Coming Out after Coming Out:

The Changing Trajectory of the Coming-Out Narrative in

Twenty-First Century Young Adult and New Adult Texts

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The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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I would like to thank my father Matthew, who asked me why I would still like boys. You were clued into my sexuality before I was but never tried to change or rush me.

For my grandmother Barbara Joy, your creativity and problem-solving never cease to inspire and amaze me. Your quiet, determined passion and endless demands for all your grandchildren to have the same opportunities regardless of gender have set the standard high.

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Abstract

LGBTQ+ literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been preoccupied with the personalised politics of coming out of the homosexual closet. Beginning with David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* in 2003, Young Adult and New Adult texts have begun to approach the coming-out narrative with greater scepticism. This thesis seeks to understand the ways in which the coming-out narrative of the twentieth century has changed in the twenty-first century, focusing on Young Adult and New Adult texts. Through an analysis of *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) by Becky Albertalli, *Carry On* (2015) and *Wayward Son* (2019) by Rainbow Rowell, *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) by David Levithan, the *Captive Prince* trilogy (2015–2016) by C. S. Pacat and *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–present) by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, this thesis addresses the changing nature of the coming-out narrative, its diminishing significance, and some of the ways in which the coming-out narrative's endurance can be seen as having a deleterious effect on LGBTQ+ people.

These contemporary texts examine often displace elements of the coming-out narrative structure onto other categories of difference and propose alternatives to the coming-out narrative. In exploring the possibility of the post-coming-out narrative, this thesis establishes an understanding of the three key elements of any coming-out narrative: secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of a dual insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure. Rather than pose legitimate challenges to the heteronormativity that necessitates LGBTQ+ characters' comings out, however, contemporary texts such as *Carry On* and *Wayward Son* bury their heteronormative assumptions in subtextual elements or displace them onto another category of difference such as vampirism. In leaving heteronormativity and, in some cases, homophobia intact, these texts are ultimately not transformative of the coming-out narrative. Moreover, by sublimating these phobic elements in otherwise anti-phobic texts, this thesis argues that stereotypical and homophobic assumptions about LGBTQ+ people and youth prevail in contemporary fiction.

Introduction

Since the Stonewall protests in New York in 1969, LGBTQ+ politics has focused, in part, upon the movement of queer people from a state of social, political and economic invisibility into one of visibility, even if this may have its disadvantages. LGBTQ+ literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been preoccupied with the personalised politics of coming out of the homosexual closet.[1] Coming out involves the explicit or implicit disclosure of homosexuality, whether this be voluntary or involuntary. One literary response to the political emphasis on coming out is the coming-out narrative. Coming-out narratives, such as *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, focus almost completely upon the coming-out itself, leaving much to be desired in detailing the long-term consequences of such information coming to public light.[2] Coming-out narratives often follow one queer adolescent protagonist struggling with their experiences of same-sex attraction, usually in the form of internalised homophobia. The genre proves prolific in Young Adult fiction. However, beginning with David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* in 2003, Young Adult and New Adult texts have begun to approach this narrative convention with more scepticism. More contemporary texts tend to displace elements of the coming-out narrative structure and propose alternative versions to the narrative. This thesis seeks to understand these contemporary changes and challenges to the conventional coming-out narrative to develop an understanding of the elements of the coming-out narrative that may be reflected in non-coming-out LGBTQ+ stories.

This thesis reads *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) by Becky Albertalli as an example of how the tropes of secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of the insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure combine to form the quintessential coming-out narrative. Additionally, *Carry On* (2015) and *Wayward Son* (2019) by Rainbow Rowell are analysed in order to understand how

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[1] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 56–57.

[2] Jenkins and Cart, *Representing the Rainbow*, 131. Jenkins and Cart specify that coming-out narratives of the twentieth century generally conclude at the moment of coming out, whereas coming-out novels of the twenty-first century explore the consequences of coming out.

Young Adult fantasy and supernatural fiction respond to the coming-out narrative by displacing it onto other categories of difference. Further, the *Captive Prince* trilogy (2015–2016) by C. S. Pacat and *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) by David Levithan, with their focus upon a bisexual protagonist and bisexual minor character respectively, may offer a vision of bisexual inclusion in the post-coming-out narrative. Finally, *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–present) by Joseph Fink and Jeffery Cranor, a form-defying podcast, offers a textual exemplar of what queer disclosure may entail when LGBTQ+ identity is inconsequential. In analysing these works, this thesis argues that Young Adult fiction must move beyond the coming-out narrative when depicting a range of LGBTQ+ characters. As such, a post-coming-out narrative would implement the progressive aspects of each of the texts above while leaving behind the heteronormative assumptions that underly such texts.

Coming Out in the Past

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a view of coming out of the homosexual closet in the context of accumulated silence of closetedness itself. Sedgwick characterises the speech acts of coming out as "strangely specific," and adds that "they might have nothing to do with the acquisition of new information."[3] In this way, Sedgwick offers a performative lens through which we can understand the specific speech acts that constitute coming out. Additionally, Ken Plummer characterises coming out as "the critical life experience of lesbians and gays during the 1970s and 1980s," hence fixing its significance to a specific historical and social moment.[4]

Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins detail the kinds of queer representation in Young Adult texts published between 1969 and 2004 within *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006), a quantitative and taxonomical overview of lesbian and gay content in Young Adult fiction. They note a shift in the twenty-first century towards a greater diversity of genders and sexualities within texts.[5]

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[3] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.
[4] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 57.
[5] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 128.

Similarly, they observe a shift towards the normalisation of LGBTQ+ characters within Young Adult texts in the twenty-first century.[6]

In contrast to Cart and Jenkins' taxonomical approach, Plummer conceives of the coming-out narrative as a trauma narrative.[7] He outlines the four differentiated steps to coming out:

> [Coming out] can be seen to capture four critical processes (which are *not* in a fixed sequence): *coming out personally*, in which self-conversation emerges which clarifies who one is; *coming out privately*, in which the first steps are made to tell specific others — family, friends, work peers — in delimited spheres; *coming out publicly*, in which many others are now told the story, and indeed it may become public knowledge out of the self's own control; and finally *coming out politically*, in which the story is used very widely as a means of social change.[8]

Plummer's approach allows for an understanding of the differing emphases upon interior identity or public knowledge in the long process of coming out. In terms of interior identity, Plummer's concept of coming out personally to oneself is key when examining texts—particularly those narrated in the first person—in which one or more characters begin the text in the process of discovering their non-normative sexuality. Similarly, Plummer's separation of the coming-out process into interior and exterior stages allows for a pinpointing of when, where and how the transition from a private secret to public knowledge is made.

Further, Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser work within Esther Saxey's (2008) idea of the coming-out narrative constructing queer identity to produce a selection of key ideas involved in the coming out stories of young men in particular. These ideas of isolation, the failure to meet hegemonic masculine expectations, the innate knowledge of the self as gay, a definitive moment of bravery in either sexual exploration or disclosure, and gaining a sense of community provide a lens

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[6] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 128. Cart and Jenkins follow up this project in *Reading the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018) with a slightly increased emphasis upon bisexual and transgender representations in texts, but do not identify any significant shifts in LGBTQ+ representation.

[7] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 56–57.

[8] Ibid., 57–58. Emphasis in original.

through which to understand the process of coming-out within fiction.[9] Further, Cover and Prosser argue that the persistence of the coming-out narrative is significant because of its effect in stabilising a non-heterosexual identity.[10]

Coming-Out Theory

As this project primarily concerns the coming-out process, the theoretical cornerstone of the project's approach to the texts is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick primarily develops a way of understanding the knowledge/ignorance dichotomy that prominent in understandings of homosexuality.[11] Specifically, Sedgwick states that, "there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy: the perfect object for the by now insatiable exacerbated epistemological/sexual anxiety of the turn-of-the-century subject," meaning that homosexuality was perpetually confined to the realm of ignorance, as secrets are not meant to be known.[12] It is precisely this secrecy that necessitates the coming-out process for Sedgwick, as the transition from "inside" to "outside" the closet is precisely marked as one that also transitions the homosexual person from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge. However, as this transition is a transitory phase between two supposedly fixed and stable states, it is necessarily unstable. Sedgwick's idea of this unstable transition allows for an approach to literary works that deal with coming out. Further, Sedgwick's approach allows for an exploration into the ways in which the knowledge of any identity category transfers power onto specific characters because of the heteronormative environment that pathologises homosexuality.

Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth in their 2015 article "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature" identify some prominent texts of the twenty-first century as belonging to an entirely different category than dominant twentieth-century texts, further

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[9] Cover and Prosser, "Memorial Accounts," 85.
[10] Ibid., 85.
[11] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 73.
[12] Ibid., 73. Emphasis in original.

implying that there has been a considerable shift post-2000.[13] They propose a new category of "Queer" Young Adult fiction that includes texts that actively disrupt narrative and social norms concerning gender and sexuality. It should be noted that both Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth, and Cart and Jenkins, identify Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) as a seminal text that commonly defies categories often applicable to other LGBTQ+ texts.[14] This is largely due to the way in which Levithan "disrupts normative assumptions around sexuality and gender," as described by Wickens, who similarly finds that *Boy Meets Boy* discards the normative positioning of homophobia as an inevitable part of LGBTQ+ life.[15]

Esther Saxey not only problematises the lack of inclusiveness in the understanding of bisexual coming-out narratives but also approaches the coming-out narrative itself as identity constructing, rather than identity disclosing.[16] Consequently, her study of twentieth-century texts attempts to identify the specific kinds of identities created in these coming-out narratives.[17] This allows the possibility within this project to develop sufficient understanding of the identity being constructed in the post-coming-out narrative, assuming any parity.

Similar to Saxey, Caroline E. Jones' understanding of the components of the lesbian coming-out narrative within Young Adult literature provides an additional lens through which to understand the development of the coming-out narrative tradition. Jones premises her study of twenty-first century lesbian novels upon Saxey's discussion of twentieth-century coming-out narratives.[18] Jones emphasises the role of self-identification within the lesbian coming-out narrative, stating that the protagonists "need to be outed to themselves."[19] This is particularly important in identifying texts that have a self-discovery element to the coming-out narrative, such as *Carry On*. Further, Jones' analysis of such a narrative is informed by Saxey's *Homoplot* as a way of understanding the

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[13] Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth, "Examining Queer Elements," 19–20.
[14] Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth, "Examining Queer Elements," 25; Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 150.
[15] Wickens, "Codes, Silences and Homophobia," 149.
[16] Saxey, *Homoplot*, 2–3.
[17] Ibid., 5.
[18] Jones, "From Homoplot to Progressive Novel," 77–78.
[19] Ibid., 77.

tradition. This is precisely to document how contemporaneous novels have broken with this tradition specific to the lesbian coming-out narrative.[20] Jones' characterises the progressive text as celebrating "individuals and relationships wherein gender and orientation are secondary to personality" and adds that "a protagonist's identity-formation may incorporate sexual identification, but is fundamentally about individual truth, integrity, and joy."[21] This idea of an increasingly progressive interpretation of the coming-out narrative offers an initial approach to what the post-coming-out narrative may entail. The ways in which personality is prioritised over sexual identity in fictional same-sex couples may provide an understanding of post-coming-out narrative's displacement of the concerns and framing devices of the traditional coming-out narrative.

Scholarly Understandings of the Coming-Out Narrative

The coming-out narrative itself is discussed by Cart and Jenkins in their model of Homosexual Visibility texts, which are characterised by the coming out or involuntary outing of a lesbian or gay character.[22] Despite this Homosexual Visibility category being noted as prominent in the history for LGBTQ+ literature, Cart and Jenkins do not move beyond giving brief examples. Further, the texts that Cart and Jenkins discuss are limited to high school, college, and associated adolescent settings, such as the boarding school.[23] While the discussion of these texts remains aware of the setting's contribution to the LGBTQ+ content of the texts, the absence of genre fiction indicates a kind of tradition from which there has been a progression. However, Cart and Jenkins's major work was published in 2006. Although their 2018 publication offers some expansion upon their points from 2006, these additional points remain minimal and serve more to undermine than reinforce their taxonomical understanding of LGBTQ+ Young Adult texts.

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[20] Jones, "From Homoplot to Progressive Novel," 78–79.
[21] Ibid., 79.
[22] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, xix–xx.
[23] Ibid., 9.

Saxey, who also provides examples of the coming-out narratives of gay and lesbian people, broadens her textual base to include autobiographical accounts of the coming-out process.[24] This allows Saxey to build her account of the purpose and utility of the coming-out narrative in a social context. Saxey's discussion of the disclosure process of bisexuality offers considerable promise, as she notes that a key element in these narratives of homosexuality is the complete rejection of opposite-sex attraction.[25] Saxey's understanding implies that the coming-out narrative is a particularly selective mode of storytelling for LGBTQ+ populations, and consideration of what may constitute a bisexual or queer coming-out narrative is needed.[26] As Saxey, in particular, noted, scholarly understandings of the coming-out narrative have remained narrow.[27]

Given the absence of research dedicated to the narratological and technical changes that may have occurred in fiction texts released between 2004 and the present moment, research addressing more recently published texts is required. Further, given Saxey's arguments regarding the possibility of LGBTQ+ storytelling moving beyond the classic tropes of the coming-out narrative, research concerning the possibility of a post-coming-out narrative is needed. This may include a significant contribution of genre fiction to the changing nature of LGBTQ+ storytelling and disclosure. Additionally, if Cart and Jenkins' Homosexual Visibility category, defined by the inclusion of a coming out, is beginning to blur with non-coming-out categories of LGBTQ+ texts, an examination of which tropes of the coming-out narrative continue to influence other categories is needed.

Thesis Overview

The texts under examination in this thesis demonstrate a thematic focus on secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of the insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure. In addition. these texts tend to displace their heteronormative and homophobic content to subtextual elements while appearing

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[24] Saxey, *Homoplot*.
[25] Ibid., 133.
[26] Ibid., 136.
[27] Ibid., 136.

progressive on a surface read. Each of the texts examined in this thesis has an unnervingly acute focus on aspects of secrecy and disclosure attached to LGBTQ+ characters. Further, the same-sex attracted characters in these texts are continually described as simultaneous insiders and outsiders in their own communities, families, and schools. Finally, each LGBTQ+ protagonist in the texts examined undergoes some form of an initiation into a queer culture or logic of queerness blatantly reminiscent of the avunculate tradition of the 1800s not only in its predation on young, inexperienced queer men, but also in its reinforcement of class and generational boundaries.[28] While strides have been made to diversify the characters and kinds of stories told in Young Adult fiction in the twenty-first century, the coming-out narrative remains a narrow point of focus through which almost all LGBTQ+ stories are reflected, refracted, and communicated.

For the purpose of this thesis, we might identify the post-coming-out narrative by its use of some traditional elements of the coming-out narrative without offering a simplistic homosexual or heterosexual identity distinction with no space for nuance between the two categories. *Carry On* and *Wayward Son*'s categorisation as Young Adult fiction as well as fantasy and supernatural fiction make them ideal texts to understand the generic components that have contributed to this development because of their mirrored depictions of homosexuality and vampirism. Further, Simon Snow's lack of distancing from his past heterosexuality may contribute to what Saxey considers as the problem of defining what a bisexual coming-out story may entail.[29] Additionally, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* provides an example of how the tropes of secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of the insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure combine in the quintessential coming-out narrative. Further, the *Captive Prince* trilogy, with its focus upon a bisexual protagonist, may offer something of bisexual inclusion in the post-coming-out narrative. Finally, *Welcome to Night Vale* offers a textual exemplar of what queer visibility looks like when the coming-out moment is not required of any character.

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[28] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 59.
[29] Saxey, *Homoplot*, 133.

Chapter 1 "Simon vs the Coming-Out Narrative" will address the most conceptually simple and straight-forward text, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) by Becky Albertalli. On the surface this text appears to be a quintessential coming-out narrative, focusing upon Simon Spier and his reactions to being outed by a fellow classmate and, eventually, his coming out to his friends and family. However, while it remains important for Simon and the plot of the novel, the coming-out comes to a climactic point of dramatic tension only in the middle of the text. The following sections of the text focus not on the coming-out but instead on the reaction of Simon's community to such knowledge. Further, the final dramatic climax of the text revolves around Simon beginning a romantic relationship with another boy. As such, this novel reconfigures the importance of the coming-out moment in the coming-out narrative by providing additional details as to how an out LGBTQ+ protagonist interacts with those around them. This follows the general trend noted by Jenkins and Cart that many texts are now following up on the consequences of being out for LGBTQ+ characters.[30]

Similarly, Chapter 2 "Simon Snow and Radical Ignorance" focuses on the way in which Rowell's *Carry On* (2015) and *Wayward Son* (2019) displaces the coming-out moment in the story. Rather than spotlighting the protagonist's discovery of his homosexuality, Rowell places more dramatic tension upon Baz disclosing his vampirism. In this way, Rowell transfers the shame and stigma traditionally attached to homosexuality to vampirism. Simon's coming-out narrative focuses upon him discovering his same-sex attraction to his roommate and rival Baz. However, instead of Rowell depicting this discovery as a clean break from a prior heterosexual identity, Simon remains doubtful about adopting a distinctly gay identity. Conversely, Baz begins the text comfortable in his identity as queer, but with the express wish of keeping his status as a vampire hidden from others, especially Simon. The critical moment of disclosure for Baz, then, becomes the one in which Simon comes to terms with Baz's vampirism, not the one in which Simon comes to understand Baz's—and by extension his own—queerness. This mirroring effect between Baz's vampirism and Simon's

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[30] Jenkins and Cart, *Representing the Rainbow*, 131.

homosexuality has significant and far-reaching consequences for depictions of homosexuality in the novels because of latent associations of infection, transmissibility and predation.

Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* offers an insight into the fragmented and complicated nature the idea of the normal has with same-sex attraction and unconventional gender expressions. Additionally, C. S. Pacat's *Captive Prince* trilogy offers a critique of heteronormativity through Pacat's careful construction of a story world where homosexuality is normal and heterosexuality is strange. Within Chapter 3 "Normalising the Coming-Out Narrative," this thesis aims to demonstrate how Levithan and Pacat construct differing contexts for queerness and hence fundamentally change the structure, trajectory and meaning of any disclosure of same-sex attraction through their inclusion of bisexual characters in their texts. Levithan's text offers an egalitarian worldview, in which homosexuality is assimilated into the norm. Conversely, Pacat's work demonstrates the construction of sexual norms and taboos as being historically and culturally specific and liable to change over time. In the former text, knowledge of characters' homosexuality is met with a radical indifference, if not support. In the latter texts, however, the supremacy of the taboo on heterosexuality outside of marriage leads the protagonist, Damen, to carefully deliver information relating to his past heterosexual behaviour in piecemeal and deliberate ways, similar to a tentative step out of the homosexual closet. The norms of Pacat's world still hold consequences for how characters behave as in heteronormative texts, but the resulting silencing of heterosexuality remains a radical departure from previous LGBTQ+ literature.

