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The Evolution of Queer Representation in the Young Adult Genre

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

Beginning in 1969, the queer young adult fiction genre has attracted an increasing number of readers. Many critics, however, have noted large problems in the genre, fueled by themes of homophobia and fear, which hindered rather than advanced normalized queer representation. Since the late 1990s, a growing number of books have worked to eradicate these stereotypes and offer a greater range of possibilities for diversity and celebration of queer identities. This thesis will examine three novels that made large contributions to the advancement of queer representation across the young adult genre. The works are discussed in historical and critical contexts—particularly queer theory—and through my own experiences as a gay man and student of literature. Although these novels are not perfect, I believe each book has made a significant positive contribution to the portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities across young adult literature.

The History, Evolution and Criticism of the Queer Young Adult Genre

The History and Evolution

Queer young adult novels – those adolescent novels explicitly depicting characters and storylines within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+¹) community – serve a vital purpose in normalizing queer culture for young readers as well as providing LGBTQ+ youth with positive, healthy, and realistic depictions of queer characters. Though these novels are charged with the important task of providing positive representations of queer identities to young readers, the genre has been battling numerous obstacles since its inception: issues of representation, visibility, and diversity have plagued the genre since its earliest days. Numerous novels within the genre stand out to break from tradition and clear pathways to new realms of possibility, yet as one barrier is broken, another is set in its place. In spite of the ever-present barriers within the queer young adult literature, the genre has made immense strides to better represent queer identities and lives to young adult readers.

Michael Cart and Christine A Jenkins' work *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* (2006) – an extensive study on the history of the queer young adult genre – cites the beginning of the genre with the 1969 publication of John Donovan's novel *I'll Get There. It'd Better Be Worth The Trip*. Though there had been young adult works prior to Donovan's that briefly dealt with queer themes, Donovan's novel was the first to display homosexuality as a prominent element in a character's story:

¹ The "+" sign is being used to pay recognition to identities not included in the standard

A moment of sexual discovery is told simply but poignantly in the life of a thirteen-year-old boy, through his relationship with a friend of his own sex and age. It is how he absorbs this experience that becomes the key to what will happen next. Davy is able to face the experience and to make his choice. (Cart et al 8)

Though this novel was the first major representation of a queer character in the young adult genre, it is evident that the overall message of the novel does not depict a positive representation of queer identity. Davy is depicted as shameful of the sexual encounter with his friend Altshuler. Davy states, “I guess the important thing is not to do it again” (Cart et al 12). Davy’s feelings of humility, shame, and willingness to brush the encounter aside do not create a positive representation of being a queer youth; rather, it reinforces homosexuality as a phase in adolescence and simultaneously promotes internal homophobia through the protagonist’s fears of his sexual identity. Presenting sexual exploration as “a phase of growing up” is highly problematic because of the negative attitudes it encourages regarding queer identities. Though Donovan’s novel is, by today’s standards, a troublesome depiction of queer adolescence, its status as the first novel of its kind gives it a pivotal role in the history of the genre.

Being the first of its kind, Donovan’s novel provided a framework to other authors for how a queer young adult narrative should look. However, this framework – held together by its negative portrayals of queer adolescents – gave way to a slow and staggered continuance of the queer young adult genre. Through the 1970s, a mere nine young adult novels with queer content were published, “and too many of these were marred by stereotypical characters and predictable plots centered on the inherent misery

of gay people's lives" (Cart et al 17). Whether it was the threat of physical violence for being gay, the fear that gay adults were pedophiles, or that gay or lesbian sexual experiences could just be phases, many of the novels published in the 1970's did nothing more than perpetuate the stereotypes set in place by Donovan's work and the dominant prejudices of society. In the works that were geared towards the young, queer generation, there was no wiggle room for hope or a sense of community: every story reinforces the "otherness" of homosexuality and other queer identities, showing a queer person's existence as isolated and bleak. It was not until 1979 when David Rees' novel *In the Tent* was published – which was not published in the United States until 1985 – that a queer young adult novel mentioned anything about the existence of an LGBT*Q+ community.

Though it's not actively denied in other novels, community simply does not exist. As a book that first appeared in England in 1979 but was not published in the U.S. until 1985, *In the Tent* straddles the two decades and foreshadows advances that would enhance the quality of America YA fiction in the years that followed." [sic] (Cart et al 32)

Though not published in the United States until 1985, Rees' novel proves to be one of the most significant queer young adult novels of the 1970s. Unlike the other novels published at this time, which emphasized the social isolation caused by being LGBTQ+, *In the Tent's* emphasis on a queer community inspired for feelings of hope and belonging. Rees' novel foreshadows an inevitable trend towards positive and hopeful representation across the genre.

The genre continued to grow in volume throughout the 1980s, with more works published in this decade than ever before: from 1980 to 1989, a grand total of forty queer

young adult novels appeared in the United States, quadrupling the number published before 1980. Though there was a massive upturn in quantity, “only seven would offer notable contributions to the field of thematic innovation or literary quality” (Cart et al 40). For those thirty-three titles that were not viewed as being notable in terms of contribution, many of their issues came from following the already existing tropes within the genre – from the usage of homophobia as the primary plot device to the isolation of queer characters from a queer community. Other issues included not focusing on LGBTQ+ characters as the majority of the protagonists are straight people who discover the sexuality of a secondary character – typically filling the role of friend, educator, or relative to the protagonist. Many of these tropes were present in these substandard works ultimately contributed to the homogenization of the queer narrative: the vast majority of these works focused on coming out², neglecting other elements of life in favor of the early stages of a person’s discovery of identity. Although coming out is a very significant event for many within the LGBTQ+ community, the heavy emphasis on this experience ultimately trivialized the process, making it out to be the singular most important moment in a queer person’s life and neglecting that there is life before and after coming out.

Contributing to the presentation of queer people as alone, one major element that was left out of most of these novels was romance. Of the forty novels released during the 1980s, Cart et al cite only Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* (1982) – a love story focusing on two high school students Annie and Liza – as a positive depiction of queer romance:

² The process of disclosing one’s gender identity or sexual orientation

Annie's particular treatment of falling in love is so effectively drawn that it can easily be generalized or extrapolated to the heterosexual experience of first love. And indeed, with the exception of Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), it's hard to recall a more nuanced picture of the gradual deepening intimacy of teens falling in love than *Annie on My Mind*. (55)

As noted previously, many of the LGBTQ+ young adult narratives inadvertently trivialized queer identities. Garden begins to detach the genre from the tradition and refocus the queer young adult novel in *Annie on My Mind*: though homophobic discourse is still present in the novel, its presence is overshadowed by the “attention to describing the evolution – and complex nature – of the relationship between Liza and Annie” (55). The detailed development of Liza, Annie, and their love for one another, Garden not only creates the first young adult novel to show a lesbian couple in a positive light; she sets a new standard in terms of the possibilities of queer young adult literature: homophobia and fear are no longer essential cruxes of the queer plotline, as *Annie on My Mind* is able to be driven by the budding relationship of the protagonist and title character.

Unfortunately, the standard set by *Annie on My Mind* was not approached by other novels for quite some time. Just as the novels of the 1980s grew in number but stagnated in content, so too did the majority of the works published in the 1990s. The volume of queer works published in the 1990s nearly doubled the amount produced in the 1980s – as well as spanning into other realms of literature like poetry, short stories, and nonfiction works. The vast majority of these novels continued the tradition of fueling the substance of the novel with homophobic discourse and elements of fear. One of the largest issues with the genre, however, proved to be quite ironic: the growing number of

novels published led to a growing separation between the queer characters and the queer readers.

If one key function of this literature is to give faces to GLBTQ youth, increased narrative distance may blur the portrait. Placing an intermediary heterosexual character between the reader and the gay/lesbian character can reduce the likelihood of reader's identification with that character... The bottom line is that more GLBTQ books than ever appeared in the 1990s, but the overall gay/lesbian characters moved farther from center stage. (Cart et al 91-92)

Though Cart et al note that there are a few novels with heterosexual narrators – primarily, Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) – that are ultimately positive, the vast majority of these tales are seen through the perspectives of narrators with wavering opinions towards their queer counterpart(s). Having these narrators with questionable loyalty to their newly “out” friends or relatives creates an even larger rift between the characters and the audience: if the straight protagonist has difficulty accepting someone for their identity, it shows that coming out can come with the price of friendship.

The turn of the century brought forward a new wave of queer young adult literature. Between 2000 and 2004 – the final year encompassed in *The Heart Has Its Reasons* – “a total of sixty-two YA titles with GLBTQ content appeared,” nearly matching the volume published during the entirety of the previous decade. Unlike the 1990s, the growing canon of queer young adult novels began to see more novels that placed LGBTQ+ characters in the central spotlight along with a diversity of

representation of queer and trans identities. Though these characters began to take command of their own stories at a more rapid pace, the content of the works was still reliant on the tradition of using homophobia and fear as a heavy-handed plot device. This continued throughout the early era of the 2000s until the publication of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). In his work, Levithan still incorporates moments of homophobia, but they are never the primary sources of conflict or plot in the novel, allowing other plot points to take center stage and ultimately allow "a gay character can say 'I'm not used to being hated' without being ironic" (Cart et al 158). Though Levithan's work, the tropes of the genre are cast aside and a new realm of possibility is created for future LGBTQ+ young adult works.

The realms of possibility created by Levithan have only been further explored since the publication of *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). The content of the genre began to evolve with the modern LGBTQ+ movement, allowing for more opportunities to disrupt heteronormative ways of thinking along with larger representation of LGBTQ+ identities: novels focusing on bisexual, transgender, and queer characters are becoming more prevalent within the genre, along with a larger number of works being published highlighting queer and trans people of color (QTPOC). With the expanding canon of the genre, some scholars are calling for an expanded set of criteria for novels in the queer young adult genre. The article "Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature" (2014) by Stephanie Logan, Terri Lasswell, Yolanda Hood, and Dwight Watson is one such example of these standards being implicated: ranging from the work's "literary merit" to issues of "social justice and equity" and "sexual expressiveness," these criteria are meant "to delve into contemporary texts and move

beyond simple coming-out narratives to engage readers in thinking emphatically and critically” (31).

Criticism in the Queer Young Adult Genre

While the presence of LGBTQ+ characters has become more prevalent since the early days of the queer young adult genre, many critics see the issue of queer young adult literature not only a matter of representation, but as a matter of being able to overcome the established traditions and expectations. As noted in the early history of the genre, numerous works reinforced negative stigmas associated with being part of the LGBTQ+ community as many of the works highlighted the fears and isolation of young queers. Though the genre has grown exponentially in terms of volume – with more and more queer young adult novels being published every year – many of these works struggle with breaking from the reliance on externalized and internalized homophobia enforced by their predecessors.

