behavior disgusting and contrary to his neat and clean tendencies. The jocks ignore Steven, finally calling him a “homo.”¹⁵ But Steven does not give up. He tries another strategy to convince himself that he is straight – dating all the girls he can round up. All dates, however, turn disastrous as they end up with Steven helping the girls with their studies or cleaning up their basements. Steven does not feel sexual attraction to any of his dates. When he thinks about sex, dreaming instead of Coach Bowman.

After repetitive failures to deny his homosexual urges, Steven puts more pressure on himself. He, again, pursues Dr. Beachum’s advice of wearing a rubber band on his wrist. Every time an “impure thought” about Coach Bowman or another male sexual fantasy pops into his mind, he snaps the rubber band and the pain impedes his fantasies.¹⁶ Yet, this aversion therapy does not really help Steven; it causes his wrist to swell. He then decides to date Solveig Amundson, a Norwegian exchange student who wants to have sex with him. Steven rejects her, pretending to have the flu. This time the protagonist can no longer deny his homosexual orientation. He decides to come out to his friend Rachel. To his surprise Rachel congratulates him, telling Steven that she and her family had assumed that he was gay. Inspired by Steven’s coming out, Rachel makes a plan to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in the school to help make the educational space safer for him (and for other homosexual students). She also supports Steven’s decision to take Kelly, her Golden Retriever, to the school dance instead of inviting Belinda, the granddaughter of an old lady who is a member of his square dancing club. By challenging the heterosexual norms of the school prom and having Rachel as his ally, Steven gradually develops self-confidence. He ultimately reveals his homosexual orientation to his parents who, although initially shocked, accept him for who he is.

14. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 52.

15. LaRochelle, 60.

16. LaRochelle, 65.

The story has a happy and comical ending with Steven getting his driving license, enabling him to attend a gay mutual support group at Summerfield House, but the meeting turns out to be only for lesbians. Nonetheless, Steven receives a warm welcome from the participants. In the meeting, he overhears a member of the group mention Mike Capella, a school hockey player, whom Steven learns is gay and attends a support group at Summerfield House too. Steven, having already come out to Rachel and his family, longs to have gay male friends to talk to. He calls Mike to have a chat. Steven is overwhelmed with joy, knowing that he has his first gay male friend and that it is not only he who is gay in the school. The story ends with the protagonist's admitting to himself that now "I was feeling absolutely, positively gay."¹⁷ LaRochelle's novel is a well-balanced treatment of the serious subject of internalized homophobia and humor.¹⁸ The teen's coming out is treated with a light tone, and the author takes Steven from self-denial to a "place of empowerment and self-acceptance."¹⁹

Similar to LaRochelle's *Absolutely, Positively Not*, Howe's sequel *Totally Joe* (from his *The Misfits* series), is told through the first-person viewpoint of Joe Bunch, a thirteen-year-old gay boy.²⁰ Joe is given an assignment by Mr. Daly, his English teacher, to write an alphabiography. The alphabiography is Joe's personal diary which consists of a set of twenty-six short stories or chapters starting with A to Z.²¹ Each chapter has to end with a "Life Lesson."²² The first chapter of his alphabiography, beginning with an A entry, tells the story of how he meets Addison Carle or Addie, the eccentric girl next door who

17. LaRochelle, 219.

18. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), "CCBC Recommended Books," CCBC: Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/detailBook.asp?idBooks=1859>.

19. Kimberly Pauley, "Absolutely, Positively Not," YA and Kids! BooksCentral, November 20, 2006, [http://www.yabookscentral.com/yafiction/2885-Absolutely-Positively-Not; The Cooperative Children's Book Center \(CCBC\), "CCBC Recommended Books."](http://www.yabookscentral.com/yafiction/2885-Absolutely-Positively-Not; The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), 'CCBC Recommended Books.')

20. *The Misfits* series contains four books: *The Misfits* (2001), *Totally Joe* (2005), *Addie on the Inside* (2011), and *Also Known as Elvis* (2014). The focus in each novel is shifted by the life of each main character in the series, so the books can be read on their own (as well as in the series).

21. Kirkus Reviews, "Totally Joe by James Howe: Kirkus Reviews," Kirkus, October 1, 2005, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/james-howe/totally-joe/>.

22. James Howe, *Totally Joe* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2005), n.p.

becomes his closest school friend, supportive ally, and the school activist who initiates the establishment of the Gay-Straight Alliance.

Howe employs the alphabiography to be the main narrative form. Joe's stories consist of tales about the "Gang of Five" (Joe, Addie, Skeeze, and Bobby), his family, his school, his romances, as well as his internalized homophobia.²³ In his family, Joe has very kind parents. His father (David or Dave) is a social worker helping "troubled teenagers," his mother (Penny) is a schoolteacher, and he has one elder brother named Jeff.²⁴ While Jeff is a "guy-guy," Joe regards himself as the opposite. He prefers cooking, playing with Barbies, and dressing up in girl's clothes over the sports, games, and computers which Jeff and his father like. These socially-assumed feminine traits, including his observing Jeff and his father doing "guy-guy" activities together, makes Joe perceive that there is something "wrong" with him and results in a developed sense of alienation.²⁵

The situation gets worse as Joe's obvious femininity causes him to be taunted by Kevin Hennessy, the school bully. Joe develops an internalized homophobia. He, like Steven in *Absolutely, Positively Not*, tries to straighten his effeminate mannerisms but fails. Joe finds that being a "guy-guy" is a mystery to him and his outward characteristics, effeminate or otherwise cannot be corrected or altered. Nevertheless, Joe does not totally feel comfortable with his homosexual identity and, more importantly, cannot come out to his family although they are kind and already suspect that he is gay. While Joe gradually learns to come to terms with his homosexuality with the support from his Aunt Pam to whom he comes out after Bobby, Colin Briggs (Joe's boyfriend) finds it more difficult to accept his recently discovered homosexual orientation. Howe creates Colin as a parallel character to Joe. His journey towards self-acceptance is made impossible because his father is homophobic. Worse, in the school, after being rumored to have kissed Joe, Colin decides

23. Although these characters call their group of close friends the "Gang of Five," there are only four members. The name Gang of Five derives from Skeeze's playing dumb with the "TOTAL NIGHTMARE" math teacher Mrs. Esley, giving her a wrong answer that "2+2 = 5." At lunch, Skeeze proposes to his friends to call themselves "The Gang of Five." See Howe, 48.

24. Howe, 40.

25. Howe, 9.

to retreat into the closet by not talking to Joe for fear of losing his social status as a popular athlete.

Despite feeling upset, Joe respects his boyfriend's decision but continues communicating with him via a chat room after school to help Colin relieve his stress. Joe finally realizes that living in the closet is causing him psychological havoc. He recognizes it as dishonest and self-disrespecting. He decides to come out to his parents who show acceptance and understanding. His action and his supportive family empower Joe to fully embrace his identity and further motivates him to act against the homophobic bullying in the school by reporting Kevin to the principal. The protagonist eventually becomes "totally Joe." With the novel shaped in the form of an alphabiography, the author crafts the book by inserting emoticons, Internet chat-room style dialogues, and colloquial language.²⁶ These writing techniques make the alphabiography seem more realistically written by a teenager and thus help the reader, regardless of sexual orientation, to understand Joe's feelings of anguish, his experiences of "coming out of the closet" which is a means to overcome his internalized homophobia, the importance of having or being supportive allies, and laughing along with Joe's amiable personality.

Notwithstanding their serious content, LaRochelle's *Absolutely, Positively Not* and Howe's *Totally Joe* humorously depict the gay teen characters' attempts to deal with their internalized homophobia. The humorous tone lightens the treatment of the serious issue and, as LaRochelle clearly states, "make[s] people laugh [along]."²⁷ It is this element which makes both books different to other contemporary gay-themed YA novels in which the tone is often dark and distressed. LaRochelle's *Absolutely, Positively Not*, his first YA novel, received the Sid Fleischman Humor Award in 2005 from Newbery winner Sid Fleischman himself. The author considers this as "one of the highlights of his writing career."²⁸ In addition, the book also gained other plaudits such as the American Library

26. LibraryThing, "Totally Joe by James Howe," LibraryThing.com, accessed June 24, 2019, <http://www.librarything.com/work/123907/reviews/>.

27. David LaRochelle, "Books for Young Adults," David LaRochelle, 2009 2005, <https://www.davidlarochelle.com/yabooks/yabooks1.html>.

28. LaRochelle.

Association's Best Books for Young Adult, *Booklist* Top Ten Debut Novel, Garden State Teen Book Award nominee (2008), New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age, CCBC Choices, IRA Young Adult Choices for 2007, *Booklist*'s Editors' Choice for 2005, Georgia Peach Book Award for Teens nominee 2008-2009, and Italy's Andersen Award finalist in 2015.²⁹ Howe's *Totally Joe* is listed in the YA book recommendations for classroom reading in *Teaching Tolerance* magazine due to its content.³⁰

More important than the multiple awards which *Absolutely, Positively Not* and *Totally Joe* received, the authors wrote the books to encourage the young closeted homosexual reader to consider coming out, especially if they have a supportive environment. To do so, LaRochelle and Howe include their personal life experiences as being "closeted" and later "out" in their novels through their characters. This is clear from their interviews. LaRochelle admits:

[Steven is] based on me! [...] Like Steven I was scared to death that somebody might discover I was attracted to men, and I did all sorts of ridiculous things to prove to myself, and the world, that I was absolutely, positively *not* gay. And like Steven, when I finally decided to be honest, I was a much happier person [*italics in original*].³¹

From what LaRochelle says, he employs Steven (drawn from his direct experience) as an exemplar of the young gay who succeeds in fighting against internalized homophobia to live authentically. Still, it must be noted here that, as LaRochelle adds in the interview, his coming out went smoothly because he had a very supportive family.³² This implies a caution to the teenage reader about the risks of coming out if they lack a supportive system.

29. Cynthia Leitich Smith, "Absolutely Positively Not by David LaRochelle Receives 2005 Sid Fleischman Humor Award," *Cynthia Leitich Smith* (blog), April 14, 2006, <https://cynthialeitichsmith.com/2006/04/absolutely-positively-not-by-david/> and; LaRochelle, "Books for Young Adults."

30. Tom Owens, "Totally James," *Teaching Tolerance*, 2006, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2006/totally-james>.

31. Daphne, "The Unedited David LaRochelle Interview," *The Places You Will Go*, accessed June 24, 2019, https://daphne.blogs.com/books/2005/07/the_unedited_da_1.html.

32. LaRochelle reveals that his father was the first person to whom he came out, and his father was supportive, telling him: "I love you." This inspired him to create Joe's father as being kind, understanding, and open-minded adult character like his father. See Daphne.

Like LaRochelle, Howe reveals that Joe is actually a reflection of his own life. He says: “[*Totally Joe* is the writing of] my own shame about being gay, my own discomfort, my own wish that I could be open and accepting and be accepted. These feelings kept bubbling up in my work, which often celebrated difference and feeling good about who you are.”³³ Here, we see that Howe sincerely reveals his “shame and self-hatred” at being a closeted gay man, and this created Joe.³⁴ The author is keen to convey the mental trauma which can be caused by the suppression of one’s sexuality (something he himself experienced and is implicit in the portrait of Joe). And, like LaRochelle, Howe makes his gay protagonist decide to come out which again echoes the author’s action that he strongly believes to “set himself free.”³⁵ Moreover, it is not always the case that coming out ends in trauma if it is undertaken properly and strategically, but instead those who come out will gain a higher sense of self-esteem and can live authentically.³⁶ In this respect, the books can be considered texts of resistance against internalized homophobia. They present ways that young gay readers can adapt in combating the bigotry absorbed from their environment.

The Manifestation of Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia in both *Absolutely, Positively Not* and *Totally Joe* manifests in various forms. Many of them are found to be congruent with the examples given in the beginning of this chapter. For instance, the narratives illustrate the gay protagonists’ self-questioning, their anxiety, and their having tried many ways to “straighten” their homosexual orientation such as hanging out with school jocks or male

33. Owens, “Totally James.”

34. Owens.

35. Owens. Howe married his first wife Deborah Smith in 1968. After she passed away, Howe re-married Betsy Imershein in 1981 and they have a daughter. The couple got divorced in 2002 and now Howe lives with his same-sex partner, Robert Mark Devis. See Ruth R. Caillouet, “James Howe,” in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary LGBTQ Literature of the United States*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 321.

36. Coming out has been promoted by many organizations throughout the United States such as PFLAG, LGBT Asylum Support Task Force, Equality NC, Gay-Straight Alliance Network, and so forth. in the hope to lessen psychological effects that closeted homosexual youths endure. In addition to this, National Coming Out Day is observed and celebrated annually on October 11. See Human Rights Campaign, “National Coming Out Day Report,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed June 26, 2019, <http://www.hrc.org/youth-report/national-coming-out-day-report/>.

friends to emulate their masculine behaviors, flirting with schoolgirls, or reading pornographic materials in an attempt to arouse desire for women. All of these demonstrate the characters' unacceptance of their homosexuality, deeming it as shameful or an undesirable behavioral trait that needs alteration. However, from my observation, the homophobia that LaRochelle and Howe place importance upon is the protagonists' concealment and vigorous denials of their homosexual orientation. The former is widely known as "being in the closet" and the latter is its variation – being in the "glass closet."³⁷ In this section, I will explore the manifestation of internalized homophobia as represented in the novels, beginning with the gay characters' concealment of their homosexual orientation (being "in the closet"). This is to show that concealing and denial of one's sexuality is in fact a form of homophobia. And this will be re-confirmed in my further demonstration of Steven and Joe's rebuttal of their apparent gayness (being "in the glass closet"). At this point, however, it is useful to provide the theory and historical background with regard to the notion of the "closet" as it will help illustrate how the term "closet" has developed and been used.

According to Michael P. Brown, the closet is literally a "place where things are hidden. It is typically a small, confining place off a more central, open room."³⁸ Brown traces the history of the term "closet" and finds that it first appeared in Middle English between 1150 and 1500 which originally referred to the "a small private room used for prayer or study."³⁹ This word carried connotative meanings such as "private" or "secluded."⁴⁰ However, it was not until in 1968 that the term "closet" was used in the gay New York community with the expanded figurative sense to mean "hidden, covert, or secret" (as of one's sexuality).⁴¹ Since then the term "in the closet" is widely used to refer

37. Jordan Bass, Robin Hardin, and Elizabeth A. Taylor, "The Glass Closet: Perceptions of Homosexuality in Intercollegiate Sport," *Journal of Applied Sport Management* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 2.

38. Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

39. Brown, 5.

40. Brown, 5.

41. Brown, 5. Brown notes that although the term "in the closet" is assumed to have been used from 1968 in the gay New York community, this might not be the precise origin. He shows that this term was used in Canada in the 1950s. Arika Okrent proposes that the term "closet" possibly originates from the English

to homosexual people's intentional concealment of their orientation and identities. Despite this, Brown does not mean that these sexual minorities are willing to be "in the closet." They are often forced to do so due to the fact that heteronormativity remains so predominant and deeply-rooted and thus compels many homosexual people not to disclose their true sexual identities for fear of homophobic persecution.

In Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991), which was written as a contribution to the anti-homophobia campaign in the United States, the author contends that "the closet is the defining structure of gay oppression of this century."⁴² She criticizes heteronormativity for its failing to consider human sexuality and gender as part of a wider spectrum.⁴³ Instead, she notes that the binary construction of our sexuality and gender (men/women and male/female) is not just limited but inevitably engenders a hetero/homo dichotomy.⁴⁴ While the former (the majority) is considered normal, the latter (the minority) is tacitly associated with abnormality.⁴⁵ Sedgwick's remarks regarding the damaging consequences of heteronormativity still bear resonance. Nicholas A. Guittar, in his empirical studies of American homosexual teenagers who, after living in the closet, later decided to disclose their homosexual identities, states that "Heteronormativity lives in our institutions, it permeates our culture, and it governs much of our social interactions."⁴⁶ It is the "powerful influence" that pushes American homosexual adolescents to build the "closet" and lock themselves in although doing so causes them mental trauma.⁴⁷ These young people, for instance, can neither be open to others that they are homosexual (despite having acknowledged their homosexual orientation for a long time), nor can they build and

expression "skeleton in the closet," a secret hidden due to social stigma. In addition to the metaphor of the "closet," there are other metaphors for the acts of concealing and revealing one's homosexual orientation. These are, for instance, "wear a mask" vs. "take off the mask," "wear his hair up" vs. "let his hair down" or "drop hairpins." See Arika Okrent, "What Is the Origin of the Phrase 'Come Out of the Closet'?", *Mental Floss*, May 3, 2013, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/50405/what-origin-phrase-come-out-closet>.

42. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990th ed. (repr., Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 71.

43. Sedgwick, 1.

44. Sedgwick, 11.

45. Sedgwick, 58.

46. Nicholas A. Guittar, *Coming Out: The New Dynamics* (London: First Forum Press, 2014), 1.

47. Guittar, 1.

develop relationships with the ones they love.⁴⁸ As such, homosexual teenagers can feel pressure from living with lies and dishonesty, which ultimately engenders their developed low self-esteem, self-loathing, and despair.⁴⁹

Brown, Sedgwick, and Guittar consider the “closet” a consequence of the predominant heteronormativity in American society. The closet reflects the overall picture of homophobic social structure that represses a sexual minority from being visible; as Brown aptly puts it: “[The closet] is the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men.”⁵⁰ In this sense, being in the closet inevitably causes psychological trauma for all homosexuals. They feel inferior to the privileged heterosexuals and develop a sense of self-worthlessness and shame at being a sexual minority. The more these marginalized people shut themselves tightly in the closet, the more their internalized homophobia is intensified. By virtue of this, it is not too much of a stretch to claim that the “closet” is an oppressive force which impedes non-heterosexual people from realizing and eliciting their “power within,” a power which will enable them to attain self-esteem and freedom to live as who they really are.

Being in the Closet

To return to the primary texts *Absolutely*, *Positively Not* and *Totally Joe*, I note that the authors relate the bedroom and basement in Steven and Joe’s houses respectively to the idea of the closet. This is to represent the protagonists’ internalized homophobia which manifests in their concealment of their homosexual orientation. In *Absolutely*, *Positively Not*, LaRochelle gives details regarding the physical characteristics of Steven’s bedroom and the activities the protagonist conducts within this space. The teenager’s bedroom is a personal area that parents allocate to their children for their privacy. Here, Steven usually spends his time after school admiring a poster of “Superman in flight” and the figures he has collected for years.⁵¹ The text also shows that every time he gets into his bedroom,

48. Guittar, 1–6.

49. Guittar, 6.

50. Brown, *Closet Space*, 1.

51. LaRochelle, *Absolutely*, *Positively Not*, 15.

Steven feels relieved from the vexation caused by his untidy and talkative mother. He admits: “When I reached my room, I shut the door and stood for a moment, absorbing the tranquility of the only orderly spot in the house. Everything was folded. Everything was dusted. Everything was exactly where it belonged.”⁵² In *Totally Joe*, the basement is where Howe depicts the gay protagonist and his boyfriend Colin watching Joe’s favorite movie *E.T.* together without interruption from any of Joe’s family members. On a superficial level, the bedroom and basement are not different to those represented in the majority of young adult novels. They serve as the characters’ space where they can seek refuge from their hectic lives and spend time doing the activities they love. However, a further reading of the bedroom and basement scenes in these novels reveals that the two spaces act as a kind of closet and this, paradoxically, reveals both gay protagonists’ internalized homophobia.

LaRochelle presents Steven’s bedroom as being very tidy and not having much space, characteristics which make the protagonist relate his bedroom to a closet in a literal sense. He describes that “[i]n fact, my closet was a small, [...] thoroughly organized tribute to the world-famous Man of Steel.”⁵³ The details of Steven’s bedroom are congruent with the literal meaning of the term “closet” that Brown provides: “It is typically a small, confining place off a more central, open room.”⁵⁴ However, as the word “closet” also has connotative meanings “hidden, covert, or secret,” it is employed in the text to foreshadow the fact that Steven’s bedroom is a space of psychological oppression. Here, the protagonist’s concealment of his homosexual orientation is unveiled. This is made evident in the descriptions as to how Steven hides his male nude magazines which he fears will be discovered by his parents.

Steven narrates that “Beneath my bed, in a shoe box wrapped in rubber bands, locked in a suitcase covered with an old blanket, were two magazines: *The Men’s Undergear Catalog* and *International Male*.”⁵⁵ The magazines are very carefully hidden.

52. LaRochelle, 14.

53. LaRochelle, 16.

54. Brown, *Closet Space*, 5.

55. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 16.

The shoebox is put inside the suitcase which is not only covered with a blanket to increase invisibility, but also placed under the bed to camouflage it with the darkness of the space beneath the furniture. With the magazines inside, this arrangement looks like a set of nesting boxes or Russian dolls; namely, the outmost shell is the bed, then the suitcase, and finally the shoebox. From here, the narrative begins to give the picture of the protagonist's bedroom as being turned into a "closet" both in the physical and metaphorical sense with the intentional concealment of Steven's homosexual orientation. Steven's keeping the "catalog full of male models in thong and jockstraps" completely out of sight from others strongly indicates that he does not want anybody to find out that he is gay.

However, while his attempt to hide his homosexual orientation is strenuously undertaken, it is indeed such an act of concealment that reveals his negative attitudes toward himself. Clearly, Steven deems his homosexual orientation as something to be ashamed of and which must be kept hidden so that no one discovers it. This is made even more obvious by his ripping up the catalogues and hiding the scraps. The narrative depicts Steven's attempts to eliminate the evidence that might lead to a divulgence of his secret. He tears up the magazines to very small pieces until the pile of scraps is smaller than "postage stamps," "stuffed the pieces into plastic grocery bags, tied it tight, and carried it out to the trash where [he] buried it beneath the remains of the last night's dinner. [...] [He] dropped the lid down on the garbage can."⁵⁶ Here, we can see that the way he dumps the shredded male nude magazines – "bur[ying] [them] beneath the remains of the last night's dinner" and closing the "lid" of the bin – is not different to how he keeps the magazines in his bedroom as the scraps are placed under many layers of coverage. As Steven himself admits, this is to prevent others from finding out that he is gay (and, at the same time, to convince himself that he is heterosexual). He says, "See! If that didn't indicate how *not* gay I was, what did? [...] Nobody could ever think that I was gay now. Because I wasn't [*italics in original*]."⁵⁷ In this regard, it can be stated that the protagonist is hiding "in the closet" – which clearly indicates his unacceptance of his homosexuality.

56. LaRochelle, 16–17.

57. LaRochelle, 17.

The gay protagonist's internalized homophobia is reiterated in the same bedroom scene. This is implied through the shape of the items – the bed, the suitcase, and the shoebox – in which the male nude magazines are kept. Here, it is remarkable that they are all made in the same rectangular shape as Steven's bedroom. The rectangular shape while suggesting "organization" (fitting Steven's demeanor of being tidy), lends a sense of being entombed, locked in, or confined due to the geometry being similar to that of a prison cell. Thus, Steven is depicted as a prisoner who locks himself in the "closet" with his own shame at being gay. In addition to this, due to the fact that the bed, the suitcase, and the shoebox are all placed over the male nude magazines, their rigid rectangular frames make them look like the multi-layered prison bars or walls. It can be construed further as that Steven confines the core part of his sexuality in the very strong and secured "closet" so that no one can see it. (And, as the narrative reveals later, Steven finds it is very difficult to get out of the "closet" that he builds and locks himself within). In this tight concealment of the protagonist's homosexual orientation, the narrative re-confirms that this self-imposed prison is indeed Steven's manifested internalized homophobia.

Very similar to the case of Steven, internalized homophobia, as manifested in the gay character's concealment of his homosexuality, is found in Howe's *Totally Joe*. The basement is represented in the novel as being the closet in both literal and figurative senses. In the scene in which Joe invites Colin his boyfriend to his home to watch movies together, we learn that the event always occurs in the basement. The characteristics of the basement are again created to look similar to the "closet." The basement is not big, it is located on the lowest level of the house, and only Joe and Colin – both gay characters – stay within. This gives an atmosphere of segregation and even confinement, like the connotative meaning of the term "closet," as Brown states, to suggest "hidden," "covert," or "secret."⁵⁸ That the characters set themselves apart from the rest of Joe's family members – who are all heterosexual – implies that the basement is not different from Steven's bedroom in terms of it is now turned (figuratively) into their "closet." Here, Joe's ghettoizing himself within this space reveals that he does not want others to know the truth that he is gay, even his family members who have already speculated that Joe and Colin are lovers. This means that, for

58. Brown, *Closet Space*, 5.

Joe, his sexuality is seen as shameful and to be kept secret. As such, we have never seen Joe introduce Colin, his boyfriend, to anyone in his family despite them having dated for months (with Colin his frequent guest in watching movies at his home). Instead, Joe locks himself (together with Colin) in the “closet.” Such an intention to hide, isolate, and withdraw himself from all heterosexual family members due to shame of being gay is indicative of Joe’s internalized homophobia.

In the basement, Joe watches his favorite movie, Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* and empathizes with the lost, lonely and isolated alien creature – a figure struggling to find a way home and fearful of discovery by government agents who would incarcerate and scrutinize him. Joe notes:

My fave movie is *E.T.—the Extra-Terrestrial*. Unlike Keanu Reeves or Leonardo DiCaprio, E.T. does not have a fabulous name and is majorly *ugly*, but ever since the first time I saw him (I was six), I couldn’t get him out of my mind. I began thinking I was from some other planet and wishing I could go home, just like E.T. ☺ I would even look up at the sky at night and try to pick out which planet was mine. I had a name for it—Wisteria.

I think that’s really the name of a flower or a perfume or something, but I liked the sound of it. I never told anybody, not Bobby or my aunt Pam or anybody. Wisteria was just for me.

I never pictured Wisteria very clearly in my mind. I didn’t know what the houses looked like or the trees or people or anything. When I imagined myself living there, it wasn’t what I saw that mattered. It was what I felt. I felt at home [*italics in original*].⁵⁹

Joe relates himself to E.T. as he shares the same feelings of alienation. For E.T. this feeling is caused by him being accidentally left on Earth after his group of alien botanists flee, in haste, to their spaceship (or UFO) after being uncovered.⁶⁰ Since then E.T. has been on a quest to find a way home. This is revealed in his attempts to communicate with Elliott, the boy who first finds E.T. in his house’s tool shed. E.T. utters “E.T. phone home” to ask for

59. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 32–33.

60. Steven Spielberg, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Universal Pictures, 1982), DVD (S.I.: Universal, 2005).

his help.⁶¹ For Joe, his sense of unbelonging results from him being gay. This feeling is so intense that Joe creates an imaginary planet “Wisteria” and “wish[es] [he could] go back home” like E.T. does.⁶² Joe confesses: “When I imagined myself living there, it wasn’t what I saw that mattered. It was what I felt. I felt *at home* [emphasis added].”⁶³

Significantly and ironically, Joe is alienated within his home. This is because the basement or, in fact, the “closet” inside which he locks himself does not truly provide him comfort and happiness, but instead isolation, a sense of dishonesty, and a lack of self-respect.

Despite such emotional distress, Joe chooses to remain closeted. He keeps his homosexual orientation secret like the way he has “never told anybody” about Wisteria.⁶⁴ Joe does not feel proud of being who he is. His gayness is, for him, a trouble, a shame, and it must be completely hidden despite the fact that he has a nurturing family. One might observe that Joe has absorbed the bigoted attributes commonly associated with homosexuality – something shameful, hidden, dirty – and therefore demonstrates an internalized self-hating homophobia.

Joe’s relating himself to E.T. also points to his fear of being discovered as gay by his family. To explain this point, I return to the scene in the film that shows E.T. hiding in the wardrobe which closely reflects Joe’s being in the basement or living in the closet. Upon fear of discovery by humans, E.T. sneaks into Elliott’s bedroom and keep himself completely hidden in the wardrobe until the boy lures him out with candies.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, E.T. keeps going back into the closet even though, after peeping through the shutters, the alien can sense the tenderness, warmth, and love of Elliott’s mother from her cuddling Gertie (Elliott’s younger sister) while reading bedtime stories for her daughter every night.⁶⁶ This depiction of E.T. in the wardrobe is very similar to the case of Joe. The narrative depicts Joe as having a warm family (like Elliott has), hinting that the gay protagonist will not face rejection and reprisal from his self-disclosure to the family. More

61. Spielberg.

62. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 32.

63. Howe, 33.

64. Howe, 32.

65. Spielberg, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*.

66. Spielberg.

importantly, at many points in the narrative, it is Joe himself who acknowledges this. He tells Colin that “[...] I think they know [that I am gay]. And, I’m pretty sure they’re okay with letting me be whoever I am.”⁶⁷ This is also re-confirmed by Colin’s positive response: “[Your] dad is THE BEST and that [you] shouldn’t worry about telling him that [you’re] gay.”⁶⁸ Again, Joe says to himself while watching the E.T. movie in the basement that “...I love my family and *they love me* [emphasis added].”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Joe fears his family finding out his true sexual identity. This is evident in his not telling his father that Colin is his boyfriend, even though the father sits in the basement and watches the movie with both teenagers. The father even follows Joe’s mother and Aunt Pam’s signaling to go upstairs in order not to intrude upon their privacy, suggesting his acknowledgement and acceptance of the romantic relationship between his son and Colin. Joe’s fear of his homosexual orientation being revealed, despite it being obvious to his family, is indeed a manifestation of his internalized homophobia.

Hiding in the Glass Closet

Apart from both gay protagonists’ being in the closet which is the manifestation of their internalized homophobia, *Absolutely, Positively Not* and *Totally Joe* also points to the homosexual characters’ vigorous denial of their homosexual orientation. This is known as being (or hiding) in the glass closet. The “glass closet” is a metaphor which originated in Hollywood between the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁰ It was first used to refer to the case of an American film actor William Haines who was publicly known as being gay although his employer Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) put considerable effort into suppressing the truth by arranging a fake traditional marriage for him.⁷¹ Later, the “glass closet” metaphor came to include any Hollywood celebrities who live openly as homosexual and/or have same-sex

67. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 30.

68. Howe, 39.

69. Howe, 30 and 33.

70. Michael Musto, “The Glass Closet,” *Out Magazine*, September 22, 2008, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/2008/09/22/glass-closet>. It is interesting to note that Musto believes the term “glass closet” was around in the 1920 and 1930s. This would cast doubt on Brown’s claim that the term “in the closet” emerged in the 1950s or 1960s.

71. Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, *Out of the Closet, Off the Screen: The Life of William Haines*, Documentary, 2001.

partners, but cagily avoid giving personal information to the press, or have never admitted publicly that they are homosexual but nor do they claim that they are heterosexual either.⁷² One example of this is the actress Jodie Foster. Foster who, by all reports, has lived as a lesbian for years but has never officially revealed her homosexuality to the public, and thereby she has been dubbed by the American press as “one of the foremost residents of a glass closet.”⁷³ Today, the meaning of the “glass closet” metaphor has expanded to include anyone who is homosexual and demonstrates outwardly homosexual mannerisms, behavior, and lifestyles but who nonetheless denies or does not fully disclose their true sexual identities to others. In short, the “glass closet” metaphor means “Where homosexuals live when they think nobody can tell they’re gay, but everybody really knows.”⁷⁴

From what has been explained about the glass closet metaphor, it is understandable that people who reside in the glass closet attempt to find a balance between their careers and personal lives, especially in the case of celebrities such as Foster, who may well be concerned about the negative repercussions of revealing their homosexual orientation. Nonetheless, in many cases, living in the glass closet can be viewed as the homosexual individual’s firm denial of their true sexual identities. To put it simply, they trap themselves between being “in” and being “out” of the closet. Such an act reveals that, deep inside, these residents of the glass closet feel insecure and embarrassed about their sexual orientation.⁷⁵ In this sense, hiding in the glass closet, to some extent, is the manifestation of their internalized homophobia.⁷⁶ It indicates that these homosexual people still hold negative attitudes towards themselves and even fail to acknowledge their latent power (power within) to liberate themselves from the oppressive force of the closet.

72. Musto, “The Glass Closet.”

73. Musto.

74. Urban Dictionary, “Glass Closet,” Urban Dictionary, November 27, 2005, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=glass%20closet>.

75. Tony E. Adams, *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction*, Writing Lives: Ethnographic Narratives (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 13.

76. John Browne, *The Glass Closet: Why Coming Out Is Good Business?* (Liverpool: WH Allen, 2014), 76.

In *Absolutely Positive Not* and *Totally Joe*, the idea of the “glass closet” is employed by both authors in relation to the characters’ persistent refutation of their homosexuality. Steven and Joe, instead of accepting their true sexuality and coming out earlier to their evidently good supportive systems, dogmatically rebut their homosexual orientation although it is obvious to themselves and to others for years. For instance, Steven, a “very observant” person, is depicted in one scene as getting frightened after he observes himself having sexual daydreams about Coach Bowman.⁷⁷ Steven notices:

I studied the [Superman in flight] poster for the millionth time. Mr. Bowman would make a good superman. I pictured him in tights.

Dang!

I sat up, knocking my notebook to the floor.

So what? So what if I had been thinking about Mr. Bowman every five minutes all day long? That meant nothing. He was an interesting teacher, that’s all. I bet every single one of his students was thinking about Mr. Bowman right this very moment.

Uneasily I lay back down on my bed.⁷⁸

Here, Steven recognizes his homosexual orientation. He finds that he does not simply relate Mr. Bowman to Superman in the poster in a sexual way (“pictur[ing] him in tights”), but also has an overwhelming sexual attraction for him (“thinking about [him] every five minutes all day long [...]).⁷⁹ Steven, however, denies his feelings. He makes sweeping generalizations about other students sharing the same feelings for Mr. Bowman because he is an “interesting teacher” to convince (in fact to deceive) himself that he is not gay.⁸⁰ Furthermore, if we look at Steven’s bodily reactions, along with his justification for being attracted to Mr. Bowman, his denial of his homosexuality is even more obvious. Steven’s springing himself up from the bed which is undertaken so abruptly that he “knock[s] [his]

77. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 12.

78. LaRochelle, 15.

79. LaRochelle, 15.

80. LaRochelle, 15.

notebook to the floor” shows that he gets into a panic.⁸¹ Such physical reactions which are unconsciously, uncontrollably, and hysterically expressed indicate Steven’s attempt to shake the “impure” thought out of his head.⁸² This means that the sexual fantasy, for the gay character, must not be allowed to emerge even though he is in his bedroom – the most private area in the house – where no one can intrude. As such, here the text re-confirms Steven as having an internalized homophobia. The gay protagonist considers his homosexual orientation as being undesirable.

It is very interesting to note here that the idea of the glass closet employed to point out Steven’s manifestation of internalized homophobia is also represented through the paratext – the front cover of the novel – especially that of the paperback edition.⁸³ In Figure 1 below, the front cover shows a lanky young man in a striped yellow shirt in the arms of a Superman figure. Behind both characters is the background of the light blue sky with a couple of billowy clouds which the word “...GAY” is written in one of them. Obviously, the illustration reflects the descriptions of Steven’s homosexual romantic fantasy in which Superman becomes Coach Bowman “in tights.”⁸⁴

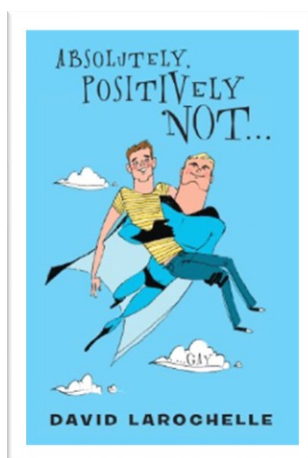


Figure 1: paperback edition

81. LaRochelle, 15.

82. LaRochelle, 65.

83. The novel’s softcover art was designed by Bill Brown and Steve Scott while that of the hardcover edition was created by Kristina Albertson. Both editions were published in 2005.

84. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 15.

From the front cover design, the novel title “ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY NOT...” is scribbled on the top of the page with an ellipsis. There is also the word “...GAY” in one of the clouds toward the bottom of the picture. Indeed, when reading only the title “ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY NOT...,” we might get confused as to what it refers to because the meaning of the title is not clear due to the missing word. But once we read the title “ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY NOT...” and the term “...GAY” together, it is clear that the complete title is “ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY NOT...GAY,” which are Steven’s own words.⁸⁵ At this point, it is remarkable that the meaning of the full title sharply contradicts that of the illustration. While the title is Steven’s rejection of his homosexual orientation with the capitalized words suggestive of vehement and loud denial, the illustration blatantly shows the contrary. This contrast conveys the important message that Steven is hiding within a glass closet. His same-sex sexual attraction to Coach Bowman is both seen and firmly denied.

In *Totally Joe*, the glass closet is treated within the text, in an interaction between Joe and Skeezie where Joe pleads with Skeezie to teach him how to be a “guy-guy.”⁸⁶

[...] in the fifth grade I wanted to be a guy-guy so badly that I actually asked Skeezie to teach me how. Oh. My. God. It was pathetic.

Skeezie: Stop crossing your legs at the knee.

Me: What does that have to do with being a guy-guy?

Skeezie: It has to do with guys do not cross their legs at the knee. Your aunt Priscilla crosses her legs at the knee.

Me: I don’t have an aunt Priscilla. [...].

Skeezie: *You’re* an aunt Priscilla, okay? Now, listen up and do what I’m tellin’ ya. If you gotta cross your legs, you keep one leg at a right angle to the floor and put your other ankle on the knee of that leg. Like this.

Me: Oh my god, you look just like that gangster in that movie. You know, the one with Al Pacino and all the blood? We saw it at Bobby’s that time.

85. LaRochelle, 16.

86. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 11.

Skeezie: Do it, lame brain.

Me: Ow. It hurts.

Skeezie: Stop waving your hands around.

Me: I'm not waving—

Skeezie: Yes, you are. Guys don't wave their hands around. They keep their hands quiet.

Me: Well *that's* boring.

Skeezie: What are you doing?

Me: What?

Skeezie: Your hands. You're folding them in your lap.

Me: I'm keeping them quiet.

Skeezie: Your aunt Priscilla sits with her hands folded in her lap [...] [*italics in original*].⁸⁷

Here, Joe refers to his past when he was in the fifth grade, the time he did not want to be different from others. It is noticeable that Joe's sexuality is already known to Skeezie. This is evident in his reference to Joe as an "aunt Priscilla."⁸⁸ The name Priscilla calls to mind the groundbreaking 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Priscilla is a tour bus named by two drag queens and a transgender woman in the movie.⁸⁹ It is rented by the characters to travel to Alice Springs, a remote town in central Australia, after they accept an offer from Lasseters Hotel Casino Resort to perform their drag act.⁹⁰ The bus is also repainted in pastel lavender, the color that often symbolizes homosexuality, to cover vandalism, "AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME!" sprayed onto it by local homophobes.⁹¹ Perhaps, Skeezie associates the outwardly feminine mannerisms of the film characters to

87. Howe, 11, 12.

88. Howe, 11.

89. Stephan Elliott, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1994), (Columbia Tristar Home Video, 2000).

90. Elliott.

91. Elliott.

those of Joe. This means that Joe's homosexuality is so obvious that Skeezie can tell that Joe is gay even though Joe has never verbally come out to him.

From this point, the author leads the reader further to see Joe's denial of his homosexuality, although it is apparent to Skeezie (and in fact to everyone in the story). Joe puts a lot of effort into emulating Skeezie's masculine sitting positions. His straightening his "effeminate" mannerisms seems comical, but it in fact involves actual pain. Not only does Joe cry out "Ow. It hurts" but he is also scolded by Skeezie – "lame brain" – for failing to copy his "masculine" gestures.⁹² Despite this, Joe insists on altering his posture in the hope that he can become a "guy-guy" like Skeezie and other school peers. Joe's willingness to accept physical pain to eradicate a mannerism which might betray his sexuality indicates his embarrassment or self-disgust. (This is very similar to the case of Steven who tugs his wristband every time he feels attracted to guys in order to curb and correct his "impure" thoughts.)⁹³ Thus, Joe too is in the glass closet; he keeps rebutting and altering his homosexuality although it is apparent to Skeezie *and* here it seems paradoxical that when he asks Skeezie to teach him how to be a "guy-guy," Joe outs himself to his friend.⁹⁴ The gay character's being in the glass closet is also reconfirmed by Skeezie's telling Joe that "I give up. Just be who you are, okay?" – the statement that suggests feelings of sympathy and acceptance for Joe.⁹⁵

As has been demonstrated, hiding inside the glass closet, as in the case of Steven and Joe, shows that the gay characters have developed an internalized homophobia. This seems worse than just simply being in the closet on the grounds that both protagonists keep denying their homosexual orientation even though it is obvious to themselves and to others. In this regard, Steven and Joe are submissive to the dominating power of the closet and they feel powerless. However, it must be conceded that the closet is what they are forced to construct due to the influence of a heteronormativity which predominates American society. Neither LaRochelle nor Howe blames his protagonist for having these negative

92. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 11.

93. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 65.

94. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 11.

95. Howe, 12.

attitudes toward himself. Instead, they allow both Steven and Joe to demonstrate the corrosive impact of living in a heteronormative society in which they are instilled with a homophobic self-hating attitude.

For instance, Steven admits that “[...] I knew what the TV evangelists said about gay people. I’ve heard the wisecracks in the locker room. You don’t have to tell *me* about the nasty words people substitute for “homosexual” [italics in original].⁹⁶ Joe reveals that a factor that leads to his developing internalized homophobia was being bullied at school by Kevin, a macho student. He says “Yesterday, [Kevin] shoved me up against my locker and called me a totally disgusting name, which I *so* cannot write down here [in his alphabiography].”⁹⁷ In such instances, the authors seem to be urging the readers to think further about the dominating power of the ideology of heteronormativity which must be resisted. To do so, the authors later present Steven and Joe’s voluntary revelation of their homosexuality to others. By coming out, the gay characters do not simply liberate themselves but also challenge the macro-scale oppressive force of heteronormativity.

Coming out of the Closet

While both protagonists exhibit an internalized homophobia in terms of their living in the closet (and in the glass closet), this does not mean that negative attitudes toward themselves cannot be overcome. Both authors present their gay protagonists as choosing to verbally disclose their homosexual orientation to their close friends and families.⁹⁸ This is a way that their “power within” is exercised, ultimately liberating themselves from the closet and gaining self-acceptance. Brown and Guittar propose that the voluntary disclosure of one’s homosexuality – coming out of the closet – can challenge internalized homophobia.⁹⁹

96. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 16.

97. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 33.

98. In this thesis, “coming out of the closet” means a voluntary revelation of one’s homosexuality to others via a verbal act, as in when each character says “I am gay” to his friends, siblings, or parents. The act of open declaration is considered by many scholars in queer studies as an acceptance and confirmation of one’s true sexual identity. See Vanessa E. Ford, “Coming Out as Lesbian or Gay: A Potential Precipitant of Crisis in Adolescence,” in *Sexual Minorities: Discrimination, Challenges, and Development in America*, ed. Michael Sullivan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 94.

99. Brown, *Closet Space*, 2; Guittar, *Coming Out: The New Dynamics*, 8.

Brown elaborates this point by examining the logo of the National Coming Out Day (in the United States) designed by Keith Haring in 1988.



Brown remarks that the metaphors of the “closet” and “coming out” are typically lumped together. While the “closet” represents the social oppression and mental trauma which homosexual people have endured, “coming out” shows the opposite – liberation. The logo itself clearly explains this. Namely, the closet’s interior is painted in black, which suggests the invisibility of sexually marginalized people and the psychological suffering associated with hiding in the closet. However, the dark room is placed in contrast to a fluorescent green wall, an orange door, and a yellow body. All of these bright items, including the “jubilant” figure of the person stepping out of the dark room, point to the freedom which homosexual people will enjoy from their voluntary coming out. Brown describes the notion of the “closet” and “coming out” by noting that “By being placed figuratively ‘into a closet,’ gay men and lesbians are marginalized; by coming out, they are liberated.”¹⁰⁰

Brown’s notion of coming out of the closet is consistent with that of Vivienne C. Cass.¹⁰¹ Cass expresses concern for homosexual people’s mental well-being as, from her empirical studies, these marginalized people typically have low self-esteem and poor self-

100. Brown, *Closet Space*, 2.

101. Vivienne C. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 20, no. 2 (May 1, 1984): 143. Vivienne C. Cass is a Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Social Inquiry at Murdoch University in Western Australia.

image due to their internalized homophobia.¹⁰² She observes that many homosexual people can lessen such harmful feelings and attitudes by coming out to trusted others.¹⁰³ This results in her developing a “model of homosexual identity formation” (widely known as the “coming out model”) which challenges the typical assumption that the acquisition of homosexual identity is perceived in a negative light.¹⁰⁴ For instance, one such assumption is that those who come out will face negative responses from others such as rejection or even death.¹⁰⁵ Cass’s theory is important. It treats sexual minorities as capable individuals; they have “power within” that can be elicited to free themselves from the oppressive force of the “closet” and ultimately attain self-esteem. To this day, Cass’s model of coming out is used in programs designed for homosexual people and their allies to help them get a better understanding of the sexually marginalized experience when coming out, enabling them to offer support.¹⁰⁶

According to Cass, coming out consists of six stages. The first stage is called “Identity Confusion” which begins with non-straight people recognizing their homosexual tendencies. This considerably causes them “confusion” and “bewilderment,” typically leading to their seeking further information about homosexuality.¹⁰⁷ In this stage, homosexual people rarely reveal their inner turmoil to others but instead attempt to maintain heterosexual images and assume that others perceive them as well.¹⁰⁸ Some vigorously reject their newly discovered homosexual orientation, convincing themselves that, for instance, “I was only experimenting,” “It happened by accident,” and “I was very drunk.”¹⁰⁹ The second stage is “Identity Comparison,” when non-heterosexual people begin

102. Cass, 144–45.

103. Cass, 147.

104. Cass, 147.

105. Ford, “Coming Out as Lesbian or Gay: A Potential Precipitant of Crisis in Adolescence,” 95.

106. Guittar, *Coming Out: The New Dynamics*, 10.

107. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” 147.

108. Cass, 150.

109. Kathleen Y. Ritter and Anthony I. Terndrup, *Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002), 91–92.

to accept their homosexual orientation.¹¹⁰ They often arrive at the point of admitting their sexuality and develop a heightened sense of alienation with the further sense of being utterly alone.¹¹¹ To sum up, the first and second stages represent severe psychological turmoil. Individuals have to struggle to understand and accept the possibilities of being different to the heterosexual majority before they move forward to the third stage: “Identity Tolerance.”

In the third stage of Cass’s model, “Identity Tolerance,” non-straight people seek out other people of same-sex attraction and they join the LGBTQ community in order to fulfill their emotional and social needs.¹¹² At this stage, they often have not fully accepted their true identities, thus coming out to heterosexual friends and family members tends to be limited, especially in the case of those receiving negative contact from the LGBTQ community. However, for those who get positive contact from their mutual support group, their sense of self-esteem is heightened, helping them move forward to the fourth stage: “Identity Acceptance.” In the fourth stage, the questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” are resolved.¹¹³ They continue and increase their contact with LGBTQ culture. Moreover, they begin to selectively come out to others, in particular, heterosexual close friends and relatives, but sometimes may opt to remain in the closet to avoid facing negative reactions from homophobes.¹¹⁴

The fifth stage is “Identity Pride” which, as the name suggests, is characterized by homosexual people’s feelings of “pride” in themselves.¹¹⁵ At this point, they do not just fully immerse themselves in LGBTQ culture (such as consuming literature, art, media, and so on.) but are also eager to tell the world that they are homosexual.¹¹⁶ Thus, coming out occurs as they undertake a complete transformation from being the residents of the closet to

110. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” 151.

111. Minnesota State University, “Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model (Cass Identity Model),” Minnesota State University, accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.mnsu.edu/lgbtc/resource.html>.

112. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” 151.

113. Minnesota State University, “Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model (Cass Identity Model).”

114. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” 152.

115. Cass, 152.

116. Minnesota State University, “Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model (Cass Identity Model).”

out-and-proud homosexual individuals. At this stage, according to Cass, people of same-sex attraction often express “anger” at heterosexuals and social institutions which discriminate against sexual minorities, leading to a confrontation between the two groups.¹¹⁷ Simply put, a sense of tension – homosexuals versus heterosexuals – can be strong.¹¹⁸ For some homosexual people at this stage, their pride and anger energizes them to become “activists” who combat homophobia.¹¹⁹ While the Identity Pride stage involves dramatic emotions, many successfully move further to the sixth stage – “Identity Synthesis” – wherein homosexual people’s anger and pride are similarly productive, if retained less emotional.¹²⁰ In this final stage, they see themselves as people, with just one aspect of them being their homosexuality. They no longer hide their sexual identities, feeling peaceful and at ease. Here, their identity formation is completed.¹²¹

From Cass’s idea of homosexual identity formation, it is noticeable that the model is linear in its nature. Thus, coming out looks similar to a psychological journey or a rite of passage through which non-heterosexual people move step by step until they gain full self-acceptance.¹²² It takes a great deal of courage as these sexual minorities have to overcome their fear of receiving possible negative reactions from those to whom they come out and have to think about how to deal with them.¹²³ Also, each time s/he meets new friends, goes to new schools, or meets new colleagues, s/he must re-consider whether s/he should disclose her/his sexuality or not.¹²⁴ In other words, coming out is, as Ann Marie Petrocelli puts, not a “one-shot-deal.”¹²⁵ Despite such difficulties, Cass’s model does show the success of homosexual people who attain self-acceptance by coming out, as evident in the

117. Minnesota State University.

118. UNC Safe Zone, “UNC LGBT: For Allies: Learn More: ‘Coming Out’ Stages,” UNC LGBT, June 12, 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030612160524/http://lgbt.unc.edu/allies/articles/stages.html>.

119. Minnesota State University, “Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model (Cass Identity Model).”

120. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” 152.

121. Cass, 152–53.

122. Guittar, *Coming Out: The New Dynamics*, 10.

123. Ford, “Coming Out as Lesbian or Gay: A Potential Precipitant of Crisis in Adolescence,” 94–95.

124. Ford, 94.

125. Petrocelli, *Prejudice to Pride*, 31.

fifth and sixth stages. This is because the model is grounded in a belief in people's "power within" – which VeneKlasen and Miller describes as the ability to "recognize individual differences," to "have hope," and to "search for dignity."¹²⁶ As such, we notice that in each stage of self-disclosure, as presented in Cass's model, the notion of "power within" is inextricably interwoven. This is especially noticeable in the third stage, Identity Tolerance, in which homosexual people begin to seek out and join the LGBTQ community.

In *Absolutely, Positively Not* and *Totally Joe*, the gay main characters' self-disclosure is represented as a journey, like that in Cass's model, and this is especially obvious when the protagonists verbally come out to their close friends; in other words, they enter the Identity Acceptance stage. This stage is the "most important" because, as Vanessa E. Ford remarks, homosexual people's coming out is commonly regarded as an affirmation of their true sexual identity.¹²⁷ Moreover, it is an event that greatly affects the homosexual person's decision as to whether they will continue disclosing their sexuality, which is a long arduous journey.¹²⁸ Thus, in the following section, I will bring the scenes which depict Steven and Joe's first coming out to their close friends Rachel and Bobby respectively into my analysis. This is to demonstrate that coming out of the closet is a way whereby the gay protagonists' "power within" is gradually elicited and exercised to lessen and overcome their internalized homophobia, freeing Steven and Joe from the closet. Furthermore, by coming out, the protagonists encourage other surrounding characters to join their activism in challenging the heteronormativity that dominates the society they live in.

Eliciting "Power Within" to Break out of the Closet

As already demonstrated in the previous section, Steven and Joe's internalized homophobia manifests itself in their being in the closet and in the glass closet. Both characters make frantic attempts to hide and rebut their homosexuality, including their own outward mannerism and gestures. However, as a result they are alienated, lonely, lacking in self-confidence and self-worth. Steven even inflicts physical punishment upon himself by

126. VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 45.

127. Ford, "Coming Out as Lesbian or Gay: A Potential Precipitant of Crisis in Adolescence," 94.

128. Ford, 94.

snapping a wristband to impede his sexual daydreams. In this way, Steven and Joe are depicted as feeling powerless due to the closet they have locked themselves inside. However, it does not mean that their “power within” or inner strength has completely gone. Rather, it is latent and can be elicited by a voluntary verbal coming out to others, as in Steven and Joe’s selective revelation of their sexuality to trustful friends.

In *Absolutely, Positively Not*, Steven’s coming out is not an easy process. This is because the power within has been suppressed and weakened by his living in the closet for a long time. LaRochelle thus presents Steven’s power within as being gradually re-gained. The author places Steven in an awkward situation – Solveig insisting he has sex with her – to catalyze Steven’s self-disclosure. The narrative depicts that Steven stoutly refuses Solveig, telling her: “No! I don’t want to do this!” and “I can’t! [...] I absolutely, positively can’t.”¹²⁹ The date ends when Steven decides to go home. Here, reading Steven’s vigorous denial through the lens of Cass’s coming out model alongside VeneKlasen and Miller’s definition of “power within,” I contend that this episode reveals Steven as stepping into the Identity Acceptance stage of self-disclosure. This is noticeable in the protagonist’s manifest sense of “self-knowledge” and “self-worth”; he “recognize[s] individual differences” (here it is himself) and, at the same time, “respect[s] others” (Solveig).¹³⁰

Steven tacitly acknowledges that he is different from the heterosexual majority – he is gay – as his sexual desire cannot be in anyway aroused by Solveig (nor by other women) no matter how much he tries. Such coming to terms with his homosexuality suggests that the gay character’s latent power within or his sense of self-knowledge has now been provoked and he ceases to manipulate Solveig to “correct” his homosexuality. Alongside this, Steven’s sense of self-worth is simultaneously awakened. The protagonist, at this moment, does not deny his gayness but instead fully accepts it as an innate part of his sexual identity which cannot be altered. This is the first time that Steven is depicted as feeling true to himself; he realizes that he was born as who he is, and this helps quell his inner turmoil because, for him, homosexuality is natural. Moreover, while Steven’s power

129. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 117.

130. VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 45.

within is roused, the text also points to his decision not to have sex with Solveig as respectful of her different sexual identity. Steven lets Solveig find the “right” heterosexual person to date although this means his losing her as a person he uses to mask his homosexuality.

To emphasize the awakening of Steven’s power within, LaRochelle depicts a kind of unpeeling, shedding of a fake sense of self through Steven’s removal of his bedroom posters:

I climbed the stairs to my room and shut the door. Surrounding me were the hundreds of women I had carefully cut out from newspapers and magazines. They seemed to be watching, wondering what I’d do next.

I located the Victoria’s Secret ad that had started my gallery. I carefully pulled it free from the wall and ripped it in two. I then did the same thing with each of the remaining photos. When the last had been removed, I carried the pieces to the garbage and returned with the phone. Then I hit the speed-dial button. “Rachel? It’s Steven. Could I please come over and talk?”¹³¹

At this point, an evocation of Steven’s power within is made apparent through his removing and ripping up of all of the provocative photos of women that are placed over the “Superman in flight” poster on his bedroom wall.¹³² This action makes the Superman figure reappear: “Superman’s expression was unchanged. Stern and resolute. But, at the same time, compassionate too.”¹³³ The re-appearance of the Superman indicates that the gay character does not want to hide his homosexuality anymore. Instead, Steven is now ready and willing to disclose it to others but also tolerant of others’ differences. Like Superman, he is resolute but compassionate. Tearing away the photos which mask his homosexuality to reveal the “Superman in flight” picture symbolizes this transition.¹³⁴ It is interesting that the depiction of Steven as being ready to come out of the “closet” is similar to that of Clark Kent, who really is Superman but disguises himself as a civilian to keep his superhero

131. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 119.

132. LaRochelle, 15.

133. LaRochelle, 163.

134. LaRochelle, 15.

identity secret. Yet, to fight against any villainous characters, Kent is usually shown in an act of tearing his shirt off to reveal his true identity. He bursts out of a closet like space, and rockets into the sky with his mighty power. In this sense, Steven is like Kent in that his dormant power within is now awakened, preparing him to fully accept his homosexual identity.

From here, the reader is led further to see the protagonist's achieving the Identity Acceptance stage. Steven rushes to meet Rachel and tells her: "The reason I've been dating so much is because...I'm gay."¹³⁵ Steven's sense that this is "The moment of truth" indicates his decision not to reside in the closet but to be honest to himself (and to Rachel).¹³⁶ But more importantly, once Steven announces his sexuality, his power from within is fully elicited and exercised. By performing this verbal act, he steps out of the closet for the first time in his life. He is now an "out" gay male (at least to Rachel), no longer someone who lives with lies or in concealment anymore. Coming out is a strategy that Steven makes use of his power within. The latent power is evoked, elicited, and exercised to challenge his internalized homophobia. The closet that Steven built around himself has now collapsed.

As with the case of Steven, *Totally Joe* represents coming out as a means through which Joe's power within is exercised. However, while Steven's self-disclosure to his friend takes a long time and lengthy unravelling, Joe's experience is only briefly mentioned. Moreover, Joe does not directly tell Bobby that "I am gay" like Steven does to Rachel. Rather, he employs a discursive method; he asks Bobby "Why can't I like girls?" which is his way of voluntarily coming out.¹³⁷ Firstly the question is an indirect admittance to Bobby that he is attracted to people of his own sex. It is this moment of self-disclosure. In this respect, Joe is in the Identity Acceptance stage of Cass's coming out model in which his power within is elicited and exercised to challenge his internalized homophobia.

135. LaRochelle, 121–22.

136. LaRochelle, 121.

137. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 19.

Superficially, one might deem such a question as Joe's self-doubt, because it is not a direct utterance of the three words "I am gay" which is, as Tim Ramsey remarks, a strong affirmation of one's homosexuality.¹³⁸ However, Joe's question is sort of "float[ing] a trial balloon" in order to see how Bobby will react to his coming out. Although the gay character knows that Bobby is trustworthy, it is hard to completely avoid the feelings of anxiety and fear of being rejected with his revelation. Joe's hint to Bobby suggests that he no longer wants to keep his homosexuality concealed but is ready to step out of the closet. He, like Steven, learns to accept his being "different" from other straight guys. This is again revealed through his question which suggests his acknowledgement of his same-sex attraction and this means that his power within or a sense of self-knowledge is now awakened.

The narrative moves further to show that the power within is ultimately elicited and exercised. After Joe asks Bobby, his friend responds: "Have you *tried* to like girls? [*italics in original*]."¹³⁹ Joe replies: "Sure [...] I imagined myself married to Julia Roberts once [...]."¹⁴⁰ With this, the conversation shifts to the topic of "her clothes" which is "all" Bobby and Joe talk about before Joe finally admits that "[...] I figured I wasn't really the marrying kind," preferring to have a dog as companion (which proposes to call "Colin").¹⁴¹ Such a prompt reply from Joe indicates his homosexuality to Bobby. Joe's affirmative answer given to Bobby strongly indicates that his power has been exercised. The gay character expresses a sense of self-knowledge and self-worth; he fully accepts himself as gay and is proud of having a "fabulous and totally original sense of style," a characteristic of his identity which once he felt ashamed of.¹⁴² The protagonist completes the Identity Acceptance stage, liberating himself from the oppressive force of the "closet." Like Steven,

138. Tim Ramsey, "I Went Back to My Old School to Say: I'm Gay," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2016, sec. Education, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/feb/02/school-gay-come-out-lgbt-teenager>.

139. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 19.

140. Howe, 20.

141. Howe, 20.

142. Howe, 81.

Joe feels relieved from stress as the scene shows him having fun talking with Bobby about fashion and dogs.

From what has been demonstrated, both Steven and Joe employ voluntary verbal self-disclosure to challenge their internalized homophobia. By coming out, they make use of their residing power within. The power, although dormant, can be elicited and exercised to break from the closet. However, it must be noted here that although Steven and Joe successfully come out to their friends, it does not mean that the power remains stable. Power within, as Ford states, can be either weakened or boosted, depending upon the responses from the person to whom one comes out, as well as the aftermaths of self-disclosure s/he experiences.¹⁴³ In case of Steven, Rachel does not just express her support but also gives him an affirmative message that being gay is not a shame. This is made clear by Rachel's "wrapp[ing] [Steven] in a hug."¹⁴⁴ She also tells her friend that "this is nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact, it's the best news I've heard in a long time. I've been worried that you didn't trust me anymore. Now that you've told me, we're going to be closer than ever."¹⁴⁵ As with Steven, Bobby does not show any homophobic reactions. He instead listens to Joe's revelation of his homosexuality and supports Joe for being who he is and encourages him to do what he likes. The positive reactions from Rachel and Bobby help enhance both characters' self-confidence. Cass would argue that this positive reception motivates them toward the Identity Pride stage of self-acceptance.

Challenging Heteronormativity and Homophobia in School

After their revelation of their homosexuality to their close friends, Steven and Joe continue the process of coming out because it is, as already stated, not a "one-shot deal" but the life-long journey to gain self-acceptance.¹⁴⁶ They later decide to come out to their parents, but more importantly, advance themselves toward the Identity Pride stage in which they urge their allies (the parents and/or friends) to engage in the activism to challenge the

143. Ford, "Coming Out as Lesbian or Gay: A Potential Precipitant of Crisis in Adolescence," 94.

144. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 123.

145. LaRochelle, 125–26.

146. Petrocelli, *Prejudice to Pride*, 31.

heteronormativity that dominates society. This is a big step that Steven and Joe take which transforms them from being submissive closeted gay teens to what Cass calls “activists.” To put it another way, by coming out, the protagonists do not only exercise power within to be free from self-imprisonment in the closet, but also they influence other characters’ “power to” (an ability to create changes for a better life and environment) and form “collective power” (collaboration) to resist heteronormativity and challenging homophobia in a wider space. From here, I will demonstrate how coming out can bring about other characters’ exercising of “power to” and “joint power” to create such positive changes.

In each novel, the challenging of heteronormativity takes place within the educational setting. The novels mention the gay characters being called homophobic names and sometimes pushed against the locker by the school bullies without interference from authority figures. This does not mean that the adults ignore such homophobic bullying. Both Steven and Joe opt not to report the harassment to any of them for fear that their secret will be divulged. Nonetheless, once the protagonists come out to their friends and families, their power within is considerably enhanced by support and acceptance from these allies. Steven and Joe thus feel empowered to act against the prevalent homophobia in their schools. Each character chooses different ways to make use of their coming out to elicit others’ “power to” and build “joint power.” While Steven takes Rachel’s golden retriever Kelly to his first high school prom, Joe encourages his parents to support the establishment of the Gay-Straight Alliance and he also officially reports Kevin, the homophobic bully, to Mr. Kiley, the school principal.

In *Absolutely, Positively Not*, Steven challenges the heterosexual tradition of the school prom that restricts dancing couples to be only male and female students. The protagonist, although feeling apprehensive and reluctant (he lurks under the dark shadows of the trees outside the school gymnasium), finally arrives at a decision to walk Kelly the dog into the prom as his date and dancing partner. Steven says:

While Kelly took care of her doggy duty, I thought about what lay ahead. Once I set foot inside that school, I’d be labeled a freak for the rest of my life.

[...] It wasn't too late. I could still avoid public humiliation. I could claim that Kelly had run away and that I had spent the night tracking her down. All I'd have to do was hide out in the cold for a few hours. All I'd have to do was invent a few more lies.

Another vehicle pulled into the parking lot. From the shadows of the trees I watched as a mountain emerged from the car. It was Dwayne Becker [...] He walked to the passenger side and opened the door. A girl half his size climbed out. It was Solveig Amundson, dressed in a gown that shone like a disco ball.

Before shutting Solveig's door, Dwayne took off his Marlboro cap and tossed it into the car. Then the two walked toward the school, hand in hand.

As the couple passed, Dwayne leaned down and whispered something in Solveig's ear. They laughed. I could almost feel the aura of happiness surrounding them. They were already having the time of their lives, and they weren't even inside yet.

So Solveig had found a new date. Good. She was a nice girl. She deserved to be happy.

And then, unexpectedly, I was angry.

Make that furious.

What about me? I was a nice guy. I deserved to be happy too.

I stepped out of the shadows. "To hell with what everyone thinks!"

Kelly's ears perked up.

"I've got the suit. I've got the tickets. I've even got the date. C'mon, girl. I'm going to this dance!"¹⁴⁷

The depiction of Steven in this scene closely reflects that of homosexual people in the Identity Pride stage in Cass's theory; in particular, their becoming LGBTQ activists. Here, we see that Steven gets "angry" about Dwayne and Solveig's being socially privileged by their sexuality while he is excluded.¹⁴⁸ At this point, Steven's sense of antagonism flares up. It energizes him to cross the "narrow boundaries about what it means to be a couple" as

147. LaRochelle, *Absolutely, Positively Not*, 153–55.

148. LaRochelle, 155.

shown in his telling himself and Kelly: “I’ve got the suit. I’ve got the tickets. I’ve even got the date. C’mon, girl. I’m going to this dance!”¹⁴⁹ This “outburst of self-confidence” or pride propels a kind of activism in Steven; he is keen to challenge the heterosexual prom no matter what happens to him.¹⁵⁰

Steven’s activism is highlighted with his insisting to dance with Kelly despite being prohibited by Mr. Cheever, the vice principal. Upon seeing Steven with the dog entering the venue, the teacher shouts: “Get that filthy animal out of here. [...] get it out *now*, before it attacks someone. [...] Out!” despite Steven confirming that Kelly is “very gentle [*italics in original*].”¹⁵¹ Here, the narrative reveals the protagonist’s evoked inner strength as being put to the test. At first, Steven feels discouraged: “Couldn’t we just sit behind these balloons and watch?”¹⁵² His activism to challenge heteronormative ideology seems about to fail.

However, it is Steven’s self-disclosure – an exercising of his power within – previously undertaken to Rachel that elicits her power to help him out. Rachel immediately interrupts the situation, expressing her active support for Steven. She yells:

Let the dog dance! Let the dog dance!

It was Rachel, sitting on Victor’s shoulders and punching the air with her clenched fist. The music had stopped and hers was the only voice in the gym.

Then another voice joined in: Victor’s. Before I knew it, the walls were echoing with Rachel’s demand as all of the students joined the chant.¹⁵³

Rachel acknowledges that she has “power to,” which here is an ability to create positive changes not just for Steven but also for other homosexual students. Her rallying cry “Let the dog dance! Let the dog dance!”, undertaken along with the gesture of vigorous protest

149. LaRochelle, 142, 155.

150. LaRochelle, 156.

151. LaRochelle, 156–57.

152. LaRochelle, 157.

153. LaRochelle, 158.

“punching the air with her clenched fist,” thus indicates that Rachel promptly and strenuously exercises her power to re-boost Steven’s weakened inner strength.¹⁵⁴ Such empowerment lifts Steven’s spirit up again, as seen in his determination not to surrender, saying to himself: “Fifteen minutes ago I would have embraced any excuse to get out of this dance, but now...well, why should I allow Cheever to tell me who I could, or could not, choose for my date?”¹⁵⁵ Steven’s standing up to the vice principal shows his firm stance as a gay activist in challenging the norms of the prom. He shows that everybody should be welcomed, in particular, those who are sexually marginalized, the school population that have been ignored and excluded. Remarkably, Rachel’s exercising of her “power to” further generates “collective power,” evident in so far as “all of the students joined the chant.” This is a collaboration of multiple agents. They join their power to form a “mob of well-dressed teenagers” which gain more strength in pressuring Mr. Cheever to “stomp[...] off” the gymnasium, ultimately giving way to Steven to dance with Kelly and establishing a new practice for the school prom to welcome all.¹⁵⁶ Thus, in the Identity Pride stage, Steven is surrounded by multiple zealous allies who join their power to help him in his activism.¹⁵⁷

Totally Joe’s protagonist makes use of his coming out to his parents – to whom he reveals his sexual orientation – to support him in fighting heteronormativity and homophobic bullying within his school.¹⁵⁸ This is shown in the scene in which Joe’s parents (David and Penny) alongside those of Addie (Graham and Lydia) discuss the petition against the establishment of the Gay-Straight Alliance. The petition is raised by Kevin Hennessey’s mother, a devout Christian, amid the teachers, the administrative staff, and other students’ parents in the school board meeting. Mrs. Hennessey claims to have

154. LaRochelle, 158.

155. LaRochelle, 158.

156. LaRochelle, 158.

157. It is worth noting here that not only Rachel and other students in the gymnasium who join Steven’s activism, Kelly also contributes. The golden retriever expresses her eagerness to support the gay character – Kelly’s ears “perked up” – a gesture that seems to be her response in agreement with Steven’s decision to step out of the shadow of the trees and walks her into the prom. Moreover, Kelly the support dog helps the protagonist resist Mr. Cheever’s order to get her out of the gymnasium.

158. Howe, *Totally Joe*, 113.

heard a rumor of two boys kissing (Joe and Colin). She also protests Addie's idea to form the GSA (which Addie believes will create a neutral and welcoming space for all students, especially those who are homosexual), dogmatically arguing that Christianity does not accept "homosexuality or any other perversion."¹⁵⁹ Even worse, she threatens Mr. Kiley, the school principal, with "serious ramifications" if he agrees to the GSA, saying that she, her husband, and other Christians will readily to join her "religious crusade."¹⁶⁰ Still, the narrative reveals that it is because of Joe's voluntary self-disclosure to his family (exercising his "power within"), leads to him becoming an activist who elicits other surrounding characters' "power to" and further build "collective force" to oppose Mrs. Hennessey's petition against the GSA.

Joe's mother is the first person in the family – inspired by her child's coming out – to exercise her power to support Joe and this begins at home. After his parents come back from the school board meeting at night, Joe notices that they are all "steamed up," but no one says anything to him.¹⁶¹ Eventually, Joe's mother says: "This is Joe's business as much as anybody's—maybe even more—and I think it's just fine that he knows what's going on."¹⁶² The response from the mother indicates her power to include Joe into the group discussion. She is aware that her gay child's well-being at school will inevitably be affected by the formation of the GSA. If the GSA is turned down, it means that the homosexual students, including Joe, are effectively ostracized by the school.

Penny's "power to" is her ability (and responsibility) to support, protect, and encourage Joe to make a contribution to the group. He provides updated information that, in fact, Mr. Kiley has already turned down Addie's proposal to form a GSA. With Joe's contribution to the group, all adult characters are urged to brainstorm as to how to reverse Mr. Kiley's decision. This can be read as Joe eliciting each participant's power to propose his/her idea to help resolve the problem while formulating a collective power. This

159. Howe, 141.

160. Howe, 141.

161. Howe, 139.

162. Howe, 140.

cooperation finally results in Mr. Graham coming up with the idea of raising a complaint to the school board meeting again to get a vote from all attendants. The idea proves to be effective. The school administrative committee finally reaches the consensus agreement to grant the formation of the GSA. This is a higher-level of cooperation or joint power from multiple agents – not just the parents (Joe’s and Addie’s) but also Mr. Kiley and the school board. In the end, the narrative shows that Mr. Kiley announces the good news about the GSA to Joe, making him feel very proud of his activism which has resulted in the school’s the first neutral and non-discriminatory space where everybody is welcomed.

In his Identity Pride stage, Joe is further represented as intensifying his activism to target the kind of homophobic bullying he has experienced firsthand. This is shown in his officially reporting Kevin to Mr. Kiley after him being called a “flaming fag” on the school’s “No-Name Day.”¹⁶³ Remarkably, in this scene, Joe’s sense of there being tension between homosexuals versus heterosexuals – which is one of the outstanding characteristics of LGBTQ people in the Identity Pride stage – is highlighted. This sense of antagonism drives the gay character to continue eliciting other characters’ “power to” (here Mr. Kiley) to help him stop Kevin, which will benefit other students who are harassed by the bully. Through this, Joe completes the fifth stage of coming out and becomes a powerful gay activist who greatly influences others to cooperate and change society with him.

As has been demonstrated, Steven and Joe’s advancing themselves to what Cass describes as the Identity Pride stage has widespread repercussions. This initially urges other characters, in particular the allies the gay characters gain from their coming out, to exercise their “power to,” as seen in the way Rachel protests against Mr. Cheever’s order and Penny includes her gay son in the group discussion. Due to the acts of these initial allies, other characters are roused to cooperate in the gay characters’ activism against homophobia in the schools; in other words, a collective power is built. It gains more strength to radically create positive change within the educational settings. In the case of LaRochelle’s *Absolutely, Positively Not*, the mob of students chanting in unison to support

163. Howe, 169.

Rachel's protest, in the presence of the vice principal Mr. Cheever, is clearly the students' proclamation of their firm intention to challenge the heteronormativity of the school prom and, of course, a demand given to this figure of authority to officially change the discriminatory practice of the prom so that it becomes a truly welcoming event for everybody. In Howe's *Totally Joe*, Penny's granting permission to Joe to join an adult discussion of the GSA leads the formation of collective power which ultimately results in establishing the GSA.

In conclusion, to challenge and overcome the internalized homophobia as manifested in the forms of the gay characters' being in the closet and hiding behind the glass closet, both *Absolutely, Positively Not* and *Totally Joe* present coming out as a potential strategy. Coming out, when undertaken through verbal acts or discursive means, is a way through which the "power within" of the gay characters is managed and made use of. Such power is an inner strength and typically is witnessed in a latent state. Thus, it needs to be evoked before being able to be exercised. Once this process is complete, the gay characters can break out of the closet, thereby destroying its oppressive force. Nonetheless, this does not mean that their awakened "power within" remains stable. Indeed, it can be destabilized by any kind of discouragement from homophobic figures, and this threatens to shove them back into the closet. Despite this, coming out is worth doing as it invokes the "power to" among allies, with this helping to reboot the decreased power within and further generate "collective power" through which the gay characters can combat homophobia in wider areas. It is therefore not a stretch to state that, by coming out, Steven and Joe assume a role as influential gay activists, therein not only freeing themselves from the closet but also helping create positive changes in their respective communities.

Chapter 2

Familial Homophobia

This chapter moves forward to analyze homophobia in American families. It will examine its manifestation and the coping strategies presented in Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) and P.E. Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009).¹ There are very few contemporary LGBTQ-themed juvenile novels that extensively feature homophobia within families, in particular that which is enacted by parental characters *and* their gay children's struggles to deal with it. Unlike internalized homophobia in the previous chapter, the manifestation of the familial homophobia in Shyer and Ryan's works is not always obvious. It is instead disguised in the form of the parents' exercising disciplinary power – the power that aims at “training individuals” to follow the rules – upon their sons.² The parents do not only train their children to strictly follow traditional gender roles and behavior. They also inflict punishment upon their sons for failing to adhere to these roles or demonstrating what the parents perceive as “effeminate” or perverse mannerisms because these adult characters hold negative attitudes toward homosexuality, deeming it as deviant.

Bennett and Garth, the gay protagonists of *The Rainbow Kite* and *In Mike We Trust*, are shown as softening their parents' attitudes. Both characters are activists who either deploy gay-friendly symbols or costumes associated with the concealment and/or celebration of homosexuality. While Bennett constructs the giant rainbow kite to challenge his father's homophobia, Garth dresses up in Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes to join in the charity scams his uncle makes up. The costumes are significant as symbols because they conceal the real Garth. He is hidden beneath the façade of a super-hero and a super-sleuth detective dog. Neither enables him to present himself with integrity or honesty. They are not unlike the “closet” his mother forces him to inhabit. It is only when these masks are

1. P.E. Ryan, a prolific American novelist, has published many novels and short stories for adults. He also writes homosexual-themed juvenile fiction. His outstanding works are, apart from *In Mike We Trust* (2009), *Saints of Augustine* (2008) and *Gemini Bites* (2011) which represent homosexual characters dealing with gay-related issues, including homophobia. See “Interview with Patrick Ryan / P.E. Ryan,” Band of Thebes, March 26, 2009, <https://bandofthebes.typepad.com/bandofthebes/2009/03/interview-with-patrick-ryan-pe-ryan.html>.

2. Social Theory Re-Wired, “Power/Knowledge,” New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives, accessed October 23, 2019, <http://routledge.com/category/profile-tags/powerknowledge>.

removed and the seams uncovered that his mother realizes that she too has been forcing Garth to conceal himself, living a life without integrity. By this virtue, I argue that these texts deploy “symbolic power” which conveys a latent association, often embedded in an object (i.e. a flag or an icon) to resist the familial homophobia that is exercised in the parents’ use of disciplinary power. Subsequently, other family members and friends are emboldened by the power of symbolic objects or the actions of the gay protagonists to become activists for change themselves. Their activism ultimately helps the homophobic parent characters to be more tolerant and accepting of their gay sons. However, prior to my demonstration as to how the familial homophobia is evident in the narratives and how symbolic power can challenge it, I will offer a brief overview of the primary texts.

Shyer’s *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) tells the story of a fifteen-year-old gay protagonist Bennett who struggles to deal with his father’s homophobia. As the eldest son, Bennett bears the responsibility put upon him by his father to set himself as a role model for his young brother Matthew. He feels he must uphold a strong academic record and behave in accordance with socially-expected gender roles for boys – playing and excelling in sports – which his father respects. Furthermore, Bennett’s father expresses virulent homophobia in front of his family. This makes Bennett fear coming out of the closet to his family (and to anybody) and instead he keeps his homosexual orientation secret. However, the secret is revealed when Matthew catches Bennett red-handed while he is watching online male pornography, and he also finds his older brother’s “dirty homo magazines” hidden in the closet of the bedroom they share.³ The discovery shocks Matthew, yet he promises Bennett not to tell his parents as he realizes that the father will definitely fly into a rage and severely punish his gay son. Bennett’s father is not named in the text, which interestingly makes him feel more imposing and dictatorial. Known only as “the father” he is unknowable, unnamed, and represents a powerful force with the capacity for punishment.

3. Marlene Fanta Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002), 84.

At school, Bennett is bullied by Go-Go Mallis – even the name suggests this boy as having bad (*mal*) and aggressive behavior – who calls Bennett a “freak” and a “pervert.”⁴ The bullying causes Bennett stress, forcing him to withdraw from all school clubs. Despite quitting all school activities, Bennett seeks a new hobby – building a rainbow kite – with Jeremy DeWitt (a new school friend from Chicago) who comes to teach him in his basement. From here, as the narrative shifts the focus from the school settings to Bennett’s family, the manifestation of the father’s homophobia is made more obvious. During the process of the giant rainbow kite’s construction, for which Bennett needs a sewing machine to stitch parts of the kite together, his father expresses frustration over his son’s undertaking what he regards as feminine activity. This sparks a quarrel between the parents who hold different views on this.

As the story develops, Bennett is finally “outed.” His homosexual identity is not just divulged to his parents but also to the DeWitts. Go-Go and his “amigos” throw a dead rat at the front door of Bennett’s house, tie a brassiere on the hoop of the basketball stand, and spray paint “FAGGOT” on the white garage door just before the two families assemble at Bennett’s house to see his giant rainbow kite.⁵ The hateful message reveals to Jeremy’s parents why their son got into a scuffle with Go-Go and his gang at school. Mr. DeWitt, instead of being concerned for his son’s safety, fears he will become gay, instructing Jeremy not to see Bennett at home. Worse, Bennett’s father tells him to destroy the rainbow kite as the rainbow is a symbol of homosexual solidarity. He does not want Bennett to fly the kite due to it representing Bennett’s coming out to the public which he sees as shameful.

Upset with his father, Bennett develops depression and suicidal thoughts. He leaves a suicide note for Matthew and goes out to fly the rainbow kite before jumping from a bridge. However, he changes his mind and swims back to shore. The news about Bennett’s decision to fly the rainbow kite to resist his father’s homophobia and his suicide attempt spreads throughout the school. Shearon, Bennett’s African American school friend, comes

4. Shyer, 52.

5. Shyer, 131.

to visit him at home to cheer him up. The gay protagonist also gets encouragement from many of his school friends and the principal at his graduation ceremony. The principal announces the school's stance on anti-homophobia and praises Bennett for being a symbol of tolerance. Bennett's father repents for being homophobic. He also feels ashamed of himself after seeing others show the support for his gay son which he, as a father, has never offered.

