Facultade de Filoloxía

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

Re-Visiting AIDS and Queerness in Contemporary Young Adult Literature

Graduanda: Icíar Rey González
Directora: Noemí Pereira-Ares
Curso académico: 2022-2023

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Formulario de delimitación do título e resumo

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2022/2023

APELIDOS E NOME:	Rey González Icíar
GRAO EN:	Lingua e Literatura Inglesas
(NO CASO DE MODERNAS) MENCIÓN EN:	
TITOR/A:	Noemí Pereira-Ares
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	Literatura en lingua inglesa e outras manifestacións artísticas

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título:

Re-Visiting AIDS and Queerness in Contemporary Young Adult Literature

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the AIDS crisis began one of the darkest chapters in the history of the LGBTQ+ community, as the already stigmatized community suffered the epidemic's effects and encountered further layers of discrimination. The AIDS crisis had a tremendous social impact: many were lost and mourned. But despite being an age marked by despair, the period also witnessed the birth of a loving and dedicated community. Since then, different authors have recreated this crisis in their works, but the representation of the AIDS crisis in Young Adult (YA) fiction has been more limited and often endowed with a didactic purpose aimed at reinforcing forms of normative heterosexuality by highlighting the dangers posed by queer identities. Departing from these considerations, the aim of this dissertation is to examine how the AIDS crisis has been revisited in recent works of YA fiction which celebrate, rather than condemn, gender and sexual diversity. To this end, the study will provide an overview of how this crisis has been represented in YA literature with queer themes and it will then move on to provide a close reading of two contemporary novels: David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019). Accordingly, the study will be divided into two main parts. In the first one, I shall lay bare the critical apparatus that will inform the subsequent analysis of the novels, reviewing critical works on queer studies and showing how these theories have influenced the representation of queer identities in YA. A retrospective of the HIV crisis, plus its depiction in literature, will also be included in this section. The second part of the study will be centered on a close reading of *Like a Love Story* and *Two Boys Kissing*, focusing on the different strategies each of them uses to revisit the past and create a collective memory while simultaneously celebrating the existence of different gender and sexual identities.

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Santiago de Compostela, 02 de novembro de 2022.

Sinatura do/a interesado/a	Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a)	Aprobado pola Comisión do Traballo de Fin de Grao coa data
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SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

Declaración de orixinalidade

Dona Icíar Rey González, con DNI 45146834L, declara que o presente Traballo de Fin de Grao é íntegramente orixinal, non tendo sido empregada ninguna fonte sen ser referenciada, sendo consciente do delito de plaxio que constitúe o contrario.

En Ourense, a 30 de xuño de 2023.

REY GONZALEZ ICIAR - 45146834L

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Introduction

The peak of the HIV epidemic, also known as the AIDS crisis, took place in the last decades of the previous century and proved to be a devastating time for all, but especially for LGBTQ+ people. The already rampant discrimination against the queer community worsened during this period, leading to more violence and stigma. Unfortunately, many individuals died in undignified conditions without any support, forgotten in hospitals and with people refusing to touch them. However, this era also witnessed the emergence of various aid organizations aimed at helping those in dire need, *ACT UP* and *Queer Nation* are some prominent cases in point. A strong sense of community was also forged amidst the tragedy, based on profound compassion among individuals trying to take on the unfathomable loss surrounding them. This unity was also characterized by intersectionality, given that people of different genders, ethnicities, and social backgrounds were at the forefront of the fight for a better future.

During this period of crisis and collective trauma, art became a powerful vehicle through which different creators tried to make sense of the precarious reality around them, whilst simultaneously raising awareness. To give just a few examples, renowned artist Keith Haring (1958-1990) created graffiti-like art on the streets of New York, which featured humorous sketches aimed at providing scathing criticism on the negligence of those politicians who decided to ignore the various horrors affecting American society, such as the crack epidemic and the AIDS crisis; and Felix González Torres (1957-1996), another influential artist in the period, created performative art based on his and his partner's experience with the disease. Similarly, the so-called AIDS crisis also left its trace on the 1980s and 1990s literary landscape, with some authors initially sharing personal accounts of their experiences and thus contributing to breaking the silences surrounding the disease. One prominent example is Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988), where the author retraces the last nineteen months he spent with his partner, from Roger Horwitz's AIDS diagnosis until his death. The

memoir offers a candid account of the experience of those who were HIV-positive in the 1980s, and the impact their suffering had on their loved ones. This autobiographical work and some others paved the way for subsequent works of fiction engaging with the crisis such as Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993)[1]. Kushner's work is, in fact, a notable example of the incorporation of the crisis into fiction, blending the story of an HIV-positive man with fantastical elements such as the angels featuring in the title.

In Young Adult (YA) literature – the focus of this dissertation – the topic was initially avoided for various reasons, from blatant homophobia to the alleged need to keep young people unaware of the crisis and thus shield them from its devastating effects. Before the publication of *Night Kites* (1986) by Marijane Meaker, AIDS was not commonly featured as a major plot point in YA fiction and, in those rare cases in which it was, authors used AIDS to convey a didactic and cautionary message against queerness. Even after the publication of *Night Kites*, the portrayal of the AIDS crisis in YA literature continued to be highly inaccurate and ridden with prejudice and ideas that morphed into tropes in later narratives. To give just some examples, most twentieth-century YA literature invested in the myth that only adults could contract AIDS, portraying teenagers as being too innocent to fall prey to the disease. Similarly, and as anticipated earlier in this introduction, the AIDS crisis was often brought to the fore as a warning about the great perils associated with same-sex intimacy, which, in turn, served to reinforce heterosexuality as the norm – the alternative was indirectly equated to death. Fortunately, in the new millennium, the depiction of the AIDS crisis in YA literature has experienced profound changes, partly due to the normalization of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This has led to the breaking down of rigid definitions of queerness and the emergence of a more inclusive LGBTQ+ experience in literature. The exponential growth

[1] The play is composed of two parts, the first one, *Millennium Approaches*, was published in 1991, the second one, *Perestroika*, in 1992.

of Young Adult literature has also played a crucial role in this transformation. The themes explored in these publications have become increasingly diversified, favoring the incorporation of subjectivities that fall outside of the heteronormative canon and leading to a re-evaluation of the AIDS crisis in YA literature. Some instances of recent works that have taken part in the revisitation of the AIDS crisis within the literary landscape of the USA are: Carol Rifka Brunt's *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012), David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019) and Helene Dunbar's *We Are Lost and Found* (2019), amongst others.

Departing from the previous considerations, the aim of this dissertation is twofold. Firstly, the study seeks to examine how the AIDS crisis has been depicted in North American YA novels since the 1980s, paying particular attention to the twenty-first century and conducting a literature review along this line. Secondly, this dissertation intends to explore how the AIDS crisis has been revisited and revised in twenty-first-century YA literature by providing a close analysis of two novels that deviate from the stereotypical approaches found in much twentieth-century literature: David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019). To this end, and in terms of methodological approach, this dissertation is grounded in close reading strategies and will deploy a theoretical framework informed by queer studies and recent criticism on YA literature engaging with queerness. Queer studies will be addressed, inter alia, through Judith Butler's work (1990; 1993), and the literature review on YA literature engaging with queerness will draw on Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins' seminal work *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018), which provides an overview of the evolution of YA literature from the Stonewall Era (1969) to the 2010s.

Finally, as far as the structure of the work is concerned, the dissertation is divided into two main parts: the theoretical framework and the part devoted to the close analysis of *Two*

Boys Kissing (2013) and *Like a Love Story* (2019). The first two chapters, corresponding to the theoretical framework, will elucidate the theoretical and critical foundations for the subsequent analysis. Chapter 1 – "Queer Theory and Young Adult Literature" – is, in turn, subdivided into two sections, with the first one – "Approaching Queer Theory" – offering an overview of queer studies from the 1970s onwards. As it could not be otherwise, this section also engages with the multiple complexities underlying the term "queer" as well as with the notion of "gender" as theorized by scholars such as Judith Butler. The second section in Chapter 1 – "Queerness in Young Adult Literature" – begins by briefly addressing the notion of "adolescence" and its emergence as a cultural category in the post-war period. The section then moves on to consider the definition of "YA literature", providing an overview of the evolution of this genre before plunging the reader into the emergence of queer YA literature in the USA, which is often traced back to the publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969). Following the same structure, Chapter 2 – "The AIDS crisis and its representation in YA Literature" – is also subdivided into two sections. The first one – "Contextualizing the AIDS Crisis" – offers background information about the AIDS crisis by presenting a timeline of the evolution and social impact of this crisis in the United States. Then, the final section, – "Representation of the Crisis in YA"–, explores the representation of the AIDS crisis in YA literature from the late twentieth century to the new millennium, placing the two novels that make up the corpus of analysis – *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and *Like a Love Story* (2019) – in the context of both previous and contemporary YA narratives centered on the above-mentioned crisis. This section is immediately followed by the analysis that occupies the second part of the dissertation – broadly titled "The AIDS Crisis in David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019)". This second part, which is divided into two chapters – "David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013): Intergenerational Dialogue around AIDS" and "Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019): The AIDS Crisis through Teenage

Eyes" – provides a close reading of the two novels mentioned above, pulling insights from the chapters devoted to laying bare the theoretical framework. Each of the two chapters devoted to the analysis begins by presenting contextual information about the chosen novels and their authors' background before moving on to explore how each text engages with the AIDS crisis both thematically but also through formal strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Chapter 1: Queer Theory and Young Adult Literature

1.1. Approaching Queer Theory

The evolution of the word "queer" is a complex one. Originally used to describe strangeness, it subsequently evolved into a "paralyzing slur, as the mundane interpellation of pathologized sexuality" (Butler, 1993, p. 223), referring to people who did not conform to the heteronormative matrix. Already in the 1990s, the term "queer" was reappropriated by the LGBTQ+ community and imbued with affirmative connotations, becoming an umbrella term for those outside the hegemonic canon. In fact, the related form "genderqueer", used to define "people who have gender identities other than male and female" (Harris, 2022, n.p.), was coined in 1995, and it is considered the antecedent of the widely used label "non-binary". The word transcends the simplistic biological binarism imposed by our cisheterosexual hegemonic society and acknowledges the "messiness of identity" (Giffney, 2009, p. 2). Nowadays, the reconceptualized expression has become part of our everyday speech, albeit still relatively obscure in meaning due to its recent incorporation into the common language. However, "its opacity encourages us to search for possible meanings within it, prompts us to ask questions about what those meanings might be and compels us to reflect on why we are driven to conduct a search for such meanings" (Giffney, 2009, p. 1).

Despite its possibilities, some critics and activists find the term "queer" too reductive and lacking nuance. By bringing together the entire LGBTQ+ community under a single unit, the intrinsic experiences of each identity are concealed. Due to "trying to be all things to all people, queer actually elides differences and becomes a meaningless mélange of competing aims and beliefs in the process" (Giffney, 2009, p. 5). What characterizes each of these groups is rendered invisible under such an umbrella term, and this leads to "the misrepresentation or silencing of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender issues and viewpoints" (Giffney, 2009, p. 3).

