

Neither Very Bi nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract This article examines four prominent young adult novels about bisexual protagonists: Julie Anne Peters's *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (2012), Brent Hartinger's *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* (2007), Lili Wilkinson's *Pink* (2009), and Sara Ryan's *Empress of the World* (2001). Defining bisexuality in terms of gender-plural sexual desire, it argues that narratives about bisexuals may impose essentializing identities, which resignify and redefine bisexuality through the use of stereotypes and the evasion of the sexuality and plurality of bisexual desire. By doing this, Peters and Hartinger, who represent the ideological middle ground in such narratives, ironically sustain the invisibility of bisexuality that they ostensibly resist. Of Ryan and Wilkinson's novels, Wilkinson's *Pink* is the most stereotypical and evasive example, while Ryan's *Empress of the World*, at the other extreme, manages to avoid essentializing bisexuality, seeing it in terms of plural desires. If narratives of bisexuality are to help bisexual teenagers interpret their plural desires and fill the bisexual spaces or gaps in their worlds, it is argued that this necessitates a shift towards approaches, like Ryan's, that recognize the variety and individuality of these teenagers.

Keywords Young adult literature; Bisexuality; LGBT fiction

[*bisexual is a weird word. it sounds like you have to buy sex. or it could be one of those one-celled creatures that you study in biology. "today, class, we will study the life cycle of the bisexual." "oh, I thought those were extinct."*] (Ryan, 2001, n.p.)

Nic, the protagonist of Sara Ryan's *Empress of the World*, writes field notes on her life, including one on the word "bisexual." The awkwardness of this word, which she is beginning to associate with herself, mirrors the awkwardness of this concept in young adult (YA) literature, where bisexuals are rare even among queer characters. It also reflects my own theoretical awkwardness in relation to both word and concept. David Halperin (2009) draws attention to the indeterminacy of the word's meaning; but even if its meaning is fixed, using it to delimit a category of sexual preference, and even arguing for the increased visibility of that category (as I do in this article) is awkward if one is suspicious of sexual identity as both a social construct and an essentializing discourse,¹ which, despite identifying as bisexual, I am. Like Leo Bersani, however, I think that if queer theory's "suspicions of identity are necessary, they are not necessarily liberating" (Bersani, 1995, p. 4). Bersani argues that "gay men and lesbians have nearly disappeared into their sophisticated awareness of how they have been *constructed as gay men and lesbians*" (p. 4, italics in original), and shows that "gay critiques of homosexual identity have generally been *desexualizing discourses*" (p. 5), suggesting that critiques of imposed gay identities, in either desexualizing or deconstructing gayness, risk erasing not only constructed identities but gays with them. He points, out, however, that "deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire" (p. 6). If, then, the essentialized construct of bisexual identity is suspiciously dismantled, the "habit of desire" for more than one gender will remain. I use the awkward word "bisexual" to refer to those of us who share this "habit" because it is, as the San Francisco Human Rights Commission (SFHRC, 2010, p. iii) says, "the term that is most widely understood as describing those whose attractions fall outside an either/or paradigm."

While I wish to make the bisexual habit of desire visible, I do not wish to suggest that the category or concept "bisexual" implies any common identity or characteristics beyond this shared habit of desire. In fact, I wish to critique the imposition of bisexual identities on characters in YA novels. Such identities implicitly

¹ Social scientists have traditionally described sexuality either as a biologically essential orientation, or as a socially constructed preference. Some literary theorists, however, have used the idea of essence more broadly, untethering it from its claims to pure biology. Leo Bersani, for example, explicitly denies the bioscientific foundation of essentialist thought when he argues that "the elaborating of certain erotic preferences into a "character"—into a kind of erotically determined essence—can never be a disinterested scientific enterprise" (Bersani, 1995: 2-3). It is this view of essence, as being part of one's fundamental character which is "elaborated" or constructed from sexual preference, that I deploy in this article.

define bisexuality as an essence that shapes and defines who and what a person is, and is evidenced in certain fundamental characteristics. If, however, it is in desexualizing bisexuality that critiques of imposed bisexual identities risk erasing not only constructed identities but bisexuals with them, then sexual desire for more than one gender—not an identity, but merely a preference or habit—should be what is definitive of bisexuals in critiques that seek to represent us, rather than to erase us. Similarly, novels that seek to represent, rather than to erase, bisexuals would also need to define bisexuality in terms of plural desire, rather than an imposed essential identity. Such novels would show a character to be bisexual by showing that character experiencing (or having experienced) sexual desire for other characters of more than one gender. Deborah L. Tolman (2002, p. 50) defines embodiment as “the experiential sense of living in and through our bodies [that] is premised on the ability to feel our bodily sensations, one of which is sexual desire.” Novels that represent, rather than erase, bisexuals depend on a recognition of the embodied plural sexual desires of bisexual characters.

A novel that evades such embodied, plural, sexual desires has few alternative means by which to show readers that a character is bisexual. If it evades the sexual nature of bisexual desires, it can signify a character as bisexual by conflating sexual desire with social desires, such as the desire for a girlfriend or boyfriend, or by conflating sexual desire and love, including platonic love, for people of more than one gender. If it evades the plural nature of bisexual desires, it can label a character as bisexual without showing the character desiring, or having desired, people of more than one gender. And if it redefines bisexuality in terms of a supposed essence, it can show that a character is bisexual through stereotyped behaviour and characteristics that are widely believed to be essential to bisexuality. In short, the desexualizing and monosexualizing discourses that impose an essential identity on bisexuals can be reinforced in fiction through narrative evasion of either the sexuality or the plurality of bisexual desires, and by essentialist stereotypes that resignify and redefine bisexuality in place of the definitive gender-plural desire that the stereotypes help evade.

