

Teach the Children Well: Young Adult Literature and Queer Content¹

“School sucks sometimes. This is the plain truth of it. Parts of school, just like parts of society, are meant to train you to conform, to make you afraid to be anything else but just like everybody else.” (Ivan E. Coyote)

This paper focuses on sexual citizenship and cultures of surveillance in a cross-cultural context—specifically, the role of high school education in social and institutional attempts to regulate the (homo) sexual behaviour of young people. It was originally inspired by the fact that well-established Canadian LGBTQ writers like Shyam Selvadurai and Ivan E. Coyote have begun to publish texts explicitly intended and marketed for adolescents, prompting definitional and generic questions about the bounds between adult and young adult literature. As Perry Nodelman points out, “[b]order guarding—keeping out what is un-childlike, keeping children’s minds in a safely bounded place of limited access to knowledge and innocent security—has been the major function of children’s literature” (8). Few issues have been more intimately associated with preserving childhood innocence than restricting access to sexual knowledge. Yet over the past twenty-five years, the boundary between adult and young adult literature has become increasingly blurred, not only because of cross-over children’s texts that adults enjoy reading, but also because of the kinds of issues now addressed in fiction aimed at youth. To provide a focal point for my discussion, I compare Shyam Selvadurai’s *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005) with Nancy Garden’s *Good Moon Rising* (1996). Selvadurai is best known for his first novel, *Funny Boy*

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Algoma University in Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, as part of ‘Straddling Boundaries: Hemispherism, Cultural Identity and Indigeneity.’ Algoma University stands on the former site of the Shingwauk Residential School. Meegwitch to the conference organizers, and to the participants who offered initial feedback on this work.

(1994); winner of a Lambda award for best gay male fiction, the book inspired public debate in Sri Lanka as to whether the laws criminalizing male homosexual acts should be repealed. Garden is acclaimed as the author of the first U.S. young adult lesbian romance with a positive ending, *Annie on My Mind* (1982), selected by the *School Library Journal* as one of the most influential books of the twentieth century; Garden's contribution to young adult literature was recognized in 2003 with the Margaret A. Edwards lifetime achievement award (Salem 105). Yet such advances remain uneven and controversial. In the U.S., books with LGBTQ content continue to appear regularly on the most challenged list produced annually by the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.² What possibilities exist for young gay, lesbian, trans or questioning individuals in Canadian young adult fiction?

As recently as 2002, when Paulette Rothbauer surveyed Canadian young adult fiction, she could find only fifteen books including gay or lesbian characters, in contrast with more than one hundred titles available south of the border by that date. The first two novels appeared in 1989, twenty years after John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, generally cited as the first young adult novel published in the U.S. to deal openly with homosexuality. Of the twenty-six characters Rothbauer catalogues, most are secondary characters providing a "problem" to be negotiated by a heterosexual protagonist; only six are lesbian, and there is not one gay male adolescent character who narrates his own story. Approximately half of the works sampled allude to the process of "coming out" and the negative consequences this often brings: "The elements of the coming-out story are predictable: fear, confusion,

² In the annual top ten list, the reason most frequently cited for mounting the challenge is the charge that the book is "sexually explicit" (seven out of ten challenges in 2012, with two citing homosexuality specifically).

and self-loathing on the part of the lesbian or gay character; and disbelief, resistance, intolerance, harassment, and abuse on the part of family members, friends, and peers, with trajectories that lead to self-acceptance and acceptance by some or self-annihilation and utter rejection by others" (23). These characters are also more likely to be depicted experiencing violence or suicidal thoughts than even the tamest of sexual encounters (such as a kiss): "More to the point, there is very little that is uplifting or affirming in any of these novels or short stories that might speak to young lesbian and gay readers about the possibilities that exist after the initial ... declaration of one's sexual identity or orientation" (23). Benjamin Lefebvre, perturbed by these patterns, asks what conclusions can be drawn about a national literature that interpellates teen characters into homophobic discourses without providing a full spectrum of homosexual characters or convincing affirmative counter-discursive positions with which adolescent readers might identify (290-91).³ His questions are all the more pertinent given that one of the texts he analyzes, Diana Wiener's *Bad Boy*, won the Governor General's literary award in the children's category.