One theoretical framework that lends itself handily to observing novels in this genre is queer theory. As defined in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (200), queer theory is “a radical rethinking of the relationship between subjectivity, sexuality and representation” within textual or societal discourse (Seldon 252). Deriving from gay theory and lesbian theory – which, respectively, focus on male and female homosociality – queer theory holds the binary natures of sexuality and gender under erasure and, consequently, creates a multiplicity of identities. In literary context, queer theory focuses on eradicating the binary oppositions, whether linguistic or thematic, and stereotypes of sexuality and gender within a body of text, aspiring to valorize sexual plurality and gender ambivalence of the characters and their world. The concepts that fuel

queer theory become highly significant to the queer young adult genre because they give scholars a framework to analyze the novels and their methods of disbanding – and in some instances, simultaneously reinforcing – the harmful nature of heteronormative culture.

In the article “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Young Adult Queer Literature” (2011), Corrine M Wickens examines seventeen young adult LGBTQ+ novels “in which major characters and conflicts centered around issues of sexual and gender identities” (149). In all but one of the novels in Wickens’ survey, homophobic discourse was the primary source for plot and character development, with authors presenting homosexuality in negative ways and reinforcing the necessity of secret, coded language regarding sexuality. Each of these novels attempts to “challenge homophobia, [but they] ultimately leave it intact” through their use of homophobia as the primary catalyst of the story (149). This leaves the impression that homophobia is a necessity for the queer young adult genre, negating any attempts at disbanding heteronormativity while simultaneously showing homophobia as a necessary component of queer identities (149). Works relying on these stereotypical methods are highly problematic, as readers are not only presented with the same narrative that trivializes the queer experience as a constant battle between rejection and acceptance, but are also shown that these are battles fought in vain, as homophobia cannot be conquered.

Wickens finds two primary ways that these novels perpetuate this problem of homophobia. The first of these problems is the portrayal of homosexuality as a negative entity. Though these novels attempt to normalize queer identities, they do so by

reinforcing the “otherness” of the community. Rather than deconstruct the framework of heterosexist arguments, many novels in the genre harness these attitudes to drive the plot:

Heteronormative assumptions, including homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, provide the root of the internal and external conflict for the characters in the majority of LGBTQ-themed books. The basis for these attitudes often draws upon historical allusions to homosexuality as a psychiatric deviation and illness. (Wickens 153)

Queer identity is humorously or seriously likened to illness or sin, reinforces the sense of otherness that fuels heterosexist discourse. Homosexuality and all other non-straight sexualities are demonized for being abnormal, whereas being straight is often seen as normal and healthy.

The second issue that Wickens finds in these novels is the issue of language – specifically, the codes and metaphors engrained into queer language. Wickens claims that “communities often used metaphors or roundabout phrases to discuss themselves,” and protect the community from harmful outsiders (Wickens 155). The queer community is no exception to this concept. This kind of coded language – whether a single word or a seemingly normal phrase – allows for feelings of safety and secrecy, as it assures that their identity will not be “found out” by friends, family, or those who could harm them. While this kind of language does provide a safety net for the characters in these novels, coded language inadvertently becomes a double-edged sword that isolates the people it strives to protect. The coded language at work in these novels reinforces the necessity for the secrecy of queer identities – the characters are unable to openly discuss their identities

without the fear of there being repercussions, ultimately silencing their queer voices and experiences to the outside world.

Throughout her study, Wickens found only one novel that was able to effectively dispel the heteronormative attitudes of society: Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*. In this novel, Levithan is able to effectively erase the constraints of heterocentric society by reversing the standard societal norms.

Levithan's (2003) *Boy Meets Boy*, through its blurring of genre and inventive use of linguistic features, undermines heteronormative assumptions by presenting the unthinkable: children as sexual beings, hegemonic masculinity as non-hegemonic and detrimental to cusses, and homosexuality as normalized and even ordinary. (Wickens 156).

The world that Levithan produces is in chronic juxtaposition with the standard beliefs and practices of society. Whereas heteronormative society enforces that children are sexually unaware, Levithan writes characters that are conscious of their identities at early ages. Rather than allowing characters that reinforce homophobic beliefs prevail through life, he shows that those who abide by those assumptions are instead held back due to ignorance. Ultimately, Levithan designs a world in which LGBTQ+ people are on equal ground with heterosexuals instead of casting those with queer identities into the outskirts of society. Through these "unthinkable" devices, Levithan is able to create a world in which queer characters are not only able to survive, but thrive.

Wickens is not the only critic to interpret *Boy Meets Boy* in this manner, as numerous critics laud the work for its redefining of the LGBTQ+ young adult genre. Thomas Crisp's "From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay

Adolescent Fiction” (2009) also identifies Levithan’s novel as an epiphany for the queer young adult genre: It signifies a shift in paradigms from traditionally-focused or romanticized LGBTQ+ narratives into the realm of magical realism – a style which removes homophobic discourse as the prime motivator of the novel’s elements and instead allows the characters to explore their own identities without the negative influences of homophobia and heterosexism (Crisp 336). Since the earliest days of the queer young adult genre, homophobia has been one of the primary catalysts in invoking a sense of realism within LGBTQ+ young adult literature. Even more contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult novels, such as Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, continue the traditions set in place when the genre was first born. However, Crisp views the consistent reliance on homophobic discourse as toxic to the genre:

Within the growing canon of gay young adult literature, authors who rely upon homophobic discourse may hope that their work will educate readers about the “problem” of homophobia, but the recurring reliance upon homophobia as a literary mechanism to engender “realism” in literature simultaneously implies that homophobia is too large an issue to confront and is ultimately bad, but inevitable behavior (339).

For the *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, specifically, Crisp criticizes Sanchez’s “surface-level” portrayal of young gay men where “‘realism’ is produced [through] reliance on homophobia as a mechanism for establishing believable ways in which the characters interact with one another and within [their world]” (336). In Crisp’s perspective, Sanchez is one of many writers of queer young adult fiction who adhere to the traditions of enforcing homophobia as the primary method of creating life and purpose within the text.

Although using homophobia as a method of relatability is prominent in the genre, Crisp also finds it to be a common trend in young adult fiction as a whole.

Interestingly, this use of homophobia to generate a sense of realism is not limited to “gay adolescent problem novels”; it is, I would argue, systematically used to engender a feeling of “realism” for readers of young adult literature more generally (337). [Sic]

In novels such as these, where the writers employ homophobic discourse to foster a sense of relatability, a character’s sexual orientation may be called into question, but the work consistently fights against these questions with assertions of heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and heterosexism. To support his claims, Crisp analyzes Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; a novel that has won numerous accolades for its representation of Native American culture, but according to Crisp provides “further evidence of the use of homophobia as a literary mechanism employed to invoke ‘realism’” (337). In Crisp’s perspective, the work has potential to be queer, exploring relationships between the protagonist and his male friends, and suggesting the protagonist is “gay coded,” that is, portraying many stereotypically homosexual characteristics. However, the text quickly and promptly dispels these notions, working “against this queer potential by rigorously and systematically constructing [the protagonist] as heterosexual” as well as using words like ‘faggot’ as insults, perpetuating the belief that “being gay is something to be feared” (337). Though there is potential for queer identity and inclusion in *The Absolute Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Crisp believes that it, and several other young adult books like it, manipulate the language and attitudes of homophobia and heterosexism “to make their books feel

contemporary and current for readers,” contrary to its use in queer young adult fiction, which uses “the same language in a more heavy-handed manner, employing that language to didactically work against homophobia” (338). Rather than use the language of homophobia to promote a sense of realism in their novels, the authors of young adult queer literature repurpose this language to confront and deconstruct homophobic discourse.

In his praise of magical realism, Crisp points to Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* as a model for how queer young adult novels can be written. For *Boy Meets Boy*, the style of magical realism not only allows for the generic forces of homophobic discourse to be temporarily suspended, but also allows Levithan to explore the societal concepts of sexuality and gender. In heteronormative society, the roles of gender and sexuality are clearly defined – with gender being bisected into the wholly masculine man and the truly feminine woman, and the heteronormativity of society. For *Boy Meets Boy*, the town that provides the setting of the novel proves to be a haven free from socially ingrained homophobia.

Within the first page of the book, in a chapter titled, “Now away we go,” protagonist Paul tells readers that “There isn’t really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best” (p. 1). (Crisp 341) [Sic]

In addition to the setting, Levithan also extends the blurring of societal boundaries to the realm of human sexuality, depicting sexual orientation as a fluid entity rather than a clear-cut heterosexual-homosexual binary. By depicting a town in which the lines between straight and gay are erased, Levithan showcases the possibilities that magical

realism offers the genre: there is no longer a need for fear and homophobic discourse to propel queer storylines. Ultimately, these provide readers with opportunities to find characters whose desires reflect their own, giving more opportunities for visibility and inclusion.

Through Levithan's experimentation with magical realism, much progress has been made within the queer young adult genre. However, while this shift has allowed for better storytelling, there are those who believe that more advancement must be made regarding the representation of queer identities outside of the gay-lesbian binary. In the article "The Case for the Missing Bisexuals: Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers" (2014), B. J. Epstein views literature for young people as "giving [them] the chance to read and learn about various kinds of people, backgrounds, and perspectives," as well as granting them the opportunity to read about other people like themselves (111). However, Epstein believes that even in works considered a part of the queer young adult genre, bisexuality is still portrayed as suspect: "the few bisexual characters who appear in literature for young readers are often described in negative terms" and depicted in promiscuous and/or sexually confused personas (111). Oftentimes, this promiscuity and confusion will lead the character to be confused and unhappy, ultimately becoming the victim of internalized biphobia³. One such instance of this occurs in Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* – the work lauded by critics for its reinvigoration of the genre. In this novel, the character Kyle is confronted about his possible bisexuality, but uses terms like "confused" and "divided" to describe his feelings towards the label (Levithan 85). In Epstein's perspective, depicting bisexual characters in such ways "propagates a binary

³ Biphobia refers to the fear of bisexuals and bisexuality. Internalized biphobia is the fear of one's own bisexuality.

system in regard to sexuality,” making it nearly impossible to educate youths on bisexuality, and eliminating any possible role models in young adult queer literature for young bisexuals (122).

