



UNIVERSIDAD
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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES
ASIGNATURA TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

“You have become our dreaming”: AIDS and Queer
Community in David Levithan’s **Two Boys Kissing**

Realizado por

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Tutor/a

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Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana
FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
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TITLE: “YOU HAVE BECOME OUR DREAMING”: AIDS AND QUEER COMMUNITY IN DAVID LEVITHAN’S *TWO BOYS KISSING*

KEYWORDS: queer community, AIDS narrative, David Levithan, LGBTQ+ literature, young adult literature, cultural inheritance.

SUMMARY: This end-of-degree dissertation will address the topics of gay identity, American gay literature, AIDS narratives, LGBTQ+ young adult literature, and the idea of queer community in David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*. The aim of this dissertation is to analyse Levithan’s book from an AIDS perspective, and from a LGBTQ+ young adult literature perspective, it will especially focus on the aspect of queer community within this latter subgenre. The dissertation aims to prove that Levithan’s book can be analysed from these two different perspectives, and that there is cultural gay identity.

TÍTULO: “Vosotros ahora sois nuestro sueño”: el SIDA y la comunidad queer en *Dos chicos besándose*, de David Levithan.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunidad queer, narrativa del SIDA, David Levithan, literatura LGBTQ+, literatura juvenil, herencia cultural.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo de fin de grado tratará los temas de la identidad gay, la literatura gay estadounidense, las narrativas del SIDA, la literatura juvenil LGBTQ+, y la idea de la comunidad queer en *Dos chicos besándose* de David Levithan. Este trabajo se propone analizar el libro de Levithan desde una perspectiva del SIDA y de la literatura juvenil LGBTQ+, se enfocará especialmente en el aspecto de la comunidad queer de este último subgénero. El objetivo final es probar que el libro de Levithan puede ser analizado desde estas dos perspectivas y también probar que hay una identidad gay cultural.

PLAGIARISM STATEMENT¹

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I am also conscious that the incorporation of material from other works or a paraphrase of such material without acknowledgement will be treated as plagiarism.

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Málaga, June 2021

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1. Introduction.

The aim of this end-of-degree dissertation is to analyse American author David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) from the perspective of AIDS, and LGBTQ+ young adult literature. This book transmits the importance of a community, and to accept yourself. Also, David Levithan treats the concept of identity, and how it is an ongoing issue even nowadays. His approach is quite unique, and the way he channels the voice of the generation lost by the AIDS – Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome – epidemic is outstanding, at the same time is able to create a narrative that adolescents, and adults can read without missing any of the importance of the narrative. Levithan manages to show the gay community, and their history, meanwhile relating said history to contemporary stories.

However, gay literature has not always been so easily accessible as it is nowadays, depending on the country that is. If it were not for the gay generation, and also the rest of the queer community, who fought against the repression, and liberation of their identity, it is safe to assume that gay literature as it is today would not exist, and it would be relegated to some references within works of literature as it used to be the case. This idea of 'identity connected to community' is explained by Tobin Siebers, who argues that identity "is enmeshed in processes of identification that connect the individual subject with a larger group (i.e. the means by which the person, qua individual, comes to join a particular social body)" (qtd. in Bristow 201), which he also relates to the "minority discourse" (qtd. in Bristow 201).

It is in fact identity, and the constant suppression of the ability to express it, what eventually led to the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Essentially, to understand what happened in Stonewall, one needs to understand two things: gay socialisation was

illegal, and that police regularly harassed places where this socialisation took place (“Stonewall”). When, on 28th June, the police decided to, once again, raid the Stonewall Inn, lesbians, gays, and transgender people inside were fed up with police brutality, and thus they joined forces against them, and it reached such point that even the Inn ended on fire (“Stonewall”). It ought to be argued that this was the spark that lit the revolution, and prompt the civil rights movement, which would eventually lead to render everyone equal, at least on paper. It is due to these activists, and fighters that queer people² enjoy the rights that they have today, at least the ones that have not been already taken away by the government in the United States in the 21st century. It is also because of them that gay literature has been able to flourish into what it is nowadays, especially gay fiction, which was able to prosper especially after Stonewall.

After the appearance of AIDS, it is no wonder that this fiction started to change, and hence evolve, and affect the future narratives, such as Levithan’s. That is the reason why this analysis of *Two Boys Kissing* will address the narrative from an AIDS perspective, but also from a young adult perspective, since after all, this book is categorised under this latter subgenre. However, before diving into the text, it is necessary the understanding of various concepts, namely: gay identity and literature, AIDS narratives, and LGBTQ+ young adult narratives.

² This idea of revolution, and the non-acceptance of the treatment they suffered can be perfectly seen when this generation “embraced their difference and became queer, adopting a pejorative term that had been used for decades to stigmatize as ‘other’ anyone who departed from the dominant heterosexual paradigm” (Queer Nation 1024).

2. Literature review.

Before one can understand gay literature, it is necessary to discuss the concept, and how it came to be. Hence, the following part is about the history of gay literature. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the concept of gay literature, and the history behind it in the United States, as *Levithan* is American, and thus part of this American gay movement. This chapter will also focus on AIDS literature as well as LGBTQ+ young adult literature, as it is of key importance to understand these approaches to be able to analyse *Levithan's Two Boys Kissing*.