Chapter 4 "Queer Logics" will discuss the fiction podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* and the way in which it constructs a radical queer visibility to each and every LGBTQ+ character in the series without ever requiring a coming-out moment from any of them. Typically, the language surrounding the disclosure of same-sex attraction is specific, detailing either the gender of object choice for the subject or some variety of LGBTQ+ identity. Contrary to this, the focal romantic relationship within *Welcome to Night Vale*, between the community radio host Cecil and new scientist in town Carlos, is permitted to simply exist in its own right in the community of Night

Vale without either Cecil or Carlos disclosing their specific identities, labelled or otherwise. Rather than Cecil narrating the moment in which he and Carlos fully disclose their attraction to other men—usually a prerequisite for a same-sex relationship—he narrates their first date. He does so to his entire community through the medium of local radio. Hence, his and Carlos' queerness is rendered hyper-visible by his lack of distinction between the public and private, though they both are never required to categorise their same-sex attraction.

Throughout the texts examined in this thesis there is a shared set of narrative tropes: secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of the insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure. This applies equally to quintessential coming-out novels like *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* as to less normative texts such as *Welcome to Night Vale*. Further, in exploring these narrative tropes, each of the texts challenges certain aspects of the coming-out narrative, such as in the displacement of stigma onto vampirism in *Carry On* and *Wayward Son*. Finally, this thesis' exploration of what might be a post-coming-out narrative has instead found the extent to which LGBTQ+ texts are beholden to the characters' needs to come out.

Chapter 1

Simon vs the Coming-Out Narrative

Introduction and Context

Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) is a quintessential example of the coming-out narrative in its depiction of the coming-out process of its protagonist Simon. Simon, over the course of the novel, comes out to his friends and family as gay. Other examples of the coming-out narrative include John Green and David Levithan's *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010), Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2014) and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). However, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is similarly quintessential in highlighting not only the narrative elements of the coming-out novel as a genre, but also the key thematic elements that inform and necessarily govern the coming-out narrative. Simon Spier, a gay seventeen-year-old living with his family in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, has been emailing another gay boy at his high school who uses the codename Blue to maintain anonymity. The main dramatic tension of the first half of the novel revolves around Martin, an acquaintance, who blackmails Simon with the threat of outing him as gay. As the story unfolds, Simon gradually tells his friends and family that he is gay. However, he is forced to accelerate his disclosure upon being outed by Martin online for the whole school to access. This characterises homophobia as an inevitability for gay teenagers. The novel does not close upon the point of homosexual disclosure, though, in contrast with coming-out narratives preceding it. Instead, it continues to depict the interpersonal difficulties and support Simon experiences from his friends and authority figures in his high school. Within this novel there are three key components that form into the quintessential coming-out narrative: secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of the insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure.

Throughout the novel's depiction of Simon's coming out there is a consistent emphasis on the kinds of disclosures Simon is permitted to have as someone involuntarily outed. This places an

emphasis equally on secrecy and disclosure, both key elements of the coming-out narrative. Further, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* explores how the protagonist navigates the differing levels of acceptance and rejection he experiences. The protagonist's navigation between acceptance and rejection both before and after he comes out exemplifies the way in which the coming-out narrative emphasises the simultaneous insider and outsider status occupied by the queer person in any community as theorised in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Finally, Albertalli depicts a distinctly urban LGBTQ+ community to which the protagonist is introduced. This community offers not only an acceptance of Simon as gay, but also a rejection of him based on his age and a model of queerness into which he does not fit. This failure to welcome Simon into the only queer community to which he has access draws attention to the role community initiation—and who initiates queer characters into a community—has in the coming-out narrative structure. These three elements of secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of the insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure all combine in the coming-out narrative told in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

Secrecy and Disclosure: The Coming-Out Moment and Agency

Simon Spier begins his story closeted to his friends, family, and community, but not to himself. According to Jenkins and Cart, texts that begin from the premise of a closeted individual are classified as Homosexual Visibility. In the context of comparing the number of books published that meet their taxonomical criteria, Jenkins and Cart state that "HV (homosexual visibility) novels" are "stories in which the character is closeted at the start of the story."[1] Moreover, Jenkins and Cart note that *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is a "superlative gay romance [that] reflects the new and heartening reality that coming out and being out no longer need to be deeply traumatic or to invite havoc in their wake."[2] Hence, according to Jenkins and Cart, this novel belongs in two genres: gay romance and the coming-out narrative. Cart and Jenkins also highlight the prominence

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[1] Jenkins and Cart, *Representing the Rainbow*, 126.
[2] Ibid., 135.

of heterosexual protagonists in LGBTQ+ texts published in the 1980s, leading to a tendency to prescribe behaviours for heterosexuals rather than depict LGBTQ+ characters in their own words.[3] Notably, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* diverges from this trend.

The way in which *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* uses first-person narration is reflective of how Esther Saxey sees the role of the first-person narration in the coming-out narrative. She describes the coming-out narrative as:

> … often presented as autobiography. It almost invariably depicts a young gay protagonist as the expert on his own situation, speaking the truth about his life, which he has learned from experience rather than education. As a sign of this seizure of authority, the vast majority of these texts are written in the first person.[4]

Saxey conveys the potential for the disclosure of homosexuality and the narrative of that disclosure to be potent tools of LGBTQ+ empowerment. This leads to an interpretation of the use of first-person narrative as being a progressive step in representing LGBTQ+ characters in their own terms.

While this novel's use of first-person narration is in line with the trend Saxey identifies across more contemporary coming-out narratives, Simon's classmate, Martin, hijacks the authority to determine whether Simon being gay is still a "big thing," in his terms, or not. This question of agency and authority over the narrative of homosexuality is highlighted by Simon in his confrontation with Martin, a confrontation in which Simon seizes some of his authority back. It is important to note, as Simon also notes, that the ultimate right to decide the manner in which he comes out was taken from him.[5] Of course, the novel is written from Simon's first-person perspective, as have been many previous queer novels of adolescence. Martin's assumption of authority to determine if being gay is still a "big thing" or not serves to highlight and reinforce the right Simon Spier had, prior to Martin's violation, to determine how big of an issue his

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[3] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 51.
[4] Saxey, *Homoplot*, 36.
[5] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 196.

homosexuality would be. This is a radical affirmation for gay teens like Simon to tell their own stories.

Similarly to Saxey, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies that the knowledge/ignorance dialectic that governs the homosexual closet positions, perhaps unexpectedly, the ignorant party in the greater position of power at the moment of homosexual disclosure.[6] As such, in the moment of coming out the LGBTQ+ character who discloses their identity is simultaneously in a position of authority on the subject of their homosexuality via a first-person narration such as Simon's but also does not have the power to "define the terms of the exchange."[7] Simon Spier rushes to come out to his family before Martin's outing of him makes its way from the school community to Simon's home environment. In coming out before he is ready, Simon is doubly disadvantaged in his inability to control the information. As such, this allows us to better understand the power dynamics of the coming-out narrative and explore approximately why a queer character about to come out, despite having the benefit of knowledge, may in fact be at a disadvantage in the moment of disclosure.

Jenkins and Cart identify that *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* "reflects the new and heartening reality that coming out and being out no longer need to be *deeply traumatic* or to *invite havoc* in their wake."[8] However, I contest their statement that the coming-out moment in this text is not deeply traumatic. Martin blackmails Simon throughout the first half of the novel with evidence of his homosexuality and eventually outs him to their school community, not only in an insulting manner but also without his consent. When Martin attempts to apologise for his actions, he displays his ignorance that he "just seriously didn't think it would be such a big thing."[9] Simon's response displays his anger and expresses his trauma. He makes it plain that Martin's thoughts on the matter are entirely irrelevant:

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[6] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4.
[7] Ibid., 4.
[8] Jenkins and Cart, *Representing the Rainbow*, 135. Emphasis added.
[9] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 196.

You don't get to say it's not a big thing. … I'm supposed to decide when and where and who knows and how I want to say it. … *you took that from me*.[10]

After Simon walks away from a speechless Martin he sits in his car and cries. Simon characterises Martin's actions as a theft, as evidenced by the word choice "took", and he registers the impossibility of now recovering what Martin has illegitimately taken. To say that the process of being outed was not traumatic for Simon, as Jenkins and Cart suggest, would be to deny the feelings of personal and permanent violation that he feels in this confrontation with Martin.

The impact of Matin's appropriation of Simon's coming-out moment is reflected in the statement:

It's clearly my moment.

Though, if this moment really belonged to me, it wouldn't be happening. Not now, I mean. Not yet.[11]

It is clear from the outset that even though Simon did intend to tell his parents that he is gay, the timing is not of his choosing. Simon's confrontation with Martin centres on the question of who, in Sedgwick's terms, has the authority to "define the terms of the exchange" of coming out.[12] The timing of Simon's coming out is similarly determined by who determines the nature of the exchange of homosexual disclosure. The question of who the moment belongs to becomes paramount to understanding who is in power in this moment. While Martin may be said to be an invisible presence in this moment, Simon's parents are also determining the terms of the exchange because of their dominance in conversation. Simon bounces his disclosure off his father's joking about him being pregnant:

"I'm pregnant," I say.

"I thought so, kid," says my dad. "You're glowing."

I look him in the eye. "Really, though. I'm gay."[13]

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[10] Ibid., 196. Emphasis added.
[11] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 163.
[12] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4.
[13] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 163.

Immediately prior to this moment, Simon's father had guessed, among the ridiculous notion that he might be pregnant, that Simon was gay. The terms of this exchange are clear: this is a joke and it is as impossible for Simon to be gay as it is for him to be pregnant. Further, the only context for understanding homosexuality in the Spier household is in the father's continuous use of gender and sexuality stereotypes in his humour. While it may seem a light-hearted characterisation of an otherwise marginal parental figure, the effect it has upon Simon's perception of his own homosexuality is damning. In Simon's family, homosexuality or gay men are mentioned directly or indirectly only as something to be laughed at. Similarly, the spectre of other stereotypes of Young Adult fiction haunt this scene: teenage pregnancy, slut shaming, and various other heterosexist narratives of adolescence. Simon must then translate his sexual identity with these terms in mind. Regardless of any single queer character's standing in a queer community, their knowledge of themselves or the ease with which they regard their homosexuality, they must translate their disclosure to a form that their audience—implicitly straight—can comprehend. This translation process is made obvious also in Simon's direct coming-out to his parents.

This problem of being unable to define the conditions into which a character comes out may indeed be the problem of a heteronormative family space more generally, but it is certainly telling that the positive critical and scholarly reception of this novel has largely chosen to ignore the potential trauma of Simon being outed and then having his rushed coming-out to his family presented in the context of a joke. The agency that Simon highlights to Martin as that which was taken from him, to choose who knows and how they know, is missing from the moment he comes out to his parents. However, given Simon's comments regarding how typical his family's reaction is to his coming out, it can be argued that Simon did not have all that much agency as a closeted gay teenager and Martin only stole what little remained.[14]

Simon is further disempowered in his high school space by Martin outing him. Though not unexpected, Simon experiences some very explicitly homophobic bullying from people outside of

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[14] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 164.

his friend circle, though his circle of friends and acquaintances are either supportive or silent on the matter. Although the homophobia appears to be contained to a few key incidents, the consequences are still inevitably felt. Rather than directly challenge homophobic rhetoric and assumptions, Albertalli's text largely leaves homophobia intact as an inevitability for characters who come out, a tendency Thomas Crisp identifies as particularly problematic. Crisp states that there remain "textual constructions that reinforce a view of gay people as outcasts subject to being the targets of physical abuse and verbal harassment," in even progressive texts that depict LGBTQ+ youth triumphing over homophobic circumstances.[15] Allowing homophobia to remain an obstacle for queer characters to overcome enables that same homophobia to determine the context of any coming out and hence grants fictional homophobes the authority to narrate queer lives.

Insider/Outsider Status: Geographies of Queerness

As Simon Spier navigates different social spaces, his disclosure of his sexuality changes depending upon the space. The different spaces Simon transverses throughout the novel grant him differing power positions. The setting of the novel being in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia is also worth noting for the potential for stereotypes to be applied to the American South. Keys, Marshall and Pini establish that young adult texts "highlight that rural communities can be simultaneously oppressive and empowering environments for queer youth, and that experiences of inclusion/exclusion can shift for them as they move across spaces such as the home, church, school and community."[16] Albertalli adopts the common perception of the South as a potentially unwelcoming space for the LGBTQ+ community. Jaime Harker describes this tendency to depict the South as ignorant of its LGBTQ+ populations, stating that "'the South' has always been an imagined community, based in wish fulfillment and aspiration, that depends upon deliberate unlooking … It ignores queer southern communities in towns both small and large."[17] Indeed,

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[15] Crisp, "From Romance to Magical Realism," 336.
[16] Keys, Marshall and Pini, "Representations of Rural Lesbian Lives in Young Adult Fiction." 363.
[17] Harker, *Lesbian South*, 140.

Albertalli, in depicting the only LGBTQ+ space in the novel be a bar/restaurant in Atlanta proper, contributes to this distinct idea of a carefully delimited queer community that is represented as urban. As such, Simon Spier experiences vastly different levels of inclusion across these social spaces.

The traditional coming-out story would be considered incomplete if there were no references to the person who comes out either discovering or moving to a queer community, following the trend of gay teenagers coming out to their parents and promptly moving to New York. This queer community, of course, can manifest itself in various ways in Young Adult literature. One example of comparing social spaces and communities is in the online space Simon shares in his emails with Blue in contrast to his school environment.

It is because Martin outs Simon in an online space designed for students of their shared high school that the outing entangles so many other social spaces. This is the simultaneous acceptance/rejection effect that Keys, Marshall and Pini highlight amongst rural LGBTQ+ youth as teenagers occupy vastly different social spaces.[18] Not only are Simon's social spaces simultaneously empowering and disenfranchising, the spaces themselves overlap in ways not previously seen prior to the prominence of social media. Novels such as *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* that deal with how people interact with social media, in particular, begin to chart an entirely new kind of social space for the closeted individual. We must remember also that under the cloak of anonymity Simon was out to Blue/Bram prior to the beginning of the story. Hence, online social spaces offer both an enfranchisement of queer youth in the protection of personal privacy, but also enable an equally anonymous homophobic rhetoric which poses no negative consequences for the perpetrators. Further, it is integral to note how localised the online space appears to be in this novel, focused through the anonymisation of the high school's students. By depicting a localised online space, Albertalli's text presents an anonymised online face to people Simon interacts with on a daily basis.

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[18] Keys, Marshall and Pini, "Representations of Rural Lesbian Lives in Young Adult Fiction." 363.

Gay–Straight Alliances are common in high school settings, such as the one featured in David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*. However, to contrast the homophobic response of Simon's suburbanite school peers, Albertalli focuses her sole depiction of queer community on a gay restaurant and bar in Atlanta proper, notably open to those underage, thereby allowing Simon to interact with LGBTQ+ people who are living openly as same-sex attracted. Rather than experiencing feelings of relief and commonality with the queer folk there, Simon becomes increasingly off-kilter as the alcohol he consumes impacts him harder and faster than he anticipates. Highlighting the discontinuity between his real, heteronormative, life and the way the people around him are presenting themselves, Simon explicitly states, "This is so totally different from my normal."[19] What Simon considers normal, therefore, is being around his exclusively heterosexual or closeted friends, as is the case with Bram, for instance.

While Simon, Abby and Nick are all around seventeen, the front-of-house staff of the restaurant and the other patrons who Simon first sees are likely college-aged and over, around twenty-one to twenty-five. With an increase in age comes an increase in experience. Simon, however, is experiencing something of a culture shock upon entering. Similarly, the patrons and staff alike appear to be far more comfortable in their LGBTQ+ identifications than Simon, recently outed before he was prepared. Hence, though Albertalli presents a cohesive and visible queer community within which Simon might find fellowship, Simon is at a significant disadvantage while he experiences the sensory overload of the bar/restaurant. The disadvantage that Simon faces is in having a burgeoning sexual identity as a gay teenager as opposed to the other patrons, who have had more time and experience to aid in their identity development, including coming out.

Queer Initiations: So Totally Different from My Normal

The scene in which Simon is introduced into his local queer community and the ones following it serve not just as a reassurance of Albertalli's that Simon is supported by his friends Abby and Nick

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[19] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 229.

in a real show of alliance. Instead, Albertalli briefly introduces the initiator figure in the context of a queer community only really depicted as drunk and stereotypically effeminate in this text. This initiator role has long been a figure of social anxieties concerning the indoctrination of young people into queer communities and lifestyles. Simonsen, by way of Sedgwick, identifies the Magician of Oscar Wilde's "The Star-Child" to be a deliberately distanced metaphor of the pederast who becomes infatuated with a beloved youth.[20] Another example is Winterson's depiction of being taken under the wing of her elders in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. This initiator role serves as a confirmation, usually for the protagonist, that they are in fact one of them, one of the community, and not alone in their struggles. Sedgwick makes this connection clear in her discussion of the avunculate within the context in which Oscar Wilde was writing, describing "uncle" as "a common term for a male protector in a sexual relation involving economic sponsorship, and, typically, class and age transitivity."[21] Sedgwick continues her discussion of the avunculate specifically in regard to queer possibilities, with queer aunts and uncles often being the first demonstration of queer possibilities to children.[22]

Peter, the man who plies Simon with drinks and attempts to introduce him to other people at the bar area of the restaurant, becomes the initiator of Simon into the LGBTQ+ community to which he is a part. Simon Spier, however, is not only ushered into the bar section of the restaurant by Peter, but also escorted back out towards Nick and Abby in the restaurant. Peter serves as a temporary yet powerful destabilising force in Simon's young life and, rather than serving as a confirmation to Simon that he belongs with Peter and his friends, he is instead encouraged to act his age:

> [Peter] helps me up and holds my hand, and the room keeps lurching, but I end up in a
> chair somehow. … "Good-bye, cute Simon," says Peter, hugging me, and then kissing
> me on the forehead. "Go be seventeen."[23]

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[20] Simonsen, "Dark Avunculate," 23–24.
[21] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 59.
[22] Ibid., 63.
[23] Albertalli, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 232.

Alcohol consumption aside, Peter very literally ushers Simon out of the more adult space of the bar and Peter's circle of friends and back to Simon's heterosexual friends and the more family-friendly restaurant. In this way, Peter ushers Simon back to his distinctly heteronormative adolescence. From this outcome, however, we can see the kinds of age restrictions not just legally, but also socially imposed on queer spaces and queer communities. Albertalli highlights, through Peter and the bar/restaurant in Atlanta, the ways in which those in the LGBTQ+ community police their own spaces, excluding those who do not conform to that community's standards of queerness or identity. Had Simon been a junior in college rather than in high school, however, the outcome of the night may have been different and rather more sexually charged.

Further, Simon's brief introduction to Peter at the bar destabilises Simon's self-perception and identity. While riding the high of alcohol and community acceptance, Simon perceives himself as belonging to this completely new group of people. However, with the instruction to "[go] be seventeen" from Peter, Simon comes back down to his heteronormative reality. While on the one hand, Peter may be said to recognise that Simon was not ready to come out when he was outed online. On the other hand, this is an opposing position from the avunculate tradition of the paederast potentially taking advantage of a queer youth's inexperience.

