

# Discovering the Secrets of the Educational Universe: How the Inclusion of LGBTQA+ Literature Can Change the World

A Thesis by Kyle Walker

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## **Abstract**

This work considers the importance of the inclusion of LGBTQA+ young adult literature in the high school classroom. It explores the literary merit of one such novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, before reviewing the educational theory centered around social justice and equity in the classroom. It then reviews the literature on the impact of inclusive high school English Language Arts (ELA) curricula. It then covers a study done in a classroom at the university centered around the impact of media on students' lives and the ways in which the novel impacted their opinions and understandings about the LGBTQA+ and Latinx communities while also considering the insights gained from the instructor who taught the novel.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the young students across the state and the nation who, like me, yearned to see their lived experiences represented in the media they consumed in their high school English classes. I hope that this work may lay the foundation for that dream to someday soon become a reality.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to acknowledge Dr. Paige Horst for her unfailing support and guidance through the process of writing this thesis; thank you very much for all of the time you spent with me on this project. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Dan Woods and Dr. Moira Baker for the hard work of supporting and informing me during this wholly new process; thank you so much for helping me make this the best product possible. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the wonderful professors and classmates in the Radford University English Department that have helped me in uncounted ways through my undergraduate degree and, now, in my graduate studies. I am fully convinced that I could not have found a better and more respectable group to work with through the difficult times that these studies often bring. Thanks, and best wishes.

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## **Introduction**

All literature, from the smallest piece of microfiction to the longest series of novels, has the ability to change the minds and lives of its readers. High school students know this best when they are moved after reading Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." As noted by Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Heather A. Barkley, and Elizabeth Koehler in their article "Promoting Equity in Children's Literacy Instruction," "[Inclusive literature] also has the ability to raise students' social consciousness and engage them in discussions about racism" (Hughes-Hassell, et al. "Equity" para. 27). These works, along with many others, indicate a shift in high school coursework towards including works by women and people of color. However, not enough is done in making these works and others like them into a central facet of the education system in rural Southwest Virginia. Oftentimes, works by black authors are relegated to February during Black History Month, but they don't appear in any significant aspect outside of that. In schools that employ block scheduling, this means that students who don't have their English courses in the second semester of the year might miss these works altogether. In short, these seminal works by women and people of color are underrepresented or not represented at all even though they serve to create a more realistic view of the culture of America and the world with regards to literature.

One of the communities almost universally unrepresented in the high school English Language Arts (ELA) classroom is the LGBTQA+ community. Stories centered around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and asexual people don't seem to be in use in high school curricula, especially in Southwest Virginia. There are many possible factors (fear of sexual deviancy, censorship, puritanical mindsets of more religious communities, etc.), but, in practice, all the exclusion of LGBTQA+ literature does is serve to limit the scope and understanding of

the world these students are going to shortly enter. By omitting these works, schools are implicitly denying the existence of the community represented by them. Furthermore, for students in these classrooms who are members of the LGBTQA+ community (whether openly so or closeted), this omission shows them that they aren't as valued as their peers who *are* represented by the curriculum.

Just as reading the works of great female authors helps female students to better understand their lives and situations, reading LGBTQA+ works will help these queer students to become more knowledgeable about *their* lives and situations. This was also indicated by Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, and Koehler when they write, “At a time when children are expected to be making progress toward becoming self-regulating, independent readers, it appears that children of color are denied the very resources that might not only motivate them to read but also allow them to make text-to-self connections—a critical part of becoming proficient readers” (Hughes-Hassell et al., “Equity” para. 51). Just as reading the struggles of black Americans during the Civil Rights movement will help white students to understand the struggles of their black peers, reading LGBTQA+ works will help straight students to see the struggles of the LGBTQA+ community and, in turn, help them to better understand their queer peers. In all, reading these works, be they from women writers, black writers, or LGBTQA+ writers, leads to a more diverse curriculum and better school culture. As one study suggested, “The findings of this study indicate that teachers of dominant-culture students need to have their students read much more multicultural literature so that they can gain experience with alternative views of the world” (Dressell 759).

One of the simple facts of ELA education is that it can do a lot to increase empathy. When a white student reads of the emotions that Martin Luther King, Jr. was feeling as he wrote

from within a jail cell to his followers and fellow people of color, they may begin to see a narrative outside of their own life. They may understand the fears and injustices that black Americans dealt with at the time and, in most cases, are still dealing with to this day. That emotional impact could lead to students who are more sympathetic to and understanding of their peers from different sexes or races. It allows for more commonality between the struggles that those students face and the struggles experienced by majority students. Including LGBTQA+ literature can have this impact on straight students as well as (likely closeted) queer students.

When I was in eighth grade, I knew myself to be one of these students. I had known something was different about me from the time I was eleven years old, and it was a significantly hard three years between the realization and the understanding that I was bisexual. When I finally did understand what was different about me, taking in media that represented myself and people like me was very important to fully understanding and accepting myself. It has been a rallying cry for equal representation in media that “representation matters,” and, for me at least, that was true. Had I been given access to books that represented LGBTQA+ people in my normal high school English curricula, I would have come to this place of acceptance and understanding more readily.

As well as my own personal understanding and acceptance, the minds of my peers might have been influenced by that representation as well. In much the same way as reading *The Diary of a Young Girl* helps students to better understand the struggles and history of their Jewish peers, and “Letter from Birmingham Jail” helps them to better understand the struggles and history of their black peers, including LGBTQA+ literature in a broad English curriculum would likely help students to understand the history and struggles of their LGBTQA+ peers. In all, representing these works alongside more common works about white people brings about the



understanding that these people are no different on an emotional level than students in the majority, which fosters acceptance and, more importantly, understanding.

None of this is anecdotal. These works seem to help readers from both sides of the community (in this case, straight and queer readers) whether it helps some to understand their loved ones or helps queer readers to understand themselves. Due to this connection, there is clear evidence that these works should be included in the ELA classroom, and there is also evidence that doing so will increase the quality of life for students in the school community. However, which works can be helpful and which can be harmful is a hard line to follow.

While representation matters, not all representation is equal. A film like *Love, Simon* did wonders for representing LGBTQA+ teens to straight and queer teens alike by showing the LGBTQA+ characters within it as yearning for the same things that their straight and cisgender peers were like love and stability. However, a show like *Riverdale* showing a collection of LGBTQA+ characters as being promiscuous and unfaithful to their partners might reinforce negative stereotypes of LGBTQA+ people being unable to maintain a loving and equal partnership like their straight counterparts. In considering what kind of works to display in order to foster this understanding, the answer is simple: Good representation shows LGBTQA+ characters as the same as their straight and cisgender counterparts apart from their sexuality or gender identity whereas bad representation shows the ills of the homosexual “lifestyle” and sees the LGBTQA+ characters as wrong compared to their straight and cisgender counterparts. In addition to this, bad representation often shows the downfalls and issues of these characters as stemming from their sexuality or gender identity alone rather than societal ills or bad decisions outside of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Throughout the course of this work, I will look at one potential candidate for inclusion in the ELA classroom, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. I will be looking through the novel closely to see the moves that it makes that cause it to stand out amongst a litany of other worthy titles. Then I will consider the ways in which it falls in with literary and educational theory, making it worthwhile to include from a critical and theoretical framework. From there, I will review the literature that shows the importance of LGBTQA+ literature into the high school classroom and library. In addition to this, I will be studying the effects of reading the novel on a first-year college composition classroom. This is being done because they closely represent students in high school being less than a year removed from high school themselves. I will then take data collected from those students and consider it in conjunction with the theory and the content analysis to see why the novel did or did not have the impact it was theorized to have. Finally, I will also take a look at the experience of teaching the novel through interviews with the instructor who taught it to her students.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Design***

In order to measure the impact that these works would have, I asked an instructor of a class of freshman students in an English 111 course at Radford University to use this novel in the teaching of the course. The novel was to be taught as a part of the course, rather than extracurricular reading. Inclusion of the novel as regular coursework negated the need for an IRB.

Kelly Jason (a pseudonym) agreed to assist me in this study. Kelly was chosen due to her experience in teaching young adult literature and the centralizing theme of her classroom being justice and equity.

Ms. Jason is a licensed high school teacher and received her student teaching and field experience from Radford University. She moved from her Radford undergrad into the graduate program where she was chosen for the GTA program due to her prior experience, good performance reviews, and knowledge of the content required to teach English at the college level. These qualifications made her an excellent fit for this research study.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection for this project consisted, initially, of two questionnaires for students. The first was administered at the beginning of the semester before they began reading the novel. The second was administered after they completed the novel. The questions addressed how media has influenced their lives, their opinions on the openness and connectedness of the community in their school, and their thoughts and feelings about the Latinx and LGBTQA+ communities. With this questionnaire being administered both before and after the class read the

novel, I hoped to gauge the difference in opinion made by reading the novel as an academic assignment.

The responses to these questionnaires were then separated into distinct categories for measure. On the question of how media has influenced their lives, student responses were measured as to what kinds of media has most influenced them as well as pull quotes that show insights into these choices. On the question of school community, the responses were measured based on whether students spoke on their high school or college, and responses were further refined on a five-point scale as to whether their feelings were negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, or positive. Pull quotes were then taken from these responses to indicate special thoughts on the subject. On the question of students' feelings towards the Latinx community and the similar question about the LGBTQA+ community, the same five-point scale was used as well as pull quotes to provide deeper insights.

The research was then expanded to also include interviews and statements from Ms. Jason as she taught the novel and as her class discussed it. These interviews were conducted to gain more insight into the teaching of the book to bolster the section of the thesis that covers a potential lesson plan for educators in K-12 ELA classrooms that might be interested in teaching this novel or ones like it to their students. Additionally, these interviews gave us some insight into the week-to-week changes in attitude toward, understanding of, and discussion of the novel. From these interviews, we will be able to more closely follow the process from the instructor's perspective as it unfolded.

### ***Research Structure***

This research project consisted of three major sections: an in-depth analysis of the novel, a review of the educational theory that makes it a viable choice for the high school ELA classroom, and the effects of teaching LGBTQA+ literature in the high school.

In the educational theory section, I turned to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* in order to explore the structures of power in educational settings. Freire and hooks were chosen to gain an insight into how Sáenz's novel fits into teaching with regards to power for minority populations. These works were chosen as they are considered to be foundational in the realm of teaching with social justice in mind. I then considered how the philosophies around teaching within these books can fit in to the discussion of how to teach works representative of minority experiences at the high school level.

Finally, I considered the ways in which inclusive education that represents all groups rather than just the majority can change the climate and culture of a school. I found many resources from educational journals looking at the changes that inclusive education had on school communities in the United States and abroad. Much of that research has been shown in the introductory section above, and there is some to come throughout this thesis.

All of this evidence was then compiled to create a case for *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and works like it (i.e. works that represent a minority experience in a positive way) to be included in a wider ELA curriculum. This case includes the ways in which the novel succeeds as literature, how it succeeds in speaking to the experience of LGBTQA+ and Latinx people, how it fits into the critical world around it, how it might be taught using foundational educational theory, and how it can impact the community of a school that it is taught in.

In the following chapters, I will discuss the novel, the literary criticism and educational theory I am working with, and the literature on including LGBTQA+ literature in the high school and the impact it can have. I will also examine the data generated by the study participants and discuss my findings.

## **Content Analysis – *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe***

One of the biggest advantages to including works that are representative of minority groups in public school ELA curriculum is giving a voice to students who are members of those groups. Additionally, the inclusion of this literature gives insight to students who aren't members of those groups. The key to this being effective is the type of representation that a work gives. When looking at novels that handle the stories of minority groups, there is a tightrope act that must occur to determine whether the story represents those people accurately, fairly, and as fully human.

