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From object of ridicule to burden and from curio to evil villain, a range of commonly recurring and damaging stereotypes traditionally dominates representations of disability in popular culture (Barnes 1992). As Ellis and Goggin (2015) argue, “there is good reason to take seriously the notion that representation is intimately involved in the policing of how we relate to disability, and indeed what is accepted as normal” (84). These media tropes are part of the material that children and young people have to work with in negotiating their own performances (James 2000). Perhaps the most dominant of all of these representations is passivity, which fails to endow agency to the disabled character. This portrayal is found in supervillains driven to insanity by accidents, which causes their disability; for example, Two-Face in the Batman franchise. Alternatively, it is seen in the vulnerability, marginalization, and dependence attributed to John Merrick in *The Elephant Man* (1980). Despite the differences in these characters, the result is the same: disability overrides the person, their autonomy, independence, and personality; thus, their potential for action and/or agency. Young people consuming such material are confronted with ableist discourses, whereby disabled bodies and minds are framed as icons of deviance, accentuating the otherness through which disability is defined (Donnelly 2016). In response to such criticisms, numerous efforts have been made to recognize and celebrate so-called “positive images” of disability and disabled people (see, for example, Curwood 2013; Dyches, Prater, and Jenson 2006). For

many, the primary mechanism by which disability is learned about and understood is popular culture (Snyder and Mitchell 2001). Children's and young adult's literature operates as both a window onto the social world and a mirror for the individual, revealing the discursive construction of disability (Blaska 2004). In response to the absence of positive disability imagery and accompanying damaging stereotypes, a slow but steady stream of more inclusive literature is emerging (Keith 2004). This chapter interrogates two examples of popular cultural texts that received recognition for their representations of disability and young adulthood. Such texts produce meanings that allow individuals to make sense of disability within their everyday experiences (Clark 2018). Thus, critical consideration of the agency endowed (or, indeed, not) to young people with disabilities within such cultural forms is vital in understanding the subject positions made available to young people from which they are able to speak or act (see Foucault 1972). The construction of these subjectivities is not one-sided, and young people can and do "talk back" to such representations, but these imaginings nonetheless provide a frame by which individuals understand themselves and their places in the world. As theoretical arguments emerge in the academy regarding how childhood agency should be conceptualized (see Castro 2005; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Raby 2014; Richards, Clark, and Boggis 2015; Twum-Danso Imoh 2013), here I ask: what kind of agency (if any) do young characters embody in young adult literature and how do such understandings of agency intersect with constructions of childhood and disability?

Award-Winning Young Adult Literature

The honoring of children's and young adult books through awards is not a new endeavor. The Randolph Caldecott Medal is awarded annually for distinguished picture books and the Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award biennially recognizes "authentic" portrayals

of individuals with developmental disabilities (Dyches, Prater, and Jenson 2006; Gray 2004). There are, of course, many other examples available; however, this chapter focuses on an analysis of two recent recipients (2015 and 2018) of the annual Schneider Family Book Award. The Schneider Family Book Award (SFBA) is part of the American Library Association's Media Youth Awards and honors an author and/or illustrator for a book that "embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" (American Library Association 2018). Three awards are presented annually for children's books (aged under 10), middle school (age 11-13), and teen readers (age 13-18). Upon the first presentation of the award in 2004, the namesake and donor Dr. Katherine Schneider highlighted the central tenet of the award: that "the disability experience...is part of a character's full life, not the focus of the life" (Schneider Family Book Award 2014, 3). The criteria articulated in the judging manual suggest that disability should not be pitied, exaggeration and stereotypes are to be avoided, and, crucially for my current analysis, the person with a disability is integral – "not merely a passive bystander" (Schneider Family Book Award 2014, 6). This chapter critically evaluates what a lack of passivity actually means in representing disability. How is agency configured and understood within such award-winning literature and how might such understandings serve to further theoretical conversations about the agency of disabled young people?

The SFBA award winners considered here are from the young adult category and include 2015 recipient – *Girls Like Us* by Gail Giles (2014), and 2018 recipient – *You're Welcome Universe* by Whitney Gardner (2017). From these titles, the diversity of disabilities represented is immediately evident. Gardner (2017) explores deaf and hearing cultures through her central protagonist, profoundly deaf Julia. Julia's expulsion from a school for the deaf leads her to enter a mainstream school, forging new friendships and developing her identity as a deaf individual, a young woman, and an artist. Giles (2014) provides a powerful

fictional account of intersecting discriminatory divides and the interplay between race, class, gender, and intellectual disability in the lives of Bidy and Quincy. This pair forge a meaningful friendship in the face of abandonment, exclusion, and rape.

As found in SFBA award winning books, disability in the lives of children and families is an encompassing term, bringing together mental illness with emotional, intellectual, and physical disability under a broad umbrella. The central characters of both books are young adults: Julia (Gardner 2017) is in her last years of schooling, and Bidy and Quincy (Giles 2014) just graduated from their school's special education program.¹ Both books are written in the first person; therefore, the stories are told from the viewpoint of central protagonists. This narrative is singular for Julia in *You're Welcome Universe* and oscillates between Bidy and Quincy in *Girls Like Us*. Such first-person narrative styles facilitate a window into the internal processes of the central characters. Readers are able to vicariously experience their actions but also hear the inner workings of their hearts and minds. Thus, these books offer an interesting opportunity to reflect upon the ways agency is attributed to and enacted by young characters with disabilities – characters who traditionally are not conceptualized as agentic beings (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2013).

