

WARDS OF STATE: COMPLICATING AGENCY AND IDENTITY
FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE AS PORTRAYED
IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

Young adult literature has become popular amongst a wider audience, and accordingly has developed significant influence on youth and adults alike. Because of this, it is important for scholars and educators to critically consider what messages the literature is passing on to and about adolescents. Texts that feature youth in foster care break from the tradition in some important ways, giving greater influence and visibility to the institutional authorities that operate in the lives of youth. Critically examining these texts allows insight into the messages inherent in the literature about adolescent agency and authority, and the way such messages reinforce the cultural construct around youth in general, and foster youth specifically.

This project begins with an examination of the theoretical background around the cultural construct of youth, the critical merit of young adult literature, and the institutional authorities at work in both. Then, these ideas are applied to the critical textual analysis of four recent, popular young adult novels that feature youth in foster care. Looking across the text set from this position demonstrates the power of the institutions over individual agency. Additionally, the web of authority created by the muddying of any defining lines within and between institutions and the lack of stability in their lives makes coming to any single sense of self nearly impossible. At the end of each text, the only option they have to find any stability is to give up their agency and submit to the institutions that operate in their lives.

The analysis shows that the literature that is available fails to show the complicated life of foster youth for what it is, instead reinforcing the stereotypes while continuing to support the status quo. Studies like this one may be able to help break from the tradition and allow for a more critical reading of young adult literature, giving agency back to the very youth targeted by the texts.

I. INTRODUCTION

My children's other mom called yesterday. Their first mom. She has not seen or spoken to them (or us) in five years, but she wanted to see how "her children" were doing. And though my entire being cringed at the phrase, she was right. They are her children. She gave birth to them and served as their primary caretaker until they moved in with us when they were two and three. No amount of time will eliminate the biological and emotional connection they have with her. But they are also *my children*. The lack of DNA does not change who I am to them, or who they are for me. In general, "family" is not a black and white term. It is messy. For kids who are adopted or living in foster-care, the definition is even more complicated.

They lived with us for two years prior to adoption, and slowly instead of "aunt and uncle" we became "mom and dad." They developed relationships with "grandparents," "aunts and uncles," and "cousins." But despite the language, the reality was much less certain: there was another mom and another dad; there was a judge and a social worker who had the power to change the terms at any moment; there were other grandparents and other extended family members that could at any time offer their homes and demand "their" children be returned to the family. When my biological daughter was born, she was 100% their sister, never knowing anything else, yet legally she was merely another kid who lived in the same home they were placed in. While my biological daughter was not considered their sister despite the relationship they had with her, my two foster children had biological sisters and brothers who were not in the home, some of

which they have never even met. The legal definition of family, clearly, doesn't account for all of the possible types of emotional and familial bonds that affect a child.

One day a judge signed a piece of paper. That paper made them "our children" and made the baby "their sister." That paper had an extraordinary amount of power to clean up the mess and uncomplicate their web of family members. Except that it didn't. Despite the language, despite the legality, they still have two moms and two dads and lots of grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and siblings. The paper made everything official and legal, but in reality it changed absolutely nothing.

Through all of this messiness, through ups and downs and visits and introductions and loss and mourning and let downs and hopes and fears, there were children. A boy and a girl who had such little life experience that they had no idea their experience was abnormal. But as they aged, they began to hear from others about their situation and their background. They entered the school system and were regular kids, until the teachers learned they were adopted from foster care. Suddenly they were in counseling at the school. Suddenly they were expected to misbehave. Suddenly they had reason to have difficulty in peer relations. They went from being kids in the class to being "the adopted kids," and although the language, like the piece of paper the judge signed, changes nothing, it also changes everything. From an incredibly young age, literally from their toddler years, their experiences with the variety of institutions in their lives--the state, school, family--have been radically altered because of their background as "foster kids."

The messiness of the webs in their lives affects my kids. They define themselves from the variety of positionalities they have been given. They begin to see themselves in

terms of their background and of the expectations people have of them. As part of a group called “foster kids,” they are susceptible to the theory called “stereotype threat,” where “the existence of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs [...] means that in situations where the stereotype is applicable, one is at risk of confirming it as a self-characterization, both to one’s self and to others who know the stereotype” (Steele and Aronson 808). My children see and hear how they are supposed to act and feel, in turn acting accordingly as they internalize the expectations, ultimately reinforcing the stereotypes themselves. They try to define themselves based on what has happened to them and who all of the people are in the complicated network that is their undefined family. There is an old adage that time will heal all things, but as my children grow more aware of their history, their experience and their view of themselves becomes more complicated.

Because of my position as an adoptive mother, as I began to work on this project I knew I wanted to explore depictions of family in young adult literature. I was fairly certain that I wanted to consider the way that family dynamics shape the cultural expectations of youth characters and how this affects their agency throughout a text. One of the first difficulties I faced in this process, though, was trying to figure out what exactly I meant by the term “family.” Through my personal experience, I discovered that often family is much more complicated than looking at the group of people who live in the same house. It can also include a web of people and even institutions that have had parental authority and influence throughout the life of the child. In terms of the foster system, when a child has multiple placements each new family is added to their web and

in some small way alters their experience, which affects how they see themselves and the world. Therefore, I chose to focus this project on depictions of youth in foster care in young adult literature, analyzing how the complicated web of authorities in their lives shapes the cultural expectations of foster-youth and the types of agency that they are afforded.

Too Many Authorities: A Break from Traditional YAL

The foster care system exists in stark contrast to much of YAL. Whereas foster-youth have a never-ending number of parental authorities in their lives, it is common in many popular YA novels to remove the parents completely. In fact, many scholars agree that removing a strong parental presence is necessary for the plot of some of the most popular young adult novels, particularly dystopian texts (Goldstein). In both YAL in general and YAL that highlights foster-youth, the loss of the parent, or of their functionality, can be a physical catalyst for the events that follow. A columnist in the *New York Times* suggests that in classic children's books "it's the removal of the adult's protective presence that kick-starts the story, so the orphan can begin his 'triumphant rise'" (Just). When adults are present in contemporary YAL they are often portrayed not as a "protective presence," but rather as the source of conflict mandating that "strong young protagonists [must] overcome obstacles related to family problems caused by adult family members' (Norton 366)" (qtd. In Giamalva 4). But whereas in much of YAL the parental figure is removed (or rebelled against) once and for all, for youth in the foster-system the removal of one parent merely triggers the addition of others.

The necessity of removing parents in YAL to allow for movement of the youth inherently suggests that the youth would either be uninterested or incapable of taking action if the adults were still present. The lack of their strong protective role is often made key to the movement of the plot and the development of the protagonist. As youth librarian and writer Antoinette Giamalva notes, “Overall, a lack of parental presence can break or build a character” (5). Again, this suggests that youth are unable to move, grow and mature to their fullest potential if they have functional adults in their lives to fall back on.

Since parents are stereotypically viewed by youth as controlling and restrictive, even repressive (Trites), young people who are still under their jurisdiction are not able to go on the types of adventures or challenge authorities the way they often do in YAL. Even healthy, protective parents would block youth from participating in situations that arise in popular novels by facing the danger themselves in order to keep the adolescent from harm. Therefore, much of YAL is expected to break the parent/child relationship in order to give adolescent protagonists the agency needed for the plot to move forward. As Waller states,

“Possibilities for adolescent agency [...] break down when the teenage protagonists aim to meet parental expectations or integrate themselves into the ways of being that have been set up by mother or father figures. Real agency might be expected to reside in those spaces where mainstream culture--as epitomised by parents--is properly resisted and reshaped.”
(112)

Whereas a focus on the reality of dysfunctional families portrays literature as a mirror for the reader, the push for youth autonomy draws on the “strong theoretical tendency to portray adolescence as a time of rupture from parental control” (Waller 101)

in order to mature and complete “growth to adulthood” (Trites 65). Many people still view the purpose of young adult literature as helping “young people in the midst of transition” (Bickmore x) learn how to “find the power to take control of their own lives in some responsible way” (Crutcher 12), navigate their world (Trites) and, ultimately, how to move from “child” to “adult.” For this reason, “the parents are [oftentimes] phased out of the story or given a negative representation [so] that the main characters in the series have to be the responsible party” (Giamalva 4). According to author Janette Rallison,

[Y]ou can’t have parents step in and solve your main character’s problem. The main character has to take care of that himself or herself. [Ideally] In real life if some evil psychopath is threatening little Suzie, she would tell her parents and they would step in and protect her. Because you can’t have that in literature, you have to render the parents incapable. (“Interview” 642)

This view of young adult literature reinforces “the idea of adulthood as the norm in relation to which adolescence is an othered, inferior category and YAL a vehicle to help youth arrive at a particular destination” (Petroni, Sarigianides and Lewis 511). It suggests that youth need to mature in order to become “adults” (promoting adulthood as a goal they should be striving for) and cannot do so within the constructs of family.

