

The Stonewall Books: LGBTQ-Themed Young Adult Novels as Semiotic Beacons

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ABSTRACT

In a society where the LGBTQ community continues to feel the stings of prejudice and discrimination, a straightforward means of conveying accurate information about LGBTQ student lives is urgently needed. The Stonewall Awards, an annual literary prize for “exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience” (American Library Association, 2016), has the potential to serve as an appropriate semiotic beacon for both the acceptance of LGBTQ students as well as LGBTQ self-affirmation. This study investigated the perceptions of secondary school students and future high school teachers toward two Stonewall Award-winning novels. The findings revealed obvious similarities as well as critical differences across reader group perceptions in regard to character actions and reactions to the issues confronting them. The realism (authenticity) and relatability evident in the young adult books used in the study hold implications for serving as fruitful guides for developing deeper understandings of others.

Keywords: LGBTQ studies, young adult literature, Stonewall Awards, semiotics, realism, relatability, intersectionality

Now is a critical time in the perception of LGBTQ students in schools. With the accelerating advent of gay marriage across the globe, young adults can feel more appreciated as full members of their respective polities. Nevertheless, pejorative campaigns against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals in other civic matters make the case for significant prejudice and discrimination against the LGBTQ community (Kosciw et al., 2012). For today's LGBTQ young adults, this era of change, with all its whirlwind potential for civil rights victory, defeat, and many hazy outcomes in between, is no less frightening than earlier days. Scholars are generally in agreement that LGBTQ-themed young adult literature can serve to diminish the insecurity and fear which LGBTQ students feel in such a troubled world (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Gallo, 2004; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003; Reese, 1998; Vetter, 2010). Many studies have already been conducted on the interactions between LGBTQ-themed literature, reader personal characteristics, and LGBTQ well-being or inclusion (Hoffman, 1993); as well as on the interactions between LGBTQ-themed literature, the school environment, and LGBTQ well-being or inclusion (Friend, 1993; Crocco, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2012). However, in spite of several attempts to broadly characterize LGBTQ-themed young adult literature (Clark & Blackburn, 2014; Bach, 2015; Blackburn, Smith, & Nemeth, 2015; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015), we could find little scholarship which concerned itself explicitly with mechanisms for the streamlined dissemination of valuable ideas from these texts. Because young adult novels have the capacity to educate young adults about important social issues (Wolk, 2009), it is important to determine if and to what degree the same is true for LGBTQ-themed young adult novels. All students, teachers, and administrators could benefit from the identification of those features which best convey to new audiences the positive ideas to be found in LGBTQ-themed literature.

Specifically, we contend that literary prizes such as the Stonewall Awards have the potential for effective semiosis on a large societal scale. James English describes literary prizes as "the single best instrument for negotiating between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital" (10). Andrew Ford draws attention to the opposition even in antiquity between the social popularity of literary prize winners and the elite critical opinion of the same (2002). While this may bode poorly for literary prizes which seek to assess the 'artistic merit' of a work, it suggests a greater utility for those literary prizes that wish to establish a firm connection with societal concerns. As such, the recipients of the Stonewall Awards could be of chief import to a community in dire need of positive perception and public relations. To our knowledge, however, there has been very little investigation of the correlation between LGBTQ youth concerns and the content of Stonewall Award-winning young adult novels. Likewise, there do not appear to be any peer-reviewed evaluations of pre-service teacher responses to novels that purport to express aspects of LGBTQ life. Our research therefore focuses on the perceptions of two Stonewall Award-winning books among pre-service teachers and teenaged youth; these populations can provide valuable input on the utility of both this prize and LGBTQ-themed young adult literature in general.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Given our interest in determining if these Stonewall Award-winning novels can "bridge the gap" between LGBTQ populations and sexual majoritarian populations, we choose a framework that purposely cuts across critical difference; evidence of this difference may arise through the course of our research, but we are not making the assumption that it will inherently characterize the events and characters of these novels. As such, special attention should be paid to established conduits of meaning-making, conduits with strong literary and filmic traditions. Bicchieri (2006) has very simply described *norms* as the grammar of social interactions. Queer frameworks are important and helpful in many regards, but we feel that the identification requires a multifarious approach, at least one part of which must take into account the semiotic paradigms encouraging (or not) connections between communities.