In some ways, the two novels I consider in this paper represent minimal progress at best. In terms of the descriptors developed by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins for young adult fiction with LGBTQ content, both fit the category of homosexual visibility, as opposed to gay assimilation or, rarest of all, queer community/consciousness (xix). As my project develops, I aim to investigate the extent to which (YA) texts with queer-positive content are being incorporated into school classrooms and libraries: *are* things getting better yet? To date, there is relatively little academic literature on this topic, and much of

³ Lefebvre's article is also useful for its elucidation of the way the generic conventions of the young adult "problem novel" are linked to other cultural forms of heteronormative power, as the first-person heterosexual homophobic protagonists of these novels experience forgiveness and growth while their gay friends are severely reprimanded.

the analysis refers to U.S. data.⁴ The research of Mollie Blackburn and Caroline Clark, for example, demonstrates that LGBT texts used in schools have generally been framed in terms of fear, bullying and survival. Students are positioned as straight and usually assumed to be homophobic by teachers. The books are expected to act as windows rather than mirrors, and studies indicate that the teaching of such a text is usually an isolated event.⁵ Garden's and Selvadurai's novels broadly replicate these assumptions, in that the teen protagonists must contend with the first stirrings of homosexual desire in institutional settings that are antipathetic, if not outright homophobic. Close reading of these two novels, focusing particularly on their dramatic intertexts, offers preliminary insights into the role of high school education in reinforcing heteronormative conformity.

Separated by nearly ten years and originating from opposite sides of the Canada-U.S. border, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *Good Moon Rising* nevertheless share many characteristics common to young adult literature more generally. The plots unfold in a relatively short space of time, set during the summer school holidays and the months from September to Christmas, respectively. Both novels employ a tried and tested formula: a newcomer arrives (the unknown Canadian cousin, the new girl in school), and the protagonist's formerly mundane existence is turned upside down. Both have coming-of-age elements, revolving around loss of innocence, sexual maturation, and coping with complex emotional and social issues. Both deal with the tribulations of first love, and how these are complicated or heightened when the object of that love is the same gender. Both authors employ recurring dreams or nightmares to signal the characters' subconscious, inarticulate fears and longings. Both novels

⁴ For preliminary research into conditions in Canadian classrooms, see Taylor et al, *Youth Speak Up About Homophobia and Transphobia*, Haskell and Burtch, and Filax.

⁵ Similar observations are made by Curwood, Schliesman and Horning.

frame their protagonists' growing awareness of their sexuality in part through participation in high school productions of two canonical plays: *Othello* in the case of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *The Crucible* in *Good Moon Rising*. There are, however, significant differences between these texts as well. Garden deals with high school seniors,⁶ aged about 17, whereas Selvadurai's protagonist, Amrith, is 14 and still in grade 9; three years make a huge difference at that age. Garden's school, set in the small town of Southview, New Hampshire in the present, is co-educational, while Selvadurai examines the privileged Roman Catholic Cinnamon Gardens elite of Colombo in 1980, where schools are rigidly divided along gender lines. In *Good Moon Rising*, Jan and Kerry are mutually attracted to each other and the novel's resolution depicts the two young women as a committed couple, standing together to face the homophobic peer pressure of being forcibly outed. In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, Amrith's desire for his 16-year-old Canadian cousin Nireesh is unreturned (and seemingly undetected), so the focus remains rather on Amrith's acceptance of his own sexuality and his inability to come out to anyone else at this particular historical place and moment. Despite these divergences, the novels use their dramatic intertexts in similar ways to foreground the intersection of education, family, nation and literary canon(s) in the performance and surveillance of adolescent sexual citizenship.

