

The 57 Bus



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DASHKA SLATER

Dashka Slater was born in 1963 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to writer parents. Her mother, Dori Appel, is a psychologist and award-winning poet and playwright, and her father, Phillip Slater, was a world-renowned sociologist and professor at Harvard University. Growing up, Slater was an avid reader—her mother taught her to read at the age of four—and she began writing very early on, even publishing her stories in *Cricket Magazine*, a literary publication for children's poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. After living most of her childhood in Massachusetts, Slater moved to the West Coast where she attended the University of California, Berkeley, graduating in 1986 with a B.S. in conservation and resource studies. After college, Slater worked a series of odd jobs but continued to write, and in 1990 she began work as a journalist. She continued working as a staff writer and editor until 1998, at which time she began a freelance career. Slater's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones*, and *Newsweek*, and she is the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, including the Meritorious Achievement Award for print journalism from *Media Alliance* in 1994. Slater's writing has also been anthologized, including in the 1995/1996 *Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry*, and she is the author of several children's books and numerous fiction and nonfiction works for both adults and young adults. In 2000, Slater's adult novel, *The Wishing Box*, was published to both popular and critical acclaim, becoming one of *The Los Angeles Times*' best fiction books of that year. Slater was also the recipient of a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004, and her children's book, *Escargot*, won the Wanda Gag Read-Aloud Award in 2017. Her young adult true crime narrative, *The 57 Bus*, which began as an article for *The New York Times Magazine*, was the winner of the 2018 Stonewall Book Award and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor. Slater lives in Oakland, California, with her husband, Cliff Baker. The couple has a son named Milo.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dashka Slater's *The 57 Bus* focuses on the attack of Sasha, a genderqueer teenager living in Oakland, California, and the biases that lead to their attack. Slater's book mentions other hate crimes, which are crimes motivated by prejudice in which victims are singled out because they belong to (or are perceived to belong to) a specific marginalized group or race, and many of her character's deal with different forms of this discrimination. Just two years prior to Sasha's own assault,

CeCe McDonald, an African American transgender woman, was attacked outside a bar in Minneapolis, Minnesota. McDonald was assaulted by a group of three men who cut her face with a broken glass from the bar. McDonald defended herself with a pair of scissors from her purse and stabbed one of her attackers in the chest. He later died from his injuries, and McDonald was charged and convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 41 months in a men's prison. McDonald's attack, and her subsequent arrest and conviction, has been widely condemned as racist and transphobic, and her case drew considerable public outcry, including a feature in *Mother Jones*, one of the magazines Slater herself has contributed to. McDonald accepted a plea bargain of 41 months rather than risk the 20-year term she was threatened with. Ultimately, she served time in two different men's prisons and was released in January 2014 after completing 19 months of her sentence. McDonald is now a public activist, advocating for LGBTQ rights and speaking out about the widespread violence against trans women of color.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Dashka Slater's books and articles focus on social justice, an interest she no doubt inherited from her father, a famous sociologist. Philip Slater was the author of several books, including *The Pursuit of Loneliness: America's Discontent and the Search for a New Democratic Ideal* and *Wealth Addiction*. Slater's mother, Dori Appel, who endlessly encouraged her daughter to write and express herself, has also penned numerous plays, poems, and comedic books, such as *Girl Talk* and *Hot Flashes*. In addition to her parents, Slater credits several classic novelists with inspiring her work, including Jane Austen, Toni Morrison, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez; however, she claims that children's books have been the most influential in her own writing. Slater names E. Nesbit, Lewis Carroll, and E.B. White, especially [Charlotte's Web](#), among her favorites. *The 57 Bus*, which focuses on an actual crime with real characters, is a true crime narrative. The genre of true crime originated in sixteenth-century Britain, but it was made popular in America during the 1960's with Truman Capote's [In Cold Blood](#). Other popular true crime narratives include Erik Larson's [The Devil in the White City](#) and *The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer. Slater's writing also frequently engages issues of race, gender, and sexuality like Ibi Zoboi's *American Street*, *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, and *Queer, There, and Everywhere: 23 People Who Changed the World* by Sarah Prager.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The 57 Bus*

- **When Written:** 2016
- **Where Written:** Oakland, California
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, True Crime
- **Setting:** Oakland, California
- **Climax:** At Richard's second legal progress report, Karl, Sasha's father, stands in front of the court and forgives Richard for his attack on Sasha. Subsequently, the judge modifies Richard's sentence from seven years to five and recommends that he serve his time in a juvenile facility rather than an adult prison.
- **Antagonist:** Richard
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. Dashka Slater's children's book, *Dangerously Ever After*, is being made into an animated film by Fantasiation Studios. The film focuses on the sassy Princess Amanita and the shy prince who gives her a gift of roses.

NoH8. The NoH8 campaign mentioned in *The 57 Bus* is a charitable organization that was founded in 2009 following California's Proposition 8, which effectively banned same-sex marriage. The campaign began as a silent protest of the proposal in which subjects were photographed with duct-taped mouths and NOH8 painted on their cheeks. Proposition 8 was declared unconstitutional by a federal court in 2010, but it was another three years before the ruling went into effect. The campaign continues to advocate for LGBTQ marriage and gender and human equality.



PLOT SUMMARY

Dashka Slater's *The 57 Bus* begins as Richard, a sixteen-year-old African American boy from Oakland High School, and Sasha, a genderqueer senior from a private school in Berkeley, board the number 57 bus in Oakland, California. Richard and Sasha don't know each other, but they both ride the 57 bus home from school every day. Sasha is agender, which means they don't identify as either male or female, and their **skirt** draws the attention of Richard and his friends. As a prank, Richard holds a lit cigarette lighter to Sasha's skirt, "but wait," Slater interrupts. Something awful is about to happen. "There must be something you can do," she says. Then, Slater begins to tell Sasha and Richard's stories.

Sasha is the only child of Karl and Debbie, a couple from the "middle-class foothills" of Oakland, and when Sasha is just seven years old, they are diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. The doctor tells Karl and Debbie not to get their hopes

up—Autistic kids don't have "normal" lives—and Sasha is indeed different. Sasha is deeply interested in language, in the way it looks and sounds, and the way it divides people into two different genders of male and female. Sasha's own gender identity doesn't fit into either category, and they begin to create their own, more inclusive, languages. At school, Sasha is just one of a handful of kids who identify on the LGBTQ spectrum, and they are comfortable with their identity. Since Sasha has questions about their gender, they wear a skirt every day to add some femininity to their otherwise masculine clothes, and few comments are ever made about their eclectic choice of clothing. Sasha has a close group of friends that supports them in every way, and they even have Nemo, a gender fluid "soul mate, but not in the romantic sense." Sasha is a happy and quirky kid who is obsessed with Russians and bus transit, and they don't even mind their hour-long commute when they climb on the bus that day.

Richard comes from the "flatlands of East Oakland." He lives with his mom and step-dad, along with his little brother and his two cousins (their own mother was killed in a drive-by shooting, and Jasmine, Richard's mother, is now their guardian.) Richard is "goofy" and likes to joke around. Sometimes, his jokes can go too far, but they are always in good humor. Richard has a kind and comforting side as well, and friends who are anxious or upset find him calming and reassuring. Richard has had some trouble, though. His grades aren't great, and he likes to skip class. He even had to spend a year away at a youth home for fighting, but Richard is committed to turning his life around. His friend Skeet was recently murdered, and Richard wants to make something of his life. He wants to get out of Oakland and make his mother proud. Richard joins a program at school with Kaprice Wilson, the truancy specialist, and begins to buckle down.

When Richard sets fire to Sasha's skirt that day on the 57 bus, he doesn't intend for it to actually happen. The fabric is supposed to smoke and smolder as a joke, but everything happens so fast. Sasha is badly burned and requires several surgeries and nearly a month in a burn unit, and Richard is charged with two hate crimes. He is being charged as an adult, and he stands to spend the rest of his life in prison. Richard barely understands what is happening to him after he is taken into police custody, and he isn't allowed to see his mother for nearly a week. His name is all over the news, and everybody thinks he hates gay people. Richard is deeply sorry for what he is done, but his lawyer withholds his heartfelt letters of apology to Sasha, claiming they "contain an admission of guilt." In the meantime, Richard is portrayed by the media and the court as a hardened criminal, and his black skin means that he is vulnerable to the systemic and institutionalized racism that plagues California's criminal justice system. Richard goes through multiple hearings before he is even sentenced, and then the district attorney's office offers him five years with no

hate-crimes if he pleads guilty to assault. Before Richard can answer, the offer is quickly taken back, and he is forced to sign a guilty plea for seven years in state prison. He will have the chance to reduce some of his time with good behavior, but Richard will be spending at least the next five years locked up.

As Sasha heals physically, the surgeries they must endure are horrific. Besides the unthinkable pain, they risk major infection, and even death, and it takes them months to fully recover. Still, during that time, their friends and the community respond with such an outpouring of love and support that Sasha sometimes finds it hard to believe they have been a victim of a hate crime. Sasha isn't sure how to feel about Richard or what his punishment should be. Their agender identity means that they don't see things quite as black and white as others do, and Sasha appreciates that Richard didn't mean for any of this to happen.

Life quickly goes on for Sasha after the fire, and they are soon accepted at MIT. Sasha has dreamed of going to MIT forever, and they can't wait to start their new life. Sasha finds a home at Epsilon Theta, MIT's "anti-fraternity," and by the time Richard is finally sentenced, Sasha has largely moved on from the fire.

They aren't even in court that final day when the judge recommends that Richard stay within the juvenile system, but Richard's punishment continues. Sasha and their family accept his letters and words of apology (wishing they had access to the letters much earlier, as the letters would have given them an important insight into Richard's thoughts and emotions), and as Slater's book ends, Richard still has two more years left on his sentence. Throughout the course of Richard's case, Slater explores "restorative justice," an alternative form of juvenile punishment that focuses on communication, redemption, and forgiveness instead of a "punitive" approach. California's justice system recognizes the program's merits, and even uses it in some cases, but ultimately, they don't believe Richard's case is appropriate. Unlike Sasha, the state of California only sees Richard in terms of guilt and innocence. Richard is guilty and he must go to jail.

Sasha must remind their friends to use proper pronouns when addressing them. They also must petition the White House for their gender identity to be validated and represented on official, public forms. Overall, though, Sasha is a happy and well-adjusted teenager from a good family, and they have deep and meaningful relationships with several different friends. Sasha is highly intelligent (they are even accepted to MIT) and thoughtful, and they appreciate life's subtle nuances and many gray areas. They are obsessed with all things Russian and love public transit, and they even enjoy their commute each day aboard the 57 bus. When Richard lights Sasha's skirt on fire as a prank, Sasha can't understand why anyone would do such a thing, but they also appreciate that Richard never intended to hurt them. Their recovery after the fire is long and grueling, but Sasha never waivers in their commitment to their true gender identity, and they manage to show compassion for Richard as well. Within *The 57 Bus*, Sasha represents the existence of a nonbinary gender identity, an identity that both Sasha and author Dashka Slater demand to be accepted and respected.

Richard – The antagonist of *The 57 Bus* and Jasmine's son. As a prank, Richard lights Sasha's **skirt** on fire aboard the 57 bus and is subsequently arrested and charged with two hate-crimes, but his fate is sealed long before this senseless and discriminatory act. Richard comes from the "flatlands of East Oakland," and his black skin means that he is vulnerable to the systemic and institutionalized racism that plagues Oakland's society. By the age of sixteen, Richard has already served time in a group home, and several of his friends have been sent to prison, or worse, have been killed in the violence that is commonplace in Oakland. Still, Richard is committed to making something of himself. He wants to graduate and make his mother proud, and he never intends to hurt Sasha when they become the object of his foolish prank that day on the bus. As an African American, Richard is more likely to be charged as an adult for crimes committed as a juvenile, and he is more likely to serve time for those crimes than his white counterparts, and this indeed proves true after he is arrested for Sasha's attack. Society is already convinced that Richard is a "criminal," and the justice system is likewise convinced that prison is the best environment for him. Richard, however, is deeply remorseful for his actions, and he doesn't even know why he targeted Sasha in the first place. Sasha and their family are accepting of his apologies. They believe that Richard never wanted to hurt Sasha, and they are able to find closure and positive healing despite the ongoing debacle that is Richard's legal experience. Richard represents what is possible within juvenile criminal justice if alternative forms of justice are considered. Richard isn't an inherently bad person, and he doesn't truly belong in prison, Slater argues. His meaningful rehabilitation and redemption independent of his prison stay suggest that "punitiveness for its own sake" is not necessary for criminal justice to be achieved, especially in juvenile cases.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sasha – The protagonist of *The 57 Bus*, and Debbie and Karl's only child. Sasha is agender, meaning they don't identify as either male or female, and they prefer the nongendered pronouns they/them/their instead of he/she, his/hers, him/her. Sasha identifies as genderqueer, which means that they "question" their gender. In line with this, Sasha wears a **skirt** everyday so that other people are just as "confused" about their gender as they are. At the age of seven, Sasha is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, and their parents are told that they will never live a "normal" life. Sasha's life is indeed different, and

Debbie – Sasha’s mother and Karl’s wife. Like her husband, Debbie is accepting and supportive of Sasha’s genderqueer identity, but she has a difficult time understanding what that is exactly. She can understand being gay or transgender, but she can’t “get her head around genderqueer.” Still, since it is important to Sasha, it is important to Debbie as well, even if she does get Sasha’s pronouns wrong occasionally, referring to Sasha as he/his/him instead of they/their/them. Debbie shows compassion for Richard after he is arrested for Sasha’s attack, but she is more resentful than Karl. She doesn’t want Richard to be tried as an adult, but beyond that, she isn’t comfortable “judging him.” She believes that hate breeds more hate, and prison is full of hate, but she also doesn’t want to see Richard go free and hurt somebody else. She fully forgives Richard after reading his letters of apology though, and she admits that if she had been able to read the letters earlier, she would have felt differently about Richard from the start (Richard’s lawyer had held on to them for the duration of the case, since he believed they “contain[ed] an admission of guilt” that would jeopardize Richard’s case). Debbie ultimately symbolizes the possibility and power of forgiveness within *The 57 Bus*; Richard’s genuine remorse allows Debbie to move away from anger and pain to acceptance and closure, and this forgiveness in turn helps Richard to heal and move on as well. With the character of Debbie, Slater suggests that meaningful justice is not necessarily punitive, and that it doesn’t always require prison.

Karl – Sasha’s father and Debbie’s husband. Karl is a kindergarten teacher at one of the local schools in Oakland, and he is an exceedingly kind and accepting man. He is understanding and supportive of Sasha’s genderqueer identity, and he is patient as Sasha discovers and explores that identity. He finds Sasha’s dedication to their gender identity “admirable,” and he corrects others when they use gendered pronouns to address Sasha. Karl is committed to helping others understand Sasha’s identity as well, and he even sends a letter to his colleges and students’ families explaining nonbinary gender after Richard attacks Sasha on the 57 bus. Karl shows compassion towards Richard as well, and he is accepting of his apologies and remorse. Like Debbie, Karl does not want to see Richard tried as an adult for his assault on Sasha, and he doesn’t want the boy to spend his life in prison. Instead, Karl hopes that Richard can learn from his senseless attack on Sasha and become an ally for the LGBTQ community.

Jasmine – Richard and Derriyon’s mother, Savannah’s sister, and Derick’s wife. Jasmine gives birth to Richard when she is just fifteen years old, but she is a dedicated and attentive mother. She doesn’t meet Derick until Richard is five years old, and the couple have Derriyon a few years later. Jasmine also becomes the legal guardian of her sister Savannah’s two daughters after Savannah is killed in a drive-by shooting. Jasmine is employed in the kitchen of a long-term care facility, and she works hard to make sure that her kids are provided for

and have a good life. She is heartbroken after Richard’s attack on Sasha, and she is determined to apologize to Sasha and their family, “mother to mother, parent to parent.” Still, Jasmine is supportive of Richard, and she “scrapes together” the money to hire a lawyer and is present during every court appearance, even when she has a difficult getting time off work from her two jobs.

Kaprice Wilson – The truancy coordinator at Oakland High School. Kaprice is from the streets of Oakland, and after her first love, Lil’ Jerry, an active member in one of the city’s gangs, is killed in a shooting, she goes to college and turns her life around. Kaprice and Richard have a special relationship, and Richard benefits from the structure and family-like atmosphere of Kaprice’s program at Oakland High. With Kaprice’s help, Richard is able to bring his grades up and make graduation a real possibility, and she is able to help other students with the same goal. Cherie, and others, refer to Kaprice as “Mom,” and they rely on her for guidance and stability. Kaprice uses restorative justice to help the Oakland High students heal after Richard’s assault on Sasha, and her efforts serve as an example of the benefits of restorative justice.

Andrew / Samantha – Sasha’s close childhood friend. Andrew is biologically born as Samantha, but he never feels comfortable inside a female body. Sasha helps to validate Andrew’s transgender identity after his therapist dismisses him, and Sasha gives him the courage to begin his gender transition. Andrew identifies as a gay man, but he keeps his “trans status on the down low” for fear of discrimination and violence. He watches as Sasha recovers from their attack on the 57 bus, and Andrew knows that threats of physical violence because of his gender are his “reality.” By the end of Slater’s book, Andrew begins to identify as genderqueer, but he is not comfortable stepping too far outside the gender binary. As a gay man, Andrew still fits somewhat into one of society’s accepted genders and he wants to keep it that way. “I’ve already been asked enough questions about my genitals,” he says.

Nemo – Sasha’s “soul mate, but not in the romantic sense.” Nemo is gender fluid, and like Sasha, they prefer gender neutral pronouns. Nemo’s gender fluid identity means that they “have the potential to be anything, any gender at any time.” Nemo is also asexual, and “doesn’t do sexual relationships,” but their coupling with Sasha is not based on sexual feelings. Nemo and Sasha instead share a deep friendship based on mutual respect and understanding of the other’s nonbinary gender.

Jamal – One of Richard’s friends. Jamal is on the 57 bus the day Richard sets fire to Sasha’s **skirt**, and he even gives Richard the cigarette lighter and encourages him to light the flame. Jamal “howls with laughter” as Sasha’s skirt burns, but he is never questioned by the police after Richard’s arrest.

Bill Du Bois – Richard’s lawyer after his attack on Sasha. Du Bois is an experienced attorney of forty years. He is

knowledgeable and competent, and he seems to have Richard's best interests at heart, but he isn't willing to entertain restorative justice as a reasonable alternative to Richard's punishment. Like the district attorney's office, Du Bois is convinced that prison is the right place for Richard, at least for a while. He also makes the mistake of holding on to Richard's apology letters to Sasha until after the case has come to a close, believing that they contain a dangerous "admission of guilt"; Karl and Debbie wish they had been able to read the heartfelt letters earlier, as the letters gave them a deeper insight into Richard's character and may have changed what kind of outcome they wanted for Richard.

The Man with a Mustache / Dan Gale – The "Good Samaritan" who puts out Sasha's flaming skirt on the 57 bus. Dan Gale is just a regular guy, but he is the only one who actively tries to help Sasha after Richard sets her skirt on fire. Debbie and Karl invite Dan to their home to formally thank him after Sasha gets home from the hospital.

Jeff – A student at Oakland High School. Jeff is punished at school using restorative justice after he slaps both TC and Pancha on their backsides. With restorative justice, Jeff, TC, and Pancha are able to resolve their conflict. After their meeting, Jeff understands how his actions hurt TC and Pancha, and the girls in turn have a chance to talk about their own feelings and start the healing process. They all become friends because of restorative justice, and they each symbolize the possibilities and benefits of restorative justice as an alternative form of punishment.

TC – [A student at Oakland High School. Jeff grabs TC's backside and is punished by the school using restorative justice. Because of restorative justice, TC and Jeff are able to resolve their conflict, and they even become friends. Like Pancha, TC serves as an example of the possible results and benefits of restorative justice as an alternative form of punishment.](#)

Pancha – A student at Oakland High School. Jeff grabs Pancha's backside and is punished by the school using restorative justice. Because of restorative justice, Pancha and Jeff are able to resolve their conflict, and they even become friends. Like TC, Pancha serves as an example of the possible results and benefits of restorative justice as an alternative form of punishment.

Nancy O'Malley – The district attorney of Alameda County. O'Malley has no problem trying Richard as an adult for his assault on Sasha, and she condemns the attack as a hate crime, which she considers a form of "discrimination" similar to "segregation." O'Malley is convinced that Richard requires a "structured environment," and she insists that restorative justice is an inappropriate approach to his punishment. In O'Malley's opinion, Richard belongs in prison.

Sujatha Baliga – The "foremost expert on restorative justice" in the United States. Sujatha refuses to "peddle" restorative

justice, and she is never formally called to weigh in on Richard's case, but she believes Sasha and Richard are ideal candidates for the program. "All of them are such gorgeously enlightened, beautiful people," she says.

Healy – Sasha's close friend. Healy has a difficult time coping with Sasha's attack and can't imagine what it must have been like for Sasha to wake up on fire. He loves his friend and supports them, and he agrees to wear a **skirt** to school in a sign of solidarity even though he hates skirts.

Cherie – Richard's oldest friend. Richard and Cherie grow up in the same neighborhood and have known each other all their lives. Cherie supports Richard, even after he is arrested for Sasha's assault, and she is deeply affected by his actions and legal difficulties. Cherie has a special relationship with Kaprice Wilson, and she benefits greatly from her truancy program at Oakland High School.

Lil' Jerry – Kaprice Wilson's boyfriend in the 1980s. Lil' Jerry is an active member of one of Oakland's gangs. Although she wants to get pregnant and go on welfare (something all the women around her do), Lil' Jerry insists that Kaprice go to college and turn her life around, though he forbids her from dating other men. Lil' Jerry is killed in a shooting before Kaprice goes to college.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lloyd – Richard's cousin. Lloyd is two years older than Richard and just as "goofy." He is aboard the 57 bus the day Richard lights fire to Sasha's **skirt**. Lloyd influences Richard's bad behavior, but like Jamal, he is never questioned by police after Richard is arrested.

Michael – Sasha's best friend. Like Healy, Michael also supports Sasha and wears a skirt during the Skirts for Sasha event at Maybeck.

Carrie – Sasha's friend. Carrie first lends Sasha a **skirt** in the tenth grade during a gag dress up day at Maybeck, and she again gives them an entire bag of skirts the following year.

Skeet – [Richard's close friend and a student at Oakland High School. Skeet is sentenced to time in a juvenile home after he is arrested for fighting. Skeet runs away from the home and goes back to Oakland, where he is soon killed in one of the city's many shootings.](#)

Derick – Jasmine's husband, Richard's stepfather, and Derriyon's father.

Savannah – Jasmine's sister and Richard's aunt. Savannah is killed in a drive-by shooting in Oakland, leaving Jasmine the guardian of her two daughters.

Derriyon – Richard's little brother, Jasmine and Derick's son.

Dr. Grossman – Sasha's surgeon at the San Francisco burn unit.

Shyam Sundar – One of Sasha's teachers at Maybeck. Sasha is

Shyam's favorite student, and he finds it difficult to teach after Sasha's attack.

Regis – Richard's cousin. Regis is openly gay and androgynous, and he goes to all of Richard's court appearances as a show of support.

Darris Young – An organizer from Oakland's social justice advocacy group. Darris follows Richard's case as it unfolds on television, and he contacts Jasmine and gets her interested in restorative justice.

Ian – Sasha's close friend and Teah's boyfriend.

Teah – Sasha's close friend and Ian's girlfriend.

TERMS

Agender – Having a gender identity that does not align with "any gender." **Sasha** is agender, and they do not identify as either male or female.

Aromantic – Not being "romantically attracted to anyone." **Sasha** identifies as aromantic when they describe their nontraditional relationship with **Nemo**, who happens to be asexual and gender fluid. Sasha and Nemo are "soul mates, but not in a romantic sense."

Asexual – Not being "physically attracted to anyone." **Nemo** is asexual and "doesn't do sexual relationships." Their relationship with **Sasha** is not rooted in sexual attraction; rather, it is based on their deep friendship and common understanding of their nonbinary genders.

Cisgender – Having a gender identity that matches one's "birth sex." **Sasha's** parents, **Karl** and **Debbie**, are cisgender.

Cupiosexual – A term for sexuality that describes someone who "doesn't feel sexual attraction, but is still interested in sex."

Sasha identifies as gray-cupiosexual, meaning they only "occasionally" have feelings of sexual attraction.

Genderqueer – A gender identity that "doesn't fit neatly into male/female categories." **Sasha** is genderqueer. They "question" their gender identity and don't feel strongly about being one gender or the other. Sasha describes that they are lacking "the file marked *Gender*" in their brain.

Gender fluid – Having a gender identity that "sometimes identifies as male and sometimes female." **Nemo** is gender fluid and has "the potential to be anything, any gender at any time."

Gray sexual – A sexual identity that "mostly doesn't feel sexual attraction but does occasionally." **Sasha** identifies as gray-cupiosexual, meaning they "don't feel sexual attraction, but are still interested in sex."

Transgender – A gender identity that is different from one's "birth sex." **Andrew**, who is biologically born Samantha, is a transgender man.

Quiromantic – Someone who "doesn't understand the difference between romantic and platonic love." **Sasha** also identifies as quiromantic, and the relationship they share with **Nemo** is not romantic. Sasha and Nemo "cuddle," but their relationship is not sexual, and "instead of 'I love you's' it's like, 'You're the greatest.'"



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The 57 Bus tells the true story of two California teens, Sasha and Richard, who meet by chance on an Oakland bus. When Richard, an African American junior from nearby Oakland High School, boards the bus and sees Sasha, a genderqueer kid in a **skirt**, Sasha quickly becomes the object of Richard's misguided prank. Sasha, who prefers the gender-neutral pronoun they instead of he or she, and does not identify as either male or female, wears their skirt alongside a masculine shirt and vest, which draws the negative attention of Richard and his friends. After Richard repeatedly flicks a cigarette lighter near the gauzy fabric of Sasha's skirt (thinking it will just smoke and smolder as a joke) and Sasha bursts into flames, Sasha is severely burned and Richard is charged with two hate crimes. Dashka Slater's *The 57 Bus* chronicles the events leading up to this terrible crime and the healing that takes place after, but it also serves as a guidebook to understanding key LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) issues and concerns. Sasha is the target of Richard's bullying because he "doesn't like gay people," and he assumes that Sasha is homosexual. Sasha, however, is not gay, and this frequent misunderstanding is just one of many LGBTQ misconceptions dispelled within Slater's book. Through the writing of *The 57 Bus*, Slater passionately advocates for LGBTQ understanding and empathy, and effectively argues that gender and sexuality are not synonymous terms.

Gender, according to Sasha, is "the word for what people feel about themselves, how they feel *inside*," and it does not necessarily align with the biological sex assigned at one's birth. Sasha is genderqueer—meaning they question their gender—and considers their identity as agender. While other people seem to inherently know their gender identity, "Sasha ransacks their own brain looking for the file [marked *Gender*], but it doesn't seem to be there." Deep down, Sasha feels neither masculine nor feminine. Sasha's close friend, Andrew, was biologically born a girl but now lives his life as a transgender

man. “I just knew I wasn’t a girl,” Andrew explains. “I just knew that was not who I was at all.” While Andrew also has deep questions concerning his gender identity, he is certain that he does not feel feminine. Nemo, another of Sasha’s close friends, identifies as gender fluid. According to Nemo, “*Gender fluid* means I have the potential to be anything, any gender at any time.” Nemo, who also uses the they/them pronoun, identifies as both masculine and feminine, and as such, they “can be male, female, masculine, feminine, neither, both.” Each of these gender identities highlights the differences across the gender spectrum within the LGBTQ community.