A critique of such evasions and impositions is necessary if, as Karen Coats (2011, p. 315) maintains, YA literature “exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation.” Thomas Crisp (2008, p. 239) suggests that this influence is particularly strong in novels about lesbian, gay, bisexual

or transgender (LGBT) characters, when he writes that Alex Sánchez's popular "Rainbow Boys" trilogy may be the only representation of LGBT, queer or questioning people that many readers have seen, and that, as a result, "these books carry with them a tremendous amount of power." The focus of representation in the "Rainbow Boys" series is, however, on gay boys. Books with bisexual protagonists are even more likely than books about gay boys or lesbian girls to be the only representations of bisexuals that readers come across, because of a lack of bisexual visibility so disproportionate that it is routinely referred to as "bisexual invisibility."

In the section that follows, I will show how bisexual invisibility is made manifest in scholarly and popular discourse, including in discourses specifically focussed on sexuality as well as in YA fiction and scholarship, and consider the possible implications of this invisibility for young bisexual readers and for YA novels about bisexual characters.

Visible and Invisible Bisexuals

Kenji Yoshino's analysis of five major studies—by Alfred Kinsey (1948 and 1953), William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson (1979), Samuel S. Janus and Cynthia L. Janus (1993), Kaye Wellings et al. (1994), and Edward O. Laumann et al. (1994)—concludes that the incidence of bisexuality has consistently been shown to be "*greater than or comparable to*" that of homosexuality (2000, p. 380). An SFHRC review of three, more recent studies—by William D. Mosher (2005), Patrick J. Egan (2007) and D. Herbenick (2010)—finds bisexuals to be "the largest single population within the LGBT community in the United States" (2010, pp. 1-3). Moreover, the number of bisexuals in a 2009 survey of LGBT school-goers in the US (Kosciw, et al., 2010, p. 10) was just over half the *combined* total of gay and lesbian participants. Yet, despite this evidence, when I searched for the words "bisexuality" and "homosexuality" online in February 2013, like Yoshino (2000, p. 368) in 1999, I found their proportional incidences to be markedly different from what the above studies would lead one to expect. Google Scholar, for example, had 26,800 results for "bisexuality" and 235,000 for "homosexuality", while Google itself had 3,550,000 and 26,100,000 respectively. Clearly, bisexual visibility in scholarly and popular discourse does not match bisexual incidence in the general population.

This mismatch is also evident in discourses specifically focussed on sexuality. One example comes from a report entitled ‘Levels of Empowerment among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People in Gauteng, South Africa’ (Wells and Polders, 2004), produced by the University of South Africa and an LGBT non-profit organisation, in which the word “bisexual” appears only four times; “gay” appears eleven times, and “lesbian” fourteen. As Cheryl Stobie (2004, p. 36) notes, bisexuality has “received scant attention” in African sexuality discourse and activism; however, though it might be expected to be less visible in Gauteng, it might equally be expected to be more visible in San Francisco, “known for its tolerance of sexual nonconformity” (Stein, 2006, p. 49). Yet, as The SFHRC (2010, p. 11) points out, the word “bisexual” appears only once in the 2008 HIV/AIDS Epidemiology Annual Report of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. Even more strikingly, in Oxford’s well-known “Very Short Introduction” series, the index to the volume on *Sexuality* (Mottier, 2008) contains neither “bisexual” nor “bisexuality” (although it does have two references to “PoMosexuals”²) (2008, p.148).

YA fiction and scholarship maintain this trend. Minority representations have received significant attention in YA scholarship, but despite a growing body of queer YA studies, little has been written on bisexuality in YA literature.³ Similarly, YA books themselves have paid scant attention to bisexuals. Michelle Anne Abate and Kenneth Kidd describe homosexuality as “nearly a mainstream topic in YA literature” (2011, p.5), and in 2003 alone, twenty-one LGBT titles were published in English (Cart and Jenkins, 2006, p. 191). However, my searches of scholarly articles, bibliographies, popular LGBT media websites, LGBT children’s book websites and Amazon yielded only thirteen English language YA titles and one series published before 2012, whose protagonists arguably show sexual desire for more than one gender.⁴

The absence of bisexuality in YA fiction thus follows (and reinforces) a broader invisibility that is likely to shape most teenagers’ lived experience of

² ‘PoMosexual’ is a term coined from ‘postmodernism’ and ‘sexual’ for unlabelled sexuality.

³ Lydia Kokkola’s study of desire in adolescent fiction, for example, states merely that “bisexuality is treated so similarly to same-sex desire that [Kokkola has] not treated it as a separate category” (2013, p. 97).

⁴ In addition to the books discussed in this article, these are: M.E. Kerr’s *Hello, I Lied* (1997); Aidan Chambers’s *Postcards from No Man’s Land* (1999); Lena Prodan’s *The Suicide Year* (2008); Malinda Lo’s *Ash* (2009); A.J. Walkley’s *Queer Greer* (2009); Rachel Cohn’s *Very Le Freak* (2010); Katherine Scott Nelson’s *Have You Seen Me* (2011); Alex Sánchez’s *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (2011); Mary Rawson’s *All of Us* (2011); and Sara Shepard’s “Pretty Little Liars” series (2006-2013).

bisexuality. For teenagers are in the process of constructing themselves as sexual beings, and those who experience gender plural desires frequently struggle with “uncertainty about how to interpret concurrent sexual attractions to both women and men” (Fox, 1996, p. 29). As a result, bisexual invisibility is particularly problematic for such teenagers, since it reduces the conceivability and plausibility of bisexuality as an explanation for their plural desires. Moreover, although bisexual communities are socially and psychologically crucial for bisexuals (see, *inter alia*, Fox, 1996, p. 29), invisibility severely limits the likelihood of bisexual teenagers’ knowingly encountering other bisexuals, let alone bisexual communities.

Scholars such as Robyn McCallum (1999, p. 256) argue that “concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with others, with language and with society,” so YA books form part of this socializing and acculturating process. Clearly, YA authors writing about bisexual protagonists are bound to know that they are breaking new ground and potentially countering invisibility. As conscious exercises in visibility, their books have the potential to help bisexual teenagers interpret their plural desires, and to replace the bisexual space or gap in their worlds with a bisexual community, even if only a fictional one.⁵

It might appear, then, that the mere existence of YA novels about bisexual characters solves the problem of bisexual invisibility for teenage readers. As the tension between definitions of bisexuality in terms of plural desire and in terms of stereotypes suggests, however, this simple solution is complicated from the outset by the question of what a bisexual character is, and what conceptualizations of bisexuality such novels make visible. What follows is thus a critique of the imposition of bisexual identities in selected YA novels with bisexual protagonists, exploring how useful they might be for an audience of bisexual teenagers; that is, the aid they offer in interpreting plural sexual desires, and the nature of the visibility they afford bisexuality.

