This is to certify that the
dissertation entitled

RE-READING *RAINBOW BOYS*:
ROMANCE, REPRESSION, AND REPRESENTATION

presented by

THOMAS BRYAN CRISP

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Doctoral	degree in	Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy

Major Professor's Signature

08/20/08

Date

RE-READING *RAINBOW BOYS*: ROMANCE, REPRESSION, AND REPRESENTATION

By

Thomas Bryan Crisp

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy

2008

ABSTRACT

RE-READING *RAINBOW BOYS*:
ROMANCE, REPRESSION, AND REPRESENTATION

By

Thomas Bryan Crisp

Few pieces of GLBTQ fiction have received the popular and scholarly acclaim awarded to Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow boys* series. Although "problem novels" are rarely taken seriously as literature, the books – the first novel in particular – have joined the few pieces of GLBTQ literature incorporated into educational discourse and curriculum. In this dissertation, the author suggests that although the positive nature and surface construction appeals to those seeking "affirmative" representations of GLBTQ youth, the contributions made by the series are overshadowed by its reliance on heteronormative gender stereotypes that may actually work to perpetuate homophobic attitudes toward gay sexuality.

After initially exploring how a problem of practice led to the questions that undergird this project, the author makes the case for the importance of critical reading and literary analysis of children's and young adult texts for scholars, critics, and teachers. He moves on to explore the "possibilities" offered to young people who read this series of canonical fiction that is not only defining the genre, but creating it as well. Drawing primarily on critical reading and feminist and queer theory, the author identifies the three co-protagonists as tropes which rely on and reinforce stereotypical constructions of gender and sexuality. As disturbing as those depictions may be, equally problematic is

the world constructed within the series: a place where GLBTQ people are tormented deviants who find solace only when isolated from the abusive heterosexual "mainstream."

Ultimately, the author makes the case that the findings in this study are about more than just these three books. He argues that the depictions in literature matter for both heterosexual and queer readers and that teachers, writers, publishers, and scholars need to begin more carefully considering the possibilities offered in gay adolescent fiction.

DEDICATION

For the limitless possibilities he offers,
this is for John.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would have been impossible without the generous support and patience of my family, friends, and colleagues. I am indebted to everyone who has guided me to this point.

My dissertation committee has been remarkable throughout this process. My advisor and dissertation director Laura Apol and committee members Janine Certo, Mary Juzwik, and Lynn Fendler have served as mentors in many ways. They have pushed my thinking with insight, generosity, and compassion. They provided listening ears when I felt lost and pressed me to continually improve my work. I am grateful for the education they have provided.

I would not have survived the doctoral program without the Children's Literature Team: people whom I am proud to have as colleagues. They have served as therapists, allies, advocates, teachers, and friends. They have listened with patience (and without judgment) to my complaints, my fears, and my frustrations and have shared my joys, my successes, and my triumphs. I am honored to have Claire Batt-Vandenburg, Suzanne Knezek, Jacqueline LaRose, and Valerie Struthers Walker as friends. They have pushed me to work harder than I thought I could and were always by my side to pick me up when things felt hopeless. I can never repay them. An additional note of thanks to Jackie for driving me to (and from) my dissertation defense and Suzy for spending a week collecting signatures and submitting the final copy of this document on my behalf.

Several professors have provided encouragement and advice while I was at Michigan State University: Michael Pressley, Mary Lundeberg, Nell Duke, and Suzanne

Wilson opened doors and guided me through this process. Kenneth Kidd has been a generous mentor, cheerleader, and advocate. I am grateful for his friendship.

Finally, to my mother and father, brother and sister I can merely say thank you for helping me find my way, guiding me when I've fallen, and helping me move ahead. Thanks to Cooper, Cody, and Taymor for their love and companionship.

To John, who amazes me: thank you for showing there are possibilities worth looking for.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Few books for gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer or questioning (GLBTQ) young adults have received the type (and quantity) of critical, scholarly, and popular acclaim and commercial success as has *Rainbow boys* (2001) by Alex Sanchez. With the possible exception of Nancy Garden's (1982) *Annie on my mind*, *Rainbow boys* has become as close to a canonical work of GLBTQ young adult fiction as any other book. Widely hailed across publications by readers, critics, and scholars, *Rainbow boys* (2001) and its sequels (*Rainbow high* [2003] and *Rainbow road* [2005]) have joined what are only a select number of GLBTQ pieces of literature to have found their way into classroom and school libraries. To say that the books are beloved almost seems an understatement: readers across a range of sexual identities and ages and from a variety of professional backgrounds (i.e. students, critics, scholars) have affirmed them as both realistic in their portrayals and positive in their content.

The popularity of the series appears to stem from several sources: it is light in tone (a quick read for young adults) and deals quite convincingly with the angst of high school life, suggesting a reflection of reality that strikes readers as being "honest" and "true." Furthermore, it is nearly impossible not to admire the author himself: a quick visit to his website (<http://www.alexsanchez.com>) reveals that this professional guidance counselor and immigrant from Mexico wants nothing more than to share with readers his own struggles with his sexual identity in ways that he hopes will simultaneously support and inspire the next generation of young people.

However, in looking beyond the surface construction of the novels, I hope to suggest that the series relies on a number of gendered stereotypes and stereotypes of gay male sexuality: depicting them as sexually inverted heterosexual couples (where one partner is the "masculine" male and the other is his "feminine" counterpart), and as sexually insatiable and both internally and externally tormented. Further, the world Sanchez has created in the series suggests that it is permissible to harass queer people and those with "deviant" identities can only find solace when secluded from the heterosexual population.

ROOTS OF THE STUDY

This study came through a problem of practice: writing a dissertation about the depictions of gay males in adolescent literature was not something I anticipated when I began my studies at Michigan State University. Approximately one year ago, I was poised to complete a very different study, but became preoccupied with a disconnect that seemed to repeatedly occur for me and my colleagues while instructing an undergraduate course entitled TE 491/448 – *Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature*. In order to clarify how this problem came to my attention and the forefront of my thought, it is necessary to briefly step back and explore the purposes and context of the course and how it fits into the work I have tried to do more generally.

When I arrived at Michigan State University in the fall semester of 2004, I began working with the Children's Literature Team in the College of Education. I spent a year learning about how children's literature courses were constructed and taught in addition to how they fit into the various undergraduate and graduate programs offered by the

College of Education. In the summer of 2005, I taught my first section of TE 348 – *Reading and Responding to Children's Literature.* This course (required for undergraduate elementary education majors) asks students to take a primarily literary (as opposed to pedagogical) stance toward the genre of children's literature. Instead of focusing on how children's literature is "used/useful" for literacy or content area instruction, students explore the ways in which the literary elements of texts (i.e. plot, setting, character, theme, point of view) work to position them (as readers) in particular ways. In addition, they are asked to consider the influence of elements like intertextuality (i.e. the context in which the book was released, the author's larger body of work) as they take a critical stance (looking at issues of power, class, race, gender, implicit/explicit messages) in exploring literature written for children and adolescents. It's a position with which students often struggle, getting stuck in questions like, "But what does this have to do with kids?" (Apol, 1998, 32).

The course requires that students speak from their own experience and resist speaking hypothetically about how "children" (as an anonymous, nebulous group) may or may not respond to the books read for class.[1] Perry Nodelman (2003) writes, "while adult readers are trying to guess how a typical child might respond, they aren't paying attention to the only thing they can know for sure: their own response" (15). Therefore, the children's literature courses at Michigan State University push student to consider "children's literature" as a genre (in the same way "Victorian literature" is a genre) and take "ownership" of their responses as opposed to imagining what potential meanings "a child" might negotiate with text.

THE PROBLEM

Upon the completion of taking TE 348, students have the option of enrolling in the elective course TE 491/448 – *Issues of diversity in children's and adolescent literature*. This course draws on scholarship around issues of race, ethnicity, ability, and sexual identity from a number of perspectives (authors, publishers, scholars of race, cultural studies, etc.) in approaching literature about populations that have been traditionally underrepresented in literature and media. It's a course which demands students [again] speak from their own experience (avoiding hypothetical statements and hearsay) and support their statements with "evidence" from course readings and activities (this could come from articles we've read, films we've watched, speakers to whom we've listened, or children's and adolescent literature we've read).

I am often impressed with the students who participate in this course: they work hard to critically evaluate, unpack, and analyze their own assumptions, opinions, and perspectives. While we ultimately agree that we may leave the course disagreeing (as there is disagreement among scholars who focus on these issues), students are generally thoughtful and careful in their work: these are people who are "trained" in the ways of the world. They are generally caring, sensitive, and aware of the importance of issues surrounding "equality," "multiculturalism," and "diversity." They worry about saying the "wrong" thing or offending other members of the class – they recognize that this is work that must be done carefully, and they make efforts to back up their statements with appropriate scholarship.

The final population we consider in TE 491/448 is what we classify as people who identify as "gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer or questioning" (GLBTQ).

When we approach this population, my colleagues and I noticed that each semester, the conversation and environment would suddenly change: students would refuse to come to class, refuse to do the course reading, and often these students (who had previously been so thoughtful and careful) started saying unkind things – often without intention, but sometimes, seemingly with malice. Statements ranging from "Americans obviously don't want gay marriage" to "that's just not right" and "what they want to do in the privacy of their own homes is fine, but it needs to stay behind closed doors" dominated the discussion. I was puzzled by this drastic change in the discourse and wondered what it was about the GLBTQ population that seemed to be altering the conversation for my students.

A possible explanation could be that students in the course didn't feel there were members of the class who identified as GLBTQ, so they no longer felt the need to be careful about what they said. This is certainly plausible, but it feels unsatisfying to me: in class, we talk about the dangers of making assumptions about people based on their physical appearance. In addition, there were populations previously discussed that didn't "appear" (on a surface level) to be represented in our class population and similar shifts in conversation did not occur around those identities. Something else seemed to be going on here.

I realized that the questions I was asking myself were too broad: since this is a course that demands participants back up statements with "evidence" from the texts read for class, I found myself ultimately wondering, *What is not "working" for my students when they approach these texts?* By rephrasing the problem this way, I began to realize that my students were bringing a "different" set of questions to our conversation about

GLBTQ Americans than they brought with them to the previous populations we discussed. For one, they seemed to assume that sexual orientation is a choice, while one is born with disability, race, etc. Also, for many students it felt acceptable to bring moral imperatives into the discourse around GLBTQ Americans: instead of focusing on issues of social justice, students seemed determined to debate whether identifying as GLBTQ was "good" or "bad."

The mission statement of the College of Education at Michigan State University states (in part) that "We seek to improve the conditions of learning and teaching for everyone in a technological society" and that "We seek to understand how children and adults learn and develop, and how educators can best use that knowledge for benefit of all learners" ("Our mission"). I made explicit statements to my students about the fact that they are enrolled in a course (and a program more generally) that has taken an active stance toward issues of social justice and that when educators employed at MSU state that we prepare our students to meet the needs of *all learners*, we mean that (by awarding students enrolled in the College of Education a degree from Michigan State University) we are certifying that they as educators share the belief that all students have the right to see themselves and their families represented in multiple, meaningful, and "authentic" ways in literature, curriculum, and classrooms more generally.

This seemed to do little to change the tone of the conversation in TE 491/448 and the situation continued to puzzle me and my colleagues: this literature was polarizing for our students – arguments broke out; people "dug in their heels" and refused to consider alternative positions (eventually seeming to "shut down" and simply "give up" on the conversation). I was surprised to be encountering these problematic perspectives and

positions in my students and decided to further reposition the argument: being GLBTQ is not a question of morality (moral imperatives have no place in this discussion); it is a matter of social justice. Further, being GLBTQ is not issue to be debated: it is an identity. It exists; therefore, it must be represented.[2]

As I worked with my students, I brought in books from my own collection of children's and young adult GLBTQ literature. It is a collection I have worked hard to assemble and contains virtually every title (both in and out of print) published in the United States. As I read and used these books, I became increasingly troubled by what I was seeing *within the texts* classified as GLBTQ children's and young adult literature. Many of these titles seemed to be reinforcing the problematic perspectives my students were bringing to the conversation by inadequately countering or addressing these problematic perspectives.

In reading about gay adolescent literature and attending conference presentations on the topic, one particular series of novels seems to come up again and again: Alex Sanchez's (2001, 2003, 2005) *Rainbow boys* books. This same series also found its way into my classroom: in TE 348, students interested in reading GLBTQ literature almost always wanted to read *Rainbow boys* (2001) and in TE 491/448, the book was often contrasted with the novel we read as a class (David Levithan's [2003] *Boy meets boy*). In reading the *Rainbow boys* series, I was troubled by the representations gay males in the novels and concerned about the praise the series was garnering from critics, scholars, and readers. In this dissertation I hope to present a reading of the *Rainbow boys* books that questions the content of the books themselves and the accolades they have received. The major research question I bring to this analysis is:

- How are gay males represented in the *Rainbow boys* series?

In answering this question, I consider several other "sub-questions" including:

- What are the "stories" being told about gay youth in the *Rainbow boys* series?
- What "possibilities" are offered to gay youth in the *Rainbow boys* series?
- How is high school culture (and the world more generally) depicted around issues of homosexuality in the *Rainbow boys* series?
- How is AIDS – a complicated subject in all young adult literature – constructed in the *Rainbow boys* series?

Through this analysis, I consider how depictions of gay males in *Rainbow boys* may simultaneously shape the perceptions of gay people for heterosexual readers and the offer possibilities to gay adolescent readers as to what their lives can be like as young people and when they are adults.

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

In **Chapter two**, "Theoretical framework: Positioning the project," the case is made for the use of critical theory and textual analysis to answer the questions of this project. Too often, literature is chosen for classroom use based solely on how it can be used as a "tool" to meet pedagogical objectives in literacy or content area instruction. Although this as an important part of the classroom environment, teachers, critics, and scholars need to carefully consider the content and depictions in the texts they bring into the classroom because the depictions in children's literature are ideological and normative and work to shape the lives of young readers.

After a brief synopsis of the plots of the three novels (for those unfamiliar with the series), in **Chapter three**, *Rainbow boys* as gay [canonical] young adult literature,"

the success and accolades for the *Rainbow boys* series are explored to make the case that – despite their genre of contemporary realistic fiction and their structure as "problem novels" (a "type" of novel rarely taken seriously) – *Rainbow boys* (2001) and its sequels are novels with which to be reckoned. By exploring reader reviews and comments about the books, discussions of the series in professional reviews and scholarly resources, and the awards the texts have received, it quickly becomes clear that *Rainbow boys* and its sequels are not only defining the genre of gay adolescent literature, they simultaneously work to create the genre as well.

In chapters four and five, the constructions of the three co-protagonists (from whose points of view the series is told) are explored. In **Chapter four**, protagonists Kyle and Jason are analyzed and it is argued that despite their surface construction as "gay males," in actuality, these are tropes of gay males that have repeatedly appeared in media, literature, and popular culture. Jason represents stereotypes of the "masculine male" whose process of self-discovery comes at the expense of his "feminine" counterpart (Kyle). In **Chapter five**, Nelson, the character who is widely held up as the sole example of what it looks like (and means) to be "queer and proud" (see, e.g. Cart & Jenkins, 2006), is examined. In actuality, Nelson is a character who exemplifies several stereotypes of gay males: he is sexual insatiable, sexually inverted, recklessly impulsive, and filled with self-loathing. Ultimately, there is little about this depiction that reflects an image of being "queer and proud."

In **Chapter six**, "Gay inevitabilities," the issue of heteronormativity within the series is addressed. The world of the *Rainbow boys* novels reinforces homophobia and heteronormativity by presenting gay people as both internally and externally conflicted

and tormented: marginalized and deviant targets of discrimination and oppression. It seems that they can only find solace from intolerance when isolated in "Arcadian" settings: away from heterosexuals. Further, although it is an under-represented and important topic in all adolescent literature, the construction of AIDS within the series depicts the disease as an inevitability for gay people.

Finally, in **Chapter seven, "**Conclusions and implications," the question is raised as to what all of this reveals and implies about the *Rainbow boys* books and what it (subsequently) means for readers of the series. Luckily, those who explore the books have the ability to be resistant readers (Fetterley, 1978) who can raise questions about these depictions as they decide to go along with the reading, negotiate meaning, or resist what is offered (Hall, 1980). The limitations of this work and opportunities for future work are also made explicit.

SOME BRIEF DISCLAIMERS

Reinforcing the normative binary

It must first be acknowledged that the use of words such as "masculine," "feminine," "male," and "female" (and even "gay" or "homosexual") throughout this project ultimately reinforces the normative binaries it critiques. Following the work of Monique Wittig, Judith Butler (1999) argues such words exist "*only* within the heterosexual matrix; indeed, they are the naturalized terms that keep that matrix concealed and, hence, protected from a radical critique" (111, italics in original). However, with this nod to their obvious limitations (and the more in depth discussion of gendered and sexual identities as social constructions in chapter two), these slippery

constructs are employed to examine and make explicit the ways in which these texts often operate within this dualistic frame. While the power of these words and the images they instantly evoke make them problematic, they are used in this analysis because they are the most familiar and readily available terms. Their familiarity helps facilitate the analysis of the elements at play in the series: because the *Rainbow boys* books rely on and reinforce images of "masculine" and "feminine," "male" and "female," "gay" and "straight," using these terms makes it possible to "unwrap" the depiction of the characters and world of the *Rainbow boys* books. It may be helpful to imagine these words as crossed out (i.e. "~~masculine~~" or "~~feminine~~") to serve as a reminder that although these are the terms used, they are highly problematic constructs.

"Authenticity" and "accuracy" in young adult literature

Terms such as "authentic" and "accurate" are also complicated and complex in the ways they are used throughout this project. The issue of "authenticity" in children's and adolescent literature has proven problematic – and often irreconcilable – for scholars, authors, and publishers. Kathy G. Short and Dana L. Fox (2003) write in their seminal *Stories matter: The complexity of authenticity in children's literature* that "authentic" literature is presumed to include "cultural facts and values and what is considered 'truth' about a particular cultural experience" (20). However, they note that there is no standardized "authentic" insider or outsider perspective, which makes the issues surrounding cultural authenticity increasingly complex. Concrete definitions of what "authentic" depictions "look like" may not be uniformly agreed upon, but their importance is unarguable. Short and Fox (2003) write, "all children have the right to see

themselves within a book, to find within a book the truth of their own experiences instead of stereotypes and misrepresentations...literature is one of the significant ways that children learn about themselves and others; therefore, those literary images should not be distorted or inauthentic" (21). While authors may ultimately create depictions of their choosing, Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen (2003) write, "authors and illustrators need to consider the implications of the cultural values they introduce in their stories" (206). Because literature helps children create an understanding of the world around them, authors have a responsibility to construct their representations with thought and care.

Not a call for censorship

Arguments such as the ones made in this dissertation could easily be appropriated by individuals seeking to keep GLBTQ literature out of the hands of young people. Because all children and young adults need to see themselves and their families represented in literature, it should be clarified that this essay does not call for the censorship of these novels. Its purpose is to raise questions around the importance of critical reading, the careful analysis of literature, and carefully selecting GLBTQ literature because accurate depictions of GLBTQ people are profoundly important for youth of all sexual identities.

NOTES

[1] It seems that often students limit what "children" are able to do with books or would(n't) like about particular texts in the name of an imagined "innocent" child. This tendency leads adult readers of children's literature to worry if (as examples) Sendak's (1964) *Where the wild things are* is too frightening or if (to borrow Perry Nodelman's [2003] example), not understanding all of the [nonsense] words in Edward Lear's *The owl and the pussycat* would lessen a child's enjoyment of the text. As Perry Nodelman (2003) writes, "In thinking about the poem [*The owl and the pussycat*] as a text for children, they had ignored their own responses and, instead, guessed how some hypothetical children might respond. Many adults base their judgments of children's literature upon such guesses. But making accurate guesses is difficult, maybe even impossible. Guessing forces adults to make generalizations about children – how they read, how they think, what they enjoy or don't, and how they absorb information...such generalizations can be dangerously misleading. If nothing else, they misrepresent the tastes and abilities of many individual children" (15-16).

[2] In an article for *School Library Journal*, young adult novelist and editor David Levithan (2004) writes:

> I've had librarians say to me, "People in my school don't agree with homosexuality, so it's difficult to have your books on the shelves." Here's the thing: being gay is not an *issue*, it is an *identity*. It is not something that you can agree or disagree with. It is a *fact*, and must be defended and represented as a fact. (44, *emphasis in original*)

He goes on to point to another part of his identity as Jewish to say that if someone told him that they disagreed with being Jewish, he would fight that position to his death. He argues that we don't assume a single book can represent the range of experiences classified as (for example) African American,[2] so it is equally wrong to assume that one book can accurately represent the range of identities classified as "GLBTQ." Finally, he suggests that we wouldn't allow ourselves to be told we could have books in our libraries by females only if they weren't "openly female," and uses the absurdity of this position to again point to the fact that this is the position taken too often regarding GLBTQ literature. We cannot deny that gay people exist. They exist; therefore they must be represented. Levithan (2004) ultimately concludes that, "discrimination is not a legitimate point of view" (44).

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSITIONING THE PROJECT

This study of the *Rainbow boys* series draws on a number of perspectives: primarily various theories of children's literature, children's literature criticism, and gender and queer theory. Because the *Rainbow boys* books are not published in isolation, it is important to explore how Western conceptions of gender and sexuality and assumptions about the purposes of children's literature more generally can provide insight into the series as well as place the current study within the body of work currently being done around GLBTQ children's and young adult literature.

It seems necessary to consider how children's literature is generally regarded in the United States. Too often, the content of children's and adolescent literature is given little critical attention. Emblematic of what often happens with literature in schools, in 1995, Allen, Freeman, Lehman, and Scharer reported that literature was usually selected for classroom use based on how well it lent itself to use in the acquisition of literacy skills, but the literary quality of the books themselves was typically not considered. Conversations about the content of literature rarely find their way into educational circles, and when they do happen, they are often limited to investigating the "moral" or "pedagogical" value of books. Peter Hunt (1999) writes, "very often, children's literature is seen as the last repository of the *ducis et utile* philosophy: the book may be pleasant, yes, but essentially they have to be *useful*" (11, italics in original). Many instructors who try to push their university students to think critically about the content of children's literature must confront the stubborn mindset that "books are designed to teach reading"

(May, 1995, 5). This "appropriation of children's literature" seems widespread and while it is an undeniably important element of the classroom culture, using books as tools through which children can gain literacy skills or through which teachers can achieve objectives in subjects such as history, science, or math shortchanges the power of literature: there is no doubt that literature can provide unique avenues through which young people can learn, but children learn more than merely "skills" from the books they are given. As Jill P. May (1995) suggests in her book *Children's literature and critical theory*, we "need to begin to look at children's literature as *literature*" (7, italics in original).

It should be noted that even within "literary" circles (i.e. departments of English), children's and adolescent literature is seldom taken seriously *as literature*. Beverly Lyon Clark (2003) writes "contemporary critics have been slow to take children's literature seriously and treat it canonically" (2). Parents and teachers often find literary analysis or critical evaluations unhelpful or inaccessible and those involved in more "serious" literary pursuits often look upon critical readings of children's books with some skepticism – these books often do not "count" as Literature. Roderick McGillis (1996) calls this the "double estranging" of critics of children's literature. He writes,

> Critics speak to critics and not to the people directly involved with children's books: teachers, librarians, parents, and most important, children themselves. But because the texts upon which critics of children's literature write are for children, and because the audience for these texts is relatively unlettered, children's literature critics find themselves looked upon with some suspicion by academic critics who work on mainstream

> literature. From the other end, the teachers, librarians, parents, and children who read children's literature look with some suspicion on those who spend their lives intellectualizing these ostensibly simple books. (17)

One of the premises of this study is that – even though it often doesn't happen – the content of children's and adolescent literature needs to be taken seriously. In teaching young readers to think carefully about how a book is constructed, we teach them to consider how they are "acted upon" as readers. When we give literature to children and young adults, we teach them to perform their lives. As Roderick McGillis (1996) writes, "what we teach when we teach literature to children is not, then, themes and structures, but rather the desire to examine, analyze, recreate, perform, and understand the forces that shape our own lives" (206).