On the other hand, sexuality, according to Sasha, is “the category for who you are physically attracted to,” which is often experienced independent of gender within the LGBTQ community. Sasha explains their own sexuality as hybrid “gray-cupiosexual.” A cupiosexual “doesn’t feel sexual attraction, but is still interested in sex,” and a graysexual “mostly doesn’t feel sexual attraction but does occasionally.” Sasha has minimal interest in sex, and their chosen sexual identity reflects this. Andrew, who keeps his trans status “on the down low” for fear of discrimination, sexually identifies as a gay man. Biologically speaking, Andrew was assigned female anatomy at birth, but his gender identity as a man means that he is also homosexual. Lastly, Nemo identifies as asexual and doesn’t “do sexual relationships”; Nemo is not physically attracted to anyone, regardless of sex or gender, and as such, they completely avoid sex and sexual relationships. Within *The 57 Bus*, Slater defines multiple terms for sexual attraction and identity, including homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual (being attracted to all people across the gender spectrum), and Sasha and their friends underscore the many sexual identities present in the LGBTQ community.

Of course, Sasha’s unique gender and sexual identity does not mean that they do not also experience meaningful relationships. On the contrary, Sasha and Nemo are exceedingly close and mutually fulfilled by a nontraditional coupling. Sasha is aromantic, meaning they do not feel romantic attraction, and they see little difference between romantic and platonic love. However, paired with Nemo’s asexuality, Sasha and Nemo “complement each other,” becoming the other’s “most important person.” Sasha describes Nemo as “a soul mate, maybe, but not in the romantic sense.” While Sasha is also quick to point out that they are not with Nemo simply because they both identify as gender nonbinary (gender is simply “another thing they have in common”), Slater’s close examination of LGBTQ identities highlights the diversity that exists within the gender spectrum and implicitly advocates for more thoughtful and nuanced consideration of these differences.



ADOLESCENT CRIME VS. ADULT CRIME

Sixteen-year-old Richard unexpectedly finds himself in legal hot water after setting fire to Sasha, a genderqueer teen, in a poorly conceived adolescent prank gone terribly wrong. Under a California law known as Proposition 21, prosecutors have the unilateral power to try underage offenders as adults in cases involving violent crime, and this is exactly what happens to Richard. He is treated as an adult for committing a crime as an adolescent, and *The 57 Bus* examines the implications of this common legal practice. Through the representation of Richard and his crime, Slater at once condemns the discrimination that lead to the assault while also advocating for Richard’s right to be tried as an adolescent. Ultimately, Slater argues that adolescent brains do not operate the same as adult brains, thus, she posits, adolescents should not be tried as adults within a court of law.

Slater contends that the juvenile brain develops in such a way that teenagers often behave “impulsively,” rendering sound decision-making difficult. According to Slater, as the human brain develops during adolescence, it is “busily lining important neural pathways with a fatty sheath called myelin.” This myelin allows messages—thoughts, actions, interpretations and the like—to travel throughout the brain by way of neurological synapses, making thought processes faster. The prefrontal cortex, “the part of the brain responsible for reason, planning, and deliberation,” is the last part of the brain myelinated, and is typically not fully myelinated until a juvenile reaches their early twenties. As such, the adolescent brain requires more time to make sound, reasonable decisions compared to an adult brain. Additionally, Slater claims that the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for processing emotional signals, becomes increasingly sensitive during puberty. The limbic system informs one’s responses to stimuli, including “*Avoid! Investigate! Eat! Fight! Flirt!*” According to Slater, this hyperactive system is “one reason teenagers become both more emotional and more interested in having new and intense experiences.” Slater points out that a teenager’s underdeveloped prefrontal cortex and their overly stimulated limbic system often combines into what psychologists refer to as “hot cognition.” Hot cognition assumes that when faced with new or stressful situations, teenagers often think with their limbic system rather than their prefrontal cortex, and the resulting actions can be catastrophic. Furthermore, Slater continues, “the presence of peers is one of the things that raises the emotional stakes,” making teens more likely to seek out risky behavior “without pausing to consider the consequences.” Neurologically speaking, a teenage brain does not process stimuli in the same way that an adult brain does, which suggests that adolescents should be held to a different set of legal consequences.

Indeed, Richard does show symptoms of “hot cognition” during Sasha’s assault, which implies that his decision-making abilities are underdeveloped. During Sasha’s attack on Oakland bus

number 57, surveillance cameras show that Richard is in fact influenced by another youth—Richard’s friend Jamal points at Sasha and whispers, “Look at this dude,” before handing Richard the lighter. Presumably, without the influence of Jamal, Richard’s bullying of Sasha would not have involved the lighter. After Richard flicks the lighter near Sasha’s **skirt** and the fabric fails to hold a flame, Jamal then encourages Richard to continue flicking the lighter three more times. “Do it,” Jamal urges. Even if the lighter had been Richard’s idea, he may have simply given up after the first failed attempt without Jamal’s influence. Lastly, once Sasha’s skirt does catch fire, Richard is immediately remorseful. While “Jamal howls with laughter,” Richard jumps off the bus but instantly begins to chase after it, trying to see if Sasha is okay. Richard’s bullying of Sasha is senseless and cruel, yet his subsequent guilt and “sadness” suggests that he is not an inherently criminal young man. Instead, Slater argues, Richard’s actions are the result of peer pressure and his own “hot cognition,” which in turn leads to poor decision making.

Furthermore, Richard’s age has important implications once he is arrested, and it continues to work against him while he is in police custody. According to Slater, “more than 90 percent of juveniles who are interrogated by police don’t wait to talk to an attorney and don’t understand the rights the police have read to them.” Richard is no different, and the police question him for several minutes before even reading him his rights. Richard is open and forthcoming with investigators, even though this is not legally advisable, and he even admits that he is “homophobic” and “doesn’t like gay people.” It is later discovered that Richard has poor understanding of the word “homophobia” and believes it means that “he isn’t gay.” Of course, Richard’s misunderstanding further incriminates him, and he is ultimately charged with two hate crimes. According to a Boston-based study on hate crimes, Slater maintains, most hate crimes are not committed by organized hate groups. Rather, an overwhelming number of hate crimes are perpetrated by “young people ‘looking for some fun’ at the expense of someone they regard as lower status.” Richard’s attack on Sasha occurs under similar circumstances, and this, coupled with Richard’s poor understanding and his “hot cognition,” is precisely why Slater argues against prosecuting Richard as an adult. If Richard’s brain is only able to process information and respond to stimuli as an adolescent, then he should be treated as such within a court of law.



BINARY THOUGHT AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

As an agender teen, Sasha’s gender identity does not align with either male or female characteristics, and they prefer gender neutral pronouns rather than the traditional he or she. Sasha views gender not as a binary difference between male and female, but as a spectrum with varying degrees of masculinity and femininity, including even

the absence of gender. Of course, the English language relies on binary words and definitions, and Sasha is frequently at odds with the gendered words used to describe them. By blurring the lines between male and female, guilt and innocence, and victim and offender, Slater implies that most people, regardless of their gender identity, do not neatly fit into binaries. Thus, Slater argues the significance of inclusive, nonbinary language, and the importance of appreciating life’s gray areas.

In addition to gendered pronouns, Sasha’s identity is out of place in other binary circumstances as well. Sasha’s signature outfit, a mismatched **skirt** paired with a shirt and vest, is a “sartorial gender mash-up” that is “masculine above, feminine below.” As neither a man nor woman, Sasha dresses as both at the same time. While on a family trip, Sasha’s father stops at a roadside rest area, but the public bathrooms are labeled Men and Women. “There’s no bathroom for me,” Sasha tells their parents and proceeds to hold their bladder for a full six hours. Since the bathrooms are labeled in gendered, binary terms, Sasha is not represented in this limited description. Lastly, even Sasha’s own name must be modified to better suit their gender needs. Initially born as Luke, they desire a more unisex name and decide on Sasha, “the Russian nickname for both Alexandra and Alexander, which was Sasha’s middle name.” For Sasha, this new ambiguous, gender-neutral name is the “perfect” way to express their nonbinary identity, which, evident by these examples, is an exceedingly important part of their life.

Because of their nonbinary identity, Sasha attempts to broaden society using nongendered language, further underscoring the importance of inclusive language. As a child, Sasha creates their own language that has “pronouns that distinguish between animate and inanimate objects” rather than “pronouns that distinguish between male and female.” In Sasha’s language, everybody is equally represented and included. After their attack, Sasha petitions Barak Obama’s White House to “legally recognize genders outside of the male–female binary, and provide an option for those genders on all legal documents and records.” As agender, Sasha has never been able to check a box next to their applicable gender, and they garner over 27,000 signatures supporting their basic human right to be acknowledged by their government and represented on official forms. Furthermore, when Sasha notices that their father, Karl, a kindergarten teacher, logistically organizes his students into two gendered lists of boys and girls, they quickly come up with an alternate solution. Sasha reorganizes the class into two lines of “A – M and N – Z,” dispensing with gender all together. “Turned out, Sasha was right,” Karl says. “Kindergartners don’t want to be pigeonholed.” Like Sasha, Karl’s students don’t want their gender projected onto them by others. Instead, the children respond better to more inclusive, nonbinary language.

Slater juxtaposes Sasha’s nonbinary identity and the importance of inclusive language against the binary nature of Richard’s legal circumstances. While Slater condemns Richard’s

actions as senseless and cruel, she also appreciates the hardships that Richard endures after one poor, split-second decision changes his life forever. As a sixteen-year-old black boy, Richard is vulnerable to the systemic and institutionalized racism that plagues American society, and this, coupled with his young age, means that he never gets a fair shake. Richard is charged and tried as an adult for hate crimes that he didn't intend with consequences that he doesn't fully understand. In this light, Richard becomes less an adult and more a child, less of an offender and more of a victim, even less guilty and more innocent. To view Richard in a binary nature, Slater maintains, is to ignore critical aspects of his case, and it is in this way that she continues to argue the importance of inclusive language and the dangers of binary thought beyond the example of gender.



DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

As Slater's book follows Sasha, a genderqueer teen who is set on fire for wearing a **skirt**, and Richard, the African American teenager who commits the assault, it becomes clear that discrimination is front and center in both teen's narratives. Throughout *The 57 Bus*, the characters are continually marginalized and victimized because of their gender, race, class, and sexuality, and Slater repeatedly draws attention to this unfortunate social reality. As a book geared towards young adults, *The 57 Bus* makes plain this prejudice in an effort to begin a dialogue between young people and overcome common biases. Ultimately, Slater seeks social justice—the righting of public wrongs perpetuated by ignorance and silence—and these efforts are reflected in her portrayal of discrimination in *The 57 Bus*.

Many characters within *The 57 Bus* are discriminated against and victimized because of their gender or sexuality. Karl, Sasha's father, is severely beaten by two unknown men while jogging because he is mistakenly identified as gay. "Let me suck your prick," one man says before violently assaulting him. The men leave Sasha's father unconscious in the street, and the police are never able to find the assailants. The men's intentions were clear, however: they caused Karl physical harm because they believed him to be of lesser social standing based on their false assumptions and homophobia. Debbie, Sasha's mother, recounts being sent home from school in 1968 for violating the dress code. Her skirt was deemed too long, ironically, by a dress code that also banned girls from wearing jeans and miniskirts. Because of her gender, Debbie was forced to adhere to ridiculous, and unrealistic, rules. Lastly, after Richard is arrested for the attack on Sasha, he admits to police that he is "homophobic," and that he "doesn't like gay people." Of course, Sasha is agender, not gay, meaning Richard's words betray not only his prejudice but also his ignorance. Each of these examples illustrates the widespread discrimination present in society against people based on gender and sexuality.

The 57 Bus also examines the discrimination that Richard faces

on account of his race, further underscoring the broad scope of prejudice within American society. After Richard is arrested for the attack, he is immediately charged as an adult—something Slater suggests is in part due to his race. Slater reports that, according to the Department of Justice, "cases against black youths are more than twice as likely to be directly filed in adult court than cases against white youths." This statistic implies that Richard is tried as an adult—which will ensure a much stiffer punishment—because he is black, and thus subject to deep-seated assumptions of African American criminality. Richard is ultimately sentenced to seven years in state prison for Sasha's assault. Slater points out that in 2012, "just one-third of white youths were sentenced to adult or juvenile state correctional facilities" and "two-thirds were given probation or sentenced to serve time in county jails." For youths of color, these statistics are reversed: "Two-thirds served time in state facilities, while one-third received probation or jail." According to Slater, a shocking 58 percent of incarcerated black teens serve their time in adult prisons, highlighting the presence of institutional racism within American society. While Richard is awaiting trial, a group of young white college students target and bully a fellow black student in a case that makes national headlines. The white students call the young man "three-fifths," a reference to the original clause in the Constitution which considered black citizens slaves, and they hang a Confederate flag in their dormitory and write the N-word on the walls. They even "clamp a bike lock around his neck" and forcibly confine him to his room. These three white offenders, the youngest of them just seventeen years old, are charged with only misdemeanor battery and hate crimes. "Girl, they got *misdemeanors*," Richard's cousin marvels. "Nobody got charged with any felonies. Three white boys on one black boy." While Slater certainly acknowledges that Richard's crime is terrible, these examples suggest that Richard's punishment is more reflective of the systemic and institutionalized racism present in American society than it is of his crime itself.

Slater's very different portrayal of Sasha and Richard illustrates their undeniable similarities—they are both *real* people who are profoundly affected by discrimination within American society. While *The 57 Bus* does not inspire much optimism that this discrimination will change anytime soon, Slater lends valuable insight and education into these marginalized identities. With *The 57 Bus*, Slater offers readers, especially young readers, a vicarious experience, hopefully resulting in empathy and increased understanding of those they perceive as different.



ACCOUNTABILITY, REDEMPTION, AND FORGIVENESS

After Richard, a young California teenager, assaults Sasha, a local genderqueer high school senior, Richard is charged with two hate crimes and is sentenced to seven years in a state correctional facility. *The 57 Bus* tells

Richard's story, covering both the events leading up to the senseless attack on Sasha and his subsequent arrest and prosecution. Richard is punished for his crimes to the fullest extent of the law; however, both Sasha and their parents question if this is the most effective approach to justice. Instead of adult sentencing and a lengthy prison stay, Sasha and their parents are more concerned with accountability and forgiveness. When Richard displays honest remorse and takes responsibility for his ugly behavior, Sasha and their parents' anger begins to soften. Through *The 57 Bus*, author Dashka Slater argues that accountability and forgiveness are crucial components of rehabilitation, and they indeed prove vital for Richard's own redemption and the peace of all those involved in his misguided crime. With her nontraditional approach to Richard's punishment, Slater reasons that traditional incarceration is not necessarily the best method of punishment for underage offenders.

Both Richard and his mother, Jasmine, seek forgiveness for Richard's attack on Sasha, which is evidence of Richard's remorse. In the early days of Richard's incarceration, he writes an apology to Sasha in the form of letter. He begs for Sasha's forgiveness and takes full responsibility for his actions. "I'll take all the consequences," Richard writes. He gives the letter to his lawyer, Bill Du Bois, to mail, but the lawyer stashes the letter in his briefcase. Richard's letter contains "an admission of guilt," and his attorney "feels he can't send it until the case is resolved." Three days later, Richard writes Sasha a substantially longer letter, in which he again begs for Sasha's forgiveness. He quotes the Bible and swears he is "not evil" but "actually good." Richard vows to write Sasha two letters each week and promises to keep them in his prayers, but Richard's lawyer withholds this letter as well, fearing that it will further incriminate his client. When Richard's lawyer withholds his letters, he also withholds his apology, hindering Richard's redemption and Sasha's acceptance and closure. Jasmine likewise wants to apologize to Debbie, Sasha's mother, for her son's behavior. Jasmine wants to tell her "how sorry she is, mother to mother, parent to parent." When Jasmine and Debbie finally meet months later at Richard's first hearing, the two women embrace tearfully and each member of Richard's family hugs Debbie, Sasha, and Karl, Sasha's father. This example, in addition to Richard's letters, are proof of the genuine forgiveness Richard and his family seek.

Sasha, Debbie, and Karl want to see Richard held accountable for his crimes; however, they also desire true redemption and meaningful forgiveness, and they aren't sure that prison is the right environment to achieve this. Both Debbie and Karl are against Richard being tried as an adult, and "they hope the state will focus more on preparing him for the world beyond incarceration than on punishing him." Furthermore, at Richard's sentencing nearly a year after Sasha's attack, Debbie tells the court, "We think that hatred only leads to more hatred and

anger. We don't want [Richard] to come out of prison full of hate." Lastly, at Richard's final progress report almost two years after committing his crimes, Karl claims that Richard's "actions appear to have been impulsive, immature, and unpremeditated. He did make a big mistake and recognizes that. He asked for our forgiveness. [...] Sasha, Debbie, and I *have* forgiven Richard." In the eyes of Karl, Debbie, and Sasha, Richard has been rehabilitated, and a long stay in an adult prison will do little to enhance his redemption.

Within *The 57 Bus*, Slater explains the concept of restorative justice, an approach sometimes used in California "as an alternative to criminal court for juveniles accused of felonies," which underscores her primary argument that teenagers should not necessarily be incarcerated as a form of punishment. With restorative justice, a "family group conference" is facilitated between the offender, the victim, and their families to "talk about what happened, and then make a plan for how the harm can be repaired." As both Richard and Sasha's families have begun to repair the harm caused by Richard's actions, they seem to be reasonable candidates for restorative justice. By way of an example, Slater tells the story of Jeff, TC, and Pancha, three local high school students who become caught up in an "ass smacking" controversy. After Jeff slaps both TC and Pancha on their respective backsides, the school administration punishes Jeff with restorative justice rather than traditional suspension or expulsion usually reserved for sexual harassment. The conferencing between Jeff and his victims results in his genuine understanding of the pain and embarrassment his actions have caused, and the three ultimately become friends. Without restorative justice, Slater maintains, Jeff's harassment would have "blown over, but the residue would have remained." The open and redemptive qualities of restorative justice repair the harm of Jeff's poor behavior. Of course, the district attorney, Nancy O'Malley, refuses to entertain restorative justice in Richard's case and declares it "absurd." "This is not a case where he is not going to be incarcerated," O'Malley says. "We cannot ignore what he did." Still, Sujatha Baliga, America's foremost expert on restorative justice, declares Sasha and Richard the "perfect candidates for this dialogue," contending, "all of them are such gorgeously enlightened, beautiful people." In the end, Slater argues that Richard's genuine remorse and Sasha's willingness to forgive are crucial to redemption, acceptance, and peace, and Richard's incarceration is not required to achieve this goal. The fact that Richard spends five years in a correctional facility anyway suggests that the American justice system is far from accepting restorative justice as an approach to criminal rehabilitation.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SASHA'S SKIRT

Sasha's skirt is symbolic of their gender identity within *The 57 Bus*. As an agender person, Sasha does not identify as either male or female. Instead, Sasha is deeply conflicted about their gender and views their identity as genderqueer. For Sasha, being genderqueer means that there is some element of "questioning" involved in their gender identity, and their skirt is an outward expression of that questioning. Sasha's skirt is not a statement of femininity, and they don't wear it because they are trying to dress like a girl; Sasha wants others to be "confused" about their gender, just like they themselves are. They don't want people to think that they are a boy in a skirt; rather, they want to be viewed as simply a person in a skirt. Sasha's skirt works against them aboard the 57 bus of the book's title, and it is the reason Richard starts the fire that leaves Sasha with devastating third-degree burns. Richard doesn't understand Sasha, or their skirt, and his own bias reflects that of Oakland's broader society, even though Oakland is so diverse. Richard assumes Sasha is gay, and in his opinion, their skirt is "too much." Richard thinks Sasha is some kind of "crossdresser," and they become the target of his senseless prank (he lights Sasha's skirt on fire while Sasha is sleeping, thinking it will only smolder a little, but the fire erupts into massive flames). Sasha is frequently misunderstood within *The 57 Bus*, and people constantly get their pronouns wrong, but their skirt remains proof of their efforts to be visible, and for their nonbinary gender to be taken seriously.



1001 BLANK WHITE CARDS

1001 Blank White Cards, a game Sasha and their friends invented, symbolizes Sasha and their friends' desire to have their nonbinary gender identity recognized and respected. The card game begins as a single stack of index cards during Sasha's freshman year in high school. Some of the cards are blank, and others are filled with silly puns, inside jokes, and random thoughts and dares. There is no real point to the game, and it really "can't be won," but it is a fun way for Sasha and their friends to spend their time. When the game begins, Sasha is known as Luke, and as the cards fill up, Sasha slowly grows secure in their true gender identity. The rules of the game stipulate that if a player addresses Sasha with the wrong pronoun, they must immediately discard, and by the end of their senior year, the cards grow to a stack over two feet tall. Symbolically speaking, the cards reflect who Sasha and their friends are, or who they have become, and they digitally scan them "for posterity." In the beginning, the cards remind Sasha's friends to respect their pronouns and gender identity. Recognition of their gender identity is important to Sasha, and

this is further reflected when they petition the White House to recognize nonbinary gender. The cards serve to legitimize Sasha's gender identity early on. Of course, their friends no longer need to be reminded to respect pronouns and gender identities, and in this way, the cards symbolize optimism that others can grow to accept and respect nonbinary gender identity as well.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Macmillan edition of *The 57 Bus* published in 2017.

Oakland, California Quotes

●● Oakland, California is a city of more than 400,000 people, but it can still feel like a small town. Not small geographically, of course. The city sprawls across seventy-eight square miles, stretching from the shallow, salty estuary at the edge of San Francisco Bay to the undulating green-and-gold hills where bobcats and coyotes roam. What makes it feel small is the web of connections, the way people stories tangle together. Our lives make footprints, tracks in the snows of time. People know each other's parents or siblings, their aunties and cousins. They go to school together, or worship together. They play sports on the same team, or work in the same building. The tracks cross. The stories overlap.

Related Characters: Richard, Sasha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs at the beginning of Slater's book, and it describes the city of Oakland, California, where Sasha's attack and most of the book takes place. This quote establishes Oakland as a large but connected city, one where there is a real sense of community, and this makes Sasha's attack all the more unbelievable. However, this quote also establishes that, like Sasha, Oakland does not fit neatly into an either/or binary. Oakland is at once big and small, urban and rural, and Slater's language perfectly captures this. The "salty estuary at the edge of San Francisco Bay" implies a busy seaside city with goods and people traveling in and out of port, but the image of bobcats and coyotes also suggests a pastoral setting full of wildlife. These contrasting images imply that Oakland is two different things at once.

The "web of connections" that Slater speaks of in this quote

carries a positive connotation—Oakland residents’ lives and stories “tangle together” in such a way that it leads to a sense of family and togetherness—but this interconnectedness is not always a positive thing throughout *The 57 Bus*. In East Oakland, where Richard lives, cyclical crime, poverty, and incarceration also leave “tracks in the snows of time” that lead the community and future generations down the wrong path. There are many positive aspects of Oakland, but it is also a city deeply affected by social inequality, and this further implies that Oakland can’t be understood in simplistic, binary terms such as good or bad.

☛ Gravity works backward here—the money flows uphill. The wealthier neighborhoods in the hills boast good schools, low crime, and views of the bay. Thanks to the Bay Area’s high-tech boom, long-vacant historic buildings downtown are filling with start-ups, boutiques peddling handmade jeans, and nightspots serving seven-ingredient cocktail. But little of this good fortune spilled over into the flatlands of East Oakland, where Richard lived. This is where the bulk of the city’s murders happen—two-thirds of them, in 2013. The schools are shabbier here; the scores are lower. There’s more trash on the streets, more roaming dogs, more liquor stores, fewer groceries stores. The median strips are ragged with weeds.

Related Characters: Richard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis



Here, Slater establishes the social and economic differences between the wealthy neighborhoods uphill, and the poverty of the city streets below. Residents living in the wealthier neighborhoods have the luxury of a solid education, and the crime rates are lower because all the residents’ basic needs are met. The upper class even enjoys idyllic “views of the bay,” a luxury that is certainly lacking in East Oakland real estate. Slater’s quote implies that the view downtown is improving, largely due to gentrification and the movement of the middle-class into urban neighborhoods, but even this means that poor families like Richard’s are pushed further away. Richard’s family can’t afford frivolous things like “handmade jeans” and “seven-ingredient cocktails,” and they have likely never been to a boutique. Instead, Richard’s clothing is stolen off his back at gunpoint in East Oakland, highlighting that some of the crimes in Oakland are crimes

of necessity. Basic needs are not met in East Oakland like they are in the financially comfortable hills, and this is reflected in everything from the lower test scores to the neglected city streets. Richard simply doesn’t have the same opportunities as those living in the wealthier hills, and this serves to perpetuate East Oakland’s cycle of poverty and crime.

Part 1: Pronouns Quotes

☛ All languages embody the obsessions of the people who speak them, and so Sasha’s language was meant to reflect the interests of people whose world was dominated by growing seasons, grains, and harvests. Instead of pronouns that disguised between male and female, Sasha’s language had pronouns that distinguished between animate and inanimate objects. The word for *sun* was *jez*, which was also the word for *day*. The difference was that *sun* was considered animate, a being, and *day* was considered inanimate, a thing.

Related Characters: Sasha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14


Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Slater is introducing Sasha, and it reflects Sasha’s interest in language, but it also introduces Sasha’s preoccupation with pronouns. As a genderqueer individual, Sasha does not identify as either male or female, and pronouns like he and she pose a real problem for them. Sasha’s identity is not equally represented in the English language, and their new language and imaginary society offers an alternative reality that is more inclusive. With this quote, Slater implies that English-speaking people are “obsessed” with gender, and this does indeed prove to be Sasha’s experience. Throughout *The 57 Bus*, Sasha is constantly referred to in a gendered way. They are called “he” and “him,” and “son,” “man,” and “dude,” all of which assume and assign them a specific gender that is either male or female. Furthermore, when Sasha’s skirt draws the negative attention of Richard (and an opinionated old woman) this reinforces that society expects Sasha to dress in a gender-specific way—and one that is in keeping with the male/female gender binary, as well as Sasha’s assigned sex at birth. This gender obsession doesn’t stop here, as Slater points out, and even bathrooms and classrooms often revolve around one’s gender. Sasha’s new language, on the other hand, is “obsessed” with agriculture, which instead reflects Sasha’s “obsession” with veganism.

Part 1: Luke and Samantha Quotes

☝☝ It was part of the disorienting feeling she'd had for years, that feeling that everyone except her had been issued a handbook. Samantha knew it was important to be pretty and cute, but she had no idea how to be those things, or even why she was supposed to want to be. Her body was growing curvier. Breasts burst from her chest like twin cannonballs, but they didn't feel sexy and good, they just felt heavy. She hid them under baggy T-shirts and sweatpants and watched the other girls come to school in tiny skirts and spaghetti straps, wondered why everything was so much hard for her than it was for them.