Agency, Disability, and Childhood

The academic study of childhood was traditionally dominated by the positioning of children as objects of concern rather than persons with voice (Prout and Hallett 2003). Placed in sub-disciplinary silos such as Developmental Psychology or Sociology of Education (particularly when intersecting with disability), theoretical analyses of childhood was limited to adult perspectives. In this framework, performance, growth, or behavior were the units of children's measurable successes or failures, often through standardized tests like the Binet-

Simon Scale (Thorndike 1916). In this process, models of linear maturation combined with philosophies of innocence and unknowingness to position children as vulnerable creatures with limited, if any, ability to meaningfully contribute to their own lives or wider cultures (Kehily 2012). Thus, children were understood as adults in waiting, their role relegated to quietly learning the skills and duties of the adult – notably, the individual, responsible, and autonomous ideal citizenry of contemporary neoliberal societies (Raby 2014). In many Western cultures, from the 1970s onward, a powerful and persuasive rights discourse swept through the social institutions of childhood (Clark and Richards 2017). Originally championed by academics such as Alanen (1988), Corsaro (1997), Prout and James (1997), and Qvortrup (1994), the "new" Sociology of Childhood positioned children as active beings in their present state, rather than limited only to their potential as future investments in adulthood. Here, agency was a key and transformative concept, whereby children were constructed as rights bearers, knowledge holders, and experts in their social worlds. As a result, children were thought of as agentic beings with the capacity to be active in their own and wider cultures.

While claims can be made that the voices, participation, and general positioning of children in society has improved, or at the very least become more visible, disabled children's profound lack of visibility has been subject to longstanding critique (Curran 2013). The dominance of the medical model, whereby disability is conceptualized as a problem of the individual to be fixed whenever possible, is partially to blame. However, accompanying the above 1970s ideological shift, the social model of disability began to gain traction, particularly in the United Kingdom. This development heralded a seismic shift in attention away from deviant bodies and minds to the larger disabling physical, social, and cultural environments of all people (Clark 2018; Oliver 2013). Despite the increased emphasis on voice and participation of children more broadly, disabled children and their experiences

continued to be marginalized. This continued lack of recognition has prompted recent development of a distinct sub-field, *Disabled Children's Childhood Studies* (Curran and Runswick-Cole 2014). Shaped by critical disability studies, post-humanist perspectives, and interactionist models of disability, a core aim of this approach is to understand and address the exclusion of children with disabilities in both the academy and public life (Goodley 2013; Goodley, Runswick-Cole, and Liddiard 2016; Shakespeare 2006). In this work, the tyranny of the "normal distribution curve" is highlighted as children are regularly syphoned off into categories of "normal," "abnormal," "universal" or "special" (Burman 1994, 22).² These categorizations cause social construction of "otherness," with exclusionary and discriminatory results (Said 1993). Thus, even as positive shifts in children's rights discourses and theorizing about children as active and agentic gained prominence in scholarship (see Mayall 2002; Moran-Ellis 2010; Wyness 2001), disabled children were still being measured against normative developmental frameworks. Therefore, it is no surprise that disabled children's voices still remained overwhelmingly hidden (Franklin and Sloper 2009). Even in studies where disabled children are constructed as having some agency (for example, their voices are sought in research), their participation and action remains focused upon their disability, largely centered on service provisions and evaluations, not extending to their wider lives or broader cultures (Abbott 2013). This myopathy exists despite wonderfully creative examples of empirical research with children with disabilities within which agency is clearly evidenced. For example, Davis, Watson, and Cunningham-Burley (2008) examine the active participation of disabled children in cultural production and their creative negotiation of intergenerational relations. Likewise, Brunberg (2005) highlights the capacity of children with disabilities to construct and maintain friendship narratives. Notwithstanding these few works, a deficit approach to disability remains prominent, playing a large role in denying agency (in theoretical and practical terms) to disabled children. However, I argue that the

definition of agency dominating often unquestioned Childhood Studies frameworks remains problematic for disabled children. Here, agency is usually understood in a neoliberal context where individual autonomy and capacity for individual action rule. In fact, despite its placement as a canonical concept, or, indeed, “cherished conceit,” childhood agency is a radically undertheorized concept (Castro 2017; Clark and Richards 2017; Prout 2000; Segal 1999).

In James, Jenks, and Prout’s (1998) seminal work *Theorizing Childhood*, children’s abilities to actively contribute to their social worlds is a central tenet, an organizing feature of their manifesto for a new way of understanding children and childhood. Such was the popularity of this approach that the idea children have agency is now considered commonsense, holding natural and normative status in Childhood Studies (Clark and Richards 2017). The concept offered a radical departure from the ideas of dependence, irrationality, and unknowingness that previously dominated scholarship, but resulting academic enthusiasm frequently excludes close and sustained analyses of the concept and conditions surrounding its recognition in children. Despite agency’s usage as part of child-centered methodologies and as a rallying point in contemporary Sociology of Childhood and interdisciplinary Childhood Studies, as Mizen and Ofofu-Kusi (2013) point out, it is not altogether clear what exactly theorists and researchers are rallying around.