Similar tendencies is also prevalent in relation to representations of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals across the young adult genre. The majority of these depictions either call upon stereotypes and stigmas afflicting the trans community, creating negative depictions of trans and gender non-conforming⁴ characters that become harmful rather than helpful. As described in Elsworth Rockefeller’s 2007 article “The Genre of Gender: The Emerging Canon of Transgender-Inclusive YA Literature:”

There are no universal truths [regarding transgender characters], but one thing that must be present in these YA novels is a respect for atypically gendered characters. Not that these characters should have no problems or be loved by absolutely everyone they know – but the narration, character descriptions, and other supporting information needs to be written in a way that does not make the character into a lesser human or exploit them for comic relief. (520)

Several young adult novels that attempt to represent transgender people do so in crude one-dimensional representations of trans characters. One such example also stems from Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy: Infinite Darlene*. Infinite Darlene is a MTF transgender character who is the high school football team’s quarterback as well as the homecoming queen. While her dual roles on the football field and the homecoming court break down

⁴ Someone who is gender non-conforming does not identify as either male or female. Gender is as diverse as sexual orientation, and just as fluid.

the gender binary⁵ reinforced in heteronormative society, her characterization and personality typecast Infinite Darlene as “a character seemingly added for entertainment value only” (Rockefeller 520). Unfortunately, Rockefeller feels the majority of novels in the genre create these one-dimensional characters rooted in stereotypes and a host of other problems that make them impalpable to most readers. Though Rockefeller sees very few novels as being accurate and honest portrayals of transgender characters and themes, his article also recognizes the significance of the novels befitting of the other three categories:

As with early gay and lesbian fiction for young adults—which followed a progression from a few scattered novels containing discreet or euphemistic references to books featuring gay friends and relatives of the main character to books in which the protagonists were gay or lesbian themselves—transgender fiction is making a stumbling debut (526).

In spite of the inaccurate and often stereotypical depictions of transgender and gender non-conforming characters, these earlier attempts in the genre have helped lay the groundwork for a better and more inclusive future for queer young adult literature.

⁵ The gender binary is the classification of gender as either being male or female

Introduction to the Novels

The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is the coming of age story of Charlie – a precocious yet troubled teenager. Coming into high school with no expectations of making friends, Charlie meets seniors Patrick and Sam, stepsiblings who quickly take Charlie under their protective wings. Through his first year of high school, Charlie will face an array of challenges and tribulations, opening dark closets with skeletons buried deep within, but with the love and trust of his friends at his side, Charlie is able to blossom into the wallflower he was meant to be.

Published in 1999, Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (referred to as *Perks* throughout the rest of the text) heavily reflects the standards of the queer young adult genre prior to the 2000's. The novel's primary storyline is a coming of age tale, in which high school freshman Charlie explores the depths and possibilities of his identity. Though this storyline makes *Perks* appear to be a carbon copy of the recipe for a typical young adult novel, Chbosky introduces numerous elements regarding queer identity and culture to make his work applicable to a wider audience. The storyline and characterization of Patrick – the stepbrother of the girl Charlie is in love with – coupled with Charlie's acceptance of Patrick's identity as well as Charlie's exploration of his own identity make *Perks* a true achievement for its time. However, *Perks'* status as a better representation of queer young adult characters does not mean that it is perfect. In spite of the progressive levels of representation *Perks* achieves, it also falls into many of the tropes of the early genre – with elements of secrecy, abnormality, and negative depictions of sexual exploration all prevalent in the work.

Boy Meets Boy

A tale of boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy gets boy back, David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* is mixed parts romance, fairy tale, and coming of age novel. In a town where being LGBTQ+ is accepted and embraced, Paul is able to live a happy and fulfilling life: he is heading the committee for the school dance, has his own gay dining column in the newspaper, and is friends with just about everybody. It seems that Paul has everything a boy could ask for, that is, until Noah comes into his life. Sparks fly the moment these boys meet, but as soon as they are brought together, they are taken apart. Now, Paul has to win back the boy he loves in spite of the challenges that face him.

As noted previously in this thesis, David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* is a work that is either lauded or decried by critics. A work in which the second chapter is titled, "Paul is Gay," *Boy Meets Boy* presents a story of an LGBTQ+ character who has never felt hated or discriminated against for his sexual orientation. Many critics side with the affirmative, seeing Levithan's work as revolutionary to the framework of the queer young adult genre. In this work, a multitude of the tropes and traditions that fueled the queer young adult genre are eliminated, producing a novel without the themes of fear and homophobia at the crux. *Boy Meets Boy* disbands the norms of society through elements of magical realism, introducing its audience to a protagonist named Paul – who was cognizant and affirmative of his gay identity since kindergarten – and a town where queer identities are celebrated and welcomed. It is a world in which queer children can be open and expressive of their identities without fear of harassment, and where Paul's biggest concern is asking the new boy at school to go to the school dance with him. In spite of the oasis of acceptance and possibility Levithan presents his readers, fault can be found in his

hyper-usage of magical realism and the depiction of non-gay queer characters – specifically, bisexual and trans characters.

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

Benjamin Alire Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a tale of opposites attract. When they first meet, Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana have nothing in common, but they are immediately drawn to each other the instant they meet. Throughout the next summer, they forge the strongest friendship of their lives, exploring their identities and the secrets of the universe together. They will face a number of obstacles on their journeys, sometimes together, sometimes alone, but it is only with the strength and belief in their friendship that they will discover the secrets of the universe.

Published in 2012, Benjamin Alire Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (referred to as *Aristotle and Dante* throughout the rest of the text) is the youngest novel included in this study. The recipient of numerous LGBTQ+ literary awards – including the Stonewall Book award and the Lambda Literary Award – Sáenz' novel focuses on Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza as he navigates the trials and tribulations of adolescence with his friend Dante Quintana. For a large portion of the novel, it would seem that *Aristotle and Dante* falls victim to the traditions of the genre, as there are multiple instances of homophobic discourse, primarily with Ari's internalized homophobia. However, *Aristotle and Dante* transcends the genre's commonly repeated tropes through its complex portrayal of identity, themes of self-assurance, and, above all, positive projection of the queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) community.

The Queer Protagonist

For novels within the queer young adult genre, the primary character plays a pivotal role in the representation of queer identities in the novel. For the majority of the works published between the 1980s and the early 2000s, the protagonist character would often be a heterosexual and cisgender person who has a friend, relative, or educator that identifies within the LGBTQ+ community. Though some may see this as a way to “provide an easier point of access to the story for straight readers” as well as “reflect the growing awareness of the universal presence” of LGBTQ+ people, this ultimately casts queer characters into no more than supporting roles in the novels that are supposed to showcase them (Cart et al 92). For those novels that have a protagonist in the LGBTQ+ community, the central character serves as a liaison between the audience and the story, using their position as interpreter to simultaneously connect with LGBTQ+ readers and positively represent the queer community to heterosexual and cisgender readers.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower: Charlie

At first glance, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower's* Charlie would seem to follow the traditional characterization of a protagonist in the queer young adult genre: Charlie is a complex, heterosexual, fifteen year old boy who is trying to understand who he is. Along the way, he accidentally discovers that his new friend, Patrick, is gay. Though *Perks* appears to adhere to the norms of the genre through Charlie's position as the central character, his role goes far beyond the expectations of a straight narrator in a novel with queer themes. Unlike many of the other novels in its era, Charlie is completely accepting and supportive from the moment he uncovers Patrick's sexuality. Whereas most straight narrators in the novels from *Perks'* era highlight the inner-struggle for the protagonist to

accept a queer friend, Charlie shines above other heterosexual protagonists for his unwavering support of his friend even in times of hardship.

From the moment that Charlie discovers Patrick's sexuality, he becomes an atypical straight narrator within the queer young adult genre. Charlie first discovers that Patrick is gay when he walks in on Patrick and his secret boyfriend, Brad, kissing. After Charlie catches them, Patrick takes Charlie aside and the two engage in the following dialogue:

“Listen Charlie. Brad doesn't want people to know. I need you to promise me that you won't tell anyone. This will be our little secret.

Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Thanks.”

With that, Patrick turned around and went back into the room. I heard some muffled voices, and Brad seemed upset, but I didn't think it was any of my business, so I went back to the kitchen. (Chbosky 37)

Charlie's immediate acceptance of Patrick's sexuality and his willingness to keeping Patrick and Brad's relationship a secret highlight just how more advanced Charlie is than other heterosexual narrators in the genre. For novels in the 1990s, a straight-identified protagonist who has a close-friend or relative come out to them often experiences levels of doubt and scrutiny that can put their relationship in jeopardy. This proves to be a major issue for the genre, as it shows there is no acceptance without the possibility of rejection. This scene allows Charlie to break from the traditional parameters of a straight protagonist, displaying an “attitude of generous and full-hearted acceptance of a friend's

difference” (Cart et al 93). He does not use Patrick’s queerness to distance himself from his new friend; he respects Patrick’s sexuality and desire for secrecy, ultimately allowing their friendship to blossom over the course of the novel.

Whereas most heterosexual protagonists develop to a state of eventual acceptance of a queer character, Charlie’s immediate acceptance of this part of Patrick’s identity is the starting point for Charlie’s development. As the two become better friends, senses of loyalty, commitment and love are heavily prevalent in Charlie’s character, as he is willing to do most anything for the sake of his friends – especially Patrick. This is best displayed during the fight between Patrick and Brad. Initially, this fight is spurred by their recent break up, but as it progresses, a large number of Brad’s friends rally to his defense in an effort to beat up the gay kid, and it is at this point that Charlie displays one of the most profound moments in queer young adult literature for a straight protagonist:

There was no clean punching or things you see in movies. They just wrestled and hit. And whoever was the most aggressive or the most angry got in the most hits. In this case, it was pretty even until Brad’s buddies got involved, and it became five on one.

That’s when I got involved. I just couldn’t watch them hurt Patrick even if things weren’t clear just yet. (Chbosky 151)

While “gay bashings” like this are common throughout the genre, Charlie’s willingness to step in is a rare occurrence. Not only is he willing to defend his friend, but he is actively putting his own safety in jeopardy for a queer person. This ultimately breaks his characters from the norms of the heterosexual narrator as he shows sincere, unwavering and unquestioning loyalty in his efforts to help Patrick.

While his loyalty to and friendship with Patrick are profound for a novel of its time, they are not the only aspects that set Charlie and *Perks* apart from other queer young adult novels of the 1990s. Rather than end his support with his acceptance of Patrick, Charlie is also highly affirmative of the queer subculture relished by Patrick and his friends, most notably their local showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – a cult-classic musical famous for its queer themes. In these showings, an ensemble of people reenacts the musical as the film version plays in the background, and the cast for these performances is composed of Charlie’s new friend group. As an audience member, Charlie watches as his friends run around on stage scantily clothed while touching themselves and one another and acting out lewd and sexual scenes.

Of all the things I’ve done this year, I think I like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* the best. Patrick and Sam took me to the theater to see it on Halloween night. It’s really fun because all these kids dress up like the people in the movie, and they act out the movie in front of the screen.