2.1. Gay literature.

Firstly, the term gay literature is a difficult one to explain, as even critics do not concur upon one single definition. There are several definitions that need to be taken into consideration so as to what one may label as “gay literature.” There are various arguments so as to what constitutes this literature, i.e. Mark Lilly argues that the term gay men’s literature can include a wide range of categories: works written by heterosexuals that involve homosexuality; works written by closeted writers, that do not deal explicitly with homosexuality, but whose meaning is reflected by the writer’s sexuality; works by gay writers who are consciously unaware of their sexuality, but they still articulate it; and lastly, works written by out gay writers who deal with the issues of homosexual culture and desire openly (xv). This “wide scope” (xv) proposed by Lilly raises a really important point, as Gregory Woods (12) says, “it is easy to tell where gay literature starts – but where does it end?”. There could be critics who might argue that since heterosexual people do not experience what it is to be part of the LGBTQ+ community, they should not write about such experiences. This argument is supported

by young adult writers who are part of the queer community, such as Adam Sass, Lev Rosen, and Kosoko Jackson. In fact, Rosen proposes a term that perfectly captures this idea: the “straight gaze” (qtd. in Kheraj). When non-queer authors tell stories that are not theirs, from their own perspectives, they are – most likely – unknowingly setting their presumptions about a community they cannot know anything about, as they are neither part of it, nor do they suffer the oppression of being part of said community. However, it could also be argued that since heterosexual people are considered the norm in our society, they are the ones who are more likely to be published, as well as heard by other heterosexual readers, so one could say it is their duty to represent the multiculturalism and the diversity of the society in which we live, and that includes acute representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

This term is an ongoing issue, even today. In the recent article “Challenging Texts: ‘I Just Don’t See Myself Here’: Challenging Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature” by Thomas Crisp and Suzanne Knezek, they analyse two books: *Totally Joe* (2005), by James Howe, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), by Stephen Chbosky. Howe’s *Totally Joe* does in fact deal with a gay 12-year-old main character and his life as such. However, *Perks* deals with homosexuality, but in a much mild manner, as the gay characters are secondary characters and the reader is able to see gay representation, but filtered through the heterosexual protagonist. Crisp and Knezek comment that *Perks* was not typically classified as being LGBTQ+ literature, but they claim that it has been discussed at conferences in order to approach the gay subject to students (77). Hence, it all comes back to the same idea: are both of these stories gay literature? Taking into consideration that meanwhile Howe is an openly gay man writing about his experiences, Chbosky is a heterosexual man writing about the gay experience from a heterosexual perspective.

The beginnings of the homosexual novel in the U.S novel can be traced to the 1880s when “a number of fictional works with major or minor male homosexual themes began to be published” (Pearl 6). However, one cannot explain the evolution of the homosexual novel without mentioning Walt Whitman, whose works suggest, at an early date, the theme of homosexuality, including a sexual and human liberation (Katz qtd. in Woods 340). Specially important is his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, as the successive editions, concretely the ones published from 1855 until 1891, can be considered the most influential of the American homoerotic texts (Woods 154). Among the authors that added homoerotic themes around this time, the most important ones are James Fenimore Cooper in his *The Last of Mohicans* (1826), Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* (1876), and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and lastly Herman Melville with *Moby-Dick* (159-160).

Another crucial period of production of homoerotic themes within literature is during the Harlem Renaissance, which lasted from the 1920s until the 1930s approximately. The importance of this period relies in the intersectionality of the texts that were produced, as not only did they deal with homosexuality, but also with racism, which is something that today’s literature is still shining light on, as intersectionality is key within the LGBTQ+ community, since the most endangered people within the community are people of colour. In this period of time, the most noteworthy writers, and poets, are Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Richard Bruce Nugent (Woods 167-216).

Pre-Stonewall novels that involved gay themes and characters fell under four categories. The first one, the narrative focused on the heterosexual character and concerns, relegating any type of gay theme, and character to minor roles (Bergman, “Introduction” xii). The second type presents sensational and sentimental novels, in

which the gay characters live terrible, lonely lives, and they are either murdered, or they take their own lives (xii). These first two types are mainly aimed for the heterosexual readers (xii). The third category includes novels, mostly foreign, that are of such high literary value, heterosexual critics did not condemn them, e.g. some of the production by Thomas Mann, and Jean Genet (xii). Lastly, the novels that dared to approach gay readers were relegated to the fourth class, pornography (xii). At this point in the 1960s, some gay writers were brought to light, such as James Purdy, and Gore Vidal, but pre-Stonewall gay works did not suffice to represent a gay literary movement (xiii). Furthermore, no line of gay books was published by a literary publisher before the 1970s (xiii). This first decade after Stonewall was dedicated to developing an audience for gay fiction, as well as to broaden the scope of fiction available for gay writers and readers (Bergman, "Gay" 13). The year 1978 is specifically appointed as the historical moment when gay literature, as it is appreciated today, started to properly flourish (Pearl 6). This was shortly followed by a boom in the 1980s of gay and lesbian writing (6).