We believe that a semiotic – or Peircean representative – approach holds the potential to shed further insights into what can make LGBTQ-themed young adult literature useful in sharing lived LGBTQ truths with a wider audience. The Peircean sign, with its constituent parts of representamen, object, and interpretant, provides the ideal framework to investigate the perceptions of interested readers of LGBTQ-themed young adult literature. According to this framework, a “sign” is a complex of meaning-making relationships (Atkin, 2010). Atkin said that the *representamen* refers to that part of the sign which is most salient for meaning-making, while the *object* refers to that part of the sign which constrains the scope of meaning-making. The *interpretant* is an understanding of the sign which the viewer perceives (Atkin). Peirce elaborated upon the interpretant further, describing immediate, dynamical, and final versions of these (1998). The immediate interpretant is that meaning which was intended to reside in the sign, while the dynamical interpretant refers to the initial reaction of the observer to the sign (Peirce). The final interpretant refers to a cognized/analytical reaction of the observer to the sign. Our survey questions attempt to connect this framework with the readers’ experiences of the novels.

This Peircean semiotic framework offers complex hermeneutic and discursive markers, markers which other frameworks do not always necessarily affirm or accept. Chiasson (2002) argues that this framework is helpful in conceiving of educational experiences as both analyzable and interpretable, while also recognizing the potential for meaning-making to be both a solitary and a group process (Smith, 2005). We agree that “signs are relational entities” (Stables and Semetsky, 2014, p. 3); as such, we believe that a semiotic perspective remembers both similarity and difference across experience and meaning-making, thus providing further key insights into this field of research.

Indeed, the evolution and parameters of the Stonewall Book Awards process evinces the desire of its founders to serve as a “relational entity” between the LGBTQ community and the world-at-large. Although founded in the 1970s, 2010 saw the Stonewall Book Awards inaugurate a young adult-oriented division (Sanders and Mathis, 2012). The growth in the award considerations – from handfuls of books to over 800 in 1995 (Sanders and Mathis) – strengthens the claim that the Stonewall Books are representative of a broad range of LGBTQ experiences. Likewise, Sanders and Mathis wrote that the commitment to gender parity, regional parity, and racial/ethnic parity during judge selection may create more opportunities for semiosis across groups. The authors noted that the selection of judges from as many different library types as possible reveals an awareness of audience accessibility; the award is evidently designed to take readership trends and needs into account.

For these reasons, we felt that the Stonewall Book Awards might act as a proxy for both LGBTQ lived concerns and a bid for accessibility of these concerns to as many populations as possible. This is what it means to us to serve as a ‘semiotic beacon’; if the novels are seen as both veridical to LGBTQ youth and effective in conveying key LGBTQ-oriented concepts to non-LGBTQ individuals, they are Peircean signs valuable for pedagogical purposes. Thus, if we can determine more carefully its reception amongst LGBTQ youth and pre-service teachers, we may shed light on whether the concerns in these books are legitimate. We may also better characterize just how pre-service teachers experience LGBTQ-oriented narratives. The semiotic frameworks experienced and constructed through these texts can help determine the utility of the Stonewall Book Awards – as well as consciously constructed LGBTQ media – towards the acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ students.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, we used a constant-comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to examine the responses of our participants to two young adult books that recently received the Stonewall Book Award

for Children's and Young Adult Literature. While we would have enjoyed having the resources to investigate responses to all the award-winning books since 2011, we felt that employing at least two novels could provide substantive, meaningful data. Because the aforementioned criteria for selection do not change from year to year, we saw less harm in choosing two books for what we hope will be a preliminary exploration amongst many equality and progress-oriented researchers. While we cannot generalize to all LGBTQ award-winning novels from our findings, we believe that they will provide much-needed insights for future investigation.

The two books were *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Saéñz, 2012) – hereby abbreviated as just *Aristotle and Dante* – and *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013). We chose these books because they were similar in some important respects – recently published, close in length, and with significant romantic elements – while different in others – taking place in different environments and eras, with protagonists identifying as either questioning/lesbian (*Fat Angie*) or questioning/gay (*Aristotle and Dante*). In *Fat Angie*, the eponymous protagonist wrestled and ultimately accepted her love for her friend K.C. Romance. Throughout the novel, Angie bonded with her neighbor Jake, dealt with the demands of her mother and brother, experienced bullying at the hands of Stacy Ann, and dearly missed her military-serving sister. In *Aristotle and Dante*, the two eponymous Mexican-American characters lived through events with their families and at their schools, slowly coming to the mutual realization that they were in love.

