Beyond Coming Out and Queer Tragedy: How Julie Ann Peters, Becky Albertalli, Adam Silvera, and Aiden Thomas Navigate Through the Spectrum of Queer Representation

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Abstract

In recent years, readers, critics and activists have recognized the importance of more inclusive storytelling, especially in young adult literature. This thesis explores how Julie Peters, Becky Albertalli, Aiden Thomas, and Adam Silvera diversify queer representation within the realm of young adult literature. Drawing on literary analysis, queer theory, and sociocultural perspectives, this thesis will explore how queer representation manifests in each of these works to challenge and complicate representational norms. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversations surrounding the importance of having diverse stories that foster a more inclusive literary environment.

*Keywords:* queer, lgbtq+, young adult literature
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Beyond Coming Out and Queer Tragedy: How Julie Ann Peters, Becky Albertalli, Adam Silvera, and Aiden Thomas Navigate Through the Spectrum of Queer Representation

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A THESIS

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1. Introduction

Representation of the LGBTQ+ community has been an important topic of discussion in the realm of young adult literature for many years. In previous years, queer representation was severely lacking in the genre. In the more recent past, LGBTQ+ representation in young adult literature grew more common, but depictions were dominated by death, suicide, and coming-out plots. Critics such as William Banks and Alex Sanchez have started to call out and argue against these tropes, as such they continue to perpetuate biased beliefs about queer people. As William Banks explains, “these texts might teach sympathy, ... [but] they do little to engage readers empathetically with characters who exist only as plot devices or subjects for still living characters to talk about” (35). These observations offer an opportunity for writers, critics, and teachers to create and promote texts that normalize seeing LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream roles if they are placed in stories that the majority of people are already familiar and comfortable with. In more progressive narratives, critics like Banks and Sanchez say, characters will no longer solely act as plot devices for other straight characters to talk about.

A number of books and movies in the early 2000s used the gay characters as an easy punch line. Take, for example, Damien from the movie *Mean Girls*. He is one classic example of the gay best friend often stereotyped in the media. His sexuality is, at times, a point of discussion for the group of popular mean girls to make fun of him – most of the time calling him “too gay to function.” In the following texts being discussed, readers will be able to see the queer characters participating in and reacting to the events happening around them rather than being the story, the butt of the joke, or the object of tragedy themselves. Depicting queer characters in more prominent roles normalizes their queerness, showing that it is not an identity that has to be othered—even othered in a sympathetic way. Writers creating more progressive narratives and
readers who digest them can be part of a movement that allows queerness to exist as a part of someone’s identity as opposed to being their whole identity.

An important element of recent discourse about queer-featuring YA texts includes dissatisfaction with one major theme. A central focus in many texts with prominent LGBTQ+ characters has been a coming-out narrative. Alex Sanchez has observed that stories that revolve around a character’s coming out reaffirm that being straight is often seen as the default sexuality. For example, *Keeping You a Secret* (2005) by Julie Ann Peters features queer representation, but it is primarily driven by the coming-out plot. When we first meet the main character, Holland Jaeger is living the ideal traditional high school life – Student Council President and on track to attend an Ivy League school – with a steady boyfriend as the cherry on top. However, Holland’s “perfect” life is disrupted when Cece Goddard arrives at school and the two girls start to develop feelings for one another. This novel presents itself as a typical coming-of-age narrative with the added layer of the main character having to grapple and come to terms with her sexuality.

Holland discovering her own queer desire is, in a way, an example of a coming-out narrative. She must be open with herself about her own sexuality in a way that’s comparable to having to be open with others regarding her sexuality after having a public coming out moment, and she must also deal with the backlash she receives from the people she’s closest to. Coming-out novels like this one have been important in regard to affirming the legitimacy of a different sexuality or gender identity, but the limited focus on a coming-out story implies there is a linear finality—a character comes out and then it’s over; when in reality a member of the LGBTQ+ community will have numerous instances in which they have to come out every time they meet someone new, and their lives go beyond simply coming out. Many young adult texts fall into this trap; however, while the book fits with this problematic trope in some ways, this
thesis will explore how Peters does her best to show that Cece and Holland must come out in multiple instances throughout the novel, and their lives continue going.

As Alex Sanchez states, “At its core, the coming-out experience is a universal story of self-discovery and being true to who you are, themes that cut across sexuality and gender. For that reason, I believe the [coming-out] story will endure. Its perspective may evolve” (22). Take into account for example, Becky Albertalli’s novel *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2018). It follows Simon Spier as he navigates being blackmailed by a fellow classmate that is threatening to release Simon’s private emails detailing his relationship with a mystery boy. Simon then faces a decision – let himself be outed or meet his blackmailer’s demands. Albertalli’s take on a coming-out narrative differs slightly from Peters’ in the sense that Simon seems to come to terms with the fact that his sexuality does not make him who he is. He is not conflicted about coming out and facing a possible overwhelmingly negative reaction. However, his inner conflict lies in why coming out has to change the way he is seen by his family and peers: after all, Simon does not act differently after publicly disclosing his sexuality. He assumes that if people are going to view him differently, it would be because he isn’t the straight teenage boy everyone had thought him to be. However, after he comes out, Simon appears to be accepted with open arms by his family and his peers. He is not shunned or mocked by his classmates. In this sense, he is not “othered” or seen as controversial because he chooses to love another boy.

