

NOSTALGIA FOR THE CLOSET:
TENDER CONNECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ADOLESCENT
LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the tenderness and nostalgia for the closet in contemporary American adolescent literature. I build a focused timeline from approximately 2010 to 2023, selecting mainstream American texts aimed towards adolescent readers and explore the depiction of the closet throughout. For each text I explore, I analyze a moment in queer history that coincides with the time of publication in order to demonstrate the influence of that context, as well as connect the analysis to the larger intracommunity conversation between queer adults and queer adolescents. Tenderness and connection are a common thread throughout these texts, emerging from the relationship between affect, privacy, and capitalism as they connect to contemporary concerns. I argue that the nostalgia for the closet that I find throughout these texts are connected to their particular moments, and that this timeline illustrates how desires for privacy and normalcy result in the closet being depicted as a space of safety and connection rather than a space of shame or confinement.

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Dedicated to the kids and adults in the back of the closet.

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Nostalgia for the Closet:

Tender Connections in Contemporary American Adolescent Literature

Introduction

The first time I heard the phrase *came out of the closet*, in a piece of juvenile gossip I did not fully understand, I pictured it literally. I imagined this person having holed themselves up in some dusty utility closet finally opening the door and emerging. The closet, as a physical space, is confining. There is little room to move inside the space, since its purpose is just to store things that do not belong elsewhere. The metaphor of being in the closet conveys secrecy and is loaded with shame and fear. The common narrative is that coming out of the closet is freeing. The closet is small, dark, and hidden—the literal space is not one in which someone is meant to be able to remain long term. Why, then, would someone feel a tender fondness for or even a nostalgic longing to return to such a space?

I am interested in the nostalgic view of the closet, shown from the perspective of contemporary adult queer life and told to an adolescent audience. The struggles of hypervisibility in life outside the closet in adulthood contrast with a welcome memory of privacy and safety that the closet offered in adolescence. My argument is that the role of the closet in contemporary adolescent queer literature is reflective of recent history from both sides of the conversation. In other words, the fictional closet tells us something about the desires and concerns for the queer community of the current moment. I posit that this nostalgia for the closet is influenced by the ways in which visibility and the scrutiny of social media in contemporary life demand that one put their own identity on display in adulthood, which limits the availability of privacy in adolescence. There is reasonable concern about the potential consequences of negative reactions from the homophobic majority, as well as a need for ownership over one's own identity. The

desire for privacy and safety in the face of life post-internet and social media is directly reflected in the trend of nostalgia for the closet in young adult literature. Queer adults, living in the present, are writing these works for queer adolescents that offer a romantic and tender picture of what the closet can look like, compared to the spotlight of living on the “outside.”

This dissertation is influenced heavily by Heather Love’s work in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, in which she discusses the importance of looking backward to queer history in order to more deeply understand contemporary queer life. She explores the concept of “backwardness” and queerness connecting to feeling backward and suggests: “Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects” (Love 7). Love goes on to talk about the interaction of affect and politics, which I endeavor to do here as well. She writes: “Politics and feelings are very different kinds of things: the public sphere is big, feelings are small; social life happens out there, psychic life, somewhere inside; public time is collective time, measured by the clock, whereas in psychic life the trains hardly ever run on time” (Love 11). This conversation between the public and private spheres evokes the closet, as a metaphor for the barriers that can exist between the two in queer life. As she goes on, she discusses how the public sphere and affect are different kinds of “objects,” with different histories and frameworks to consider. I am interested in the interaction between the big public sphere and the small feelings that Love refers to, especially in light of the deterioration of the private sphere since the publication of Love’s book in 2007, and even just in the past decade. In this dissertation, I establish a focused timeline from approximately 2010 to 2023 in order to explore these themes

and connect them with the historical context, pairing each text I examine with a moment in recent queer history.

I take inspiration as well from F. Hollis Griffin in his book *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age*. Griffin discusses the affect of queer film and media in the twenty-first century. In laying out his exploration of the concept of “feeling normal,” which he describes as “a nebulous term for an affective state,” he explains how it relates to recognition and connection, as narratives of identity often strive for an endpoint of community. As Griffin explains it, the fluidity of identity as a lived experience can cause anxiety and alienation. Griffin goes on to discuss the desire for social legibility in the queer community, establishing that he is taking seriously the way these desires manifest in queer media, and explaining that his aim is “not to rescue them or condemn them, or even to argue that they are more progressive or regressive than they seem at first glance” (Griffin 2). He elaborates: “[T]his book considers gay and lesbian media evidence of the thorny terrain of politics in the twenty-first century, where ideas about sexual minorities are animated through narratives about individual happiness, and political claims get refracted through vague assertions related to personal transcendence” (Griffin 2). His intent to explore the political elements of these narratives in popular media, recognizing their affective value without condemning or praising, is a framework I aim for here as well, along with considering the influence of wider concerns in readership and marketing.

I examine the tender imagery that emerges from the relationship between affect, capitalism, and privacy in the context of contemporary queer American adolescent literature, analyzing how that connects to conversations about emotional desire and pride between queer adults and queer adolescents. In terms of affect, I explore the imagery associated with the portrayal of the experience of the closet for adolescent queer characters. In the texts I analyze in

each chapter, the closet typically appears as a space of safety and connection. Earlier generations of coming out narratives portray the closet as a space of confinement that the queer characters are desperate to leave so that they may begin to live a more authentic life. By contrast, the works I examine tend to view the closet with nostalgia, even tenderness. With the thread of the tender view of the closet within the texts, I am juxtaposing that soft affect with specific historical moments that coincide with the publication of the texts and suggesting the connections and trends that emerge. The theoretical framework I am applying is reliant on a background of queer theory and affect theory, as well as the interaction between them.

Queer Affect

In contemporary theoretical work, affect theory is often the framework that scholars turn to in order to examine the ways in which texts influence and hook into readers emotions and moods, connecting with their affective interiority. To give a background on affect theory and queer theory, I will offer a historical summary, focusing particularly on the areas in which they overlap. French literary theorist Roland Barthes published *The Pleasure of the Text* in 1973, in which he explores the “bliss of language” (Barthes 6) and the experiences between the writer and reader of a text through physical and erotic metaphor. This framework of the sensory value of literature and the experience of reading offers an entry point to what became affect theory in literature studies. The direction affect theory took in the 90s can be attributed to psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who wrote extensively and compellingly about the psychology of affect beyond the function of drives as a framework for studying human motivation. E. Virginia Demos undertook the project of collecting Silvan Tomkins’ works on affect, publishing *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan Tomkins* in 1995, four years after Tomkins’ death. In the same year, Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank edited *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, in

which they discuss Tomkins' writings, comparing his theoretical work and its significance to Freud, both in that his work is foundational in his insights about the affect system as the primary motivation system in humans and in that his work has the potential to inspire further explorations from other theorists.

In the introduction of *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*, Stephen Ahern lays out the early years of affect theory, describing the influence of Silvan Tomkins, as well as philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Describing how affect theory functions as a framework as demonstrated by concepts like Eve Sedgwick's theories on paranoid reading, Ahern writes: "Rather than searching to uncover what is lurking *beneath*—or to call for action *beyond*—the text, we might instead focus on the *beside*, on those interstices between being and action, feeling and judgment when the relational positioning of bodies and recognition of their interdependence is all that matters" (Ahern 14). This passage summarizes an aspect of the methodology in literary affect theory, wherein scholars emphasize placing their readings alongside the text, rather than investigating hidden meanings within it or extrapolating larger messaging from it.

When investigating the role of affect scholarship in queer theory, one does not have to get much further than the name. The choice of language is always an important element to consider in scholarship surrounding identity and the interaction between the personal and private spheres in political rhetoric. In *Feeling Backward*, Love offers an affective description and analysis of the use of the term *queer* in this realm of theory, explaining that when the term was chosen in the 1980s, it was because it "evoked a long history of insult and abuse—you could hear the hurt in it" (Love 2). We are starting from a place of affect here, using the very word we're identifying the field with to convey emotion. Love says: "Queer theorists drew on the energies of

confrontational, stigma-inflected activism of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation who had first taken up this ‘forcibly bittersweet’ term” (Love 2). By its very nature and name, queer theory is impacted by affect, wrapped up in *hurt* and *bittersweet*. She brings up writers who, historically, have embraced isolation and turned away from the future themselves, while contemporary queer theory seeks to find them. She describes the works that fit in this concept as “a crucial ‘archive of feeling,’ an account of the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia.” Further, she explains what feelings she is seeking to examine: “In their work, I pay particular attention to feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness. These feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical ‘impossibility’ or same-sex desire” (Love 4). This list of feelings is a rich array of the types of negativity that are worth keeping in mind when engaging with queer studies and queer theory. Queer stories contain these kinds of feelings, and as Love is arguing, turning away from them is not the answer.

After the turn of the century, Eve Sedgwick continued her work in affect and queer theory, publishing *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* in 2003, a collection of essays that had mostly appeared in other contexts into one project addressing concepts like shame, queer performativity, and paranoid and reparative reading. The same year, Ann Cvetkovich published her innovative project *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, in which she set out to preserve a space for the typically more ephemeral pieces of queer history, creating an archive for feelings and trauma, highlighting the need to be aware of what is at risk of being lost in culture and history. She describes the organization of the archive of feelings as “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions” (Cvetkovich 7) with the content of the artifacts themselves as well as the

affective response to them. Trauma is the “point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures” (Cvetkovich 7).

The body of scholarship on negative queer affect is varied and compelling, with theorists writing about the affective repercussions of emotions like shame, trauma, regret, loneliness, and so on. Lee Edelman in his 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* explored the political ramifications for queer people of rhetoric involving the figure of the Child and an imagined future. He expresses resistance to the ideas of normalization and acceptance and hope for the future, drawn instead to queer negativity: “The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (Edelman 6). His rejection of justifying the worth of queer negativity through its potential positive social value indicates a move towards refusing the need for affect to be *useful* in order to be worthwhile. Theorist Sally Munt wrote about shame in her 2008 book *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, wherein she discussed how shame can set apart certain cultural groups and described the relationship between shame and pride. She describes the infective nature of shame and how it can travel through groups, and goes on to posit: “The binary opposition of pride/shame is one model for understanding contemporary social liberation movements since the 1960s, as we begin to understand the labyrinthine corridors of shame that bore into particular cultures, we also begin to understand that shame can incorporate some patent, positive effects” (Munt 4).

The early 2010s saw a meaningful series of projects that turned to the complexities of positive affects and emotions. Lauren Berlant and Michael Snediker both explore optimism in

their respective books *Cruel Optimism* and *Queer Optimism*, though they take very different approaches and are arguing in different areas of the concept. Lauren Berlant takes a more formalist approach to affect in *Cruel Optimism*, wherein she explores the cultural fantasy of ‘the good life’ and the fallout that occurs when the fantasy fails, as it does when it comes to capitalist society’s promises of stability and equality for entire segments of the population. In *The Promise of Happiness* by Sara Ahmed, she asks about happiness in terms of what it does and what we do with it. She explores the affect of happiness as a wish or a want, and talks about what purpose it serves for us, asking: “Why happiness, why now? We could certainly describe this *now* as a ‘happiness turn.’ *The Promise of Happiness* is written in part as a response to this turn” (Love 2). The *happiness turn* fits in effectively with the other movements of the intersection of affect and queer theory. In moves similar to all the preceding theorists, Ahmed discusses the problems with happiness and positivity, aiming to “make room” for possibilities beyond joy.

In Ahmed’s chapter “Unhappy Queers,” similar to Love in *Feeling Backward*, she explores past representations of queerness and queer people being largely tragic and negative. While Love focused on the inherent value of these stories and the affect of the tragedies in and of themselves, Ahmed also brings up the practical purpose of these endings in recent history. She describes how queer novels were publishable if and only if there were no happy endings given to the queers, and therefore no promotion of the value of their lives and happiness. The unhappy ending, then, serves to allow queer stories to be told at all. Ahmed describes them as a “political gift,” stating: “If the unhappy ending was an effect of censorship, it also provided means for overcoming censorship” (Ahmed 88). She adds that the unhappy ending does not require the gay and lesbian audience to be on board with that messaging—there is no necessity to take the ending literally. Ahmed continues: “What mattered was the existence of ‘a new book about us’”

(88). In this view, it is not the attempts at larger messages that mattered most to a queer readership desperate for stories that reflected them. It is just the existence of another queer story, whatever form that takes.

An overall theme across theory exploring queer affect is the emphasis on valuing the difficult and complex emotions associated with existing as queer, with particular focus given to emotions like shame, isolation, and fear. Love's *Feeling Backward* and Hollis's *Feeling Normal* both work to explore certain elements of the affective experience of queerness: shame at being abnormal and a desire to fit into the dominant culture, which dictates the standards of normalcy. Edelman's *No Future* and Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* both focus on the value of recognizing negative queer affect and a concern with who and what we leave behind in positive affect, with Edelman's argument about Scrooge and the *Sinthomosexual* and Ahmed's chapter "Unhappy Queers." I hesitate to situate my own aims here firmly in either the realms of negative or positive affect. Berlant explores the cruelty that can come with optimism, and Munt discusses how shame can transform into pride and solidarity in communities. Ahmed emphasizes the value of unhappy endings, and Edelman makes a compelling case against rhetoric that focuses on hope for the future. In this next section, I would like to establish my thinking in exploring nostalgia and tenderness, and how it balances positive and negative affect.

Nostalgia, Tenderness, and the Closet

I would like to establish my use of "tenderness" when exploring affect and nostalgia in queer adolescent literature. When I am looking at moments of tenderness in connections in the texts I am exploring, I am in part looking at the care taken, as in tend as a verb. There is care between the characters in the context of the texts, as well as care between the adult authors and young readers. While tenderness evokes care and healing, it also evokes hurt and sensitivity.

Some of these moments I am looking at are tender in that they are caring and sensitive, and they are also tender in the way a fresh bruise can be tender. I am interested in the way that tenderness is a demonstration of the connection between queer people, as well as the shared understanding with the newness and pain of coming to terms with one's identity.

The portrayal of the closet and the private connections one can make within it, through tenderness unspoken, is colored by nostalgia¹. There is always a sense that this affective view of the closet and the experience from within it is from the point of view of "outside" or otherwise beyond it. The perspective evokes "reaching back," in a similar way to how Love describes it. The tenderness that exists within the closet in these texts indicates a desire for safety and privacy in the real world. There is a yearning for innocence, care, and space that the fictional closet offers, as well as the newness of identity exploration. The closet becomes, in this portrayal, a conversation between the adults remembering it and the adolescents experiencing it. Even in the "out and proud" rhetoric common in the literature of the era of rainbow capitalism, we can find these moments of tender longing for the kind of connection that exists in the unspoken recognition in the closet. There is a sense that there is pressure to be unapologetic about one's identity, without space for the hesitance and shame that exists in the uncertainty one is made to feel in the closet.

We know, of course, that coming out of the closet is not one moment. There is no practical binary in that threshold. It is never as simple as being "in" the closet or "out" of the closet. One cannot discuss the closet without talking about Eve Sedgwick's foundational work,

¹ When discussing nostalgia, I am referring to the private emotion, rather than exploring the larger cultural implications, as other scholars have written about. For some examples of explorations of nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon: Janice Doane and Devon L. Hodges published *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference* in 1987, analyzing the way nostalgia in literature resisted the progressive rhetoric of feminism. More recently, in 2021, Badia Ahad-Legardy published *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture*, exploring how cultural nostalgia had been historically considered inaccessible to Black communities.

Epistemology of the Closet. She discusses how, in a post-Stonewall world, the interest in the secret-reveal of queerness was not diminished. Rather, she explains, the focus seemed to have instead heightened “by the increasingly intense atmosphere of public articulations of and about the love that is famous for daring not speak its name” (Sedgwick 67). I find that this is even more true in the age of social media. The fascination with the closet and the act of coming out of it is magnified by the way information can spread. In the early 90s, journalist and author Michelangelo Signorile pioneered the concept of “outing” as activism, reporting on closeted public figures in *OutWeek*. For Signorile, the aim was to normalize discussions of homosexuality, as well as call out hypocrisy in closeted antigay politicians². In recent years, this political philosophy of outing has remained to some extent. However, with the accessibility of public figures online and the speed at which information spreads, the climate of the internet and social media has also fostered a hunger for gossip. Sedgwick goes on to discuss the nuances of the closet, stating: “Even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (Sedgwick 68). She then discusses how new closets get built around queer people as well, with a number of new interactions, and how this calls for entirely new calculations surrounding safety in secrecy or disclosure. When we look at the closet with these realities, it is clear that there is no practical in/out binary in lived experience. By virtue of the heteronormative assumptions about identity, in that people are typically assumed straight and cis until stated otherwise, the closet is in some ways inescapable.

² For further reading: Signorile published *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power* in 1993 and *Outing Yourself: How to Come out as Lesbian or Gay to Your Family, Friends, and Coworkers* in 1996, and wrote the article “A Case for Outing on All Levels” in *The Advocate* in 2010. Additionally, Warren Johansson and William A. Percy. published *Outing: Shattering the Conspiracy of Silence* in 1994, exploring a broad timeline of outing, including Signorile’s philosophies.

In the context of contemporary queer life and adolescent literature, there is a specific fantasy of the closet that I will be engaging with. The closet, in contemporary queer conversation, is often depicted as a characteristic of adolescence. Coming out of the closet, in turn, is a milestone of queer coming of age. In the coming out narrative of popular contemporary media, the closet is a space of distinctly adolescent fear and shame. A queer teenager is, in this version of events, meant to come out of the closet once they reach a certain point of maturity. The coming out narrative is a queer coming of age story, in contemporary adolescent fiction.

This is, in part, where the nostalgia for the closet comes in. The queer adults, having long since left the adolescent closet, are reflecting on the space in much the same way that there is nostalgia for any other specific teenage milestone, however awkward, painful, or shameful. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be engaging with this fantasy of the closet in my analysis. My aim is not to claim that the closet is a wholly positive space, that we must resign ourselves to the realities of homophobia in the world and accept the closet as the only solution. I am merely suggesting that the closet, given the anxieties of the scrutiny of contemporary life, can seem like a welcome solace in comparison. The closet can, and historically has, been a space of shame, secrecy, and confinement. However, it can also be, and often is in the context of adolescent literature, a space characterized by safety, connection, and self-discovery.

Affect in queer theory often frames these discussions with movement as a metaphor for this theoretical attention, like Love's interest in reaching back. I would like to frame the affective elements of this dissertation with a similar kind of movement. I say "movements" in particular, because of the way questions of "turning" and concepts of directions are working in queer theory. In essence, in queer theory, where are we looking, to whom are we reaching out, and where are we moving? In terms of tenderness and nostalgia for the closet, I am examining the

movement in part as a conversation between the queer adults and queer adolescents experiencing the contemporary concerns of the closet, from opposite sides of the door.

Queer Adolescents and Queer Adults

To take a step back, I would like to offer a brief overview of key points in the history of the concept of adolescence. Childhood is a relatively modern concept, adolescence even more so, and the definitions are often influenced by care and nostalgia. In 1909, Ellen Key published *The Century of the Child*, wherein she argues for treating children as individuals and predicts the focus on children in the century to come, setting the tone for academic explorations of children and childhood. In his foundational 1962 book *Centuries of Childhood*, Philippe Ariès discusses how the concept of childhood has changed over time. Through his historical exploration of the role of children, he posits that childhood is a socially constructed concept, and children were not always viewed as a separate group in need of unique protection. Lloyd DeMause, in his 1974 book *The History of Childhood*, outlines the more negative aspects of the historical treatment of children. He goes through different periods and cultures, examining the history of abuse and neglect that children have suffered over time. In 1995, Hugh Cunningham published *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, giving an overview of the view of children and childhood from the Renaissance onward. He discusses the concept of childhood through lenses like that of class, family life, and education, giving space to parental relationships and grief as well. More specifically considering American adolescence, Howard P. Chudacoff writes *How Old Are You?: Age Consciousness in American Culture* in 1989 about the way age functions in American culture and how norms differ for age categories, arguing that the awareness of this began in the late nineteenth century and evolved from there. These earlier texts do theoretical work to demonstrate how the differentiation of age groups is a social construction.

In the 90s, Virginia L. Blum and Gail Murray Schmunk both published theoretical works connecting the concept of childhood to literature and fiction. In Schmunk's *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood*, she argues that childhood is not a static concept and that its definition evolves over time. She considers how literature written for children reveals dominant cultural ideals, covering authors like Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak and examining how the messages in children's literature demonstrate the priorities of the society the works originate from. The central argument Blum makes in *Hide and Seek: The Child Between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* is that the child figures in both psychoanalysis and fictional stories are stand-ins for the adult creators. The "child," she argues, has no material existence or identity beyond its connection to the adults that are using it as a vehicle. She uses both real and fictional "children" to examine this argument, from works like *Lolita* to *Home Alone*.

Other theorists narrow the focus to one single character in order to garner insights about a particular period of childhood. In her book *Robin and the Making of American Adolescence*, Lauren O'Connor does an effective job of explaining the socially constructed concept of contemporary adolescence through the lens of DC's *Robin*. As she explains: "Reading Robin reveals what mainstream culture thought and thinks about the American adolescent—and that adolescent is, I argue, merely what the larger culture thinks it is" (O'Connor 7). She goes on to discuss adolescence as it relates as well to consumer culture and markets—that is, part of the role of the adolescent in contemporary culture is to be marketed to as a new consumer demographic. She links this to DC's Robin, in positing that Robin acts as both product and producer of adolescence: "In this sense, Robin is both a *product* of adolescence being deployed (he could not be understood as a teenage character without readers first understanding the notion of 'teenager')

and a *producer* of adolescence (a constructed image meant for consumption by children and teens that communicates particular ideas about adolescence)” (O’Connor 19).

There is also a significant amount of scholarship on queerness in childhood, exploring areas of research like the role of sexuality in childhood and the queer experience of adolescence. Michel Foucault writes about children’s sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*, in his explorations of sex and power. Sigmund Freud’s essays “Infantile Sexuality” and “The Transformations of Puberty” are both foundational to the scholarship on childhood sexuality and queer childhood. In James Kincaid’s 1992 book *Child-Loving the Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, he examines the figure of the child in Victorian culture, analyzing the portrayal of angelic innocence and asexuality in the image of the child, arguing that this figure is both pure and erotic when it comes to its role in fantastical stories. He uses examples like Lewis Carroll’s Alice in this discussion. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley reference Alice as well, in their 2004 book *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, in which they collect essays examining queerness in childhood from theorists like Kincaid, Berlant, and Sedgwick. In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton discusses the concept of “growing sideways,” meant to describe growing in ways that do not adhere to the cultural ideas of growing “up.” She uses this idea to discuss the queerness of children, engaging with sociologists and historians in addition to literary analysis. She examines childhood motivations and the different ways we can “queer” children and childhood.

This timeline of theoretical work culminates in the understanding that childhood is not a biological fact but rather a cultural concept whose definition changes over time. The role children play in society and politics evolves as conversations and priorities do. In Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, for instance, he discusses how “the Child” as a

figure becomes a tool in political conversations. He explains the core of the issue of the Child as a figure guiding politics: "...we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights 'real' citizens are allowed" (Edelman 11). The Child, he is arguing, inevitably takes precedence over the actual people when the argument relies on its future as the centrally important goal. Judith Levine considers a similar line of thinking to Edelman in her work, *Harmful to Minors: the Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. Where Edelman focuses on the adult citizens who are overlooked when there is political rhetoric about protecting children, Levine considers the impact on the children who are ostensibly being protected. In *Harmful to Minors*, Levine seeks to reassess the role of sex in childhood and adolescence. She argues that the American cultural ideas of protecting children from sex and sexual identity is unproductive at best. She asserts that the "sexual politics of fear" are actively harmful to children and adolescents. In her book investigating methodology in child studies, *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood: Asymmetries of Innocence and the Cultural Politics of Child Development*, Hannah Dyer takes a different approach, balancing discussions of the image of the child with discussions of real children. She says of the figure of the child: "The child is an emblem of futurity, regularly summoned to draw attention away from past or present conditions of inequality or social instability" (Dyer 1). Later, she explains her methodology further: "My interdisciplinary mode of investigation causes this book's discussion of childhood to move between real children, embodied childhoods, and references to childhood as symbolic and phantasmic figuration" (Dyer 11).

While I am interested in the role that adults, especially queer adults, play in the creation and consumption of the trends in adolescent fiction that I am analyzing, my aim is not to ignore the queer teenagers whose experience is ostensibly being reflected in this media. Rather, I would like to balance the argument between the two and investigate the conversation that is occurring between them in these texts. In Derritt Mason's *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture*, he poses the question: "How, in other words, can queer YA and its commentary function as illuminating indexes of anxieties about how adults do and/or should address queer youth?"

(Mason 6)

Adolescent Literature

Similar to the concept of childhood in general, children's literature can be a difficult genre to pin down. Historically, the genre has changed and evolved. In the current publication market, there are a lot of nuances regarding age demographics and where certain books belong in the organization of bookstores. The distinction between children's literature, middle grade literature, and young adult literature is complex. Children's literature is a useful place to examine sentimentality and nostalgia because the very fact of its existence essentially requires that it includes some degree of both. Young adult fiction, marketed towards teenagers, is often where we find coming of age narratives. When I am describing the nostalgia and the reaching backwards of this view of the closet, it is important to establish the works to which I'm referring. As the theory in the previous section demonstrates, adolescence is a cultural creation to describe the liminal stages between childhood and adulthood. In contemporary culture, we take the concept of the teenager as a given sometimes, but this was not always the case. In queer fiction, the queer teenager is frequently going through a particular genre of queer coming of age narratives: the coming out story. I will primarily use "adolescent fiction" to refer to the

overarching category I am exploring, to encompass the genres of children's literature, middle grade literature, and young adult literature.