The ‘new’ social studies of childhood and its associated participatory methodologies developed in a Western context is saturated in neoliberalism. This connection positions particular attributes in adult citizens as desired and privileged. Such attributes are subsequently prioritized for children to learn and come to also characterize the theorizing of childhood itself. Rational, autonomous individualism is a quality necessary for contemporary citizens, with economic participation as their primary focus. As Raby (2014) argues, children’s agency is “grounded within a broader context of neoliberalism, which

favors...individual autonomy over citizen interdependence” (80). What is proffered here is, thus, an individualistic notion of agency that devalues collective identities and actions and artificially separates adults from children and children from other children (Langford 2010). I argue here and elsewhere (see Clark 2018; Richards and Clark 2018) that children with disabilities do not lack agency. Rather, modernity’s model of childhood and the agency it endows (or, in many cases, fails to recognize) needs to be interrogated. This chapter contributes to such theorizing by examining the ways award-winning young adult literature presents us with new ways of understanding agency, childhood, and disability that focus on reciprocity, relational agency, and interdependence. Instead of endorsing the myth of the autonomous and independent person, the characters and narratives in two SFBA award holders demonstrate how agency emerges in dynamic connections between social actors and specific contexts (Prout 2005; Wihstutz 2016). Here, agency is not connected to externally recognizable transformations shaped by the powerful action of the single individual; rather, it is recognized as complex, fluid, interdependent, affective, and expressed through varied relationships and in diverse contexts. Instead of continuing to follow norms of a Western model of actorship (Esser 2016), in these books choosing to do something is not necessarily evidence of agency, and failing to do something (or indeed choosing not to) is not necessarily evidence of an absence of agency. This chapter argues that the idealization of the autonomous child is a dominant discursive regime situated in a particular historical context of humanism, neoliberalism, and individualism (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De-Bie 2006).

Understandings of agency must be reconfigured to consider how it is enacted in being cared for, as well as doing caring, found in being vulnerable as well as capable, and bound up in resilience and reflection, facilitating critical questions of normative assumptions about child development and hierarchical child-adult relations.

Relational Agency and Disabled Young People: Bidy, Quincy and Julia

Friendships

In contrast to traditional models of individual, neoliberal agency, notions of action, happiness, reflection, and resilience emerge within the two SFBA winners not through solitary activity but largely within friendships. YA literature has a long history of prioritizing peer relationships in its character development and story arcs (Cornelius – this volume) and the presence is no less powerful here. Bidy and Quincy from *Girls Like Us* must live together when they simultaneously graduate from their school’s special education program and the foster care system. Their social workers facilitate a live-in arrangement for the pair in an apartment above the garage in the home of the elderly Lizabeth. Here, cooking and cleaning for Lizabeth are exchanged for lodgings and presumed safety for Bidy and Quincy. Both girls self-identify as “slow.” Bidy was born with undefined intellectual disabilities, described as “moderate retardation,” reflected in her difficulty doing certain everyday things and she cannot read or write (Giles 2014, 2). Abandoned by her mother as a young child, Bidy was raised by her grandmother (who claims she can no longer afford to keep her). Quincy has a brain injury as a result of being hit with a brick by her mother’s boyfriend; the incident resulted in her being taken out of the family home and becoming a ward of the state. Both Quincy and Bidy are aware of their differences to other people. They identify as “speddies” – a nickname for special education – and, as Quincy states, “We understand stuff. We just learn it slow” (3). As the two spend time together in their new living arrangements, initial interpersonal friction transforms to respect and mutual care. While Quincy teaches Bidy to cook, Bidy teaches Quincy that not all the world is hateful. As they fight and bond in equal measure over the duck that nests in the garden, Lizabeth’s meddling in Bidy’s past, and sharing walks together, it is evident that Quincy and Bidy find strength in one another.

When Bidy walks with Quincy to her workplace at a restaurant across town, she does so in protection, calming Quincy's anxieties. However, the walk itself supports Bidy's increased confidence to engage with the world in the light of past painful and abusive experiences.

