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Chosen Families:

Using and Creating Queer Cultural Capital in a Queer YAL Course

There has been much discussion among young adult literature (YAL) scholars about the need for queer[1] youth in K–12 settings to read diverse and authentic representations of queer youth. While all readers can benefit from queer texts, queer youth (like members of all minority groups) benefit especially from seeing their experiences reflected. Diverse queer texts allow these young readers the chance to see themselves represented, to feel affirmed, and to see possibilities for their own queer futures (Banks, 2009; Bittner, 2010; Mason, Brannon, & Yarborough, 2012). But what about college students? How do they react to queer YAL texts, and what do they gain from reading them?

I taught a queer YAL undergraduate course in 2016, which I described in the syllabus as more than a course about coming out and bullying; it was also a chance to read a variety of genres, talk about the strengths inherent in queer youth experiences, and review relevant work in queer theory. I found my class populated by a queer majority that often expressed the desire to see its identities mirrored in texts. However, as their ages ranged from 18–22 and they were living away from their families of origin, they had more life experiences than many of the high-school-aged protagonists in our novels. They were also looking at their early teen years as their recent past, rather than as a form of fond nostalgia with which older readers (including myself) might approach a YAL text.

As a result, some students had self-proclaimed wisdom gained from being in their early twenties and often expressed frustration with the younger queer main characters' choices in the novels we read. It seemed that these readers were looking at the characters more from the perspective of an exasperated older sibling or friend, and so had a difficult time maintaining distance between themselves and the characters. When they expressed frustration about a character's romantic choices, for example, I had to remind them that these characters were younger teens and that teens make mistakes, at which they would laugh and roll their eyes while continuing to grumble. My students were continuously searching for a queer storyline that was both entertaining and showcased healthy relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. They were, in fact, more judgmental of these relationships than perhaps younger readers would be.

As students examined our queer texts, we engaged in both face-to-face class discussions and virtual conversations on Twitter, using a course hashtag. From this, a strong community dynamic emerged. Being in a class dominated by other queer people and focused on queer issues allowed the students, and myself, to relax. The nature of YAL also allowed students to be more comfortable talking about texts; these were the kinds of books they might read for fun, and many were already comfortable discussing this type of literature. Additionally, our classroom environment was not only supportive but celebratory of queer identities. I aimed to instill this celebration in my curriculum by representing a variety of identities through the novels we read and the queer theories we used to

1. I am using queer as an umbrella term that encompasses diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, genderqueer, gender fluid, and non-binary identities.

analyze the texts. For example, when I introduced the concept of queer cultural capital (Pennell, 2016a) to students, many expressed excitement about a theory that allowed them to analyze the positive aspects of queer communities.

There are six aspects of queer cultural capital that will be defined below, and this article focuses on one: familial. When analyzing a short writing assignment in which students chose one aspect of queer cultural capital to identify within a text, the most popular form chosen was queer familial cultural capital. My initial thoughts about this selection centered on the fact that these college students, many of whom were freshmen, were living away from their kin families for the first time and forming strong relationships with new friends. Thus it seemed logical, in hindsight, that so many would be drawn to the idea of queer familial cultural capital as they explored new relationships. I also felt this familial capital forming in our classroom.

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In order to learn what these particular college students gained from reading queer YAL texts, I examine here the ways students utilized queer familial cultural capital to both analyze novels with queer main characters and to imagine and explore queer experiences through creative writing. I gave students a working definition of queer familial cultural capital (described below), but students expanded on this and identified new elements. I will discuss how queer familial cultural capital can describe the classroom environment and contribute to student learning. In our classroom, for instance, there was a close sense of community among the students and myself. Through these examples, I hope to demonstrate the value of teaching queer YAL at the college level, both for the intellectual growth it can inspire in students and for the possibilities of community it can create for queer students who may need—whether or not this need is conscious—a space on campus to be themselves without having to justify their experiences or right to exist. I also aim to contribute to scholarship on teaching YAL in college settings outside of teacher preparation programs, as currently there is a paucity of literature on this topic.