While there is some literature on the effects of teaching *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* in the ELA classroom (such as Ashley S. Boyd and Ruben Zecena's article "Analyzing the Text, Analyzing the World: Developing Students' Critical Literacies with *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*), the hardest work to do in including young adult literature into the high school classroom is to highlight the literary context of the work being proposed (which is outlined by S.J. Miller in his article "Text Complexity and 'Comparable Literary Merit' in Young Adult Literature"). This is one of the major tactics used by educators pushing for young adult inclusion in the high school ELA classroom. In this section, I will provide an in-depth look at the literary merits of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by outlining the various literary devices and consistent themes that Sáenz uses, as well as the effects they have on the reader. Additionally, I will consider the way that the content of the novel can impact LGBTQA+ students who read it.

I would like to start by offering some personal context. My experience, while universal to an extent, is not representative of the entirety of the bisexual community. For example, I have lived my entire life in rural Virginia. My experiences with micro and macro aggressions may be

more frequent due to my location than perhaps a student in New York or California might experience. By the same token, those micro and macro aggressions may be less frequent than someone who lives in Alabama or Texas might experience. However, those experiences with micro and macroaggressions themselves are universal within the LGBTQA+ community. Even in the most open and inclusive communities in the world, there will still be experiences of aggression towards people who are outside of what is considered “the norm.”

As well as the experience above, my experience is skewed by being able to “pass” as straight. This is not always the case either through common stereotypes like speech impediments or through choices like dying hair and painting nails. My straight passing was developed as a defense mechanism, but it is now a part of how I live my life. This is not always the case, though I have yet to find a member of the community who is unable to “pass” if they choose to.

All of this is to say that while the experience of being LGBTQA+ is not universal, just as the experience of being straight and/or cisgender is not universal, the themes within *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* are universal. Everyone who reads the book regardless of their background will experience or has experienced tension amongst their parents, friends that challenged their worldviews, coming to terms with some part of their life or personality, and the joys and pains of your first love. Works that represent minority communities well include aspects that are universal and, in the end, portray these individuals as no different from the majority apart from the color of their skin, where they are from, or who they love. In that respect, good representative works are not only helpful for the students who might be represented within them, but also for the students who fall outside of that community.

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz uses a number of repeating literary devices to create an understanding in his readers. Some of these



tactics are more overt such as the dream sequences throughout the novel. Others, however, are more covert and require either an understanding into the references being made or the commitment to research them to gain that understanding.

In all, I noted six consistent devices that Sáenz uses in his novel. They are (listed in the order in which I will be talking about them here): music, birds, visual and print art, dreams, water, and “secrets of the universe.” Sáenz uses these devices to push the plot forward, provide background information that is relevant to the characters, foreshadow upcoming events, and clue readers in on extremely plot relevant information as it appears.

### ***Music***

Beginning with music, Sáenz uses the references to music in the novel as a form of connection to his readers, as a way to foreshadow upcoming events, and to provide context to the lives and cultures of Mexican Americans in the 1980s.

Early in the novel, Sáenz mentions that Aristotle’s mother sometimes hums Patsy Cline’s song “Crazy” as she moves about the house. The first mention of being crazy in the novel comes from the reference to Patsy Cline’s song. This reference serves multiple purposes in the work that the novel is doing. Firstly, it sets up a running theme throughout the book of describing characters as crazy in many different ways. Secondly, it works to foreshadow the relationship between Aristotle and Dante.

### ***“Crazy” Boys***

Throughout the novel, Aristotle and Dante are described as “crazy” boys. This comes into play in many different ways. On some occasions, it is from them doing things that normal boys might do such as walk home in the rain and get soaked purposefully or throw their shoes around to beat them up. In other areas, it’s used in a more literal sense such as when Aristotle decides to

get revenge on the boys who beat Dante in an alley for kissing another boy. It is also used as an endearing exasperation whenever the boys have emotional issues that are then helped to a resolution by their parents.

The foreshadowing that Sáenz provides through the mention of the song “Crazy” comes from examining the lyrics more closely. In the song, Patsy Cline sings, “Crazy, / I’m crazy for feeling so lonely, / I’m crazy, / Crazy for feeling so blue” (Patsy Cline “Crazy”). These lyrics echo many different characters’ feelings throughout the novel. Specifically, Aristotle feels completely alone at the beginning of the story. He has resigned himself to another summer stuck with his parents and no friends to spend time with. This all begins to change when he meets Dante. Throughout the story, readers find that Aristotle is actually rather fond of his parents and that the feelings of loneliness he was experiencing at the beginning were him being “crazy.”

Further in the song, Cline sings, “Worry, / Why do I let myself worry? / Wondering, / What in the world did I do?” (Patsy Cline “Crazy”) These lines foreshadow Aristotle’s constant worry over his life and his love for Dante. He finds himself thinking obsessively about what people will think if they knew about his friendship with Dante as well as his act of saving Dante’s life. He worries about the closeness that he has with Dante that he has never had with anyone else. In addition to this, he worries about his friendship with Dante when Dante begins to write to Aristotle about his interest in kissing boys and his curiosity about masturbation. Cline’s wondering about her worry comes to foreshadow Aristotle’s acceptance of these things in the close of the book when Sáenz writes, “I wasn’t afraid anymore. I thought of that look on my mother’s face when I’d told her I was ashamed. I thought of that look of love and compassion that she wore as she looked at me... How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?” (359).

### *Una Poca de Gracia*

In addition to using the song “Crazy” to foreshadow future events and give insights into the characters, Sáenz also heavily uses the song “La Bamba” to much the same effect. In the beginning of the novel, Aristotle is listening to a local radio station as he wakes up. He is annoyed by the disc jockey’s corny jokes but then becomes interested as they play the Los Lobos cover of “La Bamba.” The song is a traditional Mexican folk song, often sung at Mexican weddings with the bride and groom dancing to accompany the music. The song is very important in Mexican American culture as it was the first major radio hit to be sung entirely in Spanish. It remains a landmark song in Mexican American culture today with Ritchie Valens, the singer of the first popular version, sometimes being lauded as a “Mexican Elvis.”

Using the English translation of the lyrics of the song, the incorporation of it into this novel shows its hand in foreshadowing future events. The song begins with the lines, “To dance the Bamba, / to dance the Bamba, / one needs a bit of grace. / A bit of grace for me, for you” (Ritchie Valens “La Bamba”). These lyrics, using the dance as a stand in for the discovery of one’s sexuality and beginning to explore those feelings, foreshadow the ways in which both Aristotle and Dante come to terms with their sexualities. In Dante’s case, his mother and father are very affectionate and supportive. It is through this kindness and love that Dante feels no worry in being who he is and exploring that side of himself.

In Aristotle’s case, he has a similar support system from his parents. However, he does not allow himself to feel that connection and, instead, keeps himself in isolation from it (remember “Crazy”). The “bit of grace” that Aristotle is given by his parents first comes in the form of allowing him to self-isolate from their compassion for him. By the end of the novel, however, they give him their grace in a more direct way as they tell him the truth about his Aunt

Ophelia and her romantic relationship with another woman. They force him to confront his feelings about Dante after Aristotle assaults a boy who beat up Dante for kissing his boyfriend. The scene in which Aristotle's parents bring him to terms with these feelings is tender, kind, and compassionate, echoing the "bit of grace" that it takes to dance the dance of coming to understand your sexuality.

*Holley, Valens, The Big Bopper, and the Day the Music Died*

Also connected to the theme of music and Ritchie Valens, Aristotle thinks regularly about the plane crash that killed Valens as well as early rockers Buddy Holly and "The Big Bopper." His first reflection on this crash comes in the opening pages of the novel when Sáenz writes, "For the music to be over so soon. For the music to be over when it had just begun. That was really sad" (6). This reflection relates to Aristotle's coming to terms with his own sexuality and his life changing completely as a result of it. It is likely no coincidence that Aristotle has this realization at age seventeen in the book, the same age Valens was when he died.

Additionally, the constant references to the plane crash and the sadness for the music being over play into the story of Aristotle's older brother Bernardo. Bernardo was convicted and sentenced to prison time for the murder of a transvestite (the term used in the novel's text) prostitute that he solicited when he was only fifteen. Bernardo became aggressive upon learning that the woman he thought he was with was actually a man and beat him to death with his bare hands. In cutting a life short at such a young age, Bernardo is similarly on the plane that Aristotle can't stop thinking about crashing.

The plane crash that killed Holly and Valens relates to another consistent image throughout the novel, that of birds (specifically sparrows) falling through the sky. This image is so consistent and important to the plot of the book that one of the sections is titled "Sparrows

Falling from the Sky.” Sáenz uses birds and sparrows to symbolize freedom and innocence in the novel, as well as to indicate that there are plot important events upcoming or being foreshadowed.

### ***Birds, Boys, and the Freedom of Growing Up***

According to *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* by Michael Ferber, “Birds... form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live...” (26). Ferber goes on to relate birds to humans in their building of homes, nurturing of families, and spoken communication. Additionally, Ferber notes, “The killing of a bird might be a great sin... or it might symbolize the death of a person...” (27). All of these symbols play out in the novel, as well as birds being a reference for freedom and independence.

In the novel, sparrows first arrive in the form of a dead sparrow that Dante chastises some boys for killing with their air rifle. Dante’s fierce determination to get retribution for the murdered bird echoes Ferber’s note that the killing of a bird is a great sin. The scene also takes place during the end of the summer which means—for school-aged children like Aristotle and Dante—the end of their relative freedom in the wake of a new school year. With birds, and sparrows in particular, representing freedom, the death of this sparrow echoes the boys’ own loss of freedom. After this scene, the boys bury the sparrow and Aristotle comforts Dante who is crying over the bird’s death. This emotional vulnerability is unusual for Aristotle, and it leads to the first dream sequence in the novel.

The day after the sparrow is buried, Aristotle wakes up with a fever. This fever leads to a dream in which Aristotle sees sparrows falling from the sky, “like rain and they were hitting me as they fell and I had their blood all over me and I couldn’t find a place to protect myself. Their

beaks were breaking my skin like arrows” (Sáenz 60). In this instance, Sáenz is using the sparrows to indicate the freedom that they had in the earlier sequence. In the context of sparrows raining from the sky in a way that seems to attack Aristotle, Sáenz is showing how Aristotle is afraid of the true freedom that he is looking for. The freedom is an enemy to him (since it means giving into his feelings for Dante), and, as such, it attacks him in a very violent way.

The next two images of sparrows in the novel both deal with Aristotle smothering these feelings for Dante. In the first, another dream, Aristotle is falling asleep again after awakening from a particularly emotionally impactful dream about Dante. In the next dream, Aristotle says, “The sparrows were falling from the sky. And it was me who was killing them” (Sáenz 78). In this instance, given the context of the previous dream about Dante and Aristotle being the one killing the sparrows, Sáenz is showing that Aristotle is willingly killing his feelings of closeness towards Dante.

However, he is unable to kill them completely, as, the next time that sparrows are mentioned, Aristotle is thinking about them while Dante reads him poetry. In the moment that Dante is reading to Aristotle (while Aristotle is still laid up in bed due to his illness), Aristotle begins to feel the feelings of closeness to Dante that he has been trying to quell. He also begins to reminisce about his brother, Bernardo. Sáenz writes, “As I listened to Dante’s voice, I wondered what my brother would sound like. I wondered if he’d ever read a poem. My mind was full and crowded—falling sparrows, my brother’s ghost, and Dante’s voice” (79). In this moment, it becomes clear that the feelings that Aristotle has for Dante are still present and are beginning to overtake his thoughts as they begin to take attention away from Bernardo who has monopolized Aristotle’s reminiscences to this point.