In *The Rainbow Kite*, many forms of homophobia are represented in the work, such as the gay protagonist's internalized homophobia, homophobia in school, and the familial homophobia. All of these are intertwined. Each pushes Bennett again and again to the edge of despair. Still, the young man constructs the enormous rainbow kite – a symbol of homosexuality, hope, and liberation – to resist homophobia, especially that of his father. The gay character does not give up on the project although during the kite building he is fully aware that his life will be completely changed when his father recognizes the symbol. While Bennett faces sadness and adversity throughout the novel, the book does have a happy resolution, giving the reader hope not to give up challenging homophobia.

Similar to Bennett, Garth Rudd, the gay protagonist in Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009), has also encountered familial homophobia. After his father Jerry dies in a ship accident, Garth and his mother Sonja move out of their house to live in a small old apartment in Richmond. As a single mother, Sonja has to work two jobs to earn money for her son's college fund while Garth, in an attempt not to bother his mother for a monthly allowance, finds a job at a downtown department store and cafeteria. At the age of fifteen, Garth comes out to his best friend Lisa who accepts Garth's homosexuality. Six months later the protagonist decides to tell his mother that he is gay, because he does not want to be dishonest with her. Instead of showing understanding, acceptance, or listening to him, Sonja tells Garth to "put this topic on hold" until he turns seventeen.⁶ She shuts down her son, avoids talking to him, and also prohibits him from divulging this secret to anybody "outside the family."⁷ Garth becomes terribly upset and he calls ROSMY (The Richmond

6. P.E. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust* (New York: HarperTeen, 2009), 32.

7. Ryan, 32.

Organization for Sexual Minority Youth) to ask for advice, but the staff recommends a private consultation, a process which needs Garth's mother to come to see them in person. Sonja gets "furious," refusing to go to ROSMY with Garth. Even worse, she blames her son for not "respect[ing]" her.⁸

The situation gets complicated when Mike, his father's twin brother, unexpectedly visits Garth and Sonja, asking to stay with the family for a couple of weeks. Garth decides to come out to Mike since he has observed that the uncle shows no anti-homosexual characteristics and, more importantly, he is not a person "outside the family."⁹ While Mike fully understands and accepts Garth for who he is, Sonja still keeps telling Garth to shelve the issue. Mike attempts to bring Garth's homosexuality into a discussion with Sonja and encourages her to see the staff at ROSMY for consultation, but Sonja refuses. Mike decides to help Garth to feel accepted. He takes the nephew to a gay bookstore where he not only get DVDs and books but also meets Adam – an "out" school peer – the first gay friend Garth has and who later becomes his boyfriend. However, Mike is not a straightforward person. He is a con artist and he devises a plan involving Garth to scam money from people. He lies to Garth that he works as a volunteer for a charity to help children with "meninosis" (a disease Mike makes up) and asks Garth to join the fund raising for a share of the money for his college fund.¹⁰ Despite earning four hundred dollars from the first scam, Garth begins to feel something "fishy" about Mike and the charity.¹¹ He asks Mike for the truth. The uncle admits that the charity is a total scam. This makes Garth angry as he does not want to be dishonest.

However, as the story goes on, Mike makes up two more money-making schemes which Garth joins. One is a fund raiser to help dogs with "tropolitis" and another one is to fight against "lipicarhia" (both are fake diseases).¹² In both scams, Garth wears Scooby-

8. Ryan, 37.

9. "In Mike We Trust," Indie Bound.org: A Community of Independent Local Bookstores, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.indiebound.org/book/9780060858131>.

10. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 134.

11. Ryan, 183.

12. Ryan, 206 and 243.

Doo and Superman costumes. Mike tells him these will draw attention from passers-by, making them donate their money. Unfortunately, at a money-making project at Virginia State Fair, Lisa and Adam find Garth in a Superman costume, causing him embarrassment. Worse, when the scam is divulged, Mike flees and leaves Garth to cope with the situation alone. Garth is finally forced to reveal the truth to his mother. The novel concludes with Garth growing up from his actions and the mother decides to go to ROSMY to learn to understand homosexuality and be more accepting of her gay son.

From the synopses of both texts, one can see that Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* and Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* place parental homophobia as the central issue of the narratives. But more importantly, they extensively focus on Bennett and Garth's endeavors to challenge the bigotry exhibited by their parents, the most powerful figures in the family structure. Because they foreground the boys' activism against familial homophobia, these novels have won awards and been listed as recommended novels for young readers. Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* is included in the recommendation book list in Elizabeth Dayton's *A Child's Guide to Family Issues & Multicultural Diversity* (2005) and on the website of Diversity Act: Community Service.¹³ Similarly, Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* was also a recommended novel in the 2010 Rainbow Book List of The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table and the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA).¹⁴ In addition, on the book jacket of Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite*, the author makes it clear that the work is inspired by her "experiences as a mother of a gay son."¹⁵ As such, the book is a part of her LGBTQ activism to challenge familial homophobia.

Despite this, Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* has been criticized by Corrine M. Wickens who claims that the novel still "leave[s] it [homophobia] intact."¹⁶ She analyzes the

13. Elizabeth Dayton, *A Child's Guide to Family Issues & Multicultural Diversity* (n.p.: Llumina Press, 2005), 59; Diversity Act: Community Service, "Diversity Act LGBTIQ Library," n.d., <https://diversityact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/LGBTIQ-DIVERSITY-LIBRARY-expanded-list.pdf>.

14. Tony Valenzuela, "22nd Annual Lambda Literary Awards," *Lambda Literary* (blog), May 10, 2010, <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/winners-finalists/05/10/2010-awards-finalists-winners/>.

15. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, n.p.

16 Wickens, "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia," 148.

representation of the gay protagonist, specifically in relation to homophobia, by deploying a conversational method of analysis. Through the analysis of “nominative” phrasing, “the primary actors or agents in the narrative,” are focused upon in order to provide empirical evidence. Wickens focuses upon the dialogue between Bennett and his younger brother, Matthew. Bennett complains to his sibling—in the presence of his homophobic father—after Mr. DeWitt (the father of his close friend Jeremy) will not allow his son to spend time with him for fear of Jeremy becoming a homosexual. Bennett cries out: “I’m contagious, see? Mr. DeWitt thinks what I’ve got is *catching*. And I don’t mean a *virus* [italics in original].”¹⁷ From this scene, Wickens concludes that the way Bennett himself relates his own sexual identity to a disease still “draws upon the historical allusions to homosexuality as a psychiatric deviation and illness.”¹⁸ In this reading, the scene fails to challenge one of the most persistent negative stereotypes imposed upon homosexuals.

However, I disagree with Wickens’s interpretation of Bennett’s remarks. As Matthew observes, “Bennett is speaking in a high-test voice”; therefore, his complaint is satirical, spoken in anger, and is deliberately framed to attack Mr. DeWitt and, perhaps more pertinently, his own father’s homophobia.¹⁹ This is because the narrative presents the father’s indifference to both Bennett’s outrage and Mr. DeWitt’s accusations, the implicit result being his homophobia becoming manifest through him “sipping his coffee, staying cool, his face still in his wax expression.”²⁰ Moreover, in the previous scene in which Matthew asks his brother if he has AIDS after knowing that Bennett is gay, the protagonist replies, “Of course not!”²¹ Such an affirmative answer shows that Bennett, to a great extent, feels comfortable with his homosexuality. He strongly rejects the myth that being gay is a contagious disease. In this sense, Wickens’s claim that the narrative fails to challenge homophobia is not convincing.

17 Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 155.

18. Wickens, “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia,” 148.

19. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 154.

20. Wickens, “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia,” 153.

21. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 87.

The Manifestation of Familial Homophobia

In *The Rainbow Kite* and *In Mike We Trust*, parental homophobia is not expressed directly but is camouflaged in the form of disciplinary power. Both narratives reveal that Bennett and Garth's parents force heteronormative gender roles and behavior onto their children through training and self-surveillance, forcing them to play sports and keep their homosexuality secret. This is to make their sons grow up to be what the parents perceive as "manly" and "normal" by the standard of the American heteronormative society within which they live. In addition, the parents inflict punishment upon the gay children for their failure to adhere to social norms or for disobeying their order. Thus, in this section I will demonstrate the familial homophobia that manifests in both texts in the parents' disciplinary power which is exercised via a deployment of trainings and self-surveillance and disciplinary power that involves punishment imposed upon the children. However, first I will return to the concept of disciplinary power as proposed by Michel Foucault to contextualize my analysis.

As already mentioned in the Introduction, the traditional concept of power as oppression, coercion, and punitive force ("sovereign power") became obsolete in modern western societies.²² This is a result of the changes in social and political situations which are less draconian than in earlier times. Nonetheless, Foucault contends that "power is everywhere."²³ We are still enmeshed in a new kind of power that Foucault calls "disciplinary power" which controls individuals' behavior.²⁴ Disciplinary power is the power exercised by authoritative figures within any sector of society, for instance parents in families, teachers in schools, doctors in hospitals, and so forth. The power makes people "docile bodies" – those who behave, follow, practice, and conform to rules, orders, or

22. Power as an oppression is referred to as "sovereign power" in one of Foucault's key texts *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault begins the first chapter of his book by detailing the public execution of Robert-François Damiens, a layman who attempted to regicide King Louis XV in 1757. The torture of Damiens in front of crowd well exemplifies the term "sovereign power." It shows that this form of power is, apart from being held by the very powerful figure like the King, typically exercised through severe and cruel punishments inflicted upon dissidents. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 3–5.

23. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1:93.

24. Sussex University, "Foucault: Power Is Everywhere," accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/>.

social norms and learn to automatically undertake self-surveillance despite having no authoritative figure in their presence.²⁵ In short, disciplinary power strives to make people “more obedient” so that they become useful to society.²⁶

Foucault observes that to make individuals “docile,” disciplinary methods such as training, timetables, monitoring, enclosed spaces and sometimes punishments are often used. He elaborates this point with the example of juveniles who are sent to military schools. In such schools, these young soldiers are trained to march (training). The soldiers must practice marching within a prescribed time and length of steps under the supervision of the commanders (timetable and monitoring). Such drills occur within the boundaries of “military manors” (enclosed spaces) where the orders from commanders must be strictly followed. Deviation results in the soldiers being punished (penalty).²⁷ With regular and strict training, the soldiers will gradually absorb the military rules, manners, and etiquette until they become innate and thereby the soldiers become a “useful” resource for the military.²⁸ These soldiers will “obey whatever [they are] ordered to do; [their] obedience is prompt and blind [...],” benefiting the control of the army in wartime and the country.²⁹

Disciplinary power, as Foucault observes, is an effective means to control individuals in modern society because of three basic techniques: “hierarchical observation,” “normalizing judgement,” and the “examination.”³⁰ To explain, hierarchical observation means that people’s behaviors are monitored by the “hierarchical character,” a person who has higher authority, rank, or social status.³¹ To do so, the division of physical space and/or an enclosed space is needed to facilitate the hierarchical character’s surveillance as s/he

25. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

26. Richard A. Lynch, “Foucault’s Theory of Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 28.

27. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 165.

28. Foucault, 165.

29. Foucault, 166.

30. Marcelo Hoffman, “Disciplinary Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Diana Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 29.

31. Lynch, “Foucault’s Theory of Power,” 31.

will be able to “gaze” at the subjects from “top to bottom” (an act of careful monitoring).³² Examples of the divided/enclosed spaces commonly found in many westerns countries are military camps, hospitals, asylums, schools, and prisons.³³ However, Foucault uses the “panopticon,” which is an imaginary prison created by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), to elaborate more about this kind of space and hierarchical observation.³⁴ See Figure 1 below.

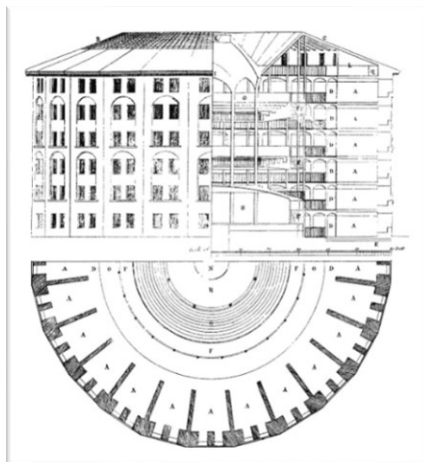


Figure 1: Panopticon designed by Jeremy Bentham

The panopticon is designed to use only one security guard (the “hierarchal character”) to monitor the prisoners locked within each enclosed cellar without the inmates knowing that they are being watched. Although the idea to have the single guard – who is placed in the center of the panopticon – to observe all inmates is practically impossible, the prisoners are motivated to undertake self-surveillance. This means that they must act as if being watched all the time and strictly regulate their own behavior. In short, in the hierarchical observation technique, individuals are not only monitored by an authoritative figure in a divided/enclosed space, but they are also pushed to self-monitor. This is similar to the case

32. Lynch, 31; Anne Schwan and Stephen Shapiro, *How to Read Foucault's Discipline and Punish*, How to Read Theory (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 127–28.

33. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 171.

34. James E. Crimmins, “Jeremy Bentham,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/bentham/>.

of the soldiers in the previous example; they absorb military manners and etiquette through training, and this ultimately results in their performing the rituals automatically, even without being in the presence of their commander.

In terms of normalizing judgement, Foucault explains that in a disciplinary world today, it is inevitable for individuals to receive judgement either from authoritative figures or social norms (or both). The first instance can be seen in the criminal court that sentences and inflicts punishment upon the wrong doers. Once, for example, the wrong doer fails to adhere to the court's orders, s/he will be observed over time as a punishment. And if they still show disobedience, exercise or work is assigned to them to correct their disruptive behavior. Rewards are sometimes used in addition to the punishment to establish good subjects.³⁵ Foucault goes on to observe that today people receive judgement by social norms more often than by an authority like the criminal court. By the term "norms," Foucault means the generally accepted standard of people's behavior within a society. Norms are thus used as a measurement to judge and classify individuals as being "normal" or "abnormal."³⁶ One of the outstanding instances of the people who receive judgments by social norms are homosexuals as they do not conform to sexual or social normativity.³⁷

The "examination" combines "hierarchical observation" and "normalizing judgement" techniques.³⁸ The examination means that people's progress and development are under the evaluation of the "hierarchical characters" and typically found in the form of documents such as medical and student records.³⁹ For instance, in hospitals, doctors use medical records to track the improvements of their patients' illness and document them.⁴⁰ Similarly, in schools, teachers write down the progress of the students and keep records of

35. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 179–80.

36. Mark Kingston, "Subversive Friendships: Foucault on Homosexuality and Social Experimentation," *Foucault Studies*, no. 7 (2009): 8, <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i7.2634>.

37. Kingston, 8.

38. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184.

39. Foucault, 185–86.

40. Foucault, 185–86.

this. Through the examination, individuals are simultaneously observed and judged, and this ultimately leads to their undertaking self-regulation.⁴¹

From Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, it is clear that socially-coercive, normative power is unlike coercive force or sovereign power in that firstly, any authoritative figure can exercise power, and secondly, it does not typically involve horrible physical punishments. Rather, "soft" strategies such as training and monitoring are applied. However, sometimes, punishments and gratification are used to correct and motivate subjects to behave in a certain way. All of these are undertaken in order to create "docile" subjects – those who will become "useful" resources for society.

Disciplinary Power Exercised via Training and Self-Surveillance

In *The Rainbow Kite* and *In Mike We Trust*, the parental homophobia that manifests in the form of the disciplinary power is evident from the opening of the narratives. At the novels' outset, both authors give the reader an overview of Bennett and Garth's families in terms of their socio-economic status and, in particular, how the parents raise their children. In Shyer's novel, the narrative presents Bennett's family as nuclear and "all-American," demonstrated especially in the way in which the family members strictly conform to normative assumptions regarding traditional gender roles. This is clearly manifested in the representation of Bennett's parents in terms of their task division (household/office tasks), the performance of their respective spousal roles (wife/husband) and in their parental roles (mother/father). The protagonist's mother (Lydia) assumes both the role of homemaker and submissive wife, while Bennett's father is a traditional breadwinner and a domineering husband. The performance of these traditional gender roles is even more apparent in the father's assumption of the parental role. For him, discipline is maintained by employing conventional practices when raising his male children. Inherent in this fathering is the desire to mold these young men into the kind of figures that American society expects and respects. This expectation, more often than not, requires the performance of "masculine" behavior; therefore, various types of sports are used to toughen the children up.

41. Foucault, 192.

Unlike *The Rainbow Kite*, Ryan's novel offers a the portrayal of a single-parent family. Here, Garth lives alone with his mother, Sonja, following his father's death. We learn that Jerry died as a result of a sailing accident a year and a half prior to the point at which the narrative opens. This change from the typical nuclear family to a sole-parent household entails a shift in the family leadership, allowing the widowed mother to assume absolute power over the only child. Although the narrative does not give the reader as much detail about Sonja's child rearing methods as we see in *The Rainbow Kite*, the mother still allows Garth to spend his savings on new models of ships, the activity that he (and his father) immensely enjoyed together. In essence, Sonja adheres to the pattern laid down by her husband of what is socially perceived as the "right" activity for boys.

The parents' child rearing methods are not dissimilar. The parents attempt to mold their sons to conform to the socially assumed standards of behavior for American boys. To be fair to the parent characters, their intentions are to protect the children from external hostility. They themselves have grown up in a heteronormative environment in which gay people might easily fall prey to homophobia. Yet, I contend that the way these parents raise their sons also reveals their having negative attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexual people and thus it seems, paradoxically, that the family itself becomes a homophobic space.

The Rainbow Kite depicts Bennett's father as being strict and rigid. He orders Bennett to play various kinds of sports – ice-hockey, softball, soccer, basketball, table-tennis, and swimming – and pushes him to participate in sport competitions, reiterating his motto "we must *never, never quit anything we start*" and "Stick with it! [*italics in original*]." ⁴² Here, reading the way the father raises Bennett through a Foucauldian lens, it can be seen that he acts as the "hierarchical character" and as head of the family he has supreme authority. With this status, the father can exercise his power to discipline the son, not unlike the commander in the "military manors" who trains the young soldiers. While the soldiers are trained to follow the strict military regulations to defend the country, Bennett is trained to conform to normative gender characteristics which are at odds with

42. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 11.

the boy's disposition. We learn that Bennett prefers cooking to playing sports, but the father deems this as neither a "wholesome experience" nor "decent" for a boy.⁴³ The father "laugh[s]" at his son's offering to cook dinner while his mother works night shifts. The father's disciplining Bennett with a wide variety of sports alongside his sneering at the son's preference for cooking indicates the parent's contempt for non-traditional gender behavior. The father thinks that, for boys, cooking is "pretty funny."⁴⁴ In this sense, the text begins to give the first hint to the reader that the father holds negative attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexual people and, of course, Bennett as they do not comply with heteronormative behavior.

Further to this, if taking a closer look at the list of sports the father forces Bennett to play, we notice that almost all of them are male-dominated, competitive contact sports. They require physical contact between players and can easily lead to injury. Even swimming is made – by the father – a physical and psychological competitive activity for Bennett as he is pushed to join the swim team and beat players from other schools. The single-minded way the father trains Bennett potentially shows a disregard for the boy's physical safety and his wishes. This is especially evident in the father's insincere consolation when Bennett loses the swimming competition due to him having a cramp. Matthew observes: "Dad said that these things happen, and not to feel bad about it. [...]" [B]ut my father sounded as if the steam had gone out of him," revealing the father's despondency with Bennett's low sporting prowess, his weakness, and his failure to be a sportsman.⁴⁵ Again, later in the narrative, the father's disregard for his son's physical and emotional well-being is revealed in his comments on Mrs. DeWitt's worries about Jeremy and Bennett being involved in a scuffle at the school. The father says: "Mrs. DeWitt might be overreacting. [...] Boys will be boys."⁴⁶ Such comments, combined with the emphasis upon competitive contact sports, reveal deeply rooted heteronormative roles about gender behavior and demonstrate potential homophobic attitudes.

43. Shyer, 54 and 91.

44. Shyer, 47.

45. Shyer, 33.

46. Shyer, 118.

The father's negativity toward sexual minorities is made more obvious in his use of the basement – an enclosed space – to train the children. This is congruent with Foucault's idea of disciplinary power that requires a separate or enclosed space to facilitate the hierarchical character's observation of his subjects. The narrative shows that only Bennett and Matthew are depicted (in the opening of the novel) as occupying the basement. While Bennett practices a regimented ping-pong, Matthew rehearses his saxophone, practicing the "Sousa" march and "We are the World."⁴⁷ The father sits on the sofa in the living room, listening to the sounds of the activities of his sons. Here, given the positions of the parent and the boys, the house can be equated to the panopticon. It is the prison where both Bennett and Matthew are kept under the monitoring of their father who, by sitting in the floor above and listening to the boys, literally undertakes surveillance from "top to bottom." Figuratively, the father's use of the basement and his close observation reveals further that he strenuously exercises his power in the "top-down" direction which is, as its vertical linearity implies, the re-enforcement of masculinity upon the children. The father keeps pushing both sons to adhere to male activities (table tennis) and even music: it must be the military march that Matthew practices. The re-enforcement of masculinity undertaken through such activities confirms the father's aversion to non-traditional gender behaviors. By this virtue, it can be further stated that, in fact, his strenuous exercising of disciplinary power upon his sons, especially Bennett, is a manifestation of his homophobia as the father does not want either of his sons to exhibit gender (and by implication sexually) deviant behavior.

It is worth noting here that the father's attempt to mold the children also disciplines them to undertake self-regulation. It is Matthew, the narrator, who reveals this. He says:

Dad told me to go to the basement and begin saxophone practice. I'd mastered the Sousa march and had a new piece to learn, "We are the World." The school band would be playing both at Bennett's graduation

47. Shyer, 25 and 47.

The Sousa march was composed by John Philip Sousa (1854-1932), an American composer who is dubbed as "The March King." See more information on this from "John Philip Sousa," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Philip-Sousa>. Interestingly, Matthew rehearses a military-like march and an inclusive, open song – "We Are the World." The latter, perhaps, indicates how the boys will break the bonds set by the father to create an open, harmonious familial space.

in June. I would have to know “the entire repertoire” perfectly, Dad kept reminding me. [...] I had to make music or Dad would run downstairs to see why I wasn’t blowing my notes [...].”⁴⁸

From what Matthew says, he is now like the inmates in the panopticon in that he must behave (keep practicing the saxophone as his father orders “One hour, no less!”) because he does not know if he is being monitored by his father or not.⁴⁹ And, because one of the songs that Matthew practices (Sousa) is the military march, the music with its strong military band rhythm which suggests an upright masculinity, the boy is suffused with conformist behavior. At this point, we can see that the father’s exercise of his disciplinary power by pushing both sons to do ritualistic male activities gradually escalates. He trains the sons to be “manly” via sports and then uses the basement, an enclosed space, to facilitate his monitoring of the children’s behavior. Through this, he can observe the children from “top-to-bottom” and, at the same time, forces them to self-monitor. In this respect, homophobia is tied up with the basement – the panopticon – in which he keeps both sons under close observation.

Like Bennett’s father, Sonja is presented in *In Mike We Trust* as demonstrating a kind of the disciplinary power to push her gay son toward strict self-surveillance by urging him to keep his homosexuality secret. This is evident in the scene describing Garth’s disclosure of his homosexual orientation to the mother. The narrative details how Garth prepares for this encounter, having “planned out what he would say” and thought about various scenarios that could arise; for example, he thinks about what he will do if his mother begins “screaming, ‘No, no, no!’ [...]but definitely not] throwing her arms around him and exclaiming ‘How wonderful!’”⁵⁰ However, upon his announcement, the mother’s response is beyond Garth’s expectations. Instead of becoming angry, the mother remains “silent” before telling Garth “to put this topic on hold [u]ntil [he’s] older and more capable of dealing with it. Until [he’s] seventeen—or even eighteen. Between then and now, [the

48. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 47–48.

49. Shyer, 10.

50. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 31.

mother] think[s] it's best to shelve the issue.”⁵¹ She also makes her son promise that he will not come out to people “outside the family,” justifying this by stating:

Please, Garth. I've got nothing against gay people. You know me. But the world is a dangerous place.... [T]here are many deceitful, harmful people out there, and you never know who you're getting involved with when you start trusting them. [...] The *world* isn't fair, Garth. [...] Promise me you'll keep this private until you're older and more equipped to take care of yourself [*italics in original*].⁵²

From Sonja's reactions to Garth's self-disclosure, it is clear that while showing concern for her son, she acts as the “hierarchical character.” In her role as a single parent, she sees it as right to exercise disciplinary power, ordering him to “shelve” the discussion of his homosexuality and to conceal it. However, her injunction forces Garth to undertake self-monitoring and, more importantly, despite her protestation to the contrary, reveals her negative attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexual people.

When compelled to promise his mother secrecy around his sexuality, Garth develops psychological distress. The dishonesty and concealment that the gay character is forced to live with is unbearable to Garth: “I can't stand hiding who I am! [...] Should I stay a closeted little freak for the rest of my life? Do you want me to be miserable?”⁵³ In addition to this, the protagonist must wait – “Three months. One week. Five days. And counting” – for his mother to raise the issue of his homosexuality which seems endless and agonizing for him.⁵⁴ The narrative shows that Garth is shoved back into the closet by his own mother despite him being ready to come out. The gay character does not struggle with his sexuality, rather he is comfortable with it.⁵⁵ This is evident in Garth's preparing of how

51. Ryan, 32.

52. Ryan, 33.

53. Ryan, 292 and 294.

54. Ryan, 38.

55. Terence A. Beck, “Conceptions of Sexuality and Coming out in Three Young Adult Novels: A Review of *Hero*, *Sprout*, and *In Mike We Trust*,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 10, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2013.799908>.

to come out to his mother, his act of self-disclosure, and his reassuring her that “nothing was *wrong*, [and] everything was *fine* [italics in original].”⁵⁶

While Garth is disciplined by his mother’s order to self-regulate, her silencing of him reveals a level of bigotry. Sonja avoids any discussion about Garth’s homosexuality. The repetitive responses she employs – “Let’s talk about this later, okay?,” “Can we just put this topic on hold?,” and “[...] I think it’s best to shelve the issue.” – reveal great discomfort.⁵⁷ Her awkwardness is also placed alongside a degree of self-defense: “[...] I’ve got nothing against gay people. You know me.”⁵⁸ Rather than supporting Garth, this repudiation of herself as a homophobe merely acts an excuse for her not to enter into the conversation. Such evasion however contrasts strongly with the narrative’s overall description of Garth’s coming out, a process that is relatively smooth.

Furthermore, the mother’s exercising disciplinary power by making Garth conceal his sexuality and modify his behavior is arguably a mask employed to hide her aversion to homosexuality. This is invoked in the use of the italicized term “world,” when she says “The *world* isn’t fair, Garth.”⁵⁹ The italic, used as an emphasis, indicates that the mother attempts to put the blame on the world outside, claiming it to be “dangerous” and not “fair.” Paradoxically, Sonja’s expressing her desire to protect Garth merely serves to highlight that it is in fact the family that turns out to be the dangerous place and the mother who is unfair. The family is dangerous in this regard as it is a place of parental homophobia rather than acceptance, celebration, and understanding. The mother attempts to cast blame on someone or something else in order to dissemble her own bigotry. Besides, the unfairness also emerges in the mother’s preoccupation with herself, rather than on Garth’s turmoil. Again, the mother’s own words – “I couldn’t bear if something happened to you. I couldn’t. It would kill me.” – best confirms this.⁶⁰

56. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 31.

57. Ryan, 32.

58. Ryan, 33.

59. Ryan, 33.

60. Ryan, 33.

Disciplinary Power Exercised via Punishment

In both novels, parental homophobia is also revealed through their exercising of disciplinary power that involves punishment being inflicted upon their gay sons. The punishment is for their disobedience to conform to gender roles and failure to undertake strict self-monitoring. In the case of Bennett's father, the narrative shows his fury after learning that Bennett quits Little League (ice-hockey) after "he slapped the wall so hard he had to take a pill for his shoulder and couldn't shoot baskets with me [Matthew] for a week."⁶¹ When he tells the parents that he is quitting the swim team, his father flies into a rage. Matthew narrates:

Dad just stood with the weapon [a steel shovel Dad uses to flip the toast] suspended in the air over the frying pan and stared at Bennett as if he'd never laid eyes on him before. "Really?" he said, his voice deeper than a baritone sax. "*Really?* [...]"

[...] Then Dad slammed the flipper down against the stove and turned red around the eyes. He looked at Bennett as if he was going to come over and do a few karate chops on him [...].

"[...] A *reason!*" Dad yelled. He was moving towards Bennett, but I was happy to see he had put down the weapon. "I need a *reason!*" he yelled. He did not slap a wall because there was really no wall handy. The kitchen is all cluttered with appliances and a window and stuff. That didn't stop Dad from slapping the table right in front of Bennett's plate. His glass of milk shook and I thought it was going to tip right over, but it just jumped a little, and so did Bennett [*italics in original*].⁶²

The father expresses his fury toward Bennett. His "staring" at his son, "yelling" at him, almost "doing a few karate chops on him," and "slapping the table" are all threatening (both verbally and physically) toward the boy. It can be read as a sort of punishment that Bennett receives for failing to be disciplined or trained by the sports and competitions which the father believes to be the "wholesome experiences," activities which will mold Bennett.⁶³ The gay character "winc[es]" in fright at the potential physical threat. The father

61. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 10.

62. Shyer, 27–28.

63. Shyer, 54.

here uses sovereign power, acting like an authoritarian to inflict harsh physical punishment on his subject (as in Foucault's example of the public execution of Damians).

One might argue that the father has the right to impose such punishment upon Bennett given his position as head of the family. Still, it seems that the threat of corporeal violence ("doing a few karate chops on [Bennett]") is excessive. Rather than hit the boy, Bennett's father orders his son to paint the "lamppost" in front of the house.⁶⁴ This is not unlike work assigned to disobedient inmates by the judges in criminal courts in the example given by Foucault. In short, the parental character exercises a disciplinary power that deploys "soft" methods to punish his son. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the activity which the father tells Bennett to do involves an exhibition of manliness – because the lamppost, an object with an erect shape, is a kind of phallic symbol. Thus, the father again attempts to re-enforce the idea of masculinity within his son and publicly with the lamppost in front of the house. This clearly demonstrates the father's homophobia.

The father's exercising disciplinary power via punishment happens again in the scene which presents him instructing Bennett to destroy the rainbow kite after he discovers that his eldest son is gay and plans to fly the kite at his graduation ceremony as a means to come out to the public. Through this, the parent character's homophobia is made blatantly clear. When he breaks the news to his family as to why Mr. DeWitt does not want Jeremy to visit Bennett, he says:

"It's the rainbow kite. He [Mr. DeWitt] will not allow any of his kids to be a part of it.

"WHAT?" I [Matthew] gulped down the last of my soda. [...]

"It's a fag thing, a rainbow kite. That's what he said, isn't it, Dad?"

Dad looked apologetic, well, almost. He didn't answer.

"Isn't it, Dad?" Bennett persisted. "He said it was a 'fag flag.' That's what you told me, Dad."

64. Shyer, 36.

“Well, he’s right about the rainbow. It’s a *symbol*. For homosexuals. It’s a gay flag. Isn’t that right, Bennett? I mean, he was right on the money about *that*.”

“[...] Get rid of it, Bennett. Get rid of the damn thing! [italics in original]”⁶⁵

Here, the father demonstrates his agreement with Mr. DeWitt. His command, “Get rid of the damn thing!” to Bennett is perhaps the harshest and most hurtful punishment Bennett receives.⁶⁶ When his father expresses his disdain for the rainbow kite as it symbolizes an acceptance of homosexuality, he sends the message to Bennett that his gayness must also be eradicated from the home. Such bigotry is reconfirmed by the father’s conversation with Bennett’s mother, who interrupts the situation to reply to Matthew’s question as to whether God really puts the rainbow in the sky to symbolize homosexuals. She replies to the child: “Who knows what God intended? [...] God is not a homophobe!” The mother’s response immediately elicits an angry denunciation from the father: “[...] you’re implying I am!”⁶⁷ His denial is quick but without foundation as every action thus far has shown the opposite to be the case.

Like Bennett’s father, Sonja in *In Mike We Trust* is also represented as exercising disciplinary power that involves punishment against Garth and through this her homophobia is exhibited. After being pushed back into the closet, Garth cannot bear the pressure of concealment, deciding to call “ROSMY,” a hotline for homosexual teenagers and also coming out to Uncle Mike as, for Garth, he is not a person “outside the family.”⁶⁸ In helping Garth resolve his issue, the ROSMY staff suggest in-person counseling, a process within which Garth and his mother can talk openly to allow them to “understand each other’s points of view more clearly.”⁶⁹ However, upon knowing that Garth calls

65. Shyer, 155 and 158.

66. Shyer, 158.

67. Shyer, 156.

68. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 34. ROSMY is the acronym for The Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth, an organization found in 1991 in Richmond, Virginia. The mission of ROSMY is to provide support (e.g., phone call counselling and in-person sessions), mostly for homosexual teenagers living in the same location where the organization is situated. More information about the ROSMY can be found from its official website: <http://rosmy.org/>.

69. Ryan, 36.

ROSMY, the mother is “furious.”⁷⁰ She rebukes her son: “If you respect me, [...] you’ll stick to your promise.”⁷¹ After that the mother shuns her child and avoids talking to him. The mother’s blaming and distancing herself from Garth can be read as a punishment imposed upon the son for his failing to conceal his true nature. This makes Garth feel detached and alienated from his own mother as the narrator reveals: “It seems he could only reach a certain part of her anymore. That basic, functioning human part: *Let’s eat breakfast, See you tonight, What’s for dinner? Love you, Sleep well* [italics in original].”⁷² Indeed, from what the text reveals here, the mother still shows she cares for Garth, but it is undeniable that her “basic [...] functioning human part” pushes Garth into despair.⁷³ Like the prisoner in the panopticon, though he is not captured within any physical confined space, Garth is put into psychological isolation; in other words, he is forced to continue locking himself deeper within the closet.

It is remarkable here that when punishing Garth for not “respect[ing]” her, the mother’s homophobia is made manifest.⁷⁴ The narrative shows two paradoxes, one in regard to the notion of respect and one that relates to the actions of concealment and revelation. With regard to the respect demanded by the mother, the narrative highlights both the irony and hypocrisy of this act in light of the mother herself being unwilling to show respect to her own son, evidenced through her attempts to keep Garth in the closet. Her lack of respect is confirmed by the use of rhetorical questions – for example, “But did she [the mother] respect him [Garth] and who he was becoming? Was she ever capable of it, buried under so many blankets of fear and distress?”⁷⁵ As this question, in its presentation within the story, is narrated from an omniscient perspective, the voice is able to further confirm that the mother’s attempt to relate the promise to respect is simply a manipulative tactic deployed to silence Garth. More significantly, the paradox between concealment and revelation provides strong evidence that the mother is indeed

70. Ryan, 37.

71. Ryan, 37.

72. Ryan, 37.

73. Ryan, 37.

74. Ryan, 37.

75. Ryan, 37.

homophobic. This is because while concealment is an act of withholding information, in this situation it also allows the mother's disapproval of Garth's homosexual orientation being revealed.

As has been demonstrated, the parental characters' exercising their disciplinary power is ostensibly a common practice but also masks their homophobia. The parents use physical training (sports) as well as self-surveillance to instill an idea of masculinity or even how to be "macho" to their sons. This is their attempt to prevent the children from being gay or to convert them as the parental characters cannot accept their sons' homosexual orientation. They also discipline their sons with punishments that sometimes involve the threat of corporeal violence, but more often than not cause psychological pain to the children. This is a re-enforcement of pre-conceived notions of masculinity which the parents consider "normal" and push their sons to follow. However, it makes the children stressed and turns the family home and unit into a homophobic space due to an atmosphere of antagonism between the parents and their gay sons.

It must be noted here that while the parent characters have negative attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexual people, they are presented as those who deserve understanding, sympathy, and time from their gay sons and family members. In the case of Bennett's father, his rigid disciplinary power exercised upon the children is possibly a result of him growing up in a poor socio-economic environment. He has had to work very hard to make ends meet before being able to have a relatively secure social status. Consequently, Bennett's father believes that to be successful, his sons must be strong and "macho" like him, and to achieve this discipline and masculinity must be strictly enforced. Such a mindset, to some extent, reveals the father's good intentions toward the children but at the same time shows a homophobia. This is confirmed by Lydia's reply to Matthew who asks her if she thinks "Dad was a homophobe."⁷⁶ She says that "He's trying very hard not to be."⁷⁷ Lydia's explanation is clearly an expression of her sympathy toward her husband and an attempt to smooth the conflict between the father and the children.

76. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 159.

77. Shyer, 159.

Sonja is mourning her husband's death. This could lead to her avoiding the discussion of Garth's homosexuality, especially his plan to come out to other people, which she deems a serious issue that might cause her only child to fall prey to homophobic violence. It is Mike who shows his understanding to Sonja's situation. He explains to Garth that "Obviously, part of her reaction is the fact that she's still dealing with the accident. She's grieving, I get that."⁷⁸ By depicting the parent characters who, although holding homophobic attitudes, deserve understanding from their family members, the authors seem to make a compromise between the parents and the children, demonstrating the necessity of mutual understanding.

Using Symbols to Challenge Parental Homophobia

Despite having faced the parents' homophobia, both *The Rainbow Kite* and *In Mike We Trust* present similar coping strategies – the deployment of symbols – to challenge the bigotry they face. The symbol Bennett uses to resist his father's homophobia is the rainbow kite and that of Garth is the Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes. While the rainbow kite, which resembles the rainbow flag, is a universally recognized symbol of homosexual pride, the costumes are a sort of symbol in a sense that they represent Garth's concealment of his homosexuality. They help convey how Garth is forced to live in a closet. Hence, I will begin this section with an overview of the critical literature on symbols and power as proposed by many scholars, for instance, Aniela Jaffé, Alex Warren and Scott Jeffrey, which is helpful for my analysis of the tactics proffered in the texts. I argue that in their resistance to the parental homophobia exercised through disciplinary power, the gay characters make use of symbolic power to help them achieve in their activism. Bennett sees it as his duty to come out publicly to make a case for sexual equality and Garth fights the concealment that his mother enforces. Such strategies also enable the protagonists to gain allies (formulate collective power) which helps corrode the parents' homophobia and ultimately instigates more understanding and acceptance of their children's sexuality.

Aniela Jaffé's research on the history of symbolism reveals that everything can assume symbolic significance – this includes natural objects (plants, stones, mountains,

78. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 53.

fire, water, sun, clouds); man-made things (boats, cars, houses); and even abstract forms (the circle, the square, the triangle). As she aptly puts it: “the whole cosmos is a potential symbol.”⁷⁹ Jaffé observes that when people create symbols, they unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) embed meanings within those symbols; therefore, symbols can convey thoughts, feelings, and send messages from the creator or user to the viewer.⁸⁰ She exemplifies this with a prehistoric menhir, the rock that was carved in a female form.⁸¹ See Figure 2.

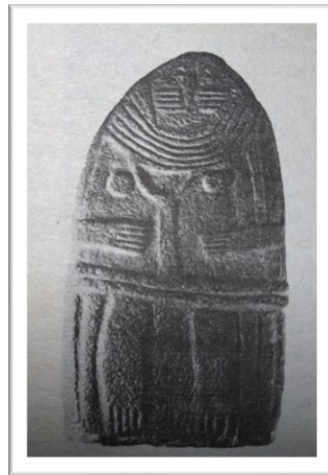


Figure 2: A prehistoric menhir

Jaffé demonstrates that in ancient human societies, even rough natural stones had highly symbolic meanings.⁸² Rocks were believed to be the dwelling places of gods and spirits.⁸³ They were thus used in primitive cultures as tombstones, boundary stones, or objects in religious ceremonies.⁸⁴ This prehistoric menhir with the female figure was an attempt of the creator to invest the stone with more power than chance and nature could give it.⁸⁵ The

79. Aniela Jaffé, “Symbolism in the Visual Arts,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl Jung (1964; repr., London: Macmillan Publishers, 1978), 257.