Roberta Trites acknowledges that this is a cultural construct of adolescence: “Since Anglophone cultures, by and large, usually accept as a given the premise that adolescents must separate from their parents in order to grow, the literatures of these cultures reflect the same bias” (55). The literary texts that remove parental characters’ ability to be functionally present embody the cultural stereotypes that limit adolescent agency in the traditional family context.

In this context, considering questions of familial influence and agency through texts that feature foster-youth is particularly intriguing because of the messiness of the definition of family in their lives. On the one hand, the texts follow the pattern of removing their parents--the story literally could not happen if their biological parents were not first removed from a direct physical presence in their lives. On the other hand, when they are taken into the system the state becomes a parental authority, and then when they are moved in with other families they take on new parents, sometimes several times over. If it is common in YAL to remove parental authorities in order to allow for youth agency, then this web of bio/foster/adoptive/state authorities that makes up the foster-youth's familial network definitely complicates the youth's agency. Furthermore, because each "family" has some influence on them it makes their sense of self unstable at best.

At the same time, the very nature of the foster care system brings into focus the multiplicity of institutions that are given authority over the lives of youth. Particularly, the state's authority is made much more apparent because of its active role in the lives foster children. The more I consider this question of family and authority, through my reading and my own experience, the more I am absolutely convinced that family, broadly speaking, has a huge impact on what is expected of youth and what types of agency they are (or are not) afforded. Thus, looking at these texts in terms of youth agency and identity (the way others see them and the way they see themselves) raises some questions that would not be visible in texts that operate around a stable familial context:

- How does institutional authority operate for foster-youth? How does the crossover of authority from one institution to the other (i.e. state and family) change the youth's agency and sense of self?
- How does complicating the definition of an institution (i.e. family) alter the way the institution operates in terms of agency and sense of self? How does the label of "foster-youth" affect the youth's agency and sense of self?
- What are these texts saying about the foster-youth's ability to gain and maintain personal agency? What does this say about youth agency in terms of the social construct of youth and institutional authority?

To develop an accurate analysis of agency and identity in foster-youth in YAL, I searched for texts that were realistic (avoiding, for example, dystopian fiction), current, and widely circulated. As both young adult literature and state systems are ever changing, I limited the texts I am reviewing to those that have been published within a decade of the time I began this project. For the sake of analyzing popular representations, I also limited the search to popular texts that have received some sort of acknowledgement or award in order to focus on texts that are likely to be widely circulated amongst the target audience. Because of the focus on parental authority, I kept my focus on texts that had a primary character between the ages of ten and eighteen in a single-family foster care situation, eliminating those that had a group home or independent living focus. With this criteria, I narrowed my list to four specific texts: *Runaway* (2006) by Wendelin Van Draanen, *The Guardian* (2009) by Joyce Sweeney, *Touch Blue* (2010) by Cynthia Lord, and *One for the Murphys* (2012) by Lynda Hunt.

Looking across the text set with these questions in mind demonstrates the power of the institutions over individual agency. I have found that foster-youth are positioned in such a way to make institutional authority highly visible, and as such are unable to achieve any real, lasting personal agency. Additionally, the web of authority created by the muddying of any defining lines within and between institutions and the lack of stability in their lives makes coming to any single sense of self nearly impossible. In the end, the only option they have to find any stability is to give up their agency and submit to the institutions that operate in their lives.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Roberta Trites, “power is the force that allows for subjectivity and consequently, agency” (5), thus one has “agency” when they “claim a subject position” (100) by consciously acting on their own terms rather than being acted upon by others. But agency is not that simple--it exists on a spectrum: by nature all people have some agency, regardless of their position in life, but groups who are marginalized and repressed are given notably less agency and often even have agency taken away as repressive authorities deny them that subjectivity. This applies to stages of life as well. Oftentimes, agency is a marker of growth, of maturity, and of autonomy. As children become more and more capable of taking care of themselves, they acquire more agency. When they are young, society assumes that they are “without critical awareness or active agency” (Lesko 183), but as they age and mature they are able to handle more power. Once they reach autonomy, they gain full agency over themselves, inasmuch as that agency does not clash with authorities who have heightened levels of agency. Many people and institutions, those in positions of power, have heightened versions of agency that includes agency over others, as well.

Take for example, agency within the institution of *family*. Typically, a child has no choice but to remain in the familial situation he or she has been dealt (whether through birth, adoption, or some other means). Under most circumstances, they must submit to their parent’s (or parental figure’s) authority and rules, they must accept the types of discipline (again, under most circumstances) that are deemed appropriate, they must eat the food and wear the clothes that are provided for them, and if they try to rebel and run

away they can actually be charged with a crime and returned by the police. However, if they accept their position and learn how to exist in the familial institution they are afforded some agency to make certain decisions so long as it fits within the constraints set by the institutional authorities. This growth in agency marks a shift between “child” and “youth”--the youth is afforded more freedom and agency than a child, but only inasmuch as they still submit to the authority of the parental figure. For example, the youth in many cases is able to get a job, participate in more extracurricular activities, etc.

However, with increased agency comes increased responsibility--the youth is expected to do homework with less oversight, participate in the household through chores, and pay for their own entertainment or extra purchases. But the youth is still under the authority of the adult (in this case, the parental figure), both legally and logistically. They must “reckon with both their sense of individual power and their recognition of the social forces that require them to modify their behaviors” (Trites 6). Failure to follow the rules results in consequences. Fittingly, one of the stereotypical consequences for a teenager acting out is “grounding” them, which means literally taking away some of their agency for a period of time.

As teenagers move into adulthood they take on the responsibility of providing and caring for themselves, and are afforded greater agency accordingly. Adults still operate within the institution of *family*, but they *are* the authorities within the institution; they can make and enforce the rules (within legal guidelines--adults are still subservient to the institution of government, albeit differently than youth); if they are displeased with their own parents they can cut contact, if they are unhappy in a romantic relationship they can

leave, if they are upset about the actions of children they can enforce consequences, etc. So while *child*, *youth* and *adult* all operate within the same institutions, adults have agency in those institutions that is denied to youth, and youth likewise have agency denied to younger children.

Agency: The Currency of Power and Authority

If agency is a marker of “growth,” in some way, then denying someone agency also keeps them in an infantile state. Nancy Lesko highlights this interdependency in the child/adult relationship when she says, “the conventional opposition of adult to child can also be seen as a form of dependency, in that each term needs the other in order to be defined” (14). Thus, one cannot be defined without the other--a child is *not yet adult* and an adult is *no longer child*. Likewise, adolescents are both *not yet adult* and *no longer child*, giving them an undefined middle ground in the supposed linear progression towards agency and autonomy. According to Nancy Lesko, “since adolescence has been defined as *not adult*, this opposition to adults [...] will influence all cultural and class groups” (10). This is why youth are culturally expected to fight for agency so as to separate themselves from children (such as the stereotypical teen accusing her parents of treating her “like a child” when they deny her request to go somewhere) and move towards the autonomy of adulthood.

In this context, Karen Coats places the question of “growth” firmly within the institution of family: “In a modernist context, growth *means* separation from the mother and the taking up of a position with respect to the Law of the Father. Closure [becoming

adult] *means* heterosexual marriage, secure gender roles, and father-led families” (7).