In the next instance of birds in the novel, Aristotle and Dante see a bird struggling to fly in the street. Dante decides to help it and is nearly hit by a car, but he is pushed out of the way at the last second by Aristotle who is hit by the car instead. In a moment after the impact, Sáenz writes, “I remember thinking it was all a dream. All of it. It was just another bad dream. I kept thinking that the world was ending. I thought about the sparrows falling from the sky” (107). In this moment, when Aristotle thinks that Dante is about to die, Sáenz brings the image of the sparrows falling from the sky back. Here, it is paired with Aristotle thinking that the world is ending. In this moment, it becomes apparent to readers that the love Aristotle feels for Dante is not only there but true as well. This moment of fear is equated with all of Aristotle’s bad dreams and the sparrows falling from the sky.

The final instance of birds in the novel comes as Aristotle is reflecting on the boys who beat Dante for kissing his boyfriend. Aristotle is overcome with anger towards them and love for Dante (although here written as love for a friend). Sáenz writes, “I wanted to tell them that I never knew that people like Dante existed in the world, people who looked at the stars, and knew the mysteries of water, and knew enough to know that birds belonged to the heavens and weren’t meant to be shot down from their graceful flights by mean and stupid boys” (308). In this moment, Sáenz is doing a lot of work with his writing. The reflection that Aristotle is having, in context, seems to be that for a friend. Aristotle’s reflection is thrown into a different light later, however, with the realization of his love for Dante being brought out of him by his parents. In the moment, as well, readers see the ways in which Dante has changed Aristotle. His reflections on Dante throughout the novel have almost always been interest and then annoyance to this point. This is the first moment in which he thinks of Dante as someone he loves. Finally, the sparrow imagery, used to this point to symbolize moments of deep emotional impact, makes an

appearance to stand in for Dante himself. With birds symbolizing freedom, Dante is finally free in being himself. His beating for that freedom is also brought up in the comment about not deserving to be shot by stupid boys (i.e. the boys who beat Dante). This is the moment when readers know, even if Aristotle doesn't, that the boys are more than friends on some level.

### ***A World in Art***

One of the ways that Sáenz brings Mexican American culture into his novel as well as foreshadowing about his characters and the novel's themes and plot is through the introduction of art. Sáenz uses the art in his novel as a way to give readers an insight into the world and the characters while also bringing those in the know further into the story.

The first instance of art being referenced in the novel is the first time that Aristotle goes to Dante's house. Dante's father, Sam, makes Dante clean his room before the two boys can spend any time together. Dante gives Aristotle a book of poems by William Carlos Williams to read so he won't get bored. Of the book and the poems, Sáenz writes, "And I actually understood some of it. Not all of it—but some. And I didn't hate it. That surprised me. It was interesting, not stupid of willy or sappy or overly intellectual—not any of those things that I thought poetry was. Some poems were easier than others... I got to thinking that poems were like people. Some people you got right off the bat. Some people you just didn't get—and never would get" (29). In this scene, Sáenz is using the poems as a way for Aristotle to begin to contextualize the world around him in a different way. In having this be the case, Sáenz is telling readers that the art is a way to further contextualize the story just as Aristotle is using it to better understand his life and his world.

The use of art to further contextualize the novel is driven again by Sáenz in a scene when Dante comes to Aristotle's house for the first time. He brings a book of Mexican artists to



Aristotle's father. Sáenz writes, "And because of that book, I learned something new about my father. He'd studied art before he joined the Marines. That seemed not to fit with the picture I had of my father. But I liked the idea" (36). In this moment, the art is a way in which Aristotle learns more about his father and his father's life and world. By having these two instances of art being used to understand life and the world so close to one another, Sáenz is showing the importance of art to understanding his novel.

In a later scene, Dante has been sketching Aristotle and allows him to look at the work that has been done. Upon seeing the picture, Sáenz has Aristotle reflect, "There was something sad and solitary about the sketch and I wondered if that's the way he saw the world or if that's the way he saw *my* world. I stared at the sketch for a long time. It scared me. Because there was something true about it" (74). Here, the sketch is allowing Aristotle to see the way in which Dante sees. He is able to understand more about Dante in that moment, as are the readers. As well as this, the sketch allows for Aristotle to understand more about his own life. He sees, perhaps for the first time, that he is lonely and isolated whether that is by chance or his own design.

In a later scene at a doctor's office, it is mentioned in passing that Aristotle's mother is reading the novel *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya. This is a Hispanic coming-of-age novel that deals heavily with themes of first love, loss, violence, and sexual awakening. Its inclusion as even a passing mention in this novel shows readers a better understanding of Aristotle's mother. Her reading this novel will eventually set her up to understand and help her son through his own coming-of-age and sexual awakening. In addition, Sáenz is using the mention of *Bless Me, Ultima* in his own novel to foreshadow some of the themes and events that will play out over the next two hundred pages.

The final instance of art that I will mention here comes in a letter that Dante writes to Aristotle when he is in Chicago. Sáenz writes, “There is a famous painting, *Nighthawks*, by Edward Hopper. I am in love with that painting... The painting reminds me of you. It breaks my heart... Did I ever tell you what my favorite painting is? It’s *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault” (185). These two paintings give a lot of insight into the characters of Aristotle and Dante from Dante’s point of view. In the painting *Nighthawks*, a group of patrons sit in a café late at night. The painting is nearly featureless other than the lighted windows and the patrons within. Notably, there is no door leading into the café from the street, and the server behind the bar seems to be trapped within as there doesn’t appear to be a break in the countertop. These few features allow readers to better understand Dante’s perception of Aristotle. In *The Raft of the Medusa*, there is a lot to be understood about Dante from Dante’s perspective. In the painting, a group of shipwrecked sailors is barely clothed and hanging on to life in the hope of being rescued by another ship. The men are clinging to one another as the waves rock the raft wildly. In this instance, readers understand a bit more about Dante’s sexuality, as well as that he sees himself (perhaps) as one of the sailors who are clinging to one another and to hope in a very turbulent time.

### ***Dreams and Their Meanings***

Another tactic that Sáenz uses to foreshadow and give deeper insights into his characters (particularly Aristotle) comes in the form of dream sequences. Throughout the novel, there are many dream sequences, and all of them come at times when Aristotle is experiencing great emotional turmoil or changes in mood and personality. Due to the times when Sáenz chooses to use these dreams, it is apparent to readers that they are showing more than the simple content of the dreams themselves.

Sáenz shows readers around the halfway point of the novel how important the dreams are to understanding the characters. He writes, “I have this idea that the reason we have dreams is that we’re thinking about things that we don’t know we’re thinking about—and those things, well, they sneak out of us in our dreams” (Sáenz 178). Here, Aristotle is reflecting on the way in which dreams function for him. However, in the larger context of the novel, Sáenz is showing the importance that the dreams to this point (and following this point) play into the themes and characters of the novel.

The first dream sequence in the novel comes during Aristotle’s illness during the first summer. In this sequence (mentioned above) sparrows are falling from the sky and piercing Aristotle’s body. As well as this, Buddy Holly’s plane is crashing, and Dante is holding Ritchie Valens’ dead body. In this, readers are able to see Aristotle’s struggle with the freedom that is coming to him in the realization of his love for and friendship with Dante in the form of the sparrows. Additionally, he is realizing that his life is changing out of his control as with the crash that killed Holly and Valens.

In a dream that follows immediately after this one, Aristotle is searching for Dante who is lost. He then begins to search for his father who is also lost to him. This instance shows the emotional rift that exists between Aristotle and Dante and Aristotle and his father. As well as this, the dream shows the ways in which Aristotle is trying to better understand his friend and his father, and the ways that he fears he may never understand them. Given the context of the birds pelting him in the previous dream and the content of the rest of the novel, it is also possible that Aristotle understands his own feelings towards Dante and his sexuality at this point, and his searching for them could represent the fear he has of losing either of them due to his feelings for Dante.

In the next dream sequence, Sáenz shows the cultural gap between Aristotle and Dante. He writes, “I was standing in the same place where my father had been standing, on the Juárez side, and Dante was standing across from me... And then he said something to me in English and I couldn’t understand him. And I said something to him in Spanish, and he couldn’t understand me” (Sáenz 77). The lack of communication between the two of them attempting to speak two different languages not only represents the emotional distance and differences in personality between the two boys, but it also represents the cultural differences between them. Dante is constantly obsessed with the fact that he doesn’t feel like a Mexican, but he sees Aristotle as being a truer Mexican than himself. The location of the two boys (Aristotle in Mexico and Dante in Texas) also represents this cultural distance as well.

In a dream soon after Aristotle is hit by the car, he imagines that his doctor will be able to heal all of the issues in his life and save him. Sáenz writes, “His hands. In my dream, he healed Dante’s bird and set it free into the summer sky. It was a nice dream. I didn’t have those very often” (119). In this dream, readers are able to see the way that Aristotle feels his whole life could be changed. If the doctor could only save Dante’s bird (a symbol of freedom) then everything might be okay. In reality, Dante’s bird is being saved as he comes to terms with his own sexuality. It is Aristotle that needs to be set free.

In the next dream, Aristotle is riding through town in his truck with the girl he is pursuing. His love for her causes him to hurt someone else. Sáenz writes, “I looked over and smiled at her. I didn’t see him, Dante, standing in the middle of the road. I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop” (169). In this moment, Aristotle seems to be wrestling with his sexuality as he aggressively pursues Ileana. In the dream, this pursuit leads to the death of Dante. In this way, Sáenz is showing how Aristotle’s refusal to accept himself and his feelings will lead to the end of

his friendship with Dante—an event which readers will come to see play out over the rest of the book before it is pulled back in the last moment.

Towards the end of the novel, after a trip to Tucson to clear out his late aunt Ophelia's house, Aristotle has another dream. In this instance, Sáenz uses the dream to signify the differences Aristotle is experiencing in his life. His parents have opened up to him somewhat about what happened with his brother and given him some insight into the parts of his life he has wanted to know about and been obsessing over throughout the novel. In his dream, this is reflected as Sáenz writes, "I dreamed my father and my brother and I were all having a cigarette. We were in the backyard. My mother and Dante were at the door. Watching" (297). The dream here reflects more of an inclusive life than Aristotle has experienced to this point, and it shows the ways in which he feels like he is suddenly able to be himself. Also, notably, this is the first dream in which Dante is in a dream with other members of Aristotle's family. This shows the acceptance that Aristotle is beginning to have about his feelings for and inclusion of Dante into his life.

The final dream in the novel comes soon thereafter. Aristotle dreams that he is kissing someone. He has had this dream before, but he has never been able to put a face to the person he is kissing. Upon waking, Aristotle feels like he wants to masturbate. However, his next thought goes immediately to Dante. Sáenz writes, "When I woke, I wanted to touch myself. 'Shaking hands with your best friend.' That was Dante's euphemism. He always smiled when he said that" (300). In having this thought of self-pleasure paired with a thought of Dante and how he talks about masturbation, Sáenz is finally putting the thoughts together in Aristotle's mind. However, Aristotle is unable to accept these feelings for himself as he takes a cold shower instead of

masturbating. It is the final notion to readers before Aristotle's parents bring his feelings for Dante to the forefront that the connection might be more romantic than friendly.