Nostalgia for childhood is common in adolescent literature, almost expected. The authors of children's media are adults reaching back towards childhood, in order to speak to a real or imagined child audience. Likewise, scholarship about children's literature and media often focuses highly theoretically, overlooking the child audience or sometimes arguing that there is no child audience. Beverly Lyon Clark focuses on larger implications of children's literature in her work, *Kiddie Lit: the Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America*. She looks at the view of children's literature in academic circles as well as mainstream conversations. She considers works from the literary canon, like Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott, as well as modern media like Walt Disney. She discusses how the shifting attitudes towards children's media connects with changing ideas about childhood in America in general, considering ideas of sentimentality and moralization.

In her book *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose uses *Peter Pan* to examine the production of children's literature and media, and argues that children's literature is a fiction. She argues that the character of Peter Pan is a perfect figure of asexual innocence in children's literature, and that children's literature as a whole relies on the idea that there is a perfect child figure reflected in him that the fiction can speak to. She writes: "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (Rose 2). She posits that, in fact, children's literature is more invested in the sentimentality and nostalgia of adults than the child that it fails to speak to.

Moving to scholarship about young adult literature, Roberta Seelinger Trites in her work, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, argues that themes in young adult novels stem from the postmodern notion that identities are constructed within the context of social institutions that dictate the terms according to which the self is understood, recognized, and regulated. She discusses how characters in these stories contend with dynamics of power in contexts like family, school, and religion, with a focus on twentieth-century authors of coming-of-age narratives, including examples like S.E. Hinton and Madeleine L'Engle. Mason discusses the critical conversation surrounding queer young adult literature and the claims made about what these texts should accomplish. He establishes the groundwork for certain critical suggestions for queer YA, stating examples in which: “critics express several distinct concerns about queer YA, including its affective contours (the dominant affects should be hope and happiness), the visibility of its protagonists (young queer characters should be ‘out and proud’) and the temporal trajectory of their narrative growth (by novel’s end, any problems surrounding sexual self-identification should be resolved)” (Mason 6). Mason argues that these particular demands for queer YA are not productive and ultimately hinder the genre. He suggests that the exploration of more complicated or latent queerness is just as valuable. He describes these complex queer stories as having sites of anxiety and explains: “Indeed, I’ve found that those sites of intense anxiety surrounding queer YA also yield compelling queer models for reading and relationality. These sites of anxiety—queer visibility and sexual coherence; adolescent risk-taking; representations of HIV/AIDS; dystopia, horror, and ‘dark’ YA themes; the promise that ‘It Gets Better’ and the threat that it might not—are what I map and explore in this book” (Mason 6).

I am focusing on mainstream media and mass market successes in order to best demonstrate the way the texts reflect the historical moment of their publication, taking into consideration opinions within readership as well as aims in marketing. By virtue of my framework including the mainstream market, I chose texts based both on the inclusion of the undercurrent of tenderness I am examining, as well as selecting based on the individual market success of the texts themselves. This does result in limitations in terms of the diversity of the identities of the characters and authors, particularly in terms of race. However, that effect does demonstrate certain aspects of my argument. Similar to the way Griffin discusses the use-value for consumers of the media he explores being the affective experience of ‘feeling normal,’ I explore the fantasy of the closet that is depicted in mainstream queer media, taking seriously the affective value of that fiction, however simplified. In his 1999 book *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Michael Warner explores the issues with prioritizing normalization in queer politics. He argues, for instance, that the focus on the campaign for same-sex marriage was counterproductive to queer progress. The trouble with “normal,” according to Warner, is that it establishes a hierarchy of acceptability within the larger queer community and ultimately feeds into the shame and stigma around sexuality and sexual identity. Warner’s arguments have only grown in relevance over the past few decades, especially following the legalization of same-sex marriage. I make no attempt in this dissertation to refute the issues with normalcy as a goal within the queer community. Rather, mirroring Griffin, I aim to take a nuanced approach at investigating texts in which the fantasy of normalcy is central. To this end, the characters in the texts I analyze are all white and all cis and all male, because the aim is to “feel normal” in some ways. In order for the fantasy of the closet to be fully realized, the

character must be able to “pass” as what would be deemed normal by the dominant culture, allowing a proximity to privilege.

In O’Connor’s analysis of the construct of adolescence, she posits that the creation allowed institutions to define the process of maturation and what the successful end goal of it would look like. She writes: “Successfully completing this process thus became contingent on one’s resemblance to those already holding the most power—namely, white, heterosexual, and male. Those who couldn’t or wouldn’t exit the crucible of adolescence with these traits were considered ‘waylaid’ or arrested in their development, unable to achieve full maturity and the rights and privileges it offers” (O’Connor 9). The lack of diverse identities of the characters in the texts I am exploring is the result of two different elements that interest me. Firstly, in the practical reality of marketing, the distributors of these texts are aiming to have as wide of an appeal as possible and are thus prioritizing certain privileged identities. Secondly, it is also an aspect of the influence that intersectional concerns of ideologies like heteronormativity, white supremacy, and transphobia have on the accessibility of security, and how that informs an underlying desire for privacy and normalcy within these texts. The closet can be a space of greater security if one is able to pass effectively as a cisgendered, heterosexual, monogamously partnered white male.

The fantasy of this version of the narrative of the closet is that one can exist in a space of being viewed as normal, so long as they remain in the closet. It is not exactly that this is a reflection of a specific masculine, gay, white experience, but rather that focusing on that particular intersection of identities allows the ability to imagine a closer proximity to cultural norms. In his book *How to Be Gay*, discussing the controversy surrounding a class he’d taught, David M. Halperin explores the cultural elements of gay male identity and the ways in which

these expectations are tied to the community. He specifically talks about the generational divides within the gay community and how generations have a tendency to define themselves through rejecting the preceding generation. He writes: “The official line of the post-Stonewall gay movement in the United States has gone something like this: “We are not freaks or monsters. We are the same as you: we are ordinary, decent people. In fact, we are just like heterosexuals except for what we do in bed (which is nobody’s business but our own—and, anyway, the less said about it, the better)” (Halperin 60). I find this tendency he discusses, especially as it connects to times of progress, to be directly connected to the fantasy of the closet and proximity to normalcy within the queer community. I am not suggesting that this is radical, nor that this is unethical or problematic. I am striving to approach the fantasy without attempting to make a strict judgement on its value or harm. This desire to look back on the closet as a purely safe and tender space requires that the assumed identity matches a certain ideal for normalcy.

In *Feeling Normal*, Griffin establishes the kinds of texts he is going to examine, explaining the affective value of popular media. As he is taking seriously the concerns and comforts offered in popular works, he is arguing that these works are worth exploring because of what they are offering. He writes: “Minorities making media for other minorities generate an affective politics that circulates across the cinema, television, and internet content examined in this book. As a cultural process, gay and lesbian media links producers and consumers in a circuit of mutual recognition, as if to say to one another: I know you, I hear you, I feel you” (Griffin 9). I notice a very similar kind of affect in my work in this dissertation. The conversation between the queer adult and the queer adolescent in these texts is one of care and recognition. There is tenderness between the characters in the text, as well as between the nostalgic adult and

the teenage reader. I am interested in exploring the care in that space, as it relates to the space of the closet.

Queer Economics and Contemporary Concerns

The desire and fantasy for a version of the closet that is safe comes from a place of discomfort with the expectations of contemporary life as openly queer. In examining the contemporary concerns that surround this fantasy of the closet, I would like to assert that queer economics and the invention of rainbow capitalism is at the heart of these concerns. Because of my focus in mainstream literature and the historical moments I am pairing with each text, I would like to offer an overview of the historical backdrop that precedes these moments, through the scholarship of queer economics.

Joyce P. Jacobsen and Adam Zeller, in their collection *Queer Economics: A Reader*, offer a hesitant definition of queer economics “as the examination of and response to the effects of heteronormativity both on economic outcomes and on economics as a discipline” (Jacobsen 2). They go on to compare the idea to the relationship between feminist economics and the economics of gender, as a contextual frame. Zeller and Jacobsen collect a number different essays about queer economics in order to consolidate what has been published in the field as well as fully define the field. They include an important piece of early queer economics theory, John D’Emilio’s essay, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in which he posits that the free labor system of capitalism, as compared to other economic systems, is in part responsible for the creation of what we understand as queer identity today. He describes a “mythology” wherein queer people drew upon personal experience to invent a history that mirrored their contemporary issues. As an example, he says: “For instance, most lesbians and gay men in the 1960s first discovered their homosexual desires in isolation, unaware of others, and without resources for naming and

understand what they felt. From this experience, we constructed a myth of silence, invisibility, and isolation as the essential characteristics of gay life in the past as well as the present”

(D’Emilio 182). As D’Emilio describes it, this mythology of historical queerness is rooted in the struggles of the queer people at the time, who imagine that their experiences were the same or at least similar to how queer people have historically experienced their queerness.

He argues that these myths are counterproductive and limiting in nature. As an example for how they limit political perspective, he writes: “They have contributed, for instance, to an overreliance on a strategy of coming out—if every gay man and lesbian in America came out, gay oppression would end—and have allowed us to ignore the institutionalized ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are reproduced” (182). D’Emilio states in his argument that he is challenging these myths, arguing that gay men and lesbians have, in fact, not always existed, certainly not in the way they do today. As he puts it, they are “a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era” (182). He explains how the free labor system allowed for adults to exist separately from the family unit, and therefore led to large numbers of people to develop an identity around their sexual and romantic preferences, as well as build communities and organize politically around those identities.

In the section on queer consumer economics of Zeller and Jacobsen’s collection, they include Liza Penalzoza’s essay “We’re Here, We’re Queer, and We’re Going Shopping! A Critical Perspective on the Accommodation of Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Marketplace,” originally published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 1996. In her essay, Penalzoza discusses the queer market in general and the risks associated with the visibility that comes with it. She begins by referencing the Stonewall Rebellion, and stating: “Businesses catering to a gay/lesbian clientele, such as the Stonewall Inn and other nightclubs, cafes, bookstores, and coffeehouses, have been at

the center of gay/lesbian communities historically (Wilson 1991; Trumbach 1991, Myrick 1972), and continue to be an important hub of contemporary social activism” (Penaloza 304). As she continues, she says that businesses targeting the queer community have expanded widely, and that at this point, they “comprise virtually a full service market that includes media, merchandise catalogues, vacation companies, and legal, medical, financial and communication services, to name a few” (304). Paired with D’Emilio’s argument about how queerness as an identity is connected to capitalism, Penaloza’s essay elaborates on the way queer communities evolve with capitalist spaces. Queer businesses are central to queer history, and are crucial to the way queer communities develop and grow. Penaloza goes on to suggest that, while there are benefits inherent with the validation that comes with the queer marketplace, there are also significant drawbacks to consider. She brings up the gay culture and visibility in the 1930s and 1940s, and how that “culminated in black and pink triangles in Germany.” As she puts it: “Let us not forget that this was a capitalist country at the time. In fact, the vibrant gay culture existing in bars, restaurants, cafes and theaters in evidence at that time may have even fueled gays’ and lesbians’ genocide under Hitler since it made them more visible” (324). She explains that, while market incorporation provides social legitimation for the queer community, it comes with limitations and is not enough when it comes to meaningful progress. The queer community cannot expect activism from advertisements. As with Penaloza’s argument, when she draws comparisons between her contemporary moment in the 1990s with the 1930s and 1940s, we can connect the same line through the present. As we are in a moment of increased visibility and market recognition in the 2020s, it is important to remember the pattern of political backlash that coincides with that visibility.

Queer economics is the backdrop I am using to tie this dissertation together. I am focusing on mainstream literature and popular media, connecting the stories that find success with the social climate of their moment and the marketing that drives their notoriety. Each of the works I am dedicating a chapter to are heavily influenced by the concerns of queer economics and capitalism, establishing a throughline that connects them to the full timeline. My aim is to demonstrate the overlap between the social concerns of contemporary life, the queer economic reality of the moment, and the tenderness shown within the texts.

Chapters & Aim

In each of my chapters, I connect a moment in queer contemporary history with popular texts published at the same time, drawing the relationships between the popular culture reflected in these mainstream texts with the nuances of the queer concerns conveyed in the particular moment. Throughout my chapters, I build the timeline for these moments and demonstrating the ways they lead into one another. As a throughline, I analyze the moments of tenderness and nostalgia for the closet within the texts and explore how they change.

In Chapter 1, I begin my timeline with the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan. I analyze the evolution of the character Nico di Angelo from his first appearance in the third book of the first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Titan's Curse*, to the end of the second series, *Heroes of Olympus*. My focus is primarily on Nico's role as the first canonically queer character in the series and his coming out story in the fourth book of the second series, *Heroes of Olympus: The House of Hades*. For the historical moment alongside Nico's story, I explore the "It Gets Better" Movement, positing parallel rhetoric between the movement and Nico's arc.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the role of the closet in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli and connecting the central themes in the novel to the philosophy in the

“#ownvoices” conversation, which began about children’s literature on Twitter the same year Albertalli’s novel was published. I explore the nuances in those conversations and how they relate to publishing and the experiences of contemporary authors. Becky Albertalli herself came out in an essay, in which she expressed the impact #ownvoices and the resulting critiques of queer authors in particular had on her journey with identity, and I analyze the way her experience mirrors the concerns shown in the novel.

In Chapter 3, I explore queer representation in contemporary American comics, specifically focusing on the recent *Robin* solo series about Tim Drake. I examine the history of queer economics and the current landscape of “rainbow capitalism” in order to analyze Tim Drake’s coming out storyline and the role of the closet in contemporary popular media. I explore the tension between the pressures associated with contemporary queer life and the internal struggle of identity in literature that seeks inclusion in consumerist queer media. In particular, I analyze the impact of rainbow capitalism on queer stories while still searching for the underlying nostalgia and tenderness I am seeing as a connection across the timeline.

The timeline I am laying out in this dissertation is short, examining a very specific sequence of moments in recent queer history, beginning in approximately 2010 and ending around 2023. There is not an exact start and end, by virtue of the recency of what I analyze and the nature of trends in literary themes and publishing. In my concluding chapter, I connect the timeline to the current historical moment and reflect on the evolving concerns in queer media.

When I look at the way my timeline begins, with the “It Gets Better” Movement, ultimately one of the questions to examine is a response to that claim. Does it really get better? What does “better” look like, then and now? In creating this timeline, each moment leads into the next. With the “It Gets Better” Movement, the central idea is queer adults, having long grown

past the closet and all its baggage, speak to the teens who are still struggling within it. The message is that there comes a point in a queer person's life where this mythic "better" happens, and you can then look back on your teenage years with empathy and compassion. After this, the assumption becomes that any successful queer adult must exist in this "better" that life becomes, able to speak to the past from newfound stability and acceptance. This assumption brings us to the "#ownvoices" conversation, wherein such responsibility was extended to queer adults. Initially intended as a way to share recommendations of books written by diverse authors, the Own Voices movement became a marketing strategy. For queer authors, this meant a level of expectation that one's identity would not only be public but available for commercial use. The next step in this timeline is "rainbow capitalism," where identity and queerness is in fact a product to be marketed.

In an effort to sketch out where to situate thoughts of tenderness among this body of work, I would like to pull two particular moments, from Love and Ahmed, about tenderness and happiness. Ahmed discusses the speech act of "I am happy if you are happy," analyzing it to its conclusions of obligation and secrecy—"If my happiness is dependent upon your happiness, then you have the power to determine my happiness. You might thus feel obliged to conceal your unhappiness in order to protect my happiness. *You have a duty to be happy for me*" (Ahmed 91). She brings up a moment in Nancy Garden's novel, *Annie On My Mind*, where the protagonist's father expresses wanting her to be happy—she thinks about how she and Annie *were* happy, "until this happened" (Garden 191). Love, in discussing feeling backward, explains how backwardness in itself is a key feature of queer culture—she brings up Camp, "with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas" (Love 7) as one such example, and lists some other instances of queer

backwardness: “in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects” (Love 7) In the “until” for queer happiness and the backwardness of tender concern and attachments is where I would situate ideas about unspoken tenderness in childhood imagery. I am interested in instances of nostalgia for the closet, like that *until* moment in *Annie On My Mind*, where the safety of secrecy is where queer childhood can be happy and tender. Unspoken tenderness offers understanding and care through isolation, as compared to the shortcomings of acceptance and pride, in how acceptance offers too little and pride asks too much. I fully acknowledge the affective power of heaviness like shame and defiance. I, however, am drawn to the tenderness in stories that have neither the drive for defiance nor the energy for pride, but still want to hold on to quieter optimism of care.

My aim in this dissertation is to approach this timeline of moments in queer contemporary conversation through specific queer texts that were published with those backdrops. I will explore the way the depiction of the closet changes through these historical moments and illustrate the concerns of contemporary life that influence the affective quality of these works. I consider both the queer adults from whom the nostalgic affect comes from and the queer adolescent readers as the intended audience for these texts, as well as the conversation that exists between the two. To return to the affect of identity politics in the contemporary world, the public sphere and the façade of acceptance comes with pressures to not only be certain about one’s own identity, despite the acknowledged fluidity, but also be open and proud. Here, I argue that, in examining contemporary American young adult queer fiction, we can see both the influence of the pressures of the political climate as well as an undercurrent of nostalgia and yearning for the remembered privacy of the experience of the closet in adolescence. In the face

of scrutiny and social pressures, the closet begins to feel like a space of comfort and is depicted with the care of nostalgia for adolescent experiences.

Chapter One:
Queer Connection and Friendship in *Heroes of Olympus*:

Nico di Angelo and Jason Grace

Queer stories of finding tenderness within the closet are not new in the twenty-first century. For as long as the closet has been built and understood, there has been a desire to find warmth within the secrecy and shame. Stories of queer people finding one another and falling in love while closeted or stories of quiet self-discovery are both examples of this, and I am not attempting to argue that queer people have not been telling these stories for decades³. Attempts at positive queer affect in storytelling tie to the climate of queer progress, and there is a conversation between queer adults and queer adolescents within stories of tenderness found in the closet, colored by nostalgia.

The timeline of queer conversation in this dissertation begins around 2010, but I will give some space to the preceding years and how to approach these moments as a framework. To that end, the *Percy Jackson* series works well as a text to examine, as the first queer character of the series was revealed as gay in a book published in 2013 but was introduced to the series in 2007. I will explore the trajectory of queer representation in mainstream children's literature, through the queer themes over the years. Following this, I focus on two main arguments in this chapter, through the examination of two characters and their relationship: the queer experience portrayed as it relates to the philosophy stated in the It Gets Better Project, and the subtler portrayal of queer connection within the closet as it relates to the nostalgia for the privacy of the closet.

I aim to balance discussing both the queer adults and the queer adolescents in conversation in these works, offering space to both the concerns communicated through the

³ Some classic queer novels that fit these sorts of categories: *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden, and *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* by Michael Chabon.

rhetoric of the queer adults as well as the experiences of the queer adolescents depicted. One element to make clear here is that I am not at any point speculating about the intentions of the authors of the texts included in this dissertation. The meaning of the texts reflect the current conversations in queer communities, whether that is occurring by any deliberate attempt to participate or by the influence of the contemporary moment. This is an important disclaimer to note here in particular, because while I will discuss the authors and their known intentions as relevant to the philosophy of works with adolescent audiences, this is not my central argument. I aim to balance the historical and social context of the moment with the analysis of the texts themselves, acknowledging the importance of this framing.

***Percy Jackson* Background & Introduction**

The Percy Jackson series is expansive and ongoing, so I will give some background on the series overall as well as establish the parameters for the analysis in this chapter. In 2005, *The Lightning Thief*, the first book in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series was published. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (shortened to PJO) is a series written by Rick Riordan consisting of five books, from 2005 to 2010. The plot revolves around adolescent demigods in modern day America. The *Percy Jackson* series is highly popular, geared towards children and middle-grade readers, with *The Lightning Thief* selling over 1.8 million copies in its first five years. This popularity allowed Riordan to expand the series, going on to publish multiple sequel series and side stories, with books coming out as recently as 2024. The popularity and longevity of PJO shows how important the representation of marginalized communities has become to mainstream children's literature, in terms of both marketing and readership, in the early years with the representation of intellectual disabilities and growing more intersectionally from there. Representation of marginalized kids is and has always been at the core of the *Percy Jackson*

books, and I would like to explore the way queer representation evolves over the course of them as a microcosm of how queer representation has changed in children's fiction overall.

We can begin with some context for the series and the PJO universe as a whole. As it stands right now, the Percy Jackson literary universe consists of three main series:

1. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, with five books, focusing on Greek mythology.
2. *The Heroes of Olympus*, with five books, focusing on Greek and Roman mythology.
3. *The Trials of Apollo*, with five books, focusing on Greek and Roman mythology.

In addition to the three primary series, there are two trilogies: *The Kane Chronicles*, which is about Egyptian mythology, and *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*, which is about Norse mythology. These books overlap and connect, with characters appearing in multiple books.

Riordan has also written many companion books in the PJO universe, including: collections of short stories, guides to the worldbuilding, and standalone novels. In addition to the series that Riordan himself writes, he has an imprint within the Disney-Hyperion publishing company called *Riordan Presents*, the goal of which is to allow authors of middle-grade fiction from underrepresented backgrounds to publish stories similar to Percy Jackson's, but inspired by their own folklore and mythology. About *Riordan Presents*, Riordan writes that he has gotten questions from fans about if he'd ever write books about different cultures mythologies, but he knew he "wasn't the best person to write those books" (*Rick Riordan*). The idea behind the imprint was to allow space for stories from cultures that Riordan, as a white man, might not be the author to write about. For this and the PJO series itself, in the publishing industry and the marketing surrounding his works, Riordan has consistently been praised for his commitment to representation.

The PJO books are known for their inclusive representation, starting with the titular character having ADHD and dyslexia. The first book began as a bedtime story that Rick Riordan told his own son. He is open about the struggles that his son faced in school with ADHD and dyslexia, and Riordan wanted to create a hero that his son could relate to. In the PJO universe, demigods often have ADHD and dyslexia, explained in-universe as a part of their powers. In a story on his website posted in September of 2005, Riordan goes over the struggles of his son's issues in school and how his diagnosis inspired Riordan to write the Percy Jackson stories. He mentions the publication and popularity of the story, and how it struck a chord: "I've gotten a flood of appreciative emails from readers, many of them ADHD/dyslexic kids who usually dislike reading. It's tremendously gratifying, and yet the book remains a very personal story from a father to a son" (Riordan, 2005). Representation of marginalized groups, specifically those who have been historically excluded from or reduced to negative stereotypes in children's literature, began and remains a core aspect of the *Percy Jackson* series. Since the original inspiration, Riordan has continued to make an effort to extend the inclusive nature of the series to other underrepresented groups, aided by the freedom afforded by the popularity of the first series. While the first series came with representation of kids with learning disabilities built in, the second series included more characters in underrepresented racial groups and included the PJO universe's first queer character.

Despite being near comparable to the *Harry Potter* series in influence and popularity, little has been written about the *Percy Jackson* series in the academic sphere.⁴ I will examine the way queer themes come up and are subsequently explored in Riordan's books. The *Percy*

⁴ For examples of scholarship on *Harry Potter*, see: *Harry Potter and the Management of Trauma* by Tolonda Henderson, *Realism and Race: The Narrative Politics of Harry Potter* by Karin E. Westman, and *Open at the Close: Literary Essays on Harry Potter* edited by Cecilia Konchar Farr.

Jackson series had groundbreaking queer representation for such a popular series; comparably mainstream children's series like *Harry Potter* did not have queer representation⁵, and queer kids rarely if ever saw themselves on the page. I would like to analyze the way queer representation evolves in the *Percy Jackson* series, starting with examining the first series, followed by the second series, and moving towards what representation exists in the current PJO books. The first series had queer subtext and themes, though no on-the-page representation. The third book in Riordan's second series, *The House of Hades* in *The Heroes of Olympus*, was a key moment in queer representation in children's literature, with the first canonically queer character in PJO. More recently, in 2017, Riordan received the Stonewall Award for the second book in the Magnus Chase trilogy, *The Hammer of Thor*, for his representation of a genderfluid character in the main character's love interest.

For my purposes, I will only focus on the first two series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *The Heroes of Olympus*. There is plenty more to address in the books that follow, and I will finish by touching on it, but that is a focus for a larger endeavor. I will begin with the third installment of the first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Titan's Curse*, with the appearance of secondary character Nico di Angelo, who would become the first gay character in the series, and follow to the last installment of the second series, *The Heroes of Olympus: Blood of Olympus*. Overall, I will include eight books in total in this chapter: the last three books of the first series and the entirety of the second series. I will focus primarily on two books in each series: in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, *The Titans Curse* and *The Battle of the Labyrinth*; in *The Heroes of Olympus*, *The House of Hades* and *The Blood of Olympus*. The first

⁵ I feel I must note, as well, J.K. Rowling's stances in recent years on the queer community, especially as it comes to trans rights. Her anti-trans rhetoric and active funding of anti-trans legislation are far greater concerns than the limited representation in her writing, and I am not comfortable referencing *Harry Potter* without acknowledging it.

series centers on Percy Jackson, demigod son of Poseidon, and follows him over the course of five years as he fights monsters and grapples with being the subject of a major prophecy. In the first book, he finds out about his parentage and is introduced to Camp Half-Blood, a safe haven for demigods like him. In the second series, *The Heroes of Olympus*, Percy Jackson remains a main character among an ensemble cast of nine different perspective characters over the course of the five books. The plot of the second series is that it is revealed that there is a camp, similar to Camp Half-Blood, for Roman demigods. Percy and a leader from the Roman camp, a son of Jupiter named Jason Grace, are switched in order to get the camps to reconnect and work together. The series follows a quest about a prophecy involving seven demigods, wherein they must defeat an old god in order to stop the end of the world. I will analyze Nico di Angelo's arc and role to highlight different stages in queer representation in mainstream children's media, starting with his role as a tertiary character in the latter half of the first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. The two primary "stages" of queer stories in children's media I establish here are first, earlier examples of queer subtext wherein there are queer themes without outright stating queerness, and second, on-the-page queer representation. Nico di Angelo, who would become the first queer character in the PJO universe, is introduced in the first series, and his introduction sets the stage for the queer representation that the PJO universe eventually came to be known for.

