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TRANSFORMING YOUNG ADULT SERVICES

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Young Adults in Contemporary Culture
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Young adults fashion their identities from the images and discourses that culture makes available to them. This chapter closely examines the literature written for young adults and argues that such literature can serve as a means to interpret how young adults imagine themselves. In addition, this chapter argues that library professionals should stay abreast of current brain research, which demonstrates that young adults' brain development drives them to process information differently from children or adults. Furthermore, by applying this theoretical knowledge to programming, librarians can encourage healthy experimentation and support diversity among young adults.

In the quest of library science professionals to imagine or perhaps reimagine today's young adults, we could do much worse than looking closely at the literature written for the age group. Although in some ways it is certainly an imperfect mirror, teen literature must speak to its audience with both realistic depictions and metaphors that resonate with their experience of themselves; hence, if a book, film, TV series, or song has uptake with young adults, we can assume that it speaks to them and thus tells us something about who they imagine themselves to be. But perhaps more
importantly, the way we live now, that is, how we negotiate our identities in postmodern culture as both adults and teens, is through dynamic interaction with visual and textual models and the discourses they produce, enable, sustain, and challenge.

This is nothing new, of course. As nineteenth-century writer Israel Zangwill put it: "There is a drop of ink in the blood of the most natural of us: we are all hybrids, crossed with literature, and Shakespeare is as much the author of our being as either of our parents" (Zangwill, 1896: 297). Perhaps not Shakespeare these days, but certainly the products of popular culture are key players in the feedback loop that teens use to fashion their identities. I use the term fashion advisedly here because, forward thinkers from past centuries like Zangwill aside, there has been a significant shift in the way academics think about the self, at least in theory, that is pertinent to the central concern of this volume: How should library and information science (LIS) imagine today’s young adults? In the contemporary academy, we no longer think of identity as something that emerges organically from inborn potentialities that develop progressively in fairly standard and predictable ways unless something happens to inhibit that development. Instead, based on current research on brain development, I suggest that we conceive of identity as the outcome of a series of identifications and interactions with culture that produce multiple trajectories toward multiple endpoints; that is, rather than growing toward some authentic, core self that is somehow innate, we self-consciously fashion our identities from the images and discourses that culture makes available to us. This interaction is dialogic and dynamic, which is to say that we work out our identities not once and for all but in a continual process of testing, reflection, and social feedback with the goal of achieving a sense of inner coherence and external recognition.

Teenagers are actively engaged in the project of self-fashioning; indeed, it is during the teen years that they are most heavily invested in seeking out possibilities for identification in order to craft an identity that has uptake in contemporary life. In this essay, then, I will explore some of the theoretical shifts that make a difference in the way scholars construct an idea of who contemporary teens are and what their central existential project consists of, using examples and trends in young adult literature to illustrate and ground the theory. It is my contention that understanding the theoretical contexts of how identity is shaped can offer some practical insights into what the LIS vision of today’s teens can and perhaps should look like so that we might serve them better by encouraging healthy experimentation and supporting diversity.

Ideological Contexts for Imagining Teens

Most scholars who study youth culture agree that adolescence is a relatively recent category, although they disagree on when it actually began or what factors enabled it to come into existence. In From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature, Michael Cart (1996) outlines the debate, asserting that the category of young adult emerged as part of American culture. He notes that some scholars like Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson (1993) believe that the category of adolescence bloomed following and as a result of the American Civil War. Betty Carter (1994: 9), however, argues that the demand for specialized job training that required prolonged education set the stage for the “birth of adolescence.” Nilsen and Donelson’s claim to an earlier recognition of this special stage of life is bolstered by the 1904 appearance of G. Stanley Hall’s two-volume work, Adolescence: Its Psychology; after all, the psychological mapping of a specific life stage requires, at least to some degree, the prior discovery or acknowledgment of the territory to be mapped. The mapping of this particular territory could be seen as traversing a wasteland of sorts, a journey across a more or less vacant expanse between childhood and adulthood where nothing very important or salutary happens. Indeed, Sleeping Beauty sleeps through her passage and Snow White learns housekeeping, but as Shakespeare notes in A Winter’s Tale, “If there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenchcs with child, wronging the ancient, stealing, lighting” (III.iv). Considering the neglect or negative impressions of this time period, an attentive, objective treatment is a significant boon. But like all psychological maps, Hall’s work unfortunately reflected his own prejudices (which were many) and was to a large degree performathe; that is, in some measure it created what it purported to describe, becoming a paratext that set expectations through which society came to view the period
between puberty and adulthood. His commitment to a *Sturm und Drang* view of adolescence that highlighted rebellion and conflict with parents, risky behaviors, and mood swings (incidentally consonant with that of Shakespeare's shepherd) has persisted and in many ways harmed our view of the creative potential of adolescents as well as the importance of the adolescent years for development toward capacious and generative adulthood. (Hall's work and its effects on LIS are explored in more detail in several other chapters in this volume.)