(Chbosky 47)

Charlie becomes one of the most frequent audience members at these screenings and it becomes as much a part of his identity as his friends’. Through regularly attending the production, Charlie displays a level of affirmation absent from the majority of queer young adult narratives. Rather than feeling disgusted and uneasy with the performance his friends put on, Charlie acts the same way as when he walked in on Patrick and Brad kissing: he accepts this as a part of who they are and loves them for these reasons, not in spite of them.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show does not only display Charlie’s affirmation of

the community, but also allows him to start exploring the realms of his own identity. At one performance, Charlie is needed to fill in for one of the parts in the show, and fills in for the role of Rocky – a heavily sexualized character who is clad in a gold speedo for the majority of the show and engages in a number of sex scenes with multiple other characters. In spite of the overtly sexual nature of the role, Charlie embraces his last-minute casting:

I won't go into detail about the whole show, but I had the best time I ever had in my whole life. I'm not kidding. I got to pretend that I was singing, and I got to dance around, and I got to wear a "feather boa" in the grand finale... (Chbosky 110)

Acting in this role gives Charlie his first opportunity to explore the realms of his own identity. On the stage, he is able to break from the heteronormativity of society by parading around the stage donning a "feather boa" and simulating physical encounters with people of multiple genders on stage. Though it is one performance, his break from societal norms provides him with one of the best nights he has ever had.

Charlie's exploration of his own identity does not stop with his debut in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. A few days after Brad and Patrick's fight, Patrick takes Charlie on a pseudo-date: going out for a movie and pizza, sharing countless stories of high school gossip, and ending the night, with a kiss.

He drove me home and pulled up in the driveway. We hugged good night, and when I was just about to let go, he held me a little tighter. And he moved his face to mine. And he kissed me. A real kiss. Then, he pulled away real slowly.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. That’s okay.”

“Really. I’m sorry.”

No, really. It was okay.”

So, he said “thanks” and hugged me again. And moved in to kiss me again. And I just let him. (Chbosky 160)

For most queer novels with heterosexual narrators, the straight protagonist typically displays subconscious fears of being coerced into sexual exploration, setting an inflexible border between the concepts of “straight” and “gay.” However, Charlie is shown to be open to the experience, reaffirming to Patrick that he is okay with the kiss, reaffirming that sexuality is not a rigid binary, but a fluid component of a person’s identity.

However, Charlie’s experimentation with his sexuality is just that – experimentation. Throughout *Perks*, Charlie reassures the narrator of his heterosexuality through statements like, “I like girls. I really do” (Chbosky 111). It can be argued that statements like this could be Charlie’s way of describing his own bisexuality – as he is attracted to women but is willing to engage physically with Patrick. However, his conversation with Sam near the end of the novel cements his identity as a heterosexual character, not a queer one.

“It’s like you can come to Patrick’s rescue and hurt two guys that are trying to hurt him, but what about when Patrick’s hurting himself? Like when you guys went to the park? Or when he was kissing you? Did you want him to kiss you?”

I shook my head no.

“So, why did you let him?”

“I was just trying to be a friend,” I said.

“But you weren’t, Charlie. At those times, you weren’t being his friend at all. Because you weren’t honest with him.” (Chbosky 201)

Charlie’s confessions ultimately erase the possibility of him being a queer character, as his kisses with Patrick were driven by a sense of duty and loyalty rather than passion and desire. In spite of the profound levels of acceptance and affirmation Charlie has previously displayed in the novel, his constant need to reaffirm his heterosexuality to the readers and his false kisses to Patrick are indicative of the traditions first set in place by novels like *I’ll Get There. It’d Better Be Worth The Trip*: exploring one’s sexual identity is nothing more than a phase the protagonist must go through on their journey of self discovery.

Thought Charlie’s queer actions hamper parts of his character, he is a sign of the overall progression that is to come. Whereas most narrators in queer young adult literature have issues of accepting a person’s queerness – either a secondary character’s or their own, if they are the narrator in their own story – Charlie is shown to be immediately accepting and understanding of queer people; he has no hesitations regarding his friendship with Patrick or other facets of queer culture, but instead affirms them for what they are. Charlie’s character only becomes problematic when one views him as a queer character, as he is heavily reliant on the tropes that have kept the genre grounded, yet his overall character is a signal of growing progress for the genre.

Boy Meets Boy: Paul

After the publication of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and the rise of the

2000s, the queer young adult genre began shifting the narrative framework: rather than having heterosexual narrators with varying levels of support, larger numbers of protagonists began to identify within the LGBTQ+ community. Though there was a rise in queer representation in the early 21st century, the storylines of these queer protagonists were frequently marred by themes of homophobia and fear, homogenizing the genre into being about the risks associated with coming out. However, the plight of the protagonist dramatically changed with David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, in which the main character, Paul, is not only cognizant of his identity from an early age, but eradicates the preconceived notions of fear and homophobia from his story, becoming one of the first queer characters in young adult literature to who can honestly say that he is "not used to being hated" (Levithan 18).

One of the ways in which Levithan is able to establish *Boy Meets Boy* as a revolution for the genre is through the description of Paul's early years of life in the second chapter, promptly titled "Paul is Gay." To begin the chapter, Paul begins by telling the readers "I've always know I was gay, but it wasn't confirmed until I was in kindergarten" (Levithan 8). By admitting that he has been cognizant of his sexual orientation since kindergarten dispels many of the heteronormative assumptions regarding children's sexual identities. As noted in Wickens' "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia," many people see sexuality as something "acquired with maturity rather than... an intrinsic part of one's humanity" (156). Essentially, children are ignorant of their attractions unless they are perceived to be heterosexual attractions. This has been a common theme throughout the queer young adult genre, as most characters who come out do so after puberty. However, Paul's awareness of his sexual orientation shows that he,

and other children, are able to understand themselves and their identities.

While his experiences in kindergarten are profound for a novel in the queer young adult genre, Paul's ease at dismantling hegemonic masculinity and homophobic discourse are also elements of his character that add to the complexity of *Boy Meets Boy*. The most evident example of this is when he runs for third grade president. During the presidential race, Paul capitalizes on his homosexuality in an effort to be the first openly gay president of the third grade by having his campaign slogan be "VOTE FOR ME... I'M GAY;" in a counterattack, his opponent's slogan evolves from "VOTE FOR ME... I'M NOT GAY" to "DON'T VOTE FOR THE FAG" (Levithan 11). By doing this, his opponent was prescribing to the standards of hegemonic masculinity, which assert that subjugation and defamation of anything that defies the epitome of masculinity – i.e. homosexuality. However, his opponent's attacks backfire and Paul is able to win in a landslide and have his first of many victories over the toxic nature of hegemonic masculinity.

While Paul's strong sense of self and his ability to undermine even the most hyper-masculine of opponents makes him a clear divergent from the traditional queer narrator in the genre, what makes these attributes even more significant is the way that he ultimately helps normalize LGBTQ+ identities in his community. This first begins with his coming out in kindergarten. During his conversation with his kindergarten teacher, Paul informs the narrator that he had never felt abnormal due to his liking boys, but assumed that because he liked boys, then all boys must like boys.

Mrs. Benchly explained a little more to me – the whole boys-liking-girls thing. I can't say I understood. Mrs. Benchly asked me if I'd noticed that

marriages were mostly made up of men and women. I had never really thought of marriages as things that involved liking. I had just assumed this man-woman arrangement was yet another adult quirk, like flossing.

(Levithan 9)

For most children raised in a heteronormative world, they perceive normal as boys liking girls and girls liking boys. The heavy assertion of heteronormativity can lead LGBTQ+ children to believe that they are “wrong” or “confused” for liking who they like.

However, Paul is able to see that his identity is normal for him, and that someone is not wrong for who they like; they just are who they are.

As the novel progresses, the readers are able to see that Paul not only makes his town a better place for himself, but a better place for all within the LGBTQ+ community. In the sixth grade, Paul and a few of his friends decide to start a GSA⁶ at their elementary school because “quite honestly, we took one look around and figured the straight kids needed our help,” and soon “membership in the gay-straight alliance soon surpassed that of the football team (which isn’t to say there wasn’t overlap)” (Levithan 12-13). Through his efforts, charisma, and sense of inclusivity, Paul is able to help make his school and community a better place.

Based on all of these early glimpses into Paul’s life, it becomes clear that he is a queer character with a very strong sense of self. He has never had to struggle with the coming out process, with serious issues of bullying or heteronormativity, and the biggest problem he ever has to face by the end of the novel is how to win Noah – his love interest and eventual boyfriend – back after losing him briefly. However, some, including many

⁶ “Gay-Straight Alliance” in the novel, though many schools are changing the name to “Gender-Sexuality Alliance” to better encompass the entire LGBTQ+ community

characters in the novel, see Paul's life as too perfect. This great strength of Paul's proves to be a double-edged sword, as it causes disconnect between him and other queer characters in the novel. The following dialogue between Kyle – Paul's ex-boyfriend – and Paul impeccably captures the attitudes of most characters to Paul's fortune:

“But I forgot about you. I forgot how easy it is for you.”

“Easy?”

“Yes,” Kyle says, punctuating the phrase by throwing down his things. “*Easy*. Paul, you don't know how lucky you are.”

“How am I lucky?”

“Because *you know who you are*.” (Levithan 147)

Unlike Kyle – who has been struggling with his identity for a year – as well as numerous other friends of his, Paul has never had to struggle with his own identity; he has always possessed a strong sense of self-awareness. Paul's ability to understand himself is something that is unbeknownst to many within the community, giving him privileges unavailable to many of his friends and community members.

Though Paul takes time to understand his privileges, his status as a protagonist in the queer young adult genre ultimately reached new limits to what a queer protagonist can do. *Boy Meets Boy* shows a queer person who is understanding of his identity and unafraid to be who he is. In his journey, Paul is able to disestablish numerous elements of heteronormative society and show that a queer character can live a happy, fulfilling life in which their biggest concern is how to win back his love. Ultimately, Paul's character is able to test the limits of the queer young adult genre and soar beyond his predecessors.

Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe: Ari

Though Paul's portrayal in *Boy Meets Boy* proved to be revolutionary for his strong sense of self, many of the novels following it depicted protagonists who, like in the early days of the genre, are learning to carve out the meaning in their identities. Unlike their predecessors, however, these works showcase a complex understanding of what composes a person's identity. Such is the case in Benjamin Alire Sáenz' novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, which to the untrained eye would appear to fall victim to the tropes and traditions of the earliest novels of the genre. Aristotle Mendoza – nicknamed Ari – is introduced to the reader as a stereotypical fifteen-year-old boy: an angst-ridden teenager who is still trying to carve his own identity into the world around him. Along with his angst comes his crippling shame of not being straight – a secret he has buried within himself so deep that he has no idea that it is there.