80. Jaffé, 257.

81. Jaffé, 258.

82. Jaffé, 258.

83. Jaffé, 258.

84. Jaffé, 258.

85. Jaffé, 258.

menhir symbolizes mothers; it expresses the creator's inner thoughts and beliefs that mothers are associated with fertility.⁸⁶

In congruence with Jaffé, Alex Warren and Scott Jeffrey propose that symbols are a good channel for communication.⁸⁷ While symbols contain something, they simultaneously transmit something to the receiver.⁸⁸ Symbols are often used to convey abstract ideas and what we cannot describe, write down, or speak.⁸⁹ They remind us that there exists a spiritual or inner world in individuals: As Warren puts it “A symbol is ‘metaphysical’. It goes beyond the physical realm.”⁹⁰ This is the power of symbols. Tom DeLiso and Jeff Hood note that many symbols which are used over time, repetitively, and passed between generations (such as national flags) often become very powerful motivators.⁹¹ These symbols are the “energy pathway”; they can unlock and evoke passionate feelings and heroic actions.⁹² Still, one should be aware that while symbols represent something, they can trick us. Sebastián Guerrini remarks, symbols also have the power to deceive us to believe that what they represent is actually real or true; symbols can cause the misunderstanding that people who wear the symbols embody that image.⁹³

In the LGBTQ community, one of the symbols that is universally recognized and used is the rainbow flag. The rainbow flag as we know today was developed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker, an American artist and gay rights activist.⁹⁴ He was asked to make the flag

86. Jaffé, 258.

87. Alex Warren, “The Power of Symbols,” New Acropolis Library, August 27, 2014, <https://library.acropolis.org/the-power-of-symbols/>; Scott Jeffrey, “How Symbols of Leadership Are Used to Influence People,” Scott Jeffrey, accessed September 18, 2019, <https://scottjeffrey.com/symbols-of-leadership/>.

88. Warren, “The Power of Symbols”; Jeffrey, “How Symbols of Leadership Are Used to Influence People.”

89. Warren, “The Power of Symbols.”

90. Warren.

91. Tom DeLiso, “The Power Behind Symbols in Reality Creating,” WD Reality Creator, accessed November 1, 2019, <http://www.wisdomsdoor.com/rc4/hrc4-20.php>; Jeff Hood, “The Power of Symbols,” Innovative Resources, April 1, 2017, <https://innovativeresources.org/the-power-of-symbols/>.

92. DeLiso, “The Power Behind Symbols in Reality Creating.”

93. Sebastián Guerrini, “The Power of Symbols,” *Sebastián Guerrini* (blog), February 1, 2011, <https://sebastianguerrini.com/features/the-power-of-symbols/>.

94. eBadges, “LGBT Pride: The Power of Badges & Symbols in Activism,” eBadges, June 22, 2018, <https://www.e-badges.net/lgbt-pride-the-power-of-badges-symbols-in-activism/>.

by the openly gay politician Harvey Milk for the Gay Freedom Pride Parade in San Francisco.⁹⁵ Baker took inspiration from many sources (such as from the hippy movement and the African American civil rights movement) but captured the natural object – the rainbow in the sky – to represent diversity of homosexual community.⁹⁶ Baker explained that each color of the rainbow strip represents a different aspect of homosexual people's lives.⁹⁷ These are: 1) hot pink for sexuality, 2) red for life, 3) orange for healing, 4) yellow for sunlight, 5) green for nature, 6) blue for art, 7) indigo for serenity, and 8) violet for spirit.⁹⁸ In 1979, Milk was assassinated and the rainbow flag became the symbol not only for homosexual pride but also for anti-hate crime and activism.⁹⁹ See Figure 3.

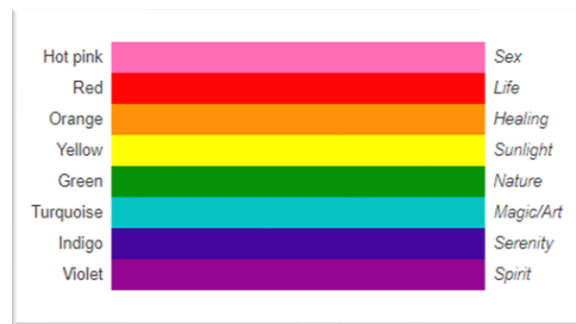


Figure 3: Rainbow Flag designed by Gilbert Baker

Following from what Jaff  defines as symbolism and considering the rainbow flag, I consider clothing a kind of symbol on the grounds that, as Molly St. Louis remarks, clothes can convey messages to others. She states that “clothes [...] communicate volumes about you as a person. The question is not whether you care about fashion, it’s more about what you’re communicating intentionally or unconsciously through your fashion choices.”¹⁰⁰

95. LAMBDA: GLBT Community Services, “Symbols of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Movements,” LAMBDA, December 26, 2004, <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/orgs/avproject/symbols.htm>.

96. LAMBDA: GLBT Community Services.

97. LAMBDA: GLBT Community Services.

98. LAMBDA: GLBT Community Services.

99. LAMBDA: GLBT Community Services.

100. Molly St. Louis, “Research Shows That the Clothes You Wear Actually Change the Way You Perform,” Inc.com, June 8, 2017, <https://www.inc.com/molly-reynolds/research-shows-that-the-clothes-you-wear-actually-change-the-way-you-perform.html>.

This is especially pertinent when we consider Garth's use of the Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes, which perform multiple functions. They con people out of their money, they conceal Garth's identity, and they act as a metaphor for the concealment this mother impresses upon him. St. Louis adds that we can tell about a person's social status, personality, age, and income just from looking at her/his clothes or how s/he dresses.¹⁰¹ This, as she observes, can be seen in the way President Barack Obama dresses when speaking in front of a crowd of working-class American people.¹⁰² The President wears no jacket and rolls up his sleeves.¹⁰³ This communicates to the audiences that he too is a hard worker.¹⁰⁴ Another example is that of "power dressing" which emerged in the United States in the 1980s among business men and women.¹⁰⁵ Power dressing is a wearing of expensive clothes as well as brand name accessories to indicate status and conveys an image of success.¹⁰⁶ The power suit, for instance, gives the wearer a look of authority no matter what, in reality, they are or are not. Moreover, apart from conveying messages about the wearer to other people, clothes affect how we feel or perceive ourselves.¹⁰⁷ Samantha Boardman adds that in a hospital gown, people tend to feel vulnerable while wearing a power suit or a nice dress, they are likely to feel empowered.¹⁰⁸ In short, clothes are sort of symbol as they have power to convey messages to other people and to make wearers feel either empowered or powerless.

Resisting Parental Homophobia with Symbols

The Rainbow Kite and *In Mike We Trust* similarly represent the gay characters' using symbols to challenge their parents' homophobia. To do so, the authors depict

101. St. Louis.

102. St. Louis.

103. St. Louis.

104. St. Louis.

105. Encyclopedia.com, "Power Dressing," Encyclopedia.com, October 31, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/power-dressing>.

106. Encyclopedia.com.

107. Encyclopedia.com.

108. Samantha Boardman, "The Science-Backed Power of Clothes," *Positive Prescription* (blog), September 13, 2014, <https://positiveprescription.com/science-backed-power-clothes/>.

Bennett's building the rainbow kite in the basement with the help of Jeremy while Garth wears Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes to join in the charity scams with Uncle Mike. In *The Rainbow Kite*, the narrative shows that after quitting all school clubs, the protagonist starts a new project: constructing a giant rainbow kite. But in fact, as the text reveals further, it is Bennett's plan to disclose his homosexuality by flying the kite at his graduation ceremony and, more importantly, this is a defiant challenge to his father's homophobia.

In the kite building scene, the reader can see that Bennett is depicted as not choosing old magazine papers to make the giant kite as he has done with his previous kites. Instead, he uses materials with rainbow colors. This reveals the protagonist's intention to make his kite the symbol to represent his homosexuality and anti-homophobia activism because the rainbow colors, as previously mentioned in relation to the pride flag, has been used as symbol of inclusivity in homosexual pride parades since 1978. By specifically making the kite in the rainbow colors, Bennett draws upon the universally recognized meanings of the rainbow flag – homosexual pride, solidarity, and activism against homophobia – to embed in his kite. The kite becomes a more powerful symbol or, as DeLiso and Hood state, an “energy pathway”; it reveals Bennett's passion and enthusiasm for resisting his father's homophobia. Therefore, it can be stated that the kite is a way by which the gay character elicits symbolic power – the potential of objects to convey messages – to communicate his homosexuality and, in particular, his unwillingness to bow to the parental homophobia. This is confirmed by Bennett's telling Matthew: “Dad would really be proud of me [for being able to make the huge kite].¹⁰⁹ Then everything would be different [...]”¹¹⁰

Interestingly, in the same scene, Bennett chooses to construct the kite only in the basement instead of in the garage which is more spacious and would be more convenient for him to carry the “humongous” kite outside for the flying trial.¹¹¹ The selection of the

109. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 92.

110. Shyer, 92.

111. Shyer, 93.

basement, however, destabilizes the father's homophobic power, challenging the associative discipline tied up with the panopticon. The kite, a symbol of homosexuality and homosexual people, is constructed on the *lowest* floor of the house and right *within* the father's sphere of power (the basement/panopticon), thus indicating that Bennett resists his father's bigotry. The rainbow kite sends a counter message (Bennett being gay) which goes against the father's command (disciplining him to be macho and straight). In this sense, the symbolic power of the kite is exercised in a "bottom up" direction to collide with the father's disciplinary power that is exercised from "top to bottom." Moreover, it is noticeable that while constructing the kite, Bennett listens to the music from Nirvana, an American rock band. Many songs from this band narrate stories of young Americans who resist social norms. From the name of the band and the content of the songs, Bennett turns the father's panopticon into his own heaven or "Nirvana" and thereby it can be construed that the parental character's power and homophobia is gradually undermined.

The narrative also presents how Bennett's use of symbolic power is continued in the scene in which he attempts to fly the rainbow kite at the Edgewater Point alone. On the one hand, this scene represents the gay character's attempt to commit suicide as he is upset with the father's instructing him to destroy the kite. However, on the other hand, the text shows Bennett's fierce resistance to his father's homophobia with the deployment of the symbol. The protagonist is depicted as using the dolly that Shearon has loaned him to carry the kite to the bridge alone, revealing his possessing enough self-affirmation to "come out" publicly rather than destroying the kite that represents his true sexual identity. Here, it is notable that although the kite resembles the pride flag, it is designed to be flown rather than being attached tightly to a pole or hung from a balcony as the gay flag traditionally is. Bennett's kite, which is to be flown high above Edgewater Point, thus suggests the gay character's sending a communication to others about his desire for freedom and the chance to live authentically. As such, the message comes back to the power of symbol that Bennett continues to elicit and exercise. It helps him express his resistance to the father's disciplinary power that pressures him to behave in macho ways or to convert him – all of which he cannot stand anymore.

At this point, it is also important to note where the kite is taken for its first flight, Edgewater Point. In the location's name, the term "edge," meaning "[t]he point at which something is likely to begin," foreshadows Bennett's letting the kite go off into the sky.¹¹² Reading "edge" as "[a] rim or brink" (of water, in this scene), the act implies that, at the same moment that the rainbow kite being let off, Bennett is crossing a boundary.¹¹³ In considering of the geography of Edgewater Point, an open space, confirmation is given to Bennett's homosexual identity being expressed through his rainbow kite, because the act will be seen by many onlookers.

Just as Bennett makes use of the symbolic power of the rainbow kite, Garth acts against his mother's homophobia by wearing Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes to join in with Uncle Mike's scams. The narrative shows that the clothes Garth wears are a kind of symbol that convey the idea of concealment. To explain, in the second fraud charity that Mike makes up to help dogs with "tropolitis," Garth is told to dress in "a hooded, pointy-eared Scooby-Doo costume," an old Halloween outfit that he still keeps in his bedroom wardrobe.¹¹⁴ In addition, Mike "had nixed the plastic dog mask, thinking Garth would look more "adorable" with his face showing. Then he'd produced a can of shoe polish from his pocket and blackened the tip of Garth's nose."¹¹⁵ The way that Mike tells Garth to dress up in the Scooby-Doo outfit is not different to that undertaken by Sonja who instructs Garth to keep his homosexuality secret by not coming out to anybody "outside the family."¹¹⁶ This allows only a part of Garth's identity to be revealed (like the way Mike tarnishes only Garth's nose with shoe polish but does not cover his whole face). In both cases, the gay character cannot fully disclose his true nature.

It is clear that Mike initiates the use of the costumes and perhaps at some level he recognizes that they function in a similar way to the cloak of invisibility Sonja imposes

112. "Edge," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing), accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=edge>.

113. "The American Heritage Dictionary Entry."

114. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 197–98.

115. Ryan, 198.

116. Ryan, 32.

upon Garth in asking him to conceal his sexuality. While knowing that dressing up in the Scooby-Doo costume is embarrassing and the scam is illegal, Garth feels both are acceptable because his mother has “[...] *asked [him] to live a lie* [italics in original].”¹¹⁷ This means that both Mike and Garth retaliate against Sonja’s homophobia in a way to “fight fire with fire” with the symbolic power of the outfit. The Scooby-Doo costume conveys the message of concealment of Garth’s identity to attack, counter, and challenge Sonja’s disciplining her gay son to cover up his true sexuality, which is also an act of dishonesty.

Indeed, it must be noted here that while wearing the Scooby-Doo costume successfully draws attention from kids and their parents to donate money to the fake charity (they are beguiled by the power of clothes into perceiving Garth is cute like Scooby-Doo), it does not make Garth feel comfortable literally or figuratively. The text shows that “the material of the Scooby-Doo costume was nylon but felt more like plastic; despite the relatively cool day, he was already feeling warm and starting to itch.”¹¹⁸ Garth also feels unconfident in the old, funny, and childish outfit that he “hadn’t worn since [he was] ten,” and deep inside, he develops a sense of guilt as he realizes that he is lying to his mother and to other donors.¹¹⁹ The depiction of Garth is consistent with the idea of power of clothes; Boardman states that clothes can make the wearer feels empowered or powerless.¹²⁰ Clearly, Garth feels disempowered. He does not sincerely believe that the way he makes use of the symbolic power of the costume to retaliate against his mother helps the situation get better but makes him a liar and even con artist like Mike. This can be seen in the way that Garth is overwhelmed with guilt throughout the narrative and his attempts to avoid participating in further scams with his uncle.

The Scooby-Doo costume is interesting. The author depicts Garth as not entirely dissimilar to the dog character in the American comedy television series. Scooby-Doo is a semi-anthropomorphic Great Dane. Although the dog helps a group of teenage characters

117. Ryan, 151.

118. Ryan, 198.

119. Ryan, 197.

120. Boardman, “The Science-Backed Power of Clothes.”

(Fred Jones, Daphne Blake, Velma Dinky, and Shaggy Rogers) to solve mysteries and ostensibly paranormal activities, he shows cowardice which is obvious from the first episode *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!*. Scooby-Doo is often depicted as hiding under clothes, curtains, nesting boxes, and costumes. See Figure 4.¹²¹



Figure 4: Scooby-Doo and Shaggy hide under the bearskin

The scene shows Scooby-Doo hiding under a bearskin in a museum. Although the bearskin can temporarily protect him and Shaggy from the villain who is chasing them, it cannot conceal their fear (evident in their facial expressions). Likewise Garth, who dresses up as the Scooby-Doo feels worried at being unmasked. The clothes make Garth feel like the wimpish dog character, fearing discovery.¹²²

121. The captured picture is from the first episode of *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* “What a Night for a Knight.”

122. In the *Scooby-Doo* series, critics have noted that costumes are used to represent homosexuality. This is especially noticeable in how Fred Jones, leader of Mystery Inc, the crime-busting gang, dresses. Fred is a handsome guy with neatly combed blonde hair and often wears a cravat. Peter Bradshaw, writing for *The Guardian*, observes that this style (for the twenty-first century) may be a hint to Fred’s homosexuality as he knows how to “accessorise.” Bradshaw’s remark is interesting. It reveals that the series points to the power of clothes to convey messages from the wearer to other people, which is similar to what Garth in *In Mike We Trust* does. While Fred perhaps uses his outfit as a means to come out of the closet to his friends in the gang, Garth’s Scooby-Doo costume is employed to push Sonja to bring up the topic of Garth’s homosexuality. It ultimately makes the mother realize that her instructing Garth to keep his homosexuality secret is not different to forcing him to live a lie. See Peter Bradshaw, “Scooby-Doo,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2002, sec. Film, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/jul/12/culture.reviews>; Sujay Kumar, “Gay Characters on Children’s TV, from Bert to SpongeBob,” *The Daily Beast*, November 2, 2010, sec. undefined, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/11/02/gay-characters-on-childrens-tv-from-bert-to-spongebob>.

The disempowerment is re-confirmed by Garth's wearing the Superman costume to do the third scam. The text shows that while the outfit is a super-hero, it is merely a Halloween costume he wore in the sixth grade (like the Scooby-Doo). Such dressing up does not empower Garth but instead makes him feel worse. He is not at all convinced by Mike who gives him the "hard-sell": "Who doesn't love Superman? He's faster than a speeding bullet [...]." ¹²³ The con artist tells Garth that he "[...] probably looked better in it *now*, with a little muscle on him, than he had when he was eleven [*italics in original*]." ¹²⁴ Garth shouts in protest "It's humiliating!" ¹²⁵ His response clearly shows that the symbolic power of the Halloween Superman costume does make Garth even feel terribly "ashamed" and foolish. ¹²⁶ The more Garth dresses up in various costumes, the more he multiplies the lies and fake identities as each costume makes him someone or something other than what he actually is.

However, it cannot be denied that the symbolic power of the clothes that Garth uses to resist his mother finally forces her to openly discuss Garth's homosexuality and his self-disclosure to other people. Once the last con job is divulged, Sonja asks Garth to tell her everything. Garth confesses:

"You know what? It *is* about you, Mom. As much as it's about Mike and me, it's about us."

"And how do you figure that?"

"Because—" He dragged his hands through his hair, then sat forward and anchored his elbows against his knees. "This is the twenty-first century."

"[...] I'm not going to keep living in the closet! Do you know what the last four months have been like for me? Living a lie about who I am, not even discussing it with you—like it's some kind of secret, when I tried *not* to make it a secret so you and I wouldn't grow apart? And knowing my *mom* was the one who wanted that?"

123. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 241.

124. Ryan, 241–42.

125. Ryan, 241.

126. Ryan, 251.

“I *have* accepted who you are,” she said evenly. Without looking up, she added, “I just haven’t dealt with it yet.”¹²⁷

“[...] I wish you were in the Garth costume you used to wear before that con man came to town. I *miss* the Garth costume, I really do.”

“You know what?” he said, suddenly angry. “That’s just what it was, Mom: a costume. Because every day I was pretending to be somebody the world would have an easier time *accepting*.”

“That was for your own good.”

“It was for *your* own good! So *you* could worry less! It made me miserable, and you didn’t care—”

“[...] I’m done with the costumes—*all* of them, including the one you want me to wear [*italics in original*].”¹²⁸

Again, the narrative reveals the symbolic power of the costumes that Garth wears. It makes Sonja feels repentant for having pushed her son to live a lie for months. The mother learns that what she has done to her child is not so different from Garth’s dressing up in Scooby-Doo and Superman outfits to join the scams with Mike. Garth does not want to be dishonest, but Sonja makes him conceal his homosexual orientation and this confusion pushes him to serious illegal activities. Both are rooted in pretense and concealment. Sonja’s repentance is evident in her admitting to Garth that “I *miss* the Garth costume, I really do.”¹²⁹ Here it seems Sonja’s homophobia is lessened and she acknowledges that in silencing him she has forced him into another kind of costume. At least, she begins to listen attentively to what Garth feels when forced to stay in the closet. Her actually listening to her son has never happened before and this is evidence of the symbolic power that Garth makes used of to resist his mother’s homophobia. It is a good sign that foreshadows the mother’s changing her stance from being homophobic to an understanding and accepting parent. Such positive change is confirmed in the narrative resolution. Sonja decides to go to ROSMY with Garth to learn more about how to deal with her negative attitude toward homosexuality.

127. Ryan, 291–92.

128. Ryan, 314–15.

129. Ryan, 314.

From what I have demonstrated, both novels show that symbolic power can be deployed to challenge the parent characters' homophobia which is demonstrated in their exertion of disciplinary power upon their children. In *The Rainbow Kite*, the symbolic power is drawn from the rainbow colors which represent homosexuality, homosexual solidarity, pride, diversity, community, and of course, anti-homophobia. Bennett's giant rainbow kite is so heavily imbued with the power of pride flag that Bennett uses it to convey his intention to come out and resist his father's negative attitudes. In *In Mike We Trust*, Garth's wearing Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes also illustrates symbolic power. The outfits ultimately come to convey that Sonja should not push her son to hide his homosexual orientation as one lie can lead to more serious lies. While able to work on their parents' homophobia, Bennett and Garth cannot make them completely relinquish their deep-rooted bigotry. They must use symbolic power to create collective power – gather more allies – who come to help the young gay characters resist their parents' homophobia, making them learn to be more tolerant and accepting of their children's homosexuality. In the following section, I will show how the symbols (the rainbow kite and the costumes) can help them achieve this.

Forming Collective Power through Symbols

Bennett gradually gains more and more allies during his giant kite building. The key ally, however, is his mother. The mother, although depicted as a submissive wife from the opening of the narrative, begins to show resistance to her husband. This is represented in the scene in which the father and mother discuss a sewing machine. The discussion is a direct result of the rainbow kite making process, which requires Bennett to “sew panels of different colors together.”¹³⁰ In this scene, the father mocks Bennett: “You’re going to take up sewing now? Instead of swimming or hockey or Little League?”¹³¹ The text further reveals that while the father’s voice “had a good-natured little ha-ha to it, [...] it also had an edge.”¹³² This is because “[the father] thought sewing machines were only for girls, [so]

130. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 76.

131. Shyer, 76.

132. Shyer, 76.

... he didn't want Bennett to do things only girls did."¹³³ However, the father's sneering pushes the mother to stand up to him. Lydia, "jump[s] right in," retorting "very forcefully," that "[w]ell, what's wrong with that? ... I think it's fine."¹³⁴ She also "glar[es] at Dad."¹³⁵ Here, the mother exercises an autonomy hitherto unseen in countering the oppressive discursive power of the father. Such retaliation clearly shows that, because of the rainbow kite building, the mother becomes a strong ally of Bennett. She protects her child and at the same time helps him challenge the father's negative attitudes toward non-traditional gender practices. This has never happened before as Lydia is typically depicted as silent in argument, "bit[ing] her lip" to suppress her disagreement and anger.¹³⁶

The mother's exercise of power to help Bennett is re-confirmed in a further argument with the father. Lydia says: "You're sending the boys the wrong messages [...]," following this with a reference to Mr. Dowd, the deceased husband of a woman for whom Lydia does private nursing. Mr. Dowd "had used the sewing machine every day of his life when he was alive [...]."¹³⁷ One might argue that Bennett's mother is "asking" the father for his permission to allow Bennett to use the sewing machine. If so, this neither confirms the mother's autonomy as previously demonstrated nor does it challenge the father's prejudices. Instead, it reinforces the patriarch's power and also pushes him to conform to how Mr. Dowd is perceived. In other words, the father is the person holding the authority to permit Bennett to sew, if the action can subsequently be framed as a masculine pursuit. Should it not be deemed acceptably masculine, the act of sewing would be prohibited. At this point, what should be taken into account is; *i.* who is actually presented as having the authority to allow Bennett to sew, the mother or the father? and *ii.* is the example of Mr. Dowd raised to show the father that masculinity is not necessarily incompatible with the act of sewing?

133. Shyer, 77.

134. Shyer, 77.

135. Shyer, 77.

136. Shyer, 136.

137. Shyer, 77.

For the first point, it is Lydia, not the father, who grants Bennett permission to use the sewing machine. This is the result of Lydia's continuous retaliation against her homophobic husband. It is the mother's assertions that makes the father "back [...] off."¹³⁸ In relinquishing his grip on the monopoly of power within the family structure, the mother's power is boosted. This is confirmed in the narrative showing Lydia's promise to Bennett, in the presence of her husband, that "[i]n fact, one of my patients has a sewing machine and I'm going to see if I can borrow it! Then I will show you how to use it."¹³⁹ Ultimately, Bennett is taught to sew by the mother who has become a "cheerleader for the kite project."¹⁴⁰ For the second point, the example of Mr. Dowd is mentioned in order to urge the father to reconsider the reliability of the ideology pertaining to typical gender roles. From the father believing that "...sewing machines were only for girls," the case of Mr. Dowd makes him realize that the ability to sew, and the act of sewing, is not limited to women.¹⁴¹ This can be seen in the father's softened response: "You're right, Lyd. Sorry Bennett. I better get rid of some of my old-fashioned stereotypical ideas [...]."¹⁴² This statement reveals a compromise to his wife's reasoning. In addition, the direct apology to his son underlines a change in the father's attitudes.

Again, the narrative shows the symbolic power of the rainbow kite in helping him gain a large number of allies (inside and outside the family) who cooperate with Bennett to eradicate the father's bigotry. This is made evident in the final scene of Bennett's graduation ceremony which illustrates such joint power:

Bennett's name was called. I [Matthew] didn't know what was coming, whether there'd be a total silence or boos or just a little polite applause, but what I didn't expect was this amazing explosion.

What burst out was not only cheers, whistles, and foot stomps but then—Dad got it all on videotape—Jeremy leaped up, pulled off his cap, and his hair was stripped in rainbow colors! And now the triplets came running down the aisle yelling and waving their baseball caps and, you guessed it,

138. Shyer, 77.

139. Shyer, 77.

140. Shyer, 93.

141. Shyer, 77.

142. Shyer, 77–78.

their hair was dyed in the same rainbow stripes! All of a sudden I saw a whole bunch of kids pull off their graduation caps or just appear from the back of the audience, and they'd done it too. They'd dyed their hair in reds and greens and blues, not exactly Roy G. Biv, but in that spirit. It was an amazing, dazzling, eye-popping, once-in-a-lifetime sight.¹⁴³

Bennett's rainbow kite has a considerable influence on his school friends. The symbol which conveys his desire to come out to the public and especially his anti-parental homophobia acts as what DeLiso and Hood call the "energy pathway" to evoke people's passionate feelings and heroic actions.¹⁴⁴ Here Jeremy, despite being prohibited by his father to associate with Bennett, dyes his hair in rainbow colors to show support for his close friend. Such an action rouses his siblings and other school peers to do the same. Thus, a collective power is formed. It gains enough strength to pressure Bennett's father to repent for being unkind to his gay son. The father is finally depicted as "[having] put down his video camera and taken out his handkerchief. He took off the sunglasses we'd given him and was wiping his eyes."¹⁴⁵ His responses suggest that he relinquishes his anti-gay attitudes and accepts his son for who he really is. This is re-confirmed by Matthew's statement: "I thought that my father's heart would finally slide into the right place, just by the way he kept his arm around Bennett while he told us that Leonardo DaVinci was one of the greatest artists of all time."¹⁴⁶

Like the rainbow kite, Garth's deployment of a symbol (clothes) helps him generate allies who work together with him in eroding his mother's homophobia. The text reveals that, in fact, the symbol consists of two forms – invisible and visible – namely that the former is Garth being forced by his mother to live in the closet which suggests he wears an "invisible" outfit to conceal his true sexual identity, while the latter is the Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes that he actually wears. In the first case, Garth cleverly makes use of the symbolic power of such an invisible costume to convince Mike to be his key ally. Mike, after learning that his nephew has been pressured to put on the invisible clothes, feels

143. Shyer, 203.

144. DeLiso, "The Power Behind Symbols in Reality Creating"; Hood, "The Power of Symbols."

145. Shyer, *The Rainbow Kite*, 204.

146. Shyer, 205.

compelled to help Garth. The uncle exercises his power by acting as Garth's "substitute" father.¹⁴⁷ As well as helping Garth and Sonja out of financial crisis, Mike shows full acceptance of the boy's homosexuality as he really feels sympathetic toward him. This is made evident in his giving consolation and support to Garth. Mike says: "All right, [...]. That's cool. I like somebody who...knows what he likes."¹⁴⁸ Such positive reactions from Mike make Garth feel "a wave of relief wash over him [...]. It almost felt like he was hearing it from his dad."¹⁴⁹ From this, Garth's invisible outfit elicits Mike's power. He gains the first adult ally who can balance and counter his mother's power within the family structure.

Moreover, Garth's invisible costume further stimulates Mike to continue to exercise his power in helping him to expose to the world of homosexual people. Mike realizes that, wearing the invisible outfit, Garth has no gay friends whom he can talk to and this causes him loneliness. Therefore, he takes Garth to the gay bookstore. At the bookstore, Mike buys Garth some gay-themed books and DVDs. This enables Garth to meet Adam whom he befriends while Mike takes a chance to teach Garth about safe sex, handing him a "couple of safe-sex pamphlets, [...and] a handful of free condoms."¹⁵⁰ Clearly, Mike's role as father figure is strengthened. In this way, Mike gains greater status within the family and wins Garth's trust. His "tearing off" of Garth's invisible costume and exposing him to the gay culture can be interpreted as his countering Sonja's disciplinary power to silence the child. This results in Sonja feeling that the distance between her and her own son is widened, making her to talk and listen to Garth again. Their conversations, though revolving around general topics, indicates Sonja is aware that now Mike has destabilized her power as the single parent who holds absolute authority to discipline Garth. This is similar to the case of Lydia (in Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite*) who challenges her husband and assumes the role of Bennett's key ally within the family.

147. Ryan, *In Mike We Trust*, 274.

148. Ryan, 52.

149. Ryan, 53.

150. Ryan, 95.

The symbolic power of the physical costumes conveys Garth's concealment of his true sexual identity and this makes Mike feel deeper empathy for his nephew. He learns that Garth is unable to re-open the discussion about his homosexuality with Sonja and unable to tell her about the relationship with Adam that begins to develop after they meet at the bookstore. Thus, Mike assumes the role of Garth's parent by inviting Adam to watch movies at home. This allows the gay teenage characters to share their experiences of dealing with their parents' homophobia, making Garth feel that he is not alone anymore. At this point, the symbolic power of the clothes that Garth dresses in recruits another ally, Adam, through Mike. Adam understands Garth's issues and gives him moral support. With this newly gained ally, the collective power that is firstly built by the cooperation of just two characters – the uncle and the nephew – is now expanded to include Adam, a person outside the family. The power gains more strength. It later inspires Garth to be open with Sonja about his relationship with his boyfriend. This can be seen in Garth's full confession. He tells his mother: "I like him [Adam]. [...] A lot. Like, I want to date him."¹⁵¹ This makes Sonja realize that she must now learn to be more open-minded, listen to her son, and accept his homosexuality or the relationship between her and her only child might never be reconciled. This is clearly evident in her admittance that "[...] I don't want this 'wall' you mentioned to stand between us any longer."¹⁵²

As has been demonstrated, both *The Rainbow Kite* and *In Mike We Trust* proffer a similar strategy – the deployment of symbolic power – to challenge the parental homophobia exerted via disciplinary power upon the respective children. In the books this is aimed at instilling a certain vision of masculinity within the teenagers, an attempt to mold them to be "manly" and "normal" by the standards of American heteronormative society. By making the rainbow kite and wearing the Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes, as Bennett and Garth do respectively, the gay characters make use of their symbolic power or the capacity of symbols to convey messages to others – thereby expressing resistance against their homophobic parents. Namely, the rainbow kite and the costumes are the way through which the protagonists exhibit their desires to come out to the public and thus

151. Ryan, 293.

152. Ryan, 317.

challenge their parents (who want to keep them in the closet). This strategy, when deployed, generates allies and builds collective power through which Bennett and Garth challenge the parents' homophobia. This collaboration between gay and straight characters invokes the awareness of the parents towards the bigotry they hold, softens their homophobic stance, and ultimately convinces them to accept the homosexuality of their respective sons.

Chapter 3

Homophobia in American High Schools

This chapter analyzes four gay-themed American young adult novels – Brent Hartinger’s *Geography Club* (2003), Kim Wallace’s *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* (2004), *Erik & Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Foresthill High* (2005), and *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year at Foresthill High* (2006).¹ The content and context of these books, in comparison to other sequels in their series and the gay-themed YA novels published in the first decade of the twenty-first century, extensively highlight the gay protagonists’ exercise of power in dealing with homophobia within school environments.² Throughout my analysis of these texts, particular attention will be paid to analyzing the coping strategy proffered in the novels in conjunction with the discussion of Foucault’s notion of the omnipresence of power, his sense that “power is everywhere.”³ My aim is to demonstrate that although gay-themed young adult fiction is imbued with the representation of homophobia, often what it constitutes is a text of resistance. This is not simply because the fiction includes a potential strategy to challenge homophobic prejudices but also because the proffered strategy is a means whereby omnipresent power is managed and made use of to resist homophobia (which is a facet of “dominating power” as, according to Joanne P.

1. *Geography Club* is the best-selling debut novel of the Russel Middlebrook series. The series has three sequels: *The Order of the Poison Oak* (2005), *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* (2009), and *The Elephant of Surprise* (2013). After the huge success of this gay-themed YA series, Hartinger has continued to write about Russel and his friends, following their lives into their twenties. These later works have been published as novels for adults —*The Thing I Didn’t Know I Didn’t Know* (2014), *Barefoot in the City of Broken Dreams* (2015), and *The Road to Amazing* (2016). The three adult books comprise the Russel Middlebrook: The Futon Years series. For more details about Hartinger’s novels, see his official website: <http://brenthartinger.com/the-russel-middlebrook-books-2/>. In similar to Hartinger, Wallace’s *Erik & Isabelle* series has four books: *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* (2004), *Erik & Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Forest Hill High* (2005), *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year at Forest Hill High* (2006), and *Erik & Isabelle: Senior Year at Forest Hill High* (2007).

2. The examples of contemporary gay-themed YA novels which present homophobia in school environments are Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* (2001), *Rainbow High* (2003), and *Rainbow Road* (2005) (sometimes referred to as the *Rainbow Trilogy*), Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson’s *Target* (2003) and Pat Schmatz’s *Mousetraps* (2008). In these books, combat against homophobia is mentioned in passing. The narratives’ focuses are shifted to other subjects such as coming out, safe sex, HIV/AIDS, and same-sex romance as found in Alex Sanchez’s the *Rainbow Trilogy*. Or, in Johnson’s *Target* and Schmatz’s *Mousetraps*, the books place more emphasis upon showing the damaging psychological impact of homophobic violence that the gay characters – both of whom are mercilessly beaten and one is raped – have experienced.

3. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1:93.

Sharp, Paul Routledge, Christ Philo, and Roman Paddison, it “discipline[s], silence[s], prohibit[s], or repress[es] difference and dissent”).⁴ In presenting characters who deal with homophobic bigotry, the selected texts reveal that one potential strategy which the non-straight characters may apply to challenge homophobia is the formation (and joining) of a gay support group. *Geography Club* focuses on the emergence of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) and *Erik & Isabelle* (Books 1, 2, and 3) presents a gathering of participants coming from both within and outside the school. Reading the novels through a Foucauldian lens, I argue that the formation of mutual support groups offers a collective power or strength for the homosexual characters and enables them to penetrate heterosexual spaces of power, thereby infiltrating heteronormative spaces as a means of challenging homophobic bigotry.

Set in the fictional Robert L. Goodkind High School, *Geography Club* narrates the story of a small band of homosexual characters as they struggle to find a safe place where they can be true to themselves.⁵ Far from being either good or kind, as the school’s name suggests, the pedagogical environment is in fact very hostile.⁶ Homophobic slurs such as “fag” and “faggot” appear to be prevalent and the entire school space is made heterosexual by default. Such manifestations of homophobia, both at interpersonal and institutional levels, force Russel Middlebrook (the gay protagonist) and other homosexual characters Kevin, Min, Terese, and Ike to tightly lock themselves “in the closet” for fear of discovery. However, as the story develops, all homosexual characters come out to one another. They start a mutual support group, arranging secret meetings at a pizza parlor, in the school café, in the library, and finally decide to establish “Geography Club” – a secret homosexual club – a name Russel settles on.⁷ He gives it the “most boring name” so that other students will not be interested in joining, preventing the members of the club from being outed.⁸

4. Sharp et al., *Entanglements of Power*, 2.

5. Kate Pavao, “Q & A with Brent Hartinger,” *PublishersWeekly.com*, April 18, 2013, /pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/56870-q-a-with-brent-hartinger.html.

6. Tim Oakes and Patricia Lynn Price, eds., *The Cultural Geography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), 402.

7. Patricia Ladd, “Banned Books: Geography Club by Brent Hartinger,” *The Plain Pladd* (blog), October 8, 2010, <http://www.patricialadd.com/2010/10/banned-books-geography-club-by-brent-hartinger/>.

8. Su Terry, “Review - Geography Club,” *Metapsychology Online Review*, May 14, 2003, http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=1705.

Although the name is a ruse, the true nature of Geography Club is discovered by Belinda, an African American school misfit. Belinda becomes the first straight ally of the group, followed by Brian, a school outcast who is later rumored to be gay. Brian ultimately decides to send the school administrative board the application to formally establish the Gay-Straight Alliance.

In a similar fashion to *Geography Club*, Wallace's three novels in the four-book *Erik & Isabelle* series feature Erik Pennington (the gay protagonist) and his closest friend Isabelle's unyielding struggles not only to survive homophobic bullying but also to make their school more tolerant and accepting of sexual minorities. The story begins with a narrative that shifts back and forth between Erik and Isabelle's lives.⁹ Erik lives under the strict regime of his homophobic military father who keeps trying to toughen him up through physical training after noticing what he perceives as his child's effeminate demeanor. In the school, Erik is presented as being an outstandingly talented athlete and an intellectual student yet the boy always "tr[ies] to lay low" to avoid being the prime target of bullying in his gay-unfriendly school environment.¹⁰ Isabelle, in contrast, has very supportive parents and siblings. This molds her to be a confident, creative, and lively person, but more importantly, the only strong-willed and "out" lesbian student in Foresthill High.¹¹ Like a number of other homosexual characters represented in contemporary homosexual-themed young adult fiction, Erik has encountered unrelenting homophobic bullying. One day, while Erik is using the boys' gym locker room, he is punched by Jacob Schmidt (the homophobic school bully). However, knowing some self-defense techniques from having grown up in a military family, Erik trips up Jacob. The bully falls face down against a bench and loses a tooth. Erik's retaliatory action is obviously undertaken in self-defense; nevertheless, the school gives him (and Jacob) a suspension for "fighting on

9. Sharon Flesher-Duffy, "Erik & Isabelle Series – GLBT Reviews," GLBT Reviews: Book and Media Reviews from ALA's Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Round Table, accessed February 25, 2017, http://www.glbtrt.ala.org/reviews/erik_aamp_isabelle_series/.

10. Kim Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* (Sacramento, CA: Foglight Press, 2004), 2.

11. Joe Wright, "Book Review 'Erik & Isabelle (Freshman Year at Foresthill High),' " StoneWall Society, June 2015, <http://www.stonewallsociety.com/GLBTArtists/kimwallacewingent.htm>.

campus.”¹² Such punishment, as is imposed upon the abused student alongside the abuser, indicates the school’s complete dismissal of the rights and well-being of its homosexual students. Mollie V. Blackburn (in her empirical research on homophobic hate crime in US schools) notes that this kind of unjust punishment plays a part in exacerbating the bullies’ homophobic prejudices.¹³

Suffering guilt about having hurt Jacob and having experienced injustice from the school, Erik seeks non-violent strategies to deal with the homophobic bigotry he encounters. One such strategy is the formation of a support group. Erik befriends Salvador, a Mexican student, Jonah, an old lunatic man who lives near the riverbank, and Mark, a closeted gay student in Jacob’s gang who at one point in the novel joins in with the bullying. The network of Erik’s allies continues to grow and extend to other spaces outside the school boundary. In *Erik & Isabelle: Sophomore Year*, Erik joins a gay teen book club and the gay-friendly Metropolitan Community Church’s activities where he finds more supportive friends, both adults and teenagers. These homosexual communities not only provide Erik with psychological solace, they also inspire him, along with Isabelle, to keep on fighting the homophobic discrimination in the school through activities such as hosting a charity run and posting poems to promote tolerance on the school website. Again, in *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year*, Erik and Mark (his boyfriend) branch out their networks of power by taking a community service class. Through this channel, the boys have an opportunity to help patients at a convalescent hospital. There they befriend Henrietta, who later turns out to be a successful businessperson, a lesbian and the owner of the mansion where the Junior Prom is to be held. Henrietta rescues Erik and Mark from being removed by a group of homophobic students when both boys join the school dance floor together. Their act disrupts the traditionally heterosexual prom, which was previously limited to the participation of straight couples. In short, with the formation of (and joining) mutual

12. Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High*, 2004, 50.