Participants

The researchers, who were from two different states, applied stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), to select different groups who may find interest in the books and which could perhaps lead to comparisons in responses to the books, especially in light of the age difference of adolescents and preservice teachers. As a result, the participants for this study composed three different groups. One group was comprised of ten undergraduate students majoring in education. While not enrolled in any particular course, these preservice teachers volunteered to read both books. Members of an LGBTQ group, not associated with any school, formed the second group of volunteer participants. All the participants were LGBTQ youth, as befit the mission statement of the Texas LGBTQ youth group these teenagers attended: “The mission of [the youth group] is to provide a safe, non-judgmental, affirming place for LGBTQ young people to express and explore who they are through education, peer-support, advocacy and friendship” (Anonymous, 2016). The youth, all between the ages of 12 and 18, had a month to read the novels. Nine youth read *Aristotle and Dante* and four read *Fat Angie*. The last group of participants consisted of members of a ninth-grade English class in a high school located in a state along the East Coast. As part of a literature unit, the students could select which book they wanted to read. Fourteen selected *Aristotle and Dante* and seven read *Fat Angie*. These students were not required to read these books, but were simply given an opportunity to do so.

Data Collection and Analysis

All participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of eleven questions. The questions focused on several aspects of the readings, some of which addressed initial impressions, authenticity of the book, and relatability to the characters and events. Because we are interested in documenting and analyzing perceptions to discrete semiotic phenomena, we chose to use each individual response as our unit of analysis and not the collected responses of each participant. To that end, we often refer to ‘responses’ instead of ‘participants’ during our elaboration of the results and subsequent discussion.

There were 110 units of analysis each for *Aristotle and Dante* and *Fat Angie* for the pre-service teachers. The LGBTQ youth supplied 99 units of analysis for *Aristotle and Dante*, and 44 units of analysis for *Fat Angie*. The participants in the English class, in turn, supplied 168 units of analysis for *Aristotle and Dante*, and 84 units of analysis for *Fat Angie*. Then, using a constant comparative approach (Mertens, 2015), we analyzed the data in three phases.

Phase 1. In this initial phase, which involved the development of a coding system to form an analytic framework, we worked together examining the second question responses to establish a pattern for initial coding. We then individually read through one group's responses and began generating these initial codes. After coding the responses for one group, we came together again to compare our codes noting similarities and differences. We then discussed the differences at length and arrived at consensus. We followed this same pattern for the other two groups of participants.

Phase 2. At this point, we individually examined the agreed upon initial codes and engaged in more focused coding efforts resulting in the development of salient categorical themes for each participant group (Charmaz, 2006). We then came together to discuss the categories for that particular group and negotiated the final categories. The same process was used for the other two groups.

Phase 3. In this final phase, we examined these emerging themes across groups noting similarities and differences in their responses. At this point, we discussed at length the meaning of each category or theme and the use of appropriate language to clearly represent the category. For example, with *Fat Angie*, we determined that references to Angie's sister, Angie's mother, Angie's brother, and K.C.'s father could be condensed into a 'family relationships' category. Likewise, with *Aristotle and Dante*, we decided that references across groups to personal growth and self-development could be condensed into a 'bildungsroman' category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We have chosen to present the responses in five categories. First are the similarities across books and groups, and then differences across the books, across ages, across sexual orientations and gender identities, and other subgroups.

Similarities Across Books and Groups

All groups found the events and characters of *Aristotle and Dante* relatable. One response revealed that "I was able to connect with each character written! The authors craft made every character relatable," while another stated that "I can definitely relate to trying to find yourself in the world; I can relate to trying to find out who you are." Many readers expressed an appreciation of the author as an engineer of characterization. They never lost sight of the fictional nature of the text, and therefore approved strongly of what they felt were attempts to engage them. The semiosis of mimicry factored into this appreciation; the characters were described well enough in their expressions and growth to allow the readers enjoy the novel.

One response shared the following about the novel's relatability:

There were many things I connected to with Dante and Ari. Even though I am not a boy who likes boys, I have felt the strangeness in not thinking quite the same as my peers, having a family member incarcerated, and feeling out of place racially. These connections really drew me in to the characters.