The most powerful example of agency, evidenced in strength, resilience, critical reflection, and mutual support, comes when the two share harrowing accounts of sexual assaults. Bidy recounts her experience of being lured into a barn by a boy promising her candy; the boy's friends gang-rape her, shoving her pants in her mouth and spitting on her once finished. The first-person narrative and writing style, whereby the phrasing and spelling echoes the direct thoughts of the protagonists, gives the description of the rape a raw, unfiltered quality. Bidy's disclosure is in direct response to Quincy's experience that happens within the present-time narrative of *Girls Like Us*. Robert, a young man Quincy knows from her workplace, sexually attacks her in an alleyway on her way home one evening. In seeking to understand Quincy's ordeal, Bidy employs what is methodologically articulated as a feminist focus on reciprocity (Ackerly and True 2010). In giving part of herself, she seeks to know more about and experience parts of the other. When Quincy does not return on time from work, Bidy uses her newfound ability to navigate the journey to the restaurant and her (proud) ability to tell the time, indicating the necessity to search for her. Finding Quincy's tied up, half-naked body, her head encircled in her own trousers, Bidy's own past horror prompts her into empathetic action. "I knew how she felt, I knew. I knew what to do. I couldn't go screamy. I had to stay easy. I had to help my friend" (Giles 2014, 140). Upon returning to their apartment, Bidy takes charge: "I don't think you're dirty, but I know you feel like it. You wash till you feel some better. I'll make coffee. You gonna drink it, and I'm gonna tell you what to do next" (143).

This kind of decisive action could perhaps be taken to be an example of neoliberal individual agency, whereby Bidy takes charge, effects change, and shapes the action in their

home. However, the action is deeply embedded in relational and emotional ties and while Bidy uses her own experiences to take charge and direct action, she too comes to learn things from this encounter. Bidy's experience of being rejected by her grandmother after the rape that she experienced a few years prior prompts her to advise Quincy not to tell anyone else, notably Lizabeth or the police – Bidy cautions, “All of a sudden you're dirty and they don't want to get it on them” (Giles 2015, 142). Quincy does re-count her experience to Lizabeth and then, ultimately, informs the police. In doing so, Quincy attempts to protect Lizabeth and Bidy from threats made by the rapist. However, she is also teaching Bidy about the worth of all human beings – that Bidy and, indeed, herself are not worth less than “normal” people. Here, motivations for action are bound up with relational connection, and it is only through mutual and shared friendship that agency is realized.

The importance of children's friendships to their processes of meaning making is well-documented (Corsaro 1997; James 1993). The application of friendships to understanding children's agency as an analytical concept has been subject to less interrogation. This void exists despite the significant value we place on friendships as a hallmark of a good adult outcomes and happy childhoods (Burhmester 1990; Calder, Hill, and Pellicano 2012; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003; Lotter 1978). Partial blame for this dearth of scholarship lies in the relative lack of evaluative work that adequately conceptualizes childhood agency. In addition, responsibility also lies in the often unquestioned dominance of a neoliberal model of agency, whereby individual autonomy and actualization is prized over interdependent relationships and shared achievements (Castro forthcoming; Clark and Richards 2017). For Bidy and Quincy, the formation of their friendship and their reciprocal processes of meaning-making are what provides them with power, strength, and resilience.

These award-winning books do not merely portray disabled young people's relationships with one another, but also demonstrate how agency emerges from diverse friendships. In *You're Welcome Universe*, central protagonist Julia's peer relations are complex and multidimensional, each providing her contexts within which agency emerges. In the beginning of the book, Julia is expelled from her school for deaf children as a result of being caught using graffiti on school property. This rebellious act is prompted by peers writing the term "slag" on a school wall, a message that is directed at her friend Jordan. Julia's loyalty to her friend results in her covering up the word with her own graffiti. However, Julia learns the difficulties of friendships when she realizes it was Jordan who divulged her actions to school authorities, resulting in expulsion, forcing Julia to enroll in a mainstream high school. Her identity as a deaf young person means she requires support in such a setting and is provided with an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, a local college girl, Casey. This relationship, despite their differences in age, has value for Julia. However, it is outside of this adult-mediated interaction that Julia meets her most significant friend, "Yoga Pants" (YP). Although YP does not identify as deaf, she does experience the otherness Julia expresses. A former cheerleader who dated the popular boy at school, YP has issues with food and body size that emerge slowly in the story as her friendship with Julia develops. YP's boyfriend ended their relationship because he claimed she had become too fat. This also damaged YP's social capital amongst her peers and her status shifted from one of near universal popularity to one of exclusion and marginalization. YP no longer existed within the successful romantic relationship that cemented higher status amongst her peers, and elements of her embodied self become problematized and "othered" (Frost 2005). Sharing similar feelings of "difference" at school is the impetus for friendship between Julia and YP. In this friendship, they help and support each other in action, emotional resilience, and strength. YP takes the time to learn elements of ASL beyond the typical hello and thumbs

up that Julia feels characterize “hearing people’s” efforts. In turn, Julia seeks to understand YP’s emotional distress and supports her in dealing with unpleasantness and intimidation from peers. Both girls invest in the friendship, drawing on the practical and emotional support that close peer relations offer.

As Corsaro (1997) argues, sociological theorizing about childhood must “break free from the individualistic doctrine” (18). Corsaro’s (1997) theory of interpretive reproduction shifts children’s development from individual internalization of norms, values, and skills into a realm whereby children’s innovative and creative work is valued for its active and collective contribution to cultural meaning-making and social change. In making sense of the world around them, children and young people collectively interpret, produce, or reproduce knowledge in their peer worlds and cultures and, in doing so, contribute to wider society (Corsaro 1997, 23). The emphasis on peer cultures in Corsaro’s body of work is pertinent here, given that it recognizes children’s action, the construction of meaning, the development of skills, and, indeed, the emergence of agency happen within relationships. Thus, in the example discussed above, Julia and YP act in ways that demonstrate commitments to their friendship and to themselves; through their friendship they contribute to their own development and to the wellbeing of the other.