Nico di Angelo in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* & Queer Readings of Peculiar Boys

I would like to begin by discussing the context of the introduction of the first queer character in the Percy Jackson series, Nico di Angelo. The first *Percy Jackson* series does not have explicitly queer characters, though there are queer themes and elements, which is not all

that surprising given the series' basis in Greek mythology⁶. Because the series was built on the commitment to representations of marginalized identities, fans often sought out queer interpretations of specific characters or plot points. The first canonically queer character in the *Percy Jackson* series is Nico di Angelo, who was first introduced in the third book of the initial series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Titan's Curse*, published in 2007. The book begins with Percy Jackson and his friends being sent to rescue Nico and his sister, Bianca, and bring the two back to the safety of Camp Half-Blood. Nico and Bianca have unknown origins and a mysterious history at their introduction. Percy and his friends are unaware of these new demigods' parentage, as well as where they came from. This mystery sets up an arc for Nico, who continues to be a peculiar (or queer) figure tangential to Percy's story. Even before Nico's character is explicitly identified as queer in the text, the character is "queer" in the broader sense of being different from the norm, and othered even in this magical universe. Furthermore, his identity is treated as something hidden and dangerous, which draws connections to the concept of the closet. Nico appears in the latter three books of the first series: *The Titan's Curse*, *Battle of the Labyrinth*, and *The Last Olympian*. I analyze his arc in these three books in two different but connected ways: first, a typical story of the loss of childhood through trauma, and second, the queer subtext that his arc in the second series is built on.

The role that death and grief play in children's literature, as a method of demonstrating the departure from childhood into adulthood, has been explored in scholarship. In Eric Tribunella's *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature*, he discusses the role that loss and trauma plays in American children's literature, and

⁶ For example: one specific storyline involves mirroring the story of Achilles and Patroclus with two minor female characters at Camp Half-Blood, including a charged death scene that one could interpret romantically, if they were inclined to.

the way that it works in stories of coming of age. Tribunella explains: “Irrevocable loss, especially of something dear, is experienced as a trauma, so American children’s literature turns time and again to that which is traumatic as a way of provoking or ensuring the development of children. The striking recurrence of this pattern suggests that children’s literature, and indeed American culture, relies on the contrived traumatization of children—both protagonists and readers—as a way of representing and promoting the process of becoming a mature adult” (Tribunella xi). While not the protagonist of the series, perhaps no character in the *Percy Jackson* universe illustrates these themes as much as Nico. After Nico’s initial introduction as an excited child, he spends the next two books first losing his sister and then losing his childlike nerdiness and excitement. On the surface, Nico’s story in the first series is the loss of childhood that Tribunella discusses, demonstrated by his sister’s death and his inability to accept it, and further made explicit by the reveal of his role as a son of Hades.

In addition to being a cornerstone of American children’s literature, the connection with death in this way also connects to early interpretations of Nico’s role as a queer character. In *A Small Boy and Others: Imitations and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol*, Michael Moon explores the concept of grief and death in boys as an initiation of sorts into queer adulthood, examining a range of texts from memoirs to letters to theatrical works. I would like to borrow a key point from Moon’s introduction, where he talks about the figures of the ‘small boys’ who become the great artists he explores, and the ways they are haunted by connections with grief and death: “Precociously ‘acquainted with grief’ as protoqueer children growing up in for the most part violently homophobic milieus can be, as adults they became—to a considerable degree against their wills—exemplary mourners of loss and searching students to the effects of illness and death on survivors” (Moon 3). While Moon is examining real figures, I

find that his assertion about protoqueer children and their proximity with grief has a place in discussing figures in children's literature as well. Queer children, when identified as queer, are contending with the way this acknowledged difference sets them apart from their peers, suggesting an inherent danger to their existence. The movement from that familiarity with danger to an association with death feels natural. In the case of Nico di Angelo, his peculiarity and association with death is at the forefront of the plot in a way that becomes a symbolic closet, even before his confirmation as a canon queer character.

When Nico first appears in *The Titan's Curse*, he is a nerdy, enthusiastic ten-year-old, who gets on protagonist Percy's nerves by talking too much about a card game he is obsessed with, all about Greek mythology. He is thrilled to be a part of this new magical world, at first excited to learn that he is a demigod, more so than any other character. He reacts the way one might expect a child who is infatuated with fiction and heroes to react when faced with the reveal that the magic he read about was real. This is good news to him, the start of an adventure where he gets to be a part of the stories he loves. The change occurs when Nico's sister, Bianca, dies on the quest she goes on with Percy. Nico blames Percy and flees the camp. The next time we see him, in *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, months have passed and Percy gets a vision of where Nico has ended up: "It was Nico di Angelo. He was throwing pieces of paper into the fire— Mythomagic trading cards, part of the game he's been obsessed with last winter. Nico was only ten, maybe eleven by now, but he looked older" (Riordan 40). Already, off the page, Nico is going through the journey that Tribunella outlines. He has lost his sister, and he is symbolically burning what remains of his childhood. Those cards are the physical representation of the innocent version of himself that we were introduced to in the last book. Later, when Percy sees Nico in person again, he says: "He was too young to look so angry. I still remembered him as the

cheerful little kid who played with Mythomagic cards” (140). Nico’s youth is at odds with his anger and grief, suggested as incompatible with the enthusiasm and cheerfulness he had embodied before. The suggestion that he is too young to be angry echoes similar sentiments about what a child might be too young for—like being too familiar with grief for his age, or too young to be identified as queer.

It is revealed that Nico has spent this time attempting to find a way to bring his sister back. When Percy finds Nico, he helps Nico summon Bianca’s ghost, who admits that she had been hoping he would give up and move on and tells him: “You’re mad because I died and left you alone. I’m sorry for that, Nico. I truly am. But you must overcome the anger. And stop blaming Percy for my choices. It will be your doom” (167). When another character points out that the villain of the series might be able to use Nico’s anger against him, Nico replies that he doesn’t care about that, saying: “I just want my sister back” (167). Nico’s grief is the driving force of his role in the plot, informing his decisions and his journey as a character. Percy and his friends have concerns about Nico’s loyalties and trustworthiness, as he is outwardly hostile towards Percy much of the time. However, his running away and his hostility has much more to do with the trauma of his loss than any potential new role as an antagonist in the series. Nico’s primary arc here is his struggle with grief and moving on from childhood. By the end of the book, Nico has reached acceptance about his sister’s death, and he comes to terms with the grief he remains connected to. In the final pages, Percy finds Nico speaking to Bianca’s ghost once more, and we get the cathartic conclusion of the story of Nico’s loss: “The shimmering form of Bianca di Angelo stood in the clearing, smiling at her brother. She said something to him and touched his face—or tried to. Then her image faded. / Nico turned and saw me, but he didn’t look mad. ‘Saying good-bye,’ he said hoarsely” (343). Nico has moved past his anger and his

drive to bring his sister back and is now willing to say goodbye to her. At the end of the second book he appears in, he has reached the natural conclusion to the loss of childhood through trauma. However, this transformation is only one main aspect of his character. He still does not have a place with the other demigods, which leads into the reading of him as a queer character.

In the first series, Nico becomes a queer character in part by virtue of how queer readers can connect with him. Beyond Nico's primary story of losing childhood through trauma and his proximity with death, his arc has further elements of queer subtext. Key aspects of Nico's character and story, including the "dark" secret of his identity, his role as an outsider, and the way he is othered by his peers, all lend themselves to queer readings, even before queerness and queer representation is an established part of the PJO universe. As Hades is the Greek god of the dead and the underworld, Nico's role as a son of Hades is primarily connected to the story of loss and grief, establishing a connection between the themes of his arc and his parentage. In the context of the PJO universe, however, it also establishes an otherness. Camp Half-Blood does not have a cabin for children of Hades, and Nico's powers are seen as especially threatening and unsettling. When it comes to the different and dangerous nature of Nico's powers, they are particularly notable as queer-coded when connected to the need for secrecy. When Percy tells Nico about his sister's death, Nico is furious, reacting with blame and anger. This emotional outburst comes with the reveal of Nico's demigod powers. The ground rips apart beneath them and flames burst from the crack. He runs away from the camp, leaving behind a permanent scar. This marks the beginning of his powers being viewed as more frightening and destructive than most, as well as the theme of his emotions being dangerous. This incident is how Percy figures out that Nico is a son of Hades, and his immediate instinct is secrecy: "[T]he words spilled out of me. 'We can't let anyone know. I don't think anyone realizes that Nico is a—'" (309). His friend

cuts him off before he can fill in the blank with “a son of Hades,” though the unfinished sentence adds to the queerness of this reveal. The cut-off sentence allows for some interpretation of what could have been stated there, and in the empty space, Nico’s identity is left ambiguous for that moment. A reader might speculate what other words could fill in that blank and might also wonder what that uncertainty could mean. In Alexander Doty’s 1993 book, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, he argues that queer readings aren’t alternative readings, nor are they wishful or reading too far into things. Rather than over-analysis or invention, he says: “They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along” (Doty 16). Queerness being implied in the unspoken, or in the unspeakable, is a trope that is familiar to those seeking queer readings. In Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, she discusses the trope of the “unspeakable” in Gothic literature and how “[s]exuality between men had, throughout the Judaeo-Christian tradition, been famous among those who knew about it at all precisely for having no name” (Sedgwick 95). The absence of an explicit disclosure for Nico’s identity suggests a fear of naming what he is and follows the precedent for queer readings. Nico’s identity is unspeakable, unnamable. Percy follows this with: “I don’t think Nico understands who he is. But we can’t go telling anyone” (Riordan 310). This establishes Nico as a character whose identity must remain unstated. There is something about him that is different and dangerous, to the point that it needs to be kept a secret.

By the end of the second book Nico appears in, *Battle of the Labyrinth*, Nico has been established as *other*, even in the world of the demigods. Camp Half-Blood is meant to be a safe haven for the demigod children and teenagers, and for Percy, it has been. He expresses to Nico that he could be accepted, that he could have friends at the camp. When Nico asks if Percy really

believes that, Percy hesitates: “I didn’t answer. The truth was, I didn’t know. Nico had always been a little different, but since Bianca’s death, he’d gotten almost... scary” (296). Later, when Nico uses his power in a fight, Percy says: “Nico...you, uh, kind of gave yourself away” (307), meaning Nico has “outed” himself as a child of Hades based on the powers he exhibits.

In the end, Nico is unable to remain at the safe haven of Camp Half-Blood, stating to Percy: “This camp isn’t for me. There’s a reason they didn’t put a cabin to Hades here. He’s not welcome, any more than he is on Olympus. I don’t belong. I have to go” (344). Percy reflects: “I wanted to argue, but part of me knew he was right. I didn’t like it, but Nico would have to find his own, dark way” (344). Nico, even among the demigods, is seen as an outsider. The other demigods are aware of his difference, and he cannot access the same kind of safety and solidarity that they can. As he leaves, Percy watches as the shadows “seemed to bend toward him,” and the head of the camp comments “There goes a very troubled young man” (345). As Nico’s journey with Tribunella’s loss of childhood concludes and his proximity with death and grief is established, his queer coding is now the center of his role, leading into his arc in the second series.

Nico di Angelo in *Heroes of Olympus*: Queer Representation & the *It Gets Better* Project

The second series in the PJO universe was the *Heroes of Olympus* series, which had five installments that came out from 2010 to 2014. The first book, *The Lost Hero*, opened with a new point of view character, Jason Grace, to establish this series as different than the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* books. Over the course of the five *Heroes of Olympus* books, there are nine total point of view characters. Riordan began the first series with the intention to create representation for kids with learning disabilities like his own son. With a similar philosophy, the second series expands the goals of representation with a racially diverse cast of main characters.

In the fourth book of the second series, *Heroes of Olympus: The House of Hades*, Riordan reveals Nico di Angelo as the first queer character in the PJO universe. *The House of Hades* was released in October of 2013, and it was a turning point for queer representation in mainstream children's literature and representation in the PJO universe in particular. I will analyze the scene in which Nico's queerness is revealed and the fallout that follows for his character, especially as compared to the context of the time period for young queer people, using the *It Gets Better* Project as particularly indicative of the rhetoric surrounding queer teen issues of the time. In the *It Gets Better* narrative, the structure is first acknowledging the pain of existing as a closeted queer teenager, and then promising a better future to instill hope. Nico's arc in the second series follows the rhetorical framework of the *It Gets Better* Project, indicating the specific narrative that was being communicated to queer teenagers in the early 2010s. This is where the intracommunity conversation comes in, where the public movement influenced literature for queer adolescents. In mainstream children's media, the increased visibility in fiction was an important step, from queer teenagers being overlooked entirely to stories of a quiet kind of hope.

In the frequently asked questions on Rick Riordan's website, he addresses how he decided on Nico's development in *The House of Hades*. Riordan discusses how he became a teacher in part to advocate for marginalized children, and how he approaches his writing with that same ethical framework. As he puts it: "It's essential to me that young readers find a variety of relatable, positive role models in my books. Every child can be a hero. No child should be shamed or shunned for being different" (Riordan). This sentiment reflects the liberal-minded conception of identity politics that informs the representation of difference in the PJO universe, beginning with Percy Jackson as representation of kids with learning disabilities. Riordan admits that he did not plan out Nico's sexual orientation from the beginning, explaining that he had no

agenda with his character. However, he picked up on the ways in which Nico was accessible to queer readers and chose to commit to that representation. While Riordan himself is not a queer adult, the influence of the queer progress is clear in his philosophy and writing. Riordan explains: “when I realized this was a major part of his life experience and the reason for so many of his difficulties with the other characters, it would have been a disservice to his character, the plot of the books, and all my readers simply to sweep the issue under the rug and pretend it didn’t exist. Turning a blind eye to children’s needs is never an acceptable answer” (Riordan). This explanation demonstrates how Nico moves from having queer subtext in his character and story to becoming a textually queer character. Nico’s change in narrative arc from the first series to the second series is indicative of a shift in queer representation in the publishing industry, as well as a development in the underlying messages aimed at young queer readers.

Nico was confirmed as a queer character in 2013, when *The House of Hades* was published. As the contextual backdrop for queer teenagers during this time, I will explore the *It Gets Better* Project. The *It Gets Better* Project is a nonprofit organization that was founded by Dan Savage and Terry Miller in September of 2010. As a reaction to the suicide of fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas, Dan Savage and his now-husband posted a video in an attempt to reach out to queer teens who might be feeling similarly hopeless and depressed. The video is a simple setup, with Savage and Miller sitting in front of a camera with a microphone. They discuss the difficulties they went through in their adolescence, before moving on to talk about how their lives improved in adulthood. Near the end, as they reach the titular section of the video, Savage outlines what he would tell his younger self. “If my adult self could talk to my fourteen-year-old self and tell him anything,” Savage tells the camera, “I would tell him to really believe the lyrics to ‘Somewhere’ from *West Side Story*. There really is a place for us. There really is a place for

you. One day you will have friends who love and support you. You will find love, you will find a community, and that life gets better, and that the bigots don't win" (Savage 2010). The project is still active today. On their current website, they describe the beginning of the movement as: "LGBTQ+ people and their allies all over the world uttered three words that would give rise to a global movement—it gets better" (It Gets Better Project). They go on to describe how over 50,000 people shared their stories for this social media campaign, garnering over 50 million views total, in order to provide "hope and encouragement" to young queer people. As Savage put it: "When a gay teenager kills himself, what he's saying is that he can't picture a future for himself with joy in it to compensate for the pain in his life now...Gay teenagers need to know that life as an openly gay adult is wonderful... and they shouldn't be filled with despair" (Lazar 2010). At its core, the *It Gets Better* Project came from a very real place of empathy, searching for a way to reach out to teenagers in whom queer adults saw reflected their own past struggles.

The *It Gets Better* Project was a popular and widely influential narrative directed at queer teenagers in the early 2010s. Nico di Angelo, as a newly gay character in a mainstream series, had an arc that followed that messaging. He starts in a very negative place, isolated and closeted and full of shame. He is ultimately able to form connections with the other characters in the quest and ends in a much better, more hopeful place when the series closes. In 2013, there were very few mainstream queer characters in children's media. Nico di Angelo, while not the very first queer character of his kind, was an early example of such representation. In the scene where he is outed, a lot of space is given to the fear and shame that Nico feels as a closeted teenager, and his experience is given the same weight as the other life-threatening legs of the quest that the other characters are dealing with. At their cores, the *It Gets Better* Project and Nico's story have similar messaging: that the pain queer teenagers feel is important and recognized, but that it will

not always be like this. In the *It Gets Better* Project, queer adults use the examples of their own lives to show that there is a future for suffering queer teenagers. For Nico, the outing in *House of Hades* is the low point of his arc in the second series, and from there, he is able to receive support and friendship and the series ends hopefully for him. Nico's narrative in *The Heroes of Olympus* series demonstrates the philosophy and the intended messages of the *It Gets Better* movement, through the way he is outed and the hopeful conclusion of his arc.

The scene in which Nico is outed is a particularly difficult scene, as it focuses on the pain of the closet, the way the *It Gets Better* messages always begin with an acknowledgement of difficulties of queer adolescent. Nico's sexuality is foreshadowed and revealed as a plot point in *The House of Hades*, when Nico is on a mission during the quest involving finding and facing Cupid, the god of love. The scene in which Nico is revealed as gay is told from the point of view of Jason Grace. In the lead up to the coming out scene, Jason is attempting to connect with Nico. Nico mentions his past, growing up in 1930s Italy before being displaced in time and ending up in the 2000s. Considering how to build trust, Jason states: "I can't imagine how weird that might be, coming from another time" (Riordan 272). Nico simply replies: "No, you *can't*" (272). This moment serves as a reminder of the origins of Nico's character and the ways in which his history set him apart from the other characters. This detail regarding his displacement from time also lends itself to further connection with his role being a connecting point in the existing conversation between queer adults and adolescents—he serves as a bridge in this way. For the purpose of the setup of the reveal, he is stating outright that there is something about his experiences that are markedly different from the experiences of the other demigods.

The scene builds with Nico's anxieties about his secrets being revealed, establishing the severity of the situation and its implications. There are moments in the lead-up that highlight the

fear involved with being in the closet. On their way, Nico and Jason first encounter the West Wind god, Favonius, who informs them that they'll be facing Cupid. Favonius tells Nico he's been watching him since he was young, and says: "I knew eventually you would return to look upon my master's face" (278). Nico turns pale and appears to feel nervous and trapped, and Jason asks what Favonius is talking about. Nico says "I don't know. Nothing." And Favonius replies, "Nothing? ... The one you care for most... plunged into Tartarus, and still you will not allow the truth?" In this moment, Favonius is referring to how Percy and his girlfriend, Annabeth, are in mortal peril. In Jason's narration, he says he "felt like he was eavesdropping" (278). Nico's panic and fear are indicative that there is something more complicated going on than what is on the surface. Previously in the series, other characters have made the assumption that Nico's crush is on Annabeth, and the ambiguity in Favonius' statement allows that assumption to continue. However, Nico's emotional reaction and Jason's sense that he is eavesdropping imply that this is not the case. As they move to face Cupid, Jason thinks that he isn't sure what exactly Favonius was talking about, but "if *facing the god of love* meant forcing Nico into some sort of confession about which girl he likes, that didn't seem so bad" (280). Jason tries to reassure Nico that he can do this, saying it "might be embarrassing" but stressing the necessity, and Nico does not seem receptive: "Nico didn't look convinced. In fact he looked like he was going to be sick. But he squared his shoulders and nodded. 'You're right. I—I'm not afraid of a love god'" (280). In this moment, Jason is falling back on previous assumptions and misunderstanding the severity of the situation for Nico. He is underestimating the stakes, and what this particular mission is risking for Nico.

The outing scene itself establishes the gravity of the reveal by paralleling the way Nico's parentage is revealed in the previous series. Additionally, the scene is filled with comments

highlighting the complex anxieties of being closeted, including the fear and shame and isolation of the closet. Early in the outing scene, when Cupid shows up, he is specifically directing much of the conflict towards Nico. He says: “Poor Nico di Angelo...Do you know what you want, much less what I want? My beloved Psyche risked everything in the name of Love. It was the only way to atone for her lack of faith. And you—what have you risked in my name?” (288) When Nico defensively replies, “You don’t scare me,” Cupid says, “I scare you very, very much. Face me. Be honest” (288). Cupid’s emphasis on the ideas of risk and fear illustrate a very specific experience that Nico is dealing with. Nico, from the closet, is afraid of facing the truth about himself and of being discovered. Jason asks what Cupid wants from Nico, Cupid says: “Tell him, Nico di Angelo...Tell him you are a coward, afraid of yourself and your feelings. Tell him the real reason you ran from Camp Half-Blood, and why you are always alone” (289). In addition to the emphasis on fear, this comment places an emphasis on the isolation that Nico experienced in the first series as well as this one. That isolation was part of the queer subtext that Nico’s character was built on, and highlighting it now serves to draw the connection between his previous arc and this one. As the tension builds, Nico’s powers are stronger and more frightening, similar to the way his powers react to his grief in the first series. The ground splits open at his feet and plants wilt around him. Nico’s powers function as a way to metaphorically show the significance of this moment, and the strength of his feelings.

At the climax of the scene, Jason is able to feel what Nico feels: “Waves of darkness rolled off the son of Hades. When they hit Jason, he almost lost consciousness—overwhelmed by hatred and fear and shame...” (289). Jason goes on to see visions of Nico’s experiences and feelings, making it obvious that his feelings are for Percy, not Annabeth. This interaction follows:

“‘Nico,’ Jason managed to say, ‘it’s okay. I get it.’

Nico glanced over, pain and misery washing across his face.

‘No, you don’t,’ he said. ‘There’s no way you can understand’” (290).

This whole sequence puts fear, shame, and pain at the center of the narrative. Nico’s feelings are validated through the narrative significance of the moment. His being outed as queer is as important as every other dangerous mission in the quest. When Nico finally admits that “the big secret” is that he had a crush on Percy, he has this moment with Cupid: “He glared at Cupid. ‘Happy now?’ / For the first time, Cupid’s gaze seemed sympathetic. ‘Oh, I wouldn’t say Love always makes you happy.’ His voice sounded smaller, much more human. ‘Sometimes it makes you incredibly sad. But at least you’ve *faced* it now. That’s the only way to conquer me’” (292)

This concluding moment of the outing serves to indicate the next step of the *It Gets Better* narrative. The closet is shown as a space of isolation and shame, and the idea of facing one’s identity and revealing it is the way one begins to reach the promised “better.”

While the *It Gets Better* movement and Nico’s story are indicative of a move forward in queer representation in children’s media, they are not without their flaws. Being a queer teenager in the early 2010s, I could not have avoided hearing about the *It Gets Better* project if I had tried. The message was somewhat simple: queer teens should know that their current situation was not permanent, and they should hold out hope that circumstances would improve. Queer adults were using their own success and happiness as evidence that things would get better. One of the flaws⁷ of the *It Gets Better* Project is the focus on a nebulous, somewhat unreachable future. The

⁷ Further critique: in 2014, scholars in the International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies conducted the study “‘Like Picking Up a Seed, But You Haven’t Planted It’: Queer Youth Analyze the It Gets Better Project,” in which they found that queer youth picked up on shortcomings about the lack of tangible resources for teenagers in need. Michael Johnson writes “The It Gets Better Project: A Study in (and of) Whiteness — in LGBT Youth and Media Cultures” about how the movement focuses on the speakers over the viewers, and how that fails queer teenagers of color. Blake Hawkins, Nazanin Andalibi, and Oliver Haimson wrote “Helpful Information to Whom? An Intersectional Critique of the ‘it Gets Better Project’” in 2018 about the ways in which the It Gets Better Project failed to be inclusive, and how it fell short of its early good intentions.

audience of these videos are, ostensibly, queer teenagers struggling with bullying, abuse, and internalized homophobia. The idea is to give them hope that their current situation will not be an indefinite situation. What good does this serve them in the present moment? A reasonable reaction that a queer teenager in pain might have to the platitude of “this too shall pass” could easily be “Okay, but when?” The promise of “better” does little to help manage the current situation.

In *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture*, Derritt Mason discusses what he calls “sites of anxiety” in queer YA texts and outlines what critics expect of depictions of queerness in young adult literature: “critics express several distinct concerns about queer YA, including its affective contours (the dominant affects should be hope and happiness), the visibility of its protagonists (young queer characters should be ‘out and proud’) and the temporal trajectory of their narrative growth (by novel’s end, any problems surrounding sexual self-identification should be resolved)” (Mason 6). Cupid’s message for Nico in the end is about facing himself and his feelings, tying the idea of being “out” to the idea of being able to become happy. Nico does, in the end of the series, come to terms with himself and his identity. Once he leaves the closet and leaves the shame there, he is able to find community and support. Mason, in outlining sites of anxiety, also references “the promise that ‘It Gets Better’ and the threat that it might not” (Mason 6).