### *The Waters of the World*

The most consistent form of symbolism in the novel comes in the mentions of water in many different forms. The novel's opening sequences see Aristotle meeting Dante at a local pool where Dante then begins to teach Aristotle to swim. When Aristotle is floating in the pool, it is one of the few times in which he is described as having a good time. Whether the lack of good times that follow this sequence are due to circumstances outside of his control or his own internal issues while coming to terms with his sexuality is unclear. However, Dante's feelings towards water and the association between Aristotle's good times and Dante's emotions link the reader to understanding water to be a sign of life, positivity, and change.

Writing on Dante's view of water, Sáenz has this to say: "Water was something he loved, something he respected. He understood its beauty and its dangers. He talked about swimming as if it were a way of life" (19). Here, Sáenz is showing that Dante sees the water in which he swims as a good force that can bring some danger with it. This theme of water representing good and bad continues throughout the novel.

In the next instance of water in the text, Dante and Aristotle are burying the bird that the boys from the neighborhood killed. Sáenz writes, "'Hey,' I whispered, 'I'll see you tomorrow morning.' 'We'll go swimming,' he said. 'Yeah, we'll go swimming.' There was a tear running down his cheek. It seemed like a river in the light of the setting sun" (55). The plan of swimming represents here a change in Dante. He is the one that brings the idea up, and he has associated this "way of life" with the change that is occurring within him in the wake of burying the bird. The water here represents the good that might take away the sting of the event, but it also

represents the change that Dante is going through. Its association with these two emotions further cements the readers' association with water as a vehicle of change and of positive emotion for Dante. Furthermore, Aristotle's choice to describe Dante's tear as a river is intentional and meant to show again the water as a force of change and negative emotion for Aristotle.

In the next section, Sáenz, in one of Aristotle's dream sequences during his fever from the flu, talks of birds falling from the sky like the rain. In this moment, the association between the birds and the rain is indicative of the previous day's events—burying the sparrow while it rained—that led to Aristotle becoming sick. More than this, though, it also associates the rain with the freedom, innocence, and foreshadowed change that will play throughout the novel. In another dream sequence that follows soon after this, Aristotle is searching for Dante and his father during a thunderstorm. This search along with the image of rain relates to the negative emotions and the changes that the water has come to represent.

After Aristotle is able to leave the house after his illness, he and Dante meet at the swimming pool. Aristotle is unable to swim as he is not completely healed from his illness and, instead, watches Dante swim. As they are walking back to Dante's house, rain begins to pour on them. They choose to walk home rather than run so as to get as wet as possible. These moments at the pool and in the rain come to reflect the change that occurred in Aristotle during his illness. Dante comes to care for Aristotle during his bedrest and the illness is ended with two instances of water not as the cure but the sign of healing. The water also represents the emotional changes that Aristotle is beginning to feel for Dante as he starts to love him (unbeknownst to himself) and also the negative emotions around that love that Aristotle will wrestle with for the remainder of the novel.

In a dream sequence following Aristotle pushing Dante out of the way of the speeding car (driving in the rain), Aristotle reflects on Dante's guilt for the injuries Aristotle is subjected to during the act of saving his life. Sáenz writes, "I remember Dante squeezing my hand. And I remember thinking, *Forgive you? For what, Dante? What is there to forgive?* I don't know why, but there was rain in my dreams. Dante and I were barefoot. The rain wouldn't stop. And I was afraid" (117). In this scene, Aristotle's feelings for Dante are made more clear. As before, Sáenz then equates these feelings with the rain in Aristotle's dreams to indicate the change and the negative feelings that Aristotle has about his love for Dante. This connection is driven home with Sáenz describing Aristotle as being afraid of these dreams and these emotions.

In the next instance of the rain, Aristotle and his parents are sitting on the porch as it rains just after Dante and his parents have left for their move to Chicago. Aristotle is reflecting on his feelings for Dante, and his mother interrupts these thoughts with a statement that causes him to begin to understand his feelings for Dante. Sáenz writes, "I kept seeing Dante standing in the rain holding a bird with a broken wing. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or not. What if he'd lost his smile? I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry. 'I love the rain,' my mother whispered. *I love it too. I love it too.* I felt like I was the saddest boy in the universe" (154). The rain and Aristotle's reflections on Dante cement the connection between Dante and water for him. By then having the mother state her love for the rain and Aristotle emphatically thinking about his agreement, Sáenz is showing that the love here is not for the rain but, rather, for Dante. This is shown through Aristotle's connection between Dante and water that occurs just before this. The negative feelings that Aristotle has about his love for Dante comes at the end of the narration when Aristotle mentions feeling sad. In this instance, Sáenz is connecting Dante and the water,



Aristotle's love for Dante as represented by his love for the rain, and Aristotle's negative emotions (also attached to the rain in previous sections) about that love.

In one of the final mentions of water and rain in the novel, Aristotle is becoming angry at forgetting beer for his and Dante's excursion into the desert together. Sáenz writes, "I don't know why I was yelling. The yelling turned into sobs. I fell into Dante's arms and cried. He held me and didn't say a word... Sometimes pain was like a storm that came out of nowhere. The clearest summer morning could end in a downpour" (261). Here, Aristotle's negative emotions have finally been fully linked to the rain. In his own reflections, he brings up the rain as a reaction to the negative emotions. However, the association between the two is beginning to be undermined through Dante's comforting of Aristotle. It is beginning to be broken down now that Dante is back and the two are able to resume their friendship. The connection remains due to the earlier link between Aristotle's love for Dante and the negative emotions that come with it.

Soon after, in another excursion to the desert, the two boys are caught in a summer storm. Dante chooses to strip off his clothes and run around the truck and convinces Aristotle to join him. Sáenz writes,

We ran around the truck, naked and laughing, the rain beating against our bodies. Around and around the truck, we ran. Until we were both tired and breathless. We sat inside the truck, laughing, trying to catch our breaths. And then the rain stopped... I opened the door to the truck and stepped out into the damp and windy night air. I stretched my arms out toward the sky. And closed my eyes. Dante was standing next to me. I could feel his breath. I don't know what I would have done if he had touched me. But he didn't. (273)

Aristotle's feelings around the rain have, here, fully been replaced from the negative emotions of his love for Dante with the positive emotions of the freedom he has been seeking during the

novel. He is able to give in fully to his own wants and desires. From this point, he does not seem to have negative emotions towards Dante or his feelings for Dante, but he is still afraid of becoming as fully free as he is running naked through the rain with Dante. The association with water returns to the positive and Dante. This association is fully realized in the final instance of water in the novel.

In a final trip into the desert, Aristotle makes his feelings to Dante known. He and Dante kiss tentatively and then begin to kiss more passionately. This release and submission to his feelings is the freedom that Aristotle has been seeking over the course of the novel. Dante then expresses his wish that it was raining. Sáenz writes, “We laughed and talked and looked up at the stars. ‘I wish it was raining,’ he said. ‘I don’t need the rain,’ I said. ‘I need you’” (358). In these closing moments, Aristotle has accepted the love he feels for Dante and, because of this, no longer holds the negative associations with rain and water. He does, however, better understand the love he once felt for the water as being love for Dante which drives his final words in the book. Readers come to understand these associations, images, fears, and freedoms in this moment due to the work that Sáenz has done with water throughout the novel.

### ***The Secrets of the Universe***

The final literary device that Sáenz uses comes in Aristotle’s reflections on the secrets of the universe. Throughout the text, Aristotle is hoping to discover the answers to the questions these secrets bring up in his mind. The use of these secrets and the reflections about them gives readers their clearest glimpse into Aristotle, his thoughts, and his emotions as he comes to terms with the secrets his family has been keeping, his personal understanding of who he is and what he stands for, and his burgeoning sexuality.

The first secret that Aristotle brings up in the text comes after he reflects on his mother humming Patsy Cline's "Crazy." He says that they sometimes smile at each other when she does this and he catches her, and reflects that they seem to be sharing a secret between one another. Sáenz then goes on to write that Aristotle is trying to figure out his mother and the relationship between the two of them. In the opening moments and the attempt on Aristotle's part to understand his mother better, Sáenz links the "secrets of the universe" to key moments of introspection in Aristotle's life. He also links it to things that need to be understood and eventually will come to be understood over the course of the novel. By linking these secrets to important moments of character progression for Aristotle, Sáenz gives more eagle-eyed readers their first insight into the importance of the device he is using.

The second instance of a secret comes when Aristotle and Dante first meet. They are at the pool and have just shared their names with one another. Sáenz writes, "We laughed again. We couldn't stop. I wondered what it was we were laughing about. Was it just our names? Were we laughing because we were relieved? Were we happy? Laughter was another one of life's mysteries" (18). Through the initial link to Aristotle's mother and the importance of understanding that relationship, this secret indicates to readers that Sáenz will give a lot of weight to the relationship between Aristotle and Dante (if the title of the book was not hint enough) without explicitly stating that it is an important detail to keep in mind. As well as this, Sáenz is reinforcing that the secrets of the universe are being encountered in the most important of places in Aristotle's life.

The importance of this literary device is further cemented in the next instance of Aristotle coming up against mysteries and secrets of the universe. When Dante first comes to Aristotle's house, he comes with a gift for Aristotle's father. It is a book of Mexican art that Dante's father

has sent along with him to give to the Mendozas. As Aristotle's father looks at it later, Aristotle learns that his father studied art before going into the Vietnam War. Sáenz writes, "I guess I didn't believe he wanted me to know who he was. So I just collected clues. Watching my father read that book was another clue in my collection. Some day all the clues would come together. And I would solve the mystery of my father" (37). By reflecting on his relationship with his father and his interest in better understanding that relationship, Aristotle shows the importance of these reflections. Sáenz has his main character drive the importance of these mysteries and secrets in his reflections. The importance of the secrets is cemented, finally and completely, less than ten pages later.

In a scene in which Aristotle has gone with Dante and his parents into the desert to stargaze and look through Dante's telescope, Aristotle looks at the stars through the telescope and begins to consider them more closely than he has before. Sáenz writes, "Something happened inside me as I looked out into the vast universe. Through that telescope, the world was closer and larger than I'd ever imagined. And it was all so beautiful and overwhelming and—I don't know—it made me aware that there was something inside of me that mattered" (42). In this reflection, Aristotle begins to understand the importance that he holds within himself where he had been unable or unwilling to see it before. Importantly, this realization is catalyzed by Dante wanting to show Aristotle the stars through the telescope.

More importantly, however, immediately following his revelation, Aristotle understands that Dante sees the world in much the same way as he now is. Sáenz writes, "As Dante was watching me search the sky through the lens of a telescope, he whispered, 'Someday, I'm going to discover all the secrets of the universe.' That made me smile. 'What are you going to do with all those secrets, Dante?' 'I'll know what to do with them,' he said. 'Maybe change the world.' I

believed him” (42-43). In this moment, Sáenz is linking Aristotle and Dante together in some way. The reader now begins to understand that these two boys are closer than just fast friends. Through this device, and through this linking, Sáenz is able to cause readers to make connections subconsciously and recognize the importance of what could have otherwise been a sweet but fleeting moment in the narrative.

As much as this device can be used to show the positive changes that are taking place in Aristotle’s life, Sáenz uses them to clue readers in on the changes that Aristotle is going through mentally over the course of the text. In one such instance, Aristotle is reminiscing about his father and the life that he lived before Aristotle was born. Sáenz writes, “Someday I would understand my father. Someday he would tell me who he was. Someday. I hated that word” (91). This is the first instance of Aristotle blatantly linking a negative emotion to his attempts to understand the mysteries of the people and world around him. In this scene, Sáenz is changing the ways in which he uses this device which, in turn, causes readers to begin to change the way that they react to this device. In doing this, Sáenz is forcing readers to go along with Aristotle as he begins to change and move through his own life. By doing this, the journey becomes more impactful to the reader and begins to give readers a better insight into the struggles faced by children as they come to terms with their differing sexualities.