As signs crafted by the author, Ari and Dante achieved a balance of more LGBTQ-oriented experiences and experiences common to other groups. Notably, the story retained appeal for pre-service teachers because of the latter, but not never lost sight of its LGBTQ focus – which readers of all groups positively acknowledged.

All groups revealed common semiotic touchstones in each of the novels. For the *Fat Angie* responses, K.C.'s purple heart tattoo made an impression (one response remarked that "the purple heart or K.C. Romance was everywhere"), while responses in *Aristotle and Dante* focused on the figurative potential of the novel's birds and dreams. Dreams, for example, "gave insight to how [Aristotle] was feeling about the events of his life or what might happen in the near future", and "were used to express Ari's fears". One youth contended that the dreams "confused [Aristotle] or helped him understand the things he was feeling", while another youth stated

that “Ari’s dream also represented his loneliness”. As evaluative tools for the characters (amongst themselves) and the readers (for understanding the characters), these dreams act – as with the relatability markers above – as semioses of reflective growth. Readers of all groups recognized the dreams as important messages to them, perhaps understanding the dreams to be a common cultural, and even psychological, touchstone for change; the predictive potential of counterfactual thought in general – in this case, dreams – is a key feature of all human thought (Epstude and Peetz, 2012).

Birds, on the other hand, “seemed like a metaphor for the trials Dante goes through in the book while trying to stay happy”. One response stated the following:

[The bird] symbolized both danger and hope. When Dante tried to save the bird in the middle of the road Ari jumped out to save him and got hit by a car, yet later in the book it mentions how they see birds singing and flying around being happy.

One response revealed that “Dante’s emotional response to the shooting of the bird became important to a critical element in the story”, while another shared this interpretation:

Dante tries to rescue a sparrow with a broken wing only to be nearly struck by a car before Ari saves him, and Dante says that Mexicans are “like sparrows” in a letter to Ari. Ari has dreams about sparrows falling from the sky.

Other semiotic templates for further analysis and understanding in *Aristotle and Dante* were perceived elements of self-discovery. Readers remarked on how the novel served as personal evolutions for both characters (and themselves), with obvious moments of wrestling with and growing through adolescent issues: “I was able to relate to [Aristotle] the most... in terms of teenaged identity confusion. There were certainly times in my life where I felt no one in my family could understand the things I was feeling.” As a semiotic marker, the developmental quality of the novel made connection with either of the LGBTQ protagonists likely: “I felt that I related more to Dante, because he actively searches to make sense of his feelings and where his life is going.” Appreciation of particularity – in this case, the lives of sexual minorities – came about through the appreciation of a semiotically multifarious “coming of age.”

Differences Across the Two Novels

The receptions and analyses of *Aristotle and Dante* differed substantially from *Fat Angie* in one respect: both youth and pre-service teachers nearly unilaterally stated a desire to recommend *Aristotle and Dante* to others. This response was similar in both passion and sense of urgency to recommend as many others we read:

I actually called my sisters and told them to buy it immediately after finishing it. It was so well-done. It would be a shame not to share it.

I would recommend this book, it had become one of my top favorite books. The book gives a detail filled setting and plot.

Yes, Yes, Yes! A thousand times yes. It was the first really good LGBT book that I have read and it really focuses on the teenage struggle.

Yes, because I believe in this book alone helped me change my opinion about homosexuality by showing the viewpoint of their mind.

Time and again, readers revealed an admiration for the craft within *Aristotle and Dante*. The philosopher W.V.O. Quine once spoke of a “web of belief” (1970), or the propensity for belief in one arena to be positively or negatively impacted by the belief in another arena. The author’s carefully delineated semioses are, to the

readers, consistent with each other, which lends credence and relatability to the characters and their struggles.

While there were several responses expressing a desire to recommend *Fat Angie*, over a quarter either expressed misgivings about recommending – “not really, I found it very odd,” “I would, however it wouldn’t be at the top of the list” – or refused to do so: “No, because although it was a quick read, certain parts felt rushed and cliché,” “I would not recommend this book. It actually left me with a bad taste.” When responses did recommend *Fat Angie*, though, they focused on a perceived strong sense of realism:

Yes, I believe that this book stays true to real life and is a great story. I would recommend this book to young adults as well as adults.

I would absolutely recommend this book. I was moved by the characters and their interaction. The book deals with things that everyday teens face everyday and should be brought to light.