As I have tried to argue elsewhere, the depictions in children's literature matter (Crisp, 2008). David Levithan (2004) writes that, "When we talk about the books in a library, we call them a *collection*. But to a young reader – especially a teen reader – it's really more of a *representation*" (44, italics in original). Literature can serve as both a window and a mirror for readers (Cullinan and Galda, 1994). When books serve as a mirror, readers see reflections of themselves and their experiences in the text being read. For readers who identify as gay males, when they read the *Rainbow boys* series, they hope to have images of themselves reflected back: these novels are supposed to provide depictions of "people like me." These readers are often looking for representations of whom they can be now and what they can be like as adults. On the other hand, when literature serves as a window, readers often hope to see beyond their own experiences and learn about people different than they are. For readers who identify as heterosexual, the

Rainbow boys books can serve to teach about what it is "like" to be young and gay in the contemporary United States. Ideally, as these readers stare through the window into gay culture, they eventually see shadows of themselves reflected back in the pane of glass and not only learn about "others," they learn about themselves as well. Regardless of identity, one of the functions of the *Rainbow boys* books (and all literature) should be, as Michael Cart (1999) suggests, "bestow[ing] knowledge by showing us the commonalities of our human hearts" (1811). Lee Galda and Bernice Cullinan (2006) write, "Books have shaped our lives. They are...our means of thinking about what kind of people we are and what we value...Give children books and books will shape their lives" (xiv).

In writing of the way literature "shapes" thinking and values, Galda and Cullinan (2006) are suggesting that books do not merely reflect an objective "reality." Instead, books contain ideological constructions of reality for young readers: books are written to "mold" young minds into particular ways of thinking about the world. As Gail S. Murray (1998) writes, "Children's books often tell us much more about the image of the ideal child that society would like to produce than they do about real children" (xv).

Children's literature as ideological

Historian Robert V. Hine (1973) writes, "what a society wants its children to know reveals what a society wants itself to be" (238). If children are seen as the "future" of a society, it makes sense that they are indoctrinated with the very ideals of how that society wants itself to be seen. Children's literature is a primary "vehicle for education, a major means of teaching and indoctrinating" (Shavit, 1986, 35) and the books written for and given to children serve as "repositories for cultural values" (Apol, 1998, 34) for the

society in which they are released and consumed. Jacqueline Rose (1984) likens children's literature to colonization, writing, "if children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2).

Books that are classified as "GLBTQ"[1] reflect the values that undergird dominant U.S. society. While the remainder of this dissertation will focus on how the *Rainbow boys* series constructs the world for readers, the very existence of this genre of literature (more generally) reveals a tremendous amount about the culture in which GLBTQ books are published.

"GLBTQ" literature as a genre can only exist in a society that relies upon gendered and sexual identity categories. In his *History of sexuality, volume one: An introduction*, Foucault (1978) argues it is through the act of naming practices as either acceptable or not that ultimately *defines* and *creates* those acts. Until identities are "named" and deemed "moral" or "deviant," they do not exist. Because of this, acts of regulation are not denials that sexual deviance exists or even attempts to *repress* these identities; they instead allow members of the population to police themselves (by determining what is and is not "acceptable" and "appropriate") and further to *talk* about these sexualities, thus bringing them into existence. When something is named "moral," it automatically creates the "deviant."

The ways in which U.S. society has traditionally considered particular identities either "acceptable" or "not" are revealed through an exploration of the concept of heteronormativity. Adrienne Rich (1980) argues that in Western culture, heterosexuality is presumed and as a result of this assumption, other experiences and identities (she

specifically writes of lesbian existence) are made invisible – or cast as deviant and unacceptable ways of being. Building on Rich's (1980) work on compulsory heterosexuality, Michael Warner (1991) coined the term "heteronormativity" in his introduction to a special issue of *Social text.* He further defines the term in *Publics and counterpublics* (2002) as "a whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness – embedded in things and not just in sex – is what we call heteronormativity" (194). "Heteronormativity" is generally used to describe the assumption that heterosexuality is the "norm" (see, e.g., Chambers [2003, 2005], Cohen [2005]) and therefore positions a heterosexual identity as the only "acceptable" gender or sexual identity category.

GLBTQ children's and young adult literature reinforcing and resisting heteronormativity

Rainbow boys and other books classified as "GLBTQ" are ultimately reactions to (and against) heteronormativity. Although they may be resistances to "normative" constructions of the world, by remaining on the path of named and defined "identity categories," these books necessarily reinforce and maintain the very normativity they hope to subvert. Foucault writes, "A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life" (144). He argues that in order to truly disrupt normative conceptions of sexualities, one must move outside identity categories (as being on the side of "life") into the realm of "bodies and pleasures" (159) beyond named practices.

It is precisely because acts of repression and regulation serve to proliferate (and not eliminate) sexuality that acts of resistance to heteronormativity often prove so ineffective. But before dismissing all gay adolescent children's literature as maintaining a heteronormative construction of the world (because of its reliance and reinforcement of identity categories), it may be helpful to consider these texts as *resistances* to heteronormativity. Foucault argues that although they remain on the path of identity, such resistances are not always futile. He writes:

> Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. (96)

In her essay, "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay," Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick (1991) demonstrates how heteronormativity is often enacted against queer children. She points to recent developments in American psychology (and society more generally) to argue that constructions which feel (on a surface level) "affirmative" or "positive" as representations for queer youth often work to make homosexuals invisible in order to maintain heteronormativity. As an example, she points to the "nature/nurture" debate and argues that while the "discovery" of a genetic or biological basis for homosexuality may initially seem to provide voice and legitimacy to queer "existence," there is never talk of "any supposed gay-producing circumstance as the *proper* hormone balance or the *conducive* endocrine environment for gay generation" (147). A "gay gene" is only

considered in an effort to explain (and ultimately – through the prevention of such genes – eliminate) queerness.

Following Sedwick's (1991) lead, I argue that despite the proliferation of young adult novels that depict gay males as characters in "affirmative" ways work to make them invisible through the reliance on heteronormative gender stereotypes and constructions. It is precisely because, as Sedgwick (1991) argues, there is "a long tradition of viewing gender and sexuality as continuous and collapsible categories" (141) that heteronormativity is reinforced and maintained within gay adolescent literature.

The normative construction of gender

These modern theories of sexuality will be used to analyze the content of the *Rainbow boys* series alongside the conceptions of "gendered" identity from which they tend to be derived. Although gender and sexuality are not "continuous and collapsible categories," theories of "gender" as a binary [oppositional] construction merit attention before moving into thinking about sexual orientation and identity.

Gendered identities are often considered "naturally occurring" and as biological "differences" between those labeled as one of two genders: either "male" or "female." These constructs of gendered identity categories are difficult to untangle. "Talking about gender for most people," writes Judith Lorber (1995), "is the equivalent of fish talking about water" (13). Contemporary U.S. society is plagued by constructions of gender and sexuality despite evidence that there are actually more similarities than differences between "males" and "females." Hess (1990) argues, "rather than being a property of the individual, maleness and femaleness are products of the operation of social systems on

both the variability and similarities provided by nature...gender is created by *suppressing* similarities, and is maintained by a deep ideological commitment to differences between women and men" (83-84, italics in original).

As opposed to being "naturally occurring," evidence suggests that "identity" is negotiated through discourses and institutions (Foucault 1978/1990) that produce sexual knowledge (Seidman 1996) and carry meanings dependent upon variables/contexts such as class and location (Mahay, Laumann, and Michaels 2005). As Judith Butler (1990) argues, identities are not "natural," but are shifting and fluid; constructed through "repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43). In *Manliness and civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880-1917*, Gail Bederman (1995) argues that gendered identities are constructed through culturally and contextually situated processes and practices. She writes:

> Many historians have simply assumed that manhood is an unproblematic identity – and unchanging essence – inherent in all male-bodied humans (...) [G]ender – whether manhood or womanhood – is a *historical, ideological process*. Through that process, individuals are positioned and position themselves as men or as women...manhood – or 'masculinity,' as it is commonly termed today – is a continual, dynamic process. (6-7, italics in original)

This process is one through which individuals interact daily (see e.g., Fine 1989). West and Zimmerman (1987) write that gender is an "achieved property of situated

conduct...an emergent feature of social situations...and a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (126).

Toril Moi (1985) argues that there has been a long tradition of depicting "males" as "masculine" (i.e. active, aggressive, dominating) and "females" as "feminine" (i.e. passive, subservient, self-sacrificing) which, despite work of critical feminist scholars, pervades Western society to this day. R.W. Connell (1987) calls this "sexual character," the idea that:

> women and men as groups have different traits: different temperaments, characters, outlooks and opinions, abilities, even whole structures of personality...often it is assumed that there is just one set of traits that characterizes men in general and thus defines masculinity. Likewise, there is one set of traits for women, which defines femininity. (167)

Talcott Parsons's (1942, 1956) academic writing is the most famous example of the "instrumental" versus "expressive" traits that stereotypically correspond to "masculine" and "feminine" roles, but despite the work of feminist scholars (Halley 2006), these gender distinctions routinely appear in children's and young adult literature.

In her study of the depictions of girls and women in *Youth's companion* serials, Laura Apol (2000) writes that in literature, coming of age "is characterized by a rite of passage that transforms boys into men, girls into women, often in highly stereotyped gender-specific ways" (61). In exploring the *Rainbow boys* series, it will be clear that these binary conceptions of gender are prevalent, despite the fact that these books explore the relationships between gay males. The ideas that undergird the construction of the

characters in the series rely on "gendered" conceptions of what it means to be a gay male.[2]

The normative construction of sexuality

Modern theories of "gendered" homosexuality date back over a century. Freud (1905) wrote in his *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* that homosexual men have more in common with heterosexual women than they do with heterosexual men and therefore strive to achieve traits held as "feminine" gender role ideals. Most famously postulated by Havelock Ellis (1897) in his book, *Sexual inversion* and by Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing (1886) in *Psychopathia sexualis*, the theory of sexual inversion suggests gay males are assumed to be females "trapped" in male bodies. In her book *Fashioning sapphism: The origins of a modern English lesbian culture*, Laura Doan (2001) summarizes "sexual inversion" as the idea that males with inverted gender traits are inclined to "female pursuits" (26).

Prior to the 1970s, it seems that being "male" was synonymous with being "masculine" and that the terms did not receive much attention (Franklin 1984). However, feminism and the Gay Liberation movements of the 1970s, led to increased visibility of queer identities and several psychoanalytic theorists argued that homosexuality relied on gendered binaries of a repressed "feminine" gay male identity. As an example, Mario Mieli (1977) argued that male homosexuality was necessarily "feminine" and called for the celebration of "feminine" queerness. These increasingly visible images of gay male identities (as "masculine" [i.e. the leather daddy] and "feminine" [i.e. the drag queen; the twink; the "boi") further solidified the misconception that because "male/masculine" was

the binary opposite of "female/feminine," in gay relationships, one partner must occupies the role of the "man" while the other is the sexually inverted "woman" in a "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1995).

Although much research contradicts the "inversion" model (see, e.g. Jones & De Cecco 1982; Robinson, Skeen & Flake-Hobson, 1982), these attitudes and misconceptions have changed little (Kite & Deaux 1987). As an example, John Boswell (1989) writes of the "fellator" and "ceveator" (the "recipient" of semen) and the "predicator" (he who penetrates) and "irrumator" (he who offers his penis for oral sex) as "active" and "passive" gay male sexual roles that parallel the construction of "heterosexual" sexuality. As problematic as these constructions may be, they have allowed entry points into the analysis of "inverted" queer characters in Literature written by a number of prominent authors like Radclyffe Hall, Oscar Wilde, and Herman Melville (see, e.g., Creech 1993; Meyers 1977; Lilly 1993; Dynes & Donaldson 1992).

These constructions of the "dominant and the [inverted] deviant" (Dollimore, 1992, 87) inform the work that follows, but before moving into the analysis of the *Rainbow boys* series, this study should be placed within the larger context of scholarly work being done around young adult literature featuring gay males as characters. As the following discussion will demonstrate, there is little being written about this genre. Most scholarly, critical, and survey texts on children's and young adult literature fail to acknowledge such books exist – and those that contain chapters on GLBTQ literature (i.e. Lehr [2008], Salem [2006]) seem to lack any critical evaluation of the content of the books. All GLBTQ titles seem interchangeable – none are considered to be of a higher literary quality than any others.

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE: MAJOR STUDIES OF GLBTQ YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Many under-represented populations have emerged in children's and adolescent literature by gradually and sporadically appearing as peripheral characters. As a result, critics and scholars often start tracking these representations through a mode of "counting characters" (see, for example, Sims 1982) in which any depiction is celebrated. After a period of engagement in this activity, scholars begin to move toward more nuanced systems of classification and analysis. Therefore, it seems logical – and not surprising – that GLBTQ literature has progressed in a way similar to other diverse populations.

While in the past five years, there has been an increase in scholarly literary activity around gay adolescent literature, there remain very few studies that critically examine the content and constructions of the books themselves. Because there has been such a dearth of scholarship around this population, there often seems to be the assumption that all representations (any representations) are "good enough." There have been books and articles written about masculinity in adolescent fiction (see, for example Stephens [2002]; Wannamaker [2006]; Khan [2006]) and in youth culture (i.e. Firminger [2006]), but these often make no mention of queerness. On the other hand, there have been attempts to "queer" children's and adolescent fiction (see, for example Pugh and Wallace [2006], Latham [2006], Cummins [2004]) and culture (i.e. Rand [1995]) that don't explicitly mention homosexuality. Eric L. Tribunella (2002) even explores refused queer identification in the novel *A separate peace*: the author seems to actively (and successfully) work to discredit any possible reading of the relationship between the two

protagonists as gay. There has been some token critical work done on the depiction of transchildren (i.e. Norton [1999]), queer families (i.e. Mallan [2004]), and adolescent fiction with lesbian characters (i.e. Thompson [2006], Abate [2007]), but outside of Benjamin Lefebvre's (2005) article in the *Children's literature association quarterly*, there are no studies that critically explore the content of gay adolescent fiction. Focusing on two Canadian young adult novels with heterosexual protagonists, Lefebvre argues that ultimately, these depictions reinforce:

> "shaming interpellations" for gay or otherwise non-heterosexual adolescent readers seeking validation through forms of representation and imaginative models with whom they can identify; instead, these readers are once again interpolated into this homophobic ideology, learning to silence their own confessions of trauma out of fear of being severely reprimanded. As a result, readers of any gender or sexual orientation are discouraged from developing the imaginative capacity to understand and embrace a wider range of possibilities for male subjectivity. (308)

More emblematic of the work being done in the field are the several book-length studies published around GLBTQ young adult literature that provide insight into the development of the genre. Generally, these major studies reflect this "counting characters" mode – the authors look for any depiction of GLBTQ people and classify all books that contain a representation as "GLBTQ" without giving much thought to the quality, "authenticity," or importance of the characterization.

In *Out of the closet and into the classroom: Homosexuality in books for young people*, an early study of children's and young adult books with gay and lesbian

characters, Australian educators Clyde & Lobban (1992) constructed an annotated bibliography of every book of which they were aware that contained gay and lesbian characters. They list several titles that they have never seen themselves: books that (through "word of mouth") they've heard exist somewhere in the marketplace and contain some instance of homosexuality. Ann Rinaldi's (1987) *The good side of my heart* is one book Clyde & Lobban (1992) admit has "not been sighted" but they include it anyway because it "is listed in several [other] bibliographies" (94). In examining the book, it does indeed deal with homosexuality: the protagonist is devastated to learn that the object of her affection (a young man named Josh) is gay. What I appreciate about this collection is that it gives a glimpse into the development of the genre of GLBTQ literature: scholars, educators, and readers were desperate to find representations – *any* depictions of gay and lesbian characters, so much so that even books merely rumored to exist were included in the collection. Unfortunately, no attention is given to the quality of the representation in terms of nuance of character, reinforcement or resistance to stereotyping, or the potential impact of these representations. What is presented is simply a list of books; some with synopses of plot structures, others without (based on their availability to the authors).

A similar reference is the more recent *Lesbian and gay voices: An annotated bibliography and guide to literature for children and young adults* by Frances Ann Day (2000). Day lists more than 275 titles in her annotated bibliography and specifies that the collection does not list every single representation of lesbian and gay characters; it only includes recommended titles. "Many additional books were considered," she writes, "and even though most of them have some strengths, they were rejected because they promote

negative stereotypes or do not meet the criteria set forth in the 'Suggested guidelines for evaluating books with lesbian and gay content'" (xix). She states that she limits her collection to books in print, but offers some historically significant titles as well. As Day (2000) makes clear in the above quote, what is significant about this collection is that it puts forth some criteria for evaluating books with gay and lesbian content, including the categories of "general selection criteria" (the books should be of a high literary quality and be free of problematic constructions), "self-esteem" (the books should contain positive images), "homophobia and heterosexism," "omission," "characterization," "language," the depiction of healthy "relationships," and the avoidance of "stereotypes" and "erasure" (summarized from pages xxiii-xxv). But even these are vague, general, surface level, and ideological criteria for analyzing texts.

Day's book is notable because contains lists of picture books, fiction, short stories, nonfiction, biography/autobiography, professional resources, and ends with author profiles all within this single volume. Unfortunately, there are far more out-of-print titles than Day initially suggests and many of the books included contain racist and stereotypical constructions that have been overlooked. Ultimately, the collection remains commendable in the sense that it attempts to establish criteria for evaluation of texts in the genre and its selection of some titles as being more exemplary than others (although the development and application of her criteria feels insufficient) suggests that Day doesn't assume that any representation is "good enough."

Published the same year as Clyde & Lobban's annotated bibliography, Allan A. Cuseo (1992) constructed the first systematic literary study of gay characters in his book, *Homosexual characters in YA novels: A literary analysis 1969-1982*. The study is an

important landmark publication, too often overlooked and unacknowledged in subsequent studies. Written before there was a substantial body of titles within the genre, Cuseo draws on a range of adolescent and adult titles to explore the depiction of characters, contexts, and literary elements as constructions to analyze what they reveal about public attitudes toward homosexuals. Cuseo finds five major flaws in the available representations: silence (most books have no positive references to homosexuality), rejection of family and peers, recognizability of gay characters merely through their appearance and/or behavior, and retribution (the gay character is the "problem" and so must suffer) (summarized from pages 392-393). It is unfortunate that the study has not been pursued in any meaningful way in terms of the literature published in the last 25 years.

The most comprehensive and systematic study of GLBTQ literature can be found in Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins's (2006), *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969-2004* in which the authors suggest that GLBTQ literature "must continue to come of age *as literature*" (166, italics in original). As I have argued elsewhere (Crisp, 2007) Cart & Jenkins begin to move scholars toward a more critical way of examining this literature by adapting the frame proposed in *Shadow and substance*, Rudine Sims [Bishop's] (1982) seminal study of what she termed "Afro-American" young adult literature. Cart & Jenkins (2006) name three "phases" of GLBTQ literature (summarized on page xx) which include *homosexual visibility* (stories in which "a character who has not previously been considered gay/lesbian comes out either voluntarily or involuntarily"), *gay assimilation* (stories which "[assume] the existence -- at least in the world of the story -- of a 'melting pot' of sexual gender

identity"), and *queer consciousness/community* (stories which "show GLBTQ characters in the context of their communities of GLBTQ people and their families of choice"). Whereas Sims's frame fits chronologically (first "social conscience" books, then "melting pot" books, and finally "culturally conscious" literature), the three categories Cart and Jenkins use are not limited by a particular time frame. In other words, in the 1970s, we had books that fit in all three categories and the same is true today. We haven't moved from homosexual visibility to queer consciousness/community; they continue to co-exist.

The analysis serves as a call for scholars, critics, and readers to begin thinking about the content of the books used in the classroom and as one gets used to the way their frame operates, it serves as a useful enough beginning to categorizing the literature. However, I argue that Cart & Jenkins (2006) do not go far enough in their critique of the novels, often failing to look beyond the surface construction of characters and "worlds."

B. Aaron Talbot (2006) writes in his scholarly review that "Cart and Jenkins's incredibly detailed and researched historical survey provides a starting point for any critical, contextual, and theoretical examination of young adult GLBTQ literature" (392). The goal of this dissertation project is to further the scholarship previously published by looking beyond titles and large-scale categorizations and critically evaluate the content of a specific popular series.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE CURRENT PROJECT

In chapter three, the decision to focus this analysis on the *Rainbow boys* series is detailed further, but at this point, it feels appropriate to merely reiterate that *Rainbow*

boys and its sequels are as close to canonical pieces of gay adolescent fiction as any other book. As mentioned in chapter one, the series has been so wildly popular that it is not only held up as the shining example of the genre, it is *creating* the genre as well: the character tropes and plot structure of the series have been mimicked in a number of different titles to the point that one could almost identify particular texts as "another *Rainbow boys*-esque" book.

With little attention being given to the content of children's and adolescent literature and the privileged place *Rainbow boys* occupies in the field of young adult literature, I hope to raise questions about the representations of gay males in the series that will push the conversation about this series. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to assist the genre in moving beyond "counting characters" or titles, beyond vague attempts at criteria without adequate applicability. This work will also serve as a model as to how literary elements can help explain the ways such books "work" for (and on) readers. In this analysis, I primarily focus on character development – as opposed to elements like setting or plot – to explore how the protagonists are constructed as representations of gay males.

As I will argue in chapters four and five, although the characters in *Rainbow boys* are gay males, they rely on a number of culturally constructed assumptions about gender and sexuality. Author Alex Sanchez depicts gay males as exemplifying characteristics that are either stereotypically "masculine" or a sexually inverted "feminine" counterpart according to the heteronormatively "gendered" role they occupy within the relationship. However, before moving to unravel the assumptions undergirding the novels, chapter three centers on the popularity of the series and argues that – despite the fact that the

books are "problem novels" – these are books (and constructions) that need to be taken seriously.

NOTES

[1] "GLBTQ" is simply one modifier of many that could be chosen when discussing literature depicting this population. In many ways, choosing GLBTQ over LGBTQ, GLBT, LGBT, and other modifiers is a personal choice. However, the use of this term is not incidental. First, I follow the lead of Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins (2006) wo use the term in their landmark study *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969-2004.* Cart and Jenkins (2006) point to the Stonewall Riots of 1969 as its roots. "We have chosen to use 'GLBTQ' in this historical account," they write, "to reflect the fact that the human rights movement on behalf of GLBTQ people that began with the 1969 Stonewall Riots was originally referred to as the gay rights or gay liberations movement" (xv). Often, "LGBTQ" is the preferred modifier because it is feared that a "lesbian" identity will be lost due to a focus on the "G" (gay) identity category. For Cart and Jenkins, the "G" is placed before the "L" because it points to the beginning of the movement for gay rights.

There is another (more personal) reason this modifier is employed: when I was teaching TE 348 – *Reading and Responding to Children's Literature*, I spent time exploring GLBTQ children's and young adult literature with my students. After class, one of my students walked over to me with what I read as a pained expression on her face. "You know," she said, "I don't quite fit." I pushed her to elaborate. "I am in a relationship with another woman right now," she continued, "but I am not ready to classify myself as a 'lesbian' or 'bisexual.' So even in looking at this group, I still don't fit in anywhere." I was happy to be able to point her toward the "Q" in GLBTQ, which

can stand either for queer or questioning people. This seems to be the most inclusive modifier available.

[2] The previous discussion implies why the term "sexual identity" is used in this dissertation as opposed to "sexual orientation." Although all identities are constructed within a normative frame, "sexual orientation" seems to suggest a hierarchical subject position in relationship to that "norm" (i.e. "How am I oriented in relation to heterosexuality?"). Warren J. Blumenfeld (1994) defines *sexual orientation* as being "determined by whom we are sexually (or erotically) attracted" and *sexual identity* as "what we call ourselves." "Identity" is an evolving construction and we must remain cognizant of the fact that we have the power to define (and "name") ourselves. Edward O. Laumann (1994) writes, "development of self-identification as homosexual or gay is a psychological and socially complex state, something which, in this society, is *achieved only over time*" (299, *emphasis mine*).

CHAPTER THREE

RAINBOW BOYS AS GAY [CANONICAL] YOUNG ADULT FICTION

ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINTS: THE STORIES OF THE RAINBOW BOYS

Simplistically, *Rainbow boys* (2001) is the story of three young men struggling to successfully complete their senior year of high school. Told from alternating viewpoints, the novel introduces readers to three protagonists and the chapters alternate from Jason's perspective (described on the back of the book as "Jock. Good looks. Beautiful girlfriend. Popular. Unsatisfied."), to Kyle's (who is described as "Swim team star. Friendly. Easygoing. Intelligent. Confused."), and finally to Nelson's (described as "Independent. Opinionated. Defiant. Joker. In love.") and back again in a rotating fashion as the story is told. In brief, best friends Kyle and Nelson (both identify as gay males) become involved in a complicated love triangle when classmate Jason Carrillo shows up at a gay youth meeting. Jason is not only Kyle's long-time love interest, he's also the school jock. On its surface, the story is about many of the issues teens might face in coming out (Kyle comes out to his parents and his high school and Jason comes out to himself, his family, and his girlfriend) as well as what it means to be "queer and proud" (through the character of Nelson.)

