

Zara Rix  
University of Connecticut  
Paper Abstract for ChLA 2019: “Activism and Empathy”

A YA novel without a young adult protagonist:  
Activism within Lurline Wailana McGregor’s *Between the Deep Blue Sea and Me*

In 2010, Native Hawaiian Lurline Wailana McGregor’s *Between the Deep Blue Sea and Me* (2008) won the American Indian Library Association (AILA) award for Youth Literature, despite the fact that the character’s protagonist is in her late 30s. In fact, none of the primary characters of McGregor’s novel is an adolescent. Nonetheless, the AILA determined that the book met their standards for disseminating accurate information about Native life on spiritual and material levels and for portraying well-rounded individuals who will appeal to younger readers.

McGregor’s combination of Native Hawaiian activism with the political energy associated with adolescence poses unique questions for both Young Adult Literature and portrayals of Kanaka Māoli sovereignty. My contribution to this panel argues that McGregor’s novel became YA Literature because it provides a framework in which readers – both Natives and non-Natives – can engage with the energy, learning, and optimism of adolescence. In doing so, *Between the Deep Blue Sea and Me* provides a hopeful future vision for the reclaiming of Native Hawaiian spiritual, social, and political realities for all Hawaiians, no matter whether they are adult, child, or adolescent. In McGregor’s work, Native Hawaiian activism goes beyond learning about the Kanaka Māoli people or history or culture; rather, her characters are adults who must learn to become the children of their ancestors. To do so, they must traverse the symbolic adolescence portrayed within McGregor’s novel. Once they become, in a sense, “adolescents,” McGregor’s adult characters can become full members of their community on a spiritual plane as well as on a material level, and their lives become a seamless form of Native activism.