13. Mollie V. Blackburn, *Interrupting Hate: Homophobia in Schools and What Literacy Can Do About It*, Language and Literacy Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012), 8.

support groups, Erik can bravely “chip away” at intolerances and change the world around him.¹⁴

In the synopses of the novels given above, it can be seen that the texts do not leave homophobia unchecked. Instead, the works – by featuring the cooperation between the gay protagonists and their allies who come from all walks of life to deal with bigotry – call for activism.¹⁵ Homophobia is presented not just as an issue for gay individuals but for everyone. The books can be seen as urging the readership to quash homophobic attitudes by joining forces and questioning omnipresent power structures and ideals. In light of this, it is not surprising to see that *Geography Club* has garnered many accolades such as GLAAD Media Award, the Scandiuizzi Children’s Book Award 2007 (Washington State Book Awards), and the SCBWI/Judy Blume Grant for a Contemporary Young Adult Novel, among others.¹⁶ The book was also a Lambda Literary Award Finalist in 2003.¹⁷ Similarly, the first book in the *Erik & Isabelle* series was nominated for the 2004 ALA

14. FictionDB, “Erik and Isabelle: Junior Year at Foresthill High by Kim Wallace,” FictionDB, 2007, <https://www.fictiondb.com/author/kim-wallace~erik-and-isabelle-junior-year-at-foresthill-high~445248~b.htm>.

15. Brent Hartinger and Kim Wallace have actively engaged in LGBTQ activism. In 1990, Hartinger co-founded Oasis, a support group for homosexual teenagers, in Washington. He also dedicates his writings, particularly *Geography Club* as a call for activism as he states: “this book is about having integrity and standing up for people who are different.” Thus, in his novel, the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), is detailed, as in fact is his co-founded homosexual support organization, Oasis. This is used as an example of a potential strategy through which to challenge homophobia. Like Hartinger, Kim Wallace’s *Erik & Isabelle* series was inspired by her witnessing high school students having been “disenfranchised.” So, she embedded coping strategies to be deployed against the sexual prejudices demonstrated in the novels. These are the effective means which she had tried during her high-school time as she stated: “I feel like my own survival can inspire kids who can’t quite see the light at the end of the tunnel on their own.” See “Brent Hartinger Discusses a Perspective on the Big Changes in LGBT YA Literature,” Dr. Bickmore’s YA Wednesday, July 27, 2016, <http://www.yawednesday.com/1/post/2016/07/brent-hartinger-discusses-a-perspective-on-the-big-changes-in-lgbt-ya-literature.html>; John Bradford, “Kim Wallace: Educator, Author, Advocate – GLBT Reviews,” GLBT Reviews: Book and media reviews from ALA’s Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Round Table, December 26, 2008, http://www.glbtrt.ala.org/reviews/kim_wallace_educator_author_advocate/.

16. “Brent Hartinger,” Alchetron: Free Social Encyclopedia for the World, 2017, <https://alchetron.com/Brent-Hartinger-602211-W>.

17. Bill Burleson, “‘Split Screen’ by Brent Hartinger,” *Lambda Literary* (blog), July 21, 2009, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/ya/07/21/split-screen-brent-hartinger/>.

Lambda Literary Awards (or known as the “Lammys”) are given to published literary works that celebrate LGBTQ-themed novels. It is awarded yearly by the United States-based Lambda Literary Foundation. See more details regarding the Lambda Literary Awards at <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/>

Stonewall Book Award and the third novel was a finalist for the 2006 Lambda Literary Award in the category of children's/young adult fiction.¹⁸ The *Erik & Isabelle* series has also been selected for discussion in many English classrooms in the United States due to the representation of the homosexual characters' non-violent challenging of homophobic prejudices. Mollie V. Blackburn and Caroline T. Clark make the case that the texts "work against homophobia in and out of schools."¹⁹

As in previous chapters, this chapter is divided into two main sections: (i) a discussion of the manifestations of homophobia within the fictional environment, here the school, and (ii) an analysis of the suggested strategy which is proffered in the texts. In the first section, I will consider the manifestations of homophobia on both levels, interpersonal and institutional, demonstrating how this bigotry is expressed. The interpersonal homophobia is found in the antagonists' multiple aggressive acts as they are directly inflicted against their non-heterosexual school peers. These acts range from verbal bullying (i.e. anti-gay slurs, rumor-spreading, gossiping, and joking) to physical harassments (pushing, shoving, and hitting). However, among these hostile deeds, the use of homophobic terms such as "fag" and its variation "faggot" are highlighted in the texts. The pejoratives are directly mentioned in the very first chapter of *Geography Club* and *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*. The placement of such loaded terms at the outset of the novels does not simply capture the reader's attention but, I argue, is employed by both authors as a means of revealing the extent of the institutional homophobia which runs through the entire school space, a space which is heterosexual by default. For the second part of this chapter, the coping strategy employed in response to homophobia – the formation (and joining) of a support group (i.e. the Gay-Straight Alliance and the gathering of allies from both inside and outside of the school) – will be analyzed. This analysis is undertaken in order to re-emphasize my argument that individuals can exercise power to make changes by joining

18. Kim Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Senior Year at Foresthill High* (Sacramento, CA: Foglight Press, 2007), (no page).

19. Mollie V. Blackburn and Caroline T. Clark, "Becoming Readers of Literature with LGBT Themes: In and Out of Classrooms," in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Shelby Anne Wolf et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 149 and 158.

their forces. They create a collective power which gives them more strength to infiltrate the heterosexual spaces of power as a means to challenge homophobia.

The Manifestation of Homophobia in the School Environment

Homophobia in the fictional Robert L. Goodkind High School and Forest Hill High School first manifests itself in the antagonists' verbal abuse – in particular, their use of anti-gay slurs – which many scholars consider to be the most blatant form of homophobia.²⁰ As can be seen from the openings of *Geography Club* and *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*, derogatory terms such as “fag” (and its variation “faggot”) are employed widely and with glee by the bullies. The negative connotations of these terms are self-evident. The bullies use the pejoratives to criticize, embarrass, intimidate, mock, or ridicule their gay school peers. In doing so, assertions are made by the bullies that these non-straight characters (and homosexuality) are disgusting.²¹ Noticeably, aside from being the most commonly employed anti-gay terms, “fag” and “faggot” are used by the bullies in a wide variety of venues – routes to and from the schools as well as inside and outside of the schools' main buildings. One can take the following cases as examples.

20. C. J. Bott, *More Bullies in More Books* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 126 and 135; Elizabeth J. Meyer, *Gender, Bullying, and Harassment: Strategies to End Sexism and Homophobia in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 44; Kevin L. Nadal, *That's so Gay! Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2013), 6; Randall B. Lindsey et al., *A Culturally Proficient Response to LGBT Communities: A Guide for Educators* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2013), 39–40. Bott, for example, observes that a reason that homo-negative language is considered the most apparent form of homophobic bigotry is possibly because such verbal abuse is a direct channel through which the offenders demonstrate their ostensible heterosexuality. In doing so, the users' deeply ingrained heterosexist and homophobic attitudes are explicitly expressed.

21. One might argue that the terms “fag” and “faggot” could be used to refer to something that is bad like in the phrase “That's so gay!” These usages might therefore be understood as not homophobic. I nevertheless agree with the suggestion of Mark McCormack, a sociologist who conducts research on homophobia in Western culture, that whenever the use of these words (i) purport to “wound” a gay recipient and/or (ii) cause any negative social effect, it should be considered homophobic practice. Crispin Thurlow and Jonathan Charlesworth further posit that such use is tacitly indexical of the user's prejudice towards gay people because it labels gay people as being inferior, wrong, and worthless. See Mark McCormack, “Mapping the Boundaries of Homophobic Language in Bullying,” in *Bullying: Experiences and Discourses of Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Ian Rivers and Neil Duncan, Foundations and Futures of Education (London: Routledge, 2013), 92; Crispin Thurlow, “Naming the ‘Outsider Within’: Homophobic Pejoratives and the Verbal Abuse of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual High-School Pupils,” *Journal of Adolescence* 24, no. 1 (February 2001): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2000.0371>; Jonathan Charlesworth, *That's So Gay: Challenging Homophobic Bullying* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 28.

In *Geography Club*, it is noted that on the way to school, the homophobic jock Jarred Gasner is staring with a “funny and [c]old almost” expression at Russel who, although facing rumors of his homosexuality, remains closeted.²² Russel is met with the threatening query, “Is it true? [...] That you’re a fag.”²³ In the boys’ locker room, the same homophobic epithet is used by the closeted Kevin towards Russel, when the former yells out “Middlebrook! [...] You are such a fag!”²⁴ In *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*, similar homophobic instances are also shown to occur. Jacob taunts Erik upon his walking through the school parking lot. The bully alongside his friends calls out: “Prince Faggot.”²⁵ In the school’s hallways, Jacob shouts the word “Faggot!” at the gay protagonist, and, in the gym locker room, his aversion to Erik is openly declared, “I hate fags.”²⁶ Again and again, in *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year*, Jacob and his buddies attempt to kick Erik and Mark out of the Junior Prom, screaming at the gay couple: “Faggots! Fucking faggots ruining *our* prom! [...] Who let these queers in here? Let’s throw them out! [italics in original]”²⁷ At first glance, most of the instances detailed above seem to simply depict the pervasiveness of anti-gay remarks within the spaces that the gay characters must pass through in their day-to-day movements. However, I argue that the pervasiveness of this verbal bullying actually functions as the vital clue that points to the manifestation of institutional homophobia.

To discern how the employment of homo-negative terms can represent institutional homophobia, one must take a closer look at the above examples. Upon close consideration, it becomes clear that the “fag” slurs are alarmingly prevalent yet there fails to be any intervention from either of the schools. No school administrators or teachers are presented as addressing the harassment, regardless of the violence being enacted in enclosed spaces

22. Brent Hartinger, *Geography Club* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 192.

23. Hartinger, 192.

24. Hartinger, 5.

25. Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High*, 2004, 13.

26. Wallace, 46.

27. Kim Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year at Foresthill High* (Sacramento, CA: Foglight Press, 2006), 160.

(the boys' gym-locker rooms) or in the more open sites (the parking lot and hallways).²⁸ The latter is especially interesting due to these being spaces in which such abuse can be easily viewed. The prevalence of unchallenged homophobic violence calls into question how schools – which, according to Ronald G. Morrow and Diane L. Gill, have a direct responsibility to provide a safe space, create an inclusive atmosphere, and combat homophobia in protecting the physical and mental wellbeing of all students – could abandon the gay students and leave them to cope alone with their situations.²⁹ Here, one might conclude that a form of institutional homophobia (macro-level bigotry) exists in such establishments. Furthermore, and in building upon this conclusion, it is highly likely that this macro-level bigotry contributes to the school bullies' free use of homo-negative language (micro-level bigotry) across the school spaces.

It is my contention that Hartinger and Wallace draw on their direct experiences with regard to young adult non-heterosexual teenagers (via their outreach work) in the composition of their fictions. I make this assertion based upon two premises. In the first instance, Hartinger and Wallace's books might well be described as so-called "problem fiction." Christine A. Jenkins and Pam B. Cole, specialists in young adult literature, describe problem fiction as novels that often highlight contemporary issues encountered by teenagers. The plots, settings, language, and characters portrayed in problem fiction actually exist in real life. In this sense, problem fiction is considered to be a literary genre that closely mirrors reality.³⁰ Secondly, both Hartinger and Wallace make the case that their

28. In most adolescent novels, the adult characters are usually absent, with this allowing the teenage characters to experience the outside world by themselves as part of their coming-of-age. However, in the selected primary texts, the absence of adults – in particular, any school authority figures – is purposely employed by both authors to show that these adult characters may also be homophobic or contribute to the homophobic bullying among the students due to their negligence in preventing the prevailing and virulent practice that is evidently occurring within the schools. Hartinger states on his official website that he intends to present the school as becoming a "pressure-cooker" for the homosexual students. See Brent Hartinger, "Geography Club Discussion Guide," *Welcome to Brent's Brain: Home of Writer Brent Hartinger* (blog), November 16, 2009, <http://brenthartinger.com/2009/11/16/geography-club-discussion-guide/>.

29. Ronald G. Morrow and Diane L. Gill, "Perceptions of Homophobia and Heterosexism in Physical Education," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 74, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2003.10609082>.

30. Jenkins, "Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969-92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance," 101; Pam B. Cole, *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2009), 49.

works are indeed a reflection of the actual homophobic violence that occurs in real American high schools. As Hartinger reveals, *Geography Club* is based on his own experiences in learning that homosexual students were being victimized in schools and research he gathered as a co-founder of Oasis. Therefore, he embeds both homophobia and the formation of a mutual support group within his novel.³¹ Similarly, Wallace demonstrates that the representations of homophobic bullying found in her works are the result of her witnessing “disenfranchise[d]” non-heterosexual students in the schools in which she had worked.³² Her novels echo actual incidents that occur in American high schools. It seems therefore apposite to draw on empirical studies of homosexual young adult experiences and those experiences within certain social spaces.

In their research on homophobia in U.S. high schools, Annemarie Vaccaro, Gerri August, and Megan S. Kennedy propose an intriguing argument with regard to the prevalence of fag slurs in schools—namely that anti-gay language in this context does not occur in a vacuum.³³ The schools themselves contribute, at least to some extent, to its occurrence. One way in which schools can foster such homophobic violence is with the physical space being made heterosexual by default. Vaccaro et al observe that, in the majority of American high schools, “spaces are never neutral.”³⁴ Their spatial physical design and allocation are, more often than not, undertaken with the schools’ priorities given over to the heterosexual students. This is, in part, because the heterosexuals are the predominant population within the educational settings and are thus the demographic who will use the space most. To put it simply, this management of space has arisen for the benefit of the majority, and in part because schools assume that sexual minorities can share the heterosexualized spaces including the facilities without conflict. With this in mind, the

31. Cynthia Leitich Smith, “The Story Behind the Story: Brent Hartinger on *Geography Club*,” Cynthia Leitich Smith: Official Author Site and Home of Children’s & YA Lit Resources, February 8, 2017, <http://cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit-resources/read/authors/stories-behind/storyhartinger/> and; Kimberly Pauley, “Hartinger, Brent,” *GLBTQ Encyclopedia* (glbtq, Inc., 2015), http://www.glbtqarchive.com/literature/hartinger_b_L.pdf.

32. Bradford, “Kim Wallace: Educator, Author, Advocate – GLBT Reviews.”

33. Annemarie Vaccaro, Gerri August, and Megan S. Kennedy, *Safe Spaces: Making Schools and Communities Welcoming to LGBT Youth* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 101–2.

34. Vaccaro, August, and Kennedy, 115.

default heterosexualization of space can be easily seen in the binary gender-segregated (male/female) locker rooms or similar facilities such as bathrooms and toilets.

Vaccaro et al argue further that space has power to “shape” students’ attitudes and behaviors. It can promote alliances among them and can instigate conflicts, depending largely on how the physical space is designed and allocated. The researchers add that the heterosexualization of the school space where the notion of heterosexism is dominant inevitably provokes a sense of hostility between the majority non-gay students and their gay minority counterparts. It forms the misconception among the student body that being straight is welcomed whereas being gay is unwanted in the school. This is an anti-gay message tacitly given by the schools to their students. It leads to the students’ deployment of verbal homophobic language and other forms of homophobic bullying against sexual minorities. Furthermore, the bullies could assume the school’s heterosexualization of the space offers them “permission” to commit violence. The researchers thereby suggest that every school ought to provide unisex facilities. Their call for gender-neutral facilities is considered a way to prevent further homophobic bullying and to help non-heterosexual students feel safer and more included.³⁵

Within the Robert L. Goodkind and Forest Hill High Schools, the prevalence of anti-gay remarks can be read as an index of the heterosexualized school space (as seen in the research of Vaccaro et al.) Namely, by depicting the use of fag slurs throughout the school terrain – in the private enclosed location (the boys’ gym locker room) or in the open communal areas (the school café and the parking lot) – Hartinger and Wallace point to the issue of the heterosexualized school space, presenting it as a manifestation of macro-leveled homophobia. This is due to the fact that such a heterosexualization of the space has potentially corruptive power to form any prevalent homophobic attitudes of the students and to contribute to their anti-gay aggressive behaviors. To elaborate more upon macro-level bigotry, I will focus upon the private enclosed place of the boys’ gym locker room. The room is consistently portrayed in both novels as the epitome of the heterosexualized school space where homophobic harassments are likely to occur. In addition to the locker

35. Vaccaro, August, and Kennedy, 115–17.

room, other shared places – the school cafeteria (as presented in *Geography Club*) and the parking lot (as depicted in *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*) – will be analyzed, too. This is to re-confirm that the heterosexualization of spaces applies to the entire school, making it an absolute heterosexual terrain of power and thus leaving the homosexual students with no safe places.

The Locker Room as the “Inner Sanctum” and as the “Battle Zone”

In both Hartinger and Wallace’s works, the manifestation of institutional homophobia is epitomized by the boys’ gym locker room. The male locker room is, as can be inferred from the given context, a confined space, perhaps with a zigzag entryway so that people cannot look directly into the area from outside.³⁶ It is also situated in a location where people rarely congregate and where few (or no) patrols are undertaken by teachers.³⁷ This is to provide the boys with a sense of privacy and comfort as they are required to change their clothes or even to undress fully in front of their peers and to shower after P.E. classes.³⁸ Such gender-segregated locker rooms which respond only to the male/female division of gender are dismissed (or merely unconsidered) by the adult authority characters as having a powerful influence upon the forming of homophobic attitudes among the students. These adults seem blind to the ways in which the segregated spaces enclose and

36. In Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson’s “Boys, Gyms, Locker Rooms and Heterotopia,” the authors observe the general shapes of US high school locker rooms. Their descriptions concur with those of Hartinger and Wallace. See more details from Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson, “Boys, Gyms, Locker Rooms and Heterotopia,” in *Boys’ Bodies: Speaking the Unspoken*, ed. Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson, Adolescent Cultures, School and Society (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 77.

37. Keith Sullivan, *The Anti-Bullying Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2011), 127.

38. Vaccaro, August, and Kennedy, *Safe Spaces*, 116. In *Geography Club* and *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*, detailed descriptions of the locker room in terms of its confined physical layout, isolated location, and lack of regular supervisions are not given. Still, the respective authors include several hints as to the locker room possessing these features. For instance, Hartinger creates the locker room in *Geography Club* as having a “[soldier] camp”- like atmosphere. The straight boys, raging with testosterone, walk around naked and care-free, use banter, and aim homophobic jokes towards one another. Thus, it is highly possible that the male locker room is an enclosed, private, restricted male zone – namely on it being situated in an area where there are few people who pass by with little or no monitoring by teachers. This consequently allows the boys to blatantly express their uncontrolled behaviors. In a similar fashion to Hartinger, Wallace characterizes Isabelle, a lesbian character in her *Erik and Isabelle: Freshman Year*, to be a strong person who acts as if she were Erik’s personal bodyguard. Isabelle, at one point in the narrative, stands at the front door of the male locker room and listens to what happens inside while Erik is changing his clothes. Isabelle’s actions reveal that the locker room in this fictional school is no different from that presented in Hartinger’s book, primarily in it being located away from a congested area and without frequent supervision from teachers.

protect power dynamics – in this instance, the boys’ locker rooms offer a safe space for heterosexual, macho, male students. But they are places of persecution for those who fall outside of this identity.

The space of the locker room is a boundary. It encloses but it also excludes. It keeps those within it safe, but only if they fit the criteria of the dominant social group. Someone who does not fit is deemed a transgressor, a deviant, a threat. He threatens to “taint” the space or “infect” it and therefore is subjected to verbal and/or physical attacks as well as ostracization. In this way, expressive aggression can arise from students towards their perceived or actual non-straight school peers who transgress the heterosexual boundary. Worse, whenever homophobic bullying takes place, it is the locker room’s typical features – enclosed layout, remote setting within the school grounds, or the absence (or intermittent appearance) of teachers – that is positioned by the adult characters as posing a real threat to the physical safety of non-heterosexual students or in making the room a location prone to homophobic violence. In short, the heterosexualization of the locker rooms is not necessarily conducive to anti-gay violence, but rather the common physical features of this kind of space hides such aggressive behavior.

One example of this can be seen in the check-up question – “Everything okay *in there* [italics mine]?” – as Coach Brewer, a P.E. teacher in Foresthill High School, asks Erik after noting some seemingly untoward behavior involving Jacob and his cronies encircling the gay student. Here, the prepositional phrase “in there” hints that it is the enclosed configuration of the room that Coach Brewer suspects as the factor that leads to the harassment. The teacher makes a lazy enquiry and no effort to follow up, thereby not really helping. It is simply a general assumption that most people, if in the same situation, might automatically make. The bullies take advantage of the confined locker room space to wait in ambush for their targeted gay victim. In both narratives, the heterosexualized gym locker room fails to be questioned by the teachers about its underlying corruptive power.

Neither is this point considered by figures with more authority (such as the school principals) in regard to making radical structural changes.³⁹

That Hartinger and Wallace present the above-mentioned typical features of the locker room as being used by the adult characters to explain homophobic violence and bullying should not be construed as the authors seeing no other factors at work here. The P.E. teacher responds hastily, taking the easy decision not to intervene; and, of course, the locker room's enclosed layout contributes to the occurrence of homophobic violence. Indeed, it is mentioned later in the narrative that the bully gang deliberately use the confined gym locker room to lie in wait for Erik. Nevertheless, I propose that Hartinger and Wallace go beyond those basic features of the locker room and invoke the paradoxical characteristics of the room – as both an “inner sanctum” and a “battle zone.”⁴⁰ It is this duality that arises from the space being heterosexualized. The narratives demonstrate how, in being embedded with these characteristics, the male gym locker room shapes, to a considerable extent, hostile attitudes towards non-straight students, homosexuality, and perceived homosexuality. The space also propels the students to physically demonstrate their aversion to homosexuality through verbal and/or physical aggressions.

The first characteristic of the male locker room, in acting as an “inner sanctum” for students, is solely pertinent to the hegemonic heterosexual characters, in particular, those who are the school jocks. Both the gender segregation and absence of adults allow these boys to enjoy a relative freedom to act in whichever way they like without fearing punishment from teachers. Physical and verbal acts – such as showing off their bare muscular bodies, performing gay imitations (sashaying), and the blatant use of sexual banter, innuendoes, jokes, or even “fag” slurs – are found to be prevalent in this private space. It is true that this “inner sanctum,” where such activities are allowed to be undertaken overtly, manifests in a way in which students can build up a closer male peer

39. One radical change that Vaccaro et al have suggested in their research is a provision of unisex facilities. In both novels, almost all of the adult characters are presented as simply being bystanders. They have acknowledged the homophobic violence occurred to the gay students but have never initiated any preventative measures to prevent or solve the issue.

40. Brent Hartinger, *Geography Club* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 1 and; Brent Hartinger, “Geography Club Discussion Guide,” *Welcome to Brent's Brain: Home of Writer Brent Hartinger* (blog), November 16, 2009, <http://brenthartinger.com/2009/11/16/geography-club-discussion-guide/>.

group.⁴¹ However, it is also true that the locker room fosters hostility towards homosexuals and homosexuality. In the testosterone-fuelled setting, all users – be they straight or gay – learn that their masculinity is kept under the constant surveillance of their peers. The boys then try to demonstrate, in a boastful manner, how virile they are through the above-mentioned performances, activities that are held to be both identifiable markers of masculinity and homophobic. This aims to re-confirm their masculinity so that they gain full acceptance from their school peers, thus witnessing them “measuring up” and completely “fitting in” within the heterosexual male space provided by the school.

In this sense, all of the students, aside from absorbing the idea that the use of the male locker room allows a social affirmation of their normative masculinity, perceive this space as being a heterosexual sanctum inaccessible to gay students. The students marginalized in the wider sphere due to their sexuality are thus positioned as being unable to enter the locker room. In addition, should they choose to ignore this ostracization, their infiltration of the male “inner sanctum” is taken as an attempt to steal a glance at the nude bodies of the straight boys inside and to possibly solicit sexual flavors – motivations that are considered to be harmful to the privacy and safety of the locker room’s users. Therefore, it follows this understanding that any aggressive behaviors that can maintain or restore the state of the space as a heterosexual male inner sanctum must be enacted. It is through this route and these modes of thinking that homophobia gradually develops across the student body within the novels.

To elaborate more upon the notion of the male locker room as an “inner sanctum” for the dominant heterosexual students and how this structure contains destructive power in shaping the homophobic attitudes of its users, the different perspectives of Russel (the gay character in *Geography Club*) and of Jacob (the straight homophobic bully in *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*) are ripe for exploration. Russel, for example, is made to witness

41. Jonathan Salisbury makes a similar point. He notes that “Locker rooms, changing rooms, showers, team baths, pavilions are all male sanctuaries. They [promote] sense of manly bonding (often expressed through horse play, dirty jokes and banter) [which] is produced through the segregation from and exclusion of women and girls. There is often a hearty guffawing, male camaraderie in such places that reveal in sexist sniggers and innuendoes and keep some boys’ spirits up through the false bravado of the pack.” See Jonathan Salisbury, *Challenging Macho Values: Ways of Working with Boys in Secondary Schools*, 1996th; repr. ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 207.

the extreme self-indulgences of his school's heterosexual jocks with envy in the locker room scene. He finds that the jocks do not quickly get dressed after showering and instead "swagger" around the room.⁴² Some of them even "waltz[...] around in just their jockstraps" with remarkable confidence and ease, as if the models in the "Abercrombie & Fitch underwear ads [were] com[ing] to life."⁴³ In contrast, Russel admits to himself that he feels extreme discomfort and is "eager to get dressed and get the hell out of [the room]."⁴⁴ These contrastive descriptions indicate that the male locker room is indeed the "inner sanctum" of the sexual majorities as it provides them with the utmost sense of inclusiveness, comfort, privacy, and safety – all of which are aspects that have never been felt, even slightly, by the gay protagonist. The jocks show no embarrassment despite being almost completely naked in front of their peers. The evocation of the models from the "Abercrombie & Fitch underwear ads" also demonstrates that the jocks attempt to show off their bare muscular bodies, exhibiting a corporeality that they perceive to be a marker of their virile masculinity. Their macho posturing is facilitated by their comfort in the heterosexualized male-dominant space. Simply put, the space has power to exacerbate the sense of hyper masculinity shared by the boys, with this developing further into homophobia in this novel.

The homophobia developed among the students in the male locker room can be most easily seen in the use of fag slurs which are aimed at both the perceived and actual gay school peers who share the facility. In regard to the deployment of homophobic remarks detailed in the beginning of this section, it is noticeable that Kevin shouts at Russel, "Middlebrook! [...] You're such a fag!" directly after Russel playfully performs a gay imitation while using the locker room.⁴⁵ Russel "bend[s] over halfway, stick[s] [his] rear out in [Kevin's] direction, and squirm[s] back and forth" in response to Kevin's joke about him having a "[n]ice ass [...]," humor that makes the other jocks standing nearby

42. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 109, 2–3.

43. Hartinger, 146.

44. Hartinger, 2.

45. Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High*, 2004, 46.

burst into wild laughter.⁴⁶ Kevin's use of the gay derogatory term is ostensibly an innocuous act or is perceived to be a playful banter employed among the boys. However, I read this as a manifestation of his developed homophobia. Kevin, like the other boys whose anti-gay behavior is shaped by the hyper-masculine space, feels that any un-masculine performance (even if produced for play) warrants a derisive insult, especially if it is undertaken in a school-designated male "inner sanctum" such as the locker room.

The locker room acting as an "inner sanctum" for the straight characters and as a space that directly contributes to homophobic behavior among the student body is also strongly emphasized in *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*. Jacob is deployed as an exemplar of the way in which assumptions about heterosexualized space can shape an individual's attitudes. Jacob is presented as reacting angrily to Erik's transgression into the heterosexual male zone; he blatantly expresses his aversion to Erik and states that it is "[b]ecause you're a *flaming queer*. That's why I hate fags. I don't want you in this locker room *checking all of us out* [*italics mine*]." ⁴⁷ Jacob's utterance of the words "flaming queer," alongside his reiteration as to why he hates seeing his gay peer sharing the locker room, suggests the influence of the heterosexualized space upon the homophobic bully. Jacob has absorbed the idea that the male locker room is entirely preserved for those who are straight, male, and macho. The trespassing committed by Erik who is both gay and who has a "soft" demeanor (in Jacob's term, is a "flaming queer") thus seriously disrupts the purity or sacredness of the school's designated heterosexual male "inner sanctum." Moreover, Jacob's statement of "I don't want you in this locker room checking all of us out" brings to the fore the myth regarding gay students who share the room as being sexual predators. Jacob's sense of comfort, safety and privacy in this sanctum is thereby threatened at this juncture, resulting in him physically harming his school peer when he steps into the room.

While the locker room is the "inner sanctum" for the dominant heterosexual students, it becomes a frightening "battle zone" for the sexual minorities. Even worse, this space has contributed to the homophobic attitudes and behaviors demonstrated among

46. Wallace, 46.

47. Wallace, 46.

these gay students. In depicting the male locker room as being a “battle zone,” military related terminology is extensively employed. This is evident in Russel’s vivid descriptions of the room in the opening of *Geography Club*.

I WAS DEEP BEHIND *ENEMY LINES*, in the very heart of the opposing *camp*. My *adversaries* were all around me. [...] The *enemy* would not take kindly to my *infiltration* of their ranks, especially not here, in their inner sanctum. [...] I feel like the boys’ locker room after third period P.E. was *enemy territory* – that the other guys in my class were *rival soldiers* in some *warlike* struggle for domination ... [lower case italics mine].⁴⁸

As with Russel, the gym locker room is a “battle zone” for Erik. This can be inferred from the gay protagonist’s extremely careful preparations for any sudden attacks from Jacob’s gang. Erik, for example, “watch[es] for” the bullies who might lie in wait at a hidden corner inside the room and “change[s] [his] clothes near the door.”⁴⁹ Both examples show that the room has a warlike atmosphere. It is permeated with a strong sense of antagonism between its straight and gay users. The former have fiercely guarded their territory in an attempt to prevent any homosexual students from intruding into this “inner sanctum,” whereas the latter are forced (by the lack of gender neutral facilities which would question heteronormative ideals and provide more choice for all students) to step over the threshold and to utilize these facilities. In such a rivalry for space, both authors give repetitive hints to the reader that it is the homosexual students who are doomed to face a crushing defeat. This is because the gay students are far outnumbered by the homophobic bullies. Russel is, for example, depicted as having “adversaries [...] all around [him]” and Erik is “circle[d]” by Jacob and his cronies. More alarmingly, Erik is represented as being forced to fight alone against those who wish to threaten him. His foes appear to be merciless savage beasts. The image of a ferocious animal pack here also indicates that the bullies’ physical harassments can be brutal or even fatal. In this regard, there is no chance for any gay transgressors to survive their attacks in the locker room and this can thus manifest, literally, as a bloody “battle zone.”

48. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 1–2.

49. Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High*, 2004, 25.

Undoubtedly, the looming disastrous consequences of being physically harmed in the heterosexual male domain frightens the gay characters. These bullies place considerable pressure upon the marginalized demographic of the school, thereby forcing them to deploy any means through which to survive, regardless of whether these be the homophobic acts either deliberately inflicted upon themselves (to trick other users into believing that they are straight) or that are enacted upon other non-straight school peers. I contend that such deeds, to a great extent, reveal their homophobia that has been influenced and developed via the gender-segregated locker room. In terms of the self-inflicted homophobic acts, *Geography Club* provides a good example of this through Russel's imitation of gay performance (by "squirming" his rear towards Kevin). Such a performance is undertaken to deceive other jocks into thinking that he is heterosexual, yet it also produces a mockery of effeminate gay men. Another more striking example is Erik's deployment of negative stereotypes about lesbians in an attempt to diminish Isabelle's honor. The homophobic act deployed against a mutual member of the homosexual community occurs when Erik is cornered by Jacob's gang in the locker room. Here, the gay protagonist, instead of shouting for help, "betray[s]" his closest friend who, in the prior scene (the parking lot), defends him from Jacob's homophobic epithet of "fairy."⁵⁰ Isabelle, feeling irritated by such unrelenting bullying, gives her tormentors a quick and sharp retort – "Erik's more of a man than any of you anal retentive repressed homophobes."⁵¹ Notwithstanding the "fight back for [Erik]," the locker room scene depicts Isabelle being betrayed.⁵² Erik engages Jacob in conversation, telling him not to "pay any attention to what she says. Nobody takes her seriously," thereby condemning her as "crazy."⁵³

In such a "lose-lose" situation, Erik's derision of Isabelle is an understandable act, namely as the narrator reasons that it was done "in favor of his safety."⁵⁴ Erik attempts to calm Jacob in the hope that the bully will not harm him. Yet, in my reading, it is

50. Wallace, 14.

51. Wallace, 14.

52. Wallace, 15.

53. Wallace, 28.

54. Wallace, 28.

undeniable that such disparagement as inflicted upon the lesbian character reveals that Erik has adopted the homophobic rituals of the male locker room. In the locker room, homophobia is not just fully accepted but also promoted. Here, as David Plummer has observed, insulting against atypical gender identities and behaviors (as includes, but is not limited to gay males), is a proclamation of the user's status a straight male rather than being a *fag* or as having a pro-LGBTQ stance.⁵⁵ In doing so, the boys feel more included or safe, even if they are gay yet closeted, from becoming a target of homophobic bullying. This is because such anti-gay behavior is a way to "pass as straight" as has been noted by Sue Sattel, Melissa Keyes, and Pat Tupper.⁵⁶ Erik is no exception. Having been forced to use the rigidly gender-segregated locker room, he is shown to have acquired its homophobic practices. His speaking disparagingly of Isabelle, no matter for what purpose, is clearly a deployment of negative stereotypes about lesbians (i.e., that they are all butch and gruff). However, these stereotypes sharply contradict the portrayal of Isabelle as a multi-faceted character. Indeed, in the novel, she is romantic, creative, and possesses many socially-accepted feminine traits (such as being good at cooking and handicraft skills). All of these have long been acknowledged by Erik but yet are completely ignored. Erik who has always been the abused gay student in this instance becomes compliant with the homophobic abuser.

As I have demonstrated so far, the narratives feature the boys' gym locker rooms as paradoxically both an "inner sanctum" and a "war zone." These characteristics are instigated by the room being made heterosexual. Such heterosexualization has an immense power in shaping the homophobic attitudes among the student body. The space is constructed as embracing only those whose gender identities and behaviors correspond with the applied heterosexism of the place (i.e. straight, macho, male students). Through this, the users have learned that homophobic violence (verbal, physical, or both) against

55. David Plummer, *One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia, and Modern Manhood*, Haworth Gay & Lesbian Studies (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999), 243–44.

56. Sue Sattel, Melissa Keyes, and Pat Tupper, "Sexual Harassment and Sexual Orientation: The Coaches' Corner," in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*, ed. James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams (Columbia University Press, 1997), 234.

their homosexual school peers and even against other mutual non-heterosexual community members is acceptable and a requirement to make themselves acceptable to other users.

The Heterosexualized School Cafeteria and the Parking Lot

In addition to the private enclosed locker rooms, both narratives further reveal that other shared places – the school cafeteria (in *Geography Club*) and the parking lot (in *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*) – which are supposed to be gender-neutral and accessible to everyone are also made overtly heterosexual. Both spaces are predominantly occupied by the actually straight and those perceived-to-be straight students. These students are allowed to privatize, take control of, and even exploit both communal places for homophobic bullying without interference from any school staff. In each book, the techniques to present this institutional homophobia are remarkably different. Hartinger employs the metaphors of “countries” and “citizens” to show how respective lunch tables are claimed by different school clique/club members. Contrastingly, Wallace illustrates the opposite positions (top versus bottom) between the heterosexual homophobic characters and their gay victims, namely the former occupy a truck in the parking lot whereas the latter encroach upon this space. I invoke both cases for analysis here as these heterosexualized communal places strongly imply that the entire school space is a heterosexual terrain of power. This means that there is no positive space provided for the homosexual students to be physically and psychologically safe.

The heterosexualized school cafeteria as featured in *Geography Club* is unveiled through Russel’s detailed observation as to how the lunch tables are occupied by different school clique/club members. Students, by sitting together at the same tables every day, claim this communal space (and its facilities) as their private area where they enjoy socializing among themselves and peer solidarity. The tables are thus named after these clique/club members, reflecting their activities and their interests. Russel provides a list: the “Cheerleaders,” the “Druggies,” the “Girl [and Boy] Jocks,” the “Theater Crowd,” the “Lefty Radicals,” the “Christians,” the “Orchestra Members,” the “Computer Geeks,” and the “Nerdy Intellectuals.”⁵⁷ In addition, the lunch tables function as the physical

57. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 8.

demarcations between each student group as no one sits down together or, in Russel's words, "cross[es the borders] at will."⁵⁸ By virtue of this, the tables are metaphorized as being the different "countries" and the clique/club members thus their "citizens."⁵⁹ From the descriptions of the lunch room, Russel seems to show that the lack of "neutral territory" in this shared space is simply due to it being occupied by the students from different cliques/clubs.⁶⁰ However, I argue that if one drills deeper down into these details in particular with regard to who claims the lunch tables, it can be interpreted that Russel is attempting to point to the cafeteria space as actually being made heterosexual. In other words, Russel is insinuating that a lack of positive space exists for the gay students in his school.

To demonstrate, it is remarkable that among the clique/club members detailed as being cafeteria space occupiers, none is represented as undertaking activities relating to and sharing interests related to the culture of homosexuality. This includes the students carrying out LGBTQ activism to challenge homophobia that has prevailed in their school. Even the Lefty Radicals are later shown to hold prejudices against homosexuality and homosexuals. Their intolerance is divulged by Ike, a closeted gay member of this group who laments that "[e]ven if they say they're radical[,] [t]hey're not radical about it [homosexuality]. Not when they're in high school."⁶¹ At this point, because the clique/club members neither undertake LGBTQ-related activities nor show an interest in such subjects, they are thus perceived as heterosexual. And, due to the gender identities of those who occupy such spaces, it can be further inferred that it is only the sexual majorities who are eligible to claim the lunchroom space and to use its facilities. It can therefore be stated that the cafeteria is a heterosexualized place, whereupon it is allocated to those who are (or appear to be) straight.

The list of space occupiers given by Russel confirms the cafeteria as a heterosexualized space. One can also notice that, in the users listed, no homosexual

58. Hartinger, 54.

59. Hartinger, 54.

60. Hartinger, 54.

61. Hartinger, 39.

characters appear to claim a lunch table, despite that such figures are “birds of a feather” who share an interest in LGBTQ issues and who would want to socialize with their peer group in this public place like the heterosexual clique/club members do.⁶² Such an absence of homosexual characters suggests that the cafeteria is reserved for the sexual majorities; in other words, it is unwelcoming to homosexual students. This is made evident by the fact that these students are depicted as having to mingle with other clique/club members. For instance, Russel and Min sit with Gunnar at the “Intellectual” table, while Ike is with the “Lefty Radicals,” Terese joins the “Girl Jocks,” and Kevin sits at the “Boy Jocks” table. While the homosexual characters join their friends within these cliques/clubs as they share similar interests, it is undeniable that their behavior and choices conceal their homosexual orientation. Their blending in with other clique/club members – the perceived heterosexual space occupiers – makes them appear to be straight. This wards off suspicion of their being thought gay, an outcome which shields them from being bullied. From my discussion, it can be stated that the cafeteria (which is supposed to be free from any kind of discrimination) is made heterosexual. Here, sexual majorities are welcomed and even allowed to privatize this communal space by claiming the shared facilities as their own occupied terrain. However, the homosexual students cannot do the same, merely sit together or socialize openly in the cafeteria. Instead, they are forced into the closet.

