

UNDERSTANDING HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITIES IN MODERN YOUNG ADULT
LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF *RAINBOW BOYS*, *OPENLY STRAIGHT*, AND *BOY*

MEETS BOY

by

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Alex Sanchez, Bill Konigsberg, and David Levithan hold a large market share of the young adult (YA) literary genre that feature homosexual young men. These authors have written characters that use broad terms like *masculine* and *gay* to discuss their sexuality. When these authors use these terms, they are using them in a context that changes based on the time and culture in which they were written. When the characters use these terms to describe themselves, it becomes difficult to understand how they are describing their sexuality. This project explores how these characters use these terms to describe themselves and argues that setting can have a powerful impact on how identity formation takes place in homosexual characters.

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by

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Chapter 1: A Brief History of Homosexual Identity in the GLBTQ YA Genre

Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins consider that GLBTQ literature for young adults began in 1969 with John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. While novels like Madeleine L'Engle's *The Small Rain* (1945), J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* (1959) predate Donovan and share themes of homosexuality in young adults, the earlier novels were not written with a young adult audience in mind (Cart 5). Instead, these novels are categorized as literary fiction and not the contemporary young adult (YA) genre. Debuting before a time where the foundations of YA canon had been established, L'Engle, Salinger, and Knowles wrote texts that have laid groundwork for how modern YA texts have dealt with the theme of homosexual identity. As I will explain briefly in this chapter, novels featuring young adults, especially those featuring homosexual young adults, will often show their protagonists coming to terms with their sexuality. A typical heteronormative text might show "coming of age" through the threat of pregnancy, sexual relationships, or self-exploration, but rarely, if ever, deal with a character accepting their heterosexuality in the same way modern homosexual characters do. GLBTQ YA texts, typically show teenagers struggling not only with their feelings toward the same sex, but being able to admit in words a label that defines them. A portion of this project is dedicated to understanding the words that characters use to define themselves. Heterosexual characters are often privileged in not having to affirm their sexual identity, but modern homosexual characters will often be concerned about how their masculinity or femininity will represent them as a homosexual. Defining masculine and feminine will vary between each novel in this project and will often impact what characters mean when they use other words like *fag*, *queer*, and *gay*.

As speaking to all the aspects of GLBTQ YA lit would be too much an undertaking, this project will only be focusing on texts by and about gay males. Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2001), David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), and Bill Konigsberg's *Openly Straight* (2013) all show homosexual characters coming to terms with their homosexual identity in vastly different ways. The environment these characters explore their relationship in also impacts their sexual affirmation. It is understandable that a character in a queer utopia will have an easier time affirming his identity than a young man in a bigoted small town. These settings impact the language these characters use to define themselves and others.

I've chosen to look at these only these novels because of their impact on the market and the lack of critical scholarship around them. Arguably, *Rainbow Boys* and *Boy Meets Boy* sparked a renaissance for modern YA novels that featured homosexual young men. These novels share the theme of what it means to be a homosexual young man, a theme that has continued nearly a decade later with *Openly Straight*. This project explores what a homosexual identity can look like, how it impacts the individual character, and how the society that character lives in reacts to that particular homosexual identity.

The earliest of these novels, *Rainbow Boys*, has become a modern classic of the genre with Sanchez receiving moderate acclaim and reference among his GLBTQ YA contemporaries. *Rainbow Boys* stands out among the genre's other novels because it features three different homosexual protagonists: Jason, Kyle, and Nelson. Each character is at a different stage of the Vivienne Cass Model of Identity Formation, a model I will be referencing throughout the project to help discuss each characters' identity formation. Sanchez mainly talks about his characters as being part of a spectrum, but I will argue in the next chapter that these characters, instead, represent a hierarchy that privileges homosexual young men who reflect heteronormative ideals.

In Chapter Three, I analyze Konigsberg's *Openly Straight*. Although the most recent of the novels, I will be discussing it in-between Sanchez and Levithan because it represents a middle ground between the two novels in terms of homosexual identity formation. *Openly Straight* follows protagonist Rafe as he begins to question his pre-established homosexual identity. Rafe is juxtaposed between characters like Kyle and Jason from *Rainbow Boys* who have yet to fully accept their homosexual identities, and the characters of Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* who never question their sexuality. This chapter will further highlight a heterosexual privilege, as Rafe's love interest Ben begins questioning his own sexuality during the latter half of the novel, and Ben chooses to subvert these homosexual feelings to further a heterosexual identity that will please his family. Unlike other characters being discussed in this project, Ben makes an active choice in the sexuality he chooses to act upon and shows a progressive idea of choosing one's identity, or at least the one they will act upon.

Levithan's novel *Boy Meets Boy* will round out the project as the novel creates something unseen in the other novels. Levithan shapes a small town community where homosexuality is not merely accepted or tolerated, but celebrated. While the previous novels show characters forming their identities in communities that are uneasy towards homosexuality, *Boy Meets Boy* demonstrates identity formation where homosexuality is a widespread and generally accepted norm.

To better understand how these novels are functioning in the modern homosexual YA cannon, we must first understand what the homosexual YA cannon looks like, and how these earlier texts have influenced their contemporary counterparts. I'll begin this chapter by discussing a brief history of homosexual identity in the days of early gay young adult lit. GLBTQ literature encompasses a wide range of sexualities that each has individual

characteristics. In the hopes of being concise and precise about these distinctions, this project will only focus on homosexual boys discovering their identity.

Beginning in 1969 with John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. The novel follows Davy after his grandmother has recently passed away. His life is altered as he learns he will now be living with his mother. Unlike the novels I discuss later, *I'll Get There* doesn't open with a character expressing homosexual tendencies. From reading, audiences know Davy is a typical American boy with a dog; the text doesn't lead the audience to establish Davy as a homosexual. Homosexuality doesn't become a central theme until the latter half of the novel. While waiting till halfway through a novel to introduce sexuality as a theme may seem off in the current trend of gay young literature, the fact that Donovan discusses homosexuality at all was quite progressive for the time. Cart and Jenkins define Donovan's novel as a product of its time, being released in the same year as the Stonewall Rebellion. They claim the novel is a product of the 1960's sexual revolution, and was joined along the ranks of other noteworthy YA novels that were emerging around the time. While these other novels commented on the taboo subject of heterosexual love among young adults, Donovan took this direction one step further by introducing homosexual love between two boys, which caused Donovan's publishers to become apprehensive about publishing the novel (7-8). Roberta Trites agrees with Cart and Jenkins, but asks, what is Davy actually saying when he speaks about his sexuality? Does a repressed homosexuality still constitute a homosexual identity (144)?

Homosexual identity formation in gay YA literature tends to fall into one of two categories. Characters either tend to have a pre-established homosexual identity, where they are fully aware of their same sex attractions when the novel starts, or their homosexuality surfaces after an inciting incident and is part of the action of the novel. For Davy, it's the latter; he

doesn't exhibit homosexual thoughts, or feelings, until after he kisses his best friend, Altschuler. Davys shows that while some may feel ashamed by sharing a homosexual kiss, he isn't concerned by his homosexual behavior. Following the kiss, he comments, "I have a new way of looking at Altschuler because of what we did last night. Don't get me wrong, I'm not ashamed. There was nothing wrong about it" (158). The fact that Davy even mentions not being ashamed shows that he is aware of how others might respond to this behavior—most notably his parents.

After Davy's mother discovers Davy and Altschuler sleeping next to one another, she arranges for Davy's father to speak with him about such behavior. His father warns him against not getting "involved in some special way of life, which will close off other ways of life" (173). Davy's father's says "special" when talking about Davy's possible homosexuality. His immediate concern is that by accepting a homosexual identity, Davy is closing himself off from a normal, heterosexual, way of life. This is a trend that persists even into modern gay YA lit. Early gay YA lit didn't offer a "reward for coming out," where characters feel empowered through accepting themselves; instead, characters who come out lead secluded lives, not unlike what Davy's father is pointing out (Cart 32). This isolation is prominently seen in Isabel Holland's *Man Without a Face* (1972) with the middle aged McLeod.

While this project is primarily focused on teenage homosexuality, it's important to point out a character like McLeod, as he is the manifestation of homosexual fear and intolerance. McLeod has obtained the name "man without a face" from the people of his town. McLeod has heavy facial scarring from a car accident years prior to the novel. He ends up living reclusively away from the other townsfolk, and he is only shown interacting with people from neighboring areas. Cart and Jenkins list a series of qualifiers that describe how homosexuality was pictured in texts during the time: being hideously scarred, becoming a tormented recluse, rejected, and dying

prematurely (21-22). McLeod embodies all of these qualifiers. In the final chapters of the novel, it's revealed that McLeod died. A part of the concern surrounding *Man Without a Face* is that the novel focuses on a young boy, Chuck, during his summer vacation, having an ambiguous sexual experience with an older man. Holland remains mildly coded in the text leading some critics to comment on the possible theme of pedophilia. Chuck is trying to enter a private school, but failed his entrance exam. Knowing that he only has one more chance to pass it, he looks for a tutor. Coincidence serves that McLeod used to be a teacher, and it is later revealed that McLeod was a teacher at the very school Chuck wants to attend. Through a series of events, McLeod begins to tutor Chuck, but this eventually evolves into romantic entanglement between the two. This interaction spoke to the fear that homosexual men could lull children into accepting this lifestyle. In her 1983 article, "Out of the Closet But Paying the Price," Jan Goodman noted that, "Gay adults should not be around children because they'll influence them to be homosexual" (qtd. in Cart 18). Goodman's statement raises the longstanding debate of whether or not homosexuality is a choice, and is a behavior someone can have influenced upon them. Much like Davy, the text doesn't allude toward Chuck being a homosexual until the events that suggest his homosexuality take place. Chuck initiates both the homosocial and homosexual relationship with McLeod, showing that McLeod isn't coaxing him into such behavior.

Chuck, like Davy, questions his sexuality after the physical act *itself*. *It* is purposely chosen as such word choice is necessary to understanding how these characters repress sexuality. Trites and Cart and Jenkins note that these young boys rely on the abstract word "it" to describe their sexual acts. Chuck questions his sexuality in the same way Davy does, by asking "Do you think I'm queer?" For both characters, there is no future as a homosexual man, as their respected novels don't give readers any glance outside their immediate future. Thus readers are left

wondering if the characters are able to live happy lives, or if their fate is like McLeod's. Neither novel offers much closure. *I'll Get There* closes with Davy asking Altschuler if they can "respect" one another. This comes after Davy blames the death of his dog on their romantic entanglement, believing one to have a direct impact on the other. *Man Without a Face* ends with a glimpse into Chuck's life at his boarding school. Neither novel suggests that the boys hold onto a homosexual identity, and privileges their homosexuality as actions rather than as a qualifier that defines them. Later novels, like *Dance on My Grave* (1982) and *Blackbird* (1986) distance themselves from the idea that sexuality is determined by sexual acts, and begin to privilege a discourse that supports sexual identity as contingent on one's own emotional response towards the other sex.

Aiden Chamber's *Dance on My Grave*'s stance towards protagonist Hal's homosexuality is unquestioning from the start of the novel. Unlike Davy and Chuck, Hal is aware of his homosexuality even before the novel presents a situation that would reveal homosexuality. He is in search of what he refers to as a "bosom buddy," a concept he learned about from watching television and discovering same sex companionship. While Trites might muse that Hal is still captured by language, and creates an equivocal term to talk about his sexuality, the fact that Hal speaks without shame shows greater movement towards accepting a homosexual identity. While Hal begins the novel reminiscing about past "bosom buddies," the primary focus of the novel is on the relationship between him and Barry, the boy who saved him from drowning. Although progressive in its stance towards open and unquestioned homosexuality, *Dance on My Grave* is not without the warnings towards homosexuality that were mentioned by Cart and Jenkins. Readers are immediately shown that *Dance on My Grave* is a story of loss. From the beginning, Hal is obsessed with death and dying. Interludes in the main chapters reveal that Hal is being

interviewed by a court ordered social worker for his erratic behavior when he is found dancing on someone's grave. As the novel continues, the grave is revealed to belong to Barry, and Hal is dancing on his grave out of a pact the two formed late one night. Barry's death is caused by a motorcycle accident he suffers after breaking-up with Hal. Chamber's text shows that not only do homosexual relationships tend to end in heartbreak, but they also end in death. Death is a trope of the homosexual character carried on from *Man Without a Face* and *I'll Get There*. While McLeod and Barry die in their respective novels, which bring loss to their loved ones, Davy loses his dog—a connection that is no less severe for Davy.