By far the most evocative pronouncement of the advent of adolescence that Cart notes, however, comes from Natalie Babbitt (1978: 140): "The category teenager itself is a new one, of course. It made its first appearance during the Second World War and was created partly by parents, partly by manufacturers, and partly by Frank Sinatra." This remark yields interesting results. The manufacturing part accords with Carter's comments that post-World War II industry required a more well-trained workforce, necessitating prolonged education, particularly in math and science, in order to meet demand for and development of enhanced technologies. But the role of parents in creating adolescence is more complex. During the wars, many women had seen their fathers, lovers, and brothers taken away from the home, only to return broken and traumatized, while they stayed home and attempted to do their part by conserving and going without luxuries in their domestic life. The response of those who were able to do so was to create homes that were havens for these wounded warriors as well as protect their own sons from the awareness that the world could be that awful and tenuous. The Donna Reed/Harriet Nelson stereotype was at least in part an attempt to contribute to the family's income, to be pampered consumers for periods of time rather than taking on the mantle of financial responsibility that inaugurates adulthood. According to Swiss-Israeli psychologist Carlo Strenger (2004), this well-meaning parenting style understandably resulted in widespread narcissism on the part of these well-cared-for children who were the center of their parent's attention, a phenomenon also noted by historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1979). Lasch charted the progression of character types that have dominated American capitalist culture from the rugged, boot-strapping individualist of the prewar period through the company man of the war era to the pathological narcissist of the boomer generation. Today, the children and grandchildren of boomers feel the effects of having been reared by narcissists in ways that are important to consider as we imagine what today's teens are like and what they value. On the one hand, narcissistic parenting may result in emotional and/or physical neglect as parents pursue their own concerns, but on the other hand, it may lead to the kind of hovering that we have come to call "helicopter" or "Vekro" parenting, where parents are overly invested in their children's success as an extension of their own. The consequences of the former form of narcissistic parenting for LIS youth services means that teens will bring unmet emotional needs to the library—needs for personalized attention and engaged relational pedagogy to discover the kinds of books and materials that attend to their specific coping styles. However, neglectful parenting can also result in the need for youth service professionals to establish clearly defined boundaries, as these teens in taking their parents as unconscious models may be looking for relationships that transcend the professional in order to meet their own narcissistic needs for connection.

The latter model of narcissistic parenting, where parents project their successes and failures onto their teens, results in a different set of circumstances. Strenger (2004) points out the tremendous pressure on today's youth to be fabulous; ordinary lives and ordinary bodies are unacceptable as parents consciously and unconsciously communicate their narcissistic needs for their children to be wildly successful, viewing that success as a reflection of their parenting skills. These ramped-up expectations are conveyed in the increasingly common idiom that is heard everywhere these days: "This is going to be the *best* day/party/prom/school year/game ever!" Obviously, teens will respond to such pressures in dynamic and unpredictable ways.
For instance, on the one hand all some teens may want from a library is a place to escape the pressure cooker; designated places of enforced peace and quiet, though seemingly old-fashioned and traditional, still have their role in youth services for teens who need the respite. On the other hand, however, they may have internalized from their high-powered parents an expectation of specific outcomes for the time they spend in the library, so the opportunity to participate in community outreach and service-oriented programming that can go on a college application becomes a priority.

In either case, knowing that the problem of narcissistic parenting is likely to be a feature of teens who are using the library can run as a sort of background program to the LIS professional’s reading and recommending of young adult (YA) fiction. Teens situated between the desire to be fabulous and the disappointments of overbearing parents feature in many YA novels, such as Jessica Warman’s Between (2011), Robin Friedman’s Nothing (2008), and Jen Virol’s Putting Makeup on Dead People (2011). Even a biography like Susan Goldman Rubin’s Music Was It: Young Leonard Bernstein (2011) can offer sustenance for teens, as it emphasizes Bernstein’s father’s strong and continuous disapproval of his son’s ambitions. The reading needs and preferences of teens with narcissistic parents can be ambiguous, however, and depend on what style of coping they have developed. While some might gravitate to fantasy or humor, others may prefer to face the problem head on, as in books like A. S. King’s Everybody Sees the Ants (2011). In any case, a theoretical knowledge of contemporary parenting styles can be helpful in the service of readers’ advisory.