Thus, agency is not a solely individual endeavor, whereby young people seek to further themselves and accidentally support others in the process. Rather, agency is relationally defined, and the young disabled people in these SFBA award winning books are strengthened, supported, and their identities further negotiated and given meaning within and through their peer relations. The characters of Julia, Bidy, and Quincy are firmly embedded with peers from which their agency emerges. Here, shared acts of social practice are sometimes acted out alone and sometimes together, but agency always builds on and develops from their relationships with others. These actions and attributes are sometimes for

the direct benefit of themselves and sometimes for others, but neither is given priority over the other. Bidy and Quincy provide emotional and practical support to each other in a didactic relationship, whereby the success of each is dependent on and emerges from the success of the other. This is not to suggest a form of pathological codependence, which is constructed as problematic because it does not support prized models of neoliberal individualism. Rather, it is to suggest that all human beings, including young people with disabilities, rely on relationships for resilience, strength, action, reflection, and development, and it is from such contexts that agency emerges.

Young people with disabilities or non-normative bodies often report experiences of bullying and negative peer relations and encounters (see, for example, Laws and Kelly 2005). Stigmatizations of disability, rise in hate crimes, and negative peer reactions often become the focus of conversations about disabled children's peer relations (Green 2003; Petry 2018; Sherry 2010). However, research also identifies the positive impact of friendships in the lives of children and young people with disabilities. Morrison and Burgman (2009) suggest friendships are far from homogenously negative, and children acknowledge friends as supportive in overcoming isolation and offering defense in negative situations. The characters in these SFBA winners do not only experience idealistic friendships and they certainly encounter negative reactions from peers. Julia is upset when her friend Jordan betrays trust when informing school authorities of her efforts to cover the graffiti; and Bidy and Quincy encounter and try to actively resist derogatory language (such as "retarded") from peers at school and family members. Clearly, even when peer relations are constructed as negative for the young people in these SFBA award winners, their experiences, action, and power are managed, and in tandem are constrained or realized in relation to others.

Relationships with Things

Notable in the two SFBA winning books is a focus on the characters' relationships not just with people but with things. Julia's spray paint and art practice in *You're Welcome, Universe* provides her with a space for the expression of creativity and for the forging of new friendships with others. In addition, Bidy's Dictaphone allows her to critically reflect on her experiences and share them with others. The characters deploy these material objects as part of their everyday agency. The characters form meaningful relationships with these material objects and endow them with emotional importance and meaning (Corsaro 1997; Miller 2010). An increasing range of post-structural and post-humanist theorists are turning their attentions to the entanglement of human and non-human agents (Whatmore 1997). The potential for post-humanist perspectives to radically alter the hierarchies of humanity and embodiment are gaining significant traction in disability studies (see Braidotti 2013; Goodley, Runswick-Cole, and Liddiard 2016). However, these areas have received relatively limited engagement in the field of Childhood Studies, with the notable exception of Prout's (2000, 2005, 2011) work on bodies and hybrid childhoods and Nieuwenhuys (2011) work on teddy bears. Prout's (2005) arguments are salient here, as he pointedly discusses the requirement to move beyond artificial dichotomies of agency/structure, nature/culture, etc. Instead, it is imperative to recognize the capacities and agency of children as not pitted against or replaced through, but extended and supplemented by, material artefacts and technologies (Prout 2005).

Bidy's Dictaphone offers a powerful example of material culture's important positioning in the lives of children and young people. In recounting a memory from her days at school, Bidy notes that a friend in her special education class keeps a diary. Bidy is both curious and envious of the diary, but is acutely aware her lack of literacy abilities prohibit such an activity. On hearing her anxieties, Bidy's teacher provides her with a tape recorder to keep a diary, a place to share her feelings and to reflect on events and experiences in her

life situations. Bidy uses the recorder for many years, keeping her boxes of tapes as one would preserve collections of written diaries. The recorder offers Bidy the ability to reflect upon her experiences and relationships in a way not available to her through writing. The recorder's importance comes into starker focus in the light of Quincy's attack. In the aftermath, Bidy is keen to know what happened so that she can help her friend, but Quincy can barely look at her, let alone share the gruesome details of the rape. Bidy collects her recorder, finds a tape, and records a brief recollection of the sexual abuse she was forced to endure in a bid to encourage Quincy to share and to know she is not alone. The Dictaphone acts as a mediator between the girls as their relationship continues to evolve to new, emotionally open, spaces not available in their relationships with others. Through this technology, the girls access the strength and resources they can offer one another. While the recorder could be used as evidence of increasing attention to self-analysis and self-regulation required of the ideal responsible citizen in late industrialized society (Rose 2007), it is deployed by Bidy and Quincy not just for introspective analysis of self but for the ability to relate harmful experiences to one another, an important form of communication to strengthen their friendship.