Assuming that higher-profile books have the potential to reach a wider audience, and are easier for teenagers to access, I chose the following four YA novels because of their relative prominence. Julie Anne Peters’s *It’s Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (2012) was selected for the 2013 American Library Association (ALA) Rainbow List, and presumably benefits from Peters’s established fan base. The third

⁵ Vanessa Wayne Lee (1998, p. 158) suggests, similarly, that “lesbian texts” offer lesbian teenagers an important “point of lesbian identification and community.”

book in Brent Hartinger's "Russell Middlebrook" series, *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* (2007), won the 2007 Bisexual Lambda Literary Award, and its profile is further raised by Hartinger's strong online presence and by a film version of *Geography Club*, the first book in the series. Lili Wilkinson's *Pink* (2009) is a 2012 Stonewall Honor Book and was nominated for a Children's/YA Lambda in 2012, while Sara Ryan's *Empress of the World* (2001) was chosen for the 2002 ALA Best Books for Young Adults list and nominated for a Children's/YA Lambda in 2002.

My critique of the representation of bisexuality in these four texts explores how they implicitly define bisexuality, and considers whether they impose essentialized identities on their bisexual characters. It begins with *It's Our Prom* and *Double Feature*, which I have grouped as examples of an ideological middle ground between the most and least empowering representations of teenage bisexual protagonists. After them I will examine *Pink*, as an example of the more disempowering margin, followed by *Empress of the World*, as an example of the more empowering margin.

The Middle Ground: Somewhat Stereotyped, and Neither Very Bi nor Particularly Sexual

It's Our Prom is structured around the attempts of three friends, Luke, Azure and Radhika, to plan an inclusive prom. Its focalization alternates between the viewpoints of Luke, who is bisexual, and Azure, who is lesbian. Both want to take their straight friend, Radhika, to the prom, which strains their friendships with each other and with Radhika; in the end, however, the three are reconciled. Also, Azure reunites with an ex-girlfriend, and Luke embarks on a relationship with a boy called Ryan, who is involved in a school play that Luke produces.

Luke's attraction to Radhika is embodied in, among other things, "Sweaty palms. Pounding pulse. Goose bumps whenever she's around. Fluttery stomach. Hard-on..." (Peters, 2012, p. 212). These embodiments are sexual, but comparatively mild; a boy called Connor, by contrast, leaves Luke's heart "crashing like a bass drum" (p. 57), implying an intensity that overwhelms the airy, lightweight connotations of, for instance, a "fluttery stomach." Similarly, Luke wants to hold Radhika's hand (p. 163), but, less chastely, to "rest [his] hand on [Connor's] leg. Pat

it sympathetically. Feel his muscles” (p. 226). And the wet dreams that he has about a young male teacher (p. 36) are also more powerfully sexual than his embodied responses to Radhika.

The courtly love tradition is a useful lens through which to view Luke’s attitude to Radhika. He explicitly differentiates his feelings for Connor and Radhika in terms of lust and true love (p. 189), and it is a conventional, sexually pure and passive femininity that appeals to him when he describes Radhika laughing “softly in that sweet, sexy way of hers” (p. 32). He idealizes her in matters both large and small. For example, he elevates her to a (presumably asexual) “guardian angel,” believing that, because of her, both he and their lesbian friend Azure have been “treated with more respect in school” (p. 16); he also refuses to believe that she can be tone deaf because “[s]he’s perfect in every way” (p. 35).

Thus, when Luke responds less sexually to Radhika than to Connor, it is either because his desire for her is less sexual, or because of learned constructions of gender relations. His list of embodied responses (p. 212) is offered as proof that he loves Radhika, suggesting that he sees sexual desire for a girl as needing legitimization through love. However, once he begins his relationship with Ryan, he sees Radhika as less “desirable” and hopes that they will “always be friends” (p. 332), confirming that her attraction has always been based in social interests and companionship more than in sexual desire.

By repeatedly minimizing the sexuality of his other-gender desires, dissolving them into either courtly admiration or heterosociality, the narrative undermines the plurality of Luke’s sexual desires. This is emphasized when Radhika questions (p. 143) and Azure denies his bisexuality (p. 209). Azure believes that Luke is gay but refuses to admit it because he gets more attention being bisexual (p. 205), reinforcing three common stereotypes: firstly, that bisexuals do not exist; secondly, that they are really closeted homosexuals; and thirdly, that they are attention-seeking (see *inter alia* Israel and Mohr, 2004, p. 121 and Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009, p.298). The first two beliefs self-evidently erase bisexuality. The third appears to increase its visibility, but may effectively also erase it by discouraging its expression, as Yoshino (2000, p. 396) argues.

Disappointingly, the narrative supports Azure’s belief that Luke is exceptionally attention-seeking. He organizes and enters a prom drag contest, and writes, directs and stars in a school musical about his own coming out. His

relationship with Ryan begins when Ryan adds an unscripted kiss (which earns a standing ovation) to the end of the musical (Peters, 2012, p. 317). Ryan then runs off, but Luke chases him and informs readers, “I’m not aware of the curtain opening again or the spotlight finding me. I just hold Ryan and kiss him until the roaring of the crowd is a *symphonie fantastique*” (p. 318). Luke’s affected obliviousness to the audience is belied by his unwarranted assumption that he monopolises the audience’s attention—the spotlight finds him, rather than he and Ryan—and by the delight in this attention that is embodied by the unlikely roaring crowd.