In 1985, Jacqueline Rose published *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, in which she argues that children’s literature is an impossible endeavor. Using the example of *Peter Pan*, she discusses how there is a disconnect between the authors of children’s fiction and the hypothetical audience: “Children’s fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple” (Rose 1). As

Rose describes it, adults writing children's literature are not speaking to any real child—they are, instead, idealizing an image of a child and romantically imagining an interaction in which the child is listening. While I find Rose's assertions about the whole of children's literature not wholly persuasive, I do think they illuminate the rhetoric of the *It Gets Better* Project, and as a fictional representation of that rhetoric, Nico's character in the PJO series. For many of the adults making *It Gets Better* videos, they were not really talking to any queer teenager but the queer teenager who they had been. Dan Savage, in the first video, talked about what his fourteen-year-old self might have needed to hear. Mason notes this connection as well, describing how the adult speaker in the *It Gets Better* project is more directly addressing a past version of themselves than the queer adolescent the project is ostensibly for: "*It Gets Better's* adult, anxious about their own subjectivity and the future of queerness (as embodied by the figure of queer youth in crisis), turns back to self-narrate in an attempt to fix the present" (Mason 137). Mason goes on to discuss the similarities between the concerns of the *It Gets Better* project and the concerns of scholarship around children's literature. Like Rose's assertion about children's fiction, the *It Gets Better* rhetoric was a matter of adults comforting their past selves through the guise of reaching towards a hypothetical queer teenager who would be saved by the mere idea that there was some beautiful perfect future in which they did not suffer anymore. In the *It Gets Better* movement, there exists this ideal queer teenager, for whom this message is crucial and comforting. In Nico di Angelo, there exists a teenager for whom "facing" their identity is what will bring about this better future. This imagined queer teenager struggles with bullying and suicidal ideation, though never serious enough to require intervention. They are saved by those three perfect words—it gets better.

In the outing scene, Nico's fear and shame is central to the conflict. His internal conflict is connected to his displacement in time and his already tenuous role in the group at large. Whether or not his peers would accept him for his queerness is almost beside the point when it comes to the source of his fear. The issue is much larger than mere acceptance for this one single trait. When Jason expresses to Nico that everyone would accept him, we the audience can understand that this is probably true. After all, these characters are our heroes: they are kind, and heroic, and accepting. Of course they are capable of accepting a queer friend. But the source of Nico's angst is not about whether his "coming out" to his friends would be met with kindness. Rather, Nico's pain is far more about his own struggle with accepting himself, shown through things like his inability to say the word "gay," instead cutting himself off or speaking in innuendo. Like the *It Gets Better* Project, however, the end and solution feels almost too simple compared to that initial misery. It *does* get better for Nico. The end of the next book, the final installment of the second series, *The Heroes of Olympus: Blood of Olympus*, has Nico casually admitting his crush to Percy before getting a last-minute implied love interest. In both Nico's arc and the *It Gets Better* Project, the rhetorical message in the end causes some dismissal of that earlier validation. The representation, while a promising step forward, falls short.

Jason Grace: Belonging, Queer Connection, & Tenderness in the Closet

Now that I have discussed the textually queer Nico di Angelo, I would like to establish a queer reading of his friend, Jason Grace, the perspective character for the outing scene and Nico's confidant. To return to Mason's *Queer Anxieties*, he discusses how queer YA fiction is most interesting when there is room for both visible queerness, like Nico di Angelo, and "latent queernesses that provide powerful opportunities for reading in all kinds of creative, nonnormative ways" (Mason 25), which is where I am placing my reading of Jason Grace. Jason

is the character who opens the second series, *The Heroes of Olympus*. He is the first point of view character, and his initial concern is that he does not remember anything other than his first name. He wakes up on a bus, apparently going on a field trip, with a girl who claims to be his girlfriend and a boy who claims to be his best friend. Jason does not know who he is, and he has this overwhelming sense for much of the first book of the series that he does not belong here. As the perspective character in the outing scene in *House of Hades*, he plays an important role in Nico's arc, and Jason as a character himself also has queer undertones. Earlier in this chapter, I drew on societal context with the *It Gets Better* movement and the author's own commentary to analyze Nico's queerness. In Nico's narrative, the space of the closet is one of shame and isolation. In this section, by contrast, I will be focusing on textual analysis of Jason Grace's arc to establish a different perspective on the space of the closet. It is unlikely that Jason Grace was intended by Riordan to be a queer character, but queerness is often found in the subtext and the empty spaces in the text. For Jason, queerness is built into his arc and his motivations, through his initial memory loss, his performance of heterosexuality throughout the series, and his connection with Nico. The *It Gets Better* Project and the way Nico's queer storyline plays out is part of the same conversation between queer adults and queer adolescents, wherein queer adults are reflecting on their experiences in the closet and attempting to speak to their past selves through queer adolescents they see as existing in that space they remember. Following that, Jason's role as Nico's friend and the queer reading of his character connect to the underlying nostalgia for tenderness and connection in the experience of the closet, beyond the message of a brighter future.

In the first section of *The Lost Hero*, Jason is grappling with his confusion and feelings of being out of place. When he is trying to explain that he does not believe he belongs here, he is

asked: ““You think you just appeared here this morning, and we’ve all got fake memories of you?”” And Jason narrates: “A little voice in Jason’s head said, *That’s exactly what I think*” (Riordan 14). Shortly after, his suspicion that he does not belong here is confirmed, and he is relieved: “Jason was so relieved he almost wanted to cry. At least he wasn’t going insane. He *was* in the wrong place” (15). All of these little moments early on serve as the baseline for Jason as a character—he has this anxiety that he is in the wrong place, a sense that he doesn’t belong, and a lack of understanding of who he is. A little later, as he is discovering his powers, he has this moment: ““I think I would know if I could fly...’ / But then he thought: *I don’t even know who I am*” (26). His identity is stripped along with his memory, and all he is left with is a discomfort with where he is and who he is with. Jason’s memory loss contributes to his feelings of not belonging and not understanding his own identity, which establishes the queerness of his character. He struggles with not being sure about who he is or who he should be, and as a result, feeling conflicted about his own understanding of who he is. Nico is a character who is removed from his own time and therefor a character that could represent the queer adolescence of any adult. He is unmoored from the time period of the novel. Jason faces an interesting issue as well in the practical elements of his character, in that he is removed from his own life, lacking the memories necessary for his recognition of his own queer identity, knowing only that there is something wrong as he attempts to fit the image projected onto him. The memory loss serves as a sort of closet for Jason’s character: if he cannot remember who he is, there is no need for him to know his own queerness.

A major aspect of Jason’s issues with his memory loss and his identity is his relationship with Piper McLean, a daughter of Aphrodite. Jason makes attempts over the course of the series and their relationship to live up to the boyfriend that she remembers, but frequently feels out of

place and inadequate. One of their first direct interactions is right after Jason wakes up on the bus in the first chapter. Piper reaches for his hand in concern, and Jason pulls away, saying: “I’m sorry...I don’t—I can’t—” (Riordan 6). This moment establishes the dynamic for their relationship. Jason cannot complete his thought as he pulls away, but the words that set the tone of the relationship are “sorry,” “don’t,” and “can’t.” Jason is establishing that there is something here he does not and cannot feel, and he is struggling with this particular connection. In the context of this early moment, the clear conclusion is about his lack of memories. However, as the relationship moves forward, the omission in this moment allows for more complex interpretations of what Jason is indicating is missing from the text.

While Jason has no memories, Piper has been given false memories of a relationship with Jason and believes him to be her boyfriend. It is revealed that Jason and Piper’s relationship is a fabrication, and that Piper’s memories were magically given to her. This results in this strained dynamic, wherein Jason attempts to behave the way he is expected to in a heterosexual relationship. He struggles with the expectations placed on him and feels inadequate in the role. While Piper’s perspective chapters contain her lamenting over the significance of her false memories of Jason, thinking to herself that “[a]ll that *couldn’t* be fake” (49), Jason struggles with guilt and uncertainty. As he explains it: “He didn’t think he’d ever seen Piper before today, but he felt strangely guilty about it” (85). As he considers how she feels and her memories, he thinks: “He didn’t even know his own story. He couldn’t play with her emotions like that” (85). Later in the series, during the outing scene with Cupid, Cupid calls Jason’s relationship with Piper out: “*I would think you’d know better, Jason Grace.* Cupid’s voice whirled around him. *You’ve found true love, after all. Or do you still doubt yourself?*” (285). Even when Jason and Piper have reached a point of sort of accepting the state of their relationship, Jason’s doubt in the

love between them is strong enough to be brought up by Cupid. This moment calls into question how much progress they have made over the past several books, and brings Jason's issues with their false foundation back up.

As compared to his relationship with Piper, which is fraught with expectations of ideal heterosexuality, Jason's connection with Nico reads as significantly more meaningful and sincere. By the time Jason has any interaction with Nico, he has reached a point where he is thinking about whether he can ever live up to the false memories that his girlfriend has of him. Where Nico's representation allows for a complex relationship with queerness involving shame and isolation, Jason's role in the outing scene and in the queer themes is interesting as well, highlighting the way connection can exist in the closet. Jason initially expresses a desire to befriend Nico, with the reasoning that they are on the same "team." In context, the use of the term *team* is meant to refer to the questing group of demigods. However, in a queer reading, it is impossible to ignore the implications of the word choice, given the innuendo of what *team* one plays for. After Jason is there for the traumatic outing scene, his desire to be close to Nico becomes more urgent. He spends the rest of the series defending Nico and reaching out to him. It is Jason's friendship with Nico that ties the queer reading of his character together. In Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards*, she has a chapter analyzing friendship in the works of Willa Cather, and she mentions the "turn to friendship in recent queer attempts to rethink intimacy beyond the family and the couple" (Love 74). Later, she brings up the stabilizing role of friendship for the queer community (Love 79). For Nico and Jason, their shared experiences create a friendship between them that offers support and tenderness in a way that is not available in the simple promise of a better future.

Where beforehand he found Nico a little intimidating and was uncertain about his loyalties, the outing scene changes Jason. He comes out⁸ of that experience feeling deeply loyal to and protective of Nico, defending him and insisting on their friendship and his trust in Nico. There is an unspoken/understated tenderness in their friendship, and a connection that feels like recognition. Jason thinks of Nico often, worrying about him and noticing him. Shortly after the outing scene, as Jason is processing the experience, he thinks to himself: “Jason couldn’t imagine what it had been like for Nico all those years, keeping a secret that would’ve been unthinkable to share in the 1940s, denying who he was, feeling completely alone—even more isolated than other demigods” (Riordan 293). The outing scene is the beginning of Jason empathizing with Nico in this way, and there are parallels in the way he views Nico’s feelings and the way he himself feels, when it comes to denying his identity, feeling alone, and feeling isolated. These are all things Jason is also familiar with, and it is his latent queerness that encourages a connection with Nico on this level. At the end of the chapter, Jason tells Nico: “‘Nico,’ he said gently, ‘I’ve seen a lot of brave things. But what you just did? That was maybe the bravest.’ / Nico looked up uncertainly. ‘We should get back to the ship’” (293). In an adventure story, where they are often in situations where their lives are in jeopardy, it is very meaningful for Jason to describe Nico’s being outed as the bravest thing he’s seen.

Later, as Jason is talking to Nico and trying to figure out how to become his friend, he says: “You want to trust somebody? Maybe take a risk that I’m really your friend and I’ll accept you” (428). He continues by encouraging Nico to stop “hiding” and adds “Maybe it’s time you come out of the shadows” (429). The phrase “come out of the shadows” works on multiple levels, as it is a reference to Nico’s powers involving traveling through shadows and is a

⁸ Remarkably, no pun intended.

reference to coming out of the closet. Nico refers back to the comment about trust later, as they are in a situation that involves drinking poison at Nico's instruction: "Nico drank from the chalice, then offered it to Jason. 'You asked me about trust, and taking a risk? Well, here you go, son of Jupiter. How much do you trust me?' ... Jason didn't hesitate. He took the cup and drank" (493). Jason's lack of hesitation demonstrates his dedication to proving his trust to Nico. This moment is not in either of their perspectives, so their internal dialogue is left up to interpretation, queerness once again found in the empty spaces.

In the final installment of the second series, *The Heroes of Olympus: The Blood of Olympus*, Jason and Nico spend the majority of the story separated, though frequently thinking of or worrying about one another. Early in the book, Jason is remembering the events of the previous book and thinks: "Gods...*Nico*. / Over the past few days, every time Jason sacrificed a portion of a mean to Jupiter, he prayed to his dad to help Nico" (14). Later, another time Jason is worrying about Nico, Piper expresses to him that he's done what he could for Nico by being his friend, and Jason thinks: "Jason wasn't sure what to say. He hadn't told Piper anything about his conversations with Nico. He'd kept di Angelo's secret" (42). These significant moments in their friendship are all textual and on the page, as compared to Jason's other relationships, which often take place outside of the books or are based on false memories. As such, they read as more concrete than the other connections Jason has. Jason never fully explains his dedication to his friendship with Nico, leaving room for the interpretation that his own queerness is a part of that connection. We can imagine that Jason's interest in being Nico's friend, his concern for and dedication to Nico, is connected to his own understanding of and experience with the closet. Jason is a complicated character, with a significant amount of pressure to exist in a certain way.

His connection to Nico allows him, as well as Nico, to experience connection and tenderness within the space of the closet.

A queer reading of Jason's character suggests that, while he supports Nico's decision to come out and trusts that he will be accepted by his peers, Jason remains in the space of the closet, either due to his own confusion about his identity or his desire for safety and privacy. This dynamic evokes, to me, the balance that queer adults strike when reaching out to queer adolescents through reminiscing about their own parallel experiences. In this case of *It Gets Better*, the adults offer a promise, both to their younger selves and the queer adolescents they know are in the space they once knew, of a future that they believe is accessible. At the same time, they are acknowledging the pain and struggle that this space presents for those still there. Jason reaches out to Nico, promising him a better future and asking for his trust, while simultaneously experiencing a parallel trajectory and remaining in the shadows. Nico's outing is traumatic and cathartic, but Jason's role as a queer character allowed to be closeted even in the context of the story suggests a kinder interpretation of what the experience of the closet is.

Chapter Two:

Pride, Privacy, and the Closet in YA Literature:

#OwnVoices, Social Media, & *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

In the mid-2010s, the rapid growth of online communication and the accessibility of smartphones were changing the experience of adolescence and coming of age. With the public nature of social media and the expectations to be constantly available with the ubiquity of smartphones, the distinction between the public and private spheres was more difficult to establish. In this chapter, I analyze the struggles with privacy that come with the expansion of digital communication, both as it relates to queer adults and queer adolescents.

In the introduction of *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, theorist Christopher Pullen explores the changing landscape of the construction of queer identity and community in connection with the growing potential of the internet as an available space to find them. He discusses the way online spaces can erode the divide between the public and private spheres and recognizes potential limitations. However, he primarily focuses on an optimistic outlook, suggesting: “Online new media provides an arena for this in the display and potential of intimacy, which in the conditions of late modernity stimulates LGBT identity in new and productive ways. LGBT identity within online new media offers new scope, particularly when it is reflective, contextual, and continuously self aware” (Pullen 10). This new arena for connection and intimacy, especially for closeted queer adolescents, is an important benefit to consider. The internet allows anonymity in the closet, which offers an opportunity to seek solidarity with less risk than physical spaces. Unfortunately, the lack of boundaries between the private and public on the internet had negative consequences for the queer community at large as well.

Cyberbullying became a way for adolescents to get harassed while in their own bedrooms. An ill-advised public post on social media could go viral and cost an adult their job.

The stress of performing under the relentless panopticon of social media could be a dissertation topic in and of itself. However, I will concentrate on the impact of social media and the pressures of visibility in terms of the closet. Along with the role of the internet and social media, concerns in the publishing industry for queer YA literature and the rhetoric of critique surrounding the genre added layers of expectations for queer authors. Theorists Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart, in their book *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, aim to give an overview charting the evolution of the depiction of queer characters and stories, highlighting specific books they deem worthy of either praise or criticism. In their words in the introduction, they write: “To provide readers—and authors—a critical context in which to evaluate LGBTQ+ literature, we believe that what is stereotypic, wrongheaded, and outdated needs to be exposed and what is accurate, thoughtful, and artful needs to be applauded” (Jenkins xiii). The philosophy of Jenkins and Cart’s work is understandable, in that they are striving to recommend works to queer teenagers seeking stories that reflect their experiences. However, this evaluation between what is accurate and thoughtful in queer literature and what is incorrect and outdated results in scrutiny that can be more limiting than productive. In this chapter, I draw a connection between the philosophy driving Jenkins and Cart and the eroded privacy of the internet and social media and explore the consequences therein, through analyzing *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and author Becky Albertalli’s coming out story.

In *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, privacy is a central concern for the titular main character, and his experience of the closet is impacted more from a desire to maintain privacy in

his identity than a concrete fear of external repercussions, as would have been more common in earlier coming out stories. Coinciding with Simon's experience, I will examine the online conversations and criticism directed towards authors of YA novels and the impact of the expectation of self-disclosure.

#OwnVoices & YA Literature

In recent years, within conversations about YA literature and publishing, there has been a push for what has been called "Own Voices" stories. The term was coined on Twitter and describes diverse literature wherein the author is a member of the marginalized group represented in the story, as in a story about marginalization from voices belonging to the group in question. "Own Voices" began on Twitter, when author Corinne Duyvis tweeted on September 6th 2015, suggesting the hashtag: "#ownvoices, to recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group" (Duyvis 2015). The purpose was specifically for sharing book recommendations on Twitter, but the concept became more expansive as it grew beyond Twitter conversations between readers and educators and gained popularity in the general world of publishing and marketing. Since then, the intention and focus has shifted, causing problems for marginalized authors. For authors of queer stories, this has resulted in being consistently interrogated about their personal identities, to determine whether they qualify as an Own Voices author. Here, I will offer an overview of the original intention behind the hashtag and the subsequent consequences for queer authors as the conversation evolved.

Corinne Duyvis, as the originator of the term, has been questioned about the philosophy behind it and the current usage. On Duyvis' website, there's a "#OwnVoices" page on which she answers frequently asked questions about the hashtag. When discussing the idea of whether

someone qualifies as “#ownvoices” if they have some identities but not others in common with their protagonist, Duyvis explains that any overlap in marginalized identity between author and protagonist would count. On further clarification, for nuanced situations wherein the overlap of identity might be debatable or unclear, Duyvis goes on: “I don’t want to set up specific rules or guidelines beyond the obvious ones above. I’m aware that “obvious” won’t answer all questions, and identity often isn’t obvious; it’s nuanced and complicated and hard to categorize. And that’s exactly why I don’t think it’s my place to make that call” (Duyvis). When answering a question about what marginalized or privileged authors “should” write about, Duyvis expresses that the intention of the hashtag “is emphatically not about policing or pressuring marginalized authors to write about any particular topic or character” and clarifies further that she prefers to use the labels to describe specific books rather than specific authors.

The original suggestion and use of the hashtag is well-intentioned. The idea was to encourage reading broadly and diversely, and to share book recommendations that contained stories of marginalization written by authors who had experienced that marginalization and had perhaps been overlooked in mainstream marketing. The original premise of the Own Voices conversation, as well as the subsequent arguments surrounding it, echo rhetoric and arguments within conversations of cultural appropriation in art. Philosopher James Young defines cultural appropriation into different categories in his book *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, discussing the distinctions between content appropriation, style appropriation, motif appropriation, and subject appropriation. For the Own Voices movement, the argument is situated in subject appropriation, occasionally referred to as voice appropriation, wherein artists who are outsiders of a particular culture attempt to represent the life of an insider. For a book to be considered an Own Voices book, the author must be an insider of the community depicted.

For an author to be considered an Own Voices author, they must not be engaging in subject appropriation. One immediate criticism, in this ethos for the Own Voices movement, is that subject appropriation is not an accurate term, according to Young. Appropriation involves taking something from the insider group, as in the case of museums appropriating artifacts from cultures in content appropriation, and subject appropriation does not take away from the potential of insiders to depict their own experiences. In fact, Young argues that appropriation in the subject matter of artwork is not truly possible, writing:

“Artists represent their own experience in their works. In representing their experience, artists represent what is already theirs. They do not represent the experience of anyone else. When artists represent their experience of other cultures, the insiders are left with their experiences. They are not appropriated. Other cultures fall within the experience of artists so, in representing other cultures, artists do not have to appropriate anyone’s experience, even if that were possible” (Young 8).

Young does explain the potential limitations of an outsider perspective, as the core of the controversy for subject appropriation, writing: “Since outsiders do not have access to the experience of insiders, one might argue, outsiders are bound to misrepresent the culture of insiders. Since the works of outsiders distort the insiders’ culture, they may be thought to have aesthetic flaws. Since artists could misrepresent the culture of others in a harmful or offensive manner, subject appropriation could also be morally objectionable” (Young 9). These concerns are part of the driving forces for the Own Voices movement. Certainly, there has often been criticism of the way male authors write women or the way white authors write Black characters. Readers and critics will note areas where these authors fall short of the nuance of writing these characters and will pick apart excerpts that demonstrate blind spots. Choosing to seek out diverse authors seems an obvious solution to this issue for readers searching for representation they feel more accurately reflects their own experiences. When limiting the Own Voices conversations to Duyvis’ original intent, there is little to critique about the concept. Of course female readers want

to read books written by female authors. Of course Black parents want to find kidlit books for their children written by Black authors.

However, the issues change when Own Voices is less about readers offering recommendations and more about publishers determining which books get published, or authors getting interrogated about the representation in their books. Despite Duyvis' thoughtful and careful answers to the potential issues arising from the Own Voices conversation, the term did enter the publishing and marketing world, with direct consequences. In April of 2019, Kat Rosenfield wrote the article "What Is #OwnVoices Doing To Our Books?", wherein she reports on an incident that happened with romance and young adult author Kosoko Jackson. As she outlines in the timeline of events, he wrote this Tweet in 2018: "Stories about the civil rights movement should be written by black people. Stories of suffrage should be written by women. Ergo, stories about boys during horrific and life changing times, like the AIDS EPIDEMIC, should be written by gay men. Why is this so hard to get?" (Jackson 2018). This tweet falls into the more complicated issues of the Own Voices conversation, clearly making an argument that Duyvis had hoped to avoid. On its surface, Jackson's point seems fair, especially with the confident tone he takes. However, the extension of the argument is less about who should be writing these particular stories, and more about whether others would be allowed to, which is where the problems arise.

Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl, in their essay "Cultural Appropriation and the Intimacy of Groups," argue that a type of intimacy exists in community groups, similar to personal relationships, and that some critiques of cultural appropriation (which they use neutrally) are rooted in a breach of that intimacy of a particular group. Jackson's tweet is an example of this kind of reaction to cultural appropriation. The concern is not necessarily about the portrayal of

the community-specific experiences he is referring to, but rather the idea that certain community experiences can only be explored by members of the group. To allow outsiders to write about these experiences would be to violate the intimacy of the group. Relatedly, Young sums up one aspect of the cultural appropriation conversation, writing: “The aesthetic case against cultural appropriation can often be summed up in a single word. Works produced by cultural appropriation are, in some sense of the word, inauthentic” (Young 27). When it comes to these conversations about cultural appropriation, the evaluation of the art itself is almost beside the point. The fact of its existence is a breach of intimacy, and is by its nature inauthentic. The Own Voices movement comes from this particular understanding of cultural appropriation—that only members of the community will be able to write a book about their experiences worth reading. Objecting to subject appropriation on the basis of inauthenticity or a breach of intimacy of an in-group is already tenuous in communities with clearer boundaries, as Young and Nguyen/Strohl demonstrate in their respective works, with complicated arguments to consider. In the queer community, however, this criticism has added layers of complications, as is made clear in the extension of the Own Voices philosophy.

In an ironic turn, Jackson’s planned debut novel, *A Place for Wolves*, was cancelled and completely pulled shortly before publication. While the protagonist of the novel was gay and Black, like Jackson, qualifying the book as an “own voices” book, an online reviewer took issue with the setting—Kosovo in the 1990s. As Rosenfield puts it: “[t]his story, critics said, was not his to tell” (Rosenfield 2019). Rosenfield goes on to discuss how rising political tensions and a difficult market for YA publication has authors saying that the focus on ‘authenticity’ within works relating to marginalization is more limiting than productive. About the case of Kosoko Jackson specifically, Rosenfield says: “For some, seeing Kosoko Jackson's career being

torpedoed by the same culture that was supposed to protect and value his voice was a particularly poignant wake-up call” (Rosenfield 2019). Here, she is hitting on one specific aspect of the issue that is cause for concern: the original intent of the hashtag was to draw attention to diverse authors writing about their own marginalization, like Jackson, and ultimately the consequences of the evolution of the term caused his book to get pulled from publication when the books had already been printed.

Since the original tweet with the Own Voices hashtag in 2015 and Jackson’s pulled debut novel in 2019, the conversation around Own Voices has changed dramatically, with many people realizing the unintended consequences of the movement to authors and the industry at large. What started as an honest attempt to find recommendations of diverse authors writing about their own experience turned into a broader publishing trend and marketing tactic, which simplified the complexity of marginalized voices and put pressure on authors to market their identities along with their books. As a sort of case study, I will summarize and elaborate on a particular incident that was in part caused by the rise of the Own Voices movement and discuss the relationship between the real-life privacy concerns of the author and how this is reflected in the role of the closet in her novel. I am interested in the way the climate around publication changing with increasing pressure to be out and the issues of privacy can be seen reflected in the nostalgic portrayal of the space of the closet. In the next section, I examine the experience of *Simon vs.* author, Becky Albertalli, with being closeted and questioning her sexual identity while dealing with criticisms related to cultural appropriation and the Own Voices movement.

Becky Albertalli & Being Closeted in the Public Eye

Conversations around cultural appropriation, particularly in content appropriation, tend primarily to focus on concerns of race and ethnicity⁹. The Own Voices movement extended to all marginalized identities, attempting to apply the philosophy more broadly. For queer authors, this meant their identities were called into question. With the rise of social media and authors being asked to personally handle their own marketing, individual authors were easier to directly contact than ever. Critics and fans could get their messages sent to author's personal phones, and especially for newer authors, there was a very good chance of the author reading at least most of what was sent their way. In addition, YA literature was getting more scrutiny, as there were concerns about what adolescents were reading. In the conclusion of *Representing the Rainbow*, Jenkins and Cart suggest how to evaluate queer YA novels for their authenticity and value as literature, suggesting the questions: "Does it offer multidimensional characters? Does it have a setting rich in verisimilitude? Does it have not only an authentic but an original voice? Does it offer fresh insights into the lives of LGBTQ+ people? Does it offer other innovations in terms of narrative strategy, structure, theme? Or is it the same old story, told in the same old way that readers have encountered too many times in the past?" (Jenkins 222). With this much scrutiny and pressure towards the authors of queer YA literature, demanding that their books fit specific criteria and that their own personal identities be both publicly available and open for questioning, the resulting harm to queer authors seems inevitable.