Harkening back to Quine’s “web of belief,” it seems likely that the web seemed shaky or ill-formed to some of the *Fat Angie* readers. These readers found it hard to imagine the events transpiring matter-of-factly as they were portrayed. Liao and Szabo (2016, p. 3) define as “imaginative resistance” the breakdown of authorial authority, a lack of trust in phenomenological verisimilitude, and/or aesthetic questioning of a text. The responses we chronicle here reveal that some readers experienced this phenomenon enough to linger in the memory after finishing the book.

Generational Differences

As a whole, the pre-service teachers found the events of the two novels to be more realistic and/or authentic than did both groups of youth. All of the pre-service teachers found the content of *Aristotle and Dante* representative of teenage interaction and experiences, with many especially so:

I was hooked by the first couple lines and I couldn’t put it down. The way the author described how his summer started was so realistic and full of sarcasm and real teenage thoughts.

It was intriguing and realistic. The characters were believable teenagers with quirky families and typical confusion.

The pre-service teachers also found *Fat Angie* realistic, although at least three of their responses took issue with particular details, such as the portrayal of military life or the intensity of the bullying that Angie faced. Even so, many pre-service teachers found the events of the novel to accurately reflect teenage life:

The social interactions were typical to what is expected when a student is an outcast. It is sad to say that the majority of teenagers in this society are cruel when their peers don’t fit into the norm, and this book highlights that in the interactions that “Fat Angie” has with her peers.

The bullying and taunting in this book done by both the teens and the parents was scarily accurate, in my opinion.

Meanwhile, the teenagers were more ambivalent about the realism of *Fat Angie*, with half of the relevant North Carolina responses (and one-fifth of the relevant Texas responses) questioning the authenticity of the events:

I don’t think there are as many bullies in today’s society as there were portrayed in the book. However, the reactions Angie had were very realistic.

One youth stated that “the bullying wasn’t very realistic but the relationship Angie had with her mother was”, while another revealed that “even at the end of the book, I didn’t get a clear understanding of why the antagonist didn’t like Angie”. The intensity and circumstances of Angie’s mistreatment were called into question various times. What the author felt was an alignment between *representamen* and object seemed not to be for some youth; the high school experience as object did not match the language and events shared in the novel.

Less than half of the germane pre-service teacher responses expressed this same doubt: “I would have liked more expansion on the main character finding out that Stacy Ann did not hate her just for being fat, but that it was deeper than that”. Where the pre-service teachers differed from the youth again was in the attention, alluded to in the above quote, they paid to the characters’ health, both through discussion of body issues and mental well-being. Twice as many more pre-service teacher responses than youth responses dealt with these two particular themes:

The bodily fat references of Angie were recurrent throughout the book; her double chin, tight fitting uncomfortable clothing, sweating profusely, gasping for breath and her deprived hunger.

The action of cutting is also something that I struggled with and experienced in high school when attempting to deal with emotions and situations I felt I couldn’t handle.

Another feature wherein the pre-service teachers differed substantially from the youth was their recognition of pop cultural elements in *Fat Angie*. One pre-service teacher noted the “reoccurring references to songs, movies, comic books, and television shows but not all were symbolic to the storyline”. Another remarked that “the pop culture references and awkward humour serve as comedy relief for the serious situations going on in the novel”. While at least 14 pre-teacher responses referred to pop culture, none of the youth in either Texas or North Carolina commented on this aspect of the book. While the pop culture references appeared to interest and ultimately increase the credence in the “web of belief” for the pre-service teachers, this did not appear to be the case for the youth.

Differences Across Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Often, the commentaries of the LGBTQ Texan youth were opposed to both those of the pre-service teachers and the North Carolina youth. With *Fat Angie*, for example, the LGBTQ Texas youth remarked often upon the romance between the protagonist Angie and her eventual girlfriend K.C. One reader wanted the novel to “maybe have more cutesy fluffiness between K.C. and Angie? I mean it would give it that much more of a depth into how a lot of lgbt+ relationships are.” Another reader revealed that it was “honestly really nice for me being a lesbian to read this fantasy book about my kind of lifestyle, other than the normal guy and girl love stories. This felt more real to me than those ever will.”

With *Aristotle and Dante*, the LGBTQ youth were concerned with categorizing language, or language which labeled – whether negatively or positively – perspectives on and identities within LGBT life:

I’m extremely curious as to why someone such as the author continually used the word transvestite to describe the person Aristotle’s brother killed. Trans or transgender definitely would have been more appropriate.