Death persists even into later novels like Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird*. Duplechan's protagonist Johnnie Ray not only accepts his homosexuality, as Hal does, but through first person inner thoughts, readers see that Johnnie Ray is quite radical as he often fantasizes about the men around him. His hyper-sexualized thoughts help establish him as a character who is more than comfortable accepting his sexuality. *Blackbird* begins a trope in gay YA lit where a neighboring border town acts as a haven for homosexual youths. These towns act as safe places for homosexual youths as these characters will often find other happier homosexuals living there. For Johnnie Ray who finds bigotry in his small town, he eventually finds acceptance among some college students in a neighboring town—one of whom becomes his new boyfriend, Marshall. Even though *Blackbird* supports a narrative of gay life even after growing up in a small town, *Blackbird* isn't without tragedy, death, and self-doubt. Johnnie's friend Efrem ends up in the hospital after being beaten by his father, who discovered him in bed with another boy. Even after seeing how his community reacts to homosexuals, Johnnie has a firm belief that his parents would remain nonchalant about the matter. This however isn't the case when Johnnie's youth pastor reveals to Johnnie's parents that Johnnie has confessed his homosexuality. Reviving a

tired stereotype from *I'll Get There*, Johnnie's parents call their son's homosexuality "perverted." Johnnie isn't even able to confide in his boyfriend Marshall, as Marshall leaves town in the middle of the night to pursue his acting career, leaving Johnnie little more than a note. *Blackbird* flips the homosexual narrative of death, by having the Romeo and Juliet-esque lovers both commit suicide. These lovers act as martyrs, much like Davy's dog, dying so their novel's respected protagonist won't. Although faced with tragedy and loss of love, Johnnie retains his homosexual identity, as seen through sequel novels. This is a drastic shift from earlier novels that left homosexual identity ambiguous.

Blackbird helps retain this trend of homosexual character's remaining firm in their sexuality even by the novel's end. While novels like *Rainbow Boys* and *Openly Straight* create a narrative that shows characters questioning their sexuality, they end their novels firm in their understanding of their homosexual identity.

What separates *Blackbird* and *Dance on My Grave* from *I'll Get There* and *Man Without a Face* is how the novels frame homosexual identity. *I'll Get There* and *Man Without a Face* both follow protagonists who learn of their sexuality as the reader does. Both Davy and Chuck experience homosexuality for the first time during the text of the novel, and begin forming their identities following these events. The practice of having a protagonist form his sexual identity as the novel progresses has fallen away, as many homosexual YA novels feature protagonists like Johnnie Ray and Hal who both accept a homosexual identity as the novel opens. Even a character like Jason from *Rainbow Boys* accepts a potential homosexual identity at the start of the novel. The idea that protagonists discovering their sexual identity being concurrent with the novels progression has fallen by the wayside and these novels seem less progressive in the actual identity formation taking place during the novels. *Rainbow Boys* and *Boy Meets Boy* both show

characters struggling with homosexuality after coming out, but it is the more recent *Openly Straight* that progressively shows a character struggling to determine his sexuality—and shows that homosexual YA novels are cycling back to the earlier novels that leave sexuality open-ended by the end of the novels.

Chapter 2: Stereotyping and Spectrums: An Analysis of Homosexual Language in *Rainbow Boys*

Although widely written about for its educational value in schools, Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* receives little literary criticism for the way in which Sanchez deals with the topics of homosexual identity in the young adult genre. Published in 2001, *Rainbow Boys* was Sanchez's first work in the GLBTQ YA literary genre. He has continued this trend with seven other novels focused on homosexual youths. *Rainbow Boys* is notable for its character development as the novel cycles among three protagonists: Jason, Kyle, and Nelson. Each boy represents what Sanchez coins as a different space on a homosexual spectrum, indicating that each boy represents a different homosexual performance. Jason representing a hyper masculine performance, Nelson, an effeminate *nelly* stereotype, and Kyle, who Sanchez places in-between these two extremes. The International Reading Association, *USA Today*, and American Library Association have all praised Sanchez for allowing time for each of the protagonists to grow throughout the novel. *Rainbow Boys* has also garnered critical attention for its representation of homosexual identity, as each boy portrays a complex space on a proverbial spectrum of homosexuality. Sanchez himself noted in an interview, "The three boys sort of present the spectrum of what it's like to be gay" (Sipe 264). Sanchez's note on the "spectrum" has often been used in conversations regarding *Rainbow Boys*. Thomas Crisp in particular has criticized Sanchez's word choice, as spectrums show a level of equal privilege among the spaces on the spectrum, when Sanchez is actually privileging one performance over another. While *Rainbow Boys* does offer multiple viewpoints, and each boy is at a different stage of "coming out," words like "spectrums" become damaging towards Sanchez's primary audience of young readers, as it limits the capacity at which a reader may affiliate their own sexuality. Sexuality is far too complex to limit in terms of stereotypes and spectrums, and while Sanchez does offer multiple

performances of homosexuality, Sanchez shouldn't limit the capacity to which these characters perform. They should be allowed to be more dynamic than a stereotype. In this chapter, I intend to show that viewing *Rainbow Boy's* protagonist across a spectrum ultimately privileges a heteronormative masculine gay identity, rather than offering three equally different and valued identity performances.

In his analysis "The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*," Thomas Crisp comments on the popularity of *Rainbow Boys* in an academic setting, and analyses why the novel has obtained success in the classroom. Crisp's analysis covers each character's "level" of homosexuality. In this case, level indicates a diagnosis of the severity of the characters' homosexuality. For Crisp, the severity comes from which characters receive attention over others. Crisp's analysis highlights the idea that these boys represent a certain level of gender—that one of the boys may be more masculine than another. Crisp's analysis shows Jason as being the most masculine, and that his jock persona in the school gives him immunity from the homophobia that Nelson and Kyle are subjected to. In this respect, Jason becomes the most privileged character in the novel, as he is not subjected to the same levels of homophobia that Kyle and Nelson experience. Despite any amount of perceived femininity, Jason still holds privilege among his peers who view him as masculine (Crisp 245). Kyle acts as an in-between character, as he has accepted his homosexuality, but doesn't project it. Kyle remains closeted to all but a select few people. Kyle doesn't become a victim of homophobia until after he comes out. Like Jason, Kyle is an athlete, but his sport (swimming) doesn't hold as much gravitas in the school as Jason's basketball. Nelson projects effeminacy and homosexual pride outwardly, which often makes him the subject of outward homophobia. Even characters like Jason will internalize homophobic discourse when

thinking about Nelson. Early in the novel, Jason describes Nelson as a “fag” in narration when introducing Nelson’s character.

The problem with critics like Thomas Crisp, and Sanchez himself, explaining the novel as a spectrum, or a scale, is that the novel only offers a limited homosexual view. While Jason, Nelson, and Kyle each represent a different homosexual experience with their own trials and tribulations, the lens in which they are read is still limited. Each boy’s experience takes place in the same town, during the same time of their lives, and involves their interacting with the same people. While the novel receives critical attention for breaking from the norm – as early, modern novels centered on homosexual characters rarely offer more than one or two homosexual characters typically seen with a gay protagonists and their love interest – *Rainbow Boys* still only offers three viewpoints from three boys in one town during one stage of their lives.

Rainbow Boys was something unlike any other homosexual young adult text before it because it offers three different homosexual viewpoints. Novels like David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* would go on to offer additional viewpoints with a plethora of homosexual characters two years later. The problem with these novels isn’t that they offer so many viewpoints, as both books are celebrated for doing so in an underrepresented market that often underrepresents multiple viewpoints; rather, critics and authors offer a limited understanding of homosexual youths. In offering multiple characters and perspectives, authors are acknowledging to youths that homosexuality doesn’t necessary limit their capacity to have a dynamic identity. Multiple viewpoints and characters often come at the expense of meaningful character development and dynamic character types, often causing these characters to become caricatures. In the case of *Rainbow Boys*, saying the characters offer a spectrum is simply inaccurate, as each boy only offers a limited perspective. A spectrum implies that there is some type of gradation between the

boys, but Sanchez has instead developed three characters on a spectrum of homosexuality that quickly develops into a hierarchy halfway through the novel. Sanchez's spectrum shares qualities with Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum, which includes "a range -- through each woman's life and throughout history-of woman -- identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (648). While Rich's argument is squarely fixed on female experience, we can borrow her analysis when we analyze Sanchez's spectrum of male homosexuality in youths to see how their own experiences have shaped their homosexuality—and that their homosexuality isn't necessarily contingent on male-on-male sexual experience, but an also in acceptance of identity.

Rainbow Boys follows Jason, Nelson, and Kyle through a school year as the boys discover more about their sexual identities. The novel opens with Jason, a popular high school basketball player, as he nervously decides whether or not he is going to go to a Rainbow Youth meeting. Jason is portrayed as questioning his sexuality, and in need of guidance. Afraid that opening up to anyone close to him would cost him his social status with his peers as a popular star athlete, and would be unaccepted by his homophobic father, Jason seeks out a local Rainbow Youth meeting. While at the meeting Jason runs into two kids from his school: Kyle and Nelson. While Jason knew Nelson was gay, because of his out and proud status, Kyle had remained closeted about his sexuality to all but Nelson. Among the novel's smaller plots is the underlying love triangle that exists among these three characters. As each chapter rotates which boy is narrating, the novel reveals that Kyle longs to be with Jason, while Nelson is shown having affection for Kyle. Sanchez writes these characters in his spectrum by placing Jason as the most masculine, Nelson as the most flamboyant/effeminate, and Kyle in a space between. While Jason is the most privileged voice in the novel, receiving the most chapters to be heard, it is Kyle who

holds the agency to choose which of the two boys he will be together with in the end. This analysis intends to show that by having Kyle and Jason end the novel together, Sanchez has privileged a masculine, heteronormative homosexual.

To begin this analysis, I will start by examining Nelson. Nelson embodies a number of homosexual stereotypes, most notably his flamboyant nature and the language he uses. Nelson uses words like “diva” to define himself, and often refers to other characters as “girl” or “she.” Nelson is most associated with homosexual stereotypes. Nelson colors his hair, attaches buttons to his backpack that celebrate his homosexuality, worries about his figure, and is a constant target of homophobia at his school. Nelson is openly gay, with his mother serving as the vice president of a local PFLAG chapter. Nelson receives support from a select few characters in the novel, but is mostly scrutinized for his “queer” behavior by nearly everyone else. Even his closest friend, Kyle, reacts negatively towards Nelson’s flamboyant attitude on occasion.

Nelson, in large part, is an embodiment of camp culture, and is *Rainbow Boys*’ prophet of homosexual history, enlightening Kyle on aspects of homosexual culture such as music, behavior, and literature. However, this knowledge and outward expression causes Nelson to become the subject of his school’s homophobic culture and collective aspersions. Nelson is referred to by *Nelly*, among other names. Although those who refer to Nelson as *Nelly* may largely be unaware of *nelly*’s use in the gay lexicon, Sanchez has encoded *nelly* into Nelson’s very character. Jennifer Brody and Dwight McBride note that *nelly*, “in more contemporary gay parlance, ... means ‘extremely effeminate,’ or ‘gay beyond a doubt’” (286). When seeing Nelson referred to as Nelly, informed audiences are able to see that Nelson represents one extreme end of Sanchez’s spectrum. Sanchez offers little hope for Nelson, though, as he privileges the relationship between Kyle and Jason. By doing so, Sanchez has not created three homosexuals

that represent a spectrum, but rather a hierarchy where heteronormative behavior is privileged above effeminate enactments of homosexuality. When Nelson's peers refer to him as Nelly they are demoralizing him on two fronts by feminizing his name and referring to him as a homosexual stereotype. Both possibilities strip Nelson of masculinity, placing him beneath the other kids in the heteronormative construct of Sanchez's novel.

