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Adolescent Minorities in Popular YA Literature: A Content Analysis

By Morgan Lee

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Introduction

Young adults are typically one of the most difficult target audiences for public libraries. There is a myriad of reading programs for children and adults, but teens can often be a difficult group to engage. Why is this? When reading fiction, most people like to read about a character they can relate to (Miller, 2013). Representation is important - if a young reader cannot relate to the main character, they are likely not to care about what happens to them. Translation: if a reader cannot see themselves in the story, they may abandon it. When this happens repeatedly, the reader's interest in reading may decrease. Michael Cart (2016), author and the former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, explains that the value of young adult literature is found in how it addresses the needs of the reader and many young adult readers are in search of self - growing, changing, and morphing from the condition of childhood to adulthood. He continues, "By addressing these needs, young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry, but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers" (Cart, 2016). If educators, librarians, and parents want to encourage teens to read, then they need to make sure that those young minds have a diverse collection of material from which to choose. Even if the community itself is not diverse, the world is and teens need access to materials that reflect an accurate portrait of global society (Diaz, 2013).

It was not until the 1920s that young adults were seen as a different class between children and adults. Cart (2016) stated, "*Seventeenth Summer*, released by Maureen Daly in 1942, is considered to be the first book written and published explicitly for teenagers. The term "young adult" was coined by YALSA during the 1960s to represent ages 12-18 (Cart, 2016). Most libraries have a significantly larger collection dedicated to young adults in 2018 than they did in the 1970s so presumably, young adults should be

able to find relatable material more easily now. Unfortunately, that is sometimes not the case. For this study, a content analysis was conducted to determine how minorities are portrayed in the most popular young adult novels over the past decade.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to conduct a content analysis of popular YA novels published over the past decade to determine how often minorities are portrayed and how this portrayal has developed over time.

Research Questions

Of the young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" lists from 2007 - 2017:

R1. How many (and what percentage) of young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" feature protagonists of a race other than white? How has this percentage changed over time?

R2. How many (and what percentage) of young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" feature protagonists who identify as LGBTQ? How has this percentage changed over time?

R3. How many (and what percentage) of young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" features protagonists of a race other than white who also identify as LGBTQ? How has this percentage changed over time?

Definitions

Content Analysis: Close analysis of a work or body of communicated information to determine its meaning and account for the effect it has on its audience. Researchers classify, quantify, analyze, and evaluate the important words, concepts, symbols, and themes in a text (or set of texts) as a basis for inferences about the explicit and implicit messages it contains, the writer(s), the audience, and the culture and time period of which it is a part. In this context, "text" is defined broadly to include books, book chapters, essays, interviews and

discussions, newspaper headlines, periodical articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, and so forth (Reitz, 2017).

Young Adult Book: A book intended to be read and enjoyed by adolescents 12 to 18 years of age. Also refers to a book intended for adults but considered suitable by reviewers and librarians for mature ninth- to twelfth-grade readers. Public libraries usually maintain a separate section for young adult literature managed by a librarian who specializes in YA services, including collection development (Reitz, 2017).

Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA): A division of the American Library Association (ALA) founded in 1930, YALSA has a membership of librarians responsible for evaluating and selecting books and nonprint materials for young adults (age 12 to 18) and for promoting and strengthening library services for young adult readers. YALSA publishes the journal *Young Adult Library Services* (Reitz, 2017).

Minority: a part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

LGBTQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (one's sexual identity) (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

Delimitations of Study

This study examines only the novels included on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" list for the years 2007 to 2017. It does not consider the representation of minority adolescents in other kinds of literature or materials typically found in libraries.

Assumptions

It is assumed that the young adult novels chosen for YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" lists accurately reflect the average young adult novel collection in a typical public library setting. It is further assumed that editions of each book consulted accurately

reproduces the content of the most recent edition at the time YALSA added the book to the list.

Importance of Study

Librarians, educators, researchers of libraries and social inclusion, and parents may find the findings of this study useful in determining which books could be added to their collections. This study aims to fill a void by providing research that will highlight which popular young adult novels feature minority characters and assist in providing diverse materials to young readers.