Related Characters: Andrew / Samantha

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Slater introduces Andrew, Sasha's close friend who is transgender, long before he has begun his gender transition. Childhood is difficult for Samantha, and her "disorienting feeling" is because she does not identify internally as a girl. The other girls at school make being a girl look easy and fun, but it isn't easy or natural for Samantha. Slater's description of Samantha's breasts as "heavy" "cannonballs" that "burst" from her chest make the changes in her developing body appear dangerous, and even deadly, and this harkens to the suicidal ideations Samantha suffers as she continues to struggle with her gender identity and find acceptance as Andrew. Samantha hides her body under baggy shirts and pants because she is deeply uncomfortable with the gender that has been projected onto to her, and this discomfort has lasting effects on her mental health and well-being. Through Samantha's experiences as a girl and her eventual transition into a transgender man named Andrew, Slater offers readers a vicarious experience that lends increased understanding into transgender identities, which will hopefully lead to more empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

Part 1: Genderqueer Quotes

☝☝ Most of us see gender and sexuality and romance as one big interconnected tangle of feelings—this is who I am, this is who I'm attracted to, this is who I love. But as Sasha began exploring the topic online, they found that some people had developed language for combing the tangle into individual strands. In these online conversations, the word *sex* referred purely to biology—the chromosomes, organs, and anatomy that define male and female from the outside. *Gender* was the word for what people felt about themselves, how they felt *inside*. *Sexuality* was the category for who you were physically attracted to. *Romantic* was the category for who you felt romantic attraction to. And there was a whole array of distinctions within each category as well. It was like a gigantic menu, with columns and columns of choices.

Related Characters: Sasha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32



Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Sasha is discovering their genderqueer identity, and it is further evidence of Sasha's interest in language. This quote also underscores one of Slater's overarching arguments: that gender and sexuality are not synonymous terms. Language used within the genderqueer community assumes that these terms exist independently of one another, and this quote helps to parse out these differences. Slater's descriptions of gender, sexuality, and romance as a "tangle of feelings" that must be "combed" into "individual strands" suggest that these distinctions are complicated and nuanced—and indeed they are—but that understanding these differences is essential to understanding LGBTQ identities. For many people, like Sasha and Andrew, their genetic sex does not align with their internal gender identity, and their sexuality has little bearing on either their biological sex or their gender. For example, while Sasha is biologically born a boy named Luke, they don't identify as either male or female, and they are not really interested in sex at all. Andrew, on the other hand, is biologically born a girl but identifies as a boy early in life, and his sexuality aligns with that of a gay man. Indeed, there are "columns and columns of choices" within the LGBTQ community, and *The 57 Bus* makes just a few of these possible identities visible.

Part 1: Becoming Sasha Quotes

☞ Discovering the existence of genderqueer identity felt like discovering a secret room. All this time there had been just two rooms: male and female. Now it turned out there was another room—one that could be furnished however you wanted. The more time Sasha spent in the room, the more comfortable it felt. But the person who lived in this new room still had a boy's name—Luke. By the second half of sophomore year, that name clearly no longer fit.

Related Characters: Sasha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37


Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Sasha is exploring their new genderqueer identity, and it is significant because it reflects their transition from Luke to Sasha. This quote also underscores the restrictions of binary thought and either/or language, and Slater's description of Sasha's identity as a "secret room" implies these limitations. Before finding the genderqueer community online, Sasha is confined to either a male or female gender identity, and neither of these genders fit who Sasha really is. Sasha questions their gender, and this confusion worsens when the male gender is projected onto them. The "other room" opened up to Sasha by the genderqueer community is custom made to accommodate their questions and confusion, and as such, Sasha is much more "comfortable" and represented in this new space. Still, just like gendered pronouns, the name Luke projects the male gender onto Sasha, and this name is too restrictive for their new identity. In order to fit more comfortably in this new room, Sasha needs a unisex name to match their nonbinary gender identity.

☞ "I don't want for people to think of me as a *he*, and when they say *he*, not only does it reinforce in their brains that I am a *he*, it also reinforces in the brains of the people who are listening," Sasha explains. "It doesn't really directly affect me, at least to hear it—it's more like, *Huh, that's not right*. And when people use the right pronoun, it feels validating."

Related Characters: Sasha (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sasha is explaining to their friends the importance of using their preferred gender-neutral pronouns: they and them. Since Sasha doesn't identify with the male gender, they don't want others to refer to them as he or him. This seems simple enough, yet people constantly refer to Sasha by the wrong pronoun, and each time this happens, Sasha's true gender identity is dismissed. This wrong pronoun "reinforces" the wrong gender in other people's minds, too. Throughout *The 57 Bus*, Slater frequently points out the "ripple effects" that are caused by single events, and incorrect pronouns are an example of that—one incorrect pronoun uttered by a single person can inform the thoughts of countless others. Additionally, this quote highlights the privilege of the cisgender community. For the most part, people who obviously align with one socially accepted gender or the other don't have to worry about pronouns or what gender is being reinforced in other people's minds, and they usually aren't overly concerned with whether their gender is "validated." These obvious differences are another example of the marginalization of the LGBTQ community within society and language.

Part 1: Bathrooms Quotes

☞ It was tough sometimes, watching Sasha navigate a world that didn't even have a category for them. Occasionally, Debbie wished Sasha would ease up a little—resist correcting well-meaning relatives who said he instead of they, for example. But there was something admirable about it, too, Karl pointed out. Knowing how shy Sasha was, he admired Sasha's newfound willingness to speak up, to stand out, to be seen.

Related Characters: Karl, Debbie, Sasha

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis


Here, Sasha's parents, Debbie and Karl, are grappling with Sasha's genderqueer identity, and it clearly hasn't been an easy transition for any of them. The fact that the world doesn't have a category for Sasha is another reference to the confines of binary thought. Sasha's genderqueer identity fits poorly into their gendered society, and it is difficult for Debbie and Karl to watch the child that they love struggle with this reality. Both Debbie and Karl claim to be accepting and supportive of Sasha's identity, but

Debbie's wish that Sasha "would ease up a little" suggests otherwise. Furthermore, honest mistakes aside, if Sasha's relatives truly "mean well," they would use Sasha's preferred pronouns, and they wouldn't take offense if Sasha has to remind them. In this way, Debbie isn't as supportive as she could be. Karl, on the other hand, appreciates how difficult this situation must be for Sasha and finds their pronoun corrections commendable, which is evidence of Karl's support and understanding of Sasha's gender identity.

Part 2: Oakland High School Quotes

☝☝ Of course, you rarely notice when you come to the fork in the road. It just feels like another day. A day when you didn't go to school because you were sick or your baby sister was sick, or you didn't study for that test so why bother taking it, or your clothes looked ratty and you were tired of hearing about it, or someone was looking for you and you needed to lay low for a few days, or any of a hundred other reasons that made not going to class seem like a better choice than going. Only once you stopped going it just seemed too hard to start again. Days rolled into weeks. Weeks into months. And then at some point you realized you'd entered the future. The one you never planned on. The one where everything was going to be that much harder.

Related Characters: Richard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Slater more fully introduces Richard and life in East Oakland, where school attendance is less important than in Sasha's middle-class neighborhood. This quote again underscores the social and economic differences between East Oakland and the wealthier neighborhoods located in the hills, and it illustrates what those differences look like in real life. Furthermore, Slater's use of the word "you" has the added effect of making the reader feel as if they are actually experiencing these differences, which leads to increased empathy and understanding of how easy it is to slip down the wrong path of "the fork in the road." Slater offers a laundry list of reasons why "you" might take the wrong path, and for the most part, these reasons are directly related to East Oakland's widespread poverty. If a teenager's baby sister gets sick in the hills, there is more than likely someone to take care of her; but if that teen were in East Oakland, it's likely that their mom can't afford to take the day off from work, so the teen must miss school to care for their sick

sister. Furthermore, that teen probably didn't have time to study for their test because they must work and help pay their family's rent. In that same vein, this quote also underscores the cyclical nature of poverty in East Oakland, and the reasons why it is so difficult to break from this unfortunate reality.

Part 2: Hopes and Prayers Quotes

☝☝ These were big dreams in her part of town. Of the roughly six hundred African American boys who started Oakland high schools as freshmen each year, only about three hundred ended up graduating. Fewer than one hundred graduated with the requirements needed to attend California state college or university. The odds of landing in the back of a police cruiser, on the other hand, were much better. African American boys made up less than 30 percent of Oakland's underage population but accounted for nearly 75 percent of all juvenile arrests.

Related Characters: Richard, Jasmine

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Slater introduces Jasmine, Richard's mother, and her "big dreams" that Richard will go to college and have a career. Jasmine was never able to complete her own education, and the fact that her hopes for Richard's relative success in life constitutes "big dreams" in East Oakland speaks to the social inequality present in Oakland society. Jasmine's modest dream for Richard pales in comparison to Sasha's own dream of attending a prestigious college like MIT, and this quote illustrates the institutionalized and systemic racism that holds Richard back. Oakland's high rate of crime and poverty are significant obstacles to Richard's success, and even if he does manage to graduate, it is likely that he still won't be adequately prepared for college. As a public school, Oakland High School is at an economic disadvantage compared to Maybeck, Sasha's private high school. Richard is simply not afforded the same opportunities as his white peers, and this all but ensures his failure. Furthermore, the rate at which African American boys are arrested also reflects this racism. Black youths make up only a small percentage of the population, yet they constitute most juvenile arrests, and this suggests that there is a concerted effort to incarcerate young black men—effectively reducing the number of free black men in American society. All things considered, Jasmine's hopes for Richard truly *are* "big

dreams” in East Oakland.

Part 2: Where He Left Off Quotes

☞ That’s how everyone knew Richard—as the funny one, the one who made people smile. He pulled pranks like putting ketchup on people’s faces while they slept or ambushing them with water balloons when they’d just woken up. He would do anything for a laugh—put on one of his female cousin’s sexy cropped sweaters, for example, or post a selfie on Instagram of himself dressed in a bra and a wig, gazing into the bathroom mirror with a sultry expression. *I’m a THOT for Halloween*, the caption explained.

Related Characters: Richard

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Slater establishes Richard as a jokester and someone who will do “anything for a laugh.” This quote is significant because it suggests that Richard’s attack on Sasha is simply a terrible prank gone wrong—not a premeditated attack with malicious intent. Richard has executed countless pranks that have never resulted in such pain and destruction, and he likely has no reason to believe that this time will be any different. In this light, Richard’s actions aren’t excusable, but they do begin to make a little more sense, and they also appear less mean and hateful.

However, Slater’s example of just how “funny” Richard can be also underscores the discrimination that leads Richard to target Sasha in the first place. When Richard dresses in his cousin’s “sexy cropped sweater,” he implies that there is something “funny” or strange about dressing in a feminine way as a man, and this is reflected in his reaction to Sasha’s skirt. Furthermore, Richard’s Halloween costume as a “THOT,” a popular acronym among urban youth that stands for “that hoe over there,” is equally disparaging to women. Slater, however, ultimately argues that this does not imply that Richard is a bad or hateful person. Instead, Slater contends that these opinions are more a product of the widespread discrimination present in society than they are a reflection of Richard’s true character, and as an adolescent looking for a laugh, he simply doesn’t know any better.

Part 3: The 57 Bus Quotes

☞ Sasha’s bus ride to and from Maybeck High School took an hour and involved as many as two transfers, but Sasha didn’t mind. They had always loved the bus. Loved the intersecting lines of transit routes on the map, the crisp procession of times on the schedule. In their spare time, they drew maps of new bus, subway, and streetcar lines, or read up on historical public transit systems.

Related Characters: Sasha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs as Sasha boards the titular 57 bus on the day of their attack, and it describes Sasha’s joyful daily commute. This quote also reflects Sasha’s unique personality, and their deep love for buses and public transit (they hope to one day be a city planner), a passion that seems a bit random and unorthodox at first. However, this passage is significant because there are many meaningful connections to be made between Sasha’s love for buses and the marginalization of certain groups of people within *The 57 Bus*. The “intersecting lines” of the bus routes recall the interconnectedness of Oakland society that Slater introduces earlier in the book, but they also harken to the concept of intersectionality—how race, gender, and class intersect to form an overlapping structure of discrimination that affects marginalized members of society, like both Sasha and Richard. The word “transit” also has increased meaning within the LGBTQ community and carries connotations of transformation and transition. Sasha’s love for the “crisp procession of times on the schedule” and their custom-made maps imply a desire to recreate a society that largely ignores and dismisses them based on their agender identity.

Part 3: Fire Quotes

☞ “That boy was on fire, wasn’t he?” a man remarks as Sasha pushes through the back doors to the sidewalk. Behind him, Sasha’s mustached rescuer paces the aisle. “Call an ambulance,” he croaks. He goes to the door of the bus and calls to Sasha, who roams the sidewalk with a cell phone, charred legs. “You need to call an ambulance, man.”

Related Characters: The Man with a Mustache / Dan Gale (speaker), Sasha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs directly after Dan Gale, known simply as the man with a mustache, puts out Sasha's flaming skirt, and it is significant because it establishes Dan Gale as a hero. After Richard jokingly sets Sasha's skirt on fire, most of the passengers barely notice until Sasha stands up and screams profanities. Even then, most of the passengers do nothing to help. As Sasha goes up in flames, Dan Gale is the only person who jumps into action, and another passenger's overly calm, and late, question of whether Sasha was just on fire reflects this. Dan Gale's heroic efforts are also clear when he follows Sasha off the bus to make sure that Sasha calls an ambulance. Dan Gale doesn't simply save Sasha's life and walk away, he makes sure that Sasha is taken care of even after he puts out the fire.


This quote also emphasizes Sasha's constant struggle with pronouns. The man's question—"That boy was on fire, wasn't he?"—assumes that Sasha is, in fact, a boy, and when Dan Gale tells Sasha "to call an ambulance, man," he assumes the very same thing. As agender, Sasha does not identify as male, yet Dan Gale and the other passenger project that gender onto them, dismissing and invalidating Sasha's true gender identity.

Part 3: A Man in a Kilt Quotes

☝☝ "A passenger on an Oakland, Calif., public bus received burns to his legs after his kilt was set on fire," UPI wrote. The word *kilt* seemed to have gotten lodged in the minds of reporters. It was in every report, as if Sasha had been on the way home from bagpipe practice. The *Daily Mail*, in the United Kingdom, even illustrated the report with a photo of a kilt, explaining a kilt is "the national dress of Scotland."

Related Characters: Sasha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis



Here, word of Sasha's assault has hit the news, and multiple

reports are flooding television and the internet. This quote from the news agency UPI, or United Press International, first wrongly identifies Sasha's gender. When the reporter reports that Sasha "received burns to his legs after his kilt was set on fire," the reporter assumes that Sasha is a boy by using the pronoun "his," twice. Furthermore, the reporter's reference to Sasha's skirt as a "kilt" implies that Sasha is Scottish, not an agender person who happens to like wearing skirts, and this is an example of the erasure and marginalization of LGBTQ identities within society. Sasha's identity is misrepresented in these new reports, and between UPI and *The Daily Mail*, this misrepresentation is projected onto much of the world. *The 57 Bus* seeks to make visible identities such as Sasha's that are typically scrubbed from mainstream society. When the *Daily Mail* gives an illustrated explanation of the cultural significance of kilts instead of explaining the personal significance of Sasha's skirt, they miss an opportunity to educate countless people about the existence of nonbinary gender and the diversity within the LGBTQ community. By telling Sasha's story, Slater's book attempts to right this social wrong.

Part 3: Direct Files Quotes

☝☝ "Stop right here, and for a moment imagine yourself forced to submit to being handcuffed and see what kind of feelings will be aroused in you," a Chicago lawyer named John P. Altgeld wrote in an 1884 book called *Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*. Arguing that "submission to that one act of degradation prepares many a young man for a career of crime," he took the reader through the experience of a youthful offender—which began with the accused, usually arrested for vagrancy or disorderly conduct, spending the night in the police station among older, more vicious criminals. He compared the criminal justice system to "a great mill which, somehow or other, supplies its own grist, a maelstrom with draws from the outside, and then keeps its victims moving in a circle until swallowed in the vortex."

Related Characters: Richard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 161



Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs right after Richard is charged as an adult for Sasha's assault. Even though Richard is only sixteen years old, it only takes the district attorney's office two days to decide to charge him as an adult, and this quote

illustrates the grave consequences of such an action. Slater uses the expert words of a past Chicago lawyer to make her argument, and his urgent demand that the reader pause and imagine being handcuffed against their will is a powerful way to command one's attention. When Richard is arrested, the lawyer's words imply, it sets off a chain reaction that will, more than likely, result in Richard's criminalization. Just like the lawyer she describes, Slater takes the reader through Richard's experience as a "youthful offender." While Richard's attack on Sasha is misguided and terrible, Slater argues, Richard did not intend to hurt Sasha. Like the "disorderly conduct" mentioned here, Richard simply wanted a laugh at someone else's expense, and while this is surely misguided and awful, Slater maintains, it should not warrant a prison sentence for an underage offender. Instead of rehabilitating adverse or criminal behavior, prison often is a "great mill" of criminals, turning otherwise decent young people bad through influence. This quote mirrors Slater's overarching argument that Richard's adolescent actions do not make him a criminal—but his incarceration might.

“A super-predator is a young juvenile criminal who is so impulsive, so remorseless, that he can kill, rape, maim without giving it a second thought,” he explained. And he warned that the numbers of these “fatherless, Godless, and jobless” teens were growing. By the mid-2000s, he predicted, their numbers would double or even triple, unleashing a tidal wave of violence across the nation. “As many as half of these juvenile super-predators could be young black males,” Dilulio wrote in 1996 article entitled “My Black Crime Problem, and Ours.”

Related Characters: Richard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Richard is arrested and charged as an adult for Sasha's attack, and in it, Slater directly quotes John J. Dilulio, Jr., a political scientist from Princeton, to better explain the circumstances of Richard's arrest. The crime wave of the 1980s and '90s gave birth to Dilulio's influential definition of the “super-predator,” and it underscores the systemic and institutionalized racism that Richard struggles against in *The 57 Bus*. Richard is trapped within the myth of the “super-predator” stereotype, Slater argues, and this quote identifies the racist origins of that falsehood. Dilulio's definition of the “super-predator” is

blatantly racist and identifies young black men as the main offenders, and he relies on African American stereotypes to further his argument. The phrase “fatherless, Godless, and jobless” is a direct reference to popular stereotypes of young black men as violent savages who lack religion and morals. This phrase implies that black men abandon their children, and that those children, further neglected by single mothers, are inherently lazy and evil. Racist stereotypes such as these rely on hate and fear to further marginalize and discriminate against young African American men, and Dilulio uses this fear as an excuse to remove young black men from society through mass incarceration by branding them all “super-predators.”

Part 3: The Second Letter Quotes

“I am not a thug, gangster, hoodlum, nor monster. Im a young African American male who's made a terrible mistake. Not only did I hurt you but I hurt your family & friends and also my family & friends for I have brought shame to them and our country and I shall be punished which is going to be hard for me because I'm not made to be incarcerated.”

Related Characters: Richard (speaker), Bill Du Bois, Sasha

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis



This passage is part of the second apology letter that Richard writes to Sasha shortly after he is arrested for Sasha's attack. Slater does not simply refer to Richard's letter, she provides the letter in its entirety—spelling and grammar errors included. This makes Richard's words appear even more sincere and heartfelt, and it underscores the fact that Richard is clearly a child, not an adult, and that he shouldn't be charged as such. When Richard tells Sasha that he is not a “thug, gangster, hoodlum, nor monster,” he is directly referencing the “super-predator” myth. Popular stereotypes of young African American men presume they are dangerous criminals who need to be removed from the streets for the safety of the community, and Richard's letter attempts to convince Sasha otherwise. Additionally, Richard's letter is also evidence of his remorse. He is not just concerned with how his senseless prank affects Sasha; Richard also considers Sasha's family and friends, as well as his own. This concern reflects Richard's obvious love for his family, a fact that is also inconsistent with the super-predator myth. Even though Richard writes this letter just days after he is arrested, he is convinced early on that he

will serve time in prison. When Richard tells Sasha that he “shall be punished” but is “not made to be incarcerated,” he implies that the criminal justice system believes otherwise simply because he is black.

Part 3: Y’All Don’t Know Quotes

☝ “People have different habitats,” he explained. “Some people have it better than others. They grew up in good neighborhoods. Their family has jobs. They have good income. They don’t understand. Their life is so good, they think *everybody’s* life is good. They don’t understand the struggles people go through. I don’t know where you grew up at, if it’s like a low-income area, where there’s lots of violence and crime. But if you grew up in a low-income area and all you see is crime and drugs? If you have family that does crime? You see it. It has an impact on you. If you’re around it a lot, it’s hard to do good.”

Related Characters: Richard, Kaprice Wilson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 197


Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Kaprice holds a restorative justice circle to help Richard’s friends cope with their anger after Richard is arrested and charged with Sasha’s attack. These words are spoken by one of Richard’s friends, and they are significant because they offer a genuine East Oakland experience and underscore the inequality present in *The 57 Bus*. Richard’s friend directly references Oakland’s economic inequality when he claims that “some people have it better than others.” Those from poor inner-city neighborhoods, like Richard, often do not have the opportunity or access to quality jobs and housing, and this, according to Richard’s friend, is why it is “hard to do good.” When one’s basic needs aren’t met, violence and crimes of necessity are more common. Slater does not imply that this social disadvantage excuses Richard’s actions; rather, she implies that understanding this social disadvantage is crucial to understanding Richard. Many of the people who hear about Richard’s case via television or the internet often have no appreciation for how difficult day-to-day life is in East Oakland, and Richard’s friend points this out. Richard has grown up in violence and crime, and it has had “an impact” on him. This “impact” is what ultimately leads to Richard’s actions that day on the 57 bus, not an inherent evil or criminality.

Part 3: God Is Good Quotes

☝ Donald Williams Jr., an African American freshman at San Jose State University, had been relentlessly bullied by the white students he lived with in a four-bedroom dormitory suite. The white kids, also freshmen, had insisted on calling Williams “three-fifths,” a reference to the clause in the original US Constitution that counted slaves as three-fifths of a person when determining population for representation in Congress. They clamped a bike lock around his neck and claimed to have lost the key. They wrote *Nigger* on a whiteboard and draped a Confederate flag over a cardboard cutout of Elvis Presley in the suite’s living room. They locked him in his room. And they claimed it was all just a series of good-natured pranks. In the end, three eighteen-year-old white students were expelled for what they did to Williams, and a seventeen-year-old was suspended. The three who were expelled were also charged in criminal court. The charge: misdemeanor battery with a hate-crime enhancement, which carried a maximum penalty of a year and a half in county jail. A jury eventually convicted all three of battery but acquitted one of the students of the hate-crime charge and deadlocked the others.

Related Characters: Richard, Jasmine, Regis

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis



This quote explains the circumstances of another hate-crime that is committed around the time of Richard’s attack on Sasha, and it highlights the racism that is present in American society. The bullying of the young African American student by his white classmates and their reference to him as a “slave,” along with their use of the N-word and Confederate flag, paints the picture of a vile and horrific assault presented by the offenders as a “series of good-natured pranks.” When the young white offenders are found guilty of only misdemeanors, this suggests that the justice system indeed believes that these hateful actions constitute a prank. On the other hand, Richard’s claims that his attack on Sasha was a stupid and misguided prank fall on deaf ears, and he is charged with two felonies. Richard’s cousin Regis tells Jasmine, Richard’s mother, about the horrible treatment of this young black student, and when he does, both Regis and Slater imply that Richard’s race is directly to blame for the harsh punishment he receives by comparison. What’s more, at seventeen and eighteen years old, the white offenders are in fact older than Richard, yet Richard is the one charged as an adult. Therefore, not only does Slater imply that Richard is treated harshly because of his race, she also suggests that race is the reason he is


charged as an adult as well.

Part 4: Dancing Quotes

“What I want is for people to be confused about what gender I am,” Sasha explained later. That didn’t happen too often—people tended to see Sasha as male. So it was a nice change to be seen as female.

Related Characters: Sasha (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sasha explains why they have decided to wear such a pretty, feminine gown to Oakland’s formal event known as the Gaskell Ball, and it is significant because it lends important insight into Sasha’s gender identity and their preference for feminine skirts instead of masculine pants. As genderqueer, Sasha questions their gender and does not identify as either male or female. In this way, Sasha is “confused” about their gender, and they want other “people to be just as confused” as they are. Slater points out that most people assume Sasha is a boy, and this is certainly the case throughout much of *The 57 Bus*. Sasha is constantly referred to by masculine pronouns, and when Richard assumes that Sasha is a boy wearing a skirt, this misunderstanding fuels Richard’s senseless prank. Sasha’s skirt is even referred to as kilt in the press, which too assumes that Sasha is a boy. Dressed in the fancy ballgown at the Gaskell Ball, people are more likely to assume that Sasha is a girl, and for Sasha, while this too is ultimately wrong, it is a welcome change.


Part 4: Restorative Justice Quotes

“RJ isn’t a guarantee of leniency,” Baliga cautioned. “It’s about dispensing with punitiveness for its own sake and trying to produce an outcome that will be more healing for everyone involved.”

Still, Baliga knew that there was little hope of diverting Richard from the criminal justice system entirely. “Given the severity of the harm to Sasha, we didn’t expect that the DA would allow the case to be diverted to restorative justice,” she said.

But if anyone seemed right for restorative justice, it was these two families, who had already expressed compassion for one another. “They were perfect candidates for this dialogue,” she said. “All of them were such gorgeously enlightened, beautiful people.”

Related Characters: Sujatha Baliga (speaker), Karl, Debbie, Jasmine, Sasha, Richard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis



Here, Sujatha Baliga, the leading authority on restorative justice in the United States, explains the goal of restorative justice, which Slater ultimately contends can be an effective and meaningful replacement to prison for some juvenile offenders like Richard. According to Baliga, restorative justice rejects “punitiveness for its own sake,” which implies that prison sentences are often handed down simply for the sake of punishment, and this certainly seems to be the case with Richard. By the end of *The 57 Bus*, Richard has found redemption and forgiveness, and even Sasha does not harbor any resentment toward him. Yet Richard still must spend two additional years incarcerated, a punishment that Slater argues has risks that far outweigh the benefits. Prison does not guarantee true redemption, and it often serves to criminalize underage offenders rather than reform them. Therefore, in certain juvenile cases, Slater argues, restorative justice can offer a meaningful and cost-effective alternative to lengthy prison sentences. The District Attorney rejects restorative justice in Richard’s case because she believes Richard must spend time in prison for what he has done to Sasha; however, according to Baliga, restorative justice was invented specifically for people like Richard and Sasha who are more open to the shared dialogue of the process. Ultimately, Richard is sentenced to seven years in a state correctional facility, which suggests that the justice system is not yet ready to “dispense with punitiveness for its own sake,” not even for juvenile offenders.

Part 4: Maybe Quotes

☝☝ The fire was becoming a more distant memory, even though Sasha still wore compression stockings. “Apart from some scars, I’m all healed, basically,” Sasha said. It was hard for people to believe it, but Sasha didn’t feel traumatized by what had happened. When the physical pain faded, the emotional pain did as well.

“I don’t really feel hated, Sasha explained. “Especially since after I was attacked, the whole world was supporting me. I felt like one person hates me—maybe.”

Related Characters: Sasha (speaker), Richard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Sasha moves east to attend MIT, and it is significant because it reflects Sasha’s healing, closure, and their capacity for forgiveness after their attack on the 57 bus. Earlier in Slater’s book, Richard claims that in order to truly forgive someone, one must also forget, and Sasha’s quote here reflects that same basic truth. To Sasha, the fire is a “distant memory,” which implies that they have all but forgotten about it, and without the physical pain to remind them, Sasha is ready to move on. Much of the press insists that Richard’s attack on Sasha is a hate-crime and that it reflects a broader dislike and discrimination of the LGBTQ community within society, but this is hard for Sasha to believe and that is why they “don’t really feel hated.” Sasha’s attack is met with such an outpouring of sympathy and support from the community that makes it impossible for them to feel hated, and they don’t fully believe that Richard hates them either, which is why Sasha claims only “one person hates me—maybe.” Unlike the press and the legal system, Sasha doesn’t believe that Richard’s prank was conceived out of malice or hatred.

