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Here, But Not Entirely Queer:
Constructions of Gay Male Identity in
21st Century Trade Fiction for Teens

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Gay boys and girls, like any others, need positive images and affirming stories to help guide them through the often painful and confusing terrain of childhood and adolescence, to glimpse a world in which they're not bad or shameful but in which they're part of the good world. Books can provide a moral compass, a system of values, a way to understand feelings. – Alex Sanchez, “Open Eyes and Change Lives: Narrative Resources Addressing Gay-Straight Themes” (2005)

While the eponymous message of writer and activist Dan Savage's wildly popular “It Gets Better” project prescribes an optimistic vision of the future for troubled gay teenagers, the present has rarely looked brighter for young people who link their identities to the now prevalent and ever-lengthening LGBTQIA acronym. Celebrities and peers alike add their voices to Savage's in proclaiming support for the struggles faced by homosexual youth; individuals find a kaleidoscopic array of gay-targeted resources in their schools, in their communities, and through the Internet; television shows with audiences in the millions urge viewers to sympathize with queer characters' stories and to celebrate their triumphs. Contemporary society inundates gay teens with a wealth of information, models, and narratives, not least of all their own specifically tailored literature.

As charted by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins in their singular and comprehensive survey *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, literature for gay teens is not necessarily a new phenomenon, though the turn of the century saw a veritable explosion of the genre, tied to the rapid growth of young adult publishing as well as to progressing attitudes toward LGBTQIA persons and issues: “In the five publishing years from 2000 to 2004, a total of sixty-six YA titles with GLBTQ content appeared, as

compared to the total of seventy titles that appeared during the entire decade of the 1990s” (128). The texts of this particular cultural moment demand analysis, linked as they are to such universally noted landmarks of the gay rights movement in America as *Lawrence vs. Texas* and the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Massachusetts.

Three books (or rather, texts, as one is a trilogy) stand as undeniable pillars of gay young adult fiction within the first years of the 21st century, quasi-canonical works by virtue of their popularity, accolades, and repeated appearances in progressive-minded high school curricula. Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* (2001), followed by *Rainbow High* (2003) and *Rainbow Road* (2005), chronicles the coming of age of three gay boys across three books; *Rainbow Boys* reached a bestselling spot on Amazon.com, and received an American Library Association award for “Best Book for Young Adults” as well as the honor of Lambda Literary Award finalist (shared by its successors in their respective years). A tale of magical realism, David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) enjoyed a similar level of success, garnering the Lambda Literary Award and an ALA nomination of “Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults.” Finally, *Geography Club* (2003) by Brent Hartinger, which dramatizes a secretive group of teens’ efforts to establish a gay-straight alliance at their high school, also scored the Lambda finalist designation and that of Children’s Book Award “Notable Book.”

The three authors – Sanchez, Levithan, and Hartinger – are remarkable not only in their reception but in their shared ability to make long and successful careers

out of writing gay young adult fiction. Sanchez boasts a catalog of gay-themed novels in addition to his ever-lauded *Rainbow Boys* series; Hartinger's book spawned three sequels (irrelevant to the thrust of this essay in their less explicit focus on gay themes) and a forthcoming film adaptation; and Levithan has regularly produced *New York Times* bestselling fiction marketed to and about gay youth, including the recent *Two Boys Kissing* (2013). Though these authors do not provide the best representation of the growing diversity within contemporary LGBTQIA young adult fiction, I have selected them in consideration of the stated reasons and in the interest of pursuing a pointed critical analysis of their parallel – though not uniform – constructions of gay male identity.

Many scholars and educators inscribe a didactic program upon gay YA literature: these texts afford pleasure, but they also furnish teens with invaluable positive representations of themselves. Appropriately utilized in classrooms, these novels become instruments of comfort and of change, as they aid non-normative students in gaining a sense of identity and facilitate an understanding of homophobia's painful consequences within heterosexual peers. Given these perceived virtues, gay-themed YA novels (including those of Sanchez, Levithan, and Hartinger) make frequent appearances on lists of progressive teaching materials for predominantly high-school educators. In his 2009 article "Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures," William P. Banks asserts that texts featuring adolescent LGBTQIA characters function "as spaces for student-readers to locate themselves, as spaces for these young people to see their lives reflected back to

them, but also to see alternative possibilities for richer, happier, fuller lives” (33); G. Douglas Meyers opens his contemporaneous essay “Alex Sanchez’s Fiction: A Resource for All” with the declaration, “The young adult novels of Alex Sanchez belong in every high school English classroom and media center” (73). Prized in educational circles, the texts of the genre and authors in question often serve as malleable teens’ first exposure to gay narratives and to representations of gay identity.

In their survey of the genre, Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins develop a model for analysis adapted from the work of Rudine Sims Bishop in her 1982 study *Shadow & Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction*. YA literature with gay-themed content, they say, consists of three not-altogether exclusive categories: homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer consciousness/community. The first grouping denotes conventional problem novels that revolve around a character’s coming out, where dramatic substance arises from reactions to the interruption of a previously homogeneous society. Conversely, “gay assimilation” stories take place in “melting pot” worlds where characters “just happen to be gay.” The last classification, that of “queer consciousness/community,” applies to books which “show GLBTQ characters in the context of their communities of GLBTQ people and their families of choice” (xx). Cart’s and Jenkins’ categories are descriptive yet fluid, as evidenced by their labeling of the texts that will constitute the objects of this essay’s analysis: *Rainbow Boys* encapsulates all three flavors of gay teen literature, while *Geography Club* and *Boy Meets Boy* assume the dual

demarcations of “homosexual visibility/queer consciousness” and “gay assimilation/queer community,” respectively.

Cart and Jenkins’ three-part model is certainly useful in its delineation of the genre, but I wish to move away from such broad and often reductive categorizations in favor of an analysis that traffics in the textual mechanisms responsible for constructing gay identity. I therefore view homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer community as themes rather than labels, cooperative rather than divisional. By working through the interactions and iterations of these themes, my critical scope seeks to question how the texts teach gayness and to problematize the fictions presented to queer youth as reflections of their realities.

The Coming Out Story

As the primary concern of Cart and Jenkins’ homosexual visibility category, coming out occupies an essential position within the gay teen novel; it is a narrative tool that reflects the continued social and political emphasis on bursting proudly from the closet to a life of honest self-knowledge and public acceptance. In *Homoplot*, her 2008 analysis of the coming out story’s place within gay fiction and autobiography, Esther Saxey states, “the coming out story pieces together for the reader what it means to be gay – what gay identity feels like, how a gay individual behaves” (35). Saxey rightly stresses the coming out story’s instructional nature, its existence as a model that synthesizes an identity for the reader to consume and potentially adopt. How Sanchez’s, Levithan’s, and Hartinger’s characters come out, then, becomes vital

to their representations of gayness as well as indicative of the didactic messages of the texts.