This general perspective also makes it impossible to establish intersections between the distinct aspects that shape people's identities such as, for example, class, ethnicity, or age (Giffney, 2009). People suffer from various kinds of oppression, which needs to be acknowledged as "[t]hese axes of social division or social identities also impact LGBTQ+ communities. Many LGBTQ+ people hold other marginalized identities, as no queer or transgender person is queer or transgender in a vacuum" (Jeffries et al., 2022, p. 5). This newfound idea of disconnection is clearly expressed in the "Introduction" to *After Queer Theory* (2014) by James Penney:

> Whereas previously politicized gay and lesbian communities, founded on generally unproblematised ideas of (minority) sexual identity, saw inherent links between their own ambitions and those of other oppressed constituencies (in particular straight women and people of colour), more recent queer writers and activists, asserting identity's inherently normative and exclusionary workings, have been comparatively self-concerned, reluctant to forge alliances with groups that don't define themselves in sexual terms. (p. 2)

Whereas nowadays objections are raised against the erasures that the category "queer" might entail, queer theory "began with a concern for identity" (Giffney, 20009, p. 4), seeking to forge alliances amongst those fell outside of heteronormativity. The rise of queer studies stemmed from the fact that other identities, such as bisexual and transgender people, felt that the "term lesbian and gay studies did not seem inclusive enough; it did not encapsulate the ambivalence toward sexual categorization which many lesbian/gay scholars felt" (Plummer & Stein, 1994, p. 181). In addition to this, homosexual studies also failed to comprehend female desire, as it was understood from a male perspective, and their identity was misinterpreted as wanting to be a man. This has to do with the fact that the discourse on gayness "added on women as an afterthought, with little or no understanding of female socio-sexual specificity, developed separately from the printed discourse on white lesbianism" (De Lauretis, 1991, p. 4). From that

moment onwards, queer theory has evolved until being considered an "analytical tool for unpacking how the identities lesbian and gay are formed both from the (sometimes hostile) discourses propounded by people not aligned with those categories while also being constructed by self-identified lesbians and gays themselves" (Giffney, 2009, p. 4). This implies that LGBTQ+ identities will no longer be formed around a cisheterosexual understanding, which fails to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of being queer. Instead, the voices of those who have been silenced by oppression will finally be taken into account. Thus, creating: "a theory for, about and by 'queers'" (Giffney, 2009, p. 5). In this respect, in 1994, Ken Plummer and Arlene Stein beautifully described the intellectual movement that queer theory is as a "glimmer of hope" (p. 178), arguing that it has been relatively prosperous when it comes to "deghettoizing lesbian and gay studies" (Plummer & Stein, 1994, p. 179). The conundrum on which sociologists found themselves entwined was how to use the foundations laid by earlier theorists without repeating their misconstructions; that is, how to "rethink sexual (and gender) nonconformity in ways that do not reproduce marginality" (Plummer & Stein, 1994, p. 179).

The growing popularity of queer studies in the late twentieth century also led to the questioning of the traditional concept of "gender", which up to this point had been a notion completely neglected by academics. Gender has always been understood as a fixed binary system in a paralleled relationship with sex (Butler, 1990). Judith Butler[2] problematized this idea in their 1990 seminal work *Gender Trouble* by stating the following: "Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (p. 22). For them, gender and sex are different entities not necessarily connected. Sex refers to the innate biological traits that the individual possesses, and gender is more complex and, according to Butler, "culturally constructed". Their hypothesis establishes that identity is

[2] Hereafter, the pronouns "they" and "them" will be used when referring to Judith Butler.

assembled through the repetitive performativity of certain acts that society associates with males and females. They further develop this idea in *Bodies that Matter* (1993):

> The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. (p. 231)

What they meant by this is that the performativity of gender is something that we must actively do as it is forced by society. Therefore, it is not something that serves to define us. In a world governed by gender roles, certain behaviors and general attributes are imposed on individuals to be accepted in society. The most important part of this excerpt is the end, where Butler mentions that these people will never meet the expectation of femininity or masculinity set by society, as they are unrealistic standards. This is a form of violence which achieves the alienation of certain groups.

Despite its popularity, queer theory has its detractors. The main objections have to do with the academic language employed and the field's western domination. People with different educational backgrounds have alleged that the rhetoric used in most cases is highly inaccessible and plagued with jargon and specialized terms, making the comprehension of the discourse almost impossible (Giffney, 2009). This is a constant issue concerning academic knowledge, as it tends to be oriented towards an erudite minority. Accuracy is required, but there is no real need to create a purposefully convoluted discourse. Likewise, queer studies have been condemned for their alliance with imperial centers and western discourse – mostly American and British culture (Giffney, 2009). Despite the proliferation of production in diverse locations (Giffney, 2009), most of the creation "has been situated in elite centres of academic capital in the United States" (Penney, 2014, p. 3). These two powers became the canon "and

then exported as a form of neo-imperialist rhetoric to other parts of the world" (Giffney, 2009, p. 3) and this way, certain parts of the world have to apply the theory that other places have created without the possibility of adding their own perspective, "as if colonised by its ideological effects" (Giffney, 2009, p. 3). Consequently, for some critics, "queer discourse in general reflects the interests and investments of this group of privileged academics and students in the global North" (Penney, 2014, p. 3).

1.2. Queerness in Young Adult Literature

In order to address queerness in Young Adult (YA) literature, it is worth beginning by briefly addressing the notion of "adolescence" and its emergence as a cultural category. Often defined as "a time of internal turmoil, of storm and stress" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 2), adolescence refers to a period of life whose boundaries are, nonetheless, difficult to pinpoint and have been constantly redrawn within a spectrum that ranges from 10 to 25 years of age (Steinberg, 2014). As noted above, adolescence is a period of transformation often accompanied by intense crisis. For it is at this stage that individuals begin to search for their identity, and the stress resulting for this search is exacerbated by their "sexual awakening and hormonal turmoil" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 12). Understood as a "separate part of human existence, troubled and troubling" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 4), the term "adolescence" was first used in 1904 by psychologist and educationalist Stanley Hall. He was the first "to distinguish a separate age between the onset of puberty and mature adulthood" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 2), and this distinction meant a quantum leap. From this moment onwards, "adolescence became defined as a process, in contrast to the static concept of "boy" or "girl," a path by which the child becomes an adult" (Baxter as cited by Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 2), and it was also Hall who first posited that adolescence entailed a period of "storm and stress" (1904: 73) dominated by conflict with authority figures, mood disruptions and risky behavior.

Despite Hall's contribution, the term "adolescence" did not permeate the fields of education and psychology, as well as popular parlance, until the inter-war period (1918-1939). The post-war period brought about many changes, for example, in the field of education. The curriculum of high schools became more specialized, broadening young people's intellectual horizons and changing the pre-war approach in which the lessons only revolved around basic general knowledge to survive in society (Dobrasko, 2023, n.p.). Due to the thriving nature of the post-war years, the word "teenager" "became widely used within the realm of consumption" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 7). The previous period of hardship was followed by a time of newfound affluence. Families, after much deprivation, had once again disposable income and free time, which translated into a realm of new possibilities. Teenagers could enjoy material goods and culture, things that previously would have been considered frivolous pleasures by society. This new economic situation turned adolescents into a target for the consumerist society, and from this moment on, certain products started to be advertised to a clear audience: young people. That moment coincided with the birth of rock and roll, and a style of music that generally dealt with themes of freedom, independence, rebellion, and love was perfect for people whose lives consisted of such turmoil.

A concept that has been widely used to describe the space that adolescence occupies in society is that of "liminality". The term implies a sense of in-betweenness, which characterizes the life of the teenager, as they are not children but still are not able to be autonomous citizens; for this reason, they "struggle for recognition against the impositions of dominant power structures" (Lojo et al., 2021, p.7). One of the main characteristics of liminality is change, which in turn, is one of the main features of adolescence. Teenagers are constantly transforming, their bodies and interests change, but their relationship with the outside world also suffers modifications, as they tend to ask for more independence and often act recklessly, challenging established boundaries (Lojo et al., 2021). The idea of liminality was introduced

by Arnold Van Gennep and developed by Victor Turner. With this concept, both anthropologists wanted to draw attention to the phases of transition life when people are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95), which are signalled by rites of passage. According to Van Gennep, rites of passage are "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Van Gennep as cited in Turner, 1969, p.94). These are, in turn, divided into three phases. The first phase is known as "separation" and involves "the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both" (Turner, 1969, p.94). The second is "the liminal period": it is the most complex one as "the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner, 1969, p.94). The final phase is that of "reaggregation or reincorporation", in which the transition is accomplished and individual re-aggregated into society. Teenagers can be said to inhabit a liminal space as they oscillate between childhood and adulthood, a disjuncture from the first has occurred, but they have not reached the second yet. This period has often been defined as the "preparatory stages in a biological and social process oriented towards adulthood" (Lojo et al., 2021, p. 1). Such definition strips the adolescent subject of agency, as it reduces teenagers to being just "adults in the making" (Lojo et al., 2021, p. 1). This depiction of youngsters as "passive subjects" "deprive[s] children and youths of sociocultural relevance, influence, meaning or agency, as if they contributed nothing to, or provided no insight into, historical change" (Lojo et al., 2021, p. 1). Even though it is true that they are in a moving process toward adulthood, this does not mean that they do not have their own interests and idiosyncrasies. Youngsters live in a perpetual state of inquiry, and this includes sexual orientation, gender identity and even political affiliation. Books are a

cornerstone in this process, as they are the place where many people find the crucial pieces of information that adolescents need to start building themselves.

In their book *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018), Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins define Young Adult (YA) literature as: "[B]ooks that are published for readers aged twelve to eighteen, have a young adult protagonist, are told from a young adult perspective, and feature coming-of age or other issues and concerns of interest to YAs" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.3). This is quite a reductive definition but describing "Young Adult literature" is rather complex since the term is "inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms "young adult" and "literature" are dynamic, changing as culture and society — which provide their context — change" (Cart, 2008, n.p.). Put differently, they are both "cultural constructions" that evolve across time and space (Hilton & Nilolajeva, 2012, p. 1). Although, as explained above, adolescence started to be addressed from a psychological perspective at the beginning of the twentieth century, this early interest did not have a direct impact on the way literature for young people was created, so "[t]he sentimental tradition of writing about children for children simply stretched to include the teenage years" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 2). During the turbulent period of the Great War and the Depression, "coming of age" stories started to be created in America, meanwhile in Great Britain: "real teenagers continued to be offered pre-war children's fiction: domestic stories, school, and adventure stories" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 4). Nevertheless, the figure of the adolescent in literature at the time was still obscure as teenagers were portrayed as independent individuals moving towards adulthood but also "with childlike innocence, total asexuality, and an athletic devotion to the outdoor adventure cum mystery quest" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 6). It was not until the Second World War that writers started to "reject the sentimental tradition and the invisibility of teenage interiority in twentieth-century literature for the young" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 6).

These new narratives appealed to the youngsters by "sympathetically portraying the alienated pains and pleasures of adolescence" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 1), allowing them to "see their own faces reflected in the pages of a book and [thus] find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone in a vast universe, that there are others "like me""(Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.3). Apart from the comfort and understanding that YA books provide, given the fact that these books are oriented to young minds still in formation, they also serve a didactic purpose instructing adolescents in respect and tolerance by bringing them "face to face with different forms of cultural alienation itself: the legacy of colonialism, political injustice, environmental desecration, sexual stereotyping, consumerism, madness, and death" (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 1). The flourishing of YA literature in the twenty-first century has even been considered "the most significant literary event of this century" (Greer, 2021, n.p.), and this has also brought about a diversification of YA literature in terms of genres and concerns dealt with. Teenagers connect with the stories since most of the main characters suffer from a lack of agency, and this tends to be one of the youngsters' frustrations as they yearn for independence (Greer, 2021). However, this idea also resonates with older people. Adults endure the consequences of forces beyond their control, so the idea of seeing their suffering portrayed provides a sense of comfort. According to the statistics provided by WordsRated, over half of the consumers who buy YA books are over the age range targeted by this literature, and half of those buyers are in fact between ages 30 and 44 (Curcic, 2023). Another factor that has impacted the current promotion of YA literature is TikTok. The creation of an international community known as "Booktok", which refers to creators whose content revolves around talking about books and recommending them, has been tremendously influential. An example of this could be the Colleen Hoover phenomenon, a completely unknown writer two years ago who in 2022 held "six of the top 10 spots on The New York

Times's paperback fiction best-seller list, a stunning number of simultaneous best sellers from a single author. She has sold 8.6 million print books this year alone" (Alter, 2022, n.p.).