During this period, a specific group of writers must be mentioned: the Violet Quill writers. They have come to epitomise the years between the Stonewall riots, and the AIDS outbreak (Bergman "Introduction" xii). A fair amount of the Violet Quill writers became some of the most important gay authors of their decade (x), e.g. Felice Picano, Edmund White, and Andrew Holleran. They set a standard for gay fiction that is still compared to contemporary gay writing (x). Moreover, they can be regarded as the most important group of gay writers to defy the established ideas about gay men's peril at the time, for in their literature they advocated for the "belief that gay people can be free, not of their history of oppression, but on the feeling that they are forever condemned to the 'pain of the earth'" (xvi). Part of their importance relies on their

desire to write for a gay audience from a gay perspective, without having to take into consideration the heterosexual eyes that might come across their texts, using the language that gay men actually used (xvi). Furthermore, their work attests to the importance of friendship for gay men, who felt now part of a community comprehended by mostly gay people (xvi). These writers fought against the notion that gay fiction, as it was gay, could not be good by itself, lacking the universality, and experience of a normal life – i.e. anything that escapes the gender and sexuality norms imposed by society at the time – , and, what is more important, they proved their critics wrong by producing a work which brilliance would be remembered for years to come (xix). They were pioneers in depicting a community that was not yet available for many gay people, and when the AIDS crisis stroke, they worked to envision a way of living with the disease as they tried to overcome it (xix).

This last period aforementioned can be regarded as the end of an era since gay literature is about to start changing once again because of AIDS. As the illness worked its way into the gay community their lives as they knew them were about to change forever until this very same day in the 21st century.

2.2.AIDS literature.

Before diving into AIDS literature, it must be taken into consideration that it was not uncommon to find a gay character die unnaturally or prematurely in whichever novel they appeared, before and after the AIDS epidemic (Pearl 9). Hence, there is no surprise in the continuation of this tradition, and that it was a disease that apparently only affected to gay people, only reinforced society's belief that gay people should be punished for who they were.

AIDS literature is a complex miscellanea of topics and ideas that the writers wanted to express to the readers, as generations of gay men and their legacies were being lost at a frightening quick pace. Hence, at this time, the cultural production and consumption was of extremely importance so gay history and identity would not perish as well (Pearl 8). AIDS literature is the rightful heir of the coming-out story, which is “the essential homosexual theme, as persistent as the romantic love story and the coming-of-age novel” (Allison qtd. in Pearl 9), it would essentially be the gay equivalent of Bildungsroman (Woods 346). They are related in their legacy of loss and mourning (Pearl 9), since as gay identity triumphs, there is always a loss, for instance in the coming-out stories, the characters tend to lose their families and become outcast based on society’s standards (9). Furthermore, gay literature, since mid-century onwards, has always dealt with grief (11).

AIDS literature has followed a trajectory of “memoir and journals, [...] followed by a growing number of documentarylike novels and short stories, and in recent years [1993] by increasingly metaphorical and idiosyncratic works of fiction” (Kakutani qtd. in Pearl 24). Some of the early fiction related to AIDS goes for practicality, and “attempted to reassure gay men that sex could still be safe, and safety could still be sexy” (Woods 368), such as *Hot Living: Erotic Stones about Safer Sex* (1985), a collection of stories edited by John Preston. Thus, it can be argued that “AIDS literature participate[s] in the reaffirmation of gay identity” (Pearl 24).

Klein (qtd. in Pearl 25) argues that AIDS poetry “is marked by the big gesture of the elegist leaving the bedside and looking at the whole fractured world—what the world has become with AIDS in it”, which Pearl (25) claims that is also applicable to novels, as writers pretended to depict what had come of the world with AIDS being part of the everyday life for gay people. The primary focus of most of these works is AIDS,

with either the protagonist being diagnosed with HIV, or his lover is the one ill and even dead (26). However, there are others such as Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), where AIDS forms a frame of the narrative, i.e. "the story may not be significantly about AIDS, but is weighted nevertheless by the presence of and awareness of AIDS as in some way important to the narrative trajectory and resolution" (26).

Most fiction writing dealing with AIDS is usually inclined to advocate for realism, as it "provides a reassuring illusion of objectivity, veracity, and familiarity" (Pearl 27). This type of fiction provides order as well as the reassurance of a "whole, unfragmented objective self" (27). Thus, by trying to gain control of the past, the present will be either controllable, or at the very least it would be understandable (29). Therefore, these narratives favour a disclosure constituted by two aspects: "recollecting and articulating everything so there are no gaps left in memory, that hence every moment and detail is accounted for" (Pearl 29). Crucially, their aim with this is not to leave anything behind, and to control at all costs the narrative, leaving a sense that the story is a "recapitulation of everyday life, that everything is on the surface, nothing is hidden" (29). Furthermore, this idea of controlling everything within the narrative is also depicted in its time, since AIDS as an illness defies linear narrative, the writer aims to create a narrative that is well-structured as one cannot in life (31). However, the gay AIDS novel that does disrupt the narrative time eventually "show that the disruption of narrative order actually proves the rule of order that they ostensibly violate" (32). After all, "gay male AIDS fiction tries to render the chaos of living with AIDS coherent" (48).