Through her depiction of Simon, Albertalli questions the idea of heterosexuality as the default, pointing out that straight people do not have to disclose their sexuality to the public and that the experience is not always disastrous or painful, despite Peters showing that there could be strong negative reactions to someone’s coming out as shown in the instance of Holland coming out to her mother. Simon’s coming out goes relatively well and shows that publicly identifying as
gay can be a positive experience. However, Judith Butler acknowledges that the widespread expectation that queer people come out ignores the obstacles many people will face upon declaring a gay sexuality. In contrast to the reaction from Simon’s friends and family regarding his coming out, Peters does not ignore the danger associated with Holland’s coming out. In fact, Peters depicts Holland’s mother having a violent reaction to Holland’s sexual identity. While these novels handle the protagonists' coming out narratives in different ways, both stories still hold value in paving the way for broader queer representation.

A number of novels published years earlier often ended with the death of the gay character due to homophobia. The death of that character was often only used as a topic of discussion between the straight characters in the novel. It diminished the importance of the life of that gay character and reduced them to simply being a small sad part of the straight characters’ stories. Aiden Thomas uses the death of the queer character to his advantage in an unconventional way in his novel *Cemetery boys* (2020). Thomas’ novel is an urban fantasy novel in which a transgender boy summons a ghost in an attempt to prove the legitimacy of his gender to his traditional Latinx family. As Yadriel tries to prove himself to his family, the ghost who bothers him was formerly known as Julian Diaz, the school’s former resident bad boy, and Julian is determined to deal with unfinished business and find out what actually happened to him. The more the two boys spend time with one another, the less it seems that either of them wants to leave the other behind. This novel deals with the issues members of the transgender community face, but it is both a mystery and a love story at heart. The two main characters must navigate the universal experience of navigating a new relationship. Readers might be inclined to root for a happy ending for Yadiel and Juan much like they would root for a happily ever after in a story with a straight couple. In the end, Yadriel and Julian do get their happy ending despite their
conflict with death throughout the story. From the very beginning of the novel, Julian, one of the gay characters, is believed to be dead. Thus, readers do not see the end of his life as a huge tragedy, but his death is simply part of the story. Even in his death, readers get to see Julian as a well rounded character with feelings and desires he still hopes to fulfill.

In *They Both Die at the End* Adam Silvera uses the trope of queer characters dying by the end of the novel to his advantage, though in a different way than Thomas’s novel. In a world where people receive phone calls warning them of their looming death, this story follows two young boys, Rufus and Mateo, on their journey as they live the last day of their lives to the fullest. Rufus and Mateo develop a deep relationship after meeting on the Last Friend app, and they challenge one another to not let their last day go to waste. In this depiction, Silvera has gay and bisexual characters as the protagonists in his novel, but he does not make their sexuality, coming out, or facing homophobia the central theme. Instead, he focuses on Rufus’ and Mateo’s grief over losing themselves and their loved ones. Rufus and Mateo do not meet their tragic ends simply to act as a conversation topic for heterosexual characters in the novel to discuss. By making their death not a byproduct of homophobia and a common experience, we are able to see their importance as individuals and to each other. We follow them throughout their journey to develop a deeper relationship and see the true impact they had on those around them. In addition, Silvera zooms in on the lives of multiple characters, both gay and straight, to highlight that death is a universal experience. Silvera is primarily focusing on the theme of grief that comes with losing a loved one while also attempting to normalize queerness and move away from coming out/tragic queer narrative as the central focus.

Each novel previously mentioned has been important in representing queer characters in their own ways. Peters’ novel tells a more traditional coming-out story, but she also shows that a
character’s life does not end after they are out to the rest of the world. Albertalli’s novel discusses how homosexuality does not have to be inherently controversial. Silvera and Thomas’ novels use the death of a queer character to tell an important story surrounding the lives of those characters. Their tragedy does not only exist for the straight characters to discuss without giving the dead queer character a full and well-rounded characterization or representation. All four of these novels hold their own important place in the realm of queer representation, and the diversity of representation within these novels can potentially open the door for continued diversity in the future. This thesis will offer more detailed analysis, attempting to show how each text fits into the spectrum I have mentioned. Further, it will explain how these texts are important in affirming the well roundedness of queer representation in denying that queerness has to be othered.

2. The Coming Out Narrative

A More Traditional Coming Out in Keeping You a Secret

Peters’s novel Keeping You a Secret follows Holland Jaeger as she navigates high school. Holland is a girl that appears to have everything going for her; she is smart, athletic, and the president of the Student Council. She even has an intimate relationship with her boyfriend Seth that seems to be headed for a long-term commitment. However, when Holland meets the new student in her art class, Cecelia Goddard, Holland’s seemingly perfect life begins to unravel. Holland discovers that she is attracted to Cece, a proudly out lesbian who wears slogans on her t-shirts and attempts to start a LGBT club at the school. After Holland breaks off her relationship with Seth so that she can pursue a romantic relationship with Cece, Cece urges Holland to keep her sexual identity a secret for her own safety. Much to Holland’s dismay, her school guidance
counselor outs her after seeing Holland and Cece kissing in the locker room, and she appears to lose everyone but Cece.