Though Ari's character appears to conform to not only the norms for a straight protagonist in a queer young adult novel, it is slowly and methodically revealed that Ari's journey is one of understanding all facets of his identity. Initially depicted as a loner, his immediate bond with Dante, stating that he “really, really liked [Dante]” the moment he met him (Sáenz 35). As their friendship blossoms, it becomes more evident that Ari is in love with Dante, he continually suppresses he feelings out due to his fear and shame of being attracted to a boy. As he continues to suppress his emotions, Ari becomes the hegemonic male; he becomes increasingly hostile towards his parents, friends, and the entirety of the world around him.

Though Ari is shown to express feelings of hegemonic masculinity as he continues suppress his feelings, *Aristotle and Dante* also displays just how toxic these

feelings can be. Ari's prescriptions to heteronormative assumptions mirror the experiences of his older brother. One of the novel's subplots is Ari's yearning to understand his older brother, who has been incarcerated since Ari was four. Near the end of the novel, Ari's parents finally begin opening up to Ari about what his brother had done, and there are immediate similarities between his story and Ari's:

My brother was fifteen years old. He was angry. From everything I understand about him, he was always angry. I especially got that from my sisters. I guess he was just mean or, just, I don't know, but he was born angry. (Sáenz 331)

In his fit of anger, Ari's brother picked up and murdered a prostitute upon learning that the prostitute was a transvestite⁷, and his consequence is being sent to prison and being ostracized from his family. The story of Ari's brother shows what could happen to Ari if he continues to suppress his identity; unless he is honest with himself, he risks succumbing to acts of violence, being ostracized by his family, and perpetual anger and unease with who he is.

Fortunately, Ari is able to cast aside his shame and embrace his both his identity and his love for Dante. After his parents help him come to terms with these facts, Ari becomes a much more open and warmer person all around. His change in character is a stark contrast to his formerly closed off nature, and is evident to all those around him, especially Dante:

Dante looked at me. "You're different."

"How?"

⁷ This is the terminology used in the novel

“I don’t know. You’re acting different.”

“Weird?”

“Yeah, weird. But in a good way.”

“Good,” I said. “I’ve always wanted to be weird in a good way.”

(Sáenz 355)

Through casting aside his fears and shame and opening himself to the people around him, Ari is able to give himself a happy ending: he has a loving family around him and becomes boyfriends with Dante. Though Ari’s story follows the pattern of a coming out story – a common trope in the genre – his happy ending depicts the evolution that the genre has undergone: rather than having queer characters end their stories alone in a heteronormative society, queer protagonists like Ari are able to end their stories with their relationships intact and heteronormativity cast out of their inner circle.

Secondary and Supporting Queer Characters

For the majority of the novels published throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the bulk of queer-identified characters could be found in supporting roles in the text. Whether they were a close friend, a relative, or an authority figure in the protagonist's life, their coming out would most frequently be a major character arch for the protagonist. In spite of their importance to the narrator's story, many of these characters were relatively superficial, following the traditions and stereotypes perpetuated by the early days of the genre. During the latter half of the 1990s and continuing into the modern queer young adult novel, these secondary characters have risen in both importance and frequency. This rise in both number and significance allowed for a plurality of LGBTQ+ identities to be present across the literature, and while some of these may not be perfect representations, many of them became starting points for further development.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower: Patrick and Brad

Similar to how Charlie's role as protagonist appears to mirror the traditions of the genre, so too does the portrayals of the secondary and supporting queer characters in *Perks*. However, through complex and intricate characterizations, the two characters who fall into this category are able to elevate the novel above the standards the genre sets. In a novel that focuses on a straight protagonist, the complex depictions of Patrick – Charlie's best friend – and Brad – Patrick's lover – show multiple layers of dimension beyond the standard portrayals of secondary queer characters commonly found throughout the genre in the 1980s and 1990s. While their individual portrayals add multiple layers of depth to the novel, their relationship adds builds on to the foundation that their individual characters establish. Though these elements help elevate *Perks* the majority of the novels

in its era, it is also held back by its overall lack of representation, as Patrick and Brad are the only explicit LGBTQ+ identified characters in the entirety of the novel.

Through the character of Patrick, *Perks* introduces one of the most complex and involved secondary queer characters of the 1990s. He is first introduced as a character named “Nothing” – a nickname he had earned in middle school after confronting his bullies and telling them, “Listen, you either can call me Patrick, or you can call me nothing” (Chbosky 13). It becomes clear that Patrick’s nickname is a misnomer, as the prominence of his storyline and involvement in Charlie’s life turns him from “Nothing” into “Something.” As Patrick and Charlie’s friendship develops throughout the novel, Patrick’s character and storyline become much more prominent for readers, giving them a better sense of Patrick’s identity and characterization.

One of the strongest parts of Patrick’s characterization is his connection to the queer subculture of his community. Rather than keep Patrick’s identity and storyline surface level, *Perks* integrates the young man into the elusive queer culture surrounding him. He stars as Dr. Frank ‘N Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* productions – a cult classic amongst the queer community – and is shown introducing Charlie to the gay nightlife of their small suburban Pennsylvania town. In doing this, Patrick not only introduces Charlie to the queer subculture surrounding them, but also introduces the audience to the existence of this culture in even one of the most “normative” places.

The only other prominent queer character in the entirety of the novel is Patrick’s boyfriend, Brad. Unlike Patrick, who is shown as being confident in his sexuality, Brad is forced to bear his gay identity with shame. His character has been brought up in a largely heteronormative environment, and his public life very much mirrors the kind of life he

was taught was correct: he is the star quarterback of the football team, is “dating” a cheerleader, and lives with a dangerously homophobic father. The society Brad lives in forces him to initially express his attraction Patrick, as it takes nearly a year for Brad to get to a place where he “doesn’t have to get drunk or stoned to make love” (Chbosky 46). Though Brad does care for Patrick, the heteronormative nature of his upbringing forces him and Patrick apart.

Though the portrayals of Patrick and Brad are dynamic, emotional, and powerful, they are the only truly relevant, named queer characters in *Perks*. Charlie does encounter “the guy who does the sports on the TV news,” in the park where Patrick goes for hookups – which is included to show that even the last person someone would expect, a person who talks about the heteronormative world of sports for a living, can be gay (Chbosky 162). This miniscule encounter aside, the low number of queer characters and the lack of representation of LGBTQ+ identities becomes an issue for *Perks*. As far as the reader is informed, Patrick and Brad are each other’s only sense of a queer community, and once they parted, they became segregated from their own community. While they were able to continue having anonymous rendezvous in the local hookup spots – more on this will be discussed in the next chapter – they are alone. In addition to this, Patrick and Brad’s inclusion as the only known LGBTQ+ characters in the work reinforces the emphasis on gay males over other identities within the community. With no other identities recognized along with Patrick and Brad being isolated from a caring queer companionship, *Perks* leaves the reader with a sense of a weak LGBTQ+ community.

Overall, the portrayal of secondary and supplementary queer characters in *Perks* leaves the novel on the cusp of being just another queer novel. The lack of representation

of LGBTQ+ identities in addition to the minimal amount of queer-identified characters makes *Perks* fail to completely break from the stereotypes that have fueled the genre for decades prior. However, the strong characterizations of both Patrick and Brad, in conjunction with the insights given into their doomed relationship help save the novel from falling into the realm of tradition queer novels.

Boy Meets Boy: The majority of the characters

Comparative to the majority of titles within the queer young adult genre, *Boy Meets Boy* contains an insurmountable number of LGBTQ+ characters. While the majority of works – like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* – will have one main queer-identified character with a few minor characters occasionally appearing, the vast majority of the secondary and supporting characters identify within the community. In spite of the large quantity of queer identified characters, the issue of quality over quantity arises. *Boy Meets Boy* is a text that many believe highly prioritizes the gay male experience while either poorly representing or underrepresenting many other identities in the LGBTQ+ community.

The difference in quality of representation amongst secondary and supporting queer characters is clearly visible throughout the novel. As the novel progresses, Paul introduces a number of gay male characters that not only help advance the plot of the story, but are well-developed enough to the point that their characters could have their own novels. Two of the most prominent secondary gay male characters are Noah and Tony. Being Paul's love interest throughout the novel, Noah is presented as one of the most authentic characters in the novel.

I know he's not going to be amazing all the time, but there's more

amazingness in him than in anyone else I've known. He makes me want to be amazing, too. (Levithan 171).

As Paul and Noah's relationship develops, it is clear that the two are very similar: they have similar personalities, similar outlooks on life, and similar methods of escaping the troubles of life. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the two characters were made for each other.

The other secondary gay male character in the story is Tony. Unlike the rest of the characters in the novel, Tony does not live in an accepting community: he lives in a conservative town a few miles away and lives in a strict Christian household. Due to these circumstances, Tony experiences an amount of growth insurmountable by any of the other characters in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Tony is incredibly timid of what his parents would do if they learned of either his or Paul's sexuality, in spite of the pair being nothing more than friends. After Tony's parents are informed about the boys' homosexuality, Tony is forbidden from seeing Paul, but inadvertently this event gives Tony the chance to stand up to his parents and defend not only his being gay, but his ability to be friends with gay boys like Paul:

"Paul is my best friend, and we've been doing homework together for a long time. He is my *friend* – nothing more, no different from Joni or Laura or any other girl. I am being totally honest with you, and I want you to be totally honest with me. Why could you possibly think it's a bad idea for Paul and me to do our homework together?" (Levithan 154)

For Tony's character, his ability to fight back against oppression foreshadows that his life as a gay teen is starting to get better: from this point on, he is allowed to have Paul over

more frequently as well as other queer friends, which gives him more ability to socialize with a community and gain support. Through speaking out against the injustice of being banned from one of his closest friends, Tony is able to open the doorways that will lead him to a brighter and happier future.

Though many gay male characters are clearly developed throughout the novel, the same cannot be said for any of the other queer characters in the novel – reaffirming the senses that the advances in representation were solely for gay male characters to enjoy. Lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender characters are either misrepresented and/or underrepresented throughout the course of the novel. Throughout the novel, there are only two prevalent, named depictions of lesbian-identified characters: Laura and Amber. Each of these characters does have a hand in disestablishing the heteronormative nature of the genre. Laura is initially introduced in the chapter “Paul is Gay” as “a lesbian fourth grader” who helps Paul and his friends establish a GSA at their elementary school, thereby adding another character to the arsenal that challenges the sexual awareness of children (Levithan 12). Amber comes into the story much later, but her pride in her identity as a lesbian compared to her shame of being “a Club Kid” – the students at Paul’s school who only get involved with things for resume purposes – “challenges the ‘normalcy’ of silencing gay and lesbian identities by highlighting the tentativeness, the fear that comes with the label” (Wickens 159).