What makes Nelson a unique character is that he is not necessarily held down by being stereotyped into this effeminate persona; rather, he defends himself against homophobia and celebrates the femininity that he reflects. Judith Butler dissolves the misconception "that gender is the rightful property of sex, that 'masculine' belongs to 'male' and 'feminine' belongs to 'female'" (360). In *Rainbow Road* (2005), for example, the final book of the *Rainbow* trilogy, Nelson is seen putting on drag. At first, Nelson has slight apprehension in doing so, being described as "nervous," but this subsides into acceptance of the unity between his masculine and feminine features that he rightfully accepts: "Nelson opened his eyes. At first the girl in the mirror startled him. Then she mesmerized him. It was hard to believe she *was* him. He slowly raised a hand and the image followed. He really was her... if he'd been born female" (115). While Nelson is midway through putting on his drag costume, he notes that in the mirror he sees "a boy's body and a girl's face" (114). In the first quote, Nelson accepts the unity between his female form and male identity. He isn't losing "maleness" by performing as a woman, as he clearly states that this would be him *if* he had been born a girl. With this statement, Nelson has shown that he is confident enough in his maleness to be an effeminate male. The problem with this reading, however, is that Sanchez waits until the third novel in the series to give Nelson any power. In the context of *Rainbow Boys*, Nelson is largely insecure about himself. It takes two novels and leaving his hometown for Nelson to find the confidence to perform drag, which might

seem too little too late for any effeminate youth reading the series. Readers who most align with Nelson will see the hierarchy that Sanchez has put in place, because of how little Nelson is valued in the novel. Nelson also demonstrates his insecure body image in *Rainbow Boys* when he is looking in his friend Shea's mirror, saying, "Look at me." He slapped his hips. "My butt's big as a beehive. My legs are like sticks. Everything's out of proportion, like a fun-house mirror. It's tragic. I hate my body'" (48). Nelson's self-deprecation is stirred on by Shea teasing him about his feelings for Kyle. Nelson doesn't feel confident about himself, in part because the hierarchy he lives in doesn't allow for him to be—a *nelly* stereotype can't be seen as normative in a heteronormative town or novel.

Although under constant attack, Nelson is quick to jab at others when presented the opportunity. Jason is the object of Kyle's affection, and Kyle often brings up his feelings about Jason to Nelson. In the same way that Jason has referred to Nelson as "Nelly," Nelson stereotypes Jason by inventing his own derogatory terminology. During his first chapter, Nelson refers to Jason as a "T.C.J. Tragic closet jock. Budding homo" (20). While Nelson almost immediately retracts this statement by saying "Oh, he's okay" just a line later, Nelson's quick temper causes him to stereotype Jason and show that there are lines that distinguish homosexuals from one another in a homosexual community. Just as Brody and McBride noted with their analysis on *nelly*, Nelson has established a new stereotype that Jason easily fits into. By referring to Jason as a "tragic closet jock," Nelson has shown that a homosexual community is large enough to establish its own ways of describing one another. The problem that exists with this stereotyping is that the gay community has its own internal prejudices and hierarchies—and *nelly* and *faggot* are at the bottom, which makes it difficult for Nelson to find acceptance as he embodies both. While Nelson tries to cope with his position through his own derogatory terms,

like tragic closet jock, this term offers him no empowerment, because using it to marginalize Jason to his peers would mean that Nelson would have to reveal Jason's closeted homosexuality – something Nelson isn't willing to do.

Throughout the novel, Nelson is subject to verbal and physical assault by the school bully, Jack Ransom. The first words out of Jack's mouth in the novel are "Hey faggot!" when referring to Nelson. Jack represents the homophobic construct of the world Nelson lives in. Characters like Jack see gay identity as a binary: us and them. Nelson is tormented throughout the novel. Readers learn that Nelson was tormented throughout middle school and continues to be through high school. One night when answering the phone, Nelson hears, "'Hey, fag,' ... 'Want to suck my dick?'" Nelson's quick wit allows him to defend himself with, "'I'm busy. You'll have to make an appointment,'" but such wit is only developed through the fact that, "Such calls were too commonplace to faze him" (144). Constantly berated, Nelson isn't above classifying others into stereotypes as a defense mechanism, just as he's done with Jason by referring to him as the "Tragic Closet Jock." For Nelson, the hierarchy is reversed. Nelson privileges his own outspoken homosexuality, over Jason's closeted feelings. Jason is unable to admit to himself or friends about his homosexual feeling until late into the novel, so in some ways, he has made less progress than Nelson into an acceptance of gay identity. Jason and Nelson are at odds with one another throughout the novel, as neither wishes to share "homosexuality" with the other. Jason fears that being homosexual will cast him in a similar light as Nelson, but Nelson sees Jason's closeted homosexuality as being less than his own outspoken homosexuality.

Jason begins the novel in an interesting place, as he doesn't describe himself as a homosexual; when discussing the possibility of being "gay," he will often privilege himself by

saying he could be “bisexual” or “confused” (8). By describing himself in these terms, Jason maintains some grasp at heteronormative culture, which he feels gives him gravitas over homosexuals. Sanchez also privileges Jason as a character, as Crisp notes, by letting Jason be the first voice readers hear when beginning *Rainbow Boys* and the last, giving his voice more chapters to flourish and be heard among the boys (246). In a novel that celebrates homosexuality in male youth through its title, *Rainbow Boys* begins on a slippery slope by giving the most agency to the character who has the most self-doubt and represents a strong heteronormative ideal of a masculine, athletic, young man. These qualifiers place him on the opposite end of the spectrum from Nelson.

Jason’s homosexuality can be described as following the Vivienne Cass Model of Homosexual Identity Formation. He begins the novel in the first stage “Identity Confusion”: a person who has inclinations of homosexual behavior, but has an inability to admit to such classification (Koponen 19). This can be seen when Jason attends the Rainbow Youth meeting at the start of the novel. Jason watches two lesbians interact with one another, and Jason is startled by how attractive the two girls are. He allows his stereotypical beliefs to take control of him and he assumes that anyone who doesn’t fit a standard stereotype of a homosexual must be “confused” like himself. Perhaps as an attempt to validate his lingering heterosexuality, Jason mentions wanting to get Shea’s phone number, one of the lesbians at the meeting. He thinks, “Maybe she was just confused, like him. Maybe they could help each other” (6). He isn’t able to admit to himself that he is a homosexual until late in the novel, after his father has made homophobic remarks regarding Kyle and Nelson. Jason’s admittance of being homosexual, albeit subverted, would fall under the fifth state of the Cass Model, “Identity Acceptance,” where “a homosexual self-image is accepted, rather than merely being tolerated, and social contracts with

gays are strengthened” (Koponen 21). Shortly before admitting to his father that he too is a homosexual, like Nelson and Kyle, Jason describes the two as “his friends” (198). While Jason has spent the entire novel having respect for the “normal” Kyle, he has often taken opportunities to degrade Nelson. By calling Nelson “his friend,” the proudest homosexual of the three protagonists, Jason is showing that he is unafraid to admit to an established bond with other outspoken homosexuals.

Jason’s initial “confusion” as to whether he is homosexual extends past his own understanding of how a homosexual can look and act. At first, he assumes that all homosexual men are as hyper-feminized as Nelson. As he is picturing himself walking into the Rainbow Youth meeting he “pictured them all looking like the school fag, Nelson Glassman—or Nelly, as everyone called him” (2). Jason alienates himself here by positioning Nelson as a caricature of homosexual youth. But Jason isn’t calling Nelson “the school homosexual,” because saying “homosexual” as an identifier would put them on a similar standing. Jason uses Nelson to equate being homosexual with being overtly feminized, or non-masculine. As Ritch Savin-Williams explains in his study *The New Gay Teenager*, derogatory words like “fag” are used in place of calling someone gay, or homosexual (6). Words like “gay,” or “homosexual” have developed a stigma around them, to the point where characters become captured by the language. Roberta Trites explains in “Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel: Repression and Power in Gay Male Adolescent Literature,” the history of how homosexual characters in literature are incapable of coming to terms with admitting to homosexuality by using words like “homosexual,” or “gay,” to describe themselves. Trites points to early novels in homosexual YA literature like Donovan’s *I’ll Get There* and Holland’s *Man Without a Face*, where Davy and Chuck use queer as their word of choice for describing their possible homosexuality.

In word choice, Jason has privileged himself by degrading Nelson's homosexuality to something less than his own.

Jason uses these derogatory words to describe the others at the Rainbow Youth meeting. He thinks, "He wasn't about to sit in a room full of queers," and "Both were pretty – not his idea of dykes" (2-8). He is only capable of using words like "fag," "homo," and "dyke" as derogatory terms to privilege himself in a hierarchy. Jason uses an "us and them" binary, which privileges one side over the other, creating a hierarchy. This is typically seen as heteronormative privilege over homosexuality, but even when he questions his possible homosexuality, he ends the first chapter with the assumption that he may be "bisexual." When Jason does admit to being homosexual, he is held captive by the term. The scene where Jason admits to being homosexual takes place shortly before his father calls him a faggot. Nelson and Kyle have just left Jason's house after Jason's father has returned home. The scene starts with Jason's dad saying, "'Don't bring them here again,' his dad sneered. 'Hear me? I don't wan' any faggots in my house.' Jason squared his shoulders. Later he would try to determine how he'd gotten the nerve for what he said next. 'Well'--- he took a deep breath---'you've got one'" (198). Despite the fact that Jason is able to come to terms with his sexuality and admit to his father that he is homosexual, Jason is still held captive to the terminology. He isn't able to say, "I'm gay," "I'm homosexual," or any of the derogatory terms he's used to describe Nelson, or other homosexuals; he is only capable of saying "you've got one." This suggests that Jason is only testing the waters, that he has not fully accepted a homosexual identity, but is merely taking steps towards one. Roberta Trites examines this behavior in early homosexual young adult literature, where characters will equivocate their homosexuality when saying it aloud. By not admitting to their homosexuality, characters like Jason are obeying the heteronormative construct that subverts homosexuality to something

beneath heterosexual behavior. By only saying, “you’ve got one,” Jason is merely placing one foot over the line on the binary hierarchy.

When Jason is called a “faggot” by his father, it is a continuation of constant attacks on Jason’s masculinity. Despite being seen as a masculine jock by his peers, Jason’s father doesn’t view his son in a similar light. In an early chapter, Jason is wearing a necklace that his girlfriend Debra has given him, to which his father says, “You look queer. Take it off” (27). The insults that Jason’s father cast toward him help track Jason’s homosexual progression throughout the novel. When Jason’s father calls his son a “queer,” in the context of *Rainbow Boys*, readers can incorrectly assume that this is an affront to Jason’s sexuality, as Jason is seen questioning his own sexuality in the novel. However, it is not impossible that “queer” could be used merely to degrade Jason’s masculinity. Jason’s father isn’t saying his son “is” a queer by wearing the necklace, but rather that he “looks” that way. The distinction is that the lack of “to be” verb, which keeps Jason from being classified as a homosexual. By saying Jason “look[s]” queer, Jason’s dad is merely participating in what Shawn Burn would describe as normative language in heterosexual friendships. Burn’s analysis shows that homophobic language is used to help distance oneself from the homosexual subgroup. In attempt to gain favor with this group of insiders, others may imitate this homophobic vernacular (4). C.J. Pascoe validates Burn’s analysis in her own sociological study she conducted on high school youths where young men would use homophobic language to assert their own status as heterosexuals (81). In Sanchez’s case, readers shouldn’t demonize Jason’s father for using homophobic language without first understanding *how* and *why* he is using this language.

While Sanchez has provided no evidence to support the idea that Jason and his father are on friendly terms, as they are only seen confronting one another, it is not a stretch to imagine that

Jason's hyper-masculine father is merely participating in Burn's definition of heteronormative language. Jason's father may be trying to push his son to hyper-masculine levels, and small infractions to Jason's father's ideal archetype of a heterosexual son may be grounds to use such language in an attempt to steer him away from what he perceives as feminine, or "queer" behavior.

Later in the novel, when Jason's uncle Ramiro visits during the holidays, he is heard discussing whether or not "a certain corporal during Vietnam service was a *maricon*" (153). Sanchez defines this term in later novels as a derogatory Spanish word for homosexuals. Seeing that Jason's father and Ramiro are discussing such terminology, coupled with the fact that he later calls Jason *faggot*, shows that he is aware of derogatory terms to describe homosexuality. As he only says "you look queer" in the earlier instance shows that he is not yet confronting Jason's homosexuality, but merely his manhood, and that these terms and affirmations can't be separated in his eyes. .