Queer Young Adult Literature

As Garden (2014) outlined, in the 1970s, queer characters in young adult literature were punished by being ostracized from their communities or even killed. The 1980s saw improvement on this trope, and there was evidence of influence by queer activist movements like Stonewall and AIDS rights activism (which continued in the 1990s publications), though there were also many books with a straight main character dealing with the queerness of a friend or relative (Garden, 2014). In the 1990s, there were books published that went beyond mainstream lesbian and gay identities and focused more on the queer characters than their relatives and friends (Garden, 2014). However, Banks (2009) noted that consistently from 1980–1995, "LGBTQ characters in YA fiction were secondary, often dead or killed . . . and separated from community and/or family" (p. 35). Scholars and educators, myself included, worry about the impact of such negative storylines on young queer readers.

While queer representations have improved in more contemporary YAL novels, there are still many stereotypical characters and mainstream situations. Crisp (2009) noted that although more recent queer YAL novels do not kill or punish their queer main characters, they still reinscribe heteronormativity (the idea that our society expects everyone to be heterosexual and cisgender) by emphasizing monogamous relationships and using homophobic characters as a way to portray realism. Wickens (2011) explained this same idea by highlighting that in older queer novels, queer sexuality was the problem, while in contemporary novels, homophobia (and I would add transphobia to the assertion) is the problem. This emphasis on homophobia may be due to the publishing industry's own reliance on heteronormative ideas and believing that queer lives must include homophobic experiences by default (Banks, 2009). While most queer people experience homophobia or transphobia, it is not necessarily a central part of queer lives, and queer YAL

should illustrate a wider range of experiences.

Queer YAL suffers from another problem endemic to YAL in general: most characters are white and middle class (Hayn & Hazlett, 2011). There has been improvement in the racial diversity of queer YAL, though like the YAL publishing industry in general, main characters are still predominantly white. Some recent novels that focus on queer characters of color include *More Happy than Not* (Silvera, 2015), *Juliet Takes a Breath* (Rivera, 2016), and *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016); given their popularity, it seems readers desire more racially diverse queer texts. As the call for racial, gender, and sexual diversity grows (such as the #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #OwnVoices Twitter campaigns), it is the hope of authors and readers that publishers will celebrate diverse, intersectional texts.

As queer YAL has gained popularity from readers and notice from publishers, so too has the scholarship on queer YAL grown. The volume *Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans and Gender Creative Youth* (edited by Miller, 2016) contains chapters on teaching queer YAL. In this collection, Greathouse (2016) discusses using Malinda Lo's *Ash* (2009), a queer retelling of Cinderella, to examine gender roles. Hayn, Clemmons, and Olvey (2016) suggest teaching YAL with transgender characters to open students' minds to transgender identities and recommend investigating author purpose and motivation. While these approaches are written specifically for use in K–12 classrooms, they could be translated to college courses as well.

Another recent publication called *Beyond Borders: Queer Eros and Ethos (Ethics) in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature* (Linville & Carlson, 2015) offers critical examinations of queer YAL using queer theory, as well as strategies and frameworks for teaching queer YAL in K–12 classrooms. I used excerpts from this volume in my college course, and students were especially taken with Thein and Kedley's (2015) chapter that queered the constructs of coming out narratives and coming of age stories. The authors posit that in many queer YAL novels, characters have to come out—and have a definite label to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity—to be considered an adult. This leaves no room for youth who are questioning or for youth's identities to change over time, which (as the authors argue and my students agree) does not represent the reality for queer individuals. This lack of nuance could be why some people, such as a gay student in Thomas, Crisp, and Knezek's (2010) children's literature course, do not see themselves represented in queer YAL.

At the time of this writing, there is a lack of research on teaching queer YAL outside of K–12 education and teacher preparation programs. While both Miller's (2016) and Linville and Carlson's (2015) texts offer vital insight into teaching queer YAL, both are focused on K–12 education and teacher education. In the university setting, Bach (2016) examined 270 syllabi from YAL college courses to find out if preservice teachers were taught about queer YAL in these courses; she found that 67 contained queer texts. However, some of the syllabi listed queer texts as options, so even in the 67 courses, not all students were actually discussing queer YAL. In addition, Pruitt (2016) surveyed professors of college courses on queer literature broadly, but these courses were not focused on queer YAL. As queer YAL courses are beginning to find homes on college campuses, I hope that the scholarship on this topic grows, and we begin to learn how teaching this at the college level (to both English and non-English majors) may differ from teaching it in courses focused on teacher preparation.