Even if the AIDS narrative is unreliable, it does present the possibility of a narrative for those whose public identity has always prevented them from claiming a

universal narrative (Pearl 35). White claims that “love and death have always been the great subject of literature [...] in its horrible way, AIDS combines both themes” (qtd. in Pearl 39). Moreover, Pearl argues that “the desire for inclusion in universal feeling is ostensible in the narratives, [...] there is similarly an urgency to participate in and recapitulate normative versions of romantic love” (38). However, there is still a uniqueness in them, as the characters of the narratives achieve an unconventional and satisfying sense of family, rather than the conventional concept of romantic love (39). When it comes to mourning, there is an inextricably link to the formation and question of identity (47), as AIDS shifts the understanding of what it is to be a gay man, and attitudes from the past are rendered unusable and/or inappropriate (45). Hence, these books originate from a need to articulate and construct a sense of self, both as a gay man and as a mortal subject (48). At this point, gay people have a universal story, in death and loss, they can be regarded as what society deems as ‘normal’, they are as any other heterosexual person, they are comprehensible in their sorrow and tragedy (Pearl 40). White further claims that AIDS literature has “made homosexuality a much more familiar part of the American landscape” (qtd. in Pearl 40). In the end, HIV rewrites the gay narrative, considered a private, secret enterprise, and makes it a public story (40).

Within AIDS literature, one can find queer AIDS literature, i.e. the texts that belong in this category draw from more than one genre and still express the representative of the experiences and losses associated with AIDS (Pearl 55). The fact these texts depart from the typical realist structures of gay AIDS fiction illustrates “the identity of a community that has been necessarily restructured by the illnesses and deaths brought about by AIDS” (67). Furthermore, “the fragmented nature of their narrative is indebted to the unreliable trajectory of an HIV-related illness” (30). Dialogues in these narratives are crucial, as they represent the melancholia, and the

hardships of losing a loved one due to AIDS, and sometimes the impossibility of letting them go, as they are “manufactured out of the loss of the other” (97-99).

The advent of the protease inhibitors, i.e. the medication that would help control, not cure, the disease around 1995 marks a point in the AIDS literature, since AIDS would start to be regarded as simply one aspect more of this literature, rather than the main focus (Pearl 114). From this point on, there are no more standard stories after contracting AIDS, since depending on your tolerance to the medication, you would most likely survive (115-116). For instance, three of the most significant writers of the AIDS era shift their fictional attention to marriage after 2000: Edmund White, Michael Cunningham, and Armistead Maupin (130).

AIDS literature has also been characterised for the yearning for family, and home (143). However, at the early stages it was referring to the biological one, meanwhile after the advent of AIDS it evolved into marriage, and queer filiation, what would become the chosen family (144), a community to which you belong. Even though nowadays there is much less likelihood of dying of AIDS, and therefore, the production of AIDS fiction has declined, compared to the 1980s, “the legacy of AIDS is cumulative and here to stay” (Ibañez-Carrasco qtd. in Buso 168) Furthermore, Suzanne Poirier (qtd. in Woods 168) argues that “all writing today is AIDS writing in that it must consciously choose how to respond to the epidemic, whether by direct involvement or evasion.” At the same time that AIDS literature was thriving, in its golden age, a new type of subgenre was also increasing in production, and it was not long until both would merge together in some narratives.

2.3. LGBTQ+ young adult literature.

Cart and Jenkins (*Heart* 1) define young adult literature as “books that are published for readers age twelve to eighteen, have young adult protagonist, are told from a young adult perspective, and feature coming-of-age or other issues and concerns of interest of YAs.” Furthermore, the idea of the young adult novel, as it is known today, is owed to the 1967 books S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, and Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contenders*, which are widely considered as the two first modern young adults novels (1). However, it would not be until two years later with John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* that the theme of homosexuality would appear in young adult literature (7). Unfortunately, this book expresses the sentiment that being queer is something undesirable, and something that no one would willingly want to be (14). Still, this book is quite important within LGBTQ+ young adult literature,³ as it establishes the treatment of the topic that many novels in the 1970s would replicate (14).

Before reviewing the evolution of the treatment, and inclusivity of the LGBTQ+ community in young adult literature, there are three concepts that need to be explained: homosexual visibility, queer consciousness/community, and gay assimilation. Jenkins derives these terms from Sims Bishop’s three model for African-American inclusion in children’s fiction, and create a model specifically for LGBTQ+ content in young adult fiction (Carter and Jenkins, *Heart* xix). The first term, homosexual visibility, is applied to stories in which a character who was not previously considered gay/lesbian comes out, most of the novels published in the 1970s and 1980s belong in this category (xx). The second concept, gay assimilation, deals with stories in which a character’s sexuality

³ Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins constantly refer to this type of literature as “GLBTQ”. However, the “L” in the acronym was posed to express the importance of women within the community, hence my changing the order, and I will also be adding a “+” at the end, since it is more inclusive towards the rest of the community, leaving the acronym as follows: LGBTQ+.

or gender identity is not questioned, they “just happen to be gay” (xx), and “gay/lesbian characters must appear to be no different from the heterosexual norm *except* for the fact of their sexual orientation”, hence the characters “assume a homogeneity” with their heterosexual peers (170-171; emphasis in original). Lastly, the third term, queer consciousness, shows LGBTQ+ characters in the context of their own communities of LGBTQ+ people, and their families of choice, and even sometimes also with their families of origin, this type of narrative is not only targeted to LGBTQ+ youth, but also to everyone else (xx).