While all three boys are referred to as "faggots" at some point in the novel, it is important to note that the word doesn't mean the same thing to each of them. In an attempt to better understand the depth of what young adults mean when they call someone a faggot, David Plummer investigated what high school students mean when they use such terminology. Plummer investigates a history behind the word. Among his informants, one student defined *faggot* by saying, "it's not a sexuality thing. If it looks a bit different, a bit tacky, pathetic or anything like that, it's 'gay'" (17). Plummer cites a number of informants who often equate the word with lack of masculinity, being different, or on occasion, as homosexual. In the context of *Rainbow Boys*, readers might conflate these words as being an immediate threat to homosexuality, but when in fact, these words can be a part of teenage vernacular for discussing

masculinity, as seen with Plummer, Pascoe, and Burns. Readers need to be aware that terms can hold different meanings in different contexts and lexicons. Discourse allows for *queer*, *nelly*, and *faggot* to all have different meanings among those who use them. Assuming these words only have a negative context gives too much power to homophobia. Refusing to accept these words as anything but derogatory, perpetuates Sanchez's privileging of one type of homosexuality, as Nelson would only ever be seen as being victimized and would receive little to no agency. Nelson's representation must retain some power, as it is the novel's third protagonist that weights Sanchez's spectrum in one end over the other.

Kyle is described as shy, and always wearing a baseball cap to hide his features. As I will discuss later, Kyle is most importantly described as "normal" (5). Kyle sits in the middle of Sanchez's spectrum, as Kyle accepts his homosexuality, but remains in the closet to anyone other than his close friend Nelson. Kyle is also the star of the school swim team, but does not receive the popularity that Jason does. Crisp notes that this comes from Jason's success at a contact sport, while Kyle's athleticism is only shown on his own merits as a swimmer; Jason's athleticism depends on his ability to work with his teammates. Jason is once again being privileged because his sport is deemed more "masculine" in our mainstream masculine culture (246). Sanchez uses Kyle to bridge the gap between the novel's two most polarizing characters, Jason and Nelson, the later of whom represents the most "gay" of the boys. Kyle is an athlete like Jason, but is also accepting of his homosexuality like Nelson.-While Kyle may appear to fall in the middle of Sanchez's spectrum, Kyle identifies more so with Jason, and the novel begins to privilege a masculine heteronormative ideal for homosexual youths.

While Jason begins the novel in the first stage of the Cass Model, Kyle begins in the second stage, "Identity Comparison." Identity Comparison finds the subject in a state where they

don't feel comfortable with their place in society, or small groups such as a family or peer group (Koponen 20). Kyle is not out yet to his parents or peers. At the start of the novel, Nelson is the only one aware that Kyle is homosexual. Kyle didn't initiate his own coming out to Nelson, however; rather Nelson spurs Kyle on by saying, "Let's get this out. You know I'm queer, I know you're queer. Get over it" (13), when the two are paired together on a class assignment. Kyle doesn't spend the earlier parts of the novel accepting, or fully understanding what he is. Just as Jason vaguely comments that Kyle is "normal," Kyle describes himself as "different": "Since Kyle was little, he'd known he was different" (12). Koponen notes that subjects in the second phase are able to pass as heterosexuals, "but does not eliminate anxiety" regarding their identity (20). Kyle shows anxiety over telling his parents about his homosexuality in his first chapter: "first he'd have to tell her he was gay. She'd get upset and tell his dad. He'd make a federal case out of it. Guaranteed" (11). Kyle is never able to initiate his "coming out" to his parents; Kyle's mom discovers a gay erotic magazine, given to him by Nelson, and elicits Kyle's a confession. She pressures Kyle into discussing the situation at dinner, which prompts Kyle to reach Identity Tolerance, where Kyle says, "'I think ... maybe'—he looked up from beneath the bill of his cap—'I'm gay'" (74). Kyle distinguishes himself from Jason at this point because Kyle is able to use a word that describes his sexuality and own it, as lines later say, "He'd actually spoken the G word" (75). This contrasts Jason, who isn't able to say this to his parents when coming out. Perhaps Sanchez does this to reinforce Kyle's space on his homosexual spectrum. Readers learn that Nelson's parents are already aware of his sexuality before the novel begins. Audiences read this when Nelson tells the kids at the Rainbow Youth meeting, "'I have queer visibility buttons, courtesy of my mom and PFLAG' ... 'My mom is vice president'" (7). On the contrary, Jason parents see him as heterosexual because of his relationship with girlfriend

Debra. Kyle comes out to his parents in the middle of the novel, which helps situate his place between the two boys. Kyle's position on the homosexual scale is further shown by the order in which the boys receive chapters. The most heterosexual Jason goes first, followed by Kyle, and then Nelson.

Rainbow Boys internalizes its own sets of privileges and hierarchy. Crisp notes that Jason is the most privileged among the protagonist as he receives the first and last chapter of the novel, which in turn, gives Jason the most chapters of the novel and the most speaking time. Readers can interpret this in a few ways. One opinion may privilege Jason's attempts at heteronormativity, or masculinity. This opinion would support an idea of hierarchy versus scale, as Jason receives the most opportunity to be perceived and understood by the audience. Even in the novel celebrating gay identity in youth, the most masculine and heterosexual of the bunch is prioritized. The other opinion allows *Rainbow Boys* to act as a didactic text. In this opinion, Jason's privilege could be seen as Sanchez's attempt to garner more attention towards the character. Sanchez is primarily a social worker, and could be using Jason as an attempt to appeal to young men who are afraid of a possible homosexual identity that might cost them relationships with their family or peers.

The first reading is more likely to be the case as the novel consistently prioritizes heteronormativity and masculinity over an overt homosexual identity. One of the novel's plots shows a love triangle between Jason, Kyle, and Nelson. Kyle admits to having a crush on Jason, while Nelson is accused by Shea of having a crush on Kyle. Jason and Kyle eventually end in a sexual relationship, while Nelson is punished for having sex.

Nelson's sexual relationships follow in the tradition on *Man Without a Face*, with a young homosexual boy having sex with an older man. Nelson meets up with a man he met online

who is much older than him. Nelson lies about his age, claiming to be eighteen. Nelson's rendezvous, Brick, gives Nelson liquor, and has unprotected sex with Nelson. Nelson immediately assumes the worst of Brick after their unprotected sex and speculates that Brick may be HIV positive. Nelson isn't given closure of whether or not he is HIV positive by the end of the novel, despite pressure from his mother to get tested. After his HIV scare, Nelson doesn't shy away from the possibility of contracting the disease, but rather is pushed towards the disease. Nelson begins a relationship with a young man named Jeremy who suspects that he is HIV positive. Nelson ignores the possible repercussions in favor of a relationship with Jeremy: "Suddenly they were kissing. It no longer mattered that Jeremy was HIV positive—only that he was warm and sweet" (224).

Jason and Kyle aren't subjected to the HIV scare as Nelson is, which further emphasizes the idea that only certain gay men (in this case the effeminate gay man) are subjected to HIV. While Jason and Kyle are both homosexual, they still maintain their privilege on the homosexual hierarchy over Nelson, because they are able to remain unthreatened by HIV. Sanchez further creates a binary of us and them, even within the context of homosexuals. Even after coming out, Jason still maintains privilege over Nelson. Jason and Kyle are the most masculine, most "normal," and most accepted among their peer groups. By pairing the two together, Sanchez has prioritized two-thirds of the novel to the culmination of this relationship. Both protagonists are able to give their commentary and insecurities on the relationship, while Nelson's relationship is only allowed to exist in his limited chapters.

The ways in which the boys are stereotyped in the novel show the unique biases of being presented on a spectrum. Sanchez writes Jason as a self-loathing character with an alcoholic abusive father, so it seems just as likely that Jason could be tempted to engage in risky behavior,

but Sanchez has chosen Nelson to be exposed to HIV and be punished for his effeminate homosexuality. It's easy for society to rationalize that the three boys represent a homosexual scale, much as Sanchez and critics have already done. By placing the boys on the scale we are trying to understand homosexuality in limited terms, that young readers should be able to see themselves represented on some level by the boys in the novel; however, this isn't the case. Jason, Kyle, and Nelson can only represent themselves. Sexuality is far more complicated than a "choose your own homosexual" style of reading, where readers are too able to latch on to a certain character. We can say that the novel represents a damaging hierarchy that reflects society. By placing the "normal" Kyle and the masculine Jason together in a relationship, Sanchez has relegated the flamboyant Nelson to his second choice in relationships. Nelson shows an interest in Kyle from the beginning of the novel, but this goes unrecognized because Kyle is interested in Jason. By placing Kyle in the middle of the love triangle between the overtly homosexual Nelson and heteronormative Jason, Kyle is given the most power in the novel. Kyle exists in a liminal state between these two extremes, and is given the opportunity to privilege one type of homosexuality over the other. By choosing Jason, Kyle shows a heavy bias towards a heteronormative homosexual identity, as the novel now focuses on their relationship, with Nelson receiving only minor interludes. The novel sets readers up for this understanding based on the interactions each character will make with the others. Jason's chapters typically only show him interacting with Kyle, and Nelson's doing the same. Kyle's chapters, situated between Nelson's and Jason's, often show him interacting with both boys. Nelson and Jason typically don't interact with one another, allowing Kyle to bridge the gap between the two. By giving Kyle the agency of choosing between the two boys, Sanchez has placed agency on which side of the binary Kyle will put weight on. When Kyle and Jason enter a relationship, Sanchez has shown

that the masculine “normal” homosexuals are privileged and the flamboyant Nelson becomes an effeminate homosexual caricature.

Chapter 3: Understanding Normativity and Sexual Fluidity in Bill Konigsberg's *Openly Straight*

Released in 2013, Bill Konigsberg's *Openly Straight* rewrote the GLBTQ YA narrative in a way no other novel had yet to attempt. Rather than following a narrative involving a young protagonist facing adversity in a homophobic small town, *Openly Straight* removes protagonist Rafe from his gay-supportive family and community, placing him in an all-male boarding school, Natick Academy. Rafe isn't forced to attend Natick, but instead desires to do so even against the advice of his parents and friends. Rafe wants to attend Natick so he can be seen as somebody more than "the gay kid," as he fears his homosexuality enveloping him and that he is only being defined by his sexuality. At Natick, Rafe plans to closet his homosexuality so he can rewrite his own narrative. Unlike most GLBTQ YA protagonists who work to accept themselves and be accepted by others, Rafe begins *Openly Straight* being accepted by his parents, feeling comfortable in his community, and having friends who support him; however, after several years of being the local gay, Rafe wants to leave this behind so he can rewrite his homosexual narrative and not become a victim of tokenism. Rafe isn't interested in being defined exclusively as "the gay kid," whether or not this comes from a positive or negative source (Konigsberg 133). Rafe doesn't want his homosexual identity to be the only label that defines him. His fear is that people will see him as a two-dimensional caricature of homosexuality. Rafe leaves his supposedly utopian environment to attend Natick in hopes that he can be seen as more than "the gay kid."

Konigsberg is writing nearly a decade following the release of Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys*, thus the homosexual cultural climate that Konigsberg is writing is far different. Konigsberg is writing at a time where homosexuality is more widely accepted than ever before. Konigsberg uses *Openly Straight* to comment on that very idea of acceptance. Konigsberg is writing in a time

where overwhelming *acceptance* of homosexuality is becoming a problem. Konigsberg asks his audiences to not merely tolerate or accept homosexuality, but to celebrate the differences among us. A part of *Openly Straight*'s plots is Rafe discovering the repercussions that come from merely accepting someone, and not celebrating them.

Rafe is on a quest to project a heteronormative identity. He's uninterested in being a stereotype, or being defined by his sexual orientation; however Rafe is more than comfortable being labeled as a straight stereotype – or at least stereotypes affiliated with heterosexuality. Shortly after arriving at Natick, Rafe is invited to play football with some of the other boys. Following the game, Rafe becomes enchanted by his “new skin”: “Here I was, two hours into my Natick adventure, and I was already in that entirely new skin I had fantasized about. Jock Rafe” (18). By saying he has “fantasized” about this “new skin,” Rafe has shown that this is an ideal type that he has been trying to achieve. Rafe is comfortable in a stereotype, so long as that stereotype is celebrated like the athletes he befriends. This ideal type is also seen in *Rainbow Boys*, as Jason follows this *type*. Jason is an athletic star at his school, so the celebrated athlete outweighs the ostracized homosexual.