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea poses intriguing questions concerning national(ist) boundaries and literary canons. Selvadurai prefaces the narrative with an epigraph from James Baldwin's ground-breaking novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956): "But people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, any more than they can invent their parents. Life gives these

⁶ Technically, Kerry is a junior, but she missed a grade when living overseas with her parents.

and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life." For informed readers, the author thus contextualizes his work in relation to a transnational body of queer writing, one moreover that actively engages themes of imperialism, race and class. In fact, however, the Canadian context (if not *content*) achieves greater prominence here than in Selvadurai's first two novels. Through the interaction of Amrith and his sisters with Niresh, Canadian society serves as a foil for the sheltered, privileged lives of the Manuel-Pillai family. This juxtaposition permits reflection upon cross-cultural distinctions in sex/gender systems, the family as institution, belonging, and citizenship. Selvadurai includes details that highlight the (post)colonial context, notably through architecture, as well as incidental references to skin colour and to class privilege. However, unlike *Funny Boy*, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* makes no overt allusions to racial and ethnic violence or to the rising tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities during this period: the young adult novel omits much of the "adult"⁷ text's political complexity to focus upon the sexual coming-of-age story. Having said that, there are no obvious racial cues in Garden's work either.

Both novels open with motifs connoting silence. *Good Moon Rising* begins with Jan's unsettling dream⁸ of herself under a spotlight on a darkened stage, being observed by two fellow apprentices from her first season in summer stock: "It was as if they'd been bound into silence at the moment they'd tried to tell her something, or as if they'd been about to warn her of something they saw and she didn't..." (3, original ellipsis). From the outset, the narrative is framed in

⁷ *Funny Boy* has sometimes been reviewed or received as a young adult fiction also, because of the age of the first-person protagonist (Arjie is seven when the novel opens and fourteen at the time of the Colombo riots in 1983). But the novel was not explicitly marketed as such by the author or his publisher. See Sarah Ellis's review of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* for a brief summary of the differences between the two novels.

⁸ In contrast, the first reference to Amrith's recurring nightmare of his mother's empty chair does not occur until p. 92.

terms of surveillance, silencing, and the ominous shadow of an as-yet unknown or unnamed threat. This is a fairly common motif in (YA) coming-out narratives; *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* also makes at least two allusions to Amrith's uncomfortable feeling that those observing him know something about him that he does not (e.g. 56, 192). Teenagers are notoriously susceptible to peer pressure. The self-conscious sensation of constant scrutiny is heightened for questioning youth by the incipient homophobia of the school environment.

The first chapter of Selvadurai's novel, "The Silent Mynah,"⁹ opens on the anniversary of the death of Amrith's parents eight years earlier in a motorcycle accident, when he was just six. Initially, readers intuit a link between the mynah's refusal (or inability) to speak and Amrith's isolation, his repression of the past, his anger at his aunt,¹⁰ and his deliberate withholding of memories of his mother and their trip to the family holiday home, Sanasuma (a Sinhalese word meaning a feeling of comfort or solace). There is also an implicit link to Sri Lankan national mythologies, as the mynah is named Kuveni for a mythical demoness.¹¹ Kuveni's story forms part of the origin myth of the Sinhala people, recorded in the *Mahavamsa* (or Great Chronicle). Kuveni was the wife of Vijaya, Sri Lanka's first king. She observed Vijaya's arrival on the island, following his exile from the land of the Vangas. Kuveni tricked Vijaya into marriage and helped him to defeat the demons, the original inhabitants who had raised her. After several years and the birth of two children, Vijaya's followers persuaded the king to expel Kuveni and their offspring into the forest; Vijaya subsequently married a princess from Southern India. Rejected by her people, Kuveni sought

⁹ Reviewers like Sarah Ellis point out that chapter titles help less confident readers navigate the novel's complexities.

¹⁰ Amrith addresses his adoptive parents as Aunt and Uncle but there is no blood relation; Aunt Bundle was his mother Asha's closest friend.