The 1970s are regarded by many critics as the first golden age of young adult literature, and the name ‘problem novel’ quickly started to catch on, as most of these books dealt with social issues affecting contemporary teens (Cart and Jenkins, *Heart* 17). Yet only seven novels from this period dealt with any gay related content, and it would take three years, after Donovan’s release, for the next one to be published: Isabel Holland’s *The Man Without a Face* (17), which is the first young adult novel to feature a homosexual character (Jenkins 316). Holland’s novel is no different from Donovan’s, as she “equates homosexuality with disfigurement, despair, and death, and [both their novels] reinforced some of the stereotypical thinking that became a fixture of [LGBTQ+] literature” (Cart and Jenkins, *Heart* 18). Holland stated that she wanted it to be “an unusual love story but, nevertheless a love story”, but she also recognised that at the time “they had something [...] they called a taboo against any expression of love between members of the same sex” (qtd. in Carter and Jenkins, *Heart* 21-22). This is probably why she finishes the book with the main character’s love interest dying, which only re-emphasizes the idea that gay people are doomed. The third young adult novel to deal with homosexuality, Sandra Scoppettone’s *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974), takes a page of Holland’s book and also kills the gay character, in this case the protagonist’s

best friend (22). Scoppettone argues that her “intention was to show that he died trying to be something he wasn’t (heterosexual), and *not* because he was homosexual” (23, emphasis on original). However, this leads to the conclusion that the homosexual is doomed either way, either because he is gay, and/or because he is trying to hide it and act heterosexual, it seems the end for the person is the same: death. However, it should be mentioned that even though Donovan does not kill his characters, he suggests that feeling same sex attraction is merely a phase which a person can leave behind. Thankfully, not all the novels from this decade are as grim about the gay youth, in E. Kerr’s pioneer *Love You When You’re More Like Me* (1977) the protagonist’s best friend is unapologetically gay, and he neither dies, nor does he reject his sexuality at the end of the novel, which makes it a gay assimilation novel (26).

Meanwhile in the 1970s there were only eight titles that dealt with gay and lesbian content, in the 1980s the production increased rapidly, adding to a total of forty novels (Cart and Jenkins, *Heart* 17-40). From these publications, only a limited number would offer thematic innovation, such as Norma Klein’s *Breaking Up* (1980), which is the first young adult novel to include a gay parent (40-41). It was not until Ron Koertge’s *The Arizona Kid* (1988) that a viable homosexual role model appeared in this literature, in the shape of the uncle’s protagonist who is an AIDS activist as well as a prominent citizen in his town (45-46). It should be mentioned that Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* (1982) is the only LGBTQ+ young adult novel of this period that attempted a romantic plot (40), it is “a lesbian love story with a positive ending” (Garden qtd. in Cart and Jenkins, *Heart* 55), which is on itself noteworthy, as that was not the norm at all. Ann Rinaldi’s *The Good Side of My Heart* (1987) is the first LGBTQ+ young adult novel that introduces religion as major feature: the female protagonist’s boyfriend comes out as gay, so she confides in her priest brother, who

claims that he does not agree with the Church's position on same-sex relationship, and he eventually tells her to "Hate the sin love the sinner" (Rinnaldi qtd. in Cart and Jenkins, *Heart* 61). Although, it may seem as progressive, the book's implication is once again that being homosexual is a sin, and that it relates it to the physical act, and not as valid identity (61). AIDS was not mentioned in this literature until M.E. Kerr's *Night Kites* was published in 1986, where the protagonist's brother is the one infected, and is somewhat ostracised when the secret is leaked (64). There are three more young adult novels that approach the subject, Koertge's which was mentioned before, Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* (1989), and Gloria D. Miklowitz's *Good-bye Tomorrow* (1987). However, the last two novels treat the theme differently, in Block's the disease is present, but it is never named, which subtly turns it into a greater menace, and in Miklowitz's it is a heterosexual male teenager who has been infected through a blood transfusion (64). Within AIDS young adult novels there is usually a slight mention, or suggestion of the existence of a queer community, but it is always in reference to the character's past, or if there is one it is always off-stage (69).