Part 4: Victim-Impact Statement Quotes

☝☝ “We do not understand your actions,” Debbie went on. “But we also think that hatred only leads to more hatred and anger. We don’t want you to come out of prison full of hate. Following the incident, communities near and far affirmed Sasha’s—and everyone’s—right to not be harassed or hurt or bullied for how they dress, or whether they are gay or trans or agender. We truly hope that you will gain some understanding and empathy in the years to come. Maybe sometime in the future *you* will be the one coming to the aid of someone being bullied.”

Related Characters: Debbie (speaker), Sasha, Richard

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 264

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sasha’s mother, Debbie, delivers a victim-impact statement at one of Richard’s hearings. By this point, neither Sasha nor their parents have seen either of Richard’s apology letters (Richard’s lawyer confiscated them, as the letters “contained an admission of guilt”), and thus they are unaware of his deep remorse. Debbie especially is struggling with Richard’s perceived lack of remorse, and this statement reflects her struggle. Still, she does not want to see Richard sentenced to time in an adult prison, and this too is reflected in her comment that “hatred only leads to more hatred and anger.” Both Debbie and Sasha’s father, Karl, believe that, as a sixteen-year-old child, Richard should not be punished as an adult. They both view his attack on Sasha as a misguided adolescent prank, and they fear that the violence of prison will only serve to further criminalize him. Instead of spending years in prison, Debbie and Karl would rather see Richard learn how to become an ally to the trans and agender community and advocate for their equality. Notably, after Debbie is finally able to read Richard’s letters, she claims that her victim-impact statement would have been dramatically different if she had been able to read Richard’s apologies prior to his sentencing. Presumably, Debbie would have advocated more strongly to keep Richard out of prison had she been aware of his remorse from the beginning.

Part 4: Progress Report Quotes

☝☝ “From the start we have been opposed to Richard’s being tried as an adult,” he said. “His actions appear to have been impulsive, immature, and unpremeditated. He did make a big mistake and recognizes that. He asked for our forgiveness.” Karl’s voice broke. “Sasha, Debbie, and I *have* forgiven Richard,” he whispered. “We hope the state will focus more on preparing him for the world beyond incarceration than on punishing him.”

Related Characters: Karl (speaker), Debbie, Sasha, Richard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sasha’s father, Karl, addresses the court at Richard’s

final progress report. This quote is significant because it reflects Sasha and their family's forgiveness of Richard, but it also makes plain their desire for Richard to be treated like a juvenile and not an adult. Richard's final progress report determines if he will serve the remaining two years of his sentence in the juvenile system or be transferred to an adult facility, and Karl's words are clear: they have been "opposed" to treating Richard like an adult "from the start." Of course, Sasha and their parents have only just learned of Richard's remorse. Richard's lawyer has withheld Richard's apology letters because he feared they would only incriminate him, but Sasha and their parents are against trying Richard as an adult even when they believe him to be hateful and remorseless, and this speaks to how strongly they are opposed to trying juveniles as adults. Instead, Karl believes that Richard is guilty of an awful adolescent prank, not a hate-crime. Karl refuses to believe that Richard is a depraved criminal, and his "broken" and "whispered" voice is evidence of his heartfelt forgiveness of Richard. Ultimately, Slater argues that there is nothing to be gained by Richard's continued incarceration, and this is reflected in Karl's "hope" that the state will "focus more on preparing [Richard] for the world beyond incarceration" rather than simply giving Richard more prison time for the sake of "punishing him."

Part 4: Andrew and the Binary Quotes

💬 "Actually," [Andrew] said, "I'm starting to identify a little bit as—I don't even know the word I want to use yet. I like *androgynous*. I like *genderqueer*." What held him back? Fear. Fear of other people's judgements, their questions, their hostility, their fascination. "Because I fall neatly within the binary, I feel comfortable right now," he explained. "But if I were to radically shift my appearance in a way that more androgynous, I don't know how comfortable that would be for me. I mean, I've already been asked enough questions about my genitals. I'm just done with that."

Related Characters: Andrew / Samantha (speaker), Sasha

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs near the end of *The 57 Bus*, after Sasha has recovered from and nearly forgotten about Richard's attack. Andrew, Sasha's close friend, confides in Sasha that he too is beginning to identify as non-binary gender, but he is hesitant to commit to a genderqueer identity, and this quote reflects that hesitation. As a young child, Andrew (who was then called Samantha) found it difficult to identify with the femininity of being a girl, but now as a man, he finds it equally difficult to identify with popular masculine stereotypes. Andrew's use of the words "androgynous" and "genderqueer" imply that like Sasha, he too is confused about gender and finds comfort in an identity that blends and blurs both male and female characteristics.

However, Andrew's "fear" of "judgement" if he steps too far outside the accepted male/female binary implies that he has not forgotten about Sasha's attack, and that he fears similar discrimination if he embraces a genderqueer identity. Furthermore, Andrew's remark that he has "already been asked enough questions about [his] genitals" reflects his own identity as a transgender man who also happens to identify as a gay man. Andrew has lived much of his life with a body that is at odds with his gender and his sexuality, and he doesn't want to draw any more attention to himself with another "radical shift" that will likely prompt additional questions. Andrew's fears are a manifestation of the discrimination and marginalization of LGBTQ individuals within society, which Slater argues can only be overcome with visibility and education, and this quote underscores just how difficult that visibility can be.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2013

It is late afternoon aboard the 57 bus, and as the sun dips low in the sky, a diverse group of passengers make their evening commute home to Oakland. While most passengers stare at their phones, pockets of rowdy school kids make the bus “loud but not as loud as sometimes.” Sasha sits alone at the back. Wearing a black fleece jacket and white **skirt**, Sasha is agender—“neither male nor female.” Sasha is reading a copy of Leo Tolstoy’s [Anna Karenina](#), but puts down the book and falls asleep.

Richard, a sixteen-year-old junior from Oakland High School, stands nearby wearing a black hoodie and baseball cap. Richard and his friends loudly play around, pretending to fight, and his cousin Lloyd runs back and forth to the front of the bus trying to flirt with a girl. As Sasha sleeps, Richard “surreptitiously flicks a lighter” at the fabric of Sasha’s **skirt**.

“Wait,” writes Slater. “In a moment, Sasha will wake inside a ball of flame and [...] everything will be set in motion.” Sasha will be severely burned and require multiple surgeries at a San Francisco burn unit, and Richard will be arrested and charged with two felony hate-crimes. If Richard is convicted of hate-crimes, he could be facing life in prison. “But,” writes Slater, “none of this has happened yet.” There must be some way to stop it, she argues. “There must be something you can do.”

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Oakland, California, is a sprawling city covering 78 miles from the San Francisco Bay to the wild hills above “where bobcats and coyotes roam.” Oakland’s population is one of the most diverse in the United States, and in addition to several different racial and ethnic groups, the city has the largest population of lesbians and “gay- and lesbian-headed households.” The city “prides itself on its open-mindedness,” Slater explains. This diverse group of people have their own “homegrown slang” and they comfortably live, work, and worship together. Their city may be large, but Oakland shares an interconnectedness, and their “stories tangle together.”

The setting sun reflects the darkness of Sasha’s upcoming assault and the discrimination that fuels it. Sasha will be targeted because of their skirt, and the passengers, engrossed in their phones, will barely notice, and few will come to their aid. Additionally, Sasha’s copy of [Anna Karenina](#) is assigned reading for school, but it hints at Sasha’s obsession with Russia.



Richard’s black hoodie and baseball cap reflects the stereotypical dress of urban youth, which America’s racist society often views as the official uniform of criminals. The word “surreptitiously” suggests that Richard is hiding the lighter and flicking it out of plain sight because he knows that it is wrong to target and bully others because of their perceived sexuality—just as it is wrong to assume Richard is a criminal because of his race.



Slater’s use of the word “you” has the effect of making the reader feel as if they can personally intervene and stop what is about to happen. Of course, what happens to Sasha and Richard can’t be stopped, but similar discrimination can be avoided in the future through empathy and education, which, as a form of social justice, Slater’s book attempts to accomplish.



Slater’s mention of bobcats and coyotes underscore the geographical differences in Oakland—the city is both urban and rural—and the people are just as different. Oakland’s diversity and large LGBTQ population implies tolerance and inclusion, which makes Sasha’s attack all the more unbelievable. Oakland’s interconnectedness makes the city a community, and their “homegrown slang” is a reflection of their shared identity.



Oakland, however, is also a place of “stark contrasts.” The year of Sasha’s attack, Oakland ranked nationally as one of the worst cities for income inequality, falling just under New York City. Oakland residents pay some of the highest rents in the United States, yet it is the second most dangerous place to live based on the violent crime rate. Most of the city’s wealthy residents live up in the hills, and while some places in the Bay Area have experienced an economic resurgence, this means very little to Richard, who lives in “the flatlands of East Oakland.” Two-thirds of the city’s murders happen in Richard’s neighborhood, and the schools and surrounding communities are poor and neglected.

The route of the 57 bus travels eleven miles from the wealthy hills to city’s flatlands, and it also passes through Sasha’s middle-class neighborhood. Oakland High, where Richard goes to school, is in the heart of Sasha’s neighborhood, and the bus route “terminates” near Richard’s own house on the southeast border of the city. Sasha and Richard are on the bus together for eight minutes each day after school. If not for the 57 bus, Slater writes, Sasha and Richard’s “paths might never have crossed at all.”

PART 1: TUMBLING

Next, Slater adapts a list from Sasha’s Tumblr page, a social media website that allows users to post short-form blogs. The list is structured like a poem with several stanzas, or verses, and the spacing between the lines of each verse creates a cascading effect down the page.

The list identifies Sasha’s favorite vegetable (bok choy) and favorite animals (cats and cuttlefish), but it also identifies Sasha’s deeper qualities, like being a good navigator and creator of “potential puns.” Sasha finds gender, wealth inequality, and education “important,” and thinks any place with a “nice subway” is a good vacation destination. “Thinking of things to get me?” Sasha asks. A “transit map shower curtain” or “a dress swirled with the image of a nebula” will do just fine.

This passage draws attention to the economic inequality present in Oakland, just one of the social injustices examined in The 57 Bus. High rent is often associated with luxury and desirable locations, yet East Oakland is poor and neglected. Families like Richard’s are kept poor by skyrocketing rent, and even though parts of the Bay Area have been revitalized, Richard’s family certainly can’t afford to move there. Slater suggests that Oakland’s violent crime rate is directly related to this economic inequality.



The fact that the route of the 57 bus “terminates” at Richard’s house suggests that it is the end of line, and that his neighborhood is one of the poorest in Oakland. Sasha’s own middle-class neighborhood is a world away from Richard’s, and there is no real reason why their lives should cross. The bus’s route is more evidence of the interconnectedness of Oakland.



Slater’s book is infused with poems and other forms of creative writing, and this nontraditional approach to nonfiction writing, in addition to drawing increased attention to Sasha, mirrors Sasha’s own nontraditional life and nonbinary identity.



Sasha’s talent for creating puns is evidence of their love of language, and the transit map shower curtain they want for their birthday reflects their love of buses. This poetic list is a glimpse of Sasha’s true identity, and it proves that there is more to Sasha than their nonbinary gender. Sasha’s mention of a nebula, which is an interstellar cloud made of dust and random gases that eventually will become a star, serves as a foil to the organized interconnectedness of the transit map, further implying that Sasha, and their interests, do not fit either/or categories.



PART 1: PRONOUNS

Since beginning to talk, Sasha has been interested in language—not in learning and speaking multiple languages, but in the shape, structure, and “Lego blocks of sound that snap together to make words and sentences.” By the age of four, Sasha was “reading independently,” and by the age of six, Sasha had invented an entirely new language.

Now in high school, Sasha is still interested in language and hangs out with other “conlangers,” or people who invent new languages. Sasha’s newest language doesn’t have a name, but it is spoken in an “imaginary agricultural society something like that of ancient Mesopotamia.” Languages, Slater explains, “embody the obsessions of the people who speak them,” and this imaginary society is “dominated by growing seasons, grains, and harvests.” As such, all pronouns within Sasha’s language “distinguish between animate and inanimate objects,” not male and female.

The English language does not work this way. The English pronouns of she or he, her or him, and hers or his reflect gender, and even though many English-speaking people think that “is just how languages work,” many languages use gender neutral pronouns. Armenian, Thai, Turkish, and Hindi, to name a few, do not assume a speaker’s gender, but English “poses a challenge” for Sasha and others who don’t fit “neatly” into “either/or categories like male or female.” Because of this, Sasha prefers the nonbinary pronoun they. “It might feel awkward at first,” Slater writes, “but you’ll get used to it.”

PART 1: 1001 BLANK WHITE CARDS

Sasha is “obsessed with everything having to do with Russia and communism,” and even asked for a Soviet flag for their sixteenth birthday. Sasha likes to talk, and according to their friends, is “very outspoken about things,” but only “once you get to know them.” Otherwise, Sasha is reserved and “shy.” Their hair is soft brown and long, and when they smile, it shines in their eyes, which are hidden behind “round owlsh” glasses. Sasha rarely looks people in the eye and has “Asperger’s, a form of autism,” which makes them “awkward socially.”

Sasha’s interest in language from such a young age foreshadows their attempts to make language more inclusive later in the text. Sasha’s nongendered identity means that they are not represented within the English language, and this sparks their interest to create new and more comprehensive languages.



Since languages “embody the obsessions” of those who speak them, Slater implies that people who speak English are obsessed with gender and sexuality, which is exactly why Richard targets Sasha for wearing a skirt. Sasha exists outside of the generally accepted binary of male and female, and their new language and the imaginary society in which it exists represents an alternative reality that is more inclusive.



Here, Slater implies that gender is a social construction rather than an innate quality or trait. Things and people are not inherently masculine or feminine, they are made that way through language and the presumption of gender. For Sasha, the word “they” does not imply these same gendered assumptions, and the “awkward” way in which this nongendered pronoun fits into everyday speech and grammar is a testament to how deeply engrained gender is in the English language.



Asperger’s syndrome is a developmental disorder that is frequently defined by social awkwardness and an unusual use of language, both of which apply to Sasha, but more importantly, it exists on the autism spectrum. Several variations of autism exist, ranging in the type and severity of symptoms, and Sasha falls somewhere on that spectrum. This is much like Sasha’s view of gender—gender also exists on a spectrum, ranging from male to female, and Sasha falls somewhere near the middle of that spectrum.



Sasha is a senior in high school, and they are “passionate” about “buses, cartoons, and the color purple.” According to Healy, one of Sasha’s best friends, Sasha is also passionate about “live-action role-playing” and *Homestruck*, a web-based comic. They love “Sarchasm,” a local “ska-pop-punk band,” and they are completely dedicated to veganism, although they don’t like how “other vegans on the Internet make such a huge deal about it.”

Sasha’s closest friend is Michael, and they have been that way since the ninth grade. Sasha and Michael’s tight circle of friends includes Healy, another kid named Ian, and Michael’s girlfriend, Teah. Within this circle, Sasha is known as “the brilliant one.” For Sasha, school is easy, and they breeze through all their advanced courses. The others are smart as well, as are most of the students at Maybeck, a private high school in Berkeley with only one hundred students. Maybeck is a “refuge for bullied kids,” and while they are accepting of everyone, there are still cliques of “artsy kids, stoners, and bros.”

“We are the nerdy kids,” says Ian. Their group is “funny, sort of crazy,” and into games, anime, and manga. In their free time, the group plays a game called “**1001 Blank White Cards**,” or “Index Cards,” in which a growing stack of previously blank note cards expands with jokes, silly commands, and random thoughts. If a player draws a blank card, they assign it a “point value and effect.”

1001 Blank White Cards has no real objective and it can’t really be won, unless the card that reads “*Game over, Ian wins!*” is drawn. Over the last four years, the game has grown to a stack of cards measuring two feet and must be carried in a “special bag.” Now, most of the cards have been assigned a value, but when they began playing back when Sasha was called “Luke,” most of the cards were blank.

PART 1: LUKE AND SAMANTHA

All through middle school, Sasha was “brainy, shy, and introverted,” making them an easy kid to ignore. Karl, Sasha’s father, says that it was like Sasha wore an “invisibility cloak”—they always just sort of blended in. Sasha didn’t have much need for other people and believed the “world would be better off without humans in it all.” Inside Sasha’s head, the world “was fascinating enough,” and they were often lost in their own languages and imaginary subway maps.

Sasha’s love for live-action role-playing is, like their made-up language and imaginary society, a form of an alternate reality. Sasha’s nonbinary identity doesn’t fit into America’s gendered society. Because of this, they are passionate about creating new realities that acknowledge and respect their gender identity.



Different forms of autism are often associated with high levels of intelligence, and this is certainly the case with Sasha; however, the fact that most of Maybeck’s students do well in school also reflects their privilege. Slater has already mentioned that the test scores are lower at nearby Oakland High where Richard goes to school, and this is directly related to the hardships they face as a poor community. It is much easier for the Maybeck students to focus on academics when they aren’t distracted by part-time jobs or crime.



Anime, or Japanese computer animation, and manga, a type of graphic novel, are popular “nerdy” stereotypes, and are frequently associated with socially awkward teens. Both anime and manga offer an alternative reality and are an escape from a society that marginalizes those who are different.



The game 1001 Blank White Cards is yet another alternative reality—one that is completely constructed by Sasha and their friends. In this new reality created by the cards, each of them is who they want to be, not who society has decided they are, including Sasha’s nonbinary gender.



Sasha’s “invisibility cloak” is highly ironic, since their skirt tends to draw undue attention from others. Furthermore, Sasha’s fascination with the intersecting lines of subway maps has an interesting correlation to social intersectionality, or the intersecting nature of social groups (like race or gender) that lead to discrimination in society. Much like a map, intersectionality identifies how, and by whom, certain groups are marginalized.



Sasha noticed what others didn't. They saw subtle shapes and colors, and in their infinite love for cats, they "had a habit of meowing." Some blamed this behavior on Sasha's Asperger's, but since Sasha "has never not had Asperger's," they can't really say if that was the case. "The only mind they'd ever been in was their own," Slater writes.

In the sixth grade, Sasha met Samantha, who "looked right past Sasha's invisibility cloak and saw a kindred spirit." Samantha was an outcast and was quite a bit smarter than the other kids—a product of her father's "Dad Homework." Samantha's father worked as a nanotechnologist and he kept his lab in the family's basement. Samantha first noticed Sasha because they used to write their name on their homework in Greek letters.

Like Samantha, Sasha was "passionate" and opinionated, and the two became fast friends. The other sixth graders assumed that Samantha and Sasha were boyfriend and girlfriend, and that "they were K-I-S-S-I-N-G. (They weren't.)" Samantha was mortified when the other students would sing and chant at them. "Stop making fun of us!" she would yell.

Samantha had a "disorienting feeling" for years. She felt like everybody else "had been issued a handbook," yet she had no idea who she was or who she wanted to be. She knew that she was supposed to be "pretty and cute," but Samantha's new curvy body did not feel "sexy" or "good." She hid under baggy clothes and begged the pretty girls to tell her how to be popular. The girls never shared their secrets, and Samantha sunk further into a depression until her parents took her to a therapist.

During one of her sessions, Samantha told her therapist about a slam poem she saw on YouTube called "Hir." In the video, two girls traded a microphone back and forth between "a girl named Melissa and the boy inside her named James." Melissa was "trapped in the flesh of a stranger," and Samantha immediately knew why she felt so disoriented in her own body. "I think I might be...transgender?" Samantha said to her therapist. "I don't think you know what *transgender* means," the therapist said. Samantha didn't bother to tell anyone else for two years.

This passage speaks to Sasha's nonbinary approach to life. Just like their gender, they appreciate nuances and differences that others ignore. Like their Asperger's, Sasha doesn't view this behavior as an anomaly or deviation from normal; rather, this is natural and simply who they are.



Sasha's writing of their name in Greek letters is another reflection of their obsession with the shape and sounds of language, and Samantha's intelligence, like Sasha's other friends from school, reflects her middle-class status. Samantha's father's job as a nanotechnologist implies that they do not live in Richard's neighborhood, and as such, Samantha has increased access to education.



Samantha is mortified when the other students assume that she is Sasha's girlfriend because, like Sasha, Samantha does not fit neatly into gender binaries. Their relationship is not romantic or sexual in the slightest, and the fact that even schoolchildren assume this speaks to how deeply engrained gender and sexuality are in American society.



Samantha is transgender, perhaps even genderqueer, and her "disorienting feeling" is evidence of this. Samantha is uncomfortable with her developing feminine body because it is at odds with the gender she identifies with internally, and this stress manifests as depression.



When Samantha's therapist dismisses her comment that she is transgender, they also dismiss her and leave her feeling invalidated, like her gender identity is a mistake. The therapist's reaction reflects the widespread discrimination and marginalization of transgender people. By not accepting Samantha's gender identity, her depression cannot be properly treated, and she cannot receive adequate medical care.



PART 1: GRAN TURISMO 2

While playing *Gran Turismo 2* in the seventh grade, Samantha turned to Sasha and, after saying she had something important to tell them, said, “I’m transgender.” She told Sasha how she felt about her body and what her therapist had told her. “You’re the only one who knows what you feel,” Sasha said. “If that’s the word for what you feel, then stick with that.” To Sasha, Samantha’s feelings about her gender were no big deal. “Now, what’s the important thing you had to tell me?” they asked.

Now, five years later, Samantha is a “handsome, apple-cheeked young man named Andrew.” His conversation with Sasha in the seventh grade had been “one of the most validating moments of his life.” Back then, Andrew never talked about his gender, and it was quite some time before he told his parents that he was transgender. He was even Sasha’s date for a dance at school, but his dress and makeup were “still just a costume.” By the time Andrew got to high school, he had “begun his gender transition.”

PART 1: HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT GENDER YOU ARE?

Back in 2012, when Sasha was in the tenth grade at Maybeck and Andrew was a freshman at a local public school, Sasha looked to Andrew and asked how he knew he was a guy. “I just knew I wasn’t a girl,” Andrew said. “I just knew that was not who I was at all.” Still, being a guy wasn’t easy for Andrew. His “trans status was a topic of constant rumor and gossip,” and he had recently been having suicidal thoughts. His mother had a “psychotic episode” of her own, and then his grandfather died, which made Andrew’s life even more miserable. To hear Sasha questioning their own gender was a “relief.”

Sasha’s father, Karl, had already told Sasha that he “just knew” that he was a man. Outside of the biological appearance of his body, Slater says, Karl has a “core understanding” of what his gender identity is. Sasha doesn’t feel this way. They “ransacked their own brain looking for the file [marked *Gender*], but it didn’t seem to be there.”

Samantha’s feelings about her gender are no big deal to Sasha because they do not identify as either male or female. It also seems that Sasha is trying to soothe Samantha’s anxieties by providing her with a nonjudgmental ear that won’t overreact, which is why Sasha jokingly asks Samantha what that “important thing” she wanted to talk about was. Sasha can empathize with Samantha’s “disorienting feeling” because they too have had a gender projected onto them that they don’t personally identify with.



Sasha is the first person to acknowledge and accept Andrew’s true gender identity, and it is this acceptance that gives Andrew the courage to project his rightful gender to others. The formal dress Andrew wears to the school dance is “still just a costume” because Andrew does not identify as female and the dress only serves to hide his real identity rather than express or celebrate it.



Andrew’s depression and suicidal thoughts are common among transgender teens. Studies conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics reflect that more than half of all teenage transgender boys attempt suicide at some point in their young lives. Rejection and harassment of transgender and agender youth is a nationwide problem, resulting in countless cases of depression, anxiety, and suicide.



To Sasha, gender is how one feels internally, and this feeling does not necessarily align with one’s biological sex. Sasha does not feel overwhelmingly male or female, and they do not have a “core understanding” of their gender like Karl.



So, Sasha searched the web and found a community of people on Facebook who identified as genderqueer, which included an “aspect of questioning” their gender. This community of people used gender neutral pronouns, and Sasha just knew that they belonged. “Are you genderqueer?” asked Debbie, Sasha’s mother. “Yeah,” they said. Later, Debbie and Karl read Sasha’s social media post about coming out as genderqueer and the positive comments and congratulations that followed it. “What does genderqueer even mean?” Sasha’s parents asked.

Sasha knows that they belong to the genderqueer community because this community has inclusive language that better reflects Sasha’s nonbinary identity, which speaks to the importance of inclusion and representation within language. Like Debbie and Karl, however, Sasha too feels confused about their gender, but this new community is tolerant of this confusion and offers the language needed to better understand it.



PART 1: GENDERQUEER

As Debbie attempts to understand Sasha’s gender, her thoughts keep returning to sex. “Who are you attracted to?” she asks. “Do you have sexual feelings for men?” Sasha, however, isn’t interested in having sex with anyone. To Sasha, “terms like *homosexual* and *heterosexual* make no sense” because they don’t feel like either a man or a woman. Unlike Debbie, Sasha does not view gender, sexuality, and romance as “one big interconnected tangle of feelings.”

Homosexual and heterosexual “make no sense” to Sasha because these terms rely on a binary understanding of gender. In order to be either homosexual or heterosexual, Sasha must first identify as either male or female. Since they don’t, they do not fit neatly into these categories either.



The genderqueer community online has taught Sasha new “language for combing the tangle [of gender, sexuality, and romance] into individual strands.” Sex is merely biology, the “chromosomes, organs, and anatomy” that makes a body a man or woman. *Gender* is “what people feel about themselves, how they feel inside,” while *sexuality* is the “category for who you feel physically attracted to.” Romance, on the other hand, is “who you feel romantic attraction to.” There are several distinctions within these general categories as well, and to Sasha, this new language is “like a gigantic menu, with columns and columns of choices.”

The language of the online genderqueer community offers Sasha increased understanding of their gender and sexual identity outside of the widespread male/female gender binary. This spectrum allows for more choices and subtle differences among people and does not rely on an either/or understanding of gender. Furthermore, this language dispenses with the assumption that gender and sexuality are linked. In the LGBTQ community, these terms are viewed independent of one another.



PART 1: GENDER, SEX, SEXUALITY, ROMANCE: SOME TERMS

Language is “evolving rapidly,” Slater writes, and because of this, it is important to “always adopt the language individuals use about themselves.” To that end, Slater offers a list of terms for gender, sex, and romance.

Slater’s insistence that others adopt this language encourages others to acknowledge and respect the LGBTQ community by using more inclusive language.



“Agender” is not identifying as either male or female, while “androgynous” is a “third gender that blends male and female characteristics.” “Gender fluid” people identify as both male and female, and if one is “cisgender,” their “gender matches their birth sex.” A person who is “genderqueer” does not “fit neatly into male/female categories,” and the term “intersex,” which is biologically having both male and female anatomy, has replaced the antiquated term “hermaphrodite.” To be “transgender” is to feel that one’s “gender is different from their birth sex.”

Slater’s list of gender terms provides readers with a deeper understanding of nonbinary gender. This list of terms overturns the idea that there are only two genders, and instead offers multiple genders across a spectrum that includes male, female, both, and neither. This list is more inclusive and better represents individuals like Sasha.