Of the novels in question, Hartinger's *Geography Club* adheres most closely to the typical trajectory of a coming out story. Though he establishes himself as gay within the very first pages, protagonist Russel spends the majority of the narrative striving to hide his true identity at all costs. A secret romance with the school's most popular jock, baseball star Kevin Land, confines Russel to the closet even as he opens up to a sympathetic group of gay students masquerading under the guise of a Geography Club (a Gay-Straight Alliance would only provoke torment in their singularly hostile school environment). After a disastrous heterosexual double date (a favor for a straight friend) leads to rumors that he is the "Gay Kid" at school, Russel elects to embrace the identity, and his coming out parallels the creation of a true GSA, though his relationship with Kevin – unable to risk his own secure position within the social landscape - does not survive.

Geography Club's treatment of its protagonist's self-revelatory progression utilizes many of the elements that lead Esther Saxey to characterize coming out as "not universal or ahistorical" but productive of a "highly specific version of gay identity" (36). It is significant that the opening scene of the book, set in a locker room that Russel describes in militaristic terms – "I was deep behind enemy lines, in the very heart of the opposing camp" (1) – is an instance of passing as heterosexual. Confronted with naked classmates and "Kevin Land's latest test of my manhood" (4) in the form of a teasing compliment directed at his physique, Russel responds in a

manner that derides homosexuality and thereby reinforces his illusion of straightness: bending over and shaking his butt at Kevin, Russel elicits the exclamation “You are such a fag!” and confides to the reader, “Mission accomplished, I thought. My cover was holding—for another day at least” (5). Performing heterosexuality necessitates an abjection of homosexuality that Russel accomplishes without hesitation, and this theme of passing carries throughout the novel as Russel joins the baseball team to be closer to Kevin. When a game-winning home run assures him a space within the “Land of the Popular,” Russel relishes his newfound social position, which he maintains by participating in the bullying of Brian Bund, an outcast whom fellow students rip into “because they think he’s gay” (162).

Russel embodies an aspect of the coming out story as characterized by Saxey: “passing is the basis for the protagonist’s central decision to disclose his sexuality” (46). Coming out generates drama and acquires narrative merit due to the tension between a character’s performed sexuality and his masked identity, and so coming out stories must foreground their subject’s ability to pass as straight. As Saxey succinctly puts it, coming out “is only available to a particular kind of protagonist: sensitive and emotionally literate but with gender variant characteristics that can be concealed when necessary” (49). Russel fits this bill perfectly: though he may exhibit stereotypically feminine qualities such as a penchant for animated Disney musicals, he is athletic and willing to perform homophobia, acutely aware of the reality that “not being gay wasn’t just about not throwing a bone in the showers. It was a whole way of acting around other guys, a level of casualness, of comfort, that says, ‘I’m one

of you. I fit in.' I wasn't one of them, I didn't fit in, but they didn't need to know that" (4).

Two of the three protagonists in *Rainbow Boys* also fulfill Saxey's passing-as-straight stipulation that defines the coming out story. With his glasses, braces, and ubiquitous baseball cap, the sensitive Kyle epitomizes the intellectual yet masculine hero that coming out requires, even down to his sport of choice – swimming – which Saxey notes has its own importance within homosexual narratives: “Water activities are connotative of gay identity, not denotative...swimming and surfing indicate fitness and physicality, denying the stereotype of the effete gay boy without moving into macho contact sports” (40-41). Established as the athletic and sensible counterpoint to his flamboyant best friend Nelson, Kyle provides fellow protagonist and love interest Jason with an example of non-threatening gayness that spurs his own coming out, as Jason confesses at the beginning of *Rainbow High*, “I never suspected Kyle was gay. He looked too normal...I thought, If someone like him is okay with being gay, then maybe I could be too” (6). And if Kyle refutes the stereotype of the effete gay boy, then Jason, whom Thomas Crisp labels the “Tragic Closet Jock” in his 2011 essay “The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*,” seems purposefully designed to provoke surprise at the revelation of his non-heterosexual identity. With his physical appearance, his status as a basketball player (a team pursuit rather than solo sport of the traditional loner homosexual), and his position within a heterosexual relationship at the start of *Rainbow Boys*, Jason typifies conventional masculinity, a description captured most succinctly by the yearbook

photo over which Kyle lusts, which depicts “Jason, number seventy-seven, was racing down the court, intensity on his face, curls flying, muscles taut, sheer power in motion” (12). By virtue of their appearances and the activities they choose to engage in, Kyle and Jason are capable of passing as straight, and it is only after they come out or through their associations with Nelson that they face the consequences of living openly as gay men.

Nelson’s inability to pass as straight sets him apart from Jason and Kyle (and from Russel), creating a binary of gay identity that persists throughout Sanchez’s series. Introduced in *Rainbow Boys* as “the school fag” through Jason’s perspective, Nelson manifests the flaming homosexual stereotype with “his million earrings, his snapping fingers, his weird haircuts. Why didn’t he just announce he was a homo over the school loudspeaker?” (2) For Nelson, external markers of gayness are inescapable and leave him open to attack from the heterosexual figures Russel emulates so well, a fact that Nelson’s mother evidences when she relates how “his very first day of school he learned a new word: ‘sissy’” (181). Incapable of performing heterosexuality, Nelson is thereby incapable of coming out, and so must resort to over-the-top, in-your-face demonstrations of homosexuality in order to claim the identity that society will thrust upon him regardless of any attempts to mask or alter his behavior. Again, Saxey proves useful in conceptualizing the forces that divide Nelson’s narrative from those of his straight-passing counterparts: “An internal gendered difference (being sensitive and intellectual) is good; an observable gendered difference (being a sissy) is less often celebrated. Camp men are most often valued as

visible beacons who allow straight-acting boys to contact one another” (48). And indeed, the function described by Saxey is precisely that which Nelson serves in *Rainbow Boys*; he stands as the sole representative of uncompromisingly explicit homosexuality – queerness, even – assisting Kyle and Jason in coming to terms with their own identities and thereby coming to love one another. Nelson’s character polarizes the *Rainbow Boys* series, creating an opposition between internal and observable gayness that functionally limits the books’ representation of gay teens to two tropes, yet his inclusion invaluablely gives voice to those gay individuals who lack the privilege of a coming out story.