Moving from the general to the particular, it is surprising that the first YA novel to deal with LGBTQ+ themes did not come out until the Stonewall riots[3] in 1969, and I am here referring to John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969). However, the novel does not paint an altogether positive portrait of the LGBTQ+ community. Same-gender attraction is depicted as a direct consequence of a problematic situation at home, in particular, a troubled relationship with the father figure, thus pathologizing queerness. The publication of YA LGBTQ+ books back in the 1960s was not without controversy since it was not considered suitable for the minds of the youngest, as it was perceived as a corrupting force. The mention of homosexuality in works aimed at these early stages was purely incidental, and when queerness was indeed tackled, it was often portrayed in a blatantly discriminatory way (Cart & Jenkins, 2018).

In their seminal work *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart examine YA literature with LGBTQ+ content from the 1970s to the new millennium and their findings reveal the following proportions: "Ten young adult titles with LGBTQ+ content were published in the 1970s, forty in the 1980s, eighty-two in the 1990s, 292 in 2000–2009, and 513 titles in 2010–2016" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.xi). Although at first glance this may seem like an abundant amount and a good progression, when compared to the number of publications of YA books with heteronormative characters, the portion corresponding to queer YA books is minuscule. One problem that can be noticed by looking at the statistics provided by Cart and Jenkins is the predominance of homosexual characters over

[3] The Stonewall Riots were a series of protests and demonstrations that started on the 28th of June of 1969 in New York City. They emerged as a reaction to a violent police raid of the gay club Stonewall Inn. The riots continued for six days, led by several members of the LGBTQ+ community who were demonstrating for their rights and against police brutality. This event is considered the dawn of the fight for the rights of the queer community.

those having other sexual orientations. In addition, there is also a component of gender bias, given that more than half of these stories have men as protagonists (Cart & Jenkins, 2018). Nevertheless, it must be stated that a progressive transformation towards a more positive and faithful representation of the queer community in YA literature can be detected.

In *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, Cart and Jenkins divide contemporary YA literature dealing with queerness into three main categories: homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer consciousness/community. According to them, works targeting "homosexual visibility" have been the most numerous over the years. These books are centered around a character coming out, their sexuality being the story's sole focus. Yet, more often than not, this literature is "marred by stereotypical characters and predictable plots centered about the inherent misery of gay people's lives" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.17). The books narrate the process of acknowledging one's sexual orientation, "first, discovering one's sexual identity, then second, struggling to come to terms with it, and third, sharing the truth about oneself with others" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.56). The predicament starts when the narratives only delve into the difficulties of existing as a queer person. This type of story is more oriented towards the education of cisheterosexual people about "the struggles that queer people face daily, by making discrimination something visual, rather than abstract" (Kaur, 2021, n.p.). Hence, there is a dissonance between the subject of the stories and who it is aimed at. Queer people tend to feel uncomfortable by these stories because it is a continuous reminder of the suffering they endure. However, the main issue is the fact that between the late 2000s and the early 2010s, this pessimistic portrayal of the LBTQ+ community became the main queer publishing trend. During this period, some authors had a pernicious fixation with portraying the sorrows of queerness, as it was expected for queer characters to endure tremendous horrors. "Guilt, self-hatred, social opprobrium, and homophobia with their corollary threats of violence—either self-imposed or imposed by others" (Cart & Jenkins,

2018, p.102) are some elements that describe the characters. There was a tendency to trace a "cause-and-effect relationship between homosexuality and physical violence—even death" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.29). This is not to say that all publications followed this example, although this was the main tendency, there were several exceptions. Nevertheless, as Camille Perri stated in her essay "Telling Queer Love Stories with Happy Endings Is a Form of Resistance" (2018): "The struggle shouldn't always be the story", stories about empowerment and of celebration are also needed. The next subdivision, "gay assimilation", deals with characters that "just happen to be gay" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. xv). This creates a world of possibilities where more nuanced dynamics between queer characters can be explored. The third and final group described by the authors is that of narratives characterized by the presence of a queer community (Cart & Jenkins, 2018). This idea was not very present in the first novels of the genre, as the community tended to be described as "being somewhere offstage, often in the past, sometimes in the future, usually urban, and definitely far from the teen protagonist's home" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.85). However, from the 1980s onwards, there have been several examples where glimpses of a community can be seen in bars and cultural spaces. (Cart & Jenkins, 2018).

This last decade has been exceptionally brilliant for the publication of LGBTQ+ books, and it also stands out for the innovative and more sensitive treatment of certain tropes. One example is the introduction of homosexual family members or even teachers, which shows queer teenagers that having a fulfilling future is possible for people like them. These characters also serve as mentors, being a guiding force helping queer youth navigate the specifics of growing up being part of the community. The authors pay special attention to the figure of the uncle as "a viable role model for young homosexuals and, come to think of it, for all young people" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.44). Through this character, hope is transmitted to the younger generations. Another improvement has to do with the diversification of genres

deployed to address queerness within YA fiction. YA queer literature was initially confined mainly to romance fiction; however, there is now a wide range of options, from historical fiction, such as *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) by Malinda Lo, to graphic novels such as *Cosmoknights* (2019- present) by Hannah Templer, fantasy, as in *The Dark Tide* (2020) by Alicia Jasinska, amongst others. In addition, over the last decade, YA literature addressing queerness has also incorporated characters from different ethnicities and class environments, thus exploring the intersections of different identity parameters. A priori, this diversification may appear to be a solely positive development, as it gives a voice to those who have been systematically silenced. Yet, it is a more nuanced affair, as it is possible that the authors have ulterior motives for including those characters, for this reason: "there is the risk of tokenism, such that the inclusion of the queer character is superficial diversity rather than genuine inclusion" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.129). Unfortunately, tokenism is something that is present in today's literary landscape. To avoid backlash for the lack of diversity in their narratives, certain authors feel obliged to insert characters who belong to an oppressed collective without any knowledge or intention to make it right. A prime example of this would be the *Harry Potter* series. The author, J.K. Rowling, named the only Asian character in the whole saga "Cho Chang", using two common Asian surnames. This, one could argue, shows a complete disregard for the culture that she is trying to represent. Secondly, Cho Chang is merely introduced as a pawn for the development of the main character, representing the first love experience that will prepare him for his chosen one, and then she disappears completely. What is even worse is the fact that the surname of the only black character is "Shacklebolt". Given the history of slavery, it is quite unfortunate. After criticism due to the lack of sexual diversity, J.K. Rowling announced that Dumbledore was indeed gay, even though there is no explicit reference across the whole series (Owlcation, 2022). This is a case of retroactive representation, which happens when "creators explicitly (and retroactively) claim that certain characters are

LGBTQ+, although nothing in the story definitively confirms it" (Kaur, 2021, n.p.). This was a ploy used by Rowling to get more people to watch the new films about the *Harry Potter* universe, despite her repeatedly using her platform to attack the transgender community. For some critics and reviewers, these are all examples of elements that she introduced in her narratives in order to fill a quota of "diverse characters" because all of them are "either undeveloped or ineffectual, packed alongside continuing stereotypes" (Kaur, 2021, n.p.).

Returning to the recent developments in YA literature engaging with queerness, the last decade has also witnessed the inclusion of the whole LGBTQ+ community. This entails a step forward if we consider that, in the twentieth century, LGBTQ+ representation was mostly restricted to gay or lesbian characters, with the absence of other queer identities being a persistent feature. The presence of bisexual characters, for example, was negligible; in most cases, they were relegated to a secondary role. Their depiction was flawed, as there was a tendency to understand bisexuality as a transitory sexuality or a synonym for promiscuity (Cart & Jenkins, 2018). Some examples of recent publications rectifying this bias are *Heartstopper* (2016- present), a graphic novel created by Alice Oseman and in which the focus is the relationship between two teenagers, one gay and the other bisexual, and how they both learn to accept themselves and navigate the problems associated with adolescence. Another instance of this is the fantasy saga *The Raven Cycle* (2012-2016) by Maggie Stiefvater, in which one of the main characters is bisexual and has relationships with people of different genders throughout the saga. Representation of transgender individuals has also been conspicuous by its absence. In the first instances in which a person belonging to the transgender community was included in a literary work, the way in which their gender identity was treated was entirely erroneous and harmful, in most cases, without using the appropriate terminology. The few existing publications are from the 2010s, and although the number has been growing, further attention to this question is much needed. As cases in point, we could mention: Andrew Joseph

White's *Hell Followed With Us* (2022), a dystopian novel whose main character is a transgender boy that navigates a society inhabited by many other queer characters – some of them even use neo-pronouns; or Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After* (2020), a Young Adult novel that revolves around the life of a black transgender boy during his last year of high school.

Chapter 2: The AIDS Crisis and its Representation in YA Literature

2.1. Contextualizing the AIDS Crisis

In a section dealing with the AIDS crisis, it is worth beginning by clarifying a common misconception: HIV and AIDS are not interchangeable terms. HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks the immunological system; AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is, however, "the late stage of HIV infection that occurs when the body's immune system is badly damaged because of the virus" (HIV.gov, 2023), which might result in people dying – strictly speaking not of AIDS, but of the complications arising from the body's incapability to fight the infection. What is commonly known as the "HIV/AIDS crisis" refers to the peak of this worldwide epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s – an utterly heartbreaking period. Among all those affected by the catastrophe, an entire generation of LGBTQ+ people was lost, and this tragedy forever scarred those who survived. They were consumed by dread and shame, seeing how their lives, and those of their friends, would soon be over. The rest of the world looked the other way while a whole community was mourning.

The beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis is often set in the late 1970s (New York City AIDS Memorial [NYCAM], 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section), although the first case was documented in 1969 when a teenager died in St. Louis, Missouri and the cause of their illness was uncertain. Since most of those affected were homosexuals, in 1981, the terms "gay-related immune deficiency" (GRID) or "gay cancer" (NYCAM, 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section) rose in popularity. This was extremely detrimental for the community as it contributed to

stigmatizing them even further and established “an inherent link between homosexuality and the new disease” (NYCAM, 2022). Even today, according to Red Cross criteria, simply being a man who has sex with men is considered a risk of contracting HIV. If someone in this situation wants to donate blood, they must remain celibate for more than three months. This notwithstanding, in 1982, a change was implemented, motivated by two key events. Firstly, new cases were reported involving people other than gay men, such as women, who lived up to three times less than men, and drug users (Pearl, 2013). Therefore, the acronym AIDS was coined, and this can be considered the first step toward the destigmatization of the HIV positive community. In 1985, when the number of deaths reached the horrifyingly high number of 12,529 in the US in just a year, President Reagan mentioned AIDS for the very first time. He hypocritically stated that it was his priority, despite his actions showing the opposite. During the first five years of the crisis, his administration kept deliberately silent about this issue (NYCAM, 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section). By 1990 “nearly twice as many Americans have died of AIDS as died in the Vietnam War” (NYCAM, 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section), a shocking comparison that put into perspective the desolation left behind by the illness.