Aristotle himself comes to understand his differing sexuality through the use of this device (even if he does not allow himself to accept it from the first understanding). In a scene near the middle of the novel, Aristotle is with his mom and dad after a happy dinner with his sisters, nieces, and nephews. This dinner is held to lift Aristotle’s spirits after his unhappy time at home while he recovers from being hit by a car. The three of them are on the front porch together, drinking coffee. Sáenz writes, “My mother and father held hands. I wondered what it

was like to hold someone's hand. I bet you could sometimes find all of the mysteries of the universe in someone's hand" (140). In this moment, Aristotle begins to reflect again on a theme that has become common to readers from his point of view so far. Tellingly, this is the first time that he begins to use Dante's words in calling the mysteries of life "mysteries of the universe." Importantly, he is making this first connection to coopting Dante's terminology while reflecting on hand holding. Again, Sáenz uses this device to key readers in on important plot and story details, in this instance making the desire Aristotle has for a romantic relationship with Dante known more clearly to the reader.

In the next instance of the secrets of the universe theme, Aristotle has been given a truck by his parents. He is unable to drive as he is still in casts from being hit by the car, but, nonetheless, he sits behind the wheel in the driver's seat and reflects. Sáenz writes, "There was a whole universe waiting to be discovered in a pickup truck. Sitting in the driver's seat made everything seem possible. It was strange to feel those moments of optimism. Strange and beautiful" (168). In having this connection to the truck and discovering the secrets of the universe, Sáenz shows the importance that this truck will hold in Aristotle coming to terms with who he is and who he wants to be. Readers will come to find that this truck is what allows him to spend time in the desert without Dante, it is what allows him to experience getting drunk and high for the first time, and it will be what allows him and Dante to begin their romantic relationship together without having to be around their parents when they do. This theme, again, pushes the important aspects of the novel for readers to key in on and hold in their minds as they move throughout the text.

In an instance close to the end of the novel, Aristotle is driving with his dad to Phoenix due to the death of his aunt Ophelia. In this scene, Aristotle reflects on his relationship with

Dante and what Dante sees in him, what Gina and Suzie (two girls from his school that he wants to be friends with) see in him and why having a friendship with girls is hard for boys, what his life might have been like if his brother had been at the house, and why he spent four months staying with Ophelia when he was younger. This scene sets the stage for the end of the novel, and, importantly, all of the things that Aristotle is reflecting on will come to be understood by him and the reader by the closing of the book. Sáenz links this reflection to the true climax of the novel, further driving the importance of this literary device to the text.

In a scene after Dante has been beaten by a group of boys for kissing his boyfriend, Aristotle is considering his options while also considering his dog, Legs. Sáenz writes, “Dogs didn’t censor themselves. Maybe animals were smarter than people. The dog was so happy. Mom and dad too... It somehow seemed that the dog helped us be a better family. Maybe dogs were one of the secrets of the universe” (305). In this reflection, Sáenz is showing readers that Aristotle is beginning to understand a bit more about the things that he wants from his life. He ties the freedom and free expression of dogs to the way that he thinks maybe people ought to be. In doing this, readers begin to understand a bit more about the ways in which Aristotle is going to begin to act and react moving forward. This newfound way of living will turn out to be both positive and negative: negative in his instant reaction to beat up the boys who beat Dante up without thinking twice about it, and positive in that he will accept his love for Dante when it is first brought up to him by his mother and father. This new attitude also allows Aristotle to accept that his parents love him regardless of his love for Dante which drives the return to happiness that readers see at the end of the novel.

The final instance of note on the secrets of the universe in the novel that is worth noting comes when Aristotle decides to get revenge for Dante. In the scene, he is talking with Dante’s

parents and sees the pain on their faces. He is masking his own pain, but wants to connect to them and tell them the things that he is even unwilling to tell himself. Sáenz writes,

I wanted to tell them that I never knew that people like Dante existed in the world, people who looked at the stars, and knew the mysteries of water, and knew enough to know that birds belonged to the heavens and weren't meant to be shot down from their graceful flights by mean and stupid boys. I wanted to tell them that he had changed my life and that I would never be the same, not ever. And that somehow it felt like it was Dante who had saved my life and not the other way around. I wanted to tell them that he was the first human being aside from my mother who had ever made me want to talk about the things that scared me. I wanted to tell them so many things and yet I didn't have the words.

(308-309)

Finally, readers begin to understand the true depth of the love that Aristotle feels for Dante. In this moment, Aristotle sees it as very deep friendship because he is unwilling to let himself know it to be love. However, Sáenz uses the secrets of the universe theme to finally fill readers in on the true importance of the instances of the two boys' lives together and reveal, once and for all, that it is love as opposed to friendship. This is the final moment in which Aristotle is able to reflect before the climax begins as he hunts down the boys that hurt Dante and faces the retribution for his actions. Importantly, Aristotle understands the importance of these feelings even if he does not understand them as love. His claim that Dante saved him rather than the other way around shows the ways that Dante has opened Aristotle's eyes to what his life might be if he was willing to be with Dante as a friend or as a boyfriend. This instance of the secrets of the universe ties the themes and driving plots of the novel together finally, and it sets the ending in



motion while also revealing Aristotle's true feelings. It also makes the reader understand the major points the book makes about being a part of the LGBTQA+ community.

Throughout the course of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz uses symbols, themes, and devices of music, art, birds, dreams, water, and "secrets of the universe" to bring the reader further into the messages of the book. In doing so, Sáenz sets his novel apart from what academics might simply brand as "YA" (young adult) without another thought. Sáenz's use of these devices and symbols provide ample evidence that this is a work of great literary merit. These themes and devices demonstrate that, despite a non-academic reputation, "popular" fiction such as young adult literature can be as complex and worthy of study as more traditional "literary" texts such as *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The novel itself uses similar themes and devices to those novels on a level that is more accessible to many first-year students in English survey courses, and this accessibility stands to make young adult texts a better choice for classroom study than more "literary" texts.

In the next chapter, I will consider the ways teaching this novel in the ELA classroom may help teachers reimagine the classroom as a space of social justice, social equity, and freedom as argued by Paulo Freire and bell hooks.

## **Theoretical Framework – Paulo Freire and bell hooks**

Through the course of this section, I will tie together theoretical strands to create a theoretical framework by which the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* will be explicated further. In the previous section, I looked closely at the literary devices and themes that make Sáenz's novel worthy of study, and in this section I will consider how this text may help teachers resist the power structures inherent in educational settings. I will consider Paulo Freire's ideas of the classroom as being the starting point for bringing oppressed peoples out of their oppression by giving them a voice and a space to create their own education. Next, I will highlight bell hooks' idea that the classroom is not only that starting point, but that teachers and professors need to be willing to change their previously held beliefs about education to create that freedom. In each section, I will provide the evidence before I discuss how they interact with those that came before them. I will then consider how the novel and the teaching of the novel can bring these ideas together and into the forefront of education.

### ***Freire and Power in Education***

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire talks about the importance of the classroom as the site for the beginning of the work of using education and discourse to create power for the oppressed peoples being educated. He talks about how discourse within the classroom can begin to tear at the foundation of unjust power systems and the role that oppressed peoples must play in bringing this oppression to an end. Freire speaks about the attempts to overturn this power struggle from those below by using the methods of the higher ups leading only to the further oppression of people who were meant to be free. Freire shows the solution to this to be breaking the chain of oppression and allowing for people to realize their own freedom in a way that does not limit the freedom of others.

Freire then begins to speak about the power that “dialogics” have in creating power inside and outside of the classroom. Freire holds that to speak is to have the power to create the world around you. He writes,

Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.

(92)

Freire shows that the only way that these words can have power is if they are created equally, justly, and critically with an eye towards the freedom of all people. The true power of words come from the equality of those who are given agency over saying and writing them. He moves that to begin to limit someone’s speech is to attempt to keep them subjected to a powerless existence. In his view, the use of dialogue is a system of freedom whereas the limit of dialogue is a system of oppression.

### ***Freedom in Education and Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe***

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* fits into the Freirean idea of power dynamics, education as freedom, and the power of dialogue in a few key ways. The first is that the novel looks at the ways in which the children are subjected to the rules of their parents and the respect they command. It is only once the difference in the responses from the children is noted that the parents begin to take new approaches to leading their children. This plays with Freire’s idea that the true sharing of power comes from including the needs and voices of the oppressed peoples in the reshaping of education. By allowing for the children to carve a space

and have a say in how they wish for the relationships to go, the parents are fulfilling this idea. As well as this, the novel plays to the way that Freire sees education as a way of freeing those being oppressed within any given society. The children, oppressed both by themselves and the culture around them, are allowed to begin to take the power back for themselves by exploring these different sexual identities and play with the edges of what is deemed right and wrong in the ways of drug and alcohol use (whether the parents know about it or not). In allowing this space for the boys to find their own ways, the novel relates well to Freire's ideas.

The way that Freire considers the power of dialogue can also be found in the novel. Throughout the text, readers see Aristotle's worldview as dark and depressing because he is unable to give words to the love that he feels for Dante. He is unwilling to allow that part of his reality to become fully realized by speaking it into being. In the beginning, when the world is better for him, he is allowing for the word "friendship" to describe his relationship to Dante. At the time, that is exactly what the relationship is. This is why the beginning and ending of the novel are so far removed from the tone of the middle. In the middle, Aristotle has grown to love Dante in a romantic way, but he is refusing himself the freedom of naming it as such. By doing this, Aristotle is taking away his own freedoms whether he knows it or not. The effect on his mental health from this action is felt and seen throughout the middle of the novel.

### ***Educational Freedom in the Classroom***

Teaching *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* in the classroom also begins to bring about the change that Freire is calling for. By bringing an LGBTQA+ voice into the classroom, students who are LGBTQA+ may then begin to experience less oppression from the school system than they otherwise do when they are not represented within the literature being studied. By bringing the lives and experiences of the LGBTQA+ community into the

classroom, teachers give the students a space to shape the discussion and the world in which they are involved every single day. This begins to share the power of the classroom and the academy as a whole.

As well as this, bringing a novel like this into the classroom begins the dialogue that Freire sees as so important to the freedom of the oppressed. Without this text and/or others like it, the representation of the world as seen in the literature that is studied is incomplete. By allowing for the dialogue around LGBTQA+ issues to enter into the classroom, teachers begin to give power to the oppressed people within that community which begins the process of creating freedom for them. By the same token, not including these works within the sphere of education only serves to further the oppression of the LGBTQA+ community and maintain the current and unequal balance of power as Freire says it will.

### ***hooks and the Classroom as the Site of a New, Freer Society***

Throughout the course of her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes on the issues of the classroom in a more interconnected and diverse world than ever. Like Freire, hooks sees the classroom as the birthplace of the freedom that the students who are not as free as their peers wish to see in the world. Writing on the issues that face the modern classroom, hooks says that the role of education is essential to the creation of an equal balance of power. Also, like Foucault, Butler, and Freire, hooks illustrates the importance of words and their interconnectivity to power. She states that the power of the classroom and of education comes in giving words where there has only been silence to date.