Self-Knowledge and Manifesting Gay Identity

Boy Meets Boy is unique among its peers in that it does not feature a coming out story, although two of the novel’s ancillary characters do undergo struggles with their sexuality that provide counterpoints to the simple, open journey of protagonist Paul. Tony, Paul’s best friend, lives just outside the bounds of Levithan’s idyllic, bias-free town, and so must face opposition from his Bible-thumping parents when his gay identity comes to light. A previous romantic entanglement, the confused Kyle rejected Paul and staunchly professed his heterosexuality, yet he remains a source of anxiety for the protagonist and, when he begins to come to terms with his bisexuality, a threat to Paul’s budding relationship with the artistic Noah. Levithan draws distinct parallels between these two troubled young men as Tony demonstrates an understanding of Kyle’s situation that Paul cannot manage himself: “Kyle feels lost,

Paul. That's all he's saying. And he knows that you're not lost. You've never really been lost. You've *felt* lost. But you've never *been* lost" (151). Paul represents a new brand of gay teen, a homosexual who has rarely faced homophobia, whose sexual identity was determined by age five – "It was my teacher who said so. It was right there on my kindergarten report card: PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS A VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF" (8). Self-knowledge forms the basis of any individual's construction of gay identity, and Paul possesses self-knowledge in spades.

To understand the importance that gay teen novels pin to self-knowledge, we return once more to *Homoplot*, in which Saxey notes, "Gay identity is essentially a matter of emotion and emotional literacy rather than of activity" (42). Though this statement participates in a larger argument concerning the nature of same-sex experiences between a gay individual and a heterosexual partner, Saxey vocalizes an operation that just as easily describes how these young protagonists understand their sexual identities: homosexuality is a state rather than a behavior, dependent upon feeling rather than action. For these characters, gayness has little to do with sex, but with a sense of personal difference that derives from self-awareness. This conception of gay identity allows Paul to claim his gay identity at five years old, and it enables the following conversation with Noah: "'Have you always known?' he asks. I know immediately what he's talking about. 'Pretty much so, yeah,' I answer. 'You?' He nods" (49). Pre-adolescence and pre-sexual experience, gayness exists within these

characters as a static trait of which they are aware, and so coming out becomes the process of simply stating the previously known.

Across all of the novels in question, Saxey's rendition of gay identity holds, and many instances even draw a division between identifying as gay and engaging in homosexual activity. In *Rainbow Boys*, Jason gives in to his growing curiosity and asks Kyle, "'Did you always know you were...'" His voice trailed off. Fortunately, Kyle seemed to get his drift. He grabbed the bill of his cap and nodded. 'Well, yeah. I didn't know what it was called...I knew I liked guys'" (65). Just as in *Boy Meets Boy*, the unspecific question meets with immediate understanding: gayness is The Secret, The Truth, the eternal core of one's identity. Kyle's response informs Jason's later coming out to his girlfriend Debra, when he cuts through his usual sexual confusion to state, "I don't suddenly think I like guys. I always have" (123). Yet despite this unwavering self-knowledge, the characters' sexual identification stands without the added leverage of sexual experience or even desire. After rendering his gay history of sorts to Jason, Kyle admits that he is a virgin and that he lacks the courage to change that fact, regardless of being out: "I'm always afraid that, I don't know, if I told a guy I liked him, he'd punch me out or something" (66). Even Nelson, who like Paul has laid claim to a gay identity since kindergarten, grounds his homosexuality in thought before action, saying, "I get bashed every day for being queer, and I haven't even kissed a guy yet" (89). The odd dissonance between gay identity and homosexual acts finds full expression in the words of Russel, who remarks at the opening of *Geography Club*, "I liked guys. Seeing them naked, I mean. But—and this is worth

emphasizing—I liked seeing them naked on the Internet; I had absolutely no interest in seeing them naked, in person...I'd never been naked with a guy—I mean in a sexual way—and I had no plans to do it anytime soon” (3).

Why this rift, this simultaneous distancing of gay from its literal definition – a sexual preference – while maintaining its role as an inescapable and integral aspect of the self? The go-to answer that these are books for young readers, desexualized to present a sanitized version of gayness appropriate for impressionable minds, seems erroneous; though the protagonists reach self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-identification before they become sexually active, they all get there eventually, and the authors are not shy about representing the pleasure that comes with same-sex sex. Instead, Saxey postulates, “Emotion, exclusivity, permanence...these become the distinguishing characteristics of gay identity. Why are they so central? In part, possibly, because each one of these emphasized components counteracts a negative gay stereotype” (43). As gay men themselves, Sanchez, Hartinger, and Levithan are all too aware of the negative cultural representations of gay identity: gays are promiscuous and insatiable; gay sex is casual and lacks emotional investment; homosexuality is a phase. These writers’ constructions of gay identity as derived from emotion and independent of sexual activity refute society’s derogatory models of gay men and furnish teen readers with positive reflections of themselves and with prescriptive modes of claiming identity. Yet in doing so, these novels attribute gayness to a self-knowledge that not every teenager possesses, and thereby fail to remain accessible to questioning readers whose feelings and experiences may not

conform to the rather uniform manner by which these characters conceptualize gay identity.

Fraught Parental Relationships as Symptomatic of Gay Youth

Within the collective cultural consciousness, few actions assume more significance or generate more anxiety for gay teens than coming out to one's parents. From disappointment to fear or anger, negative parental reactions are the threats that loom large over the heads of many queer youth, and a son or daughter's revelation of their sexual identity often serves as the pivotal moment of a coming out story. But though socially perceived to bear such weight in the lives of gay teens, scenes of coming out to parents are all but absent from two of the three texts that constitute the focus of this essay.

Boy Meets Boy and *Geography Club* depart from conventional gay teen narratives in the brevity with which they treat the parent / gay son relationship. Russel is entirely dismissive of the role his parents play in his narrative: he makes use of a parenthetical reference only to state, "Needless to say, my parents don't come into this story much. But then, they don't come into my life much either" (209). For Hartinger's protagonist, the lack of emphasis on the parent-child dynamic is simply reflective of his reality. Not so with Levithan's Paul, whose loving mother and father make occasional appearances in the text, though he treats their reaction to his homosexuality with equal succinctness and relates, "It took my parents a couple years. But eventually they got used to it" (10). The simple paragraph communicates a

pointed message from the author himself: this book is not a coming out story. In glossing over a long and presumably difficult period in his character's life, Levithan discounts the surplus of narratives dealing in that same process and makes clear his intent to represent only what is pertinent to Paul's present. While Hartinger's treatment of parental absence illustrates the importance of friends over family in the modern teenager's life, Levithan's choice to deemphasize the coming-out-to-mom-and-dad trope is a political action consistent with his magical realist setting.