Literature Review

Providing diverse material to young adults in the public library is paramount to the continuing development of their reading and critical thinking skills as well as inspiring them to become lifelong learners and readers. Representation is important in any media, especially literature. Young adults should have easy access to materials that feature characters of all races, ethnicities, religions, social classes, economic statuses, sexual orientations, genders, etc. LIS researchers have done studies on the topic of diversity in young adult literature, especially in recent decades. Many of the beginning studies on diversity focus on gender and race (typically African American). As societal attitudes have shifted to become more tolerant of different religions, races, and sexual orientations, more studies on these particular issues have emerged.

Review of Published Research

Miller (2013) reported on the importance of finding one's own identity represented in young adult literature. For this study, Miller, a professor of Early Childhood Development at Aaniiih Nakoda College on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, wanted to gauge the importance of representation in young adult literature. In reference to Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Miller states: "Offering young adult literature that features Native American protagonists is one way to address the issues of identity formation, reading motivation, and literacy development for American Indian youth. With such literature, we promote and honor cultural identity. When readers see themselves represented in stories like Alexie's, they realize that they matter, that their experiences count" (Miller, 2013, p. 29).

Cultural relevance motives students to read and encourages discussion, which fosters critical thinking skills.

The Jiménez (2015) study focused on YA novels that had been awarded either the Lambda Award, which recognizes one groundbreaking LGBTQ book per year, or the Stonewall Youth award, which honors one LGBTQ book per year that is written for young adults. Jiménez found that “the dominance of White, gay, male characters contradicts the trend toward strong female protagonists in mainstream YA; stories about lesbians are primarily tragic; and there are no bisexual protagonists” (Jiménez, 2015, p. 421).

Both of these studies examine how different minority groups are represented in popular young adult literature. While one study sought to find diversity in young adult books regularly assigned in schools, the other sought diversity within an already diverse group, people who identify as LGBTQ. Both studies are based on the concept that young readers want to be represented and are inspired by characters who are relatable.

One way to study diversity in young adult literature is to conduct a content analysis of books that have already been published and deemed exemplary by YALSA or any other particular literary committee. In 2011, Rawson examined 248 unique titles (114 award-winning novels, 74 Teens’ Top Ten novels, and 92 bestselling novels). She found that urban-dwelling protagonists made up only one fourth of the books studied when in reality, over half (58.2 percent) of teens lived in urban areas (2011). White protagonists made up 81.1 percent of the 2011 findings when at the time, only 56.7 percent of children aged 19 and under in the United States were white. Rawson (2011) found that “while award-winning lists include more diversity on the whole than Teens’ Top Ten lists or bestsellers lists, no single list, or even a combination of these lists, is sufficient across all aspects of diversity studied here.” Teens should be able to find a book in their local library that portrays characters that are relatable to them. Rawson argues, “They find those books depending on whether librarians are willing to embrace a broad view of diversity—looking beyond simply protagonists’ race or ethnicity—and take the time to locate and purchase

titles featuring protagonists from marginalized groups who are portrayed accurately and compassionately” (2011).

Simmons (2014) conducted a content analysis and examined 70 graphic novels and created a coding document to note how females are represented in graphic novels. She found that female representation is on the rise as well as females of minority races and females with disabilities such as blindness or mental health issues. Simmons explains, “In order for any genre or format to appeal to an adolescent, it must accurately reflect the current demographic as well as continue to advance alongside the perpetual evolution of humanity” (Simmons, 2014, p. 22). Although results showed that representation was improving, it was not improving at the same rate as the female demographics of reading graphic novels.

Monoyiou and Symeonidou (2016) examined 50 children’s books written after 1990 and noted instances of diversity in the form of disability, appearance, and race. Results showed that “the key figure is presented as different from the group; the key figure is often only accepted through the mediation of another character who is not considered different or an incident; different figures belong together and not with the figures that belong in the dominant group; and the key figure is an excellent character who might also be brave and unique for several reasons” (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016, p. 601).

Like the previous three studies mentioned, this study used content analysis to uncover trends in diversity within a subset of literature. Methodology was similar in that a coding device was developed to measure specific characteristics of the novels in the study. This study specifically examined diversity in the race and sexual orientation of the protagonist in each young adult book examined as opposed to race alone.