¹¹ My condensed summary of this myth is based on de Votta and Amarasingham.

revenge, using magical weapons to attack Vijaya in his sleep, resulting in his death. According to Neil de Votta, the myth of Vijaya is taught in schools, and is accepted by many Sinhalese as historical fact, the deeply rooted basis for Sinhalese nationalist claims to Sri Lanka as (Buddhist) homeland (5-7). Typically, fundamental national myths are intertwined with compulsory heterosexuality. By naming the mynah Kuveni, Selvadurai subtly aligns Amrith with a reviled figure cast out from both nation and community.¹² Later in the novel, it emerges that the bird was a gift from Aunty Bundle's friend and business partner, the architect Lucien Lindamulagé (72)—a character consistently associated with rumour and scandal due to his "constant round of male secretaries," which Amrith observes "deeply sadden[s] and trouble[s]" Aunty Bundle (73). The cautionary figure of the aging architect both attracts and repels Amrith, who feels he can be himself with Lindamulagé despite his odd manner, unlike with most other men (74). Yet Amrith has also heard boys at school talking about the secretaries and referring "to the old man as a 'ponnaya'—a word whose precise meaning Amrith did not understand, though he knew it disparaged the masculinity of another man, reducing him to the level of a woman" (75).¹³ Selvadurai uses the figure of Lindamulagé to inform the reader, through Amrith's only partial understanding, that homosexuality is both illegal and dangerous in Sri Lankan society. The silent mynah reappears at the novel's resolution. Speculating that the bird is lonely, Lindamulagé offers to find

¹² There are clear parallels between Kuveni and other indigenous women demonized as traitors to their people because of marriages to invader-conquerors, such as the figure of La Malinche in Mexico. There is also a family resemblance between the allusions to Kuveni and the Salem witches as demonic scapegoat figures, symbolically linked to homosexuality in the two novels.

¹³ The word "reducing" reveals (perhaps unconsciously) the hierarchical gender binary that assumes the superiority of men over women, automatically devaluing the latter. Thus in the all-male school theatricals, junior boys like Amrith generally play the women's roles. There is, of course, a link between sexism or misogyny and homophobia.

a male mate for her. But Amrith's perspective has altered, in light of his discovery of his sexual orientation. Perceiving that Kuveni seems "perfectly content to be alone. Perfectly content to remain silent," he opts to leave her in peace for now (268). Symbolically, the mynah becomes associated with the operation of the closet and Amrith's decision to acknowledge and accept his sexuality but remain silent about it.

One of the most striking similarities in the structure and plot development of *Good Moon Rising* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is their use of canonical plays as intertexts to accentuate the emotions and messages evoked by their respective containing texts. Both *The Crucible* and *Othello* are plays one might expect to appear on high school syllabi (indeed, *The Crucible* is a popular choice for amateur high school productions because the cast includes so many young people). At key points in each novel, the characters infiltrate their own concerns into the roles they are performing, literally "acting out" an emotional subtext on stage. The shadow of violent death haunting both plays also mirrors the undercurrent of homophobic violence that threatens to disrupt the social and sexual development of these young subjects.

A large proportion of *Good Moon Rising* is devoted to the casting, rehearsals and performances of *The Crucible*. This throws into relief a productive tension between the protagonists' desire for the audience's admiration and applause, and their fear of failure before or censure by that same audience, composed largely of school-mates, friends, and family. The drama teacher, Elvira Nicholson, introduces *The Crucible* to her students as "a play about misguided power and the cruelty of falsehood, and about the sin of blindly following the common herd" (36). As a canonical American work that resonates with the founding of the U.S. as a nation state and its Puritan heritage, this