Coda

Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda and its emphasis on acceptance of the LGBTQ+ protagonist and the romance plot that might otherwise be typical of a Young Adult text displays the groundwork of the ways in which the coming-out narrative is shifting in both content and form. Not only is Albertalli's text indicative of the newer trends of displaying acceptance of the queer characters in a text and narrating the characters' development beyond the point of coming out, but it is also indicative of the extent to which the previous trends, such as the figure of the initiator into the LGBTQ+ community, continue to influence and be included in such texts. Albertalli presents a novel in which the gay protagonist finds acceptance in his friends and family, and begins a romantic

relationship with another boy. This is clearly a positive message for both closeted LGBTQ+ youth seeking hope and heterosexual youth who may be unaware of how to demonstrate support for their LGBTQ+ cohort in a school setting.

While Albertalli offers a view of narrative change, she ultimately does not offer a complete or total transformation of the genre, allowing the heteronormativity necessitating the coming-out narrative to remain unquestioned. Albertalli's vision of acceptance is ultimately not transformative in its basic premises. The inability for this novel to escape heteronormativity aligns with Crisp's idea of homophobia being a perpetual foil against which LGBTQ+ youth must prevail.[24] Simon is involuntarily outed to his entire high school, for a start. He is berated with the stereotypical slurs from equally stereotypical jocks on various sports teams in the school. The agency to narrate his own life was taken from Simon, aligning the novel with what Saxey identifies as a problematic tradition of heterosexuals assuming the agency of defining queer lives.[25] Most of Simon's interactions with Martin involve him having to school Martin into far more accurate or realistic views about what it is like to be gay in America, and particularly in Georgia, during their time. Even though Martin apologises, he has to be coddled into that position by Simon who is stuck perpetually as the one reaching out and correcting false assumptions. Although Jenkins and Cart are right to argue that this text, by sheer comparison, can provide a positive message for its readers, it is important to remember that this positive message is mired in depictions of homophobia and stereotyping that ultimately shadow Simon in the proceeding parts of the text.

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[24] Crisp, "From Romance to Magic Realism," 336.
[25] Saxey, *Homoplot*, 36.

Simon Snow and Radical Ignorance

Introduction and Context

Rainbow Rowell presents readers of *Carry On* (2015) and its sequel *Wayward Son* (2019) with a protagonist who has not been permitted to have a stable knowledge of his own self.[1] Instead, Simon Snow has taken himself at others' words: he is the most powerful Mage, the saviour of the world against the Insidious Humdrum and, finally, the one who will be the death of Baz, his roommate and begrudging vampire. Rowell implements alternating first-perspective perspectives for four of her key characters: Simon, Baz, Penelope, and Agatha. Throughout *Carry On*, Simon's knowledge of his world unravels, including his assumptions about his supposed heterosexuality and destiny of marrying Agatha after school. Similarly, Baz's knowledge of who he is as a vampire unravels as he enters the wild unknown of the United States in *Wayward Son*. Baz gradually finds a middle ground between the monster he thinks he is and the magician others assume him to be. As Simon's and Baz's presumptive knowledge of themselves proves an amalgamation of unknown ignorances, the disclosure of their secrets becomes complicated, unsure, and somewhat unarticulated. In turn, the presentation of Simon Snow's coming out—involving a radical doubt focused upon whether he is gay or simply attracted to Baz—destabilises the certainty highlighted in the traditional coming-out narrative. Unlike Simon Spier, for whom knowledge of himself is innate and articulated, Simon Snow enables others to determine his identity. Further, an in-depth discussion of how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorises the knowledge/ignorance distinction, which Sedgwick claims governs all knowledge of sexuality, but homosexuality in particular, will be provided. Simon's own experience of his knowledge will be analysed in light of Sedgwick's understanding of this knowledge/ignorance dichotomy and its governance of sexual knowledge. Additionally, an analysis of the coming-out moment proper between Simon and Baz—as the text's first instance of a queer

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[1] Rowell is set to release the third novel in the series, *Any Way the Wind Blows*, on July 6, 2021.

disclosure—will lead into the exploration of doubt within the text relating to knowledge of Simon

Snow's homosexuality. The discussion will then focus upon Baz and his experiences of self-

knowledge, which have less to do with his homosexuality, of which he is certain, and more to do

with his self-ignorance regarding his vampirism and its precise operations. With Baz's induction

into the vampire culture in Las Vegas in *Wayward Son* comes a realisation of how little he knows

about vampirism and vampires, and this undermines his certainty about vampires'—and in turn his

own—monstrous nature. The depiction of vampirism within a queer character allows Rowell to

construct a mirroring affect between homosexuality and vampirism in each novel. This also

demonstrates the deep uncertainty that can permeate any realisation of an ignorance, not only a

realisation of unarticulated homosexuality. However, this also creates a mirroring between the

monstrous aspects of vampirism and homophobic understandings of male homosexuality. This, in

effect, displaces internalised homophobia onto an internalised phobia of vampirism in Baz, granting

him a shame common to LGBTQ+ characters.

In their 2018 update of *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, which addresses the kinds of

representations in LGBTQ+ literature for young people, Jenkins and Cart consider *Carry On* as part

of their Homosexual Visibility (HV) category. HV texts, according to Jenkins and Cart, highlight

issues LGBTQ+ people face, most commonly through the coming-out narrative.[2] Jenkins and Cart

highlight a shift in narrative structure within texts published from 2006 to 2018, whereby texts

move their focus from the coming out to the consequences of the coming out.[3] They also

specifically state of Simon in *Carry On*:

> Whether he is gay or not (and it becomes increasingly obvious to readers that he is) …
>
> Simon and Baz begin a relationship … that is at once tender and stormy and, for the
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> reader, deeply satisfying. It is also secret until, at the book's end, at a school party, the
>
> two come out, as they dance together and Simon kisses Baz.[4]

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[2] Jenkins and Cart, *Reading the Rainbow*, xiv. Jenkins and Cart, *Reading the Rainbow*, 126.
[3] Jenkins and Cart, *Reading the Rainbow*, 131.
[4] Ibid., 136.

Jenkins and Cart establish Rowell's work as within this new tradition of looking past—at least chronologically—the coming-out scene to display a queer future after coming out occurs. Although I would contest the assumption that it is obvious to readers that Simon is gay, as opposed to bisexual or more broadly queer, the fact that Jenkins and Cart read the community coming out moment as within the epilogue of the first novel supports their view that Rowell adopts many of the narrative techniques of this trend. Beyond a simple alteration in chronology, however, Rowell's novels are emblematic of a slippage in these newer texts between categorical descriptions of the coming-out narrative; that is a blurring of the coming-out narrative with assimilationist narratives of acceptance.

The Knowledge/Ignorance Dialectic

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* outlines a way of thinking about the homosexual closet, specifically within the struggle between knowledge and ignorance. Sedgwick offers a divergence from earlier thinking on theories of sexuality and gender by stating that "perhaps there exists instead a plethora of *ignorances*, and we may begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of their human production and distribution."[5] Further, Sedgwick undertakes a more deconstructive examination of what these terms mean and how these concepts operate in the sphere of power, while refraining from providing a stable definition of knowledge. She continues her point in relation to knowledge, stating:

> Insofar as ignorance is ignorance *of* a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth.[6]

Hence, instead of relying on unexamined categories of knowledge or ignorance, Sedgwick offers a critical lens through which we can understand the interplay between the two ideas and how they

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[5] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8. Emphasis in original.
[6] Ibid., 8. Emphasis in original.

contribute to social power dynamics, such as towards prevailing homophobia and the existence of the homosexual closet. As such, the homosexual closet may be considered a space of a contained knowledge that heterosexual others may not realise is an unknown knowledge.

Sedgwick maintains throughout the introduction to *Epistemology* a Foucauldian reading that systems of truth—determining what is true, when it is true, and who has access to this truth—are productive in their capacity to create knowledges or ignorances and, in turn, these knowledges and ignorances are productive in their own right. In the instance of the homosexual closet, there is a dual functioning of knowledge and ignorance. In regard to ignorance, a person may be considered in the closet if they have yet to define or ascertain their same-sex attraction, providing it is there yet unnamed. Further, once knowledge of same-sex attraction enters the circulation of the subject—the closeted individual—the power that comes with ignorance reveals itself, most prominently in internalised homophobia. Sedgwick describes that both knowledges and ignorances "circulate as part of particular regimes of truth," prompting the closeted individual to undergo a concealment of their same-sex attraction in order to prevent this circulation.[7] It should be noted, of course, that an ignorance can also be an ignorance of an ignorance in the sense that one in a state of ignorance cannot fully grasp the approximate amount of knowledge that one *does not* have or is unaware of existing. In this sense the lines blur between knowledge and ignorance in Sedgwick's terms. Further, due to the transitory and fluid nature of regimes of truth, the knowledge/ignorance dichotomy creates a cycle of consistently gaining knowledge—either of a knowledge or of an ignorance—and having that knowledge dismantled, dismissed or undermined and necessitating the further collection of knowledge.

Halperin argues that Sedgwick's work on revealing the knowledge/ignorance power balance—or imbalance—governing modern considerations of sexuality and homosexuality in particular becomes useful in articulating precisely what is newly contained in the modern system, rather than what might overlap with older models of sexual identity.[8] Further, Halperin responds to

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[7] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8.
[8] Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, 109.

Sedgwick's deconstructive mode of thinking throughout *Epistemology* in considering that the differing historical models of conceptualising sexual identity bleed into one another in a way that encourages a reading of multiplicity rather than an either/or description of identity.[9] As such, fictional works featuring LGBTQ+ characters have not only a range of ways of thinking of queerness, but these ways of thinking need not be defined by opposition.

Systems of Knowing and Unknowing

The system of knowledge upon which Simon formulates the ideas he holds about himself in *Carry On* operates as a system of knowledge only under a particular regime of truth, in Sedgwick's terminology. Simon gathers the aggregate of his self-knowledge not from his experiences or self-reflection, but through the words of others. Specifically, he relies on the Mage to define the terms of his identity. Simon states of the Mage, "It's like, when he's there, I almost buy into what he's always told me—that I'm the most powerful magician the World of Mages has ever known."[10] This establishes the Mage as Simon's link to the knowledge of the prophecy, which has been interpreted as him being a communal saviour. Additionally, Simon's wording of this reflection indicates a kind of complicity in allowing the Mage to be Simon's sole source of information on the prophecy, and therefore on Simon as well. Further, Simon recites the prophecy that supposedly predicts his existence and power and reflects, "The Greatest Mage. The Chosen One. The Power of Powers. | It still feels strange believing that that bloke's supposed to be me. But I can't deny it, either."[11] This introduces both his acceptance of this knowledge and his inherent doubts about it in application to himself. This allows Rowell to present both the piece of knowledge—in this instance the wording of the prophecy—alongside both Simon's and his community's interpretations of that wording, hence demonstrating that the knowledge Simon gathers about himself is not only primary information such as the prophecy, but also how others have interpreted it. In this way Simon's

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[9] Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, 109.
[10] Rowell, *Carry On*, 17.
[11] Ibid., 34.

knowledge of himself is not based on action or experience, but is instead refracted through others' interpretations of both Simon and the prophecy that foretells his heroic deeds.

Simon's system of knowledge for the people around him, based largely upon his own personal experiences, similarly runs into some serious issues when encountering Baz. Simon hits the mark with his suspicion of Baz being a vampire. Further, there is no doubting that the Old Families are deeply suspicious of Simon's power and the influence the Mage has over him. Not only a member of the Old Family community but also the heir to the Pitch line and the previous Mage's heir, Baz is both privy to and shares many of those sentiments. However, the antagonism between Baz and Simon stems not from this knowledge of how different they are from one another—and the effects of sharing a room for their entire schooling—but instead from misplaced sexual and romantic frustration, particularly after their fifth year at Watford. Baz reflects on his time after realising he was in love with Simon: "Those were my fifth-year fantasies: kisses and blood and Snow ridding the world of me."[12] This operates on assumptions regarding Simon's antagonism towards Baz being pure hatred and not underlying sexual or romantic tension. The biggest assumption on the part of Baz that operates in this instance is that Simon is exclusively heterosexual. Though queer himself, Baz accepts the heteronormative assumption that Simon must be straight—at least until proven gay or somewhere in between—and assumes his ignorance regarding Simon's orientation is, in fact, a knowledge.

Baz's acceptance of the heteronormative frame of mind of his community is not a unique phenomenon. It is what Wittig identifies as an example of "the straight mind":

> the straight mind develops a totalizing interpretation of history, social reality, culture, language, and all the subjective phenomena at the same time. I can only underline the oppressive character that the straight mind is clothed in its tendency to immediately universalize its production of concepts into general laws which claim to hold true for all societies, all epochs, *all individuals*.[13]

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[12] Rowell, *Carry On*, 201.
[13] Wittig, *Straight Mind,* 27. Emphasis added.

It is this last element that Baz demonstrates. Instead of inviting the possibility of Simon also being attracted to men, Baz takes Simon's one heterosexual relationship with Agatha as evidence of Simon's heterosexuality. Heteronormativity, in this instance, also applies to the bisexual individual and bisexual experience in enforcing a binary distinction to sexual identities and practices. Until such a time as Baz hears otherwise from Simon, Baz is operating in a heteronormative frame in assuming that Simon is exclusively attracted to women. As such, through his heteronormative assumptions, Baz mirrors the complicity Simon displays regarding Simon's self-knowledge in taking the views of others to be a given.

In order for the romance plot between Simon and Baz to gain traction, then, a clear declaration of same-sex attraction is required of Simon. Simply, he must come out in one way or another in order to shake Baz's heteronormative assumptions. Bittner highlights how common it is for a coming out moment to be the only point of queer incursion into a heteronormative story:

> In the case of YA especially, heterosexuality is privileged to the point where straightness is the norm unless otherwise indicated by a character's coming out, through the make-up of a relationship, or through textual cues that rely on stereotypical actions or behaviours.[14]

Bittner's point suggests that the coming-out moment and narrative are the only vehicles for visible, meaningful representation of non-heterosexuality in texts aimed at a younger audience. Further, Bittner suggests that the genre of Young Adult fiction as a whole adopts a heteronormative frame for understanding its characters. Bittner presents a caveat to this statement, stating: "Of course, there are possibilities for reading queerness into characters who are not otherwise described, but this requires that readers make the effort to read in queerer ways from the start."[15] Hence, Bittner highlights the heteronormative frame of typical reading practices and writing practices. What this queerer reading practice might look like, especially for a younger audience, is worthy of further consideration.

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[14] Bittner, "(Im)Possibility and (In)Visibility," 202.
[15] Ibid., 202.

Coming Out

The coming out moment itself is of considerable importance when considering approximately what has altered in the twenty-first century in terms of representing the disclosure process of homosexuality, bisexuality, and otherwise unspecified queerness in fiction. Plummer states of the coming-out process:

> Coming out was the critical life experience of lesbians and gays during the 1970s and 1980s … and it can be seen to capture four critical processes (which are *not* in a fixed sequence): *coming out personally …*; *coming out privately …*; *coming out publicly …*; and finally *coming out politically*.[16]

Plummer's idea of a multiple-stage process is compelling when examining Young Adult texts. This is particularly of interest when considering the audience of these Young Adult fictional comings out as including same-age peers, parents, and the school community. Of course, the critical insight Plummer offers here is the idea of coming out to oneself, or discovering one's same-sex attraction and naming it as such to oneself.[17] In Sedgwick's terms, this is the point at which an assumed knowledge of the self transforms into an actual, realised knowledge. The scene immediately prior to the coming-out moment within *Carry On* displays multiple stages in the process Plummer identifies, notably when Simon pauses in the self-disclosure stage while Baz is coming out, in Plummer's wording, privately to Simon. Indeed, Baz's disclosure to Simon that he is a vampire takes place privately despite it having already been largely public knowledge, or at least a well-known rumour. Plummer's multi-stage theory of coming-out is retraced in these disclosures.

Further, the role these moments and narratives have in the development of individual characters should not be understated because of their tendency not only to define the "terms of engagement" as per Sedgwick, but they also contribute to developing these queer identities in the first instance. Saxey states of the coming out narrative:

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[16] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 57–58. Emphasis in original.
[17] Ibid., 57–58.

Rather than simply reflecting pre-existing sexual identities, these stories work to

construct identities. They are not a by-product of the process of becoming lesbian, gay

or bisexual, but a contribution to the work of creating such identities. Not only do gay,

lesbian and bisexual individuals tell coming out stories, but the coming out story "tells"

us. It supplies a vocabulary with which one can speak of same-sex desire …. It tells

readers what characterizes a gay man or a lesbian, what constitutes a "gay life", to what

end certain feelings should be directed.[18]

Saxey's understanding of the coming-out narrative establishes the coming-out moment, fictional or

otherwise, as a key point in the development of the LGBTQ+ individual and their sexual identity.

Taking fictional examples only, these moments become crucial turning points in the narrative arc of

an individual character and often denote some irresistible turning point, upon which they cannot

help but see the world differently.[19]

Baz adopts the identity label of "gay" in the coming-out scene. This communicates a

specificity and also places this scene well within the tradition of Young Adult coming-out

narratives, in which the disclosure of a definitive gay identity or same-sex sexual orientation is the

cornerstone of the narrative structure.[20] Although not a public declaration, the moment when Simon

and Baz communicate their homosexuality to each other is the closest in proximity to a scene of

coming out that the novel offers. Instead of presenting a moment of radical otherness, with its

attendant possibility of ostracism from their community, Simon's abrupt questioning of whether

Baz is gay or not followed by Baz's confirmatory statement presents the two main queer characters

of the novel as recognising a commonality and sameness between them.[21] As such, the ways in

which Simon and Baz both navigate their respective outsider and insider statuses is firmly tied to

their queerness. Further, in Baz's hesitation to approach the subject, his statement of "I didn't think

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[18] Saxey, *Homoplot*, 2–3.
[19] Saxey refers to this as an "eruption of same-sex desire" that then allows for critique of social and cultural elements otherwise left unexamined. *Homoplot*, 4.
[20] Rowell, *Carry On*, 354.
[21] Ibid., 354.

you were gay" implies a secondary statement along the lines of "I didn't think you were like me" or that the attraction could be reciprocated.[22] This establishes the focus of the scene as an exploration of the similarities between the characters, rather than one that highlights the gap of experience between either queer character or their heterosexual peers. This naturally alters the wording and depiction of the disclosure process as opposed to instances in which the audience for the disclosure is heterosexual.

The language of the coming-out scene in *Carry On* focuses heavily on the topic of knowledge, specifically the knowledge of a personal identity: whether or not a person is gay is determined not just by same-sex attraction or acting on that attraction, but how they think about themselves as a result. Baz narrates of this coming-out: "'So you do this all the time?' | I roll my eyes. 'No.' | 'Then how do you know you're gay?' | 'I just do. How do you *not* know?'"[23] Simon is still in the realisation stage of his same-sex attraction, and is making sense of past occurrences in this different light.[24] As such, the articulation of a queer identity which Baz so readily finds fails to come to Simon. In this way we can understand the privilege of sexual self-knowledge often comes alongside the privilege of articulating such knowledge, as demonstrated in Simon struggling to articulate his in-between state of sexual knowledge and sexual ignorance. Baz characterises his knowledge of his same-sex attraction as innate and obvious while not considering that he also moved from a state of ignorance into one of realisation in his attraction to Simon.