Despite the perceived norms that are broken by Laura and Amber’s characters, their brief and minor encounters in *Boy Meets Boy* highlights a larger issue within the queer young adult genre: the growing separation of gay men and lesbians. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, Cart et al point to a disturbing fact that has been present since the early

days of the genre – gays and lesbians rarely ever associate with one another in queer young adult literature. In the 1990s – the decade before *Boy Meets Boy* was published, “only four titles (6%) included both gay males and lesbians” as featured characters (Cart et al 90). Though *Boy Meets Boy* does have interactions between these two types of people, the prioritized presence of Paul and other gay males in the story compared to the miniscule prevalence of Laura and Amber shows a clear disconnect between gay male and lesbian identities – symbolizing a lack of community and inclusion between these identities.

In spite of their minimal presence in the book, the lesbian-identified characters that appear in the work are still presented in positive and groundbreaking ways. The same is not true for bisexual and transgender characters in the work. Regarding bisexuality, B.J. Epstein discusses many of the societal issues the bisexual community faces – from the societal enforced straight-gay binary that eradicates their existence to the stereotypes of confusion and hyper-sexualization, erasing the identity all together due to its lack of visibility. In regards to the queer young adult genre, Epstein believes:

The situation is slightly different in YA novels, because there are a few bisexual characters, which means there is some visibility. Unfortunately, however, in LGBT literature for young people, when there are bisexual characters, they are not always described positively, nor are they shown living happy bisexual lives. (119)

Throughout the genre, the majority of the bisexual characters are depicted in negative terms, most often associated with either confusion, disdain for their identity or promiscuous behavior. In the case of *Boy Meets Boy*, the two bisexual characters who

appear in the novel – Kyle and Jasmine – reinforce these stereotypes.

Kyle, being the envious ex-boyfriend of Paul, is cast as one of the main antagonists in the story. After the two break up, Kyle begins spreading rumors that Paul “tricked him” into being gay and begins to date girls after their breakup (Levithan 18). Though Kyle is still shown to harbor feelings for Paul throughout most of the book, his inability to cope with his feelings of bisexuality is what makes him into the novel’s antagonist, creating the image that bisexual people are confused and scornful of those they think “turned them” queer. What complicates Kyle’s situation even more is a conversation that he and Paul have later in the book regarding his sexuality.

“I’m so confused.”

“Why?”

“I still like girls.”

“So?”

“And I also like guys.”

“I touched his knee. “It doesn’t sound like you’re confused, then.”

“But I wanted to be one or the other. With you, I wanted just to like you. Then, after you, I wanted to just like the girls. But every time I’m with one, I think the other’s possible.”

“So you’re bisexual.”

Kyle’s face flushes. “I hate that word,” he tells me, slumping in his chair. “It makes it sound like I’m divided.” (Levithan 85)

From this excerpt, it becomes evident that there are many problems with Kyle and his bisexual representation. When describing Kyle’s sexuality, words like “confused” and

“divided” reinforce the stigma that bisexuals are sexually indecisive. Kyle’s description of his own sexuality – thinking “the other’s possible” when with a person of a certain gender – also proves problematic due to depicting bisexuals as sexually flippant and unsatisfied when being in a relationship, always desiring the gender opposite of their partner. Though Kyle receives a happy ending at the end of the story through his relationship with Tony, he never recants his statements on bisexuality. Though many people in the LGBTQ+ community do not use labels for their identities, Kyle’s rejection of bisexuality ultimately shows that being bisexual is not something socially or individually acceptable, as it is easier to like one *or* the other, not both, creating a very negative depiction of bisexuality as a whole in *Boy Meets Boy*.

Kyle’s depiction as a “confused” bisexual antagonist is highly problematic for depicting bisexuality in the queer young adult genre, but he is not alone in his misrepresentation. The only other bisexual character makes one appearance in the novel, yet the ways in which she is portrayed make her out to be a negative representation of the bisexual community. This character is Jasmine Gupta. Unlike Kyle, Jasmine is portrayed to be very confident and accepting of her bisexuality to the point where she is seen by many as the quintessential “rebound-girl:”

Kyle could take lessons from Jasmine – she’ll fall for anybody, guy or girl. The hitch is that the person has to be on the rebound from a serious break-up. Something about this fragile-yet-vindictive state entrances her.

(Levithan 90)

There are many issues with how Jasmine’s bisexuality is portrayed in this passage, with the most prevalent being the promiscuous nature of her sexuality. In describing Jasmine,

she is said to “fall for anybody,” reinforcing the stigmas that bisexual people are sexually greedy and promiscuous. Furthermore, her desire to only date people “on the rebound” also reinforces the perceived promiscuity of the sexuality as it says that Jasmine is not interested in serious relationships; only the next fling. The most troubling thing in terms of bisexual representation, however, comes from the first part of the passage – “Kyle could take lessons from Jasmine” – as it implies that confidence in one’s bisexuality equates to becoming sexually promiscuous.

In a similar fashion, the transgender characters in *Boy Meets Boy* are also grossly misrepresented. In *Boy Meets Boy*, the most prominent transgender character is Infinite Darlene. Her dual roles as the football team’s quarterback and as the homecoming queen not only break the gender binary, but also show that Infinite Darlene is immensely talented and well liked by her peers. At a first glance, this could make it seem like Infinite Darlene is a character that breaks numerous boundaries for trans community in queer young adult literature. However, her strength as a groundbreaking character is severely limited because of her portrayal: in spite of her being the school quarterback and the homecoming queen blurring the gender binary of heteronormative society, her characterization and personality typecast Infinite Darlene as “a character seemingly added for entertainment value only” (Rockefeller 520).

From the moment Infinite Darlene is introduced, it is clear that she is meant to be a comedic character, not a serious one. Upon introducing the reader to Infinite Darlene, Paul describes her as “sounding like Scarlett O’Hara as played by Clark Gable” while “scuttling through the halls in high heels, a red shock wig, and more-than-passable makeup” (Levithan 15). Though this is meant to be a lighthearted, funny introduction to

Infinite Darlene, it poses a larger problem she faces: people accepting her for who she is. Throughout the text, people are shown to either see Infinite Darlene as either a transwoman or a drag queen, usually the latter. This becomes highly problematic as it shows that even in this LGBTQ+ friendly environment, her gender identity is not being respected. So rarely do people accept Infinite Darlene as female that she becomes shocked when they actually do, as exhibited below in Noah's first time meeting her:

“Now, are all the girls at this school as nice as you?” he asks. “If so, I'm definitely going to like it here.”

He looks right at her as he says it. And I can tell that even Infinite Darlene is a little taken aback, because it's clear he's seeing her just as she wants to be seen. So few people do that. (Levithan 41)

Though Noah is able to respect Infinite Darlene for who she is by seeing her as she is, the fact that “so few people do that” shows that *Boy Meets Boy* creates a place of acceptance and tolerance in regards to sexual orientation, but gender identity is still something that is ridiculed and misunderstood. Though Infinite Darlene's character has depth, the way that the other characters in the story – including the narrator – see and treat her shows that the work completely missed the mark when it came to representing transgender characters.

Though *Boy Meets Boy* is able to include a diverse array of characters in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, many of the biggest issues with the novel arise from the portrayals of these characters. Whereas gay male characters like Noah and Tony are thoroughly flushed out for the reader, characters of other LGBTQ+ identities are depicted in negative and harmful ways: lesbian characters make memorable yet incredibly brief appearances, bisexual characters epitomize the societal stereotypes of the

sexual orientation, and transgender characters are solitary people to be gawked and laughed at.

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe: Dante & others

When compared to a work like *Boy Meets Boy*, *Aristotle and Dante* would seem to follow the patterns of queer representation found in novels like *Perks*. In *Aristotle and Dante*, the only secondary queer character that is alive and/or relevant at the end of the novel is Dante. All other queer characters discussed in the book have either passed away or became insignificant in the grand scope of the story. Initially, the deceased state of these characters would make it appear that *Aristotle and Dante* has succumb to the traditions of the genre that asserted only the gay male. However, the lessons that these characters, most prominently Ari's aunt Ophelia, teach are highly significant to the framework of the novel.

Dante proves himself to be the diametric opposite of Ari. Whereas Ari is closed, Dante is open to the world; whereas Ari is serious, Dante is jovial and silly; whereas Ari is struggling to find himself, Dante is self-aware. When the boys first meet, they bond over the uniqueness of their names: Aristotle is the Anglicized form of his grandfather's name – "Aristotiles" – whereas Dante received his name because his "father's an English professor" (Sáenz 18). During this discussion, Dante reveals a strong sense of self-awareness when reflecting on his attempts to change his name:

"I used to tell people my name was Dan. I mean, you know, I just dropped two letters. But I stopped doing that. It wasn't honest. And anyway, I always got found out. And I felt like a liar and an idiot. I was ashamed of myself for being ashamed of myself. I didn't like feeling like that." (18)

Though some may see this as just being a simple matter of not adjusting to a nickname, Dante's efforts to change his name reveal a deeper component of his identity: if he is anything less than his authentic self, he sees himself as being deceitful. In his attempts to mask parts of his identity— in this instance, his name – he ultimately harms himself, degrading himself as dishonest and foolish. By hiding parts of himself to the world around him, Dante is not being the authentic Dante, and it is only when he accepts his identity that he can bear it with pride.

Dante's feelings with changing his name foreshadow his experiences when discovering his identity. As Dante and Ari's friendship grows, so do their feelings for one another. Unlike Ari, who suppresses his feelings for Dante to near toxic levels, Dante "doesn't hide [his feelings for Ari] from himself," proving himself incapable of closeting his physical and emotional attraction to Ari (Sáenz 348). The majority of the physical interactions between the two are initiated by Dante: he is the one who asks Ari if they can try kissing, he is the one who willingly gives Ari a sponge bath when he is recovering from being hit by a car, he is the one who begins asking Ari questions about masturbation and sex. However, these moments are never driven by Dante's sexual urges, but by his pure affection for Ari.

In spite of Dante's high sense of shame when being deceitful about his identity, one of the things he fears the most is coming out to his parents. In heteronormative society, it is expected that sons bring forward their own sons to carry on the family lineage. Being an only child in a culture that emphasizes the importance of heredity, Dante fears that revealing his queerness will make his parents ashamed of him since he is not biologically able to give them grandchildren. However, rather than prescribe to the

heteronormative ways of his society, Dante chooses that it is more important to be true to himself than to lead a life that was not meant for him.