One steady thread throughout Keeping You a Secret explores how two teen girls navigate life before and after coming out. Readers do not only follow Holland’s journey when it comes to navigating her sexuality, but they also see Cece’s struggles, as she has a hard time finding a place in her new school as well as in her everyday life. When Cece asks Holland to keep their relationship a secret, at least for the time being, she explains how hard being out is:

It’s the other things, the whispering behind your back, the laughing at you in your face, like you don’t even have feelings. Want to know how many times I get called ‘dyke’ every day? Gee, I don’t know…I’ve lost count. It’s the ones who give you the look though… There’s so much hate in people. It scares me, okay? (Peters 111)

Cece recognizes that while she is proud to be out as a lesbian, it does not come without risks. She realizes that people will treat Holland differently because of the way she identifies. People she does not know on a personal level may be disgusted with her choices in who her romantic partners are. Since Cece knows what it’s like to face that risk head on and be affected by the outcomes, she is trying to protect Holland from as much of the tribulations as she can for even a short amount of time.

Ultimately in the end of the novel, there is a hopeful future for Holland in which she gets to live a life together with Cece, but for a majority of the novel, readers see how the people Holland is surrounded by react negatively to homosexuality in general. Holland witnessed her friend, Kirsten, express negative feelings toward the LGBTQ+ community numerous times. For example, when Kirsten discovered that a few students wished to start a “Lesbian Bisexual Gay" club, she started throwing insults toward the faculty representative:
“All the queers want a club? Forget it.”

Who said that? My head whipped around. Kirsten?

“Let me see.” she snatched the app out of my hands. “Ms. Markeno agreed to be their faculty rep?” she clucked her tongue. “I always figured her for a big dyke.” (45)

Kirsten’s comment begins to spark anxiety in Holland in regard to her own sexual identity. If Kirsten is reacting in such a manner when speaking about a figure of authority, Holland has to doubt that Kirsten will still accept her as a friend after she finds out she has feelings for Cece. This is one of the first interactions readers can see that the life Holland had built for herself will inevitably come tumbling around her. If it were that easy for Holland to lose someone she considered to be a close friend, there is a very likely chance Holland will lose much more than she imagined after coming out.

Holland’s home is supposed to be a safe space for her. It is where she can go to spend time with her baby sister Hannah who she loves dearly. There were members of her family she didn’t always get along with all of the time--her step-sister Faith being one of those people-- but nevertheless, Holland assumed her family members were supposed to be the ones that supported her in the choices they made. However, Holland’s mother had carefully crafted Holland’s life for her, and it almost worked perfectly. Holland had the grades, the popularity, and she was on her way to an Ivy League college, so when she learned of Holland’s sexuality from Faith, she physically assaulted Holland:

She hit me again, harder, and I stumbled out into the dining room, my hip ramming into the credenza. Neal was feeding Hannah at the table, where Faith slithered back into her seat. Mom charged me, pounding on my back...Mom yelled at me, “I didn’t raise you to
be a lesbian!” She made it sound like the filthiest word in the English language. “It’s sick. Perverted. You’re perverted.” (126)

Holland’s mother discovered that her daughter no longer fit into the life she wanted Holland to live and reacted violently. Holland’s sexuality made her different, which deeply upset her mother, who now thinks Holland’s life is over because Holland is a lesbian. However, Holland discovering her own sexuality was simply a first step in figuring out her identity as a whole. The scene that shows the fight between Holland and her mother is one in which readers see the risks that Holland faces in coming out. Peters does not allow Holland to fall into thinking that her own life is over in the same way that Holland’s mother is expressing. Holland had never truly wanted to live the life that her mother had planned for her. Instead, Holland discovers her found family in Cece and other friends she has made that identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Holland recognizes that she still has a full life to live, even if it is not how she originally envisioned the rest of her life going.

Terry L. Norton and Jonathan W. Ware explain in their article “Literature for Today’s Gay and Lesbian teens: Subverting the Culture of Silence” that a valuable aspect of Peter’s novel “is the realistic and understanding portrayal of the process of disclosure that Holland and Cece face each time they must decide how and when to reveal their identities to another person” (68). Holland and Cece do not have to simply come out once; it is a continuous process of always coming out to new people. While Cece loudly proclaims her sexuality from the moment she enters her new school, Holland first comes out to Cece and subsequently Cece’s parents. Holland then must navigate when to tell the other people in her life that she is gay. While Peters did tell a coming-out story, it is not traditional in the sense that the characters come out and the novel ends. Instead, Peters also shows that there still is a place for a more traditional coming out
narrative that still shows the lives of the characters can go on, and they can go on happily as evident in Holland and Cece’s relationships, as well as showing that homophobia still exists and it can trump love.