For hooks, the importance of the classroom is unable to be overstated. The classroom is the microcosm of the world outside of it, and omission from the academic sphere is a tacit admission that these stories, these people, and their lives will not exist outside of the walls of the

school. hooks writes, “If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings—we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change” (35). She states that the importance of representation within academics goes far beyond giving a voice but, rather, that it will be pushing the issues of freedom and power to create a more equal and just society in an increasingly unequal and unjust world. To hooks, the current cast of teachers across all levels of the academic sphere were taught in a classroom that looked exclusively at white and European ideas of literature and that has led to an unequal power dynamic within current classrooms. In order to break this cycle, the work must begin in the classroom and it must begin by introducing alternative points of view and voices.

***A New, Freer Society in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe***

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* shows examples of the discourse created by hooks. Throughout the novel, readers see the inequalities that face the two boys as they begin to delve into their lives and their identities, and the true sharing of power comes in the sharing of space and of words. It is only once Aristotle is given room to be himself without the rules imposed so heavily on him that he begins to explore his identity and become more comfortable in his skin. It is only in being given the room to speak his love into existence that he begins to feel free and happy as he did at the beginning of the novel. Similarly, it is only in Chicago and out from under the loving yet all-encompassing realm of his parents that Dante is able to experiment with drugs and love. In doing so, he is able to become a more fully realized version of himself.

As well as this, the novel fits into the ways in which hooks sees developmental areas as the gateways to freedom. Importantly, Aristotle is unable to consider the ways in which he is different in the confines of his school. There, he is expected to play a role and he is unable to be his authentic self. Tellingly, it is during the summers, when he is out from the more oppressive atmosphere of the school, that he is able to feel freer and happier. While hooks is speaking more specifically about the educational sphere, the home is a place of important development as well. By creating a more open and free home, Aristotle's parents are stepping into the role that hooks believes teachers ought to be stepping into, that of one who sets others free rather than oppresses them.

### ***Teaching to Create a New, Freer Society***

In teaching the novel, teachers begin to open the discourses that hooks speaks about as being the most important tool to create the freedom that should begin in the classroom. By the inclusion of the novel, teachers are also creating the more just and equal classroom that hooks says is necessary for the transgression of rights and power back to those who have been given little in the unequal system of the world. hooks tells readers that the synthesis point for these changes is the academic world, and inclusion of this novel and other works like it that are representative of the true world outside of the classroom walls will begin the hard work of realizing that space that hooks is calling for.

### ***Summary***

Paulo Freire takes the idea of discourse and freedom, applying it to education to create the foundation for the classroom as the beginning of the end of oppression by giving those oppressed a voice within the classroom. bell hooks then ties these concepts together to create a

model of the classroom in which students and teachers are truly equal and, thereby, more capable of creating a new, freer world outside of the classroom.



## **Literature Review – Effects of Representative Literature on the High School Community**

In the high school ELA classroom, many students are given their first look into a world outside of their own. Whether it is reading about the life and times of Martin Luther King, Jr., experiencing Nazi Germany through the writing of Anne Frank, or seeing their own community during different times and movements such as students in the South reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, ELA classes allow students to better understand the world and the struggles that people from outside of their communities face. In this sphere, work has been done justly and to good effect to include as many voices and points of view as possible from the African American community to the immigrant community and many voices of people going through turbulent and trying times. However, all of that good work has left out one community in general: the LGBTQA+ community.

While this simply seems like the last aspect that is needed to create a complete picture of the world outside of the school walls, there is a more insidious implication found in this omission. By bringing voices from all over the country and the world to the forefront of the ELA classroom, students see the world around them more fully. As stated by Freire, “The words of [the oppressor’s] own class come to be the “true” words, which he imposes or attempts to impose on the others: the oppressed, whose words have been stolen from them. Those who steal the words of others develop a deep doubt in the abilities of the others and consider them incompetent... Under these circumstances, dialogue is impossible” (134). However, by omitting the LGBTQA+ community and its stories and struggles, teachers are unknowingly tacitly admitting that these people either will not be a regular occurrence outside of the school in the “real” world or they are showing that these people and their stories are simply not as important as those included in the curriculum already. Both of these points bring issue to the world at large

in that students may not have any experience with the LGBTQA+ community before they leave the school apart from what they have been told online, on the television, and from their parents, or they begin to think that these people are in some way lesser or other.

By including these works and voices in the high school ELA classroom, teachers can begin to undo the years of struggle and torment that the LGBTQA+ community has faced and continues to face on a daily basis, be it from the people around them or the governments their countries are ruled by. Including these voices and stories in the ELA classroom allows for students to begin building empathy for and increasing their understanding of the community in a safe and structured way without fear of influence from bad faith actors that are pushing an agenda of some kind. By giving students simple representation, they can then begin to make up their minds for themselves as to how they feel about the community and those within it.

Teaching these works begins to break down the walls that are so often put up by society and institutions of religion or the state. This concept is apparent in hooks' final statements from *Teaching to Transgress* when she writes, "Commitment to engaged pedagogy carries with it the willingness to be responsible, not to pretend that professors do not have the power to change the direction of our students' lives" (206).

The effects of including these works in the high school classroom have been studied at length. For example, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Elizabeth Overberg, and Shannon Harris in their article "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ)-Themed Literature for Teens: Are School Libraries Providing Adequate Collections?" cover the importance of including these works for LGBTQA+ teens when they write, "...LGBTQ-themed literature provides LGBTQ teens with the opportunity to understand what it means to be queer, to learn gay social norms, to vicariously experience the coming out process, to know they are not alone,

to connect with others like them, to find positive role models, and, perhaps most importantly, to affirm the fact that they are normal” (“Libraries” 4). In modern society, many closeted LGBTQA+ teens have been told that being a member of that community is one of the worst things they can be. It seems to be one of the last areas in which people are so quickly and openly “othered.” By providing a safe and secure space in which these students can begin to come to terms with and better understand their own sexual and gender identities, schools create a community that makes each member feel respected, safe, and normal. In addition, including these texts begins to show straight and cisgender students that their LGBTQA+ friends and peers are not a monolithic group as they might otherwise be seen. This is outlined by Elisabeth W. Rauch in her article “GLBTQ Collections are for Every Library Serving Teens,” when she writes, All teens can learn about diversity and about sexual identities to which they may not have exposure in their nuclear family situation. Access to stories with characters who may be like his/her classmates or friends can help a teen reader be more empathetic and understanding as s/he experiences vicariously the struggles and confusion many GLBTQ teens go through” (14). Including instances of these works throughout the curriculum that showcase many different aspects of and stories from within the community shows all students that this is normal and that the people within the group are individuals with unique backgrounds, lives, and struggles. This, in turn, creates a more open and accepting community of students within the school by creating the alternative discourses that both Freire and hooks argued create a more equal distribution of power in the classroom.

One often overlooked fact when it comes to the possibility of including these works in the high school is the positive impact young adult representation on mental health issues in LGBTQA+ teens. In their study on the rates of mental health issues in sexual minority teens,

researchers Tessa M. L. Kaufman and Laura Baams reported, “Sexual minority or lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth report more depression, self-harm, and suicidality compared to heterosexual youth. For example, sexual minority youth are twice as likely to experience depression or psychological problems compared to their heterosexual peers” (184). By including works that look at LGBTQA+ stories and voices, the high school curriculum may then begin to allow spaces in which these teens can feel seen, respected, and understood. Simply having the representation that these teens are so often lacking in the world of popular culture around them may begin to allow them to understand their own lives and identities. As will be shown later in this thesis, the media that students take in will often change their own lives and experiences. Media can be impactful and influential in a large and important way (Walker “Introductory” and “Exit”). By including LGBTQA+ media in the high school, LGBTQA+ and straight and cisgender students can begin the hard process of understanding themselves and those around them for, possibly, the first time in their lives. This understanding can bring about the change in power dynamics that Freire and hooks speak to in their respective works.

The outcomes of lack of representation from the school system or neglect from parents on LGBTQA+ youth is summed up well by Christa Preston Agiro, Christine Quiblat, Claire Preston, and Kineta Sanford in their article “Critical Readings of Young Adult Literature about LGBTQ Youth” when they write,

If we do not want some students to be pushed into dangerous and self-destructive behavior, we need to train all students to care about their peers. Even if adults in the school and community do not want youth to study or discuss non-heterosexuality, that discussion will be far less traumatizing for students than for them to have classmates that drop out of school, become homeless, abuse substances, or attempt or commit suicide.

While some may not approve of messages of acceptance, they cannot deny the importance of messages that have the power and likelihood to save lives. (24)

In the end, this is the goal of including LGBTQA+ literature in the high school ELA classroom. By its inclusion, teachers might be able to create a more inclusive and diverse school community, help students who feel isolated or unheard begin to see improvements in mental health issues, and, ultimately, create a more free and equal world when these students leave the high school and enter the world either through college, the work force, or the armed forces.

Oftentimes, young adult literature (such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*) is more developmentally appropriate for high school students. While there is still a need for literary classics in the high school ELA classroom, the inclusion of young adult literature hits a point that these works are often unable to. This source of impact is noted by The National Council for Teachers of English in the book *Teaching Reading in High School English Classes*:

[Young adult literature] provides the “strategies for living” many young adult readers seek from their reading, and it is written to be accessible to young adults emotionally and cognitively—as readers still developing their reading skills. Because it speaks to students’ needs and interests, this literature is more likely to motivate young adults to want to read... (National 121)

Put simply, young adult literature meets these students where they are both developmentally and personally. By using young adult literature with LGBTQA+ themes rather than more “literary works, teachers are allowing students to be exposed to these stories and ideas in the way that is the most digestible to them. This will go a long way to creating the type of change that teachers are likely hoping to see by including any minority works in their classroom.

The effects of this literature in high schools has been experienced and written about first-hand by Alex Sanchez, author of *Rainbow Boys*, a 2001 novel about three senior boys in high school who are questioning their sexuality as they come to understand who they are and the dangers in the world for people like them. In his article “Open Eyes and Change Lives: Narrative Resources Addressing Gay-Straight Themes,” he details the many emails he has received from closeted and out LGBTQA+ students about the impact this book has had on them and the communities at their school as well as the way it turned one girl away from using her religion to condemn LGBTQA+ people and opened her eyes to the community to a point where she joined the Gay Straight Alliance at her school. (I recommend reading the entire three-page article if possible, the information for which can be found in the works cited from this thesis.) Sanchez sums his article up by writing:

Gay-straight themed books can give young people and adults a way to make sense of gay-straight struggles and provide *all* readers a key to empathy, compassion, and understanding... I have come to understand this: As each of you summons the courage to include narrative with gay-straight themes in your school and classroom libraries, you may be confronted with your own coming-out process, as individuals who understand the need to address gay-straight issues. (48)

Through these experiences, Sanchez shows the importance that these works have in increasing empathy and understanding from straight and cisgender students, but he also shows the importance of these narratives to the LGBTQA+ students—both out and closeted—who read them. These accounts show one thing clearly: these works can create a more accepting and safe school community for all students.

## **Findings**

One of the key components to the research portion of this thesis centered around teaching the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* in a college classroom at Radford University. This was done to gauge the impact that the novel might have on high school students. In order to make the results as close as possible to what they might be in a high school classroom, a freshman English course was chosen to participate in reading the book. To measure the response to the novel, a questionnaire was given to the students before and after reading the book. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. It looked at what kind of media students took in and how it affected them, what the climate was like in their school, how they felt about the Latinx community, and how they felt about the LGBTQA+ community.