Amidst the staggering figures that marked the period from the 1980s to the 1990s, the HIV/AIDS crises also brought about multiple instances of social action and solidarity, as times of hardship often bring out the most compassionate side of people. Indeed, this period is fairly known for the precious solidarity amongst the members of the LGBTQ+ community and the rise of many grassroots initiatives that were of utter importance. The “Gay Men’s Health Crisis” (GMHC), founded in 1982, is a prominent case in point. This was an organization based in New York and “dedicated to educating the gay community, caring for those who were ill, and bringing more attention to the illness; it became the model for other AIDS service organizations in the United States and in Europe” (Pearl, 2013, p. 2). A tragic anecdote is that

the first night the group created a counselling hotline, they received over 100 calls from terrified gay men asking for advice (NYCAM, 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section). GMHC and other organizations protected and cared for their own while the rest of the world turned its back on them. Another salient example is "ACT UP" (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), the best-known HIV/AIDS-related organization in these decades, which was formed by AIDS activist Larry Kramer. This came as a reaction to politicians' negligence, who decided to wash their hands despite the lethal force annihilating the country. The main goals of this organization were "to create a political direct-action group that will force governments, elected officials, public health agencies, pharmaceutical and insurance industries, and religious institutions to act to protect those at risk of HIV and those who are sick with AIDS" (NYCAM, 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section). What they did for the community was truly astounding. They fought against powerful companies and heads of state to vindicate the rights of those infected. That very same year the creation of one of the art pieces about HIV/AIDS that forms part of the collective memory, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, started. An activist created it to honor and remember a late friend who had lost his life due to complications derived from the virus. The quilt emerged as both an individual and collective form of mourning, and, tellingly enough, the dimensions of the panels forming the quilt coincide in "size and shape of a typical grave plot" (NYCAM, 2022, HIV/AIDS Timeline Section). Concerning the art scene, an enormous group of artists, who made groundbreaking pieces, succumbed to the illness. Some examples include Keith Haring, who made graffiti-inspired drawings and collaborated with many artists and performers, such as Andy Warhol. Another would be Félix González Torres, a visual artist well-known for his interactive pieces. The tragic thing is that, to this day, the names of most of them have been forgotten. They must be honored, so that their legacy continues to live on.

Currently, in the twenty-first century, HIV/AIDS is no longer into the spotlight in the same way as it was in the last decades of the 1900s. However, the illness has not been fully

eradicated. People still get sick, especially in places without sophisticated medical resources where HIV/AIDS remains a lethal threat. Even though a cure has yet to be developed, the medication has improved tremendously, lengthening the lives of those infected. The treatment "reduces the amount of HIV in your blood (viral load) to a very low level, which keeps your immune system working and prevents illness" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV, 2022). The implication of this is that the diagnosis is no longer to be considered a death sentence, eradicating the "equation that AIDS equaled death or loss" (Pearl, 2013, p. 2). Scientific progress is advancing, and the day when the virus can be cured draws ever closer. For example, at the beginning of 2023, the third HIV-positive patient was cured using stem cells.

2.2. Representations of the AIDS Crisis in YA Literature

As noted in the previous section – "Contextualizing the AIDS Crisis" –, the AIDS crisis bleakly marked the decade of the 1980s. Both the illness and the panic spread quickly, but despite that, AIDS was barely mentioned in YA literature. The topic was avoided partly because, as explained in Section 1.2., "gay identity was already deemed too controversial to portray in novels for young readers" (Duckels, 2020, n.p.). In addition, not including the AIDS crisis in fiction could be understood as a way to protect children from the world's harsh reality, so for this reason, "the primary source of death and isolation in queer lives in the 1980s and 1990s remained hidden in plain sight" (Duckels, 2020, n.p.). An important aspect to consider when addressing how the epidemic is represented in literature is that "[t]o discuss AIDS is to remember loss. Any interrogation of traumatic loss – its implications for adolescent identity formation, the ways in which loss both constitute and challenge our understanding of the world – enters into the language of mourning and melancholia" (Duckels, 2021, p. 428). According to this, a traumatizing event involving the death of a cherished person is needed for the teenager

to reach adulthood, as it acts as a "catalyst for growth" (James, 2009, as cited in Duckels, 2021, p. 427). In AIDS stories, this idea is often translated into the figure of the gay mentor, a man who is infected and whose decay would stand as a contraposition to the maturation of the adolescent "into a heteronormative sexual identity" (Duckels, 2020, n.p.). The first mention of the disease in the YA genre, the novel *Night Kites* (1986) by Marijane Meaker, followed this pattern. The book narrates how the main character's life crumbles when the family discovers that his older brother is a gay man and HIV-positive. The illness strengthens the relationship between the brothers, but in the end, they both know that the diagnosis is a death sentence. In the story, "the melancholic loss of an older, gay relative to AIDS provides a way for the protagonist to name its own heterosexuality" (Duckels, 2021, p. 429). Throughout the narrative, several parallels between the brothers are established. Still, it is "by recognising Pete's decline, inextricably tied to his identity as a gay man, that Erick affirms his own heterosexuality as a direct contrast" (Duckels, 2021, p. 429). Towards the end of the novel, a moment of tender comfort between the straight main character and his friend is mistaken by his father as a romantic gesture. The protagonist reacts to his father assumption by profusely denying the possibility of being queer, concluding that: "a logic of compulsory heterosexuality is thereby affirmed in the text through the intrusion of its subversion in the figure of the dying brother" (Duckels, 2021, p. 430). After the publication of this novel, "the silence that had surrounded the disease gradually became less pervasive, as AIDS began to be mentioned in passing, almost always in the context of fear or the need to practice safe sex" (Cart & Jenkins, 2008, p.39). However, the topic was a significant plot point in only three other novels from this decade, and they all promoted certain prejudices. First, in *Good-Bye Tomorrow* (1987) by Gloria Miklowitz, the main character, a straight teenage boy, gets infected through a blood transfusion. The novel thus deploys a common trope through which panic was spread at the time, even when scientific discourse had refuted that this procedure could be a common cause of infection

since “the introduction of the HIV test in the year 1985 quickly led to the screening of all blood donations” (Robertson, 2019, n.p.), making it a completely safe procedure. Secondly, Ron Koertge’s novel *The Arizona Kid* (1988) promoted the myth that only adults could get infected, as young people were considered too innocent to be touched by the terrible disease. The third main publication dealing with AIDS in the 1980s is *Weetzie Bat* (1989) by Francesca Lia Block. In this narrative, “the disease is present but never referred to by name, a device that, in a way, makes it an even darker, more menacing presence” (Cart & Jenkins, 2008, p.39).

During the 1990s, a popular trend in YA literature was to use a structure similar to the one of the cautionary tale, stating the possible health dangers of intimacy. Those texts portraying cisheterosexual young couples sought to warn teenagers about the risk of pregnancy. Meanwhile, when those portrayed engaged in same-sex sexual activity, the direct consequence was HIV/AIDS (Cart & Jenkins, 2008). Only thirteen more queer YA books including an HIV-positive character were written in this decade. Moreover, authors continued to promote the false belief that only adults could get infected, as in all but one of these, the one who suffers it is an adult. Therefore, in most of these books, the teen protagonist is a mere observer, allowing readers to observe a person suffering from the disease from afar. This narrative tool promotes the idea of “compassionate heterosexuality,” as coined by Cindy Patton, otherizing “AIDS to install compassionate heterosexuality in their protagonists” (Duckels, 2020, n.p.). *My Brother Has AIDS* (1994) by Deborah Davis was the only book of the 1990s to feature a Young Adult as the one infected, although this character has a secondary role.

The portrayal of the AIDS crisis in twenty-first-century YA literature has evolved considerably. This revisitation has been motivated “by an intergenerational impulse between past and present queer horizons: for young people, to understand; for older people, to be understood” (Duckels, 2021, p. 432). The reason for this change is mainly the acquisition of a queer political consciousness. This gained awareness facilitated the normalization of various

gay identities by abolishing the classic rigid definition of homosexual, which established that people who identified as such had to share a fixed set of traits. In addition, overcoming the dichotomy of the good gay/ bad gay has also played a crucial role. According to this binary logic, the good gay is someone "who wants to be 'an ordinary American' and not 'challenge or threaten the norm of heterosexuality'" (Seidman, 2002, as cited in Duckels, 2021, p. 431). This echoes the prejudiced idea that people can be whomever they want inside closed doors, but outside, they are expected to behave as model citizens. A "bad gay" wants to express himself in a particular way outside the hegemonic model (Duckels, 2021). Developments in the ideological area have also been transferred to the creation of queer YA literature. For this reason, the queer experience has been diversified in the past decades. One of the main improvements is that "gay representation is now central rather than peripheral to the production of culture for children and young people" (Duckels, 2021, p. 431).

As Cart and Jenkins state in *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature,* although the situation has improved, one should not forget that "AIDS-related literature remains a very modest subgenre of LGBTQ+ literature" (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p.67). This seems to be confirmed by the study on the presence of HIV/AIDS in YA literature conducted by authors Melissa Gross, Annette Y. Goldsmith, and Debi Carruth, covering a time frame from the beginning of the pandemic to 2008. After that, the researchers compiled the results in the book *HIV/AIDS in Young Adult Novels: An Annotated Bibliography* (2010). The total was ninety-three books dealing with the AIDS crisis and, given the fact that just seventeen were written between the 1980s and 1990s, the other seventy-six correspond to the twenty-first century. This data has not been updated, as no further research has been conducted along these lines. However, Derritt Mason, in his article "How Has Queer YA Addressed HIV/AIDS?" (2021), declared that, after carrying out an informal investigation through the platform Goodreads, he found that between 2015 and 2019, only eight YA titles published in those five

years dealt with HIV. This is particularly disheartening given that, as mentioned in the previous section – "Queerness in Young Adult Literature" – there has been tremendous growth since 2010 in the production of YA literature. Yet, the AIDS crisis remains barely addressed (Mason, 2021). More than half of the aforementioned titles are set in the twentieth century, at the peak of the crisis. The predicament of this is that they represent HIV/AIDS as a "historical issue that is largely detached from young people themselves" (Mason, 2021, n.p.), creating a sense of separatedness, when "despite what YA suggests, HIV/AIDS continues to be a very real part of the lived experience of many young people in contemporary America" (Mason, 2021, n.p.). Among those with a contemporary setting, only one, Christopher Koehler's novel *Poz*, has a teenager as the one who is HIV positive. From this, we can deduce that some of the biases of the previous century are still in force, like the reluctance to show infected young people following the tradition of innocence associated with youth or the predominance of cisheterosexual main characters. Two recent examples of queer YA books that deal with the AIDS crisis are *Two boys Kissing* (2013) and *Like a Love Story* (2019). Notably, these two novels also refuse to present Young Adult s as potential victims of the illness, reproducing the previous pattern. *Two boys Kissing* (2013) by David Levithan narrates the lives of several young gay characters living in the twentieth century. All the stories are interwoven and told through a Greek chorus made up of the voices of those who lost their lives during the HIV/AIDS crisis. In so doing, Levithan's novel establishes a connection between contemporary people from the LGBTQ+ community and those who preceded them and who started the fight for their rights. For its part, *Like a Love Story* (2019) by Abdi Nazemian tells the story of a gay teenager growing up during the peak of the AIDS crisis in Manhattan. The teen and his group of friends become involved in one of the grassroots initiatives of the time, ACT UP, because the uncle of one of them is HIV-positive. He matches the archetype of the wise homosexual uncle who acts as a mentor for the new generations.