In August of 2020, Becky Albertalli, author of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, came out as bisexual in an essay she published on Medium, a platform allowing anyone to post

⁹ For examples of further explorations of cultural appropriation in these contexts, see these articles: "Cultural appropriation and oppression" by Erich Hatala Matthes, "Rethinking Cultural Appropriation in YA Literature Through Sámi and Arctic Pedagogies" by Lena Manderstedt, Annbritt Palo, and Lydia Kokkola, and "Moving From Cultural Appropriation to Cultural Appreciation" by Hsiao-Cheng Han.

their writing publicly. In it, she talks about the difficulties she faced with people making assumptions and speculating about her sexuality, as she herself was still struggling with questioning her identity from the closet. Albertalli opens her essay by discussing the tendency to share stories about the kinds of “queer things” someone might have done before realizing their own queerness, and she says: “Or how about this one: writing a book about a closeted gay kid in Georgia who doesn’t want to come out because he doesn’t want people to make his sexuality a big deal, and then (right after the release of the film adaptation) publishing a number one New York Times bestselling sequel about, what else: a closeted bisexual girl” (Albertalli 2020). Albertalli describes the way she felt in the time immediately following the publication of *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda.*, and how she hated being asked about her inspiration for writing it. She explains that she didn’t realize her sexuality at that time and did call herself straight in those earlier interviews.

In their book queering memory and exploring the interactions of performativity and identity, *Queer Memory and Storytelling: Gender and Sexually-Diverse Identities and Trans-Media Narrative*, Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser write a chapter in which they discuss these concepts in coming out stories, giving particular space to coming out stories posted online, on platforms like YouTube or personal blogs. They pose the question of what has made the coming out story such an enduring genre, and ask what might motivate these large numbers of people to share their experiences publicly, suggesting possible reasons like a desire to help others or searching for community and belonging (Cover 26). Becky Albertalli’s essay is similar to the stories that Cover and Prosser explore, though it is distinct in that the act of writing and posting functions as the act of coming out rather than as a narrative recounting the experience. Cover and Prosser argue that coming out stories, despite having roots in political defiance in the Gay

Liberation rhetoric of the 1970s, function as a performance to create a coherent and stabilized sense of self within nonnormative identities. They write: “Significantly, what the coming out narrative does is exclude or disavow the possibilities of fluidity, choice, agency and flux in favor of dominant discourses of liberal-humanist subjectivity that underscore all identity practices” (Cover 28). They continue by explaining the cultural implications of the demand that queer people articulate a coming out story, as well as “the demand for stories to be alike, conforming and narrow in their construction of the queer self as an essential, authentic, innate sexual subject of perceived integrity and honesty” (Cover 28). As in the concerns of cultural appropriation and the Own Voices conversation, there is this question of authenticity in identity and representation. In Cover and Prosser’s assessment, they are describing how the genre conventions of coming out stories place limitations on queer identity through assuming a clear and intelligible trajectory that precludes uncertainty and fluidity. In Albertalli’s essay, she expresses that uncertainty was very central to her experience and that the pressure from the criticism she got for her identity impacted her greatly.

A major turning point for her was in 2018, when *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* was adapted into a major blockbuster, *Love, Simon*. The film adaptation brought a spotlight to her, and there was a lot of discourse surrounding the movie and her identity. *Love, Simon* was an important movie in terms of mainstream queer representation, with many people excited about what the film meant for queer teenagers, but also many people critical of both the film and Albertalli herself. Albertalli writes: “[I]n many online spaces, my straightness was a springboard for some — legitimately important — conversations about representation, authenticity, and ownership of stories. And for some people, my straightness was enough to boycott the film entirely” (Albertalli 2020). With the release of Albertalli’s sequel to *Simon vs.*, *Leah on the*

Offbeat, which focuses on Simon's best friend who is a closeted bisexual girl, the scrutiny about Albertalli's own identity continued. She talks about how overwhelming it was for her, in the midst of her own uncertainty about her identity. She shares how anxious she felt, as she declined interview questions and saw her name repeatedly brought up in these conversations, as she puts it: "held up again and again as the quintessential example of allocishet inauthenticity. I was a straight woman writing shitty queer books for the straights, profiting off of communities I had no connection to." Albertalli acknowledges that she had identified as straight in the past, so the people bringing up her identity to critique were working off of information directly from her. However, she adds: "But labels change sometimes. That's what everyone always says, right? It's okay if you're not out. It's okay if you're not ready. It's okay if you don't fully understand your identity yet. There's no time limit, no age limit, no one right way to be queer" (Albertalli 2020). This point here is the central issue when it comes to the identities of queer authors. The rhetoric surrounding coming out of the closet, in its most encouraging form, is that one should be able to come out on their own terms, when they are ready. However, with the assumptions of a linear narrative that Cover and Prosser discuss in the conventions of coming out stories, as well as the concerns of cultural appropriation criticism and the calls of the Own Voices movement, these assuring platitudes extended to those in the closet were not offered to closeted adults. Certainly, Albertalli draws attention to the way this ideal did not seem to apply to her, as the emphasis was on whether she had the right to the stories she wrote. There was no space for her experience with the closet to be on her own terms.

Albertalli brings up the Own Voices conversation directly in her essay, saying that she does believe in the value of these critical discussions of representation and responsibility. She argues, though, that the discussions are not given the care and nuance they should be. She talks

about the original intention of the hashtag and Duyvis' own points about exercising caution and not using the term to pressure authors into coming out. Ultimately, she says that this was not how she wanted to come out, making her frustration and discomfort clear: "This doesn't feel good or empowering, or even particularly safe. Honestly, I'm doing this because I've been scrutinized, subtweeted, mocked, lectured, and invalidated just about every single day for years, and I'm exhausted. And if you think I'm the only closeted or semi-closeted queer author feeling this pressure, you haven't been paying attention" (Albertalli 2020). While Albertalli is a particularly big name in the YA literature world to come forward here, the way her coming out played out demonstrates a treatment of contemporary authors that is not unique to her. The efforts to critically address inequity in YA publication and the concern for the impact of these issues on marginalized queer teenagers seeking representation ended up resulting in responsibility falling directly on the shoulders of individual authors. In addition to the well-intentioned calls for diverse YA literature, these kinds of discourse also allowed a space for invasive interrogation of authors, with platforms on the internet facilitating more direct lines of communication.

Nyugen and Strohl write that criticism of cultural appropriation often relies on the claim that there is real harm being caused, though these claims can come without evidence of the aforementioned harm (Nguyen 985). This relationship between subject appropriation or offensive depictions of marginalized identities and the subsequent harm done to the marginalized group in question is able to be demonstrated in some cases; however, if the harm is hypothetical, what is the intended purpose of the criticism? For *Simon vs.* and Beky Albertalli, the theorized harm of a "straight" woman engaging in subject appropriation was hypothetical, but the harm done to a closeted bisexual artist in the midst of that criticism was all too real. In the end of Albertalli's essay, she calls for the importance of care in these discussions in the future: "[C]an we all be a

bit more careful when we engage in queer Ownvoices discourse? Can we remember that our carelessness in these discussions has caused real harm? And that the people we're hurting rarely have my degree of privilege or industry power? Can we make space for those of us who are still discovering ourselves? Can we be a little more compassionate?" Albertalli's coming out essay marked a shift in the way Own Voices books and authors were talked about. Her particular situation gets referenced in these conversations, now being used as an example of the damage the pressure on closeted authors can cause instead of a point about the inauthenticity of straight authors writing queer narratives.¹⁰

While the rhetoric around the Own Voices movement in the publishing industry became more compassionate following Albertalli's essay, the same cannot be said for the theoretical criticism. *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* does get praised by Jenkins and Cart in *Representing the Rainbow*, for being feel-good and positive. They write: "this superlative gay romance 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. Indeed, it can be almost as natural as breathing" (Jenkins 135). However, the same optimism that is praised for being the kind of story that today's adolescents need lures criticism for being unradical, from the same philosophy of concern for the impact on readers. In her 2022 article, "'I Am My Brother's Keeper': Heteronormativity and the Straight Sister in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature," Nicole Galante discusses the tendency of queer YA literature to feature a gay teenage boy with a straight sister. Referencing scholars like Roberta Trites in *Disturbing the Universe*, Galante focuses on how YA

¹⁰ As examples of the changing conversation around the Own Voices label: the nonprofit We Need Diverse Books announced they would no longer be using the hashtag in June of 2021 because of the way it was being used broadly in the publishing industry, and an article on Book Riot by Grace Lapointe titled "What Happened to the Own Voices Label?" was published in 2022, outlining the evolution of the hashtag and discussing Becky Albertalli's situation in particular.

literature as a genre is all about power. In the beginning of her argument, she sets up her critique of YA literature: “Despite this progress, the genre still has a long way to go before it can be truly called ‘radical.’ A recent phenomenon in LGBTQ young adult literature can help illuminate the covert ways in which the genre fails to truly ‘challenge the status quo’” (Galante 1103). Among other novels with the same trope, she talks about *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and in particular brings up the way Simon’s younger sister Nora acts as a protector when Martin outs Simon online: “Nora breaks the news to him. “I already reported it,” she tells Simon, taking it upon herself to get the post removed before he even has the chance to react to it himself. Nora simultaneously reassures Simon that his sexuality is “obviously not something to be ashamed of,” and the issue at hand is quickly resolved for Simon, instead of by Simon (159-60)” (1113). Galante goes on to suggest that these narratives she is exploring are not just unradical, they are also unethical. She refers to a critic who argues that there will always be a degree of irony in YA literature, as it is by nature adult authors attempting to imitate adolescent voices, but that YA authors should attempt to mitigate that irony. Galante argues that authors of the genre have an ethical responsibility to be as unironic in their works as possible and she ends up suggesting further: “Anything but narrative resistance is unradical and unethical” (1118).

Galante argues that these novels are more concerned with controlling adolescents than caring for them and connects this to narratives of children as powerless. She refers then to Lee Edelman’s arguments about reproductive futurism in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, going on to posit: “If we truly value our children, though, why do we privilege physical and cultural reproduction above all else? Why do we privilege the future survival of a social institution over the present survival and flourishing of our children? The answer is likely that we don’t care as much as we pretend” (1118). It is an interesting choice for Galante to refer to

Edelman's work with reproductive futurism in this moment, where she is arguing that these young adult novels are unethical in how they speak to their teenage audience and further positing that perhaps there is not as much care given to children as there should be, if we are meant to value them as the future.

Edelman's core work in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* fundamentally argues that the focus on the figure of the Child as a hypothetical future to work towards causes real harm to adults in the present. While Galante is focusing on the ethics of young adult literature, there is real harm done to the authors of the queer young adult works, often queer themselves. While I believe that the figure of the straight sister to a gay male protagonist in queer YA literature that Galante notices is worth analyzing, I find that her conclusion fails to consider the reality around these stories. Galante has valuable insight in the way this trend demonstrates a desire to maintain the traditional family structures and ends up in less than radical conclusions about gender and family institutions. However, I hesitate to engage with the idea that this leads into an overly harsh understanding of the responsibilities of authors of young adult novels and a judgement on their work as not just unradical but unethical.

If our concern for the teenage readers of YA literature becomes placing an ethical responsibility on the authors of those novels, there is a possibility that an attempt at reducing harm actually simply creates harm in a different area. The Own Voices conversation began as well-intentioned, aiming to draw attention to authors from marginalized communities writing about their own experiences. Similarly, Galante's aim is ostensibly well-intentioned—the argument concludes with a focus on care for the adolescent readers of these novels. However, as Lee Edelman argues, focus on a hypothetical child over a real adult is a rhetorical strategy that is ultimately damaging to the queer community. Arguing that Becky Albertalli's novel is not just

unradical in nature but unethical is placing a significant amount of responsibility on authors. Why must queer literature, especially queer YA literature, always be fully radical, consistently critiquing institutions like marriage and family in a perfectly progressive way? Is there no room for reflections of other experiences? My concern is that in striving to focus on radical, “ethical” YA literature, we stifle the genre and place expectations on authors that lead to moments like Becky Albertalli’s coming out essay.

The coining of the Own Voices label and the subsequent use of it to scrutinize authors’ private lives and identities demonstrates a difficult issue in conversations of queer literature, especially young adult literature. Putting questions of the responsibilities of YA writers aside and the urgency of concern for teen readers, I would like to look at what *Simon vs.* is portraying with the love and tenderness in the nostalgia for the closet. In the next section, I examine how the closet is portrayed in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and how privacy, safety, and social media come into play. I explore how Simon’s story reflects Albertalli’s, and what those parallels show about the treatment of both queer teenagers and queer adults. In my analysis, I take two different approaches to the role of the closet in the novel. First, I examine the “outside” view of the closet, which is to say the experiences in public-facing spheres and the external perspectives. Then I analyze the interiority of the closet, in reflections about identity and connections found in anonymity and privacy.

Outside: Privacy & Social Media in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

In this section, I examine *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* an example of a contemporary coming out narrative in YA literature and analyze how the closet is portrayed from an outside view, especially as it connects to anxieties around privacy, social media, and access to information. Published in 2015, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli was

released right around the same moment as the Own Voices conversation began on Twitter. This was a significant year for queer rights, as same-sex marriage was legalized on June 26, 2015, with the Supreme Court ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Queer-centered discussions of language and identity were much more mainstream and public, both due to the legislative progress and the growing use of internet platforms to host these conversations. Here, I explore the way these questions of privacy manifest in depictions of the closet in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, examining comparisons between Simon's story and concurrent trends of queer representation, Simon's interactions with Martin and his family, and the way he is publicly outed compared to Albertalli's experiences in the previous section.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda is a coming out narrative, which is a distinct genre within queer literature. Based on its popularity in the YA genre and the timing of its publication, *Simon vs.* is a typical example of the genre, covering the broad checklist of expectations. In *Queer Memory and Storytelling*, Cover and Pross outline a list of elements typically constructing the coming out story:

“Key ideas narrated in coming out stories include (1) feelings of isolation or loneliness as a young person; (2) having always known one is non-normative as a child but not necessarily knowing the name for it; (3) a moment of bravery either in a first sexual encounter or in disclosing and confessing a non-heteronormative sexual identity; and (4) typically coming to a sense of belonging to a community or online community or through a coupled relationship” (Cover 28).

In another exploration of the features of coming out narratives, Gilad Padva examines adolescent melodramas in his article, “Edge of Seventeen: Melodramatic Coming-Out in New Queer Adolescence Films,” wherein coming out is the core obstacle in the narrative. He discusses elements like conflicts with older generations, platonic connections with female peers, rebellion and sexual exploration. He acknowledges the limitations of the romanticization of coming out as the cathartic solution to conclude the story of the film, calling it a “naïve illusion” (Padva 369).

However, he continues: “Nevertheless, the happy endings of these queer youth films do demonstrate maturity, acceptance, pride, and happiness. These final melodramatic scenes express empathy, comfort, and compassion, and thus they encourage the young viewers not to feel devastated but to celebrate their gay identity” (Padva 369). Simon’s story hits all of the benchmarks Cover and Pross list. He describes understanding himself as different starting at a young age and feels alienated from his friends and peers. Though he ultimately gets publicly outed, he does get moments of bravery in self-disclosure. By the end of the novel, he is happily in a romantic relationship. Elements of Padva’s observations of queer melodramas are present as well, in the forms of Simon’s frustration with his parents, his closeness with two particular female friends, and the optimism of the end of the story.

The novel centers on Simon Spier, a closeted gay high school student, and his struggles with his identity and feelings of alienation from his peers. Simon has an established secret pen pal online, another gay student at his school. They email and use pen names with one another. The instigating event of the book is another student, Martin Addison, seeing Simon’s emails and subsequently blackmailing Simon with the information, threatening to out him to the school if he doesn’t comply with Martin’s requests to be set up with a female friend of Simon. Within the narrative, the closet is the space that offers safety and connection for Simon. While he does have feelings of fear and shame, the emphasis is placed more on considering when he is “ready” to leave the closet. The closet, in this sense, is not where one is forced to hide one’s identity but rather where one is safe from interrogation about their identity. Simon finds comfort in the privacy of the closet and the connection he shares with his pen pal Blue, and likely would have been happy to remain closeted for longer than the story allows. I posit that the blackmail plot as the catalyst of the story and the driving force behind Simon’s actions serve to communicate the

stress of social media and the deterioration of privacy for contemporary queer adolescents, demonstrating the closet as a space of solace as well as fear.

The opening conversation is between Simon and Martin, his to-be blackmailer. The first line of the book is: “It’s a weirdly subtle conversation. I almost don’t notice I’m being blackmailed” (Albertalli 1). Martin reveals in the conversation that he used a school computer after Simon did, and as a result, saw Simon’s private emails to his pen pal, Blue, in which they discuss being gay and closeted. As the opening line states, the conversation is subtle, cloaked in inuendo and implications. This being the first sentence of the book is meaningful because it draws immediate attention to reading farther into words. Simon is closeted, and his friend he emails is also closeted, and this is an opening that evokes the closet. The implication of blackmail is so unspoken that Simon almost doesn’t notice. Martin tells Simon: “[I]t’s pretty obvious that you don’t want people to know” and Simon thinks to himself: “I mean. I guess I don’t. Except the whole coming out thing doesn’t really scare me. / I don’t think it scares me. / It’s a giant holy box of awkwardness, and I won’t pretend I’m looking forward to it. But it probably won’t be the end of the world. Not for me” (2). Even in this moment where Simon is thinking that coming out isn’t that big of a deal, the language is hesitant and unsure. He starts by claiming that the whole “coming out thing” doesn’t scare him, but then immediately qualifies that with he doesn’t *think* it scares him. He follows up with saying it *probably* won’t be the end of the world for him. As Martin is subtly introducing the blackmail, Simon is using hesitant language in his own narration, even internally avoiding stating the true fear involved in being closeted.

In her essay, “Bullies and Blackmail: Finding Homophobia in the Closet on Teen TV,” theorist Wendy Peters examines trends in queer representation in teen shows in the early 2010s,

especially in relation to the treatment of closeted teens. As Peters explores in depictions of the closet in television, stories about the closet that fall too far on the side of insisting that coming out of the closet is an uncomplicated good that will invariably improve a queer teenager's life risk suggesting that closeted teenagers are to blame for their own pain, and worse, are possibly to blame for the homophobia present in high school at large. She writes: "Such narratives discipline post-Stonewall, not-out and not-proud characters, blaming them for the existence of the closet" (Peters 501). Notably, she examines a recurring plotline of closeted characters getting blackmailed out of the closet by their post-closet counterparts, who are aiming to demonstrate to them the safety and acceptance in coming out. She explains that these incidents are typically portrayed as an attempt to reach out and be helpful, rather than invasive or even potentially dangerous. In *Simon vs.*, the trend Peters finds in teen shows is subverted. The blackmail is the core concern he has throughout the story, and his desire for privacy and autonomy in the closet is given great validity. Additionally, the blackmailer is an overtly heterosexual character, who is portrayed as having little understanding for the experience of the closet. Echoing the sentiment of the post-closet blackmailers in Peters' examples, Martin tells Simon: "I actually think people would be cool about it ... You should be who you are" (Albertalli 3). Simon reacts to this in his narration: "I don't even know where to begin with that. Some straight kid who barely knows me, advising me on coming out. I kind of have to roll my eyes" (3). With the timing coinciding with the legalization of same-sex marriage and the Own Voices movement ostensibly being about celebrating diverse authors, as well as the closet being depicted as the producer of homophobia rather than a result of it in teen shows, the rhetoric surrounding queer conversations in 2015 treated homophobia as a dwindling issue, attributed to individual incidents rather than systemic prejudice. In the novel, Simon mentions a few times being lucky to have been gay in this

moment rather than in the past, and Martin is suggesting that there would be no issue with Simon coming out. The effect of the idea that homophobia is, if not solved, at least a much less significant concern results in an appearance of acceptance for the moment that in turn leads to an expectation that coming out could be simple or easy. While Simon dismisses Martin's perspective, his experience in being closeted is similarly impacted by the comparatively accepting historical moment.

Immediately after this, Martin says he won't "show anyone," and reveals that he took screenshots of Simon's emails. There is an interesting juxtaposition here between Martin's advice and his threat, as it relates to the nature of conversations of progress and acceptance. His advice is somewhat shallow, not acknowledging the complicated nature of coming out and coming from a very limited perspective, impacted by a climate that seems accepting on the surface. Simon is understandably frustrated and impatient with the advice, not taking it seriously as he recognizes Martin's inability to understand the full nuance of being closeted. Martin's limited perspective is immediately magnified with the way he follows this up with blackmail, and his advice is undercut by it as well. He is claiming that people would "be cool about it" while simultaneously using the uncertainty of that reassurance to his advantage. Martin does not and cannot relate to Simon's experience in being closeted, but he is able to understand it enough to weaponize it against him.

This entire set-up for the premise of the novel introduces a compelling tone for the narrative. The narrative is concerned with shallow support from insincere sources, with Martin's advice and threat coming in the same moment. The threat is also subtle enough to be nearly unnoticed, demonstrating how the dangers of contemporary homophobia for teenagers can be difficult to describe. Additionally, the result of the blackmail is that Simon's actions are

scrutinized in a new way that he cannot express to his family and friends. In a very direct sense, the blackmail acts as a new, different closet for Simon to navigate. All of these nuances in the instigating scene add up to drawing attention to the concerns of privacy, scrutiny, and safety in an age of social media and fragile acceptance. These themes are furthered by the role that social media plays in the actual outing later in the novel, and how feelings of being watched and judged manifest in the experience of being closeted as a contemporary teenager for Simon.

The way Simon gets outed in the story and his feelings about it connect strongly to Becky Albertalli's essay in 2020 and the contemporary concerns of the closet. In this way, Simon's experience of the closet mirrors very directly the queer adult concerns as well, demonstrating the continuation of the intracommunity conversation. While Albertalli reports still identifying as straight when she wrote the book, the desire for the safety of the closet until one is "ready" to come out and the feelings of hurt when that desire is violated come through clearly. Throughout the novel, the space of the closet is shown as safe and private, impacted by a sense of nostalgia for adolescence and the function of the closet compared to life as a publicly out queer adult.

To further contextualize these concerns, this nostalgia for the role of the closet is connected heavily to the role social media and the internet play in teenage life at the time and now. In 2015, a Pew Research Report stated that about a quarter of teenagers used the internet "nearly constantly," with the growing role of smartphones in daily life. About three quarters of teenagers at the time had access to a smartphone, and 91% of teenagers reported going online at least daily. There were many social media platforms available to teens in 2015, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Tumblr (Lenhart, 2015). Sander De Ridder and Sofie Van Bauwe published a study in 2015 exploring the reflections of youth on storytelling and "realness" on popular social media platforms. They reference earlier predictions on the potential

benefits of the internet for queer teenagers and demonstrate the role that social media plays in the lives of contemporary teenagers, establishing that it is essentially unimaginable for teenagers to maintain social and intimate lives without these platforms (Ridder 778). This access to constant interaction and erosion of a private sphere is invasive enough, without the added pressure of being a closeted adolescent through these expectations of being constantly willing to perform.

The primary tension throughout much of the novel is that all of Simon's choices are informed by the fact that he is being blackmailed. Simon expresses feelings of being observed too closely, by his parents and as it relates to social media in 2015 teenage life, but in addition to those issues, Simon is being literally watched and monitored by Martin with the looming threat of his personal emails being shown publicly. In this coming out narrative, rather than Simon having one single moment of bravery or clarity that allows him to be open about his identity, the closet becomes something that was taken away from him, a space of comfort and safety that he should have been allowed more time with. Privacy becomes something to yearn for, when faced with the ways in which it can be violated by screenshots and social media. The information spreads faster than a word-of-mouth rumor and comes with evidence rather than speculation. Simon is outed by Martin on "Creeksecrets," the school Tumblr page where he first connected with his anonymous digital pen pal. Martin submits a crude post offering sexual favors to only male classmates and signs it as Simon. Simon's younger sister informs him of the post, telling him she has reported it. The fact that the outing happens on social media is significant. First, that Simon is not even the first one aware that it has happened. He has to be told that he was outed in this way, crudely and abruptly, on a website where he can't be fully sure who has or has not seen it. The social media aspect to this outing leaves it both more public and more disconnected from Simon himself. With the way social media functions, as a somewhat constant presence in teenage

life, it is impossible to feel fully private. Simon knows that anyone could have seen that post. Even in his own home, even when he is nowhere near the school, he can still end up feeling like his secrets are on display. And fundamentally, they are—he was outed while on break, while in the presumed privacy of his own home.

When Simon and Martin speak again after the online outing, Martin tries to apologize, saying: “I just seriously didn’t think it would be such a big thing” (Albertalli 196). Simon responds: “‘You don’t get to say it’s not a big thing. This is a big fucking thing, okay? This was supposed to be—this is mine. I’m supposed to decide when and where and who knows and how I want to say it.’ Suddenly, my throat gets thick. ‘So, yeah, you took that from me’” (197). It is hard not to connect this moment in particular to Albertalli’s essay in 2020. She talks about how this was not how she wanted to come out, how it doesn’t feel empowering or even particularly safe to her. The details of the situations are obviously very different, but there is overlap in the desire to feel as though one has ownership over the public knowledge of one’s own identity.