Similar to the lunch tables which are all claimed by the heterosexual students, the parking lot in Wallace’s *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year* is taken by Jacob and his cronies as their private territory. This shared space is not used for its intended purpose but exploited by these characters for stationing their pack of homophobes to attack Erik and Isabelle.⁶³ In this scene, the gang of bullies is shown as having “pil[ed] in the back of a jack-up truck” to lob fag slurs at Erik and Isabelle who “walked between the parked cars in the Junior lot.”⁶⁴ Here, it is obvious that Wallace places two parties in opposing positions (top versus bottom). The heterosexual characters are in a higher position than their

62. Hartinger, 52.

63. Kim Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* (Sacramento, CA: Foglight Press, 2004), 102.

64. Wallace, 13.

homosexual school peers, thus indicating a power imbalance. Their upper position is also made more prominent in terms of the elevated “jack-up truck” upon which they sit (a truck with lifted suspension and big wheels so that the body is far off the ground).⁶⁵ This portrayal of the heterosexual students being in the elevated position can be construed as a marker of their privileged social status due to their being straight, the hegemonic group that the educational institution gives priority to. This sharply contrasts with their homosexual counterparts who are on foot, suggesting that they are in the lower social hierarchy – the subpopulation that the school ignores. This connotative meaning, drawn from the position of the two parties, evokes what Vaccaro et al have already stated: in heteronormative schools, schools prioritize the sexual majority through the allocation of space. In this sense, it can be inferred that the parking lot, as presented in Wallace’s novel, could be one of the places allocated to the heterosexual students. That is why Jacob and his friends, the heterosexual students held as being the privileged demographic in the school, can use, claim, or privatize the parking lot. Simply put, these heterosexual characters can take control of this shared space because it was allocated to them in the first place.

Through the representation of the communal places – the cafeteria and the parking lot – which are made heterosexual, both narratives imply that the heterosexualization of space is applied throughout the school areas. By doing so, the schools do not just stress that it is only the sexual majority who are eligible for using the spaces, but also tacitly insinuates that they are allowed to take control of the schools’ communal areas, with little or no inference from the institution. Such implied permission from the schools, in both instances, leads to the shared spaces being exploited for committing homophobic violence. Hartinger and Wallace raise concerns over this issue, demonstrating in their novels that the communal spaces which are claimed by the heterosexual students greatly empower them, especially those who are homophobic, to inflict anti-gay bullying upon their homosexual school peers. To elaborate this point, further analysis can be provided in regard to the “countries” and “citizens” metaphors *and* the merciless bullying of Brian by the heterosexual school jocks Jarred, Nate, and Brent which is described by Michael Brown as

65. “Urban Dictionary: Lifted Truck,” Urban Dictionary, accessed September 13, 2018, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Lifted%20truck>.

one of the most “abject” scenes in *Geography Club*.⁶⁶ Also, the contrastive placement of the heterosexual characters (Jacob and his friends) and the homosexual characters (Erik and Isabelle) as employed in Wallace’s novel is analyzed too.

One way of approaching space and territory in *Geography Club* is to consider the notions of “countries” and “citizens.” For instance, each table represents a “country” and those who sit at it are the “citizens.” The spaces in between are often perilous to those who dare to step across them. Interestingly, “citizenship” – which connotes a physical protection and sense of belonging – is predominantly given to those who are straight. There is no “country” for the homosexual students to call their own. Jarred, Nate, and Brent (school jocks) are presented as committing blatant violence in the cafeteria without fear of being punished. The jocks make fun of Brian who usually sits alone in a corner of the cafeteria (“exiled”) by “wrapp[ing] a bra tightly around his chest, then smear[ing] lipstick and rouge all over his face.”⁶⁷ Notably, at the time of Brian being humiliated, these homophobic perpetrators gain physical protection from their “country” (Boy Jocks table), with the zone of heterosexuals and of athletes residing at the top of the social hierarchy within the school. The table marks a clear physical boundary that identifies their domain of power. It is thus a visual warning for other cafeteria users not to transgress (literally) into this land and not to interfere with their harassment (figuratively).

In addition to the physical protection gained, their occupied area provides them with a sense of belonging. These homophobes receive considerable cheers from the rest of the jocks, other clique/club members sitting at nearby tables, and even a cafeteria patroller. Almost all of the students laugh at Brian as if they were “bursting a gut” while the lunch room monitor “smil[es] a little.”⁶⁸ These responses not only indicate their participation in such bullying, but also their active support of the jocks. As such, it is unsurprising that the scene concludes with the picture of these jocks walking in a “cockier swagger than usual,”

66. Michael Brown, “A Geographer Reads *Geography Club*: Spatial Metaphor and Metonym in Textual/Sexual Space,” *Cultural Geographies* 13, no. 3 (July 1, 2006): 320, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474006eu362oa>.

67. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 54, 182.

68. Hartinger, 182.

a gesture which demonstrates their confidence, pride, and peer acceptance (both from the athlete crowd and other homophobic supporters).⁶⁹

The occupation of space that empowers the heterosexual students in their violence is similar to the homophobic bullying which Jacob and his friends inflict upon Erik and Isabelle. Wallace's novel demonstrates that it is their occupied territory of the parking lot which provides the pack of homophobes both physical and psychological protection. It supports them in their attack upon Erik and Isabelle. To explain, as the homophobes are on the "jacked-up truck" in the school Junior lot, it is obvious that they are at advantage. The area in which the vehicle is parked is the territory of their pack and the lifted truck gives them the upper hand over their designated victims because, with its elevated body, the perpetrators are in the higher and safer position. This enables them to assault Erik and Isabelle immediately upon their stepping into the parking lot. Again, like the homophobic jocks who are presented as gaining cheers from their clique, Jacob as being the leader is backed up by his pack. One of the tormentors, in response to Jacob's calling Erik "Prince Faggot" and Isabelle "Princess Dyke," chimes in with the bully, saying "No, dude, it goes the other way round," invoking roars from the rest of the homophobes. Indeed, due to such participation from his peers, Jacob swells with pride and continues to pester Erik and Isabelle.

From this discussion of both the cafeteria and the parking lot as heterosexualized spaces, it is clear that sexual majorities are put in charge of these spaces. They can claim communal areas and, more significantly, exploit them for homophobic bullying. Their occupied territories provide them physical protection and a sense of belonging (or support from peers within the same boundaries). Such an assumption of power confirms their privilege as the sexual majorities and, of course, their eligibility for using the spaces (and shared facilities). It makes them feel that it is acceptable to bully any homosexual student, the disenfranchised who the schools, in their allocation and management of spaces, have never taken into account. Moreover, these two scenes, if read together with that of the gym locker room, indeed offer confirmation of the destructive power of the heterosexualized

69. Hartinger, 183.

school space as a manifestation of institutional homophobia. The examples provided throughout amply demonstrate the deeply embedded institutional discrimination within both Robert L. Goodkind High School and Foresthill High School. In this regard, the sexual minorities find it difficult (or perhaps impossible) to live as openly gay because the homophobes continue to enact their anti-gay violence throughout the heterosexual domains of power within the schools.

The Formation of the Mutual Support Group

Hartinger and Wallace's novels feature the schools as being imbued with homophobia which manifests at both interpersonal and institutional levels, but the narratives do not leave the issue unresolved. The texts instead proffer a strategy – the formation (and joining) of a mutual support group – to deal with homophobia. This strategy mainly involves radically eroding the macro-level bigotry due to it being a key contributing factor in the prevalence of interpersonal homophobia, i.e. verbal and physical harassment as directly inflicted upon the non-heterosexual student characters. I contend that the formation of a mutual support group is a means whereby collective force is made use of because the homosexual characters and their allies, each of whom is represented as an agent to exercise power, act in cooperation to tackle homophobia. Through this, a joint power is formed, enabling them to infiltrate the school's heterosexual space of power, to disrupt it, and to make the educational setting a safe and inclusive space for all.

To elaborate on how the formation of a mutual support group can challenge institutional homophobia, Foucault's notion of power is a useful theoretical framework for my analysis of such a coping strategy. As has already been explained in the Introduction, Foucault's view of power is revolutionary. He writes that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."⁷⁰ This statement reveals that Foucault does not consider power in a traditional way: power equals coercion, domination, repression, oppression, or a "thing" that a person or group possesses and

70. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1:93.

another person or group lacks.⁷¹ He rejects the orthodox “zero-sum” concept of power – when one gains power, another will lose his/hers.⁷² Rather Foucault defines power as the “network of relationships” in people.⁷³ Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato, and Jen Webb note that power can “flow very quickly from one point or area to another, depending on changing alliances and circumstances;” in other words, power is “mobile” and “contingent.”⁷⁴

Barry Smart provides further explanation regarding Foucault’s notion of the omnipresence of power. He notes that life in society from birth to death inevitably involves action being exercised on others’ actions. Our behaviors are shaped and directed by social institutions (e.g. family, schools, hospitals, prisons, and so forth) as well as other people with whom we interact. These are the power relations that no one can escape from as they are embedded in our social life.⁷⁵ In line with Smart, Richard A. Lynch quotes Foucault’s words “power is ‘always already there’, that one is never ‘outside’ it” to underline the omnipresence of power that enmeshes everyone within societies.⁷⁶ He gives an example of such power by evoking the school context where by a student’s choice of dress depends on a numbers of others’ different perspectives. The student would ask himself: “What will my best friend say?”, “What ‘group’ (the ‘popular’ set, jocks, brains, punks, and skaters) does dressing like this put me in?”, “What will my parents and teachers think?”⁷⁷ All of these questions emerge due to the influence of what Lynch calls the “multiple sources of force relations” which can shape the choice of the student’s dress.⁷⁸ And, if the student dresses in

71. Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato, and Jen Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, Cultural Studies (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 70 and Richard Dunphy, *Sexual Politics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 22.

72. Roar Hagen, “Collective Power: Reception and Prospect of a Scientific Concept,” *Interdisciplinary Communications* 2008/2009, 2010, 1.

73. Sara Mills, “Geography, Gender and Power,” in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, ed. Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 49.

74. Danaher, Schirato, and Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, 71.

75. Barry Smart, *Michel Foucault*, Rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), xv.

76. Richard A. Lynch, “Is Power All There Is? Michel Foucault and the ‘Omnipresence’ of Power Relations,” *Philosophy Today* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 65, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday19984217>.

77. Lynch, “Foucault’s Theory of Power,” 20.

78. Lynch, 20.

a style or costume which these people say (perhaps in unison) is not “cool,” it is highly possible that he would change it.⁷⁹

From the explanation of the omnipresence of power that Smart and Lynch draw from Foucault, there are two significant implications that we should not overlook. Firstly, both suggest that individuals are not restricted to be merely the recipients of other people’s actions, but instead each individual can exercise power to cooperate with others as well. And secondly, what we can elicit further from the example given by Lynch in regard to the student who finally changes his dress after his friends, peers, teachers, and parents, agree that his outfit is not “cool” is the notion of collective power. Namely, the people surrounding this student who, although from different social groups/status but sharing the same stance/opinion, are influential in his decision making about what to wear, what not to wear, and even to drop his “uncool” style of dressing ultimately. In this sense, it can be concluded that an individual acts as an agent to exercise power and through the co-operating individuals (or coalition) joint power can be formed. This is the “strength in unity” that can bring about change.⁸⁰

In congruence with the notion of collective power from the example given by Lynch, the formation of a mutual support group as featured in *Geography Club* and the *Erik & Isabelle* series is a way through which the characters join together to form a powerful collective. From my observation, these two collaborations of homosexual characters and their allies have differences in the details. Hartinger’s *Geography Club* presents a gathering of all five non-straight students (Russel, Min, Terese, Kevin, and Ike) at the pizza parlor *outside* their school. They, *as a group*, come to share their experiences of being the “closeted” homosexual students and the associated psychological trauma. Contrastingly, Wallace’s *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year* shows the formation of a support group that starts *within* the school, building allies *one by one*. This starts with Erik befriending Salvador in English class before seeking more supporters outside the school

79. Lynch, 20.

80. Thompson, *Power and Empowerment*, 15.

boundary. Both novels consistently present the achievement of these characters in building joint efforts and their disruption of the school's heterosexual terrain of power. Before giving an analysis of how the support group can challenge homophobia in the schools, I will begin this section with a discussion of how collective power in the novels can be developed. Hartinger and Wallace suggest that such power can be built from small steps of actions however trivial they may seem, e.g. having a group talk in a pizza restaurant (as in *Geography Club*) or participating in class activities (as in *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*). By doing so, their novels point out to the reader that there are always possibilities to create joint power – “the strength in unity” – to resist homophobia, notwithstanding the hostility of the school environments, as power is indeed everywhere.

Building Collective Force

In *Geography Club*, the emergence of a collective force is revealed in the pizza parlor scene. The scene illustrates the first secret meeting of all “closeted” homosexual characters who ultimately reach mutual agreement on ordering two pizzas – “one pepperoni and one vegetarian with no mushroom or olives” – after facing initial reluctance due to each of them having different food preferences. Russel says:

Kevin and Terese both wanted meat, but Kevin wanted ground beef and sausage, and Terese wanted Canadian bacon. Min and Ike were vegetarians, but Ike didn't like mushrooms and Min hated olives. As for me, I wanted anchovies and artichoke hearts [...].⁸¹

Here, none of them get the pizzas that they exactly want as their decisions are affected by each of their friends' various preferences. This situation is, if going back to Lynch's example in regard to the omnipresence of power, congruent with that of the student whose choice of dress is determined by others' opinions. However, although these homosexual characters are enmeshed in power relations, they are not entirely the passive recipients of their peers' actions. Hartinger, instead, represents them as individuals who can take an active role in influencing others, too. This is evident in each character's making assertions explicitly and strongly about what kind of food he/she likes or dislikes to one another. In my view, such a situation evokes the idea that power is in the stage of being omnipresent

81. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 35.

but weak, because each character – the subject to exercise power – still holds conflicting opinions, which might lead to dispute unless he/she compromises. The disagreement, however, does not last for long. The students later learn to negotiate, as exemplified in the case of Kevin and Terese who, although wanting “ground beef and sausage” and “Canadian bacon” respectively, finally order a “pepperoni” pizza. This is a well-balanced combination of both characters’ choices. Through such mutual agreement, it could be construed further as that power which has dispersed begins to take shape into the collective force, in other words, by means of individuals’ cooperation to work towards agreement or the same goal, joint power can be ultimately developed.

In spite of the achievement in building the collective power, it seems common for such power in its initial stage of formation to be unstable and thereby requiring strengthening. Again, Hartinger presents the protagonist who, apart from arranging the meeting, moves forward to fortify the power in order to create more solidarity among these “five random people.”⁸² Russel remarks “We’re all alone.” Those words immediately excite all group members’ attention as they invoke a common issue – loneliness – which they have experienced from living in a gay-hostile school environment that forces them to hide in the closet. The mutual problem raised by Russel elicits everybody’s revelation of their mental agonies which have been kept secret for years. For instance, Terese admits to the group that she can never “relax” when with her friends from the Girl Jocks as they playfully call her a “dyke.”⁸³ Kevin confesses that he “drinks so much” to forget the pressure from school jocks who will ostracize him if they find out that he is gay.⁸⁴ Worst of all, Ike divulges his secret that, at the age of fourteen, he attempted to commit suicide after learning that his friends from the Lefty Radicals were intolerant of homosexuality. Russel’s choice of the mutual problem of loneliness as the topic of discussion allows all group members to confide and share their personal experiences and helps them relieve their stress. They feel that they have something in common. And more importantly, their bond, group belonging, and peer solidarity tighten as confirmed by Russel’s observation of his

82. Hartinger, 39.

83. Hartinger, 40.

84. Hartinger, 40.

friends' enjoyment of the supportive group talk, saying that "no one wanted to let the moment end."⁸⁵ Through this means, the collective power which has been unstable is now fortified. It later propels them to take a bolder step in challenging the heteronormative school space of power by sitting together at the same lunch table in the school cafeteria for the first time (the scene will be discussed later).

In contrast to the formation of the mutual support group/the collective power as featured in *Geography Club*, that represented in the *Erik & Isabelle* series is shown to begin *within* the school boundary.⁸⁶ Wallace introduces the start of the mutual support group that Erik forms in the English classroom where each student is assigned to write a piece of poetry before sharing it with his/her partners for comments. In the class activity, Erik does not only make positive comments on Salvador's poem dedicated to his dead mother but also conveys his heartfelt condolences to him. The author describes that "Erik's eyes were filled with tears;" he says "I'm sorry. [...] [i]t's just so intense and sad. I can see how much you love her."⁸⁷ The empathy Erik demonstrates makes Salvador confide his feelings of "pain and loss" to him: "I miss her everyday."⁸⁸ In exchange, after listening Erik reads his poem to him, Salvador also gives sympathetic comments to Erik: "I understand the feelings of loneliness of which you speak."⁸⁹ At this point, as both students share their poems, they are linked together through their feelings of sadness and loneliness. Such mutual feelings are made manifest by their participation in the classroom activity and gains Erik the first heterosexual ally. As he "risk[s]" expressing himself to Salvador (which he rarely does to others except Isabelle), Salvador gets to know Erik better. He does not see the protagonist as just a gay student, but instead as a multi-dimensional human being, a

85. Hartinger, 43.

86. The possibility of such establishments even in the rigid heterosexual space of power is a result of Erik being openly gay and having Isabelle, a proud lesbian activist, as his strong supporter. His self-acceptance and their mutual alliance enable him to dare to start LGBTQ activism to combat homophobia in his school. But in Hartinger's novel, the building of the support group and joint power seems more difficult as all five homosexual characters fear being "outed." Thus, choosing the pizza parlor *outside* their school to be their meeting venue is practical in consideration to their level of readiness to "come out" to other heterosexual school peers and their safety.

87. Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High*, 2004, 39.

88. Wallace, 39.

89. Wallace, 39.

talented person and; more importantly, his trustful companion. Salvador finally tells him: “Erik, you are a true poet [...]. I feel like *I know you better now* [emphasis mine].”⁹⁰ If relating this back to the pizza parlor scene in *Geography Club*, it can be said that Erik also achieves in forming the mutual support group whose members, aside from Isabelle, now includes Salvador, his new ally. And, because each character is depicted as an agent to exercise power, i.e. by exchanging their comments on poems and shared mutual feelings, collective force is formed accordingly. This is similar to Russel’s uniting his school friends – Min, Terese, Kevin, and Ike – who are seemingly “random people” by arranging the group meeting at the pizza parlor.

It is worth noting here that because Wallace presents Erik as also being pestered by Jacob’s gang in other spaces *outside* the school, such as at the ice-cream restaurant in the example that I will discuss later, it is necessary for the protagonist to get more allies for his safety and to help him to cope with homophobic violence occurring both inside and outside his school. The narrative depicts Erik making friends with Jonah, Henrietta, Matthew and Joshua, and Reverend Kat, for instance. He gets allies *one by one*. This is contrary to how Russel forms his support group as all of his homosexual school peers are assembled at the pizza parlor. By doing so, the narrative points out that, in building a support group/collective power, it is possible for Erik to recruit diverse individuals in fighting against homophobia. Again, as each of these characters represents an agent to exercise power, their cooperation suggests that omnipresent force is gradually merged into the collective power, and it gains more and more strength by the increasing the number of allies Erik gathers.

From my observation, Wallace makes the same point as Hartinger in stressing that although the support group/collective power can be built, it needs to be fortified. This is perhaps to make sure that the support group/joint power has enough potential to radically erode homophobia within the schools, because such bigotry does not only manifest itself at an interpersonal level but also at an institutional one. The latter is more complex and

90. Wallace, 39.

challenging. In *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*, to show how joint force is strengthened, Wallace includes a scene in which Erik invites Salvador to have ice-cream downtown. At Apple's Ice Cream parking lot, Erik is harassed by Jacob's gang. He is hit by a thrown shoe before the bullies drive away. The violence occurs right in front of Salvador's eyes, inciting his curiosity as to why Erik is picked on. Erik, instead of withholding the truth, "ret[ells] the story" to Salvador who responds by "nodd[ing]," a gesture of understanding and sympathy.⁹¹ Here, Erik intelligently changes the crisis into an opportunity, strengthening the recently built alliance and collective force. Namely, while his "re-te[lling]" the truth to Salvador discloses his homosexuality as a cause of him falling a prey to homophobic violence (and this could be read as a warning to Salvador that he might become a secondary-victim by continuing to hang around with him), Erik sincerely shows his honesty and openness to the new friend. This boosts trust between two characters, making Salvador confide his secret to Erik that he is also a victim of Jacob's gang, who pick on his "skin color."⁹² Salvador tells Erik that the bullies "keep telling [him] to go back to Mexico."⁹³ The moment when both Erik and Salvador share their experiences of being harassed due to their being "misfits" creates a stronger sense of comradeship (like the five homosexual characters in Hartinger's *Geography Club* feel after they reveal their psychological pain at being the closeted homosexual students). In this way, Erik and Salvador's bond/joint power gets stronger.

In both cases, we see that the mutual support group can be built through the characters' undertaking simple activities, and it can also begin *outside* or *within* the school boundaries, depending on circumstances. Russel invites all of his homosexual school peers to have pizzas and to share experiences of being "closeted" while Erik starts his support group within the school before expanding it beyond the educational setting by recruiting other characters one by one, from all walks of life as allies. To conclude, both Hartinger and Wallace's novels urge the reader to realize that power (both negative and positive) is

91. Wallace, 86.

92. Wallace, 86.

93. Wallace, 86.

indeed omnipresent. It is “always already there” for us to manage and make use of it—like Russel and Erik who initiate the support groups which help them to gain more strength in challenging homophobia within the school.

Disrupting the School's Heterosexual Space of Power

From here, I will now move further to show how the support group/joint force can challenge homophobia. Focus will be placed on the macro-level bigotry which manifests the school space being made the heterosexual terrain of power. In Hartinger and Wallace's novels, although the disruption of the heterosexualized space is first noticed in the allies' attempts to create the mutual support groups, it actually occurs when the groups resituate themselves from outside to inside the school and vice versa. Hartinger presents the movements from outward to inward, whereas Wallace depicts the opposite and the multi-directional ones.

In *Geography Club*, after forming the mutual support group in the pizza parlor, Russel initiates the second meeting. But this time, it is exactly at his lunch table, in the school cafeteria, where the meeting occurs. He proposes “[...] why couldn't we meet again tomorrow? At school? We could eat lunch together,” and this is agreed by all group members.⁹⁴ In the cafeteria scene, the reader perceives the feelings of nervousness and fear that the homosexual characters unconsciously express as Hartinger gives vivid descriptions of them. For instance, Terese, who is the first to meet Russel and Min at the table, “looked both ways, like she was about to cross a busy street. Then she barreled straight ahead, pulled out a chair, and sat.”⁹⁵ Ike “sidl[es] up to our table like a cat burglar trying to evade the police.”⁹⁶ Kevin “didn't sit. He didn't look nervous, but [...] he had such a firm grip on his tray that his knuckles were white.”⁹⁷ When reading this scene alongside that of the pizza parlor through a Foucauldian lens, we see that such a gathering is the first achievement of Russel and his peers in corroding institutional homophobia. As I have

94. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 43.

95. Hartinger, 51.

96. Hartinger, 51.

97. Hartinger, 53.

already explained, in the lunchroom, it is not a common practice for all students, even those who are straight, jocks, or of different social ranks, to “cross [the boundaries]” by sitting at other clique members’ tables.⁹⁸ It transgresses the school norm. And, for these homosexual students, “cross[ing] the boundaries” is even more daunting as other students might be suspicious of their meeting, spy on them, drag them out of the closet, and finally bully them. The students’ nervous reactions are entirely understandable because the cafeteria is the heterosexual terrain of power where homophobic bullying can occur to any students who are perceived to be gay, without any interference from school staff (as shown in the case of Brian). Thus, due to such an extremely hostile environment, their meeting in the cafeteria should be considered in a more positive light – their bravery, strength, and strenuous exercising of the collective power to resist the school practice and particularly to fracture this heterosexualized space of power.

According to Foucault’s notion of power, one of the fundamental characteristics of power is its mobility. It can “flow” from one area to another area. This implies that physical spaces cannot entirely prevent, impede, or block the movement of power. So, in relating the gathering of the homosexual characters in the pizza parlor and what happens later in the cafeteria to what Foucault posits, the narrative reveals that there begins the first movement of the support group/collective force from *outside* to *inside* the school boundary. In this sense, it can be construed that the lunchroom – the heterosexualized space of power – is now being disrupted by such flow of joint force exercised by the group of homosexual students. Simply put, these sexually marginalized students gradually penetrate the heterosexualized school space, weakening its power. Moreover, their meeting at the “Intellectual table” is a queering of this space. At the table, there is only this sexual minority group. The gathering of these like-minded students in the lunchroom indicates that they are now placed on a position of power approximating that of other clique members since they can use this space and even claim the table to be their private terrain.

98. Hartinger, 54.

Russel's announcement to his homosexual peers that "Great, [...] You guys made it [...]" reiterates the initial success of reclaiming and queering the space by the group.⁹⁹

Hartinger re-emphasizes the disruption of the institutional homophobia with the repetitive movements of the mutual support group/collective force. They occur another two times – from the lunchroom to the library and again from the library to a classroom where the homosexual students establish the Geography Club. In the library, the band of homosexual students choose an "aisle" in which to meet.¹⁰⁰ It might be conjectured that their gathering in the library aisle could be read as their "hid[ing]" from other library users.¹⁰¹ They still fear being spied upon and outed. The narrative describes that the students have already invented an excuse – they just happen to be looking for the books in the same place if anyone sees them – because they realize that "[f]ive people in the same aisle was a pretty big coincidence."¹⁰² But, it is apparent that the author points to the assertiveness of these school misfits who do not yield to the institutional homophobia. They refuse to retreat to the pizza parlor even though it seems a safer space for group socialization. In addition, Ike's explosion, "We shouldn't have to hide like this, like political dissidents or whatever. Why can't we be seen together like normal people?", clearly shows his feeling of anger against homophobia within his school, vigorously resisting the bigotry he faces.¹⁰³ Thus, the meeting in the library is in fact a deeper infiltration of the school's heterosexual space of power. The movement of the group/joint power disrupts, cracks, and queers this space.

As the story goes on, the disruption of the school heterosexual domain of power is more intensified with the setting up of the Geography Club, which is actually the homosexual community. The non-straight characters use Mr. Kephart's classroom, an "empty classroom on the second floor of the deserted school building," to be the venue for

99. Hartinger, 51.

100. Hartinger, 59.

101. Hartinger, 59.

102. Hartinger, 59.

103. Hartinger, 59.

the club meeting.¹⁰⁴ It is this space that Hartinger presents as being the safe place for these marginalized students. In the classroom scene, the reader can observe that the little band of students can meet more frequently to do activities together. The author emphasizes this point by giving a long elaboration of the mini baseball game which these students play together to show that the Geography Club is their haven:

It was that afternoon at the Tuesday meeting of the Geography Club and we were playing baseball in Kephart's classroom. We were using a Ping-Pong ball for a ball and an eraser for a bat. Kevin was pitching, and I was up to bat. It was Kevin and Terese against Ike, Min and Me. [...] Terese threw [the ball] to Kevin, who snatched it from the air and rushed to meet me at home plate. [...]

"Out!" Kevin said, his arms wrapped tightly around me.

"Safe!" Ike said.

"Out! Terese said.

"*Safe!*" Min said.

"Safe!" I said. "Three against two!"

"Boooooo!" Terese yelled from the back of the classroom. "Cheap call, cheap call!"

We all started laughing [...] [*italics in original*].¹⁰⁵

It is obvious that the group greatly enjoy spending time together, which has never happened before within the heterosexual school setting. This activity and the relaxed atmosphere of the club make them feel that they are really a "part of," not "apart from," enhancing their sense of peer solidarity and joint power as made clear evidence in Russel's admittance that "[...] I honestly couldn't think of another time when I felt so close to a group of people."¹⁰⁶ Notably, the descriptions of the Geography Club in terms of its location – as being in a private, enclosed, and remote area *and* its atmosphere – are created by the author to be relatively similar to those of the boys' locker room, the space where the

104. Hartinger, 73.

105. Hartinger, 105.

106. Hartinger, 105.

heterosexual male and macho students have tremendous fun (however in this zone, no derogatory words are spoken among the members.) The author's depicting these two sites in juxtaposition strongly indicates the great success of the homosexual support group/collective power in countering the dominating power of the school heterosexualized space. This is because the Geography Club is formed to be, as Michael Brown notes, the "private sanctum" of these sexually marginalized students.¹⁰⁷ This queer space of power then can be equated to the changing room, the distilled location of the heterosexuals' terrain of power. In this regard, the establishment of the club is presented as the counterpart or in opposition to the locker room – queer space versus heterosexual space – and thereby suggests further that the power of heterosexualized school space is challenged and resisted.

As has been delineated, we can see that with the continuous movements of support group from *outward* to *inward* as depicted in the changing of all three different meeting venues (the pizza parlor, the school cafeteria, the library, and finally Mr. Kephart's classroom), the school's heterosexual space of power is gradually corroded. Step-by-step the homosexual characters infiltrate the school space and seize the classroom to form their private domain of power and through this means the institutionalized homophobia as manifested in the school space as normatively heterosexualized is challenged. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that despite the achievement in challenging the institutional bigotry, the Geography Club and the two meeting venues – which are queered – exclude other students. As such, there remains no neutral space on the school campus. In my view, it is not the intention of Hartinger, the co-founder of Oasis which is a Gay-Straight Alliance in the US, to send the message to the young reader that collective power can be abused to sustain discrimination. This is because his novel includes a scene in which the Geography Club comes to an end with the appearance of Belinda. She discovers the truth of the club after overhearing a conversation among its members about their

107. Brown, "A Geographer Reads Geography Club," 321.

experiencing social prejudices simply because they are homosexual. Such an “outing” implies that Hartinger intends to have the Geography Club disrupted.¹⁰⁸

Hartinger characterizes Belinda as a “nongay,” “large black girl” who pleads to join the group, telling the homosexual members that her mother is “alcoholic.”¹⁰⁹ This elicits their understanding, sympathy, and her admittance to the group. Here, it is highly possible that, with this characterization of Belinda, the author wants to show further the openness of this queered space. Belinda is not just the “first straight member” but also represented as being a sort of school misfit (similar to Russel and other homosexual characters) due to her being overweight, being African American (the racial minority in the school), and facing damaging family issues.¹¹⁰ Her participation—as both the heterosexual and the misfit—reveals that the Geography Club is now transformed from the queer space of power into the first (unofficial) Gay-Straight Alliance within Goodkind High School. The Gay-Straight Alliance is the neutral, positive, and non-discriminatory space where students regardless of their sex/gender identities, race, or ethnicity are welcomed.¹¹¹ By the end of narrative, the GSA becomes an officially established school club. Brian, the second non-gay ally, submits an application form to the school and thereby effaces its fake name: “Geography Club.”¹¹² In addition to this, the formation of the Gay-Straight Alliance within this educational setting indicates that the homophobia in the school is challenged and corroded.

108. Hartinger also gives repetitive hints to the disruption of all queered spaces, possibly to re-confirm his stance that the entire school space should be free from all forms of discrimination. For example, the Intellectual Table in the cafeteria which the homosexual students make their private boundary is transgressed by Gunnar’s approach, resulting in Kevin, Ike, and Terese returning to their lunch tables. The library aisle, the third meeting venue of these homosexual characters, is interrupted by other students who start to get suspicious of the strange gathering. And, the Geography Club is disrupted and “outed” as foreshadowed by the word “Out” which is uttered twice by Kevin and Terese while playing the mini baseball in Mr. Kephart’s classroom.

109. Hartinger, *Geography Club*, 2003, 107, 105, and 137.

110. Hartinger, 140.

111. This is congruent with the empirical studies of Paul V. Poteat, EthanH. Mereish, and Craig D. DiGiovanni in terms of the inherent goal of GSAs – to include students of “all sexual orientations.” See Paul V. Poteat et al., “Homophobic Bullying,” in *Bullying: Experiences and Discourses of Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Ian Rivers and Neil Duncan (London: Routledge, 2013), 84.

112. The Gay-Straight Alliance is the radical transformation of the Geography Club in terms of its being the neutral safe space and its name change. This serves to rebut Wickens’s claim about the “code word” (Geography Club as the ruse name) used in Hartinger’s novel which, in her view, sustains homophobia. She

After demonstrating the disruption of the heterosexualized school space by the continuous and single-directional movements of the mutual support group/collective power from *outside* to *inside* the school boundary, I will go on discuss those occurring from the *opposite* and *multiple* directions as featured in Wallace's *Erik & Isabelle* series. My aim is to re-emphasize that the support group has considerable potential to challenge the institutional homophobia – the heterosexualized school space. In Wallace's third book in the series, the prom at Henrietta's mansion might also be viewed as a heteronormative space, albeit outside the school setting. At this venue, with the support of Henrietta and the collective force of his friends, Erik and other homosexual students feel protected, safe, and create positive changes in their school.

In Wallace's *Erik & Isabelle series*, the author presents the gay protagonist building the mutual support group/joint power by gathering the allies *individually*. His allies are not limited to the teenaged students from the same school but include adults from diverse social groups. The size of the group or the strength of the collective force is thus mightier than that in Hartinger's *Geography Club*. Instead, the group moves together—as a coalition—from outside the school to inside the school. Some of the adult characters they meet outside the school, however, are on standby to assist Erik and his school allies in their challenging the institutional homophobia, e.g. Reverend Kate gives them advice as to how to establish the GSA in the Foresthill High School when Isabelle asks for it. Some of them

criticizes that because the name is made up to sound very boring so that no one wants to join the club, the narrative underscores the idea of homosexuality as something to be kept secret like “the love that dare not speak its name.” See more information about Wickens's claim in the Introduction or in her article: Corrine M. Wickens, “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature,” *Children's Literature in Education* 42, no. 2 (March 26, 2011): 156, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-011-9129-0>.

In Ian K. Macguillivry's studies on Gay-Straight Alliance in the United States, the researcher mentions Hartinger's *Geography Club* as an example of YA fiction that presents the use of an “innocuous name” to hide the true purpose of the homosexual club. Even though Macguillivry disagrees with such naming due to it making the homosexuals invisible, he concedes that where homophobia is virulent or it is too risky to form the GSA, teachers and students might consider using the name that has anything to do with sexual orientation such as “Diversity Club.” This strategy is put into practice in many schools around the United States. Still, Macguillivry advises that, if possible, the name Gay-Straight Alliance should be retained in order to tell students that there is nothing bad with the term “gay.” See Ian K. Macgillivray, *Gay-Straight Alliances: A Handbook for Students, Educators, and Parents* (New York, 2007), 35.

even take immediate action to interfere with the homophobic bullying which Erik faces outside the school boundaries.

Wallace exemplifies the potency of collective force in the Junior prom scene in which Erik and Mark (the third student ally who joins Erik's group and later become his boyfriend and prom date) are humiliated by Jacob's gang once they embark on the dance floor. An aggressor shouts, "Faggots! Fucking faggots ruining *our* prom!" at the gay students before another chimes in with "Who let these queers in here? Let's throw them out [*italics in original*]."¹¹³ Undoubtedly, the ballroom is created as a microcosmic version of the Foresthill High School in terms of its being a heterosexual sphere of power. The possessive pronoun "*our*" spoken by the straight homophobe and italicized strongly indicates that, as Mark observes, the "prom is so hetero;" only the heterosexual couples are eligible to join the event.¹¹⁴ This is clearly discrimination based on sexual and gender identities of the students. Moreover, the prepositional phrase "in here" used to identify the ballroom implies that the venue is protected by a heterosexual boundary which Jacob and his cronies police.¹¹⁵ Therefore, gay students must not step over the heterosexual domain otherwise they face ostracization. Despite such a boundary, the homosexual presence troubles the heteronormative space of the prom. Within this space, Erik and Mark *and* Isabelle and Mandy share a double date, directly challenging the homophobia they encounter. Prior to this, the romantic relationships of these two couples have been confined within the Foresthill High School, but here they venture outside the parameters of the school. At this point, we can see that the narrative presents the shift of locations—from school to prom venue—from *inside* to *outside*, stressing that collective power can transgress any physical boundaries. It helps Erik and his friends gain more confidence and eventually disrupt the traditional school prom and the microcosmic heterosexual school space.

113. Kim Wallace, *Erik & Isabelle: Junior Year at Foresthill High* (Sacramento, CA: Foglight Press, 2006), 160.

114. Wallace, 104.

115. Wallace, 104.

Remarkably, in this scene, Henrietta steps in to help the gay couple. She appears in a “tuxedo” at the ballroom entryway, shouting at the homophobes: “You are in my home and you will not speak of others in that way. I do not allow foul language in my home. It seeps into the walls and sticks to furniture. Whoever said such things must leave now.”¹¹⁶ It is obvious that Henrietta exercises power. As Erik and Mark’s ally, she protects them. Her action, although unable to completely silence Jacob who retorts “Shut up, dyke,” urges other allies to join their force in fighting against the homophobic harassment, and this has a ripple effect upon the entire group of prom-goers. Stan DeMarco, a school jock Erik befriends during the track running practice, steps out to announce his stance as being ally: “Guess I’m a faggot-lover. How about you? [...] Erik and Mark are cool with me. [...] And so is anybody who is gay.”¹¹⁷ His action further spurs the students from different cliques dancing in the ballroom to revolt against the violence to protect the couple. The narrative depicts Erik and Mark as not only being cheered up but also immediately “*surrounded by allies* they never knew they had [*italics mine*].”¹¹⁸

From this, if reverting to Foucault’s notion of power as described by Danaher that power can “flow very quickly from one point or area to another, depending on changing alliances and circumstance,” the scene underlines that power is indeed “mobile” and “contingent.” Here, power “flow[s]” quickly from multiple directions as represented with the *ad hoc* conglomeration of the diverse groups of allies—adult and students—starting with Henrietta and Stan, to other school peers in the ballroom. Such coalition of allies creates a bigger support group or more potent joint force to challenge the homophobia, it neutralizes the prom and the venue as Erik and Mark are welcomed by their allies to dance here, but Jacob’s gang is pressured to get out of the ballroom immediately. This is the victory of the mutual support group in disrupting the homophobia not just in the institutional level but also in the interpersonal one. Isabelle confirms that “[...] we survived. It’s over. Nothing else to fear.”¹¹⁹ And again, such achievement is celebrated by

116. Wallace, 161.

117. Wallace, 161–62.

118. Wallace, 162.

119. Wallace, 162.

the gay couple's expressing their appreciation of the powerful alliance, especially the homosexual community they form: "See I told you, Mark hissed. I knew [Henrietta] was *family*. Thanks for *sticking with* us, Erik said [*italics mine*]." ¹²⁰

It must be noted here that Wallace's series does not present the collective force that moves only from one single direction (or *inside* to *outside* the Foresthill High School) to disrupt the heterosexualized space, the prom and its venue. It is multi-directional. Prior to this, *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year* and *Erik & Isabelle: Sophomore Year* already depict the multiple directions across which the groups of Erik's allies have moved. Take, for example, in *Erik & Isabelle: Freshman Year*, the scene in which Erik is almost beaten by Jacob while jogging near the riverbank. The novel shows that Mark pleads with Jacob to leave Erik alone before Jonah, a poor man whom Erik befriends and gives money to, steps out to save the protagonist, cursing all bullies in Jacob's gang to be punished by God. Here, there are two allies from different groups – Mark and Jonah – who merge their force to rescue Erik. The former follows Erik from the school while the latter awaits outside the educational setting in preparation to offer him help in case of emergency. This is the movement of the collective forces from different directions that intertwine, gain more strength, and can stop the crime.