“Asexual” people are “not physically attracted to anyone,” and a “bisexual” person feels attraction to “both men and women,” Slater explains. A “cupiosexual” does not view others in a sexual way, “but is still interested in sex,” while someone who is “graysexual” only feels sexual attraction “occasionally.” “Heterosexuals” feel attraction for the opposite gender, and a “homosexual” is attracted to the same gender. A “pansexual” finds all genders “across the gender spectrum” attractive.

Romance is an entirely separate category, and those who are “aromantic” don’t feel any romantic inclination. A “biromantic” is romantically drawn to both women and men, and a “cupioromantic” isn’t romantically attracted to anyone, “but is still interested in romance,” Slater says. To be “heteroromantic” is to be romantically attracted to the opposite gender, while “homoromantic” is to be romantically attracted to the same gender. A “panromantic” is interested romantically in those “across the gender spectrum,” and a “quioromantic” does not “understand the difference between romantic and platonic love.”

PART 1: SASHA'S TERMS

Slater also includes a list of Sasha’s preferred terms. It reads: “Agender. / Gray-cupiosexual. / Quioromantic / Also: Vegan.”

PART 1: BECOMING SASHA

To Sasha, genderqueer identity is “like discovering a secret room.” All their life they had only known male and female, but by sophomore year in high school, their gender identity was starting to become more nuanced. The name Luke didn’t “fit” anymore.

Sasha and Andrew began looking on the internet for new unisex names and found the name “Sasha,” a nickname in Russia “for both Alexandra and Alexander, which was Sasha’s middle name.” Sasha’s new name—Russian and both feminine and masculine—was “perfect,” and when Sasha wrote an article about gender for the school paper that same year, “they used their new name as the byline.”

This list of terms underscores Slater’s argument that gender and sexuality are different and often unrelated. For example, Richard assumes that Sasha’s skirt means that they are homosexual; however, this is not the case. Sasha has very little interest in having sex with anybody, regardless of their gender, and Slater’s list of terms helps to understand this.



Slater’s list of terms also dispenses with the idea that sexuality and romantic inclination are one and the same. For example, Sasha’s “soul mate,” Nemo, is gender fluid and identifies as both a man and a woman. Nemo has zero interest in sex and identifies as asexual, but they still have a form of romantic attraction to Sasha. Nemo admits that their relationship is complicated, and it is not rooted in traditional notions of sex and romance.



Sasha’s sexual identity is so nuanced that they must hyphenate their terms in order to be adequately represented, even within this more inclusive list of terms.



Obviously, Luke doesn’t fit Sasha’s identity because this name assumes that they are male. Like their inclusive nongendered pronouns, Sasha desires a name that is more reflective of their identity.



When Sasha uses their new name as the byline on their gender article for the school paper, they cement their new identity and project it to the world. Like Slater’s list, Sasha’s article encourages others to respect and acknowledge the LGBTQ community.



At Sasha's school, the other students accepted Sasha's new identity "without much comment." Several of Sasha's classmates come from LGBTQ households, and it never was made to be a big deal. Sasha quietly became another person, and the others at school grew accustomed to their gender-neutral pronoun. A new **card** entitled "Luke...Sasha...Person" was added to their deck of index cards. Now, if anyone playing calls Sasha the wrong name, they must immediately discard.

Like the byline in the school paper, the new card in 1001 Blank White Cards validates and legitimizes Sasha's gender and their identity. The card serves to remind others that they must respect Sasha's identity and use proper names and pronouns. In that vein, the cards are also a form of social justice.



PART 1: BATHROOMS

Early in Sasha's transition, Debbie often felt that Sasha's gender identity was a "pain in the ass." Once on a family trip during Thanksgiving break, Sasha refused to use a roadside bathroom because it was labeled "Men and Women." "There's no bathroom for me," Sasha said. They then held their bladder for six hours. "It's not healthy," Debbie told Sasha. "You have to be more flexible."

This chapter reveals a common form of discrimination experienced by agender and transgender people. As bathrooms rely on the gender binary—most public spaces have only a men's restroom and a women's restroom—Sasha isn't entirely comfortable using either one. Furthermore, Debbie's comment that Sasha must be "more flexible" is inconsiderate; ironically, "it's not healthy" to deny one's gender identity, as evidenced by Andrew's depression and suicidal ideations.



PART 1: BATHROOMS REVISITED

Back then, Sasha knew they had to find a solution to their bathroom problems. They had begun to use the single bathroom that the teachers used at school, but in public they used whatever bathroom was closest or whichever one was "least conspicuous." They began to switch up which bathroom they used, and "nobody seemed to care."

The fact that "nobody seemed to care" which bathroom Sasha used dispels common misconceptions about trans and agender bathroom use. Sasha's experience suggests that, for the most part, cisgender people really don't care which bathroom trans and agender individuals use.



PART 1: SKIRTS

Slater tells of the first time Sasha wore a **skirt** in the tenth grade after borrowing one from their friend, Carrie. Maybeck had a gag dress up day and Sasha couldn't believe how comfortable the skirt was. A year later, despite already identifying as gender nonbinary, Sasha still only had masculine clothes. Carrie again lent them a skirt, this time an entire bag full, and Sasha has been wearing one every day since then.

While Maybeck's gag dress-up day gives Sasha the opportunity to dress in a way that they are most comfortable, it still implies that Sasha's preference for skirts is some type of joke or anomaly. Gag dress up days perpetuate cisgender ideals of appropriate dress, and they marginalize those who don't adhere to those ideals.



Sasha loves **skirts**, and they love the way they compliment the masculine look of their other clothes. Sasha's outfits are a "sartorial gender mash-up" of skirts mixed with t-shirts and vests, and while the outfits aren't exactly "flamboyant," they still "make Debbie nervous." The skirts mean that Sasha no longer wears the "cloak of invisibility," and she worries about how the world will look at them.

Sasha's choice of clothing reflects their gender confusion. Sasha questions their gender, and by dressing in a way that is both masculine and feminine they project this confusion to the outside world, which makes it difficult for others to assume that they are either a man or a woman.



According to Slater, transgender people become the victims of a disproportionate number of crimes each year. A quarter of all trans people have been the victim of a “bias-driven” assault, and these statistics go up for trans women, those of color, and those who don’t identify as either male or female. A 2008 survey of 860 nonbinary people found that an “astonishing” 32 percent of them had been attacked physically because of their gender.

So, Debbie worries about Sasha. “Did anyone give you a hard time?” she asks each day after school. But nobody ever does, except for one opinionated old lady who demands to know why Sasha is wearing a **skirt** since they are “not a girl!”

Sadly, Sasha’s experience on the 57 bus is not an isolated incident, and these statistics reflect this unjust reality. Trans and nonbinary people are forced to live with the reality that they are at an increased risk for violence, and Slater’s book directly addresses and attempts to right this social wrong.



Sasha’s experience with the old lady also suggests that most people are accepting of trans and agender individuals. Furthermore, this suggests that these opinions are rooted in ignorance, not hatred or malice.



PART 1: RUNNING

One day in 1987, when Karl was jogging just outside of Berkeley, three men pulled alongside him in a car as he ran. “Hey, I like your legs!” one yelled. “Let me suck your prick,” said another. After following close behind Karl, they finally parked the car and got out. “Hey, why don’t you want to talk to us?” one of the men asked. Karl tried to evade the men, telling them he was “busy,” but they grabbed him and “choked” him.

When Karl regained consciousness, he was surrounded by bystanders, but the police were never able to find the men. Later, Karl wrote about it in his journal and found the whole thing “bizarre.” After all, he wasn’t even gay. This was an isolated incident, one “not likely to be repeated,” he thought.

Karl’s attack based on his perceived sexuality mirrors Sasha’s own attack. Karl’s attackers believe him to be gay, and Richard believes that Sasha’s skirt is a reflection of their homosexuality as well. Of course, neither Sasha nor Karl identify as gay, and this further underscores the misunderstanding and bias directed toward the LGBTQ community.



Karl’s belief that his attack is an isolated incident is highly ironic. Of course, his child will be attack for the very same reasons, and the fact that both Karl and Sasha have been affected by this discrimination highlights the prevalence of bias directed at LGBTQ individuals.



PART 1: THE PETITION

Each Wednesday at Maybeck, the school holds an “all-school meeting” in which students can make and hear announcements. One Wednesday back in March during Sasha’s junior year, Sasha made an announcement to the school. “My name is Sasha and I identify as agender,” Sasha told their classmates. They also told the students that it is “important to respect people’s preferred pronouns and if you’re not sure what those are, you should ask.” Lastly, Sasha told their fellow students that they would be “petitioning the White House to recognize nonbinary gender.”

Sasha’s announcement at school underscores the privilege of cisgender people to be accepted and represented within language. Sasha must go out of their way to ensure that others use their preferred pronouns, and they must petition the White House to acknowledge their existence. Nonbinary people are not represented on legal forms and documents—there is no box to check for those who identify as agender or gender fluid—and Sasha’s announcement emphasizes this fact, which is often taken for granted by the cisgender community.



In order for a petition to get an “official response” from the White House, it must get 100,000 signatures within a thirty-day period. Sasha’s petition got 27,000 signatures, which “wasn’t too shabby,” but ultimately wasn’t enough. Still, Sasha remembers, “that was 27,000 people reading and agreeing with my words—words that I had written.”

Even though the White House does not acknowledge Sasha’s petition, it still serves to validate their gender identity. The 27,000 signatures imply that there are many people who support Sasha’s right to exist and be acknowledged.



PART 1: CLIPBOARDS

A few years ago, while visiting Karl in the kindergarten classroom where he taught, Sasha noticed that the students’ names were listed on separate clipboards by gender. Parents had to sign their child out when they picked them up at the end of the day, and the separate lists for boys and girls made things “easier.” “What about the kids who aren’t either one?” Sasha asked. “Which clipboard do they go on?”

Karl’s kindergarten list highlights the frequency of gender segregation. Karl is supportive of Sasha’s gender identity and is certainly aware of the difficulties they endure because of binary separation, but he still organizes his own classroom using gender. This reflects how commonplace binary understanding of gender is in society.



By the time the new school year came around, Sasha had made Karl two new clipboards that separated his students into two lists of “A–M and N–Z.” A few years later, Karl had a boy in his class who wore a princess dress and girl “who talked about maybe being a boy someday.” “Turned out, Sasha was right,” Karl says. “Kindergartners don’t want to be pigeonholed.”

Like Sasha, Karl’s students don’t want to have their gender projected on to them by others. Since Karl has future students who benefit from this nonbinary approach, it is safe to assume that his boy/girl clipboards have alienated nonbinary students in the past.



PART 1: BEST DAY EVER

“Best day ever” is one of Sasha’s “trademark phrases,” and because Sasha likes lots of things, their chances for best days ever are very high. Once, while on a trip to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Sasha met another fan of the web comic *Homestuck* while on the subway. The person even liked Sasha’s **skirt** and wore one too, but theirs was “in the wash.” “Best. Day. Ever,” Sasha says.

All of Sasha’s favorite things are incorporated into this day. They are passionate about MIT, comic books, and subways, and the fact that another person too wears skirts reinforces to Sasha that they are not alone in their nonbinary gender identity.



PART 1: DRESS CODE

Slater recounts Debbie’s experience being sent home from school in 1968 because her **skirt** was too long. Debbie’s story is told as a poem and has several short lines, many of which describe dresses and clothing. “Sleek or flouncy / cinched at the waist / pleated, knitted / patterned, plain,” Slater writes.

The structure of Slater’s poem makes it resemble a skirt on the page. Multiple short lines make the poem narrow and long, much like the skirt Debbie is suspended for wearing to school.



Debbie went to El Camino Real High School, where the girls chanted “*Pants! Pants! / Let Girls Wear Pants! / Debbie and her friends stood up / on two fabric-swaddled legs / and won.*” Even then, the girls couldn’t wear blue jeans or mini-**skirts**, so Debbie made her own dress “from an Indian bedspread.” However, Slater writes, “That ruffled draping skirt, they said, / was just / too long.”

The dress code at El Camino Real High School reflects the commonplace discrimination of girls in public schools. The school has banned blue jeans, skirts, and dresses that are too long, and the female students must protest in order to wear pants in general. This many restrictions on clothing make it exceedingly difficult for girls to find suitable clothing for school.



PART 1: SASHA AND NEMO

While on a trip to Yosemite in early 2013, Sasha and the other students from Maybeck were forced to evacuate the park because the “Rim Fire, the third-largest wildfire in California history,” was barreling toward their campsite. As they evacuated, Sasha climbed into the back of a truck with Nemo, a student who was a year younger. “We were both freaking out,” Nemo now explains. “That was our first date.”

Nemo and Sasha’s first date is certainly nontraditional, much like their relationship. However, both Sasha and Nemo are comforted during a stressful situation by their relationship, and this comfort is mirrored throughout the rest of Slater’s book. Since both Sasha and Nemo are nonbinary, they are well aware of the challenges that the other experiences in a gendered society.



Nemo identifies as gender fluid and uses gender neutral pronouns as well. To Nemo, “*gender fluid* means I have the potential to be anything, any gender at any time.” Sasha and Nemo know each other from Maybeck’s “Queer Club” and they spent some time together before the fire, but their “relationship sort of sprang fully-formed on that camping trip.” Their relationship is “confusing,” since Sasha is aromantic and Nemo is asexual, but they “complement each other.” Just like in their favorite comic, *Homestuck*, Nemo is Sasha’s “moirail,” or “most important person,” like “a soul mate maybe, but not in the romantic sense.”

Nemo and Sasha’s relationship proves that meaningful relationships do not necessarily have to adhere to heteronormative, or even homosexual, stereotypes. Nemo and Sasha’s relationship underscores the fact that gender, sexuality, and romance are considered independent of one another by many within the LGBTQ community. Their relationship is not sexual or romantic, and it doesn’t assume that they are one gender or the other.



PART 2: BOOK OF FACES

In a poem, Slater describes pictures of Richard that he has up loaded onto his Facebook page. The poem has several verses, and each verse has only two lines describing a single picture.

The short structure of each of Slater’s verses mirrors the minimal information that can be gleaned from Richard’s photographs. This implies that Richard cannot be fully understood at a glance, which is often the case with racial discrimination.



The pictures reflect Richard at different times in his life, “At fourteen, in a beanie: / round-faced, bright-eyed,” and “At sixteen: jaw slack, brows raised, / expression asking, *What?*” The pictures capture his family, “Smiling beside his cousin’s / slit-eyed hilarity,” and “Soft-eyed on a sofa, / younger brother cuddled on his chest.”

Furthermore, Richard’s childhood pictures have the effect of reminding readers that he is just a child, and that he shouldn’t be tried as an adult. The pictures with his family make him appear loving and tender, and incapable of committing a hate crime.



The pictures also depict Richard's life with his friends. "Standing with Skeet, spines straight, / chins up, peas in a pod. / And later, beside Skeet's picture, / wearing a bandanna in tribute."

But, Slater writes, "None of it captures / how [Richard] looks in conversation / how his eye hold your eyes, / seeing you see him. / His own secret power: / that paying attention."

These pictures reflect the pain Richard endures after his friend, Skeet, is murdered. Slater depicts Richard as a teenager struggling with the emotions of loss, and this makes it easier to forgive him for his attack on Sasha.



Again, Slater implies that the photographs are an incomplete picture of Richard. Richard's actions cannot be judged or condemned without first seeing the larger picture.



PART 2: FIRST DAY

This chapter is another poem, this time about Richard's first day at Oakland High School. Slater's poem is one solid verse of fourteen lines, and she describes the smells that Richard experiences on that day.

She begins with "The smell that is the lemon-pine-disinfectant / of just-mopped floors," and the "body spray, reeking bathrooms, weed / smoke, morning breath—" Slater continues, "The smell that is the salty press of bodies changing classes / that is socks that is feet that is blood that is bones."

In closing, Slater writes, "That smell is the pungent eraser that wipes / the whiteboard clean, so just / ignore the ghosts of last year's scrawl / still there, still showing through."

This poem follows a more traditional structure and looks much like a sonnet. This traditional structure implies that Richard's experiences during his first day of school at Oakland High are common.



Slater's poem reflects Richard's teenage existence, and this reinforces that he is not yet an adult. Furthermore, the mention of blood and bones make him appear more human, and this reminds readers that Richard is a real, living person, not merely a statistic.



Slater suggests that there are lessons to be learned from the past, and that these lessons are frequently ignored. Also, the image of "the whiteboard clean" is a powerful contrast to Richard's own black identity and it harkens the systemic and institutionalized racism he must endure.



PART 2: AN OLD FRIEND

Richard's childhood friend Cherie talks about Richard's first day at Oakland High. He didn't attend the school until their junior year, but the two had grown up in the same apartment complex and they were "inseparable, even though they went to different schools." Still, it has been more than a year since Cherie has seen Richard, and a lot has happened since then. The year before was "terrible," and "they are still broken; maybe they'd never be fixed again."

Cherie's reference to the "terrible" year before and the "broken" state it has left them in is a product of Oakland's economic inequality. For Cherie, a resident living in the poverty of East Oakland, the past year has been riddled with crime, incarceration, and death; however, if Cherie lived in the wealthy neighborhoods of the hills, her experiences would likely be much different.



"[Richard] gets on my nerves but I love him to death," Cherie says. "He is my friend. I don't know what I would do without him." Richard has a light complexion, Cherie explains, and lots of people think he is "mixed." He is constantly joking around, even when it is not appropriate. "You don't want to be bothered," Cherie says, "he'll just keep talking to you, keep playing, to the point where you'll cuss him out and he'll still be laughing."

Cherie also points out that Richard is shy around those he doesn't know. He falls to "the background" becoming "just a pair of hazel eyes watching everything go down." However, she says, if you are Richard's friend, "then you are family to him," and he will "be loyal until the sun quits rising in the east."

Cherie's description of Richard's playfulness implies that his prank on Sasha was just that—a prank, albeit an ill-informed one—and that he never intended to physically harm them. This description also suggests that Richard is an equal opportunity harasser, which also makes it easier to forgive his attack on Sasha. If Richard jokes with everyone, that makes his prank on Sasha less discriminatory.



Richard's hazel eyes are mentioned several times throughout The 57 Bus. Frequently viewed as the window to the soul, Richard's eyes suggest that he is an inherently good person who has made an adolescent mistake, not a depraved individual who should spend the rest of their life in prison.



PART 2: OAKLAND HIGH SCHOOL

According to Slater, "O High isn't the best school in Oakland, but it isn't the worst one either, not by a long shot." Just outside of downtown, the school is "high enough on the hill that you call roll a quarter down Park Boulevard," but it isn't completely outside the "regular Oakland drama." Not many white kids go to O High, but everyone else does. Parents can send their kids to whichever school they please, and "Oakland High is a popular choice."

Lots of parents hope that O High is "a little safer, a little saner than [schools] closer to home," but the school still has problems. At O High there are fights, suicide attempts, and "rumors about who got shot and who hooked up." Despite this, Slater writes, there are still chances for success. The school offers advanced academics, and there are sports if a student can keep their grades up.

"The finish line," Slater writes, "is marked with a cap and gown and a march across the stage." By the end of Richard's junior year, two-thirds of the outgoing senior class will graduate, "but life has a way of sticking its foot out," Slater says, "and then you are part of the other one-third." When this happens, it often goes unnoticed at first, until one is suddenly on a path "into a future that is as hazy as weed smoke."

Like Sasha, O High doesn't fit very well into either/or binaries. The school exists in a state of both good and bad, and to focus solely on one is to discredit the other. There are some real problems at Oakland High (like overpopulation and understaffing), but academic programs and educators like Kaprice Wilson make it a good school as well. O High is best appreciated outside the confines of binary thought.



Oakland High students have a chance to escape the city's cyclical crime and poverty if they take advantage of offered programs. Richard takes advantage of Kaprice Wilson's program, and this reflects his dedication to making a better life for himself, which in turn implies that he is not inherently a criminal.



The uncertainty of Richard's future further underscores the social inequality present in Oakland. Life has many ways of "sticking its foot out" for Oakland High students, and as members of the lower class, poverty, drugs, and crime are constant obstacles to their academic success.



PART 2: MISS KAPRICE

During the first month of Richard's time at O High, Cherie gets into a fight and is sent home. She texts Richard in the middle of the day and he leaves school to go meet her at the bus stop. After all, Richard "isn't really in the habit of going to school, all day, every day."

When Cherie gets to the bus stop, however, she is with Kaprice Wilson, O High's truancy coordinator. It is Kaprice's job to intervene when students miss too much school, and she frequently works with the kids who get into trouble. "Can I get in your program?" Richard asks Kaprice.

Later, Kaprice reads Richard's transcript. Her program is geared more towards freshmen and sophomores (O High has 1,875 kids, and Kaprice can only work with about 275 kids a year) and Richard is already a junior, but he clearly needs her help. His attendance is poor, and his grades are bad, and he has already been to two other high schools. He even spent the entire previous year in a group home in Redding after being arrested for fighting. To Kaprice, Richard's future doesn't look good.

Kaprice later tells Richard that if he wants to be in her program, he must follow her rules. "I'm going to make you understand the family motto," Kaprice says. "Never let your obstacles become more important than your goal." Richard's goal is to graduate, and Kaprice tells him that "if you don't comply with the family motto, then just know I have a collection of belts in the back of my filing cabinet and they're not for sagging pants."

PART 2: THE PRINCESS OF EAST OAKLAND

Kaprice grew up in East Oakland during the 1980s, "when crack cocaine was just hitting the streets." At fourteen, she fell in love with Lil' Jerry, a neighborhood kid who "claimed" the 96vill gang of East Oakland. After the gang's leader was killed in the mid '80s, crime in the area "skyrocketed," and Kaprice spent most of her time running around with Lil' Jerry.

Unlike many other students, there is no one in Richard's life to make sure that he goes to school. He has a loving mother, but she works two jobs to pay their high Oakland rent, and she is often preoccupied.



The fact that Richard takes initiative by asking to be in Kaprice's program—no one forces him to do it—is a testament to his determination to finish school and keep out of trouble, and this too implies that Richard is not innately criminal.



Kaprice's workload is another reflection of the discrimination present in Oakland's society. Clearly, Kaprice is overworked, and she can't reasonably be expected to help all the kids in need at Oakland High. Because she is spread so thin, not all the kids at O High are given the same opportunities for success, and this serves to compound their truancy problems.



Richard's "obstacles" are the discrimination and inequalities that he must navigate each day, and it is a constant struggle to not lose sight of his goals. Richard hopes to graduate, stay out of jail, and simply survive—a stark contrast to Sasha's own goals to attend MIT and become a city planner. These goals further underscore the disparity between the middle and lower classes in Oakland.



Kaprice works well with the students at Oakland High because she has lived their life. She knows firsthand the obstacles that the students face daily, and she is well suited to help overcome them. Kaprice is proof that Oakland's cycle of crime and poverty can be broken.



After high school, Kaprice's brother filled out a college application for Clark Atlanta University on her behalf, and she was accepted. Kaprice, however, had little interest in college and preferred to stay close to Lil' Jerry. She wanted to get pregnant and "go on welfare," since "that's what all the girls she knew did." Lil' Jerry refused, and he refused to have sex with her after that too. He insisted she go to college, and he refused to let her to see other boys. "You're not messing with nobody else either," Lil' Jerry said. "Try somebody else, I'll kill them and I'll kill you first."

So Kaprice went to college, and Lil' Jerry was later killed by a drug dealer. The random dealer had trampled an old lady's flowers, and when Lil' Jerry demanded he stop, the dealer shot him dead. The case remains unsolved, but Kaprice finished college and landed the job at O High. She feels connected to the kids and "she knows how to work with them. They are her children."

Lil' Jerry's behavior disrupts common stereotypes of criminals as heartless sociopaths who lack the capacity for good. Clearly, Lil' Jerry has done some very bad things (like threatening to kill Kaprice), but he still cares about Kaprice and wants to see her get out of Oakland. This implies that Lil' Jerry is not all bad and perhaps his criminal behavior is more indicative of his social surroundings than an innate criminal quality.



Lil' Jerry's behavior implies that, like Richard, he is not an inherent criminal and instead is a complex human being. He cares about the old lady, which is a quality that a truly depraved person would lack. Lil' Jerry challenges popular stereotypes of young black men as dangerous felons.



PART 2: THE BEST MOTHER EVER

Kaprice is the "surrogate mom" to many kids at Oakland High. Cherie even calls her "Mom," like many other students do, and they all keep Kaprice updated on their grades and write her little notes, which Kaprice hangs all over her tiny office. "We are a family," Kaprice tells them. "This is your sister. This is your brother. You have no say in the matter."

Kaprice's office is "a safe zone for Richard," and there she reminds him of his goals: "go to class, get your grades up, graduate, stay of jail, survive." Richard asks to call Kaprice "Mom," but she tells him no. Richard already has a loving mother, and Kaprice doesn't want "to take that spot." Instead, she says, "I'll be your auntie."

Kaprice is completely dedicated to the students at Oakland High, and her nickname of "Mom" reflects this. Several of O High's students are without one parent or another, and Kaprice helps to fill this role.



Richard's goals reflect Oakland's social inequalities. Richard's goals do not include college, travel, or marriage and family like many other students' do. Instead, he hopes for the bare minimum—to graduate high school and stay alive.



PART 2: HOPES AND PRAYERS

Jasmine, Richard's mother, gave birth to Richard when she was just fourteen years old. Richard's real father didn't stick around long, and Jasmine started dating Derick, Richard's stepdad, when Richard was just five years old. When Richard was nine, Jasmine's sister, Savannah, was killed in a drive-by shooting, and her two daughters came to live with Jasmine.

Within two years, Jasmine gave birth to Derriyon, Richard's younger brother, and suddenly their small family had six members. Jasmine was never able to finish her own education, and she now works in the kitchen of a long-term care facility. "I want [Richard] to have a career. Go to college," she says.

Savannah's tragic murder is another reflection of Oakland's social inequality. Drive-by shootings don't tend to happen in Sasha's middle-class neighborhood—Savannah is killed simply because she had the misfortune of living in a high crime area.



Jasmine is an example of what happens when "life sticks its foot out." Lack of opportunities and increased responsibilities mean that she has had to settle for less, and she wants better for Richard.



But these are “big dreams in [Jasmine’s] part of town,” Slater writes. Each year about six hundred African American boys begin high school in Oakland and only half graduate. Even then, “fewer than one hundred [will] graduate with the requirements needed to attend a California state college or university.” It is more likely that Richard will be arrested. Young black boys account for only 30 percent of the underage population in Oakland, yet they account “for nearly 75 percent of all juvenile arrests.” So Jasmine “prays.” She prays for Richard to graduate, to stay alive, and to not get anyone pregnant.

These statistics reflect the institutional racism present in American society. Black youths are given few opportunities for success in the city of Oakland, and then once they get into trouble, a biased justice system funnels many of them, regardless of their age, into prison, effectively removing large numbers of black men from American society.



PART 2: WHERE HE LEFT OFF

Richard begins to spend most of his free time in Kaprice’s office. His grades have started to improve, and he likes to hang out and talk with the other students who come to check in. Richard is much like a “little counselor” to the other students, and he plays around with them, making everyone laugh. “There’s already enough craziness,” Richard tells Kaprice. “I just like happy stuff.”

This description again paints Richard in such a light that it is difficult to believe that his impending attack on Sasha is malicious. Richard is caring and sensitive, and much like Sasha, is largely misunderstood by others. Richard is not a stereotypical criminal.