Rafe does however share similar fears with other homosexual YA lit characters who fear they will be degraded for their homosexuality; while Rafe has a positive support network, he has growing concerns that homosexuality is all people will see from him. He doesn't necessarily want to hide his homosexuality, but rather plans to change the subject if the question of sexuality is ever brought up. Rafe's mother is largely against his plan to hide his sexuality, but Rafe's anxiety outweighs his mother's judgment. Rafe tells her, “I'm tired of it. I'm so tired of being the gay kid. I don't want this anymore. I just want to be, like, a normal kid” (133). Rafe has singled himself out by being “the gay kid,” using the demonstrative article to establish himself as

a singular entity who distances himself from a homosexual community. Interestingly, unlike Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys*, where "the gay kid" Nelson is being singled out as the only open member of his community, Rafe comes from a town that welcomes his sexuality and Rafe is aware that he is a member of a homosexual community. Rafe is involved with PFLAG, and mentions having homosocial friendships with other homosexuals, so it's surprising that he is willing to relegate himself into such a small box when he is aware that he isn't the only person in his community that shares his same-sex attractions. Comparing Rafe to Nelson, who are both described as "the gay kid," we can see that one is self-defined and the other has this title thrust upon him. Others define Nelson as "the gay kid," because he is the only outspoken homosexual at his school, but Rafe defines himself as "the gay kid." Rafe has the luxury of hiding his homosexuality, as Nelson's effeminacy leads his peers to immediately define him as "gay." While Nelson wears his homosexuality with pride, Rafe doesn't want to become a caricature—he wants to achieve a level of normativity. Rafe's anxiety over being seen as a homosexual caricature is similar to what Andrew Sullivan points out in *Virtually Normal* (1995). Sullivan notes that he had all the makings of "normal," citing his strong relationships with girls his age. Sullivan continues to reflect on his past and tries "to decipher what might have caused [his] apparent aberration" (9). The problem with Sullivan's argument, as Michael Warner notes in his 1999 response to Sullivan, *The Trouble With Normal*, when given the opportunity to be seen as normal, who would choose abnormality over normative being? Warner traces normativity to a nineteenth century boon in statistics that dictate large parts of mass culture such as clinical needs, shopping, and even sex (53-54). It seems too that Konigsberg is sided with Warner's argument, and that he is largely against an idea of normal, because normativity isn't something that can be achieved. Rafe defines himself as types (gay and jock), but yet he still tries to describe himself in

terms of normal throughout the novel. Like Warner notes, Rafe wants to be a part of a majority statistic; he wants to look and be treated like a majority.

Rafe must be tested so he can come out with a stronger idea of self. For Rafe, that means testing an ideal normal, in his case the athletic jock type, so he can learn that normal does in fact hold little meaning outside of statistics, and that differences should be celebrated.

Rafe is attempting to perform what early twentieth century psychologists decreed as socially normal for his gender role. As the fear of femininity became increasingly present in social spheres, there was a need to adjust to what was perceived as proper “normal” adult life (Pascoe 6). Rafe fears that his homosexuality would create dissonance between himself and this jock culture that he is trying to immerse himself in. During the aforementioned scene where Rafe meets his roommate Albie, a stocky counter culture young man who keeps a police scanner in his room, Rafe asks Albie what there is to do at Natick. Albie retorts, “it depends on what kind of guy you are?” (21). Rafe’s response is seemingly out of character, which helps reflect the internal struggle Rafe is facing in the novel. “Why do I have to be any particular type?” (21). Rafe has left his home because he no longer wanted to be labeled. In the first chapter, he speaks about waking up one morning and only seeing “GAY” in the mirror, and that the “real” Rafe had been lost in this two-dimensional caricature (3). When Albie responds that Rafe looks like a “Preppy jock type,” Rafe asks if that’s a bad thing (22). This conversation is an interesting distinction for Rafe, as he seems comfortable being labeled in one context but not the other. Albie responds with “it’s a thing,” but is pressured by Rafe into saying, “yeah, it’s kinda lame” (22). Rafe finds some level of comfort in his new label, as he says, “maybe it was just the irony that I’d finally been labeled something mainstream and acceptable” (22). Rafe had spent the novel up to this point discussing how the people of Boulder accepted his homosexuality, yet he

doesn't find the same level of comfort in that label as he does in "jock Rafe." "Jock Rafe" returns to the homosexual/heterosexual binary that privileges one identity over the other. At this point in the novel, the "jock" qualifier helps Rafe maintain his heteronormative façade. This façade is validated on Rafe's first day of class when he writes about his best friend, Claire Olivia. After he has finished reading, one of the boys in the class responds, "Why the hell would someone leave their hot girlfriend and move across country to an all-boys school?" (41) Rafe notes that he never used the word "girlfriend," but this identity has been assumed of him. This raises the question of whether Rafe has successfully built a heterosexual persona, or whether Rafe has merely fallen victim to heterosexism. Rafe has spoken out against heterosexism, and has been told the dangers of it by his mother, yet doesn't act out against it. Part of Rafe wants the privilege that comes from a heterosexual identity; however, as Clinton Hammock explains it, the heterosexual privilege only comes from devaluing homosexuality:

When looking more closely at this binary pairings, one observes that one position in the binary pair (in this case, the homosexual) becomes devalued through homophobic cultural pressure in order to subordinate it to an inferior position or identity, but it is also its existence and subordination that gives powerful meaning and privilege to the heterosexual position or identity. (1)

While he may believe this binary construct, Rafe is given opportunities to deviate from it and celebrate his identity as both a homosexual and the jock he desires to be. This can be seen in a conversation Rafe has with his fellow athlete and love interest Ben. At a school baseball game, Ben tells Rafe about the speaker who came and spoke at Natick's Diversity Day the previous year. Ben describes him as a "gay guy" who "used to play college football" (102). Ben explains that this changed the way that the soccer team reacted to homophobia. Ben makes an important

distinction as he discusses this with Rafe, saying that while the team still makes fun of homosexuals behind their backs, it's no longer about their sexuality. Even though Rafe has found acceptance with this group of boys, and knows that they aren't homophobic, he still chooses to hide his homosexuality.

While Rafe seemingly wants to partake in heteronormative discourse and share in its privileges, he still remains uncomfortable with their lexicon, which is a part of those privileges. Rafe notes, "Once *faggot* had been taken away from my Boulder teammates, they'd found other ones – dumbass, shit breath, dick face" (46). C.J. Pascoe and Shawn Burns both validate this as typical vernacular in male heterosexual friendships. Rafe feeling that these words only function as derogatory insults towards him shows that he is unwilling to compromise in his search for normativity. This validates Warner, as Rafe is unwilling to accept this aspect of the heteronormative construct he seeks to enter, essentially showing the faults in *normal*.

Rafe, like most people, has no grasp on what "normal" really means. Konigsberg strategically throws around the term "heterosexism" in *Openly Straight*. Rafe is well aware of the term, as he has commented on giving speeches about the topic, and although he is surrounded by people who accept homosexuals within his home town of Boulder, and the Natick school, Rafe still desires to be seen as "straight" within certain contexts. Rafe remains open to his parents, his best friend Claire Olivia, and even his English teacher, Mr. Scarborough, but masquerades in a straight persona to his male peers. However, Rafe's straight persona only goes skin deep, as he doesn't repress the feelings he has towards fellow student athlete Ben. Above even a heteronormative façade, Rafe values homosocial bonds with a certain demographic—adolescent males.

Rafe's façade ends at the outward level, as Rafe shows his initial homosocial turned homosexual yearning towards Ben, one of his fellow Natick athletes. For the most part, Rafe is able to achieve this level of normativity he is seeking with the boys at Natick, but only because he keeps his true identity subverted under the outward façade. Midway through the novel, Konigsberg writes a scene that shows Rafe beginning to question the nature of *different* and *normal*. One of the novel's seemingly minor characters, Bryce, who is described as the only black student in the junior class at Natick, is forced to leave Natick following a depressive episode that finds him out after curfew. Mr. Scarborough, Rafe's English teacher, brings this subject up for discussion with his class shortly after Bryce has left Natick. Mr. Scarborough asks his students whether or not normalizing is a good or bad thing. In this instance, he is discussing the school's colorblind policy, but wonders what damaging effect it might have on an isolated subject. He says, "I want, for just a moment, for you to think about what it might be like to be the only black person in the room. Would color blindness then be a good thing, or a bad thing?" (140) Mr. Scarborough discusses with his class the idea of being tolerated or accepted, in favor of being "celebrated" (142). Mr. Scarborough's lecture helps further establish that normality isn't something that can necessarily be achieved, as Natick demonstrates normal as a statistic, rather than a sense of being. For Bryce, normality is broken because he is the only black adolescent in the white majority of his junior class. Rafe is able to subvert his difference (homosexuality), by looking like the majority he fits into. Early in the novel, Rafe's first acquaintance at Natick, Steve, who says, "You look just like Schroeder ... Graduated last year. Megapopular. You could be his brother" (10). Rafe's appearance allows him to easily fit into the majority he wants to belong to, and helps him perpetuate his masquerade.

Contrasting Rafe is Ben, Rafe's love interest. Ben is introduced early in the novel, shortly after Steve invites Rafe to play football. Ben and Rafe begin on rocky terms. Ben disapproves of Rafe's showboating during the football game, which leads to Rafe trying to win Ben's approval in an awkward encounter in the boy's bathroom where Rafe tries to make small talk. Rafe begins to develop an attraction towards Ben as they both shower following a soccer practice. While Rafe craves finding a heteronormative identity, Ben desires to rid himself of labels. While driving Rafe back from a party, Ben begins a conversation with Rafe about this very subject. Rafe asks Ben where he fits into the "scheme of things at Natick," and how Ben is a quiet jock. Just as Rafe said when stereotyped by Albie, Ben responds by asking Rafe why he needs to be a "type." While Rafe shows excitement over Ben wanting to be more than a simple stereotype or demographic, Rafe's purpose at Natick doesn't reflect this (75). In his quest to rid himself of being a token homosexual, Rafe has chosen a new type, he has chosen to hide his homosexuality and create an illusion of heterosexuality. Despite constant warnings, and his own knowledge of heterosexism, Rafe has privileged a false heterosexual identity over his own.

Ben's homosexual identity formation is unlike that of the typical GLBTQ YA character, mainly in part to the fact that Ben doesn't confess to having feeling of attraction towards other men, but he does make the distinction about having these feelings towards Rafe. Ben doesn't establish a connection between his emotional attraction to Rafe and a homosexual identity. Shortly after Ben and Rafe kiss, Rafe notices that Ben was "tenting the front of his sweatpants" (243). Ben later establishes that his attraction and feelings are towards Rafe's personality, and not necessarily contingent on Rafe being male. Ben says, "I've never had feelings like this for a guy ... I mean, I don't even know if I'm having them. It's you. It's not like towards a guy" (260). Following their kiss, Ben begins to reject the possibility of being a homosexual, but still decides

to classify Rafe as such by saying, “So even if you tell me you aren’t gay, I think you probably are. And I’m pretty sure I’m not. Because I can’t be” (286). In this moment, Ben is asserting his disbelief in a social construct that says experience shapes gender identity. Ben’s statement shows that sexual experience doesn’t necessarily shape his identity. In fact, Ben chooses to subvert a possible homosexual identity in favor of a “straight” one by saying, “I have to be straight” (285), which stems from his desire to remain close to his family who Ben believes wouldn’t accept a homosexual son. Ben is given a unique choice in this moment; he is able to choose his sexual identity. While Ben’s attraction isn’t contingent, necessarily, on choice, he is able to choose what type of attraction he will act upon. Ben ends the novel in a similar state in which Rafe begins. Ben’s homosexual identity is formed on the grounds that he feels an attraction towards Rafe, but chooses to suppress this in favor of a heterosexual persona. While Rafe’s narrative begins with him wanting to establish homosocial friendships, Ben subverts a possible homosexual identity based on how he believes his family may perceive him. Ben notes that while Rafe’s family is willing to accept a homosexual son, his family is not (286). Here, we return to the initial root of the book. The society in which Ben comes from privileges a heterosexual identity. Ben has allowed this to impact his decision on whether or not he is willing to accept his homosexuality as a part of his identity formation. Whereas Rafe masquerades in a heterosexual identity that was never his own, Ben is able to return to this identity as it was the one he developed prior to meeting Rafe. Since Ben begins the novel heterosexual, he is able to choose not to act on his feelings towards Rafe, and maintain his pre-established heterosexual persona. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins describe these situations faced by GLBTQ youth in the “social opprobrium” where “it seems unlikely that any teen would ‘want’ to be gay” (36). Based on social prejudices, the same ones that Rafe feared, it seemed natural that Ben would accept one identity over the

other when given the choice. Rafe makes a choice as well; he chooses to reveal to Ben his closeted homosexuality. Just as Ben returned to where his identity began prior to Rafe, so does Rafe. Rafe returns to being openly gay, whereas Ben closets his homosexuality and remains openly straight. Konigsberg uses Ben to represent a certain level of sexual fluidity. While readers see no evidence of Rafe having a heterosexual relationship with a female, Ben has mentioned such a relationship prior to his kiss with Rafe. Ben seems far more progressive than other homosexual YA characters because he doesn't come to a firm understanding of his own identity by the end of the novel. If anything, Ben shows that he is attracted to individuals, and not a certain sex.