From what I have demonstrated, Wallace's novels represent the disruption of the institutional homophobia with the opposite and multi-directional movements of the mutual support groups. These diverse groups of allies can be prompted to merge their forces into building a bigger and mightier powerful collective in an emergency (as exemplified with Henrietta's urging other allies to save Erik and Mark *and* to force Jacob's gang out of the prom). The joint power is also intertwined like the net or cobweb that spreads across and throughout the many physical spaces which Erik occupies and thus increases the level of protection, safety, and encourages him to move forward to challenge homophobia in the school in order to make it a positive space for all students.

In conclusion, Hartinger and Wallace's works discussed in this chapter reveal that homophobia within American high schools manifests itself at two levels—institutional and

120. Wallace, 163.

interpersonal levels. The former can be witnessed in the heterosexualization of the school spaces, especially the boys' locker rooms, and the latter is seen in homophobic school bullies' inflicting verbal and physical violence upon the gay students. The heterosexualized school spaces have a destructive power or influence upon all student and adult characters. It contributes to the development of homophobic attitudes, enabling the perception that the entire educational setting is allocated only to the heterosexual majority (thus leading to the marginalization or even the ostracization of the sexual minority groups). Despite this, the narratives suggest that the formation of a mutual support group is a potential strategy to challenge homophobia manifested at both levels. Such a mutual support group helps non-straight characters generate collective power and more strength. The collective power, as in the case of *Geography Club*, helps the group of homosexual students penetrate in the school space, thereby queering it, and ultimately to neutralize it through their establishment of the GSA. In the *Erik & Isabelle* series, the joint power Erik builds by gathering more allies within and outside his school is like a network. It gives him protection from homophobic bullies. Again, this network of allies, which moves in and out of the school space, is suggestive of the corrosion of hegemonic power of the heterosexualized school space.

Chapter 4

Christian-Based Homophobia

Having discussed the gay-themed YA novels which present homophobia in three key domains, this chapter moves forward to the last one – Christian-based homophobia. Christian-based homophobia is prejudice against homosexuality and homosexual people which could stem from one's literal readings and misinterpretation of the Biblical verses regarding same-sex sexual acts and/or belief in preachers' teachings that denigrate the sexually marginalized.¹ In my analysis, two novels Alex Sanchez's *The God Box* (2007) and Robin Reardon's *Thinking Straight* (2008) will be used. Both books, in comparison to other contemporary gay-themed YA novels, place religious-based homophobia as the central issue of the narratives. Other titles which mention it in passing include Joe Babcock's *The Boys and the Bees* (2006), Drew Ferguson's *The Screwed-Up Life of Charlie the Second* (2008), and Mia Kerick's *Inclination* (2015). Due to the limited number of adolescent novels that focus upon Christian-based homophobia, it is impossible for me not to include the work of Sanchez—who is a Mexican American writer—in the list of my primary texts.² Even in the twenty-first century, there are not many texts which deal with Christian-based or religious homophobia. Such underrepresentation of Christian-based homophobia in YA literature leaves many homosexual teenagers without a good source of information to help them deal with this kind of bigotry. This perhaps results in impressionable teenagers who take their cues from religious leaders and scriptures feeling confused and distressed by what they believe to be aberrant behavior.

The God Box and *Thinking Straight* depict gay teen characters, Manuel Cordeo and Taylor Adams respectively, who having experienced faith-based homophobia, vigorously challenge it. The books do not disparage Christianity *per se* as the source of violence against these gay characters. Instead, they reveal the destructive power of literal reading

1. Philo Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe: An Unbiased Look at Homosexuality in the Bible* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2004), 1–3.

2. Karen Stearns, "Sanchez, Alex," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary LGBTQ Literature of the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2009), 550.

and interpretation of the Scriptural verses upon many characters, both teenage and adult. This approach leads to their developing an aversion to homosexuality and even inflicting verbal or physical violence upon the gay characters. Indeed, while religious homophobia is virulent, both novels suggest that such prejudice can be resisted through critical reading and deep thinking about the Biblical verses, as Manuel and Taylor do. This coping strategy might not be able to subvert the deep-seated bigotry in all characters; nevertheless, it does help some to learn to read the Scripture in a new light, lessening their negativity toward homosexuality and homosexual people. As such, in this chapter, I argue that critical reading and thinking, developing the capacity to have reasonable skepticism, to analyze and evaluate the reliability, strengths and weakness (flaws) of the texts helps challenge Christian-based homophobia. This further creates alliances or the building of collective power to engage the gay characters' activism against religious-based homophobia.

For this chapter, I will follow the same structure of the previous chapters, dividing it into two main sections. First, I will examine the manifestation of Christian-based homophobia which can be seen in the homophobic characters' literal reading and interpretation of the Scripture; then I will look at how some preachers' teachings demonize homosexuality and the sexually marginalized. The notion of literal reading of religious texts proposed by academic and Biblical scholars Philo Thelos, Daniel A. Helminiak, and Marc Zvi Bretler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington will be used in my analysis. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the coping strategy – critical reading and thinking – as proffered in the texts can challenge this kind of homophobia. To do so, ideas about critical reading and thinking skills as proposed by Mike Wallace and Alison Wray, Victoria Pontzer Ehrhardt, and Stella Cottrell are useful. In addition, approaches to interpret the Biblical verses as suggested by Scriptural scholars Thelos, Helminiak, Steven Wells, and Roger E. Biery will also be applied to my reading. However, prior to this, I will provide synopses of *The God Box* and *Thinking Straight* to give a sense of the narrative plots.

Sanchez's *The God Box* (2007) is narrated from the perspective of Paul (Pablo) Mendoza, the Mexican American gay protagonist who lives in a “conservative little west

Texas town.”³ Everything in his life seems to be right on track. Paul lives with his widowed father. On long holidays, his grandmother (*Abuelita*) from Mexico usually visits Paul and his father. Paul has a “close and loving” family.⁴ At school, Paul is an outstanding high-school senior, a devout Christian role model, and has a very nice and intelligent girlfriend Angie Leon. Both Paul and Angie share many interests such as being active in the school Bible reading club and singing in their church choir. Despite having a girlfriend, Paul recognizes his homosexual proclivities after having repeated dreams of sex with men. He prays to God to take away these “unwanted” feelings from him so that he remains a good Christian as being homosexual is, for Paul who reads the Bible literally, a sin.⁵ Paul’s inner conflicts – his love of God and his homosexuality – culminate in an internalized homophobia.

However, Paul’s belief in the fundamental teachings of the Scriptural verses and stories that condemn homosexuality is challenged after Manuel Cordeo moves from Dallas to study at Paul’s school. On the first day, Manuel introduces himself to Paul’s small group of close friends consisting of Angie, Elizabeth, and Dakota, asking them whether the school has a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance).⁶ This question does not simply perplex Angie and Elizabeth who have no idea what GSA is, but it also leads to Manuel’s voluntary admitting to the group that he is gay. Manuel’s openness shocks Elizabeth. This, however, piques Angie and Dakota’s interests in homosexuality and Christianity, LGBTQ lives, and the GSA (which has never been established or even brought into discussion in this conservative school despite the fact that homophobic bullying occurs here every day). Manuel causes Paul uneasiness. He fears that Manuel’s honesty will push him to accept his homosexual orientation or Manuel, who is represented as being able to identify Paul as also being gay, will “out” him to others.

3. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 2.

4. Caroline E. Jones, “‘Jesus Loves Me, This I Know’: Finding a Rainbow God in Contemporary Adolescent Literature,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 43, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-011-9148-x>.

5. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 97.

6. Sanchez, 3.

The story gets more intense after Manuel joins the Bible club. He undertakes vehement debates on the topic of homosexuality and scripture with Cliff, a fundamentalist minister's son. Cliff believes in every word written in the Bible as being infallible. Manuel's ripostes make Cliff and his girlfriend Elizabeth furious. Cliff threatens to physically harm Manuel for his radical re-interpretation of the Bible. Angie and Dakota feel worried about Manuel's safety. They realize that, aside from Cliff, Jude Maldonado is another homophobic school bully who might harm Manuel. To protect Manuel, Angie and Dakota think about establishing a GSA. However, Paul refuses to cooperate with them; he is afraid of being deemed gay by association.

While Angie and Dakota do research on how to form the GSA, the narrative switches to portray the developing relationship between Paul and Manuel. One day, Manuel visits Paul's home. He sees a God Box, a "maple-wood box" with the lid carved with the "Serenity Prayer."⁷ Paul's father gave the God Box to him to write his specific prayers or troubles on small pieces of paper and slip them into the box. This is believed to help Paul leave his worries to God. Of course, one such worry is Paul's praying not to be gay. In return, Paul decides to visit Manuel's home although he feels that Manuel is a troublesome new student who "mess[es] with his mind too much" with his honesty, outspokenness, and in particular his re-reading of the Biblical verses regarding homosexuality.⁸ Here, Paul discusses the topic of homosexuality and Christianity with Manuel and both characters debate passionately. The text reveals Paul as often getting angry at Manuel for challenging traditional Biblical readings. The debates thus sometimes end with Paul walking away from Manuel.

Paul gradually rethinks his religious beliefs, how he reads the Bible, and his homosexuality.⁹ He also finds himself attracted to Manuel and eventually decides to tell Angie that he is gay (but still does not confess his love to Manuel). Angie feels upset but

7. Sanchez, 49–50.

8. Barb Anderson, "Review of Alex Sanchez 'The God Box,'" Parents Action League, August 8, 2011, <https://www.parentSACTION.org/>.

9. Publishers Weekly, "The God Box," PublishersWeekly.com, accessed August 4, 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4169-0899-9>.

she accepts Paul for who he is. Paul goes further and comes out to his father and grandmother; both show understanding. One day, Manuel invites Paul to see a movie together and when he finds a chance confesses his love to Paul and kisses him. Paul, still not fully accepting his homosexual orientation, feels very angry. He leaves Manuel alone in the theater parking lot and Manuel falls prey to a hate crime as two homophobic school students, Jude and Terry, cruelly beat him. While these delinquents are later arrested and one of them is imprisoned, Manuel is left comatose. Paul regrets his insincerity to his own feelings and to Manuel and decides to take a year's suspension of his studies to help Manuel in his recuperation. The narrative ends happily with Paul's successful reconciliation of his sexuality and his spirituality. He takes Manuel to the school senior prom, and the GSA is successfully established (their first activity is to run a campaign against homophobic violence).

Reardon's *Thinking Straight* (2008) revolves around the life of Taylor Adams, a sixteen-year-old gay teen who challenges the Christian teachings that condemn homosexuality. Taylor has a strong faith in God for creating him as who he is; he rejects some preachers' literal readings of the Bible which say that gayness is a sin.¹⁰ After coming out to the parents (both are fundamentalist Christians), Taylor is immediately "shift[ed] off" to Straight to God, an organization established to correct "screwed up" teenagers such as alcohol addicts, premarital pregnant girls, thieves, and, of course, homosexuals. Taylor's father hopes that his only son can be redeemed after forty days of staying here, and if not he will be sent to military school to learn to be a man. At Straight to God, Taylor is put into SafeZone for a week, which means that he must remain mute.¹¹ The gay protagonist is also assigned to work in the laundry under the supervision of a man named Sean; he has Contemplation Time from four to six o'clock alone at his room; he must write four MI or Moral Inventory reports a week to submit to Mrs. Harnett (the leader of the Praying Meeting group); and he must join the Public Apology at night. These activities are based

10. Robin Reardon, "Thinking Straight," Robin Reardon, 2008, <https://www.robinreardon.com/books/thinkingstraight>.

11. Publishers Weekly, "Thinking Straight," PublishersWeekly.com, accessed September 2, 2019, /978-0-7582-1928-2.

upon the Straight to God's motto—"ora et labora" or "pray and work"—which its program director Dr. Emmett Strickland believes to be a "panacea," even for homosexuality.

Despite being at Straight to God to repent his "sin" of being gay, Taylor maintains a firm stance by not accepting the group's misinterpretation of the Scripture so that he might stigmatize himself. He has never confessed to sinning for being who he is. Instead, Taylor writes down the rules of Straight to God which he intentionally breaks. For instance, he masturbates during the Contemplation Time while thinking about his boyfriend Will Martin. Later, Taylor is invited by Nate (or Shorty), a resident of Straight to God, to join a secret circle at night where other teenagers gather to re-read the Bible verses which are misused or used out of context. Nate asks Taylor to lead the group meeting after he has observed Taylor's unshakable self-confidence, intelligence, and his faith in God. These characteristics are needed for other young homosexuals in order to reconcile their sexuality with their spirituality, redeeming themselves from internalized homophobia and rallying against the homophobic priests at Straight to God.

Still, it must be conceded that not all young homosexual characters in these books realize the power of critical reading and thinking as a strategy to challenge faith-based homophobia. Reardon creates Taylor's roommate Charles Courtney to be a submissive gay teenager to reflect an alternative situation. This is comparable to Paul in *The God Box* who is manipulated by a priest at his church and believes in his teachings that homosexuality is a sin. But, in the case of Charles, Reardon warns of the dangers of the sexual harassment that Charles faces while at Straight to God. Charles, in the hope of being "de-gay," blindly follows Reverend Bartle's "advice" to engage in frequent sexual activity with him in the chapel as this will make Charles feel disgusted by homosexual desires and ultimately kill his homosexuality. The young victim is hurt but keeps the sexual harassment secret. Taylor begins to suspect what has happened to his roommate after the young boy often sneaks out of the room. Taylor tells Nate and Mrs. Harnett, who surprisingly turns out to be Nate's mother. Both Nate and Mrs. Harnett have tried to collect evidence against Reverend Bartle after eleven gay residents committed suicide over twelve years. One of them, we learn, was Charles's former roommate, Ray, who is reported to have kissed another boy, Leland.

To save Charles and other gay residents, Taylor writes a fake MI to Reverend Bartle, telling him that he often has sexual dreams about his boyfriend Will. This is the bait the protagonist sets to capture Reverend Bartle before Charles is raped again. From this point, the narrative seems a bit like a detective story which, from my research, is unusual in most contemporary gay-themed YA novels. Taylor is called to the chapel but when the priest attempts to rape him, the protagonist shouts for help. Sean comes to rescue Taylor in time. He calls the police to arrest Reverend Bartle. The story ends with Charles's realization that he has been deceived by the Reverend Bartle. Dr. Strickland, the Program Director resigns but is still unrepentant for his literal interpretation of the Bible that homosexuality is a sin. Taylor decides to stay at Straight to God for a few days until his parents take him home. In the end, Taylor is not sent to military school. His father comes to admire his son, saying: "I'm proud of you."¹²

Both novels highlight the activism of Manuel and Taylor who challenge Christian-based homophobia. In the "A Note from the Author" section placed at the end of *The God Box*, Sanchez makes it clear that this book was inspired by the feedback of his teen readers across America who emailed him after reading his first YA novel *Rainbow Boys* (2001). They shared their experiences of facing psychological conflict – how to be gay and Christian – as they had been taught that homosexuality is a sin. This reminded Sanchez of his own strategy to deal with this issue. He says:

Reading such comments made me recall my own faith journey. Growing up, I was blessed to have a mom and dad who accepted me, regardless of my sexuality. But the church presented an image of a God who didn't love me quite so unconditionally.

It took quite a few years for me to get up the courage to revisit the Bible and come to my own conclusions about God. And as I began to hear the struggles of young people, I came to believe that my own experience might help others. The result was *The God Box*.¹³

Sanchez's work thus can be considered as a text of resistance or even a guidance novel for those who are struggling against Christian-based homophobia. Although *The God Box* has

12. Robin Reardon, *Thinking Straight* (New York: Kensington, 2008), 283.

13. Sanchez, *The God Box*, n.p.

not received the numerous accolades of Sanchez's debut *Rainbow Boys* (2001), which was widely praised as the "best gay book of the year," the novel is well-informed and immersed in religious scholarship. Sanchez includes a list of his research and reading within his novel for further reference.

Moreover, Sanchez is an openly gay activist. He typically incorporates his experiences as a counselor for young people and families into his novels to make them a source of reliable information. On his official website or at the end of his novels, Sanchez also provides useful resources about homosexual-related issues such as coming out, AIDS, and homophobia for his young readers who seek advice as to how to deal with these problems. In this regard, Sanchez is consistently acknowledged as an activist writer who produces numerous high-quality gay-themed YA novels.¹⁴ His books appear in the recommended reading lists of the American Library Association, the International Reading Association, the New York Public Library, the Lambda Literary Foundation, the Book-of-the-Month-Club, and the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights.¹⁵

Likewise, Robin Reardon is an activist whose YA novels are dedicated to anti-homophobia and designed to foster acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual people, especially American teenagers as they are vulnerable to homophobic violence.¹⁶ This is revealed in her motto: "The only thing wrong with being gay is how some people treat you when they find out."¹⁷ Reardon states that *Thinking Straight* was inspired by a true story of a gay boy named Zack Stark who was sent by his parents to Love in Action/Refuge (LIA/R), a Christian "ex-gay" ministry, for reparative therapy.¹⁸ Stark posted on his MySpace page about the terrible experiences he had at the camp and how he was

14. Stearns, "Sanchez, Alex," 550.

15. Stearns, 550.

16. In addition to YA gay-themed novels, Reardon also writes novellas and short stories for The Trevor Project, which runs campaigns against homosexual teen suicide and for Brent Hartinger's Real Story Safe Sex Project. See Robin Reardon, "Author," Robin Reardon, 2009, <https://www.robinreardon.com/author>.

17. Reardon.

18. Robin Reardon, "Thinking Straight: Background Information," Robin Reardon, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/540f35d3e4b002b3e937def0/t/5415e8ade4b09de883253971/1410721965675/THINKING+STRAIGHT+-+background+info.pdf>.

disciplined by what LIA/R called Refuge Program Rules.¹⁹ Reardon uses such information to write *Thinking Straight*, reflecting the life of Stark and the LIA/R ministry's rules through the portrayal of the gay protagonist Taylor and Straight to God Program.²⁰ Her reflection of the cruelty that really exists in American society is her attempt to use the novel to raise awareness of homophobic violence and to call for activism against an issue that plagues gay and lesbian American teenagers' well-being.²¹

In writing *Thinking Straight*, Reardon had to undertake a lot of research on the Bible and homosexuality, making this novel similar to Sanchez's *The God Box* in the sense that both offer a great deal of information and insights into the Bible and homosexuality. The novels can be used by homosexual young readers who seek the means to cope with Christian-based homophobia. Further to this, on her official website, Reardon provides background information regarding the homosexual-related topics which are mentioned in *Thinking Straight* such as homosexuality in science, reparative therapy, and homosexuality in the Bible. This, as she adds, does not only aim to help gay and lesbian teenagers to understand more about homosexuality but also urge her straight readers to "learn some things they didn't already know."²² Reardon hopes that her novel will instigate anti-homophobia, acceptance, and the embrace of homosexual people especially by Christian churches as she states: "[...] the story is positive and inclusive. Not only does it respect religious belief, but also it takes steps forward in creating a safe space for people of all sexual orientations within the religion called Christianity."²³ This ultimately has brought the novel many accolades, even from The Reverend Reid D. Farrell of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. He praises the book: "*Thinking Straight* needs to be read by every

19. Reardon.

20. Reardon.

21. Reardon, "Author."

22. Reardon, "Thinking Straight: Background Information."

23. Robin Reardon, "The Case for Acceptance: An Open Letter to Humanity," Robin Reardon, December 18, 2016, http://robinreardon.com/resources/documents/THECASEFORACCEPTANCE_RobinReardon_004.pdf.

pastor, priest, and rabbi actively engaged in ministry today, as well as being required reading in every seminary in the country.”²⁴

The Manifestation of Christian-Based Homophobia

In both *The God Box* and *Thinking Straight*, the manifestation of religious-based homophobia is derived from the homophobic characters’ literal reading and interpretation of the Scripture which has led to their conviction that homosexuality is a sin and that those who practice it are sinners. Worse, for some antagonists, their bigotry is rooted in their following a preacher who stigmatizes homosexuality in his teachings. All of this results in their inflicting verbal and physical homophobic violence upon sexual minorities. According to the research of Biblical scholar and pastor Philo Thelos, the Bible is not just powerful literature that influences millions of people around the world to follow the route of Jesus to love their fellow humans, but it can also lead to a hatred of homosexuals.²⁵ This occurs when the Scriptural verses are read literally and interpreted, misused, or abused by some churches to fit the ideas they desire to promote.²⁶

Thelos, having been a preacher for more than twenty years, observes that in Bible study, many Christians or even some priests themselves read the Scripture in a literal way.²⁷ They take the given text at face value but do not engage in a deeper examination of what Thelos considers to be two core components of Bible study: *i.* the text itself (words and/or phrases) and *ii.* cultural and historical situations of the text.²⁸ The text itself means that the actual words and phrases are defined by authoritative scholars.²⁹ Thus, we cannot understand the text of the Scripture without “brutal honesty as to exact meaning of words and phrases.”³⁰ In short, as Thelos aptly puts, “Every word must be understood as nearly as

24. Robin Reardon, “Thinking Straight,” Robin Reardon, accessed November 28, 2019, <https://www.robinreardon.com/books/thinkingstraight>.

25. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 1.

26. Thelos, 1.

27. Thelos, 3–4.

28. Thelos, 7.

29. Thelos, 7.

30. Thelos, 7.

possible, in exactly the way the writer and original audience understood that word.”³¹ He exemplifies this point with the word “Flesh” in Romans 13:14 which, in fact, does not refer to the “physical body but to man’s sinful nature.”³² By reading and interpreting this term literally, some people physically hurt themselves, believing that such an action is to “*make no provision for the flesh...* [italics in original].”³³ Clearly, this does not seem to be a sign of holiness to inflict pain upon ourselves.³⁴

Thelos’s idea is congruent with that of Daniel A. Helminiak, a priest and lecturer at the State University of West Georgia. Helminiak proposes that when reading and interpreting the Bible, we cannot take words and phrases literally as we will miss the point of the text.³⁵ He gives an example of Jesus teaching about simplicity through a parable in three of the Gospels – Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:25.³⁶ Jesus says: “It’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”³⁷ As this parable tells us, it seems that rich people cannot get into heaven because it is certain that no camel can get through the needle’s eye.³⁸ Despite this, some people read the parable to mean that in Jerusalem there was a very low gate at which all camels had to be unloaded, were made to crouch down, and led into the city wall.³⁹ That gate was supposedly called “the eye of the needle.”⁴⁰ However, in the study of Thelos and

31. Thelos, 7.

32. Thelos, 12. In Romans 13:14 New International Version (NIV): “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” The meaning of this parable is explained as “Romans 13:14 [sic] In contexts like this, the Greek word for flesh (sarx) refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power in opposition to the Spirit.” See BibleGateway, “Bible Gateway Passage: Romans 13:14 - New International Version,” Bible Gateway, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+13%3A14&version=NIV>.

33. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 12.

34. Thelos, 12.

35. Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 8th ed. (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2007), 30.

36. Helminiak, 31.

37. Helminiak, 31.

38. Helminiak, 31.

39. Helminiak, 31.

40. Helminiak, 31.

other historians, the gate had never existed.⁴¹ Some fundamentalist Christians interpret the parable as meaning that camels could literally get through a needle's eye, claiming that God has the power to perform miracles.⁴² This is an example of a literal reading or interpretation of the Bible that clearly goes to such extremity as to miss the gist of the Biblical verse.

Thelos proposes further that when reading the Bible, historical and cultural contexts must be considered as the Biblical text does not come to us in a form of "timeless axioms."⁴³ The Bible abounds with references to places, time, social and political events.⁴⁴ The writers did not usually give a clear definition of the words/phrases they used but assumed that the original reader would understand what they wrote.⁴⁵ In this regard, the only way to understand the Bible is to put ourselves into the original situations as nearly as possible by studying the cultural and historical contexts in which the Bible was written.⁴⁶ The serious issue when reading the Bible is that people tend to interpret the text in the light of our modern cultural/historical situations.⁴⁷ Similar to Thelos, Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington remind us that the Bible has been translated into multiple versions and many languages.⁴⁸ The translators' selection of word/phrasal choices is inevitably varied by the understanding/interpretation of the translators themselves.⁴⁹ As such, the reader should be aware of the varied meanings of words in different versions of

41. Helminiak, 31; Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 14.

42. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 31.

43. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 13.

44. Thelos, 7.

45. Thelos, 7.

46. Thelos, 7.

47. Thelos, 7.

48. Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7–8, <http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780199863013>.

49. Brettler, Enns, and Harrington, 7.

the Scripture and must read the Bible critically which can again be done through the study of the culture and history in the time frame that the text was written.⁵⁰

When it comes to the Bible and homosexuality, both Thelos and Helminiak agree that the Scriptural verses regarding intercourse between individuals of the same sex are often read and interpreted literally, instead of taking cultural and historical contexts into account. This is because many Christians and priests are not willing to put more effort into studying the Bible to find the truth for themselves.⁵¹ Indeed, Thelos cites examples of priests who copy other priests' Sunday sermons.⁵² They even accept any teaching as truth on the basis of their confidence in those who teach them.⁵³ Thelos and Helminiak elaborate this point with the word "abomination." This term is often associated with the Scripture's contempt for homosexuality and some people use it as a synonym.⁵⁴ The word "abomination," as Thelos and Helminiak observe, is found to be connected with homosexuality (prohibition of male-male intercourse) only in the "Holiness Code" of Leviticus and not everywhere else.⁵⁵ Leviticus 18:22 states, "A male must not lie with a male 'as one lies with a woman.' It is 'abomination [*sic*] [*italics in original*].'"⁵⁶ Then Leviticus 20:13 added a severe punishment for male-male intercourse that "For a male to lie with another male 'as he lies with a woman,' is to incur the death penalty."⁵⁷ If one reads and interprets these codes literally, it is highly possible that one might feel, at its simplest, uncomfortable with homosexuality and anybody who practices it or, at its worst, develop a hatred and impose violence upon the practitioners with "the death penalty." This is clearly the destructive power of a literal reading and interpretation of the Bible.

50. Brettler, Enns, and Harrington, 6.

51. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, v.

52. Thelos, 4.

53. Thelos, 6.

54. Thelos, 33.

55. Thelos, 35; Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 55.

56. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 36.

57. Thelos, 37.

Thelos adds that in taking the literal reading and interpreting approach to the Scripture or merely following the “built-in” sermons of preachers, one does not only develop the wrong attitude toward homosexuality and sexual minorities, but one can perpetuate “hearsay, ignorance and errors.”⁵⁸ Thelos admits that before undertaking any critical reading and interpretation of the Biblical verses with regard to homosexuality, he adopted a negative outlook on this from his teachers who had taught him that these minorities deserved condemnation for turning away from God.⁵⁹ He contends that those who literally interpret the Bible, in fact, are those who fail to understand its teachings. Thelos quotes Saint Augustine’s statement: “Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the Divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor, does not understand it at all, (Christian Doctrine 1.35.40).”⁶⁰ This serves to remind us that reading and interpreting the Holy Bible should not be undertaken in a way that promotes any kind of hatred which is inimical to the ultimate goal of Christianity: that we should love all human fellows.

In *The God Box* and *Thinking Straight*, both narratives similarly represent Christian-based homophobia as manifested in the homophobic characters’ literal reading and interpretation of the Scripture, including their adoption of some preachers’ sermons that despise homosexuality and those who practice it. To do so, the novels include cases of religious-based bigotry that range from mild to severe – which means that some antagonists show no physical threat to Manuel and Taylor (or other gay characters) whereas others who actually inflict physical violence upon them. In this regard, I will present the demonstration of the faith-based homophobia from the mild to severe cases so that the reader can see the destructive power of a literal approach to reading and interpreting the Bible (and adopting the “built-in” sermons from some priests) that instigate an escalating level of the violence against the homosexual characters.

58. Thelos, v.

59. Thelos, iii.

60. Thelos, 2.

Encountering Christian-Based Homophobia

In *The God Box*, an interesting case that Sanchez deploys in demonstrating Christian-based homophobia is through the character of Paul, the gay protagonist and narrator. Paul does not express any virulent homophobic violence toward Manuel, although Manuel blatantly claims that he is gay and a devout Christian and who re-assesses the Biblical verses regarding homosexuality. Perhaps, here the author is making a comparison between a rounded character like Paul and other fundamentalist Christian characters such as Elizabeth, Cliff, and Pastor José. While Paul changes his way of studying the Holy Scripture after Manuel urges him to read it critically, which in the end helps Paul to overcome his internalized homophobia and the faith-based homophobia, other characters resist doing so. This points to the truth that for some people their religious-based homophobia is very difficult or in fact cannot be eradicated due to their deep-seated belief in literal readings of the Bible. They deem it as the only way to understand the words of God and they believe that everything in the Scripture is infallible and must not be challenged. These fundamentalists are therefore unwilling to open their mind to any other approaches to the Bible or perhaps despise them as a sacrilege to Christianity.

Paul is mostly depicted as adopting the “built-in” sermons of Pastor José (an evangelical minister at the “I Am The Way Church” who often preaches that homosexuality is a sin) rather than shown to seriously study the Bible by himself.⁶¹ However, there are some scenes which depict Paul as reading the Bible, and one of these is his studying St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. This happens after Paul visits Manuel at his home and asks him: “What about St. Paul’s letter to the Romans? Doesn’t it clearly state that homosexuality is wrong?” The narrative shows:

I lay down in bed and stared at the crack in the ceiling that branched off in different directions. [...] From my nightstand I picked up my Bible.

[...] Chapter I began by affirming that the gospel was for everyone, including both Jews and Gentiles. Then, at verse 1:22, the letter began to condemn Gentiles who had turned to worshipping idols: *Claiming to be*

61. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 31.

wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Directly following that came the part that Pastor José and my other church teachers had used to preach against gays: *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.... For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.*

I kept reading: *Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*⁶²

Here, Paul simply takes the given text at face value especially the verses – “*Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men [...]*.”⁶³ This is revealed through his question: “Doesn’t it clearly state that homosexuality is wrong?”⁶⁴ Paul has never questioned the original meanings of the words and phrases used in St. Paul’s letter such as “*men committing shameless acts with men.*”⁶⁵ Instead, he jumps to the conclusion that this is “homosexuality” and is an abomination while in actually St. Paul neither used the word “homosexuality” in his letter nor clearly stated what types of same-sex acts he was referring to.

Moreover, Paul is not aware that such a literal approach in reading the Bible has a flaw in that it excludes the time, space, cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts which influence St. Paul’s letter. This inevitably results in the protagonist’s misinterpretation of the passage. St. Paul’s letter might connect same-sex intercourse to the idol worship (as shown in the previous verses); he deemed this as making people turn away from God who, according to Christian belief, creates them. If Paul read the Bible in the historical context, he would understand that St. Paul’s letter to the Romans was written at

62. Sanchez, 114–15.

63. Sanchez, 115.

64. Sanchez, 110.

65. Sanchez, 115.

Corinth, Greece about the end of the year 57; it was addressed to the Christian Church at Rome.⁶⁶ At that time when St. Paul wrote the letter, Corinthians indulged in pleasure, sex, lust, and idolatry while Christian priests had different ways of teaching morals to people and faced divisions.⁶⁷ Hence, St. Paul wrote the letter as a guidance for the Corinthians and Christians to follow so that they would stop idolatry and be reunited.⁶⁸ He does not explicitly condemn homosexuality.⁶⁹

Paul concludes that men who have intercourse with men must be punished and this includes himself even though he has never actually had sex with a man, other than in his dreams. He tugs his “red rubber WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? wristband” against his wrist to impede his desires.⁷⁰ Such self-infliction of pain is what Paul believes is the punishment he deserves. He even feels it is a holy act. This is linked to his understanding of the verse of St. Paul’s letter: “[...] *men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*”⁷¹ His punitive snapping of the band seems to be an answer to the printed text: “WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?” Moreover, the wristband’s red color, which is associated with the blood of Jesus, re-confirms Paul’s belief in inflicting physical pain upon himself as the right pathway to show his being a good Christian follower.

Aside from harming himself, Paul shuns Manuel every time he meets him in school. Such a negative reaction can be construed as his extending punishment upon Manuel, because Manuel has told him that he misses his boyfriend Bryan and the time they spent together (he implies they have had sexual relations). Paul presumes that the same verse in St. Paul’s letter – “[...] *men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their*

66. John Calvin, “Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Romans,” Online Library of Liberty, 2004, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/calvin-commentaries-on-the-epistles-of-paul-to-the-romans>.

67. “The Letter of Paul to the Corinthians,” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Letter-of-Paul-to-the-Corinthians>.

68. Rachel Pollack and Cheryl Schwartz, *The Journey Out: A Guide for and About Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Teens* (New York: Viking, 1995), 87.

69. Pollack and Schwartz, 87.

70. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 1.

71. Sanchez, 115.

own persons the due penalty for their error” – is also a justification for him to punish any of those who undertake “*shameless acts*.” Paul again overlooks the fact that St. Paul did not specify what types of same-sex relations he considered “*shameless*.” Nor does he think clearly about if this judgment should apply to the relationship between Manuel and Bryan. The protagonist also keeps wondering how Manuel can say that he misses Bryan without feeling sinful, and Paul gets frustrated by this. Here, we see the destructive power of literal reading and interpreting of the Bible. It leads to Paul’s developed homophobic attitudes and even self-harming with a blind conviction that it is right to do so. Paul also extends such hatred to Manuel, taking for granted that Manuel deserves a punishment for him being gay and having had sex with Bryan. This is clearly a manifestation of Paul’s religious-based homophobia.

Paul’s literal reading and interpreting the Bible is foreshadowed through his use of the God Box in the previous scene. We learn that every time Paul faces difficulties, he writes down his worries onto a small piece of paper, folds and puts it into the box before praying to God to solve the issues for him. The way Paul uses the Box is not different from how he reads the Bible. He believes that God can perform miracles; therefore, he prays to God to literally change him to be heterosexual – which has never happened. The depiction of how Paul uses the God Box and his reading the Bible makes him not dissimilar to those who believe that camels can literally get through the needle’s eye (as in the parable in the Gospels – Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:25 – which Helminiak uses as an example of literal reading of the Biblical texts). Thus, it is not surprising to see that Paul is presented throughout the narrative as expressing annoyance toward Manuel’s challenging his way of reading the Bible because this radical approach is contrary to what he has done all his life, shaking his conviction in both the Bible study and his belief that homosexuality is a sin.

Like Paul, Marie in *Thinking Straight* is represented as reading the Bible literally and this results in her developed homophobia and violence against homosexual characters. The key scene which reveals the manifestation of this heterosexual character’s Christian-based homophobia is a Public Apology meeting held for every program participant to

confess his/her sin and receive forgiveness from others. Marie quotes scripture at “the top of her voice” after Leland admits in front of the group that he has sinned by being gay:

First Corinthians, chapter six, verse nine: “Or don’t you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don’t be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, *nor homosexuals*, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor extortioners, will inherit in Kingdom of God [emphasis added].”⁷²

Here, from Marie’s selection of the Biblical verses, it is obvious that she is considerably influenced by her literal reading and interpretation of the Biblical texts. She blatantly expresses her aversion to homosexuality through her use of Corinthians – which contains a passage about homosexuality – to condemn Leland, the gay boy sent by his parents to the Straight to God Program to be converted. Marie shows neither skepticism nor any evidence that she has researched the original meanings of the term “homosexuality” within the passage she cites. Rather, she is too quick to believe that every word/phrase in the Bible is the truth to obey and therefore it is right to use the Scripture to attack Leland. This is confirmed by Taylor’s observation: “She must have memorized that just so she could do this tonight!”⁷³ At this point, we can see that Marie is depicted as simply reciting the Biblical verses like a parrot which does not help her gain a true understanding of the passage, but rather nurtures her homophobia.

In addition, Marie is not aware of the version of the Bible she reads which is, as the narrative shows, a translated one because other words and phrases here are from the modern English language.⁷⁴ This means that although the Biblical verses Marie quotes clearly state that “homosexuals [...] will [not] inherit in Kingdom of God,” it might not be the exact or original word used, but a re-interpretation by the translators. This reminds us of Bretler, Enns, and Harrington’s note to anybody who studies the Bible to keep in mind that the Bible has been translated in many versions and languages. The terms and phrases

72. Reardon, *Thinking Straight*, 2008, 104.

73. Reardon, 104.

74. This is re-confirmed by a note on the copyright page which clearly states that “All scriptural references in *Thinking Straight* come directly from the World English Bible, 2005.”

used in each version are merely the translators' understanding and interpretations. As such, Marie merely reads secondary documents; it is highly likely that – without taking historical contexts into consideration – she misinterprets the passage, and this inevitably forms a wrong conviction about homosexuality and how to treat homosexual people. This is evident in that Marie, whose name suggests the maternal compassion of the Holy Mother, Mary, and also the converted sinner Mary Magdalene, or even Mary of the Mary and Martha sisters, ironically bears none of their qualities. Where they show mercy, she is merciless; where they show humility, she demonstrates arrogance; and where they show love and compassion, she shows only intolerance. Marie does not only quote the Scripture at “the top of her voice” (shouting at Leland) but also “points not just her finger but her whole arm at Leland [...]” in condemnation.⁷⁵ Such actions are clearly a threat that frightens the gay boy as he stands “cowering.”⁷⁶ Marie does not help Leland to feel better which is the supposed purpose of the Public Apology meeting (to provide spiritual uplifting for those who repent their sin). Instead, she intimidates Leland. Indeed, Marie demonstrates her faith-based homophobia.

Violence and Christian-Based Homophobia

Both novels also include more severe cases in which the antagonists' fervent belief in Christianity motivates them to physically harass the gay characters. This is evident in Cliff, Jude, and Terry in *The God Box* and Reverend Bartle in *Thinking Straight*. Such an inclusion of severe cases of religious-based homophobia within the narratives is to show an extremity of violence that religious faith could bring about if the Bible passages are literally read, misinterpreted, or abused to attack LGBTQ individuals. In *The God Box*, Cliff is represented as exhibiting aggressiveness toward Manuel at the Bible Club meeting. This happens when he volunteers to lead the reading group with the story of Sodom. Cliff reads the episode in which Lot, a nephew of Abraham, negotiates with the men of Sodom

75. Reardon, *Thinking Straight*, 2008, 104.

76. Reardon, 104.

who press him hard to send the “two male angels” (Lot’s guests) out of his house so that they will “know” (or “to have sex”) with them.⁷⁷ Cliff reads aloud:

“But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.’”

[...] “Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, ‘I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.’”⁷⁸

While reading the story of Sodom, Cliff is repeatedly interrupted by Dakota and Angie who pose many questions (in fact they show skepticism) such as “[...] how can he offer his two virgin daughters to be raped?” and “What kind of dad is that? Isn’t he just as bad as the rest of the Sodomites?”⁷⁹ Cliff replies: “No. He knew the men outside were gay, so they wouldn’t want his daughters.”⁸⁰ Then he continues citing the next verses that mention Lot’s saving his son-in-law who is among the mob before answering Dakota’s last question whether the son-in-law is also gay: “Yeah. Apparently. That’s why they get destroyed with the rest.”⁸¹ From this point, the narrative reveals that Cliff’s reading and interpretation of the passage, especially his concluding that the men of Sodom are all homosexual and the story is about the sin of homosexuality, seem implausible.

To explain, Cliff is too quick to claim (and be convinced by the story) that the men of Sodom are all gay simply because they want to “know” the angels who are male. Again, this applies to the case of Lot’s son-in-law who Cliff believes is also gay – an inference he quickly draws from the character’s being among the crowd and killed with the rest when God destroys the city with fire. Such reading and interpretation lead Cliff to conclude that the story of Sodom is the teaching about homosexuality and sin. With this, he ultimately

77. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 76.

78. Sanchez, 76.

79. Sanchez, 76.

80. Sanchez, 76.

81. Sanchez, 77.

forms a strong conviction that gay people deserve harsh punishment such as that doled out to the Sodomites. Cliff rules out other possible readings that the story of Sodom could convey to the reader, for example, the lesson of inhospitality and sexual violence. This is suggested in Manuel's counter argument: "Maybe the story isn't really about homosexuality, but about rape. If the angels had been female, and the men of Sodom said they wanted to 'know' them against their will, would people claim that the story shows *heterosexuality* is a sin? [italics in original]." ⁸² Cliff, however, expresses his dogma, insisting that "The story is about homosexuality. [...] The angels weren't female. You're trying to change the story." ⁸³ Here, it is obvious that Cliff is indeed a Biblical literalist who refuses to change his way of studying the Bible.