Peters does not only follow Holland as she navigates her own coming out journey, but Peters also explores how Cece continues to come out after she enters her new environment. After switching schools, Cece must come out to an entirely new group of peers in a new setting, and she does so openly and with conviction. Cece’s t-shirts that she wears proudly proclaim that she is gay and she has nothing to hide. She is not ashamed, and every person that she crosses paths with, whether she is meeting them for the first time or the thousandth time, she is showing that she is proud to be who she is. While Cece is not one to hide her sexuality from those around her, it does imply that she is different from others simply because of her sexuality. Banks argues that a character’s coming out may be “realistic,” but these narratives “reinforce the notion that one’s sexuality is inherently controversial and conflicted” (35). Peters may fall into the trap described by Banks by showing negative reactions to coming out. It emphasizes that queerness is controversial in the text, but Peters including this controversy also reflects a common reality for people Holland and Cece also appear to have their version of a happy ending. The last scene of the novel shows the two of them moving Holland into her new rundown apartment, a place where they can truly be themselves. We see them laughing and it can only be assumed that they will be together for a time after the end of the novel. As a couple, they do not have to experience a tragic ending. They are also capable of experiencing the kind of high school love that is seen in a large number of books and movies. However, their journey has not been smooth sailing to get to their happy ending. After both of the girls’ tribulations around having to come out and face the reactions of those around them, Cece explains to Holland, “[Coming out]’s about getting past
that question of what's wrong with me, to knowing there's nothing wrong, that you were born this way. You’re a normal person and a beautiful person and you should be proud of who you are. You deserve to live and live with dignity and show people your pride” (153). Both Cece and Holland must stare into the ugly face of homophobia and respond bravely. Neither Holland or Cece are living life for anyone other than themselves. It is assumed that both of their lives go on in a fulfilling way, whatever that may mean for each of them respectively. There are parts of Peters’ novel that do fall into the “traps” that more traditional coming out narratives often fall into because they face homophobic reactions. However, her focus on having her characters coming out in the face of homophobia does socially important work. The novel does not pretend that the lives of its queer characters end after their respective coming out moments. When Peters chooses to include the silver lining and happy moments for Cece and Holland it humanizes them and shows readers that a queer character does not have to have a tragic ending. A well rounded character will be well-rounded and experience highs and lows throughout the parts of their lives shown on the page.

*The Question of Identity in Simon vs. the Homo Sapien’s Agenda*

Similarly, Becky Albertalli’s novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapien’s Agenda* follows Simon Spier as he navigates a high school experience that might be *slightly* different from the rest of his peers. Simon is a closeted teenager in his junior year of high school that prefers to save any drama in his life for the school’s musical production. His plans change when his private email exchange between himself and another anonymous boy from his school falls into the hands of the resident class clown, Martin. Martin then blackmails Simon into playing wingman for him, and if Simon doesn’t comply with Martin's demands, then Martin will release the emails to the rest of their school. Much like Peter's novel, Albertalli shows that potentially being outed
complicates matters for queer characters. The control is being taken out of the hands of the gay characters, and their sexuality is being used as leverage. Now, both Albertalli and Peters create situations where coming out occurs because of pressure and the weaponizing of queer identity. Even worse than Simon beingouted, the secret identity of Blue, the boy Simon has been exchanging emails with, is also at risk of being jeopardized.

Trying to find out who you are in high school is a nearly universal experience. Stories centering around a high school student on a path to self-discovery have existed for decades, and they will continue to exist for many more. The difference that readers get to see in Albertalli’s novel is the gay character grappling with “normal” teenage conflicts instead of solely focusing on his inner conflicts about his sexuality due to a homophobic society. That said, the coming-out aspect of Albertalli’s novel is still vastly important, even more so since Simon’s life does not end after he comes out.

At its core, Albertalli’s novel is still very much a coming out narrative. However, Simon is tasked with figuring out who he wants to be beyond his sexuality. In multiple instances throughout the novel, Simon states that he does not want his sexuality becoming public to change him or how others perceive him because he is always going to stay the same Simon. Therefore, not only must Simon tiptoe around Martin to ensure that Martin doesn’t reveal his secret, but Simon has to find some way out of his comfort zone without pushing away his close friends or compromising who he really is because of his sexuality. While the predicament that Simon finds himself in with Martin is not exactly the most ideal situation, it does appear that it is the first small nudge that jumpstarts Simon leaving his comfort zone. Of course, Simon is apprehensive of people discovering that he is a gay teen in a small town in Georgia. Simon, narrating in 1st person, explains:
I don’t know how to be gay in Georgia. We’re right outside Atlanta, so I know it could be worse. But Shady Creek isn’t exactly a progressive paradise. At school, there are one or two guys who are out, and people definitely give them crap. Not like violent crap. But the word ‘fag’ isn’t exactly uncommon. And I guess there are a few lesbian and bisexual girls, but I think it’s different for girls. Maybe it’s easier. If there’s one thing Tumblr has taught me, it’s that a lot of guys consider it hot when a girl is a lesbian. (Albertalli 21)

The interesting thing about Simon’s train of thought is that he expresses that he “doesn’t know exactly what it means to be gay in Georgia.” It implies that there is some kind of performance in which Simon must perform outness in a homophobic space because that is what will be expected of him. His peers may have an idea of what it looks like when someone is gay, but that may not necessarily be the way that Simon acts naturally. Simon is apprehensive about this performance because he does not want to change his personality just because of the way he sexually identifies.

Judith Butler argues, “Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power” (611). Even saying the words “I’m gay” is a performance in its own right. Simon knows that he is gay. He knows that it is who he has always been. It has always been a part of his identity; the people around him are just not privy to this information. Simon feels he must, eventually, openly admit it, which is not something that he is fully comfortable doing because that performance commits him to a different identity when nothing about his identity will actually change. He acknowledges this concern in his narration:

I know, coming out isn’t something that straight kids generally worry about. That’s the thing people wouldn’t understand. This coming out thing. It’s not even about me being gay, because I know deep down that my family would be fine with it… But I’m tired of
coming out. All I ever do is come out. I try not to change, but I keep changing, in all these tiny ways. I get a girlfriend. I have a beer. And every freaking time, I have to reintroduce myself to the universe all over again. (55-56)

Simon must conform to the specific performance of coming out for the benefit of those around him. Simon had many small public changes in his identity that may cause those around him to view him in a slightly different way. For example, Simon explains that he changes because he gets a girlfriend and has a beer, signifying he is growing up and moving away from childhood. Therefore, he does not understand why the fact that he likes a boy has to be a life changing event. He views discovering his own sexuality as a part of growing up—similar to having your first alcoholic beverage. He does not think that his sexuality changes him any more than any other teenager changing and growing simply because they are getting older and beginning to truly discover who they are.