I would [recommend the book], with the added comment on the trans-centered violence toward the end. All in all, it’s a good book in a queer library that too often focuses more on the sexuality than the characters and their stories.

One reader “would make Aristotle more openly transgender, and take out the mention of hate-crime towards

the trans girl,” while another shared that “[the book] shows that [the] LGBT+ community is not weird or out of the ordinary, but can be very normal and assimilated to society’s norms.” Another response revealed that “my first impression was that it was very low-key queer, in a good way.”

To a much greater degree – three times as often – as for the North Carolina youth, the LGBTQ Texas youth were dubious about the realism evinced in *Aristotle and Dante*, with some eventually finding veracity in the events and characters and others not:

I question how realistic the parents were with their support. Yes, some parents are really supportive of their children and how they identify, but not all parents are that way. Alas, I question how both sets of parents are supportive of their sons.

I believe it was somewhat accurate. The main characters, teenage boys, displayed more maturity and foresight than most teenage boys I have encountered, but taking into consideration the different time period, it was still a believable portrayal.

It definitely didn’t represent me personally but I do love the struggles of intersectionality addressed throughout the entire book. I do however feel the interactions were very real and very human and the internal struggle Aristotle faced with coming to his own fabulously gay conclusion was definitely as complex as it should be.

The latter quote points to a striking commonality that the LGBTQ Texas youth and the pre-service teachers shared: the recognition of intersectionality. Sociologists Hill Collins and Birge define intersectionality as “an analytic tool that sheds light on the complexity of people’s lives within an equally complex social context” (2016, p.25). As a lens, intersectionality is concerned with understanding lives through “many axes [of social division] that work together and influence each other” (Birge and Collins, p. 2), as well as the “systems of power [that] intersect and coproduce one another to result in unequal material realities and the distinctive social experiences that characterise them” (Collins and Chepp, 2013, p. 60). In an intersectional framework, each ‘axis’ and/or ‘system of power’ corresponds to a social identity and/or label. While the status of Angie and K.C. as intersectionally female and lesbian are of note, we were struck by how both the LGBTQ Texas youth and the pre-service teachers lingered on the intersectionality of an LGBTQ identity and a Mexican-American identity:

I feel like it tackles the internal turmoil any gay minority faces when they aren’t white. He somehow felt broken ethnically because of his homosexuality, as if that invalidated him. It was definitely restated over and over again that he was a half-assed Mexican.

I particularly enjoyed the fact that the boys truly inhabit what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as ‘The Borderlands’. They are not only navigating the space between their Mexican Heritage and their American Culture, they also navigate their own sexual identity. It is clear that the two borderlands which they inhabit complicate the other.

The semiotic potential of *Aristotle and Dante* is enhanced by its intersectionally-enabled multiplicity of identities; with greater opportunities for personalized meaning-making through identity relation, the greater chance there seemed to be for both relatability and realism. Several times reader responses take note of and remark positively upon the combination of identities in this work. Almost uniformly, readers recommend *Aristotle and Dante*; while the recognition of intersectionality cannot be explicitly connected with this fact, these responses do suggest that intersectionality may be a strategy in a text that successfully – and perhaps most importantly, without strong opposition – reaches across personal histories and identities to inform.

Other Notable Differences

The North Carolina youth agreed on several occasions with the pre-service teachers in particular. Two abiding interests of just the North Carolina youth, however, were their desire to –in *Fat Angie* – replace Angie’s girlfriend K.C. with her male friend Jake and their desire to either downplay or disagree with the LGBTQ presence in *Aristotle and Dante*. One reader simply stated that they prefer “KC and Angie... just be friends and Angie and Jake would date”, while another reader connected the same thought with a stylized narrative: “I would have liked for Angie and Jake to date. It would have been your typical teenage relationship, but the cute kind that forms from long-time friends.” One youth contends that “in this day we have seen (sic) that homosexuality has become semi-popular and more accepted”; in an earlier response, the same youth states that they “don’t agree with homosexuality”, and believed that it would make the novel “weird”. Another youth reveals that they could not relate to the characters because they “don’t find the same sex attractive.”