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Scholars are also developing ways to analyze queer texts, such as Helmer's (2016) queer literacies framework, which draws from critical literacy and queer theory, and Miller's (2015) queer literacy framework, which provides guidelines for educators of queer inclusion. Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth (2015), in an expansion of Cart and Jenkins's (2006) work on categorizing LGBTQ YAL, note the difference between LGBTQ-inclusive texts, which sometimes reinforce heteronormativity and gender binaries, and

queer texts, which instead "interrogate heteronormativity by acknowledging a variety of genders, sexes, and desires, as well as foregrounding the sexual, thereby challenging the notion of what counts as normal among them (Blackburn & Clark, 2011)" (p. 12).

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Boyd and Bereiter (2017) have created criteria particularly for selecting trans-focused YAL. I have posited that queer cultural capital can be used to analyze memoirs of transgender teens (Pennell, 2016b) and that this framework could also be used to select queer YAL texts that incorporate positive aspects of queer identity. Using these analytical frameworks and critical guidelines, instructors of queer YAL at both the secondary and college levels can critically choose novels that celebrate intersectional queer identities without teaching that queer people have to choose a definitive gender or sexual orientation, acknowledging instead that these identities are flexible across time and space.

Theoretical Framework

Queer cultural capital (Pennell, 2016a) is an asset-based theory intended to highlight the strengths queer people have *because* of, not in spite of, their varied queer identities and the challenges of living in a heteronormative world. There are six forms of queer cultural capital, five of which were adopted from Yosso's (2005) forms of cultural capital for people of color (aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, and resistant), and I added an additional form: transgressive. These forms of cultural capital highlight the strengths inherent in marginalized communities due to their very marginalization. Rather than seeing the differences of marginalized identities as a deterrent to happiness and success, cultural capital recognizes that these differences create positive qualities. For example, rather than focusing on how difficult it is for people of color to navigate institutions created for white people, Yosso (2005) saw the strengths this builds within people of color as navigational capital and recognized as a skill this ability to work within institutional structures not created with their needs in mind. Yosso (2005) defined familial capital as encompassing the history and social resources that come from family bonds, which can be defined broadly beyond biological kinship.

It is the aspect of familial capital beyond biology that applies most readily to queer familial cultural capital. Queer familial cultural capital was defined in course materials for students as "family history and community memories, social networks and resources. Family can mean families united by kinship or chosen families (common in LGBTQ communities)" (adapted from Yosso, 2005, & Pennell, 2016a). In class, we discussed how queer people often form chosen families, either because their kin families reject them or simply because they find closer bonds with friends. This is a strength of queer communities, one that provides a well-connected social network that can help queer people get through hardships or important milestones in life. For some students, the queer concept of chosen family was new, and they readily engaged in applying this concept to the characters' relationships in our novels.

Context of the Course

This study took place at a public liberal arts university in the Midwest. The queer YAL course was a lower-division undergraduate class, and the students had a range of majors and experiences with literary analysis at the college level. I wanted the course to expose students to new literature and diverse ideas about queer literature, identities, and theory, agreeing with Hayn and Hazlett (2011) that "the best works portray LGBTQs in various situations and genres, interacting with an array of people, their sexuality simply one part of them" (p. 70). Further, I agree that "by integrating texts with queer community into our curricula, we can show students what the world can and should look like in terms of how we demonstrate respect and appreciation for all facets of our own and others' identities" (Mason, Brannon, & Yarborough 2012, p. 19).

Thus, it was important to me that the novels we read reflect a wide range of both genre (realistic fiction, fantasy, science fiction, and genre-bending texts) and identity (diverse sexual orientations and gender identities as well as racial and socioeconomic diversity).