What remains to be considered of Babbitt’s pronouncement is the reference to Frank Sinatra. What does it mean to say that a singer had a part in creating modern adolescence? Scholars in the sociology of music have written extensively about the relationship of teens to their music, and how it acts to secure both individual and group identity particularly between the ages of 14 and 18 when music preferences tend to form and solidify. In addition to its identity-bearing function, Simon Frith (1987) notes that music helps teens express and even experience emotion in more complex and satisfying ways. The intensity of first love, the depth of sadness or loneliness, the rage of a perceived injustice, the elation of a really good are all rendered rather banal by the ordinary language we have to express them. But put a beat and some soulful instruments behind metaphorical lyrics and a song can make emotions more available, and their expression more adequate, to the experience.

The specific context of Sinatra surely refers to his appeal to adolescent girls, who made him the first teen singing idol. But I read Babbitt’s quip as a metonym for the representation and validation of specifically adolescent concerns in literature as well as music. When we consider the development of YA literature offered by Michael Cart (1996) in light of Lasch’s overview of dominant personality types, we note a similar progression of plot preoccupations and characters, with perhaps only a small mismatch between texts and the historical moments as Lasch delineates them. For instance, Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885) and Howard Pease’s The Tattooed Man (1926) feature rough-edged individualists, as do many of the boy’s adventure stories of the early and mid-twentieth century. Similarly, novels for girls featured eponymous characters—Nancy Drew, Sue Barton, Cherry Ames—to emphasize their individuality. But there also grew alongside these popular novels works that featured group protagonists like the Rover Boys and the Adventure Girls who were defined by their affiliative identities rather than their individuality. The effect of both the rugged individualist and the organization man myths is to consolidate a specifically American identity that emphasizes allegiance to adult ideals of self-reliance, loyalty, and swagger in light of the notion of simply being American. Maureen Daly’s Seventeenth Summer (1942) and the romances that followed, as well as the more or less realistic problem novels of the 1960s and 1970s, could be said to be driven by the growth in narcissistic concerns—the increasing desire to see oneself and one’s experiences reflected in literature.

Were Lasch still alive, it would be interesting to hear his take on the dominant personality type that we find ourselves enacting today, but other social critics have taken up the task with interestingly parallel findings, even if they come at their work from different angles. In broadest terms, philosophers, sociologists, cultural historians, educators, theologians, and psychologists have traced an ideological shift from a romantic to a modernist to a postmodernist and now to a transmodern view of the self. These adjetival terms enact a kind of reductive shorthand, of course, encapsulating points of view that emerged from multiple sources, such as changes in economic and political systems, revolutions in religion, and literary
innovations and interpretive stances. It is important to note that while these shifts can be said to have moments of emergence and even periods of ascendency or dominance, they are not confined to a particular time, nor are they progressive. Instead, they map attitudes or commitments that for most people exist along a continuum, a Likert scale of sorts if you will, that helps us sort out what we believe about what it means to be human—and in our more specific inquiry what it means to be a teen.

Thus, for instance, the romantic view, traditionally ascribed to Wordsworth and company in the late 1700s, configured the self as innate, complete, and glorious from birth, and rendered less so by growing older and less able to access our inborn connections to nature and the spiritual realm. According to Wordsworth (1807: viii) we come into the world “trailing clouds of glory” but soon devolve into less authentic creatures as we interact with polluted society. Even though this is decidedly an Eighteenth-Century conception, it could be said to have antecedent roots in the philosophy of St. Augustine, whose Confessions is arguably the first autobiography in Western literature and, if I may be forgiven for being a bit playful, may in fact be the first adolescent problem novel, chronicling as it does his teenage dissipation in a first person narrative. The salient point here is that his expressivist text espoused a romantic view of the self as a deep well of emotion, imagination, and perception, and posits that if one goes deep enough into self-understanding, one inevitably finds God as one’s true source. The depths of sensibility that animate the soul connect the self to others and the natural world as well as to God, and have to be protected from the banalities of interaction and work in order to prioritize meditation and greater understanding of a self that already exists fully and needs only to be discovered. Harry Potter might be considered a touchstone of this type of character. Despite harsh treatment by his aunt and uncle and a significantly deprived childhood, Harry continually discovers depths of talent, strength, and compassion that amaze his friends and foes alike, and he possesses an innate, incorruptible goodness that enables him to resist the misuse of his considerable power.