To everyone in his life, Richard is “the funny one, the one who makes people smile.” Jasmine begins to plan a trip to Disneyland for the family, and she questions if Richard will have any fun since he is a teenager now. But Richard isn’t worried. “I’m going to have fun like I’m five years old,” he says.

Jasmine’s plans to take Richard to Disneyland again emphasize the fact that Richard is still a child, and that he should not be tried as an adult for Sasha’s attack.



PART 2: HOW IT WAS BEFORE

Cherie remembers back in 2012, when she and Richard were freshmen, they used to “cut school on the daily” and hang out with friends. They went bowling, or to the beach, anywhere but school, and it was a blast. “Not gonna lie,” Cherie says, “in those days it was hecca fun.”

This illustrates the progress Richard has made since coming to O High and beginning Kaprice’s program. Richard no longer skips school to hang out with friends, and this reflects his commitment to achieving a better life outside of East Oakland’s crime and poverty.



PART 2: FIGHTING

One day back in 2012, Cherie and Richard skipped school with a group of friends, including their old friend, Skeet. They were headed to the beach when one of their friends began to have a verbal disagreement with another group of kids. Before long, all the boys were fighting, and Skeet ended up hitting one of them with a skateboard. “It was hecca savage,” Cherie says. Later, on their way back from the beach, they saw the other kids talking to the cops, and “then a cruiser pulled up behind the bus.”

This incident, like Richard’s attack on Sasha, bears the hallmarks of “hot cognition” (when a person’s emotions heavily influence their thinking) and poor adolescent decision making, especially in a group setting. The fight begins over seemingly nothing, and it is escalated to violence without thinking about the consequences.



PART 2: ARRESTED

“We were just young,” Cherie says. “We didn’t even think we could go to jail for it. Honestly, we didn’t think about jail when it happened.” Each of them was arrested anyway. The other kids, a group of skateboarders, accused them of stealing some of their stuff, including a cell phone. “Nothing was found on Richard and his friends,” Slater writes, “but charges were brought.”

Each of them was sentenced and “went their separate ways.” Cherie was sentenced to probation and made to wear a “GPS monitor on her ankle,” but Richard was sent to the group home in Redding three hours away. He stayed there for over a year. Skeet was sent to another group home, and Richard and his friends “would never all be together again. After that, everything went wrong instead of right,” Slater writes.

This passage contains another example of social discrimination based on race within The 57 Bus, as charges are brought against the children without evidence. Presumably, if Richard and his friends had been white, it is likely that this experience would have ended much differently.



Slater implies that Richard’s previous arrest and punishment is a catalyst for the events leading up to Sasha’s attack. In this way, Richard alone is not wholly responsible for Sasha’s assault; rather, Slater implies that Richard’s racist society is, at least in part, responsible for Richard’s actions that day.



PART 2: NOW IT’S A GOOD DAY

Skeet was sentenced to time in a group home in Chino Hills, California, but he ran away not long after arriving. His last Facebook post was on November 26, 2012, Slater writes, and it includes “a sepia-toned photo of himself” with a gun in his right hand. The day before that, Skeet posted another picture “with a bottle of cognac and bottle of cough syrup. *Got my syrup and Remy now it’s a good day,*” it read.

On January 7, 2013, Skeet was shot dead in Oakland at just seventeen years old. His murderer was also killed days later “in an outbreak of violence that left four people dead in one six-hour period.” Richard heard about his friend’s death while he was in Redding. When Jasmine told him, Richard immediately burst into tears. “He didn’t even hang up,” Slater writes. “Just put the phone down and walked away.”

Slater’s description of Skeet’s picture as “sepia-toned” has a connotation of warmth, yet there is nothing warm about it. However, Slater has already implied that photographs offer an incomplete picture, and this is no doubt the case with Skeet as well. While these pictures reflect the poor choices Skeet has made, they do not reflect the social injustices that have led to this behavior.



Richard is clearly traumatized by Skeet’s murder, and it becomes yet another towering obstacle that he must overcome. Skeet’s death, in addition to the poverty and crime Richard is forced to deal with on a daily basis, makes it all the more difficult for him to achieve his goals of graduation and a law-abiding life.



PART 2: IF

Skeet’s death “killed Richard,” Cherie says. Skeet started to hang out with some pretty bad kids after he ran away from the group home, and now Cherie thinks that if they hadn’t skipped school that day and gone to the beach, “maybe Skeet would still be alive.” When Cherie attended Skeet’s funeral, she nearly “passed out” after seeing him in the casket and had to be “held up.” “But at least she wasn’t alone,” Slater writes. Richard was alone at the group home and “had no one beside him to keep him from falling.”

If Cherie feels responsible for Skeet’s death, it is likely that Richard feels this way as well, and this type of thinking mirrors Jasmine’s “what if” thinking after Richard is arrested for Sasha’s assault. Like Jasmine, Cherie is powerless to change the true cause of Skeet’s death—Oakland’s social and economic inequality.



PART 2: MURDER

Oakland Police Department statistics reflect that 2,800 assaults were committed in Oakland in 2012, in addition to 4,100 robberies, making it “the most dangerous city in California” that year. 131 people were murdered, and eight of those victims were under eighteen years old.

Slater lists the names of all the minors killed in 2012, but Skeet was the first person killed in 2013. There will be 91 more murders before the end of the year, and of those 91 deaths, seven will be under the age of eighteen, “including an eight-year-old girl and a sixteen-month-old boy.” Death, unfortunately, is commonplace in Oakland. “Every year we lose somebody,” Cherie says. “It’s just like, who’s next? I’m scared for myself because bullets don’t have no names on them.”

These statistics illustrate the frequent crime that Richard and his friends are exposed to, which is also evidence of Oakland’s glaring social inequality. Instead of a normal childhood full of innocence and play, Richard’s life is consumed by crime and death.



Slater’s list of the minors killed in 2012—Richard knows two of them—has the effect of making them appear like real people and less like statistics. In addition to many other hardships Richard and his friends endure, they are also afraid that they will be the next one killed, since violence and death is so pervasive in their neighborhood.



PART 2: WORKING

When Richard returned to Oakland after serving time in the Redding group home, it was the summer before his junior year. He immediately “signed up for a job-training program conducted by the Unity Council, an Oakland nonprofit, which led to an internship.” Now, Richard “loves having a job,” and he is good at it, too. He even offers Jasmine money for bills. Richard “likes being a man with a paycheck.”

Richard’s desire for honest work again challenges stereotypical assumptions of criminality in black male teens. Richard likes his job, and he likes to contribute to his family and feel as if he is helping and making a difference. Again, this is not the behavior of an evil criminal, and this makes it much easier to believe that Richard never meant to hurt Sasha.



PART 2: STRIPPED

Later that fall, Richard is held at gunpoint and robbed while walking to Cherie’s house. “In Oakland it’s called getting stripped,” and they take Richard’s wallet, shoes, phone, money, and his coat. Richard recognizes one of them, and according to “rumor,” this kid has definitely “killed people.” Richard’s cousin wants to go back and get his stuff, but Richard “keeps walking.”

This passage again illustrates the prevalence of crime in East Oakland, and the fact that the community has a specific word for this type of attack is a testament to how frequently “stripping” occurs.



PART 2: TRUST ISSUES

This chapter is another of Slater’s poems in which she examines Richard’s life. The poem is one solid verse of several lines, and many of the lines have peculiar spacing. Some lines are flush with the margin, while others are scattered across the page. The poem appears to trail down the page, and the lines “Who / Can / You / Trust?” stand out in the middle of the poem.

The peculiar spacing and structure of Slater’s poem draws attention to the fact that Richard has very few people he can trust, as his support network is sparse. Society is structured in such a way that many people appear out to get him. The boy who robs him could be considered a casual friend, yet he holds Richard at gunpoint.



“Who in this world can you trust?” Slater writes. “When the guns are drawn, / when the sun goes down, / when you’re walking in the shadows.” She continues, “People call themselves your friend. / They say they were there / but they weren’t there. / Say they’re coming / but they don’t show.” Slater ends her poem with the following two lines: “I don’t have any friends,’ Richard once said. / ‘I have associates.”

Slater’s poem also points out the plain disparities between Sasha’s middle-class life and Richard’s lower-class existence. Sasha has the luxury of many close and meaningful friendships, while Richard doesn’t. Richard expects to be betrayed rather than supported.



PART 2: RESOLVE

After the robbery, Richard stays away from school for a few days. When he goes back, he visits Kaprice in her office and tells her about the whole ordeal. Then he gives her Jasmine’s phone number. Richard wants Kaprice and Jasmine to be friends so his mother will know how hard he is working. “I’m a graduate,” Richard says. “And I’m a make her happy.”

Again, this reflects Richard’s dedication to achieving his goals, which implies that he is not an inherent criminal. In this light, Richard surely doesn’t deserve to spend the rest of his life in prison because of one misguided prank.



PART 3: MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2013

A week after Richard is robbed, his cousin Lloyd—a “goofy and boisterous” kid two years older than Richard—stops by O High. The school security guard thinks Lloyd is “a big old baby,” but she makes him wait outside anyway. Lloyd has already asked Richard to skip class, but he refused, so now Lloyd waits for the end of the day. When Richard finally comes outside, he hugs the security guard. “Bye, Auntie,” Richard says. Later, the security guard recalls, “I’m telling you, I didn’t feel nothing but love when he hugged me.”

Here, both Richard and Lloyd disrupt widespread stereotypes of black inner-city youth as hardened and destructive criminals. Lloyd’s description as a “goofy and boisterous” “big old baby” and Richard’s behavior (remaining in school and lovingly hugging the security guard) are not consistent with typical assumptions of violence and delinquency.



PART 3: THE 57 BUS

Sasha’s commute back and forth to Maybeck takes an hour and two buses, but, according to Healy, “Sasha loves buses in a way I can’t even understand,” so they actually enjoy it. The 57 bus is their second bus, and it is usually pretty loud. The girls sit mostly in the front and try to escape the noisy boys in the back, but Sasha prefers their own seat, and that is only possible in the back of the bus. Today, they’re exhausted. Sasha was up all night writing a paper on [Anna Karenina](#), and it’s not long before they’re asleep.

The 57 bus, like many other places in society, is segregated, albeit unintentionally, by gender. With the girls in the front and the noisy boys in the back, there is no natural choice for Sasha based on their gender. This serves as yet another example of the privilege afforded to cisgender individuals, which often goes largely unnoticed.



PART 3: 4:52 P.M.

At 4:52 P.M., the security camera on the 57 bus records Richard and Lloyd as they board. In the back, they find their friend Jamal, who is just a few feet away from a sleeping Sasha. “Look at this dude,” Jamal says to Richard, pointing at Sasha. As the camera records, Lloyd runs back and forth to the front of the bus, flirting with a girl, and Jamal hands Richard a lighter.

Jamal’s reference to Sasha as a “dude” is another example of the gendered nature of the English language. “Dude” assumes that Sasha is boy, and, just as Sasha argues, this word also projects this assumption to anyone who hears Sasha referred to as such.



Although Jamal can't be heard on the video, he takes out his phone and "points it at Sasha as if planning to record." It will be "funny," Jamal and Richard figure, "like that prank show on MTV with Ashton Kutcher, *Punk'd*." The **skirt** will smoke a little and they will all have a good laugh. "I need a good laugh," Richard says, and flicks the lighter near Sasha's skirt.

This interaction implies that Richard doesn't intend to hurt Sasha with his poorly conceived prank—he is simply a kid looking to have a "good laugh" at the expense of the "dude" in a skirt. This interaction implies that Richard is not a hardened criminal while also underscoring the social marginalization of LGBTQ individuals.



Sasha's **skirt** fails to smoke or smolder. "Go ahead, you do it," Jamal says to Richard. He flicks the lighter a second time, but there is still no smoke. "Do it," Jamal says again as Lloyd joins them, giving up on the girl. Richard flicks the lighter for a third time, and again, "nothing." Lloyd yells "Back door! Back door!" to the driver, and the three get "ready to make their escape." Richard flicks the lighter for the fourth time just as the driver opens the back door. Richard immediately jumps off the bus, and as he does, Sasha's skirt "erupts into a sheet of flame."

Clearly, Richard is encouraged by both Jamal and Lloyd in his attack on Sasha. It is likely that Richard would have given up after the first and second attempts failed to ignite Sasha's skirt, but Jamal's persistent comments ensure that Richard keeps trying. Lloyd's efforts to ease their escape also encourage Richard's actions, and this implies that Jamal and Lloyd are also responsible for Sasha's injuries.



PART 3: FIRE

"I'm on fire! I'm on fire!" Sasha yells as Jamal "howls with laughter." On the bus it is pandemonium, and the passengers begin running for the exits. Nearby, another kid laughs, and the driver still has no idea that anything has happened. A man with a mustache leaps into action and "smothers Sasha's flaming skirt with his coat." It is over as quickly as it started. As the driver finally pulls over, Sasha gets off the bus in their underwear. "Oh, Lord. Fuck," they say.

When Jamal "howls with laughter" this suggests that he, not Richard, is inherently evil. Jamal seems to be enjoying Sasha's agony while Richard runs after the bus trying to figure out if Sasha is okay. Instead of trying to help Sasha, Jamal stands to the side and laughs, yet he is still never questioned by police and Richard is left to take the fall.



PART 3: WATCHING

Immediately after Richard jumps off the bus and sees Sasha in flames, he begins running after the moving bus, and it isn't long before it pulls over again and coughing passengers file out onto the street. Richard watches as Sasha sits on the sidewalk, their legs a "charred" mess. Lloyd and Jamal get off the 57 bus too, and the three board another waiting bus. Later at home, Jasmine notices that Richard is "sad," but he doesn't tell her why.

Richard is truly surprised to see Sasha busts into flames, and this is apparent when he immediately begins running after the bus. Richard's actions and his "sad" behavior later at home are evidence of his genuine remorse. Richard feels badly that his adolescent prank has caused Sasha to sustain real injuries, and this implies that he is not a bad kid.



PART 3: THE MAN WITH THE MUSTACHE

As he walks home after talking to the police, the man with the mustache has "tears streaming down his face." He cries and keeps asking, "Why? Oh my God, why?"

This chapter illustrates how harmful discrimination is to society. The stranger is visibly affected and shaken by Richard's attack on Sasha.



PART 3: PHONE CALL

At five o'clock in the evening when Sasha calls Karl, he is still at work. "Dad. I need you to come over here right now," Sasha says. "I was on the bus and I got set on fire." "What?" he asks in disbelief. When Debbie arrives, she thinks Sasha has "fallen in mud." Sasha can't tell the police anything about what happened—they had been asleep—but their legs are "skinless, exposed," and it is forty-five minutes before an ambulance arrives. As Sasha is loaded into the ambulance with Karl (there's only room for one), Debbie watches as they drive away. "They did it because he was wearing a **skirt!**" she cries.

Debbie thinks that Sasha has "fallen in mud" because their legs are blackened and charred from the fire, which further suggests the severity of Sasha's injuries. Sasha's legs are not only "skinless" and "exposed" because of their burns, they are exposed because their skirt has burnt up, leaving Sasha in their underwear. Furthermore, in the chaos of the fire, Debbie has forgotten to use Sasha's preferred pronouns, and they must suffer this indignation as well.



PART 3: THE RIM FIRE'S REVENGE

Later at the emergency department, Sasha is "giddy" and "high on morphine," and they are immediately transferred to Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. There is a burn unit there, and Sasha has third-degree burns, meaning their skin is "burned all the way through, down to the fat below." There, Sasha is bathed in "diluted bleach" and assessed. They have burns over 22 percent of their body, but Sasha's doctor, Dr. Grossman, is optimistic that Sasha will live.

Sasha's injuries are exceedingly severe. 22 percent is a large portion of Sasha's body, and complications from infection are common. Sasha's injuries present a serious threat to their life, a consequence that Richard failed to appreciate when he decided to bully Sasha, and this is further evidence of the adolescent nature of Richard's crime.



PART 3: THE TEN O'CLOCK NEWS

Later that night, Kaprice watches the evening news. She does so every night; it is "part of her preparation for the next day at school." Chances are, if there is trouble in Oakland on any given day, it is connected to one of her students somehow. Kaprice "shakes her head" as she watches the news report about Sasha's attack. "Who would do something like that?" she wonders.

Kaprice's evening preparation is another indication of the interconnected nature of Oakland society. Since everyone's "stories tangle together," the news gives her an idea of what the next day has in store for her. Her question, of course, is highly ironic, since one of her own students is responsible for the fire.



PART 3: LOCKED OUT

The next morning at school, Kaprice gets a call from one of Richard's teachers. Richard is requesting to talk to her, and she tells the teacher to send him up during lunch. When Richard arrives, Kaprice's office is full of other students, and he can't get her alone. He quickly turns and leaves.

Ostensibly, Richard wants to talk to Kaprice about Sasha's attack, which further suggests that he is remorseful for his actions and wants to try to correct them. Richard is not trying to hide or deny what he has done and is instead trying to actively seek help from an adult he trusts and respects.



Later, Kaprice must escort another student out of her office, and she accidentally locks her keys inside. As she walks around to another door, Kaprice sees Richard “being led away in handcuffs by two uniformed police officers.”

Because of Kaprice’s heavy workload, she can’t see Richard soon enough. While talking to Kaprice surely would not have stopped Richard from being arrested, it would have demonstrated his remorse, which would have likely served him well in his case early on. The fact that Richard does not have this opportunity further reflects the widespread discrimination and inequalities present in lower-class communities.



PART 3: MAYBECK

It is not long before news of Sasha’s attack spreads through their group of friends, and life at school grinds “to a halt.” Sasha’s attack is “unfathomable. How could such a thing happen in the queer-friendly Bay Area?” They have no idea who could have done this, but Healy decides he doesn’t like him. “Hate his guts,” Healy says.

Healy’s blind hate of Richard, despite not knowing anything about him, is ironic since it is a similar biased prejudice that leads to Sasha’s attack in the first place. Sasha’s injuries are proof of the dangers of bias and prejudice, yet Healy fails to see this.



PART 3: SHYAM

Shyam Sundar, Sasha’s science teacher, can’t bring himself to teach after Sasha’s attack. Sasha is his favorite student, and once he learns that Sasha is the student who was burned, “he doesn’t remember much of anything.” Shyam says, “The whole week is blocked from my memory.” He continues to go to school each day “but he just hands out worksheets” and doesn’t teach.

Shyam Sundar’s reaction to the tragic situation reflects how important Sasha is to their community. Richard viewed Sasha as simply some “dude” in a skirt, when in all actuality, they are a loved and valued member of their community.



PART 3: I KNEW MY BABY

Watching television at home, Jasmine watches as the police arrest a suspect for the fire on the 57 bus. The news only shows the boy’s back, but Jasmine “knows her baby as soon as she sees him.” She calls Kaprice and immediately confirms that Richard has been arrested. Then she calls “everyone she can think of—Richard’s father, his probation officer, the police station.” No one knows where Richard is, so she waits for him to call. Instead of Jasmine, however, Richard calls his father. Jasmine won’t be allowed to see her son for six days, Slater writes, and by that time, the district attorney will have already charged Richard as an adult and released his name to the press.

Jasmine’s reference to Richard as her “baby” cements the fact that Richard is still a child, and should not be charged, tried, or punished as an adult. As a minor, Richard is Jasmine’s responsibility, yet she is denied access to him during this critical time. Keeping a mother from her child would likely be viewed as inhumane in many other circumstances, and in this situation, Slater contends, keeping Richard from his mother proves to be detrimental.



PART 3: THE INTERVIEW, PART 1

After Richard is arrested, the police put him in an interrogation room and leave him alone for an hour. Then, an officer brings him a “bag lunch,” and Richard quietly eats a sandwich. When two officers finally come into the room, Richard has been sitting there for two hours and nineteen minutes. One of the officers comments that Richard didn’t eat all his lunch. Richard says, “I was getting a little stomachache.”

This passage highlights the fact that Richard has no appreciation for the severity of his actions, or that what he has done is even considered a hate-crime. As a child, Richard doesn’t fully understand this, and therefore he can eat a sandwich in police custody after starting someone on fire with only “a little stomachache.” His comment about having “a little stomachache” also sounds childish, reminding readers once again that Richard is still young and naïve.



The officers tell Richard “they want to keep things relaxed,” and they start asking about his life. They ask about sports and school, and when they ask about girls, Richard says, “It’s not looking too good.” One of the officers asks if there “were girls up in Redding” and if he “learned anything” there. Richard admits he did, and he has been doing good, but the death of Skeet has caused him to have “a little breakdown.” The officers tell Richard that they want to get his side of the story, but first they need to read him his rights.

This “relaxed” questioning represents the police’s attempts to get Richard to incriminate himself. The officers know that Richard is not likely to immediately ask for a lawyer, and they try to take advantage of his ignorance. As a child, Richard is not wholly aware of his legal rights, and this is further evidence that Richard should be treated like an adolescent and not an adult.



PART 3: MIRANDA WARNING

“Why did you talk?” Jasmine asks Richard later. She tells him that he should have waited for a lawyer, but Richard didn’t even think about lawyers. According to Slater, 90 percent of arrested juveniles “do what Richard did. They talk.” Studies show that once kids are arrested, they rarely ask for a lawyer. They are scared and still hope “that somehow their parents won’t find out” what they’ve done. The police *had* read Richard his rights, but Jasmine knows that “he didn’t understand.” How could he? “When we’re in court,” Jasmine says, “I don’t know nothing until the lawyer tells me.”

Clearly, Richard does not fully understand the severity of his situation. He has no idea that his actions could result in spending the rest of his life in prison, and because of this, Slater questions the morality of treating Richard like an adult. Instead, Slater argues that Richard’s adolescent ignorance should not equate to a life sentence, and that adolescents should be held to a different standard of punishment.



PART 3: THE INTERVIEW, PART 2

“What do you think about dudes who dress up in skirts?” one of the officers asks Richard. “I’m not with that,” Richard says. “I wouldn’t say that I hate gay people, but I’m very homophobic.” The cops nod. “Cross-dressing and like—some people,” Richard continues, “like they try to make everybody know that they are that and they try to do too much and—it’s just a lot.”

Richard assumes that Sasha’s skirt means that they are homosexual, and this reflects the common misconception that gender and sexuality are one and the same. Additionally, Richard’s words highlight the widespread bias directed toward the LGBTQ community within American society.



The police tell Richard that they have a video from the bus. “You’re not a bad kid,” one of the officers says. “Keeping in mind that you know we have video, and the video shows everything that happened on that bus,” he continues, “right now is a time in your life when you’ve got to decide, am I going to take responsibility for my actions? Am I going to be honest?” Richard looks at the officer and asks to see the video.

Richard does take responsibility for his actions, this is evident in the letters he writes Sasha in the days just after the attack, but if he verbalizes this to the police it will only incriminate him further. This dilemma emphasizes just one of the problems present within the justice system—if Richard takes responsibility it will make him appear guilty.



PART 3: THE INTERVIEW, PART 3

The police show Richard “a short snippet of the video,” and then they ask him why he did it. He tells them he was “being stupid.” They ask him what he was thinking, and he tells them “nothing.” The police continue. “Was it because the dude was wearing a dress?” they ask. Richard answers, “I’m homophobic. I don’t like gay people.” The police ask Richard if his friends influenced him. He says no, but he didn’t think the **skirt** would catch fire like that, either. As the officer fills out the paperwork, he writes “DURING SUSP INTERVIEW, THE SUSP STATED HE DID IT BECAUSE HE WAS HOMOPHOBIC.”

Richard’s lawyer later discovers that Richard doesn’t fully understand the meaning of the word homophobic; however, Richard still targets Sasha because of their skirt, and this reflects the widespread discrimination of LGBTQ individuals. Still, the police care very little whether Richard understands or not, and this further proof that Richard should not be treated like an adult.



PART 3: A MAN IN A KILT

News coverage of Sasha’s attack “spreads quickly,” even to national and international outlets, and Reuters reports that “a man wearing a kilt-like garment was set on fire as he slept on a public bus.” The kilt report is everywhere, and “it feels wrong to Debbie.” So, when a news reporter knocks on their door, she responds, “My son considers himself agender. He likes to wear a **skirt**. It’s his statement. That’s how he feels comfortable dressing.”

While Debbie claims to support Sasha’s nonbinary gender identity, the language that she uses suggests otherwise. Sasha is not her child but her “son,” and “he” considers “himself” agender. Debbie’s language very clearly defines Sasha as a boy, and much like when the press refers to their skirt as a “kilt,” this language misrepresents Sasha’s gender identity.



PART 3: THIS IS REAL

Michael and Healy text back and forth about Sasha, and Slater includes their frequent messages, using a font and size of print like a cellular phone display. Healy tells Michael that Sasha is now responding to texts. “They are!?!?!?” Michael asks, surprised. Healy confirms, although he doesn’t know if Sasha will answer tonight—“their first surgery is tomorrow,” he says. The two talk back and forth for a bit about school and Sasha’s attack, and then Michael says that “there’s pretty much no way that it wasn’t a hate crime.” “Uh-huh,” Healy responds.

This chapter makes Michael and Healy’s text messages seem more realistic. Instead of simply saying that Michael and Healy communicate via text, Slater presents their messages just as they would have received them, and this has the effect of making them, and Sasha, appear like real people who are dealing with real problems. Discrimination and violence are urgent issues faced by many people, and this chapter highlights this unfortunate fact.



PART 3: BOOKED IN

Next, Slater explains what happens when a person is booked into Alameda County Juvenile Hall, using the reader as an example. At the entrance, a large sign with big, black letters hangs on the wall and reads: “ALL PERSONAL / PROPERTY/ REMOVED IN THIS / AREA INCLUDING / PIERCINGS WIGS / AND DETACTABLE / HAIR PIECES.” Slater says the officers remove your clothes and shoes and issue institutional “replacements” of a sweatshirt and khakis. You are placed in a “holding tank,” and then you are given a cursory medical exam.

You are given two phone calls—one to your parents, the other to your boss or probation officer—and then you are escorted to a cell that is “eight feet by eight feet and brightly lit,” and the only small window is on the steel door. The exercise yard is a small patch of grass “with a mural of wildlife” behind it. If your crime is serious enough, like murder or “setting a person on fire on a bus,” a camera tapes you for the first twenty-four hours “to make sure you don’t become your own next victim.”

Slater’s switch to the second-person point of view has the effect of making the reader feel as if they are actually being booked into Alameda County Juvenile Hall. By addressing the reader directly, Slater draws increased empathy for Richard while also implying that what has happened to him could, in theory, happen to anyone, which is further evidence that he is not inherently a bad person.



Richard’s experiences in Juvenile Hall beg the question of cruel and unusual punishment. By offering an outdoor exercise yard, the justice system acknowledges its importance, yet the outdoor area is hardly “outdoors” and relies on a painted mural to simulate nature. The suicide prevention forced on Richard during his initial days suggests that many teens would rather die than live long-term in the facility.



PART 3: SURGERY

The next day, Dr. Grossman “shaves away at the burned, dead skin” of Sasha’s legs and covers the wounds “with a temporary graft of pig skin.” When Sasha wakes up, they are all over the news, but they can’t concentrate to watch television. Although Sasha doesn’t know it, the police officer who interviewed Richard tells Debbie that Richard “*actually said he’s homophobic*” and that “*he giggled*.”

The police and the press paint Richard as a homophobic criminal, which makes it easy to condemn him and treat him like an adult instead of a juvenile. Richard’s giggles were likely a reflection of his discomfort while talking to the police, yet this too is twisted and used against him.