As *Rainbow boys* (2001) begins, Jason is dating a young woman named Debra who will do anything to satisfy his needs. After avoiding the conversation with her for some time, at their prom, Jason finally confesses to Debra that he is "confused" (he does not specifically say he is confused about his sexual identity) and needs to "figure things out...to decide what I want" (60) before he can continue in their relationship. As the pair breaks up, Jason immediately remembers Kyle's offer to tutor him. He invites Kyle over

to his house, shows him his athletic trophies, and shares his cologne with him before hesitantly approaching a conversation about when/how Kyle knew he was gay.

When Kyle returns home, he reminisces about what it was like to be in Jason's room and imagines introducing Jason to his parents as his boyfriend. Just before falling asleep, Kyle is so preoccupied with his feelings for Jason that he forgets to hide gay pornographic magazine at which he was looking. When she wakes him up for school the following morning, Kyle's mother finds the copy of *Honcho* and he is forced to "come out" to his parents.

Throughout the novel, Kyle's voice is dominated by his confusion over Jason. After the excitement of Jason's appearance at the gay youth meeting, Kyle finds himself in several situations in which he and Jason are alone, but his attempts to be more intimate cause both panic and subsequent abandonment. Eventually Kyle and Jason kiss, leading Jason to reject Kyle. They then have sex, after which Jason rejects Kyle once more. For his part, Kyle is generally willing to wait for Jason as he works through his confusion.

As Jason and Kyle gradually get closer to one another, Nelson becomes increasingly frustrated: realizing he is in love with Kyle, he is angry that his friend is casting him aside for Jason. Eventually, Nelson meets a young man named Blake at a gay youth meeting and quickly becomes infatuated with him while simultaneously chatting online with an older gay male named Brick to whom he will lose his virginity. After having unprotected sex with Brick, Nelson becomes worried that he may have contracted AIDS; an issue never resolved at the end of the novel (serving as a "cliff-hanger" if readers decide to continue through the series).

The second book, *Rainbow high* (2003), explores the lives of the three protagonists as they move closer to the end of their senior year – for these boys, it's a period filled with the anticipation many high school seniors face and, with the development of promising personal relationships, the "rainbow boys" look forward to their senior prom and try to iron out their individual (and collective) plans for life after graduation. As the story progresses, all three protagonists are accepted to the same college, but their plans to attend "Tech" with one another become complicated when Kyle learns he has also been accepted to Princeton. For all three boys, their personal decisions lead to a range of difficulties: Jason decides to "come out" to his coach, teammates, and the world, Nelson struggles to sustain his relationship with his HIV-positive boyfriend when those around him disapprove, and Kyle tries to weigh his relationship with Jason against the opportunity to study at a prestigious university.

In *Rainbow road* (2005), the final novel of the series, Jason has been invited to speak at the opening of a new high school for gay and lesbian students in California. In order to spend time with Kyle before he leaves for college, Jason opts to forgo a flight to Los Angeles and instead embarks on a cross country driving trip with his boyfriend. The three protagonists (Nelson tags along because the road trip is his idea and involves the use of his car) travel together and encounter a range of individuals: from homophobic heterosexuals to a transgender teen, a committed gay couple, and a commune of "social misfits." As the adventure progresses, Kyle becomes increasingly unsure of his relationship with Jason, Jason tries to sort through his sexual confusion, and Nelson continues to search for Mr. Right (or at least, Mr. Right Now.) By the time the journey

ends, Nelson has found (what could be) love and Kyle and Jason's relationship remains intact.

CREATING THE CANON

Widely hailed across publications by readers, critics, and scholars, *Rainbow boys* (2001) and its sequels (*Rainbow high* [2003] and *Rainbow road* [2005]) have joined what are only a select number of GLBTQ pieces of literature to have found their way into classroom and school libraries. It would ultimately be unfair to solely explore in this dissertation the first novel in the trilogy as the books should be considered as an artistic whole and also because much of the growth and change for the three protagonists doesn't come until the third novel, *Rainbow road* (2005). However, in structuring the arguments in subsequent chapters, time will be spent looking at the portrayals and themes established in the first novel before moving to show how these depictions are either reinforced or complicated as one continues to read through the remainder of the series. It may feel artificial or unnecessarily extensive, but this construction is adopted because:

> (1) *Rainbow boys* (2001) is a book which can (and is often asked to) stand on its own as an artistic creation – unless one is compelled to continue through the series, a reader can leave the first book with a feeling of closure.
>
> (2) As a result, more young adults are likely to pick up and read the first novel than they are to read the entire series.
>
> (3) Additionally, in academic scholarship and professional writing, it is *Rainbow boys* (2001) – and not the other two titles – that is routinely recommended for classroom use from high school through the university.

As an example, although Linda C. Salem's *Children's literature studies: Cases and discussions* was published in 2006 (a year after the final book in the series was published) she asks her undergraduate pre-service teacher audience only to read and consider *Rainbow boys* (2001).

(4) Penultimately, in any classroom (even in a course entirely devoted to the study of GLBTQ children's and adolescent literature), it is unlikely that time will be spent collectively studying the entire series of novels. Teachers who use this particular literature will mostly likely share only the first installment; leaving it up to students (if it has captured their interest) to continue reading the series on their own.

(5) Finally, it is clear that Sanchez has written these books for a dual audience of both homosexual and heterosexual readers. If one of his goals is to leave "intolerant" heterosexuals (who will probably not seek out and read the remainder of the series on their own) with a depiction of homosexual characters that might positively impact how such readers subsequently view GLBTQ people, it is even more important that the depictions in the first installment of the series be accurate representations.

It should be made clear that I am not denying the existence of gay young men who embody many (or all) of the characteristics found in protagonists Nelson, Kyle, or Jason – it is wonderful that this series provides readers with depictions of three very different gay men. However, when they serve as the only representations that readers explore, these token tropes serve not to present "authentic," "positive" homosexual

characters, but may actually work to limit readers' understandings of what it can look like (and what it means) to be gay.

"8,000 THUMBS UP!": THE SUCCESS OF *RAINBOW BOYS*

When *Rainbow boys* hit bookstore and library shelves in 2001, there was little doubt that author Alex Sanchez had created a nearly unrivaled success in the field of GLBTQ young adult literature, and over subsequent years the accolades have continued to multiply. In 2003, the International Reading Association selected *Rainbow boys* as "Young Adults' Choice," it's been named an American Library Association "Best Book for Young Adults," a "Gay Youth Book of the Year," a Center for Children's Books "Blue Ribbon Winner," and a New York Public Library "Books for the Teen Age" selection. In April 2006, it was listed "Best, Notable, and Recommended" by the Young Adult Library Services Association. The success of this 2001 novel has launched author Alex Sanchez to celebrity status in the field of YA literature. In fact, on the covers of the hardback editions of his most recent novels, *Getting it* (2006) and *The god box* (2007), his name appears boldly and prominently while the titles themselves are nearly lost in the background.

More than one-hundred-fifty readers on Amazon.com and the Barnes and Noble website have reviewed *Rainbow boys* and in both locations, the book has earned the maximum rating, a nearly unprecedented "five stars."[1] Readers have called *Rainbow Boys*, "one of the greatest books I've ever read" ("Yessy Jess", 2005) and give it "8,000 thumbs up" ("A reviewer", 2007). They declare "the story will inspire you to be yourself..." ("a reader", 2003) and are convinced that it "really helps break down sterotypes" [*sic*] ("Claire", 2003). Furthermore, they recommend it "to anyone who is

really narrow minded or is a gay or lesiban" [*sic*] (Vickery, 2002). A "Top 1000 Reviewer" named T. Burger nicely sums up the overall tone of these reviews, "...if you're a gay teenager, *this book should shine bright rays of hope into your life*" (2005, my italics).

These reviewers not only recommend the book for all young adult readers, they identify themselves as being from a range of sexual identities across a tremendous span of ages. A reviewer who names herself "Just Grammy's Opinion" says, "This is the definition of a page turner. Beautifully written and totally honest in tone..." and a middle school reader says, "I love this book...everyone should read it!" ("A Reviewer", 2007). Another reviewer, who calls herself "Janell, a straight who could relate to this" says that the book made her more open to homosexuality and although "I know I'll never trully understand how I could kiss the same sex as me, but I know that to some people, it feels all right" [*sic*] (2006). Readers refer to their anticipation of reading other books in the series and even suggest the creation of a television series based on the characters. While it may be difficult to take some of these reviews seriously (as many of the glowing comments are at the same time speckled with phrases like "typical queer," "the sissy kid," and "faggy"), these reviews tend to come from Sanchez's target audience and clearly, their opinions matter. The fact that they praise the book indicates that on some level, it strikes them as true.

The accolades for the book continue in professional publications where reviewers particularly praise the novel for its realism, honesty, and positive messages. Betty S. Evans (2001) wrote in the *School library journal* that "[t]his gutsy, in-your-face debut novel speaks the language of...*having what it takes to stand up and be proud of who you*

are...it can open eyes and change lives" (169, my italics). A 2003 *Kliatt* review by Paula Rohrlick (2003) declares, "YAs who are struggling with some of the same issues will appreciate this *realistic, caring portrayal* of the relationships between the three boys and their efforts to accept their sexuality in the face of intolerance" (my italics). A review by Kristin Kloberdanz (2001) in *Book* calls the novel "clear [and] honest" and states that "the three boys learn how to be themselves and stand up to their tormentors, who are not just ignorant students but also older predators and gay bashers." A 2001 *VOYA* review by Lynn Evarts (2001) states, "this book is an important purchase for libraries serving teens." Kate McDowell (2001) wrote of *Rainbow boys* in the *Bulletin of the center for children's books*, "Sanchez...creates *believably nuanced portrayals*...When a work of fiction embodies such accuracy and emotional complexity, there is but one word to describe it: true" (91, my italics).

Within academic scholarship, Linda C. Salem's (2006) publication *Children's literature studies: Cases and discussions* extensively uses *Rainbow boys* (2001) in her chapter, "Literature with GLBTQ Characters, Themes, and Content," where she states "[GLBTQ] fiction in the late 1990s and 2000s is characterized by authentic stories and characters" (103) and lists Alex Sanchez as a recommended author in the next generation of writers of GLBTQ fiction. She asks her presumed undergraduate teacher education audience to read *Rainbow boys* (2001) as the one piece of GLBTQ fiction they examine and assumes they will recommended it to their own students. In her Braverman Prize-winning article published in *Progressive librarian*, Jennifer Downey (2005) recommends the book because the characters are "not stereotypes whose lives revolve around sexuality or who are surrounded by violence and a lack of acceptance" (86).

An article published in the *Journal of adolescent & adult literacy* by Mollie V. Blackburn and JF Buckley (2005) calls for queer-inclusive English Language Arts curricula in high schools. The authors were dismayed to find that only 8.49% of schools responding to their survey indicated "that they use texts, films or other materials addressing same-sex desire in their English language arts curriculum" (205) and even these were often in a single course or through the use of a single text (many of which depicted GLBTQ people in negative ways.) The authors state they want to help prepare teachers by identifying "materials that provide authentic and accurate representations of diverse LGBTQ people" (206). Although they voice concern that some heterosexual characters with stereotypically Latino names "tend to be disturbingly homophobic" (207), they recommend teachers use *Rainbow Boys* because it "disrupts the stereotypical notions of gay men" (206).[2]

In *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969-2004*, scholars Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins (2006) note that *Rainbow Boys* is "sometimes didactic" (144), but even they praise the "realistic, sympathetic characters" (144). Cart and Jenkins place *Rainbow boys* (2001) in all three categories in the system they have created (see chapter two) and *Rainbow high* (2003) in the categories of "homosexual visibility" and "queer consciousness/community."[3]

While the sequels to *Rainbow boys* (2001) are often recognized to be more didactic, the books are still generally lauded by readers and critics – in fact, all three books are Lambda Literary Award finalists. *Rainbow high* (2003) was named a New York Public Library "Book for the Teen Age" in 2004, the same year the Children's Book Council named it a "Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People." Robert

Gray (2003) writes in *School library journal* that "Sanchez has written a respectable sequel to the noteworthy *Rainbow boys* (S & S, 2001). He has a definite feel for the thoughts, feelings and speech patterns of contemporary high school students, and his characters are believable, although perhaps not as fully developed as one would like" (146) and suggests "the narrative flows smoothly, with plenty of soap-opera dramatics to keep readers interested and a steamy scene or two to boot" (146). In *The horn book magazine*, Rodger Sutton (2004) praises the "frankness" of *Rainbow high* and ultimately refers to the novel as "a guilty pleasure – and reassuring, too" (83). Jeff Katz (2005) in the *School library journal* calls *Rainbow road* (2005) "a true winner" (172) and declares the characters to be realistic, saying, "these boys are distinct personalities and genuine teens, searching for clarity and identity and acceptance, trying to make sense of themselves and a world that can be equally bright and dark" (172). He concludes that the novel is "a tender book that will likely be appreciated and embraced by young adult readers" (173). While Rodger Sutton (2005) calls the book "the last and best" (725) of the *Rainbow boys* series, Michael Cart (2005) notes in *The booklist* that the book is highly banal until "halfway through the cross-country journey...the story becomes more involving as characterization finally takes the driver's seat" (113). He goes on to identify Nelson as "annoyingly predictable" but concludes "the other two boys are sympathetic charmers, and fans of Sanchez's first two Rainbow novels will certainly want to read this one" (113).

"A BRIGHT RAY OF HOPE": THE APPEAL OF SANCHEZ AND THE *RAINBOW BOYS* SERIES

"Problem novels" are rarely taken seriously as literature, and yet the *Rainbow boys* series has become GLBTQ literature with which to be reckoned. What has made the series popular and influential with readers of all sexual identities, both young and old? There seem to be several factors that contribute to the popularity of the series (especially the first installment) that deserve further exploration as to what they suggest about the novels' appeal.

According to his online biography, Sanchez initially set out to write a story about gay teens which reflected what he "wanted and needed to read when he was a young teenager – a book that would have told him: 'It's okay to be who you are'" (Sanchez, 2007). Recognizing that in the history of GLBTQ literature, "there has been little focus on gays as protagonists" (Dean, 2001), he decided to write a novel which worked against the trend of subjugating gays to secondary roles. It is commendable that Sanchez (unlike many authors of GLBTQ young adult fiction) is remarkably open not only about his educational, professional, and personal background, but about his own self-identification as a gay male. Clearly, he cares deeply about providing representation and voice to this population: his website includes detailed pages that guide young adults in issues ranging from "coming out" to family and friends to spirituality and censorship.

As an author, Sanchez says he is concerned that "the predominant experience for most GLBTQ youth is still one of isolation, harassment, persecution, and self-loathing" (Smith, 2005) and hopes that his books will help young people come to believe in themselves when those in society are telling them what they feel is wrong. In interviews, he shares excerpts of emails he receives from young adult readers of his books – all of

which are deeply moving and heart-felt thanks for his work; it is work that has undoubtedly provided many gay young people an opportunity to see themselves reflected in literature for the very first time. Further, the admiration doesn't just move in one direction; Sanchez says, "gay youth today are my heroes...so many of them are so willing to stand up for themselves and take risks, and I recognize the courage that takes" (Murphy, 2002).

In the structure of his writing itself, Sanchez tackles three alternating perspectives throughout the series, something worthy of applause as the technique often proves elusive for even the most seasoned writers. And yet, in spite of all the accolades and praise, he appears remarkably humble: in an interview for *Youth resource: Advocates for youth*, he states, "no one taught me to think of writing and books as agents of social change, able to inspire, empower, and change lives. That my books can do this ceaselessly amazes me" (Alana, 2004).

Obviously, it's not just Sanchez himself that makes the series so popular. Michael Cart (2002) has said of *Rainbow boys* (2001) in his column "Carte Blache" for *Booklist*, "What saves the story from problem-novel limbo are its realistic, right-on dialogue; its sympathetic characters who rise above the stereotypical; and – most important – its focus on love as the heart of homosexuality" (587). In a genre with a history of assuming homogeneity among homosexuals, the *Rainbow boys* series is commendable because it presents for readers different "types" of gay men. And the books are also notable because they contain both gay men and lesbian women as characters – another rarity in GLBTQ young adult fiction (certainly fitting with Cart and Jenkins' category of "queer consciousness/community"), which too often explores the lives of gay men and lesbian

women in isolation of one another. The series remains important because it addresses the issue of AIDS (a subject Cart and Jenkins have noted is habitually absent from GLBTQ young adult literature) and the books appear to provide an accurate, realistic depiction of contemporary high school life: filled with cliques, heartaches and crushes, and the struggle to discover one's self-identity.

Scholars, critics, and readers also praise the book for its realistic, sympathetic characters and that is primarily where the reading explored in this dissertation stands at odds with other analyses. Having the best authorial intentions is not enough: it is the subtext of what Sanchez has created (by depicting his themes and queer characters within a heterosexual binary) that establishes the problematic way the books work. Although they are hailed for making gay men visible, these books must be analyzed in terms of *how* characters are made to feel "realistic" and "true" and how gay relationships are made to feel "acceptable" for readers.

NOTES

[1] By November 2001, *Rainbow boys* had the distinction of being Amazon.com's top selling piece of gay and lesbian fiction (http://alexsanchez.com/AmazonNo1.htm).

[2] If heterosexual Latinos are uniformly depicted as homophobic, it may be enough for us to rethink the *Rainbow boys* series because, to extend Debbie Reese's (1997) argument around depictions of Native Americans in children's literature, it is "wrong to celebrate one culture at the expense of another" (161).

[3] *The Heart has its reasons* chronicles GLBTQ young adult literature through 2004 and therefore does not include the final book in the *Rainbow boys* trilogy, *Rainbow road* (2005).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HETERONORMATIVE COUPLE

The *Rainbow boys* books can be classified in multiple genres: including contemporary realistic romance fiction and as gay adolescent problem novels. As it happens, situating these texts within a particular genre has an influence on the way the books can be "read" and shifting the genre shifts the meanings. In order to achieve the most complex understanding of what is occurring in these books, it will be necessary to consider how the literary elements shape the text according to the conventions of each genre type and formula.

RAINBOW BOYS AS ROMANCE FICTION

In many ways, *Rainbow boys* can be read as a contemporary version of the traditional romance formula. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several scholars and critics began writing about the conventions and content of romance novels. With roots in Samuel Richardson's 1740 epistolary novel *Pamela*, the contemporary romance is a highly profitable venture for publishers (Mussell, 1984; Radway, 1984/1991; Thurston, 1987). According to the Romance Writers of America (2008), sales of romance novels topped $1.37 billion in 2006. Carol Thurston (1987) notes that there is variation between the plots and characteristics of romance novels, arguing that "romance novels today are not all the same, nor have all of them changed in fundamental ways" (61). Kay Mussell (1984) agrees by noting that each era "finds its own models for the familiar tale" (4), but writes that although individual texts may play with the events of in the book, "the shape

of the narrative is predictable, even when the outline of a specific plot seems to represent an innovation" (37). John Cawelti (1976) identifies some general traits of the formula romance when he writes that "the crucial defining characteristic of the [modern] romance is not that it stars a female, but that its organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman...The moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (41). Reiterating classical rhetorical theory, Linda Barlow (1993) is more straightforward when she writes that "all romances share four basic elements: a heroine, a hero, a conflict-ridden love story, and a happily-ever-after ending" (47). The general conventions of the contemporary romance focus on the trials and tribulations of a single couple as they work against internal or external forces that keep them apart. The optimistic endings promise a future in which both partners find happily monogamous domestic bliss with one another.

JASON AND KYLE AS ROMANTIC [HETERONORMATIVE] COUPLE

Although romance novels are generally told through the third-person perspective of the heroine, *Rainbow boys* breaks this tradition by telling its story through multiple viewpoints, giving readers a glimpse into the mindset of three protagonists as opposed to a single heroine. In these books, readers are invited to experience firsthand what it "feels like" to be both a dominant (a role traditionally assigned to the "hero") and passive (traditionally the "heroine") partner in a romantic relationship. One of the major critiques of the romance novel is that it reflects and reinforces the notion that women find satisfaction and fulfillment in life by gaining the love of a man: a woman's success is measured by whether or not she is able to "tame the stud" (Mussell, 1984, 36). These

books rely on stereotypical constructions of what it means to be a "man" and a "woman." Although the heroes and heroines are not identical across novels, they rely on known stereotypes (Gilbert, 1993, 71) and scholars have described a number of characteristics that are frequently attributed to these character tropes (compiled from Mussell, 1984; Radway, 1984/1991; Christian-Smith, 1993; Krentz, 1992):

HERO	**HEROINE**
Sexually experienced	Chaste
Protector	Needs protection
Powerful in traditionally masculine ways	Weak in traditionally feminine ways
Emotionally remote	Emotional
Self-motivated	Self-sacrificing
Exciting	Quiet
Older	Younger
Rough	Gentle
Strong	Soft/Compassionate
Suspicious	Trusting
Dominating/Domineering	Submissive
Hot-tempered/Capable of violence	Calm
Moody	Talkative
Dark	Light
Lost	Grounded

In *Rainbow boys*, the "hero" Jason is essentially a stock character who appears in many gay young adult novels, and is identified by Alex Sanchez in *Rainbow boys* (through the voice of Nelson) as the "Tragic Closet Jock" (or T.C.J.), a trope that represents many of the stereotypes of a "masculine" male. He is the "dominant" actor who is self-sufficient, self-gratifying, physically aggressive, athletic, immature, and unemotional. It seems that this trope is also familiar to the readers of romance and, like the romance hero, Jason must carry the *Rainbow boys* books by drawing in readers with his "desirable maleness" (Kinsale, 1993, 37): Jason is handsome, physically well

developed, and quintessentially "masculine." This is a character that has become a staple in numerous gay young adult literature titles: the closeted school sports hero who discovers his sexual identity through interactions with a "feminine" gay counterpart (in the case of the *Rainbow boys* series, Kyle). As only two examples, recent T.C.J.'s include Kevin, the baseball star/object of protagonist Russell's affection in Brent Hartinger's (2003) popular *Geography club* trilogy and Colin, the closeted jock and secret boyfriend of protagonist Joe in James Howe's (2005) *Totally joe*. Embodying many of the same stereotypical and troublesome characteristics traditionally assigned in literature to females, Kyle fills the role of the heroine: he is emotional, sensitive, and willing to put his own needs secondary to those of the dominant male. Kyle's courage comes from having the strength to always be ready to accept the love of the hero.

RAINBOW BOYS AS SERIES ROMANCE

In her book *Fantasy and reconciliation: Contemporary formulas of women's romance fiction*, Kay Mussell (1984) lays out a typology of romance formulas; although there is some overlap between the various categories of romances, she generally divides them up into *series*, *erotic*, *suspense*, *gothic*, *biographies*, and *historical*. The *Rainbow boys* books (particularly as they pertain to Jason and Kyle) fit most closely as an example of the *series* romance. *Rainbow boys*, like all series romances, "concentrate[s] on the development of a romantic relationship between two characters" (30) as readers follow the internal turmoil for Jason and Kyle while they find their way to one another. *Rainbow boys* is primarily a story about the lovers working through issues that "come from within." Jason works through his internalized homophobia as he struggles to accept his

budding sexuality. However, Mussell (1984) notes that in the series romance, "external impediments love to play only a minor part" (30) and in *Rainbow boys*, I would argue that external forces are also contributing in a major way to keeping the two lovers apart: the "Rainbow Boys" have been living in a world in which they have been conditioned to be fearful of the intolerance of those around them. The fear Jason has of "coming out" (to himself or others) stems from the ways his father, his peers, and nearly everyone around him reinforces the idea that being queer is undesirable at best and immoral, disgusting, and the grounds for ridicule and abuse at worst.