Given these priorities, I chose texts using these guidelines: a) the main character had to be queer; b) the plot had to be about more than coming out; c) across the texts, a variety of queer identities had to be represented, and d) across the texts, a variety of genres beyond realistic fiction had to be represented. I also focused on contemporary publications that I hoped would be new to my students, rather than taking a survey or historical approach to text selection. To locate potential texts, I searched for and evaluated recent queer YA publications, looking to create a set of titles that fit my criteria and contained intersectional characters. I found many of these texts at the ALAN Workshop and other English education conferences.

I chose six YA novels: *Afterworlds* (Westerfeld, 2014), *Carry On* (Rowell, 2015), *Huntress* (Lo, 2011), *Openly Straight* (Konigsberg, 2013), *The Art of Being Normal* (Williamson, 2016), and *We Are the Ants* (Hutchinson, 2016). *Huntress* is the only text I had previously taught, though in a middle school setting. A brief description of these texts can be found in Table 1. The course goals were for students to: a) examine the intersections and complexities of LGBTQ identities; b) question and critique the social construction of adolescence and LGBTQ+ youth; c) improve their skills as critical readers and writers; d) learn to communicate effectively with classmates and a global Twitter audience; and e) analyze texts using theory (primarily queer theory, but also intersectionality and feminist theories). For theory, I drew primarily from an edited collection on queer theory analyses of queer YAL (Linville & Carlson, 2015).

Students completed a variety of writing assignments throughout the course. For the first novel we read, *The Art of Being Normal*, students completed a more traditional writing assignment, analyzing the main characters' relationships to their family members. For *Carry On*, students had a more creative assignment—to write queer fanfiction involving characters of their choosing. As the semester progressed, I gave students choices between writing a traditional analytic response, generating a PowerPoint presentation, or creating an artistic representation and providing an artistic statement (though they had to choose each option once) in responding to the novels. For the artistic representations, students drew illustrations of character personalities and curated playlists that demonstrated their analyses of the novel.

Additionally, all students completed two assignments on queer cultural capital. In the first, they identified examples of each form of queer cultural capital (described in detail below) in *Openly Straight*. Then, they chose one form of capital and in a 2–3-page paper, used this form to analyze any book read during our course to that point (all books except *We*

Table 1. Descriptions of course texts

Book Title	Author	Genre	Queer Identities (either named or inferred)	Other Identities/ Issues
Afterworlds	Scott Westerfeld	Realistic/ paranormal	Lesbian, demisexual	Indian American (Gujarati), Hindu
Carry On	Rainbow Rowell	Fantasy/ fanfiction	Gay (male)	Orphan, mixed-ethnicity (secondary character is Indian and English)
Huntress	Malinda Lo	Fantasy	Lesbian	Asian, spirituality
Openly Straight	Bill Konigsberg	Realistic/ sports lit	Gay (male)	Racial minority status as tied to mental health (secondary character is African American)
The Art of Being Normal	Lisa Williamson	Realistic	Transgender (female and male)	Low socioeconomic status
We Are the Ants	Shaun Hutchinson	Realistic/ sci-fi	Gay (male) Queer (male)	Mental health

Are the Ants). Their final writing assignment was to write a 5–7-page paper that either analyzed a theme (in one or multiple novels) using a theory from class or to use a theory as inspiration for a creative writing piece, including a short artistic statement. Students were fairly evenly split between the two options, even though only a few were creative writing majors.

Another major component of class was Twitter. Students were required to have a public Twitter account (though they did not have to use their real names or photos) to communicate with their classmates, myself, and the novels' authors. We used a course hashtag, which allowed me to easily look through and evaluate my students' tweets for grading purposes. I required students to tweet a minimum of twice per week (many exceeded this) and to tweet our authors at least three times. Students understood that the authors may not communicate with them, but to our delight, many were responsive. Using Twitter allowed students to talk easily with each other both during and outside of class. It also allowed me to communicate with my students more casually than my typical professorial demeanor, which in turn served to help bond us as a community. I could also use the Twitter feed to see what students were interested in or confused about, which helped inform my instruction and aided student learning.