The modernist self, on the other hand, was inaugurated largely by the work of John Locke, who rejected the idea of innate, preexisting depths of the self in favor of the view that the mind is a tabula rasa that takes in impressions from experience and then develops through reflecting and making associations. Rather than discovered, the self in modernist thought is formed through experience, then shaped and cultivated through rationality and reason. While some modernist thinkers also acknowledge the presence of a Freudian unconscious that harbors irrational drives and desires, those in the Lockean tradition favor developmental schema theories, believing in the possibility for continuous growth and progress in rational thought, impulse control, and intentional morality over the life span.

Andi Alpers, in Jennifer Donnelly’s Revolution (2010), is representative of a modernist character. Her mental health is significantly compromised by the death of her younger brother, a death for which she feels responsible. But through reflecting on her own grief in light of the tragic fate of the young Dauphin in the aftermath of the French Revolution, she is able to slowly overcome her irrational desire to take her own life and instead embraces a moral imperative to help others through grief using her talent for music. Her relation to music acts as both a plot device and an affective metaphor, as she is studying a (fictional) composer known for his innovative use of the tritone, a note that was deemed “diabolical” because of its dissonant effect on the ear. The tritone, also known as an augmented fourth or diminished fifth, haunts as a sound out of place that requires resolution; the untimely death of Andi’s brother constitutes such a restless interval in her life, a scary, oppressive time that she must resolve if she is going to remain alive and sane. Implicitly, the book enacts a patriarchal affirmation of rationality over the realm of emotion (traditionally associated with the feminine) by contrasting the character of her father, a Nobel Prize-winning geneticist, with her mother, an artist whose production becomes obsessive and dysfunctional following the death of her son. Andi’s path could be said to reconcile and correct the two positions, but it clearly favors the paternal, modernist response of rendering grief functional through rational action.

Postmodern thought challenges both the romantic and the modernist conceptions of the self. Like modernity, it rejects a depth model, but it also critiques the optimistic notion of progress and the rejection of ways of knowing that are not embedded in empiricism, rationality, and reason. Most importantly, postmodernism rejects assertions of universal truth and essential humanity, calling these out as “grand narratives” that were never really adequate to define human experience, and thus became restrictive hegemonies that sought to stifle diversity in the service of institutional
power. The monomyth of mid-twentieth-century American identity, for instance, is neatly summed up by Erving Goffman (1963: 128) in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*; “In an important sense there is only one complete blushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, height, and a recent record in sports.” Anyone who stands outside that string of attributes is judged against them and found wanting.

Consider how each character in S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) or Frank Bonham’s *Durango Street* (1965) not only fails to meet more than one of those criteria as a teen, but is also positioned so that they can never achieve those ideals as an adult. Stories that bring these sorts of characters out of the margins and into a space of empathy within the teen reader sensitize the reader to the necessity of postmodern critique. It could even be said that the project to advance some sort of definition of what it means to be a teen in contemporary culture could be read as an attempt to erect a grand narrative that inevitably excludes and marginalizes those individuals who don’t fit the mold. But conversely, the narrative that all teens are individuals with singular concerns and absolute ideological independence is just as suspect, as it depends on a contested view of atomic individualism. Still another popular narrative is the one that places teens in tribal identity groupings; that is, teens are seen to accord without personal exception with affiliative groupings or expectations organized around race, class, gender, ethnicity, and so on, based on the way they dress, talk, and look. Any of these narratives can be equally restrictive, as each may require teens to reject common understandings of and compliance with the dominant culture that may hold important components of their sense of self; in other words, they are put into ideological boxes that may not hold all of their various parts. The postmodernist argument thus calls on theorists of the self to move away from content-based assertions of what constitutes a mature self (such as coherence, integration, continuity of consciousness, etc., which may only have value in certain narratives) and focus instead on the dialogic processes by which one achieves a sense of self in contemporary culture.

The great divorce of the self from cultural monomyths and grand narratives forms the common core of these contemporary theories of the self.

For postmodern critics, the idea of a deep or authentic self is an illusion; such a sense of self is enabled by a certain kind of grand narrative that, because it is not shared by every culture, must have been constructed by one particular culture, and is therefore ideologically driven by the mechanisms of power that provide coherence and stability for that culture and may in fact be detrimental or oppressive for individuals. (I would be remiss if I did not point out that this position is itself ideologically driven—the grand narratives that provide stability and coherence for a culture can and do enable individuals to thrive as well; it is often the conditions of one’s embodiment that place one at a particular point on the success/failure continuum.) On the one hand, untethering the self from grand narratives enables a sense of fluidity and freedom to fashion oneself as one wills; on the other it demands continual experimentation with cultural supports that act more as moving targets than fixed measures of success. The fact remains that the self is dialogic: it requires a dynamic feedback loop with a responsive culture to exist, and if not grand narratives, then the artifacts of popular culture provide that feedback.