A promise fulfilled: The pattern of romance

Mussell (1984) notes that the series romance begins "with a problem or dramatic change in the life of the heroine" (31) and in the first chapter told from Kyle's perspective, readers see the marking of this change: Jason, the long-time object of his sexual desire, has shown up at the gay youth meeting. Suddenly, this young man is no longer unattainable: the fantasy star athlete may actually be gay. Told from his perspective, readers see firsthand what Jason's appearance at this meeting has meant for Kyle: "In an instant, he raced through the door and down the four flights. When he reached the front stoop, he looked down one end of the street, then the other. Had the man of his dreams really shown up at the meeting? He searched every block around the neighborhood" (10). After seeing Jason in this entirely new context, readers know that life will not ever be the same for Kyle; things are different now. Like all romance heroines, Kyle's life is more joyful, but also more difficult and complex once Jason is playing a more predominant and direct role in his life (it is indirectly a result of Jason that

Kyle "comes out" to his parents).

In the series romance, "characters go to great lengths to resist their feelings" (35) and in the first chapter on the novel, Jason appears, standing on the steps and debating whether or not he should attend the gay youth meeting. He reminds himself that he has a girlfriend and reminisces about "that night he made it with her – a girl. Homos couldn't do that. Ergo, he couldn't be a homo" (3). He continues to dream about men and question his sexual identity even as he has sex with his girlfriend Debra to "take his mind off everything – and prove once again he wasn't queer" (31). When he finds himself unable to perform with her, Debra worries that he is no longer interested in her, to which Jason thinks, "He was interested, if for no other reason than to reassure himself he wasn't queer" (32). As he and Kyle become closer to one another, Jason continues to resist his feelings. The pair decide to go to a movie together and Jason eventually finds his hand sharing an arm rest with Kyle's. As their hands touch, Jason reprimands himself: "the longer his hand stayed there, the more significant the fact became, the more difficult it would be to explain away. He should remove his hand now. *Do it. Now*" (99, *italics in original*).

When Jason comes to Kyle house to study (they choose to work in the bedroom – where Kyle has to quickly hide the yearbook lying open on his bed, as it is, of course, open to Jason's picture), the pair practice shooting hoops with wads of balled up paper before staring lustfully at one another and eventually kissing.

As is traditional in the structure of the series romance, in *Rainbow boys*, Kyle admits his love before Jason is ready to accept it. When the pair kiss for the first time, "their mouths met perfectly" (137) and Kyle blurts out that he loves Jason – and Jason

flees, leaving Kyle alone to bask in the fact that "he had actually kissed the boy he loved. And that boy had kissed him back" (138). Jason hurriedly leaves and decides he needs to break things off with Kyle. As Kyle approaches his lunch table the following day at school, Jason tells him "Uh...someone's sitting here" (159). Kyle flees from the cafeteria and Jason chases after him saying they should talk it about it later, someplace no one can see them. Although Kyle calls Jason a creep, he (as "feminine" counterpart) is willing to take the responsibility on himself. Luckily, Kyle finds solace in fantasies about Jason: he looks at Jason's yearbook photos (even scanning one into his computer) and lies in bed where "his mind drifted to images of Jason in the locker room of tenth-grade gym class – his biceps bulging against his T-shirt sleeves, his butt framed by his jockstrap. Kyle wrapped his arm around his pillow and, smiling, fell asleep" (16). It is the dream of obtaining the love of the Jason that simultaneously creates strife and satisfaction for Kyle.

In spite of what Jason reconstructs as an unwelcomed kiss, he decides that he values his friendship with Kyle and hopes that he can make it clear to him that he wants to be friends – but not lovers. Like many romantic heroes, Jason does not initially recognize what Kyle can offer and does not recognize his potential as a partner. It is not until the pair walk to Kyle's house to study that:

> Every once in a while he glanced over at Kyle. He had never really taken a good look at him before. His eyes were hazel, and his wire-frame glasses gave him a teddy-bear face. His hair was a honey color and hung down in bangs from beneath his cap. His shoulders were broad for such a thin guy. He remembered Kyle telling him he was on the swim team. He had a body like a swimmer – long, firm, and lean. (2001, 62-3)

In a scene reminiscent of countless love stories, Jason looks beyond Kyle's glasses and realizes that there may be more to this guy than he originally thought: he notices his eyes – and the rest of him – for what feels like the very first time. Kay Mussell (1984) identifies this as the "domestic test": "masculine" Jason is able to look beyond his initial impressions and can "recognize worth despite the exterior package" (Mussell, 1984, 99) by finding the beauty hidden within/beneath the "ordinary" package.

For his part, Jason will also be subjected to the "domestic test." Although the romance hero must be unfailingly "masculine," "heroes also may need understanding, protection, and sensitivity" (103). Through his relationship with his younger sister Melissa, readers see Jason as someone with nurturing characteristics. He knows that "she trusted him" (161) and he works to protect her from the violence of their father. He plays with her, spends time with her, and teaches her about life and what it "means" to be gay (Melissa concludes that "it means when two boys are really happy 'cause they love each other" [161]).

Knowing when to say "yes": The transformative power of "The first time"

After Jason rescues Kyle and Nelson from a hate-attack from school bully Jack Ransom, the pair begin to become closer. Kyle is invited to Jason's house and when he arrives, he finds Jason crying: sitting "on the bed, leaning against the headboard. His eyes were closed, his cheeks wet" (209). Despite his efforts to work through his emotion with aggression, "masculine" Jason releases his anger at his abusive father and confusion stemming from his identity only when he believes he is alone in a darkened house. Kyle moves to comfort him and the two cry together.

Jason looked up at Kyle. His soft, damp cheek brushed his own, and their lips touched. Kyle's body melted beneath the kiss, but his mind flooded with anxiety. This wasn't the right time.

"We better not," he said, drawing away. "You're upset. You may feel different tomorrow."

Jason stared back with a look so hurt it broke Kyle's heart.

"What about your mom?" Kyle insisted.

Jason ran a hand through his curls, as if considering. When he looked again at Kyle, his face was changed, looking calm like Kyle had never seen it. "She won't be back till late. Please, stay?"

The song from the headphones drifted beside them, dispersing Kyle's resolve. If this was what Jason wanted, he would give it to him. He might die from pain if Jason ditched him after, but he'd get through somehow. (210-11) Finally, when the couple begins to have sex for the first time, Kyle again blurts out that he loves Jason and feels Jason's hands slide away from him: "*How stupid I could be*, he thought. *I should just shoot myself and end my misery*" (212, *italics in original*), but this time his feelings are accepted as Jason works through his initial feelings of panic and proclaims his love for Kyle as well. Like all good romantic heroines, Kyle has maintained his virginity, but intuitively recognizes when he must give this "gift" to the hero. He has the "courage" to take this risk and trust that the loss of his virginity will be a rite of passage for both him and the hero (effectively domesticating Jason). As Doreen Owens Malek (1993) writes, "we as readers anticipated the loss of the heroine's virginity to this one very special man...virginity is a gift that can only be given *once*, and it is ideally bestowed on a

woman's great love. This giving of virginity adds an immeasurable element of drama and power to a story. It changes the heroine, of course, but in romance novels it also changes the hero" (118). Jason realizes how much Kyle has been there for him and knows then that he must possess him. In *Rainbow boys*, there are two moments of triumph for Kyle: found in the moment when he and Jason finally kiss and when he has effectively "tamed the stud."

THE FORMULA OF *RAINBOW BOYS*

John Cawelti (1976) defines four functions common to formula romances: they "affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes"; they "resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values"; they "enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across this boundary"; and they "assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs" (35-6).

In some ways, the *Rainbow Boys* books serve to bring queer identities further into mainstream culture. They provide for readers a familiar plot structure, but with a twist: as opposed to the traditional story of the hero who romances a heroine, instead, readers have two males who are embarking upon a relationship with one another. These are familiar codes being played out by these characters, which makes them particularly powerful and immediately acceptable for readers. As Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz (1993) write, "the greatest challenge for the romance writer working today is to excite and

delight our readers while, at the same time, fulfilling their expectations. It has been our experience that this is best achieved by making full use of the codes and conventions that have served us well for centuries, codes that are universally recognized by our sisters in every nation and culture, codes that celebrate the most enduring myths of feminine consciousness" (28-9). Despite the fact that these are two gay males, their construction makes them immediately recognizable for readers. This familiarity may be what leads readers to remark that they now "get" what it is like to be gay: they've seen an image of a gay romance that is familiar as a "heterosexual" model (albeit fictional) that pushes against what has previously been considered taboo. The use of romantic myths around what "males" and "females" are like serves as an "in" for heterosexual readers. What draws readers to romance are the predictability of the characters and plot: readers know that a love story will develop, the boundaries of that love will be tested, and ultimately, a happy ending will bring about closure in the form of a monogamous couple with a bright future. Putting readers through the difficulty and turbulence of the pursuit of romance makes the "victory" even more appealing and triumphant. And in the safe harbor as reader of a text, these identities can be "lived" without actually being experienced. Responding to the criticism of the romance novel, many readers respond that "This is the type of story we like, and why shouldn't we have it? It's labeled fiction, nobody thinks it's real, and it harms no one" (Malek, 1993, 79). As Sandra Brown (1993) writes, romance novels are fantasies. She argues that fantasies allow readers personas ("costumes") that can be tried on and worn for awhile; romance novels are a type of make-believe where readers are granted "momentary permission to be something that we're not" (146). The same type of arguments could be made toward the tropes in

Rainbow boys. Unfortunately, what is harmful is that these are not merely neutral words on the page; these myths and messages shape and construct "reality." Romance novels are fantasies, but Kathleen Gilles Seidel (1993) writes that "the plot of a romance novel – especially its happy ending – sets up fantasies about the way the world ought to work" (160) and where romance novels become particularly problematic is within what ultimately makes them so appealing for readers: the "happy" endings may make readers feel satisfied and affirmed, but at the same time these characters and situations are instantly recognizable because they are standard conventions that are repeatedly relied upon. By employing these conventions, Sanchez is reinforcing heteronormative assumptions about how the gendered world looks and operates for gay men.

REINFORCING THE GENDER BINARY

The characters in romance novels are grounded in a gender binary of "masculinity" and "femininity" in which the characteristics of each are viewed as distinctive, opposite, and both contradictory and complementary. Toril Moi (1985) writes, "in the opposition of masculine/feminine, each term only achieves significance through its structural relationship to the other: 'masculine' would be meaningless without its direct opposite 'feminine' and vice versa" (105). Insofar as *Rainbow boys* maintains this heteronormative structure, it is not an example of queer literature. Although both the leading characters are male, the story structure is a conventional heterosexual romance.

Further, "masculine" and "feminine" counterparts are not equal, they are viewed as dominant and subordinate. Moi (1985) writes that "these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analysed as a

hierarchy where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance" (104). In order for this system to exist, one term must be viewed as central or dominant while the other is subordinate and more reactionary. Throughout *Rainbow boys* (2001), the "masculine" is routinely privileged – at even a superficial level, the "Tragic Closet Jock" Jason gets both the first and last chapter of the book, giving him both the first and last word and allowing him more opportunity for his voice to be heard. This privileging and granting of power to the "masculine" is a result of the oppositional gender binary: "the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes" (Butler, 1990, 145) and these commonly accepted and taken for granted "differences" serve to excuse inequities in power and social status (Epstein 1988). This is another feature of the books that is more heteronormative than queer.

Warren J. Blumenfeld (1992) summarizes Western assumptions/constructions of "traditional" gender roles in his book *Homophobia: How we all pay the price*, writing, "Males are encouraged to be independent, competitive, goal oriented, and unemotional, to value physical courage and toughness. Females, on the other hand, are taught to be nurturing, emotional, sensitive, expressive, to be caretakers of others while disregarding their own needs" (691). If Jason, the attractive star athlete who is allowed to discover his sexuality at both his girlfriend and co-protagonist Kyle's expense, is what Blumenfeld characterizes as traditionally "male," Kyle (in addition to Jason's girlfriend Debra) fits the "female" counterpart as the sensitive nurturer who puts his own needs secondary to those of his boyfriend.

Like the Tragic Closet Jock, the Sympathetic, Understanding Doormat Kyle is also an athlete, but the series makes clear that he is subordinate to the alpha male: being a

swim team star is not in the same class as the jocks who play contact sports like basketball. The sports played by "masculine" athletes (like Jason) and that carry positions of social privilege are exclusionary of those who don't identify as "male," while sports like the swim team on which "feminine" Kyle participates are co-educational.

The reliance on the heteronormative binary becomes particularly problematic when these characters are explored as representations of gay men. It is because these depictions of gay men are played so "straight" – without play or nuance – that the books feel so "inauthentic" as representations of gay men, but often feel "authentic" in the familiar context of the male/female heterosexual binary.

In an interview with teenreads.com, author Sanchez says that in *Rainbow boys*, "I tried to depict characters that both embraced and challenged stereotypes of what gay teens are like" (2002). While his acknowledgment is admirable, it comes at a tremendous cost in terms of the negative implications inherent in these depictions. In fact, his reliance on these constructions may actually work against the very goals he hopes to achieve: as Rosalinda B. Barrera, Olga Liguori, and Loretta Salas (1993) suggest, "authenticity of content and images in children's literature is essential because inauthentic representation subverts the very cultural awareness and understanding that such literature can build" (212).

WRITING THE *RAINBOW BOYS* GAY: HOW SANCHEZ CONSTRUCTS JASON AND KYLE AS QUEER

T.C.J. Jason's construction as the quintessential unemotional "male" comes as a result of his internalized homophobia; he desperately seeks the attention of his alcoholic

father: a physically violent and verbally abusive man who consistently calls him names like "Stupid, Dummy, Fairy-Boy, Pansy" (2001, 27). Although the novel distances itself from Jason's father (as readers, we are supposed to disagree with his viewpoint), it routinely implies that if his father were more affirmative of his "masculinity" as opposed to identifying him as "feminine," Jason may not have "turned out" gay. Jason's mother gives voice to these concerns, asking, "Do you think it's because of [your father] that you're...gay?" (2003, 190).[i]

In "How to bring your kids up gay," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) points to the work of revisionist psychoanalysts as serving to renaturalize gender in ways which suggest that boys (no matter how "effeminate") can be dissuaded from homosexuality through early affirmation of their "masculinity." According to these accounts, "the reason effeminate boys turn out gay...is that other men don't validate them as masculine" (22). These same psychoanalysts proclaim that, although they cannot affirm their son's "masculinity," "mothers who display any tolerance of their sons' cross-gender behavior" (25) also contribute to their homosexuality. Sedgwick argues:

> Mothers, indeed have nothing to contribute to this process of masculine validation and women are reduced in the light of its urgency to a null set: any involvement in it by a woman is overinvolvement, any protectiveness is overprotectiveness, and for instance, mothers "proud of their sons' nonviolent qualities" are manifesting unmistakable "family pathology" (193). (23)

Moments that exemplify this epistemological position are glimpsed throughout the series in moments such as a scene early in *Rainbow boys* in which Jason and his father argue

and his mother, seeking to prevent further violence, intervenes. In response to her request that the two men cease their argument, Jason's father replies, "Always mothering him. No wonder he's such a pansy" (28).

Sedgwick's comments highlight another dimension of *Rainbow boys* that is more conventionally heteronormative than queer. In all three novels, Jason's self-perceived "femininity" leads him to constantly work to embody "masculine" characteristics (i.e. he routinely wills himself not to cry, but if he must, he does so alone and privately; he is aggressive and physically violent). Even his vocabulary is "masculine" – throughout the entire series, he perpetually and consistently says "Wha's up?" Although it has been argued that this is "teen talk," not "masculine jock talk," it is worth noting that only Jason (as the "masculine" male) uses this terminology. Jason's desire to be seen by other men as "masculine" and therefore obtain (and maintain) their approval – what Eve Kosofsy Sedgwick (1985) calls "male homosociality" – leads him to desperately seek the attention and affirmation of other "masculine" males: as he explicitly states in *Rainbow road* (2005), the teasing of his peers and his father's abuse led him to "work harder to prove he wasn't gay" (62-3) by acting more "masculine."

When Jason's mind wanders during oral sex with his girlfriend and it is "too late" (32) for him to fight the image of Kyle performing oral sex, the physical, sexual act marks the pivotal moment in Jason's realization that he is in fact, gay. Reflecting on these events, he decides that, "Kyle was okay. If Jason ever did make it with another guy – not that he ever would, he assured himself – but if he did, it would be with someone normal, like Kyle" (33). It seems there are acceptable ways to be gay – and, for the "masculine" male, the "natural," "normal" counterpart would be someone occupying a stereotypically

"feminine" position: subordinate, passive, and self-sacrificing. As Stevi Jackson (1996) argues, "we all learn to be sexual within a society in which 'real sex' is defined as a quintessentially heterosexual act, vaginal intercourse, and in which sexual activity is thought of in terms of an active subject and passive object" (2). By defining a particular way of being a gay male as "normal," Sanchez implies that any alternatives are undesirable at best and impossibilities at worst (Davies 1989).

In his analysis of gay men's literature in the Twentieth century, Mark Lilly (1993) writes of the "desirability of the brutish male" (118) as related to the work of Tennessee Williams. There is a history in Western gay culture of privileging those gay men who embody the characteristics traditionally thought of as "masculine" while those who are "effeminate" are taboo and undesirable. Lilly's argument that "culture, refinement and kindness itself, in men, are seen as emasculating" (116) can be read as a defense of the "masculinity" of Jason through the observation that it could very well be that Jason's internalized homophobia serves as an explanation for his routine rejection of "feminine" Kyle. To open himself up and treat another male with kindness would make him "less of a man."

Although Sanchez depicts Jason as a character working through internalized homophobia, in a novel that is steeped in gay identity politics with a self-proclaimed mission of educating readers about what "gay teens are like" (Sanchez, 2002), it is troubling that there would be any talk of "normal" ways it of being gay. It seems to simultaneously reinforce and rely upon the heteronormative ideological belief in the "male/female" sex/gender distinction that "produces a correlative belief that those two sexes/genders exist in order to fulfill complementary roles" (Queen, Farrell, & Gupta,

2005, 3). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) writes, there is "a tradition of assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a man must by definition be feminine" (20).

THE INVERTED HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE

As explored in chapter two, the theory of inversion has been used to "naturalize" (Butler, 1990, 54-55, 60-61) queer relationships in ways that fit them within normative ways of viewing sexuality and the world – heterosexuality is reinscribed within homosexuality. This is a pattern that has appeared frequently in literature depicting gay men. As Carole-Anne Tyler (1991) writes, "sexual inversion theory explains what looks like a homosexual object choice as in effect a heterosexual object choice by labeling the homosexual an 'invert' and, therefore, psychically (and perhaps to some degree physically) the opposite sex" (34). Chapter two noted that despite an abundance of criticism, this theory is still relied upon today. In his work on "Gay Machismo," Martin Humphries asserts, "By creating amongst ourselves [gay men] apparently masculine men who desire other men we are refuting the idea that we are really feminine souls in male bodies" (84). Carole-Anne Tyler (1991) locates a playful extension of this idea in Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit jungle* in which "it is heterosexuals, not homosexuals, who suffer from gender confusion, as their sexual fantasies of 'inversion' reveal" (36).

The most serious treatment of inversion can be found in Jonathan Dollimore's (1991) analysis of Marguerite Radclyffe Hall's (1928) *The well of loneliness*. Through the character of Stephen, a "'masculine' lesbian" (48), the "scientific" theories of inversion are given legitimacy when homosexuality is depicted as an "abnormal yet natural" aberration (48). He argues that Hall's novel is important because it allows

lesbian characters to see themselves represented, but the depictions are ultimately repressing. He writes that "the process of authenticating the inauthentic works by merging, displacing, and replacing negative representations with more positive ones appropriated from the dominant" (48-9). He writes that it can be argued that characters who are "inverted" can be representations of "superiority" (49) as a result of their ability to identify as "both" genders. However, the "blind acceptance of the division between masculine and feminine as also an immutable law" (50); these depictions ultimately reinforce heteronormativity as opposed to subverting it with queer characters.

Again, it could very well be that Sanchez is aware of the implications of these depictions: perhaps these characters serve as an "in" for heterosexual readers; these may be two "males," but they are familiar and may help readers work against their own homophobia in the ways that these characters feel "natural." The quotes put forth in chapter three may certainly support this notion: remember "Janell, a straight who could relate to this" who wrote that "I know I'll never trully understand how I could kiss the same sex as me, but I know that to some people, it feels all right" [*sic*] (2006). These representations may work for readers who identify themselves as heterosexual, but in fact they offer little in terms of an "authentic" glimpse at a queer identity: as opposed to providing young readers an image of queer identity, they are instead given the same stereotypically heterosexual constructions that serve to do little more than reinforce heteronormativity.

PERPETUATING THE TROPES

These tropes continue throughout the series: early in *Rainbow High* (2003), the second novel in the trilogy, Kyle encourages T.C.J. Jason to come out of the closet publicly because "if you come out now, you'd be, I don't know, like, a role model – someone people would look up to" (27). After talking with his coach[ii] and the school principal, Jason decides not to reveal his homosexuality because it might "screw up our chances for the [state] championship" (101). However, upon rescuing Nelson from a scuffle with one of his bully-teammates in the cafeteria, Jason accidentally alludes to his own sexual identity and it is decided that the subject can no longer be avoided. Jason comes out to his teammates, who are (to Sanchez's credit) portrayed as generally accepting and supportive, and this sets in motion a series of events in which Jason is heteronormatively hailed as a hero and a role model by the media, his peers, and superiors. He is, for example, flocked by freshmen girls who yearn to take him shopping and want his opinion as to which boy band members are more attractive.

Most importantly, his status as "jock" trumps his identity as gay and his popularity remains unquestioned: even the most homophobic students still embrace and accept him. When it is eventually revealed that Kyle and Jason are in a relationship together, "feminine" Kyle (and interestingly Jason's ex-girlfriend) becomes the focus of the verbal harassment of his peers, while Jason has positive interactions with those around him. It isn't long before Jason gets "notes shoved through the slats of my locker from people telling me I've given *them* courage" (150, italics in original) and members of the local media decide to interview him as an "excellent role model" (68) for young people everywhere. Although he initially claims he is uncomfortable serving as a role

model, Jason accepts this position after Kyle, his ex-girlfriend Debra, his coach, his school principal, the local media, co-protagonist (and sometimes adversary) Nelson, the faculty-head of the high school's gay-straight alliance, and even complete strangers applaud "his courage for coming out" (189). The "masculine" male is revered for his sexual identity, while the "feminine" counterparts are exiled and ridiculed. This feels familiar because it parallels the double standard for the sexual activity described by Lees (1993) in which heterosexual males are labeled "real men" and females are named "sluts".

In *Rainbow high* (2003), Jason continues to exemplify stereotypes of the "masculine" male by acting with little regard to those around him – particularly S.U.D. Kyle. As an example, he denies having a boyfriend in a television interview filmed in front of an audience of his peers. When Kyle (who was present at the interview) becomes upset, Jason wonders "since when had they become 'boyfriends.' They'd never discussed it. True, they'd had sex. But that just sort of happened...but did that make them *boyfriends*?" (62, italics in original). In fact, "he'd never thought of Kyle and him as 'dating'" (65). Near the end of the second novel, Jason publicly acknowledges Kyle as his boyfriend: brazenly putting his arm around him and kissing him in front of strangers and in the presence of television reporters and their cameras. As it is written, however, after winning the state basketball championship, the acknowledgement of Kyle comes not because he recognizes the role Kyle plays in his life or the importance of acknowledging his partner in meaningful, legitimizing ways, but because "high with excitement, Jason didn't think twice" (193) about answering the reporters when they ask if Kyle is his boyfriend.

It also seems the S.U.D. Kyle remains unchanged since he was first presented in *Rainbow boys* (2001) as he spends the bulk of *Rainbow high* swooning "at the sound of the low, husky voice" (52) of the T.C.J. Kyle remains unfailingly self-sacrificing – buying Jason gifts and giving up his own material possessions (his gloves on page 59 and his jacket on page 219) to ensure Jason is protected and comfortable. He compromises his own emotional well-being while spending most of the book dreaming of "the image of Jason in his satin uniform, arms pumping" (83).