Simon’s close friend Abby is the first person that Simon openly comes out to, and he doesn’t pick a special moment: he tells her when they are stopped at a red light on their way home from Waffle House. Simon tells readers,

I didn’t plan to do this tonight.

‘So. the thing is, I’m gay.’

It’s the first time I’ve said those words out loud. I pause with my hands on the steering wheel, waiting to feel something extraordinary. The light turns green. (124)

Simon had expressed anxious thoughts regarding his coming out moment and when the moment finally happens, it feels normal. Abby does not react in a dramatic way. Nothing about their situation or friendship changes at that moment. She even tells Simon that she isn’t surprised, but she is honored that he felt comfortable enough to tell her. Even the traffic light continues to do
exactly what it has always done. The small detail of the traffic light symbolizes that just because Simon has admitted that he is gay out loud to someone, life still goes on just as it always has. Abby knows that Simon has not changed in any way, knowing that deep down his sexuality was always something that may have played a part in making him the Simon that she is friends with. In a novel about coming out, Albertalli makes the first reaction relatively banal, meaning that this moment does not always have to be dramatic or traumatic.

Even if Simon knows that not everything has to change after he comes out, there is still a part of him that feels like he is fighting against what the “norm” is, hence the title itself. Eve Sedgwick touches upon the idea of oppositions in a similar manner. She states,

The supposed oppositions that characteristically structure [writing about homosexuality] – the respectable ‘versus’ the bohemian, the cynical ‘versus’ the sentimental, the provincial ‘versus’ the cosmopolitan, the anesthetized ‘versus’ the sexual–seem to be, among other things, recastings and explorations of another pseudo-opposition that had come by the middle of the nineteenth century to be crippling knotted into the guts of British men and, through them, into the lives of women. The name of this pseudo-opposition, when it came to having a name, was, as we have seen. Homosexual ‘versus’ heterosexual. (509)

Simon feels like he is fighting this battle against the rest of society because he is scared that they will tell him he must now act a certain way because he chooses to identify as homosexual. It is safe to assume that Simon will inevitably be treated differently by some of his classmates from the passage referenced earlier in regard to the slurs he has heard being used against the few gay teenagers that have been openly out. Perhaps he feels that he will be at some kind of disadvantage because his sexuality will be something that people can target in order to make him
feel lesser than others. However, by the end of the novel, Simon begins to appreciate and accept that his sexuality will most likely always make him different from others.

In reference to his sexuality and finally being openly out after his emails did get posted on Tumblr for his entire school to see, Simon tells readers that “There’s this huge part of me, and I'm still trying it on. And I don't know how it fits together. How I fit together. It's like a new version of me” (284). He acknowledges that his sexuality is a big part of who he is, but it is not all of who he his. He is still figuring out who he wants to be when he grows up because he still has plenty growing up to do. Simon is still a junior in high school, and while he has been accepted by his friends and family, there will still be college applications and acceptances he has to look forward to. He will still experience typical high school activities like prom, graduation, and hoping that his new relationship with Bram (aka Blue) will be one of the great love stories. His life is not over after his coming out. He has just started a new public relationship and he still has the rest of his youth ahead of him for further self-discovery, which is something that perhaps a large number of teens that are Simon’s age can relate to.

In contrast to Peters’ novel, Albertalli does not include dramatic reactions to Simon’s coming out. Overall, it appears that Simon had a positive experience with his coming out journey despite the fact that his sexuality was also revealed by someone other than himself. He is not thrown out by his family, and his friends are not upset with the fact that he is gay, they are more so upset that they made him feel like he could not freely tell them he was gay sooner. In contrast, Holland had a less desirable experience after coming out, coming face to face with homophobia from her close friends and family. However, both coming out novels present themselves in a way that shows their characters continuing to live fulfilling lives even after coming out.
In a review of the film *Love, Simon* based on Albertalli's novel, Ryan Deloney explains that the film was revolutionary because it was “unapologetically mainstream…so unassuming, so accessible and so simple” (1). Having a story that is widely accessible and understandable is important in the broad scope of representation. Deloney goes on to say “it’s clear we’re meant to see Simon beyond what makes him different–we’re meant to see ourselves in his quirks, his shenanigans, his triumphs and even his heartbreaks. And we do” (1). Albertalli acknowledges that there might always be opposition between queer and straight that Sedgewick mentions. However, Albertalli shows that there is a space in which a queer character is accepted without having to continue to fight that opposition their entire lives, perhaps inciting hope in others who feel as though they can relate to Simon.