The responses were then aggregated into distinct categories to be measured here. For the question on media, the type of media was recorded. For the question on school climate, high school or college was recorded and then a five-point scale of the general response based on the following: negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, and positive. The same scale was also used for the responses on the Latinx and LGBTQA+ communities. In addition to the scale, a measure was taken of the students that self-identified as being members of either the Latinx or LGBTQA+ communities. The responses to the questionnaires were written rather than simply marked on the scale above. Pull quotes were taken from the responses. Those quotes will be found in the “Discussion” section following this one.

The pre-reading questionnaire garnered twenty-six responses out of a total of thirty students. To account for understood participation, students were not made to fill out the questionnaire and were only asked to do so if they wished. From these twenty-six responses, the following results came.

Eighteen students mentioned that they felt influenced by books they had read, twenty indicated that movies had influenced them, eighteen students mentioned television in their responses, and thirteen students mentioned music. Two students did not answer at all to the first question after indicating that they did not feel that media influenced their lives or outlooks.

On the question of school climate, seven students responded with regards to their previous high school and nineteen students responded about Radford University itself. Of the students who responded about their high school, two responses were negative, four were somewhat negative, and only one was positive. Of the students who responded about Radford University, one response was negative, two were somewhat negative, seven were somewhat positive, and nine were positive.

On the subject of thoughts and opinions about the Latinx community, seven responses were neutral, seven were somewhat positive, and twelve were positive. Four students self-identified as being members of this community.

In the results for thoughts and opinions about the LGBTQA+ community, one response was negative, two responses were neutral, four responses were somewhat positive, and eighteen responses were positive. As well as this, two students self-identified as members of the LGBTQA+ community. Some of the feelings of these responses were summed up in this quote from the pre-reading questionnaire: “I think that they are asking for to[o] much” (Walker “Introductory”).

Between administering the pre- and post-reading questionnaires, I began interviewing Kelly Jason (the graduate teaching fellow who was teaching the novel to her class) in order to gauge her feelings about the experience. Additionally, I asked about the in-class responses from the students, what she felt went well, what could have gone better, and what she would



recommend others do that she would do differently in the future. These responses were then used to give better context to the process of teaching the novel.

The post-reading questionnaire was identical in content to the pre-reading questionnaire. As was to be expected, there were a few less responses here. This was expected due to the timing of the class finishing the novel falling just after midterm exams and only three weeks before finals. In all, twenty-four students responded to the post-reading questionnaire as compared to the twenty-six responses for the pre-reading questionnaire. This drop off is significantly smaller than was expected.

With regards to the type of media that influenced them, twenty students indicated books in their responses, eighteen indicated movies, fifteen indicated television, and fourteen indicated music. No students felt they were not influenced by the media they had consumed.

All twenty-four respondents spoke about Radford University in the second question. Of these twenty-four responses, one was negative, three were somewhat negative, one was neutral, six were somewhat positive, and thirteen were positive.

On the question about the Latinx community, seven responses were neutral, five were somewhat positive, and twelve were positive. In these results, three students self-identified as members of the community.

On the final question about the LGBTQA+ community, two responses were neutral, one was somewhat positive, and twenty-one responses were positive. In this batch, two students self-identified as being members of the community. The feelings in the post-reading questionnaires can be summed up when one student wrote, “I think anyone should be able to express themselves freely and be who they want to be. I especially think you should never be judged for loving who you love” (Walker “Exit”).

## **Discussion**

The pre- and post-reading questionnaires were administered as a part of the study to consider the ways in which media consumption affects the lives of those consuming it. This provided an understanding about whether or not the novel and others like it could potentially be impactful to the students reading them. Additionally, I wanted to look at the way that media consumption affected students' views and opinions about the world around them, specifically with regards to the community of their schools. Finally, I included the two questions about the Latinx and LGBTQA+ communities to gauge the ways in which the novel they were reading would be impactful to them.

### ***A Note on Data Tabulation***

In the pre-reading responses, nineteen students responded about Radford University while the other seven responded about their high school. In the post-reading responses, all twenty-four students responded about the university.

In order to better understand these responses in comparison to the initial responses, each response was taken and written as a fraction and then equated to a fraction where “x” was the numerator and nineteen was the denominator to indicate what the answer would have been out of the initial nineteen responses about Radford University. From there, the fractions were cross multiplied and then divided by twenty-four from the initial responses. This left the remaining number as the comparable value out of nineteen. For example, the thirteen positive responses out of the twenty-four from the post-reading results was written as  $\frac{13}{24}$ . This was then set next to a fraction reading  $\frac{x}{19}$ . From here, cross multiplication left me with  $247=24x$ . Then, twenty-four was divided from both sides. This removed the twenty-four from the variable side of the equation and left the value of “x” as 10.29. In this case, the comparable results from the second survey of

twenty-four responses would have been equivalent to 10.29 responses in the initial questionnaire being positive responses about Radford University.

From here, I rounded the final number up or down to find that the post-reading responses are equivalent to one negative response, two somewhat negative responses, one neutral response, five somewhat positive responses, and ten positive responses ( $1+2+1+5+10=19$ ). This was done to better directly compare the results from the initial and final responses.

### ***Media and Its Effect on Worldview***

The pre- and post-reading questionnaires indicate some interesting findings. With regards to the question on whether or not media has influenced the students' lives and outlooks as well as what kind of media has been influential, initial results showed that eighteen students felt books had influenced them compared to twenty in the post-reading questionnaire. This small bump could indicate that the novel they had just finished reading had them thinking more about books, but it could also indicate that they felt they had been impacted by the novel. This result shows that books can be a powerful tool for influencing understanding and perspective. In addition to this, twenty students initially indicated that films had influenced them compared to only eighteen in the post-reading questionnaire. This small decrease could be due to several factors. Most likely is the inability to see movies in the theaters during the COVID-19 pandemic. This change in routine might have led to some students feeling they had not been influenced by a film recently, and therefore felt it was unimportant to mention in the post-reading questionnaires. Eighteen students indicated that television was influential in the initial responses compared to fifteen in the final responses. This dip, like with movies, could be due to a lack of output during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this could also be due to the lack of time in students' schedules to watch television during their studies as compared to the two-month winter break

they were coming off of in the initial responses. In the first responses, thirteen students indicated that music had affected them whereas fourteen indicated music in the final responses. This small increase could be due to a myriad of factors, but is likely due to the quick digestion of music in comparison to the other types of media listed. The overall effect of media was summarized by a student in their pre-reading questionnaire when they wrote, “The biggest part, and I think most important, is being able to see other people’s viewpoints and experiences. Even though it is through fiction, it is still helpful to see other people’s viewpoints and experiences so you can be a more open person” (Walker “Introductory”).

### ***School Climate***

The second question on school climate indicated very interesting results. In the initial survey, seven students wrote about their high schools. Of these seven students, two responded negatively, four responded somewhat negatively, and only one responded positively. In the second questionnaire, no students responded about their high schools. These responses—taken in tandem with the quotes about the high schools being discussed—may show that the problems of othering and violence stemmed from more than just segregation into cliques and bullying. Some of these high schools had higher rates of crime and overall instructor negligence. Two students had this to say: “It is unfortunately very sadly disconnected in every way. So many gangs & hoods that there is too many to count. I wish I grew up in a different setting one more accepting. This boy in my high school was so scared to come out as gay he didn’t and acted as if he was straight until now” (Walker “Introductory”), and “My high school really was not the ideal school for most people. A lot of gang activity, drug bust, and fights have happened at my school” (Walker “Introductory”). Post-reading questionnaire responses had no students writing about their high schools, which is to be expected as these students are all preparing to finish their first

year in college. This milestone likely had students reflecting on the past year and all that happened to them and around them during that time. In the initial questionnaire, nineteen students responded about the climate at the university. Of these nineteen responses, one was negative, two were somewhat negative, seven were somewhat positive, and nine were positive. The initial negative responder mentioned, “It’s very closed to me. Everybody here already has their friend group, and it feels like another high school to me” (Walker “Exit”). One of the *somewhat* negative responders said,

The community in my school, while I have met a diverse friend group, is still not as inclusive as I would like it to be, and I knew this coming here as well. I have definitely hit a jack pot finding the people I did, but the thought of not having those people with me whilst I navigate college is truly scary. Even looking at the difference between the “light” and “dark” side of campus can show you the divide between the population on campus.

(Walker “Exit”)

The responses about high schools considered during reading the responses about the university may indicate that the high schools these students were coming from also had issues with separation of the student body into cliques and school community bullying. In light of that, the experiences of this group of students at the university is comparatively better. The most telling responses were the overwhelmingly negative and positive, however. In the post-reading questionnaire, all twenty-four students spoke about the university. In this set of data, one response was negative, three were somewhat negative, one was neutral, six were somewhat positive, and thirteen were positive.

Using the data tabulation formula above to compare the initial results to the final results, one response was negative compared to one negative response in the final responses, two

responses were somewhat negative compared to two that were somewhat negative in the final responses, none were neutral compared to one that was neutral in the final responses, seven were somewhat positive compared to five that were somewhat positive in the final responses, and nine were positive compared to ten that were positive in the final responses.

### ***The Latinx and LGBTQA+ Communities and Cultures***

The third question, relating to the Latinx community, showed somewhat more consistent results. Seven responses were neutral in the initial results which carried over in the post-reading responses, seven were somewhat positive in the initial results compared to five in the final results, and twelve were positive initially which also carried over into twelve in the final responses. One of the neutral responses from the post-reading questionnaire showed the influence that reading the novel had on that student when they wrote, “I don’t have any thoughts on the Latinx community, but I know more now that I have read A&D” (Walker “Exit”), and one student highlighted the struggles within the community in the post-reading response, writing, “They are a hard-working community and they as good as the average citizen. I believe it is really hard for the kids though because they are to fit in but in so many ways the Hispanic culture is very different. That is why kids tease each other on being ‘too Hispanic’ or whitewashed. Finding a middle ground is hard” (Walker “Exit”). In the initial responses, four students self-identified as being members of the Latinx community compared to three students in the post-reading responses.

The final question, regarding the LGBTQA+ community, showed significant change in participant perceptions. One response was negative in the initial responses compared to zero in the post-reading responses, two responses were neutral compared to zero in the post-reading responses, four responses were somewhat positive compared to one in the post-reading

responses, and eighteen were positive compared to twenty-one in the final responses. As well as this, two students self-identified as being members of the LGBTQA+ community in the initial responses which remained the same in the post-reading responses. The initial responses ranged from the positive, such as, “I am not a part of the LGBTQ+ community but I believe that the people who are, are nothing less than the people who are not. We are all equal. I fully support people in the community. My best friend is a part of the community. I only have positive things to say about the LGBTQ+ community” (Walker “Introductory”), to the negative, such as, “I think that they are asking for to[o] much” (Walker “Introductory”), and the neutral, such as, “Personally, I was raised in a conservative home so when I was younger I always thought it was bad. Throughout the end of high school, I started to feel like it wasn’t such a bad thing because a couple friends of mine had started to come out. I am still on the fence about this topic” (Walker “Introductory”). The overall feelings expressed in the post-reading questionnaires can be summed up in this quote from a student: “I fully support the LGBTQ+ community. I think anyone should be able to express themselves freely and be who they want to be. I especially think you should never be judged for loving who you love. I think the world is becoming more accepting although I do believe people in the LGBTQ+ community are often still targeted and get hate” (Walker “Exit”).

### ***Behind the Desk: Instructor Experience***

One of the biggest parts of this study was the in-depth look at the experience of teaching this novel. To fulfill this side, Kelly Jason agreed to bi-weekly interviews with me to shed some light on what she felt went best, what could have gone better, some insights from the discussions in the classroom, and some of her own thoughts about what the impact of teaching this novel

could be in a high school classroom. For the purposes of this discussion, I will consider these categories in that order.