Kyle recognizes that his devotion to the T.C.J. forces him to silence his own voice, but resigns himself to the fact that must remain hidden even though "it was killing him to sit by invisible" (144). The dedicated "feminine" counterpart to the "masculine" jock, Kyle pines for his inattentive boyfriend:

> Kyle hugged a cushion to his chest and for the millionth time watched Jason appear on the screen. The lush curly hair, imploring brown eyes, and breathtaking lips made him look like the star of some TV teen drama. Even though Kyle wanted to hurl the remote at the tube each time Jason told the reporter he didn't have a boyfriend, he couldn't stop watching and rewatching. (...) He fell asleep on the couch, dreaming of the dark-eyed boy on the TV screen. (174-5)

Harboring insecurity about dating a boy who used to like girls, the S.U.D. wonders if he can really trust Jason to remain faithful if they don't attend the same college. When Kyle learns he's been accepted to Princeton University's math program, he quickly convinces himself that he and Jason "absolutely *had* to go to Tech [the local public university]. Once away from home, there was no way his parents – or anyone – could keep Jason and

him apart" (61, italics in original). While debating his options, S.U.D. Kyle hides his acceptance letter to Princeton "between the pages of his yearbook, opposite his favorite photo of Jason, at last year's basketball championships" and at the height of his internal conflict, he melodramatically removes the acceptance letter as "his gaze shifted back and forth between the letter and Jason's photo. How could he leave Jason? And how could he pass up Princeton?" (120).

Readers who continue through the series will find the suggestion of growth in these characters and their relationship in the final installment of the trilogy. However, in *Rainbow road* (2005), Jason continues to be depicted as stereotypically "masculine": practical, immature, grumbling, vulgar, and insatiable. Jason's "masculinity" actually distances him from the other homosexuals in the book. On the road trip, he is happy to be able to take a break from Kyle and Nelson and play basketball with a group of strangers because, "it felt great to be around *normal* guys again, who played by clear, established rules; guys who looked and acted like guys were supposed to look and act" (86, italics in original) and heteronormativity is reinforced when homosexual characters who aren't "masculine" are cast as deviants and outcasts.

Jason vacillates between identifying himself as both "bisexual" and "gay" and it is interesting to note Sedgwick's (1991) argument around the claims revisionist psychoanalysts who encourage "predominantly gay young men to 'reassure' their parents they are 'bisexual'" (24). One way of reading these fluctuations is to assume Jason has been constructed as a character working to avoid normative labels, but its randomness across the series ultimately suggests it is accidental. It is eventually written that Jason "didn't really like to label himself as 'bi' because it made him feel like he didn't belong

in either group, straight or gay" (130).

In *Rainbow road* (2005), another stereotype of the "masculine" male is reinforced as Jason's eye consistently wanders outside of his current relationship. In a nightclub, he dances with a young woman he senses is attracted to him and flirts with her until "next thing he knew, her moist lips were reaching up and resting on his" (131). After attempting to hide the situation by lying about what happened, Jason eventually comes clean and although he "regretted having *let* [the young woman] kiss him," (distancing himself from responsibility) he doesn't understand why Kyle is upset: Jason is convinced that "Kyle was being unfair for not giving him more credit for walking away" from the situation (150, my italics). Shortly after kissing this young woman, Jason begins to recognize that he is also sexually attracted to Kyle's best friend. He watches Nelson as he runs naked through an open field and realizes "he'd never really paid attention to Nelson's body before. Now, seeing him naked, he couldn't help notice. The guy actually had quite a nice little body" (153).

On the opening page of *Rainbow road* (2005), S.U.D. Kyle awakens from a sexual dream about Jason, whose "musky athletic scent" (55) and "tanned skin" (57) continue to intoxicate him throughout the novel. In this installment, "feminine" Kyle embodies the stereotypical myth that females are more mature than males as he acts as caregiver, protector, and the "responsible one" in the relationship (i.e. holding onto Jason's money for him, ironing his clothing, and setting his alarm), even though he recognizes how it often negatively impacts him. As he tells Jason, "part of the risk of being responsible [is that] sometimes you get hurt" (182).

Frequently (and ultimately detrimentally) ignoring his protective instincts, "feminine" Kyle is repeatedly depicted as insecure and "pretty foolish" (60) for having concerns about his boyfriend's drinking and harboring suspicions about Jason's fidelity. Even co-protagonist Nelson believes Jason's indiscretions should be expected (and accepted) as an inevitable result of his "masculinity." He tells Kyle, "I think you're overreacting. You knew Jason liked girls when you met him. Just because he hit on some blondie doesn't mean he's dumping you" (136).

Toward the end of *Rainbow road* (2005), there is a dramatic shift in these two characters as Kyle begins rethinking his relationship with the T.C.J. He notes, "It felt like Jason had changed. Every day he was revealing sides of himself that Kyle had never realized were there. Although Kyle had known Jason was bi, impulsive, stubborn, and had a trigger temper, he'd never been confronted with all of who Jason was on such a daily basis" (193). Furthermore, he becomes aware of the fact that "I got caught up in this image of you...I know it sounds dorky, but it's like you were some sort of god...I felt like the luckiest guy on earth...I guess I kind of put you on a pedestal" (200). For his part, Jason begins to recognize that "he was a better person because of Kyle. If it weren't for Kyle, he might never have come out to his parents or worked up the courage to keep going to the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, or come out to his coach and his team. Most importantly, he might never have accepted himself" (180).

Unfortunately, although these milestone recognitions indicate that these characters have grown and have a new understanding of themselves and an appreciation for one another, with fewer than fifty pages remaining in the final installment of the series, they do little to counter the portrayals perpetuated across the more than 650

previous pages of text (obviously, if one fails to read past the first novel, they have no impact at all), especially when Kyle continues to "beam at [Jason] even more admiringly" (224) and the novel ends with a line like, "every time Jason smiled at him, Kyle couldn't help seeing a lifetime ahead" (243).

These two characters are intended to show readers what it "looks like" to be in a gay relationship. But instead of being given "space" as characters, they are forced to fulfill previously delineated and perpetuated gender roles for stereotypical "heterosexual" coupling. They are reduced to "types" of gay men: either a "masculine" male who is independent, unemotional, insensitive, and aggressive, or his "feminine" counterpart who is passive, subservient, and self-sacrificing. If Kyle were biologically "female," these depictions would be immediately disregarded and identified as problematic – such representations of heterosexual "male" and "female" characters have been readily identified as inaccurate and patriarchal (see, e.g. Allen, 2003).

However, because Kyle has been gendered as a "gay male," questions have not been raised in any publications (or conversations) of which I am aware about their implications. These tropes are taken as acceptable because the assumption is that any representation of a gay male is good enough – regardless of its accuracy. However, these depictions are as problematic for representing gay males as they are for representing heterosexuals. Because these characters are inaccurately constructed within a stereotypical, heterosexual gender binary as actively "masculine" or passively "feminine," these tropes work against their potential ability to "teach" readers about what gay males are like: gay males are not sexual inverts who exist to fulfill previous conceptions of binary "masculine/feminine" relationships.

The story doesn't only depict the S.U.D. and the T.C.J.: unlike many gay young adult novels, there is a third young man depicted in *Rainbow boys* (2001) in the character of Nelson. While both Jason and Kyle eventually proclaim they are proud of their sexual identity, it is only the character of Nelson who is widely held up as a self-aware and (to quote Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins [2006]) "queer and proud" (147) homosexual. As troubling as Jason and Kyle may be, in exploring the third protagonist Nelson, the series becomes even more problematic. Nelson not only reinforces the stereotypes that define Jason and Kyle, he carries the burden of being the one character who is presumably supposed to show gay young adult males what it means and looks like to be openly and comfortably gay.

NOTES

[i] Somewhere between *Rainbow high* (2003) and *Rainbow road* (2005), Jason's mother comes to fully accept her son's sexual identity, but it is never explained why or how this comes about.

[ii] It should be noted that (after an initial misstep) Coach Cameron will eventually serve as one of the few positive portrayals of a heterosexual character in the entire series. It is clear he cares deeply for Jason and he does his best to advocate and provide support.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE *QUEER AND PROUD* HOMOSEXUAL

Of the three protagonists in *Rainbow boys*, Nelson is the character that has proven most difficult to categorize. When the texts of *Rainbow boys* function as romance novels, Nelson can best be described as fitting the role of the "other woman." He operates on a couple of different levels as this trope: he is the character who foolishly gives away his virginity and the character who tries to keep the hero (T.C.J.) and heroine (S.U.D.) apart from one another. However, unlike Jason and Kyle (who, once the layer of their "maleness" is peeled away more closely resemble the stereotypical gendered depictions of "males" and "females" in literature) there are some aspects of Nelson that certainly feel queer.

It should be re-emphasized from the start of this chapter that the argument presented is not intended to deny the existence of homosexual males with characteristics similar to Nelson and certainly shouldn't be read as implicitly reinforcing the ideas of revisionist pychoanalysts that "the healthy homosexual is one who...acts masculine" (Sedgwick, 1991, 19). The purpose of this critique is simply to raise questions about the implications inherent in hailing the depiction of Nelson as the sole embodiment of being "queer and proud" because it seems that doing so implies for readers that this is the only way one can be proudly and comfortably gay.

THE SEXUAL INVERT

Fitting the pattern established with the S.U.D. Kyle, Nelson serves as a character who is represented as a sexual invert. While he may initially seem to fit the Neo-Gramscian notion of counterhegemony, working against legitimized notions of the "masculine" male, Nelson "puts on" a gender properly "belonging" to the "female" by embodying what are traditionally thought of as "feminine" qualities. In doing so, stereotypes of women are reinforced, alongside the misconception that in homosexual relationships there is one participant who plays the role of a sexually inverted "female."[1] Nelson routinely bats his eyes, pouts, cajoles physical compliments from his friends, and is overly-dramatic. For example, placing the back of his hand against his forehead or screeching when he finds the roots of his hair are starting to show. In fact, in the *Rainbow boys* series, to be "Queer and Proud" seems to mean being constructed as embodying the worst stereotypes of both the "masculine" male and "feminine" female. It feels as if Sanchez took the most problematic characteristics of these character types and combined them to create the depiction of Nelson, the "queer and proud" homosexual male.

There is little about Nelson which reflects an image of being "proud" of who he is: he is portrayed as someone with deep-rooted self-hatred, frequently saying things like, "It's not easy being me. Imagine what I have to put up with twenty-four/seven. At least you can get away from me occasionally" (2001, 50). In the first chapter that is told from his perspective, Nelson appears chain smoking cigarettes while he gets his hair restyled and dyed. Throughout the story, his loathing for his body eventually leads him from pinching his flesh to estimate body fat to bulimia and abusing diet pills in an attempt to slim down even though those around him insist to him that he is slender.

QUEERING THE ROMANCE: NELSON AS THE "OTHER WOMAN"

Kay Mussell (1984) writes that the "other woman" serves in some ways as a villain in romance novels. This is a character who is generally "a beautiful and passionate character who may be sympathetic but rarely admirable" (105). These are characters who serve as negative role models for readers: providing implicit instructions about how *not* to "tame the stud." Nelson operates as a foil for both Kyle and Nelson: in the first installment of the trilogy, he is relentless in his pursuit to obtain the love of Kyle. In later installments, he will attempt to seduce Jason.

As a romantic "other woman," Nelson is "corrupted through lack of sexual control" (Mussell, 1984, 106). Although Nelson's sexual insatiability may simply be a byproduct of his role within the genre of romance, it takes on larger implications as a representation of queerness when placed within the larger picture of stereotypes of gay men: in this case, a portrayal that Michael S. Kimmel (2004) describes simply as "gay men as sexually insatiable" (105). Virtually every scene in which Nelson is involved deals in some way with the fact that he is "horny...pretty much 24/7" (2001, 83).

In *Rainbow boys* (2001), Nelson attempts to have sex with Kyle and nearly has sex at a party with a college-aged man named Blake. While the pair shares a bottle of rum in his car, Blake is surprised to learn that Nelson is still in high school, but kisses him and, acting in the tradition of John Boswell's (1989) "irrumator" (a male who "presents" his penis and forces oral sex), Blake "laid a hand behind Nelson's neck, gently directing his head down. A rich, musky smell wafted up" (117). Taking on the role traditionally and stereotypically embodied by female characters, through the swirl of alcohol and lust,

Nelson thinks they should use a condom, but doesn't voice his concerns as he worries he will insult "masculine" Blake. Nelson's hesitation to perform oral sex leads Blake to ask if he is a virgin – a fact Nelson tries to deny because "If he said yes, Blake might never want to have sex with him" (117). Eventually, Nelson confesses (and apologizes) that he is a virgin. Blake responds that "It's not your fault" before being overcome with a sudden wave of morality and deciding, "Look, we never should've done this. You're not even eighteen, are you?" (118). Despite Nelson's protests, the pair does not engage in sexual activity: Blake tells him that his first time should be with someone special.

The situation takes a dramatic turn when Blake rests "a brotherly hand on Nelson's shoulder" (118), but this sudden and complete repositioning of Blake feels unrealistic. The scene clearly imitates the seduction of the passive, helpless "female" at the hands of an older, active "male." Blake is clearly experienced in sexual activity – it is even obvious that he's well-versed in the perils inherent in discreetly "hooking up" in a car (i.e. warning Nelson to avoid the horn so that it doesn't sound and draw attention from nearby partygoers) – and his knowledge that Nelson is a senior in high school does not prevent him from sharing a bottle of rum and soliciting oral sex from someone he strongly suspects is under the age of eighteen (until he discovers the young man is a virgin).

NOT KNOWING WHEN TO SAY "NO": NELSON AS CAUTIONARY TALE

After several failed attempts to have sex with men closer to his own age, Nelson ultimately becomes seduced by an older online predator: the only portrayal of an adult gay male beyond "traditional" high school and undergraduate college-age men that we

see in the novel. This character provides YA readers the only glimpse into what their lives as an adult gay male can be like. Nelson agrees to meet Brick, screen name "HotLove69" (145) at a Starbucks after chatting with him online. The pair immediately head to Brick's quintessential predatory lair (think track lighting, glowing potted palms, a fancy stereo system, and chrome-framed prints of men in underwear) where he gives alcohol to Nelson who he thinks is eighteen (here is another adult gay male attempting to intoxicate and seduce a minor) before the pair moves into Brick's bedroom. The scene deserve special attention for two reasons: (1) it reinforces the portrayal of Nelson as stereotypically "feminine" and afraid to advocate for himself lest he ruin "the moment" and (2) the character of Brick is the only portrayal of an adult gay male (beyond "traditional" high school and undergraduate college-age men) that we see in the novel, and therefore this character provides YA readers the only glimpse into what their lives as an adult gay male can be like. Here's how that interaction takes place:

> Brick guided Nelson onto the bed and pressed him down onto the satin comforter. His warm hands slipped beneath Nelson's shirt, sliding across his skin. Nelson shivered with excitement and closed his eyes. The rush of blood made him dizzy. Nothing had ever thrilled him so much.
>
> Brick slid on top of him, as if wanting more of him, like he was somehow trying to get inside him. He kissed so hard that Nelson's head reeled back. He opened his eyes and found himself looking up at the underwear poster.
>
> "I want you," Brick said, his hands rushing frantically across Nelson's naked chest.

Nelson wasn't sure exactly what Brick meant, though he had a pretty good idea. He wanted to say that he hadn't ever done that – or anything else.

"Okay," Nelson managed as Brick de-pantsed him. "I guess so."

Then he remembered: *Wait. A condom!*

But before he could say anything, Brick was on top of him, pressed against him, touching every part of him, as though needing more, looking for Nelson's very core.

A voice screamed inside Nelson: *Stop! Tell him. He needs to use a condom.*

But if he did say something, Brick might reject him, the same as Blake, the same as Kyle. A wave of despair swept over Nelson, until it seemed he was totally lost to himself. He no longer knew where he was or what was happening, only that he wanted Brick. He clutched at him, soaked with sweat. His heart thundered faster and harder, till it seemed to burst.

Then just as quickly, it was over. Brick lay on top of him, head cradled in Nelson's shoulder, his breath puffing lightly across Nelson's chest. Nelson looked down at the soft blond hair and broad shoulders of the man he'd let inside of him. He'd never felt anything so incredible in his life. (148-9, italics in original)

Here again the "Queer and Proud" homosexual exemplifies the negative, stereotypically "feminine" stance of wishing for the use of protection during sexual activity and the

subsequent abandonment of that protective instinct in order not to risk the rejection (and to satisfy the needs) of the "masculine" male: in this case, the motorcycle riding, muscular "HotLove69" Brick.

There is a disproportionate amount of risk portrayed here: Brick is a character who fills the role Boswell (1989) describes as the "predicator," an experienced male who has nothing to lose in casual sexual encounters while Nelson fits the role of the "ceveatar" (the passive virginal recipient for the predicator who has everything to lose). Sanchez has constructed for readers a cautionary tale in which the young innocent is lured into the lair of the older predator and if his goal is to teach readers to be alert for (and wary of) such situations, it feels all the more important that Nelson stick up for himself. Instead Nelson is not only preyed upon by Brick, he finds satisfaction and feels affection for this man who objectified and (according to the text) "de-pantsed" him (148). He feels romantic as he holds Brick in his arms, lovingly noticing his broad shoulders and soft blond hair as readers are told that Nelson "never felt anything so incredible in his life" (149). After this depiction of first-time anal sex, the "passive recipient" Nelson becomes fearful that he may have contracted the AIDS virus. This issue is never resolved and at the end of *Rainbow boys* (2001), the reader is left with the impression that Nelson probably does have AIDS, thus heightening the stakes in this cautionary example (this construction is further explored in Chapter six: *Gay inevitabilities*). Like many who fill the role of the "other woman" in romance novels, Nelson's promiscuity and foolishness lead him to "a predictable fate" (Mussell, 1984, 39) which in this case is the contraction of the AIDS virus as punishment for what has been depicted as a foolish sexual encounter.

SUBVERTING GENDER BINARIES: NELSON AS "QUEER"

Following the work of Foucault, in *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, Judith Butler advocates "subversive" performances such as drag shows as they reveal the imitative structure and contingency of the (repeated) performances that construct gender. She argues they "destabilize the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates...gay and lesbian cultures often thematize 'the natural' in parodic contexts which bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex" (viii).

Throughout the series, Nelson seems to make moves toward destabilizing notions of gender and in some ways he certainly appears to be "queer and proud." He refers to male characters as "she," "girl," and "queen" and calls himself a "diva," and at the end of *Rainbow high* (2003), he tries on an evening gown at a post-prom party. In *Rainbow road* (2005), he says that he "and the other femmy guys at youth group had often called each other 'girl' or 'girlfriend,' as if to champion their queenyness to the world. But...Nelson had never seriously desired to become a *real* girl" (111, italics in original). In another scene, he shaves his legs, dresses in drag, and his "image in the mirror, with a boy's body and a girl's face, looked oddly strong and soft, vulnerable and confident" and he is "enchanted by his evolving female self" (114). Once fully transformed, he opens his eyes and "at first the girl in the mirror startled him. Then she mesmerized him. It was hard to believe she *was* him. He slowly raised a hand and the image followed. He really was her...if he'd been born female" (115, italics in original). In these moments, Sanchez blurs

the line between "male" and "female" through Nelson's evolving "gendered" state: he puts (within this "male" body) stereotypical conceptions of gender. Nelson's face (covered in makeup) is described as a "girl's" face (described as "soft" and "vulnerable") and Nelson's body as a "boy's" body (described as "strong" and "confident"). When he has put on his gendered clothing (a dress), he sees himself as if "he'd been born female." There are still characteristics, appearances, and qualities that belong to being either "male" or "female," but by placing them all on Nelson, he queers normative constructions of gender.

In her essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler (2004) warns, "Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group, i.e. an act of *ex*propriation or *ap*propriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that 'masculine' belongs to 'male' and 'feminine' belongs to 'female'" (360, italics in original). This complicates our reading of Nelson in drag: on the surface it may seem as if Nelson is an agent of "resignification," but Butler helps us realize that in actuality, these depictions miss the ironic destabilization of gender toward which queer cultures work – the "realistic" feel that readers get from the series comes from the familiar play between "masculine" and "feminine" counterparts and reiterates rather than subverts these gender stereotypes and misconceptions about sexuality.

THE NEGATIVE ROLE MODEL AS "QUEER AND PROUD"

If Nelson is supposed to operate as a reader's only example of what it means (and looks like) to be "Queer and Proud," it is troubling that he remains virtually static throughout most of the entire series: he never learns from his experiences or thinks before

he acts. Of all the protagonists, it feels most important that we see him grow and it is unfortunate that he changes little across the three books.

Although his bulimia is briefly mentioned in *Rainbow road* (2005), the bulk of the text in the last two novels involving Nelson revolves solely around his depiction as sexually insatiable. In *Rainbow high* (2003), he dates Jeremy, an HIV-positive young man who serves as educator for Nelson (and readers) throughout the novel. His sexual desire for Kyle re-emerges as a complication in the final installment of the trilogy: for example, Nelson notes that "He'd seen Kyle in his underwear before, but had always been curious to take things to the next level," (36) and at one point, "Nelson gazed up into Kyle's eyes, wanting more than anything to kiss those cute thin lips," (76).

New in *Rainbow road* (2005) is Nelson's sexual interest in Jason. When he and Jason end up in a campground shower room together and Nelson has to "fight the urge to turn and gape" at Jason's "tight pecs and ripped abs." He watches as Jason steps into a shower stall and eventually gets a quick look at his "glistening butt" before reprimanding himself for checking out his best friend's boyfriend (52). In another scene, Nelson lies in the tent next to a sleeping Jason and it is revealed that "He'd always thought Jason's thick eyebrows were sexy, and he loved the olive color of his skin. His shoulders stuck out of the sleeping bag, broad and muscled. His lips looked so tender and inviting" (135).

It isn't only Kyle and Jason for whom Nelson harbors desire: from (as a few examples) snapping photos of an "adorable" park ranger and referring him as "totally lickable" (45-6) and calling the "beefy registration guy reading a college textbook" at a campground "delicious" (123), to trying to hook up with a "total lust-magnet" (127) he meets at a dance club, Nelson continues to live on the edge. When the "rainbow boys"

visit the Civil Rights museum, Kyle tells Jason and Nelson (who [shockingly] are largely unaware of the Civil Rights Movement) the story of Rosa Parks and Jason wonders why the museum doesn't mention the hatred toward GLBTQ people. Nelson suggests staging a "kiss-in" in order to bring attention to the issue, implying he knows something of the history of queer activism, but also re-emphasizing his preoccupation with sexual acts.

Eventually, Nelson does meet a young man named Manny whose similarly dyed hair and "teeth so beautifully white against his cinnamon-colored skin that it made Nelson wonder, *Why are you torturing me like this?*" (207, italics in original). Manny serves as a *deus ex machina*, a character conveniently (often absurdly) introduced at "just the right moment" to disentangle and resolve the plot of a story. In this tradition, Nelson and Manny immediately fall for one another and quickly make love "as if discovering places never before experienced...ebbing and flowing, their ardor peaked and waned, as they kissed and touched, exploring nooks and crannies, tearing open condoms, entering one another, feeling closer than ever, and then lying quietly together, hearing only their heartbeats" (230-231). This connection is so powerful for Nelson that he decides to stay in Los Angeles to see where this relationship with Manny may lead.

[NOT QUITE] A GLIMMER OF HOPE

It should be acknowledged that Nelson is constructed as the one character in the series who questions Jason's celebrity status upon coming out. In fact, starting in *Rainbow high* (2003), Nelson takes issue with how Jason's standing as school jock privileges him, asking, "Why did everyone keep making such a big whoop about [Jason]? As if he was the first high school student to ever come out? So what if he was a sports

champ? Did that make him superior?" (194). Unfortunately for Nelson (and for readers), no one examines this issue with him. In fact, when Nelson tells his mother that "Jason got invited to give a speech at the ceremony, since he's a jock," she adds to the sense of injustice by responding, "I should invite him to come speak to my PFLAG group" (18) – an invitation that she hasn't extended to her son.

In spite of his heightened awareness, it seems that in reality, Nelson too accepts Jason's conduct on account of his "masculine" status. As one example, he tells Kyle he's overreacting to Jason's infidelity because he knew Jason "liked girls when you met him" (136). But more revealing is the moment where Jason (in a moment of panic) attempts to convince Nelson to deliver his speech at the gay and lesbian high school on his behalf because "you're the one they should've invited" (222). Although thrilled to have someone echo his own thinking, Nelson tells Jason, "Maybe you'll make a huge fool of yourself, but if that's what it takes for you to accept that *a lot of us look up to you* – then that's what you've got to do" (222, my italics), suggesting that despite what he may say to the contrary, he too looks up to the T.C.J., he sets him apart from (and above) other GLBTQ young people: even in Nelson's eyes, the T.C.J.'s "masculinity" makes him a hero and a role model.