As a coming out narrative, described by both Cover/Prosser and Padva, Simon’s story must end with a positive and optimistic spin, having found freedom and acceptance on the other side of the closet. Despite the pressures of feeling watched and the way social media encroached on his privacy, the conclusion of the novel attempts to make positive that public online space. Near the end of the book, once Simon has found out Blue’s real identity (classmate Bram Greenfield), the scene after they first get together is dedicated to the process of them changing their relationship statuses on Facebook, and the following interactions those posts get (Albertalli 277). Simon calls Bram and the two of them joke about posting dozens of selfies together. We begin with the voyeuristic nature of 2015 social media causing scrutiny and a lack of privacy for closeted teenagers, and end with an interesting public display. The comparison is further

demonstrated by the platforms used for the initial connection as well as the public outing being Tumblr, a social media known for more anonymity, and this public announcement being made on Facebook, which had the reputation for being much more public-facing. In the analysis of De Ridder and Van Bauwe's findings on the role of social media for teenagers, they pose the questions: "Are queer teens able to tell their own intimate stories in social media places equal to their heterosexual peers? Can queer teens go through the same teenage rituals, such as celebrating their first love on social media, as their heterosexual peers do?" (Ridder 790). At the end of Simon's coming out narrative, the answer appears to be yes. Once the safety of the closet is left behind, queer teenagers can engage in the public rituals on social media to the same extent as their peers, for better or worse.

Inside: Tenderness, Connection, & Love Letters in the Closet

While the larger concerns of the story are things that Simon has little to no agency in, this makes those moments of agency in his experience of the closet all the more important. I explore here the interiority of the experience of the closet, and the relationship between Simon's feelings of alienation and loneliness and the connection he finds from within the space of the closet. In this last section, I focus on the small moments of tenderness in the story and the way connections exist in the closet. The way Simon experiences connection and love within the closet serves as a kind of ideal fantasy when compared to the outing and the realities surrounding the external issues of the novel. The pressures and concerns of social media and the feelings of being constantly observed in teenage life result in intensely precious tenderness in those moments of privacy and individual connection that Simon does find. I argue that, in the interiority of Simon's feelings and his emails with Blue, the nostalgia for and fantasy of the closet as a space of safety and comfort is shown through the unique kind of connection that can be found only within it in

contrast to the lack of privacy found anywhere else. In particular, my argument is centered on the affect of Simon's feelings of alienation and the emails while he and Blue are still anonymous.

Simon is very concerned with feeling normal and being allowed privacy. Much of his struggle with the "whole coming out thing" is more about not wanting to be looked at or examined. He is frustrated by needing to come out at all, wanting to be allowed to consider himself and his identity without feeling on display. Part of this is seen with how he interacts with his parents; he finds himself defensive at any observation from them, feels like he is "coming out" every time he has a minute change in preference. He wants to feel normal. He wants being gay to not be a whole big thing. Slightly paradoxically, he also gets frustrated when it is not a big deal—as though all the anxiety and working up to it and worrying about it was not worth going through. He wants acknowledgement for how hard this is for him, which he only really gets from Blue, as someone who relates to the difficulties he is facing.

In considering what coming out would mean for him, Simon narrates that what people wouldn't understand about "this coming out thing" is that it is not necessarily about him being gay, explaining: "I know deep down that my family would be fine with it. We're not religious. My parents are Democrats. My dad likes to joke around, and it would definitely be awkward, but I guess I'm lucky. I know they're not going to disown me. And I'm sure some people in school would give me hell, but my friends would be fine" (Albertalli 55). There's a reluctance in Simon saying "I guess I'm lucky." He is acknowledging the privilege of familial support and acceptance from his friends, though the tone is frustrated by that, as if he does not feel lucky in the way he logically knows he is. He goes on: "But I'm tired of coming out. All I ever do is come out. I try not to change, but I keep changing, in all these tiny ways. I get a girlfriend. I have a beer. And every freaking time, I have to reintroduce myself to the universe all over again" (56). Simon is

looking at “coming out” in a broader sense—the idea that he must have a decisive, obvious sense of self, and that any deviance from that established identity is its own kind of announcement. His concern with “The Coming Out Thing” becomes, then, not just about queer identity but about any identity at all. With his particular relationship with his family and the norms of social media and public identity, he is coming of age in a time where there is always a voyeur to his self discovery.

There is also the constant uncertainty that Simon feels. He can *feel* like his parents will accept him, but there is always a level of doubt. The fact of the matter is that he does not know how they will react. He does not know if the little jokes his father has made over the years would amount to a sort of “real” homophobia. He does not fully trust that everything would be fine, because there is always the possibility that it won’t be. In Griffin’s *Feeling Normal*, he discusses the connection between the affective desire for normativity in gay and lesbian media and the associated feelings of freedom and belonging. As he puts it: “The desire for social legibility is a compelling one, which most sexual minorities—most people, even—understand as being necessary if one is to have a livable life” (Griffin 2). The desire to feel normal is understandable, as proximity to normalcy allows freedom from scrutiny and belonging with one’s immediate community. In Griffin’s argument, he considers how these stories dilute political ideology in favor of personal narratives of happiness. Unlike Galante, Griffin does not seek to either condemn the politics in these stories or argue for their progressiveness. Similarly, I am interested in exploring the affect relating to this desire for normalcy shown in this story without aiming to classify it as either radical or regressive.

The emails between Simon and Blue are of interest to me in that they are a reflection of a very real kind of communication that queer teenagers can engage in on the internet, serving as a

way to talk about the closet from within the closet, to other teenagers going through the same experience. While the internet is rarely wholly anonymous and teenagers growing up in the age of the internet are familiar with the dangers of sharing personal information with strangers, there are spaces where anonymity and safety exist, or at least feel reliable. The way Simon finds Blue is through his school specific Tumblr page, but for queer teenagers, there are options that they can seek out depending on their specific situations. These messages are often ephemeral and would be extremely difficult to meaningfully study, by virtue of their purpose. In Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*, one of the significant elements of her work is addressing the atypical sources one explores when researching in the queer community. The archive she compiles and showcases consist of a number of different kinds of ephemeral artifacts. As she explains it: "Trauma's archive incorporates personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals. The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value" (Cvetkovich 7). While her work is focused on this archive as it connects to larger cultural trauma, my focus is more on the function of this ephemerality for the experience of the closet. The real equivalents of these emails would be exceedingly difficult to find, but we do have the fictional emails to look at and analyze as a contemporary example of the ephemeral communication that the queer community engages in. I suggest the emails between Simon and Blue are kinds of artifacts of tenderness within the closet. They function very much like contemporary love letters, and the anonymity of them allows the boys to be more open about the issues they face. Because of the way the internet functions, they were able to meet within the space of the closet and find that connection while remaining closeted even from one another.

Following Simon being outed and then coming out to his family, he writes to Blue to vent about the situation. Blue replies: “Oh, Jacques, I’m so sorry. I can’t even begin to imagine what mysterious circumstances led to your being outed to the universe, but it doesn’t sound pleasant, and I know it’s not what you wanted. I wish I could fix it somehow” (Albertalli 170). This moment is a good summary of the way their connection works—the details of their situations are filtered out to maintain anonymity, and they end up connecting on the shared experience and empathy of the closet. Blue does not know why Simon was forced out to his family; he can just express that he understands and wishes it were different.

Early in the book, Simon explains how he and Blue connected, when Blue wrote a post on the Tumblr page for anonymous confessions for their school. Simon says that Blue’s post spoke to him, narrating: “I guess it was about loneliness. And it’s funny, because I don’t really think of myself as lonely. But there was something so familiar about the way Blue described the feeling” (18). The way Simon describes resonating with Blue’s post is significant. He does not just feel as though he relates; specifically, he finds the way Blue describes the feeling “familiar.” Simon is experiencing a connection with the post because he recognizes himself in the feelings, and because he can recognize the common ground of queerness and the closet. Simon talks about how Blue said he “feels so hidden and so exposed about the fact that he’s gay” and says: “I felt strangely panicked and self-conscious when I read that part, but there was also this quiet thrum of excitement” (18). Describing the thrum of excitement as “quiet” evokes the nature of the closet, describing the experience of secrecy through sound. He is both self-conscious and excited, in finding recognition through a stranger in the same space as him, and his reaction is akin to the camaraderie of sharing a big secret. This allows Simon to experience the complexities of his feelings in a safe environment, developing a connection with someone who can understand

precisely what he is going through. In some ways, the online space here serves as an idealized version of the physical space of the closet in the reminder that one is not alone in it.

When Simon is reflecting on the “Martin situation,” he says that one of the worst aspects of it is that he can’t talk about it with Blue, and narrates: “I’m not used to keeping secrets from him” (17). Simon clarifies that there is a lot that he and Blue don’t tell each other, explaining: “We talk about all the big things, but avoid the identifying details—the names of our friends and anything too specific about school. All the stuff I used to think defined me. But I don’t think of those things as secrets. It’s more like an unspoken agreement” (17). Simon is drawing a distinction between identifying details—what he “used to think” defined him—and actual secrets. Despite knowing very little basic information about Blue, the connection between them as it exists in the space of the closet is meaningful to Simon in a way that makes him redefine what counts as a secret.

When Simon and Blue talk about coming out, they discuss it with a level of implicit understanding of the inherent complexity and difficulty of it, even in the best of circumstances. Compared with the way Martin tried to tell Simon that it would not be a big deal, Simon and Blue share the understanding that it always is. In discussing the possibility of coming out, Blue writes to Simon: “And the thing is, I’m actually considering doubling down on the awkward factor and turning this mess into a coming out thing. Maybe I should capitalize that: Coming Out Thing. Am I crazy?” (104). In the next email, Blue continues to talk about his hesitance with following through with coming out to his family, saying: “Like, you read about these gay kids with really churchy Catholic parents, and the parents end up doing PFLAG and Pride Parades and everything. And then you hear about parents who are totally fine with homosexuality, but can’t handle it when their own kid comes out. You just never know” (106). He is summarizing

here one of the reasons coming out remains difficult, regardless of apparent familial support: they just never know. Simon has repeated similar points over the course of the novel that he believes that his family and friends will be supportive, but there is always that degree of uncertainty. He cannot be sure how his parents will react until he tells them. Until then, there will always be the possibility that they will reject him. The closet is safer in this way because it allows him to avoid that possibility. He can remain in the uncertainty in order to delay the worst case scenario. Until then, he has his connection with Blue, where they are both able to be more honest with the comfort of solidarity and anonymity. The connection between Blue and Simon is particularly indicative of the connections queer adolescents can find in the closet, as they only share that space with one another. The internet and their emails serve as the metaphorical space of the closet—as though they are sharing the space while they lament about the experience of hiding one’s identity and worry about what coming out will mean for them.

Chapter Three:

Identity Politics and the Closet:

Tim Drake, Queer Stories, & Rainbow Capitalism

Following conversations like those surrounding the Own Voices movement and the increased scrutiny on queer adolescent literature, perhaps a natural consequence of the concerns authors of these works faced presented itself in the demands of marketability. I examine here the effects of queer marketing and “rainbow capitalism” on queer storytelling, through analyzing queer representation in mainstream media, particularly as it connects to texts that aim to fulfill the demands of rainbow capitalism. Similar to Griffin’s aim in *Feeling Normal*, where he focuses on the affective value of queer media that might be clumsy or simplistic in its political messaging, I explore the tenderness and care underlying the somewhat artificial affect in queer stories influenced by rainbow capitalism. To that end, this chapter is about queer representation in contemporary DC comics, focusing on the development of newly queer character Tim Drake and his recent comic run, *Tim Drake: Robin*.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed writes the chapter “Unhappy Queers” on the literature featuring queer characters overcoming censorship through unhappy endings and the value of these stories as a political gift. In contemporary queer fiction, I notice an interesting trend on the other side of the spectrum of queer happiness and unhappiness in rainbow capitalism. Like Ahmed notes, these stories can be published, only with the caveat of an uncomplicated *happy* ending. Derritt Mason outlines the confining nature of the parameters for “happy queers” in *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture*, listing out the requirements for positive queer representation he notes from critics: “critics express several distinct concerns about queer YA, including its affective contours (the dominant affects should

be hope and happiness), the visibility of its protagonists (young queer characters should be ‘out and proud’) and the temporal trajectory of their narrative growth (by novel’s end, any problems surrounding sexual self-identification should be resolved)” (Mason 6). While Mason’s strict list demonstrates the limitations of queer stories aiming to fit this narrow ideal, I am interested in exploring the works published with these requirements, recognizing a value in them in much the same way as the value Ahmed discusses with unhappy endings.

Within the confines of rainbow capitalism, the closet is not a welcome aspect of the narrative. The aim is to tell stories of unapologetic pride and queer joy, fulfilling the demands that queer adolescents receive only positive affect from the representation. In order to explore the effects of the limitations of rainbow capitalism, I analyze contemporary DC Comics with the coming out story and individual run of established character Tim Drake. Within the marketing of rainbow capitalism, the emphasis is placed away from stories that give space to negative queer affect and the closet does not fit into the requirements. Rainbow capitalism asks that stories focus only on pride and love, and I connect how Tim Drake’s history as a character meant to have broad appeal functions in this realm. The stories affected by rainbow capitalism mirror early trends of queer stories only being allowed with unhappy endings, demonstrating what the alternate side of those limitations looks like in contemporary queer fiction, influenced by market demands and progressive politics in capitalism.

Queerness in Comics

I would like to begin this chapter by discussing the history of queerness in comics, in order to establish the current climate. The first Pride collection that DC released was in June of 2021, and they have released a new collection every June since. Along with the Pride collections, DC releases special Pride covers for a number of different comic runs during the month of June.

These Pride covers tend to be a combination of highlighting their queer characters and releasing artwork of their most famous characters with pride flags. In the foreword of the first collection, comic book author Marc Andreyko writes an inspiring outline of the way that things have changed for queer characters and readers. He begins with an acknowledgment of the historical treatment of queer characters, saying: “LGBTQ+ characters were once used for shock value as villains, prancing butts of jokes, or martyred souls felled by AIDS or bashing of some other awful untimely end” (Andreyko 4). This history Andreyko refers to is in part due to the Comics Code Authority, which was a set of rules censoring comics that started in the 1950s and came with a stamp that would be displayed prominently on the covers of comics for sale. The code was privately funded and impacted a variety of controversial subject matters in comics, including sexuality. The code changed in 1989 with major industry changes in distribution. In 2011, the seal stopped appearing on comic covers entirely (Nyberg).

In addition to the treatment of queer characters changing due to the Comics Code Authority disappearing, the political climate and the rhetoric around queer representation has impacted the contents of comics. The 2010s and 2020s saw a significant amount of progress for queer rights along with discourse around queer representation in fiction, and DC Comics appears to be following the times, as comic books, as an industry, have always been heavily influenced by market trends. Andreyko lists out several of the characters that appear in the 2021 collection, describing the ways they are important representation for queer readers. He goes on: “With every new queer face in the public eye (and in the comic books of DC), someone, somewhere, sees themselves for the first time. Someone feels less alone. Someone feels hope” (4). He concludes the foreword with: “These characters and their, yes, pride in who they are can reach out from the four-color pages and maybe, just maybe, help a scared queer kid see that they are not alone. That

they are valued. That they matter. That they are loved. And that is the most glorious thing of all” (4). This optimistic tone is clearly what the collection was created in mind with, coinciding with the rise of rainbow capitalism and the potential for drawing in new demographics. The term “pride” is very central to the original purpose of these collections.

The 2021 collection includes stories for characters like Kate Kane, Batwoman, a lesbian character, couples like Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy, long-standing characters like Alan Scott, the first Green Lantern, more recently confirmed as gay after a history of queer-coding, and much newer characters like Nia Nal, Dreamer, a trans character who first appeared in the CW’s *Supergirl* and was making her comics debut in the Pride collection. The final story in the 2021 collection is “Love Life,” where there is a villain attack at a pride parade where many of DC’s queer heroes happen to be marching. The queer heroes quickly triumph, and the story ends with the narration: “This is what we’re fighting for, the right to be out here in the world, visible and unafraid. There are going to be bad days, and we’ve lead the fight for everyone that follows us—we’re also following the people who fought for us, and we owe it to them to make the most of days like this. We’re not just sharing this fight. We’re showing our pride” (Wheeler 77). DC has not limited their Pride releases to the collections. They have expanded their publications over the years, including historical collections and books of artwork. In 2023, they released *The DC Book of Pride: A Celebration of DC’s LGBTQIA+ Characters*, which contained small summaries of many but not all of DC’s queer characters. Jadzia Axelrod, in the introduction of the book, states: “While researching this book, I was staggered by the number of LGBTQIA+ characters in the DC universe. There are hundreds. I didn’t expect that” (Axelrod 8).

Comics, as a genre, are influenced by marketing and advertising in ways that traditional literature is not. The history of censorship and the space in comics being sold to advertisers

impact the stories that get published, offering a different angle to the role of contemporary concerns in examining queer literature and media. In the next section, I give an overview of queer marketing in capitalism and the historical context that frames the current conversation about rainbow capitalism.

Gay Marketing and Rainbow Capitalism

The term “rainbow capitalism” has grown in popularity over the last few years. “Rainbow washing” and “pink capitalism” refer to the same phenomenon, which is the tendency of companies and corporations to indicate support for queer consumers in order to profit off of them as a market. Rainbow washing and pink capitalism evolved from the term “pinkwashing,” which is used to describe the way governments will support LGBTQ+ human rights to distract from other issues. In particular, pinkwashing is the term to describe the way Israel uses the appearance of queer acceptance to pull focus from struggles with Palestinian citizens, as Corinne E. Blackmer writes about in “Pinkwashing” in *Israel Studies*. Pinkwashing itself, as a term, evolved from *whitewashing*, more generally meaning to deliberately conceal unpleasant elements of a situation. In recent years, “rainbow capitalism” has been the most common term, so it is the term I will use to discuss the concept. In this section, I give an overview of the history of gay marketing in order to establish the field and offer the context for the contemporary moment in queer history for this chapter.

Betsy Reed and Amy Gluckman edited a collection of queer economics essays in 1997, titled *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*. They open with their essay, “The Gay Marketing Moment,” originally published in *Dollars & Sense* in 1993, in which they discuss how increased visibility with the “gay moment,” which falsely presented the queer community as an exceptionally prosperous minority, coincided with the rise of political

attacks of queer rights driven by the right-wing reaction to that visibility. They explore the various implications and consequences for the queer community's increased recognition as a marketing demographic. As they put it: "To the extent that gay advances hinge on financial interests, however, they are precarious. What if a future backlash depletes gay incomes, or the right wing proves the greater economic force?" (Reed and Gluckman 5). They go on to discuss how gay men and lesbians have a complex relationship with the economy, and how they were at that time witnessing a shift in the dynamic, with improvements as well as potential drawbacks. They explore as well how the market divides the queer community, offering recognition to the more privileged segments while alienating others. As a consequence of this tendency, they refer to the change in rhetoric in gay politics that follows this divide, with a growing amount of conservative gay writers calling to separate gay activism in order to prioritize the needs of the privileged members of the community at the expense of the less visible. They write: "Queer Nation's slogan, 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it,' says to straight people, 'We will stretch your concept of morality, of family, of politics.' But many who have reaped the benefits of corporate acceptance seem to be saying, 'We're here, we're just like you, don't worry about it'" (8). This element of queer economics is significant to what I explore here in contemporary rainbow capitalism and the impact it has on queer adolescent literature. Rainbow capitalism and contemporary popular media are influenced by the desire for assimilation—the affective value of "feeling normal," as Griffin explores.

In another chapter of Reed and Gluckman's collection, Dan Baker writes "A History in Ads: The Growth of the Gay and Lesbian Market," in which he outlines the development of advertising in the queer market. He starts with the ads that Absolut vodka ran in *The Advocate* in 1979, when Michel Roux chose the gay community as a niche target demographic to advertise

to, in the hopes that the community would respond to a product taking them seriously. Absolut vodka saw immense success with this gamble, which caused other companies to take note. Though, as Baker outlines the way this played out with other companies, not all advertisers were as overt as Absolut in their marketing. As an example, Baker states: “Some advertisers with an apparent interest in gay consumers are even reluctant to be identified as marketing to the gay community. The Gap, for example, refuses to discuss its marketing strategies, even though it appears to target some of its ads to gays” (Baker 15). In another example, Baker discusses MCI as the first of the big three long-distance phone companies at the time to target the gay community with a mail advertisement: “Mailed in November 1993, the advertising flyer promoted MCI’s ‘Friends and Family’ service with the slogan, ‘When your friends are family.’ The mailer was sent to gay and lesbian direct-mail lists, but the piece itself was terribly closeted, never once mentioning the ‘g’ word or the ‘l’ word: the ‘Marketing that Dare Not Speak Its Name’” (15). This phenomenon of marketing being closeted itself in targeting queer consumers demonstrates some of the issues with attempting to maintain broad appeal.

With evolving terms and phrases, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact origin. An early occasion of “rainbow capitalism” being used in academics is in the collection *Gay Latino Studies: A Reader*, published in 2011, which some have cited as the coining of the phrase. Horacio N. Roque Ramirez wrote “Gay Latino Cultural Citizenship: Predicaments of Identity and Visibility in San Francisco in the 1990s,” in which he discusses the intersecting concerns of queer Latinos, through questions of identity and corporate exploitation. He refers to queer Latino theorist Juana Maria Rodriguez’s question of “What is identity for?” and writes: “Her work asks us to consider political and historical moments when narratives of identity are profoundly a necessity, and others when the exact same terms may become overused, reductionist, and

essentialist representations of complex social life” (Ramirez 175). This question of what identity is for and Ramirez’s subsequent analysis offers an opening for what I explore with queer representation in contemporary comics. Certain elements of queer marketing that may have been groundbreaking at a different political moment become shallow and trite in their moment, and queer audiences and consumers have to consider what purposes these narratives serve.

One of the examples Ramirez focuses on in his essay is the Gay Pride celebration in San Francisco in the year 2000. Ramirez writes: “in advanced capitalism, as *Pride 00* displayed most colorfully, identity can easily turn into a commodity, a good to be sold and consumed in the marketplace” (188). He points out the way that a reliance on corporate endorsements in Pride celebrations alters the meaning and environment of the event, shifting from the historical protest to a “less politically charged and corporate-friendly parade and festival” (192). He goes on to discuss the criticisms of such a change: “The high visibility of “rainbow capitalism” (reducible to the hegemonic rainbow flag) and its overly simplified claims for inclusion have brought conflict to local and national organizing efforts” (192). He explains that these critics are not interested in the strong presence of corporations in queer politics and have a stronger investment in grassroots efforts at a local level, rather than national or even global Pride marketing strategies. In Ramon A. Gutierrez’s response to Ramirez’s essay, he refers back to a protest phrase from the 1970s: “Two, four, six, eight, smash the family, smash the state! Two, four, six, eight, hell no, we won’t assimilate!” (Gutierrez 201). Then he writes: “In 2007 the organized remnants of the movement wanted as their principal goal state-sanctioned marriage and the full legal rights of spouses to hold and inherit property, to birth and to adopt, to acknowledge such unions as families—in short, to be normalized” (201). One of the complications with visibility and progress being so interconnected with marketing and advertising is that the community begins to adopt the

concerns and priorities of advertisers. Acceptance and normalization become the benchmark for progress, rather than the breaking down of exclusionary structures.

The connection between the politics of the moment to the visibility of the queer community in marketing, as well as the range of attitudes of advertisers that Baker describes, bring us to the issue of “rainbow capitalism” that has dominated the conversation of queer issues in recent years, especially during the month of June. Some common examples of what people reference when talking about rainbow capitalism in contemporary conversation are companies like Walmart and Target, and their annual release of “pride collections” in June in order to capitalize on the growing popularity of Pride Month. There are many critiques of rainbow capitalism, from surface level issues of taste and aesthetic, to in depth arguments about whether this kind of support is ultimately more harmful than constructive. On the other hand, people will also defend rainbow capitalism, claiming any support as good support, or arguing that the phenomenon is an indication of larger social change.

When it comes to the contemporary discussion around rainbow capitalism, the rhetoric largely varies between critiques of a lack of sincerity versus the comfort of any support at all. In June of 2021, an article called “Your Rainbow Logo Doesn’t Make You An Ally” came out in the *Harvard Business Review*, written by Lily Zheng. She opens with: “If I were to predict a word of the year for 2021, it’d be ‘performative’” (Zheng). She argues that the kind of corporate support that might have felt revolutionary even a few years ago is no longer enough, and that queer people are generally expecting more from companies that use Pride Month as a marketing opportunity. She lists out possible ways companies can prove the sincerity in their support, like working with queer creators and advocating for queer rights outside of June, and ends the piece by saying: “The bar for approval from LGBTQ+ communities in 2021 has risen, and rainbow

marketing just doesn't cut it anymore. Consider retiring the rainbow logo next year. Let your actions between now and Pride 2022 demonstrate your commitment to the LGBTQ+ community, instead" (Zheng). In June of 2023, Tess Bonn wrote "These Companies Say They Support Pride — But Do They Really?" for Katie Couric Media. Bonn writes: "While the move is clearly to show their support for the queer community, is simply waving a Pride flag from the top of your corporation's metaphorical tower enough? Is there actual effort behind those actions?" As she continues, she discusses how the issue lies primarily in the potential lack of authenticity behind that support. She talks about companies that participate in rainbow capitalism, making money off of queer consumers, and then donate to anti-gay politicians and fund damaging legislation. On the other side of the argument, Brian Broome wrote an opinion piece in *The Washington Post*, titled "This Year, I'm Embracing 'Rainbow Capitalism,'" in which he argues that any representation and any support can be meaningful to queer people who grew up without seeing themselves represented anywhere. He says: "Yes, it's capitalism at work, and it's soulless. But it's there. I remember what it was like to feel totally alone. Some other kid might see it and realize they aren't alone" (Broome). While Zheng and Bonn focus on the political side of rainbow capitalism, Broome is arguing for the affective value of the phenomenon, much like the affect of popular media for comfort and validation.