The thing is I love my dad. My mom too. And I keep wondering what they're going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. I wonder how that's going to go over? I'm the only son. What's going to happen to the grandchildren thing? I hate that I'm going to disappoint them, Ari. (Sáenz 227)

It is later revealed that his parents do not care about grandchildren, as well as already being aware that Dante is gay, putting his hesitations about disappointing his parents to rest. However, Dante's decision to put his own happiness ahead of the expectations of his society makes him out to be an immensely significant queer character in the young adult genre, as his experiences, decisions, and sense of authenticity can teach readers that their own happiness is more important than what others expect from them.

Though Dante proves to be a highly significant queer character, much of the representation in this work ends with him. Though *Aristotle and Dante* does include mentions of lesbian and transgender characters, these characters are deceased by the time they are introduced to the reader. Aside from Ari and Dante, the only other queer character who is not dead at the end of the novel is Daniel G, the boy who abandons Dante when he is being assaulted and is described by Dante as “a self-involved, conceited” person (Sáenz 352). Considering that most of the novel's queer characters either die or are already dead during the events of the novel, it would appear that *Aristotle and Dante* faces issues of LGBTQ+ diversity and representation, positioning gay male characters as the only living queer characters at the end of the novel. However, their

deaths do not negate the impact they have on characters' perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.

The most significant of these deceased queer characters is Ari's aunt Ophelia. Although she has passed on by the time the reader is officially introduced to her, it is clear that Ophelia plays an intricate role in Ari's parents accepting his sexuality. Ophelia was the sister of Ari's mother, and she lived with her girlfriend, Fanny, for a large portion of her life. Ophelia's lesbianism became a family controversy as her entire family – excluding Ari's parents – refused to acknowledge her existence to the point where many of them do not attend her funeral.

“I loved Ophelia,” [Ari's father] said. “She was kind and she was decent.”

“It didn't matter to you that she lived with Franny?”

“To some people it mattered,” he said. “Your uncles and aunts, Ari, they just couldn't.” (Sáenz 286)

Whereas the rest of the family shunned Ophelia for her homosexuality, Ari's parents kept her involved in their lives. Their decision to keep Ophelia a part of their family ultimately helps them connect with Ari when they discuss his sexuality.

“I'm a guy, He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be. Mom –”

“I know,” she said. “Ophelia taught me some things, you know? All those letters. I've learned some things.” (349)

From this conversation, it is evident that without Ophelia's presence in their lives, Ari's parents would not have been as quickly affirming of their son's sexuality. It is through

the things that Ophelia taught them concerning identity and unconditional love that lead to Ari's happy ending with his parents.

Though the queer representation in *Aristotle and Dante* is limited to a small number of characters who are mostly gay males, it is evident that their inclusion in the story highly significant to the novel's status in the queer young adult genre. Through his commitment to being true to himself, Dante is able to break from the heteronormative nature of society and show that accepting and affirming one's individuality is more important than abiding by the expectations of others.

Community and Society

As much as the characters' portrayals influence the effectiveness of the queer representation in these works, a large part of the overall representation concerns the society and the communities of the environment of the characters. The setting of the story also contributes greatly to this, as novels that take place in two different cities in two different time periods will be vastly different from one another. For many of the works in the queer young adult genre, the concept of a queer community is non-existent, as the queer characters are often cast as isolated from other LGBTQ+ people and the rest of the world. This becomes highly problematic for queer readers, as that lack of community further drives the stereotype that they are segregated from society. However, in recent years, larger numbers of novels are paying closer attention to these pockets of communities, with there always being some sort of safe haven present for any LGBTQ+ characters in need.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower

The Perks of Being a Wallflower takes place in the early 1990s in a small suburb in Pennsylvania. Needless to say, the environment surrounding Charlie, Patrick, and all of their friends is strictly heteronormative: families are patriarchal, relationships have to be straight, gender identity has to be rigidly cisgender, and deviation from these "norms" is highly punishable. The best evidence to support this is the scene when Brad's father discovers Patrick and Brad having sex.

I guess that Brad's father didn't know about his son because when he caught them, Brad's father started beating Brad. Not a slap kind of beating. A belt kind. A real kind. Patrick told Sam who told Bob that he

had never seen anything like it. I guess it was that bad. He wanted to say “Stop” and “You’re killing him.” He even wanted to hold Brad’s father down. But he just froze. And Brad kept yelling, “Get out!” to Patrick. And finally, Patrick just did. (Chbosky 147)

The brutality and hatred displayed by Brad’s father towards gay relationships captures the realities of their small suburban life. He was willing to beat – possibly even kill – his own child over his non-compliance to the heteronormative culture of their town.

Though this type of environment can be seen as adherence to the traditional conventions of the genre – and also a sad reality for many LGBTQ+ youth in the United States today – *Perks* does offer some sanctuaries for queer characters like Patrick. One of the most prevalent escapes from the heteronormative culture is the screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. As noted earlier in the discussion on Charlie, partaking in this show gives the cast members and the audience an opportunity to escape from the rigid rules of the conservative culture around them through the highly sexualized performance. For Charlie, his performance leaves him exhilarated and appreciated, yet also reminds him that while his performance is tolerable to the cast and audience in attendance, it would not be welcomed by just everyone.

When the show was over, we all bowed together, and there was applause everywhere... All I could think was how nice it was that every one applauded for me and how glad I was that nobody in my family was there to see me play Rocky in a feather boa. Especially my dad. (Chbosky 111)

Though these performances are able to temporarily liberate the performers and the audience from the stigmas created by heteronormative culture, Charlie’s thoughts remind

the reader that this feeling of freedom is a fleeting one – as it only lasts till the end of the applause.

In addition to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, there is a small pocket of queer culture existing in their small town, yet it has a different atmosphere about it. Throughout Charlie's faux-sexual exploration, Patrick takes Charlie to cruising spots in town and other locales where gay men would meet in secret to have sex.

All in all, I think Patrick took me to about every place there is to go that I wouldn't have known about otherwise. There was this karaoke bar on one of the main streets in the city. And there was this dance club. And this one bathroom in this one gym. (Chbosky 163)

Though these places do allow for a release from the heteronormative world around them, these provide a different sense of community than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* productions. With these locations, the men who frequent them are not looking for friendship, companionship, or support; they are looking for anonymous sex, no personal information necessary. Depicting this type of "community" ultimately works against the feelings of belonging created by events like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as it shows that gay men do not want to build a community or support network.

Though *Perks* does acknowledge the existence of a queer community of sorts, the most supportive community is found in Charlie's friend group. Outsiders at their school, this group of friends understands the importance of trust and loyalty. This is best evidenced by Patrick's words to Charlie upon his unofficial induction into the group: "You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand" (Chbosky 37). It becomes evident that these are the unspoken principles for the entirety of the group,

creating a strong bond of trust that, if broken, leads to immediate isolation. This eventually happens to Charlie when he kisses Sam instead of Mary Elizabeth – the girl he had been dating – at a party, and he is told that “the best thing to do was keep away for a while” (137). Charlie is temporarily banished from his social group, and as a consequence is completely isolated from the world around him. Though this is not specifically a queer space, the values of trust, respect and understanding resonate within its structure, showing that outsider groups are important to a person’s sense of belonging.

In spite of this group’s sense of community, many of the actions they perform cast a problematic, negative image of outsider groups including LGBTQ+ communities. Whenever the group gets together, there is always some sort of illicit activity that happens – ranging from underage drinking to drug usage. The most severe instance of this is when Charlie tries LSD and wanders out to a post office at four o’clock in the morning:

Once I got to the post office, I dropped the letter into the mailbox.
And it felt final. And calm. Then, I started throwing up, and I didn’t stop
throwing up until the sun came up....
... and the trees kept moving... they just wouldn’t stop moving...
so I laid down and made a snow angel.

The policemen found me pale blue and asleep. (Chbosky 98-99)

This group is able to provide a sense of community and inclusion to many social outcasts like Charlie and Patrick, yet they often entangle themselves with dangerous and illegal activities that jeopardize the safety of the members. Though Charlie resolves to never take LSD again, his incident is representative of a larger issue with these types of communities: they are often associated with high-risk behavior such as the incidents that

Charlie experiences, showing that belonging to one of these social groups on the fringe of society – LGBTQ+ groups included – are ultimately a bad influence on their members.

In spite of the reckless portrayal of Charlie's friend group, *Perks* does well in depicting inclusive communities for queer characters like Patrick. The society that Charlie and Patrick live in is highly influenced by heteronormative assumptions and attitudes, yet the queer and outcast members of society are able to find places that allow them to be themselves. While some of these might not be the most positive representation of queer culture – like the various cruising spots Patrick takes Charlie to – welcoming atmospheres like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and friend groups are able to provide safe havens for those who are vulnerable to the brutality of the heterosexist culture engulfing their community.

Boy Meets Boy

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, many queer young adult novels have begun a trend of there being a safe haven for LGBTQ+ youth to escape to in times of identity crisis. What makes *Boy Meets Boy* notable in this category is that the main setting of the story is this sanctuary. Rather than being required to leave their homes to feel safe, the queer teens in this town are able to find the comforts of acceptance and support in their own back yards. In his creation of this town, Levithan employed many elements of magical realism to “suspend reality” and create “an environment relatively free of discrimination” (Crisp 336). Though Levithan suspends Paul's town from the realities of heteronormativity, he also creates a town, Tony's town, where the social limitations of heteronormativity are still in place, highlighting not only the fantasy elements of Paul's world, but the reasons why a town like Paul's should not be an

impossibility.

One of the most significant aspects of *Boy Meets Boy* is the town that Paul and the majority of the characters live in. Unlike most settings for queer young adult novels, the divisions between a “gay” and “straight” scene have dissolved and LGBTQ+ culture blends into the heterosexual culture of the town. Through incorporating elements of magical realism into the novel’s setting, Levithan creates a place where heteronormativity is far from the norm:

There isn’t really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best. Back when I was in second grade, the older gay kids who didn’t flee to the city for entertainment would have to make their own fun. Now it’s all good.

(Levithan 1)

Rather than feeling the need to escape their surroundings to find serenity, the queer characters are able to not only survive in this town, but thrive in a community that welcomes their differences and allows for a multitude of possibilities for the local youth: a GSA is able to be established in an elementary school, Paul has a weekly column in the local paper, the quarterback for the school is also the homecoming queen, and the cheerleaders ride Harleys. In their society, anything is possible for LGBTQ+ children.

While the opportunity to live in this environment is afforded to most every character in *Boy Meets Boy*, Tony lives in a town a few miles away. Despite being the neighboring community, Tony’s town is one where heteronormativity is largely engrained in social norms. Though Tony is a frequent visitor of Paul’s town, he always has to return to the town that isolates him.