Although patriarchy and heteronormativity are questions for a different project, Coats’s definition is important here for its placement of all three categories in the family, the very institution that is blatantly complicated by the foster-care system. If the mark of growth in agency and autonomy comes first from separating from the mother (childhood), moves to respecting the law of the father (adolescence), then finally finds closure (adulthood), it makes sense that familial relationships, particularly that of parent/guardian and child, serve as a significant source of power and repression in the lives of adolescents. This also suggests that losing a defined “mother” and “father,” as in cases of youth who are wards of the state, is likely to disrupt the same growth.

Agency and Institutional Authority

But family, while very significant, is not the only institution where we see the denial of agency used as a form of repression. Trites goes on to discuss several specific institutions “with clearly defined goals of training children and adolescents” (22). Government, schools, and identity politics are all also given power over youth--both in life and in YAL (Young Adult Literature). The common storyline includes a protagonist who struggles within one or more of these institutions (denial of agency), rebels against it (exercising agency), and ultimately finds their place within the institution and accepts its constructs (accepts limited agency). The high school outcast finds a friend. The rebel finds a supportive teacher and gets help. The bully repents. The angry daughter learns to be thankful for her parents. The orphan is adopted. The activist discovers how to work

within the system. As Trites notes, “In these novels, the protagonist experiences some form of conflict with authority and learns something about institutional accommodation” (15)--but often in the end the protagonist finds a way to live happily with the limited agency they were always afforded.

The types of stories described above are the norm. It is what readers have come to expect from young adult literature--the after-school special, if you will. These types of stories are designed to teach youth readers a lesson through the experience of the characters, and that lesson is often that things will be better for them if they accept their place within the institutions. But the storylines seem awfully simplistic, reinforcing societal expectations of youth in these institutions and making “age [...] a shorthand, a code that evokes what amounts to an epidemic of signification” (Lesko 4). But what if this singular narrative is inaccurate? What does that do for questions of agency? Understanding a child (or adult) as Nancy Lesko does, as “a bricollage” or “a performance” (14), means that there is no single narrative, and in fact the narrative of each individual is ever changing. Although there are likely multiple ways that a text can break from the simplistic narratives listed above, of particular interest for this project is a consideration of youth who lack a stable home life. The disruption of the primary institution of family, and the power structures within, complicate the child to youth to adult narrative, and accordingly the agency afforded therein.

In particular, a focus on texts that highlight youth who are in foster care shows agency as ever-changing as it demonstrates how foster-youth are simultaneously afforded more and less agency than youth in “normal” families. These texts make visible the

power dynamics within multiple institutions (government, school, family, and identity politics) that operate in the life of foster-youth, giving the institutions more power within the story than in narratives that keep them in the background. Despite this heightened authority, in some ways their lack of stable parental figures and other authorities often requires foster-youth to “grow up” in ways that youth their age aren’t normally expected to, taking on adult characteristics and being afforded agency that usually isn’t available to them. This tension between simultaneously limiting power and affording greater subjectivity causes the “child to adult” narrative to lose its linear progression and complicates the agency and sense of self for foster-youth in all of the areas of their lives.

Agency and the Cultural Construct of “Foster Youth”

An exploration of agency afforded to foster-youth in these institutions is significant because the types of cultural expectations placed on children who have been in the foster system are different from the expectations placed on youth at large. As soon as people discover that my children have come from the foster system their analysis of their appearance, attitudes, and behaviors radically changes. The types of questions/comments I get and the way they are treated by the state, by extended family, and by the school system demonstrate the prevalence of a specific cultural construct of foster-youth that is readily available in the minds of others before ever actually meeting someone who has been in the system. For example, as soon as it was made known to the school that they were adopted, both of my children were automatically referred to weekly meetings with the school counselor. Likewise, when taking my then six-year-old son in to

get a full psychiatric evaluation, the new patient form asked directly whether or not the child had ever been in foster care and what was known about their prior experiences and their biological family. Sadly, in my experience even the family institution shows similar biases--at first grandparents and aunts/uncles regularly made comments to me regarding the “difficulty” of raising “someone else’s” children.

This view of them from the various institutions in their lives, often not as well hidden as it probably should be, can really affect how they view themselves and what they expect from themselves and others. As Steele and Aronson’s study confirmed that “stereotype threat” causes “individuals [to] belittle themselves, consciously or unconsciously, based on stereotypically defined perceived ability” (Trimble 8), it is not surprising that foster-youth internalize the stereotypes of the foster-care system as portrayed in media and cultural discourse. Thus, what is expected of them, particularly if it is made known to them, defines in part how children (and any subject) view themselves. Their sense of self, in turn, limits their agency and autonomy because of their tendency to internalize the expectations and adhere to who society thinks they should be, giving authority to the institution Trites calls “identity politics.”

Examining how wards of the state are portrayed in young adult novels brings into view such societal expectations and highlights clearly how expectations placed on them by others can alter or confuse their sense of self and simultaneously give them more and less agency. The web of bio/foster/adoptive/state authorities makes up the foster-youth’s “family,” and the complexity of this familial network complicates the youth’s agency and sense of self. At the same time, literature depicting the foster care system brings into

focus the multiplicity of institutions that are given authority over the lives of youth, particularly in terms of the state's authority which is made much more apparent because of its active role in the lives of foster children.

Looking at these texts in terms of youth agency and identity (the way others see them and the way they see themselves) demonstrates the power of the institutions over the individual. Additionally, through institutional power crossover concepts of authority, agency, and the youth's sense of self are complicated. As part of this it becomes evident that foster youth are simultaneously afforded more and less agency than non-foster youth and their development towards "adulthood" is chaotic at best. They must embrace their position of "youth" in each institution in order to find stability--they ultimately exercise their agency by giving it up.

The Web of Institutional Authority and its Affect on Adolescent Agency

YAL that represents youth in foster care makes blatantly visible each of the institutions Trites defines as they operate to give or deny agency to the foster-youth and other relevant characters. Some of the findings about the power of the institutions to alter youth agency, though, are unique to youth who are within the system. Their very presence in the foster-care system gives the state direct access to their lives and alters their position in school and family. For example, there is mixing of institutional authority that wouldn't happen for non-foster-youth, particularly where the state sometimes takes on a parental role in the lives of its wards. Likewise, foster parents must operate not only as authorities in the familial institution but also as employees of the state. Additionally,

the youth's sense of self as developed through identity politics is repeatedly muddled and complicated as they move from one familial placement to another, often causing them to change not just families but also schools and communities. The institution of family fails to be straightforward due to the multiplicity of parental figures who have had some influence, for better or worse, on the youth in their care.

As state, family and identity politics continue to weave a complicated web of authority in the lives of these youth, stereotype threat dictates that the very societal expectations placed on them (as youth in general *and* youth in foster care specifically) alter their expectations of themselves and direct many of their actions, thus operating as another source of power and repression in their lives and causing them to indirectly deny their own agency. As the foster-youth in these texts learn to navigate each of these institutions and struggle to find their own place within them, it becomes apparent that the only true way for them to exercise their agency is to willingly give it up.

In order to show each youth's struggle for agency and the complicated ways in which each institution overlaps, the next section provides an extended example in terms of institutional authority, youth agency and sense of self. Wendelin Van Draanen's *Runaway* provides the perfect example, as the physical act of running away from a foster placement provides an unexpected contrast to the foster-youth's inability to actually escape institutional authority and find any real agency. After this example, I look at each of the other texts individually, albeit more briefly, to show how the foster-youth in each text struggles with the same ideas of authority, agency, and sense of self despite the vast differences in their stories. The following section looks across the entire text set to draw

out key themes, such as the foster characters' inability to ever overcome their position as "youth," the continuing influence of each institution, a false sense of agency, and their need to exercise agency by giving it up. Finally, I offer some discussion and potential questions for further research.

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Runaway: Can She Truly Escape?