As previously stated in regards to *Boy Meets Boy*, Tony's coming out story provides a foil for the untroubled journey of Paul, and the same holds true when it comes to their parents; though his political decision to downplay the gay child's filial struggle remains dominant, Levithan handles Tony's subplot with nuance, providing a perhaps more faithful-to-life depiction of a parent's initial reaction to homosexuality for his reader. After stumbling across a copy of *The Advocate* in their son's room, Tony's hyper-Christian parents sequester him at home, isolated from the influence of his friends. Paul manages a visit and suggests running away, yet the sage Tony responds, "I know you won't understand this, but they love me. It would be much easier if they didn't...They think that being gay is going to mess up my whole life. I can't prove them right, Paul. I have to prove them wrong" (152). Rather than letting the conflict over his sexuality degenerate into rash actions or ideological arguments, Tony recognizes the love his parents bear for him and resolves to change their minds by example. This strategy pays off just moments later, after Tony calmly stands up to his mother regarding Paul's presence in his bedroom, then dissolves into tears, and as

Paul comforts his friend, he observes Tony's mother in the doorway: "She wants to be where I am, holding him. But I know she will not say the things I am willing to say. Maybe she knows this, too. Maybe this will change, too" (155). Levithan's treatment of Tony's coming out and his parents' response does not demonize the perpetrators of ignorance and homophobia, but stresses the humanity of all parties involved and hews to *Boy Meets Boy's* overarching celebration of love in all its forms.

In his *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, Alex Sanchez foregrounds parent-teen conflicts more than his literary counterparts, and the act of coming out to one's mother and father creates much of the drama in these problem novels and provides much of the motivation steering Sanchez's characters. Nelson is of course the exception, his flagrantly gay identity having manifested at a very young age; Nelson's mother serves as the model of an accepting parent and even heads the local PFLAG (Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) chapter, though her absent ex-husband ensures that Nelson experiences his fair share of interfamilial strife (more on that to follow). Through narrative constructions that earn *Rainbow Boys* its "homosexual visibility" label from Cart and Jenkins, Jason and Kyle must confront their parents' misconceptions of and backwards attitudes towards homosexuality. When his mother discovers a gay-themed magazine in his bedroom (yes, the same device used to out Tony in *Boy Meets Boy*, though this magazine is pornographic rather than soft-activist in nature), Kyle confronts the full force of his parents' confusion. Their immediate reaction is to blame Nelson, as if gayness is contagious, and they treat Kyle like a

disobedient child who has made the choice not to live up to their expectations; essentially, the son's coming out is framed as a disruption of a perfectly normative household. Jason faces a more obviously dangerous, though no less insidious, brand of homophobia in the form of his father, whose alcoholism and violent behavior have long troubled the family. When Nelson's presence in the Carillo home incites Jason's father to proclaim, "I don't want any faggots in my house," Jason finally challenges his bigotry: "'Well'—he took a deep breath—'you've got one'" (198). A fistfight ensues, concluding with Jason's father's permanent departure from the family home and disappearance from the *Rainbow Boys* series.

Jason's strained relationship with his father is the most violent iteration of a theme that persists throughout *Rainbow Boys*: insensitively put, gay men have daddy issues. While Sanchez clearly intends Jason's father as a despicable personification of intolerance, with his constant bullying of his son – "You look queer" (27) - Thomas Crisp notes in "The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*" that the novel actually endorses the strategies of revisionist psychoanalysts (dissected in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay") to dissuade children from homosexuality: "Although the novel distances itself from Jason's father (as readers, we are supposed to disagree with his viewpoint), it routinely implies that if his father were more affirmative of his 'masculinity' as opposed to identifying him as 'feminine,' Jason may not have 'turned out' gay" (245). Crisp's causal link between an absent model of healthy masculinity and homosexuality is a tough sell in the age of "born this way," but the text certainly implicates the distraught father-son bond in the conflation of

homosexuality and violence that Jason embodies. An incident of proto-sexual exploration gone wrong haunts Jason – when his father stumbles upon the ten year old Jason exchanging touches with his friend Tommy, “he beat the shit out of me, really pounded me, like never before. He told me if he ever caught me again, he’d kill me” (*Rainbow Boys*, 134) – and this poses an obstacle to the self-acknowledgement of his same-sex attraction. The beating also prefigures Jason’s coming out, which culminates in a role-reversal as Jason drops his father with a punch (198). When Jason’s father then leaves the family home, never to return to the pages of Sanchez’s series, the unresolved violence becomes ingrained within Jason’s character. In *Rainbow Road*, we see that Jason has not managed to work through the issues with his father: defending an effeminate young boy from his religious and homophobic parent, Jason encourages, “You grow up big and strong, Esau...When your day comes, you smack your dad, good and solid” (164). That he can advocate violence to a child demonstrates the extent to which his father has harmed Jason, driving him into destructive cycles of self-hatred and physical brutality.

Rainbow Boys more obviously locates the direct cause of Nelson’s gayness within the figure of his absent father. Open hostility characterizes Nelson’s interactions with his dad, all of which occur over the phone; still, Nelson craves paternal affection, which his father deprives him of when he “hung up without so much as a ‘Good to hear your voice,’ certainly no ‘I’ve missed you,’ and definitely no ‘I love you’” (142-143). After a scheduled father-son visit results in the inevitable no-show, Nelson’s disappointment leads him to replace the appointment with another: a

risky meet-up with an Internet stranger that ends with unprotected sex. The novel draws an explicit link between fatherly absence and Nelson's dangerous behavior, and thereby reiterates the tired cause-and-effect relationship between poor paternalism and homosexuality.

Even Kyle's narrative is not immune to this faulty construction, though in his case – unique due to the constant presence of a father who eventually accepts his gay son – the link has less to do with causality than with conditions of acceptance. While Kyle's father exhibits a reluctant tolerance of his son's homosexuality, he remains convinced that Kyle is making a choice that will only lead to trouble. The pivotal change in his attitude occurs when Kyle returns home beaten and bruised, a result of the same encounter with bullies that spurred Jason to bring Nelson into his home and to come out to his own father: when questioned about his appearance, “Kyle hesitated at first, afraid his dad would blame Nelson and him for bringing this upon themselves. But as he told the story his dad nodded eagerly, seeming almost proud of him. He grinned as he examined Kyle's eye more closely. ‘I hope you got at least one good lick in’” (203). Violence is the catalyst for acceptance, as Kyle observes true pride and love in his father only after he has proven his masculinity by getting into a fight (read: been the victim of a hate crime). Thus the culture of androcentric aggression supplies the sole tool capable of dispelling homophobia, where the gay experience of intolerance can be gendered as active and male.