Mollie V. Blackburn and Caroline T. Clark (2011, p. 161) identify a need for YA literature “that represents queer people in communities.” Michael Cart (2004, n.p.) argues that explorations of “community and friendship” in YA books with LGBT characters are scarce. Cart and Christine A. Jenkins describe the majority of LGBT children’s and YA books as stories of “homosexual visibility,” a minority as tales of “gay assimilation,” and only very few as narratives of “queer consciousness or community” (2006, pp. 178-184). *It’s Our Prom* is therefore commendable for situating its several queer characters within a community of queer consciousness and allies, and nowhere is such community more evident than in the reaction of the audience to Luke and Ryan’s kisses.

Yet, troublingly, these public kisses also link Luke’s love of the spotlight directly with his sexuality. The narrative repeatedly calls his plural sexual desires into question. Consequently, lacking a clear signifier of his bisexuality, the novel instead marks his sexuality by rehearsing and reinforcing an essentializing stereotype.

In *Double Feature*, three friends, Russell, Min and Gunnar, act as extras in a zombie movie. The narrative describes the week of the shoot, first from the perspective of Russell, a gay boy, and then from the viewpoint of his bisexual friend, Min. Min’s narrative centres on her relationship with a closeted lesbian, Leah, who she meets at the shoot, and on her uncertainties about being involved with someone who is in the closet.

Like *It’s Our Prom*, *Double Feature* situates its bisexual protagonist within a culture of queer consciousness and a supportive community of both queer and straight allies. Unfortunately, as in *It’s Our Prom*, it also stereotypes this protagonist as attention-seeking. Min and Leah’s second kiss—in an empty stadium where, Min says, “the roar of a thousand invisible spectators cheered us on” (Hartinger, 2007, p.

138)—tellingly echoes Luke and Ryan’s kisses. Min’s spectators are fictitious, but her instinct to imagine them only strengthens the association between bisexuality and exhibition. By contrast, when Russell’s boyfriend kisses him in public, he hesitates, aware that people are staring. Satisfying gay desire in public is thus presented as unfamiliar, exceptional, while the association of Min and Luke’s bisexual kisses with an audience is presented as naturalized, essential. Significantly, this association between bisexuality and spectacle has been endorsed earlier, when Russell reflects on Min as “pretty in-your-face. Example: she had recently put purple streaks in her hair. And she was bi and open about it” (n.p.). Russell himself is openly gay, but is never characterized as attention-seeking, so it is Min’s bi-ness, more than her openness, that is “in-your-face.”

A further correspondence between *It’s Our Prom* and *Double Feature* is that, with their dual focalization, neither allows its bisexual voice to speak alone. It is certainly suggestive that, of the thirteen YA books and the one series with arguably bisexual protagonists published before 2012, four of these books, along with the series, delimit the voices of their bisexuals by representing them only alongside other, non-bisexual voices.⁶ This suggests that a bisexual voice is an inadequate focalizer, needing to be balanced by a more “normal” voice: the lesbian or gay voice of monosexuality, say, which makes the homosexual always more normal, and more normatively similar to the straight, than the bisexual. If these shared focalizations are literary attempts to marry form and content, then the content implicitly suggests that bisexuals are essentially limited and deficient, evincing stereotypes of bisexuals as confused and indecisive (see *inter alia* Israel and Mohr, 2004, p. 121).

Where *It’s Our Prom* downplays the plurality of Luke’s sexual desires, *Double Feature* simply silences Min’s. Across the series so far, Min has been involved with two girls and one boy. In *Double Feature*, the one volume in which she narrates, Min desires Leah only, so that any other-gender desire becomes incidentally silenced in her account. Additionally, she thinks about both same- and other-gender attraction in social, not embodied terms. Discussing what she is and is not attracted to, for example, she considers behavioural and fashion codes, and personality traits, all of which are associated in Western high school culture with particular social groupings:

⁶ In addition to *It’s Our Prom* and *Double Feature*, *Boyfriends with Girlfriends*, *Postcards from No Man’s Land* and the “Pretty Little Liars” series are also focalized from more than one perspective.

I hate the extremes: giggly girls with their catty backstabbing and frilly lace bras, and macho guys with their ridiculous swagger and stupid sex jokes. These people all seem like they're trying too hard. I like people who are comfortable in their own skin. I also like it when someone is confident and decisive and bold. (Hartinger, 2007, p. 9)

These codes and traits suggest that Min finds social markers of mainstream popularity unattractive, whereas social markers of an individualistic resistance to the mainstream are attractive. When Min first sees Leah, she describes Leah in a series of paired and contrasted observations that represent further markers of these two opposed social groups.

She was tall but didn't slouch; had blond hair, but had pulled it back into a simple ponytail; and had smooth skin, but wore only lip gloss. Her navy jacket looked like something from the Civil War—Union, not Confederate—complete with brass buttons in front and actual epaulets on the shoulders.... Maybe it was the epaulets, but I couldn't keep my eyes off her. (p. 11)

Despite her liking for boldness, Min appears to hate bold sexuality: what the giggliness, bras and swagger are “trying too hard” (p. 9) to do is attract sexual attention; the jokes are stupid because they are jokes about sex. Leah's height, blondness and skin place her in the frilly group that Min despises socially because these physical qualities draw attention to Leah's conventional prettiness and potential as an object of sexual desire; her bra is not visible, but Min is later discomfited by her trendy, sexy pink thong (pp. 28-9). However, Leah also belongs among the bold people that Min desires socially: her upright posture shows confidence (and avoids flaunting her hips or breasts); her simple hairstyle and lack of makeup defy convention (and resist accentuating her prettiness); her unique jacket asserts bold individuality (and covers her breasts and cleavage). In short, Min's initial interest in Leah is based on the social criteria she fulfils rather than on any embodied desire—especially as one of the unacknowledged social criteria is Leah's lack of sexual display. This attracts Min, in part, because she hopes that Leah's refusal to present herself in ways conventionally understood to appeal to the male gaze implies a preference for girls; hence she assesses Leah's cheerleading experience and thong—

more markers of social convention—against her jacket and lack of makeup—both markers of social resistance—in order to judge whether or not Leah is “into girls” (p. 29).