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Research Methods

In order to examine student learning surrounding queer YAL texts, as well as how the classroom community contributed to this learning, my research questions were: 1) How were students identifying and defining queer familial cultural capital within queer YAL? 2) How did queer familial cultural capital apply to our classroom dynamic? To answer these questions, I approached the data using a case study method (Stake, 2000). The phenomenon of investigation was student work surrounding queer familial cultural capital (Pennell, 2016a). The data set came from a broader study of the course at large and included student response papers and creative projects, the final paper, students' tweets using our course hashtag, end-of-semester surveys and demographic forms, and my own reflective and analytical memos of the course.

Participants

Twenty-three students enrolled in the course, and 18 participated in the study. The majority of students were white, reflecting the demographics of the university. Student majors included English, creative writing, biology, business, chemistry, and psychology. Students were diverse in gender identity (genderqueer, nonbinary, cisgender men and women, and transgender men and women) and sexual orientation (identities included lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, asexual, biromantic, and panromantic, with only three participants identifying as heterosexual).

Out of the 18 participants, seven wrote about queer familial cultural capital in their short essay assignment, making it the most popular choice out of six possibilities. (The next most popular was navigational, with five.)

This article focuses on the work of three students (all names are pseudonyms): Birch, a white, gay, cisgender male junior; Lily, a white, lesbian, cisgender female freshman; and Mahogany, a white, queer aromantic, genderqueer junior. These students used queer familial cultural capital for both their short queer cultural capital essay and their final project, allowing for an in-depth case study examination of their use of the theory. Birch's final project was a memoir, Lily's was contemporary fiction, and Mahogany's was fantasy. Consequently, the primary data sources for this study were the queer cultural capital short essay, final project, end-of-semester surveys (which asked their opinion on queer cultural capital theory), and tweets from the three focal students.

Data Analysis

As I was the course instructor, all participants' responses remained anonymous until the final course grades were submitted. Students delivered IRB-

approved consent forms and end-of-semester surveys to a colleague who kept them until the semester was complete. Data were coded, using both open and in-vivo codes, using MAXQDA analytical software to discover prominent themes. I began by coding the queer cultural capital essay and final projects of the focal students. Initial codes were organized into categories and then translated to themes. For example, codes such as "acceptance of identity" and "encouragement" were organized into a category of "support," which was further refined to the theme of "support for personal queer identity." Surveys and tweets from the focal students were coded to confirm these categories and themes, and tweets from other participants are also reported as they relate to the themes described here, particularly regarding my second research question about our classroom environment. Additionally, I consulted my reflections and notes on the course as part of the data analysis.

Findings: Exploring Queer Familial Cultural Capital

In their written assignments and through their tweets, each focal student demonstrated how queer familial cultural capital was, or can be, formed; they were creating the kind of queer narratives they wanted to read. These students identified several aspects of queer familial cultural capital that went beyond the definition provided. After analyzing the data, three of the most common themes were support for personal queer identity, learning experiences, and adventure.

Support for Queer Identities

Support for personal queer identities is crucial to any queer person's well-being, but perhaps more important to queer youth and young adults. Unsurprisingly, students wrote extensively about this when referring to queer familial cultural capital. As Mahogany wrote in his short essay, "Family . . . play[s] a huge role in affirming a queer person's identity." Mahogany wrote about the enthusiastic and at times overbearing support Rafe has from his parents in *Openly Straight,* which allowed him "to grow and help others that do not have that same support," as when he spoke at other high schools on queer issues. Mahogany also addressed this need for support in his final project when he wrote a fantasy story about a transgender character, Cas, who found a chosen family that accepted his identity as a prince rather than the princess he was expected to be by his royal family members. When Cas told his new friends about his identity, the leader of the traveling performers said, "Kid, you're not the only one with a story like that. When you need a family, someone has to take up the reins, and we protect our own." Mahogany was perhaps projecting his own desires for unconditional familial support onto his character.

Birch and Lily also wrote about supportive chosen families in their short stories. Birch wrote about his own experience at a Pride festival, where his friends encouraged him to talk to a cute boy. The cute boy turned out to be dating the girl he was with, which he revealed to Birch the next day after he and Birch had flirted. Yet despite the initial deception, Birch felt a kinship with the pair and remained friends. He felt "they'd given [him] an amazing couple of days [and] an incredible way to remember [his] first Pride," which supported his own gay identity. Lily wrote about a fictional group of "queer musketeers" who supported other queer people who were abandoned by their families of origin. This group of chosen family members lived together, helped each other find clothing to outwardly express their gender identities, and provided both emotional and material support.