Methodology

Data Collection

For this study, data were collected from books featured on YALSA’s “Teens’ Top Ten” lists from 2007 to 2017. Two of the books from these lists (one from 2007 and one from 2010) were not included in data

collection due to them being classified as nonfiction and lacking a protagonist. The remaining 108 books were analyzed individually and information regarding the sex, race, and sexual orientation of the protagonist was recorded on a coding sheet developed for the study (Appendix A). Data were collected for each book and then compiled for each year as a whole. Data were collected on coding forms and were recorded into an Excel spreadsheet so that the number (and percentages) for each year as well as the past ten years as a whole may were calculated and recorded.

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, raw numbers and percentages were examined to determine trends from year to year. While these lists are in no way a generalization of the entire young adult genre, they may provide insight into some of the most popular materials that are available to young adults in an average public library setting.

Limitations

Although it was assumed, for the purposes of this study, that the books on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" list are reasonably representative of the kinds of YA

book libraries typically offer in their YA collections, the study's findings are not generalizable to all YA literature. They are valid only to the books contained on YALSA's list.

Results

R1. How many (and what percentage) of young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" feature protagonists of a race other than white? How has this percentage changed over time?

Figure 1 illustrates the results of the study that indicate there were 88 books featured on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" during 2007 - 2017 with white protagonists and 20 books with non-white protagonists (See Appendix A). Books featuring non-white protagonists made up 18.5 percent of those chosen for YALSA's list over the past decade. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the race of protagonists per year. There were no books chosen for the list in 2008, 2009, and 2013 that featured non-white protagonists; 2011 saw the highest number of books (4) with non-white protagonists and there was an increase in the number of non-white protagonists between 2014 and 2017.

Figure 1.

Race of Protagonists in Featured Books 2007 - 2017

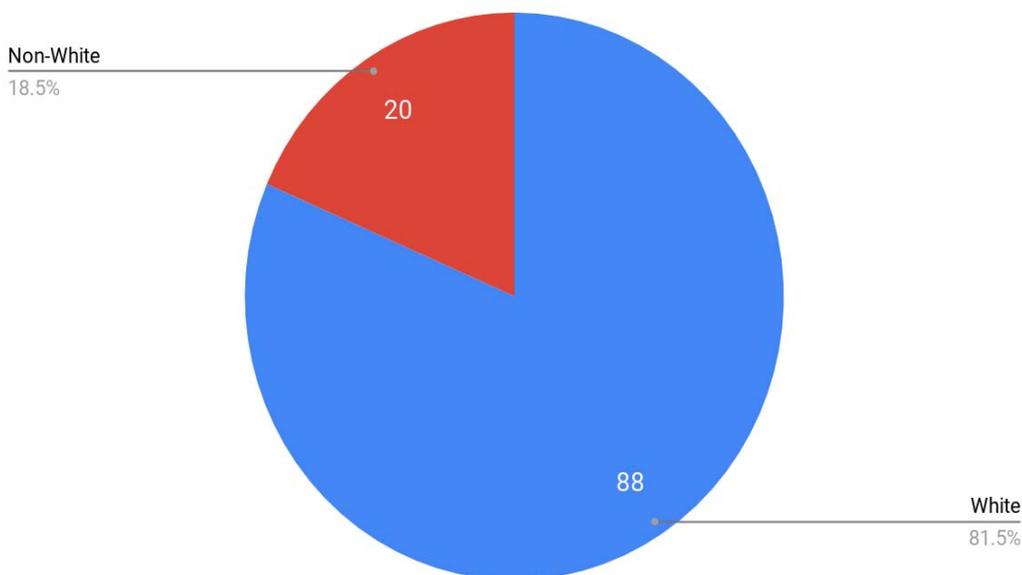


Figure 2.