As this text begins, Holly is claiming a significant amount of agency as she rebels successfully against the institutions of family, government and school when she runs away. She goes from having no power over herself--being forced into a very infantile state including even the ability to choose to pet a dog, get a drink of water or go to the bathroom--to a glimpse of adulthood by making all of her own decisions and taking responsibility for her own well being. After leaving the Bender's home, she moves from one place to another at will, she decides how to define her situation ("I've decided I'm *not* homeless./I'm a gypsy. I'm a gypsy and my home is the great outdoors" (Van Draanen 22)), she determines when and what to "lift" (steal), and she makes (and tries to keep) both short-term and long-term plans for her own life: "I *am* going to do good and be good, and someday, someday, I *will* become a veterinarian" (202). She even has her own moral code--she doesn't "feel bad" about stealing because "[she] steal[s] for survival, not for fun" (114) as opposed to her mom who "rationalized a lot" because she got "greedy" (143). On the surface, it looks like she has complete agency over herself.

But even as she claims agency that was not previously available to her, she is nevertheless still controlled by the same institutions she has supposedly left. Although Holly no longer lives with a family, everything that happens to her is still connected to questions of family--her birth mother's poor choices and her foster parents' cruelty that pushed her to run away--and she finds (and leaves) two pseudo families throughout the

text. Similarly, even though she has left school, she remains tied to it, and in particular to her teacher Ms. Leone, as demonstrated by her constant referral to the “handy-dandy poetry sheet” (25) that Ms. Leone had given the class during their poetry unit. Likewise, she has left the “system” but she lives in fear of being discovered by the state and returned to the system. Throughout the text she has a few close calls with the police and social services (at the “manor”, at the farm, during the “sweep,” walking down the road, etc.). Despite the fact that it looks like she has gained agency, Holly is never able to escape these institutions or gain authority within them.

Trites says that “school serves as the metaphorical representation of the many institutions that will influence adolescents throughout their lives” (33). Likewise, Lesko also notes the importance of school in the life of youth, adding a note about its tendency to limit adolescent agency when she states that “school controls the majority of a teenager’s life and most of that is outside personal choice and control” (176).

Appropriately, school serves as a theme throughout *Runaway*. Holly’s physical attendance at school serves as the opening and closing of the book, and in the middle when she is no longer in school it still operates metaphorically. Despite saying “I really, really, *really* hate school” (132), she expresses jealousy of another homeless girl because she “gets to go to school and I don’t!” (150). She finds the “bullfrog” middle school and ends up spending a lot of time watching the students during their breaks and while they play softball for P.E. Eventually she even steals a textbook from the school and hopes to be able to homeschool herself (206).

The most significant way school maintains its authority is through the journal Holly keeps. The novel is written as a series of journal entries written to Holly's (ex-)language arts teacher, Ms. Leone. Despite the physical distance she puts between herself and her last placement, the journal reminds both Holly and the reader that she is still young and should be in school. Although she is not physically present, Ms. Leone, and by extension the school, heavily influences Holly's actions. Early on she says, "It's bugging me that I can't forget about *you* [Ms. Leone]. Why do I keep writing to you like you can hear me? How many times have I told myself that I'm through writing in this journal? Then I pick it up and write some more" (45). This does eventually change, though: At the end of the book Holly notes that at some point she "stopped venting at [Ms. Leone] and started writing to...some imaginary friend? Myself?" (244). On the surface, it could be argued that this transition marks a gain in agency and a separation from Ms. Leone and the school that she left in the beginning.

However, once again she is not actually able to escape the authority of the institution. By this point in the story, Ms. Leone no longer represents the institution of school in the text. Holly has already been taken in by Vera and Meg and is enrolled in the "bullfrog" middle school (234). Her final entry is a note to Ms. Leone thanking her for the journal, which "made me feel less alone. Like I had someone to talk to" (244), and her final words, "Thank you for helping me turn the page" (245), acknowledge Ms. Leone's agency over her throughout the text. It is not until she accepts the authority of a new school that she is able to move out from the authority of the previous one. Ms. Leone

helped her “turn the page” by providing the institutional authority of the school when she otherwise would have been out from under it.

Similarly, no matter how independent she becomes she lives in fear of social services. Despite their lack of physical presence in her life, they still heavily influence her choices. When she sees law enforcement officers her response is fear--this isn't her first time in the system, the abusive home she fled wasn't her first placement, and she knows as soon as the state discovers she is a runaway she will be returned to social services and forced into another “emergency-care family” (178) where she fears she will continue to suffer abuse. So she is careful to avoid activity that might arouse suspicion: She only stays in one place for a few days for fear of someone getting suspicious, deceives people throughout the text into believing her mother is with her to avoid raising red flags, and she leaves early after a farmer and his wife care for her for a night for fear that they will call the state (172). Even as she makes decisions for herself, they are informed by her knowledge of social services and the decisions they will make for her. Thus, by her need to consider their authority before making any decision, the state's authority is still affecting the choices she has, keeping her from having any true agency.

Although less obvious, the institution that Trites calls “identity politics” also maintains a significant amount of authority over Holly, particularly in terms of her youth. She lives on her own, homeless, for months (the story spans May through November)--finding and providing her own food and shelter--yet is never able to fully escape from society's expectations of someone her age. She might make her own decisions, but they are limited because of her age, showing that the construct of youth, one defining trait

embedded in identity politics, continues to maintain agency over her. For example, early on she finds a homeless shelter but knows they will not let her in without an adult.

Experience has taught her that a young person on her own is not cared for even in these charitable institutions: “Instead of giving me food they set traps, which is how social services caught me and how I got stuck at the Benders” (48). Despite her apparent ability to care for herself, Holly’s age keeps her from being able to get a shower, a meal, or a bed at the shelter. She finds an older woman with a poor memory, “Louise K. Palmer” (49), and tricks her into playing the part of mother to get them into the shelter.

The contrast is clear--Holly is bright enough to take care of herself and overcome many obstacles throughout the book, she is capable of manipulating those around her to get what she wants, yet the institutions do not allow her agency so she must acknowledge and submit to the authority that identity politics has over her life. Louise K. Palmer, on the other hand, is barely capable of functioning and is mentally (and physically) unwell, yet she is treated as if she has full agency because she has passed the age that society dubs “adult.” It is by age and societal expectation that power is distributed, yet throughout the text we are given multiple chances to see the folly of this formula. Only a handful of pages later Holly finds herself in a religious shelter at “The People’s Church,” and although they let her in without question she still feels the need to lie and tells them, “My mom said to meet her here” (89).

At the government shelter it was clear that the institution itself (state) refused her the agency afforded to adults, but at the religious institution it becomes apparent that Holly herself is experiencing the results of stereotype threat and has internalized the

expectation that she needs adults to survive. The power of each of the institutions over her, most significantly of identity politics, plays a role in how she views herself.

Throughout the text, she is unable to become “adult” as she regularly needs adults to save her--homeless adults give her food (43, 80), Louise K. Palmer gets her into the shelter (50), Reverend Raynaldo and Shanana let her into the People’s Church (89), she is given food by the rescue wagon (121) and the soup kitchen (201), she is temporarily provided shelter and even a blanket by Venus’s mom in the homeless “manor” (123), the farmer literally saves her from being trapped in an outhouse (170) and then he and his wife care for her overnight (172), she finds a sleeping bag and recycles cans that belonged to a homeless man named Hog (184), and she is finally taken in by Meg and Vera (230), which marks her ultimate return to acceptance of all of the institutions she originally ran from. Even when she gets stopped by police she is still metaphorically saved by adults, she “did something [her] mom used to do” by speaking French and “channeled [her] phony mother, Louise, as [she] curstied and said, ‘Au revoir!’” (95).

At the end she is taken in by two women, and it is through allowing her journal to be read that Holly finally finds healing and a family. When she hands over the journal, she is metaphorically handing over her life and sharing her memories, including evidence of her most vulnerable moments. Her decision to share the journal is possibly her greatest act of agency, but it is also the moment she gives it up. Once Meg reads her journal, she no longer has any secrets, and from that moment we see her life rapidly return to that of a “normal” youth.

Ironically, in order to finally gain stability she has to give up her autonomy and accept the authority of each of the institutions--she finds a family, she gets enrolled in school, social services and the court are involved in making this placement "official," and she gives up her journal--representing her autonomy and the protective layers she has built around herself--and accepts her position as an adolescent. The ending of the story is hopeful, but Holly has not actually gained any agency. In fact, she has less power over herself or her institutions than she did in the beginning.