As represented by *Rainbow Boys*, a difficult relationship with one's father is a universal reality of gay existence. In two of three cases, dads incur the blame for their

sons' sexuality, and even when a father (Kyle's) manages to reach a level of acceptance, such a process is dependent upon the valorization of violence and masculinity. Though Sanchez understands and rejects many gay stereotypes (as outlined in the previous section of this essay), his characters play into antiquated notions of homosexuality, parenthood, and causality that compromise his mission of furnishing his readers with positive and progressive of gay teens.

Tolerating Intolerance

In "The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*," Thomas Crisp argues that, for all of their pro-gay didacticism, Sanchez's novels nevertheless rely upon and reinforce normativity and homophobia within the larger fictive world, promoting a "resilience, not acceptance" vision of the out gay existence (239). Crisp's assertion is not without substantial narrative evidence: though Sanchez clearly sets himself and his characters in opposition to homophobia, his treatment of casually violent incidents of bias expresses a "predominant message across all three books that the world remains a dangerous and scary place for homosexual teens" (240).

As the series' token flamboyant gay boy, Nelson unsurprisingly functions as *Rainbow Boys*' bullying victim par excellence. While Nelson is subjected to taunts, slurs, and even physical violence, the reader learns to accept homophobia as an unfortunate facet of reality; after a threatening anonymous phone call ("Hey fag... Want to suck my dick?"), the narrator remarks of Nelson that "Such calls were too commonplace to phase him" (144). For Nelson, being gay is inextricably tied to

being victimized, and though homophobic actions may become mundane, they remain inescapable. Attempting to combat violence with violence – “Nelson fought back but usually got creamed” (21) – only presents more danger to someone like Nelson, yet after facing the physical abuse of his perpetual bullies, Jack Ransom and José Montero, Nelson teaches Kyle that “You’ve got to be ready to fight them. If they see you’re scared, you’re dead meat” (38). Unable to confront homophobia in a safe and productive manner, the gay teen must be schooled in the art of self-preservation if he is to survive in a straight world where “whether I said anything or not, they were going to beat us up anyways” (192).

Though Sanchez holds up Nelson as the prime object of homophobic bullying, Kyle’s coming out leaves him vulnerable to similar treatment, a fact he recognizes: “Before this year, he’d never understood the degree of bashing that Nelson experienced. By staying in the closet and keeping to himself at school, he’d managed to avoid things Nelson went through every day. Now homophobia seemed to be confronting him from every direction” (130). Again, the text sustains the theme that being out is dangerous, as Kyle finds himself threatened both over the phone and in person by Jack and José. This exposure follows Kyle across Sanchez’s series, rising to a head in *Rainbow High* with an incident in the locker room. When Kyle faces harassment from his swimming teammates who refuse to sleep in the same room as him during an away meet, his coach admonishes, “You brought this on yourself. If you hadn’t started this whole coming out business, none of this would’ve happened” (178). This statement reeks of homophobia, which Sanchez intends for the reader to

recognize, yet Kyle is unable to critique it in a manner that forces his coach to own up to her bigotry; only after channeling his anger into a record-breaking swim does Kyle find the courage to stand up to his teammates, whose muttered response (“Fag”) indicates that even when confronted, homophobia persists. And as with Nelson’s enforced readiness to engage in fistfights, Kyle’s athletic triumph equates physical prowess and action with effective resistance to harassment, at once proposing a strategy of violence and privileging expressions of conventional masculinity.

Jason is unique among the protagonists of *Rainbow Boys* in that his hypermasculinity grants him immunity from the harassment directed towards his gay peers. Jason’s imposing, muscular stature and physical prowess ensure that bullies do not threaten him, and he repeatedly appears to rescue the weaker and more vulnerable Nelson and Kyle from dangerous situations: in *Rainbow Boys*, he interrupts a beating from Jack and José and emphasizes his difference from the two victims with, “You two don’t get in many fights, do you?” (191); when Nelson falls into danger during a confrontation with a bully in *Rainbow High*, Jason appears over his shoulder like a guardian angel (122). Despite his gay identity, Jason has more in common with the perpetrators of homophobia than with their victims, a position he is forced to interrogate after challenging Nelson’s distaste for sports in *Rainbow Road*. As Nelson describes the bullying he experienced during team selection in gym class, Jason “felt a little guilty recalling the many times in his own gym classes when he’d been elected team captain and picked teams. Naturally, he’d dreaded picking the Nelson-types” (62). In light of his blissful ignorance of being victimized, it comes as no surprise

when Jason's coming out in *Rainbow High* fails to subject him to the harassment endured by Kyle and Nelson. While they torment Kyle with slurs and threats (175), the same bullies approach Jason to shake hands and offer their respect and acceptance (144), and in a direct inversion of the swim team's awful treatment of Kyle, Jason enters the locker room post-coming out to the apologies and jokes of his basketball teammates (131). Nelson verbalizes this incongruity in the behavior of the boys' straight classmates when he notes, "Being a jock trumps being gay" (145). Jason's masculinity functions as social capital to override his homosexuality, hence a significant alteration in the consequences of coming out: though Jason must contend with the admittedly unfortunate loss of his college basketball scholarship due to his public acknowledgment of being gay, this pales in comparison to the very real threats of bodily harm that Nelson and Kyle undergo on a daily basis. Jason is only susceptible to this interpersonally violent brand of homophobia when with Nelson and Kyle, a fact played up in *Rainbow Road*, which sees the three boys carpooling cross-country and encountering all manner of hazards due to their homosexuality: the rainbow flag bumper sticker on Nelson's car alerts bigots to the protagonists' gay identities, eventually resulting in a life-risking car chase that prompts Kyle to scream, "Does the name Matthew Shepard mean anything to you?" (174) This invocation of gay bashing's most visible victim highlights the implicit message that spans all three of Sanchez's novels, that the real world is an irremediably dangerous place for gay teens.