During the 1990s, the number of LGBTQ+ young adult fiction increased considerably, seventy-five novels, and five short story collections were published to the best of my knowledge (Cart and Jenkins, *Heart* 90). The principal focus of most of these narratives remained stuck on homosexual visibility (90). However, there is a much larger variety compared to previous decades, e.g. the first book in this literature to ever treat bisexuality was published in this decade, M.E. Kerr's "*Hello,*" *I Lied* (1997). In this time, the most common method to out a character's sexuality was to make the character discover that he had contracted AIDS through same-sex unprotected intercourse (91). However, only two escape the norm: Theresa Nelson's *Earthshine* (1994), in which the character is openly gay from the very beginning, and Deborah

Davis' *My Brother has AIDS* (1994), where it is a young adult suffering from the disease (91). However, in none of the fiction is the person with AIDS the protagonist (91). As it was mentioned before, there is more diversity in content, and some examples of gay assimilation can be found, such as a secondary character in Francesca Lia Block's *I Was a Teenage Fairy* (1998), and only one protagonist on Nancy Garden's *Lark in the Morning* (1991) where the character is openly lesbian (108). Although the idea of a queer community started to appear more, the community itself was neither more visible, nor more immediate than before (109). Nonetheless, there are other books that place this community optimistically in the future (109). To finish this period, it is worth mentioning Marion Dane Bauer's *Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence* (1994), as this collection of short stories "represent[s] a remarkable diversity of characters" that was not generally found at the time (114).

The period of the 2000s and 2010s have witnessed the critical expansion of the LGBTQ+ young adult literature: 252 of these books were published in the span of 2000-2009 (Cart and Jenkins, *Rainbow* 93), and in the period of 2009-2016 it escalated to 592 (125). During the first decade of the 21st century, the majority of young adult novels with LGBTQ+ content revolved around homosexual visibility (99). However, there are some successes within this time such as Sarah Shepard's hit book series *Pretty Little Liars* (2006-2014), that deal for the most part with gay assimilation (112). However, from 2010 on, the field has been practically egalitarian as the numbers of publication of homosexual visibility and gay assimilation novels are almost equal to each other (125). It is during this time that David Levithan publishes his first book, which rose him to prominence within the field of LGBTQ+ young adult literature (95). Levithan's first book, *Boy Meets Boy* was published in 2003, and is a perfect example of both gay assimilation and queer consciousness/community (120). In fact, Levithan's book is

considered a breakthrough, being “the first feel-good gay novel for teens” (116). From this point on Levithan would keep writing books with LGBTQ+ representation, including the one to be analysed: *Two Boys Kissing* (2013).

3. Analysis of David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*.

As mentioned above, David Levithan started his literary career in 2003 with his first book, *Boy Meets Boy*, and has been writing ever since. But before publishing his first book, Levithan was, and still is, an editorial director at Scholastic, and the founding editor of the PUSH imprint, which is “devoted to finding new voices and new authors in teen literature” (Levithan, “About me”). It must be mentioned that Levithan is, what has come to be named as, an ‘Own Voices’ writer,⁴ as he is gay. He has been in fact quite a prolific writer as he has written twenty-three books since his first publication (Levithan, “My books”). Furthermore, it has been due to his prolific production that he was awarded the 2016 Margaret A. Edwards Award for “his significant and lasting contribution to writing for teens [...] who often feel marginalised [as well as for] his writing [that] shows teens the importance of inclusion and the acceptance of themselves and others just as they are” (Morales).

It could be argued that Levithan's writing was born out of the “[hungriness] for reflections” sought by queer people from fiction (Miller qtd. in Pearl 7), since his most celebrated work, *Boy Meets Boy*, was born out of his desire “of getting [such a book] as an editor – a book about gay teens that doesn't conform to the old norms about gay teens in literature” (Levithan, “About me”), i.e. these norms being the ones explored in the previous section – especially prior 21st century –: LGBT+ Young Adult Literature. In fact, by escaping them, and subverting the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality, *Boy Meets Boy* “creates a new template for the young adult novel” (Pattee 156).

⁴ “#OwnVoices is a term coined by the writer Corinne Duyvis, and refers to an author from a marginalized or under-represented group writing about their own experiences/from their own perspective, rather than someone from an outside perspective writing as a character from an underrepresented group.” (“Own Voices”).

However, Levithan's writing evolves from this "utopian [setting]" (156) into the real-life world, in which *Two Boys Kissing* is set.

The title of the book comes from Walt Whitman's poem "We Two Boys Together Clinging" (Levithan, "About Two"). Furthermore, there are more works that have served as an inspiration for the creation of this book, such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991), as well as accounts of the AIDS epidemic, which helped Levithan in the creation of the narrative voice of the story. However, not only was he influenced by literary works, but also by factual events, i.e. the Guinness World Record for longest continuous kiss, broken by Marr Daley, and Bobby Cancielo in 2010 (Levithan, "About Two"). It ought to be mentioned that this book's unique voice was originally part of a short story of an anthology, *How Beautiful the Ordinary* (2009), edited by Michael Cart (Levithan, "About Two").

Two Boys Kissing narrates the story of seven different 21st century young gay teenagers. Two of the protagonists, Craig and Harry, are trying to break the Guinness World Record for longest kiss to make a political statement, in consequence of one of their friend being victim of a hate crime. Neil and Peter, another couple, are trying to figure out if their relationship is working. The last couple, Avery and Ryan, just met and are exploring the beginnings of a new relationship. Lastly, the last protagonist, Cooper, is closeted, and in fear of what may be of him if he came out, and what happens when, in fact, he is forced to do so. All these stories are interconnected by the voices of those who died in the AIDS pandemic, they are the ones who narrate their individual stories, in the small town, Kindling, all of them frequent, and live.