Konigsberg brings the novel full circle in Rafe's "coming out." Rafe attends Natick in attempt to be seen as something more than a label, but after hurting the ones he cared about most he is given a new label. As Rafe tries to reconcile his relationship with Ben after revealing his homosexuality, Ben responds, "I should have gone with what I thought of you that first day. I knew what you were." Rafe immediately assumes Ben thought he was homosexual, but instead Ben replies with, "No ... fundamentally dishonest" (291). Ben is getting to the heart of the moral that Konigsberg has delivered. Rafe wants to be with Ben, but seduces Ben under false pretenses. Rafe leads Ben to believe that they are experiencing these homosexual feelings for the first time together; however, Rafe has shown attraction towards Ben since they've met early in the novel. Konigsberg's narrative punishes Rafe for not being honest about his labels. While both Rafe and Ben have wanted to escape the labels that define them, they both find comfort in labels that are culturally normative. Both find comfort in a heterosexual identity, whether or not that was the label that defines them.

Ben's assertion of Rafe as being dishonest is, in fact, a form of homophobia. Ben has asked that Rafe perform a gender stereotype, or at least announce himself as a homosexual. For the heterosexual, sexual identity is able to remain private within homosocial friendships, as there is no immediate threat to either party's sexual orientation. However, Ben has been the victim of a homosexual trying to create a homosocial bond. Rafe's original intention on coming to Natick was to establish these bonds and not be seen as a caricature; he wants to be seen as more complex. Ben is showing heterosexual privilege that comes from being able to remain private about one's sexuality. Typically, heterosexual privilege is a matter of the public, as heterosexuals receive certain rights and benefits based on such desire (Pascoe 10). Rafe notes these privileges in terms of social interactions with a heterosexual majority, while Ben may see having children being a benefit to a heterosexual identity. Ben notes this when he and Rafe are fanaticizing about their future. He mentions having a wife and "a couple kids" (194). Ben strips Rafe of some of these privileges by asserting a homosexual identity onto Rafe. Ben does this so that both parties can be fully aware of any implications that come from a heterosexual and a homosexual in a homosocial bond.

"Coming out" can transcend the typical definition that one must announce his/her sexuality verbally by using the labels that define them. C.J. Pascoe spent eighteen months studying how high school students in a working-class high school performed their gender. Part of this performance came from the clothes they wore. Implicitly, a homosexual dressed in a certain way that announced his sexuality quietly. Pascoe interviewed high school boys on how they believe a "fag" dresses. Most indicated that the homosexual "fag" cared about their appearance by wearing tight fashionable clothes that remained clean, while masculine "guys" didn't (62). This is based highly on what we believe gender performance to look like; Rafe has some level of

understanding about how to dress in a way that will be perceived as “normal,” and thereby straight. As he leaves on a trip with Ben, Albie, and Toby, Rafe makes a similar judgment on the homosexual Toby as the boys in Pascoe’s study: “Later, we four walked to the parking lot, me and Ben wearing normal clothing, Toby wearing his usual skinny jeans and a hoodie” (155). Rafe doesn’t note what he and Ben are wearing other than the fact that it is “normal.” Presumably, his clothing is more akin to Ben’s. Toby’s clothing is non-descriptive save for the “skinny” qualifier on his jeans. Rafe has privileged his performance by not discussing it, returning to the idea of a heterosexual’s quiet privilege, where the heterosexual isn’t expected to discuss their performance, or explain their intentions. Rafe doesn’t have to describe Ben or his own clothes, because they are what Rafe perceives as culturally normal, accepted, and straight.

Ben never openly questions or degrades Rafe’s sexuality. When Ben does say that he knows Rafe is gay, it’s not meant as an insult, but instead of a simple qualifier, “I’m pretty sure you’re gay” (285). Ben carefully chooses language that doesn’t degrade homosexuality as something that is wrong, or abnormal; however, if Rafe perceives “gay” as derogatory based on his own divorce from the term, does it imply some level of homophobia? Pascoe studied how teenage boys use the word “fag,” which is typically affiliated with the most feminized of homosexual men; while Pascoe notes that the boys do use it to degrade the most homosexual men, she also notes that “fag” is a term often used in heterosexual homosocial relationships (81). While “gay” doesn’t connote the same negative cultural backlash that “fag” does, we need to ask if other words are damaging if someone doesn’t want to be defined by them. In Rafe’s case he has worked hard to remove the stigma associated with being “the gay kid” in favor of a heteronormative identity. By saying Rafe is “gay,” Ben has relegated Rafe to the very position he sought to walk away from. Ben separates his own feelings for Rafe away from a homosexual

identity, but doesn't give Rafe a chance to do the same. While Ben doesn't label Rafe, "the gay kid," he does label him as "gay," by saying, "I'm pretty sure you're gay. I just know it" (285). Ben doesn't allow Rafe to share in the possibility of sexual fluidity. Ben, who has tried to disavow such labels, returns to being comforted by them. He feels comfortable calling Rafe "gay," even going to the lengths of saying, "and I'm totally okay with that" (285). However, Ben never thinks to ask Rafe if he is okay with such a label. Just as characters like Nelson from *Rainbow Boys* don't use "fag" to qualify themselves, and are thereby discriminated against by the word, Rafe has faced a similar challenge with "gay." Instances like this show Ben as what I'm calling a quiet homophobe.

Ben is often described as quiet, and not outwardly expressive (75). Ben even acts out against openly homophobic remarks. After the soccer team has lost their game, the team begins slinging around "fag" and "faggot" as an insult. Rafe immediately stands up to this, but has his own masculinity questioned by his teammate Zack. Ben, who is described as having the most imposing presence on the team steps up to say, "'Cut out the homophobic crap'" (209). While he stands up against his teammates' outward homophobia, Ben still uses the term as a quick way of qualifying Toby. While at a school softball match, Ben asks Rafe about his roommate, Albie, and Albie's friend Toby. Rafe, who has established a friendship with the two boys, asks Ben what he thinks about the pair. Ben replies, "Different ... Albie's real smart. Toby is gay" (102). While Ben describes Albie with a qualifier that measures his intelligence, Ben only describes Toby in terms of sexuality. While not implicitly negative, Ben doesn't use any other qualifier other than one that speaks to Toby's sexuality. Just as Rafe fears becoming the token "gay kid," Ben has placed Toby in that slot. Ben's homophobia doesn't threaten Toby, but merely shows that Toby's sexuality is the first thing that comes to Ben's mind as he describes him. Ben follows his

description up with, “You know that, right?” as to create some type of warning sign to Rafe (102). The reason Ben’s homophobia is quiet is that he remains unaware of what he’s doing as implicitly negative. He is unaware that “gay” as a qualifier can share all the same harshness that “fag” or other derogatory qualifiers can have.

Ben is hypocritical of Rafe’s situation. He isn’t critical of Rafe’s homosexuality, but rather upset that Rafe was dishonest with him. Despite Ben’s attack on Rafe’s honesty, Ben refuses to connect his feelings towards Rafe as being homosexual. This could place Ben in the early stages of the Vivienne Cass Model of homosexual identity formation. Ben is experiencing “identity confusion” (Koponen 19). Unlike Jason from *Rainbow Boys* who hasn’t physically acted on a homosexual feeling, Ben has admitted to having feelings for Rafe, but doesn’t equate that with homosexuality. He chooses to suppress these feelings to keep a close bond with his family. We see this when Ben is confessing his thoughts to Rafe on why he “can’t” be a homosexual, “I can’t be. My family just isn’t like yours, and ... I’m not ready to give them up” (286). Ben’s statement is common of the homosexual; Wilfrid Koponen points this out when discussing how coming out to one’s family may impact the homosexual. For Ben, whose homosexual identity has only recently surfaced, he may be experiencing fear of what is jeopardized by surrendering his heterosexual privilege (Koponen 11). Ben not only wants to remain close to his family, but has mentioned wanting to start a family of his own mentioning a wife and kids (194). By experiencing his homosexual identity, Ben may fear that he is losing this possible idealized, presumably heterosexual, experience. Koponen points this out that the thought of possibility raising a family may become far more complicated once the homosexual identity has surfaced (11). Ben’s fears of losing heterosexual privilege, coupled with distancing

himself from his family, push him further away from accepting his homosexual identity, and keeps him locked in the early stages of the Cass model.

Arguably, Rafe begins the novel in either the “identity tolerance” or “identity acceptance” stage. Rafe begins the novel fearing that he is only being seen as a token homosexual, and that his homosexuality is the predominant feature that defines him. Rafe’s negative experiences with homosexuality, the tokenism, has brought him into Koponen’s notion of “identity foreclosure” (20). Rafe has decided to take charge of his own identity formation and in place, trade it in for a new one. On the other hand, Rafe also has found acceptance from his parents and members of his community in Boulder. Rafe has established friendships with other homosexuals and could easily be placed into the “identity acceptance” of the model. From what is seen in retrospect in the novel, Rafe most likely begins prior to the novel in the “identity acceptance” stage, before relapsing to “identity tolerance” at the start of the novel. Interestingly, the novel condemns both “tolerance” and “acceptance” in favor of celebrating differences, as seen with Mr. Scarborough’s lecture to his class on the very topic, and the novel’s ending lines. Rafe is eventually able to move past his relapse on the Cass model, and into the fifth stage, “Identity Pride.” Towards the end of the novel, Rafe joins Natick’s GSA and establishes friendships with other homosexual boys his own age (304-311). The novel ends by establishing what arguably Rafe and Konigsberg feel is appropriate for how homosexuals and heterosexuals deal with homosexuality.

Konigsberg ends the novel with Rafe’s realizing the need to celebrate the labels that define him rather than accept or tolerate them: “We were dancers and drummers and standers and jugglers and there was nothing anyone needed to accept or tolerate. We celebrated” (320). For a character who spends so much time forming his homosexual identity in the “acceptance”

and “tolerance” sections of the Cass model, Rafe ends the novel wanting to celebrate the labels that define people. Konigsberg’s ending is left open for both homosexual and heterosexual characters to celebrate the differences between them. This helps push Rafe to the final stage of the Cass model, “Identity Synthesis,” where Rafe’s homosexuality no longer defines him, but still remains an intricate part of his self-identification—the labels which define him (Koponen 21).

Konigsberg ends his novel in a drastically different place from Sanchez. Sanchez has privileged a masculine ideal for a homosexual boy. Konigsberg has done something unique to his market by writing endings for characters that fully celebrate different identities rather than the acceptance that Sanchez has created with his. While some may criticize this distinction based on the near ten-year gap between these novels, one of Sanchez’s contemporaries, David Levithan, wrote *Boy Meets Boy* in the same year as *Rainbow Boys*. Much like *Openly Straight*, *Boy Meets Boy* celebrates homosexuality, albeit in a fairy tale setting.