While Simon and Baz communicate their queerness to each other almost exclusively in terms of self-knowledge, the Epilogue to *Carry On* in which they dance together in front of their school community is similarly framed in terms of knowledge. In Baz's section of the chapter, he tells Simon preceding their dance, "'We don't have to do this,' … 'No one has to know.'"[25] This positions the scene as the closest in structural proximity to a community coming-out scene for them both. It is also an invitation to prolong them both being in the closet to their community. However,

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[22] Rowell, *Carry On*, 354.
[23] Ibid., 354–355. Emphasis in original.
[24] Ibid., 350–351.
[25] Ibid., 503. Jenkins and Cart (2018) also recognise this as the coming-out moment in the text.

in Simon's response of, "'Know what?…That I'm obsessed with you? That horse left the barn a long time ago,'" Simon undermines the notion of a definitive, singular coming-out moment in which knowledge is revealed.[26] Further, this scene reveals the blurred boundary between a community's knowledge of a person's sexual orientation, sexual identity, and how that person interacts with those around them. While the communal interpretation of Simon's acknowledged obsession with Baz may have been interpreted—by Simon as well in this instance—as sheer antagonism, the relationship Baz and Simon develop may also be interpreted as an extension of that obsession. This is despite the knowledge of the original obsession not having changed.

The communal and individual coming-out moments for Simon, though marked by their emphasis upon systems of knowledge and their interpretation, remain noticeably absent from any of Simon's own interpretations or vocalisations of his identity. Instead, Simon emphasises actions, such as kissing or dancing with Baz in comprehending his own sexuality.[27] The only indication that Simon has considered a gay identity for himself as a result of his attraction to Baz is in the parenthetical statement, "(All that's still happening, too. I suppose I am gay; my therapist says it's not even in the top five things I have to sort out right now.)"[28] Rather than being a clear, definitive statement of identity—the wording "I suppose"—combined with the isolation from the rest of the paragraph, which focuses on the romantic things he and Baz are doing and talking about, casts doubt on any possibility of certainty in that declaration. If anything, the positioning of the notion in a sentence partially about his therapeutic processing post-plot serves less to fix that identity label upon him and far more to consider his whole identity as being a work in progress and liable to change in the future. As such, Simon's communication of identity may not happen yet in a definitive, verbalised moment because his knowledge of himself is in a process of transition and instability.

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[26] Rowell, *Carry On*, 503.
[27] Rowell, *Carry On*, 350–351; Rowell, *Carry On*, 504.
[28] Rowell, *Carry On*, 515.

This is not to say that the rendering of this doubt as to Simon's self-perception of being queer subsequently renders his attraction to and affection for Baz invisible or enacts a performative denial of his same-sex attraction. Rather, the two elements coexist throughout the entirety of *Wayward Son*. At a Renaissance Faire, Simon has an increasingly flirtatious foam sword fight with Baz—innuendo no doubt intentional—with Baz during which he reflects, "I'm wondering if I could kiss him. If the other person I am today could kiss the other person he is. Is that legal in Nebraska? Is it allowed at the Faire?"[29] This reflection indicates, similar to Simon Spier in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, that acceptance or rejection of Simon Snow's homosexuality is determined in part by social spaces. The narration positions the tone of the scene as bubbly, happy, romantic and a clear moment of connection between the two. Only a few paragraphs later Simon makes a comment on the abundance of cleavage his eyes are drawn to, indicating that it is through his acceptance of his attraction to Baz—including whichever version of himself he chooses to show the world—that he is finding greater comfort in exploring the possibility of not having an exclusively gay sexual orientation or identity. Rather than detracting from one another, the coexistence of these two elements of both doubt and attraction in fact buttresses Simon's exploration of his self.

Baz's Vampirism

The casualness with which Baz discloses his queerness to Simon correlates to it not being new information. Further, the casualness with which he presents this brand new information to Simon only makes sense in the context of what preceded the scene: Baz finally admitting to Simon that he is a vampire. In this context, the nonchalant way Baz discloses his queerness is explained by the sheer dramatic weight that has already dropped from Baz's shoulders in keeping his vampirism a closely guarded secret from the person he loves. True to form, Rowell positions this scene from Simon's perspective, granting the reader perspective not on what Baz thinks of his vampirism more

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[29] Rowell, *Wayward Son*, 106.

than his dialogue would suggest, but instead focusing the scene on how Simon considers and counters Baz's views of himself as a vampire. The scene unfolds:

"I'm a vampire, Snow! Are you happy?"

"You're not," I say, and I don't know why I say it, and I don't know why I'm crying all of a sudden.

Baz looks surprised. And irritated. "What?"

"You've never bitten anyone," I say.

"Fuck. *Off*."[30]

Though the reader is privy to Baz's shame surrounding his vampirism, the counterarguments Simon presents about Baz not being a predatory or monstrous vampire become part of the disclosure process. Simon's acceptance of Baz as both a vampire and not a threat makes Baz's disclosure of his homosexuality so fluid and easy: the part of himself he is ashamed of has already been accepted. Further, the comment that Baz has never bitten anyone suggests a kind of virginal purity to Baz's character, given that he has never vampirically penetrated anyone.

The way in which vampirism is presented in the novels, of course, relies heavily on thematics of infection and transmission. It is noted early on by Baz that what turned him into a vampire was a vampire's bite to his neck as a toddler, not a willing process like the one Nicodemus undertook.[31] Cart and Jenkins note that in the coming-out narratives of the 1990s, a prominent theme was the dual disclosure of—invariably male—homosexuality and the character having contracted HIV/AIDS. They state:

During the first half of the 1990s, one of the most common methods of outing—or revealing a character's sexual identity—was the discovery that the (invariably male) character had contracted AIDS from having unprotected sex with a male partner.[32]

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[30] Rowell, *Carry On*, 339. Emphasis in original.
[31] Ibid., 335.
[32] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 91.

Although this emphasis on a correlation between male homosexuality and a contagious disease may be considered an effort of authors to highlight issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community, the lingering assumption remains that to be homosexual is to also have this transmission of disease into the body. The association Rowell makes with Baz having had bodily transmission of an infection echoes the tradition Cart and Jenkins identify in the 1990s. As such, the mirroring between homosexuality and vampirism takes on a particularly archaic tone when, by extension, it associates homosexuality with a consistent transmission and infection risk to do with the penetration of a body.

In the second novel of the trilogy, *Wayward Son*, Baz encounters an actualised, visible community of vampires centred around Las Vegas, Nevada. The group clings to localised power and appears to prey upon the human tourists. Upon entering into the vampire-only hotel party, Baz states, "It's nothing like the club that Simon and I visited in London. Those vampires were lying low. These vampires *want* to be seen—and admired."[33] This characterises the vampire community in Las Vegas as an open, proud, visible community. This is the start of Baz's swift unravelling of his perceptions of what vampirism is, what it is not, and what level of monstrosity it might actually entail. As the chapter progresses, Baz learns such a volume of new information about vampirism that he did not consider possible to even exist as knowledge, let alone possible to learn, that he struggles to keep up with the influence of Lamb throughout the night. As Baz himself states, "It's very hard to be droll when your head is exploding," referencing the expanding possibility of unanticipated knowledge.[34]

Further, José Esteban Muñoz contends in *Cruising Utopia* that the force of what Lisa Duggan terms "homonormativity" on LGBTQ+ activist discourse and politics is not a relatively benign mimicry of heterosexuality by queer people. Instead, the "pragmatic" discourse of the contemporary activist impulse is a result of homonormativity:

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[33] Rowell, *Wayward Son*, 235. Emphasis in original.
[34] Ibid., 239.

Duggan's term is meant to outline the retreat into the private sphere that conservative

homosexuals have participated in, in an effort to assimilate and perhaps purchase a seat

at the table that right-wing gay pundits such as Bruce Bawer and Andrew Sullivan long

for.[35]

One of the tendencies of this homonormative thinking, as with assimilationist thought generally, is

to assume that there are more respectable queers or less respectable ones. In this instance, the

former is likely to be the wealthy white male elite while the latter includes sex workers, people of

colour and trans folk. As such, Lamb's comment that prior to arriving in Nevada he had thought of

vampirism as being animalistic creates a similar differentiation between civilised, wealthy vampires

such as Lamb and those which succumb to their base urges. When mirroring vampirism and

homosexuality in these novels, Rowell implicitly creates a similar differentiation between the

civilised homosexual and the animalistic queer.

Of course, Baz's vampirism is not the horrifying invasion into the domestic England that

Stoker's *Dracula* depicted. Instead, he is a part of the powerful and wealthy elite who have come to

dominate the World of Mages and his own family in particular. Chaplin identifies this as a trend

among twenty-first-century texts featuring vampires: "In the twenty-first century, there is a broad

critical consensus that the vampire has undergone a process of humanisation and, indeed,

romanticisation, that begins in the 1970s."[36] Chaplin highlights that the vampire may well not be the

predatory vampire of old horror stories in these novels, but instead a sympathetic lead like Baz.

Though still relying on the old tropes and thematics of infection and transmission, Rowell

nevertheless updates the vampire character to be in line with modern depictions.

It is Baz's introduction to Lamb as a character and all the (possibly ancient) knowledge he has

to offer that begins the process of Baz's unravelling of his self-knowledge as a vampire. This self-

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[35] Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia*, 54. Bruce Bawer is a prolific writer on gay rights and religion, specifically Islam, and his work is considered controversial. Andrew Sullivan is a political commentator and journalist, known for his work advocating for same-sex marriage and his linking of race and I.Q., the controversy of which has surrounded the remainder of his work.

[36] Chaplin, *Postmillennial Vampire*, 17. This is in part thanks to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series with its romanticised vampire lead, along with earlier authors such as Anne Rice.

knowledge is revealed to be a series of personal experiences and Baz begins wrestling with the oppressive weight of his own ignorance. Rather than Lamb's sharing his history and knowledge of vampirism expanding the realm of Baz's knowledge on its own, Baz comes to realise the extent of his lack of knowledge of vampirism. Upon realising the extent of Baz's ignorance, Lamb adopts a more initiatory role, demonstrated in the scene where Lamb teaches Baz how to eat food without his fangs popping out of his mouth, singlehandedly changing Baz's mind about the inevitability of his fangs popping when he eats with the simple pronouncement: "'This is an animal response,' Lamb says. 'And you are not an animal.'"[37] This initiation that Lamb begins for Baz, then, allows him to separate out the monstrous or animalistic tendencies of his vampirism from who he is as a vampire; that is, a distinction is drawn between his identity and his behaviour., However, this draws upon a caste system regarding vampires, with ones like Lamb significantly higher than those Simon and Baz encountered in London. This is indicative of what Chaplin identifies as the way in which the vampire figure "has ceased to exist as the monstrous embodiment of a mimetic violence," instead becoming a sympathetic lead.[38] While Baz and Lamb are positioned as the sympathetic leads, the vampires around London are cast in an older, more monstrous, light.

Mirroring Vampirism and Homosexuality through Knowledge and Ignorance

Both Simon and Baz have similar unravellings throughout the books, but particularly in key chapters, of the knowledge systems that allow them to know themselves. Although the two deviate regarding what, in particular, they discover about themselves through this process, they both nevertheless learn something crucial about themselves and their way of being in the world. While Simon was content with spending the rest of his romantic life with Agatha until the realisation of his attraction to Baz disrupted that trajectory, Baz was resigned to assume that his vampirism posed an imminent danger to the people around him and, by extension, to assume that he had little, if any, control over it. However, with the introduction of a knowledgeable figure on the matter—Baz for

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[37] Rowell, *Wayward Son*, 274.
[38] Chaplin, *The Postmillennial Vampire*, 11.

Simon's homosexuality and Lamb for Baz's vampirism—both are able to unravel his previous assumptions about himself, the people around him, and how he might conduct himself in future. Each receives an initiation at the hands of a mentor, even if this remains confined to the passing on of knowledge from one person to another.

The structural mirroring between Simon and Baz's respective journeys discovering their own ignorance within the two novels similarly indicates a strong thematic mirroring between the facts of Simon's same-sex attraction and Baz's vampirism. Both elements are present throughout the entire narrative, with Baz being open with the reader about the fact early in his narration and Simon making sense of his obsession with Baz through his newly realised attraction. Similarly, both have a pseudo-coming-out scene in which the information of vampirism or same-sex attraction is disclosed with a subsequent denial of identity labels or stereotypes. The association between depictions of vampirism, non-normative sexualities and inverted gender expectations is not a new one.[39] However, Rowell's use of the vampire trope takes a specific form. First, Baz has been infected by a vampire bite and is continually concerned that he will bite Simon and either kill him or turn him into a vampire as well.[40] Second, Lamb's emphasis in teaching Baz how to control the "animal response[s]" which come along with his vampirism indicates two kinds of vampire—one civilised and the other base—and that it is a matter of willpower and choice between the two.[41] Further, the connection between knowledge and control strongly indicates that those without knowledge are liable to lose control and resign themselves to being base predators. This constant threat of becoming a predator is problematic given the novels' mirroring of vampirism and homosexuality through the characters of Simon and Baz. To associate homosexuality with predation serves only to reinforce deeply homophobic stereotypes linking male homosexuality with paedophilia.

That Baz and Simon linger in stasis after the moment of coming out without engaging in a chronological stasis for the remainder of the plot allows Rowell in her split first-person focalisation

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[39] Craft, "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips,'" 109–110.

[40] While Baz is explicit about not wanting to hurt Simon, it should be noted that he thinks that any vampire bite will either kill someone or turn them like he was and hence it remains a concern.

[41] Rowell, *Wayward Son*, 274.

through both Simon and Baz continually to resurface questions of doubt about their knowledge. Simon does not simply adopt a definitive gay or bisexual identity over the course of *Wayward Son* but instead conducts a more thorough exploration of his doubt about his knowledge of himself. As such, Rowell displays how one system of sexual self-knowledge may not so easily be replaced with another. Simon does not jump from a cohesive heterosexual identity to a cohesive bisexual one. Instead, Simon slowly transitions from a system of sexual self-knowledge without doubt to one with doubt at its core. Since his moment of disclosure to Baz involves almost no articulation of an identity label, a matter intrinsic to the coming-out narrative, Simon's coming-out narrative has remained in stasis: hinted at but undisclosed. By placing greater dramatic weight on plot events that might—and do—result in death and disruption, Rowell grants Simon room to explore this new sexual self-knowledge precisely as unarticulated, undisclosed, and overall still messy and in progress.

Conclusion and Coda

While it may come across as a marked difference to the coming-out narrative tradition to have a protagonist like Simon Spier refuse to label himself as gay or queer prior to him being comfortable with such a label, *Carry On* and *Wayward Son* also retain an adherence to narrative tradition and a particularly conservative idea of queer community and politics. In terms of the novels' focus on secrecy and disclosure, the structural mirroring between Simon's homosexuality and Baz's vampirism is particularly concerning when extrapolating associations of infection and a clear class divide between those familiar with the concept and those who succumb to their supposedly animalistic urges without thinking. Further, Rowell's constant return to both Simon and Baz as simultaneously having insider and outsider roles, depending on the context, rehashes outdated notions that even when queer characters find a community, it is not necessarily one in which they are entirely accepted or a community to be desired.

Finally, when extrapolating the mirroring of Simon's homosexuality and Baz's vampirism, the elitist vampire coven Baz gradually discovers in Nevada only cements a hierarchy between a supposedly civilised class capable of political action and inter-community negotiation and those who do not meet this requirement of civility because of factors such as age, race, sexual behaviour, status or wealth. There is no doubt that Lamb in Las Vegas is part of the elite ruling class of the city. He is old, wealthy, knowledgeable and able to act with what amounts to legal impunity. When he encounters the fact that Baz has the natural response to food of his fangs becoming prominent, he describes this response as "animal" despite the process being presumed natural by Baz. In this way, *Wayward Son* draws upon questions of the naturalness or artificiality of both vampirism and homosexuality. As such, rather than reading the surface of Simon Snow's homosexuality, it is necessary to examine Rowell's depiction of Baz's vampirism to find the homonormative and, in some cases, homophobic depictions of homosexuality.

As seen in the previous chapter discussing Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* there is still a tendency for Young Adult authors to provide homophobia as the key conflict for queer characters. However, Albertalli's text acknowledges the homophobia present in the text precisely as homophobia and as both inappropriate and to be rallied against. Albertalli asserts a vision of homosexuality as a difference that is to be supported and accepted, and equal in terms of narrative potential in the romance plot. *Carry On* and *Wayward Son* appear to leave the homophobia unacknowledged. Where the mirroring of Simon Snow's homosexuality and Baz's vampirism diverge is precisely in the direction of shame. While Simon may struggle to articulate his identity, he is never ashamed of it. Baz, on the other hand, takes on the self-loathing and internalised phobia of vampirism and refuses to consider it as a part of his identity. In mirroring the disclosure of both of these elements, the text encourages an analogous understanding of Baz's vampirism with homosexuality itself. It should not be understated that at times Baz's vampirism has been characterised as monstrous, a transmissible infection, animalistic, dangerous, terrifying and something to be hidden. As in the example of Lamb, perhaps worst of all these characterisations, is

also the narcissistic ability to sell out those who differ even slightly, as Lamb surrenders Simon and

Penny to NowNext in order to keep his own privilege.[42]

 Carry On and *Wayward Son* present the character of Baz as having displaced internalised

homophobia onto an internalised phobia of his vampirism. While this might be considered a

progressive step in presenting an LGBTQ+ character unashamed of his sexuality, Baz is

nevertheless a queer character with an immense sense of shame about who he is. Moreover, in

mirroring Simon's homosexuality and Baz's vampirism through the knowledge/ignorance dialectic,

these novels draw parallels between a monstrous, predatory vampirism that Baz is ashamed of and

the unarticulated homosexuality Simon has yet to fully explore.

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[42] Rowell, *Wayward Son*, 318.

Chapter 3

Normalising the Coming-Out Narrative

Introduction and Context

In line with the fantastical world presented in both *Carry On* and *Wayward Son*, David Levithan's

Boy Meets Boy (2003) presents a magical realist world in which the social norms and mores

concerning sexuality have finally reached an egalitarian standpoint, but not without acknowledging

a too-recent history of homophobia within the setting. Similarly, C.S. Pacat's *Captive Prince* trilogy

(2015–2016) presents an alternative hierarchy of social norms, not so much to propose an

alternative to our own, but to highlight the absurd and arbitrary nature of any such set of social

mores, particularly concerning sexuality and desire. This purposely disrupts what Sedgwick

theorises of the closet within *Epistemology of the Closet* as entirely governed by a

knowledge/ignorance binary.[1] When examining the queer and LGBTQ+ representation in different

media it is important to keep in mind not only how fictional characters are depicted, but also who is

responsible for the texts' creation. To articulate queerness, as the coming-out narrative itself

demonstrates, is to assume the power of queer definition. Within *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan presents

an egalitarian town in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are regarded as equally normal.