intertext permits direct and indirect reflection on sexual citizenship. Arthur Miller famously conceived his play in the depths of the Cold War, drawing historical parallels between the witch hunts of Salem and contemporary fears concerning Communist espionage. The notorious slippage between political subversion and sexual deviance during the 1950s hearings makes this choice all the more apt for Garden's purposes. This is underscored in *Good Moon Rising* when a small group of students starts an anonymous campaign against Jan and Kerry, using dialogue modelled on *The Crucible's* "crying out" to accuse them. The slogan "I SAW JAN MONTCRIEF WITH THE DEVIL. I SAW KERRY SOCRIDES WITH THE DEVIL" (159) is chalked up on the homeroom blackboard. Kent Norris, the school's leading man cast in the role of John Proctor, is characterized from the outset as attractive, volatile, and insecure enough about his masculinity to take refuge in homophobic remarks and bullying behaviour (he claims to have been followed around the previous summer by "a couple of fags" while performing the role of Stanley Kowalski, 12). Kent deliberately sets out to intimidate, upstage or upset Kerry so much that she will either fall apart on stage or give up the role of Elizabeth altogether. Kent's sidekick, Will Omlin, similarly informs Jan that lesbianism is "A terrible, unnatural sin" (173), and the girls receive anonymous phone calls citing Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death" (181). The persecution escalates until on the evening of the final performance, a banner with three-foot letters is hung at the entrance to the school proclaiming "KERRY SOCRIDES IS GAY. JAN MONTCRIEF IS GAY," while hand-written signs with similar messages have been posted all around the backstage area, the school corridors, and even in the girls' washroom. In the early phases of this campaign, Jan and Kerry try to ignore or deny the rumours and gossip, hoping their failure to react will discourage their tormentors. They even contemplate getting Jan's

gay actor friend Raphael to pretend to be her boyfriend at the cast party (Jan similarly served as a “beard”¹⁴ for Raphael the previous summer, whenever his parents visited). Ultimately, however, the pair opts to proclaim their love publicly and claim their identity as lesbians. As this is an idealistic young adult novel with a positive political message, Garden is careful to make clear that most of the cast are sympathetic to Jan and Kerry and indifferent to, or tolerant of, their sexuality. Furthermore, the three homophobic culprits are suspended for defacing school property and harassing other students—contrary to the actual experience of many queer adolescents who encounter bullying in U.S. high schools.¹⁵ In short, Garden uses a familiar play about moral absolutism, unjust persecution and individual conscience to characterize the situation of her young lesbian protagonists, involuntarily outed by a narrow-minded minority.

While the staging of *Othello* takes up much less space in Selvadurai’s narrative, it would be hard to miss the parallels between Othello’s jealous rage and Amrith’s black moods and behaviour—though Selvadurai resists quoting the famous line about loving not wisely but too well. In fact, the circumstances of Amrith’s ‘tragic, flawed past’ complicate the love triangle between himself, his sister Mala and his cousin Niresh, as the nature and role of family are questioned much more extensively in this text than in Garden’s. Parental absence or indifference often serves as a catalyst in children’s literature, and to some extent

¹⁴ A significant portion of the novel’s conflict revolves around a literal beard. In defiance of Mrs Nicholson’s vision for the character of John Proctor, Kent grows a beard. When Jan takes over the role of director because of the teacher’s terminal illness, Kent’s beard becomes the sign of his resistance to Jan’s authority, his expression of masculinity, and his fear of being perceived as weak or “faggy” (65).

¹⁵ Since 1999, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has been conducting a National Climate School Survey annually to document the incidence of anti-LGBT language and victimization in U.S. classrooms, and its impact on student experience and performance. In 2011, 81.9% reported being verbally harassed in the past year because of sexual orientation, yet 60.4% failed to report instances of abuse or assault to staff, believing little or no action would be taken. 36.7% of students who reported an incident at school claimed that staff did nothing in response (Executive Summary 5).