Chapter 4: Coming to a Gay Utopia: Gay Identity in David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*

Released in 2003, David Levithan shook a community of readers with his debut novel, *Boy Meets Boy*. Unlike the traditional homosexual YA narrative that saw a youth struggling to accept him/herself, or others, *Boy Meets Boy* creates a seemingly utopian environment that not only accepts homosexuality, but celebrates it. Critics like Amy Pattee, in her article, "Sexual Fantasy: The Queer Utopia of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*," likens the novel to a gay utopia, where a drag queen can be quarterback of the football team, and the Gay-Straight Alliance holds major weight in the high school's social scene. Protagonist Paul outs himself to the audience within the first few paragraphs of the novel, identifying himself in terms that many homosexual protagonists before him couldn't do until late into their respected novels, if at all. While seen as a progressive novel that celebrates homosexuality, *Boy Meets Boy* still exhibits heteronormative markers, homophobia, and continues to privilege heterosexuality.

The world of *Boy Meets Boy* is carnivale, where typical narratives are somehow flipped. Characters don't exhibit heteronormativity; if anything, Levithan creates a world where homonormativity could be argued. *Boy Meets Boy* dissolves a typical sexual binary that segregates homosexuals to typical cultural roles. Homosexual youths are able to hold positions of social status (quarterback and class president) without their sexuality being called into question. *Boy Meets Boy* even goes as far to mock traditional aspects of heteronormativity, by having a character question his possible heterosexuality. Where characters like Jason from Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* suffer identity crises that have them question their heterosexuality, Levithan has one of his characters question his homosexuality. Kyle, one of Paul's love interest, goes through a "straight phase," where he experiments with dating a girl before he returns to his realization that he's homosexual. Whereas typical novels in gay YA genre would take one experimenting

with their sexuality as a plot for an entire novel, Levithan presents it as an after thought—a joke, saying, “(He didn’t realize he was straight at the time)” (18). Although this line is found in Paul’s internal dialogue, the line separates itself from those around it with parentheses that call readers to look at the line differently. This can be seen as Levithan informing his audience that in *Boy Meets Boy*’s world one is assumed gay until outed as straight. While Levithan creates situations like this, his novel doesn’t abolish heterosexuality. Many of the novel’s side characters are celebrated heterosexuals, including Paul’s best friend Joni, his parents, and his brother. Levithan doesn’t immediately privilege one sexuality over the other, but instead, blurs the lines that exist between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This raises the question of how environments like the one in *Boy Meets Boy* shape homosexual identity. Whereas the characters from *Rainbow Boys* and *Openly Straight* move throughout the Vivien Cass Model of Identity Formation, Levithan’s characters are grounded in their sexual identity. Cass’s model describes the final stage, Identity Synthesis, as dissolving a barrier that is formed between the heterosexual and the homosexual—a binary that says “us against them.” Homosexuality becomes “integrated with all other aspects of self” (Koponen 21).

Identity synthesis is most prominently seen with the school’s drag queen quarterback who goes by Infinite Darlene. When Paul is first found running into her, Infinite Darlene is described as a “six-foot-four football player scuttling through the halls in high heels, a red shock wig, and more-than-passable make-up” (15). Infinite Darlene has created an identity that synthesizes the qualifiers that make up her identity. Although biologically male, Daryl Heisenberg (the name she went by previously), Infinite Darlene has created a merged identity that has married the masculine football player with the feminized drag queen. Levithan blurs the hierarchy of homosexuality we see in Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys*: Jason, who represents the most masculine

homosexual through his physical stature and aptitude at contact sports, and Nelson who represented the most feminized version of male homosexuality by dressing in drag. Infinite Darlene marries these two concepts. Throughout *Rainbow Boys*, Jason and Nelson are most often found to be at odds with one another, and are typically only ever in contact through their mutual friend Kyle.

Infinite Darlene represents a hyper social blurring of the homosexual hierarchy that other writers have taken for granted in their novels. She is the masculine quarterback *and* the feminized drag queen. She transcends the social boundaries typically affiliated with these positions in the high school. Infinite Darlene's femininity doesn't keep her from being popular in her school, which contrasts with Nelson who is a social pariah. Infinite Darlene represents the dissolving of qualifiers that are affiliated with sex. Not only is Infinite Darlene the quarterback of the football team, but she also becomes the homecoming queen. Her persona as a drag queen allows her to transcend the barriers that separate typical masculine and feminine behavior. Infinite Darlene is not merely a six-foot tall football player in a dress who embodies both masculinity and femininity; rather she is a complex embodiment of something entirely different. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp describe drag identity as "neither masculine nor feminine, but rather their own complex genders" (114). In a novel where every other character is referred to by first name, Infinite Darlene is only ever referred to as *Infinite Darlene*, an embodiment of this new persona. This is why Paul makes the connection that no one refers to Infinite Darlene as Daryl Heisenberg, and that no one can remember Daryl "since Infinite Darlene consumed him so completely" (16). This is the rare opportunity in *Boy Meets Boy* where Infinite Darlene, albeit in reference to her time as Daryl, is referred to by the masculine pronoun "him" and not the feminine "her" or "she." One may be thinking, "why discuss a drag queen's persona in a

discussion centered on gay identity?” Infinite Darlene is the manifestation of the world Paul lives, a world where standard adolescent gender roles are dissolved, but where heteronormativity is constantly being challenged. This is an important distinction that separates *Boy Meets Boy* from the novels that came before it, and many of novels that will follow it. This lack of heteronormativity is one of the key characteristics that set *Boy Meets Boy* as utopian literature when being discussed by critics.

In her analysis of *Boy Meets Boy* as utopian literature, Amy Pattee describes the relationship between Paul and Noah as only being successful because the utopian environment allows for it (159). Historically, gay YA lit hasn't allowed for their characters to have an on-going successful relationship by the end of their novels; if anything, the novels have privileged their characters having a greater understanding of themselves. *Openly Straight* finds Rafe and Ben barely speaking to one another by the end of the novel, but Rafe ends the novel knowing he needs to celebrate his identity rather than hiding it. *Rainbow Boys* ends with Nelson in a relationship, albeit with an HIV positive adult. Jason and Kyle's relationship is left open as Jason ends the novel still coming to terms with his sexuality. Pattee states that *Boy Meets Boy* ends in a situation that is typical of the heterosexual romance novel; however, *Boy Meets Boy* requires a utopian setting for their characters to end happy, whereas a heterosexual romance would not require such a utopia (159). This raises a question: does *Boy Meets Boy* perpetuate heteronormative privilege by placing the story in a town without heteronormative boundaries? Could Paul and Noah not have had a happy ending in a heteronormative town? Pattee's reading makes it seem so, where it takes a unique location to allow a homosexual relationship to flourish. Such a utopia creates an unrealistic fantasy where a homosexual boy can say without being ironic, as Cart and Jenkins point out, "I'm not used to being hated" (18) and "*What a wonderful*

world” (185). William Banks addresses the concern that *Boy Meets Boy* creates an unrealistic narrative, by saying, “In presenting a ‘modern fairytale,’ Levithan disrupts mythical constructions that continue to pervade American culture, particularly myths about gender, sexuality, and religion, and creates a space in a critical pedagogy for reenvisioning the options before us” (34). Banks doesn’t dissolve *Boy Meets Boy* as a fantasy, but rather establishes its use for cultural reform in social constructs that are dominated by heteronormative ideals and practices. If one were to flip *Boy Meets Boy*’s narrative, and change perspective to outsider Tony, audiences would see a world still dominated by heteronormative constructs and behavior.

Discovering one’s identity in a location outside their hometown is standard in the novels of this analysis. Rafe goes to Natick to discover his self-identity, and the *Rainbow Boys* series ends with the trio on a cross-country road trip where they finally come to terms with their relationships. *Boy Meets Boy* flips this narrative by allowing Paul’s town to act as the location where a homosexual identity can be discovered. By situating Paul’s town near a religious community, Levithan validates Pattee’s claim that the homosexual romance requires a utopian setting. One of the novel’s subplots finds Paul’s friend Tony trying to find acceptance. Tony is from “the next town over” and has “extremely religious” parents who don’t approve of their son’s homosexuality (1). Tony must leave this community to find interactions with other homosexuals and celebrate his identity. This trope appears in early homosexual YA literature with the novel *Blackbird*, where Johnnie Ray must leave his community to find meaningful relationships with other homosexuals. Paul’s town acts as a gay Mecca for Tony, an escape from a heteronormative narrative.

While Levithan creates a world filled with drag queen quarterbacks, motorcycle riding cheerleaders, and Gay-Straight Alliances with the sole purpose of teaching straight boys to

dance, one can easily forget the instances in *Boy Meets Boy* that perpetuate a homosexual identity crises. In the previous two chapters, I discussed two different forms that homosexual identity crises can take. In the case of *Rainbow Boys*, Jason follows a typical narrative of a heterosexual questioning the possibility of homosexuality, whereas Rafe, in *Openly Straight*, accepts his homosexuality, but hides it in an attempt as being seen as more than his sexuality. When analyzing *Boy Meets Boy*, one can see that Paul is actually little more than his sexuality. From the first chapter, audiences are introduced to Ted, Paul's best friend and Joni's on-again off-again boyfriend. When talking to Paul, Ted will often refer to him as "Gay Boy," which seems out of place in a world that is filled with open homosexuals. Even in the presence of fellow homosexual Tony, Ted refers to Tony as Tony, and Paul as Gay Boy. Paul doesn't question his homosexuality; in fact, in the second chapter, appropriately titled "Paul is Gay," Paul explains how he discovered his homosexuality. In his kindergarten class, Paul reads a note on his teacher's desk that reads, "PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF." This is followed by, "I might not have realized I was different if Mrs. Benchly hadn't pointed it out" (8). When discussing this with Mrs. Benchly, Paul notes that he assumed all boys were gay since they spent their time with other boys. Surprisingly, Paul notes in retrospect lines before this that "[he] might not have realized [he] was different" (8). In a novel that celebrates differences among sexualities, it's surprising that Levithan would have Paul describe himself in terms that would continue to perpetuate a heteronormative binary. Logically, the only sense of normality to be found in *Boy Meets Boy* is the celebration of being different as no character speaks to being a part of a larger "normal" culture, which is something that dominates the language in *Rainbow Boys* and *Openly Straight*.

Sanchez and Konigsberg's characters perpetuate an idea of normal—a default setting a person can be inclined to follow. Corrine Wickens proposes that novels that predated *Boy Meets Boy* “challenge homophobia, but ultimately leave it intact” (Wickens 149). Wickens’ argument analyzes the discourse seen in these novels, and which words perpetuate throughout the novels. While characters like Jason and Rafe grow as characters throughout their respected novels, the world doesn’t distinguish cultural intolerance. By the end of *Rainbow Boys*, homosexuals are still being referred to as “fags.” *Openly Straight*, while slightly more progressive than *Rainbow Boys*, ends with Rafe still assuming that heterosexuals are combative towards homosexuals. Wickens paints *Boy Meets Boy* as a modern fairytale, much as Banks does, which in many ways is the closest the novel can get to achieve normativity. The novel forwards the classic trope of boy meets girl, boy and girl breakup, boy and girl reconcile (Wickens 149), and if you replace “girl” with another “boy,” the plot of *Boy Meets Boy* seems little changed. While *Rainbow Boys* ends with the boys coupling with one another, their future remains undetermined. Bigotry and homophobia await them in the future. *Boy Meets Boy* creates a happily ever after where the boys don’t have adversity to face going forward. Although this sense of normal exists outside the novel, Paul and Noah have no need to discuss what is normal. Rafe and Jason discuss “normal” behavior because they feel that their homosexuality makes them somehow abnormal, or different. If a character didn’t feel abnormal, though, why would they have a need to discuss normality? For Paul, the idea of boy meets boy and reconciliation is normal, as he has done this before with his previous fling, Kyle.

Levithan has created a world where sexuality and gender have become far more fluid than that of his contemporaries. Characters like Infinite Darlene represent the dissolving of gender barriers by representing positive aspects of masculinity and femininity. Kyle, on the other

hand, shows that Levithan is aware of a fluid sexuality. Levithan's does not compose a narrative in which one is necessarily gay or straight; rather, this binary can be dissolved in place of something far more complex. Some may criticize this argument by saying Kyle is merely playing off the trope of homosexual experiences being a part of confusion, as Paul does think, "[Kyle] didn't realize he was straight at the time" (18). Kyle isn't the only character to have such a complex sexuality, as second-string quarterback Chuck has a similar complex sexuality.