Although on the surface this is a story about a homeless girl who runs away from the institutions that repressed her and through sheer willpower and self-determination finally finds her way, in the end she comes to a place of accepting the same institutions from which she originally rebelled. If it can be said that she ever achieved autonomy through this text, based on the agency she found after running away, then it was short lived as she gave it up and returned to her youthful status at the end. If anything, this story shows a youth who is unable to achieve true agency and reverses the process of development at the end.

Touch Blue: Just a Pawn in the Game

The inescapable power of the institutions is evident in all of the texts. The foster-youth in the other texts do not fight the system nearly as obviously as Holly does, but their inability to gain any authority over their own lives is no less apparent. The state's authority is especially vivid in *Touch Blue* because the social worker, Natalie, operates as a key character in the story. Throughout the text she is alluded to as a sort of gatekeeper

between Aaron and his biological mother; and he regularly expresses frustration with the type of control Natalie, and by extension the state, has over his everyday life.

Likewise, the school system maintains its status as the “metaphorical representation” of institutional authority, despite the fact that *Touch Blue* is set in the summer months when school is out of session. Aaron’s very presence on the island is only in response to fears of the school closing. In the end, his decision to stay (the one time he exercises true agency) literally gives the school its power as it would have been forced to close without his attendance keeping it at the minimum number of students. In the same way that Natalie operates as an obvious sign of state power, the school system on the island is significant as a metaphorical representation of the muddying of institutional lines. He is on the island as a foster kid (state/identity politics), the only “youth” of the group of foster kids brought to the island (identity politics), because the island school (school) where his foster mother teaches (family) needs more students. Each of the institutions informs and shares authority with the others in this example, which happens to be the very reason Aaron is on the island and, literally, the reason he or this book even exist.

Of the novels I analyze, this book most clearly limits any power and agency on the part of the foster-youth. The book opens as Aaron’s foster sisters are waiting for their dad and him to show up at the island’s port on the ferry--the only way to travel between the island and the mainland. The physical setting of a small rural community (where everyone knows everyone’s business) on an island (where there is literally no escape) reinforces Aaron’s inability to make his own decisions or have agency over himself. At

one point he tries to run away only to have Tess tell him, “It won’t work. [...]. The ferry captain won’t take you without calling Dad first. An island kid can’t just get on the ferry by himself with a suitcase and not have to answer some questions” (Lord 120-21).

Aaron’s response comes in two parts, both of which highlight exactly how powerless he feels, both as a foster-youth in general and in this placement in particular. First alluding to his place in identity politics, he states simply, “I am not an island kid” (121). Of course, this does not mean he is going to be able to board the ferry, if anything it limits his agency even further--he has no power AND he doesn’t belong. The second part of his response shows his frustration, “No one’s going to decide things for me anymore. I’m getting off this island and going home--even if I have to swim!” (121). Even as he speaks these words, he knows they aren’t true. In speaking against the power others have over him, he is acknowledging his complete powerlessness in the situation.

Aaron’s mother serves as another reminder of his inability to escape the institutions that control his life. He was taken from her when he was five years old. He then lived with his grandmother until she passed away when he was eleven. During those six years, his mother failed to follow the treatment plan ordered by the judge and stopped showing up at “the meetings she was supposed to go to” (10), so her rights were permanently taken away by the state. By the time his grandmother passed away, no one knew where his mother was. Although we get very little of her story, we see her absence as having a real presence in Aaron’s mind and life.

When Aaron receives a letter from his mother, he asks Tess not to tell anyone, saying “I don’t want my mom to get in trouble. Natalie probably won’t like some of the

things Mom says in here” (40). He has not heard from her in four years, two years before his grandma passed away, and he blames the state: “If Natalie gets mad at her, [she] might not write to me again” (41). Aaron acknowledges here that both he and his mother are subject to the will of the social workers and judges, and that they have no agency to as much as write to each other without first getting permission.

Throughout the book we see Aaron villainizing the state for taking him away from his mother, making it too hard for her to get him back, and for keeping them apart even now. When Tess suggests making her a video, Aaron replies, “Your parents would have to ask Natalie. I hate how everything has to go through her. It’s not like I’m a baby!” (95) The state has full agency in determining when and if Aaron can have any type of contact with his mother, and that includes him having any knowledge of her: “I don’t even know if she *has* a doorstep. [...]. I’m afraid if anything bad happened to her, no one would even tell me” (124). Ultimately, when they decide to invite her to the talent show to watch him play, Tess has to write the letter because as the non-foster youth in the story she is not subject to the power of the state in the same way he is; “Natalie has never mentioned [his] mom to [Tess],” so she rationalizes that “It can’t be breaking a rule for *me* to invite her, right?” (125)

It is interesting that every time his mother comes up, Aaron leaves youthfulness and steps into the adult role of protector, if only for a moment. He expresses concern about her wellbeing, he tries to protect her from getting “in trouble” with Natalie (a.k.a. the state), and he expresses sadness over the fact that she found out about her own mother’s death two years after the fact. While the last time they were physically together

was when he was five, at thirteen he still sees himself as needing to care for her. Although there is very little background information about his life before he was removed from her care, what we learn makes it appropriate to assume that he may have taken on the role of caregiver to an extent even as a young child. However, he holds her memory in high regard and wants to be back with her, regardless of what the state deems to be appropriate. As with all of the foster-youth in these texts, and even with my own children, the previous family does not stop having influence merely because of time and distance. He is never able to fully let go of his attachment to his mother, and in that way she maintains some authority in his life.

Aaron's childhood was interrupted in such a way that he was unable to achieve "separation from the mother" (Coats 7) in the natural way. Since Aaron "never knew his father" (Lord 52), he is unable to "come under the 'Law of the Father'" (Coats 7) in a literal sense, so the state steps in and takes that role. Here we see the muddying of institutional roles playing out in Aaron's life--the foster parents are not the parents, and the biological parents are no longer (or in the case of Aaron's father, never were) the parents, so the state assumes a role in the institution of family as well as in the institution of government. Thus, Aaron's ability to grow towards adulthood, in Lacanian terms, is stunted. This institutional convolution suggests that foster-youth, despite having to take on some "adult" traits at certain points, will have greater difficulty finding lasting autonomy and agency and reaching "adulthood" than youth who are still with their biological parents. This finding is consistent throughout the texts.

Despite his consistent defense of his mother, when he is finally able to speak with her face-to-face he gets angry and accuses her of “lov[ing] drinking too much” (170). Then he shares something she presumably never knew--he was the one that called 9-1-1 the day he was removed from her care. Five-year-old Aaron found his mother passed out drunk and unresponsive, and made the call when she wouldn't wake up. He says, “I tried to get you help, and look what happened! They punished *me* for it!” (171) This last statement is key in understanding Aaron's desperation and feeling of powerlessness with the state--at five he had the agency to take care of his mother who was unable (or unwilling) to take care of herself (this reminds me of Holly and Louise K. Palmer), but at thirteen he doesn't even get to decide to call her. The state's role in his life has been one of control, as exemplified by the island placement that leaves him, literally, nowhere to run.

It is significant to note in terms of Lacan that it is not until Aaron was given the opportunity to share *language* with his mother, actually talk to her directly, that she becomes someone separate from his memory and, accordingly, from himself. When he is finally able to look her in the eye he surprises himself by getting angry with her. It is at this point that he is finally released to grow, as the separation necessary in “the next step in the constitution of the subject [...] starts with the recognition of a lack in the Other” (Coats 25). According to Lacanian theory, as described by Karen Coats, it is not until he can verbalize his knowledge of her faults that he is able to move from the “infant” phase to the “Symbolic” where he can finally move towards his own growth: “In this prelapsarian world, before the infant has ‘fallen’ into language [or, in Aaron's case, is

able to verbalize it], it knows nothing of its own alienation” (26). We see this move when Aaron states plainly, “I thought I would only feel happy to see her and glad she was okay. But when I started talking, it all came out” (176).