3. The Tragic Death of the Queer Character

Much like a traditional coming out narrative that ends after the protagonist comes out, the death of the queer character, as mentioned in the introduction, is another trope that makes regular appearances in queer media. Perhaps the most famous example of the death of a gay character is seen in the movie *Brokeback Mountain*. This trope is established when the two main characters, Jack and Ennis are sitting by a fire and Ennis is describing a childhood memory of seeing the body of a man who had been tortured and killed for suspected homosexuality. It feels inevitable that the lives of these two men will be tragically altered in a similar way, implying that the lives of queer characters are destined to end in tragedy. The lives of queer characters ending in tragic ways diminishes their overall characterization, and takes away from showing their well-rounded identity. It reduces queerness to being viewed as inevitably linked to tragedy itself. However, authors such as Aiden Thomas and Adam Silvera actively fight against the trope and show that the lives of the queer characters in novels do not have to end in such a tragedy.
From Death to Life in Cemetery Boys

Cemetery Boys by Aiden Thomas is a young adult urban fantasy novel that closely follows Yadriel, a queer and transgender brujo, on the adventure he goes on with his best friend and cousin, Maritza. Yadriel’s main goal has been to prove himself as a real brujo in order to be accepted by his family, who still see him as the little girl he was before he began transitioning. From the very beginning of the novel, readers see the process of Yadriel trying to cement his place in the brux community by attempting to summon the ghost of his cousin, Miguel, who is assumed to be dead by the rest of the community after their failed attempts to find him after he was reported missing. Instead, Yadriel accidentally summons Juan Diaz, a boy from his school that does not remember how he died and is far from ready to move on to the afterlife. The two boys strike a deal with one another: Juan will let Yadriel complete his duties as a brujo in crossing Juan over to the other side, but only if Yadriel helps find out what really happened the night that Juan died. Together with Maritza, the group of teens set forth on solving this mystery one step at a time, only to find out that dying was not something that came easy to Juan.

In his novel, Aiden Thomas completely flips the trope of the death of the queer character by using a paranormal and magical plot to his advantage by having a queer character die without it being a byproduct of homophobia and ultimately bringing the queer character back to life at the end of the novel. It turns out that Yadriel’s uncle was the mastermind behind a scheme in which he could obtain an unprecedented amount of power— the only cost was four human sacrifices. Much to Yadriel’s surprise, both Miguel and Julian were two of those sacrifices, and the spirit version of Juan that Yadriel had been interacting with throughout the novel was because Juan had one foot in the land of the living and the other in the spirit world. When Yadriel and Martzia go to speak to Julian’s friends, they discover that Julian is gay. When Yadriel looks to
Julian in surprise, Julian is incredibly nonchalant, stating that it is not that big of a deal that he is gay. Therefore, the queer character was dead from the very beginning, and his queerness is not made into the key part of his identity or the cause of his passing. After meeting the spirit version of Juan and knowing that his life did have an abrupt and mysterious end, his tragedy is not where his story ended—it is where his story began.

Right from the beginning chapters of the novel, Thomas is sufficiently subverting the trope that states that the queer characters probably will die by the end of the narrative. Instead, he begins his novel with the death of a queer character. He then goes one step further and brings Juan back to life by the end of the story. Thomas gives Juan and Yadriel their happy ending with one another. In a somewhat strange turn of events, the main characters are not separated by death; they are instead brought closer together because of it. With death being a heavily recurring theme throughout the novel, Thomas shows that there is beauty in the balance of life and death.

It is after Yadriel stops his uncle from finishing the human sacrifice ritual, ultimately saving their community and the souls of the four sacrifices (including his cousin Miguel and Julian) that Yadriel is accepted into the community with open arms. Yadriel has accomplished what no other brujo has in centuries by returning these souls into their respective bodies, essentially bringing them back to life from the dead. The souls returning to the bodies of the human sacrifices is a connection in its own right. Since the souls were ripped unnaturally from their bodies, by returning them, balance is being restored, and Yadriel is the one restoring that balance. He has taken control of the situation, and therefore he has taken control of what could have ended in a much larger tragedy. Thomas thus critiques the way that queerness is often seen as disempowering by putting the power and control in the hands of a queer character.
When readers meet Yadriel, his identity is immediately tied to dealing with the dead. He has control over death and helping spirits pass on to the afterlife. However, the men and women in this community have different roles or gifts. The women (brujas) have the ability to heal the sick and injured while the men (brujos) can help spirits pass on to the afterlife. Yadriel is transgender, which causes conflict between him and the rest of his community. Yadriel feels as though he was always destined to be a brujo, whereas there are members of the community that will not openly accept him as a strong male figure in the community because of his gender identity. When Yadriel insists that he help Juan cross over, it is in an attempt to show his brujo community that he does belong and he is just as worthy of being a respected brujo just like his brother and father. He tells Juan, “So I’m gonna help you find your friends…And you’re gonna help me by letting me release you to the afterlife, then they’ll have to accept that I’m a brujo” (Thomas 83). In this interaction, Yadriel is emphasizing the importance of feeling accepted by the brujo community, linking the story to the social acceptance element of the coming-out narrative, even though readers do not see an explicit coming out moment on the page. Since Yadriel is trans, some members of his family do not think that he has the capability of taking on the role and responsibilities of a brujo. Yadriel was made to feel like an outsider in his own home a majority of the time because “being transgender and gay had earned Yadriel the title of Head Black Sheep among the brujo. Though, in truth, being gay had actually been much easier for them to accept, but only because they saw Yadriel liking boys as still being heterosexual” (13). Yadriel’s family had erased all of his queerness because it is the narrative that better fits their more traditional values and gender roles. The women were supposed to be the nurturers, which is why they were the ones with the healing abilities. The men in the community took charge in guiding lost spirits to their rightful destinations.
It is mostly his father’s approval that Yadriel is in search of. Early in the book, his father misgenders him intentionally by saying “You stay here with the rest of the women!” (27). After being misgendered by his father, Yadriel is reminded that he might never seamlessly fit into the role of being a brujo. Yadriel is forced into closer proximity with the women in the community because some feel as though that is where he belongs. The entire time readers see Yadriel in the novel, he is only ever trying to be his authentic self. However, it appears that because he has not fully transitioned, Yadriel’s feminine appearance is one thing keeping him from being fully recognized as a brujo. The consistent misgendering that Yadriel experiences is a driving force in him wanting to prove himself to the rest of the brujx community as he is and how he defines himself.