Within the *Captive Prince* trilogy, Pacat presents readers with a homonormative setting in which

heterosexuality is shunned until marriage. With the "normal" redefined, the way in which the

disclosure of homosexuality occurs is inevitably altered, allowing for an analysis of the queer and

non-queer disclosure processes that may take place in fictional worlds where, theoretically,

anything is possible. Unlike the previous two chapters whose texts have directly engaged with the

tropes of the coming-out narrative, the texts under consideration in this chapter appear to have

rejected a direct approach. However, despite the efforts these texts make to normalise

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[1] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 10.

homosexuality and, to an extent, bisexuality, the narrative tropes which mark the coming-out

narrative are reinforced rather than disrupted. Between *Boy Meets Boy* including a coming-out

narrative arc for the bisexual character of Kyle and the *Captive Prince* trilogy depicting its bisexual

protagonist as the perpetual outsider, these novels ultimately offer nothing revolutionary for queer

storytelling. The chapter will conclude its focus on *Boy Meets Boy* and the *Captive Prince* trilogy

with an analysis of the overlapping depictions of secrecy and disclosure between these two texts

along with a discussion of the implications of such a depiction. These implications include a

maintenance of the shame surrounding queer characters and a depiction of the closet as inevitable

for LGBTQ+ characters. Finally, consideration will be given to the ways in which, despite

normalising homosexuality to varying degrees, the knowledge/secrecy dialectic that governs the

coming-out narrative is still present and prominent in these queer texts. Such a dialectic particularly

disadvantages bisexual characters who remain conceptual and community outsiders in any binary

consideration of sexuality.

David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) is the first of many of Levithan's fictional works to

deal with homosexuality, particularly in a male context. The protagonist, Paul, is at the centre of his

high school's Gay–Straight Alliance and a friend group which includes Infinite Darlene, the

school's quarterback and Homecoming queen, numerous other non-heterosexual students and Tony,

a gay boy who lives in the next town with his oppressive and religious parents. Paul primarily tells

his story of meeting a new boy in town, Noah, and their romantic relationship

Critical Scholarship on *Boy Meets Boy*

Many scholars have discussed *Boy Meets* Boy as genre- and convention-defying in its approach to

sexuality and the figure of the child. Similarly, *Boy Meets Boy* is involved in a publication shift

towards LGBTQ+ characters who are strong and thrive despite homophobia or discrimination.[2] Cart

and Jenkins in their original 2006 publication write of Levithan's novel:

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2 Hussack and Schmidt, "Carpe Librum," 86; Blasingame Jr., Nilsen and Nilsen, "The 2012 Honor List in a Digital
Age," 93; Schmidt and Renzi, "Carpe Librum," 124.

Strictly speaking, *Boy Meets Boy* might be considered a story of "gay assimilation,"

since the difference of sexual orientation truly makes no difference here, but we would

agree that it is also a story of a queer community as envisioned by LGBTQ teens who

would just like to hold hands or attend a school dance without getting gay-bashed or

facing the peer rejection of Outcast Island.[3]

This assimilationist interpretation of the novel highlights the way in which Levithan disrupts

readers' expectations of the norms concerning sexuality and orientation within the novel by

focusing on a supportive community environment. Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth highlight, in

extension to Cart and Jenkins's (2006) work, how Levithan's novel is quite blunt in its disruption of

sexual and gender norms.[4] This is compared with the readers' context and focuses on the way in

which the novel crosses categorical boundaries. Thomas Crisp similarly celebrates *Boy Meets Boy*

as a model for its disruptions of homophobia as a central part of the LGBTQ+ experience and its

overall tone of hope.[5] Many other critics have considered Levithan's wider work—usually

LGBTQ+ focused or inclusive—as important for the depictions of first loves in young adult fiction

and for Levithan's engagement with the digital world.

Disclosure and the Romance Plot

The way in which the romance plot within *Boy Meets Boy* manifests is governed by an emphasis on

disclosure of otherwise concealed information. Everything down to the title of the novel suggests

the typicality of the romance between two boys and the characters who witness or hear about the

relationship treat it like any other high school romance: complicated and a bit messy, but not

something to discriminate against based on the sexes or genders of the individuals. However, the

focus of this particular queer romance is the disclosure process, mirroring the tradition of the

coming-out narrative with the declaration of queer love at the plot climax of the novel. The romance

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[3] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 150.
[4] Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth, "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature," 30–31.
[5] Crisp, "From Romance to Magical Realism," 341–43.

plot, no matter how normalising for two same-sex characters, still adheres to the same thematic emphasis as the coming-out plot of other and earlier works.

The conclusion to the romance plot in *Boy Meets Boy* follows the disclosure process in an interesting way. Instead of Paul talking to Noah in an effort to repair their relationship, Paul takes the avenue of disclosing his love for Noah in actions. In the chapters titled "Possibly Maybe" and "Instinct and Proof," Paul repeats the words "I give him…" in relation to his daily disclosure to Noah precisely what Noah means to him.[6] The implication is that along with the individual things Paul gives Noah across the week, ranging from giving him flowers to offering himself, he is also granting Noah information. The information he is attempting to communicate or disclose includes a recognition that he hurt Noah, that he is apologising, and that Paul loves Noah dearly. This last component is specifically queer in nature. Paul narrates at the beginning of his reconciliation, "Show him, Tony said. But really, I'm guided more by what Tony's shown me. I will not hesitate to *say who I love*," indicating that this is the closest moment Paul has ever had to a coming-out.[7] He has always taken his position as gay as a given, but it is when his love for another boy is being tested that he must come to terms with being clear and confident in his queerness and its disclosure. In this way Levithan displaces the dramatic importance and narrative climax of the coming-out narrative from the disclosure of homosexuality specifically onto the disclosure between Paul and Noah of their commitment to each other. Indeed, the final moments of the novel being dedicated to the reconciliation between Paul and Noah and whether Noah will accept Paul's disclosure mirrors the traditional culmination of the coming-out narrative, that being the moment of disclosure.

Bisexuality: The Insider/Outsider

One of the central problems that has been raised by critics about the coming-out narrative is its refusal to deal with the possibility of bisexuality. Saxey states of the coming-out narrative that, "[m]any bisexual coming out stories conclude not with a celebration that cements their identity but

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[6] Levithan, *Boy Meets Boy*, 194–206.
[7] Ibid., 194. Emphasis added.

with a list of ambitions or plans, a declaration of uncertainty, or a nod to the possibility of future transformation."[8] What this indicates is that bisexual coming-out narratives resist narrative satisfaction and closure. What this also indicates is that the bisexual subject's legitimacy as a cohesive sexual identity is undermined by denying the same kind of narrative fulfilment which gay and lesbian subjects typically enjoy. This rejection of the form of the coming-out narrative ending for the bisexual subject highlights troubling concerns regarding the inclusivity of the coming-out narrative for all non-heterosexual members of the LGBTQ+ community.[9] The bisexual subject is neither satisfactorily in or out but in an eternal space of navigation. Rather than this navigation being depicted as a space of freedom to express sexual and gender identity in a unique way, it is instead described as a space of perpetual confusion and anxiety. Epstein raises concerns about stereotypes attached to bisexuals in children's literature and young adult texts, which includes stereotypes of consistent infidelity and a complete absence of the depiction of bisexuals' sex lives in these texts.[10] This is despite depiction of gay men's and gay women's sex lives—especially the former—being prevalent.[11] As such, the bisexual problem for the coming-out narrative and queer texts more broadly results in confused, varied and often stereotypical depictions of bisexual characters despite taking an antihomophobic stance to exclusively homosexual characters within the same texts.

Although *Boy Meets Boy* focuses on the exclusively gay characters of Paul and Noah, the character of Kyle is significant for a few reasons. Kyle, Paul's ex-boyfriend, is struggling to define and come to terms with his sexuality now that he has begun dating girls at their school. The break-up, only referenced in the novel and not depicted, characterises same-sex break-ups as normal as opposite-sex break-ups. This is an important element of the depiction of queer relationships in order to achieve a more realistic, un-idealised depiction of queer life. It is also important in the egalitarian sense of treating both homosexuality and heterosexuality as the same in the contexts of either a

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[8] Saxey, *Homoplot*, 135.
[9] Ibid., 135.
[10] Epstein, *Are the Kids All Right?*, 132.
[11] Ibid., 217.

relationship or its aftermath. Additionally, Kyle is a bisexual character. As noted by the scholars

mentioned above, this is a rare occurrence despite the long-standing inclusion of bisexuals in the

LGBTQ+ community. While it cannot be said to be a coming-out novel for Paul or Noah, *Boy*

Meets Boy certainly is for Kyle. Kyle had been seeking to rekindle his and Paul's relationship

during the early parts of the novel in order to gain some semblance of stability to his sexual

orientation. He reaches a breaking point, however, coming out to Paul, stating:

> "I'm so confused."

> "Why?"

> "I still like girls."

> "So?"

> "And I also like guys."

> I touch his knee. "It doesn't sound like you're confused, then."

This dialogue, narrated by Paul, is quickly followed by the rejection of the label of bisexuality by

both Kyle and Paul.[12] This is despite Paul readily using the label 'gay' for himself since early

childhood. This absence of clear and specific language contributes to the stigmatisation and erasure

of bisexuality even in an egalitarian text. If homosexuality is the love that dare not speak its name,

then bisexuality is the love that should not be named or even exist in language according to

depictions such as these. As such, the coming-out story of Kyle within the novel adheres to the

dominant tradition of focusing upon the disclosure process and the subsequent navigation of the

character's insider/outsider status within various communities.

Because of this similarity between Kyle and Paul, however, Paul is able to usher Kyle through

some self-imposed stereotypes through which Kyle understands himself, such as being confused.

By acting as Kyle's conventionally gay saviour, Paul provides certainty to Kyle's identity at the

point of coming out, though the rejection of an accurate label may prove contentious. Although

reliance upon pre-inscribed labels is considered by some to be regressive, the prerogative of

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[12] Levithan, *Boy Meets Boy*, 107.

rejecting LGBTQ+ labelling invariably falls to the bisexual subject rather than the gay or lesbian subject, creating an imbalance in visibility.[13] Hence, as a result of gay/lesbian social positionings already having a place in the strict homo/heterosexual binary, the bisexual subject is robbed of communicating their positioning in a way that is understandable to a variety of people. In the context of queer visibility, to be visible is specifically to be named in language and thus enter political discourse. As such, this emphasis upon bisexual characters rejecting labels results in a silencing of the bisexual subject from both political discourse and queer texts.

Tony

As a character within *Boy Meets Boy*, Tony is a perfect blend of insider and outsider. A part of Paul's circle of friends, Tony is accepted for being gay just like anybody else in this context. However, being from a different town, with a different culture and a different family, Tony is faced with the reality that he is an outsider in his own religious family's space. He is out to his parents but his social life and privacy are restricted all the more for it, and he explicitly addresses the pressure he feels to ignore or deny his queerness: "It's like I've been pushed back into the shape of this person I used to be. And I don't fit into the old shape any more. I don't fit."[14] Coming out to his parents is not the turning point for Tony: instead, it is when he stands his ground to his mother about Paul staying to do homework with him.[15] This is the scene that marks a turning point for Tony being out to his parents, not his coming out. This is due to Tony asserting his right to live as a regular teenager would despite his parents' hyper-vigilance regarding Tony being with his male friends. Paul narrates the moment: "I tell him that he's done it — he's taken not the first step (that happened a long time ago) but the next step," indicating that there are more important moments to being queer than coming out.[16] Further, this also implies that coming-out is a process without a fixed or stable end-point.

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13 Earl, "*The Advocates* Podcast".
14 Levithan, *Boy Meets Boy*, 185.
15 Ibid., 188.
16 Ibid., 190.

Queer Initiations

Boy Meets Boy is focalised through Paul's first-person perspective and this grants Levithan the ability to disrupt the filtering of other queer characters' experiences through the potentially homophobic lens of a heterosexual protagonist. As such, Paul's narration of other characters, and in particular Noah, allows Paul to conduct himself as the insider of the egalitarian reality that is his home town and his high school. Noah is the new kid at Paul's high school.[17] Paul makes it clear early on that it is only his town that has an egalitarian perspective on sexuality and same-sex dating, not other towns like Tony's or Noah's old place of residence. This positions Paul as the knowledgeable insider in comparison to Noah's outsider status, not due to sexual orientation but because of Noah's newness. As such, Paul is positioned as the one who is to introduce Noah, or initiate him, into this comparatively new environment of queer-inclusive egalitarianism. Similar to the initiator position in which Baz finds himself in relation to Simon within *Carry On*, this is a peer-to-peer position, not defined by age difference but instead by experience and knowledge.

As discussed above, this initiator figure occurs briefly within *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* as the figure of Peter in an Atlanta gay bar and restaurant. While *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) is an older text than either *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) or *Carry On* (2015) and its sequel *Wayward Son* (2019), there is a recurrence of the figure of the initiator, presented as being usually within a broader queer community, more knowledgeable than the newly out character and occasionally, though this is the largest difference between texts, the same age or of a similar generation. The exceptions to this latter point are, of course, Peter within *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, a college student speaking to a seventeen-year-old protagonist and Lamb within *Wayward Son*, centuries older than Baz due to his vampiric nature. Even if these initiator figures are temporary, as both Lamb and Peter are, their archetypal recurrence is worth further consideration. They allow the texts in which they appear to be governed by the negotiation of one or more

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[17] Levithan, *Boy Meets Boy*, 12.

characters of an insider/outsider status which hinges upon them either being ignorant or inexperienced. Further, when they do appear it is without exception around the concept of difference, be it literal queerness, or vampirism in the case of *Wayward Son*.

Captive Prince **and C. S. Pacat**

The *Captive Prince* trilogy, comprising *Captive Prince* (2015), *Prince's Gambit* (2015) and *Kings Rising* (2016) is a New Adult series featuring the protagonist Damen, a twenty-five-year-old princeling from the ancient Greek-inspired kingdom of Akielos. It is predominantly set within the rival kingdom of Vere, loosely inspired by medieval France. New Adult texts, differing slightly from the Young Adult category of fiction, typically depict protagonists within the eighteen- to twenty-five age range. This encompasses both lead characters within *Captive Prince*.[18] The slightly older protagonist marks this work as separate from the texts under prior discussion because of the differing experiences of same-sex attraction that might be considered more appropriate for a twenty-five-year-old. One example within *Captive Prince* is the variety of sexually explicit scenes, more suitable to a protagonist of Damen's twenty-five years than the teenage protagonist of, for example, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Additionally, a marked difference between the prior authors under consideration and Pacat is C. S. Pacat's status as a female Australian LGBTQ+ author, in comparison to, for example, Becky Albertalli or Rainbow Rowell who are notably American and heterosexual. While David Levithan is notable for being a gay male author, the female authors whose works are considered here are otherwise heterosexual. Pacat works within the representative gap left behind in the mass popularity of *Game of Thrones*, particularly the television series, with SBS cheekily referring to Pacat's book series as "Gays on Thrones."[19] This representational gap is specifically within the fantasy genre of books, with both Pacat and several interviewers focusing on the homosexual romance plot running throughout the *Captive Prince*

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[18] McAlister, "Defining and Redefining Popular Genres," 5.
[19] Russel, "All Rise for the 'Gays on Thrones.'"

trilogy as a progressive step for queer representation in the genre. Within LGBTQ+ texts more broadly, however, we might question the progressive nature of the text.

Homonormativity and Sexual Norms

The most obvious depiction of queerness within the trilogy is in its homonormative set of sexual norms and social mores. Homonormativity has been used to describe the phenomenon of the mimicry of heterosexual practices by queer people and cultures and the new process of normalising a very narrow view of queerness, to the exclusion of many others.[20] In this instance, I am choosing to use the term homonormativity in an inversion of what is considered normal in order to achieve conceptual parity in this chapter. In the case of heteronormativity, the only sexual identity normalised is that of the heterosexual. If the heteronormativity of novels such as *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* results in a kind of "straight until proven gay" mentality, necessitating the coming-out moment, then Pacat's homonormativity operates in precisely the same way, only that here each individual is assumed to be exclusively homosexual unless proven otherwise by their actions or words. For example, *Captive Prince* outlines this explicitly via the character of Jord in his talks with Damen: "Jord preferred men. *Didn't Damen?* You knew what was what, with men. And you could spurt without fear."[21] Jord, in line with the normative thinking of his culture and community, assumes that Damen is exclusively homosexual. In this regard I am considering Pacat's story-world, at least in the setting of Vere, to be homonormative in that homosexuality is a norm to which characters must adhere or else face slander, isolation or outright abandonment.

Pacat does not stop with establishing homonormativity in rearranging the sexual norms and mores of the context in which she is writing: instead, she turns to the egalitarian, same-rank partnerships of contemporary same-sex relations. Through the character of Damen the reader is introduced to the character of Nicaise, the Regent's pre-pubescent pet. The intergenerational nature

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[20] Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan, "Destabilizing the Homonormative," 87; Banks and Alexander, "After Homonormativity," 103.
[21] Pacat, *Captive Prince*, 81. Emphasis added.

of this sexual relationship between the Regent and Nicaise is not regarded as unusual in Vere as it is in other settings. Damen narrates: "It seemed like a blunder of etiquette to have Nicaise at the high table, considering the sensibilities of the Patrans. … No one from Patras would suppose that a child catamite sat at the table alongside royalty," highlighting how prominent and visible this practice is in Vere.[22] The practice of keeping pets in Vere is likened to the practice of slavery in Akielos, with the tacit assumption on Damen's behalf that there is always a sexually submissive partner, and it is the pet or slave, not the master.[23] The emphasis Pacat places on the commonality of hierarchical same-sex relationships across the board is in direct contrast to the modern conception of same-sex relationships being egalitarian in nature and relying on the same-status of participants.[24] Instead, there is a return to an older model of same-sex sexuality dating back to Greek antiquity.[25] However, the main romance plot remains between two men of equal rank; the third novel, *Kings Rising*, makes a very explicit point even in its title about their sameness. Hence, within this text the main romance plot involves an eruption of more modern and contemporary same-sex attraction in the midst of what, to the reader, might be seen as an antiquated system of sexualised inequality.

Homonormativity and the Coming-Out Narrative

Even in Pacat's altered context entailing the normative position of exclusive homosexuality, the coming-out narrative has yet to disappear entirely. Instead, the taboo of heterosexuality, exclusive or otherwise, occupies a similar position to homosexuality in the contemporary context of the coming-out narrative. As such, when Jord explains to Damen that the aristocracy of Vere are homosexual by default until marriage, he characterises this as a way for the nobility to avoid the taboo and blight of bastardry to their family line.[26] By consequence, however, Jord also implies that homosexuality is something for an immature adolescent and not viable into adulthood. Further, as

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[22] Pacat, *Captive Prince*, 153.
[23] Ibid., 160.
[24] Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, 121.
[25] Ibid., 121.
[26] Pacat, *Captive Prince*, 80.

Damen comprehends this information he has just been given by Jord, he "was wisely silent. His own preference was for women; it seemed ill-advised to admit this," and hence allows the assumption of his homosexuality to stand for the benefit of not admitting to a severe social taboo.[27] In the interest of his personal safety and his reputation amongst the men guarding him, he constructs a closet around himself with his silence on the matter. If in Sedgwick's terms silence is the cumulative speech act which constructs the closet for the individual, Damen exhibits a very deliberate construction of a sexual closet specifically around his heterosexuality, not his homosexuality.[28] Pacat's choice to invert heteronormativity in this way, even down to the construction of the sexual closet, is politically pointed in its demonstration of what a heterosexual closet would look and feel like: horrible. Similar to Levithan's novel, Pacat positions Damen, the sole bisexual character, as simultaneously inside and outside of the social norms and consequently unable to navigate his social position without some struggle. While Pacat may indeed be making a concerted point about the limitations of this binary thinking regarding sexuality, she nevertheless uses this prominent trope of active closeting to demonstrate the limitations precisely of that linguistic step out of the closet and hence reinforces the prominence of the coming-out narrative even in bisexual queer stories.