Chuck is introduced as having "[fallen] for Infinite Darlene" (23). He holds animosity towards Infinite Darlene, who never returned his affection. The character is later shown dating Paul's best friend, Joni. Chuck's sexuality becomes harder to understand when he is seen as having affection for the biological male, yet identified as female, Infinite Darlene. Joni, on the other hand, identifies as her biological female gender. Chuck's fluid sexual identity, showing affection for both Infinite Darlene and Joni, demonstrates Levithan's changing of the homosexual YA genre.

Levithan has been praised by critics like P.L Thomas and Antero Garcia who identifies all of Levithan's work over the past decade as disrupting a cultural understanding of what gender and identity can look like (91). Levithan has written characters like Chuck, Kyle, and Infinite Darlene, who express a break from a traditional identity formation in these novels. *Boy Meets Boy* situates nicely between the publication of *Rainbow Boys* and *Openly Straight*. Where *Rainbow Boys* privileges a heteronormative idea of homosexuality by pairing the "straightest" of the boys together, *Openly Straight* has shown progress with more complex gender fluidity. Ben's character in *Openly Straight* never confesses to a homosexual identity, despite having sexual relationships with Rafe. Ben continues to affirm a straight identity, because that is what he

believes society asks of him. Society is a key component in understanding the differences between why Chuck never questions his identity and Ben does.

Boy Meets Boy is a fairy tale, following in a move set by Jonathan Harvey's play *A Beautiful Thing: An Urban Fairy Tale* (1993). Critics like Pattee have already noted that *Boy Meets Boy*'s utopian setting is what allows for Paul and Noah's relationship to thrive at the end of the novel—essentially allowing them to grasp at a happily ever after. Harvey's play is important to mention here because it sets up similar stakes. While Harvey's play takes place in a modern working class town that expresses homophobic fears similar to that of *Rainbow Boys*, the fairy tale aspect is that the play's two central lovers, Ste and Jamie (both homosexual teens), end the play by dancing together in the streets of a London working class neighborhood. This is echoed with Levithan's own ending where the group of teenagers are found dancing: "the dirt is our dance floor. The stars are our elaborate decoration. We dance with abandon" (184). Levithan and Harvey leave their respected audiences with the possibility that their characters could continue to live in their fairy tale lives. Years later, Konigsberg would end his novel *Openly Straight* in a similar way. He ends with his characters dancing and celebrating who they are. Konigsberg's, however, is not a fairy tale; Rafe doesn't end his novel with a chance at a happily ever after, because he is without a prince. Ben, Rafe's prince charming, doesn't live in a fairy tale setting. Ben lives in a realistic society that he allows to dictate the relationships he pursues.

The identity formation found in *Boy Meets Boy* is that of camp and fairy tale—where a protagonist can discover "a good sense of self" (8) in kindergarten, and be "the first openly gay president of his third grade class" (11). The school's star quarterback can also be a drag queen, and homosexuality can be openly celebrated as a norm. While some may criticize Levithan's novel as unrealistic, it help set a trend away from the binaries that have dominated the genre.

Characters no longer had to be gay or straight, but instead were allowed to express their own individual sense of self. *Boy Meets Boy* allows Ben of *Openly Straight* to be fluid in his sexuality; he doesn't have to express a definitive sexual orientation like the protagonists of *Rainbow Boys*. Having characters like Chuck and Ben opens the genre up past merely classifying oneself as gay or straight, but allows their characters to expand upon their identity formation past even the novels' end. They are allowed to continue past the confines of the novel and hopefully discover that "a good sense of self" is not immediately discovered in a singular moment, or interactions with one other person.

Chapter 5: In Response to the Future of Homosexual Young Adult Literature

As more homosexual YA literature is being published, we are seeing trends that differ from a narrative based entirely on homosexual affirmation. Whereas characters in Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* and David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* end their respective novels more confident in themselves and their sexual identity, Bill Konigsberg's *Openly Straight* sets a new precedent that allows for a major character to end the novel still questioning his identity. While Rafe ends the novel accepting his homosexual identity, Ben's sexual identity is left to be determined. This returns to a trope in the early homosexual YA genre that was discussed in chapter one. Characters like Davy from John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* and Chuck from Isabel Holland's *Man Without a Face* both end their novels without coming to terms with their sexuality—as sexuality isn't even a topic these characters discuss towards the conclusion of their stories. Davy asks his friend Altschuler if they can respect one another, while Chuck ends away from his family in his new boarding school. What makes these characters unique is that neither claims a homosexual identity, which links them closely to Ben. While Ben performs homosexual acts with Rafe, he doesn't claim a homosexual identity—and readers are encouraged to accept this reading because we are never offered Ben's thoughts that would allude to a repressed sexuality. Ben is uncertain of what his sexuality is and he shows anxiety over it, whereas Davy and Chuck don't show that same anxiety by the time their novels end. Ben is allowed to have uncertainty over his sexuality because he lives in a time where homosexuality is accepted. Chuck and Davy live in a time where the image of growing up into a homosexual man would have them turning into McLeod – hideously scarred and a recluse. Holland and Donovan have also written their narratives themes other than homosexuality and

their characters have other concerns. Konigsberg's novel is centered on homosexuality, so it's unsurprising to see Ben reach a sexual identity crisis. Rafe begins the novel afraid of only being seen as his sexuality, and Ben is afraid of how his family may react to his possible homosexuality. Ben may fear that his family may only see his homosexuality, and not the son they've raised. Readers may find answers to Ben's sexuality in Konigsberg's upcoming sequel novel *Honestly Ben*, but at the moment of this analysis readers can only speculate on Ben based on the dialogue Konigsberg provides.

In the past decade there has been a greater number of homosexual texts being released in the YA genre, albeit still very low in comparison to other novels. Even further, there is a lack of novels that place characters of color at the forefront. While Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird* places Johnnie Ray as the protagonist, race is rarely mentioned and not a plot point of the novel in the same way Alex Sanchez has used race. Sanchez's novels highlight Hispanic community in his novels, as all of his novels feature a prominent Hispanic character in some capacity.

In 2006, when Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins published *The Heart Has It's Reasons*, a bibliography for the GLBTQ YA genre, they ended the book by asking for more novels that feature characters whose homosexuality was a part the novel in such a way that the subject of the novel isn't their discovering their sexuality (166). *Rainbow Boys* featured Nelson, but as discussed, Nelson only represents a third of his novel, and the other two-thirds are spent seeing Kyle and Jason open up to themselves and others. *Openly Straight*'s Rafe arguably begins his novel questioning his own homosexuality, as he believes that his homosexuality has consumed him. *Boy Meets Boy* is the closest to what Cart and Jenkins are looking for with protagonist Paul discovering his sexuality long before the novel begins and with a host of other gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer characters, but the utopian setting and camp value cost Paul meaningful

character development. Cart and Jenkins' bibliography ends in 2004, shortly after the release of *Boy Meets Boy*. In a decade since their research the market has grown wider and novels have been released that show homosexual characters who begin their novel unquestioning of their sexuality.

In 2015, Will Walton released *Anything Could Happen*, which follows protagonist Tretch through a school year as he deals with having a crush on his heterosexual best friend Matt. The same year also saw the release of Shaun David Hutchinson's *The Five Stages of Andrew Brawley*, which follows protagonist Andrew as he secretly lives in a hospital following the death of his parents. Andrew never questions his sexuality throughout the novel, and audiences primarily discover his sexuality when Andrew begins interacting with a boy named Rusty, who was a victim of violent homophobia. Novels like these suggest that the market is changing, and the narratives available for homosexual youths are no longer just a rite-of-passage that ends with their affirming their sexuality. We can begin to see that these novels are following similar narratives like Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird* and Andrew Chambers' *Dance On My Grave*. Both of these novels featured protagonists who were confident in their homosexuality from the start of their novels and featured plots that weren't only about their protagonists affirming their sexuality. Walton's and Hutchinson's novels are showing that the market is returning to a narrative that allows a protagonist to be homosexual without the entire novel being centered around their affirmation.

I'll Get There and *Man Without a Face* both begin showing homosexuality in the middle points of the novels. We have to question, though, whether or not homosexuality is the crux of these novels? While recent novels like *Rainbow Boys* and *Openly Straight* begin their novels by questioning a homosexual identity and building upon that idea throughout the novel, *I'll Get*

There and *Man Without a Face* both end and begin without questioning sexuality. *I'll Get There* centers on Davy moving in with his mother after his grandmother dies, and *Man Without a Face* follows Chuck as he preps for an entrance exam. Arguably, neither of these novels are about homosexual youths, because neither claim a homosexual identity by the end of the novel, but despite that, both of these novels made significant strides in establishing a place for homosexual YA lit. These novels paved a way for others that did feature unquestioned homosexuality.

Blackbird and Aidan Chambers' *Dance on My Grave* both feature protagonists who were confident and unquestioning homosexuals, characters who established a homosexual identity before experiencing homosexual sex. As with the recent Hutchinson and Walton novels, we can see that the market may be ready to return to more diverse narrative. Novels like these help affirm young readers that homosexuality identity synthesis isn't contingent on merely having sex with a same-sex partner, but rather that identity formation is a complex process.

Novels like *Rainbow Boys & Openly Straight* show how damaging a narrative solely written around individual homosexual acceptance can be. Alex Sanchez presenting *Rainbow Boys* as a homosexual identity spectrum causes his characters to be presented in terms of how "gay" they are. His spectrum paints homosexuals as either being consumed by a homosexual identity like Nelson, or only "slightly gay" like Jason. A spectrum like this becomes damaging to understanding a homosexual identity as it causes homosexuals to believe that their homosexuality can consume them—much like Rafe believes at the start of *Openly Straight*. This spectrum helps support the idea that sexuality is a binary as there is no heterosexual spectrum reflecting how straight someone is, but rather the context of how "straight" someone is still only persists in the homosexual narrative.

In 2013, the film adaptation of Brent Hartinger *Geography Club* (2003) brought the popular gay YA novel to a wider audience. While the film and book follow Russel Middlebrook as he comes to terms with his sexual identity, it is the character Ike who perpetuates the idea of sexual spectrums. In the film, scenes with Ike often involve him discussing how gay and straight he is in terms of percentages. Throughout the film, he slowly moves from saying he is 80% straight and 20% gay varying these numbers each time, until he has flipped them and then declares he's 100% gay. Alex Newell portrays Ike in the film and creates a gag around these percentages. Audiences are well aware that Ike is 100% gay from the moment the character is introduced based on mannerisms, dress, and speech. Ike becomes a comic relief character, and the film perpetuates the idea that the effeminate homosexual man is nothing more than the subject of mockery. Notably, the novel does not feature Ike discussing such percentages. The film adaptation seems to pick up on the same idea of "spectrum" that Sanchez and other writers have used. Ultimately, when this spectrum isn't really a spectrum, but a hierarchy, it does more harm than good.

Blackbird, adapted into a film in 2014, takes so many liberties with the plot that the film shares little more than a title with its source material. While this analysis isn't concerned with film movements, it is important to note that this film is ultimately less progressive than its thirty-year-old source material. Whereas he is highly confident in his sexuality in the novel, Johnnie Ray is highly questioning in the film to the point of rejecting this identity based on religious beliefs. While film's depiction of the struggles of homosexual teens deserves its own analysis, it is important to note their role in establishing the homosexual narrative—as at their core they are still stories being heard by the market and play an important role in identity formation.

Homosexual YA literature has made strides in progressing how identity formation can take place. While characters like those in *Rainbow Boys*, *Boy Meets Boy*, and *Openly Straight's* Rafe have shown that homosexuality can be accepted and celebrated, the market has allowed for character's like Ben to continue to discover their identity after adolescence. Identity formation is an ongoing process, and while the characters that help affirm a homosexual identity at an early age are becoming more prevalent in the market, it is healthy to see that there are characters like Ben who are not stigmatized for remaining confused about their identity by the end of their novels. A part of celebrating homosexuality is celebrating the differences that separate us, whether that be heterosexuality, homosexuality, or confused on our sexuality. The important part is that the YA market is growing and more stories that celebrate our differences are being published.

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