Good Moon Rising resembles this pattern. Kerry's sudden appearance as the new girl at school is explained by the fact that she is living with her aunt for a few months while her parents are abroad in Europe. This temporary arrangement adds to the tension when the girls' relationship comes under pressure, as there is always the possibility that Kerry will either choose to leave (to avoid the situation), or be forced to do so by the older, uncomprehending aunt (who views the intensity of the friendship with Jan as unhealthy, and tries to prevent Kerry from seeing so much of her). Although Jan's mother is depicted as supportive and nurturing, her father is frequently absent, out of town on business, and her older sister has already moved out and is heavily pregnant with her first child. The fact that Jan has access to her mother's car also facilitates a high degree of independence and mobility. Garden does, however, interpolate brief reflections on heteronormative marriage and family life. Significantly, one key example occurs during the Montcrieff Thanksgiving dinner, a festival that highlights the primacy of the nuclear family in U.S. national mythology. Jan has written to her friend Raphael seeking advice about her possible feelings for Kerry. Now, surrounded by the trappings of domesticity, she thinks: "I am different from them; their world isn't my world.... Where do Kerry and I fit? If we stay together, end up together, could we make a place for ourselves here?" (106). It is perhaps worth noting that the focus of the denouement remains on the two lovers and what is happening amongst their peers, at school, rather than on their families. Kerry tells Jan that she intends to stay, that she has written to tell her parents about their relationship, and to ask for help explaining things to Aunt Elena. But Jan has not yet said anything to her family, and it remains ambiguous how they will respond to the disclosure.

Parental absence can certainly be said to drive Amrith's story, as it is precisely his orphaned status that foregrounds questions about the nature of filiation versus affiliation. Nevertheless, Selvadurai makes clear the importance of family in Sri Lankan society through a variety of incidents. He goes to some lengths to emphasize the loving, supportive environment in which Amrith is raised, despite the loss of his biological parents. Amrith has been ostracized by his blood relatives on both sides, because his parents eloped and married against their families' wishes.¹⁶ In contrast, both Aunty Bundle and Uncle Lucky constantly address Amrith as "son," and Mala worships him as an older brother, although they are the same age. Lucky mentors Amrith by recounting a dispute between his own father and uncle over a piece of land, asserting that "Families hold on to things for too long, nurse grievances until they corrode their hearts and ruin their lives. How much better it is to forgive old wrongs, to let things go" (82-3). Selvadurai pointedly distinguishes this nurturing, albeit adoptive, family from the dysfunctional relationship between cousin Niresh and his father Mervin, the abusive older brother of Amrith's beloved mother Asha.¹⁷ But Amrith increasingly feels a darkness overwhelming him and a gulf opening up between himself and his family. This blackness is associated from the outset with the motif of the wild, stormy monsoon sea, with his repression of the past (3, 32), and with his changing body, since these new moods began the previous year: "When he thought of himself before he was thirteen, it was as a dashing-about child, with no thoughts distinct from the dictates and actions of his body. As he passed into his teenage years, his mind seemed to separate more and more

¹⁶ "His father had been expected to marry for wealth and provide dowries for his sisters," so he had brought hardship to the family, making his sisters less marriageable (86).

¹⁷ Mervin is divorced from Niresh's mother, who cited physical and mental cruelty when she left. At 16, Niresh is big enough to stand up to his father and attempt to intimidate him physically. Father and son invariably speak rudely and disrespectfully to each other.

from his body, causing him to see himself from a distance" (33). The onset of puberty also partially explains the growing rift between Amrith and his sisters, as parental watchfulness and regulation intensify. For instance, the family has determined that the children will not be permitted to date until they are 18: "Their friends and classmates envied them this future liberty. Most of them would have arranged marriages. Others might be allowed to date in their twenties, if the partner was first vetted to be of the right caste, class, religion, and race, with good education and prospects" (44). Inevitably, the girls develop interests and social sets that diverge from Amrith's; still, he feels abandoned, angry and secretly envious (70). Despite the family's solidarity, Amrith's outsider status is underlined by one of Bundle's acquaintances, who goes out of her way to emphasize that Amrith is not suitable marriage material because of the scandal surrounding his parents' death and the rejection of his blood relatives. This does rather beg the question, why has Amrith not acquired the social standing of the Manuel-Pillais? All of these facets throw into high relief the prominence of family ties in Sri Lankan society, even as Selvadurai subtly indicates the existence of alternative models. As the plot unfolds, Amrith's own actions exacerbate the rifts. Possessive of his new-found cousin's attention and affection, Amrith resents sharing him with the girls and tries to exclude them. He accuses them of "throwing themselves" at Niresa and denies ever having felt part of the family, much to Mala's distress. These feelings of anger, resentment and jealousy come to a head when Niresa confesses to Amrith that he has a crush on Mala and starts dividing his attention between the two.