The element around which secrecy and disclosure gravitate, however, is not limited to Damen's bisexuality with a heterosexual preference. Instead, while he remains conscious of the fact that he should not openly talk of his previous sexual relationships with women, he focuses more upon maintaining the secret of his political and national identity. As the lost crown prince of Akielos, supposedly dead along with his father and enslaved in the court of Vere, he must pretend to be an ordinary soldier who has somehow upset the new king, Kastor. The maintenance of this false identity becomes paramount for Damen to maintain his relative safety in the court. This is the secret Damen must maintain in order to survive in the court of Vere. His preference for heterosexual relationships, though not exclusive, may be easily ignored as a simple cultural

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[27] Pacat, *Captive Prince*, 81.
[28] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

difference between Akielos and Vere if carefully managed. It is his identity as Damianos of Akielos, the man who killed the previous crown prince Auguste of Vere, that puts Damen in the most significant danger in Vere than any other aspect of his identity. It is surrounding this political identity, then, that Damen constructs a much more forceful and secure closet around himself, displacing the potential revelation of a sexual identity or behaviour with the tension of the revelation of his political identity, suspended throughout the first two novels. The otherwise traditional tension surrounding the potential for a non-normative sexuality to be revealed is hence displaced onto the political and national identity of the protagonist. This achieves a shift in focus of the tension of such a secret, rather than eliminating it entirely. As such, this narrative emphasis on the secrets connected to personal identity and the disclosure of such, as demonstrated through this text as well as those such as *Boy Meets Boy*, can be mapped onto almost any element of personal identity. However, it is in the way in which secrecy and disclosure gravitate towards LGBTQ+ characters in these texts which further implies that even in egalitarian or homonormative contexts, the closet is still present if only hidden in other terminology.

Queer Initiations Part 2

Similar to the initiator figures seen in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *Carry On*, *Wayward Son* and *Boy Meets Boy*, the *Captive Prince* trilogy offers a few key characters and ways in which the transference of knowledge occurs with the intention to inform an ignorant character about a culture. In this example, Vere is arguably a queer community to which Damen is a distinct foreigner. He is an outsider racially, nationally, culturally and sexually. It is only when he proves himself a valuable asset to Laurent in his knowledge of Akielon language, culture and battle strategy that Laurent attempts to introduce reciprocal information to Damen. Lack of trust aside, Laurent becomes the initiator figure, acclimating Damen to the Veretian style of politics and political manipulation as well as to the layout of various forts and strategically important points between Vere and the border with Akielos. Rather than supplying this knowledge to Damen out of the goodness of his heart,

Laurent utilises Damen's insight into Akielon strategy and his straight forward perspective on the

political machinations occurring around Laurent to improve his own political standing in the court.

At the beginning of the third novel, *Kings Rising*, Damen adopts the position of the King of

Akielos at the behest and declaration of Nikandros, a close friend and advisor. Along with this shift

in political identity from the captured slave to the returned king of his nation is a shift in his

communication with Laurent. No longer at a disadvantage and on his home ground in Akielos, he

positions himself as an equal to Laurent both personally and ceremonially.[29] As Laurent had taken

the position of a cultural initiator to Damen, so too does Damen take on a similar role with Laurent

while the two are in Akielos. However, this is not a simple chronology. Damen narrates early on,

"Damen thought of him, alone, politically cornered, sitting at his desk to begin writing. He

remembered Laurent's limpid voice. *Do you think I'd get on well with Nikandros of Delpha?*"

emphasising the fact that all the while Damen was alleviating his ignorance of the politics of the

Veretian court, Laurent had been alleviating himself of a similar ignorance towards Akielon

customs, culture and language.[30] Despite Damen and Laurent occupying equal roles and statuses in

their relationship over time, Laurent had always been in control of the knowledge transferred

between them, either finding out precisely what he wishes to know or ensuring that Damen only

knew as much as Laurent wished him to.

Secrecy and Disclosure in Non-Heteronormative Texts

Given the lack of a traditional coming-out narrative in either *Boy Meets Boy* or the *Captive Prince*

trilogy, between the way in which Kyle fails to adopt the bisexual label within *Boy Meets Boy* and

the predominantly homonormative setting of the *Captive Prince* trilogy, there is copious emphasis

upon secrecy and disclosure. Secrecy in these texts operates in a similar manner to the closets of the

previous texts analysed, however. Within the *Captive Prince* trilogy Damen continuously hides his

heterosexual preference while being casual about his homosexuality. Further, he adopts an alternate

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[29] Pacat, *Kings Rising*, 64.
[30] Ibid., 9. Emphasis in original.

identity, politically at least, in order to avoid identification as The Other, Damianos of Akielos, arguably the most despised person in Vere. In this way Damen seeks to "pass" for a common soldier who has fallen out of favour, rather than a more dangerous identity position. Further, Tony within *Boy Meets Boy*, despite having disclosed his homosexuality to his parents, reaches a turning point in which he refuses to hide his friendship with Paul for fear of his parents' opinions. Despite coming out, Tony had been maintaining a secret socialisation with his friends from a queer-affirmative town and community.

Further, not only is secrecy and its maintenance abundant in these two texts, disclosure is also incredibly prominent. Most notably, Pacat builds the dramatic tension and suspense across two entire novels as to whether Laurent will know of Damen's identity as Damianos or has known all along. When disclosure occurs of Damen admitting who he is to Laurent, a reciprocal disclosure occurs when Laurent reveals that he knew who Damen was the moment he first saw him.[31] Despite this being focused on an entirely different aspect of Damen's identity than his sexuality, there is the same circulation of knowledges and ignorances to this moment of disclosure. This ties this disclosure of political identity—and, by extension, the knowledge of such—to Sedgwick's theorisation of the homosexual closet circulating within the power balance of knowledges and ignorances.[32] Additionally, within *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan closes the dramatic and emotional climax of the novel with a number of a moments of clear, queer disclosure from Paul to Noah. Structurally, then, the relationship between Noah and Paul is encapsulated and reaches its height only within these moments of admission, of disclosure and communication. As such, the dominant queer storyline of the novel, that of the same-sex romance, is only achieved narratively through the disclosure of Paul's love for Noah, a distinctly queer phenomenon.

Implications

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[31] Pacat, *Kings Rising*, 41.
[32] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8.

As such, though neither of these texts fit the structure of the coming-out narrative or Jenkins and Cart's Homosexual Visibility category of fiction, the strict maintenance of secrecy and the disclosure of information still permeates these texts in such a way as these elements become the dominant dramatic force of the plot.[33] The implications of having such non-coming-out queer texts still rely on the core components of the coming-out narrative are varied. However, the most notable implication of having such queer texts rely on the circulation of knowledges and ignorances, especially in regards to identity and the self, is the tacit assumption that a queer text may not exist without this circulation. Further, there is a distinct possibility that the coming-out narrative structure has been displaced in these texts to focus upon other elements yet still retains its basic premise of a secret of the self revealed. The coming-out narrative in these more contemporary texts has been disguised in other language and in other terminology, yet is never fully separated from the notion of a queer text, especially featuring homosexual or bisexual men. Both *Boy Meets Boy* and the *Captive Prince* trilogy cannot escape the context of queer storytelling that comes before them due to its saturation in the coming-out narrative.

Disruptions and Failure

Boy Meets Boy is considered a Gay Assimilation text within Cart and Jenkins' (2006) publication and focuses on the egalitarian setting of the high school and the town at large.[34] However, they qualify this statement by stating:

> … but we would agree that it is also a story of a queer community as envisioned by
>
> GLBTQ teens who would like to just hold hands or attend a school dance without
>
> getting gay-bashed or facing the peer rejection of Outcast Island.[35]

This implies that *Boy Meets Boy* is not only a gay assimilation text in their taxonomy, but also one of queer community, indicating that there can be a blurring between these categories within the

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[33] Jenkins and Cart, *Representing the Rainbow*, 126.
[34] Cart and Jenkins, *Heart Has Its Reasons*, 150.
[35] Ibid., 150.

same text. This categorisation, including the novel's absence of Homosexual Visibility elements, would usually indicate that the novel has either disrupted or otherwise avoided the expectations of the coming-out narrative. However, I would argue that rather than a simple blending of Gay Assimilation and Queer Community in category as per the egalitarian attitude to sexual identity, there is also a blending of the novel into the Homosexual Visibility category. Instead of being focused upon Paul, the coming-out narratives focus upon Kyle and Tony, as they both either come out in the time frame of the novel, as does Kyle, or deal with the impacts and consequences of coming out, as does Tony. As such, it is clear that texts such as *Boy Meets Boy* surpass previous notions of how to categories LGBTQ+ texts.

Besides these more obvious examples of the text's treatment of coming-out moments and processes ultimately not disrupting the prominence of the coming-out narrative in queer texts, the ways in which secrets are kept by different characters in the novel are often used in a similar manner to the ways in which the closet is maintained to ensure homosexual secrecy. Wickens highlights the importance of understanding coded language in both LGBTQ+ texts and communities to maintain the secret of homosexuality from outsiders.[36] She proceeds to analyse Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* in relation to how it depicts the circulation and revelation of secrets:

> In novels with LGBTQ characters secrets are commonplace with a significant number
> of characters in the closet worrying over "who knows." … But in this case, [Amber's]
> worry is not about the label of "lesbian" but of being called a "Club Kid".[37]

Wickens reinforces her point about Levithan's disruption of social taboos surrounding homosexuality, but the fact that the scene at hand closes with Paul essentially promising to maintain Amber's secret of loving to join school clubs can lend itself to a different reading. Rather than refusing to rely on the same elements which compose the coming-out narrative—the secrecy of queer characters in particular—Levithan displaces the category of difference (here replacing lesbian with Club Kid) while reinforcing the maintenance of a secret as the form of queer storytelling.

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[36] Wickens, "Codes, Silences and Homophobia," 155.
[37] Ibid., 160.

While *Boy Meets Boy* fails to disrupt the coming-out narrative by including it for two of the queer male characters, between Kyle's bisexuality and Tony's standing up to his parents in defence of his friendship with Paul, the *Captive Prince* trilogy similarly fails to disrupt the coming-out narrative through its abundant emphasis on personal secrecy. Damen, for a start, must maintain a false identification for himself throughout his entire time in Vere, though not based on sexual identity. However, Damen's sexuality is a factor of cultural difference that he deliberately obscures. Further, in order to maintain standing with the guards in Laurent's employ and not place himself in danger of a considerable social faux pas, Damen constructs a veil of silence around his heterosexual behaviour of the past and works to avoid mentioning his heterosexual preference. This is not done in the same way as his homosexuality. As a bisexual character, Damen is continually disadvantaged by any kind of normativity, be it based on heterosexuality or homosexuality and as such must navigate the homonormative landscape of Vere as much as real-life LGBTQ+ people must navigate the heteronormative cultural landscape of the real world. This constant navigation of an insider and outsider status results in a rejection from both kinds of normative spaces for the bisexual subject. The assumption that the bisexual is "actually straight" in queer spaces, as Kyle assumes of himself, and that they are "going through a phase" in straight spaces results in the absence of belonging to any community.

Conclusion and Coda

The previous two chapters have discussed texts that actively engage with the tropes of the coming-out narrative in order to subvert expectations of the coming-out moment being the end of the narrative (*Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*) or to displace the narrative anxiety associated with the coming-out narrative (*Carry On* and *Wayward Son*). However, the texts examined in this chapter have seemingly taken efforts deliberately to move away from the narrative tropes typical of the coming-out narrative in order, perhaps, to envision a greater normalisation of homosexuality. Despite this antihomophobic spirit that the texts do convey on a surface read, the exact same tropes

and narrative emphases that are prominent in—and we might even say define—the coming-out narrative are left reinforced rather than disrupted. *Boy Meets Boy* blatantly includes a coming-out narrative arc for Kyle and provides Paul as the sole counterpoint for Kyle's internalised biphobia, marking Paul as the exclusively gay gatekeeper for Kyle's acceptance into the LGBTQ+ community as a bisexual. Similar to the tendency of early YA texts to present a homosexual coming-out through a heterosexual protagonist, this presentation of Kyle's journey of sexual identity being presented through a homosexual character raises questions of filtering representation through a more privileged character.

Similarly, there is much to be said about the *Captive Prince Trilogy* that is complimentary regarding its representation of a bisexual protagonist who has a sexual preference between men and women. It cannot be understated how important recognition of a preference is for asserting the validity of bisexual identity. However, it should not be ignored the degree to which the exact same tropes of the coming-out narrative—well-documented for its bisexual exclusion—dominate this text and its main dramatic tension. This trilogy is driven by the tension between the maintenance of a secret of the self and its eventual, inevitable revelation. Furthermore, Damen's constant navigation of his status as Laurent's personal property and private confidant indicates a dual insider and outsider status also characteristic of a protagonist in the process of coming out of the closet. Rather than disrupting or transforming the limiting narrative tradition of the coming-out narrative, each of these texts reaffirm the primacy of the coming-out narrative as the only coherent form of queer or LGBTQ+ storytelling.

Chapter 4

Queer Logics

Introduction and Context

LGBTQ+ storytelling has been dominated by the coming-out narrative for the past half century. In contrast to this tradition, the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–present) by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor is widely recognised as radically different compared to other contemporaneous texts in its representation of non-normative sexualities and gender identities. *Night Vale* lacks an explicit coming-out moment or narrative for any of its LGBTQ+ characters. Typically, *Night Vale*'s representation involves individual characters treating their social positionings as equally normal and equally valid in their communities, not tolerating discrimination based on race, gender, age, ability, sexuality, or status of actual existence. It is in this way that *Night Vale* establishes a kind of logic to the LGBTQ+ representation it features. Further, the creators make a point of casting actors of the same social positionings to play certain characters, such as Cecil Baldwin depicting protagonist Cecil Palmer. Dylan Marron, a gay man of colour, being cast as Carlos, a similarly gay male character of colour, is a further example of this. However, it is evident that throughout both the podcast series and the novels of *Welcome to Night Vale* that the text invests heavily in the same thematics, plot devices and character archetypes as the more traditional coming-out novels discussed earlier in this thesis. This chapter will open with a discussion of the form which *Night Vale* takes, a mixture of poetry, prose and playwriting, and will examine the comparatively narrow scholarship on such a broad text. Further, the town of Night Vale establishes its own style of secrecy and disclosure, relying upon deliberate forgetting, denial, unlooking and literalised secrecy. The way in which secrecy and disclosure operate, specifically within the realm of knowledge, influences how the community of Night Vale and its residents navigate their respective insider/outsider statuses from the rest of the world, and from each other. Focusing the analysis through Carlos, resident scientist and Cecil's husband, this chapter will explore how outsiders are

considered in Night Vale and how they eventually achieve insider status as citizens. Carlos'

relationship with Cecil is further analysed as a way of determining Cecil as the initiator figure for

Carlos in the latter's adjustment to the queer little town of Night Vale. Expanding upon this, Cecil is

considered as the initiator or guiding figure for the community of Night Vale and the audience of

the podcast series itself, in line with his position as community broadcaster and knowledgeable

journalist. Finally, the political and literary implications of having such a similar structural bent

towards the traditional queer story and coming-out narrative are discussed in detail, notably in the

reinforcement of traditional markers of heteronormative respectability such as marriage.

Welcome to Night Vale is prolific. The podcast contains a complete eight seasons running

from 2012 and continues (as of 2021) to be released twice a month. On top of this total of 170

episodes across eight seasons are nine live shows and three novels: *Welcome to Night Vale: A Novel*

(2015), *It Devours!* (2017), and *The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your Home* (2020).

There are official transcripts for the first four years of the podcast and the remaining four seasons

have been dutifully transcribed by fan communities on sites such as Tumblr.[1] This chapter will

examine seasons one through eight of the podcast and the novels. It should be noted that the novels

are explicitly designed not to spoil plot elements of the podcast and operate as individual texts in

their own rights. So, while the novels are not components of any of the podcast's story arcs across

the years, they do provide valuable information on the story-world of Night Vale and many of the

minor characters who populate it.

The scholarly perspectives on *Welcome to Night Vale* vary in focus and energies, but are

generally contained within *Critical Approaches to "Welcome to Night Vale": Podcasting between*

Weather and the Void (2018), edited and with an introduction by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock.[2] The

contributors, by and large, focus on how unusual and absurdist *Night Vale* is as a text, as a literary

format, as a story, and in its representation of normalcy and the truly terrifying. The question of

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[1] Here I am referring to the 'cecilspeaks' Tumblr blog/account, which provides written transcripts of the episodes as
they are released. See https://cecilspeaks.tumblr.com for these fan transcripts.
[2] Weinstock, *Critical Approaches to "*Welcome to Night Vale.*"*

form is raised by Elliott Freeman who analyses *Night Vale* as a hybrid poetic medium. Additionally, the transcripts are all formatted in prose paragraphs and the audio format of the podcast implies a kinship with radio dramas.[3] The format of the podcast appears to resist all attempts at neat classification and hence it is not only appropriate but also necessary to consider *Night Vale*'s formats as multiple and simultaneous. Further, critics and journalists alike have described *Night Vale* as a hallmark of narrative podcasting or storytelling through podcasts, in itself its own kind of formation of an audio drama.[4] Apart from the dedicated *Critical Approaches* edited by Weinstock and a lonesome few journal articles, there is no other scholarship dedicated to *Welcome to Night Vale*.[5]

The difference by which *Night Vale* has come to be known by journalists, scholars, and fans of the show provides an interesting opportunity to examine how conventional narrative structures and conventional ideas of queerness are presented in such a "radically different" text. *Night Vale*'s authors place particular emphasis on not labelling things that are queer as a specific kind of queerness, or specifically anything at all. Within *Welcome to Night Vale: A Novel*, Diane Crayton's teenage son, Josh, is a shapeshifter and fantastical allegory for the malleability of adolescent identity.[6] More prominent, however, is the existence of the romantic relationship between Cecil Palmer and the scientist Carlos. Both men are very much in love with one another—as stated by Cecil in the pilot episode—and their relationship is never labelled as gay or queer.[7] Further, each avoids specific identity labels such as gay, bisexual or queer, despite these terms being potentially accurate.

It cannot be overemphasised that the reception of the podcast has focused on the fact that none of the queer characters are required to come out in order to be visible (or audible, as the case

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[3] Freeman, "Ode for the Lights Above the Arby's," 110–111.
[4] Hancock, "Our Friendly Desert Town," 36; Wu, "Welcome to Night Vale."; Bottomley, "Podcasting, *Welcome to Night Vale*, and the Revival of the Radio Drama," 179.
[5] The remaining commentary on *Night Vale* has been from media outlets such as newspapers and magazines, also largely circulated online rather than in print format.
[6] Fink and Cranor, *Welcome to Night Vale*, 15.
[7] Fink and Cranor, *Mostly Void*, 5.

may be) and valuable members of their community. Carroll makes this a distinct point in her article on the ease with which *Night Vale* has achieved the unproblematic diversity other productions have failed to achieve. She states:

> However, not once, in over four years, has the issue of Cecil and Carlos being queer come up. *Nobody has to come out* to their parents, no one has to work to get their friends to accept them, they simply live their weird lives, as a same-sex couple.[8]

And she is correct: nobody has to come out to their parents, their friends or their community. It is a given that Cecil, at least, as a longstanding member of the Night Vale community, is not heterosexual.