Yet the context of the rest of the narrative suggests that Leah’s lack of sexual display also attracts Min precisely because Min herself exhibits a basic sexlessness. Sexual desire is conspicuously absent from Min’s enumeration of Leah’s points of attraction, or indeed from Min’s decision-making. Min hesitates to get involved with Leah because Leah is closeted. Again Min considers social, not sexual, criteria; for instance, she asks herself, “what does it say about me” to date someone who is not “honest and open about who they are” (p. 58), and ponders whether she and Leah “are a good match” (p. 120). After their first date she finds herself “dying to see Leah again” (p. 49), but she evades asking herself, or perhaps does not know, why this is so.

Even when Min and Leah do, at last, express their relationship through their bodies, their language evades the sexuality of this embodiment, rather choosing to emphasize, through an extended legal metaphor, the way in which it marks a social connection. Thus, after they agree that Min will not hide from Leah’s straight friends, Min says: “I think we’ve effectively completed our negotiations... . Now if only we had some way to seal this agreement. Some way to consummate the arrangement” (p. 125). They then consider signing a document or shaking hands before, finally, kissing. Their negotiations are undeniably flirtatious, but their archness epitomizes the narrative of the relationship as a whole: sexual desire is yet again overridden or obscured by the social. As if to underline the point, the same thing happens during the kiss itself, which is described as briefly, blandly and sexlessly as possible—“We kissed” (p. 126)—and halted before they can “get too far” (p. 127), since Leah’s friends are coming to visit her. Min does not express any disappointment about the interruption of this first kiss. Instead, she reserves any strong feelings for the cod legal social agreement that is evidently what really arouses her: “the terms of our agreement were about to be put to their first test!” (p. 127). The final exclamation mark is the only indication of any excitement at this first kiss, but attaches this excitement to the social agreement that the kiss marks, rather than to the kiss itself as an embodiment of sexual desire.

Min and Leah’s second kiss is also presented in terms of sealing an agreement, rather than fulfilling a desire. In this case the agreement is love:

Here at last we could finally say what we couldn't say in front of
[Leah's friends].

"I love you," Leah whispered.

"I love you too," I whispered back.

We met in the kiss to end all kisses. (p. 137-138)

These kisses may fulfil embodied desires, but Min's choice of language—the first kiss ends before they could get “too far,” rather than “any further,” let alone “as far as I wanted”—undercuts such a reading, as does the ease with which Leah is distracted from her first lesbian kiss. The redundancy of the words “at last” and “finally” might suggest the anticipated satiation of overwhelming, pent-up desire, but sexuality is determinedly sidelined when the anticipation is exhausted in declarations of love. The hyperbole of the phrase “kiss to end all kisses” emphasizes the importance of the second kiss, but, like the description of the first, in its fastidious avoidance of sensory or sensual specifics it absents itself from the realms of desire or sexuality: the “kiss to end all kisses” is the ultimate expression of love, rather than of sexual embodiment. By comparison, before Russell kisses a boy called Kevin he is intensely aware of Kevin's “body heat,” Kevin's smell, his own “bone-dry” mouth; he says, “I could feel the sizzle of his electricity right in front of me, could hear it crackling.” He thinks about his absent boyfriend, but Kevin is physically present, “flesh and blood, and more” (n.p.). Russell experiences his desires in the body, and their sexuality is evident in the sexual connotations of “body heat,” “bone,” “sizzle,” “electricity” and “flesh,” and the implicit promise of “flesh and blood, and more.” If Min's desires are sexual and embodied, then this sexual embodiment—unlike love or social desires—is not something that the narrative wishes to share.

This silence desexualizes all girls, and bisexual boys, nullifying bisexuality and reinscribing gendered constructions of teenage girls' sexuality as though it were based on “the desire for relationship and emotional connection” rather than on “sexual feelings in their bodies,” and as though girls lacked the sexual desire “at the heart of sexual subjectivity” (Tolman, 2002, p. 5). Tolman's (2002) research shows both that these constructions bear little relation to girls' lived experience, and that they make girls' sexuality more difficult to negotiate. The critique of heterosexual sex that Beth Younger (2009, p. 51) argues is common in lesbian YA novels, however, might

suggest a more positive way of constructing teenage girls' sexuality. Younger argues that this critique "allows characters and readers the possibility of reimagining what better sex is, both for lesbians and heterosexuals. The lesbian YA novel depicts female sexual pleasure as a critique of male-centered heterosexist culture by portraying female sexual pleasure as cooperative and mutual." If the contrast between Min's and Russell's desires suggests that the desire of the bisexual girl is something best evaded, then the contrast between Min's sexless narrative and the lesbian YA novel, as Younger characterizes it, suggests that it is the bisexuality of such desire, not only its youth and femaleness, that compels such evasion. This is worrying in the light of Tolman's research, in which girls—including bisexual girls—who desired girls "were more conscious of their sexual desire than many ... other girls; it was not only a significant but also an especially defining feature of their adolescence" (2002, p. 184). Desexualizing bisexual girls may therefore affect their sense of self even beyond their gender and sexual identities.

Being Bisexual: View From the Middle Ground

It's Our Prom stereotypes Luke's bisexuality even while undermining his plural desires; *Double Feature* goes further, stereotyping, desexualizing, and effectively monosexualizing Min. In replacing plural sexual desire with essentializing stereotypes, both books reinforce the belief that bisexuality is an essence that shapes and defines identity and is evidenced in certain fundamental characteristics—in these cases, attention seeking and displaying signs of confusion or indecision—rather than in a sexual desire for people of more than one gender. Yet I have argued that Hartinger and Peters must know that they are breaking new ground and potentially countering bisexual invisibility. Their books, to all appearances, are well-intentioned efforts to situate visible bisexual characters—and readers—within communities of queer consciousness. And these efforts are probably cherished by many teenagers. For, as Lee argues in connection with young lesbians, "readers have found identification and community in even the most negative and conflicted lesbian texts by reading against dysphoric plots and making heroes out of unfortunate characters" (1998, p. 158); the same is likely true of young bisexuals. Ideologically, these novels represent the middle ground between the extremes of empowerment and disempowerment in writing that gives voice to bisexual teenagers. I will now,

therefore, consider examples of what appears at either margin of this valuable, well-intentioned, yet problematic centre.