In terms of agency, in the end Aaron comes to a place of acceptance of all of the institutions discussed in the introduction. He accepts his place in the community (identity politics) when he agrees to play music at the festivals, and he accepts the family he is with (and, by association, the authority of the state that has placed him there). In the end it is specifically mentioned that he will be starting school soon, which is particularly significant because school has not been in session over the course of the novel (it is summer) yet he is acknowledging an acceptance of the authority of the one institution that was not directly visible (although still very significant) in the story. As with Holly, Aaron attempts to maintain some agency throughout the book, but it is not until he agrees to give that up and accept his place as a youth in each institution that we come to some sort of resolution in the text.

The Guardian: He is Never Alone

Hunter has been in multiple foster homes. Unlike Holly from *Runaway*, those placements all ended by no fault of his own--caseworkers always eventually found the placement to be unsafe. So whereas Holly seems to have some agency early on when she purposefully gets sent away by foster parents, Hunter is subject to the whim of each family and the state every time. Despite his own innocence in each situation, by the time he was nine, he had been warned that “if [he] got too many placements, nobody would

ever want [him] because [he'd] look like a problem child" (Sweeney 95). Here, before the story even begins, the web of authority is already wreaking havoc on Hunter--the state determines each placement unfit, but it is Hunter's character that is questioned because of the identity politics of foster kids who have been removed from several homes.

Hunter's sense of self is heavily influenced by the way others perceive him as a foster-youth. Literally, the story opens with evidence of this: "I start answering the door so I won't feel invisible. It's one of the tricks I've picked up in foster care--even people who hate you will cut you a little slack if you make yourself useful" (1). He is a foster child who has had several placements, he is a boy (Stephanie only ever wanted girls), he is a teenager, and he is the "difficult child" (7). He starts to see himself as others see him, to the point of doubting his own reality after both his foster-sister and foster-mother accuse him of being crazy: "Maybe I'm really in bad shape and I'm doing all these things and blaming it on some guardian angel in my mind" (110). The text ends with him commenting that knowing about his "real parents" is not what he always expected, demonstrating the way his position as "foster kid" defined his life.

When Holly ran away, she took action that gave her some measure of control over her own life, although it was still very limited. Hunter, on the other hand, never gains any agency throughout the text. His stepmother forces him to work and give her all of his money, the one teacher whose name is mentioned in the book sends a note home saying he is "defiant" for not knowing an answer in class, the bully on the bus picks on him and steals money from him, and his sisters keep tabs on him and pass on any negative information to Stephanie. He is even powerless in dating; the cute girl who takes interest

in him determines what their science project will be, where they will work on it, when they will kiss, and when they will ultimately break up because he is grounded and unable to be the boyfriend she wants him to be.

When things start to look up for Hunter, it is prayer, not individual action, which is acted upon by his “guardian angel” (51). So although he believes for a time that his prayers are making things happen, giving him agency over both himself and others, Hunter still needs someone else to take action (again similar to Holly needing adults like Louise K. Palmer). When his biological father reveals himself as the “angel,” he kidnaps Hunter and takes him across the country, trying to simultaneously buy his love and devotion while keeping him under tight surveillance. Even at the end all Hunter can do is run; it is by the work of the police that he is saved.

The very title of the text alludes to this false sense of agency. At one point it seems that maybe Hunter is the title character, the guardian of his foster-sisters. But in the end he is unable to do anything of his own accord to protect them, and in fact needs protection himself from the state and what looks to be divine intervention from the lightning storm at the end. Instead, like Holly, Hunter needs adults to save him along the way--his foster father Mike, the women whose yards he cares for, his “guardian angel” Gabriel, Father Ruiz, WWE wrestler Rolan Thunder (gives him the courage to run through a thumbs up), the police, his biological grandparents and even the mysterious angel on the Staples Center.

Of course, in all of these texts there are some places where the youth take agency, regardless of whether or not it is acknowledged by the authorities. In Hunter’s case there

are some small exceptions: the money he began skimming off the top of his earnings, the time he went into the library in L.A. (a breach of trust he ended up paying for) and the time he ran from his father (ultimately to the police). But other than these brief moments, Hunter never *does* anything that gives him real agency. He never overcomes the full control of or gains authority within the institutions that had power in his life--family (both biological and foster), school, and social services (gov't).

Out of the text set, Hunter is the only foster-youth who doesn't exercise any agency in the end. He is shown as submitting to the authority of the institutions, just like Holly and Aaron, but there is no conscious acceptance or willing handing over of authority. He is placed by the state with biological grandparents that he never knew and it is assumed that after his ordeal with his biological father things will now settle into some sort of normal routine. The grandparents show a desire to get to know and care for him, but there is nothing in the text that suggests that Hunter shares that concern. The only possible area where we see some shift in agency is when he meets with his old foster sister for lunch and there are hints of a potential romantic relationship (176). However, even in this we see a mixing of institutional boundaries and a lack of true agency. The text even acknowledges a "power shift"--since it was hinted throughout the entire text that she might have interest in him, the possibility of a future relationship seems to be furthering her agency more than his own.

One for the Murphys: "Family" Matters

One for the Murphys deviates in some significant ways from the other texts. The home of Julie Murphy and her family is thirteen-year-old Carley's first foster home. The state steps in because her stepfather put both herself and her mother in the hospital, not because her biological parent is deemed unfit or has passed away. Unlike the foster-youth in the other books, Carley is able to see her biological mother, and in the end it is likely that they will be reunited and will make a life together. Although these differences are significant, the constant presence of the institutions and the power they wield remains the same.

Growing up under difficult conditions in Las Vegas has taught Carley to be tough and not let anyone see her cry, but now she is placed with a picture-perfect family that eats meals together and she immediately feels out of place. Her displacement is enhanced early on when she hears Mrs. Murphy tell her son, "Family looks out for family" (Hunt 12), an adage that clearly has not been true in her life. The institution of family is very visible in this text, as Carley is constantly comparing what she observes with the Murphys to her own memories of her mother. In fact, the cover itself invokes this institution, as it asks the question, "Can she find her place in such a perfect family?" In many ways this novel is a book about redefining family as the misfit discovers "family" as she has never known it through the incredibly cliché after-school-special family.

From the very beginning, Carley constantly questions her own sense of self as the people around her respond to her in ways that she can't quite understand. She clearly perceives herself as fitting within the socially constructed group called "foster kids," and

openly accepts the stereotypes of people within the system. This becomes evident right from the start, before she even meets the Murphys, when she says, “I’ve read books and seen movies. I know what foster parents are like” (3). Early on she notes, “Funny how something can be defined by the one thing that makes it different from everything else. Like ‘the foster kid’” (18). Similarly, when Mrs. Murphy is trying to get to know her better and asking questions, Carley responds with “I’m in foster care. Doesn’t that pretty much spell it out” (38). But the authority of identity politics is clearly at work in her life through the realization of stereotype threat when she doesn’t just verbally acknowledge the expectations of “foster kid,” but actively lives them out. When she makes a scene at the restaurant, she gives agency to identity politics by becoming exactly what she believes they expect her to be. However, as the Murphys continually break her expectations of “foster parents,” she is likewise forced to question her own positionality of “foster kid.” As the text continues, she is constantly having to readjust her sense of self based on how others perceive her.

She is new to foster care, new in the family, new to having siblings, new to home cooked meals, new to small town Connecticut, and new to having someone talk to her “like it matters [...] whether [she is] happy or not” (25). Through it all, Carley “stand[s] in a place with no space” (12) as she tries to work through her past, her memories of the trauma that landed her in the system to begin with, and the very different life she is now expected to live. After just a few days, she thinks to herself, “it seems like a world I can never fit into” (64).

The one thing that Carley controls, and the only area where she exercises consistent agency, is the way she manipulates numbers and words to support her thoughts, such as when she realizes at one point “that the last four letters in ‘Julie’ are ‘u lie’” and decides she can’t trust her (35). Throughout the text we see, as Mr. Murphy says, that Carley has “an interesting take on the world” (66). For example, during her first night in the house she has difficulty sleeping. She looks at the clock at 2:34 a.m., “I like the consecutive numbers. I watch and wait for 2:35 because two plus three will be five. At 2:36, two times three will be six./The number six makes me remember my mother’s favorite vase. [...]” (10).