PART 3: STILL KINDA DYING

Slater again includes a conversation between Healy and Michael via text message. They have both spoken to Sasha, either by text or video call, and Michael texts: “Nemo and I are visiting him tomorrow / *them.” Healy then tells Michael that the whole school will be wearing **skirts** to school on Friday in solidarity for Sasha. They are planning on taking a school picture to present to them. As the conversation ends, Healy tells Michael that he hasn’t been able to sleep. “I mean, think about it,” Healy says, “they woke up and they were on fire.”

Like Debbie, Michael also occasionally messes up Sasha’s pronouns, but he tries to correct it, and this reflects his deep respect for Sasha and their gender identity. Furthermore, Healy’s inability to sleep suggests that there is a “ripple effect” to biased attacks as well. Healy isn’t directly hurt by Sasha’s attack, but he is clearly suffering indirectly, which suggests how deeply hate and discrimination can affect a community.



PART 3: CHARGES

Within two days, Richard is charged as an adult with two felonies: “aggravated mayhem” and “assault with intent to cause great bodily harm.” Both felonies have “hate-crime clauses” that will increase the time he serves by “one to three years” if he is found guilty. The maximum sentence is life in prison, a punishment he “wouldn’t face” if he was charged as a juvenile instead. Lloyd and Jamal are never questioned by police.

The fact that Richard is charged as an adult so quickly suggests that this was the plan all along. Very little effort is put into questioning Richard, and Lloyd and Jamal are never questioned, despite providing the tools and encouragement for the attack. This illustrates how common it is for juveniles to be charged as adults in Alameda county.



PART 3: DIRECT FILES

According to Slater, before the late 1980s, juvenile offenders were viewed as “fundamentally different from adults,” but the “crime wave” of the ‘80s and ‘90s changed this perception. During this time, the juvenile offender morphed into the “super-predator,” a juvenile criminal “utterly unlike the misbehaving teens of the past.” These new kids were “fatherless, Godless, and jobless,” and the crimes they committed were certainly not juvenile. The Speaker of the United States House of Representatives claimed, “You rape somebody, you’re an adult. You shoot somebody, you’re an adult.”

Since the crime wave of the ‘80s and ‘90s disproportionately affected areas of the country with high populations of African American citizens, the “super-predator” myth is disproportionately applied to black youths. This misconception only serves to worsen the racism and discrimination already preset in East Oakland.



In early 2000 came California’s Proposition 21, which increased sentences for certain crimes and gave prosecutors power to file “charges in adult court against offenders as young as fourteen.” Certain crimes, especially those involving sex, “now *had* to be prosecuted in adult court.” Within nine months of the passing the proposition, 30 percent of all California teens were charged as adults, and in San Diego County alone, “three out of every four young people were charged as adults by the end of that first year.”

These numbers are staggering, and they reflect the frequency with which juveniles are charged and prosecuted as adults in the state of California. This is not an occasional practice reserved for only the most severe cases; rather, it is largely the rule, and this passage draws attention to this unfortunate reality.



However, “the super-predator apocalypse is a myth,” Slater says. Juvenile arrest rates have been falling since 1994, “and that’s true across racial lines,” according to the FBI’s juvenile violent-crime index. There has been a 60 percent drop in violent-crime committed by black youths in the last twenty years, and homicide rates are down 82 percent, yet more and more black teenagers are jailed. Cases against black youths are twice as likely to be filed in adult court compared to white kids, and “cases against Latino youths are more than six times as likely.” Black offenders are also more likely to serve time. Just one-third of white teen offenders serve time compared to two-thirds for black kids. “Nationally, 58 percent of all incarcerated African American youths are serving their time in adult prisons.”

These statistics are evidence of the institutionalized racism that plagues California’s criminal justice system. Because of false “super-predator” stereotypes, Richard is viewed as a criminal from the outset simply because he is a young, black male. Furthermore, racist laws and practices are implemented within the system in such a way that Richard is automatically at a disadvantage because of his race. Richard’s punishment is more reflective of this widespread discrimination than it is of his crime.



PART 3: COURT DATE

During Richard's first court appearance, the press corners his family, asking them multiple questions. "What kind of boy is he?" they ask, and "Why do you think he did this?" Richard's aunt tells the reporters that Richard was only "joking around" and that "he's not a bad person," but the news outlets see it differently. Setting someone on fire isn't a joke—ever—and many of the online papers "seethe with outrage." People take to Facebook and condemn Richard and Jasmine. "Lock him up," they say. "Throw away the key. Lock up the mother too while you're at it."

While lighting someone on fire is clearly not funny, Slater suggests that the issue is not so straightforward, which further underscores the danger of binary thought. Richard never intended for Sasha to get hurt and condemning Richard as a criminal full of hate does not accurately describe his actions. Richard's situation is bit more nuanced than that, and the interaction between his family and the press reflects this.



PART 3: REELING

Jasmine feels as if "the world has spun off its axis." She can't believe that Richard has really done this. She's angry with him, his friends, herself, and the whole world. Her family encourages her not to talk about the arrest, but she refuses. "If you have anything to say, bad comments, take it to God," she says. "Pray for him."

Jasmine can't believe what Richard has done because Sasha's attack is simply a stupid, adolescent mistake. Jasmine refuses to let one misguided prank define her son's life, which is what Richard's press coverage effectively does.



PART 3: THE DESK

Nancy O'Malley, the Alameda County district attorney, has no problem charging Richard as an adult. She considers his crime "very, very, very serious," and argues that hate crimes are another form of discrimination, "just like segregation was." Richard is "a real threat" to society, she says, and his behavior "will never be tolerated."

While the district attorney is quick to point out the discriminatory nature of Richard's attack on Sasha, she ironically ignores the discrimination that Richard faces within the justice system because of his race. O'Malley's reference to segregation suggests that because Richard is black, he should more easily recognize the discrimination of others.



Hate-crimes "offer a powerful narrative," Slater says, about hate and prejudice, but most hate crimes are not committed by hate groups like neo-Nazis. A Boston-based study reflects that most are perpetrated by young men with their friends—and "often immediately after school." Two-thirds of these crimes are "thrill-seeking" behavior, or young people "'looking for some fun' at the expense of someone they regard as lower status."

Richard's assault on Sasha is certainly in keeping with Slater's description of the typical hate crime in America, yet Richard doesn't truly hate Sasha or their lifestyle. Richard is not a neo-Nazi, and, Slater suggests, he shouldn't be subjected to the same type of punishment.



One day in November, Nancy O'Malley is surprised to receive a letter from the National Center for Lesbian Rights and the Transgender Law Center. Both organizations ask her in a joint letter to reconsider charging Richard as an adult. "We firmly believe that you can demonstrate your offices' commitment to protecting the victims of hate crimes without imposing adult sanctions on juvenile offenders," they say.

As part of the LGBTQ community, O'Malley expects the National Center for Lesbian Rights and the Transgender Law Center both to support Richard's harsh punishment, and the fact that they don't further underscores how unethical it is to hold a juvenile to adult standards of punishment.



PART 3: UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ADOLESCENCE

“Children are different from adults,” Slater says, and she explains what that means, biologically and physiologically speaking. The limbic system, the part of the brain that signals the body to respond to stimuli—like “Avoid! Investigate! Eat! Fight! Flirt!”—becomes overly sensitive during puberty. This makes teenagers “more emotional and more interested in having new and intense experiences.”

Furthermore, “the brain is busily lining important neural pathways with a fatty sheath called myelin,” which helps to carry signals more quickly through the brain. The part of the brain responsible for “reason, planning, and deliberation,” known as the prefrontal cortex, is last to be myelinated. “So,” Slater says, “while teenage emotions have gone into hyperdrive, reason and logic are still obeying the speed limit.”

A teenager’s active limbic system and underdeveloped prefrontal cortex combine to create what is known as “hot cognition,” making judgement “fairly awful,” especially during intense or exciting circumstances. This decision making becomes worse when a teenager is around friends, and according to experts, “even the brightest, best-meaning teenager doesn’t tend to think much beyond the moment, especially when they’re with their friends.” Generally, teenagers begin to make better decisions around their early twenties, at the time criminologists refer to as the “age-crime curve.”

Of course, some kids are just bad, or “irredeemably depraved,” but this is not evident until after the “age-crime curve.” Slater points out that most of the people who support hate-crime legislation are “liberals,” the very same people who are against mass incarceration. Still, “the remedy here is imprisonment, and prisons are the ultimate incubators of antisocial attitudes.”

If adolescents are biologically and physiologically different from adults, then it stands to reason that they should not be treated as one in a court of law. Slater’s argument that trying a child as an adult is unethical is supported by the scientific consensus that adolescents and adults are fundamentally different.



Because the adolescent brain is not fully developed, Slater contends, they cannot be expected to process information in quite the same way as an adult. Instead, juveniles are driven by emotion instead of reason, and their standard of punishment should reflect this.



Richard’s actions during his attack on Sasha clearly reflect a youth under the influence of “hot cognition.” The presence of Lloyd and Jamal definitely influences his behavior, and Richard certainly doesn’t think beyond the moment of flicking the lighter and having a laugh at Sasha’s expense. Richard’s decision to target and bully Sasha is “fairly awful,” but he has very little insight into the consequences of his actions.



In Richard’s case, he will not hit the “age-crime curve” for at least another five years, and Slater implies that it is unethical and cruel to treat him as if he is “irredeemably depraved” before this time. Plus, this punishment in itself is likely to turn Richard into a criminal, defeating the purpose of prison as a means of rehabilitation.



PART 3: LIFE AT BOTHIN

Sasha’s first surgery is quickly followed by a second, and they grow bored at the hospital, lying in bed all day long, waiting for their next dose of pain medication. Sasha’s favorite part of the day is “hydrotherapy.” The water is warm and relaxing, and it helps to break up the monotony of the day. Their friends come to visit and bring vegan sushi, but Sasha just wants to go home. Sasha’s roommate in the hospital, who had been chatty and kind, has come down with an infection and now just “moans and murmurs in his sleep.”

The declining nature of Sasha’s roommate’s condition serves as an example of what could happen to Sasha. Sasha’s burns are serious, and they could very easily contract an infection that threatens their life. Richard never expected that his prank would have such serious consequences, and this is further evidence of his underdeveloped brain as a child.



PART 3: NOT VISITING

Andrew thinks constantly about Sasha and knows that he should visit them, but he can't bring himself to go. Sasha has been a great friend to him, in fact the best, and he worries that he hasn't returned the favor. He can't imagine how Sasha must look in their hospital bed, burned and wrapped in bandages. "This is how it is for people like us," Andrew says. "This is the reality."

As a transgender man, Andrew too fears physical violence because of his gender identity, and this highlights the widespread discrimination of the trans and agender community within American society. By making this discrimination more visible, Slater ultimately seeks to correct this social injustice.



PART 3: THE FIRST LETTER

Slater includes a letter written by Richard to Sasha. "Dear, Victum," the letter reads, "I apologize for my actions." In the letter, Richard tells Sasha that he is "not a monster," and he has no idea why he did what he did. "I'm deeply sorry for my actions," he says, "I think about what happened every second." He takes responsibility for his actions, prays for Sasha's recovery, and ends the letter "Love, Richard."

Richard's letter is proof that he takes responsibility for his actions and is remorseful of Sasha's assault. The awkward nature of Richard's letter and the way he misspells "victum" reflects his ignorance and young age.



PART 3: INTO THE BRIEFCASE

A few days after his arrest, Richard's family "scrapes the money together" for a lawyer, and they hire Bill Du Bois, a defense lawyer with forty years of experience. Richard gives him the letter for Sasha, which he immediately puts in his briefcase. The letter contains "an admission of guilt," and he doesn't want Sasha to see it until the case is over. The case, however, won't be over for fourteen months.

Du Bois withholds Richard's letters because he fears that they will make Richard appear guilty and cause him to spend even more time in prison, yet the letters are an important part of Richard's redemption and Sasha's closure. Richard's letters underscore the ineffectiveness of prison as a meaningful form of punishment and rehabilitation.



PART 3: SKIRTS FOR SASHA

Everyone at Maybeck wears a skirt to school on Friday, November 8. Everyone, including the teachers, pose for a picture holding a sign that reads "SKIRTS FOR SASHA." The picture is posted to several "LGBTQ and anti-bullying blogs," and within one week, 150 people march along the route of the 57 bus holding balloons and signs that say, "ACCEPT EVERYONE" and "WE'RE ALL SASHA."

Maybeck's "Skirts or Sasha" and the march along the 57 bus route mirrors Slater's own call for social justice. Through solidarity and visibility, Sasha's community attempts to overcome hate and discrimination.



PART 3: THE SECOND LETTER

Two days later, Richard writes another letter to Sasha, but this one is much longer. “Dear Mr.—,” Richard begins, “I just wanted to say that I’m still very sorry and I hope your getting better.” He quotes the Bible and Jeramiah 1:5, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you: I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Richard knows he is not a prophet, but God “made a plan for us all, and we know its not evil because God isn’t evil.” He tells Sasha to “get better,” and says he is looking forward to meeting them, so he can apologize. Richard vows to write two letters each week.

Again, Richard’s letter is evidence of his remorse and accountability, but it also highlights his own inherent goodness. Just like his family claims, Richard is not a bad person; rather, he is just a kid who has made a very bad decision. Richard’s devotion to God and religion, and his knowledge of the Bible, further suggests this goodness, which is incompatible with the assumption that Richard is a “super-predator.”



PART 3: LET’S ALL TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER

Richard never writes another letter; however, Karl writes one to the parents and staff at the school where he teaches. In Karl’s letter, he says that “it’s really important to keep in mind that none of us can know the mind, motivations, or intentions of the person who set flame to Sasha’s clothing.” The only thing that is known for certain, Karl says, is that the sixteen-year-old kid the police have in custody was “playing with fire” and “he gravely underestimated the consequences of that.”

Karl’s letter reflects his own belief that Richard should not be tried as an adult. Karl’s reference to Richard as “a kid” and his acknowledgement that Richard “gravely underestimated the consequences” of the attack implies that Richard should not be held to the same standard of punishment as adults who have a firm understanding of actions and consequences.



There are plenty of “assumptions,” Karl says, about why this boy started the fire, “but they are just that: assumptions.” Karl then goes on to fully explain Sasha’s agender status. “Different people dress or behave or look differently,” Karl says. “And that’s a GOOD thing.” Furthermore, Karl says, “I have a feeling that if he had seen Sasha’s skirt as an expression of another kid’s unique, beautiful self, and had smiled and thought, ‘I hella love Oakland,’ I wouldn’t be writing this now.” Karl ends his letter with “Let’s all take care of each other.”

Despite Karl’s belief that Richard shouldn’t be tried as an adult, he still condemns Richard’s actions. Richard targets Sasha because they are different, and Karl’s letter stresses this unfortunate fact; however, Karl’s letter also attempts to educate others about Sasha’s differences, much like Slater’s book, and this is the first step to inclusion and social justice.



PART 3: HOMOPHOBIC

At Richard’s second court appearance, his cousin Regis arrives at the courthouse. Regis is gay and is “tall, attractive, and androgynous.” He doesn’t speak to the press, “but his presence is a statement in itself—I’m here, I’m queer, and I support my cousin.”

Regis’s declaration of support for his cousin implies the two are close, and further suggests that Richard isn’t actually homophobic. Additionally, Regis’s androgynous appearance blends both male and female characteristics, much like Sasha’s, which again implies that many people exist outside of the male/female binary.



The reporters aren’t sure how to refer to Sasha, and they aren’t sure if they are gender fluid or gender non-conforming. “I just say he was wearing a **skirt**,” one reporter says.

The reporters’ ignorance is reflective of the widespread misunderstanding of nonbinary gender identities, which only adds to their social sidelining.



Richard's court appearance is uneventful and Du Bois files an appeal to contest Richard's being charged as an adult, but the reporters are more concerned with Richard's use of the word "homophobic." Du Bois says that Richard can't even "spell homophobic, much less be it." Richard had told his lawyer that being homophobic means that "he isn't gay, that he likes girls." Du Bois tells the reporters that they are "putting [Richard] in the category of skinhead because he admitted to being homophobic." This isn't a hate-crime, he says. "Lynchings—they're hate crimes." Richard is just a "kid who thinks that [wearing a skirt] is anomalous and decided to play a prank."

Just as Richard doesn't understand the consequences of his crime, he doesn't fully understand the word "homophobic," yet the press and public treat him as if he embodies this hateful word. Richard's misunderstanding of this word is further proof of his adolescence and is yet another reason why he should not be tried as an adult. If Richard is not homophobic in the true sense of the word, then he shouldn't be treated as such. While Richard may think that Sasha is strange because they wear a dress, he certainly does not hate them.



PART 3: WHAT THEY SENT

While Sasha is in the hospital, people from all over the world send them get-well cards, flowers, and small gifts. Sasha's cousin even sets up a medical fund online, and it collects over \$30,000 in mere days. "Get well," the cards say. "Stay strong. Be proud. You are beautiful the way you are." Sasha appreciates the sentiment, but they can't "concentrate" on any of it. They keep only cards from friends and a bouquet of silk flowers from a stranger. Debbie and Karl take the rest home.

The many gifts that Sasha receives in the hospital suggests that most people support Sasha's identity and their right to exist despite the hate and discrimination of a few. This implies that justice for the LGBTQ is possible, and perhaps even likely.



At home, Debbie checks the online news sites for coverage of Sasha's case, and she comes across a neo-Nazi site. "They are having a really hard time," Debbie says. "An African American? Oh, evil! But then it's this trans kid wearing a skirt. What?" Karl smiles. "They can't figure out who to root against," he says.

The neo-Nazis can't figure out who to root against because they equally hate African Americans and the LGBTQ community. These neo-Nazis are the picture of true hate and homophobia, not Richard.



PART 3: NO H8

At Oakland High, nobody can believe that Richard has done such a thing. Still, they begin to distance themselves from him. "It is important to say no," writes Slater. "To say, that's not us." The school is worried they will be painted with the same brush, and soon the No H8 movement "sprouts on campus." The movement raises money for Sasha's medical bills and make signs and t-shirts with No H8 on them. In the gymnasium, banners read, "NOT IN OUR SCHOOL" and "STAND UP TO HATE." They even chant at basketball games, "No hate on me! No hate on me! One, two, three...No hate!"

Like the press, the No H8 movement assumes that Richard hates Sasha and others within the LGBTQ community, and each sign and t-shirt they make relies on this same assumption. While the No H8 movement serves to dispel and counteract hate, in this circumstance it has the opposite effect. Richard doesn't hate Sasha, but the implication that he does is just as damaging and it further fuels the public's own hate for Richard.



PART 3: Y'ALL DON'T KNOW

Kaprice finds it difficult to go to school after Richard is arrested. No H8 banners fill the school, and the principal keeps reminding everyone to treat people with “compassion and tolerance.” Cherie is also hurt. Richard’s true friends don’t believe that he “intentionally” burned Sasha. “Like, ‘Oh yeah, he gay, he hecka gay, let’s burn him,’” Cherie says sarcastically. What Richard did was wrong, she says, “but he is sixteen. You’re all just trying to put an opinion on something that you don’t know. Y’all don’t know.”

The No H8 movement is also the cause of additional hurt for Richard’s friends. Each time the principal reminds them to be compassionate and tolerant, he implies that Richard doesn’t possess these qualities, which Richard’s friends know isn’t true. Richard is at once a good person and a sixteen-year-old kid who made a stupid decision, which is in keeping with Slater’s overarching argument of the danger of binary thought—it is possible for Richard to be both things.



PART 3: THE CIRCLE

As Richard’s friends continue to grow angry with each No H8 event that takes place at Oakland High, Kaprice organizes a “restorative justice circle” between Richard’s friends and the faculty member who is “working with students to show support for Sasha.” The group begins with playful questions, but they quickly become serious. One student mentions Richard’s “hazel eyes” and Kaprice remembers how he calmed students in her office who were upset or worked up. One girl begins to cry. “He is so sweet,” she says. “And he’s such a young person facing such serious consequences.” The circle is a success. “All they wanted,” writes Slater, “was someone else to understand.”

Kaprice’s restorative justice circle is an example of the benefits of this approach, especially when adolescents are involved. The dialogue of this process allows participants to openly talk about their pain and grievances, which, in this case, leads to meaningful healing and closure. Instead of being angry and resentful, Richard’s friends have the chance to explain their feelings, which they likely would not have been able to do without Kaprice’s restorative justice circle.



PART 3: SKINNED

Five days after Sasha’s second surgery, they go in for a third. Dr. Grossman removes skin from Sasha’s back and, after stretching it to make it bigger, applies it to their skinless legs. The pain is unimaginable. “It is as if they have been skinned alive.”

Again, Richard had no idea that his prank would lead to such serious and painful consequences, which is further evidence of his adolescence and underdeveloped ability to reason.



PART 3: GOD IS GOOD

At Richard’s third court hearing, three women arrive wearing “turtlenecks and blazers and sensible shoes.” They are worried about Richard. “Not that it’s not a horrible crime,” they say, “but it’s also a crime to try a child as an adult.” As Jasmine watches her son enter the courtroom, she whispers to herself, “God is good, God is good, God is good.”

The women who show up to Richard’s hearing further underscore Slater’s argument that trying Richard as an adult is an unethical approach to his punishment. While Richard deserves to be punished, the justice system seems to be the only supporters of this questionable treatment.



Regis tells Jasmine and the rest of the family about a group of white kids who have recently been in the news for bullying their black classmate. The white kids had called the black student racist names and locked him in his room with a chain around his neck, but they were only charged with misdemeanors. “Girl, they got *misdemeanors*,” Regis says. “Nobody got charged with any felonies. Three white boys on one black boy.”

Regis’s mention of the white students reflects the institutionalized racism present in the American justice system. While the cases certainly differ in some ways, there are many similarities, and Regis implies that the reason Richard has not been charged with a misdemeanor is because he is African American.



PART 3: DOES IT HAVE TO BE ME?

After 23 days, Sasha is released from the hospital. They give an interview on the news while wearing a **skirt**, and Sasha is excited that an agender person is on television, but they are sorry it must be them. Plus, Sasha says, most “of the coverage is ‘A boy was wearing a skirt.’ Rather than, ‘An agender person was wearing a skirt,’” and Sasha feels “misrepresented.”

Sasha feels “misrepresented” by the news coverage because they consistently refer to them as the wrong gender. This too reflects the marginalization of agender individuals within American society—even when directly interviewing Sasha, they still call them a boy.



PART 3: BACK AT MAYBECK

Sasha goes back to school in December. Everyone makes a big deal about their return, and paparazzi and reporters are everywhere. Reporters constantly ask, “Are you Sasha’s friend, can we talk to you?” and it makes some of the students uncomfortable. Sasha goes to Ballroom Dance Club after school and Michael notices that they are quiet, “but overall Sasha seems okay.”

Despite their assault, Sasha tries to return to their normal life, but the press makes this nearly impossible. Sasha is still struggling with their physical injuries, yet the press is more concerned with their nonbinary identity.



PART 3: WORST DAYS EVER

Now instead of best days, Sasha has a series of “worst days,” and “worst nights.” Their legs constantly ache and itch, and everything is different now. They must shower sitting down and still “feel like they have to pee all the time, but can’t, a side effect of having a urinary catheter in for all those weeks.” Sasha is tired at school, but their pain pills make them “hyper.” Everything has happened so fast. “*How is this a thing that happens?*” Sasha wonders.

Sasha can’t understand how their skirt has led to such pain. Their entire life has to be modified because they have been perceived as different and targeted for it, and this too underscores the hardships faced by the trans and agender community.



PART 3: REUNION

One Saturday in early December, a guy named Dan Gale sits in Sasha’s living room. Sasha’s family has invited Dan for brunch, and much of the last several weeks have been a “whirlwind.” He is just an “ordinary guy,” a construction worker on a bus, but when he put out the fire that day, he became “a hero, a Good Samaritan.” Debbie and Karl catch Dan up to speed on Sasha’s condition, and when Sasha finally come downstairs, Dan stands up. “Oh, wow,” he says. “How you doing, man?”

Dan Gale is a hero. Of all the people on the bus that day, Dan was one of the only passenger who tried to help Sasha. Dan’s comment when Sasha enters the room is another testament to how gendered the English language is. Presumably, Dan has followed the news and Sasha’s case, yet he still refers to him as “man.” Of course, the word “man” has become a catch-all term for anyone, but it is still rooted in masculinity.



They all thank Dan for putting out the fire, and he awkwardly responds, “Man, I’m sorry I couldn’t’ve done more.” He tells Sasha that he has seen them on the bus for quite some time, “always with a book in hand.” Dan says that he once put another fire out years ago when his friend caught fire after a car accident. “Who’d even imagine it was a skill he’d need to use a second time?” Slater writes. Dan asks Sasha what they want to happen to Richard now that he has been arrested and charged. “It’s really hard to know what I want for him,” Sasha says.

Dan again uses gendered language when addressing Sasha, which further underscores the pervasiveness of binary thought in the English language. Additionally, it is hard for Sasha to know what they want for Richard because they understand and appreciate that Richard is just a sixteen-year-old kid. Sasha knows that Richard is the reason why they have endured such pain, yet they are hesitant to condemn him to prison for life.



PART 4: BINARY

Slater includes another poem. This poem is several lines long, and the line, “There are two kinds of people in the world,” is repeated three times throughout. In between this repeated line, Slater writes several contrasting terms. “Male and Female. / Gay and Straight. / Black and White. / Normal and Weird. / Cis and Trans.” She continues, “Victims and Villains. / Cruel and Kind. / Guilty and Innocent.” Slater repeats the line again and writes, “Just two. / Just two. / Only two.”

Slater’s poem highlights the problematic nature of binary thought. Sasha, as well as Richard, cannot be defined by either/or categories, and this poem draws attention to this. While Richard’s attack on Sasha was certainly cruel, Richard is still kind in many ways, and while he certainly behaved as a villain that day on the bus, he is still the victim of a racist legal system. Clearly, there are more than two kinds of people in the world, and Slater argues for all to be equally represented within language and society.



PART 4: CRUEL AND UNUSUAL?

As Richard enters the courtroom in mid-January, he is sure not to smile at Jasmine, so people won’t think “he doesn’t have compassion for Sasha.” Others may think his smile is a “smirk.” Du Bois files a petition with the judge that argues trying Richard as an adult is “cruel and unusual punishment.” At sixteen, it is simply too early to assume Richard is “irredeemably a depraved ‘criminal,’” he says. The judge denies the petition.

Du Bois files this petition because Richard has not reached the age-crime curve. It remains to be seen whether Richard is a criminal, and to treat him as such, Du Bois argues, constitutes cruel punishment. The quick and offhanded way in which the judge dismisses Du Bois’s petition reflects the racist nature of the justice system—the system already believes Richard is “super-predator.”



PART 4: BACK AT JUVIE

At Juvenile Hall, Richard quickly falls into the routine—he has been here before, after all. He attends classes and goes to church, but he mostly keeps to himself. One day, early in his stay, Richard is put in a room with the kid who had “stripped” him at gunpoint. He quickly apologizes to Richard and Richard accepts, since “he, too, hoped to be forgiven.” “Forgive, but don’t forget,” Jasmine says. Richard tells her to “stop saying that.” Richard says, “you *have* to forget. Because otherwise you haven’t truly forgiven.”

The fact that Richard can so easily forgive the kid who “stripped” him is further evidence of his innate goodness. Richard does not hold the boy’s actions against him, and instead of fighting or dwelling on what has happened, Richard chooses to forgive and move on.