The AIDS Crisis in David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019)

Chapter 3: David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013): Intergenerational Dialogue around AIDS.

Before the launch of his first novel, *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), David Levithan had a successful career as an editor, as he was, and still is, editorial director at *Scholastic*, and the founding editor of the *PUSH* imprint, whose purpose is to find "new voices and new authors in teen literature" (Levithan, 2023, n.p.). As an editor, Levithan has worked with many renowned authors and helped launch the careers of several bestselling authors who paved the way for the YA genre, including Suzanne Collins, Maggie Stiefvater, and Cassandra Clare. Levithan's own literary career started in 2003 with the publication of *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). It is a feel-good novel, depicting a utopian city where differences are embraced, and thus, the LGBTQ+ community is, for once, free from prejudice and violence. *Boy Meets Boy* was conceived to fulfill the author's desire to "write the book that I dreamed of getting as an editor – a book about gay teens that doesn't conform to the old norms about gay teens in literature" (Levithan, 2023, n.p.). The tropes that he wanted to leave behind are the ones previously mentioned in Section 1.2. – "Queerness in Young Adult Literature" –, namely those involving stories "about a gay uncle, or a teen who gets beaten up for being gay, or about outcasts who come out and find they're still outcasts, albeit outcasts with their outcastedness in common" (Levithan, 2023, n.p.). From this moment onwards, he has become a prolific writer with over thirty titles published thus far. He has openly declared his inclination towards Young Adult literature, despite having explored multiple genres and formats over the course of his career. His predilection for this genre is due to the realm of possibilities it has offered him and, most importantly, because "the path of queer YA is the path of inclusion" (Levithan as cited in

Franklin, 2018, n.p.). He further consolidated himself as a writer of queer narratives with yet another novel portraying LGBTQ teens: *Two Boys Kissing* (2013). The novel came out on the 10th anniversary of the author's first work, but mainly, as the author pointed out, because: "the world of LGBT teens has changed so much in the past decade, [he] wanted to take a look at where we are now" (Levithan as cited in Graver, 2013, n.p.). Levithan wanted to explore and establish synergies between the queer generation before his, deeply scarred by AIDS, and the current one, who lives in an entirely technological world with access to all kinds of content and information (Graver, 2013).

Before plunging into the analysis of *Two Boys Kissing*, it is worth considering both the novel's cover and its very title. The idea behind the cover, which was controversial upon publication, was that the author found it necessary to finally have a kiss between two men in the YA section to break the taboo surrounding same-sex relationships (Graver, 2013). Equally significant is the title, which comes from Walt Whitman's poem "We Two Boys Together Clinging" (1867), a beautiful literary piece about the love between two young men forged amidst the hardships of war. The poem is also recited in the story by the main characters when the record-breaking kiss occurs. Interestingly, it was David Hockney's eponymous artwork (1961) that drew Levithan's attention to Whitman's poem. The imagery of the artwork derives from the poem itself; and, in fact, specific lines from the poem appear on the canvas. Levithan cites many other literary works as inspirational sources for the novel, most notably accounts of the AIDS epidemic written during its peak back in the 1980s-1990s. As Levithan has acknowledged in different media, while writing the novel, he read different genres, journalistic reports, memoirs, and fiction to perfect the voice he wanted to establish for the characters. Among them are the classic *And the Band Still Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987) by Randy Shilts, the memoir *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988) by Paul Monette, and the widely known play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National*

Themes (1993) by Tony Kushner, which is mentioned on multiple occasions. In addition, the novel also echoes a symbolic event in LGBTQ+ history: two students, Matt Daley and Bobby Canciello, broke the Guinness World Record for the longest continuous kiss in 2010. Daley confided to Levithan that he found the motivation to do this after reading Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). As Levithan was trying to pay homage to this previous generation of gay pioneers, the life of his uncle, who is gay and was once close to getting infected, was a guiding force in the work.

Two Boys Kissing (2013) narrates the lives of eight gay teenagers living in twenty-first-century North America: Harry and Craig attempt to set the Guinness World Record for the longest kiss as a form of activism, thus responding to the fact that their friend Tariq, another main character, was a victim of gay-bashing; Avery and Ryan are a newly-formed couple navigating the start of a new relationship while dealing with their insecurities; Peter and Neil are long-term boyfriends coping with their solidified relationship; and, finally, Cooper is a gay teen utterly terrified of being out of the closet and who searches for a connection on the Internet to make him feel alive. As the novel progresses, the stories of these characters intertwine, offering a diverse and complex portrayal of the lives of LGBTQ+ youth as they navigate milestone events: first love, relationships, pain, coming out, and acceptance in a world that may not always understand or support them. In addition to this set of twenty-first-century characters, following the ancient Greek tradition, the novel includes a chorus composed by nameless men who died of AIDS back in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Certain formal features of the novel contribute to its effectiveness and impact. Firstly, the sections narrated by the chorus are, for the most part, written in a style that borrows from the stream-of-consciousness technique so popular in Modernist writing, and this allows for the joint exploration of past and present, while giving a dream-like quality to these unique narrators. It is interesting to mention that the novel has an experimental structure, given that

the book is not divided into conventional chapters but comprises short sections. This strategy helps to establish the fragmented identities of the different characters in the story, at the same time as it serves to conform a mosaic of shared experiences. The novel references historical events and cultural elements of crucial significance for the LGBTQ+ community, adding context and depth to the characters. Some examples could be the inclusion of intertextual references to queer books such as *Giovanni's Room* (1956) by James Baldwin or *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky, as well as allusions to such historical events as the Stonewall Riots, or to pop stars of great importance to the community such as Lady Gaga. Finally, the most interesting feature, and the one that makes this book an excellent rumination on AIDS, is the narrative style. David Levithan's novel *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) integrates a Greek chorus in the narration, giving a voice to those who were systematically silenced, that is, a group of unnamed gay men who succumbed to HIV- related complications:

> We are your shadow uncles, your angel godfathers, your mother's or your grandmother's best friend from college, the author of that book you found in the gay section of the library [...] We are the ghosts of the remaining older generation. (Levithan, 2013, p. 3)

This story-telling technique is appealing because it allows the reader "to see and hear the action from an omniscient entity that comments, teaches, cheers, and grieves" (Harris, 2014, n.p.). These men carry the narration and, as the story progresses, they reflect on their cumulative experiences and lives to give context and counsel. The Greek Chorus reminds the reader that the queer community had to endure a long history of prejudice and oppression, bringing forth their struggles, while commenting on the main character's experiences. However, the collective voice is "[d]enied true agency, Levithan's spirits can only watch the story unfurl, enlarging its meanings where they can and tease out cross-generational epiphanies" (Bayard, 2013, n.p.). For example, at the time of Cooper's accidental outing, they know what will happen, as many

of them have already experienced it. Notwithstanding, there is nothing they can do to change the course of events:

> We shiver in recognition at what's about to happen. [...] We want to wake Cooper up. We want to make the door louder as it opens. We want his father's footsteps to sound like thunder, but instead they sound like lightning. (Levithan, 2013, p. 24)

Overall, the all-seeing figures that make up the chorus provide a nuanced examination of the struggle of LGBTQ+ people back in the peak of the crisis during the 1980s and how they were treated during this devastating period, while also giving context to the story. They also "tie together past and future, living and dead, and give thematic weight to the novel's form, with its separate stories stitched into a larger whole, like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, begun in 1987 and still being sewn" (Quattlebaum, 2013, n.p.). Furthermore, the chorus conveys a sense of hope and resilience, demonstrating that, despite the suffering, there is a strong sense of compassion and solidarity.

3.1 Revisiting the AIDS Crisis in *Two Boys Kissing*

In *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), AIDS organizes the voices of the chorus that frame the twenty-first-century narratives of LGBT youths. While the story may not be primarily about AIDS, its presence is vital to ensure the full understanding of the novel (Pearl, 2013). Monica Pearl, in her seminal work *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (2013), declared that most AIDS stories rely on realism as a literary genre, because "they [realistic novels] embody the kind of narrative that is most comfortable, accessible, and familiar" (Pearl, 2013, p. 27). Levithan partakes in this strategy, albeit only partially, because the narrative is led by a group of men who died due to HIV-related complications during the peak of the AIDS crisis, thus creating a hybrid of the realistic genre by introducing a supernatural element.

Two Boys Kissing presents a bridge between the experiences of past and present generations of queer people. This is made obvious at the beginning of the story when Neil, one of the main characters, "is struck by a feeling of deep, unnamed gratitude. He realizes that part of his good fortune is his place in history" (Levithan, 2013, p. 2). This moment is salient because the character acknowledges the security provided by the period in which he was born: living in the twenty-first century gives Neil access to information and methods of protection so that he can enjoy his life as a young gay man without being constantly overwhelmed by the fear of falling ill. What is more, how this moment of revelation is described is of crucial importance: "[H]e thinks fleetingly of us, the ones who came before. We are not names or faces to him; we are an abstraction, a force" (Levithan, 2013, p. 2). This thought is only momentary, and the voices representing the deceased during the peak of the crisis are just an abstraction for him. The fact that the narrators have access to the teenagers' innermost reflections, such as Neil's, makes the text collapse the present/past separation.

Despite the chorus being the most salient feature of the story, AIDS is barely mentioned explicitly throughout the story: the term only appears twice in the entirety of the novel. Throughout the novel, specific niche references are made to establish the relationship of the chorus with AIDS: "We are characters in a Tony Kushner play or names on a quilt that rarely gets taken out anymore" (Levithan, 2013, p. 3). This is not quite as effective, as it demands prior cultural knowledge, obviating that not many people, especially out of the queer community, know the plot of Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993)[4] or the symbolic charge of a quilt[5] in this context. It is true that, by naming

[4] Kushner's play is an allegorical examination of AIDS and homosexuality in America during the decade of the 1980s. The main character discovers that he has contracted HIV and his long-term boyfriend, unable to cope with the diagnosis, abandons him.

[5] The AIDS Memorial Quilt is an important emblem of remembrance, hope and activism. Each panel commemorates the life of a particular person who died of AIDS.

AIDS/HIV explicitly, a conversation around the issue is enabled. However, by only making allusions, Levithan conceals the reality and the identity of those affected.