As with Kyle and Jason, the complexity of "gender" and "sexuality" through the depiction (and interactions) of Nelson is reduced to a heteronormative binary in which a "feminine" gay male is depicted as innocent and passive while being acted upon (and satisfied) by older, "masculine" males. When Nelson dresses in drag, it could be argued that he represents the coming together of "male" and "female" in a moment that serves as a visualization of the instability of gender (his depiction as inverted could certainly

confirm this), but these possibilities seem rejected when "All the way home Nelson thought how much fun it had been to be a girl – at least for a little while. Then he was sitting in front of the mirror, wiping his face with cold cream as he returned to being a boy" (117). Newton (1972) argues, drag "is a double inversion" (103) in which "masculine" and "feminine" are both implied and disrupted. As Vern and Bonnie Bullough (1993) write, drag is a "confusion of costume whereby the illusion of assuming the opposite sex is not intended to convince the viewer of authenticity but to suggest ambiguity" (246). By writing Nelson as being so convincingly "female," even the attempt to destabilize gender actually reinscribes binary categories.

It ultimately seems that to be "queer and proud" in this series means to be vain, self-loathing, recklessly impulsive, sexually insatiable, and self-sacrificing. If this is the character who is supposed to provide readers with an image of an openly and comfortably gay male young adult, it opens the question: "Who wants to be like Nelson?"

NOTES

[1] This is reinforced in *Rainbow high* (2003) in scenes in which heterosexual girls ask Kyle, "Which one of you is the girl?" (204) and these misconceptions go unchallenged. It is also reinforced by Nelson's boyfriend Jeremy. When he meets Nelson's mother, he is "flattering to Nelson's mom ('Those are cool earrings...'); and funny ('Can I borrow them sometime?')" (106).

CHAPTER SIX

GAY INEVITABILITIES

As troubling as the individual depictions of the Tragic Closet Jock, the Sympathetic, Understanding Doormat, and the "Queer and Proud" homosexual may be,[1] in the end, the *Rainbow boys* series does more than just look at the story of these three young men. It moves into larger issues of gay culture through the presentation of these lives within the context of an American high school.

RESILIENCE, NOT ACCEPTANCE:

In a series of novels that looks at three gay young men who have to navigate the tricky terrain of high school culture, predictably, things aren't easy for them. As examples of gay adolescent "problem novels," one may expect these books to didactically work against homophobic discourse. Problem novels as a genre rely upon intrusions that are clearly written to educate and inform readers. Roberta Seelinger Trites suggests such authorial impositions tend to "manipulat[e] the adolescent reader" (2000, p. x) toward particular ways of thinking. Kenneth Kidd (1998) notes, "homophobia [has] replaced homosexuality as the designated social problem addressed" (p. 114); however, in the *Rainbow boys* series it seems that homophobia is addressed in ways that subsequently work to reinforce homophobia and heteronormativity as bad, but inevitable behaviors. As Loykie L. Lomine (2006) found in his study of French youth literature, these books "never go far in their condemnation of both homophobia and blatantly homophobic people" (226).

Beginning with *Rainbow Boys* (2001), readers are told that Nelson has been bullied, mocked, and tormented since middle school and is routinely told by those in positions of power that he has to learn to control his temper and put up with the abuse. When on one occasion he answers the phone and is greeted with "Hey, fag...Want to suck my dick?", we read that, "Such calls were too commonplace to phase him" (144). Having learned to be "tough" in the face of homophobic abuse, Nelson teaches Kyle that he must be ready to defend himself (notably through physical violence) against intolerant individuals. "What good would it do?" an unconvinced Kyle asks, "For every [bully like] Jack Ransom, there's ten more. He's not the problem, homophobia's the problem" (38). On one level, this can be read as a rather contrived, predictable declaration against homophobia, but on another, it's a construction re-emphasizing that: (1) because it's physically dangerous to be gay (or perceived as gay), homosexual teens need to toughen up and become resilient to intolerance and (2) homophobia is a problem too big to take on. The theme that gay teens need to be resilient (as opposed to being accepted) is further reinforced at the end of the first novel when the boys succeed in getting a gay-straight alliance in their high school and the students who want to attend the meeting need to walk past their whispering, jeering peers:

> [Jason] watched Nelson walk down the hall toward the main office. The group of boys outside the office door jeered him: "Hey, faggot!" "Homo!" "Queer!"
>
> Jason started after Nelson, not with any intention of going to the meeting – just to help Nelson if the boys jumped him. But Mueller

charged out of the office, yelling at the boys and spreading his arms, stopping any scuffle.

One boy noticed Jason and whispered something to another boy. Oh, shit, Jason thought. By Fifth period it would be all over school.

He hesitated a moment, then continued past the boys, into the office, his heart beating wildly. He could always say he had an appointment with his counselor. But he wouldn't. He wouldn't lie. Not anymore.

He walked down the corridor to the counselor's conference room. Through the glass window he saw Kyle moving extra chairs over to the table. Some girls sat on one side, MacTraugh and a group of boys on the other. Quite a crowd of people – more than Jason had expected.

His hand hesitated on the doorknob. He could still turn around.

Then Kyle looked up at him and smiled. He motioned to the chair beside him.

Jason took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped inside. (233)

This can be read as a rite of passage: readers watch as Jason works through the confrontation and walks through the door of queerness, but at that same time, this is supposed to be the moment of triumph: the rainbow boys have gotten a gay/straight alliance in their high school, and what's more, Jason is brave enough to attend the first meeting. It is important, however, to pay attention to what this triumph looks like. While these constructions may serve a method of establishing empathy for the protagonists

(convincing heterosexual readers that gay people are "normal" [6]), they simultaneously imply that the harassment of queer youth is inevitable. Throughout the entire series, this idea that gay youth must become resilient to homophobia and intolerance is clear. In *Rainbow high*, Nelson tells Kyle, "If you can't think up a good comeback, then just smile and wave. But don't let them get a rise out of you. That just eggs them on" (206).

"Queer and Proud" Nelson is regular fodder for bullying and maltreatment by nearly all heterosexual characters throughout the series (i.e. Kyle's father blames Nelson – not Jason or Kyle himself – when Kyle insists that he doesn't want to attend Princeton), but the focus of much of the intolerance in *Rainbow high* falls on Kyle. When a young man on his swim team expresses concern that Kyle is gay, the coach (Sanchez is careful to give readers Jason's intolerant basketball coach, who identifies as "male," as well as this intolerant swimming coach, who identifies as "female") accepts Kyle's offer to shower at home as opposed to showering in the locker room with the rest of the players. Later, when the team attends a meet requiring an overnight stay, none of the young men want to share a hotel room with Kyle because, as one student puts it, "I'm not sleeping in the same room with no fag" (177). The coach decides that homosexual Kyle should be isolated: he will sleep by himself in her hotel room while she shares a room with some of the girls. When this arrangement leads to increased derision, instead of confronting the students who ridicule Kyle and call him a "fag" in her presence, the coach "turned to Kyle, her eyes burning with anger. 'I've had enough, Kyle. You brought this on yourself. If you hadn't started this whole coming out business, none of this would've happened'" (178).

Later, when Kyle and his father meet with the swim coach, for the first time in the series (226 pages into the middle novel) it is suggested that heterosexuals in society should adjust their misconceptions of gay people. Kyle's father says, "You're their coach. It's up to you to set the rules. But unless my son is doing something wrong, then maybe those boys and their parents are the ones who need to alter *their* behavior" (227, italics in original). While we can celebrate this affirmative moment, it is still overshadowed by the predominant message across all three books that the world remains a dangerous and scary place for homosexual teens.

When Jason decides to "come out" to his teammates as a gay male, the principal tells him that if he cares about his team, he will keep the information to himself. "'If you feel the need to jeopardize your future with this, that's one thing,'" he tells Jason, "'but for you to risk upsetting your team as we head toward the state title...' He shook his head as if genuinely mystified. 'I can't believe you'd do that, Jason'" (96). By the end of the novel, Principal Mueller's position becomes legitimized as Jason loses his college athletic scholarship as a result of his sexuality. Although the college claims it comes as the result of an altercation with another teammate, Coach Cameron makes it clear that he believes Jason's sexual identity is the true underlying cause.

As the boys embark on their road trip in *Rainbow road* (2005), the world becomes an even more intolerant and frightening place as the protagonists are regularly confronted with prejudice. At one stop, they encounter a bus marked "FIRST EVANGELICAL CHURCH" (46, emphasis in original) where a woman tells Nelson she has a problem with "people like you" and Jason suggests that if he didn't "dress so weird," Nelson wouldn't encounter such blatant homophobia (47). At a gas station, they encounter two

men driving a pickup truck sporting a "TERRORIST HUNTER'S PERMIT – WE NEVER FORGET" (172, emphasis in original) bumper sticker on its rear. One man wears a cowboy hat while the other wears a "wifebeater tank top, boots, and jeans" (171) and spits chewing tobacco. After Nelson (who is sexually attracted to one of the men) announces to the pair that the rainbow bumper sticker on his car indicates he (and by association, Jason and Kyle) is gay, the men get in their truck and menacingly attempt to force the boys' car off the road by recklessly driving and throwing beer cans at their windshield. A high speed chase ensues on narrow, winding mountain roads before the men in the pickup truck lose control of their truck and crash.

While camping at the "Fam-E-Lee Values Campground" (154), an obvious attempt by Sanchez to immediately invoke images of the troubling things done in the name of "family values," the protagonists meet a very young boy with a pronounced lisp named Esau. In addition to scoffing that Esau is, "Sweet like a girl! He'd better start acting like a man or he's going to get his ass kicked" (155), Esau's father is overhead further deriding his son: "Oh, stop sounding like a girl...In fact, I think you *are* a girl. They must've made a mistake at the hospital. Now shut up and say your prayers. I don't want to look at you anymore" (159, italics in original). Nelson declares that, regardless of how the boy will identify sexually, "with that lisp and those curls, he's going to get called queer anyway. That's what's wrong with our society – if you're in any way different, you get clobbered" (156). Nelson and Esau eventually do a facial mask together as Nelson tells him, "life's going to get rough sometimes...people will call you names and try to hurt you, they'll tell you what to feel, what to think. They'll say you're a mistake. But you're not" (162). He says, "It's okay to be you – exactly who you are, no matter what

anyone says. Believe in yourself. Trust your heart. Be true to who you are" (162-3). A rather didactic moment, this sudden compassion is so uncharacteristic of Nelson that one cannot help but imagine author Sanchez stepping into the story and speaking directly to his reader.

Dramatically, Esau's father catches the pair together and refers to Nelson as a "faggot" (163). Although Nelson tries to reason with the father, it is only threats of physical violence from Jason (who mostly avoids the abuse of intolerant heterosexuals) that convinces the man to back down. Perpetuating the idea that gays must often show resilience to injustice through physical violence, Jason (who probably sees parallels between the paternal "feminizing" of this young boy and his personal experience) tells Esau "You grow up big and strong...when your day comes, you smack your dad, good and solid" (164). "Masculine" Jason teaches young Esau that "feminine" attempts to educate with reason, rationality, and words are futile: the only way to try to end the abuse of intolerant heterosexuals is by demonstrating dominance through physical violence.

SAFETY IN "ARCADIA"

In these novels, it seems gay people can only find solace from intolerance by isolating themselves from heterosexuals. Building on the work of Byrne R.S. Fone, Allan A. Cuseo (1992) refers to novels employing such sanctuaries as "Arcadian." He suggests, "the roots of Arcadia lie in pastoral settings, but today the homosexual community has embraced the Arcadian ideal to mean any setting which serves as a hermitage or sanctuary away from a disapproving heterosexual world...Arcadia represents the special

place needed for the homosexual character(s) to be apart from a homophobic mainstream" (86-7).

In *Rainbow road* (2005), the boys stay at a "sanctuary for gay and lesbian people" (65) where "no one hassled you for being crazily queer, a place where you could totally be yourself" (70). People dress in outlandish outfits (or nothing at all) and eat "roasted tofu, apple squash, apple-raisin salad, and grapes" (72) and speak about "what's in your heart" (73); content to be an isolated assemblage of deviant outcasts.

The only other place we see gay people "being allowed" to be themselves in self-identifying ways is at the Los Angeles high school for gay and lesbian students. After Jason's speech, he is bombarded by students "with green hair and purple hair, with earrings and nose rings, kids he wasn't sure were boys or girls – all excited and hyper and giggling, as kids were meant to be, in a school where they could be themselves without being called names or fearing they'd get pounded" (226). The fact that Jason (himself only a couple of months out of high school) takes on this adult perspective and refers to these students as "kids" as he looks at their situation with such insightfulness suggests this is another statement directly from the author directly to his imagined readers, with implicit messages not only about where it is safe to be homosexual, but who can be (and what it means and how it looks to be) gay.

AIDS: "WHEN I GET IT"

In his essay "Reading and writing 'immunity': Children and the anti-body," Robert McRuer (1998) argues that "The liberal reinscription of AIDS from the late 1980s on, as 'everyone's disease' ironically functions within the text of children's literature – as

it has elsewhere – to make gay men living with AIDS invisible...The discursive shift to understanding AIDS as everyone's disease justifies, or rationalizes, the proscription of gay male representation in children's literature" (134). As if in response to this assessment, much of the *Rainbow Boys* series has been devoted to providing for its readers a source of education about AIDS (as constructed as a disease for gay males).

After Nelson's cautionary example in the first novel, his HIV-test in *Rainbow high* provides an opportunity to make explicit the process of HIV-testing as well as to clarify how the virus is spread (this information is provided through a doctor's lecture on the importance of advocating for safe sex or abstaining if your partner refuses to use protection). Later, next to his dinner plate, Nelson's mother leaves a newspaper clipping that reads: "HALF OF ALL NEW AMERICAN HIV INFECTIONS OCCUR IN YOUNG PEOPLE AGES 13-24" (134, emphasis in original) and when he meets many of Jeremy's HIV-positive friends, Nelson's surprised that "none of the guys looked positive" (166).

In his book, *Policing desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the media*, Simon Watney (1988) claims, "From very early on in the history of the epidemic, Aids [*sic*] has been mobilised to a prior agenda of issues concerning the kind of society we wish to inhabit...Aids [*sic*] is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to 'justify' calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable" (3). He identifies the media's homophobic construction of AIDS as a gay disease (and subsequently those with AIDS as "the polluting person") as being implicitly suggestive of a highly problematic depiction of a "pollutive homosexual." Although Sanchez undoubtedly has the best intentions in attempting to educate young adult readers

about the virus, it feels as if gay men are reduced to a stereotype through the equating of being gay with being at risk for contracting AIDS. While there are examples of this throughout the series, this is particularly evident in the first novel: including the moment when Kyle comes out to his parents and his father immediately says, "There's one other question I need to ask, son. Since you brought all this up. Is there anything else we should know? About your health?" (106) and Kyle instinctively recognizes that his father is referring to HIV, but also believes that he had no reason "to worry about that *yet*" (106, my italics).

Although Kyle briefly worries about the fact that Jason and his ex-girlfriend Debra engaged in unprotected sex after Debra began taking birth control pills, the issue of AIDS remains a gay disease in *Rainbow high*. Jason's ex-girlfriend tells him she's "afraid something's going to happen to you" (153) now that he's self-identified as homosexual and she identifies that "something" as being the contraction of the AIDS virus. When the second novel begins, Nelson awaits the results of his HIV test and views the contraction of the virus as inevitable, not only accepting that "he was probably going to test positive" (15), but when he doesn't, he indicates he actually wants to contract the virus from his HIV-positive boyfriend Jeremy so he "wouldn't worry all the time about *when* I'm going to get it" (168, my italics). While readers might expect Jeremy (the character constructed as teacher) to educate Nelson that not all gay men contract HIV, he instead reminisces about when he learned he had contracted the virus: "I felt this awesome sense of relief. At least I didn't have to worry anymore if I was going to get it. (...) But take my word for it, the worrying doesn't stop. You just trade the old worries for the new ones" (168).

In contrast, with the exception of a few tangential statements, the third novel *Rainbow road* contains virtually no reference to AIDS. Early in the novel, Nelson notes that "he was dating an HIV-positive guy" (17) and later Jeremy makes a cameo appearance and it is written that "Jeremy was HIV positive and Nelson was HIV negative. They'd both decided the difference in status was too big an issue between them" (35). Later, the issue of safe sex comes up when Kyle tells Nelson "Even with a condom, he might've had some disease besides HIV. Every day the news reports some new drug-resistant STD" (83) and at the end of the book, he asks Nelson, "Did you discuss HIV status, like you promised me?" (234). In spite of the fact that these are the only mentions of HIV/AIDS, the book has been stamped with an HIV/AIDS awareness logo on its cover, something problematic (and heterosexist) unless every book dealing depicting teen sexual activity with any mention of HIV/AIDS is stamped with such a logo.

Although on their surface the *Rainbow boys* series may appear to give voice to this marginalized population, this is a trilogy that has be given a didactic mission – on their surface, the books are all about what it "means" and "looks like" to be gay and how to prevent the contraction of AIDS. Although nearly all children's literature serves as cautionary tales, what gets perpetuated in the set-up Sanchez has established is that instead of advocating for safe sexual practice, all gay characters look like potential carriers: no one can be trusted. Sanchez is trying to create what Alexander Garcia Duttmann (1996) calls the "responsible subject" who practices the "[h]ygienic care and self-control, the 'desacralization,' reflected in a 'ritualization of safer sex'" (37). When Debra starts taking birth control, there is no concern between she and Jason that they

might contract AIDS, but the issue is always present surrounding gay males. As an example, at the end of *Rainbow road* when Nelson finds potential love with Manny, Kyle lectures him at length about the importance of safe sexual activity. Although the three protagonists escape the disease (they haven't gotten it "yet"), they still wait for the day (seemingly with anticipation) "when" they learn they've gotten it. Finally, the HIV/AIDS awareness logo stamped on the covers of the novels and prominently featured in lists of resources and hotline ads following the narratives further perpetuate the notion of the gay carrier – a badge of warning for readers.

Although Sanchez is working to address AIDS and issues like homophobia more generally, he does so in ways which reinforce the idea that being a gay male is dangerous. Gay males must be prepared to either defend themselves through physical violence or find isolation and live as deviant outcasts hidden from the heterosexual "mainstream" society. But even within isolation, there is fear: the threat of contamination ominously looms in the distance. No possibilities exist without the potential of danger.

NOTES

[1] Also included in the second installment is some explicit exposition about the cultural background of the "rainbow boys," which seems to reflect an awareness that in the field of young adult literature, there is a clear need for "more GLBTQ books featuring characters of color" (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, 165). Although it is implied in *Rainbow boys* that Jason is Latino (his last name is "Carillo"), in *Rainbow high*, Jason uses token Spanish terms such as "maricon" (5) and "loco" (6). Additionally, Nelson is established as a Jewish character – at one moment, Kyle points out, "Nelson, you're Jewish" (42) and later, Nelson uses the Yiddish term "chutzpah" (90). Nelson's identity as Jewish never reappears in the series and, although in *Rainbow road* Nelson notes that "I've never done it with a Latino guy" to which Jason proudly responds: "Dude, we're the best!" (213), Jason never again uses Spanish terms and his identity as Latino is all but forgotten. This is troubling because it seems to reduce these characters to ethnic stereotypes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE [LIMITED] POSSIBILITIES OF *RAINBOW BOYS*

The *Rainbow boys* books are probably the most successful and canonically accepted pieces of GLBTQ literature written for young adults. In many cases, these books are the only titles to find their way into homes, libraries, bookstores, and classrooms. In a time when issues of diversity are paramount, these books have been written to give voice to gay adolescent males. With a dramatically increasing number books classified as "GLBTQ" being published each year, GLBTQ young adult literature "has begun to move – as have many of the individual titles that comprise it – toward assimilation; moving, that is, from being an isolated or 'ghettoized' subgenre to becoming a more integrated part of the total body of young adult literature" (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, 128). In looking at the problems inherent in the *Rainbow boys* series, it may be tempting to call for the revocation of the awards, honors, and accolades they have received. Although the *Rainbow boys* series is problematic, it is important to consider the contexts in which they appeared, the potential *Rainbow boys* offers readers, and what alternatives to these depictions may be available.

RAINBOW BOYS AND QUEER AMERICAN CULTURE

When *Rainbow boys* was released in 2001, it built on the already growing popularity of watching gayness being performed: that same year, "Will and Grace," a television show applauded for its two gay male leading characters, was seeing the highest ratings of its run (USA Today) and by the time *Rainbow high* was released two years later, much of the country was captivated by five gay guys who helped popularize the "metrosexual" on Bravo Television's hit "Queer eye for the straight guy." In his book *No respect: Intellectuals and popular culture*, Andrew Ross (1989) points to the roots of the popularity of "queer" style as emerging early in the post-Stonewall era. He writes, "the gay male became a model consumer, in the vanguard of the business of shaping and defining taste, choice, and style for mainstream markets" (144). The popularity of gay culture, argues Japp Kooijman (2005) has continued to morph and grow, becoming most striking within the last decade. Suddenly, more than ever before, "queer is hip, queer is fashionable, and thus queer is just another gay male sense of style" (107). The announcement of "Boy meets boy" (the first gay dating show) prompted Frank Rich (2003) to write in *The New York times* that gay and lesbian people were more visible than ever – and heterosexual viewers seemed to be accepting of this shift.

While it may be appealing to suggest that the popularity of these shows is indicative of queer identities being accepted and celebrated in mainstream society, it is worth noting that often these shows are similar to the *Rainbow boys* books in that they serve as representations of queerness on their surface but are often fitted into a heteronormative frame. Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix (2006) write "While Queers are now permitted access to the media mainstream, they are welcome there only

so long as they observe certain limits imposed upon them by the conventions of the mainstream's heterosexist sociosexual order" (427). Gay people are allowed as long as they are available to laugh at or serve to advance heterosexual love while having no romantic lives of their own. Following the work of Gluckman (1963), Westerfelhaus and Lacroix (2006) write that the popularity of queer culture in mainstream media outlets is an example of a "ritual of rebellion" in which participants are granted "temporary license to violate selected sociocultural rules; in doing so, they provide much-needed outlets for expressing and relieving social tensions" (430). As opposed to disrupting the social order, however, these rituals actually promote social stability by "reaffirming the values and reasserting the social structure of the dominant order" (430).

Take as an example the January 23, 2004 episode of "Oprah" in which the cast of "Will and Grace" was interviewed and Winfrey managed to conduct the entire hour-long interview without even mentioning homosexuality. Ultimately, these shows are popular because "straight" America can "feel good" about their "progressive" acceptance of gay characters, while at the same time, gay males are positioned at the service of heterosexuals: the character of Will on "Will and Grace" is the gay best friend who consoles and cuddles Grace after a bad date and when no heterosexual man is available; on "Queer eye for the straight guy," the five gay males work to ensure that heterosexual men can attract (or maintain a relationship with) a heterosexual female before retreating to the isolation of their loft, watching the impact of their intervention via a television feed. Some of these media depictions – and the *Rainbow boys* series as well – allow for gay people...as long as they are not gay (and are not "queer" representations) and the heteronormative social order is be re-instated and reinforced.

THE POPULARITY AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE *RAINBOW BOYS* SERIES

While it may be appealing to conclude that the *Rainbow boys* series is popular *in spite* of its flaws, the purpose of this analysis is to suggest the opposite: they are popular because they reduce gay males to a familiar formula that supports the normative way of viewing the world. As H.A. Schugart (2003) writes, such representations serve to merely "enrich and strengthen specifically heteronormative social and political sensibilities" (70). It does not seem to matter that the formulas utilized are inaccurate; because it has been seen over and over, readers are led to conclude the series feels "true."

With statistics indicating that more than a third of high school students experience physical harassment and two-thirds experience verbal harassment on the basis of their sexual identity (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006, 5), it is disheartening that 81.7% of students indicate they have never been taught about GLBTQ people in their school curriculum (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006, 9). This makes the depictions in literature all the more important: gay young adults "look to literature hoping to find answers and positive role models" (Wilson, 2006, 60) and quality literature can provide much needed "validation for their feelings and hope for a bright future that involves self-affirmation" (Goodman, 1983, 15) while simultaneously teaching about what they are like.