Yadriel attempts to have as much control over his physical appearance as possible, making himself look as masculine as he can without having gone through top surgery. There are multiple instances where Yadriel mentions his binder, implying that he has not fully transitioned. Perhaps his more feminine outward appearance holds weight in what Yadriel’s role should be in the community. Other members of the community may think that if he looks feminine that he is a girl, despite the way that he dresses. Men’s clothes do not fit him in the way that he wishes. There are a number of instances where the men’s button downs that Yadriel wears draws his own attention to the fact that his chest is not flat. Due to the fact that Yadriel has those feminine characteristics, despite his efforts to hide them, he does not fully fit in as a brujo. If Yadriel presents himself as a male, perhaps others will see him as that masculine presence in the community. Yadriel’s desire to present himself as a brujo ties into his desire of wanting to be a strong male figure in his community. In being a successful brujo, Yadriel is one step closer to being viewed as the young man he presents himself to be.
Similarly to Yadriel taking control of his outward appearance, he now has also taken control of the power of life and death. Thomas has given his queer character power over tragedy, almost entirely eliminating it from the end of his novel. Thomas does not let homophobia or transphobia define queerness. Therefore, he limits the power that these ideas hold over his characters and gives the characters control over their own fates and endings. Instead, Thomas’s characters get a happy and hopeful ending. Throughout the novel, Thomas showed Yadriel finding his place in the community, and even branching outside of the community when it came to meeting Julian’s friends who were weary of newcomers but still accepting of his gender identity. They never made Yadriel feel unwelcome because of the way that he chose to identify. Perhaps, this group of people viewed as outsiders to a wider population could be an example of acceptance. Even at the end of the novel, Yadriel’s family is grateful for the brave young man he turned out to be, and they are proud that he would protect his loved ones, even if they didn’t fully accept him as one of their own like they should have. Both Yadriel and his family show growth by the end of the novel; Yadriel has grown into the brujo he has always wanted to be and his father has fully accepted Yadriel as his son in the way Yadriel had been hoping for most of the novel. The themes of death, queer identity, and acceptance gets treated creatively in Silvera’s novel.

_Death Throughout They Both Die at The End_

Silvera’s _They Both Die at the End_ follows two young boys, Rufus and Mateo, living in a near future New York City. Both boys receive a phone call on the day they are going to die letting them know that sometime in the next twenty-four hours they will meet their tragic ends. This news causes both boys to log on to an app created for Deckers (the slang term for people that have received calls letting them know they will die today). On this app, Rufus and Mateo
match and begin their adventurous last day together. Their goals are simple; they want to make the most of their last day. While readers know that both of these characters will not survive, the lives of Rufus and Mateo are not solely tragic—and they aren’t threatened with an early death because of their sexuality. In the end, Rufus and Mateo are the ones that give each other their own versions of a happy ending. While their time together is brief, the two develop a romantic relationship, and perhaps in another life the two of them could have been together for many years.

Despite death looming in the background for much of the novel, it does not cause the characters to live their lives stuck in tragedy; therefore, from the title of Silvera’s book *They Both Die at the End*, it is evident that both of the main characters will meet an undesirable death. However, their deaths, while tragic, do not become reality because of homophobia. Rather they come because death is a natural part of life that everyone will experience at one point, whether they happen to be queer or straight. As if to stress this point, Silvera zooms in on the lives of others that have their own unique role in the novel and who will play a small role in the lives of the main characters. For instance, Silvera briefly focuses in on the life of Andrea Donahue, an employee of Death Cast, the company responsible for predicting the death days of anyone that registers:

Death-Cast did not call Andrea Donahue because she isn’t dying today. Andrea herself, one of Death-Cast’s top reps since their inception seven years ago, has made her fair share of End Day calls. Tonight, between midnight and three, Andrea called sixty-seven Deckers; not her best number, but it’s proven difficult to beat her record of ninety-two calls in one shift ever since she was put under inspection for rushing through calls. Allegedly. (Silvera 83)
Andrea gets to live, but she also appears to be a catalyst in the adventure that Rufus and Mateo embark on.