What this means for LIS professionals endeavoring to understand their young clientele is that there is no longer the sense that there is a single path to a mature identity, nor is there a fixed idea of what that identity might ultimately look like. Though it seems by now a cliché, respect for diversity, broadly conceived, is key to understanding today’s teens, because in today’s reckoning diversity exists within the self as well as externally as a feature of identity politics. A teen may enjoy indie music, for instance, and incline more toward an evangelical Christian perspective than the goth or emo persona that musical preference may suggest to outsiders. Identity components are selected à la carte, rather than coming together as a plu­x fixe meal. Rather than rebelling against some fixed and restrictive notion of adulthood, teens today are using their access to global popular culture to experiment with niche identities that key to sometimes transient values. They then test and adjust these identities based on what kind of feedback they receive and how that makes them feel. Obviously, their skill and success at making these adjustments vary, and they are not always able to gauge the connection of their actions and self-presentation to the social consequences, but LIS professionals should understand that they themselves are part of the teens’ feedback loop. They should also understand
that experiments at self-fashioning sometimes fail, so that radical changes in a teen's presentation may be worth worrying about (for instance, when they seem to indicate self-harm) and at other times may not (when they suggest a new experiment in fashion or affiliation).

Postmodern theorists of the self analyze how this process of self-fashioning and developing niche identities came about and how it works. Philip Cushman (1995), for instance, argues that postwar advertising and therapeutic culture consciously set out to construct the self as empty, so that they could offer consumer-based products to fill it. Cushman's assessment of adult culture has filtered down to advertising and therapies aimed squarely at teens: Libba Bray's darkly hilarious send-up of teen pageant and reality show culture, *Beauty Queens* (2011: 37), contains a commercial that ends with the tagline, "Because there's nothing wrong with you...that we can't fix," and more and more YA lit features characters with mental health and disability issues, such as E. Lockhart's *Ruby Oliver* books, Donnelly's *Revolution* (2010), Beverley Brenna's *Wild Orchid* (2005), Jennifer Roy's *Mindblind* (2010), and any number of books with characters struggling with eating disorders. While books that feature rampant consumerism run the gamut between celebration (e.g., Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girls* [2002]) and critique (e.g., Janet Tashjian's *The Gospel According to Larry* [2001]), contemporary books about mental illness and disability seek to normalize those characters' experience, to show them coping and healing when they need to but otherwise living functional lives.

Sterenger's fabulous teens are also well represented in YA literature but are again given differential treatments: superachieving Parker in Friedman's *Nothing* (2008) turns to bulimia in an attempt to escape his father's overbearing pressure, while Carlos in Bil Wright's *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (2011) realizes his dream of becoming a teen makeup artist for a reality TV star. Danny's dilemmas in *Mexican White Boy* (2008) and Junior's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) offer more nuanced reflections on the pressures of being exceptional. Other theorists focus on the process of self-fashioning as pursuing the self as a work of art (Foucault, 1997) or the outcome of a series of gender performances (Butler, 1990). The former is foregrounded metaphorically in Paul Fleischman's *Whirligig* (1998) and *Mind's Eye* (2001), where the characters craft their sense of self through identification with artistic styles, while the latter is arguably present in all YA fiction, but perhaps most visible in books that feature transgressive gender performances, such as Julie Ann Peters's *Luna* (2004) and Cris Beam's *I am J* (2011).

Another compelling theory of the self in contemporary culture is offered by Kenneth Gergen (1991) in his book *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. Like the other theorists I have mentioned, he agrees that young people have been set adrift from grand narratives into a sea of competing and ever-proliferating messages that are increasingly difficult to sort through. It is not that youth today face an attention deficit; rather, it is that they pay attention to everything, and no message stands out as particularly compelling or foundational—there is no authoritative voice that helps them sort opposing messages into categories of useful or trivial, right or wrong. The self, then, is fully dependent, and additionally, so, on the images and discourses that swirl around it from birth demanding attention and response. M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002) is exemplary of this type of media and social saturation; with the Internet wet-wired into people's heads, there is no escape into a space of Augustinian contemplation but rather a constant relational matrix to negotiate. And while *Feed* offers a cautionary tale of being constantly online, its warning seems almost anachronistic as social networking has become ubiquitous. The self is no longer at the center of activity but is displaced by the social relationships that one must continually develop and maintain. Consider Facebook in this regard: The continual updates are without question narcissistic, but they are narcissistic in the service of maintaining relationships with others.