Alex Sanchez (2005) himself has said that:

> Gay boys and girls, like any others, need positive images and affirming stories to help guide them through the often painful and confusing terrain of childhood and adolescence, to glimpse a world in which they're not bad or shameful but in which they're part of the good world. Books can

> provide a moral compass, a system of values, a way to understand feelings. (49)

It is utterly clear that Sanchez wants nothing more than to instill hope and inspire acceptance for future generations of gay youth and is doing his best to give voice to a population traditionally underrepresented in literature and misrepresented across popular culture and media. However, Roberta Seelinger Trites (1998) notes, "all too often, gay YA literature parallels the cultural traditions of repression that have long stigmatized homosexuality" (149) and *Rainbow boys* exemplifies this tradition by presenting gay characters who are acceptable because they are constructed within a heteronormative binary as opposed to being depicted as "queer."

In these novels, gay readers have three options in terms of who they can hope to be as young people:

1. A heteronormatively "masculine" male (such as the unemotional, inconsiderate, confused, self-consumed Tragic Closet Jock)
2. A "feminine" counterpart (who silences his own voice in order to satisfy the needs of the "masculine" male)
3. A sexually insatiable, self-loathing "Queer and Proud" target of abuse

As adults, the options are equally bleak: it seems that adult gay males can either be predators who attempt to intoxicate and seduce minors or deviants who live isolated from an intolerant "mainstream" society.

Again, the question of audience arises. If the series also serves to "teach" heterosexual readers about what gay people are "like," the books are equally troubling.

The misconception that in gay relationships, one person is the "male" while the other is the inverted "feminine" counterpart is reiterated throughout the series. Further, readers are taught that it is acceptable to verbally harass and physically abuse people who are queer.

"DIFFICULT" CONVERSIONS AND "DEEP" READING

In some ways, the *Rainbow boys* books are reminiscent of what Deborah Britzman (1998) calls "difficult pedagogy." Writing specifically of the popular use of *The diary of Anne Frank* to teach about the Holocaust, she argues that the inclination of teachers (and society more generally) is to protect young readers from what may seem "startling" or "traumatic" (125). Thus, the appeal of a book like *Anne Frank* is simply that it allows for a discussion of the Holocaust without confronting anything "difficult": young people are provided Frank's diary and learn about life in the Secret Annex and read small pieces about what she hears is happening outside the attic without having to deal explicitly with the realities and images of persecution. On their surface, the *Rainbow boys* books appear "affirmative" of gay males and seem as if they should give voice to (and representation of) gay males, but because they so heavily rely on heteronormative constructions of gender, sexuality, and the world more broadly, they actually work to make gay men invisible. Using these books may allow educators to bring literature into the classroom that looks "progressive" without really providing anything that challenges the heteronormative status quo. These books may appear "gay," but as has been shown across this dissertation, there is very little that is "queer" within the pages.

In looking at these books from another theoretical approach, it is important to remember that readers don't have to accept what they are presented: the fact that the *Rainbow boys* books are so problematic also makes them powerful tools for teaching. Because readers can choose to resist what is read (Fetterley, 1978), we as educators can guide students toward questioning these texts and subverting their messages. Through the identification of familiar misconceptions and stereotypical representations, readers can recognize what it is that contemporary adults want young people to believe and become through reading these books. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1997) suggests, books with problematic constructions can often "[lend themselves] to a critical discussion of stereotyping and its consequences" (10). Vivian Yenika-Agbaw (2003) agrees, "the ability to question signs and meanings embedded in texts empowers readers with skills that enable them to construct new knowledge by subverting these signs and the dominant messages they are expected to retrieve" (244). With appropriate scaffolding, a close, critical study of the *Rainbow boys* series could help students begin to identify how these pieces of contemporary realistic romance fiction depict homosexual and heterosexual people (and the context and content of their lives) in ways that rely upon and reinforce heteronormative and stereotypical constructions of gender and sexuality.

In his essay "Making boys appear: The masculinity of children's fiction," Perry Nodelman (2002) writes that by changing the character of Max in *Where the wild things are* to "Maxine," his students were able to recognize the ways in which Max was "gendered" male. Following this lead, teachers and students reading *Rainbow boys* could identify similarities between characters Kyle and Debra to begin to see the ways in which Kyle is gendered "female" and subsequently begin to analyze how Jason is a character

who is depicted as stereotypically "masculine." After exploring the ways in which "masculinity" and "femininity" are constructed, asking readers to identify Nelson's characteristics may bring about discussion of how Sanchez has depicted what it looks like to be "queer and proud," leading readers to deconstruct why the novels feel "familiar" and "true" and helping raise questions about the representational accuracy of the series.

Beyond looking at the three protagonists, conversations could also be had about the ways in which the larger world of the novel is constructed. Guiding readers to pay attention to the HIV/AIDS logos on the covers of the books and the advertisements and resources listed in the back could help heighten their awareness of the ways in which AIDS is used as simultaneously educative and ominous for gay males. Beyond the use of the AIDS virus, questions like "Where do gay males find acceptance?" or "Where are gay people safe?" can move readers to reflect on how Sanchez's "realistic" fiction portrays the world and attempts to elicit sympathy for the protagonists.

Although many of the difficulties explored in this dissertation may actually supply ways to facilitate a discussion that challenges readers to reconsider previously unquestioned assumptions about how the world looks and operates, it may be difficult to imagine what literature for queer adolescents may look like in a genre focused almost exclusively on the discovery of sexuality and sexual identity. There are books, however, that may help facilitate the same conversations offered through the most "positive" discussions of *Rainbow boys* (in equally rich ways), while at the same time presenting more nuanced, "authentic," and wide-ranging depictions of GLBTQ people.

RE-IMAGINING POSSIBILITY: GAY ADOLESCENT LITERATURE BEYOND *RAINBOW BOYS*

I have argued that authors are the creators of worlds they ask their readers to accept and trust. But because the "realities" constructed in young adult literature rely upon ideological assumptions of how the world looks and operates, careful consideration must be given to the possibilities imagined and offered within those worlds. Because heterosexuality is often assumed to be a "natural" or "normal" way of "being" in Western society (Rich 1980, Warner 1991), other experiences and identities are often marginalized and made invisible, and at times GLBTQ fiction for young adults attempts to subvert this heteronormativity. In an attempt to identify gay adolescent literature "outside" of heteronormativity, two young adult novels will be examined – chosen specifically because of their reliance on the genre of "magical realism" to disrupt heteronormativity for young readers.

Zamora and Faris (1995) write that understanding magical realism is "a simple matter of the most complicated sort" (3) because a range of tangentially related and sometimes divergent theories of the genre have been established. In this analysis, "magical realism" is used to describe texts that re-imagine "normal" by re-envisioning "reality" in ways that challenge readers to deconstruct the novel and the contexts in which they live. Bruce Holland Rogers (2002) writes that a book classified as magical realism "tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective" (n.p.). Luis Leal (1995) writes that "in magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts" (121). Lois Parkinson

Zamora (1995) writes that magical realism repositions readers and "obliges us to recognize our responsibility for the constitution of *all* meanings in the world, to recall our fundamental and necessary implication in the definition of reality as such" (500; *italics in original*). The authors of the texts examined in this section hope to use the construction of their worlds to make explicit the heteronormativity that hides behind (and within) Western society – these texts may feel like "magic" for readers from the ways in which privileged discourses are de-centered and what may have previously been taken as "logical" or "normal" is disrupted.

Don Sakers's (1986) *Act well your part*, the first novel examined, is seems to be self-published and it would be easy to attack its two-dimensional characters, groaningly predictable dialogue and plot conventions, and editorial negligence. While it may be tempting to dismiss the novel, it feels important to treat this book seriously because it reads as if there is a great deal of "back story" to which readers are (unfortunately) not provided access: it feels as if Sakers "knows" these characters on a level that does not translate to the text itself. Care should be used with this book because in some ways, the analysis is unfair: first published in 1986, Sakers's novel comes from a different time in U.S. history and it may be that I am asking it to speak in a context in which it never imagined itself.

However, the book has recently been re-released in a Twentieth Anniversary Edition and on its back cover, this self-proclaimed "classic" and "timeless tale" is brought "back into print for its adult fans *as well as a new generation of teens*" (my italics). If the book is going to be presented for contemporary young readers, it seems important to consider what possibilities it has to offer. The book is also generally well-

reviewed by readers on websites like amazon.com and is discussed in Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins's (2006) study, *The heart has its reasons*. Cart and Jenkins (2006) refer to the book as "gracelessly written and didactic," but seem to support the classification of the book as "magical realism" when they note some of the situations within the text may be "more wish fulfillment than reality" (58).

Sakers makes his authorial intentions in writing this book explicit in an author's note that prefaces the text. He writes:

> *Act well your part* does not take place in our world. Oak Grove High School exists only in that misty, far-off place called "The Best of All Possible Worlds." It is a parallel universe just a few steps away, a world in which sexual orientation matters only as much as eye color or left-handedness, and young love is a sweet and beautiful thing for all young lovers.
>
> This is an unabashed romance story, set a few decades ago, not in the world as it was, but in the world as, perhaps, it *should have been.*
>
> *Act well your part* is a piece of fiction. But I know that my readers will join with me in the fervent hope that one day we may live in a world in which high school students, teachers, parents, and the general public will be just as accepting as the characters in this book." (5; italics in original)

On its surface, this is an invitation for readers to enter the world Sakers has created, but it simultaneously operates as a warning, giving readers an opportunity to refuse engagement with this world and giving permission to outright reject its possibilities in the "real" world: resistant readers are given an immediate "out."

The second novel explored, David Levithan's (2003) *Boy meets boy*, does not provide this opportunity to readers: it does not offer an explicit statement as to its genre or the author's intentions – in fact, the book has proven difficult to classify. In this essay, I will be arguing that it is "magical realism," but *Boy meets boy* has also been called "fantasy" and Cart & Jenkins (2006) call it "utopian" and "the first feel-good gay novel

for teens" (p. 144). In an article in the most recent edition of the *Children's literature association quarterly*, Amy Pattee (2008) writes that the book is "utopian" in the sense that it "encourages active critique of the 'real' world outside its own literary boundaries" (157). Levithan himself (or at least his publishers) makes his opinion on the novel's lack of realism clear by including his statement that "a story doesn't have to always reflect reality; it can create reality as well" (2006, n.p.) in promotional materials for the book. In Levithan's view, this may not be a world that looks like "our own," but he hopes his novel will show what this world can become.

These are two texts whose authors actively work to subvert heteronormative constructions by showing readers the "best of all possible worlds." However, both the focus on monogamous coupling and reliance on identity categories in many ways reinforce normativity as opposed to subverting it. As Foucault (1978) argues, acts of repression and regulation serve to proliferate (and not eliminate) sexuality and therefore acts of resistance to heteronormativity often prove ineffective. Foucault argues that in order to truly disrupt normative constructions of sexualities, we must move outside identity categories into the realm of "bodies and pleasures" (159) beyond named practices. This analysis is limited because these books remain on the path of identity categories, but these novels *are* resistances and as Foucault argues, resistances are *not* always futile.

The opening page of Sakers's novel sets the scene for our experience as readers: "Outside it was a glorious October day. The sky was abroil with fast-moving clouds in every shade of grey and white, and a crisp wind darted through the schoolground carrying odd bits of trash as it went. (...) This was a time of year for possibilities..." (7). *Act well*

your part is the story of Keith Graff, a sixteen-year-old junior who recently transferred to Oak Grove High School. He quickly develops a crush on senior drama star Bran Davenport whose "dark eyebrows gave him a somewhat satanic look" (9). Bran fits the role of the tempting romance hero as described by Stella Cameron (1992): "a dark force, vaguely satanic, perhaps. He may be aloof, introspective, and sardonic" (p. 143).

Reminiscent of the John Donovan (1969)/Ursula Nordstrom (quoted in Marcus, 1998) "buddy-love" era (257-258) of gay adolescent literature, Keith struggles throughout the novel to work through his feelings and eventually acknowledges that "A person had to have friends, sure. But more than that, you needed someone to be a special friend" (46). For Keith, his attraction to Bran is a marker of sexual identity and he pushes against his developing feelings (and queerness), worrying that Bran was "becoming too close a friend too quickly" (22). Eventually the chills and shivers he gets when Bran touches him or calls him on the phone lead Keith to confess to himself that he loves Bran, but these moments of insight are often disrupted as Keith continues to self-police what he sees as deviant desires. Keith is tormented as he pines for Bran – holding (and eventually sleeping with) a borrowed shirt close to his face to "feel" Bran near him. He is consistently left unsure where he stands with his "friend" and routinely reprimands himself for his confusion while spending the bulk of the book miserable and isolated: he cannot tell Bran how he feels and (outside of his former "special friend" i.e. lover, Frank) he has no one in whom he can confide.

For much of the book, readers are left unsure of how Bran self-identifies: there are a number of scenes that suggest a romantic connection (and queer identity); moments where "Bran's manic personality had parted like a curtain to allow [Keith] a brief glimpse

of the young man who lay beneath" (39). It is only when Bran is intoxicated that he can confront (and, as Sakers writes, "confess" [120]) his desire. He drags Keith deep into the woods to share secrets and admits to being in love with another young man, but knows he cannot reveal his feelings because "If he knew how I feel, he'd treat it as a personal attack. Things could get pretty ugly" (115).

It seems that these fears are warranted, for in Sakers's "Best of All Possible Worlds" (5), gay characters are not only internally tormented, conflicted, and self-loathing; the larger world of the novel positions them as outcasts as well. Readers are told that "there were plenty of boys at Oak Grove who were in love with other boys. Nobody minded...it was a concern of only the two boys involved" (46), but we don't see these boys except in passing. In the world we are offered in Sakers's novel, heteronormativity reigns.

As Bran and Keith "come out" in their relationship, their friends are polarized (divided as to whether or not they should accept this homosexual couple) and their drama clique begins to fall apart. After student-director Debbie refuses to cast Bran and Keith in the spring play, Bran (ever the sensitive actor) melodramatically falls ill and when Keith attempts to console him, Bran reacts by rejecting him – he feels he must choose between his love and being accepted by his peers and society, and he chooses societal acceptance. Keith isolates himself both from Bran and the drama group so that the original clique can remain intact. The pair eventually reunites to spend a weekend alone and readers are given scenes of domestic bliss in which Keith and Bran do homework together, cook together, and have sex with one another. Keith wishes it could "be this way all the time" and Sakers seems to step directly into the novel to didactically tell readers, "It *could*. In

the future" (174, *italics in original*). But once they step out of isolation, Bran and Keith are again confronted with the homophobia of their circle of friends and their peers before they eventually decide to go to the school dance together and have a "showdown with all the people who disapprove of us" (185).

After the first page of the novel in which readers are told it is the "time of year for possibilities," the word "possibility" never reappears in Sakers's text. This is for good reason: despite being told that the novel shows us the "best of all possible worlds," Sakers's world is one in which gay characters are shown living with the fear that being "out" will lead to unhappiness, ridicule, and exile. Butler helps us see that the way Bran and Keith have been gendered as "male" stands as an oppositional force that results in this inner turmoil. Gender in this novel is something fixed, stable, and "natural" and queer characters fall outside of what is "normal." Beyond this, thinking back to the work of Deborah Britzman, it becomes clear that this novel (like *Rainbow boys*) allows for talk about gay people as long as the characters are kept at a safe distance from readers – thus, this "best of all possible worlds" reinforces the marginalized subject position of those who are queer.

Like many gay young adult novels, David Levithan's (2003) *Boy meets boy* is essentially a love story. Also like many gay young adult novels, the protagonist Paul has had a relationship with a closeted young man who rejects him; declaring he had been "tricked" (18) into being gay. However, unlike many other novels published to this point, that relationship is not the focus of *Boy meets boy* and readers are instead presented with Paul's relationship with Noah, a young man who recently transferred to his school. Refreshingly, Paul and Noah do not discover their sexual identity by leaping into bed

with one another. Although for Paul, it is a note written on his kindergarten report card that categorizes his identity and puts it into words, he makes clear that he has known he is attracted to boys for as long as he can remember – without questioning it.

Levithan periodically implies for readers that this world is different from the "real world." Within the first page of the novel, 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" (1). In many ways, the book has some elements that feel fantastical: in Paul's town, the Boy Scouts have been replaced by the Joy Scouts and P-Flag has a bigger draw than the PTA.

To his credit, Levithan is in many ways actively working against identity categories: there are characters in the novel who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning. When Paul is asked if Noah is "on the bride's side or on the groom's side," he replies that "I think people can sit wherever they want nowadays" (5). There are male characters who are attracted to those who identify as female as well as those who are transgender. When Paul's ex-boyfriend Kyle reveals he is attracted to both men and women, Paul identifies him as bisexual. "I hate that word," Kyle says, "It makes it sound like I'm divided" (85). Paul suggests calling him "ambisexual," "duosexual" before Kyle interrupts: "Do I really have to find a word for it? (...) Can't it just be what it is?" and Paul laments that "The world loves stupid labels" (85). Butler would celebrate this moment as both Kyle and Paul work to push themselves beyond normative labels toward Foucault's (1978) realm of "bodies and pleasure" (159) outside of named practices.

At the same time, even in the "best of all possible worlds" of Levithan's novel, there is still homophobia and intolerance. This is viewed most explicitly through the character of Tony, a young man living outside Paul's town who identifies as gay and whose parents are dogmatic in their belief that homosexuality is a sin. Paul says that, "I want a fair world. And in a fair world, Tony would shine" (p. 5) – indicating to readers that, unfortunately, this is still not a fair world.

What's more, Levithan's world isn't nearly as "utopian" as has been suggested. Even within Paul's town, we see that there is still homophobia. Paul notes that it took his parents "a couple of years" to accept his sexual identity (10) – implying that for a couple of years, they didn't accept it – and yet, we are regularly reminded that he is one of the lucky ones – characters tell him how easy he has things because "*you know who you are*" (147, italics in original). And Paul recognizes that "In this space, in this moment, we are who we want to be. I am lucky, because for me that doesn't take that much courage. But for others, it takes a world of bravery to make it to the clearing" (184).

When Paul runs for the position of third-grade class president, his opponent resorts to a number of anti-gay attacks, eventually resorting to the slogan "DONT VOTE FOR THE FAG" [*sic*] (11, emphases in originals). When he is in eighth grade, Paul is attacked by two high school wrestlers: they tackle him, call him insults – "queer, faggot, the usual" (13) and he realizes that even in this "best of all possible worlds," "I had to be careful" (13).

Although queerness is not always constructed as something bad, it is still constructed as something *different* and therefore in relationship to some "norm" (there cannot be a "different" subject position unless there is some "natural" position

somewhere: arguably, heterosexuality). Following Britzman's (1992) work, it seems that this moment is another example of the safe distancing of queer people; actually reinforcing heteronormative thinking and construction while attempting to disrupt it. Further, there *are* moments where being identified as queer is bad and being identified as gay (when you're not) is an insult.

It feels problematic (and heteronormative) that, when one book (of two-hundred plus gay young adult novels) does not center on acts of abuse and provides images of queer characters who are generally well-adjusted and belong as full members of society, it routinely gets called a "fantasy" (something that can only exist in a make-believe world where reality is suspended). In spite of Levithan's attempt to disrupt heteronormativity by showing the world through a different pair of eyes, heteronormativity is reinforced when the contents are uniformly dismissed through a classification as "fantasy." As Rogers (2002) reminds us, "It's possible to read magical realism as fantasy, just as it's possible to dismiss people who believe in witches as primitives or fools. But [magical realism] literature at its best invites the reader to compassionately experience the world as many of our fellow human beings see it" (n.p.). Renowned author of GLBTQ fiction Nancy Garden (2004) writes that *Boy meets boy* treats readers "to a glimpse of what life can and should be for GLBT kids, and what, in some enlightened parts of the country, it to a large extent already is" (33). Levithan clarifies that within the world offered in *Boy meets boy*, this town is not the "norm," yet the novel is not generally classified as "realistic fiction" (taking place in "our world" today). It is not even called "science fiction" (something that could possibly happen, but hasn't). It is too frequently called a "fantasy."

In spite of the above critiques, the novel does give a feeling of hope uncharacteristic of GLBTQ adolescent literature. When Tony stands up to his parents and refuses to isolate himself from his queer friends, we read that:

> This is what a small victory feels like: It feels like a little surprise and a lot of relief. It makes the past feel lighter and the future seem even lighter than that, if only for a moment. It feels like rightness winning. It feels like possibility. (158)

Unlike *Act well your part*, a novel that opens speaking of possibility and then fails to bring what is offered to fruition, it is not until the end of *Boy meets boy* – after readers have seen firsthand the world Levithan has constructed – that "possibility" is explicitly offered. Despite this town's shortcomings, Paul's is still a world in which he (as an openly gay young adult) can say, "I'm not used to being hated" (18).

Act well your part and *Boy meets boy* are novels with a clear mission: they hope to be interventions and serve (in some way) as tools for activism. Butler's and Britzman's theories help us see that Sakers's novel ultimately reinforces normative constructions of the world, and that Levithan's book is more effective at disrupting categories of "male," "female," "gay," "straight," and "queer." Unlike Sakers, Levithan effectively intervenes to offer readers of a range of identities and a number of "possibilities." These books may provide images of what the world can become in the future, but it feels important to remind ourselves that these are depictions that show young readers the "possibilities" of who they are already.

Unlike the *Rainbow boys* series, *Boy meets boy* is a novel that, through its very construction, forces readers who identify as heterosexual to step outside of the "world as

we know it" in ways that reposition them as outsiders, providing extraordinary opportunities to explore why this may feel uncomfortable or unjust – and subsequently raise questions as to what it may suggest about how the "real world" positions GLBTQ people. At the same time, for insiders, the novel shows a world in which GLBTQ people belong as full members of society. This, coupled with the book's range of depictions of GLBTQ young adult characters from various backgrounds and identities (without the implication that the pages contain "one GLBTQ person of every flavor"), suggests for readers that there is no one way (or even three ways) to be "queer and proud." Future work will need to be done to illuminate what conversations are being had around the content of these novels (and the larger genre of GLBTQ young adult literature) – "bad" examples can be powerful tools for teaching.

EXPANDING POSSIBILITY: LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The work in this dissertation is done with the hope that it will begin to raise questions about how all GLBTQ literature is used in classrooms at the elementary, secondary, and university levels; looking at both *what* books are being used as well as exploring *how* they are used – what conversations are happening around these books? The work being done in this dissertation is founded on the belief that we as teachers, critics, and scholars need to understand children's literature as *literature* and that books need to be used carefully and thoughtfully in classrooms. McGillis (1996) argues that as teachers and critics, we must "raise to consciousness our own presuppositions when we interpret literature. What is our theoretical position? Why do we read texts the way we do? At the very least, we should be aware of the possibilities for reading texts and of the

implications of choosing a particular methodology" (21). This is what young readers, teachers, and scholars can do as they read *Rainbow boys* – and all GLBTQ literature. By using theories of gender and sexuality, we can begin to more thoroughly investigate the content of the increasing body of young adult literature about gay males.

It will be important for the questions raised in this study to be explored across the larger genre of GLBTQ fiction as well. Do these presentations continue in much of the available gay adolescent literature or is this unique to the *Rainbow boys* series? In the reading I've done, my inclination is that these tropes and constructions are not unique to *Rainbow boys*, but a full analysis of available titles would help create a more vivid picture of the possibilities offered to young readers.

Ultimately, it is the *Rainbow boys* series' unrivaled popularity among homosexual and heterosexual teen and adult readers, critics, and scholars that makes it most problematic, but also the most promising. The *Rainbow boys* books are lauded because the content appears to be new, but as Kay Mussell (1984) argues of the structure of romance novels: "the shape of the narrative is predictable, even when the outline of a specific plot seems to represent an innovation" (37). It seems that readers refer to the novels as "honest" and "true" because these are stories with some heart, but they rely upon familiar tropes that have become recognizable as a result of their repeated portrayal across literature and media. This feels "realistic" because these are motifs we've seen again and again.

Regardless of what educators end up "doing" with these novels, the intent of this study is not to vilify Alex Sanchez or the *Rainbow boys* series because these books have provided many gay young adults with a representation when few others (if any) were

readily available to them. It's important to remember, however, that these aren't just depictions, these are possibilities. When these canonical texts are the only books depicting gay men used in classrooms and curriculum (or when only *Rainbow boys* [2001] is used), they imply for readers that the only ways to "be" a gay male are to be a S.U.D., a T.C.J., or a "Queer and Proud" target. This is troublesome when heterosexual readers may be looking to these texts to help build understanding. Further, Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins (2006) write that GLBTQ literature "must continue to come of age *as literature*" (166, italics in original) and the ultimate goal of this analysis is merely to second that call by suggesting that the time has come to move beyond accepting *any* representation and begin looking for depictions that reflect for gay adolescent readers the *possibilities* of who they can become – and who they are already.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A reader. (2003). A great book, That everyone should read!" Retrieved March 17, 2007 from, http://www.amazon.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

A reviewer. (2007). Excellent! Retrieved April 1, 2007 from http://www.bn.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Abate, M.A. (2007). From cold war lesbian pulp to contemporary young adult novels: Vin Packer's *Spring fire*, M.E. Kerr's *Deliver us from Evie*, and Marijane Meaker's fight against fifties homophobia. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 32* (3), 231-251.