The Disempowering Margin: Essentializing Stereotype and the Irrelevance of Bi/Sexuality

Pink is about an experimental period in the life of its protagonist, Ava, who wishes to try dating boys and replacing her alternative lesbian lifestyle with a “preppy” straight one. To facilitate this she begs her parents to let her change schools, and the novel begins with her lying to her girlfriend, Chloe, and pretending that her parents have forced the change on her. She then lies to everyone at her new school, cheats on Chloe with a boy called Ethan, and, in her new double life, juggles old and new friends, hobbies and even clothes: boyish black outfits for her old identity, pastels for the one to which she aspires. When her two lives collide and her lies are exposed, she realizes that many of the people she most cares about are members of the stage crew for a school musical, who she at first dismissed sneeringly as neither coolly alternative, like Chloe, nor coolly “preppy”, like the popular crowd she tries to befriend at her new school.

Despite all her efforts to try dating boys, it is never clear whether or not Ava desires any boy sexually. Her initial idea that she might like dating boys is not related to any particular individual. Ethan, a boy at her new school, becomes the object of her interest only because a popular girl, with whom she wants to be friends, suggests that he would be an “eligible” boyfriend (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 24). When Ethan’s sexual prowess is praised Ava realizes:

I hadn’t really thought about that side of things. I mean, I *wanted* a boyfriend. I did. I wanted to be normal and go to the school formal and wear a dress and for him to wear a tux and give me a corsage. But I hadn’t actually considered that I would *kiss* a boy, let alone have *sex* with one. (p. 36, italics in original)

Her desire for Ethan is social, not sexual; when her defensive repetition of the point that she wants a boyfriend sounds unconvincing, it is his power to socially “normalize” her through the clichés of teen romance—dance, dress, corsage, the very triteness of which underscores their normality—that she desires. And when she kisses

him, it does little to clarify what her thoughts on kissing a boy, or indeed, having sex with one, might be:

His mouth was hot and wet and much bigger than Chloe's mouth, so the kiss was messy. But I didn't mind. I was feeling messy. Messy and sexy. Ethan's hands were wandering all over my body. I wondered if anyone was watching us. I wasn't used to kissing like this in company.... I felt dizzy and trembly.
(p. 124)

With the sexual connotations of "hot" and "wet," and in her "messy," "sexy" dizziness and trembling, Ava is clearly sexually aroused. It is less clear that it is Ethan that has aroused her. She has drunk two cocktails. Unused to kissing "like this" in company, her unaccustomed exhibitionism may be sexually exciting in itself. The public realization of all her social desires, as she dances with the popular crowd at one of their parties, may be a thrill that she experiences bodily. And she may also be aroused by the unfamiliar hypersexualization of her environment or the sexual displays of the pretty, popular girls, whose dancing resembles pole dancing, and who rub up against the boys and titillate them with their bisexual performance (p. 122).

After Ethan, Ava becomes interested in a boy from the stage crew, called Sam, but chooses friendship over a romantic or sexual relationship with him, perhaps because she experiences no embodied response to him. It is not only her sexual desires for boys that are uncertain, however. Although when she and Chloe first kiss, "things happened inside [her] that had never happened before" (p. 11), what she stresses repeatedly about their relationship is social triumph, not sexual awakening, saying of Chloe: "She was the coolest, sexiest, most interesting person I had ever met, and she had chosen me" (p. 12). Ava thinks at first that her not liking Ethan means that she is lesbian (p. 309), but eventually she realizes that her lack of feelings for Ethan and Chloe reveals nothing about whether her sexual desires lie with boys or with girls: Ethan is simply not "the *right* boy," or Chloe "the *right girl*" (p. 309, italics in original). But since there are no other characters in whom Ava is sexually interested, the narrative—like Ava—is hazy about her desires, evading sexual desire for Sam entirely and, with Ethan and Chloe, conflating lack of sexual desire with lack of love even while mixing social and sexual desires to the point where they are inseparable, perhaps indistinguishable.

True to stereotype (see *inter alia* Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009, p. 298), Ava is portrayed as bisexual because she is confused. Also, stereotypically (see *inter alia* Israel and Mohr, 2004, pp. 121-122 and Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009, p. 298), she is closeted, deceitful, disloyal, and undependable as a friend or girlfriend, she betrays her lesbian community and politics, and she cheats on Chloe with Ethan largely to enjoy heterosexual privilege by passing as straight.

Ava's narrative suggests that it is irrelevant whether her desires are plural, or even sexual in nature. Whereas Luke and Min are stereotyped in their attention seeking and, possibly, their confused and indecisive behaviour, Ava represents a catalogue of stereotypes that are far more despised and injurious. What signifies that she is bisexual is not her desires but, rather, the antisocial essence that this accumulation of stereotypes creates. She thus fills the bisexual space or gap in the lives of teenage readers with the most disempowering of compromises: she suggests that bisexuality is a form of identity, with all the restrictions and prescriptions that this entails, but without the sense of belonging and community associated with shared identity; she also suggests that bisexuality is deterministic of something essential about character, with all the reductiveness and prejudiciality that this entails, but without the compensation of the validation that many feel follows from the belief that sexual preference is a genetically determined, or biologically essential, characteristic.

The Empowering Margin: Bi, Sexual, Individual

Empress of the World takes place on a holiday programme for gifted youth, where Nic, the first-person protagonist, is studying archaeology. It is a character-driven novel with a slight plot: Nic falls in love with a girl called Battle, but Battle soon ends their relationship and Nic is heartbroken. After a time, however, they become reconciled.

There are four important ways in which this love story takes a more promising approach to bisexuality than the novels so far discussed. Firstly, because Nic's narrative never desexualizes her desire. The sexual attraction between her and Battle is, in fact, so palpable that it shocks a mutual friend to discover that they are not yet physically intimate (n.p.). Whereas Min's worry about whether Leah is a "good match" is social, Nic's worry that Battle might read her mind as she pictures Battle

showering is more sexual. Nic is intimately conscious of Battle's physical presence; when Battle does a headstand her first thought is of the risk—and hope—that Battle's breasts may be exposed; when Battle gives her something she has hidden in a scarf tied around her thigh, under her jodhpurs, Nic "can't stop thinking about where this something has been" (n.p.), and her hands shake with arousal at the thought.