As it was mentioned above, the narration is carried by those men who died in the AIDS pandemic, hence it is safe to assume that these men have a crucial role on the book, at the same time they offer a completely unique perspective on the lives of these

21st century gay teenagers. As Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), in Levithan's book, AIDS forms a frame of the narrative, since this story is not necessarily about AIDS, but the presence of it is all over the story that is being narrated, and this AIDS perspective is crucial for the full understanding of the book (Pearl 26). Levithan is using the voices of the victims of the AIDS epidemic to create an intergenerational narrative. Pearl argues that most AIDS narratives advocate for realism (27), although Levithan does rely on this genre, it must be mentioned that he brings back the lives of a dead generation of gay people, hence disrupting the illusion of realism, but at the same time that these voices take over the narrative they are telling the story of the real-life world. Thus, Levithan is playing with the idea of realism to create a unique story. Furthermore, even though narrative time is not strictly disrupted, at some points in the book, this dead generation relates some situations to their old lives to offer perspective to the reader, and thus "render[ing] the chaos of living with AIDS coherent" (48). It ought to be argued that Levithan's narrative is "manufactured out of the loss of the other" (97-99), the other being those who died in the epidemic. Levithan aims to show the reader what this generation lived and suffered so as to raise awareness for the younger generations, as well as for those who lived through it that may have forgotten. He is bringing back gay history, and culture, to the community, as writers who lived during the AIDS epidemic did, so no one is able to forget that this epidemic did happen, and they must remember it, and still fight for the rights that can so easily be taken away by the government. Hence, it can be inferred that one of the main aims of this book is to remember the LGBT+ community of their past history in order to avoid its repetition.

The stories told by these narrators are filled with their past, and how they lived, they are giving advice to the (possible) queer reader. The aforementioned idea of them

telling the younger generation to fight can be seen in “your mistake would be to find our commonality in our dying. *The living part mattered more*” (Levithan, *Two* 3; my emphasis). Throughout the book there is a constant allusion, such as the one emphasised before, to keep fighting, for there is a better future for the LGBTQ+ community, as “there is a nearly perfect balance between the past and the future.” Concretely one character, Neil, is “thinking of” (2) them, as for him they are “an abstraction, a force” (2), that aids him. However, the voices argue that “his gratitude is a rare thing” (2).

The very beginning of the book is somewhat bittersweet, as the narrative voices are recalling part of their past, at the same time they are wondered by the present lives of the queer community, and the possibilities there are today for them. In the very first page, there is already a sense of loss: “as we become the distant past, you become a future few of us would have imagined” (1). They are amazed by these younger generations, but also saddened by their inability to be there, celebrating their legacy with them: “we resent you. You astonish us” (2). There is a sense of grief even, as they are grieving for themselves, and the lives they lost. This feeling of loss is even stronger by the recollection of their past lives: “just when we stopped wanting to kill ourselves, we started to die. Just when we were feeling strength, it was taken from us” (4): when gay identity triumphs, there is always a loss (Pearl 9). This sense of loss is connected to Cooper’s story, as his narration is arguably the most traumatic, and saddening from all the ones narrated in this book. Cooper is depressed, he “keeps his mind busy, tricking himself out of nowhere, even if it still feels like nowhere [...] time becomes worthless, to be spent on worthless things” (Levithan, *Two* 5). Cooper’s loss is not something physical, as he has essentially, and at the end of the book literally, lost his will to live, he tries to keep himself busy so as not to really feel things, he is a living corpse, with no

friends, and no support system. Cooper relies on the Internet to flirt with strangers online to try to feel something, “gratification” (65).

The narrative voices coin a term for all those men and boys, that like Cooper, are looking for this instant pleasure: “*limbo*” (Levithan, *Two* 65; emphasis in original). They have created a reality for themselves by compartmentalising their lives, they live their true selves through the screen, but when the “devices are off, [...] they are alone with themselves again” (65). This limbo is directly related to what is commonly known as being ‘closeted’, which is again related to loss, since the person, in this case male, is aware of his homosexuality, but is afraid of coming out, hence he is in an in-between place, the limbo. The impossibility of revealing your real identity is the loss, as there is always a likelihood that were you to come out as gay, your family will reject you. Hence, they believe to be at a crossroads, for they assume there is always something to be lost, either your identity, or your family. They consider themselves “defective” (64), as society does not conceive them as “normal” (64), because the standard is to be cis-heterosexual, and when someone dares to defy it, there are consequences, which ranges from being deemed a pariah to be victim of a hate crime, and even death. The crudeness of this reality is reflected through the entirety of Cooper’s story, when he refuses to feel, he closes himself to the world, and thus he is only able to see one possible outcome: death, as for him “the future is a theory that has already been proven false” (154). However, the narrative voices aim to put in perspective the reality of death, they describe, in a graphic way, the horrible deaths they suffered due to the disease, and again the grief emerges: “everything was taken away from us, and we miss it” (188). Furthermore, they are scared for the LGBTQ+ community, as “we die over and over again” (189), the losses are too great, and too many, and they are afraid for losing another life that can be easily saved. At the end, Cooper is saved, and a sense of hope

appears for his narrative, but at the same time there is a mixed feeling of this hope and loss, as Cooper is alive, but unfortunately there are too many lives who have been lost forever.