Geography Club similarly proposes a vision of the world that stresses the perils of being a gay teen rather than the triumph of acceptance and the act of constructively challenging homophobia. The previously cited (in regards to passing) military metaphors that open the novel quite literally situate the reader within a war zone and give shape to the threat of being outed, a threat that Russel must avoid should he intend to survive. But while Russel passes undercover, school outcast Brian Bund provides an all-too-clear example of how those individuals believed to be gay are treated. Brian faces relentless physical and verbal abuse, graphically illustrated as students hurl food at him in the cafeteria, and a disturbed Russel remarks, “Brian didn’t seem so different to me. Because I knew that’s how people might treat me if they ever learned the truth. It scared the hell out of me, because I was certain I could never handle being that completely alone” (11). In the heavily regulated social world of *Geography Club*, coming out leads to, as Russel characterizes it in regards to his anonymous Internet communication with Kevin, “mutually assured destruction” (15), and the military vocabulary returns to explain why the clique-spanning members of the Geography Club cannot risk sitting together at lunch: “There was no neutral territory on a high school campus. The land was all claimed, and the borders were solid. We couldn’t just cross them at will” (54). Strict laws govern the social landscape of Robert L. Goodkind High School, and these laws operate along lines of gender and sexuality to secure, as in *Rainbow Boys*, the veneration of masculinity – “Jocks got special treatment” (181) – and the exclusion and harassment of persons perceived to be gay. Publicly embracing a gay identity is so dangerous that Russel

cannot quite manage it by the end of the novel, instead accepting Brian's decision to play the martyr and submit the application for an official gay-straight alliance, and so "people still didn't think of me as gay. Brian was The Gay Kid (even if he wasn't really gay), and I was just being nice to him" (224). Young readers of *Geography Club* and *Rainbow Boys*, bearing witness to the inevitable harassment experienced by gay characters, learn to accept the resistance of such violence as typical of gay existence rather than to develop strategies for combatting and changing homophobic attitudes.

Crisp's characterization of "resilience, not acceptance" may seem at odds with one of the major plot points of both Sanchez's and Hartinger's novels, the creation of a gay-straight alliance, yet the texts' treatment of such organizations fails to acknowledge how GSAs may function as an instrument of social change. Instead, Sanchez and Hartinger focus on GSAs as a necessary resource for gay teens in search of a place that will allow them to be open and honest with their identities. While the fight for a school-sanctioned GSA takes a backseat to the protagonists' personal drama in *Rainbow Boys*, it nevertheless merits its own narrative arc, including a scene in which Nelson delivers an impassioned defense before the school board, stating, "What we hope to do is change attitudes and build understanding...I'm doing this for those who come after me...Don't put them through what I've been through" (182). Nelson's vision is certainly global, espousing a concern for his fellow and future homosexuals and a desire to fight bigotry through education, but though an elated, hopeful tone greets the approval of the GSA, its ultimate function does not live up to

the mission that Nelson proposes. Narrative arc of the battle for its creation complete, the GSA seldom appears throughout the rest of the series; references to its existence only occur via scenes that feature Ms. MacTraugh, a lesbian art teacher and the club's advisor, who acts as something of a personal therapist and role model for Nelson, Kyle, and Jason. That Sanchez provides little evidence of the GSA's impact on the school environment undermines Nelson's strong argument for their value. Hartinger's eponymous Geography Club serves a similar "support group" (75) purpose, enabling its varied members to convene in a place where they can be "completely honest for the first time in my life" and facilitating a feeling that "we weren't really alone. Not anymore" (42). The Geography Club fulfills a vital need for its high school's marginalized population, who demand, "Why can't there be just one place for gay kids, where we don't have to hide who we are? Hell, straight people have the whole rest of the world!" (136), but in doing so, it participates in the limiting demarcation of where and when it is safe to be homosexual. Here, Crisp's summary of the *Rainbow Boys* novels applies equally well to Hartinger's work: "it seems gay people can only find solace from intolerance by isolating themselves from heterosexuals" (242).

Rather than advocating for the eradication of homophobia in mainstream, straight society, these texts implicitly argue in favor of isolationism, an ideology not without precedent in the queer community and that manifests in the conclusion of the *Rainbow Road* when Jason speaks at the opening of an all-gay high school in California, a school where a crowd of flamboyant and gender-variant students "could be themselves without being called names or fearing they'd get pounded...[Jason]

imagined a future world in which boys and girls like him would no longer be afraid of—and miss out on—getting to know such kids” (226). Though the intent behind such an institution admirably foregrounds the safety and individuality of gay teens, it rings of “separate but equal” – how are straight-acting individuals like Jason expected to get to know kids like Nelson and to confront their ingrained homophobia without regularly and respectfully coexisting with their queer peers? Isolationism is a tantalizing fantasy but an ineffective solution, as well as an irresponsible lesson for young gay readers who must contend with the often cruel realities of our predominantly straight society.

In its typical magical-realist fashion, *Boy Meets Boy* treats homophobia and the gay-YA staple of a GSA’s creation with a sense of whimsy that distances Levithan’s work from the misguided didacticism of Sanchez and Hartinger. Though the novel takes place in a miraculously tolerant, quasi-fantastical town, Levithan avoids the dangers of isolationist policy and proposes a progressive vision of a world that accepts, protects, and celebrates homosexuality. Hate speech carries no weight in this world, as Paul’s campaign for third grade president demonstrates: when his opponent resorts to a homophobic slogan (“DONT VOTE FOR THE FAG”), “I knew he’d played right into our hands. When the election held, he was left with the rather tiny lint-head vote, while I carried the girl vote, the open-minded guy vote, the third-grade closet-case vote, and the Ted-hater vote. It was a total blowout” (12). Paul handles bias with utter nonchalance, a testament to his confidence in redefined norms of acceptance that now stigmatize homophobia. Even an instance of physical

harassment receives the same treatment, as Paul relates how he was tackled outside of a movie theater and, “At first I thought it was a strange kind of foreplay, but then I realized that their grunts were actually insults—queer, faggot, the usual. I wasn’t about to take such verbal abuse from strangers” (13) and the encounter ends with Paul’s fencing team foiling the perpetrators. Paul’s society and personal experience render hate-motivated violence almost unrecognizable, yet he does not resign himself to mere resilience, but bands together with the right-minded majority to incapacitate homophobia’s agents. In *Boy Meets Boy*’s idyllic setting, children grow up learning not to tolerate intolerance, and the elementary school GSA can work to address the appropriately trivial concerns – style and dance (12) – of gay students who don’t live under the constant threat of harassment. Though one might accuse Levithan of the irresponsible fantasizing of Sanchez and Hartinger, *Boy Meets Boy* is a valuable exercise in hope; it does not subscribe to the isolationism and resilience of its peer texts, but furnishes gay teens with a vision of the future that eradicates hate without segregating its victims or normalizing violence towards gay individuals.