Another critique that can be levelled at the novel is that the text promotes the misconception that only adults get infected, and the fact that AIDS is mostly presented as a fundamentally historical issue that has no real impact on our current society. The first explicit mention of the illness is on page 8 when the chorus states: "Some of us swear we died of heartbreak, not AIDS" (Levithan, 2013, p. 8). This and similar somber statements are pronounced by the chorus to present the constant suffering and discrimination they faced back in the 1980s, and while it is utterly important to bring forth their testimony, this could be understood as an attempt to locate the issue in the past. However, the presence of the history teacher breaks this pattern. Tom Bellamy, the teacher, is the only person in the environment of the young protagonists who is HIV-positive, which brings the illness to the present, even though it is still embodied in a middle-aged person and most experiences he recalls took place in the past. It is a favorable portrayal, as the diagnosis did not mean a death sentence in this case. This was possible due to the fact that Mr. Bellamy got ill later, when medication was already available: "[W]hen his blood turned against him, it was a little later on and the cocktail was starting to work. So he lived" (Levithan, 2013, p. 109). Tom Bellamy belonged to the generation who received the full-blown force of the crisis, so his presence provides an honest and raw window into the reality of the time. It articulates the social grievances of a marginalized collective who had to suffer constant mistreatment and dehumanization. Tom was there for all of them, offering the comfort that they profusely lacked and holding their hands until their last moment. The chorus portrays him as a beacon of hope, who tirelessly supported his comrades, despite the immense emotional pain this caused to him:

> Tom went through it all with us. Tom made it through. He was there in the hospital with so many of us, the archangel of St. Vincent's, our healthier

> version, prodding the doctors and calling over the nurses and holding our hands and holding the hands of our partners, our parents, our little sisters—anyone who had a hand to be held. He had to watch so many of us die, had to say goodbye so many times. (Levithan, 2013, p. 109)

This is a beautiful tribute to all those compassionate souls who selflessly cared for their friends in the face of death and despair. The passage also touches on the profound impact that the epidemic had on Tom and the survivors of the community: "what losing most of your friends does: It makes you unafraid [...] because you have already survived much, much worse. In fact, you are still surviving" (Levithan, 2013, p. 109). It suggests that the experience has scarred the survivor as they will carry the trauma of seeing their friends succumb to the illness; but it also has granted them a unique perspective on life, and they are unafraid to speak out and be themselves, regardless of what others may think. It is also significant that the novel shows the possibility of a happy future for the queer elders: Tom Bellamy is alive, has a fulfilling job and is happily married. The final sentence, where Tom looks up at the sky, is a beautiful reminder that the memories of those who were lost are still with them, even as they move forward with their lives.

The second time the word AIDS is mentioned explicitly, it finally occurs in a contemporary situation, defying the aforementioned tendency to locate it in the past. A homophobic man calls on a radio to comment on the record-winning kiss: "I hope they're giving each other AIDS," [...]"I hope that when they're dying of AIDS, they show that on the Internet, too, so children will know what happens if you kiss like that" (Levithan, 2013, p. 129). This offensive comment provides an opportunity for Neil to confront his parents and express his frustration at them for failing to recognize that he is gay. The teenager is incensed when his family does not seem to be faced by what the stranger said – "When something like that is

being said, how can you just sit there?" (Levithan, 2013, p. 130) – and adds that, if it were something related to them directly, they would be horrified:

> If they were saying they hope that all Koreans die of AIDS, your blood would boil higher with every single word. But when it's gays they're talking about, you let it slide. You don't bother to hear it. It's acceptable to you. Even if you don't agree with it—and I am not saying you want me to get AIDS from kissing Peter—you accept it when someone else says it. You let it happen. (Levithan, 2013, p. 132)

This excerpt brings to the fore the silences and prejudices still surrounding the queer experience nowadays as it foregrounds the reluctance of Neil's parents to acknowledge their son's sexuality, which puts a strain on their relationship and makes Neil feel unsupported. At the same time, the passage also captures the general attitude towards HIV-positives during the peak of the AIDS crisis, and how most of the population turned their backs on those who were infected, acting as if nothing important was happening because it did not affect them directly. The chorus further develops this idea in the following paragraph:

> We tried to tell them what was happening. We tried to tell them the disease was spreading. We needed doctors. We needed scientists. Most of all, we needed money, and to get money, we needed attention. We put our lives in other people's hands, and for the most part, they looked at us blankly and said, What lives? What hands? (Levithan, 2013, p. 132)

This poignant fragment conveys a sense of urgency and desperation in the face of the spreading disease. The ultimate blow comes with the final questions: "What lives? What hands?" (Levithan, 2013, p. 132) This inquiry is especially devastating since it emphasizes the complete ignorance with which their pleas were received. These two excerpts demonstrate that the stigma

about the HIV-positive and the LBGTQ+ communities is still ever-present and that many connections can be traced between past and present queer generations.

3.2 Past and Present in *Two Boys Kissing*

As mentioned earlier, *Two Boys Kissing* is an intergenerational narrative, where the stories of twenty-first-century queer youngsters are addressed by a previous generation. In this novel, Levithan establishes links of ""commonality" visible in the lives of gay men throughout time" (Heggestad, 2020, p. 3). With utterances such as "We taught you how to dance" (Levithan, 2013, p. 3), the chorus brings forth the idea of cultural inheritance[6] that connects the two groups despite belonging to different eras. According to David M. Halperin, gay culture functions in a particular way, given that gay individuals do not usually receive the knowledge and history about their culture from their birth families, so they "must discover their roots through contact with the larger society and the larger world" (Halperin as cited in Heggestad, 2020, p. 2). The chorus takes on the role of mentors preaching their experiences to help the teenagers navigate life as a queer person. Although "the younger protagonists of the work may be largely unaware of the impact that this older generation of gay men has had on their lives" (Heggestad, 2020, p. 4), they do acknowledge and admire the existence of their teacher, Tom Bellamy, who, not coincidentally, also knew first-hand those who are now part of this dream-like chorus. Another cultural vehicle are the queer books mentioned in the story: *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), which gave the characters the necessary comfort when they were still discovering their sexuality.

The members of the Greek chorus claim an intrinsic connection with the younger protagonists right from the start of the narrative: "We were once like you, only our world wasn't

[6] The concept was introduced by Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Marcus W. Feldman in 1973. They defined it as: "the transmission from generation to generation of information. It includes, or at least influences, behavior, social customs and language" (Cavalli & Feldman as cited in Heggestad, 2020, p. 2).

like yours" (Levithan, 2013, p. 2). The fact that both groups share a crucial piece of their identities, their sexuality, while their contexts are widely different, leads to a certain sense of resentment. The reason for this is because of the increased social acceptance the younger generations enjoy: younger members of the community have the possibility of doing everything the older could only have dreamed of. However, the chorus acknowledges that the world is far from ideal and that for these teenagers to express themselves so openly takes a lot of courage, as they are aware that: "Just because it's better now doesn't mean that it's always good" (Levithan, 2013, p. 6). This sentiment is summarized in the powerful juxtaposition: "We resent you. You astonish us" (Levithan, 2013, p. 2). Nevertheless, at least at a narrative level, the members of the chorus get to experience this newly-gained freedom through the characters they observe and on which they provide commentary. In this way, an intergenerational dialogue is established, which is also comforting for the group of deceased men.

Each generation has been shaped by their circumstances, in a way in which similarities and differences can be discerned. The older narrators' lives have indeed been marked by the desolation of the epidemic, but their existence is more nuanced and cannot be reduced to their association with AIDS: they lived, loved, and fought for their rights, laying the foundations of the current LGBTQ+ rights movement. "We are so much more complicated than that" (Levithan, 2013, p. 6), they argue. The reality of the teenage protagonists is different, as they also have their idiosyncrasies tied to the society and moment in time they live in, and yet, the men of the chorus are still able to recognize their suffering. While significant progress has been made in recent years to advance LGBTQ+ rights, the community still faces systemic discrimination that contributes to their marginalization. For example, transgender individuals often deal with significant barriers to obtain healthcare and homosexuality is still considered a crime in several countries. Hence, the protagonists of the novel face challenges due to the stigma associated with their sexuality and which also intersect with other aspects, such as race

and gender. Tariq Johnson is a black gay teenager who depicts the trauma of being out in a world where homophobia and racism are still rampant. When he was the target of a vicious hate crime, his immediate thought was that he was being attacked because of his race, but when he heard the homophobic slurs, he realized that the true reason behind the assault was his sexual identity. After the event, Tariq is "haunted" (Levithan, 2013, p. 35), and he cannot avoid asking himself what he did wrong for people to be able to guess his sexual orientation. Sadly, situations like this, where gay people are targeted just for the sake of existing, were also common in the last century, as the members of the chorus declare: "The memories returned to ours. That dehumanizing loss of safety. It is something all of us feared and many of us knew firsthand" (Levithan, 2013, p. 35).

Similarly, the novel also presents us with the character of Avery, a transgender boy who describes his transition as rather ideal: his parents were considerably open-minded and made an effort to normalize the process for him as much as possible, providing him with the medical support he needed. However, Avery still experiences body dysmorphia, as he is hyper-aware of his physique and concerned about not passing as a cisgender man while still struggling to reconcile himself with the idea of masculinity promoted by society. Finally, Cooper's character is perhaps the most interesting and complex of the eight. With this character, Levithan "provided the most real portrayal of what a lack of acceptance and support can do to a queer person" (Please Read It To Me, 2022, n.p.). Cooper tries to conceal his identity from everyone in his environment because he suffers from internalized homophobia and is, thus, consumed by shame, sadness, and fear: "He feels he's been soured by his own desires, squandered by his own impulses. He despises himself" (Levithan, 2013, p. 118). He spends his nights meaninglessly flirting with other gay people through websites, looking for a connection that may make him feel something real. After being outed and attacked by his father, he runs away from home, facing a reality that unfortunately remains prevalent for gay youth: homelessness.

Cooper does not know what to do, given that he does not have a support system and he is not yet prepared to look for a community in queer spaces, such as organizations or shelters. Therefore, the only option he sees as viable is putting an end to his life. The shadow uncles are completely devastated, seeing a young man having such a hard time and again, they see their misery echoed: “Why must we die over and over again?” (Levithan, 2013, p. 189). The boy is thankfully saved, and with that comes a promise of a hopeful future.

To conclude the analysis, *Two Boys Kissing* is a queer YA novel that pays tribute to the queer generation who succumbed to AIDS by giving them a voice. The novel thus creates a dialogue between past and present, collapsing both temporalities and facilitating, at least on a textual level, an intergenerational connection. The chorus acts as a presence that, despite its absence in the “physical” world, allows the writer to recover the past of the LGBTQ+ community, vindicating its achievements. The teacher, another vital participant, acts as an intermediary between the two generations, conveying the message of his deceased friends and preventing their struggle to fall into oblivion, while also inspiring the young people of the twenty-first century. Mr. Bellamy moves on both the physical and the spiritual planes, thus connecting the story’s real and more mystical elements. The young protagonists represent a new generation that has benefited from the achievements of the previous, although they continue to struggle against prejudices that persist in our most immediate present. The presence of the youngsters arouses the “envy” of the chorus but also allows these men to vicariously enjoy the freedom and opportunities that the new century has to offer to queer people.

Chapter 4: Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019): The AIDS Crisis through Teenage Eyes

Abdi Nazemian is an Iranian American author, screenwriter, and producer. He was born in Iran and spent his teenage years in New York City. His upbringing in an Iranian household instilled in him a strong connection to his Middle Eastern heritage, which is overtly present in his literary works, including *Like a Love Story* (2019), the novel under scrutiny in this chapter. Moreover, Nazemian's cultural background had a profound impact on his process of discovery early in his career, given that he grew up in a conservative family and environment where his sexuality was not widely accepted. In addition, information about the LGBTQ+ community in Iran was limited and biased, which left him without a point of reference. Moving to New York, a culturally diverse city, represented a significant shift in the author's life, profoundly influencing his personal growth and allowing him to express himself more freely, even though, as he has confessed on different media, growing up as an immigrant in the United States also entailed huge challenges. The contrast between his Iranian upbringing and the elements of American culture that the author had embraced created a duality in him that provoked tensions in his traditional family (Baucas, 2019).