Both the pre-service teachers and the North Carolina youth were preoccupied with the relationships of the two main characters in *Fat Angie*, Angie and K.C., with their families. In particular, the North Carolina youth, by a margin of 2 to 1 in relevant responses, wondered about Angie and her connection with her missing military sister. Both groups also reflected at length on Angie’s relationship with her mother. One pre-service teacher stated that “the interactions with her mother exemplified that she had no parent figure to talk to or to even protect her from the cruelty of her environment”. One pre-service teacher claims that “her mother expects ‘perfection’ and is far from perfect herself”, while another shares that they “believe her not-to-be-bothered-mother was also something that was also connected back to how Angie viewed herself”. One North Carolina youth reveals that “it was almost made out to be like their mom didn’t actually care about Wang and Angie, she only cared about how other people viewed her children and their family.”

This look at family and friendships often predicated the appeal of *Fat Angie*, at least for the pre-service teachers and the North Carolina youth. (The Texas LGBTQ youth responses focused more on the possibility and presence of romance – but even they recognized the family relationships in the novel, albeit to a lesser degree.) Reader responses expressed concern for Angie’s turbulent family life, evaluated Angie’s friendship with Jake, and often compared the relationships of the characters to their experiences with their own families. Pre-service teachers especially found these aspects of *Fat Angie* realistic and relatable; the variety in relationship types of *Fat Angie* drew the sustained semiotic attention of those who might choose these novels for students: namely, adults.

CONCLUSION

While the nation is on a trajectory of acceptance for gay and transgender youth and adults, there is still a major undercurrent of hatred present in our society. Providing literature with LGBTQ themes should not be a one-time event in a classroom (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). Instead, it should be incorporated in a thematic unit in which the semiotic markers of acceptance, compassion, and caring are the major focus (Wood, Kissel & Miller, 2016). Stonewall Award-winning works are an excellent means for approaching this focus. In this way, all marginalized youth can see themselves in the literary characters and, with teacher instruction, empathy, and assistance, the examination and discussion of this literature has the potential to help all students understand one another more completely.

The intersectionality in some LGBTQ books like *Aristotle and Dante* may be a productive way to introduce texts like these into the classroom. One of the participants commented that although he was not gay, he understood being different because of his race and other issues in his life. Students, both gay and straight, can see semiotic connections between parts of their lives with parts of others that they might not have realized. Intersectionality may offer us a way to talk about these issues productively. Negotiating identities, power,

and relationships through the intersectionality framework may help students gain insight into themselves and others.

Certainly, the political reality encourages classroom teachers to avoid these issues, but the data is very clear. Our LGBTQ youth desperately need these books in their high school curriculum, and they are asking for them. While our future teachers may be hesitant to use LGBTQ texts, we must create spaces in our preservice programs to help them productively integrate these books into the literacy curriculum. Teachers, if supplied with novels that accurately convey – at least to LGBTQ youth – the LGBTQ youth experience, can teach all youth how to effectively signal – or make a Peircean sign – in a way that fosters LGBTQ-safe environments. The ways in which these novels successfully appeal to and resonate with LGBTQ youth can teach faculty and student peers how to enforce a better quality of life for these youth. It is through the study of literature on the topic of diversity, in all its forms, that we have a neutral vehicle by which to create “safe zones” for our youth, where students can feel free to be who they are without fear of disdain or reproach from peers (Henkin, 2011; Ratts et al., 2013). This is a most pressing challenge for us as teacher educators – one that needs to be addressed immediately.

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REFERENCE CITATION

APA

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APPENDIX

1. Please state the name of the book that you have just finished reading.
2. What were your first impressions about the book? Why?
3. Were the interactions between characters in the book representative of the way teens/young adults that you know interact? Explain your response.
4. Were there any motifs (recurrent imagery, symbols, or structural elements) in the book you read? If so, what were they?
5. Were you able to personally connect with the feelings, emotions, and actions of the characters? If so, which ones, and why?
6. What are some events in the book that you felt might be especially helpful in informing the reader about the protagonist's struggles? Explain your response.
7. Were there any parts of the book that you question? Explain your response.
8. How realistic are the characters and the problems they are facing? How realistic are the reactions to the things that happen to them? Explain your responses.
9. If you could change one thing about the book to make it more realistic, what would it be? Why?
10. If you could change one thing about the book to make it more enjoyable, what would it be? Why?
11. Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why or why not?
12. Would this book make a good television show or movie? Why or why not?*