Art and graffiti, symbolized by cans of spray paint, is a powerful presence in the life of Julia in *You're Welcome, Universe*. Initially her reason for being expelled, art presents itself as a lifeline to Julia as she battles to get into the over-enrolled advanced art class in her new school. As Julia navigates her feelings about her old friend Jordan (she feels underappreciated and betrayed), she uses her graffiti, sketch books, and illicit art supplies to feel in control and express her emotional turmoil.³ Art also becomes a significant part of her emerging, and ultimately solidified, friendship with YP. Through the strength she gains from YP and her graffiti art, Julia manages to let her disappointing friendship with Jordan go. Toward the end of the novel, Julia collects the last of her supplies from her part-time job at

McDonalds and, when doing so, bumps into Jordan. Jordan is crying because her latest boyfriend broke up with her. Julia is not mad; instead, she comes to the realization that Jordan is only interested in their friendship when she is selfishly in need. Julia states, “And when it does happen again...I don’t want to hear about it” (Gardener 2017, 290).

Symbolically, she grabs her backpack full of art materials and slams the door to return to YP. Julia’s friendship with YP becomes more than mutual support for supposed “otherness”; as the book progresses we learn they have additional relational elements in common.

Throughout *You’re Welcome, Universe*, a competition emerges between Julia and an unknown graffiti artist. Every time Julia creates a graffiti piece around her town, it is added to or modified by this unknown source. Toward the end of the novel, it is revealed that this person is indeed YP, who, as it turns out, is a very experienced graffiti artist in her own right. After some faltering in their relationship due to YP’s secret identity, Julia and YP emerge more solidified friends. Indeed, learning from each other about their art practice, and how to navigate the legal boundaries to their artistic expression, enables them to fully cement the friendship. The book closes with Julia and YP about to tackle their largest piece of graffiti art yet. Setting up tarps, sheets, and ladders, YP realizes she forgot to bring the art plans. Communicating in near perfect ASL, she panics, but Julia calmly reminds her that they practiced this piece a thousand times. Julia is eager to get started on this powerful, shared, and symbolic mural they are creating for Julia’s mother – Julia thinks, “I want all of our histories, YP’s and mine, tangled up together on the wall, our wall” (290).

I wish not to present an analysis that is technologically deterministic, whereby technology is condemned or prized as universally negative or positive for the human condition. The Dictaphone is not agentic, but as Nieuwenhuys (2011) argues in reference to the agency of teddy bears, the material object is enabling and extending of both Bidy’s and Quincy’s selves. From the productive friendship they build together, agency can and does

emerge. For Julia and YP, art practice and materials are not just symbolic gestures to represent a friendship, but are part of the formation of the relationship itself. As Corsaro (1997) points out, consumer artifacts and experiences are embedded myriad ways in children's peer cultures. Such collective actions contribute to innovative friendship cultures, vital to cultural reproduction and change (Corsaro 1997, 140). Coombs (2017) makes extensive use of children's material cultures in her research on young people's perspectives on death. She discusses the importance of physical mementoes in dealing with death in everyday life, encouraging young people in her research to bring household "stuff" to "travel back and forth across the topic of death" (Coombs 2017, 75). Common views about the corruption of childhood from material and consumer culture can blind us to broader analysis of agency and youth empowerment through their relationships with material "stuff" (Miller 2010, 144). Thus, I argue that the novels demonstrate how material objects serve to shape the agency of children and young people. For Bidy, Quincy, and Julia, these cultural items offer opportunities for reflection, resilience, and power. Therefore, these books encourage recognition of agency as not owned by the individual, but emerging through interplay with others and material culture (Cetina 2001). As Turmel (2008) argues, "a child's agency is not the property of a subject but rather is derived from a distributed network of subjects, bodies, materials, texts and technologies" (34).

Relations of Care

Disabled children and young people's capacities have traditionally been under-recognized, treated as lesser and positioned as dependent, passive, and unknowing (Tisdall 2012). Childhood, as a phase of the life course, is traditionally conceptualized as free from responsibility, a space of protection, innocence, and care. Active, autonomous adult citizens

are defined by their abilities to undertake the responsibilities of adulthood, to economically provide for and further themselves in private and public spheres. Children, on the other hand, are not to care; rather, they are to be cared for. Traditionally, this so-called dependence positioned children at the bottom of a hierarchical child-adult relationship. The additional needs or adjustments that may be required for functioning, wellbeing, and happiness in the everyday lives of children with disabilities results in perceptions of vulnerability, dependence, and a distinct lack of agency. While some call for notions of passivity and vulnerability to be replaced with notions of agency and independence, this standpoint ignores the realities of generational interdependencies and limits productive conversations about the value of dependency and care (Lewis 2003). This chapter, and the books it analyzes, echo existing work in Disability Studies and Childhood Studies that positions mutual interdependence as something to be recognized and valued, prompting reconsiderations of competency and interdependence (see Arneil 2002; Oliver 2013). Vulnerability and weakness do not necessarily prohibit agency. As Kitzinger (1997) notes in her analysis of girls' strategies to avoid or get through sexual violence in the home, perceived weakness (a romanticized characterization of the child) enabled one of her interviewees to avoid situations where she would be at risk. The reconfiguration of agency as not mutually exclusive with dependence or vulnerability, an agency that can potentially incorporate weakness, provides a different analytic picture. In such reconceptualizations, all human beings are both carers and cared for in embedded relationships comprised of attentiveness and responsibilities toward one another (Esser 2016; Wihstutz 2016).