In including this brief moment about Andrea, Silvera made the choice to include a character readers know little information about intentionally. Without Andrea, the story Silvera is telling wouldn’t be quite the same. She is the driving force, the one making the phone calls to Rufus and Mateo informing of their impending death. If Andrea did not call in the exact moment she did, there is possibility that Rufus and Mateo would not have met. The sexuality of Rufus and Mateo is not something that Andrea concerns herself with. She continues to play her role in the machinery without worrying about the details of anyone’s sexuality. In so doing, Silvera acknowledges that queer characters are not the only ones that are simply used to drive the plot forward. Considering Andrea’s sexuality is not revealed, it can be assumed that Silvera does not place a high importance as to whether or not she is gay or straight. She is just a character in the story, and her role, as small as it may be, plays a large part in the beginning of Rufus and Mateo’s last day together. He thus intentionally skews our sense of where queer characters belong in the hierarchy of importance.

Silvera’s novel is not one that follows the trope of the death of the queer character that makes straight characters reflect on homophobia. Instead, it is about the lives of these two queer characters and how both young boys are mourning the lives that they could have and should have gotten the chance to live. Silvera does not even hint at the sexuality of his protagonists until several chapters in, where readers see Mateo filling out a profile for the Last Friend app. Mateo chooses to skip the “orientation” section of his profile, perhaps implying that his sexuality is not one of the most important things someone should know about him on his End Day. Readers learn
of Rufus’s sexuality in a similar and nonchalant way—the Last Friend app. Mateo comes across Rufus’s profile and he infers that Rufus is comfortable in accepting his sexual identity.

From the moment they meet, it appears that the two young boys are ready to live their lives to the fullest and “Do it up” (73). They travel around New York City saying their goodbyes to their loved ones and falling into one or two Decker gimmick activities intended to give people the chance to do something reckless on their End Day without placing themselves in any real danger. Mateo even gets the chance to visit his hospitalized father one last time, leaving him a note telling his father that everything is going to be okay. While it may appear that these two characters are navigating tragic circumstances, they are getting the kind of ending that would be part of anyone’s hopes for a last day, not one simply defined by homophobia. They get to go out and live freely, something Mateo was scared of doing before. This story is far from just being about their deaths. As Mateo says, “Twelve hours ago I received the phone call telling me I’m going to die today, and I’m more alive now than I was then” (227).

The inevitable deaths of Rufus and Mateo offer the opportunity to start conversations around death and grief. The aspects of grief in this novel do not only effect Rufus and Mateo, but their loved ones as well. It is important to have those conversations regarding how grief impacts characters who have lost someone they are close to. While heartbreaking, Silvera celebrates the lives that Rufus and Mateo have lived. He emphasizes the importance they have not only had on one another in the short time they have known each other, but on their friends and families as well. To reiterate, their lives do not end tragically because of their sexuality. Silvera ensures that readers are aware of almost all aspects of their lives, showing their well-rounded representation. He shows that Rufus and Mateo did not exist to die, but they existed to give each other the best lives with the best versions of themselves.
Throughout the novel, readers see Rusfus pushing Mateo out of his comfort zone so that he can truly say that Mateo had lived the last day his father would have wanted him to. Yes, the deaths of the characters is a driving force of their adventures, but Silvera highlights the adventures they go on together rather than the tragedy of their deaths or shaping their lives by homophobia. The novel also does not go beyond their deaths, as Rufus is the very last character we see on the page. The novel ends with his death. He is not used to spark a conversation about grief and loss for a heterosexual character in the following pages because the story doesn’t continue. Rufus and Mateo’s story is ultimately theirs. It starts and ends with the two of them being the central focus. Therefore, Silvera acknowledges that their early deaths were heartbreaking and tragic for themselves and their loved ones. Still, Rufus and Mateo do not exist to perpetuate the queer death trope or to comment on homophobia.

4. Conclusion

Recent trends in young adult literature have broadened the spectrum of queer representation present in texts. Albertalli and Peters have used a coming out narrative to show that the lives of their queer characters do not end after coming out. While characters such as Simon and Holland might continue to face opposition even after they have come out, their lives do not end in a tragedy. This idea gives hope to readers that may be struggling with their own coming out, fearful of the risks that come with openly expressing your sexuality. While Peters does fall into the trap of a more traditional coming out narrative, she still provides a valuable insight as to what it may be like for a teenager to come out. She provides readers with a realistic portrayal of a young girl experiencing the highs and lows of openly expressing her sexuality. Ultimately, Holland’s story can give readers hope that life does not have to end because they have been on the receiving end of negative reactions to their coming out.
Similarly, Thomas and Silvera use the death of queer characters to their advantage, offering a creative twist on the previously established trope. For instance, Thomas begins his novel with the fact that the queer character is already dead and we continue to follow his story as he navigates the possibility of moving on to the afterlife. Silvera establishes that both of his queer characters will die by the novel's end and celebrates the life that the two of them get to live for the next twenty-four hours rather than focus on their impending death. These four authors are only a few examples of the authors putting in the work to diversify the queer representation young readers are exposed to, and they are paving the way for future authors to continue on the path towards further representation and acceptance.

The significance of authors such as Peters, Albertalli, Thomas, and Silvera, courageously pushing through boundaries in the face of the banning of books with diverse queer representation content cannot be overstated. Their advocating for authentic representations of queer experiences in young adult literature contributes to a cultural shift towards acceptance and understanding within society. These authors play a pivotal role in dismantling stereotypes and fostering empathy among readers. These novels offer the potential to invite readers to question preconceptions and embrace the importance of diversity. In a world where the banning of books persists, the resilience of these authors becomes a beacon of hope, inspiring future generations to continue pushing boundaries and shaping a more inclusive literary future.
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