Race of Protagonists in Books Featured

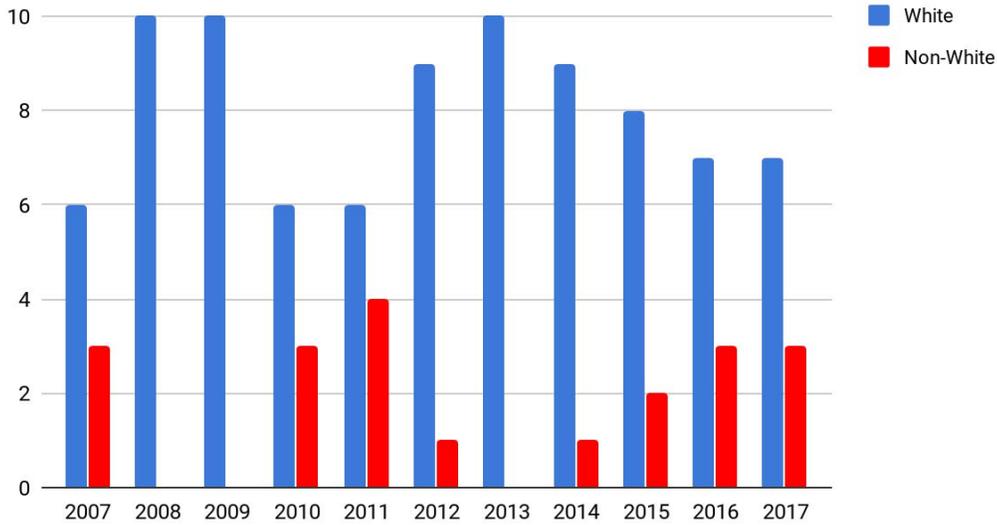
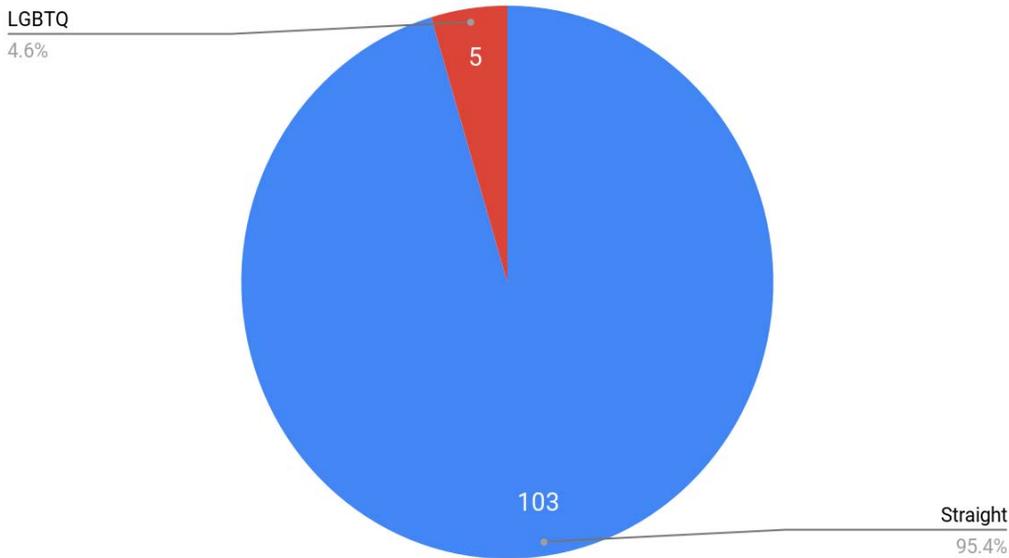


Figure 3.

Percentage of LGBTQ Protagonists 2007-2017



R2. How many (and what percentage) of young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" feature protagonists who identify as LGBTQ? How has this percentage changed over time?

Figure 3 illustrates that of the 108 books in this study, 5 of them featured protagonists who identify as

LGBTQ (See Appendix B). LGBTQ protagonist-featuring books made up 4.6 percent of books on YALSA's list from 2007 - 2017. Figure 4 illustrates that there were no books featuring LGBTQ protagonists between the years of 2007 and 2014. There has been a noticeable increase in LGBTQ books since 2015.

Figure 4.