What Battle gives her is wine, its purpose being seduction. Their consummation is sexual; unlike Min's bald statement that she and Leah kiss, with its delicate neglect of the sensory, Nic's description of "all those steps [they] haven't taken yet" (n.p.) is uncompromisingly sensuous. The wine makes everything "blurry and soft until all that's left is sensations," blurry softness suggesting the femininity of her and Battle's bodies, the sensations of touch, scent and sound centred on the parts of the body most used for physical contact: "cool night air on skin, hands and mouths moving over each other, the scent of pine mixed with lavender, the sound of breath" (n.p.). Afterwards, they are reprimanded for breaking a curfew and asked if they think they made a good choice. Older readers may interpret Nic's response, "Yes, yes, yes" (n.p.), as recalling recalling what was, possibly, an earlier orgasm, and may read an enthusiastic allusion to frottage or tribadism between the lines of her wordplay a few days later, when a friend comments that she and Battle "are rubbing off on each other." In response, she cackles, "every chance we get!" (n.p.).

The second way in which the novel takes a more promising approach to bisexuality is because it avoids conflating sexual desire with social desire, or with love. Nic's ecstatic "Yes, yes, yes" is introduced with the words "Yes, I think, remembering Battle's arms around me" (n.p.); this memory thus implies pleasure in both their physical and their emotional closeness. But the two are intertwined, not conflated. Desire appears first, but then co-exists with love, rather than being subsumed in it. After Battle leaves Nic, Nic and a boy called Isaac, whose parents are divorcing, seek comfort in a kiss. She later thinks:

I can remember standing in his arms, afterwards, crying, but the kiss itself is like something I saw in a movie. Whereas everything that happened with Battle has been seared into my brain with a branding iron. Does that mean I'm definitely a lesbian, not bisexual, or just that I love Battle and I only like Isaac? (n.p.)

Nic remembers the emotional comfort of being held, but distances herself from physical intimacy with Isaac by positioning herself as a passive observer of their kiss. In the extravagant metaphor that she uses to compare the fixity of her memories of Battle to being branded, however, the image of a searing branding iron gives a physicality to her emotional pain, highlighting the corporeal side to their relationship even as the sexual and emotional are conflated in “everything that happened.” With Isaac she implicitly assumes that emotional and physical closeness are separable, but with Battle she considers the possibility that love makes the two inextricable. In contrast to Ava in *Pink*, however, Nic immediately recognizes the complexity of the interrelationship between love and desire, and resists the simplicity of merging them, thus answering her own question: “Maybe you don’t get to know, Nic. Maybe you need to stop trying to pick it all apart” (n.p.).

The third promising aspect of the novel’s approach to bisexuality is its representation of Nic’s desires as unambiguously plural. Despite her overwhelming desire for Battle, Nic concludes that she is bisexual, not lesbian, because she has “liked boys before” and “probably will again” (n.p.). It is true that her desires for boys, like Min’s, are never enacted in the novel. Also, her question about whether Isaac’s kiss is forgettable because she is lesbian recalls Ava’s assumption that she is lesbian because of her lack of feeling for Ethan. But whereas the social impetus of Ava’s desire for Ethan reflects a blurring of the lines of the sexual and social in her desires for boys collectively, there is no suggestion that Nic and Isaac’s kiss expresses anything more than comfort, and Nic is aware that it reflects merely “a desperate desire for everything to become boy/girl simple” (n.p.) after she loses Battle. There is good reason to think of Isaac in the same way that Ava comes to think of Ethan: as simply not “the *right* boy” (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 309, italics in original). Similarly, there is good reason to interpret the verb “like,” in the clause “I only like Isaac,” not the way teenagers customarily use it, to imply attraction, but denotatively, and therefore sexlessly. The meaning of Isaac’s kiss cannot be presumed to reveal anything general about Nic’s desires for boys.

Rather, the plurality of her sexual desires is demonstrated in her feelings for André, a boy she says she spent a year “trying desperately to attract” (Ryan, 2001, n.p.). This implies that she was attracted to him but, as *Pink* intimates, there are social advantages to girls in winning boys, so her language could be read in more equivocal terms. To interpret it as though she tried to attract André for such social advantages,

rather than because she was herself attracted to him, would, however, be to dismiss the interpretation that her character suggests is most likely. After having sex with Battle, Nic subjects her to a barrage of questions. When Battle asks why she has to take everything apart, she replies, “So I can figure out how it fits together” (n.p.). This explanation makes sense when we consider Nic’s dream of being an archaeologist. She is taught that archaeology is “the art of sorting through the fragments that people have left behind, and trying to draw conclusions about their lives and their cultures based on those fragments” (n.p.), and she imagines that, as an archaeologist, she will be able to “analyze artifacts” (n.p.) for the rest of her life. Archaeology, for her, is about careful analysis of “fragments” to understand people and to uncover and recover their lives, and she understands language to be integral to this analysis: a homework assignment teaches her the importance of an objective written description of an artefact, and she knows that the final product of archaeological analysis has to be written, telling two racist and homophobic archaeology students sarcastically: “Boy, you guys are going to make super archaeologists. You’ll write really sensitive analyses of oppressed cultures” (n.p.). The inclination to uncover that draws her to archaeology, as well as her archaeological training, drives her to use words to uncover the human story behind the fragments of a life, not to try to submerge or obfuscate that life.

When she mentions André, which she does only twice, it is in the context of an attempt to contextualize, and thus make sense of, her attraction to Battle. She thinks back to a girl called Rachel, whom she was attracted to in the previous year, and then admits to herself that Rachel is “not the whole story” (n.p.): the previous year was also the year that she spent trying to attract André. She mentions him because she is trying, uncertainly, to interpret these simultaneous gender-plural attractions, and to work out what they mean in relation to her growing desire for Battle. This is an excavation of her own history, with an analysis of fragments of her past and an attempt to put them together to uncover the human story of her own life. It suggests an archaeological, longitudinal approach, which necessarily accommodates the inconclusiveness and incompleteness of her experience, to the issue of how to interpret gender-plural desire. Her discussion of André is peripheral, and avoids reifying sexual desire for boys. But its direct engagement with the plurality of her desires implies the very opposite of calling them into question as, for example, *It’s Our Prom* does with Luke’s desires.