Mala's budding relationship with Niresa is facilitated by Amrith's absences to rehearse with his school-mates in preparation for the annual Shakespeare

competition. Amrith was invisible and isolated at school¹⁸ until the previous year when he won the cup for his portrayal of Juliet; now he yearns to retain that respect and approval in the role of Desdemona. Thus successful performance is repeatedly linked to winning “honor for the school colors” (50)—though the intersections between the school and the Sri Lankan nation are not as clearly drawn in this novel as they are in the Victoria Academy of “The Best School of All” in *Funny Boy*. It is perhaps telling that in his young adult text, Selvadurai fails to exploit the inter-racial aspect of the marriage between Othello and Desdemona to comment upon the increasing tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese (particularly the impact of the “Sinhala Only” bill on education). However, the production of *Othello* in an all-male setting permits exploration of the cross-currents of the homosocial dynamic, particularly linked to the teenage boys’ nervousness and ragging around the potential homoeroticism of the episode between Cassio and Iago in Act III, Scene 3: Iago fans Othello’s jealousy by claiming that Cassio, in his sleep, mistook Iago for Desdemona, put his leg over Iago’s thigh, and kissed him hard. This scene resonates with one earlier in the novel where Amrith, who is sharing his bed with Nires, becomes sexually aroused one night after Nires comforts him following a nightmare—one of several clues to Amrith’s as-yet unacknowledged homosexual desires. Although the boys are only performing the final scene from the play for the competition, they repeatedly allude to the passage about Cassio and Iago as a way to insult one another. In the first instance this method is used to taunt Peries, Amrith’s rival for the part of Desdemona, whom the boys have nicknamed “Penis.” There is no overt evidence to suggest Peries might be gay—

¹⁸ Similarly, the reader is informed that Jan’s only close friend at school prior to Kerry’s arrival was Ted, best friend and co-conspirator since grade 4—until the previous spring he started developing feelings for her which she could not return.

only that he is unpopular with the others. Possibly he has become a target because he joined an evangelical religious group in the wake of his parents' divorce, which is considered shameful in Sri Lankan society. There are intriguing parallels throughout between the shame of family secrets and the secrecy imposed on closeted homosexuals.

As the novel's crisis approaches, conflict develops between Amrith and Suraj, the youth playing Othello. Suraj is comparable to Kent Norris to some extent, as a figure for hypermasculinity. He is initially introduced as an unruly boy, always in trouble at school; the rigger captain, he is powerfully built and popular. He is also attracted to Mala, so Niresh's attentions have sparked a jealous rivalry, culminating in a fistfight. Although Niresh comes off worst in the fight, Suraj is forced by his parents to apologize—a humiliation Amrith witnesses. As a consequence of these high emotions, the last rehearsal of the scene from *Othello* turns into a challenge of wills between Suraj and Amrith, until the two are shouting their lines at each other and Amrith accuses Suraj of attempting to strangle him in earnest. Amrith is subsequently demoted to the role of Cassio for failing to learn his lines properly and for his erratic performances (veering between the wooden and the histrionic). Afterwards, when the triumphant Suraj taunts Amrith about waiting for his darling Iago, their teacher, Mrs Algama, admonishes: "I have friends in the theater world who are *that* way inclined, and it's no laughing matter in this country. I don't like such things being ridiculed. Don't ever do that again" (224). As in the case of Peries, it is unclear to what extent Suraj actively suspects anything about Amrith, or whether he just makes use of a handy weapon, almost by rote, in the way that children in the schoolyard routinely use epithets they have picked up from others because they know they are meant to be insulting. The text hints

that Mrs Algama senses Amrith's difference, even if no one else does, in that she is unusually sympathetic and patient with him. She attempts to deflect Suraj's attack, although on a previous occasion when the boys were teasing Peries in a similar manner she did nothing, and even to some extent colluded with the joke.¹⁹ This demonstrates how the actions, omissions or silences on the part of teachers can (inadvertently) contribute to the perpetuation of a hostile or homophobic environment in classroom and school.