This kind of interest in counting, numbers, letters, luck, etc. is the one thing she maintains consistent control over throughout the book. It is where her autonomy is held, as Holly’s was in the journal and Aaron’s was in his refusal to play Monopoly. Her entire physical life is completely foreign to her and out of her control, even wearing new clothes she doesn’t like; but the way she thinks about numbers and letters is hers alone. Despite its constant presence in the text--she counts steps, she counts time, she counts days--she only ever verbalizes to another character one time, it is for her and her alone. But even this agency is unsustainable. When she feels out of control, she begins “searching the wall for something to count” (208). When she can’t find something to count, she finally lets herself cry, something she has consciously fought against through the entire text. Rather than being the breaking point where she finally mourns what has happened and gains some real control, she says, “My body feels like it isn’t mine” (209). Though it is small and fairly inconsequential in the storyline, her focus on numbers is the only thing

that gives her any real agency over herself, and losing it is the moment when she finally gives all agency up.

The ending is consistent with most of the other novels--Carley has to willingly let go of her agency over herself and become childlike in order to find any stability. Throughout the book she regularly notes wanting to cry but refuses to do so, claiming that crying is "just weak" (44). But when the time comes for her to finally receive some sort of hope and healing, she gives into it. She tells Mrs. Murphy directly that she doesn't want to be seen "Crying like a baby" (208), but we see the childish need for comfort drawn out of her when Mrs. Murphy holds her while "rocking back and forth a bit" (208). The image here is clearly that of a babe in its mother's arms, not of a strong, hardened foster kid from Las Vegas: "Where once I would've run, I'm now still. I stand, collapsing in her arms, depending on this woman [Mrs. Murphy] to hold me up" (209).

In the same way that Aaron had to revisit the experience of his childhood, Carley is shown as literally having to let go of any "growth" she may have found and return to an infantile state in order to find healing. In the same way that Holly is forced to let adults help her out, Carley now needs an adult to literally "hold [her] up." The book does not end with her having gained agency, but rather reverses the progress narrative by requiring her to literally return to a prior state of being (childhood) and ultimately return to the care of her biological mother.

A Look Across the Texts: They Cannot Overcome

The analyses above demonstrate some significant similarities in terms of institutional authority and agency within these texts. Some of the themes that are consistent throughout the text set, though evident in the above descriptions, deserve a more focused look. A look across them shows clearly that all of the foster-youth in these stories are directly subject to the authority of all of the institutions described by Trites. But there are also more specific themes that come out: the significance of their age, a false sense of agency, the impact of complicated institutional definitions on the foster-youth and their sense of self, and their need to give up agency in order to come to a place of stability. Ultimately, these texts favor institutional authority over personal agency for the foster-youth, requiring them to remain in the position of (non)authority deemed appropriate for their age.

All of these texts are YAL, but they all fit into a subset often termed middle-grade fiction. The main characters are between twelve- and fourteen-years-old, the age typically ascribed to middle-school students (5th through 8th grade). This is significant because while their situation as foster-youth puts them in a sort of liminal space in terms of family, agency, and stability, their age is also a marker of an undefined place--in our culture they are no longer “child” but not quite yet full-blown “youth.” As Lesko states, this group is still positioned as “waiting passively for the future. [...] imprisoned in their time (age) and out of time (abstracted), and they are thereby denied power over decisions or resources” (105-6). This alters their ability to have any agency--none of them can yet legally drive, none can legally hold a job, none can be legally emancipated. It also alters

the perception of them by the adults in the story--they are viewed as children. In this in-between stage, the characters have a heightened focus on being “not child,” demonstrated by Carley’s rebellion against tears, Hunter’s attempt to provide for and protect his foster-sisters, Aaron’s anger with the state, and Holly’s continual drive to care for herself and plan for her future. This magnifies the significance of the need to return to an almost infantile state, most notably with Aaron and Carley, in order to find any sort of stability in the end of the text.

This in-between age is connected to the false sense of agency that each of the characters has at some point in the text. Lesko acknowledges this “awkward, in between time” as a social construct, a time when “middle school youth should act big and make decisions,” yet could get in trouble if they choose wrong because the decisions weren’t really theirs to make (108). It is in the effort to “act big” that Holly tries to plan her future and homeschool herself, Aaron refuses to accept his new family and keeps himself distant, Hunter believes his prayers are able to affect those around him, and Carley denies her past in an effort to fit in. It is the Monopoly game in *Touch Blue* that best emphasizes this false sense of agency. Throughout the book, the younger foster-sister, Libby, regularly asks Aaron to play Monopoly with her. He repeatedly refuses to play the game, mirroring his refusal to try to become part of the community or the family. He is unwilling to play Monopoly, but also metaphorically unwilling to play the game of the system. But his refusal represents a false sense of agency, because, of course, a kid in the system has no choice but to follow the rules of the game. And in this case, his very presence emphasizes his position as a pawn in the game--like a bench player in a

basketball game, he was brought in only because they needed more warm bodies to keep the school open. As with Lesko's metaphor of "puppeteers controlling [their] actions" (108), Aaron is moved around like a piece on the gameboard, having no choice but to go where the players (the institutions) direct. Aaron consistently demonstrates his frustration over his inability to change anything. The book ends with Aaron and Tess finally playing Monopoly with Libby, a symbol of his growth and move towards the family and a bold picture of his acceptance of his place in life, as if he finally acknowledges he is just a piece on the game board being moved by the institutional authorities.

Each youth's inability to stop the institutional players from making choices for them plays into their disrupted sense of self, connected above to questions of identity politics. This confusion is connected to the unclear web of family that has had part in each of their lives. With the exception of Carley, the characters have all had multiple placements since being in foster care. The flashbacks in the text make it apparent that each placement has lasting effects on the youth's sense of self, regardless of the length of the placement or the reason it didn't last. Beyond state placements, all of the youth--including Carley--have multiple family members, loosely defined, whose actions and opinions affect how they see themselves. Carley thinks not only of her biological mother, but also of her step-father whose abuse brought her to this point. Aaron is constantly thinking about his mother and the concern he has for her, but also spends time considering his grandmother who cared for him after his mother was dubbed unable to do so. Hunter consciously remembers his earlier placements, including showing concern for his foster-sisters and even his abusive foster-mother after his biological father kidnaps

him. Even though he barely remembers his mother, she plays a part in the text as he drills his father when they are together for information about her. Finally, Holly writes about her mother more regularly as the text progresses, and ultimately shares some information about a man her mother was with who had a significant impact on her early life and memories.

With all of the family members at play, not to mention the physical move to new homes, communities, and schools, it is no wonder that these youth all actively struggle with questions of who they are and how they should feel and act. They see themselves defined by labels: “runaway” (Holly), “foster kid” (Carley), “difficult child” (Hunter), “orphan” (Aaron) and so many more. And as they struggle with whether or not to live up to the expectations of these labels, sometimes giving in (Carley in the diner) and sometimes trying to overcome (Hunter at the funeral) they continually find themselves in new situations that don’t fit. Carley’s self-dialogue most clearly represents this struggle with sense of self. Her room in the Murphy’s home has a sign that says, “Be someone’s hero” (Hunt 6) but Carley has a hard time picturing herself as a “hero” because she believes she is to blame for what her stepfather did to her and her mother, and she is sure her mother will never forgive her. Throughout the text we see her going back and forth between acting out as the “foster kid” and trying to fit in. She doesn’t like the way the Murphys live because it is so unfamiliar, but also finds herself wanting to be a part of their family. This tension is clear until the end of the book, when she finally lets herself receive comfort from Mrs. Murphy and falls into her arms.