Finally, the novel takes a promising approach to bisexuality in that its portrayal of Nic's plural desires is situated within a nuanced exploration of the ambiguities and uncertainties of bisexuality, and of the interplay between sexuality and other factors that shape character. Whereas the confusion that leads to most of Ava's problems is presented as essential to her bisexuality, Nic's problem (Battle leaving her) is idiosyncratic: Battle finds the intimacy of Nic's constant archaeological scrutiny and analysis frightening. Not an archaeology student, she finds Nic's obsession with the fragments of Battle's life, and Nic's desire to piece these fragments together to uncover the story behind them, invasive; she compares it to vivisection. Ava's confusion is resolved with laughable simplicity. Sam asks why she has to choose between being straight and being lesbian, which makes her realise that it "feels good" to acknowledge that she does not know who she likes (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 309), and this settles all that has confused her during the novel. By comparison, Nic interrogates not only her own feelings, but also a number of other things: the concept of bisexuality itself, the value of such labels, and how they might be related to notions of identity and essence. Contemplating being called a "dyke" (n.p.), for example, Nic thinks, "*it's just odd—what has changed about me, that makes these people now want to call me this name?*" (n.p.). She recognizes that the label is "odd" because nothing essential about her has changed: there is no causal connection between her desires and her identity.

Nic's voice and analyses are oblique, but the archaeological field note with which I began this article exemplifies the depth and range of her inquiry. The statement "*bisexual is a weird word*" hints not only at the status of the word but also at the concept. The declaration that follows, "*it sounds like you have to buy sex,*" suggests traces of a cultural distaste for bisexuality; this distaste is taken further in the dehumanizing idea that "*it could be one of those one-celled creatures that you study in biology*", which positions bisexuals as other, as specimens or objects. Similarly, Nic imagines a teacher announcing that "*today, class, we will study the life cycle of the bisexual*"; this continues the theme of dehumanization by implying that bisexuals are a separate and lesser species suitable for high school biological study. Consideration of a life cycle, furthermore, hints at Nic's earlier reflections about how bisexuality might fit into her future and explain her past attractions to André and Rachel, while study of a bisexual suggests her interrogations of herself as a bisexual: whether she is one or not, and what it means for her, or says about her, to be one. In

her next sentence, “*oh, I thought those were extinct*”, she confronts one of the key stereotypes used by Peters to undermine Luke’s claims to bisexuality in *It’s Our Prom*—the idea that bisexuals do not exist—and probes the space created by bisexual invisibility. Through the emotive word “*extinct*”, she links this space and invisibility to humanity’s collective sadness and shame in relation to species that we have exterminated. Enclosing this whole passage in square brackets suggests the way society marginalizes “*the bisexual*,” and so locates the responsibility for distaste, dehumanization, invisibility, sadness and shame in this marginalization.

I have characterized Nic’s voice as being both oblique and unequivocal. This apparent contradiction springs from a narrative recognition of the complexity of experience, and the delusiveness of attempts to capture it within essentializing and reductive terms. In a similar way, Nic’s careful exploration of what she desires and how this might relate to her identity springs from a narrative recognition of the “uncertainty about how to interpret concurrent sexual attractions to both women and men” (Fox, 1996, p. 29) that is experienced by many bisexuals, rather than from the stereotypical confusion of, for example, Ava, in *Pink*. Whereas Ava is confused because she does not know what she wants, Nic’s uncertainty arises out of her attempt to make sense of new territory for which the more familiar scripts of straight or lesbian are unsuited. Another way of expressing this might be to say that her character—unlike those of Luke, Min or Ava—is too fully rounded, too individually specific, to be reducible to stereotype, as the habit of desire she represents is too varied in its expression.

Conclusion: Reshaping the Margins

What emerges from my comparison of the middle-ground positions of Peters and Hartinger and the more marginal stance of Wilkinson is that, ideologically speaking, the middle ground in published bisexual narratives for teenagers is distinguishable only by degree from its disempowering margin. That is, in being neither very bi nor particularly sexual, novels in both these categories are alike in evading the plurality and sexuality of bisexuality, often submerging these attributes under a stereotyped essence. Despite these shortcomings, the novels of the middle ground discussed here are valuable for their depictions of supportive communities of queer people and

straight allies. In addition, the middle ground is more likely than the margin to recognize a role for either the plurality or the sexuality of bisexual desires. Most significantly, it upholds fewer or less egregious stereotypes of what is seen to be a bisexual essence. Replacing what is definitive about bisexuality with what is merely a social construction, however, novels in both categories, to a greater or lesser extent, reinforce the very invisibility and, indeed, enact the very erasure that they ostensibly resist.

I suggested earlier that YA novels could, potentially, help bisexual teenagers interpret their plural desires, and help fill the bisexual spaces or gaps in their worlds with fictional communities. However, if this potential is to be realized then the middle ground will have to distinguish itself more materially from its disempowering margin; for example, by providing more nuanced and rounded characters, like Nic in *Empress of the World*, in order to recognize the variety and individuality of teenagers who sexually desire people of more than one gender. Moreover, the fictional communities that the middle ground creates will need to offer bisexual readers the sense of validation associated with being part of a community, without imposing on them the limitations of an offensive, essential identity; Ryan's novel suggests one way to do this, in the way that it raises pertinent questions about the relationship of sexual preference to both essence and identity, as well as acknowledging the plurality of Nic's desires and representing their sexuality prominently. Without an approach, such as this one, that distances the middle ground from the ideological margin, the bisexual YA narrative becomes little more than a titillating oddity that reinforces damaging stereotypes and colludes, albeit unintentionally, in keeping bisexual teenagers in the margins, invisible.

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