We all need a place. I have mine – this topsy-turvy collection of friends, tunes, afterschool activities, and dreams. I want him to have a place, too. When he says, “I like it here,” I don’t want there to be a sad undertone. I want to be able to say, *So stay*. (Levithan 5-6)

Levithan’s inclusion of Tony’s town does two things for the novel. Tony’s town shows that in spite of the existence of towns like Paul’s, there are still places where LGBTQ+ youth are not able to have prosperous or fulfilling lives. Though it bears this grim reality, Tony’s town also brings hope with its inclusion, as it reinforces the necessity for disbanding heteronormative ways of thinking. As evidenced in the quote from the previous paragraph, his town was able to become a safe space for queer youth because people actively sought to make a change. Without the initial work from the “older gay kids who didn’t flee” to larger cities, Paul’s town could be very similar to Tony’s (1).

Ultimately, the societies in *Boy Meets Boy* show that it can be possible to have a healthy and happy life as a queer youth. Prior to its publication, nearly every queer young adult novel was set in an environment like Tony’s, capitalizing on the social isolation experienced by the queer characters in contribution to the hardships they face for being queer in a heteronormative locale. However, *Boy Meets Boy* dispels with this tradition and presents a place where queer children are able to establish themselves as open and active members of their community, as well as showing that any place – even heteronormative ones like Tony’s – can be changed to match these levels of inclusivity.

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

As Sáenz’ novel takes place during the 1980s in El Paso, Texas, it is clear that Aristotle and Dante are discovering their queer identities in a highly heteronormative

environment. Much like the town that Charlie, Patrick and Brad live in in *Perks*, the setting of El Paso, Texas reinforces heteronormative values through any means necessary. The consequences of open defiance of the homophobic nature of their society leads Dante to become the victim of a gay bashing, where the assailant beat Dante to the point where he is unrecognizable:

“Dante and another boy were kissing in the alley. Some boys were walking by and saw the. And –” She tried to smile. “Well, you saw what they did to him.” (Sáenz 307).

Though the abusers in this instance are strangers – rather than a parent like in *Perks* – the message this beating sends stays the same: those who challenge the heteronormative way of life are extinguished by violence and hatred.

Though the social structure of El Paso is similar to that of the suburb from *Perks*, one of the biggest differences is that there is no sense of a queer community in El Paso; Ari and Dante are left to fend for themselves in the big heteronormative world as they try to define their identities. To combat this, *Aristotle and Dante* emphasizes the queer character’s need to escape from their society. Like with Tony in *Boy Meets Boy*, both Ari and Dante are granted opportunities to escape from the stifling heteronormativity that engulfs them in El Paso.

For Dante, this haven becomes Chicago, Illinois. When his family is forced to temporarily relocate for his dad’s job, Dante is forced to leave Ari, his only friend, behind in El Paso. Though he is initially upset about having to leave his friend, moving to Chicago allows Dante the ability to explore and define his identity without the overbearing pressures of a heteronormative society. In Chicago, Dante is able to find a

community of friends who accept him and welcome him, one of whom is a girl who he experiments kissing with. She is also the person who helps him cement his attraction to boys.

“Dante, I think that when you kiss me, you’re kissing someone else.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess so.”

“Are you kissing another girl? Or are you kissing a boy?”

I thought this was a very interesting and forward question.

“A boy,” I said. (Sáenz 225-226)

Rather than chastise or ridicule Dante for his attraction to boys, the girl accepts him for who he is. Chicago gives Dante a safe environment where he can explore the limits of his own identity, openly admitting that he likes boys and not girls. Though Dante states that he is not a fan of Chicago and would prefer to be in El Paso – where Ari is – without Chicago, Dante would not have been able to discover his authentic self and accept himself as gay.

Whereas Dante’s safe haven is located states away from his home, the place that Ari uses for his escape from the world is located closer to home. After Ari turns sixteen and gets a truck, he frequently drives into the empty desert outside of the city – a place where he can be in solitude. In spite of being located right outside of the city, Ari is freed of the pressures and stigmas enforced by society, and is able to explore the secrets of the universe from the flatbed of his truck. Typically he drives out there alone, yet as he begins to open up, he brings company with him to enjoy the universe’s mysteries. For his final venture into the desert, his companion is Dante, and it is in this moment that Ari is

able to discover all of the answers he has been looking for:

This was what was wrong with me. All this time I had been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe, the secrets of my own body, of my own heart. All of the answers had always been so close and yet I had always fought them without even knowing it...

As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free. Imagine that. Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn't afraid anymore. (Sáenz 358-359)

What was once a lonely desert for Ari has become a prosperous oasis for him and Dante. Outside of the realm of the city, Ari and Dante are able to freely express their feelings for one another, releasing their secrets to the universe and finding comfort in each other's arms. Though they may live in a highly heteronormative city, they now have a shared haven that not only protects them from the outside world, but brings them closer together.

While *Aristotle and Dante* might not have a distinctive queer community outside of this desert sanctuary, both Ari and Dante are part of another community that offers them unconditional love and support: their families. In a large number of queer young adult novels, queer characters are often devalued, ostracized, or rejected by their families for their identities – including Brad in *Perks* and Tony in *Boy Meets Boy*. However, both the Mendozas and the Quintanas in *Aristotle and Dante* are presented in a much more positive manner:

“Our parents are really weird,” he said.

“Because they love us? That’s not so weird.”

“It’s how they love us that’s weird.”

“Beautiful,” I said. (Sáenz 354)

When they discover their children’s identities, both the Quintanas and the Mendozas are whole-heartedly accepting of their children. For Dante, coming out to his parents comes with feelings of disappointment and shame, as his being gay means they would not have any grandchildren, yet his fear is proven irrational when his father says, “I don’t care about grandchildren. I care about Dante” (303). Ari’s situation with his parents proves to be quite different, as his parents are the ones who help him realize that he is in love with Dante (348-350) Rather than prescribe to the dictates of heteronormative culture and disavow Ari and Dante for being queer, the Mendozas and Quintanas display levels of acceptance, support, and unconditional love frequently missing from novels in the genre.

In spite of there being no presence of a larger queer community in the novel, *Aristotle and Dante* still has highly positive depictions of society and community. Taking place in El Paso, Texas, it would appear that neither Ari nor Dante would ever be able to escape the cusp of their heteronormative society and come into their own identities. However, the novel dishevels this by offering both Ari and Dante places where they can escape from society’s influence and pressures, as well as giving them each fantastically supportive parents.

In Conclusion

The queer young adult genre has come a long way since its beginnings in 1969. John Donovan's novel, while provocative at the time for its depiction of youth questioning their sexualities, floundered at creating positive depictions of queer lives. Donovan's poor depictions of queer youth inspired many authors to take up the task of creating positive representations of LGBT*Q+ children and adolescents, but their missions became paradoxical by creating texts and characters that thrived on homophobia as a necessity for the genre's existence. As the decades have passed, the number of novels published in the genre increased drastically, yet it took a long time for the genre to cast aside the traditions set in place by Donovan's work. Through their advanced descriptions and representations across the primary, secondary and supplementary characters and the growing acknowledgement of the importance of community and society, each of the titles included in this thesis – *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Boy Meets Boy*, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* – each show the evolution in queer representation across the genre. Though none of these novels are perfect, they are each significant to the continuing evolution of the genre.

Afterward: Possibilities for Expansion

Every week new queer young adult novels are published, so of course, this thesis provides a limited survey of this important and rapidly developing genre. Given the time periods covered in my thesis, I would like to expand the number of novels included.

While the novels I have selected are successful and monumental works in the own right, they provide a limited scope for analysis. Published in 1999, 2003, and 2012, these novels highlight specific achievements within their respective eras, but it is also important to recognize the achievements of their contemporaries, including books such as Alex Sanchez' *Rainbow Boys* (2001), Julie Anne Peters' *Luna* (2004), and Sarah Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* (2013). Ideally, I would like to discuss a minimum of ten novels to better portray the advancement of LGBTQ+ representation in the genre.

I would also like to examine a more diverse group of novels. The three novels selected for this thesis display an array of characters and communities, but the most prominent and well-depicted LGBTQ+ characters are gay men. Based on the criticism of the genre by scholars like Epstein and Rockefeller, it is evident that non-gay identities are either poorly depicted or underrepresented in a large percentage of the novels published. Expanding my work to include more novels focusing on lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters, as well as discovering novels that depict lesser-known identities – including asexual, genderqueer, and pansexual characters – to better represent how the genre has developed and evolved in terms of representing the entirety of the LGBTQ+ community, not just the “G.”

Appendix: LGBTQ+ Terminology

The following lists LGBTQ+ terminology that has not already been pertinently discussed in this text. While these may not pertain specifically to the topics of this thesis, their inclusion in this work aims to educate a larger spectrum of people to the LGBTQ+ community. Please note that this does not encompass all terms used within the community. Many of the definitions have been adapted from Sam Killerman's "Comprehensive* List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions" found on itspronouncedmetrosexual.com, where a more comprehensive* list of terms can be found.

- Ally – a person who actively supports the LGBTQ+ community. Often associated with straight-identified people, this can also be used for people within the community who actively support the rights of other identities.
- Androgyny – a gender expression bearing both masculine and feminine attributes.
- Asexual – a person who does not regularly experience sexual attraction. Like many other identities, asexuality is a spectrum that includes many other identities within it. A common term that some asexual people use for to identify themselves is "ace."
- Biological Sex – the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics used to assign gender at birth. It is also commonly referred to as "Sex."
- Cisgender – a person whose gender identity and biological sex align. Can also be thought of as, "biology matches psychology."
- Cisnormativity – the individual and/or societal assumption that all people are cisgender and that cisgender identities are superior to identities on the trans spectrum.
- Closeted – when a person is not open to themselves or others regarding either their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Fluid(ity) – refers to an identity that can change or shift overtime
- FTM and MTF – abbreviations used by some trans people. FTM refers to female-to-male transgender people, whereas MTF refers to male-to-female transgender people.
- Gender Expression – the ways that a person externally expresses their gender through dress, demeanor, and behavior. This is independent of gender identity.
- Gender Identity – a person's psychological perception of their own gender. Common labels include man, woman, trans, genderqueer, and others.

- Genderqueer – a label used by people who do not identify within the gender binary of man/woman. Can also be used as an umbrella term for a multitude of non-binary gender identities.
- Intersex – a person whose biological sex is indeterminate at birth. Formerly referred to as hermaphrodite, which is now considered to be outdated and derogatory.
- Pansexual – a person who experiences sexual attraction to members of all gender identities and expressions.
- Romantic Orientation – often combined with sexual orientation, but specific to the romantic attraction a person feels for others. Like sexual orientation, it is labeled based on the gender(s) the person is attracted to.
- Trans – an umbrella term encompassing non-cisgender identities.
- Transphobia – the fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of trans people, the trans community, and/or gender ambiguity.
- Two-Spirit – a Native American-specific term used to recognize people who possess both masculine and feminine qualities.

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