Finally, despite the variety of stories, every book ends the same way: the foster-youth give up their sense of agency and submit to the authority of others as they accept their place in each of the institutions. *The Guardian* resists this narrative slightly, as there is no point where Hunter willingly hands over his agency, but he is still back under the authority of the state, family (his biological grandparents), school, and identity politics (age, sexuality) in the end. The rest of the foster-youth have a moment of willing release of agency: Holly hands over her journal, Aaron decides to stay on the island and plays Monopoly with his foster-sisters, and Carley lets go of control and weeps in Mrs. Murphy's arms. Without this letting go of agency, none of the books could have reached the point of denouement that they did, suggesting that the same failed attempts at overcoming institutional authority, the same false sense of agency, and the same confused sense of self would have continued indefinitely. It is only through giving up their agency that they are able to exercise any true agency, for it is only in this moment in each of the texts where the foster-youth are able to claim any lasting change in their own lives.

Ultimately, these texts reinforce Trites' argument that "institutions rely on language to regulate the individual's authority throughout the genre of the Young Adult novel" (53). As the youth described above discover their inability to overcome the institutional authorities in their lives and eventually give up their own agency, they accept that they are only able to gain power "as they engage (necessarily) in the social forces that simultaneously empower and repress them" (52).

Additionally, by finding examples that apply Lesko's study about the cultural construct of "youth" to the texts that claim the same as their target audience, this analysis

further the argument that what constitutes appropriate behavior of youth is socially produced. Lesko calls this the “mutually negotiated social age” (142), which emphasizes a “slow development toward adulthood” (143). The “normalized age chronologies” that are reflected in cultural “theories and school practices” (135) are threatened when youth don’t act accordingly. In the texts about foster-youth, their unusual familial positioning allows them to take on adult characteristics “before their time” (135). But the need for them all to return to a childlike state at the end ensures that the “discourse of ‘adolescent development’” (178) remains unchallenged. The adult characteristics that disrupt the linear child-to-adult narrative keep the foster-youth from any true progress, so they return to a child-like state in order to reinstate the “proper development [...] meant to produce well-socialized, productive citizens” (39). So, although the youth’s position in the system disrupts the progress narrative, each of these texts finds a way to still support it in the end.

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Crag Hill argues that it is important for scholars and teachers “to study what adult writers convey to adolescent readers, deliberately or unintentionally, and what that means” (13). YAL is uniquely positioned, as it is typically authored by adults but targeted to youth. The literature itself is often placed in an instructional position for its readers, helping adolescents to “develop their cultural identities as it allows them to understand and appreciate the cultures of others” (Al-Hazza and Bucher 210), “learn their place in the power structure [and] learn to negotiate the many institutions that shape them” (Trites x) and “develop good coping skills” for difficult situations (Cole and Napier 17). For readers who have experiences similar to those in a text it can serve as a mirror for their own realities. For those whose experiences differ, reading a text can give them insight into the lives of many of their peers and, ideally, help them to empathize with those whose lives are unlike their own. This gives YAL itself a distinct level of authority as an institutional discourse: as it is typically penned by adult authors, it often represents and reinforces the expectations society has of youth, thus increasing the potential for youth to succumb to stereotype threat and adopt the construct that is presented to them.

The analysis of foster-youth in YAL certainly reinforces some of these expectations of literature targeted toward young adults. It is particularly intriguing to me, and merits further study, that the text-set I found was universally middle-grade fiction, meaning it was targeted towards younger adolescents. This is significant because as a sub-group of adolescents, 10- to 15- year olds have been historically seen as “heavy with opportunity and potential disaster” and “needing to be guided into responsibility and

productivity” (Lesko 79). As this age seems to be a transitional time not just between “child” and “adult,” but a sort of becoming-youth as well, it is unremarkable to see the instructive nature of the texts. Each of these texts have some very clear lessons about right and wrong, but what stands out as most significant in this context is the similarity of the ending of each text. Without exception, the youth are made to give up any power they tried to gain at the end and submit to the institutional authorities.

Lesko argues that at the turn of the century, “Adolescence became a way to prepare individuals for a new social order yet *maintain the social hierarchy*” (74, emphasis mine). The universal push towards submission to authorities in these texts about foster-youth suggests that little has changed. Quoting a 1989 report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescence, Lesko states, “If American society was to be both orderly and progressive, a homogeneous culture and a spirit of like-mindedness and cooperation had to exist within its population” (82). Accepting state, school, and family authority, and denying one’s own agency to operate outside of the expectations of identity politics, is an important step towards the production of “like-mindedness and cooperation.”

Limitations and Directions for Further Study

This study approaches one element of family, the foster family, from the perspective of a critical youth lens in order to analyze the messages for and about youth that are included, consciously and unconsciously, in a narrow set of young adult novels. The fact that each of the texts reinforces “the social hierarchy” isn’t unexpected,

particularly given the age of the target audience. Still, it would be worth further research to see just how consistently middle-grade fiction reinforces such a very specific form of social order. Similarly, further study needs to be done to determine why texts that highlight foster-youth are not predominantly targeted at older teens. Furthermore, this study sets up a foundation for further study on the ideological implications of differing portrayals of family in YAL.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of “family” in YAL, similar studies must be done surrounding other parental situations found in some novels--single parents, step parents, grandparents raising children, orphans, group homes, mixed families, same-gender parents, etc. In addition, similar studies can be done elucidating sibling relationships, extended families, surrogate parents, the changing expectations of “family” over time (a.k.a. 1920s to today), and even the ways in which the literature itself takes on a parental role.

In an email to me, Dr. Hill stated, “There have been a number of articles critiquing a novel or a set of novels on negative, stereotypical depictions of families, but I don't know of any study that has systematically examined the messages YA promulgates about families and parents.” Therefore, further research must be done to complete a comprehensive content analysis about the depictions of family in recent YAL to elucidate how families are currently being depicted in the literature and what is being said about the cultural construct of adolescents through this depiction. To further study what “adult writers convey to adolescent readers” (Hill 13) it would be worth analyzing YAL at large through the idea of stereotype threat, viewing YAL as an educational tool that either

reinforces or pushes against said stereotypes and determining how this impacts the adolescent readers.

Similarly, this study approaches the questions of agency, authority, and sense of self in these novels from one perspective of *power*. This narrow focus presents a narrow, negative reading that leaves this researcher with a sense of discontent and concern. However, studying the same text set from different perceptions of power would render different readings as well. Some of these readings could even show the youth in these texts to be empowered rather than repressed.

Finally, I approach these questions using literary analysis rather than empirical data. I am able to come to conclusions as a researcher by analyzing the texts in terms of the theoretical background that would not be available to real readers, including those who are and are not within the target audience. Furthering this study with empirical research that analyzes the response of real readers to these texts would lend itself to greater implications about the potential effect of these texts as part of an institutional discourse that simultaneously represents and directs its readers.

V. CONCLUSION

My kids are no longer wards of the state. That was their official position for two and a half years before their adoption was finalized. Now they are part of a “forever family,” and their lives are relatively more stable, legally speaking. But regardless of their legal status, their web of family will always affect them in some way or another. Their history as foster and adoptive kids will continue to follow them, and each and every day we are able to see it crop up in different ways. They may no longer be “foster kids,” but for the rest of their lives they will always be kids who were adopted from foster care. The end of their story has yet to be written, but when it is it will not be wrapped up neatly and succinctly. Unfortunately, the literature that portrays youth with their background makes this process far too simplistic.

Contrary to my kid’s experience, these YA texts all end the same way: the youth submit to the authorities and the implication is that everything will be better for them from that point forward. But the reality is so much messier. Foster-youth can lead successful lives, they can find stability, they can overcome the stereotype threat. But the literature that is available fails to show this process for what it is, instead reinforcing the stereotypes while continuing to support the status quo. The message is clear: submit, accept your place, be what the institutions want you to be, and then (and only then) can healing happen.

My hope is that youth will have the ability to interact with literature like this, but will stop being conditioned to believe that the literature they read in any way defines them. I want them to see the stories, not as mirrors of themselves or their peers, but as

evidence of what they can overcome. In the same way that reading these texts from different perspectives of power can change the outcome of this analysis, teaching students to read critically gives them the chance to consider multiple perspectives and, ultimately, the opportunity to exercise agency in how they read and what messages they take away. As we continue to study what messages are being promoted through young adult texts, we must also consider how to help students to critically read, not just for what *is* being said, but for what *could be*.

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