Alana. (2004). Our lives: Media – alex sanchez. *Youth Resource: A Project of Advocates for Youth.* Retrieved April 28, 2007 from, http://alexsanchez.com/Youth%20resource%20Interview.htm.

Alderson, J.C., & Short, M. (1989). Reading literature. In M. Short (Ed.), *Reading, analysing, and teaching literature.* London: Longman.

Alexander, L. (1986). Future conditional. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 10* (4).

Allen, L. (2003). Girls want sex, boys want love: Resisting dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality. *Sexualities, 6* (2), 215-236.

Allen, V.G., Freeman, E.B., Lehman, B.A., & Scharer, P.L. (1995). *Amos and Boris*: A window on teachers' thinking about the use of literature in their classrooms. *Reading Teacher, 48*, 384-390.

Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy.* New York: The Monthly Review Press.

Althusser, L. (1986). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. B. Brewster (Trans.). In H. Adams, & L. Searle (Eds.), *Critical theory since 1965.* Tallahassee: University Press of Florida and Florida State University Press, 239-250.

Anderson, J.D. (1994). School climate for gay and lesbian students and staff members. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76* (2), 151-54.

Anonymous. (2003). Young adults' choices for 2003. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 47* (3), 211.

Anonymous. (2006). 2006: Best, notable, & recommended. *Teacher Librarian, 33* (4), 8-22.

Apol, L. (1998). "But what does this have to do with kids?": Literary theory in the children's literature classroom. *Journal of Children's Literature, 24* (2), 32-46.

Apol, L. (2000). Taming and ordeals: Depictions of female and male coming of age in the west in turn-of-century *Youth's companion* serials." *The Lion and the Unicorn, 24* (1), 61-80.

Barlow, L. (1992). The androgynous writer: Another view of point of view. In J.A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men and adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 45-52.

Barlow, L., & Krentz, J.A. (1992). Beneath the surface: The hidden codes of romance. In J.A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men and adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 15-30.

Barnard, I. (1994). Anti-homophobic pedagogy: Some suggestions for teachers. *Radical Teacher, 45*, 26-28.

Barrera, R.B., Liguori, O., & Salas, L. (1993). Ideas a literature can grow on: Key insights for enriching and expanding children's literature about the Mexican-American experience. In V.J. Harris (Ed.)., *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 203-241.

Bederman, G. (1995). *Manliness and civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bishop, R.S. (1997). Selecting literature for a multicultural curriculum. In V.J. Harris (Ed.), *Using multiethnic literature in the K-8 classroom*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1-19.

Blackburn, M.V., & Buckley, JF. Teaching queer-inclusive English language arts. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 49* (3), 202-213.

Blumenfeld, W.J. (1994). Adolescence, sexual orientation, & identity: An overview. Retrieved March 20, 2008, from <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Parade/9548/article_sexual_identity.html>

Blumenfeld, W.J. (1992). *Homophobia: How we all pay the price*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Britzman, D. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning*. New York: SUNY Press.

Boswell, John (1989). Revolutions, universals, and sexual categories. In M.B. Duberman, M. Vicinus, & G. Chauncey (Eds.), *Hidden from history: Reclaiming the gay & lesbian past*. New York: Dutton Books.

Brown, S. (1992). The risk of seduction and the seduction of risk. In J.A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men and adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 145-150.

Bullough, V., & Bullough, B. (1993). *Cross dressing, sex and gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Burger, T. (2005). Should be mandatory reading for gay teens and their parents. Retrieved March 17, 2007 from, http://www.amazon.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1995). Melancholy gender/refused identification. In M. Berger, B. Wallis, & S. Watson (Eds.), *Constructing masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 21-36.

Butler, J. (2004). Imitation and gender insubordination." In D. Carlin & J. DiGrazia (Eds.), *Queer cultures*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 354-371.

Cart, M. (1997). Honoring their stories, too. *The ALAN review*. 25.1 (Fall 1997).

Cart, M. (1999). Saying "no!" to stereotypes. *The Booklist,95* (19/20), 1810-1811.

Cart, M. (2002). Carte blanche: Next! *The Booklist, 99* (6), 587.

Cart, M. (2005). Rainbow road. *The Booklist, 102* (1), 113.

Cart, M., & Jenkins, C.A. (2006). *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969-2004*. Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, No. 18. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Cawelti, J.G. (1976). *Adventure, mystery, and romance: Formula stories as art and popular culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chambers, S.A. (2003). Telepistemology of the closet; Or, the queer politics of *Six feet under*. *Journal of American Culture, 26* (1), 24-41.

Chambers, S.A. (2005). Revising the closet: Reading sexuality in *Six feet under*. In K. Akass & J. McCabe (Eds.), *Reading* Six feet under. New York: IB Taurus, 174-190.

Christian-Smith, L.K. (1993). *Texts of desire: Essays on fiction, femininity and schooling*. Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Claire. (2003). Five stars for the rainbow boys! Retrieved March 17, 2007 from, http://www.amazon.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Clark, B.L. (2003). *Kiddie lit: The cultural construction of children's literature in America.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Clyde, L.A., & Lobban, M. (1994). *Out of the closet and into the classroom: Homosexuality in books for young people.* Port Melbourne: ALIA Thorpe.

Cohen, C.J. (2005). Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queen: The radical potential of queer politics? In E.P. Johnson & M.G. Henderson (Eds). *Black queer studies.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Connell, R.W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Connell, R.W. (1995/2005). *Masculinities.* 2nd Edition. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Creech, J. (1993). *Closet writing/Gay reading: The case of Melville's* Pierre. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Crismore, Avon. (1989). *Talking with readers: Metadiscourse as rhetorical act.* New York: Peter Lang.

Crisp, T. (2007). Review. *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969-2004. The Lion and the Unicorn, 31* (2), 200-204.

Crisp, T. (2008). The trouble with *Rainbow boys. Children's Literature in Education.* OnlineFirst (forthcoming in print edition).

Crisp, T. (2008b). Re-imagining "possibility": Gay adolescent literature beyond heteronormativity. Paper for the Children's Literature Association Conference, (ChLA), Normal, IL.

Cullinan, B., & Galda, L. (1994). *Literature and the child.* 3rd ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College.

Cummins, J. (2004) Understood Betsy, understood nation: Dorothy canfield fisher and Willa cather queer America. *Children's Literature 32*, 15-39.

Cuseo, A.A. (1994). *Gay characters in YA literature: A literary analysis, 1969-1992.* Landham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Daignault, J. (1992). Traces at work from different places. In W. Pinar & W. Reynolds (Eds.), *Understanding curriculum as phenomenological and deconstructed text.* New York: Teachers College Press, 195-216.

Davies, B. (1989). *Frogs, snails and feminist tales: Preschool children and gender.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Day, F.A. (2000). *Lesbian and gay voices: An annotated bibliography and guide to literature for children and young adults.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Dean, J. (2001). Sovo living: When you're young and gay." 02 November 2001. Southern Voice Online. Retrieved April 28, 2007 from, http://alexsanchez.com/Rainbow_Boys/Southern_Voice_Interview.htm.

Doan, L. (2001). *Fashioning sapphism: the origins of a modern English lesbian culture.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Dollimore, J. (1992). The dominant and the deviant: A violent dialectic. In W.R. Dynes & S. Donaldson (Eds.), *Homosexual themes in literary studies.* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 87-100.

Dollimore, J. (1991). *Sexual dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault.* New York: Clarendon Press.

Donovan, J. (1969). *I'll get there. It better be worth the trip.* New York: Harper & Row.

Downey, J. (2005). Braverman prize essay: Public library collection development issues regarding the information needs of GLBT patrons." *Progressive Librarian, 25* (Summer), 86.

Duttman, A.G. (1996). *At odds with AIDS: Thinking and talking about a virus.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Dynes, W.R., & Donaldson, S. (1992). *Homosexual themes in literary studies.* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Elbow, Peter. (1990). *What is English?* New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

Epstein, C.F. (1988). *Deceptive distinctions: Sex, gender and the social order.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Evans, B.S. (2001). Rainbow boys. *School Library Journal, 47* (10), 169.

Evarts, L. (2001). Rainbow boys. *VOYA, 24* (5), n.p.

Fetterley, J. (1978). *The resisting reader: A feminist approach to American fiction.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Fine, G.A. (1989). The dirty play of little boys. In M. Kimmel & M. Messner (Eds.), *Men's lives.* New York: Macmillan, 171-179.

Firminger, K.B. (2006). Is he boyfriend material?: Representation of males in teenage girls' magazines. *Men and Masculinities, 8* (3), 298-308.

Foucault, M. (1978/1990). *The history of sexuality, Volume I: Introduction.* R. Hurley (Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.

Franklin, C.V. (1984). *The changing definition of masculinity.* New York: Plenum Press.

Freud, S. (1905). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality.* New York: Avon Books.

Galda, L., & Cullinan, B.E. *Literature and the child.* 6th ed. New York: Thomason/Wadsworth, 2006.

Gallo, D. (2004). The boldest books. *English Journal, 94* (1), 126-131.

Garden, N. (2004). Brave new world. *Lambda Book Report, 12* (8/9), 32.

Garden, N. (1982). *Annie on my mind.* New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Gilbert, P. (1993). *Dolly* fictions: Teen romance down under. In L.K. Christian-Smith (Ed.), *Texts of desire: Essays on fiction, femininity and schooling.* Bristol, PA: Falmer Press, 69-86.

Gluckman, M. (1963). *Order and rebellion in tribal Africa.* London: Cohen & West.

Goodman, J. (1983). Out of the closet, but paying the price: Lesbian and gay characters in children's literature." *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, 14,* 13-15.

Guillory, J. (1993). *Cultural capital: The problem of literary canon formation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hall, S. (1980). Cultural studies: Two paradigms. *Media, Culture and Society, 2,* 57-72.

Halley, J. (2006). *Split decisions: How and why to take a break from feminism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Harris, V.J. (2003). The complexity of debates about Multicultural Literature and Cultural Authenticity." In D.L. Fox, & K.G. Short (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 116-134.

Hartinger, B. (2003). *Geography club*. New York: HarperTeen.

Hess, B. (1990). Beyond dichotomy: Drawing distinctions and embracing differences. *Sociological Forum, 5* (1), 75-93.

Hine, R. (1973). *The American west: An interpretive history*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Howe, J. (2005). *Totally joe*. New York: Ginee Seo Books/Aladdin.

Humphries, M. (1985). Gay machismo. In A. Metcalf and M. Humphries (Eds.), *The sexuality of men*. New York: Pluto, 79-92.

Hunt, Peter. (1999). Introduction: The world of children's literature studies. In P. Hunt (Ed.), *Understanding children's literature*. New York: Routledge.

Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Jackson, S. (1996). Sexual skirmishes and feminist factions: Twenty-five years of debate on women and sexuality.In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality: A reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Janell, a straight who could relate to this. (2006). I reccomend this book! Retrieved April 2, 2007 from, http://www.bn.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Jones, R.W., & De Cecco, J.P. (1982). The femininity and masculinity of partners in heterosexual and homosexual relationships. *Journal of Homosexuality, 8* (2), 37-44.

Just Grammy's Opinion. (2006). Honest and open. Retrieved April 2, 2007 from, http://www.bn.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Katz, J. (2005). Rainbow road. *School Library Journal, 51* (10), 172.

Khan, S., & Wachholz, P. (2006). Rough flight: Boys fleeing the feminine in young adult literature. *ALAN Review, 34* (1), 58-65.

Kidd, K.K. (1998). Introduction: Lesbian/gay literature for children and young adults. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 23*(3), 114-119.

Kimmel, M.S. (2004). Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity. In E. Disch (Ed.), *Reconstructing gender: A multicultural anthology*(3rd ed.). New York: McGraw/Hill, 103-109.

Kinsale, L. (1992). The androgynous reader: Point of view in the romance. In J.A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men and adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 31-44.

Kite, M.E., & Deaux, K. (1987). Gender belief systems: Homosexuality and the implicit inversion theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 11*, 83-96.

Kloberdanz, K. (2001). Recommended young adult reading. *Book* (September), 91.

Kooijman, J. (2005). They're here, they're queer, and straight America loves it. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 11*, 106-109.

Kosciw, J.G., & Diaz, E.M. (2006). *The 2005 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.

Krafft-Ebing, R. (1886/1965). *Psychopathia sexualis: A medico-forensic study*. H.E. Wedeck (Trans.). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Kronemeyer, R. (1980). *Overcoming homosexuality*. New York: Macmillan.

Latham, D. (2006). Melinda's closet: Trauma and the queer subtext of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 31* (4), 369-382.

Laumann, E.O. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality: Sexual practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Leal, L. (1995). Magical realism in Spanish American literature. In L.P. Zamora and W.B. Faris (Eds.), *Magical realism: Theory, history, community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 119-124.

Lees, S. (1993). *Sugar and spice: Sexuality and adolescent girls*. New York: Penguin.

Lehr, S.S. (2008). *Shattering the looking glass: Controversy in children's literature*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

Levithan, D. (2003). *Boy meets boy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House.

Levithan, D. (2004). Supporting gay teen literature: An advocate speaks out for representation on library shelves." *School Library Journal, 55* (10), 44-46.

Levithan, D. (2006). Author Profile. Retrieved April 2, 2007 from, http://www.teenreads.com/authors/au-levithan-david.asp.

Lilly, M. (1993). *Gay men's literature in the Twentieth century*. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press.

Lomine, L.L. (2006). The "coming-out" of homosexuality in French youth literature in the 1990s. *Modern and Contemporary France, 14* (2), 221-234.

Lorber, J. (1995). *Paradoxes of gender.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mahay, J., Laumann, E.O., & Michaels, S. (2005). Race, gender and class in sexual scripts. In J.K. Davidson Sr. & N.B. Moore (Eds). *Speaking of sexuality: Interdisciplinary readings.* Los Angeles: Roxbury, 144-158.

Malek, D.O. (1992). Mad, bad, and dangerous to know: The hero as challenge. In J.A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men and adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 73-80.

Mallan, K. (2004). (M)other love: Constructing queer families in *Girl walking backwards* and *Obsession. Children's Literature Association Quarterly 29* (4), 345-357.

Marcus, L.S. (2000). *Dear genius: The letters of Ursula Nordstrom.* New York: HarperTrophy.

May, Jill P. (1995). *Children's literature and critical theory.* New York: Oxford University Press.

McClean, M.M. (1997). Out of the closet and onto the bookshelves: Images of gays and lesbians in young adult literature. In T. Rogers & A.O. Soter (Eds.). *Reading across cultures: Teaching literature in a diverse society.* Urbana, IL: NCTE Press. 178-198.

McDowell, K. (2001). Rainbow boys. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, 55* (3), 91.

McGillis, R. (1996). *The nimble reader: Literary theory and children's literature.* New York: Twayne Publishers.

McGillis, R. (1998/9). The delights of impossibility: No children, no books, only theory. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 23* (4), 202-208.

McRuer, R. (1998). Reading and writing "immunity": Children and the anti-body. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 23* (3), 134-142.

Meyers, J. (1977). *Homosexuality and literature, 1890-1930.* London: The Athlone Press.

Mieli, M. (1977). *Homosexuality and liberation: Elements of a gay critique.* London: Gay Men's Press.

Mo, W., & Shen, W. (2003). Accuracy is not enough: The role of cultural values in authenticity of picture books. In D.L. Fox & K.G. Short (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 198-212.

Moi, T. (1985). *Sexual/textual politics: Feminist literary theory.* Routledge: New York.

Murphy, M. (2002). Alex sanchez interview – My so-gay life. *Dallas Voice Online.* Retrieved April 28, 2007 from, http://alexsanchez.com/Rainbow_Boys/Dallas_Voice_Interview.htm.

Murray, G.S. (1998). *American children's literature and the cultural construction of childhood.* Twayne's History of American Childhood Series. Series Editors J.M. Hawes, & N.R. Hiner. Toronto: Twayne Publishers.

Mussell, K. (1984). *Fantasy and reconciliation: Contemporary formulas of women's romance fiction.* Contributions in Women's Studies series, Number 46. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Newton, E. (1972). *Mother camp: Female impersonators in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nodelman, P. (2002). Making boys appear: The masculinity of children's fiction. In J. Stephens (Ed.), *Ways of being male: Representing masculinities in children's literature and film.* New York: Routledge, 1-15.

Nodelman, P., & Reimer, M. (2003). *The pleasures of children's literature.* (3rd ed.). New York: Allyn and Bacon.

Norton, J. (1999). Transchildren and the discipline of children's literature. *The Lion and the Unicorn, 23* (3), 415-436.

Our Mission. (n.p.). *Our mission.* Retrieved March 28, 2008, from http://www.educ.msu.edu/college/mission.htm.

Parsons, T. (1942). Age and sex in the social structure of the United States. *American Sociological Review, 7,* 604-616.

Parsons, T., & Bales, R.F. (1956). *Family socialization and interaction process.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Pattee, A. (2008). Sexual fantasy: The queer utopia of David Levithan's *Boy meets boy. Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 33* (2), 156-171.

Pugh, T., & Wallace, D.L. (2006). Heteronormative heroism and queering the school story in J.K. Rowling's *Harry potter* series. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 31* (3), 260-281.

Purves, A. (1985). That sunny dome: Those caves of ice. In C.R. Cooper (Ed.), *Researching response to literature and the teaching of literature: Points of departure*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 54-69.

Queen, M., Farrell, K., Gupta, N. (2005). Editors' introduction. In K Farrell, N. Gupta, and M. Queen (Eds.), *Interrupting heteronormativity: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender pedagogy and responsible teaching at Syracuse University*. Syracuse, NY: The Graduate School of Syracuse University.

Radway, J.A. (1984/1991). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Rand, E. (1995). *Barbie's queer accessories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reese, D. (1997). Native Americans in children's literature. In V.J. Harris (Ed.), *Using multiethnic literature in the K-8 classroom*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 155-192.

Rich, A. (1980) Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian experience. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 5: 631-660.

Rich, F. (2003, June 22). Gay kiss: Business as usual. *New York Times*, Section 2, 1,7.

Rinaldi, A. (1987). *The good side of my heart.* New York: Holiday House.

Robinson, B.E., Skeen, P., & Flake-Hobson, C. (1982). Sex role endorsement among homosexual men across the life span. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 11*, 355-359.

Rogers, B.H. (2002). What is magical realism, really? Retrieved June 23, 2008 from http://www.writing-world.com/sf/realism.shtml.

Rohrlick, P. (2003). Rainbow boys. *Kliatt.* Retrieved, April 7, 2007 from, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0PBX/is_3_37/ai_111305385.

Romance Writers of America. (2008). About the romance genre. Retrieved June 23, 200 from http://www.rwanational.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics.

Rosenblatt, L. (1938/1995). *Literature as exploration.* New York: Modern Language Association of America.

Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work.* Carbondale: Southern University Press.

Ross, A. (1989). *No respect: Intellectuals and popular culture.* New York: Routledge.

Sakers, D. (1986/2006). *Act well your part.* New York: Alyson Publications.

Salem, L.C. (2006). *Children's literature studies: Cases and discussions.* Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Sanchez, A. (2001). *Rainbow boys.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sanchez, A. (2003). *Rainbow high.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sanchez, A. (2005). Open eyes and change lives: Narrative sources addressing gay-straight themes." *English Journal, 94* (3), 46-49.

Sanchez, A. (2005). *Rainbow road.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sanchez, A. (2006). *Getting it.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sanchez, A. (2007). Alex sanchez – The bio. Retrieved April 28, 2007 from, http://www.alexsanchez.com/Alex_Sanchez_bio.htm.

Sanchez, A. (2007). *The god box.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sedgwick, E.K. (1985). *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Sedgwick, E.K. (1991). How to bring your kids up gay." *Social Text, 29,* 18-27.

Seidman, S. (1996). Introduction. In S. Seidman (Ed.), *Queer theory/sociology.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1-29.

Sendak, M. (1964) *Where the wild things are.* New York: Harper Collins.

Shavit, Z. (1986). *Poetics of children's literature.* Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Short, K.G., & Fox, D.L. (2003). The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature: Why the debates really matter. In D.L. Fox & K.G. Short (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 3-24.

Shugart, H.A. (2003). Reinventing privilege: The new (gay) man in contemporary popular media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 20,* 67-91.

Sims, R. (1982). *Shadow and substance: Afro-American experience in contemporary children's fiction.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Smith, C.L. (2005). Interview with young adult author alex sanchez. Retrieved April 28, 2007 from, http://alexsanchez.com/CLSmith%20Interview.htm.

Stephens, J. (2002). *Ways of being male: Representing masculinities in children's literature and film.* New York: Routledge.

Stevenson, D. (2004). Rainbow high. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, 57* (5), 206.

Stott, J.C. (1981). Literary criticism and teaching children. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 6* (1).

Sutton, R. (2004). Boy meets boy/Rainbow high. *The Horn Book Magazine, 80* (1), 83.

Sutton, R. (2005). Rainbow road. *The Horn Book Magazine, 81* (6), 725.

Talbot, B.A. (2006). Review of: *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969-2004. Children's Literature Association Quarterly 31* (4), 390-392.

Taxel, J. (2003). Multicultural literature and the politics of reaction. In D.L. Fox & K.G. Short (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 143-166.

Thompson, D. (2006). Prussic acid with a twist: *The well of loneliness*, M.E. kerr, and young adult readers. *Children's literature association quarterly, 31* (3), 282-99.

Thurston, C. (1987). *The romance revolution: Erotic novels for women and the quest for a new sexual identity.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Tribunella, E.L. (2002). Refusing the queer potential: John knowles's *A separate peace. Children's Literature, 30*, 81-95.

Tribunella, E.L. (2004). A boy and his dog: Canine companions and the proto-erotics of youth. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 29* (3), 152-171.

Trites, R.S. (1998). Queer discourse and the young adult novel: Repression and power in gay male adolescent literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 23* (3), 143-151.

Trites, R.S. (2000). *Disturbing the universe: Power and repression in adolescent literature.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Tyler, C.A. (1991). Boys will be girls: The politics of gay drag. In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*. New York: Routledge, 32-70.

USA Today. (2002). How did your favorite show rate? Retrieved June 23, 2008 from http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/2002/2002-05-28-year-end-chart.htm.

Vickery, M. (2002). The best book you can read. Retrieved March 17, 2007 from, http://www.amazon.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Wannamaker, A. (2006). Reading in the gaps and lacks: (De)constructing masculinity in Louis Sachar's *holes*. *Children's Literature in Education, 37* (1), 15-33.

Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a queer planet. *Social Text, 9* (4 [29]), 3-17.

Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. New York: Zone.

Watney, S. (1988). *Policing desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society, 1*, 125-151.

Westerfelhaus, R., &C. Lacroix. Seeing 'straight' through *Queer eye*: Exposing the strategic rhetoric of heteronormativity in a mediated ritual of gay rebellion. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 23* (5), 426-444.

Williams, R. (1976/1983). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fontana.

Wilson, D.E. (1984). The open library: YA books for gay teens. *English Journal, 73* (7), 60-63.

Yenika-Agbaw, V. (2003). Images of West Africa in children's books: Replacing old stereotypes with new ones? In D.L. Fox & K.G. Short (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 231-246.

Yessy Jess. (2005). Amazing. Retrieved March 17, 2007 from, http://www.amazon.com. Path: Rainbow Boys; Customer Reviews.

Zamora, L.P. (1995). Magical romance/Magical realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American fiction. In L.P. Zamora and W.B. Faris (Eds.), *Magical realism: Theory, history, community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 497-550.

Zamora, L.P., & Faris, W.B. (1995). Introduction: Daiquiri birds and flaubertian parrot(ie)s. In L.P. Zamora and W.B. Faris (Eds.), *Magical realism: Theory, history, community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1-14.

Zipes, J. (1981). Second thoughts on socialization through literature for children. *The Lion and the Unicorn, 5*, 19-32.