Prior to becoming an author, Nazemian worked in the entertainment industry and has several credits as a screenwriter and producer. His blooming literary career started with his debut novel, *The Walk-In Closet* (2013), a work of adult fiction about the feigned relationship between a woman and his gay friend. Since then, all his publications have fallen into the category of Young Adult literature. He has written four YA novels in less than a decade: *The Authentics* (2017), *Like a Love Story* (2019), *The Chandler Legacies* (2022), and *Only This Beautiful Moment* (2023). All these stories have a crucial biographical component, especially *Like a Love Story* (2019), which depicts the author's anxieties during his teenage years, and *The Chandler Legacies* (2022), loosely based on his experience in a boarding school

(Nazemian, 2022). Nazemian's cultural identity and sexual orientation are pervasive themes in most of his oeuvre and, in effect, he proudly confesses his belonging to what is known as the *#OwnVoices* movement[7]. The author describes writing as a restorative process, considering that he grew up without role models in the artistic sphere, which made him feel as if "[he] didn't really exist, or at the very least like the world didn't want [him] to exist" (Nazemian as cited in Fregni, 2022, n.p.). As a reaction, he decided to "wr[i]te [him]self into existence" (Nazemian as cited in Fregni, 2022, n.p.), creating diverse stories so that no child would feel the way he did.

Like a Love Story (2019) is set in 1989 and narrates the story of Reza, an Iranian teenager who relocates to New York in his last year of high school, thereby showing autobiographical underpinnings from its inception. He befriends a girl called Judy while also starting to develop an interest in the only gay teen in the school: Judy's best friend, Art. The characters' dramatic love triangle and familiar situations interweave with a desolating background marked, inter alia, by the AIDS crisis. The teenagers, through Judy's dying Uncle Stephen, become acquainted with gay culture, and are involved in the preparation of ACT UP protests, given that the first actions of the organization took place in the late 1980s. Throughout the novel, the protagonist embarks himself on a journey of self-discovery, which culminates with Stephen's death, prompting Reza's complete acceptance of his sexual orientation.

The novel is a representation of the author's childhood, as he himself described it: "[I]t's like a big piece of me is on the page" (Nazemian as cited in Baucas, 2019, n.p.). Nazemian aimed to depict the experience of coming of age as a gay immigrant in the United States during a period when the only information he got about his sexuality was associated with death and disease. For him, growing up amidst the AIDS epidemic was "the single biggest

[7] *#OwnVoices* refers to "an author from a marginalized or under-represented group writing about their own experiences and from their own perspective" (The Westport Library, 2019, n.p.)

influence on [his] life in a variety of ways, both good and painful" (Nazemian as cited in Lewis, 2020, n.p.). The author sought to convey the fear and shame he experienced back then, as well as the love and unity that he also felt during the period. Because, according to Nazemian, this is a story about "love for your friends, for your culture, for your community, and so in a lot of ways, the journey of the book is that that realization, that love is ultimately stronger than fear" (Nazemian as cited in Baucas, 2019, n.p.). The narrative brims with hope as it pays homage to the many individuals who aided the author in overcoming the stigma and accepting himself, including artists, activists, and mentors, the ones who made it and those who did not.

Nazemian drew inspiration from his experience during the height of the AIDS crisis, that is, the 1980s. This is reflected in the way he implemented the jargon used by teenagers at the time or the music popular among the community's youngest members. Even so, he never partook in any activism movement, so he required thorough research, given the importance of the topic and his wish to provide a bona fide account of the events. Apart from reading several chronicles of the time and watching documentaries, Nazemian counted on two ACT UP activists to supervise the accuracy of his writing because the author was adamant about getting it right to provide the most accurate portrayal of the organization as possible. Nazemian cited several writers as touchstones of queer art such as Oscar Wilde or James Baldwin, much like Levithan, and filmmakers such as Pedro Almodóvar. Old Hollywood is another of the author's main fascinations, and it plays an integral part in the novel, given that during the movie nights, a crucial moment of comfort for the characters of the narrative, they always watch films from that era (Tracy, 2019).

As for the title – *Like a Love Story* – it emerged from one of Nazemian's chief sources of inspiration: Madonna. The story's characters discuss why she names her works "Like a", citing her albums *Like a Virgin* (1984) and *Like a Prayer* (1989) as examples. Art argues, for example, that Madonna is exploring the illusion of something, in this case, of sex and religion.

However, between these two albums, the singer released another called *True Blue* because "sex and religion aren't clear-cut to her, but love is" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 67); if not, she would have probably named it *Like a Love Story*. Regarding other formal features, the novel has a triple perspective, as Reza, Art, and Judy take turns narrating the story. The three of them represent the different archetypes of people who were at the frontlines of the fight: those who were out and proud and ready to fight like Art, those who were not yet prepared to embrace their "authentic" selves like Reza, and finally, those who offered their allyship because of their intrinsic connection with diversity, as they found themselves outside the hegemonic canon, like Judy. As adumbrated at the beginning, the timeline of *Like a Love Story* covers roughly the school year of 1989-1990. The choice of that particular year is strategic. It was the year of the ACT UP protests that attracted the author's attention, as well as a pivotal moment in his adolescence. The novel is divided into three sections, which are, in turn, subdivided into conventional chapters based around an ACT UP action.

4.1. Revisitation of the AIDS Crisis in *Like a Love Story*

Considering what has been explained in Chapter 2.2., one could say that *Like a Love Story* (2019) belongs to the narrative trend of revisiting the AIDS crisis from new lenses, a tendency described as: "[T]he impulse to look back at the start of the crisis from the perspective of a precarious but ameliorated present in which the dust has settled on an original scene of trauma" (Duckels, 2022, p. 5). In effect, as noted above, the novel takes place amidst the highest point of the epidemic, and in one of the most punished states: 1989, New York city.

Nazemian does a fantastic job representing the period in which the novel is set and the AIDS crisis. The author humanizes the crisis by giving insight and not depicting a mythologized version of the pandemic. Despite none of the main characters being HIV-positive, their relationship with Stephen makes them connect with ACT UP and have a window

into the reality of those who suffer. This access makes an honest portrayal of the illness possible. Nazemian does not shy away from giving explicit descriptions of the harsh situation of HIV-positive people during a period when "gay identity and disease seemed inextricably entwined" (Woodrow-Butcher, 2019, n.p.). The author describes the impact on the physique of those infected, how they look like ghosts of who they were before. Towards the end of the novel, this is illustrated during Stephen's last days, when his niece reflects on the aestheticized view of pain usually shown in the media, and which contrasts with what he is experiencing. Judy adds that his uncle has been reduced to a shell of what he once was, now needing his younger sister to tend to him as if he were a child. Another crucial detail that contributes to the depiction of the situation at the time is added by Stephen, when he mentions that the infected did not receive a modicum of dignity, since their corpses were carried out from the hospital in garbage bags – and this also happened to his partner. The novel is here dramatizing a practice that is well documented as shown by the following lines from the documentary *How to Survive a Plague* (2012)[8], "when people died in the hospital, they used to put them in black trash bags" (France, 2012, 00:20:14). In addition, the documentary also mentions that certain funeral homes did not accept to bury the bodies of those who were infected. These facts exemplify the double indignity to which HIV-positive people were condemned, first in life and then in death.

It is worth mentioning that the novel echoes specific patterns of the representation of the AIDS Crisis in YA literature. First, there is the prominent role of the gay uncle as a mentor. The connection with Stephen helps Art understand the complexity of sexuality, guiding him through the process of self-acceptance. Given that Art's family is homophobic, he looks up to Stephen as: "[T]he dad [he] wish[es] [he] had, the dad [he] was supposed to have, the man [he] consider [his] spiritual father" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 22). Moreover, Stephen fulfills the role of

[8] How to Survive a Plague (2012) is "the story of two coalitions—ACT UP and TAG (Treatment Action Group)—whose activism and innovation turned AIDS from a death sentence into a manageable condition" (How to Survive a Plague, 2023, n.p.).

the mentor by giving Art flashcards explaining "[THEIR] history" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 68) and by showing him the importance of organized political action. Towards the end of the novel, Art's evolution is completed when Judy tells him that he has "literally turned into Stephen" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 357). Another significant aspect is that only adult secondary characters are infected here, as is often the case in much YA fiction (see Chapter 2.2.). In the epilogue, the reader learns that Art is HIV-positive; however, this is only mentioned in passing, and it happens once he gets older, reinforcing the idea that teenagers are too innocent to be affected and infected. Notwithstanding, it must be highlighted that this novel diverges from the general trend and depicts the crisis as "a concern for queer adolescents[...] acknowledg[ing] their personal connections to the time period and their role as its witnesses" (Duckels, 2022, p. 5)

As noted in Chapter 2.1., the pandemic brought a sense of terror to many people, rendering them incapable of continuing their lives without being terrified. In this novel, Reza is consumed by paranoia due to the pervasive stigma and the general lack of exposure to accurate information about HIV. From a young age, Reza knew he was interested in boys, but when he first arrived in Toronto, he saw a magazine discussing the horrors of the AIDS epidemic:

> [S]ickness, disease, lesions, young men dying. I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me, this was something I did not know until that moment. Until Time magazine informed me that I would die soon. (Nazemian, 2019, p. 8)

From that moment onwards, he started to fear for his future, even going so far as to claim that he will not get to reach old age. When he sees Art's picture, he stops himself from feeling attraction by thinking about men dying of AIDS, which tellingly points at his internalized fear. For a long time, he suppresses his sexual identity because, according to him, "to live, [he] can't ever be what [he] know[s] that [he] [is]" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 14). Reza's fear is rooted in his

self-hatred but also in his lack of knowledge. In fact, on several occasions throughout the novel, he acknowledges to be unfamiliar with how HIV is transmitted. This is because he is growing up during a period when AIDS was still generally known as GRID (Gay-related immune deficiency), a disease "born of [their] deficiencies" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 39), and for that reason, what scarce information there was on the subject is manipulated. In the first pages of the book, when Reza accidentally hurts himself, he stops his mother from touching his blood, "[j]ust in case [his] blood is toxic. Just in case you can get it from having too many thoughts of boys in locker rooms" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 5). Similarly, he is also terrified to share space with a person with AIDS, afraid that he will catch the virus just by breathing the same air. Just before meeting Uncle Stephen, Art explains to him how the illness evolves, and the fluids that intervene in the transmission of the disease. However, Reza's paranoia runs so deep that he sees simple touches, such as kissing or holding hands, as a threat. Finally, Reza reaches a point where he can see beyond his panic, and this is demonstrated in the beautiful moment when he grabs the hand of one of Stephen's friends, even though that man is HIV-positive:

> I freeze when I notice another lesion on his palm. I feel its texture on me. I remind myself this isn't how you get infected, and I grip his hand so tight that the lesion disappears in our united palms. There's no purple anymore. Just my brown hand gripped into his black one. (Nazemian, 2019, p. 228)

Reza's anxiety is also reflected in his fear of sex. As a teenager having his first relationship, he cannot stop thinking about the possibility of getting infected. His fear is, indeed, more prominent than his desire, given that: "The moment [he] come[s] close to doing more, [he] feel[s] the fear and instantly think about disease, death, blindness, and lesions. It paralyzes [him]" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 277). Reza is unable to perceive sex as anything other than a death sentence, even when his friends tell him about condoms and other methods

necessary to be safe. Jimmy, a friend of Stephen, tries to explain to Reza what profound meaning the union of two bodies represents:

> That intimacy is beautiful. That feeling like one with another human being is why we were put on this planet. It connects us to everything good that exists inside us and outside us. And you can't be robbed of that. Stay safe, but don't lock yourself in a prison. Live. (Nazemian, 2019, p. 286)

This is a poignant statement, because several people, as Jimmy mentions, were not given the possibility of enjoying themselves without it being a reminder of impending doom. Reza cannot transcend his terror and have intercourse with his partner until Stephen's death. It is during that moment of deep sorrow that he can seek a moment of connection and pure love with Art.