PART 4: WHAT IF?

Jasmine tries to “focus on the positive,” like what they will all learn from this awful experience, but mostly she just thinks about “what ifs.” “What if” she had gotten Richard a better lawyer the last time he got in trouble? “What if” he was “tested for ADHD,” or “what if” they didn’t live in Oakland? Jasmine “stops herself,” believing that there must be “a reason” for all of this. “God works in mysterious ways,” she says. “He don’t do nothing on accident.”

Jasmine’s “what if” thinking relies on several things she doesn’t have the power to change, which again emphasizes Oakland’s social inequalities. Jasmine doesn’t have much money, and she is even forced to work two jobs, so it is unlikely that she could have afforded a better lawyer, or medical testing for learning and behavioral disorders, let alone resulting medications. She likely can’t afford to move from Oakland, either. In this vein, Slater implies that social inequality is the “reason” why all of this has happened.



PART 4: NOT READY

After Christmas, Sasha is accepted at MIT. Life is somewhat back to normal, except for the thick stockings Sasha must wear to prevent scars from forming on their legs. Jasmine asks to meet with Sasha and their parents to formally apologize “mother to mother, parent to parent,” but Debbie isn’t ready yet, and she “flinches” at the request. “She believes in forgiveness,” Slater writes, “but it is just too soon. She needs more time.”

Jasmine’s desire to apologize directly to Sasha and their family is evidence of her deep remorse. Of course, Richard feels this way as well, but neither Debbie nor Sasha are aware of this, since Richard’s lawyer still has his apology letters. Ironically, Debbie doesn’t need more time, she simply needs to hear an apology directly from Richard.



PART 4: WHAT TO SAY

After Richard’s first evidentiary hearing in March, Jasmine “dashes over to speak” to Sasha and their family. “My son’s not like that,” she says. “I don’t know what made him do that, and I’m sorry. We’re not hateful people.” She hugs Sasha, Debbie, and Karl, as do the other members of Richard’s family, and soon they are all crying. “I don’t know what to say but sorry,” Jasmine cries.

Jasmine is eager to apologize to Sasha and their parents, and this is evidence of her, and Richard’s remorse. The easy way in which Sasha and their family accept Jasmine’s apology and embrace her suggests that they each desire forgiveness, healing, and closure.



PART 4: ALWAYS OKAY

“I felt like it was genuine on their part,” Debbie says later in the elevator. “I’m always okay with hugs,” Sasha says. The deputy district attorney saw the families embrace and was “glad that they showed some remorse,” but he would rather see it “from the person who did it.” The district attorney never speaks to Richard, however, and Richard’s letters stay in Du Bois’s briefcase.

Richard is remorseful, and the fact that his lawyer (who has 40 years of experience) keeps his letters hidden is an example of the fundamental flaws of the justice system. Du Bois withholds the letters because Richard’s apologies assume guilt; however, when Richard fails to apologize, the system believes his remorselessness is a sign of guilt.



PART 4: WE THE PEOPLE

About a year after Sasha petitions the White House to recognize nonbinary gender, a second petition is posted, and it is “pretty much identical to the one Sasha had written.” The petition goes viral and gets 103,202 signatures. The White House responds that they “understand the profound impact, both symbolic and otherwise,” of recognizing nonbinary gender. Sasha knows this doesn’t mean anything will change, but still they feel “proud.” The White House had “acknowledged the existence of nonbinary gender. Who would have thought it possible?”

The comment released by the White House may be small, but it represents a huge victory for Sasha and other nonbinary people. When the White House acknowledges the existence of nonbinary gender, Sasha’s identity is legitimized, which is the first step to equal recognition and treatment.



PART 4: PRETTY

In April, Nemo is Sasha’s date for an annual dance held downtown. Sasha wears a beautiful, flowing gown and Nemo wears a “Edwardian waistcoat” with “pleated black pants.” When Teah’s dog gets too close, Sasha shoos it away. “I’m dry-clean only,” they say. Nemo asks if they mean their dress is dry-clean only, and Sasha says, “Well, I effectively *am* my dress. On the outside.” Nemo looks to Sasha. “Are you?” they say. “You’re also skin and your necklace.”

Nemo’s comment reminds Sasha that there is more to them than their skirt and nonbinary gender. In addition to being skin and a necklace, Sasha is also Nemo’s “most important person,” and they have other redeemable qualities as well.



PART 4: DANCING

At the dance, everything is perfect. “The dress is pretty and Sasha is pretty and the room is pretty and Nemo is pretty,” Slater writes. Sasha loves ballroom dancing, and tonight “nobody is going to mistake them for a boy.” “What I want,” Sasha explains, “is for people to be confused about what gender I am.” That doesn’t “happen too often.”

As genderqueer, Sasha questions their gender and doesn’t exactly know if they are male or female. They want everyone else to be just as confused about their gender as they are, and that is why they wear a skirt every day.



PART 4: RIPPLES

Darris Young, an organizer from an Oakland social justice advocacy group, watches as Richard’s case unfolds on television. He thinks that there might be a “different kind of solution,” one that isn’t prison. According to Darris, prison “harms the whole community, it has ripple effects up and down.” He pitches Jasmine “something called restorative justice.” Darris thinks perhaps Richard and Sasha’s families can “come together to keep Richard out of prison.”

The “ripple effects” that Darris speaks of are another example of the interconnectedness of Oakland. If Richard goes to prison, he will likely become criminalized, in which case he will become an actual threat to society. Prison is often an ineffective form of rehabilitation, and the high cost of housing prisoners further strains the community. Slater argues that Richard can be held accountable for his crime without a lengthy prison stay.



PART 4: ASS SMACKING

One day during the fall, Jeff, an African American student at Oakland High School, slaps TC, a girl at school, “hard on the behind.” TC is humiliated, and Jeff’s actions constitute sexual harassment. The school punishes Jeff with “restorative justice,” and when TC sits down with him during the meeting, she discovers that Jeff has slapped another girl, Pancha, as well. The three students have a serious conversation about Jeff’s actions and how it makes the girls feel, and by the end of the session, they are “friends.”

Now, Jeff, TC, and Pancha all joke about Jeff’s “ass smacking.” “Without the circle,” they all agree, “the whole thing would have blown over, but the residue would have remained.” Restorative justice “allows them to hold two things in their head at the same time—that butt-slapping is funny, and also that it isn’t.”

Had Jeff not been punished using restorative justice, it is likely that he would have been either suspended or expelled from school, which would also have a negative effect on the community. By forcing Jeff to face his crimes, he becomes accountable for them, and it is unlikely that he will repeat the same offense. Had Jeff simply been kicked out, it is unlikely he would come to the same conclusions.



This passage points to Slater’s argument of the dangers of binary thought. Restorative justice assumes that people and things are not either/or, and this helps Jeff to appreciate that to TC and Pancha, butt-slapping isn’t always funny.



PART 4: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Sujatha Baliga, “the nation’s foremost expert on restorative justice,” has been aware of Richard’s case from the beginning. She doesn’t, however, try to get in touch with Jasmine. “I’m not here to peddle restorative justice,” Sujatha says. If she is needed, they will call her. Sometimes, the Alameda County Court uses restorative justice as “an alternative to criminal court for juveniles.” Meetings are called between the offender and the victim, their families and legal teams, and they all talk about the crime, and “then make a plan for how the harm can be repaired.” There are “measurable benchmarks” for the offender, and if they are met, “no criminal charges are ever filed.”

Restorative justice “dispenses with punitiveness for its own sake,” and instead “produces an outcome that will be more healing for everyone involved.” Sujatha is not hopeful that Richard will be offered restorative justice “given the severity of the harm to Sasha,” and she finds it disappointing. “They are perfect candidates for this dialogue,” Sujatha claims. Sasha, Richard, and their families “are such gorgeously enlightened, beautiful people.”

Slater implies that perhaps Sujatha should “peddle” restorative justice. Like Sasha’s nonbinary identity, visibility is the key to acceptance, and society cannot benefit from restorative justice if they aren’t aware it exists. Furthermore, the deputy DA doesn’t even bother talking to Richard, so it seems unlikely that they would contact Sujatha on Richard’s behalf to keep him out of prison. The institutionalized racism of the criminal justice system works to imprison young black men like Richard, not rehabilitate them.



Richard and Sasha are perfect candidates for restorative justice. The justice system, however, is intent on sending Richard to prison, and the very legal process that is supposed to hold him accountable for his actions actually prohibits his ability to apologize and achieve full redemption and forgiveness.



PART 4: NOT WANTING TO

Debbie and Karl “don’t feel much need for restorative justice.” Debbie can’t imagine what could even come it. “I’m kind of not wanting to do that,” she says. Debbie doesn’t want anything to do with Richard’s punishment (she’s “wary about making any recommendations”), but she is convinced that she doesn’t want him tried as an adult. Debbie says she “doesn’t have enough information” to judge Richard.

Ironically, it is Richard’s lack of remorse that causes Debbie to feel disconnected from his punishment. She is unaware of Richard’s remorse (Sasha still hasn’t seen Richard’s letters), which is exactly what restorative justice seeks to encourage. Restorative justice would provide Debbie with the information she needs to be more involved in Richard’s punishment.



PART 4: THE PEOPLE VS. RICHARD

Bill Du Bois thinks restorative justice “is a distraction.” He “loves their program,” but in Richard’s case the suggestion is “absurd.” They can all complete restorative justice, Du Bois says, but it will do nothing to lessen Richard’s sentence. The DA, Nancy O’Malley, refuses as well. “We cannot ignore what he did,” she says.

Slater argues that the true absurdity is adhering to a legal process that is largely ineffective and excessively expensive. Restorative justice does not “ignore” what Richard has done—it forces him to face his actions, and his victim, head-on.



PART 4: TIRED

All summer long, Richard’s case makes little progress. Each court date only sets a new court date, and all Jasmine does is work and wait. The press stops covering the case, but the plainly dressed women still go to court and protest Richard being charged as an adult.

This emphasizes how long and drawn out the legal process is. Richard goes to multiple hearings, all of which are undoubtedly costly, and none of them move him any closer to accountability or redemption—this Richard has done completely on his own.



PART 4: DEPARTMENT 11

Slater explains the sign that hangs on the wall in Department 11, a courtroom in Alameda County, that is “a way station” where “you pass through on your way to someplace else.” This court puts a case “on the calendar for the first hearing.” It is more of a “clearinghouse,” and according to the sign, there is no cell phones or pagers, and “no food, drinks, or gum.” There is “no talking or loitering in the vestibule,” and “no communication with inmates.”

Again, Slater’s use of the word “you” has the effect of making the reader feel as if they are moving through Department 11, and this leads to increased empathy for Richard’s situation. Department 11 doesn’t serve a purpose other than to funnel inmates to a different court, a step that could be eliminated with restorative justice.



PART 4: MAYBE

By the end of August, Sasha is ready to leave for MIT. They are scared about leaving the “Bay Area bubble,” and says they will “have to work a little harder to seek out their people” at MIT. The fire is “a distant memory,” and Sasha is moving on. “I don’t really feel hated,” Sasha says. “I feel like one person hates me—maybe.”

Unlike the justice system, Sasha appreciates that Richard does not truly hate them. Sasha has forgiven Richard for what he has done, and this is evident in their description of the attack as a “distant memory.” Sasha has nearly forgotten about Richard’s actions; which Richard argues is key to true forgiveness.



PART 4: SUITCASE

Sasha packs for college. They pack their **skirts**, and favorite hats and shirts, and they even pack a bunch of subway maps and some shower shoes. Sasha brings along their favorite books, including *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, and their special compression stockings. Sasha also packs a “string of paper cranes” made by Oakland High School students.

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* is a novel about a male poet who changes his gender and lives the rest of their life as a woman. Of course, this mirrors Sasha’s own gender identity and underscores Slater’s principal argument of the existence and recognition of trans and nonbinary gender individuals.



PART 4: A PRAYER

As Sasha gets ready to leave for college, Debbie thinks about the psychologist who diagnosed Sasha with Asperger’s when they were just seven years old. He had told Debbie and Karl to “lower their expectations,” since he had never seen a child with Autism live a normal life. Now, Debbie thinks, Sasha is headed to MIT. “Take that, Mr. Doom and Gloom therapist!” Debbie writes in her blog.

This passage is important because it emphasizes that people often don’t live up to their stereotypes. Sasha is capable of many things, none of which their psychologist acknowledged during their early diagnosis.



PART 4: BARGAINING

In September, after Sasha leaves for college, the district attorney’s office makes Richard an offer. If Richard accepts five years for assault, they will drop the mayhem charge and the hate-crime clauses. Du Bois thinks Richard should take it. Du Bois communicates very little with Jasmine, who still doesn’t know if Richard will be tried as an adult should the case go to trial, and Debbie is “frustrated.” She “just wants it to be done with.”

As Sasha leaves for college, they leave their attack behind as well, yet the justice system continues to belabor the incident. Five years in prison is a long time, but if Richard goes to trial and is tried as an adult, he stands to be sentenced to life in prison for hate-crimes.



PART 4: THE DEAL

In October, Nancy O’Malley, the district attorney, “abruptly withdraws” Richard’s five-year offer. “No! No! No!” Jasmine yells. “I’ve been nice! I’ve been polite!” The district attorney offers Richard seven years in state prison instead and tells Du Bois to “take the deal or go to trial.” Richard is led, handcuffed and shackled, into the courtroom to sign the plea.

By withdrawing Richard’s five-year offer, the DA ensures that Richard will spend more time behind bars. Richard doesn’t have a choice—it is either seven years or a potential life sentence—and his handcuffs and shackles are a reflection of what his future now holds.



PART 4: THE FINE PRINT

Richard can still have his sentence reduced to five years with good behavior. If his conduct is good until his eighteenth birthday, the judge will reduce his sentence, and he will be able to stay in the juvenile system. Still, any number of things could count against his conduct, Du Bois warns, then Richard will go to prison. “And for what?” Du Bois asks. “Protecting the community by making this kid into a *real* gangster?”

Du Bois argues that the community is not protected by sending Richard to prison. In prison, Richard will be surrounded by true offenders, and this environment is likely to criminalize him in the process. Du Bois also suggests that it not only bad behavior on Richard’s part that will count against his conduct—the mere perception of bad behavior, even a simple misunderstanding, could mean that Richard will serve his time in an adult facility.



PART 4: A STRUCTURED ENVIRONMENT

Nancy O’Malley can’t say for sure why her office withdrew Richard’s original offer. “It keeps getting continued and continued and continued and the result is that he sits in our facility without having meaningful treatment,” she explains. O’Malley says that it is clear, “unfortunately,” that Richard needs “a structured environment.”

O’Malley’s withdrawal of Richard’s original offer for no reason reflects the system’s institutionalized racism. If Richard is in prison, then he is removed from society, and this is the “structure” that O’Malley refers to.



PART 4: LOOK WHERE HIS PEOPLE WENT

Some of Richard’s friends agree that maybe it is best that he does go to prison. So many of the young people from Oakland High get into serious trouble, and some even get killed like Skeet. “I’m not saying jail is for everybody,” Cherie says, “but it probably could save his life because look where his people went.”

Cherie’s comments reflect the injustices of Oakland’s social inequality, and the fact that she believes Richard is better off in prison implies that society’s efforts to marginalize people of color have largely been effective.



PART 4: VICTIM-IMPACT STATEMENT

In November, Debbie addresses the court at Richard’s sentencing and gives a “victim impact statement.” Standing in front of Richard, Debbie says, “You attacked our child as they slept on a bus.” She doesn’t understand why he did it, but she believes “hatred only leads to more hatred.” Sasha has “a right not to be bullied or harassed,” Debbie says, and she tells Richard she hopes he will “gain some understanding and empathy in the years to come.”

Debbie is less concerned with Richard spending time in prison and is more concerned with positive redemption, which she believes he can achieve by becoming an advocate for those who are bullied. Debbie is convinced that prison will only cause Richard more hate, which will ultimately be counterproductive to his true rehabilitation.



Debbie feels better after addressing Richard directly, but Karl can’t get over how young Richard looked. “Poor Jasmine,” Debbie says. “She lost her son for years to come. [...] I hope they can make it. I hope they don’t get crushed.” Karl immediately corrects her. “He,” he says. “Yeah,” Debbie says. “I hope he doesn’t get crushed.”

Ironically, had Debbie been more open to restorative justice, she would have been able to directly address Richard much earlier, and she would have begun the healing process that much sooner. Additionally, Richard looks young because he is young, and Karl’s comment draws attention to this.



PART 4: NERD FRATERNITY

Sasha doesn't attend Richard's sentencing. They are moving into the Epsilon Theta fraternity house on MIT's campus. Epsilon Theta is a sort of "anti-fraternity," and Sasha fits right in. The students play games and build puzzles, and they invent things and listen to music. Sasha is the only nonbinary person in Epsilon Theta, but the bathrooms are still labeled "men's plus" and "women's plus." Sasha is "happy" here—people at MIT don't even know about the fire.

Sasha's absence at Richard's hearing is evidence that they have forgiven Richard and moved on. Sasha is happy and feels accepted in their new life at MIT, and there is nothing to be gained from continuing to go to legal proceedings that only serve to remind Sasha of the attack.



PART 4: HOW IT ENDED UP

Cherie reflects on her group of friends from Oakland High. So many have gotten into trouble and have been sent away like Richard, and a few are even serving real time in state prison. Some are dead, like Skeet, and others are pregnant. None of them is going to graduate, it appears. "It's just a sad story," Cherie says. "When you think about it, it's just hella sad."

Cherie's story is "hella sad," and by telling it, Slater hopes to right the social wrongs that have led to this unfortunate reality. The more people who are aware of Cherie's story, the better the chances that these social injustices can be addressed and resolved.



PART 4: MAIL DELIVERY

Sasha finally receives Richard's letters in January 2015. Sasha, Karl, and Debbie all appreciate his apologies, but they wish that they had seen the letters earlier. "It would've made a difference," Debbie says. "I would have been more engaged in what was going on with Richard." If she had known about the letters sooner, Debbie would have given a different "victim impact speech," Slater writes.

Again, restorative justice would have ensured that Debbie knew of Richard's true feelings much sooner, and in this way, the justice system does Sasha and their family more harm than good. Had Richard been able to apologize sooner, much pain, energy, and resources could have been saved.



PART 4: CHAD

On January 2, 2015 Richard is transferred to the N.A. Chaderjian Youth Correctional Facility in Stockton, California, otherwise "known as Chad."

Chad is roughly 70 miles east of Oakland, which means that Richard is taken even further away from his family.



PART 4: OPPORTUNITY

Slater cites the "Youth Rights Handbook distributed by the Division of Juvenile Justice." The book says that "feelings of anxiety or fear" are normal when first arriving at Chad, but they "would like to see you successfully complete your stay and end your involvement with the criminal justice system." While in the facility, the handbook says, "You have the right.../ To be provided with the basic things you need to live and stay healthy." These things include, among others, food, sleep, and exercise.

Again, Slater's inclusion of the Youth Rights Handbook and her use of the word "you" has the effect of giving the reader the vicarious experience of actually being booked into Chad correctional facility. In this way, the reader is better able to empathize with Richard and his experiences in the criminal justice system.



However, you only have a right to “the basics,” the handbook says, and if you want special clothing, snacks, or makeup, you have to buy those items at the “canteen.” Any items such as cigarettes, drugs, or phones, are considered “contraband,” and lastly, “you have a right... / TO BE SEARCHED IN A WAY THAT IS THE LEAST EMBARRASING TO YOU.”

This reminds inmates that even though they are in a juvenile facility, they are still in prison. Inmates are afforded little rights, and arguably, being searched in any sort of way is embarrassing. The treatment of juveniles in correctional facilities has a lasting effect, and the fact that this is Richard’s second time in the system is a testament to that.



PART 4: THEN AND NOW

A decade ago, there were 10,000 juveniles in prison in California, Slater says. Now, there are about 700, spread out among four facilities. The system has undergone some serious reform since then, and Chad is not as bad as it used to be. The inmates get “positive checks,” instead of only being reprimanded for bad behavior, and there is an “incentive locker” filled with snacks as a reward for good behavior. If an inmate is well behaved for long enough, they earn time in the “incentive room,” and are allowed DirecTV and video games.

The reform of California’s juvenile justice system reflects a positive shift away from focusing only on bad behavior and punishment. By focusing on an inmate’s positive behavior, their chances for meaningful rehabilitation increase, especially when they are motivated by incentives and reward systems.



PART 4: RISKY THINKING

Inside Chad, Richard attends small meetings with other inmates and one of the parole agents. The meetings “teach problem-solving and perspective-taking.” They talk about their fears, mostly their “fear of getting in trouble,” and they talk about the behavior that gets them into trouble. They talk about “risky thinking,” like thinking “maybe I shouldn’t have” done this or that, and they identify other types counterproductive thinking. “Overgeneralizing” and “catastrophizing” thoughts are also risky, they decide, along with “desperate and deserving” thoughts. Like rich people who think they deserve wives, one inmate says. “They can be hella rich and they can be like, ‘I deserve to have a wife’ and you start to feel hella bad for yourself,” he says. “Yeah,” says another inmate, “but I’d rather be them than be here.”

Ironically, the meetings that Richard attends while an inmate at Chad follow a similar structure and purpose to restorative justice. Open dialogue allows the inmates to talk about important subjects that both help and hinder their rehabilitation, and this is another way to hold inmates accountable. Furthermore, the inmates’ comments about rich people further underscore the social inequalities present within American society by insinuating that they wouldn’t be an inmate at Chad if they weren’t also poor.



PART 4: PROGRESS REPORT

Sasha stands outside of Department 11 wearing a long **skirt** and “ballet flats.” Their canvas purse is covered in LGBTQ buttons and others that simply read “they/them/their.” Debbie and Karl are there too. It is the last Friday in June 2015. Today is Richard’s second progress report, and if all goes well, his sentence will be reduced to five years and he will probably remain in the juvenile system and not go to an adult prison. Richard is coming in from Chad, and Jasmine had to get the day off from work—she has recently started a second job.

The buttons on Sasha’s bag are a gentle reminder of the importance of inclusive language. With a better understanding of Sasha’s gender identity, Slater ultimately argues, perhaps this senseless attack could have been avoided.



Richard's court file is misplaced, and the judge is forced to postpone the progress report until the following week. Jasmine "slumps" in her seat. She will never get another day off from work. The judge does agree, however, to let Karl address the court. Karl speaks "on behalf" of Debbie and Sasha as well and tells the court that they have all "forgiven Richard." They each believe that Richard "meant no bodily harm to Sasha." Richard has shown remorse and has apologized, and they have "accepted." "We hope that there are programs in juvenile detention that can at least help Richard with this, and that he can become an ally who will stand up against the bullying and hatred of gay and trans people," Karl says. "Thank you," Richard silently mouths.

When Richard silently thanks Karl, they all achieve closure and healing, but it has taken them years to get to this point. Potentially, Richard and Sasha could have reached this desired conclusion much sooner (with less pain and suffering for all involved) if restorative justice had been an option for Richard's punishment. Additionally, Jasmine's second job is further evidence of Oakland's inequality. She must work twice as hard as those who have more money and better opportunities.



PART 4: A LEVEL OF MATURITY

The next week, the judge acknowledges Richard's good behavior in court. He has done well at Chad, the judge says, and Richard has behaved with "a level of maturity that he didn't exhibit on the day of the offense." Taking Karl's statement into consideration, the judge reduces Richard sentence to five years, and recommends that he stay within the juvenile system. Jasmine was able to get the day off after all, and she is "relieved" by the judge's decision. After three years, the progress report is "such a release," Jasmine says.

When the judge says that Richard's behavior at Chad shows "maturity" he didn't exhibit on the 57 bus, he effectively admits that Richard is, like his lawyer had attempted to argue to the court, just a child. Paradoxically, it isn't until Richard behaves with more maturity that the court finally agrees to punish him as a juvenile rather than an adult.



PART 4: ANDREW AND THE BINARY

Five months later, Sasha meets Andrew in Berkley for dinner. Andrew tells Sasha that he is beginning to "identify a little bit as [...] genderqueer." He is still hesitant, though. As a gay transgender man, Andrew still fits neatly in the male/female "binary," and he is scared to step out of it. "I've already been asked enough questions about my genitals," he says. "I'm done with that."

Andrew is hesitant to live a life that more closely aligns with his gender identity because he is afraid of becoming a victim of physical violence on account of that gender. Andrew's concerns underscore the discrimination of the LGBTQ community within American society.



PART 4: BIRTHDAYS

Richard spends his eighteenth birthday in Chad. He eventually earns his high school diploma and takes some vocational classes. He even gets a job and starts paying off his court fines. Richard is "slow to trust, slow to warm," and he keeps mostly to himself. He still has two more birthdays to spend here, then "the next chapter of his life will finally begin."

Richard's time in the justice system has already begun to change him. His "goofy" personality has been stifled, and he becomes more introverted, which is no doubt an attempt to distance himself from the other inmates.



PART 4: 1001 NO-LONGER-BLANK WHITE CARDS

In January, before heading back to college, Sasha and Michael get together and play the **index card game**. The game is “still funny,” and Sasha draws the card that is meant to “remind” everyone to use proper pronouns, but “nobody needed reminding” now. Michael and Sasha had “digitally scanned” stacks of the cards the day before for “posterity.” The cards were, according to Sasha, “part of the historical record.” The cards reflect who they are, and Sasha is “an autistic kid with a special interest.” “That’s probably the best answer I can give,” Sasha says.

When Michael and Sasha scan the cards for “posterity,” they are effectively reminding future generations of the importance of inclusive language. This also legitimizes Sasha’s nonbinary identity and makes them more visible. In this way, the index card game encourages others to accept and respect Sasha’s nonbinary gender identity, in keeping with Slater’s overarching argument of inclusion and tolerance.



PART 4: SOME GENDER-NEUTRALITY MILESTONES

Slater includes several milestones in gender nonbinary equality. In 2013, for example, Australia began to offer a choice of three genders on official forms: “male, female, and X,” and Germany now offers the choice of “indeterminate” when assigning gender at birth. In 2014, Facebook began allowing users to identify as a gender “other than male or female,” and in 2015, Disney “removed gender categories from Halloween costumes.” In 2016, the Obama administration “directed the nation’s schools to provide students with access to bathrooms and locker rooms that match their chosen gender identity.” President Trump eliminated much of the guidelines implemented by Obama, Slater points out, but in 2017, the first nonbinary character was cast on the Showtime drama *Billions*.

Slater points out that the world is beginning to realize the positive changes that Sasha, and many others, desire. Nonbinary gender is slowly becoming acknowledged and respected around the world, but this has not occurred without setbacks. Still, Disney’s removal of gender categories from costumes and the presence of nonbinary characters on television suggests that a majority of society is accepting and tolerant of those who identify outside of the male/female gender binary.



PART 4: US JUVENILE INCARCERATION

Slater also includes some numbers applicable to Richard’s case. 54,148 juveniles are “held in correctional facilities on any given day,” she writes, and while African Americans only make up 16 percent of total juveniles, “41 percent of incarcerated youths are African American.” According to Slater, it costs 2.5 million dollars to jail one single juvenile for life, and nearly 10 percent of all “confined youths” have experienced sexual assault while in custody. Sadly, 22 percent of “confined youths” have also attempted suicide.

Sadly, these statistics imply that similar progress has not been made to address the discrimination and racism present in America’s criminal justice system. These statistics are bleak; however, Slater ultimately argues, acknowledging this unjust reality is the first step to overcoming the hate and discrimination that fuels it.





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