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Support was also a class value that was evident in both face-to-face and Twitter conversations. In a class conversation on high school experiences, Birch shared that someone asked him if he sat under the painting of the school mascot in the cafeteria. Unbeknownst to him, that was a coded question for "Are you gay?" After class, students in the course referred to themselves as "the mascot," began tweeting[2] their own stories from high school, and shared affirming comments, such as when Oak tweeted, "Seeing fellow

2. To maintain anonymity, dates and twitter usernames are omitted, and tweets may be paraphrased. Original spelling and conventions are maintained as much as possible.

[mascots] 2day rly does help relieve stress. [We] gotta stick together." Lily also sought support from the class when she tweeted, "I always feel weird not living up to the stereotypical gay appearance. I feel like I need to cut my hair and buy a cat," to which she received reassuring replies from classmates.

These learning experiences about queer culture helped solidify our familial bond as students learned that even members of the queer community have more to learn about queer identities outside of their own.

Current events that occurred during the course of the semester also increased the students' desire for emotional support of queerness. The largest event was the 2016 presidential election, which left my students (and me) scared and uncertain about the landscape for queer rights. Our class community, which already felt a bit like a queer book club among friends, became more important to students. The night of the election, students tweeted using our course hashtag to vent their fears. Some students expressed their appreciation for their classmates, such as Iris who tweeted, "So thankful for my support systems today. My mom, my sister [Oak], and the rest of [our class]." The next day, I used Twitter to gather students on the quad. So while queer familial cultural capital was a helpful tool for highlighting and analyzing the strengths in queer YAL characters, I found it described the community we built in our classroom as well. Students frequently commented that the class environment was a positive experience for them, and undoubtedly the support we demonstrated for one another was a large part of that.

Learning Experiences

Lily, Mahogany, and Birch's work also indicated that support from queer familial cultural capital sometimes included learning experiences. Often this learning was about the queer community, but it also included learning for other interests. For example, Lily wrote that in *Afterworlds*, "Imogen is Darcy's main connection to both the world of writing and the queer community, and Darcy learns a great deal about each of them from her girlfriend [Imogen]." Mahogany wrote that in *Openly Straight*, Rafe's mom taught him the history of the American gay rights movement, which was important to his development. Mahogany noted that:

> [I]t is excellent that he is learning this because he has yet to face challenges that he would later come across when he was out publicly. By helping him to learn this history, she is also preparing him for the world that he lives in, one in which he will still face prejudice.

According to Mahogany's argument, queer youth benefit from learning queer history, as they can draw from this history if they experience homophobia in their own lives. Birch talked about learning in more subtle ways, such as his depiction of Pride as a space for him and his new friends to explore their queer identities and learn more about who they were attracted to and how to act on those attractions.

The concept of learning about the queer community extended to our classroom. When discussing *The Art of Being Normal,* which many students found to be a problematic portrayal of transgender identities, Lily tweeted that even if it "may not have been the best representation . . . it and [our class] showed me fascinating new LGBTQ perspectives." As the instructor, my desire for student learning stretched beyond our texts and queer theory to knowledge about queer communities and queer pop culture as well. For instance, when I pondered if Westerfeld named Imogen after Imogene Threadgoode, the queer tomboy in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (Flagg, 1987), I was shocked that my students were unfamiliar with this book and movie. In response, I tweeted images of Imogene and her partner Ruth from the film. Similarly, while students were in small groups to discuss *Huntress,* I talked with students about how Lo was likely making a lesbian joke by naming a city Cathair. One student tweeted our comments, and then other students explained the joke to classmates who did not understand: a stereotype about lesbians is that they love cats. This novel includes a central lesbian relationship, and the city Cathair is cat-hair. These learning experiences about queer culture helped solidify our familial bond as students learned that even members of the queer community have more to learn about queer identities outside of their own.