### **Changes in Student Perception**

Beginning with what went well in her classroom, Ms. Jason spoke clearly about the impact that the novel can have on students who are a part of the LGBTQA+ community, whether out or closeted:

I had one student that self-identified as part of the LGBT+ community. I think she now feels comfortable telling people and so she says that she was really excited about this book. So, I think it's important when students are seeing themselves in books. I have one [student] who said, "I think this is a good book for high schoolers or even middle schoolers to read. It describes what growing up is like." The student put a heart over her summary. She says, "This book is about no matter what you think or who you love or what your background is, this novel can bring us together." (Walker "3/9")

It is clear from this in-class response and written response (from two separate students) that the novel can be extremely impactful to students who are a part of the LGBTQA+ community as well as students who are not a part of the community. In short, this novel can show LGBTQA+ students that they are normal and should be comfortable with themselves and their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and it also shows straight and cisgender students that the LGBTQA+ community consists of people who are just the same as they are and want the same things that they want. The impact of the representation present in this novel is also likely the cause of the significant change in responses on question four between the pre- and post-reading surveys. As well as this, the indication that this novel could be good for middle schoolers to read was interesting as the content would seem to indicate that the students would need to be much



older. However, that feeling could stem from inherent and societal stigmas about romance within the LGBTQA+ community being more “adult” than romance outside of it.

In another written response from the same assignment, the instructor found a divergent view from the ones stated above:

[It] says, “This book has not changed anything for me personally on how I view my life or anyone else.” When reading that you might think, “Oh, well, either they support or maybe the book is just separate from their life.” I’ve had this student in previous years, and I know that they come from a very conservative background based on the essays that have been given to me and like what they voiced their support for especially in these times. So, I am erring on the side of not that she doesn’t support the community but maybe it is so removed from her that she’s not feeling sympathetic towards the community. Like, it’s just a book. It’s just a fiction novel. (Walker “2/12”)

This quote and the explication by Ms. Jason indicate a rather stark pitfall of the effects of teaching this novel in the high school classroom. At the end of the day, it is a work of fiction and there will likely be some students who see it that way. There are some students who are deeply moved by the media they consume and others that are not, and this will determine the overall impact of teaching this novel and ones like it on the community of a given high school. That being said, the survey responses centered around media intake and influence indicate that this response is something of an outlier. In the initial twenty-six responses, only two students indicated that they felt media had no impact on their lives and outlooks which is a ratio of around eight percent. That is to say that, based on the study conducted here, ninety-two percent of students may be impacted in some way by teaching LGBTQA+ content in the high school classroom.

### **Providing Context for Controversial Topics**

Speaking to what could have gone better in the classroom, Ms. Jason considered carefully the way in which the class structure could have been more geared towards the novel itself. The instructor had adapted a class structure that originally had *The Book Thief* at the center of it. This class looked at the historical context around the novel, and the instructor felt that her use of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* could have done similar things:

This book would be great if we included aspects like, “What did we think about the LGBTQ+ community in the 80s versus what do we think about that now?” But that’s really specific whereas I’m letting them write about whatever topics they want. They’re just having a hard time drawing a parallel between the writing aspect and the reading aspect of the class, and I think what I wanted to do was more of like a genre thing. You know, can we look at academic journals that discussed the LGBTQ+ community in the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s? Oh, look, I have a novel that goes right with it, and now we can listen to podcasts and we can look at film. I did not do that, so I would say bringing in more genres and sources that are related to the book would be better. I think if I had done a better job at tying them together they wouldn’t think, “Yeah, I mean, it’s fun, but what are we doing?” (Walker “2/16”)

In this reflection, Ms. Jason is bringing a very important aspect of teaching this novel to the forefront of the discussion. In bringing the LGBTQ+ community to the front of a classroom of students who likely have had very little to no exposure to the community, the importance of the historical aspects becomes paramount. The context that surrounds the community and the issues being discussed in the novel helps students to better understand some of the issues that characters in the novel are dealing with. In addition, allowing for students to understand the history of

bigotry and pseudoscience that encompasses most historical discussions of the community will help to open their eyes to the reason that studying this work is so important.

### **The Troubles with Teaching a Novel**

Additionally, Ms. Jason discussed one of the issues that is inherent in almost any English course, that of eagerness and openness to discussion:

My eleven o'clock class, we had much less attendance, but we had more widespread answers. Everyone in class was participating, but we only had half the class most days. In my two o'clock class, only two people were answering about content yeah, but that class is generally more talkative just about like life, so the discussion seemed opposite of what I expected. (Walker "3/19")

Ms. Jason mentioned that the days during which she had more structured discussion (i.e. having questions for students to answer specifically rather than beginning the discussion and seeing where it went from there) the students responded better and more in-depth than they otherwise were. This also led to a tactic in which she had students write their responses and then read them aloud if they were interested in doing so. This allowed for students to only speak if they felt comfortable, but it also spurred discussion from what was said. If a student read their response and another student disagreed or wished to expand on it, they were more likely to do so having already written it down and being given the time to flesh it out before being asked to speak. This is a tactic that would likely also lead to better and more insightful discussions in the high school classroom as well.

### **How Students Responded to the Novel**

When asked about insights from the discussion, Ms. Jason found that students were more interested in the plot of the novel rather than the humanistic aspects of the characters within it.

She said that they were interested in knowing about Aristotle's brother Bernardo and what he did that got him thrown in prison. In addition to this, students were also interested in the pregnancies that were taking place throughout the novel. Ms. Jason said, "They're kind of awed by the pregnancies. I think Ileana is pregnant, Dante's mom being pregnant, so I don't know if that's where they're at in their lives. Like a baby would be the worst thing for them right now."

(Walker "3/9") This reflects the importance of bringing this novel in at a given time then being driven by where those students are in their lives. In middle school and high school, very few of the sexually active students are concerned with the risk of pregnancy or STDs that they are unlikely to consider this aspect of the novel. That is not to say that pregnancy does not occur in middle and high school, but that kids of that age give more worth to the act rather than the potential downfalls of it unless they listened to that aspect of sex education in a careful way. This would lead to the more intimate themes of love, romance, soul-searching, and personal acceptance to come forward more in a middle or high school classroom. This is also likely the reason that students in Ms. Jason's class were more interested in the incarceration aspect of the novel rather than the familial relationship between Aristotle and his mother and father that stemmed from Bernardo's incarceration. Ms. Jason also mentioned a key tactic she used in teaching this novel at the college level:

I think by putting them in the shoes of the parents they feel a little removed from the situations. They don't have to give their whole life's story in trauma. They can be an adult in the situation and make decisions in this situation. I think that was empowering, and I also think it made them more thoughtful because if they're going to fight then they want to fight and stand up for their friend, but as a parent they realize, "Oh, we can't just

make rash decisions.” They actually have to think about what I’m asking and respond.

(Walker “3/19”)

This tactic of tailoring the situation to the maturity level of the students in the class is also one that can be done in reverse. Perhaps, when looking at the scenes in which Aristotle finds and beats up the boys that beat Dante up, a teacher can consider coming from the opposite approach that the instructor took. By asking the students what they would do in that situation, asking them to explain why, and then giving the parental idea of what the implications of this revenge are, teachers can bring students into a better understanding of what it means to be brutalized for being a member of the LGBTQA+ community, what it means to stand up for your friends if they are hurt for any reason, and why that standing up might need to be a form of words rather than violence. This was an insight gained from the instructor’s teaching of the novel that is very interesting and important to consider when bringing the novel to a younger group rather than an older one.

### **Impacts of the Novel**

Finally, on the topic of potential impacts of teaching this novel in the high school classroom, the instructor had this to say: “If [students] are already accepting, you know, because we all want our students to be accepting and empathetic. That’s one thing I think that we champion when we teach literature, really: empathy. Different worldviews. So, if my students are already there, then that’s great and they might just see it as like just another assignment. But if they aren’t, it might get them there” (Walker “3/9”).

In all, the survey responses show an important increase in empathy for and understanding of the Latinx and LGBTQA+ communities, as well as a deepened understanding of the way in which the media we consume affects our understanding of the world. Additionally, the insights

gained from interviewing the instructor also show the ways in which this novel were good for her classroom, could have been better for her classroom, what she recommends teachers do differently from her, and the overall impact that literature has on any classroom in which it is studied.

All of this data, when taken together and used in any classroom, has the potential to increase the justice and equalize the power distribution within that classroom and in the community at large as outlined by Freire and hooks. To sum it all up, “The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (Freire 124). hooks builds upon this idea, writing, “The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (207).

## **Conclusion**

The world of the high school ELA classroom can be a site for the good changes that most people wish to see in the world. By allowing for stories and voices from minority communities to enter the classroom, teachers can begin to create a fuller and more realistic view of the world outside as well as expose students to thoughts and ideas outside of their own. The importance of this inclusion is indescribable, and the time for such changes is now.

By looking closely at a novel that might be taught to accomplish inclusion for the LGBTQA+ community, providing critical literary and educational theory backing for the novel and others like it, showing the impacts that these stories can hold, and looking in-depth at the response from a class at the university as they studied the novel, I hope to have shown the full scope of what this inclusion can do.

Through many different literary devices such as symbolism, foreshadowing, and repetitious “secrets of the universe,” Benjamin Alire Sáenz, in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, has created a novel that can fulfill the same literary merits that more classic pieces of literature also bring to the classroom.

Teaching the novel in the classroom begins the work that Paulo Freire calls for in speaking truth to power and education as a way to end oppression by representing and speaking about those being oppressed. The novel, used as a pedagogical tool, also echoes the way bell hooks theorized the classroom as the breeding ground for equality in society through the means of representation.

This novel and others like it also begin the work of reducing mental health issues for LGBTQA+ teens, increasing empathy in straight and cisgender teens, and creating a more

inclusive and accepting school community. These effects begin to create a more just and open society outside of the walls of the school as well as within its halls.

Finally, teaching the novel in a classroom of college freshman only one year removed from high school showed the importance of media on the minds and outlooks of these students. The novel affected their understanding of and respect for the LGBTQA+ community. The instructor also gave key insights into teaching this novel and the impact that it can have on students.

In all, this study was constructed to show the merits of these works, signify the importance of their inclusion, and measure the impact they have on students. Works that deal with LGBTQA+ voices and struggles are paramount to creating a more inclusive community within and without the school, and they need to be included in the same way that other minority literature has been included to date. Doing so can and will lead to students inside and outside of the community feeling the way that Aristotle does at the end of the novel:

As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free. Imagine that. Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn't afraid anymore. I thought of that look on my mother's face when I'd told her I was ashamed. I thought of that look of love and compassion she wore as she looked at me. "Ashamed? Of loving Dante?" I took Dante's hand and held it. How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana? (Sáenz 359)



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## **Appendix A: Pre- and Post-Reading Questionnaire**

Please answer all of the following questions truthfully to yourself. Your responses are 100% anonymous and will not be recorded with any identifying characteristics. You can feel free to express yourself without any fear of repercussion as this questionnaire is solely for research purposes.

1. How have the books you've read, TV shows and movies you've watched, and music you've listened to affected your understanding of the world? Have these works in any way shaped your thoughts and personality?

2. How would you describe the community in your school? Is it open and accepting, is it split into cliques, is it close knit, etc.

3. What are your current thoughts and opinions about the Latinx community?

4. What are your current thoughts and opinions about the LGBTQ+ community?