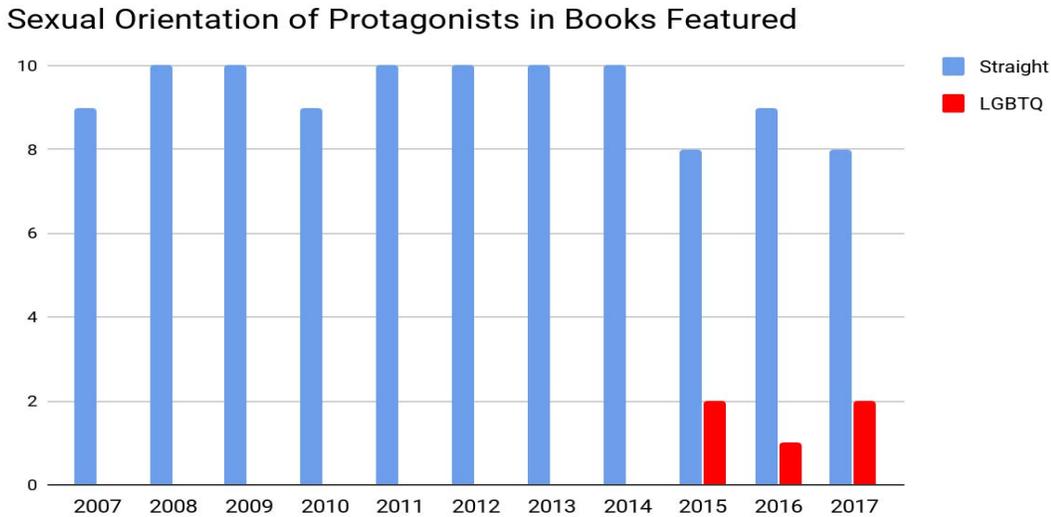
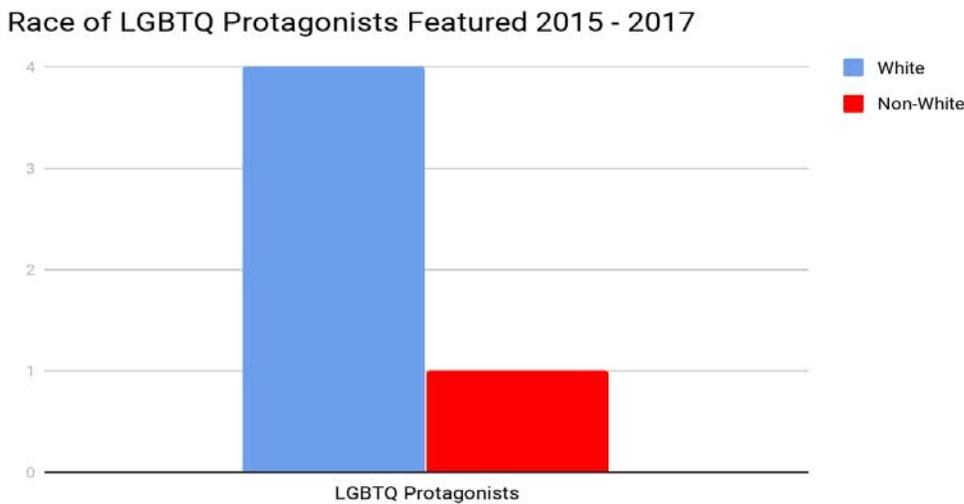


Figure 5.



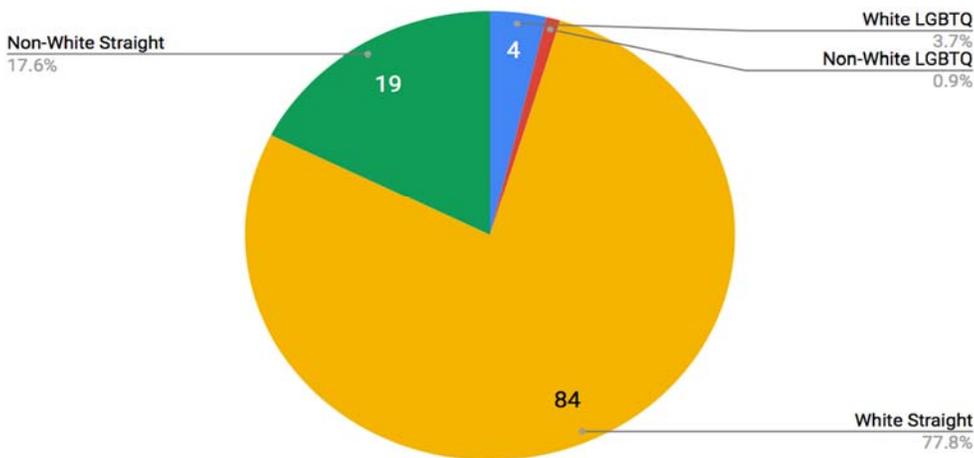
R3. How many (and what percentage) of young adult novels found on YALSA's "Teens' Top Ten" features protagonists of a race other than white who also identify as LGBTQ? How has this percentage changed over time?