With all of this in mind, I hope to take a nuanced look at the impact of the moment of rainbow capitalism on queer storylines in popular media. I will analyze recent examples of queer representation in DC comics, as comics represent a unique overlap between marketing and literature. In the next sections of this chapter, I will explore this balance with DC's Tim Drake as an example of how these issues manifest in contemporary queer stories, examining first Tim's traditional coming out story and connecting how it relates to the strategies of queer advertising

and then following that with analyzing the way tenderness and nostalgia for the closet is cloaked in metaphor in literature affected by rainbow capitalism.

Tim Drake & DC's Coming Out Story

When dealing with a large and ever-expanding world like comics, it is important to clearly define the guidelines of what we are discussing. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus primarily on one specific character, Tim Drake, the third¹¹ character to hold the Robin mantle in the DC Comics' universe. Tim Drake has existed for over thirty years, through several different reboots of the DC canon and he became Robin during DC's Modern Age¹². It is difficult to summarize a character with a varied history and select specific elements that make that character who they are, as comic characters are inherently malleable. The nature of comics as a medium is that characters will exist for a long time, in many different iterations, with many different authors driving their stories and external factors influencing their marketing. With this in mind, it is impossible to address every element of a long-standing character's history, and one must establish specific boundaries to work with. I offer here a brief overview of the history of the character and the key elements of his role in the DC universe, in order to contextualize his coming out story.

To give more detail to Tim's timeline in particular, Tim Drake's first comic appearance was in *Batman* issue #436 in 1989, shortly after the death of the second Robin, Jason Todd. Tim

¹¹ Timeline of Robins: Dick Grayson, the original character to hold the mantle, was Robin from the first appearance in 1940 to 1984, after which he aged out of the role and became Nightwing. Jason Todd, from 1984 to 1988, when he was killed by the Joker. Tim Drake, from 1989 to 2009, though he was reinstated as Robin in the soft reboot of Infinite Frontier. Damian Wayne, from 2009 to present. Other characters have held the mantle in limited ways, but these four characters are typically viewed as the main ones.

¹² DC sorts their comics into specific eras: The Golden Age from 1938 to 1956, The Silver Age from 1956 to 1971, The Bronze Age from 1971 to 1986, The Modern Age from 1986 to 2011, The New 52 from 2011 to 2016, and Rebirth from 2016 to present. These different eras represent a number of changes to the genre, including evolving art styles, plotlines, marketing, etc. I will only be looking at contemporary comics (Rebirth era) and one issue from the Modern Age.

Drake's first appearance in the Robin costume was a few issues later, in *Batman* #442. In this initial appearance, he was wearing Jason Todd's version of the Robin costume. Tim got his own Robin costume in *Batman* #457 and he got his own solo comic run, *Robin*, that ran from 1993 to 2009. He was the sole Robin until Damian Wayne was given the mantle in 2009. From 2009 to 2011, Tim took up the mantle "Red Robin," until the New 52 reboot. From Rebirth to the present canon DC world, certain characters have been allowed to share hero names¹³.

When it comes to Tim Drake and his role in the DC canon, the explicitly queer elements of his character exist in his recent appearances and individual run. In my analysis, I focus on his appearance in *Batman: Urban Legends* in 2021 and elements of his ten-issue run from September 2022 to June 2023, *Tim Drake: Robin*, as well as a small excerpt of his 90s *Robin* run. On DC Universe Infinite, they have "Get to Know" pages for individual characters, where they give a brief description of the character and collect the important comics they appear in. On Tim's, they choose to describe him as a tech whiz and master detective, as his defining characteristics. Tim's intelligence is central to his introduction. He becomes Robin through figuring out Batman and Robin's true identities and following them for years, ultimately showing up after Jason Todd's death because he has seen Batman/Bruce Wayne get more violent in his grief and feels that Batman needs to have a Robin in order to function. Tim originally is trying to convince Dick Grayson to take the mantle again. When Dick Grayson refuses, as he has grown past the role of sidekick, Tim makes the choice to become Robin. Tim Drake's active decision to become Robin is one of traits that sets him apart from other characters who have held the mantle, along with his comparatively stable home life, at least in the beginning. At his introduction, Tim

¹³ Namely, in the "Batfamily" (the term, often used by Tim, to refer to the larger group of vigilantes working with Batman) the *Batgirls* comic run from 2022 to 2023 had Barbara Gordon, Stephanie Brown, and Cassandra Cain all sharing the Batgirl mantle, and Tim Drake and Damian Wayne have shared the Robin mantle.

is meant to be a relatively normal kid, an only child with both parents. Compared to his predecessors, Tim was meant to be a more relatable figure, possibly more marketable to the teenage comic book readers in the 90s. He had a civilian life in a way that his predecessors did not, being orphans taken in by Bruce Wayne and becoming vigilantes through that circumstance. His original role as a character with wide appeal is important in looking at how his queer storylines played out in the recent comics, as the choice to use him in particular for this direction directly connects with his historical function as a character.

In June of 2021, the fourth issue of *Batman: Urban Legends* came out. One of the storylines within the comic was the first installment of “Sum of Our Parts,” a three-part story that focused on Tim Drake. This arc is the story of Tim Drake coming to terms with his sexuality and coming out as queer. On a meta level, the story was DC Comics’ confirmation of the character as bisexual representation. I aim to draw a parallel between the story of the character and DC’s goals on a meta level, considering the marketing strategies at play. Tim’s origin as a character demonstrates this same tendency, as his insistence that Batman needs a Robin is both an argument the character is making, as well as a metatextual argument about the need for the more upbeat sidekick to balance out the brooding hero. Tim’s coming out story is both the character coming to terms with his sexuality within the context of the comics, as well as DC “coming out” and testing the waters for the reception of a more marketable queer character in the climate of rainbow capitalism. Tim Drake’s coming out story coincides with trends in queer media and is reflective of the concerns and rhetoric of that moment. In Lauren O’Connor’s book, *Robin and the Making of American Adolescence*, she writes that she is “interested in precisely the way Robin has swung alongside incredibly intricate social and political trends that have, collectively, ‘made’ adolescence throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century” (O’Connor 2). As

compared to the earlier examples in this dissertation, Tim's story has more of a focus on internal issues, treating the closet as a space of self-discovery and coming out as a move towards understanding one's own identity, and this functions in part as a transition into queer stories published with rainbow capitalist sensibilities.

The particular comic run that this story is situated in, *Batman: Urban Legends*, ran from March of 2021 to January of 2023 and had a total of 23 issues. The run was characterized as being longer than other comics, with multiple running storylines in each issue. The plots were focused primarily on Batman and the other heroes and villains of Gotham, with different writers and artists working on it simultaneously. The run tended to have more character-focused plots, rather than the long-running comic stories that are often central to the main comic runs, like *Action Comics* and *Detective Comics*, or the comics connected to the most popular characters like *Batman* or *Superman*. The *Urban Legends* stories were specific, self-contained, and not necessarily meant to impact the comic continuity at large. The choice to have the coming out story in *Urban Legends* is important in that it allowed DC to keep Tim's queerness from bleeding into the main storylines. Comics are an interconnected genre, and keeping Tim's coming out story in a self-contained run allowed for the possibility to course correct if public reception was not what DC hoped. I argue that the coming out story mirrors the advertising tendencies that Dan Baker describes, wherein there is an external closet placed on the story in a metatextual sense, demonstrated through the placement in larger canon as well as the thematic use of omissions to evoke queer subtext.

Like many of the stories in *Urban Legends*, the plot of "Sum of Our Parts" was more of a vehicle for character development and internal reflection than an important event in the comics' timeline. "Sum of Our Parts" follows Tim Drake primarily working alone, with occasional

conversations with other characters as he investigates. Tim is reconnecting with an old friend, when there is an attack and his friend is kidnapped. Tim finds out over the course of his search that his friend was involved in a cult in town, and that cult is behind the abductions Tim has been looking into. The three-part arc culminates in Tim rescuing his friend from the cult just in time and reveals that their original dinner meetup had been intended as a date. The story is a familiar pattern in superhero narratives, and the plot itself serves as a way of introducing Tim's reflection on his own identity and his introduction as a queer character. Throughout the arc, there is an emphasis on *want*. The question is repeated several times, by other characters as well as Tim himself: What does Tim *want*? This theme of want, as well as the recurring theme of Tim's identity as it connects to clothing, costumes, and masks, serves to craft a coming out narrative that has more focus on internal identity than external shame or fear. The use of the question of *want* and the avoidance of the answer effectively causes the coming out story to be about Tim coming out to himself, or in a metatextual sense, coming out to the audience as an introduction to the era of rainbow capitalism in comics.

In "Sum of Our Parts: Chapter 1," the story arc begins with Tim Drake front and center in a large panel, as he stands in his Robin costume overlooking the city of Gotham with a large clockface behind him. In the first few pages, he is talking to Oracle, Barbara Gordon, about a new case involving teenagers getting kidnapped. The discussion becomes more personal, and when Tim attempts to cut off the conversation, Barbara says: "You need to slow down and take a look at yourself...[Y]ou won't figure out what is for you if you're busy trying to solve everyone and everything else. Because you're scared. You're so incredibly scared that if you use that big, brilliant brain of yours to analyze yourself, what you find is going to change you" (Fitzmartin 39). Like in the first panel of the story, Tim is in front of the clockface. This time, he's in profile,

surrounded by fog. His eyes are obscured by the Robin mask, but his posture suggests stress or fatigue, with one hand on the back of his neck. This quote and this moment are indicative of the themes of the arc, as well as the way Tim's coming out story works. As Barbara says, Tim is keeping himself busy to avoid the self-reflection required for coming to terms with his queer identity. Tim doesn't respond to Barbara, instead saying that he is going to meet an old friend before hanging up on her.



Figure 1 Tim Drake speaking to Barbara Gordon. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, "Sum of Our Parts: Chapter 1," Batman: Urban Legends #4.

On the next page, Tim is out of his Robin costume. He is readjusting his clothes and thinking: “Why am I doing this? I should be looking into the Chaos Monster. And we definitely need to update the clothes in the micro caves. These feel like Dick’s old clothes. How can one man have shoulders the length of the Grand Canyon?” (40). Dick is referring to Dick Grayson, Tim’s adoptive older brother and the first character to hold the Robin mantle. The ill-fitting hand-me-down civilian clothes are representative of how Tim is struggling with his identity. He is at a restaurant waiting for the old friend he’d referred to before. In his narration, he is thinking to himself: “Why am I so nervous? It’s fine, Tim. You haven’t seen him in a while, but he’s still the same guy. / Is Oracle right? Am I scared to—” (40). In the panels with this narration, we see him from behind. He is no longer wearing the mask, but his face is still hidden as he searches the restaurant and worries. His thought gets cut off by the arrival of his friend, who is revealed to be Bernard Dowd¹⁴, a pre-existing character from Tim’s previous solo Robin run in the nineties and two-thousands. In Tim’s narration, as he greets Bernard, he thinks to himself: “It feels like it’s been years, but he still looks... He looks...” (41). Twice in a row here, Tim’s thoughts are left incomplete. He does not say what he might be scared to do, and he does not explain how Bernard looks or how he feels about it. These empty spaces are the indication of the closet, the secrecy that Tim is keeping from the audience as well as himself. Combined with his ill-fitting clothes, Tim is struggling more with his personal identity, and his role as Robin is functioning as the closet.

Bernard greets Tim, and the two hug under the stringed lights of the restaurant, and Tim suggests they go and sit down. The framing and the interaction itself immediately have a

¹⁴ There is a footnote, indicating that the last time we saw Bernard was in *Robin*, Vol. 2, issue #140, which was published in 2005. Bernard’s history sets him apart from some of the other queer love interests, who were created with that express purpose in mind.

romantic undertone to it. After the hug, Bernard puts an arm over Tim’s shoulder and jokes: “But just to be clear—we’re not splitting the bill, Tim *Wayne*” (41). The joke is meant in part as a reference to Tim’s access to wealth as Bruce Wayne’s adopted son, but it is also another romantic cue. The nighttime setting, the restaurant balcony, and the stringed lights are all meant to signal that there is a romantic context to this interaction. Additionally, the two are immediately physically affectionate, with the hug greeting getting its own panel, suggesting a lingering moment, and Bernard continuing the physical contact with the arm over Tim’s shoulder.



Figure 2 Tim Drake and Bernard Dowd at the restaurant. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, “Sum of Our Parts: Chapter 1,” Batman: Urban Legends #4.

As they’re catching up, Tim says that he’s not sure what he wants to do. Bernard comments that this is a change from the way Tim used to be, and Tim says: “I don’t know. It’s like... my programming’s corrupted. Has been for a while, I think. And I haven’t been able to figure out how to fix it... / But what about you, Bernard? What do you want?” (42). Once again, Tim is focusing on the concept of “want,” directing the question to Bernard this time as both a method of deflection and possibly to reconsider the question for himself. Additionally, the way

Tim talks about his understanding of himself, as “programming,” is a running theme with his character. As he struggles to truly reflect on his identity, he uses language of computers as a way to describe feeling wrong or different. Their dinner gets interrupted by the apparent villain of the arc, and Tim attempts to jump in, but is quickly rendered unconscious. As he’s coming to again, he thinks: “Systems check. Offline. Come on. Come on. Reboot. Gotta get up. Gotta stop...”

(44). Once again, Tim is using the language of technology and computers in his understanding of himself. As he gets up, the police officer informs him that Bernard has been kidnapped. This sets up Bernard in a classic role of hero comics as the damsel in distress, a common trope for the love interest. At this point in the publication of the story arc, it was still unconfirmed that Tim was bisexual, as that was going to be a plot reveal in the third installment. This first chapter of the arc serves to give the clues towards that reveal, as well as establish the struggles Tim is experiencing with his identity. In a narrative sense, the secrecy is meant to build tension and encourage questions for the audience to consider. The omissions in the narration and the romantic cues characterizing Bernard’s role both suggest potential queerness without stating it outright, much like historical queer coding and subtext. With the history of the Comics Code Authority, these storytelling moments would be familiar to comic fans aware of the censorship of queer themes. Tim’s coming out story functions here as a point between the age of comics where queer themes had to be obfuscated or marketed exclusively to adult readers and the pride marketing that followed.

Tim’s avoidance of stating his desires outright continues in the next segment of the story, in *Batman: Urban Legends #5*. First, working with his ex-girlfriend, Stephanie Brown, she attempts to reach out to him and accuses him of bury his feelings. When he brushes her off, she calls after him: “But you’ve got to tell me—what do you want, Tim?” (Fitzmartin 36). Here,

there is another repetition of the concept of “want.” Tim continues to avoid the questions, both in his interactions with characters and in his own narration, thus continuing to be closeted from the audience. Following this, another close friend of him asks about who Bernard is to him, and Tim replies: “He’s a... friend. He’s in trouble” (36). The ellipses before he calls Bernard a friend is telling. Tim has been avoiding stating directly, out loud or in his head, what exactly Bernard means to him. He was nervous at the dinner, and he hesitates calling Bernard a friend, giving the implication that the word is not quite accurate.

The hints at queerness leading up to the reveal continue when Tim’s investigation brings him to Bernard’s parents’ house. In his narration, he explains: “Bernard’s parents never liked me. Couldn’t figure out why. They always wanted everything just so. Perfectly placed. And Bernard... Bernard never quite measures up to their standards” (37). The first panel in this narration shows a dark and imposing house. The next shows us the interior, with the police commissioner speaking to Bernard’s parents in a well-decorated living room. This description of Bernard’s relationship with his parents offers another cue suggesting queerness. Like Tim describing how his “programming” feels off, Bernard similarly doesn’t fit right in his parents’ house, where everything is “perfectly placed.” Additionally, Bernard’s parents never liked Tim, as though they could pick up on an aspect to their relationship that Tim himself was unaware of. These moments show the way Bernard and Tim are paralleling one another, in how they are both searching for answers to their questions about their own identities.

His investigation leads into what is possibly the most significant moment before Tim’s coming out in the last chapter of the arc. Tim is on the rooftop, reflecting on the case and his identity. The two-page internal monologue begins with a small panel with only his silhouette, moving into that larger background frame of him overlooking the city in the Robin costume. He

narrates: “What am I doing? Everyone keeps asking me that. I came here to help these kids. To find them... To find Bernard” (42). He goes on to question to himself why he went in alone, without asking an ally for help. Then he thinks: “The thing is—what scares me the most—” (42), and cuts off once again. He continues: “I’m always Robin. Ever since Batman gave me the cowl, I... That’s who I see myself to be. That’s who I’ve been for all the important moments of my life. But in that room...” (42) As he goes on, he boils it down to one real question: “Who am I if I’m not a Robin?” (42) As he is standing there, the edges of his cape become less clear and he thinks: “I need to figure out... What it is I want” (42). The next panel has him realizing someone else is on the roof, and getting ready to turn around to fight. In that panel, the mask begins fading off of his face. As the Robin costume disappears, Tim narrates: “No matter my questions, no matter if I’m trying to figure out who I am in this world, I’m still Tim Drake. I fight the dragons. I win the war. I save people. I’m damn good at it” (43).

The way Tim is visually depicted across these panels is very telling, with regard to the Robin costume. As described and shown in the figures below, Tim starts out as being depicted wearing the Robin costume. Eventually, the costume fades off of him, and it is revealed that he has been in his civilian clothes dressed as Tim Drake this entire time. The costume was in his imagination, as he was sorting through his thoughts. As he puts it, Robin is who he sees himself to be. The costume here is representative of the closet, in that it is a space concealing his real identity. Much like how the closet can function in adolescence, the costume and Tim’s imagining of it is a way to feel more protected in his current circumstance. This sequence in particular demonstrates the way the costume represents safety to Tim. He is forced to enter this situation as Tim Drake, in order to infiltrate the villains, and imagining himself in the costume gives him back a sense of control over his identity.



Figure 3 Tim Drake in the Robin suit on a rooftop. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, "Sum of Our Parts: Chapter 2," Batman: Urban Legends #5.



Figure 4 The Robin suit fading off of Tim Drake. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, "Sum of Our Parts: Chapter 2," *Batman: Urban Legends* #5.

The third and final chapter of the arc has Tim as Robin infiltrating the cult and rescuing Bernard and all the others that were kidnapped. Bernard asks if “Robin” can do him a favor if he doesn’t make it out. Tim begins to reassure him that he will make it out, but Bernard cuts him off to say: “Please. Tell Tim Drake... He helped me realize my true self. Who I am. Tell him... / Well, he probably knows. He’s the smartest guy I’ve ever met. But tell him... / I wish we could have finished our date” (39). This brings us to the climactic realization that the arc has been leading to, when Tim narrates: “Ever had a lightbulb moment? Like something out in the ether has been taunting you, teasing you. Like you know you’re supposed to be on the same page with your brain but not everything made sense. People keep asking me what I want... But I couldn’t grasp it. Whatever it was, it always felt just out of reach. Until now. Until right now” (40). The “teasing” in question refers in a meta sense to the foreshadowing of the plot twist and the implications of queerness. Tim is realizing his own identity and his feelings for Bernard, and the audience is being let in on the new direction that this reveal implies for DC Comics. This arc, in a sense, is in itself an advertisement for the potential next comics featuring Tim, if there is enough interest and support from consumers.

In the aftermath of the conclusion of the case, Tim thinks about how this part of the story feels familiar to him: ““What happened, Robin?” ‘Can you tell us what went down here today?’ ‘Anything we need to know?’ Even if they did ask me, I don’t think I have the words for it. It’s like something changed in... in a program that I didn’t even know was running. Or maybe it didn’t change. Maybe it was always there. Waiting for someone to start the program” (42). Detective Williams, clearly filling the role of Tim’s version of Gordon for Batman, comes up to the rooftop Tim is on to talk to him. Tim confides some of his difficulties, and Detective Williams says: “You’re holding too tight to a version of yourself you think you have to fit. Let

go. You can figure out what you want along the way” (43). In a way, this is the thesis statement of Tim’s coming out narrative. In addition to the focus on what he wants, this comment refers to the role Tim is attempting to hold onto. Similar to the way he thinks about what Batman would do, and how he frames things in terms of programming, this is a moment of reflection on the closet that Tim is imposing on himself. In this coming out narrative, Tim’s uncertainty is a major part of why he is closeted. It has less to do with safety or external acceptance and has more to do with coming to terms with one’s own identity in an internal way. In terms of the larger purpose of the story in DC comics, the comment is meant to speak to letting go of the previous, non-queer version of Tim Drake’s character, as his function within DC Comics will be changing. As a transition towards the rainbow capitalist marketing in comics, Tim’s story aims to fulfill the new market desires and the comparative freedom of contemporary comics. This story is DC’s foray into testing out a mainstream, known character as queer representation, without abruptly alienating a base that might be more hesitant with the new direction.

Tim considers: “I want my family to be safe. I want the mantle. I want... I want...” (43) This final omission is confirmation of what all of the previous omissions have meant. The interruptions and the moments when Tim’s internal narration trail off are in reference to the queer elements of the story he is attempting to avoid mentioning. The arc ends with Tim as himself, having removed the closet of the costume, going to Bernard’s house. He tells Bernard: “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, about that night, and I—I don’t know what it meant to me. Not yet. But I’d like to figure it out” (43). Bernard replies: “I was hoping you would. Tim Drake... Do you want to go on a date with me?” and Tim says: “Yeah... Yeah, I think I want that” (43). This final moment leaves the door open for DC Comics in terms of where to take Tim’s character. While the date is clear, they avoid using language that is too direct or explicit in

regards to Tim's identity. Tim's coming out is aimed towards his own understanding of himself and towards the audience.

The Mask as the Second Closet

With Tim Drake's current role in DC canon as an openly queer character, I would like to examine how the closet still plays a role in his stories. In the previous section, I analyze the panels that demonstrate how the Robin costume and mask function as a space of safety like the closet, and I expand on that element here, as it connects to queer stories influenced by rainbow capitalism about existence post-closet. Secret identity narratives have an inherent queerness in superhero stories, in how they talk about the mask as a kind of closet and how their secret double lives can be "outed" when they are unmasked. Throughout his time as Batman's sidekick, Tim is very dedicated to his secret identity and separates his civilian identity from his vigilante role as much as possible. An earlier example of the mask being treated as a kind of closet comes from Tim Drake's first solo run, Chuck Dixon's *Robin*, issue #87, appropriately titled "Secrets Revealed." In this issue, Batman reveals Tim's civilian identity to Stephanie Brown, his on-and-off girlfriend at the time. This occurs at a point of relative tension of Tim's time as Robin, as his father has sent him to a boarding school out of concern. Stephanie Brown, in her vigilante "Spoiler" costume, shows up at Tim's school, revealing that she now knows his secret identity by saying: "Hi, Robin. Or can I call you Tim?" (Dixon 19). This casual confrontation is juxtaposed with the severity of Tim's reaction. Immediately, Tim thinks: "No. This isn't happening. / My worlds collide. / My heart's racing. My mind's in a spin" (19). He is unable to get a sentence out as he is faced with Stephanie knowing the truth. Tim's reaction to being "outed" is one of immediate panic. He runs from Stephanie, his fleeing dragging out over several

panels, and he thinks: “I feel trapped, I feel like I have to get away. / It’s too late to run. / It’s too late to hide. / This can’t be undone. / But I just can’t deal with it” (20).

When he finds Batman and confronts him, Tim says: “This is my life. It was my decision. / I wasn’t ready for this!” (21). In superhero and vigilante stories, one primary purpose of secret identities tends to be practical: avoiding arrest, protecting loved ones, and being able to maintain a typical job. In this moment, however, Tim is reacting emotionally. This is a personal secret to him, beyond practicality. His language here is evocative of a queer person being outed: it is his life, his decision, and he wasn’t ready. Ostensibly, Stephanie should be a safe person to reveal his identity to, as Tim already knows her identity, they already care about one another, and she is also a vigilante and would understand his concerns. However, this is beside the point to Tim, because the reveal of his secret is about more than practicality or safety. This is indicative that, for Tim at least, the mask and the mantle are similar to a closet. He uses the Robin costume as a form of protection for his real identity, and because of that, his real identity reads as queer in nature.



Figure 5 Tim Drake reacting to Batman revealing his secret identity. Credit: Chuck Dixon, “Secrets Revealed,” Robin #87.

To return to contemporary comics and the way the mask-as-closet functions in explicitly queer narratives, I focus in this section on Tim Drake's more recent solo run, *Tim Drake: Robin*, which began in September of 2022 and ran for a little under a year. It is typical for coming out stories to end shortly after the character leaves the closet, with an optimistic note that things will be better from here, fulfilling the promise of the It Gets Better project. The case of Tim Drake is interesting in that, by nature of comics, his story must continue following this fantasy of the closet as a simple, teenage narrative. If the idea is that the closet is the big story for queer adolescents, where does a story go when it follows an adolescent character who has already come out? Within the fantasy of the teenage closet, with the goals of marketing in rainbow capitalism being to be purely optimistic and offer readers an opportunity to feel normal, the queer narrative of *Tim Drake: Robin* is under a lot of pressure to fulfill the fantasy of life getting better after the closet, while still being caught in the nostalgia for queer adolescence.