Adventure

Adventure often accompanied queer familial cultural capital as characters in our novels (and those in the three focal students' short stories) explored their worlds. Birch argued that "narratives focused on adventure and friendship more accurately depict the LGBTQ YA experience" than stereotypical coming out stories. These moments of adventure depict queer characters as in-depth and well-rounded people whose sexuality is only a part of their identity. In his essay on queer familial cultural capital in *The Art of Being Normal,* Birch wrote about Kate and Leo's (the main characters) journey to find Leo's father, which involves a train ride where Kate presents as a woman in public for the first time, a drunken night of karaoke, and a swim in a freezing ocean. Birch's description illustrates the overlap between adventure and support in queer identities, as he wrote, "[A]lthough Leo is not incredibly supportive of Kate at the beginning of the trip to see his dad, over the course of their journey, he starts to reach back to Kate, primarily by talking about their shared queer experiences."

Birch also explored his own adventure of crashing a wedding and finding his way to the roof of a hotel with new friends he met at Pride. He described it as "God giving [me my] 'teen rebel' moment on a beautiful queer platter." In Lily's short story, "Queer Musketeers," the main character narrated how "the pride flag draped over her shoulders made her look like a vengeful goddess of the queers. Which, technically, she was." Lily's characters went on adventures in support of their queer friends, such as rescuing someone from conversion therapy. Mahogany's fantasy story was also an adventure, as the main character (Cas) was running away from home. To add an additional aspect of adventure, the performers Cas traveled with were story dancers, which Mahogany characterized as capable of "weaving great tales of adventure, magic, and fantasy together with only the music and their dancing."

Even though a classroom is usually a contained space, we managed to have a class adventure when we went on a field trip to attend a lecture on magic and medicine at another university. The lecture was advertised as discussing the science behind the magic in the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 1997–2007), and since we were reading *Carry On* (Rowell, 2015), which is inspired by the series, it seemed a natural fit for our class. However, the lecture was different than expected, and the speaker discussed medicine in a way that made us all doubt our doctors' training. We communicated via Twitter during the lecture to vent our feelings, especially on the euphemisms the lecturer was unintentionally (we think) using: asking volunteers for magic tricks to "excite the wood" and to "gently touch the tip" of a pointy metal object. Amusingly, *Carry On* contains several similar euphemisms—mostly about the main male characters "pushing" magic energy into each other and their frequent discussions about their wands—which we had discussed extensively in class. So this lecture fit better with our class than we initially thought. I tweeted "gamefaces" to the class when I myself was struggling not to laugh at the speaker's word choices. When we debriefed about this experience in the following class, many students expressed that they were glad we all could experience it together. Like other class experiences, this little adventure brought us together and strengthened our queer familial cultural capital.

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Implications for College YAL Courses

In queer communities, chosen families are vital. For this semester, our class became a chosen family where students sought support. As young adults learning to live on their own, my students were exploring their identities and creating strong friendships outside of their families and home towns. In writing about transgender YAL, Bittner (2010) stated that such novels "can be seen as a form of therapy that will aid young people in developing healthy self-acceptance" (p. 31). This was certainly true of my queer students, both transgender and cisgender, as they related the characters' experiences to their own. I think this is why many students were drawn to queer familial cultural capital as an analytical tool.

This was especially true for freshmen, like Lily, who were developing these new chosen family rela-

tionships for the first time while living apart from their families of origin. Lily's tweets echoed the queer familial cultural capital present in class: "love you guys and I hope you're having a wonderful day!" and "[our class] makes my day so much better." Creating a welcoming classroom environment for queer students is just as important at the college level as it is in K–12 environments. It may also be more easily done, as including queer YAL texts in a college setting rarely involves parental backlash. This freedom was likely felt by students who were discovering their identities, whether their own family was supportive or not, because they could thrive in the supportive space of our classroom as well as in the relative freedom of new living spaces in college.

I do not want to suggest that only queer faculty should teach queer YAL texts or courses. Students need faculty allies to create inclusive curricular experiences, and by reading queer YAL, college students can reflect on their own adolescent experiences and see new possibilities for forming chosen families through literature.