Queer Culture and Community as Essential to Gay Identity

A key element to gay teen novels’ representational value is how they educate readers about gay culture; these books provide young homosexuals with an authoritative source on what constitutes the non-normative existence, which includes an awareness of prominent gay figures, history, and vocabulary. In *Rainbow Boys*, Nelson becomes this authority: “And Nelson seemed to know *everything* about being

gay. He told Kyle about Alexander the Great, Oscar Wilde, and Michelangelo. He explained the Stonewall Riots and defined words like *cruising* and *drag*. He told Kyle about gay youth Web sites and introduced him to out music groups like Size Queen and Indigo Girls” (14). This description reads like a list of references, as if Sanchez is inviting the reader to Google each bullet point so they too can acquire the knowledge vital to “being gay.” Having provided the syllabus for Homosexuality 101, Sanchez peppers his novels with these crucial details that constitute the gay intellectual and cultural canon. When Kyle explains the Kinsey scale to a confused Jason, his audience is twofold in that it includes the young reader, who gleans, “In the fifties, Dr. Kinsey found that most people aren’t exclusively gay or straight. He came up with a scale, zero to six, from totally heterosexual to completely homosexual” (95). Even the more passing references communicate valuable information, for instance when we learn in *Rainbow Road* that Nelson did a junior-year English presentation on Truman Capote (40). Each moment of intertextuality broadens the world of Sanchez’s teen gay reader, offering a sense of inclusion and camaraderie. Homosexuality engenders access to an array of knowledge often unfamiliar to or absent from dominant heterosexual society, and it is the gay author’s responsibility to present this knowledge to a new generation.

As suggested by Cart’s and Jenkins’ queer consciousness/community label, gay society also proves vital to Sanchez’s construction of homosexual lives, a concept thoroughly illustrated during the three protagonists’ cross-country trip in *Rainbow Road*. In a narrative device that echoes the referential broadening of the reader’s

world, Nelson, Jason, and Kyle encounter queer society in a number of unexpected places throughout their journey from Maryland to California. At a roadside diner, the boys share a meal with a middle-aged gay couple that recognizes the rainbow flag sticker on Nelson's bumper. Together for twenty years, Miguel and Todd baffle the teens, who question the two about the secret to their romantic success; "Trust. Communication. Commitment" (145) the men respond, and they encourage Kyle and Jason to consider the traits they love about one another. With this meeting of two queer generations in which the older offers kind advice to the young and confused, Sanchez testifies to the age- and location-spanning nature of homosexual society, encouraging his readers to avail themselves of the familial solidarity that accompanies being gay. The boys find additional community at a rural, hippie-ish collective that Nelson insists upon seeking out; known as the Radical Faerie sanctuary, its members describe themselves as "an anti-mainstream radical fringe of free-spirited queers" (68). Explicitly linked to gay rights activist Harry Hay's movement of the same name, the Faeries expose their guests and the reader to representations of open relationships, body positivity, and drug use, prompting Nelson to declare, "I think you guys are awesome...It's like *The Wizard of Oz* when you suddenly go from black-and-white to Technicolor. I haven't felt this excited since Madonna kissed Britney" (73). Nelson articulates his sense of belonging through the language of gay cultural references, and this moment further underscores the pleasurable and liberating consequences of queer community. Though Crisp properly notes that the Radical Faerie commune conforms to the troubling isolationist ideology

of a gay pastoral “Arcadia” (242), Sanchez does right by his reader in portraying an array of non-normative lifestyles and their positive effects upon lost LGBTQIA persons in search of an alternative to stifling heterosexual society.

Cart and Jenkins also grant the “queer community” distinction to *Boy Meets Boy* in tandem with that of “gay assimilation,” and this proves to be an apt summary of how gay culture operates within the novel: unifying for homosexuals, yet also absorbed into the mainstream. On an interpersonal level, gay culture generates affection and friendship, as Paul details that he met Tony in an NYC bookstore when “We were both looking for a used copy of *The Lost Language of Cranes*” (35). David Leavitt’s novel, a coming out story published in 1986, alerts Paul and Tony to their shared gayness and provides a catalyst through which their relationship grows. In Paul’s town, however, queer culture acquires an almost universal presence, where “There isn’t really a gay scene or a straight scene” (2). The high school hosts a “Homecoming Pride” (15), the students refer to a pair of close female friends as “the Indigo Girls, even though they’re straight” (123), and “Joy Scouts” (66) replace the homophobic Boy Scouts organization. Gay culture has diffused throughout Paul’s society, approaching a level of assimilation that queer critics may label as detrimental to non-normative individualism, yet in the park “The Old Queen sits at his bench, reminiscing about Broadway in the 1920s. Two benches away, the Young Punk shouts loudly about Sid and Nancy and the birth of revolt...the Old Queen and the Young Punk sit together and share memories of events that happened long before they were born” (69). Despite universal acceptance of gay customs and figures, in

Levithan's world counter-culture individuals retain their autonomy, convening to swap knowledge and experiences in a mutually beneficial exchange. The author does not propose a dangerous assimilative society, but a macrocosm of the Radical Faeries' free-spirited acceptance.

Though Hartinger does not incorporate as many references to gay culture into *Geography Club* as his peers, he succeeds in representing a facet of queer community that has become increasingly relevant to LGBTQIA teens: the Internet. To be fair, *Rainbow Boys* features the episode in which Nelson meets up and has sex with a stranger and his subsequent HIV scare, but this functions more as a sensational warning about online activity rather than a realistic depiction of modern teens' technology-fueled habits. Hartinger is the only author to acknowledge the Internet within his narrative as a potentially positive tool for gay youth in search of information and community. Russel may wallow in the loneliness of the closet, but anonymous chat rooms facilitate some brand of relief and companionship: "I desperately wanted to be somewhere where I could be honest about who I was and what I wanted. I had plenty to say on the topic, but no one to say it to—not my friends, definitely not my parents...The Internet gave me people to say it to" (11-12). Thrilled at the appearance of another user in the chat room devoted to his hometown, Russel exercises caution – "if it was some creepy old guy looking to bust a nut, it would become clear pretty quickly, and I could just check myself out" (13) – before agreeing to a meet-up. The following encounter with Kevin sparks the plot of the novel, as Russel then finds the courage to come out to his friend Min and to start the

Geography Club. Utilized in a healthy manner by those conscious of the dangers involved, the Internet becomes essential to the creation of queer community.

Despite their ubiquitous celebration of gay culture and community, the teen novels in question lack substantial representations of diversity, which should constitute a key component of any texts with such an overt social consciousness. *Boy Meets Boy* chooses to gloss over race entirely, perhaps suggesting that the utopic nature of its setting applies not solely to sexual identity; however, this assumption cannot hold when both explicit and implicit racial descriptors are absent from the text, offering no clues for readers in search of diverse representation and allowing unconscious readers to whitewash Levithan's cast of characters. *Geography Club* fares little better, including people of color in the Asian Min and African-American Belinda, but both characters remain on the periphery of a narrative that devotes little time to exploring their personalities and even less to their ethnicities. Perhaps the most egregious fault with regards to racial representation belongs to Sanchez, who grants his characters a semblance of diversity in name only. As Jason's last name (Carillo) would suggest, he is Hispanic, yet this aspect of his identity finds sole expression in relation to his abusive father, who has a "Latino temper" (*Rainbow Boys*, 27) – a rather negative link to draw, especially considering Sanchez's own identity as a Mexican-American immigrant. Nelson, too, fails to claim part of his ethnicity, flippantly commenting that he is "Barely" Jewish (*Rainbow High*, 42). While these nominal instances of racial diversity disappoint readers in search of a textual space for people of color, the authors do a slightly better job of representing

gender-variant individuals. Infinite Darlene, the fiery and campy quarterback-slash-drag-queen of *Boy Meets Boy*, dominates each scene in which she appears with her larger-than-life personality. And a highlight of the cross-country trip in *Rainbow Road* is a wonderfully sympathetic portrayal of transgender Britney Spears impersonator BJ, whose gracious manner and longing to undergo sexual reassignment surgery touch both the protagonists and the reader: “She was their friend; that was all that mattered” (120). Still, non-white, non-male, non-cisgender characters occupy at best liminal spaces within these novels, compromising their representational value to readers who span the full breadth of the LGBTQIA spectrum.