Given this propensity of the text to leave any and all sexuality or gender positions as unlabelled, it would appear that the coming-out narrative is entirely absent from the text. Indeed, the way in which Cecil narrates that "everything about [Carlos] was perfect, and I fell in love instantly," with such a casual, matter-of-fact tone implies that Cecil's attraction to other men is very far from new information to him or the community to whom he is broadcasting.[9] Further, the fact that Cecil is by far the most common voice we hear of the town of Night Vale and his central positioning as a narrative focaliser of the series would imply that the podcast plot is his story of his own town. So, *Night Vale* has a definitely same-sex-attracted protagonist and no narrative or ideological push for him to label himself. What, then, is the queer story that *Night Vale* will tell as it unfolds? Moreover, what *kind* of queer story *can* this text tell given its apparent break with all queer narrative tradition? As will be argued here, *Welcome to Night Vale* invests in the same narrative tropes that have preceded it within the coming-out narrative and, paired with its leading queer characters, attaches these coming-out tropes to queerness consistently. Rather than making a radical break with narrative form, then, *Welcome to Night Vale* demonstrates that even the most diverse, middle-finger-to-the-status-quo queer stories have yet to escape the tradition from which they have come.

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[8] Carroll, "A Lesson in How Easy Diversity Can Be." Emphasis added.
[9] Fink and Cranor, *Mostly Void*, 5.

The Initiator and the Avunculate

Sedgwick identifies the avunculate as a kind of initiator role or figure in a largely male, Western and middle-class queer culture around the time Oscar Wilde was writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[10] Further, she highlights how there is a fundamental difference between Dorian Gray and his male admirers: a difference in age and initiation status.[11] This focus on the experience and knowledge difference between male partners may be considered an example of the avunculate. Sedgwick furthers this latter point by highlighting how the title "Uncle" was used to describe an older man "offering a degree of initiation into gay *cultures* and *identities*."[12] Conceptually, this positions the avunculate or initiator figure as a knowledgeable patron of such gay cultures and familiar with gay identities, usually their own. Characters that have fulfilled this role in texts under analysis in previous chapters include Peter in the Atlanta bar and restaurant in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and Lamb in the decadent and vampire-controlled Las Vegas in *Wayward Son*. Cecil Palmer, in relation to Carlos and the listeners of *Welcome to Night Vale* is in a perfect position to fulfil this initiator role. Romantically interested in Carlos, Cecil grants Carlos the knowledge of Night Vale as a town and culture, and a distinctly queer one at that. Broadly, the town may be considered queer because of the town's status as an alternative, pocket universe, but it also may be considered queer in how consistently it affirms and embraces its queer community members. From Sheriff Sam using the singular pronoun "they" to Cecil and Carlos' wedding celebration being broadcast to the entire town via community radio, the town is a queer space through and through.

The Initiator: Story-World Logics and Narration

Because of the construction of narrative intimacy between Cecil Palmer and the listener of the podcast, Cecil may easily be seen as a kind of initiator figure for the listener venturing into the town

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[10] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 57.
[11] Ibid., 57.
[12] Ibid., 57. Emphasis added.

of Night Vale for the first time. The bizarre occurrences, characters and concepts that Night Vale readily accepts as part of its neighbourhood, such as the existence of angels and the subsequent City Council declaration of their nonexistence, would normally perplex listeners. However, Cecil's narration of these things as completely normal allows listeners a kind of familiarity with the absurdity of the town.[13] Andy McCumber highlights the governing logic of the podcast as "establishing this set of rules, where the most bizarre events have to be accepted." He further emphasises acceptance as "a prerequisite for being a listener of the show. Without it, *Night Vale* is just a frustrating, confusing stream of nonsense that offers no satisfactory explanation."[14] As such, the intimacy with which Cecil addresses both the town and listeners of the podcast in episode 79, "Lost in the Mail," allows the listener to collaborate in the affect of Cecil's broadcast and join the fictional town in their mourning on Remembrance Day of those to be lost in the Blood Space War, rather than any nonfictional conflict.[15] Through positioning Cecil as the initiator for the listener, a translation between the real world and the world of the text occurs, such as Remembrance Day still being commemorated as it is in the real world, but introducing a fictional conflict as its focus.

The role Cecil Palmer has in the narration of *Welcome to Night Vale* as a series is unusual. There are constant questions about his reliability as a narrator and newscaster, such as in episode 63, "There Is No Part 1: Part 2," in which Cecil cheekily refers to the non-existent part one of his broadcast in the words, "… let us continue right where we left off," in the second introductory paragraph.[16] However, Cecil's narration style—emboldened by the audio format of the podcast—creates a kind of intimacy between the character, narrator and the listener. Grace Gist writes of this narrative intimacy:

> The listener's intimacy with Cecil then inflects how we respond to the news he reports.
>
> Because we know Cecil and Cecil knows Night Vale, we can trust his evaluations of

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[13] cecilspeaks, "Episode 105 - What Happened at the Smithwick House."
[14] McCumber, "'It Would Make More Sense for It to Be There Than Not'," 75.
[15] Fink and Cranor, *Who's a Good Boy?*, 99. This episode was cowritten with Zack Parsons.
[16] Fink and Cranor, *The Buying of Lot 37*, 167.

events, which allows news that might in the "real world" terrify us to be received as comedy.[17]

This allows Cecil as a narrator to mediate the horrifying elements which are commonplace in Night Vale while the listener gradually acclimates themselves to the logic of the story-world as Cecil sees it. Indeed, the way in which Fink and Cranor present this narrative as a distinct second part, the first half of the story missing, can be considered a part of a queer method of storytelling, in which the text may pick and choose which aspects of a story it wishes to tell.[18]

Moreover, not only is Cecil the initiator figure for the listeners of the podcast, but also for any and all outsider figures in the town. Carlos is the perfect example of this. Cecil is the means by which Carlos gathers information about the community of Night Vale, what their expectations are, how they view time, and what might be the way he can grant himself full community membership. As Cecil and Carlos begin dating in the second year of the podcast, Carlos gradually comes to view Night Vale more as his home through his budding connection with Cecil. Certainly, by the time they are married Carlos is convinced that the town is its own special kind of normal and he is largely unbothered by the scientific interest which brought him to the town in the pilot episode. Carlos, berating himself for "no longer see[ing] the strangeness, but only my home," demonstrates not only his complacency with accepting the logic of the town, but also Cecil's success in initiating him into such a logic to begin with.[19] Had Carlos remained isolated in his lab as an observer of the town and not formed such solid community connections, there is a considerable chance that he would have still borne witness to the immense strangeness of the town and declared it as such. He is a scientist, after all.

Insider/Outsider Status: Carlos and His Scientists

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[17] Gist, "'More Reassuring Noise in This Quiet World'," 87.

[18] Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth discuss certain literary elements such as flashbacks and foreshadowing—two devices that enable a text to pick and choose what to present to the reader—that allow a text to present a disrupted view of linear time, aiding in said text's representation of queerness. "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature," 15–18.

[19] cecilspeaks, "111 - Summer 2017, Night Vale, USA."

An outsider status in Night Vale is particularly hard to shake, and requires more than community involvement and personal connection. Night Vale as a community is not dismissive of its secretive, somewhat xenophobic nature. Cecil states in episode 10, "Feral Dogs," that:

> Our town was founded by peace-loving, imperialist conquerors who, to escape taxation, overwhelmed a potentially violent race of indigenous people and founded this beautiful city on principles of family, fortitude, fence building, and friendly propaganda. Let's not forget our long-standing town motto: "We have nothing to fear except ourselves. We are unholy, awful people. Fear ourselves with silence. Look down, Night Vale. Look down, and forget what you've done."[20]

This town's strong sense of community involvement—including involvement in maintaining its secrets—leads to a very particular relationship to outsiders. Carlos is the best example of this, as he has been a consistent presence throughout the entire podcast series and has come to call Night Vale his home. Metaphysically speaking, Carlos is not meant to be in Night Vale. This is made apparent in episode 49, "Old Oak Doors," in which Carlos becomes trapped in a desert otherworld because, "We can't shut the oak doors unless everyone is back where they belong."[21] Upon the doors closing, Carlos states, "And I remembered that I am not from Night Vale. I remembered that, as far as the laws of the universe are concerned, it is not where I belong." Hence he constructs a very literal outsider status for himself beyond his control.[22] This is despite Carlos residing in Night Vale for two years at the time, as well as dating Cecil for nearly a year as well.

On a cultural level, moreover, Carlos is considered a literal interloper. Within *It Devours!* Carlos dismisses the Night Vale citizens' exclamations of "Interloper!" as friendly greetings with no ill intent or xenophobia behind them.[23] One of his scientist colleagues and a protagonist in the novel, Nilanjana, is still receiving cries of the title throughout the novel despite living in the town for four years. The way in which Carlos addresses her concerns deserves quoting in full:

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[20] Fink and Cranor, *Mostly Void*, 90.
[21] Fink and Cranor, *Great Glowing Coils*, 268.
[22] Ibid., 268.
[23] Fink and Cranor, *It Devours!*, 34.

Carlos said he didn't get the interloper stuff much since he'd started dating Cecil, and

once they had gotten married it had stopped completely. "Guess I'm finally one of

them," he said, in an offhanded way that manifested in Nilanjana's chest as a pang of

jealousy. … "Don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll be settled down here soon

enough."[24]

Here we can see that the criterion he had been lacking in episode 49, three years prior to the setting

of the novel, he has achieved by this point: monogamous marriage to a born Night Vale citizen. He

only achieves true insider status in the town not when he saves it multiple times from disaster or

participates in the communal secret-keeping for which he berates himself in episode 111, but when

he marries. While for many this is a straight-forward celebration of LGBTQ+ rights and the same-

sex relationship Cecil and Carlos have, it also prompts the question: What is it about marriage that

makes Carlos an insider? Even though the cries of "interloper" do not bother Carlos as they bother

Nilanjana, there is still an immense community pressure to form a conventional partnership to a

citizen of Night Vale and thus assimilate into the norm of the married, monogamous couple.

Carlos must make himself intelligible to this heterosexual norm in order to be of Night Vale

as a town. In the signing of the marriage contract and the declaration of Cecil and Carlos as a

married couple, the performance of the joining of families and the joining of two people has been

completed, and Carlos and Cecil are considered as one. As such it may easily be said that Night

Vale manages the insider/outsider status of its citizens and newcomers through the marriage

ceremony and spectacle. Of course, simply because Carlos marries a man does not mean that

marriage is not still a heterosexual tradition, kinship system, spectacle and norm. The wedding itself

is both a heterosexual spectacle and a publicly broadcast one. Episode 100, "Toast," details

speeches held at Cecil and Carlos' wedding reception by guests and the grooms.[25] There is no

context provided for why the reception was broadcast on the community radio station, as this is

only way we can hear the episodes is through Cecil's broadcasting. Presumably there is sufficient

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[24] Fink and Cranor, *It Devours!*, 34.
[25] cecilspeaks, "Episode 100 - Toast."

community interest to broadcast the reception, making it appropriate content for the community radio station. However, the fact that most, if not all, of the community members present in episodes 1 through 99 are present at the wedding speaks volumes as to the acceptance of the community to the relationship.

Carlos does not only marry into the town of Night Vale, he also takes on the same logic which governs the world of *Welcome to Night Vale* such as the weird being normal and the mundane being considered queer. Carlos begins the podcast series by testing Cecil's workspace "for materials" with a blinking box covered in wires and tubes and advising Cecil to evacuate the radio station.[26] However, by the time he marries Cecil, Carlos is fully absorbed in the governing logic of the town. After the narrative arc in which Night Vale citizens must acknowledge their lived reality or face the second end of their world, Carlos states to Cecil, "'I've become too complacent … When I came here, I understood this town as scientifically fascinating. And then, gradually, it became my day to day life. I could no longer see the strangeness, but only my home.'"[27] This establishes that in order for Carlos fully to consider Night Vale his home, he had to adjust his world view to be accepting of the town and its own kind of strangeness. Moreover, Carlos has to relinquish his idea of a community being an object of study. The relationship Carlos has to this normalisation of his thinking is complex. On the one hand, he appears to lament the fact that he lost his scientific curiosity for the town itself. On the other hand, the way in which his thoughts of Night Vale became normalised was not entirely voluntary and accrued over time. Further, while costing his keen scientific eye for the irregular, Carlos was granted community membership in part due to his adherence to the logic of the town and considering it a normal city.

Besides the more literal outsider example of Carlos and his scientists, the way in which the text focuses heavily on the insider/outsider status of characters is reflected in the ways in which Cecil narrates the other outsider characters who come into the town, such as the Man in the Tan Jacket and The Woman from Italy. In comparison to Cecil's enamoured appreciation of Carlos'

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[26] Fink and Cranor, *Mostly Void*, 9.
[27] cecilspeaks, "111 - Summer 2017, Night Vale, USA."

physical beauty in the first episode, Cecil introduces these other characters as being mired in suspicion and ultimately very secretive. Part of this affect of deep suspicion is unique to Night Vale: nobody can quite remember the Man in the Tan Jacket after speaking with him and The Woman from Italy possesses Cecil on air, channeling her words through his voice while he is broadcasting.[28] These outsider figures stay as outsiders to the community of Night Vale, in contrast to Carlos. The Man in the Tan Jacket is the mayor of another city and wishes to venture back there and The Woman from Italy is, in simplistic terms, not from Night Vale and her talent for possession cannot be put to the town's communal use, and so she is disregarded as not being valuable. Hence, it is only Carlos and his team of scientists who ever really find a home in Night Vale from elsewhere. It is only Carlos who ever marries into full citizenship of the town. Given Carlos' comments to Nilanjana that she will be "settled down here soon enough" specifically in the context of his marriage to Cecil correlating to Night Vale citizens no longer referring to him as an interloper, there is a correlation between community acceptance and the marriage of an outsider to a community insider. In this way the text presents romantic, monogamous marriage as the only method of full community acceptance.

Secrecy and Disclosure: Scholarship and the Text

Secrecy and its accompanied disclosure are the first and most apparent elements that *Night Vale* utilises surrounding its queer characters. Conceptually, secrecy may best be understood in the queer sense in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms. In writing of the way in which secrecy and disclosure operate for the homosexual closet, Sedgwick states:

> "Closetedness" itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—
> not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in
> relation to discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.[29]

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[28] Fink and Cranor, *Mostly Void*, 121; Fink and Cranor, *Great Glowing Coils*, 139–140.
[29] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

As such, the apparent truth of closetedness is only a truth when the assumption of heterosexuality has not been corrected. In this way, to allow a silence to stand as truth is to be complicit with the heteronormative assumption. It is important to point out homosexuality itself has been explored by Sedgwick as the sexuality of secrecy, following an open-secret structure.[30] Further, the discourse Sedgwick highlights in relation to the silence of secrecy may be heteronormativity or any other regime of truth, not limited to sexuality. She establishes this practice in examining the homosexual closet as a part of a knowledge/ignorance exchange and thus broadening the way in which she uses closetedness to be applicable to any kind of forbidden knowledge. If the term "closetedness" is substituted for the term "secrecy" in the quote above while the remainder of the sentence remains intact, we can see opportunities to apply this theorisation of the closet to any example of secrecy, be it state secrets, personal secrets or the deliberate forgetting of knowledge. Each of these appears in *Night Vale*, all contributing to the text's reliance upon secrecy as a narrative element. Further, in this instance we may also regard the town as "queer" in the broad sense, considering the emphasis that the text places on normalising the fantastical.

The town of Night Vale and its residents do not only maintain their secrets from others in the form of literal secrecy. Instead, Night Vale undertakes a process of deliberately forgetting the events affecting the town, knowledge that the town holds collectively, and the residents' own personal histories. To take an example from Cecil's personal history, episode 33 "Cassette" details present-day Cecil finding an audio recording of his teenage self meeting an untimely death. In order to maintain this personal secret, including as a secret from himself, Cecil states:

> No matter! I'm taking the tape, just now and I'm [*Grunts*] crushing it into little pieces.
> None of us have to think about it again. I'll just double check that the mirror in the
> station bathroom is covered as usual and then that will be that. Done. Forgotten.[31]

The active and deliberate forgetting of this secret provides a more unique way of seeing secrecy, including sexual secrecy, especially when it comes to personal identity. Had Cecil been born into

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[30] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 22.
[31] Fink and Cranor, *Great Glowing Coils*, 81.

something similar to a contemporaneous heteronormative society, he may indeed find it far easier to simply forget his queerness rather than act on his same-sex desire. As such, this tendency for *Night Vale* to rely so heavily on secrecy for its LGBTQ+ characters offers a narrow vision for LGBTQ+ existence outside of a heteronormative context. To put it simply, this approach implies that you can take the queer out of the closet but cannot take the closet out of the queer.

The final way in which secrecy comes to haunt Night Vale as a distinctly queer place is in the climax of Year Five of the podcast, in which the physical reality of Night Vale collapses into other, alternative, realities, and the citizens of the town must acknowledge the truth in order to avoid demise. It is the oft-stigmatised character of Steve Carlsberg who succeeds in pointing this out:

> **Steve Carlsberg:** Unless we pay attention to our true reality, all will be lost. I believe recognizing angels is a vital first step. It's like my brother-in-law saying mean things all the time. I tried to ignore the mean bits, I just put my head down and kept moving. The main thing was to keep moving, not to bog down in tears and fights and emotions. Just move forward, because facing it would mean pain.
>
> But then a few weeks ago, I looked him in the eye and said, "Stop." He looked shocked. I inhaled and just as I did, he did too. And in a synchronous moment of breath, I started crying.[32]

While taken to a cosmic extreme, the way in which Fink and Cranor present the impetus behind acknowledging strangeness and difference for the town of Night Vale is precisely the same for a queer coming out: unless the truth is acknowledged, personally as well as communally, one cannot hope to maintain a cohesive or stable identity. Cecil closes the same episode with a statement reflective of both: "Now our reality is badly damaged, and the only thing keeping it together is our acknowledgement. Finally, this strange town that we live in, no more denial. *We must see ourselves clearly, or risk losing ourselves forever*."[33] The abnormal and unusual are real and are not to be denied. This is directly opposed to the town's motto encouraging citizens to forget the horrors of the

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[32] cecilspeaks, "110 - Matryoshka."
[33] Ibid. Emphasis added.

past. To forget is to take on great personal and communal cost. Given the text's approach to the coming-out narrative—that is to deny it a clear place in the narrative at all—this Year Five story arc undermines the ideological visibility of Cecil and Carlos among others as queer characters, instead displacing the secret *par excellence* onto other uncomfortable acknowledgements.