Indeed one of the most interesting facets of these theories seems to be that they implicitly rehabilitate narcissism from its negative connotations. Because the new form of the self is not inwardly focused or dependent on exclusive or oppressive metanarratives, a narcissistic focus on the self encompasses a broader space, a space of relationship, community, and interdependence that renders narcissism expansive: when I am looking at myself, I see all of the others who are in conversation with me and I am performing for those others. David Leviathan creates the quintessential postmodern subject in *Boy Meets Boy* (2003); Infinite Darlene is transgressively gendered and is both the star quarterback of the football team and the homecoming queen. She thus embodies multiple and fluid subject positions, and her sense of self is fully relationship-oriented.
She seems very full of herself. Which she is. It's only after you get to know her better that you realize that somehow she's managed to encompass all her friends within her own self-image, so that when she's acting full of herself, she's actually full of her close friends, too. (Levithan, 2003: 41)

But even though today's teens are relationship oriented, that does not mean that they have lost the value of thinking for themselves, of claiming their individual right to do things that run counter to parental and societal desires and expectations. Donna Parisi, the protagonist of Jen Violi's Putting Makeup on Dead People (2011), offers a powerful example of many of the traits identified by the theorists I have cited. She is grieving the death of her beloved father and has pulled back emotionally from the rest of her family, but she still feels the pressure to make her life extraordinary. She discovers within herself a willingness to do what many people would not be capable of doing—loving the dead and supporting the living by standing alongside them and preparing bodies for funerals. This is certainly countercultural in terms of gender performance and teen performance; her mother is particularly resistant to the idea, interpreting it as a morbid response to the loss of her father. But Donna knows better. She knows that this is a way of honoring her own experience, of claiming the intensity of what happened to her and remaking it into a loving service for others.

Other characters insist on their right to resist the dullness of social saturation, as Scarlet does in The Six Rules of Maybe:

I never understood why it was somehow superior to be a joiner. Being an introvert is judged in some extreme way, as if you're lacking some ability to cope because you don't drink beer and smoke pot in Macy Friedman's basement. In our society, introversion as an alternate lifestyle gets less respect than any other alternate lifestyle, in my opinion. You could be gay and go to homecoming with your girlfriend or boyfriend, you could go drink, you could go and ditch your partner mid-dance, but if you didn't go at all, you were a loser. Introversion is distrusted—it makes people nervous. Maybe it seems like we've got secrets. They think the secret is that you're depressed or something, that's why you don't seek their company, when the secret is really that you're happy and relieved and almost flying at the near-miss escape of not having to be in their company. You're looked at like you're seriously lacking, when the only thing you feel lacking is the ability to be an introvert in peace. (Caletti, 2010: 69)

But even Scarlet is absorbed in her small network of friends and neighbors whose lives intersect with hers and whom she feels a desire to help and protect. Similarly, nearly all of the 70 YA authors who participated in the Dear Bully anthology, edited by Megan Kelley Hall and Carrie Jones (2011), emphasize their current adult status as surrounded by a group of loving friends as an implicit (and sometimes explicit) measure of their self-worth, which was called into question by their adolescent experience with bullying.

The guiding principles of the self in postmodern society for teens as well as adults, then, are fluidity and dialogism; our sense of self is marked by continual responsiveness to the feedback of others rather than a stubborn adherence to an abstract ideal that might set us apart from our peers. As a result, we can feel somewhat fragmented and at times compromised or inauthentic, but it is the embrace of flexibility that enables us to confront rapidly changing technologies that both force and enable us to engage in the social networks that have come to define us.

Interestingly, this kind of flexibility and fluidity is, and perhaps always has been, a hallmark of teen identity. As we turn now to examine the key developmental tasks of the teenage years, it is important to note that the life skills necessary to negotiate contemporary technologies, such as identity fluidity, peer orientation, incessant interactivity, a fascination with cool, adaptability to the new, and risk taking, have long been viewed as teen behaviors that we should ideally grow out of as we achieve a more serene and stable adulthood; in contemporary culture, however, they are a destination rather than a stage you pass on the way.

The Emerging Adult

The challenge for many adults thinking through these postmodern challenges is that many of us do experience a strong, stable sense of self based
on what we believe are core values, and we do not think of ourselves as fragmented and plastic; we believe that achieving a stable and secure identity is a good thing, and we want that for our teens as well. In short, we both believe in and value a lot of the things that postmodernism critiques about romantic and modernist conceptions of the self. We believe in progressive intellectual and moral development, although we may reject lockstep, age-defined categories such as those identified by Freud, Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, among others. We believe in fostering critical thinking, although we may insist on a place for emotional response as a complement to a mechanistic rationality. We believe in encouraging the ability to make and keep commitments, even though we want to hold open space for flexibility when life circumstances force change. Indeed, these values were all part of the dialogue that we engaged in as we grew up, and therefore they helped shape the dialogic selves we now uphold as ideal.