Despite the bleak reality it represents, the narrative is not only about trauma, anger, or fear. *Like a Love Story* contains a myriad of examples of love and community. The novel is riddled with examples of love that go beyond the romantic. This encompasses friendships, found families, and unconditional affection within the LGBTQ+ community. One example could be the reverence with which HIV-positive people treat each other. They are not just individuals who share the tragedy of a deathly burden; they are family. Stephen and Jimmy, after the devastating loss of their partners, become platonic companions. They are each other's greatest support, with a heartfelt bond based on complete understanding. The pair often devote their time to remembering those who died, given that they know the importance of keeping their legacy alive. The potential of solidarity and compassion is shown through the actions coordinated by ACT UP, a group whose sole purpose was to help those who were being blatantly ignored in their suffering. Moreover, the story also mentions how sometimes they all shared action with other groups, for example, the Women's Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM!). This provides another example of how important the coming together of different groups was at the time, and it also demonstrates the power of compassion.

4.2. The Intersection of Pop Culture and Queer Identity in Times of Crisis in *Like a Love Story*

The phenomenon of cultural transmission plays a crucial role in *Like a Love Story*. Old Hollywood and pop divas establish a bridge between the younger and the older generation of queer individuals. This connection brings comfort to both groups and serves to pass on knowledge about the community indirectly.

The unique connection many gay men seem to have with pop divas originates from seeing their struggles reflected in the artists. First and foremost, both women and gay men suffer repression, the former from the patriarchal society, particularly given that they are in a male-dominated field, and the latter due to them disrupting the heteronormative matrix. Moreover, both divas and some gays tend to be chastised for their hyper-femininity. In the case of women, people associate said quality with a lack of intelligence, represented by the concept of the "bimbo"; in the case of men, it is considered unnatural. Hence, underlying this identification between the gay man and the diva is, at times, the following proposition: "If the diva is accepted and adored because of her over the top, the "ordinary," hyper-feminized behavior, maybe the gay man can be as well" (Paxton, 2011, p. 13).

In *Like a Love Story*, rather than adding to the generalization of homosexuals being drawn to pop music due to their inherent flamboyant identity, Nazemian "transforms the stereotype into a source of power, foregrounding it as a useful politic for gay cultural and sexual identification" (Duckels, 2022, p. 13). Reza is an Iranian immigrant; thus, his access to media and pop culture has always been limited, so when Art introduces him to Madonna, a whole world of possibilities opens before him. Reza becomes obsessed with the artist, filling his room with posters and buying all her records. He explains his deep fascination for her by stating: "[T]here's something deeper like she is saying all the things that I want to be saying" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 91). Madonna's music and her performances provide Reza with "a

symbolic release valve for the repression of the closet" (Duckels, 2022, p. 13), while helping him become the person he has always wanted to be. Thanks to the artist, Reza, like Abdi Nazemian, "saw queerness not as a death sentence, but as a community and an identity to be celebrated" (Nazemian, 2019, n.p.).

When the main characters converse about the appeal of pop divas to the gay community, Art thinks that this is because: "We [queer people] can see what's hiding behind the artifice" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 66). This idea of artifice relates to the aesthetic theory of "Camp", defined as: "[L]ove of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (Sontag, 1964, p. 1). Old Hollywood provided a glamorous utopia to individuals stuck in non-progressive areas. Daniel Harries describes the association of the two groups with this poignant statement:

> At the very heart of gay diva worship is not the diva herself but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity, which ultimately led to what might be called the aestheticism of maladjustment, the gay man's exploitation of cinematic visions of Hollywood grandeur to elevate himself above his antagonistic surroundings and simultaneously express membership in a secret society of upper-class aesthetes. (Harries, 1997, n.p.).

In addition, this fanaticism served the purpose of identification, "providing [gay men] with a repository of subcultural narratives that became [their] own private language" (Harries, 1997, n.p.). Declaring an interest in a particular movie star could help identify if the other person is also queer in an elusive way without putting nobody at risk. In relation to this, "A friend of Dorothy" was a popular way of signaling queerness during WWII, given the "gay icon" status of Greta Garbo.

The final crucial element of cultural transmission in the narrative relates to the overtly didactic "Queer 101 notecards" designed by Stephen. The format has an ironic purpose, mocking the idea that "queer culture is something that can be learned and revised like algebra"

(Duckels, 2022, p. 14). Notwithstanding, as David M. Halperin stated, cultural transmission is indeed an active process that "must be taught" (Halperin as cited in Heggestad, 2020, p. 2) and specially when referring to the LGBTQ+ community. Conventional cultural elements can be absorbed within the familiar nucleus; however, regarding queerness, an outside output is needed in almost all cases. The concept of the gay mentor, embodied by Uncle Stephen, stems from this need for an outside source of knowledge. The cards also demonstrate "the very real need to pass down queer history from generation to generation, lest it be forgotten" (Duckels, 2022, p. 14). The importance of this is proven when Art, starting his journey of self-discovery, asks Stephen to create them, given that he knows nothing about queer milestones. At the end of the story, after Stephen's death, the trio of teenagers decide to take his mantle and raise awareness by scattering the flashcards across New York City.

In conclusion, *Like a Love Story* is a novel that deals with the HIV crisis from a historical perspective but provides a refreshing approach by including a triple teenage perspective, making it clear that they too suffered and were also involved in the struggle. Through a love triangle, broken and mended friendships, and popular music, a complex story about the epidemic is woven together. The intricacies of the HIV crisis are shown to the reader, the extent of the suffering and the constant apathy of a society to which those who were HIV-positive had to submit. Notwithstanding, not only the downside of the crisis is portrayed, the acts of solidarity and compassion carried out by people during those traumatic times also play a key role in the narrative. The final crucial message in *Like a Love Story*, one could argue, hinges on the necessity of commemorating the legacy of those who contracted the illness and died fighting, so as to not let it fall into oblivion, given that: "What [they] did. What [they] fought for. [Their] history. Who [they] are. They won't teach it in schools (Nazemian, 2019, p. 377).

Conclusion

Revisiting the HIV crisis is imperative in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the events and to reflect on them from an ameliorated moment in time. Given the widely spread use of new technologies, accessing accurate information and personal testimonies is relatively easy nowadays, allowing us to rectify any misinformation that may have been disseminated during the peak of the crisis. In revisiting the crisis from a twenty-first-century perspective, authors and creators have attempted to approach this sensitive topic with the respect and dignity it deserves, while preserving the memory of those who lost their lives. Keeping AIDS in the collective consciousness is particularly important as we continue to combat the stigma still associated with HIV-positive individuals and the erasure of the legacy of those who once fought for a better future for the queer community. It is also relevant that this process of revision penetrates YA literature, given the didactic function traditionally associated with this genre.

This dissertation aimed to examine how the AIDS crisis has been represented in contemporary YA literature, mostly in the USA. With this purpose in mind, a literature review was carried out and two contemporary novels – *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and *Like a Love Story* (2019) – were analyzed in detail. As concluded in Chapter 1, YA novels with LGBTQ+ themes have only recently gained relevance, with the first one, John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969), being published just after the Stonewall Riots in 1969. However, those stories published in the twentieth century often offered slanted forms of representation due to the systemic discrimination and violence that the queer community faced in the period. At a time when the fight for LGBTQ+ rights was just starting to gain traction, belonging to this community was seen as a perversion by a significant fraction of the population, and this message was also echoed in literature. Queer characters in YA novels of the twentieth century were destined to suffer tremendous hardship and, in this way, the texts reinforced the message that heterosexuality was indeed the only possible way to live a fulfilling

existence. This tendency reached its climax with the incorporation of the crisis into literature since most authors used it to prove that engaging in same-sex activity would consequently end in death.

Leaving the twentieth century behind, the new millennium has witnessed the popularization of YA literature and a greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. This has translated into works of YA literature that feature a richer diversity of characters and themes, deviating from the hegemonic canon. One clear manifestation of this development is the inclusion of characters from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and the inclusion of the entire LGBTQ+ community. To put it another way, the narratives do not just revolve around affluent white gay men but include characters whose gender is crossed and recrossed by other identity parameters. Similarly, YA literature has also incorporated a more sensitive approach to certain topics and tropes such as that of the gay mentor. In much twentieth-century literature, the purpose of this figure was to prompt the main character's coming of age by confronting them with the traumatic event of his/her/their death and, by extension, to show the perils of transgressing heteronormativity. In contrast, in twenty-first-century literature, this figure has been progressively transformed into a beacon of hope for teenage characters, showing them that a prosperous life as a queer individual is indeed possible. The diversification and popularity of YA literature also enabled the emergence of new trends and the treatment of taboo topics. One such instance can be found in recent attempts to revisit and revise the AIDS crisis, as exemplified by Carol Rifka Brunt's *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012), Helene Dunbar's *We Are Lost and Found* (2019) or the two novels analyzed in this dissertation. What these and other works attempt to do is to recover a memory that has been either erased or tarnished by the dissemination of misinformation and thus to grant the dignified recount the event deserves.

Both *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and *Like a Love Story* (2019) deserve to be extolled for their exceptional depiction of a crisis that was kept out of the teenage sphere in a not so far removed past. In *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), David Levithan explores the reality of a group of queer teenagers, whose stories and tribulations are interwoven with the interventions of a choir of deceased men who lost their lives back in the 1980s due to AIDS complications. Levithan grants those men, who were silenced by systemic oppression during the height of the AIDS crisis, the opportunity to voice their trauma and acknowledge everything they went through. With this narrative technique, a bridge is established between the two temporalities, which serves a restorative process for the older men who could not express themselves in their time. For that reason, they enjoy the recently acquired rights and freedom vicariously through the teenagers of the story. *Like a Love Story* (2019) is, in turn, set amid the height of the AIDS crisis. It conforms to the pattern of presenting the epidemic as a historical event. However, it offers a refreshing take on the crisis by dramatizing a story in which, even though teenagers were not directly affected by the illness, they still suffered the consequences of the stigma and violence exacerbated by popular panic, misinformation, and the latent reservoirs of prejudice. The author takes the narrative as an opportunity to create an honest portrait of the complex reality of the time, characterized not only by prejudice but also by countless acts of love and solidarity. It is worth noting that Nazemian drew on personal experiences from his teenage years to write this novel, which explains the expertise with which he portrays the complexity of adolescent identity by establishing and problematizing the intersections between gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Overall, both novels aim to underline the importance of the LGBTQ+ community and thus of "keeping alive" the collective memory by means of establishing connections between past and present. Another crucial feature worth mentioning is that both Levithan and Nazemian present culture as an essential tool that connects community members, estranged from the hegemonic majority, as well as different generations of queer individuals.

Finally, both texts convey the idea that hope for a better future is feasible; sacrifice and effort will be needed to achieve this, but with unity and especially love for the community, it will be attainable.

This dissertation also points at future research lines which, due to time and space constraints, could not be explored in this work. For example, it would be interesting to update the research carried out by Melissa Gross, Annette Y. Goldsmith, and Debi Carruth in *HIV/AIDS in Young Adult Novels: An Annotated Bibliography* (2010). The study covers a time frame that spans from the beginning of the pandemic in the late 1970s to 2008. Given that North American YA literature has shown an exponential growth since 2010, it would be worth examining the recurrence of the AIDS crisis in the most recent body of narratives. In addition, conducting research along this line would also serve to assess how the AIDS crises is dealt with in these recent narratives, a question that could also be evaluated in other genres.

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