Figure 5 illustrates that of the 5 LGBTQ books featured, only 1 of them features a character

classified as non-white. Figure 6 illustrates the race and sexuality of protagonists and shows that books featuring characters who identify as LGBTQ and non-white make up 0.9 percent of YALSA's list. The book featuring a Latina LGBTQ character made YALSA's list in 2017.

Figure 6.

Race and Sexual Orientation of Protagonists in Books Featured 2007-2017



Discussion and Conclusion

Of the 108 books studied on YALSA's Teens' Top Ten List during 2007 - 2017, 20 or 18.5 percent featured non-white protagonists; 5 books or 4.6 percent featured characters who identified as LGBTQ. Only 1 book featured an LGBTQ non-white character.

few years, from 2015 - 2017. This trend is likely to continue as social attitudes concerning diversity change and evolve.

As it stands, the selections for the Teens' Top Ten Lists are not reflective of our society. Cart's (2016) study found the following:

In 2012, Census figures showed that young people aged 10 to 18 represented 13.6 percent of the total population. More than 16 percent of them were black; 12.2 percent were Asian, and 17.7 percent were Latino. Together the minorities totaled some 46 percent of the youth population and at the present rate of change, it is projected that as soon as 2018 children and teens of color will have become the majority youth population.

This study could be repeated at regular intervals to determine trend over a longer period of time. Further studies could examine diversity in YA books with expanded categories such as gender of the protagonists and/or protagonists with a physical or

The trend over time for non-white protagonists has an irregular pattern until 2015, after which there is an upward trend. LGBTQ protagonists did not appear in the books in this study until 2015, then appeared each year after that.

There has been an increase in books chosen that feature non-white and LGBTQ characters in the last mental impairment. Diversity of authors and publishers could be studied as well.

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Simmons, E. (2014). Adolescent females and the graphic novel: A content analysis. *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 6, 1-22.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Books Featuring Non-White Protagonists

Bacigalupi, P. (2011). *Ship Breaker*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

Bardugo, L. (2016). *Six of Crows*. New York: Macmillan/Henry Holt & Co.

Brockenbrough, M. (2016). *The Game of Love and Death*. New York: Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine Books.

Elkeles, S. (2014). *How to Ruin a Summer Vacation*. Woodbury, Minn: Flux.

Gout, L. (2017). *Genius: The Game*. New York: Feiwel & Friends.

Griffin, Paul. (2011). *The Orange Houses*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group.

Han, J. (2016). *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Jaffe, M. (2007). *Bad Kitty*. New York: HarperTeen.

Lu, M. (2013). *Legend*. London: New York: Penguin Books.

Lu, M. (2015). *Young Elites*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group.

Meyer, S. (2006). *New Moon*. New York: Little, Brown and Co.

Mulligan, A. (2016). *Trash*. New York: Random House.

Nijkamp, M. (2016). *This is Where It Ends*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks Fire.

Perkins, Mitali, & Davis, Jonathan. (2015). *Bamboo People*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbrige.

Rowell, R. (2016). *Eleanor & Park*. New York: Macmillan/St. Martin's Griffin.

Saenz, B. A. (2012). *Last Night I Sang to the Monster*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.

Stork, F. X. (2009). *Marcelo in the Real World*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Taylor, L. (n.d.). *Lips Touch: Three Times*. New York: Findaway World.

Yoon, N., & Yoon, D. (2017). *Everything, Everything*. London: Corgi.

Yoon, N. (2018). *The Sun is Also a Star*. New York: Penguin Random House.

Appendix B. Books Featuring LGBTQ Protagonists

Clare, C., Brennan, S. R., & Johnson, M. (2015). *The Bane Chronicles*. New York: Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry

Nijkamp, M. (2016). *This is Where It Ends*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks Fire.

Russo, M. (2017). *If I was Your Girl*. New York: Flatiron Books.

Shine, Joe. (2015). *I Become Shadow*. New York: Soho Teen.

Weingarten, Lynn. (2016). *Suicide Notes from Beautiful Girls*. St. Louis, MO: Turtleback Books.