Gender Dynamics in Gay Relationships: Reframing Heteronormativity

Thus far, I have examined the construction and function of queer community within the larger context of quasi-familial homosexual society, yet resisted delving into a closer analysis of the much more narratively significant, romantic gay relationships; here, as Crisp asserts in reference to “Tragic Closet Jock” Jason and “Sympathetic Understanding Doormat” Kyle (226), the represented same-sex relationship covertly reinforces heteronormative gender roles. As discussed, Jason embodies a brutish hypermasculinity, while Kyle assumes a passive and coded feminine position within the relationship. Kyle repeatedly expresses discomfort with Jason’s bisexuality – “He’d always worried Jason might someday go back to girls” (*Rainbow Road*, 141) – and this establishes the static quality of his feelings for Jason, while said object of said feelings possesses a roving masculine eye, even going so far

as to make out with a female stranger when the boys visit a club. In multiple instances, Kyle is likened to Jason's ex-girlfriend Debra, such as when he admonishes his boyfriend "in the same tone Debra had used" (*Rainbow Boys*, 160), and throughout *Rainbow Road* Sanchez depicts him performing traditional femininity, as "Kyle embodies the stereotypical myth that females are more mature than males as he acts as caregiver, protector, and the 'responsible one' in the relationship (i.e., holding onto Jason's money for him, ironing his clothing, and setting his alarm), even though he recognizes how it often negatively impacts him" (Crisp, 232). In contrast, Jason delights in the moments during the road trip when he can escape from Kyle and Nelson who "almost [sound] like a couple of old ladies", and when he joins a game of pickup basketball with a group of strangers in Nashville, "It felt great to be around *normal* guys again, who played by clear, established rules; guys who looked and acted like guys were supposed to look and act" (*Rainbow Road*, 86-87). Within their relationship, the two boys fulfill such clearly defined gender roles – Kyle that of the passive, sentimental, unwavering feminine; Jason the active, aggressive, wandering masculine – that Kyle's recurring dream of an ideal, heteronormative future seems within reach: "My dream is for Jason and me to go to college together. Who knows? By the time we graduate, gay marriage might even be legal. Jason and I could have a house in the 'burbs. Maybe adopt kids. My mom could be a grandmom after all. That's my dream" (*Rainbow High*, 5). And indeed, the last line of the trilogy sustains the desirable nature of prevailing heterosexual institutions, as "every time Jason smiled at him, Kyle couldn't help seeing a lifetime ahead" (*Rainbow Road*, 243).

Geography Club promotes a similar heteronormative model of same-sex romance through its central relationship between Russel and Kevin; the sensitive protagonist pines after the Tragic Closet Jock, though notably Kevin's inability to come out prevents future conjugal bliss akin to that of Jason and Kyle, and Russel must elect to live openly within the healthy queer society of the newly minted Goodkind High School Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance. *Boy Meets Boy*, however, presents a true alternative to binary-reinforcing gay relationships that is worth discussing. Rather than defining the bond between his characters through the gendered actions they perform, Levithan casts the relationship between Paul and Noah as an abundantly queer collision of souls. This takes shape informed by the spaces that they inhabit together. Shortly after meeting, Noah invites Paul to his home and then his bedroom, which appears as a shrine to whimsy and creativity with its handmade decorations. Noah is an artist, and keeps a studio in his attic accessible only through a "closet, which is unusually deep" (47); there, the boys "paint music", and Paul's "flights of color are meeting his dancer somewhere in the middle of the room. We do not need to speak to be aware of each other's presence" (51). Noah has transformed a closet-like space, with all of its connotations of a stifled and unsatisfying gay existence, into a locus of productive pleasure, and there he and Paul nurture a love that grows out of a shared non-sexual, non-normative, but highly creative sensibility. Reciprocity, rather than one-sided pining or an active/passive dichotomy, later characterizes their expressions of love for one another, as Paul shows what Noah means to him via a string of creative gifts (thousands of origami

flowers, a personalized song, rolls of film and pages of letters), and Noah responds with an artistic gesture of his own and develops the film into a series of message-bearing photographs. Eschewing a reliance on traditional gender roles or an evocation of heteronormative institutions like marriage and parenthood, *Boy Meets Boy* constructs a representation of same-sex romance that does not limit itself or its readers to the models encoded within straight society.

Claiming Responsibility and Possibility

Having exposed the mechanisms that drive how novels for gay teens construct and teach gay identity, I conclude with a broader consideration of the impact they may have upon their young audience, and of their usefulness in both instructional and recreational settings. In summation of his work on the problematic elements of the *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, Thomas Crisp succinctly underscores the utility of a literature intended for readers who are in the midst of discovering and developing their mature selves: “the time has come to move beyond accepting any representation and begin looking for depictions that reflect for gay adolescent readers the *possibilities* of who they can become” (247). Crisp’s emphasis points to the fact that, for these texts to continue functioning as positive agents of change in the lives of gay teens, authors must deploy representational techniques that challenge rather than reinforce limited notions of homosexual identity. Today’s LGBTQIA youth should find not just solace but encouragement within the pages of these novels – encouragement to embrace, question, and celebrate all facets of their emerging sexuality. Here, Alex Sanchez’s

Rainbow Boys trilogy and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* often (though not always) fall short of their own objective, saturated as they are in a thematic of violence-tolerating resilience and heteronormativity-endorsing binaries. David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* fares much better in this regard, with its unrestrainedly queer vision of love and acceptance, yet it too must confront calls for more conscious depictions of diversity and for broader definitions of the homosexual self. Gay teen novels have as yet experienced little in the way of careful critical analysis, lauded as they are for their mere existence, but I hope that this essay has alerted empathetic minds to our literary responsibility as authors, educators, and forebears of a new and constantly evolving queer generation.

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