How, then, can we hold on to and pass on to our teens what we value, while taking the critiques of postmodernism seriously? How do we preserve what we believe to be important in the face of cultural and ideological change? Paul Vitz (1995) coined the term transmodern to indicate a view of the self that reaches across prior understandings and transforms them. The answer to many of the critiques of the modernist and postmodern versions of the self lies in reintroducing the body into the terms of imagining the teen, then, we have to consider not only social environment and immersion in the contemporary cultural moment but also the special circumstances of teen embodiment.

Recent research in brain development has yielded information that surprised the scientists if not the parents of teens. What they discovered is that teen brains do not work the same way as adult brains, and therefore their responses to situations tend to be different as well. Specifically, there is an overproduction of gray matter in the area of the prefrontal cortex just prior to puberty. Hence, new capacities in the area that is known as the chief executive officer (CEO) of the brain stand ready to be reinforced or pruned, depending on experience during the next several years. The prefrontal cortex is believed to be responsible for mental activities such as planning, organizing, strategizing, assessing risk, impulse control, and dispassionate reasoning. According to neuroscientist Jay Giedd (Spinks, 2002b), the overproduction of gray matter does not matter as much as the pruning down process that follows during the teen years. This is the time when the "use it or lose it" principle is most important, because "[t] hose cells and connections that are used will survive and flourish. Those cells and connections that are not used will wither and die." It might seem sad to "lose" certain capacities, but the pruning metaphor is not an idle one; just as in gardening, pruning away some pathways enables others to grow stronger.

Giedd notes that the cerebellum is also undergoing significant change during the teen years. Scientists have long believed that the cerebellum is responsible for coordinating physical movement, so new growth in that area may account for the frustrating clumsiness that some teens experience. But recent research indicates that the cerebellum is responsible for coordinating thought processes as well, so that social awkwardness or the inability to track complicated arguments or make cognitive connections may be related to the instability of the cerebellum as it grows and changes. The relative immaturity of these areas of the brain can account for teens' inability to connect their own behaviors with social consequences, but the presence of mirror neurons—that is, neurons that fire both when a person acts and when a person observes an action in others, as well as the ability to form emotional attachments with characters—may be instrumental in helping teens reflect on behaviors they read about in books. Although the scientific evidence for this is still in its infancy (see, for example, Vermeulen, 2009), seeing how things work out for characters may then help build and reinforce the connections a teen needs to make in his or her own brain.

What is fully developed at this stage of life is the amygdala, the area of the brain that initiates emotional, gut responses. Because this area is well developed, because hormonal fluctuations augment emotional response, and because all of the connections to and from the frontal cortex are not fully functional yet, teens lead with their emotions. However, they are not always able to match the appropriate emotional response to the stimuli (Spinks, 2002a); this seems to require the full coordination of the cerebellum, the frontal cortex, and the amygdala, which as we have noted is not fully online yet.

While Giedd and others are cautious in translating their findings into recommendations for practice, several practical outcomes can be interpolated that are of use in our quest to think critically about how to imagine teens:
It matters very much how people spend their time and energies during their teen years. It is not a time for sleeping as older texts suggest, but rather a time for experimentation with many different physical and mental activities so that they can find a few that they might want to specialize in.

Most young people will need significant scaffolding to realize goals that require planning, organizing, and strategies. Depending on the genetic lottery, they may be full of creative ideas or have significant problem-solving abilities thanks to a well-developed corpus callosum, but their frontal lobes are simply not yet ready to figure out and implement the series of steps that will secure the success of their endeavors.

Reading engrossing fiction may help scaffold increased emotional intelligence as well as help students develop an awareness of cause and effect.

As much as we want to encourage reading, we need to ensure that teens get up and get moving. The new findings regarding the cerebellum indicate a correlation between sluggish bodies and sluggish minds.

Their responses will not always accord with the stimuli that prompt them.

Combining these findings with what we know about “zones of proximal development” should prompt us to think carefully about the kinds of support teens need. They need the opportunity to participate in diverse, experimental activities that engage both mind and body. For instance, LIS professionals can build such activities into their programming by inviting community experts to offer one-off workshops specifically for teens in which nothing is dismissed as too weird or uncool, because it might be just right for someone looking for a new niche identity component or skill set to try.