By taking a rigid stance as a Biblical literalist, Cliff is under the dominating power of the Biblical texts and motivated to impose physical threats toward Manuel. He feels angry with Manuel's argument that the story of Sodom is not "antigay" but "it's antiviolence" and makes an immediate riposte. ⁸⁴ Cliff quotes the Biblical verses: "Leviticus Eighteen-Twenty-two: 'You shall not lie with a male as a woman; it is an abomination.'" ⁸⁵ Again, he cites Leviticus 20:13: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall put to death, their blood is upon them." ⁸⁶ Here, Cliff attempts to use the Biblical verses not only to support his claim but also to justify the physical harm that he threatens to impose upon Manuel who, by not yielding to Cliff in the debate, dares to provoke him – "Well, I'm gay. [...] Do you think I should be put to death? This is evident in Cliff's reply: "That's what the Bible says. It's our job to obey." ⁸⁷ Clearly, Cliff demonstrates his homophobia toward Manuel. His hatred, which arises from his using a literal approach to the Biblical reading, is so intense that he becomes a religious bigot. He

82. Sanchez, 77–78.

83. Sanchez, 78.

84. Sanchez, 78.

85. Sanchez, 78.

86. Sanchez, 79.

87. Sanchez, 79.

is ready to inflict physical violence upon Manuel simply because the gay character disagrees with his traditional way of reading and interpreting the Bible.

The narrative re-emphasizes the destructive influence of the literal reading and interpretation of the Bible with Cliff's recruitment of other school peers to form a mob against the establishment of a GSA. Cliff persuades Elizabeth and then the whole football team to occupy the classroom used for the Bible Club meeting. Cliff and his girlfriend put the most footwork into rallying their anti-homosexual campaign. He excites the jocks, "As you've all heard, a club on our school campus is being formed for homosexuals," and through this gains their support; they "burst into boos and hisses, banged on their desks, and stomped their feet."⁸⁸ This is followed by Cliff's announcement of his mission as a fundamentalist Christian: "it's our duty to speak out against sin," is backed up with Elizabeth's cooperative acts. She helps fuel the hatred against homosexuals by passing around her anti-gay tracts entitled "Sin City of Sodom," "Triumph Over Homosexuality," and "No Longer Gay."⁸⁹

This scene shows us that apart from being a homophobic Christian himself, Cliff perpetuates his erroneous interpretation of the Biblical verses. He passes his aversion to homosexuality and gay people onto his girlfriend Elizabeth, evoking her to exercise power to oppose the formation of the GSA. Moreover, both characters, acting in cooperation, rouse other school peers to join their force by forming the anti-homosexual mob. Cliff's action is congruent with what Thelos observes, that Christian Biblical literalists tend to perpetuate "hearsay, ignorance and errors."⁹⁰ In consequence, the mob gains more power the more members Cliff and Elizabeth recruit. This is underscored when the most virulent homophobic violence happens to Manuel. He is beaten by Jude and Terry, who are both homophobic school peers and appear to be, to some extent, influenced by Cliff's anti-gay propaganda. Jude joins Cliff's mob to stop the formation of the GSA and his bigotry is plain when he announces that "If I saw two guys walk down the street holding hands, I'd

88. Sanchez, 157.

89. Sanchez, 157.

90. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, v.

take a baseball bat and kill them.”⁹¹ As such, Jude’s deeply ingrained homophobia is kindled and intensified, further propelling him to commit a hate crime which finally results in not only Manuel being seriously injured but also Jude being imprisoned.

In *Thinking Straight*, the most severe case of Christian-based homophobia is represented through the character of Reverend Bartle, one of the preachers at the Straight to God Program. Reverend Bartle’s homophobia is, similar to the case of Cliff, rooted in his being a Bible literalist. He is depicted as often reciting scriptural verses about same-sex acts in front of the young gay residents and making Taylor do the same – “[...] he opens the Bible and tells me to read certain passages. Of course, they have to do mostly with sex and sin and men lying with men.”⁹² Reverend Bartle strongly believes that homosexuality is a sin that needs confession and conversion. This is presented in the scene in which he presses Taylor to confess his sin of being gay. The minister “grabbed [Taylor’s] neck, squeezed it until it almost hurt, and then stroked the back of [his] head once” before speaking:

“Tell me why you’re here. [...] Tell me about how you’ve given in to your ungodly feelings to satisfy your baser needs.”

“[...] I haven’t done anything ungodly.”

“For their women changed the natural function into that which is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural function of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another, men doing what is inappropriate with men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty of their error.”

Then, quietly, “Do you recognize that text, Taylor?”

“It’s from Romans.”

“That’s right. Do you know what it’s saying?”

“It’s talking about lust. Not love. And it’s not Jesus speaking.”

91. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 34.

92. Reardon, *Thinking Straight*, 2008, 213.

[...] He went into this rant, quoting chapter and verse from all over the Bible, stopping in between to paint these horrid pictures of all kinds of sex as evil. Especially sex between men.⁹³

Reverend Bartle's biblically inspired homophobia influences him to impose physical coercion upon Taylor. This is made obvious in his "grabb[ing] [Taylor's] neck [and] squeez[ing] it" to press the gay boy to admit that he has sinned.⁹⁴ His action is not a common practice in Christian confession, an act which is undertaken voluntarily by the repentant while the preacher acts as a good listener and consoler. Instead, in the case of Reverend Bartle, it is a threat and perhaps a punishment upon Taylor who shows resistance to his using Biblical passages to condemn gays. With the physical coercion that Reverend Bartle undertakes, it is clear that he is a religious homophobe.

Reardon intensifies the severity of Reverend Bartle's Christian-based homophobia through his deep entrenchment in the teachings of Dr. Strickland, *Straight to God's* director, that leads to his committing sexual harassment and even killing many gay residents. Dr. Strickland is a fundamentalist Christian who announces his firm stance against homosexuality. He, in the interview with a local newspaper after Ray commits suicide, insists that "Better a boy like Ray should take his own life than return to his gay lifestyle. Homosexuality leads to death of the spirit. If he dies before he commits himself to that pit, God may still take his soul."⁹⁵ Adopting Dr. Strickland's idea, Reverend Bartle lures some gay boys to have sex with him in a chapel at night and kills them, disguising their death as suicide. This can be seen in the scene in which Taylor is called to pray with him. Taylor struggles to flee from the chapel after Reverend Bartle attempts to kill him for not repenting his sin and refusing sex (which the preacher believes will save him). Taylor shouts:

"Are you like Strickland?" I'm nearly spitting at him. "Do you think death is better—"

93. Reardon, 30–32.

94. Reardon, 30.

95. Reardon, 133.

“Than living a life of abomination? Absolutely.”⁹⁶

It is clear that Reverend Bartle adopts the “built-in” sermons of Dr. Strickland. He is thus not dissimilar to the priests who copy Sunday sermons, in the example given by Thelos, in the sense that they follow their other priests rather than deeply thinking about their teachings or putting more effort in understanding the Bible themselves. This makes Reverend Bartle a blind follower, believing that, in the case of those who are unrepentant (like Taylor), death is a better choice than “living a life of abomination.”⁹⁷ He demonstrates the most extreme Christian-based homophobia which causes him to choose violence rather than love and compassion.

Interestingly, while Reverend Bartle is characterized as being a Biblical literalist and adopter of Dr. Strickland’s fervent belief that homosexuality is a greater sin than death, he is also a pedophile. He enjoys having sex with boys (and perhaps he is gay but cannot accept his sexuality). The depiction of the Reverend Bartle as a pedophile shows that sometimes Bible teachings can be abused. Reverend Bartle exploits the Bible to beguile Charles into believing that his homosexuality and desire is an “abomination” – the oft-quoted word in the Bible – and this trick is also tried on Taylor. Many scenes present Reverend Bartle attempting to convince Taylor to accept his redemption (having sex with him) as a means to cure homosexuality. The preacher eloquently persuades Taylor:

“Father, tell me what I can do to make Taylor hear you. To make him understand.” Silence. Then, “Is that the only way?” Silence again. It’s like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. Then he bows his head. “The Lord’s will be done.”

[...] Feel the love, Taylor. Feel God’s love. [...] God’s love for you is coming through me.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Receive love, Taylor. That’s all. Let God’s love take the place of Satan’s urgings.”⁹⁸

96. Reardon, “Thinking Straight,” 259.

97. Reardon, 259.

98. Reardon, 253–54.

Reverend Bartle pretends to act as the mouthpiece of God to deliver his messages. His acts, which often comes in tandem with his citing the term “abomination,” are designed to convince Taylor (and others) to accept his supposedly spiritual power to redeem them from sin. Here, as Reverend Bartle abuses the Bible and Christian teachings, he is a Satan cloaked with the image of Christian priest.

From what I have demonstrated, Christian-based homophobia arises from the antagonistic characters’ literal reading and interpretation of certain biblical passages pertaining to same-sex sexual acts and/or blindly following some preachers whose teachings demonize homosexuality and homosexual people. This literal approach contributes to their negative attitudes towards the gay characters, leading them to view the sexually marginalized as sinners who deserve punishments. In some cases (such as Cliff, Jude, Terry, Reverend Bartle, and Dr. Strickland) their faith-based homophobia is more virulent than that of Paul and Marie. It propels them to impose physical violence against the gay characters. Indeed, these homophobes operate under the destructive and dominant power of their fervent belief which harms not only the gay characters but also the homophobes themselves. Paul – who is both gay and homophobic – inflicts self-punishment by snapping a wristband while Jude, Terry, Reverend Bartle, and Dr. Strickland commit very seriously destructive hate crime by the end of the narratives. And, they face the consequences, which for some characters includes the curtailment of their liberty.

Critical Reading and Thinking

In *The God Box* and *Thinking Straight*, Manuel and Taylor’s employment of critical reading and thinking skills to approach the Bible is presented as a potential strategy to challenge Christian-based homophobia. This also builds collaboration between gay and straight allies – which is a strengthened power – who ultimately help Manuel and Taylor to deal with the homophobes who practice extreme and often violent bigotry. As both books proffer critical reading and thinking as the way to combat the faith-based homophobia, I will begin this section with ideas about critical reading and thinking as proposed by Mike Wallace and Alison Wray, Victoria Pontzer Ehrhardt, and Stella Cottrell, including

Christian theologians and academicians Thelos, Helminiak, Steven Wells, and Roger E. Biery. Then, I will demonstrate how critical reading and thinking help challenge the homophobia.

According to Wallace and Wray, people read a text by using three strategies: *scanning* which means that we look through a text in order to find specific sections or key words that indicate the information we are looking for; *skimming* refers to a way that we read the text quickly through some parts of it which helps us see the overview of the content; and *intensive reading* (or critical reading) that is a careful reading of every word of the text from beginning to end.⁹⁹ All of these strategies are important in our daily life; namely, while scanning and skimming can save time in accessing the information we seek, intensive reading enables us to be more deliberate in our approach to the text.¹⁰⁰ To elaborate more upon the third reading strategy, Wallace and Wray explain that to read critically it is necessary for the reader to identify authors' claims, underlying aims, and agendas as these might not be obvious.¹⁰¹ Moreover, we must look at whether the authors' claim is supported with enough evidence; in other words, critical reading requires us to have "reasonable skepticism" – "being open-minded and willing to be convinced, but only if authors can adequately back up their claim."¹⁰² This can help us establish their purposes, and more importantly evaluate the reliability of the thesis and the evidence.¹⁰³ Wallace and Wray add that when undertaking critical reading of a text in order to gain knowledge of something, it is important for us to relate what we read to other information.¹⁰⁴ Such a tactic helps us to see strengths and weaknesses, evaluate, and interpret the information because knowledge is not simply a set of facts that we can easily get by reading the text at face value.¹⁰⁵

99. Mike Wallace and Alison Wray, *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 27.

100. Wallace and Wray, 27.

101. Wallace and Wray, 4 and 29.

102. Wallace and Wray, 5.

103. Wallace and Wray, 29.

104. Wallace and Wray, 9.

105. Wallace and Wray, 9.

In the process of critical reading, the reader must work. Both skills (reading and the work of interpreting) are interwoven. Ehrhardt's analysis traces back to when humans began to think *and* how we think. She claims that the "human mind is wired to reason."¹⁰⁶ We were born with the capacity to think logically, and we can sharpen such innate power by making more close and careful observations. She elaborates this point by giving an example of the behavior of infants. Infants realize quickly that when they cry, parents will pick them up. They learn to use a cause and effect thinking process. At the same time, new parents use similar skills (plus with their close observation and examination of the possibilities) to discern if the baby is hungry, or if their diapers need to be changed.¹⁰⁷ Similar to Ehrhardt, Cottrell believes that human beings have the innate ability to think logically and this ability can be honed to critical thinking.¹⁰⁸ One tactic to achieve this is "skepticism" or "bringing an element of polite doubt."¹⁰⁹ This, however, does not mean that we never believe anything, but instead we have to "hold[...] open the possibility that what [we] know at a given time may be only part of the picture."¹¹⁰ (Cottrell's idea is similar to what Wallace and Wray call "reasonable skepticism.") Skepticism, as Cottrell goes further, helps us make better and more informed decisions about whether something we know is likely to be true.¹¹¹ Again, like Wallace and Wray, Cottrell reminds us that we ultimately have to accept something which requires "trust," but this should be the result of our careful analysis of information.¹¹²

Scriptural scholars Thelos, Helminiak, Biery, and Wells all agree that critical reading and thinking are important in approaching the Bible which contains numerous ambiguous passages about same-sex intercourse. For them, to read and think critically means to take historical contexts into consideration. This is because, as I already

106. Victoria Pontzer Ehrhardt, *Anthem Critical Thinking and Writing Skills: An Introduction Guide* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 1.

107. Ehrhardt, 1–3.

108. Stella Cottrell, *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Argument* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

109. Cottrell, 2.

110. Cottrell, 2.

111. Cottrell, 2.

112. Cottrell, 2.

mentioned, the Scripture was written thousand years ago and has been translated into many versions and different languages. It is likely that one may misinterpret the gist of the passages if historical contexts are excluded. The importance of historical context is re-emphasized by Wells who, in his key text *Strange Flesh: The Bible and Homosexuality* (2014), writes – “You’ve got to read between the lines. It’s all about context. Context, context, context!” – when analyzing St. Paul’s letter to the Romans.¹¹³ To demonstrate how to approach biblical passages critically, Thelos and Helminiak re-interpret the word “abomination” which is often associated with homosexual acts and which stigmatizes homosexuality as a sin.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 read as follows: “A male must not lie with a male ‘*as one lies with a woman.*’ It is ‘*abomination,*’ [and] For a male to lie with another male ‘*as he lies with a woman,*’ is to incur to the death penalty.”¹¹⁴ Thelos and Helminiak, reading with attention to the historical contexts, argue that such passages condemn neither homosexuality nor homosexual people.¹¹⁵ Rather they are codes of conducts which stemmed from the ancient Israelites’ concern over their existence of the community.¹¹⁶ They explain that, in ancient times, Israelites had to fight against other tribes to protect the “promised” land that they believed God gave them.¹¹⁷ Hence, Israelite men were socially privileged; they had authority to control women, animal herds, and the land.¹¹⁸ Ancient Israelite laws around land inheritance were affected by various social and political situations; importantly, rights over land would be passed on to patrilineal clans only.¹¹⁹ Intercourse between males that produced nothing to promote the prosperity of the Israelite community was thus prohibited.¹²⁰ The same is true with having sex with animals because

113. Steve Wells, *Strange Flesh: The Bible and Homosexuality* (n.p.: SAB Books, 2014), 12.

114. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 36–37.

115. Thelos, 35; Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 66.

116. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 41; Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 53.

117. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 52.

118. Helminiak, 52.

119. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 41.

120. Thelos, 41; Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 53.

it was believed that this would “weaken and even kill a man’s inheritance line.”¹²¹ In effect, it is the perpetuation of the nation which is the true message of the Holiness Code in Leviticus.¹²²

With regard to the story of Sodom, Biery argues that the teachings of Sodom are not the sin of homosexuality, but rather sexual violence. He observes that the story of Sodom is nearly identical to that of Gibeah in Judges Chapters 19 to 21. In Gibeah, the crowd of townspeople surrounded a house of a man who hosts a visitor. The men of Gibeah command the host: “Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations with him.” As with Lot, the host offers his virgin daughter and the visitor’s concubine to the crowd. They refuse, but the host sent the concubine to them anyway. She is raped, abused, and left to die at the doorway in the morning. Then, the Lord destroys Gibeah with a civil war. By relating the story of Sodom to that of Gibeah, Biery points out a flaw in the traditional interpretation of the story of Sodom as being a punishment of the Sodomites due to their engaging in homosexual acts. He argues: “If one concludes that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is merely the *intention* of ‘homosexual’ sexual expression, then one must similarly conclude that the sin of Gibeah is ‘heterosexual’ sexual expression [*italics in original*].” From here, Biery moves further to pose a question “But would this sin be ‘heterosexuality’ itself, or would it involve rape?” which ultimately leads to his conclusion that a purely sexual interpretation of either story completely misses the point.¹²³

Challenging Christian-Based Homophobia

Returning to *The God Box* and *Thinking Straight*, both Manuel and Taylor are depicted as the characters who read the Bible critically and think deeply about the texts they read (and hear), in particular, those that are used to demonize homosexuality and gay people. *The God Box* presents many scenes in which Manuel undertakes intensive reading and uses his thinking skills to challenge religious-based prejudices. One of these is the debate with Cliff in the Bible reading club. The first sign to reveal Manuel’s critical

121. Thelos, *God Is Not a Homophobe*, 41.

122. Thelos, 41; Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 53.

123. Roger E. Biery, *Understanding Homosexuality: The Pride and the Prejudice* (Austin, TX: Edward-William, 1990), 147.

reading and thinking is immediately brought into the reader's notice through his "cut[ting] in" on Cliff who cites "Genesis Nineteen," mistakenly deeming it as the beginning of the story of Sodom.¹²⁴ Manuel interrupts: "Excuse me, [...] [b]ut the story really starts in chapter eighteen."¹²⁵ His interruption occurs twice, yet Cliff ignores him. Here, the narrative shows that Manuel's critical skills are made to work as he immediately identifies Cliff's wrong citation of the source of information. Such quick and precise spotting of the flaw reveals that Manuel makes use of his skills of observation, an attribute of logical thinking. Manuel elicits and exercises such power. Through this, we see that he nudges other participants in the Bible reading group, particularly Paul, to be aware that Cliff is a novice (or in fact poor) reader. He makes a stupid mistake even in a simple task – locating the chapter where the story of Sodom begins – which would never happen if Cliff read the Bible carefully.

Manuel's using his critical reading and thinking to challenge Cliff's further interpretation of the story of Sodom and the passages regarding same-sex intercourse in Leviticus is made even more obvious. As already mentioned, Manuel proposes his idea to the circle: "Maybe the story isn't really about homosexuality, but about rape. If the angels had been female, and the men of Sodom said they wanted to 'know' them against their will, would people claim that the story shows *heterosexuality* is a sin? [italics in original]"¹²⁶ Here, Manuel expresses his skepticism; he poses a hypothetical question about the angels' gender – "If the angels had been female, and the men of Sodom said they wanted to 'know' them against their will, would people claim that the story shows *heterosexuality* is a sin?"¹²⁷ By doing so, Manuel eliminates Cliff's interpretation that the story of Sodom condemns homosexuality because the angels are male and the men of Sodom want to "know" them. Manuel, instead, looks at the story of Sodom without a "homophobe bias [*sic*]."¹²⁸ He sees the sex of the angels as irrelevant, noting that it is the fact that the

124. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 77.

125. Sanchez, 77.

126. Sanchez, 77–78.

127. Sanchez, 77–78.

128. Sanchez, 78.

Sodomites want to “harm the visiting strangers” which is the point and therefore the gist of this story is to teach people not to engage in sexual violence.¹²⁹ This conclusion sounds more convincing and plausible as confirmed by the reactions of Paul. Paul feels amazed. He admits: “It was the first time I’d ever heard anybody approach the story that way.”¹³⁰ From this point, Paul re-reads the Scripture and approaches it with the new method Manuel has taught him and other participants of the Bible club. This is a positive and radical change which Manuel’s strategy in challenging Christian-based homophobia brings about.

Again, in the same scene, Manuel deploys his critical reading in a debate with Cliff in which the latter makes a bold claim to attack Manuel: “The Bible says homosexuality is a sin,” and citing “Leviticus Eighteen-Twenty-Two: ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.’”¹³¹ Manuel retorts “So, are lesbians okay?” before referring to the passages from the Scripture – “In Leviticus Eleven, the Bible indicates that eating any seafood other than fish is an abomination. So does anyone who eats shrimps commit a lesser abomination than homosexuality?”¹³² His tactic here (relating what he reads to other information) is useful because it helps detect strength and weakness in one’s claim. Indeed, Manuel can specify the fundamental flaw in Cliff’s claim – “The Bible says homosexuality is a sin” – which is that Cliff fails to take the historical contexts into account, leading to his misinterpretation of the Scripture.

Manuel proves this by offering a rational explanation about the meaning of the word “abomination” to Cliff. He says:

Do you even know what ‘abomination’ means in the Old Testament? It meant unclean and impure. Leviticus describes an ancient code of cleanliness and ritual purity. It forbade sex between men because Jewish people of that time thought it was unclean, similar to talking to a Samaritan or eating shrimp or pork--not because those things were evil or wrong in themselves. St. Paul clarified in Romans Fourteen-Fourteen, ‘I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in

129. Sanchez, 78.

130. Sanchez, 78.

131. Sanchez, 78.

132. Sanchez, 78.

itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.’ Can’t you understand that?¹³³

Manuel applies the historical reading and interpreting approach to understand the Bible and, of course, to refute Cliff’s claim. He traces the meaning of the word “abomination” to discern what it originally referred to. And, as we see, he demonstrates an awareness of the historical development of how the term “abomination” was used and meant, and he backs up his explanation with the precise the source of information, not just Leviticus but also Romans Fourteen-Fourteen. In this regard, Manuel outsmarts Cliff and persuades Dakota, Angie and other participants to re-assess their approach in reading and interpreting the Biblical passages pertaining to same-sex sexual acts.

Like Manuel, Taylor uses his critical reading and thinking to challenge his parents’ faith-based bigotry. This happens immediately after both parents, to whom Taylor admits his sexuality, decide to send him to Straight to God for sexual conversion.¹³⁴ The scene shows the argument between Taylor and his homophobic father:

Dad wheeled on me, and I nearly fell back onto the sofa. “I don’t ever want to hear you say that again! Do you hear me? You’re talking Satan. You’re talking Hell. You’re talking about your immortal soul [...].”

[...] “You know, God made me who I am. It’s between me and God.”

[...] “You’ve done it already, haven’t you? You’ve been active. You’ve committed sodomy.”

[...] Sodomy. If you read the Bible carefully, the people of Sodom committed all kinds of sin. It wasn’t just a matter of men having sex with men. They were greedy, and they proved frequently that they were without mercy. And Abram’s nephew, Lot, lived there; why? And when two angels—who were always men, of course—came as guests to Lot’s house and some local guys wanted to have sex with them, do you know what Lot did? He offered instead his two virgin daughters! Talk about abomination. But my point is, sodomy means just one thing today, but the original meaning was more than that. So had I committed sodomy? Not

133. Sanchez, 79.

134. Reardon, *Thinking Straight*, 2008, 22.

biblically. Not in all its aspects. So for at least two very different reasons, I said, “No. You’re wrong.”¹³⁵

Taylor shows his father that he approaches the story of Sodom critically. He reads the text “carefully” and seriously. He tells the parent: “I’ve spent a lot of time this year thinking about this, praying about this, and reading the Bible about this.”¹³⁶ Moreover, the protagonist reads the Bible with skepticism. This is evident in his questioning not only Lot’s integrity but also angels’ gender – “[...] And when two angels—who were always men, of course—came as guests to Lot’s house and some local guys wanted to have sex with them, do you know what Lot did? He offered instead his two virgin daughters!”¹³⁷ The angel’s gender is the same point that Manuel picks up on in order to elicit the true meaning of the story of Sodom. Taylor is able to reach a reasonable conclusion, like Manuel does, that it is not homosexuality that this story stigmatizes as a sin but instead violence. He, therefore, gives a corrective answer to his father: “No. You’re wrong [...]”¹³⁸ Clearly, this is Taylor’s expression of his resistance against the father’s Christian-based bigotry.

Despite failing to convince the parents to discern the gist of the story of Sodom and accept his sexuality, Taylor’s first attempt is not entirely futile. It shows the parents that he had read carefully and without bias to find that homosexuality is not a sin and that he is not a sinner due to his sexual identity. This is borne out in the narrative’s affirmative resolution which depicts the parents taking Taylor home. They realize that it is, in fact, the religious-based homophobia that they and the priests at Straight to God hold which is sinful. The final chapter presents Taylor’s father talking to his gay son on the phone after learning that Reverend Bartle is in police custody for sexual crimes. The father says: “Your mother wants to fetch you home, son. Now, I know this has been a horrible experience for you [...]”¹³⁹ Here, the father shows a softer stance which, as the narrative suggests, does not only result from Taylor’s taking a risk to save Charles from Reverend Bartle but also from

135. Reardon, 22–23.

136. Reardon, 23.

137. Reardon, 23.

138. Reardon, 23.

139. Reardon, 282.

his being a “real leader.”¹⁴⁰ He tells his son: “They [Mrs. Harnett and other administrative staff], uh, they tell me you’re doing really well there, son. Said you’re proving yourself to be a real leader.”¹⁴¹ This is hugely different to his reaction when Taylor came out to him: “You’re talking Satan. You’re talking Hell. You’re talking about your immortal soul [...]”.¹⁴² Taylor has proven himself a “real leader” in acting as a role model for other homosexual teenage residents. By the end of the novel the father tells his son: “I just want you to know, I’m uh...I’m proud of you.”¹⁴³

Recruiting Allies to Combat Christian-Based Homophobia

As already demonstrated, the manifestation of religious-based bigotry can be violent as in the case of Cliff, Jude, and the Reverend Bartle. Therefore, it is necessary for Manuel and Taylor to recruit allies to help them challenge such pernicious homophobia. Both narratives again represent Manuel and Taylor’s reading the Bible and thinking deeply about its verses as a potential strategy to build collaboration or collective power. Returning to the scene in which Manuel debates with Cliff in the school Bible club, we can notice that the gay character attempts to make Cliff see the flaw in the literal approach that he employs to read the Bible. Manuel starts with a probing question. He asks Cliff:

“Do you have a weekend job?”

“Yeah,” Cliff replied cautiously.

“Including Sundays?”

“Sometimes.”

“Well, doesn’t Exodus Thirty-five-Two proclaim that for working on the Sabbath *you* also should be put to death?”

“That’s different,” Elizabeth interjected. “In Mark, Jesus proclaims, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’”

140. Reardon, 283.

141. Reardon, 283.

142. Reardon, 23.

143. Reardon, 283.

Manuel turned to her. “You mean Jesus corrected the inerrant word of God?”

“Jesus was the Word made flesh,” Cliff replied, sounding almost enlightened.

“Exactly!”

Manuel nearly leaped out of his seat. “Don’t you get what that means? He showed us how to question, think, and not make an idol of the Bible. Time and again, he challenged those who followed the Law—including Leviticus—to look into their hearts. Is it such a stretch to think that if Jesus had said anything at all about homosexuality, it might’ve been that it’s not the gender of your partner that matters, but what’s in your heart? [*italics in original*]”¹⁴⁴

Manuel is a critical reader and thinker. He does not only show his ability in locating a precise source of information he has studied (Exodus 35:2), but also in relating it to the point he wants to make (showing Cliff that he “mak[es] an idol of the Bible”).¹⁴⁵ Manuel pushes Cliff to fall into his own trap; namely, when Cliff answers that he has weekend jobs on “Sundays,” which is the “Sabbath,” he admits that he himself goes against the code in Exodus 35:2, and thus he “should be put to death” if he literally reads and interprets the Bible.¹⁴⁶ This is, of course, an absurdity and the weakness of literal approach Cliff uses to read the Scripture.

From this point, Cliff’s religious bigotry is even made obvious to everybody in the Bible club. He again retorts “Listen! [...] If you don’t believe in the Bible, then maybe you should just leave.”¹⁴⁷ Clearly, Cliff shows an aggressive behavior that stems from him being a Biblical literalist. And it is this evident homophobia – which Manuel’s critical reading and thinking unmasks – which propels other surrounding characters to take prompt action (to exercise their power) to protect Manuel. For instance, Angie tells Manuel that he has the right to disagree with Cliff’s literal interpretation of the Bible; Dakota shouts at Cliff “You’re a Neanderthal, you know that?;” and Paul, although sitting still, is later

144. Sanchez, *The God Box*, 80.

145. Sanchez, 80.

146. Sanchez, 80.

147. Sanchez, 80.

depicted as rescuing Manuel from being bullied by Cliff and Jude.¹⁴⁸ Here, we see that Manuel's recruitment of allies is a result of his deployment of critical reading and thinking. He identifies the weaknesses in Cliff's literal approach, makes Cliff openly express his homophobia, and allows other characters to perceive how virulent faith-based prejudices can be. This ultimately prompts everybody to become an ally for Manuel (and later form the GSA) as they see that Cliff is now led (by his own religious dogma) astray from the right path to God, to love human fellows, and he is highly likely to inflict physical harm upon Manuel.

Notably, the importance of allies in fighting Christian-based homophobia can be seen in the paratext (or the front cover of 2007 edition).



Figure 1: Front cover of *The God Box* (2007)

The picture of two guys (presumably representing Manuel and Paul) holding hands indicates that Manuel, after showing his resistance to Cliff by re-interpreting the Bible, is not alone anymore. He gains Paul as one of his allies. Both gay characters, as suggested through their standing right in front of a white church building, join their power to confront Christian-based homophobia. They do not yield to Christian homophobes whether they are school peers or priests such as Pastor José who also perverts certain passages in the Bible to condemn homosexuality. This is confirmed by Paul's making decision to leave the "I

148. Sanchez, 80.

Am The Way Church,” whose name is ironic as this is the place Pastor José promotes homophobia through his teachings, rather than a place of love which is the true way to God.¹⁴⁹ Paul and Manuel finally congregate in another church where homosexual people are welcome.¹⁵⁰

In *Thinking Straight*, the narrative also presents Taylor’s deployment of critical thinking to gain more allies. This is revealed through his attending the secret Bible reading group that the young residents – both homosexual and straight – join in order to re-read and re-interpret the Scriptural verses. Here, although Taylor is not the leader of the circle as he is put into a “SafeZone,” he encourages other participants to engage in discussion about homosexuality and love.¹⁵¹ Taylor grabs a piece of paper and writes down his opinion after Nate shows his curiosity as to why the Bible does not include any teachings by Jesus about homosexual love. Nate says: “Why *didn’t* Jesus say anything about it? If he knew everything God knows, why didn’t he mention it in some other way either? [*italics in original*]”¹⁵² Taylor writes: “You’re assuming it’s not a sin.”¹⁵³ This response prompts the other residents to question terminology and ideas. Dave asks “What is sin?” and, in turn, others join in sharing their opinions as to what they believe sin constitutes. For example, Jessica says, “It’s the opposite of loving connection. Anything that stops love or makes it difficult to love.”¹⁵⁴ And Nate continues, “[...] sin is anything that prevents us from getting to God, and we believe that path is love. Or sin could be something we do that prevents someone else from loving, which really prevents both parties.”¹⁵⁵ At this point, it is Taylor’s critical thinking – his showing the ability to make an assumption from Nate’s

149. Sanchez, 31.

150. In my view, the paratext that shows the collaboration of allies can be construed further as a way through which the literature conveys the message to the young reader that, in case the extreme homophobia, often the actions of a single character do not carry enough strength to adequately mount a challenge. Therefore, allies are necessary; they encourage, support, protect, and help gay people combat homophobia. Simply put, the fiction urges the reader to be aware of the allies’ power and even encourages them to join in LGBTQ activism to challenge bigotry, as Paul does.

151. Reardon, “Thinking Straight,” 2008, 177.

152. Reardon, 180.

153. Reardon, 180.

154. Reardon, 180.

155. Reardon, 181.

statement – which elicits other participants’ opinions, urging them to think and contribute their ideas to the Bible discussion group. In other words, Taylor evokes his peers’ brain power and through this becomes a “real leader” and gains more allies – both gay and straight – who, after this discussion ends, no longer believe that homosexuality is a sin.

From here, the narrative reveals the collaboration of Taylor’s allies in saving him from being raped by Reverend Bartle. Taylor, in an attempt to trap the homophobic pedophile priest, takes a risk (and, in a way, sacrifices his own safety) by praying with Bartle in the chapel at night. The gay character, however, is “lassoed” and almost killed until Sean comes to rescue him. Sean is informed by Peter, whom Nate sends to search for Taylor after he does not show up at the Bible reading group as usual. In this scene, it is remarkable that many characters are involved in saving Taylor. This is the power of alliance. They also help Sean capture Reverend Bartle and send him to the police. The success in combating the extreme case of Christian-based homophobia like that of Reverend Bartle cannot happen if Taylor acts alone. Here, Taylor sacrifices himself and his own safety for the good of those around him. He offers himself so that others might be saved. This is a truly Christian act. And just as Christ’s ultimate sacrifice brought him a legion of followers, so Taylor finds himself a leader of a wide group of supporters.

From what I have demonstrated, both narratives depict how Christian-based homophobia is rooted either in the characters reading and interpreting the Bible or following a minister whose teachings condemn homosexuality as a sin. This results in the Biblical literalists portrayed in the texts developing negative attitudes toward homosexuality and gay people. And such religious inspired bigotry may propel them to verbal and physical violence upon sexual minorities – and, as shown, the latter can be very extreme (such as gay bashing, rape, or even murder) – which the perpetrator considers as just punishment for sinful homosexuals. However, Sanchez and Reardon’s novels provide a coping strategy for the faith-based bigotry, namely that one should undertake critical reading and thinking when approaching the Scriptures, which means that s/he must have a sense of skepticism and read sacred texts while taking historical contexts into account. This, they show, can alter a received interpretation of the Biblical verses and stamp out the bigotry of biased interpretation. Moreover, as we can see, by undertaking critical reading

and thinking, gay characters (Manuel and Taylor) can generate alliances; they can build collaboration or collective power to help them combat faith-based homophobia.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that the gay-themed adolescent fictional texts under discussion constitute texts of resistance. They call for activism against homophobia which, as I have argued, exists in four main areas: (i) internalized homophobia, (ii) familial homophobia, (iii) homophobia in American high schools, and (iv) Christian-based homophobia. Ten novels which were published in the 2000s, ranging from Marlene Fanta Shyer's *The Rainbow Kite* (2002) through to P.E. Ryan's *In Mike We Trust* (2009), have been used as exemplars. There are many other texts which might have served my thesis well, such as Rob Clinger's *Just A Boy* (2007), J. Tomas's *Without Sin* (2008) and Dale Peck's *Sprout* (2009), but those selected are texts which have garnered the widest reach and readership. I began with a discussion of the ways in which homophobia was represented in these novels because, as we have seen, homophobia can be overt or covert. Then I offered an analysis of the coping strategies as presented in these texts, but only those which the narratives present as having the potential to challenge homophobic prejudices or, at the very least, to lessen the severity of their effects. To do so, I applied the notion of power, in particular, that which is proposed by Foucault, to my readings. For Foucault, "power is everywhere" – which means that power should not be deemed in only a negative way (as an oppressive force) but instead in a positive light.¹ In short, Foucault urges us to see that we should make use of power to resist homophobia which is a facet of the "dominating power" due to the fact that it "discipline[s], silence[s], prohibit[s], or repress[es] difference and dissents."²

As my research reveals, homophobia in the literature manifests itself in various forms – some are obvious and some are obscure. These are, for instance, gay individuals' imposing physical violence upon themselves and/or other homosexual characters, parents' exercising disciplinary power over their gay children through the imposition of what are typically perceived as "masculine" activities suitable for boys to mold the children to be "manly," the heterosexualization of the school spaces, priests' exploiting Biblical verses to

1. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1:93.

2. Sharp et al., *Entanglements of Power*, 2.

condemn the sexual minorities or even raping gay boys, and so on. More interestingly, homophobias intersect with each other in different domains. For example, LaRoche's *Absolutely Positively Not* shows internalized homophobia through the gay protagonist's being "in the closet" and inflicting physical punishment upon himself by snapping an elastic band every time he fantasizes about his handsome teacher. The same form of manifested homophobia is also found in Sanchez's *The God Box* which, although being classified as the novel to mainly represent Christian-based homophobia, represents Paul's self-hatred. He tugs his wrist band with the hope that the pain would impede his sex dreams about boys. Such intersection of homophobias is a re-enforcement of the fact that the bigotry is pervasive and harms gay characters' well-being. However, I have found that such the prevalent homophobia in the primary texts is not left unchecked at all. It is instead vigorously challenged as the gay characters deploy several strategies to cope with it. This is evident in the ways in which they wisely manage and make use of whatever form of power they can seize. Stephen in *Absolutely Positively Not* decides to "come out" which is a way that he acknowledges, elicits, and exercises his dormant "power within" to overcome his self-hatred. For Paul, his internalized homophobia is eradicated by means of his applying critical reading and thinking approaches to the Bible. This does not simply help Paul to come to terms with his homosexuality but also reconcile his Christian-based homophobia, accepting Manuel, his gay schoolfriend, for who he is.

The management of power is highlighted in the rest of the primary texts used in this research. In Chapter Two (Familial Homophobia), the gay characters, Bennett and Garth, resist their parents' negativity by deploying symbolic power. Symbolic power pertains to the capacity of symbols to convey messages from those who deploy the symbol in the first place to others. This can be seen in Bennett's rainbow kite (a symbol of homosexual pride) and in Garth's wearing Scooby-Doo and Superman costumes (clothes that disguise his true identity thereby outwardly demonstrating the way in which he is forced into the closet by his mother). With these symbols, the parents are made to be aware of their own homophobic attitudes (which they may not even be conscious of) and their negative consequences for their sons and upon the relationships between the parents and their children. This eventually helps the parents be more accepting of their gay sons. Again, in Chapter Three, Homophobia within American High Schools, the homosexual characters

form mutual support groups (and build collective power) by recruiting allies from all walks of life. This is to neutralize the heterosexual school space, making it a welcome and safe place for everybody. Lastly, in the final chapter (Christian-Based Homophobia), the gay main characters Paul in *The God Box* and Taylor in *Thinking Straight* apply critical reading and thinking approaches to fight against the homophobic antagonists who are presented in these texts as reading and interpreting scriptural passages which seem to refer to same-sex acts at face value, believing that the texts are infallible. This kind of approach demonstrates that the Bible is replete with historical events that must be taken into account so a more rounded interpretation of the ambiguous scriptural passages may be attained.

It is remarkable that while homophobia manifests itself in many intersecting forms and, making the strategies to cope with it correspondingly varied, one key thing that all novels show is the formulation of collective power. Namely, when the gay characters deploy their strategies to challenge homophobia, multiple allies – gay, straight, teenagers, and adults – are simultaneously recruited. They work together to challenge homophobia. Thus, gay-themed YA novels place significant importance upon cooperation from everyone to combat the prejudice of deeply rooted homophobia. The novels therefore encourage all of us to exercise our power to create positive change, not unlike the gay teenage characters in the novels.

Furthermore, as the gay-themed young adult novels call for activism against homophobia, I strongly believe that the books can be practically useful for further pedagogical practices, especially in English classrooms. Teachers might consider selecting some of these texts as additional reading or to be used in their class, in tandem with their raising discussions as to how homophobia is made manifest and nurtured. This does not just nudge the students to be aware of the existence of homophobia in the twenty-first century and its detrimental impacts, but also to prompt them to find out how to eradicate the prejudice, ultimately instigating a non-discriminatory society where everyone – regardless of gender and sexual identities – can live happily together.

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