All the strands of Selvadurai's novel come together in back-to-back climactic chapters, when Amrith first loses the part of Desdemona to his rival and then, in a fit of jealous rage, attempts to drown Mala in the monsoon sea. Only in this moment of extreme crisis does Amrith fully realize the true nature of his jealousy: that he is suffering not just from a childish, possessive reluctance to share his only blood relative and friend with his adoptive family (the construction they uniformly place on his behaviour), but that Amrith loves Niresh "in the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy" (234). His initial reaction to this "unnatural defect" is "deep horror" (234). Although in the denouement Amrith accepts the past, coming to terms with his loss and reconciling with his aunt, he has in effect exchanged one burden of silence for another: "A ponnaya—that was what he was, a ponnaya. He did not know what to do about this thing within him, where to turn, who to appeal to for comfort. He felt the burden of his silence choking him" (266). Indeed, Amrith believes the only person he can tell is his dead mother (267-8). As in *Good Moon Rising*, the supportiveness of his adoptive family is never tested, since they remain unaware of his homosexuality. Equally, the novel ends before Amrith has to return to school, so the reader can only speculate about any future consequences

¹⁹ Mrs Algama tells Peries he is perfect for the role of Cassio because he is "poetic looking" and has "such lovely fair skin, such pretty curls" (67).

stemming from the conflicts that emerged during the rehearsals of *Othello*. Given the novel's sedate pace²⁰ and gradual accumulation of intricate detail, some readers may also find the resolution somewhat abrupt and unsatisfying. Having spent eighteen chapters and over two hundred pages building up to the climax, Selvadurai devotes only three chapters to the aftermath. Amrith's shift from horror to acceptance thus appears too sudden, too compressed and underdeveloped.²¹ There is also a danger that homosexuality will remain conflated with the "darkness [Amrith] did not want to face" (3), symbolized by the wild monsoon sea, in an overly simplistic manner. There is nothing in the text to counter the slur implicit in ponnaya; Amrith can find no "decent word to describe himself" in his confession to his mother's gravestone, beyond the hesitant declaration, "I am ... different" (267, original ellipsis). Thus assimilation and queer community remain distant dreams at the close of this text. Given the subplot revolving around *Othello*, to some extent the novel might actually reinforce the framing of LGBT texts in the high school classroom in terms of fear, bullying and homophobia.

In both *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *Good Moon Rising*, sustained parallels between themes explored in the main plot and those of the dramatic intertexts act as pedagogical aids to help make the protagonists' emotional and psychological experiences more legible to young readers. Each novel interpellates or writes back to canonical texts in order to open a space in their respective communities and nations for queer youth. High school is a particularly fraught experience for questioning adolescents. The ease with which homophobic

²⁰ Niresh is not even introduced until p 80, more than a quarter of the way through the text.

²¹ This sentiment was voiced by some members of the final-year undergraduate seminar on Recent Queer Writing in which we discussed *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. I am grateful to the members of this group for sharing their responses with me.

slurs continue to be bandied about playground and schoolroom and the periodic spikes in teen suicide and self-harm provide stark evidence of the seeming difficulty of eradicating bullying in general and homophobia in particular. But as Nodelman and Reimer argue, ignorance is always more dangerous than knowledge:

Those who are deprived of knowledge of certain attitudes or forms of behavior and, therefore, prevented from thinking about why they might be harmful, are the ones most likely to take such attitudes or commit such acts. To deprive children of the opportunity to read about confusing or painful matters like those they might actually be experiencing will either make literature irrelevant to them or else leave them feeling they are alone in their thoughts or experiences.

(102-3)

Perhaps novels like *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and *Good Moon Rising* can provide a point of departure for illuminating and, eventually, eradicating such situations.

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