The relationships in these SFBA winners are interdependent. The elderly Lizabeth, whom Bidy and Quincy lodge with in *Girls Like Us*, is the girls' boss, a wealthy, older, white, middle class woman. At first, she teaches Bidy and Quincy about setting the table and sitting appropriately at dinner. These elements of the narrative support a hierarchical

interpretation of child-adult relations. However, Lizabeth's desire to help leads to an awkward and painful scenario. The result of rape, Bidy became pregnant and was forced to give her newborn daughter up for adoption prior to the onset of the book. Reflecting upon this memory, Bidy decides she believes this was a good decision but it remains a painful element in her life. Lizabeth, trying to help, realizes who the baby's adoptive family are and invites the mother to tea. The mother, Mrs. Judge, is scared for her daughter and speaks to Bidy with contempt, warning her to stay away from her daughter, home, and family. After the encounter, Bidy and Quincy are simultaneously angry and sad. They admonish Lizabeth for making the mistake of inviting Mrs. Judge to meet Bidy. Explaining Lizabeth's actions to Bidy, Quincy states: "Maybe she meant to do a good thing, but she's a full grown woman and she ain't no Speddie and should know when right is right and wrong is wrong. It's hard knowing that real people can make mistakes just like girls like us" (Giles 2014, 194). Here, the girls reflect on the fluid nature of power and knowledge. The certainty of adult knowledge pitted against the construction of children with disabilities as unknowing, irrational, and dependent is lost as they experience the ramifications of Lizabeth's decision-making. Lizabeth, too, reflects upon her actions and says to the girls: "I never meant that to happen. I'm a meddling old fool" (190).

Adult-child relations may be generally characterized by inequality, as children must act within adult-dominated social structures, but these relationships are also interdependent, reciprocal, and dynamic (see Alanen 2011; Castro – this volume; Leonard 2015). Whilst a relatively underexplored topic, some scholars devote significant attention to generationality in Childhood Studies and as an analytical tool for understanding children's lives (see, for example, Alanen 2011; Leonard 2015; Mayall 2003) Most focus on the structuring of children's lives through adult-child hierarchies (for example, see Mayall 2003). However, they also recognize the potential for children to participate in a form of generational

exchange, whereby interpretations, perspectives, and wishes are understood and valued by all parties (Alanen 2011; Castro – this volume). This potential does not position children as theoretically or practically “in charge,” but recognizes that in relationships imbued with power, power is fluid in the Foucauldian (1995) sense. Children and young people with disabilities often have as much to teach and share with adults in their lives as adults do with these children. From Lizabeth, Quincy learns not all adults are bad and Bidy learns the conduct and composure to sit with good comportment at the dinner table . In turn, Lizabeth learns of the complexity of families and the need to speak and share, rather than to position oneself as “knowing better” when one really does not know at all.

Child-adult relational negotiation does not equate to automatic removal or endowment of agency to children. However, it does highlight the interdependent nature of children’s lives as they are socially bound up with the adults they depend on, live with, or share parts of their lives. Just as adults can respond to the needs of children in their lives, so do children respond to the needs of others through emotional work, negotiation, and care (Castro 2017; Mayall 2003). In line with Tronto’s (1993) conceptualization of care, neediness is presented as a threat to autonomy. This supposed inversion of the power relations of child and adult is constructed as problematic to normative conceptions of both adulthood and childhood. The mother is positioned as failing in her duty to properly mother and the child is ousted from childhood (and the accompanying, discursively constructed, freedom from responsibility). However, Tronto (1993) positions care with the fundamental presumption that all individuals will, at some point in their lifecourse, be dependent on others. What Bidy, Quincy, and Julia demonstrate is that children and adults can and do develop relationships of attentiveness and responsibility toward one another (Wihstutz 2016). Children can find the role of carer as problematic (see Dearden and Becker 2000). However, children also find themselves invested with power in their caring roles (Jones, Jeyasingham, and Rajasoorya 2002). In this process,

young people develop an ethical position, whereby they develop responsiveness to situations, recognizing the needs of family members or friends without fundamentally placing parent-child relationships or friendships into question while enacting help (Miller 2005). The ability of the three central protagonists to position themselves as belonging participants in effective and valued relationships characterizes the plot trajectories of the two novels explored here. These relationships reveal themselves as highly valued, places where care is both received and provided (Wihstutz 2016).