Students often referred to queer familial capital elements of "chosen families" and "shared queer experiences" when discussing our queer novels. They discussed secondary characters who supported their queer friends unconditionally—Rafe's best friend, Claire Olivia, in *Openly Straight* and Penelope, Simon Snow's formidable best friend, in *Carry On*—and noted how important that was to a queer character's journey. Birch's end-of-semester survey stated that he "benefitted from [a queer cultural capital] understanding" because the theory "helped [him] on a personal level to reframe [his] experience." This illustrates that using an asset-based queer theory can benefit both students' analysis of a text and their feelings about their own identity—at least in the case of my students, who eagerly used queer familial cultural capital and expanded it, which is what I hope for as a queer scholar. In future iterations of this course, I would like to incorporate more asset-based theories to demonstrate the multiple ways queer identities are positive and to continue affirming students' own identities.

The next time I teach this course, I will strive harder to represent more identities outside of the typical white, middle-class, cisgender identity and will look for more queer books, as defined by Blackburn et al. (2015) as literature that "offers multiple and conflicting ideologies related to sexuality and gender [that] manifest themselves in queer elements, such as disruptions of norms as they pertain to sexuality, gender, families, homes, and time" (p. 24). As more students (in my limited experience) are identifying as asexual (someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction, though they may experience romantic attraction), genderqueer or non-binary (someone whose gender is neither male nor female, but in the middle), or agender (someone who does not identify with any gender), teachers of YAL at all levels should work to include these identities in the works they teach.

Conclusion: Finding a Queer Home in College

Banks (2009) wrote that most queer YA novels in the 1980s–1990s were about characters' struggles with sexuality, which "continues to reinforce the notion that one's sexuality is inherently controversial and conflicted, and I'm not sure that is true for all LGBT adolescents today" (p. 35). My students seemed to largely agree with this latter sentiment. They relished narratives that did not center on sexuality and instead focused on adventures, friendships, and other elements of adolescents' experiences. They liked reading about how Rafe's family, however overbearing, was supportive of his sexual orientation (Konigsberg, 2013). They enjoyed characters who used magic (Lo, 2011; Rowell, 2015); dealt with aliens, family issues, and mental health (Hutchinson, 2016); learned to live on their own (Westerfeld, 2014); and traveled to unknown places together (Lo, 2011; Williamson, 2015). For my students, these shared experiences bonded the characters together and demonstrated queer familial capital.

Research has shown (though these findings are likely obvious to those in marginalized communities) that queer students feel less stigmatized when queer identities are represented in the curriculum and when they have an "out" faculty member (Linley & Nguyen,

2015). In this class, my students were able to experience both, and several expressed to me that these factors were meaningful to them. I, too, was forming new chosen families as a professor, and that extended network now included my students. The straight students were also fundamental to the community, and hopefully gained some insight into authentic queer experiences, as did the straight students in Pruitt's (2015) study.

However, I do not want to suggest that only queer faculty should teach queer YAL texts or courses. Students need faculty allies to create inclusive curricular experiences, and by reading queer YAL, college students can reflect on their own adolescent experiences and see new possibilities for forming chosen families through literature. Any faculty with background in literature could teach a course as I outlined here and create a space celebratory of diverse queer identities. I also recommend professors try Twitter or other forms of informal communication that will allow them to get to know their students better in a low-pressure environment. Studying queer YAL in an inclusive, familial environment is important both for students' learning experiences and personal development. As Birch wrote in his essay on *The Art of Being Normal,* "[I]n a world that pressures queer people to be 'normal,' community is our greatest refuge." This idea was echoed in Lily's short story: "She had never felt more loved and accepted in her entire life. She wasn't gross, or weird, or broken. She was normal and whole and good and even though things would never be easy, she knew that she was going to be okay. She was with her family. She was home."

This queer YAL course was a refuge and a home to the students and to me, a refuge I did not know I wanted until I experienced it. Later, some students told me they had similar reactions to the course; they had not realized how much they craved an inclusive and celebratory queer space until they were in one. The queer familial cultural capital I experienced with my students was invaluable as we became chosen family, and this concept enabled them to analyze queer YAL in new and sophisticated ways. Focusing on the strengths within queer communities allowed for both scholarly investigations and personal affirmation.

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