The brain research should also remind us that while they are not exactly other, teens are also not exactly like us, and hence we should be careful not to be dismissive of the things that are important to them, even if they seem ephemeral or melodramatic. The teenage years appear as something of a paradox in our usual ways of sorting experience: it is a time that is both crucial and temporary, urgent and important. We have to remind both them and ourselves that the impermanence of this stage of life in no way negates its importance.

Besides embodiment, Vitz (1995) posits two other elements that are essential to understanding the transmodern self—our embeddedness in community and the centrality of language to both crafting and communicating identity. These elements, he contends, are in fact human universals, but they are also infinitely variable across cultures. In order to translate his concept into a model that we can use to better understand both ourselves and our teens, I turn to the work of Mark Bracher (2006). Bracher cites the work of Heinz Lichtenstein (1977) and Norman Holland (1985) to support the claim that development and maintenance of one’s identity is the most basic of all human needs. He ties this insight to current thought in education that the primary goal of education is no longer socialization, as it was in previous eras, but individual identity formation (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Bracher then goes on to advance a theory of identity that, though drawn specifically from the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, resonates with the theory of the transmodern self. Like the transmodern self, Bracher’s theory of identity consists of three basic elements: the affective/emotional register, which correlates most closely with the experience of embodiment; the imagistic/perceptual register, which is composed of ideal images of the self and others and which privileges one’s body image and capabilities as the site of agency; and the cognitive/linguistic register, which revolves around the signifiers that a person identifies with and finds valuable. Too often, Bracher argues, we who work with young people focus overmuch on this latter category. We are educators, after all, who have been trained to see our arena of influence as the information-processing dimensions of the human mind. We give short shrift, then, to aspects of our teens’ personalities that are in fact very important to them, namely, the development and maintenance of their body image and nonlinguistic competencies and the validation of their emotions. He also urges us to be aware that we ourselves have similar identity needs in each of the three areas, and when they are neglected or come into conflict with our students’ identity needs or the goals of our programming, we will all be hindered from achieving those goals.

But conflict can arise between the registers as well. For instance, an exceptionally tall black male teenager may be expected, because of his embodiment and his cultural positioning, to desire to be a basketball star
and hang out with friends, when the signifiers and activities he actually values include being a good poet and spending time with his grandfather. While his friends and coach seek to use him to serve and validate their identity needs or the needs of the school sports program, his needs go unrecognized. When this happens, he may try to compensate for unmet needs in one register by engaging in another; for example, he may retreat into music to alter his feeling state or may sabotage his basketball playing by injuring himself. The point is that when teens act out inappropriately, they are usually driven by unrecognized needs in one area or another and are seeking to compensate for the lack of recognition of their identity, because even negative recognition, or recognition for negative things, is better than not being recognized at all.

Admittedly, it is difficult to withhold judgment for behaviors that we consider negative, and sometimes we should not; after all, as adults we can perceive consequences in ways that teens may not, either because of brain development or a lack of historical perspective. But honest self-reflection is key here: If we understand the teen self as dialogically engaged with his or her culture, we must also recognize that we as adults are acting in dialogue with our cultures as well. Often our judgments are based in nostalgia or a culture that no longer functions as it once did. As the culture changes, then, so does the dialogue and its outcomes; our goals are not necessarily their goals. But this does not mean that our opinions and insights do not matter, because we are part of the dialogue as well. Engaged YA librarians and LIS scholars can and should critically examine current cultural trends, delaying judgment while measuring them against their likely consequences and outcomes, and then find ways through book and media talks and discussion groups to engage teens in critical conversations about their world as well.

As librarians and educators, we have a wealth of resources at our disposal to help our teens find recognition for their identity components. As I have argued in this essay, thinking theoretically matters. We must recognize that today's teens live in a world that demands they be spectacular and that sometimes glosses over their individuality in favor of their identity group affiliation. We must stay abreast of current brain research, which teaches us that teenaged bodies are in a state of flux that can be confusing and painful, but that most importantly recognizes their brain development drives them to process information differently from children or adults. We must be aware that they are constantly immersed in a swirl of language and social connection that requires organization and sorting skills they may not yet possess but that we can help scaffold through connecting them with the literature that will expand their understanding of characters and situations. We must engage in serious self-reflection such that our own unmet needs are not visited on our clients in negative ways. And then we must find ways to turn our theoretical knowledge into practical programming that encourages healthy experimentation, provides appropriate and effective feedback, and supports diversity, even diversity within the self. This project requires that we be our best adult selves—attentive, supportive, creative, and generative. If we succeed, then we can help our teens develop through a more informed and self-aware dialogue with their culture toward what they consider a desirable destination.

Primary Sources
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Scholarly References