Because this comic run takes place following Tim's coming out narrative, leaving the fantasy of the teenage closet in the past, the nostalgia for the privacy of the closet takes on a different form. The nostalgia for the closet becomes aimed at the metaphor of the closet that exists in the superhero secret identity. In Derritt Mason's *Queer Anxieties*, he summarizes the trajectory of two major works about queer young adult literature. He discusses the 1976 article by Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham, "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?", in which they look at struggles depicted in early American young adult novels that feature gay themes and argue for certain criteria in writing positive gay YA novels, including an emphasis on hope. Following that, Mason discusses *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, co-authored by Michael Cart and Christine A Jenkins, where they echo similar concerns. Mason notes that both sets of authors share "a desire for queer

YA to follow the same forward oriented, linear, teleological trajectory as queer youth themselves: the transition from troubled adolescence to a stable and sexually resolved adulthood” (Mason 4). Mason focuses on the young adult works that do not fit in the guidelines of the scholarship, arguing that these sites of anxiety in queer YA literature offer compelling and productive readings that are fundamentally valuable. I agree with Mason’s overarching point that works that explore more complicated and latent queerness and focus on the sites of anxiety he mentions are meaningful and worth dedicating scholarship to. However, here, I am interested in looking at work that does follow the formula that Mason is critiquing, and what we can find within those stories. Like in Ahmed’s defense of tragic stories in “Unhappy Queers,” the requirements determined by the market influenced by rainbow capitalism put a particular burden on contemporary queer fiction. When paired with the demands adolescent literature, this results in an acceptance of what queer stories will be “allowed” to exist, similar to the historical unhappy endings.

In its limited existence, *Tim Drake: Robin* came with a backdrop of queer characters. In the first issue, Tim summarizes the background characters that live in the Gotham Marina with him, to establish the setting of the story. It is immediately clear that part of the aim of the run is to provide queer representation to DC comics: “Tammy and Lauren live in the boat next to me. They’re the ones with the progressive pride flag and the works of art taking up their deck. When Pie isn’t working on the dock, they’re hanging out with them” (Fitzmartin 7). Later in the issue, Tim also interacts with the recurring police officer, Detective Williams, who tells him: “I’m not your fairy gayfather” (12), but is still clearly willing to be his liaison to the department. All of this allows a clear picture of the backdrop of the comic to emerge. There is a lesbian couple, with

not just a rainbow flag but the *progressive* pride flag specifically, a nonbinary character who goes by they/them pronouns, and a gay cop as Tim's law enforcement ally.

Later in the run, there is a clearly queer angle to the way issues are handled. In one particular scene in the fourth issue, our nonbinary character, Pie, is getting fired and their boss says "I knew I shouldn'ta hired one a' ya marina scum barrels... You're all *degenerates*. This is a family establishment" (7). The language here is clearly meant to evoke homophobia, calling them "degenerates" and bringing up "family" values. The apparent target of the discrimination, however, is the residents of the marina. Because the setting is meant to be an idealized queer community, the homophobia cannot be overtly about queerness. The language remains so that that queer concerns can be addressed, but to fit the setting, the homophobia has been rendered metaphoric rather than blatant. In that same scene, Bernard reacts to the interaction, saying, "Did you hear what he said? Degenerate? I'm gonna march over there and—" (7). He is interrupted by another resident of the marina, and the scene becomes the characters having a moment of lamenting the discrimination they are facing. The homophobia must be present, but it can never be truly threatening or hurtful. The forefront of the story must be joy and positivity about queer openness. Ultimately, part of the point of the scene is to show the oppression without making it about queerness, so that the community can maintain a queer solidarity while still existing in a post-homophobia world.



Figure 6 The residents of the marina experiencing discrimination. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, *Tim Drake: Robin* #4.

In examining *Tim Drake: Robin*'s ten issues for unspoken tenderness and connection in the closet, the seventh stands out. The seventh issue has a standalone plot and is narrated by Tim's boyfriend, Bernard. In the larger run, it functions as something of a transition between plot points, as well as a special issue to give more insight into the love interest character. The premise is simple: Tim and Bernard are trying to go on a date, and they are interrupted by running into Bernard's parents and then a recurring Gotham villain at the restaurant. Tim must navigate switching between his civilian and vigilante identities to fight the villain, and Bernard faces his strained relationship with his parents. The plot twist of the issue is that Bernard has known all along that Tim is Robin. Until this issue, it was a recurring concern for Tim that he was keeping his secret identity from his boyfriend. This issue, being from Bernard's perspective, shows that Bernard is aware of the secret and is waiting for Tim to tell him on his own. At the very

beginning of the issue, Tim is suggesting that they stay home and Bernard says in his narration: “He’s afraid that something bad will happen to me. Nothing bad will happen to me with Tim around. Even if I’m kidnapped by a cult, he always rescues me” (Fitzmartin 3). This is the first instance of the reveal, though it is subtle in the context of the story. Bernard is equating Robin rescuing him with Tim rescuing him, though he is not quite stating outright that he knows the secret. In comics, if the audience might have forgotten the full context of an event, there is often a footnote as a reminder. This moment does not have a footnote, though the moment it is referencing is in a different run. It is a signal that while Bernard knows the truth, he is not lingering on it here. Bernard goes on: “Tim’s my lucky charm. He always has been” (3).

The end of the issue lingers on this reveal, in a romantic scene between Bernard and Tim, where they are discussing what happened. There is a bittersweet affect to this scene, with them discussing the difficulties of Bernard facing his parents and the unspoken secret between them. However, there is also care and connection. Throughout the scene, they are both colored with the same pale blue and purple to represent the night lighting. It is a stark contrast to the bright, distinct colors of the previous scenes. At the beginning of the scene, Tim asks Bernard if he is okay, and Bernard replies: “I’m always safe with you around” (19). Despite the tenderness of the words themselves, the two of them are in separate panels, with a black line clearly dividing them. This is representative of the way the mask functions as a closet, demonstrating the secret as a space that separates them.



Figure 7 Tim and Bernard in separate panels. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, Tim Drake: Robin #7.

Bernard narrates: “I’m not dense. I play like I am, though. Easier that way. Means no one pays attention to me. But Tim does. / I see it, out of the corner of my eye. He’s waiting for me to say something. / Maybe he wants me to know. But until he says something, I’ll keep his secret” (20).

The language here is reminiscent of the closet. Bernard is aware of Tim’s secret, but is waiting for Tim to be ready to be open about his identity and his secret life. There is tenderness in the way Bernard is understanding about the difficulty of the secret.



Figure 8 Bernard keeping Tim's secret. Credit: Meghan Fitzmartin, Tim Drake: Robin #7.

After, Bernard gifts a necklace with a charm of his initial on it to Tim, explaining: “I... I wanted to give this to you tonight. On the anniversary of when we reconnected. I don’t know if I ever told you, but... You were my gay awakening” (22). Tim says: “I always thought you were super straight” and Bernard replies: “I knew you weren’t” (22). As Bernard puts the necklace on Tim, he narrates: “I feel so lucky to be with Tim. And this way, no matter where he is in Gotham... / ...as Tim or as Robin... / ...I can be his lucky charm, too” (23). The way they are speaking openly about their queerness, making references to previously being closeted, while still having an undercurrent of secrecy in their relationship, shows how nostalgia for the closet remains in queer stories in rainbow capitalism. Even with the idealized version of life post-closet, there is a new closet being created to contain the nostalgia and tenderness of queer adolescent stories.

Pride Specials & Closing the Book on Rainbow Capitalism

I would like end this chapter by considering what the future holds for this kind of publication and marketing, when looking at the window of rainbow capitalism in DC Comics. The year following the release of “Sum of Our Parts” in *Batman: Urban Legends*, Tim Drake made his first appearance in the second annual Pride collection in 2022. The story is called “Special Delivery” and follows Tim carrying a package across the city and getting held up fighting villains. At the end, he gets the package to his boyfriend who was waiting for him. The final two pages are Tim, now in civilian clothes, delivering the box to Bernard. In the lead up, Tim is rushing over, with the narration: “What I’m trying to say is that I’m proud of you. I’m proud of us. I’m proud of the time we’ve spent together. I’m proud to have you in my life again” (Moore 74). Behind him is a panel of the parade, with several different pride flags. The repetition of the word “proud” and the colorful, sunny background image demonstrates an inspirational

tone to the story. It is clearly meant to be feel-good and fluffy, if a little simple. The story ends with Bernard opening the box to reveal a cake that originally said “Happy First Pride” but was damaged while Tim was bringing it and now only says “Happy Fir Pri.” The mistake adds a cute clumsiness to this first experience for the couple. The story is sweet, almost overly so, to fit in with the hopeful and celebratory angle of the collections.



Figure 9 Tim Drake running with the backdrop of a Pride parade. Credit: Travis Moore, “Special Delivery,” DC Pride 2022.



Figure 10 Tim Drake and his boyfriend. Credit: Travis Moore, “Special Delivery,” DC Pride 2022.

Since Tim Drake's coming out story, his presence in the DC universe has changed. The first year after his confirmation as a queer character, he had the story centered on him in the 2022 Pride Collection, as well as the release of a Pride Special collecting his coming out story and promising more to come in his solo run to begin release later that year. *Tim Drake: Robin* ran from September 2022 to June 2023. The run was quietly canceled alongside the *Batgirls* run, and Tim's role in the Gotham canon was reduced to a recurring character in *Batman* and *Detective Comics*. In the Pride Collection of 2023, Tim was a secondary character in a story focused on Connor Hawk, a friend of his. Tim concurrently played a role in Batman-centered arcs in *Batman*, with the focus on his connection to the rest of the team rather than his own identity as a character. As of July 2025, the most recent appearance of Tim's boyfriend Bernard in DC continuity outside of the canceled *Tim Drake: Robin* was from April 2023 in *Batman* issue #132, where he appeared with Tim in the secondary storyline. In the Pride Collection of 2024, Tim did not appear in any of the stories and was not on the regular cover. On DC's official shop in 2024, they were selling LGBT+ Pride merchandise. Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, a fandom favorite couple, had shirts and mugs with artwork of them kissing. Batwoman, an out lesbian character since the creation of her character in 2006, also appeared on a couple shirts for sale. Tim did not appear in any of the merchandise. As of July 2025, there is no longer a section on the website for Pride merchandise. Perhaps the marketing and Pride-themed items for sale felt shallow, but the absence feels foreboding.

Tim Drake is not the only element of the DC Pride Collections that have changed in the handful of years they've existed. Phil Jimenez wrote the foreword for *DC Pride 2023*, and his tone starts off very different to the joy and hope found in the 2021 foreword. He writes: "I'm struggling some, hemming and hawing about the tone of the piece. It's being printed in a comic

book anthology celebrating queer joy and achievement, published by a major studio with global reach, and yet the political landscape in which it exists has grown exponentially bleak” (4). He goes on to elaborate on the bleakness of politics for queer people, discussing the anti-LGBTQ bills that have passed and the rise of hate crimes. *DC Pride 2024* did not have a foreword at all, a major change from the first three.

Perhaps it is too early to tell what this means for queer characters in DC Comics, and maybe this is simply the natural way popularity in comics changes over time. However, given Tim’s particular story arc, it seems indicative of larger trends. For characters like Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn, and Batwoman, who have always appealed more specifically to queer demographics and have a much longer history of queerness, their roles in the Pride collections and merchandise were less reliant on a broader social temperature. However, for Tim Drake, whose coming out story was perhaps a sort of testing of the waters, his presence is less stable. Since being confirmed as queer in 2021, he has had a relatively quick rise and fall in the spotlight. His short-lived solo run did not even last an entire year, and his presence in the Pride collections has dwindled over time. Comics are an expansive genre, and DC Comics has an enormous collection of characters and stories. Plenty of DC characters have gotten the same treatment as Tim Drake, falling into the background or disappearing for years. This rise and fall can happen for a wide range of reasons. Popular characters have been set aside for story reasons. Controversial characters have been given runs that have no interaction with the broader canon. Characters have died and been brought back and been retconned into and out of existence.

In the foreword of the first collection, Marc Andreyko claims: “The only thing more groundbreaking than where DC is (and has been) with its commitment to diversity over the years is the fact that the characters in this very book are not only trotted out for ‘very special’ stories”

(Andreyko 1). Despite Andreyko's claim, it is possible that Tim's future in the DC canon is to be brought out every June for an appearance in the annual Pride Special, or even left out entirely until his queerness is forgotten. After the cancellation of his solo run in under a year and his diminishing role in each Pride Special since his confirmation as queer and his complete absence from the DC official pride merch, the preliminary prediction seems bleak. I would not be surprised if he fades into the background, replaced in the central storylines with the plethora of other Gotham characters. Tim Drake is only one character, and DC Comics does have plenty of queer characters. I am not attempting to say anything damning about the state of queer representation in all of DC Comics. However, Tim is a very specific and unique character. He is long-standing and connected with many other characters. He became inescapably queer in *Urban Legends* and then *Tim Drake: Robin*. He was not created for the purpose of being queer, and his queerness can't be erased or retconned effectively. He also can't be completely stored away in a safely edgy comic run like Poison Ivy or John Constantine.

Comparing Tim to characters like Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, whose runs are more catered to an adult demographic and who have always been more controversial in nature, does not seem like the most accurate way to gauge the future for queer characters. Tim Drake has a history of broad appeal and adolescent-friendly stories. A more appropriate comparison might be Jon Kent, the son of Clark Kent and Lois Lane. While Jon Kent is a much newer character than Tim Drake, first appearing in Rebirth as a child before getting aged up in Infinite Frontier, he has followed a similar storyline. Jon Kent started as a sidekick, Superboy, and a close friend of the newest Robin, Damian Wayne, son of Bruce Wayne. Together, they had a run in Rebirth called *Supersons*. Jon Kent was eventually aged up via comic-typical time travel, and he is now a college student in canon. He was confirmed as bisexual not long before Tim Drake was, and got

his own run, *Superman: Son of Kal El*. Jon's run was first changed and then cancelled, and now he has mostly been relegated to background roles in runs focused on his father or friends. He remains a more consistent figure in the Pride collections and merchandise than Tim does.

Jon and Tim are both legacy characters that were not originally introduced for queer representation, the way a character like Nia Nal "Dreamer" was. They are intended to have broad appeal in the consumer base. Ultimately, as we know from queer economics, it is the areas with broad appeal that are most at risk of shying away from being overtly supportive of the queer community. As mentioned earlier, Absolut Vodka might not have to worry about broad appeal, just like Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn don't. The Gap, however, doesn't want to alienate the homophobes, at the risk of losing business. While queer representation in DC Comics is certainly not fading entirely, it seems that it no longer has a steady place in the main canon. Characters like Poison Ivy will be allowed to have their stories, able to be skipped over and safe in the realm of gray morality, but characters like Tim Drake and Jon Kent will be set aside in favor of more widely palatable characters.

A fan going by "Queerly Nerd" wrote a blog post in 2021, "Robin: An Exploration of Queerness in Tim Drake," outlining the history of queerness in comics and the choice to make Tim queer. They write: "In a way, Tim, as a fictional character, acts exactly like the story behind his creation. He was created to please. Warner Bros. ordered Denny O'Neil, then Batman editor, to create a new Robin, even though Jason Todd had just died. Tim was developed to please both the fans that voted for Jason to die and those who voted for him to live" (GateCrashers 2021). The fan goes into an optimistic view of Tim's future as a character, imagining that he can be more than what he was originally created for. However, I posit that his role continues to be indicative of the original purpose behind his creation. He became a queer character in a key

moment in rainbow capitalism, where it seemed especially marketable to have queer characters. Then he had a short solo run and made appearance in the Pride specials until the moment passed and the queer characters seemed to become more controversial. A character like Tim Drake, who was never supposed to be controversial and was *always* meant to appeal widely to the image of the typical comic book fan, might not be worth risking if the social climate around queer support is once again shifting. If Tim Drake's queerness is not as family-friendly and easy to market as the powers that be might like, perhaps the cautious business move is to relegate him to the background and let him quietly fade from the current canon.

Conclusion

The closet has been written about before and continues to be worth exploring. As a space, the closet can be confining or comforting; it can be a space meant to conceal, protect, stifle, and so on. In continuing with the metaphor more literally, in childhood, a closet might be a hiding place during a game. In adolescence, it could hold secrets from one's parents. In adulthood, it might be a place where one stores things to avoid looking at them. For queer people, the closet holds the barrier between secrecy and scrutiny. Through examining the nostalgia that one can feel for the closet, the complexities of the expectations of coming out in the contemporary world are illuminated.

The focused timeline I have built in this dissertation demonstrates the connection between contemporary queer concerns and the depiction of the closet in queer adolescent literature. Children's and young adult literature are important elements to the intracommunity interactions for queer people, as unlike most marginalized communities, there is not a hereditary aspect to queerness. Queer adults do not always raise queer children; queer children are not always raised by queer parents. The intracommunity conversation exists in culture, media, and history, rather than parental teachings. Queer children's and young adult literature is where we can find the conversation between queer adults and queer adolescents. This space is where my examination of the nostalgia for the closet is situated, in the focused timeline between approximately 2010 and 2023.

Beginning with the *Percy Jackson* series and the early inclusion of queer representation in mainstream children's literature, Nico di Angelo, as the first queer character in the series, demonstrates both an example of queer subtext in the first series and a queer storyline in the second series, following the rhetoric of queer conversation at the time, as shown in the *It Gets*

Better Project. Nico di Angelo and the arc he goes through, as a queer child thematically connected with grief and death and then as a queer teenager feeling shame in the closet, mirror the trajectory of the *It Gets Better* Project, as his pain is acknowledged with a promise that he can look forward to acceptance and joy post-closet. In his friend and confidant, Jason Grace, as a subtextually queer character, the closet becomes a space for safety in uncertainty and queer connection, highlighting tenderness and nostalgia for the closet even in a story that suggests optimism for post-closet life.

The *It Gets Better* Project implied a certain stability in queer adulthood, and subsequently a lack of need for a space of safety like the closet. If it gets better, after adolescence and post-closet, then queer adults must be safe and comfortable enough to be open about their identities. In the continuation of this rhetoric, we can find the #OwnVoices movement, beginning on Twitter and suggesting that stories of marginalization are more valuable when written by authors whose identities match their stories. The next step in my timeline is the way this conversation relates to young adult novel, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and the experience of author Becky Albertalli as a closeted writer during this conversation. In *Simon vs.*, Simon experiences being pressured and blackmailed and then outed online. Albertalli, as a consequence of the success of her debut novel, found herself the subject of discourse online about whether a “straight” woman had the right to write queer stories. The role of social media and the accessibility offered by the internet impact both Simon and Albertalli, removing barriers between the private and public spheres. Here, the necessity of the closet becomes not just a place required for safety but also the only option available for privacy in one’s identity.

If the *It Gets Better* Project imagined that queer adulthood was characterized by safety and success, then the #OwnVoices conversation furthered those assumptions and elaborated on

the rhetoric of discussions of cultural appropriation to suggest the responsibility of the authors of stories of marginalization. From there, in light of promising progress like *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage, publishers and advertisers began to capitalize on the popularity of queer media, which brought us to rainbow capitalism. In order to explore the effects of the demands of rainbow capitalism, the next point in my timeline is DC Comics character Tim Drake and his coming out story and subsequent role in pride marketing. The joy and simplicity of stories that aim to follow the framework of rainbow capitalism reflect issues faced in earlier queer fiction, when unhappy endings were a requirement for publication. In Tim Drake's individual run, the nostalgia for the closet becomes a metaphor. Rather than queer subtext being pulled from non-queer texts, *Tim Drake: Robin* is full of textually queer moments, though the moments of quiet nostalgia and tenderness connect to the "closet" of secret identities.

Throughout this timeline, I explore the tenderness and nostalgia within the depictions of the closet. While theorists like Eve Sedgwick, Sally Hunt, and Heather Love beautifully explore the value of shame in queer affect, and theorists like Michael Warner, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant craft compelling arguments about how positive affect falls short, the aim of this dissertation is to discuss the quiet, personal affect that exists in nostalgia, uncertainty, and a desire for privacy and how these concerns manifest as a tender longing for the memories of the closet in adolescence. The closet has become even more relevant recently, as the rise in conservative rhetoric serves as a grim reminder of its necessity. A common thread connecting the three examples I explore in this dissertation is that the closet is, in some form or another, removed from them. Nico is outed through magical forces putting his feelings and experiences on display; Simon is outed through cyberbullying from a classmate. The closet being removed from Tim is more complex, in that this happens in an external form, through the conventions of a

text influenced by rainbow capitalism. Tim's sexual identity must be open for the text to fulfill the requirements set by rainbow capitalism, so the story of the closet is moved instead to his secret identity as a vigilante. In this removal of the closet, I find the anxiety about the loss of privacy and safety in the age of social media and constant access through technology. My aim is to establish how the nostalgia for the closet within adolescent literature connects to these anxieties and the impact of technology and political visibility on the lives of individual queer people.

Theorists in the current landscape of queer theory, affect theory, and contemporary media make it clear that this is a rich area worth investigation. Lauren Berlant's *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, published in 2022, demonstrates a space for "smaller" or more specific affective experiences, and the worth of exploring the impact of these more everyday emotions. Scholar Eve Ng published *Mainstreaming Gays: Critical Convergences of Queer Media, Fan Cultures, and Commercial Television* in 2023, in which she explores the development of LGBTQ media, focusing on networks Bravo and Logo. She discusses the ways in which queer media was impacted by the growth of digital spaces and fan culture, as well as streaming marketing and network strategies, and how these changes occur in connection with broader sociopolitical and economic shifts in the United States. In 2024, Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser published *Queer Memory and Storytelling: Gender and Sexually-Diverse Identities and Trans-Media Narrative*. A core theme they explore is the way storytelling functions in the queer community, and the intracommunity interactions that drive some of these stories. They discuss how the stories in queer community are often essential to social participation, but also how the communication between generations struggles to account for the changes that impact queer coming of age. I situate my own work alongside these examples, considering tenderness in storytelling, the

influence of technology and digital spaces, and the interaction of the queer community, while examining specific moments in contemporary queer history.

In the intersection of affect and queer theory, there are questions of who we are reaching for, as well as who we risk leaving out and where we are looking towards. A common thread is the frustration with the politics of inclusion and assimilation, along with a particular attention paid to the negative, whether to highlight it as a crucial part of our history or examine its current presence and use. As far as who we are reaching towards, Ann Cvetkovich suggests in *An Archive of Feelings* people that can offer testimony about queer history. Heather Love in *Feeling Backward* suggests authors from the past who may or may not yearn for a future inclusion. Sara Ahmed and Lee Edelman both suggest figures to offer space for: Edelman with the *sinthomosexual* and Ahmed with the “wretch.” Edelman brings up Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol* and discusses his proximity to queerness, and his role in the story. Scrooge revels in isolation, stinginess, and the rejection of joy and comfort—therefor, connecting to the death drive that Edelman discusses. As for Ahmed’s wretch, she asks if we can rewrite the history of happiness from their point of view, positing that “[i]f we listen to those who are cast aside as wretched, perhaps their wretchedness would no longer belong to them” (Ahmed 17). Beyond the *who*, there’s a sense of a need for orientation, whether it be towards a past that we need or a future we’d like to reject.

With recent political developments, conversations around the complexity of the closet and the varying experiences with secrecy have grown in relevance. In May of this year, reporter Mark Harris published an article in the *New York Times* titled “Coming Out of the Closet Was a Liberation. Why Are Some Peeking Back In?”, primarily about Paul Reubens (best known as Pee-wee Herman) and his experience with the closet. He writes about how Reubens spent much

of his life in the “gray area” of the closet, wherein the queer community might be aware while outsiders might not: “a closet, but a large one” (Harris) as Harris describes. He goes into a more in-depth discussion about how the choice to remain closeted has as many effects in one’s life as the choice to come out. These conversations about the closet as more than a binary of out/in remain important, and it is worth considering the implications of why one might choose the closet or why one might feel a nostalgia for it. As Griffin in *Feeling Normal* seriously considers the affective value of the desire to feel normal as shown in mainstream queer media, I approach the nostalgia for the closet with a similarly nonjudgmental philosophy. Members of the queer community who choose a large closet like Reubens or who wanted more time in the closet without scrutiny like Albertalli are in part who I consider this dissertation reaching towards, along with the queer adolescents in the intended audience of the explored works.

While I followed the philosophy of Sedgwick’s affective literary analysis about rejecting paranoid reading, as well as Griffin’s elaboration of it in *Feeling Normal*, in meeting the works where they are rather than attempting to investigate their political ramifications or condemn them for simplistic messaging, the current political climate surrounding the rights and safety of queer people does have an impact on the function of that philosophy. When analyzing contemporary literature, one runs into the inevitable limitation of being unable to see the future. In writing this dissertation, we have reached what I believe to be the endpoint of the timeline. This moment of queer marketing is changing, in much the same way as it did in the early 1990s. Progress is not linear, and the political landscape seems to change by the week. Academically studying queer works, especial queer works written for an adolescent audience, becomes more complicated in times of censorship and anti-gay legislation. What we know from the queer economics of the 90s is that times of apparent queer progress in terms of culture and media have a tendency to

coincide with political attacks. The rainbow capitalism of the 2020s seems to follow that same trend. Corporate pride and marketing are coinciding with attacks on queer youth, especially transgender teens. Intersex children are being erased; trans children are being forced back in the closet. Mainstream tv shows looking to capitalize on the popularity of queer representation are adding side characters that are nonbinary, while nonbinary teenagers are not being allowed to be called by their chosen names and pronouns in schools.

It is difficult to imagine where to go from here. When building this timeline of adolescent literature and historical queer moments, I aimed to consider a framework for how to look at the evolving role of the closet in these works. At the time I began building the timeline, rainbow capitalism was still the central moment I was concerned with. I was keeping an eye on the evolving nature of queer representation in comics and examining how the pride collections and advertising grew and changed. Ultimately, rainbow capitalism appears by all accounts to be on the way out. Target rolled back their pride merchandise during the month of June this year. DC Comics is quietly storing away certain storylines, relegating queer characters to edgy, niche runs or else letting them hide in the background of ensemble casts.

In imagining where my timeline goes from here, I would like to focus on tenderness and care in storytelling, and how nostalgia for the closet relies on the closet feeling like a choice rather than a requirement for survival. As we move towards a more hostile climate for queer youth, the closet is no longer a space of safety, though it is still one of connection, despite the hostility.

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