Conclusion

The rise of children's agency as a transformative concept in the newly-formed, 1970s discipline of Childhood Studies is without question. The recognition of agency and voice as attributes of childhood paved the way for creative and progressive accounts of children's lives, often in their own words and on their own terms. However, some have criticized that its pervasive and unquestioned nature results in analytical dead ends (Coffey and Farrugia 2014; Wyness 2006). The application of these individualized neoliberal models of agency to the lives and experiences of children with disabilities is problematic. The elements of children's lives (or, indeed, adults with disabilities) that require dependence, adjustments, support, and intervention results in deficit model positionality. Even as disability rights and activism grows and as attention in the academy rises, young people with disabilities still grapple with assumptions about their capabilities, power, and agency (Oliver 2013). These young people also face an onslaught of popular culture products filled with visions of superheroes overcoming disability, vengeful disabled villains pitted against a wrathful world, or pitiable/pitiful victims (Clark 2018). As Hall (1997) argues, representations in popular culture are powerful in shaping ideologies that position particular subjects in particular ways. Thus,

texts recognized as positive through literature awards are highly visible examples of how discourses come to be reified or challenged. While repetition of imagery plays a role in the solidification of discourse as truth, forward-thinking, award-winning literature can combat the cementing of so-called truths. These SFBA winners can, and do, trouble oft-adopted, problematic notions of disabled children's limited identities, power, and agency.

Since children are traditionally constructed as individuals lacking power and knowledge, power relations are critical to any analysis of agency. Their "powerless" position is thus dichotomous to the powerful, rational, agentic adult. However, increasing numbers of theorists are pointing to the negotiation between children and adults (see Castro – this volume). I argue elsewhere that making blind assumptions that adults are powerful and children are powerless is naïve and denies the creativity of children to navigate social structures for their own benefits (Richards, Clark, and Boggis 2015). Childhood and adulthood are intricately interwoven, and reducing discussions of agency to simplistic child-adult dichotomies is unhelpful, masking the potential to understand relationships between the two and those accompanying contexts within which agency for both parties can and does emerge. I argue that children who are too often conceptualized as vulnerable can indeed respond to this characterization with empowerment. The assumed vulnerability of children coexists and is supported by notions of the innate innocence of the child. Discourses of childhood innocence have come to be regulatory tools by which child and adult subjectivities are shaped and child-adult relations are discursively governed (Robinson 2013).

Childhood itself is infused with a sentimentality and nostalgia that is largely built on this idea of innocence, and thus the innocent child has "become a figurehead for the ideals of Western civilization" (Robinson 2013, 42). Therefore, notions of childhood innocence and vulnerability, whereby the agentic adult is contrasted with the passive, unknowing, innocent child, underpin child-adult power relations. Thus, protectionist discourses have emerged,

restricting children's access to knowledge and playing a key role in constituting political/legal policies and cultural practices which are all predominantly motivated by "the best interests of the child" rhetoric (Robinson 2013). Assumptively, innocence and vulnerability are viewed as mutually exclusive to the conceptualization of children as agentic beings. Alternately, as Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013) state, through recognition of their own vulnerability, children come to make complex decisions in their lives. Vulnerability, in this sense, is not mutually exclusive with notions of agency, and, as witnessed in these two novels, a perspective that foregrounds care as an analytical framework draws attention to the interdependent and relational aspects of children's agency.

These books are ostensibly celebrated for offering alternative visions whereby disability is not tied to passivity and dependence; instead, disability is part of their rich, colorful lives. In addition, these SFBA winners provide alternative ways of imagining disability and the agency of young people with disabilities. Contrasted against neoliberal models of individualistic, autonomous agentic action, disabled young people fall short; for, as Quincy points out, "we understand stuff, we just learn it slow" (Giles 2014, 3). However, these books also suggest an alternative way to theorize agency – children's agency can and does emerge in the context of relationships and interdependence. Through building connections with peers, adults, and material culture, the characters in these books grapple with the implications of disability, emerging romances, family troubles, and the strains, strife, and joy of adolescence itself. Raithelhuber (2016) suggests that agency can be "conceived as a complex, situational and collective achievement that is partly stabilised through other 'humans'" (99). Power, resilience, creativity, and action emerge not from the solitary individual, but from interdependent relations characterized by care. Thus, reconfiguring notions of care and dependence allows for more imaginative recognition and understanding

of agency that encompasses the everyday lives of young people with disabilities and, indeed, all children.

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Notes

¹ Julia's age is unspecified throughout *You're Welcome, Universe*, although it is clear she is a high school student in Junior year of a North American high school, which places her age at approximately 16-17 years old. Bidy and Quincy also have unspecified ages but *Girls Like Us* begins as they are graduating high school so their age is likely to be 18 years old.

² The notion of the "normal" child is distilled from the comparative scores of age-graded populations in a range of developmental fields related to IQ, physical development (i.e. gross and fine motor skills), and social and emotional development, to name a few. Critics of the way in which approaches rooted in Developmental Psychology come to be operationalized in the lives of children suggest that notions of this "normal" child, based on so-called objective measurement, are in fact "an abstraction, a fantasy, a fiction, a production of the testing apparatus" and that "no real child lies at its basis" (Burman 1994, 22).

³ Julia's expulsion from school at the very beginning of *You're Welcome, Universe* results in graffiti art being ostensibly banned by her mothers (Julia's parents are women in a same-sex relationship). As such, Julia must store her spray paints and other supplies in a variety of creative places including her car, school locker, under her bed, and the locker at her part-time job at McDonalds.