It is in the final example above where we can see the realisation of a secret immediately transformed into a process of disclosure. For the residents of Cecil's Night Vale, it is not enough simply to see their town as strange to prevent the collapse of reality. Instead, Cecil takes the first step towards openly declaring and disclosing the weirdness of Night Vale. Ken Plummer similarly explores the way in which secrecy is typically governed by a process of disclosure. He states of the coming-out story:

> As well as having suffering at the base of these stories, there is also the harbouring of a secret and a silence which may eventually be given a voice, disclosed, brought out of the private world into a public one. … Personally and socially, secrets can perform vital functions … They may indeed be vital to a sense of our own powerfulness: to tell all, for all to be known, can render people extremely vulnerable.[34]

In this way, the power conveyed by secrecy is similarly placed upon disclosure, because they are intertwined. To hold a secret also means to hold the possibility of freeing oneself of that secret. Further, Plummer outlines different stages or types of coming-out as we have seen in previous chapters: personal, private, public, and political.[35] Through Plummer's understanding of disclosure as multiple, continuous, and powerful, we can understand the way in which the disclosure of Night Vale's secrets also might be multiple, continuous, and particularly powerful. Not only do the town's residents hold their own secrets which they might disclose, but the town as a whole maintains certain communal secrets. Hence, understanding a difference between a personal coming out and a public coming out is important not only for understanding the audience to the disclosure, but also for who might be participating in such a disclosure.

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[34] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 56–57.
[35] Ibid., 57–58.

As such, disclosure within *Welcome to Night Vale* might take on some obvious and comedic forms. Cecil is an excellent example of this. Cecil talks about his personal life while broadcasting in such a way as to be deemed unprofessional for anyone in his position, not only for a queer community radio broadcaster. One of the ways Fink and Cranor establish Cecil as a character in the first episode, "Pilot," is through his frank declaration of his love for Carlos.[36] Moreover, episode 27, "First Date," is Cecil's narration of his entire first date with Carlos, live, on air, to his entire community, while he is working. The frankness and honesty with which Cecil delivers this information is played off for comedic effect, with Cecil intermittently narrating the displeasure of Station Management. For example: "Hold on, Station Management is apparently getting agitated, flailing around their office and howling, so I need to do more news real quick."[37] Cecil pauses the narrative of what he really wants to talk about—Carlos—in order to maintain some semblance of a performance of his actual job as a news reporter.[38] The audience for this particular disclosure of Cecil's is arguably the entire town of Night Vale. He is broadcasting on the community radio during a time slot dedicated to community interests, such as the news, weather, and traffic. What he should be disclosing at this time is the news and the other pre-written segments already prepared for Cecil to read out. Instead, Cecil is disclosing the details of his first date with Carlos. While Cecil never positions this date as a secret from his community, there is little doubt that this information incongruous to the format of disclosure. Cecil's narration of his first date with Carlos is the exact opposite of closetedness: it is disclosure at the potential cost of social standing. As such, it is not only secrecy in Night Vale which takes on a distinctly different character from the expected, but so is the disclosure process and the way in which disclosure is received.

Implications

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[36] Fink and Cranor, *Mostly Void*, 5.
[37] Fink and Cranor, *Great Glowing Coils*, 16.
[38] Ibid., 16.

Traditionally, the elements of secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of a dual insider and outsider status, and the initiator figure have been at the core of the coming-out narrative. These narrative elements have expanded in the twenty-first century to be present in a wide range of LGBTQ+ texts, including *Welcome to Night Vale.* Weinstock highlights how distinctly anti-corporate the podcast comes across in its use of real-world corporations during its satirical "a word from our sponsors" segments while maintaining the relative privacy of characters like Cecil and Carlos in not having to come out to their community as queer.[39] These multiple rejections of the real-world status quo might further imply a similar resistance of certain narrative traditions like the coming-out narrative, particularly in *Night Vale*'s emphasis on not coming out at all.

However, regardless of the phobic or anti-phobic resulting text, there is a consistency between these earlier texts and *Welcome to Night Vale* which might be alarming considering how radically queer the podcast series is considered. We might ask of a text like *Welcome to Night Vale* what it is precisely replicating or displacing onto other elements when considering the coming-out narrative. In *Welcome to Night Vale*'s adherence to the same tropes of the coming-out narrative as per the analysis above, there is no considerable or radical break with the key elements of the coming-out narrative. Secrecy and disclosure, the navigation of an insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure are all equally prominent in these texts as earlier ones depicting a character's coming-out. Moreover, but the cultural norms which govern the real world are often equally adhered to in *Night Vale*. Here we might return to the emphasis *Night Vale* places upon marriage being the primary and most valued kinship system in the town, as it is in the real world, through the broadcast of Cecil and Carlos' wedding. The inability for the podcast completely to separate itself from governing cultural norms is hinted at in scholarship, with Weinstock stating that to, "appreciat[e] what is familiar in *Night Vale* allows us then to consider more clearly what it is doing that it is new and different,"

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[39] Weinstock, "Introduction," 13–18. Brands and corporations featured in this segment include McDonald's and The Home Depot along with sponsors such as "the concept of itching" as in episode 52. The tone of such segments ranges from lighthearted absurdity, which is then juxtaposed with a real-world brand, to the local chapter of the NRA promoting their fundraising bumper stickers with "We genuinely do not value human life," printed on them.

specifically of the horror elements of the text.[40] However, we might ask similar questions of *Night Vale*'s familiarity in representing LGBTQ+ people. The familiarity of *Night Vale* is not only in the soothing tones of Cecil Baldwin's narration to long-time listeners, but also in the kinds of stories it is telling about its LGBTQ+ residents and how narrow these stories can be.

It was earlier stated that the media and critical reception of the podcast highlights the fact that nobody in Night Vale is required to come out to their community. While that assessment is technically correct, that does not mean that queer characters do not hold secrets above and beyond heterosexual characters. For instance, in episode 108, "Cal," Cecil is visited by his brother from an alternative universe, an alternate Night Vale, and deliberately does not disclose the fact that in his own reality he has a husband.[41] Cecil narrates of this moment:

> In my life with Cal, I'd never told him I would never have a girlfriend. In Night Vale, no one cared either way, but I felt like Cal would have. In this other reality, I was single.
>
> So I only said, "No."[42]

As such, it cannot be said, while nobody in Night Vale *has to come out* in order to achieve community acceptance as a queer person, that nobody is in the closet. Cecil is quite brutally confronted with a reality in which he is closeted to his own family and assumes the accrued silence that closetedness requires like a second skin. He has never had to come out, but he is still closeted.

Welcome to Night Vale stands out as a text for a few reasons. First is its podcast format and how under-researched fiction podcasts are as texts particularly in relation to their literary value. Second is its dedication to diversity in its depictions of various ethnicities, nationalities, orientations, gender identities, abilities and even sentient species in its characters. Despite these distinct differences from the realist coming-out narratives such as *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and egalitarian realist texts such as *Boy Meets Boy*, *Welcome to Night Vale* ultimately adheres to the same narrative techniques as these texts when depicting its queer characters. Hence,

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[40] Weinstock, "Introduction," 7.
[41] cecilspeaks, "108 - Cal."
[42] Ibid.

it goes to show that even texts that defy traditional storytelling methods, have a distinctly un-realist or absurdist bent to their story-world and story logics, and commit to not depicting any coming-out moments in favour of complete and immediate acceptance can still, and equally, fail in breaking away from the coming-out narrative tradition of queer storytelling. As a text that is always changing, *Night Vale* is in a unique position to respond to itself and its prior depictions of queer life. It would be a shame for this position to go as a wasted opportunity.

Conclusion

The tendency for a wide range of LGBTQ+ texts to adhere to and reinforce the same structural elements of the coming-out narrative, especially when focusing on queer characters rather than their heterosexual peers, is worth investigating in its own right. However, the effect created by these texts' adherence to the same norms and expectations of the coming-out narrative is similarly worthy of consideration, particularly regarding the typical readership of YA texts. Many readers may rightfully be left with an impression of increased diversity in these texts, especially in the case of *Welcome to Night Vale* with its representation of more queer identities than simply lesbian or gay characters. The inverse is similarly true, with the inevitability of the homosexual closet—in whatever form it takes—reinforced rather than dismantled as a site of homosexual shame, secrecy, and as a determination of if a character belongs in a specific community and culture. The prevalence of the coming-out narrative implies a similar prevalence of the homosexual closet and, by extension, the normalisation of heteronormativity within these same anti-homophobic texts.

The consistency in these different texts is in the narrative tropes to which they adhere. The three key elements of the coming out narrative—secrecy and disclosure, insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure—each appear to be displaced onto another element of the texts. In the coming-out narratives examined in this thesis—and in other quintessential coming-out narratives—LGBTQ+ characters have been required to maintain a secret, be it a secret of sexual identity or another aspect of personal identity. This directly links the depiction of queerness in these texts to Sedgwick's theorisation of the homosexual closet as governed by a knowledge/ignorance dialectic.[1] As a consequence, an equal emphasis is placed throughout these texts on the ways in which secrets might be revealed, disclosed, or used as intensely consequential bargaining chips against an LGBTQ+ character. This occurs most obviously in the coming-out narrative of *Simon vs the Homo*

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[1] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

Sapiens Agenda (2015). As such, the coming-out narrative is displaced from the homosexuality of one or more characters and onto a different, often unrelated element of the text.

Simon Spier, the gay protagonist of *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, narrates his journey from a state of being closeted, to being out of the closet to his friends, family and high school by the conclusion of the novel. Unlike texts preceding it, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* does not conclude the narrative with a communal or familial rejection, or the rejection of a homophobic community by the queer protagonist. Instead, Simon is given the narratological attention to realise his own high school romance. The connection between Simon's homosexuality and the pressure of both secrecy and disclosure is clear: Simon is closeted and, in the first half of the novel, threatened with the disclosure of his homosexuality without his consent and before he is fully prepared.

In comparison to *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, the other texts discussed in this thesis have sought to displace the coming-out narrative and its emphasis upon both secrecy and disclosure onto different elements of their respective narratives. In the case of Simon Snow and his boyfriend Baz in *Carry On* and *Wayward Son*, this is done in the novels' depiction of Baz's vampirism as mirroring Simon's homosexuality. Specifically, vampirism is compared to homosexuality through the disclosure process and the extent to which Baz wishes to hide his vampiric nature from those around him. Within *Boy Meets Boy* and the *Captive Prince* trilogy, secrecy and disclosure revolve around the bisexual characters Kyle and Damen, respectively, making them perpetual outsiders even in homonormative and egalitarian societies. This is despite both texts' anti-homophobic presentation of alternative realities to the heteronormative real world. Further, within *Welcome to Night Vale* the emphasis the text places upon secrecy is specific to a determination to maintain community identity through wilful ignorance of the strange happenings in town. While not coming-out narratives in the traditional sense, the ways in which both secrecy and disclosure attach themselves to LGBTQ+ characters and LGBTQ+ stories in these texts create close parallels between these additional narratives and the coming-out narrative, perpetuating the link between queerness and exclusion.

Due to the prominence of the coming-out narrative's characteristic tropes of secrecy and disclosure, there is a similar prominence among LGBTQ+ characters navigating their dual insider and outsider status over the course of their respective texts. Simon Spier navigates the process of coming out of the homosexual closet, and does so gradually. In doing so he maintains a position both inside and outside the closet. This is in line with Plummer's thinking of a multi-stage process of coming-out.[2] Similarly, both Simon Snow and Baz within *Carry On* and *Wayward Son* must navigate their dual insider/outsider status by way of alleviating their ignorance of their homosexuality and vampirism respectively. This demonstrates the intertwined nature of both secrecy and disclosure, and the navigation of an insider/outsider status. Similarly, in reaching the wild unknown of Las Vegas, Baz must recognise his outsider status from the community of vampires he finds there. Further, *Boy Meets Boy* presents the character of Kyle torn between a heterosexual and homosexual identity despite being confident in his attraction to both boys and girls. The character of Tony also presents a dual insider and outsider in his friendship with Paul, constituting the latter as a trusted insider. However, his residence in another town renders him an outsider to his own community and, in many ways, his own family. This suggests that even visions of egalitarian societies presuppose an oppressed other to demonstrate their egalitarianism.

Geography becomes a particularly sticky point of contention within the *Captive Prince* trilogy, with protagonist Damen's political and national identity posing a threat to his life if it were discovered. His adoption of the identity of a common soldier and not the presumed deceased crown prince of Akielos provides him with the burden of having an integral role in the power struggle between Laurent and the Regent but without the power to control or direct that role unless he reveals his status as the rightful king of Akielos. Similar to Kyle in *Boy Meets Boy*, Damen must navigate the homonormative society of Vere as a bisexual, at risk of breaching a social more whether he expresses attraction to women or the men around him. Rather than posing an alternative to this bisexual double-bind, the *Captive Prince* trilogy suggests it is an inevitability for bisexual

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[2] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*.

people. Finally, *Welcome to Night Vale* takes a characteristically satirical approach to the town's obvious xenophobia. Rather than define the "in group" and "out group" along the lines of race, ability or sexuality, Night Vale differentiates its citizens by whether they were born in the town and, at times, marriage status. Carlos in particular is a good example with him admitting that the "'friendly greeting" of "Interloper!" had ceased upon his marriage to Cecil.[3]

The typical process for an outsider to be considered an insider in these texts is through a process of initiation, usually at the behest of a good Samaritan elder queer in the community, familiar and well-connected with other members of the community or culture. This initiator figure appears in the LGBTQ+ narrative—specifically the coming-out narrative—in order to initiate the newly out protagonist into a distinct and visible queer community in the case of Peter for Simon Spier in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Baz for Simon Snow within *Carry On* and Paul for both Noah and Kyle in *Boy Meets Boy*. Further, the character of Lamb appears in *Wayward Son* to initiate Baz into the community of vampires openly residing in Las Vegas. This initiator figure is reminiscent of the concept of the avunculate as explored by Sedgwick.[4] This initiator figure requires some understanding of an in-group and out-group dichotomy, such that those freshly out of the closet seemingly must accept the culture of their older and more experienced peers.

While *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *Carry On*, *Wayward Son* and *Boy Meets Boy* each demonstrate their respective protagonists' initiations into a queer or LGBTQ+ community, the *Captive Prince* trilogy presents a more sophisticated version of the initiator as one who communicates cultural knowledge and personal experience. The cultural insights Damen gains from talking with Laurent about Vere and, by the end of *Kings Rising*, the political insights Laurent gains from discussing battle strategy with Damen prove vital to both of them. Here the series presents a more egalitarian exchange of roles between the initiator and initiate. Similarly, *Welcome to Night Vale* presents the equal-status romance of Cecil and Carlos as a contemporary take on the

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[3] Fink and Cranor, *It Devours!*, 34.
[4] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 57. Here she uses the term "uncle" as an older man "offering a degree of initiation into gay cultures and identities."

avunculate. Rather than Cecil being considerably older than Carlos, both Cecil and Carlos are

described as middle-aged men and hence occupy the typical age of the initiator figure. Instead of

age, then, Cecil has the advantage of community knowledge and experience in introducing Carlos to

the town of Night Vale over time. While the traditional avunculate model usually contains some

intergenerational element, the kinds of initiator figures in these texts are significantly closer in

status to the character they are initiating.

Corrine Wickens identifies the displacement of queer stigma as present within *Boy Meets Boy*

and considers this tendency of Levithan's novel to displace the shame usually associated with

homosexuality onto another aspect of personal identity a progressive shift in LGBTQ+

representation.[5] However, despite the anti-homophobic nature of this displacement, the same key

narrative elements in the coming-out narrative are not only present but also prominent in these more

contemporary kinds of fiction. In particular, the popular conception of *Welcome to Night Vale* as

radically and unapologetically queer only holds true on a surface reading of the text and by

considering various casting decisions made by the authors. Rather, when analysing the podcast and

novels of *Night Vale* closely, the normative assumptions about community, family and queer

assimilation into the normal become clear through the lens of a queer navigation of the

insider/outsider status and, by extension, the role of the initiator.

It is worth questioning the political origins of such narrative techniques that have attached

themselves to so many depictions of queerness in these texts. Take the initiator figure, for example.

Sedgwick highlights how the avunculate figures in fiction offer an alternative figuration of the

parent.[6] This alternative, while important for considering the development of gender nonconforming

or otherwise queer children for finding their own alternatives to the heteronormative frame in which

they were raised, also became a figure of domesticated horror in works of authors such as Oscar

Wilde.[7] Consider also coming out itself. The standard audience for such a disclosure is, in reality

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[5] Wickens, "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia," 160.

[6] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 63.

[7] Simonsen, "Dark Avunculate," 24. As the title suggests, Simonsen analyses Wilde's "The Star-Child" with a focus on the darker avunculate presence of the Magician.

and fiction, the straight audience. Between heterosexual parents, heterosexual peers and the wider heteronormative community, the disclosure of queerness has evolved as a way of translating queer lived experience to a straight audience. This is politically imperative, of course, in light of the global history of queer persecution and for the sake of political and personal visibility. However, as important as this process is in the fight against homophobia, it would be remiss to distance the coming-out narrative and its techniques from this original translation process. Hence, in its rather strict adherence to the same narrative techniques of the coming-out narrative, it can be said that *Welcome to Night Vale*, despite its overwhelmingly queer audience, is actually written presupposing a heterosexual audience. That such a beam of hope for meaningful LGBTQ+ representation as *Night Vale* cannot separate itself from this heteronormative literary frame is disheartening at best.

The homosexual closet is well-documented for being governed by secrecy and disclosure, as per Sedgwick. This secrecy and silence which surrounds the homosexual closet further implies precisely that there is something about homosexuality that is deserving of its stigma, shame and silence on the matter. In some circumstances it is simply and clearly unsafe to be out of the closet, but in others it is a matter of internalised shame, stigma and silence concerning the same-sex attraction of a fictional character. What the coming-out narrative then reinforces is the heteronormative and homophobic assumption that same-sex desire of any kind is pathological. Homosexuality in these texts is still taboo, not to be talked about and fully integrated into the heterosexual institution of monogamous marriage. As such, the prevalence of the same key elements of secrecy and disclosure, a navigation of a dual insider/outsider status, and the initiator figure achieve a reinforcement of the homophobic understandings of homosexuality that form the basis of heteronormativity.

The common scholarly and broad public understanding of a progressive improvement in the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in fiction, particularly in YA novels, has been challenged through this research. What the coming-out narrative of the twenty-first century has changed about the narrative tradition from which it came is not its homophobic or heteronormative content, but

instead where such content lies. Instead of the explicitly normative and downright tragic stories published in the 1970s through the 1990s, stories published in the 2000s and 2010s have given their LGBTQ+ characters the shame of other secrets. Be it a secret anonymous love interest, the internalised fear of becoming a predator of those one desires, the confusion and pressure of identity labels for bisexual characters, or only being accepted into a community upon monogamous marriage, the shame of a secret and of a difference surrounds the LGBTQ+ characters in all of the texts examined here. Moreover, in seeking to downplay the potential impact coming out has on an LGBTQ+ character, these texts have the consequential effect of reinforcing the heteronormative assumptions and expectations which necessitate coming out and the coming-out narrative. Any kind of post-coming-out narrative must seek to address these heteronormative assumptions that the coming-out narrative of the twenty-first century has yet to acknowledge as necessitating its existence.

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