The concept of identity is raised during this narrative of loss, as both are intricately connected, since, as it was mentioned before, the expression of your identity may lead to loss. The concept of gay identity around the subject of AIDS is quite complex, since most of the society, at the time that the epidemic hit, decided to believe that HIV exclusively targeted gay men; in fact, at the beginning of the epidemic it was named GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency. It appears that society viewed gay men as people who were dying due to his own acts, and hence should bear the consequences of their actions. This idea is mentioned in the book, and how the narratives voices “did not choose [their] identity, but [they] were chosen to die for it” (Levithan, *Two* 66), and they also make reference to the fact that “ten of thousands of people will die before drugs are made and drugs are approved” (66) to treat the disease, which could have been avoided were the government decided to mobilise sooner. This linking between identity and suffering is brought to a closer reality by using Avery and Ryan as examples.

Ryan “came down with an eating disorder, about the time he was coming out” (67). Meanwhile, Avery, even having the complete support of his parents when he came out as a transgender boy, felt the need to “cut himself” (68) due to the rejection of a male love interest. These two characters exemplify the agony, and anxiety that the AIDS narratives portray, they are the new gay generation, who even though does not necessarily have to deal with AIDS, still carry the same sorrow and agony for an identity that do not conform to society’s standards, and hence they are eventually bound to suffer for it. There is also a character that depicts the trauma of being ‘out and proud’,

Tariq, who is black and gay, and in consequence, is the victim of a hate crime. Tariq is part of two repressed minorities that are constantly victims of the social hierarchy system, and after the assault he is “haunted” (35) by what happened and cannot stop wondering what he did wrong. Tariq mourns his old self, he has been relegated to a victim by his abusers, and now he feels unsafe, his mortality has been reminded as in the AIDS narratives.

However, the narratives voices refuse to accept that their identities are merely related to the AIDS epidemic, and all the mourning, loss, and suffering, in fact they claim to be “more complicated than that” (6). This idea of hope for a better future, where one’s gay identity does not define him is represented by another character, eleven-year-old Max. He was raised in a progressive household, where his parents made sure to break down the cisheteropatriarchy so he knew that there are more possibilities apart from what society idealises and expects. Hence, due to his upbringing when Max realised his affections, he did not question them, and “he doesn’t see [his sexuality] as defining him [but just as] a part of his definition” (70). Max encapsulates an ideal future where being queer is not regarded as your whole identity, but simply as a part of it. Then, there is Tom Bellamy, one of the teachers helping Craig and Harry to break the Guinness World Record, he is the personification of those who died in the AIDS epidemic as he is a survivor of the virus. Tom is the voice of a deceased gay generation; he represents the gay history and culture of those who died. Meanwhile Max represents the hope for a better future, Tom is said future, he might be living in a world that does not fully accept homosexuality as it should, but he is the clear epitome that there is a future after coming out, and especially after contracting the disease. Tom exemplifies that AIDS is no longer the thread it was and shows that one can be happy living with the disease, as he is with his husband.

As some of the most influential writers of AIDS, Levithan approaches the topic of marriage with Tom, showing again the hopefulness that there is a future, and showing what Pearl calls “the urgency to participate in and recapitulate normative versions of romantic love” (38). The sense of a family within the community is constantly mentioned, as the narrative voices claim, “some of our parents chose to banish us rather than see us for who we were” (Levithan, *Two* 84). Furthermore, this allusion to family is linked with situations that occur nowadays, as in “there are boys sleeping on benches and under bridges, and luckier unlucky boys sleeping in *shelters*, which feel like *safety* but not like home” (19; my emphasis). Levithan is trying to bring attention to the tough realities that queer youth faces, he is warning the reader that this younger generation is not as safe as one may assume. The fact that they live in shelters, and feel some safety does not amount to actually being happy, they are in need of help; at the same time, he is implying that queer people’s sense of family is shifted, and that the LGBTQ+ community is not able to rely on those who are related to them, since in reality there are plenty parents, and/or guardians, that repudiate their children when they decide to come out to live their identity freely. Hence, the idea of “an unconventional but still satisfying sense of family” (Pearl 39) appears, since most queer youth relies on the queer community, looking for a sense of family within their peers.

At this point is when the idea of a queer community appears. In fact, there are several examples, such as the one mentioned before: the shelters. Typically, queer youth that are no longer welcome at home try to access these services, where queer people is accepted, and not considered a disgrace. However, there are more positive examples, such as what the 1990s LGBTQ+ young adult literature desired. For instance, in *Kindling*, a “gay prom” (Levithan, *Two* 7) is celebrated in the community centre, and since there are “not enough gay kids to support a prom on its own [...] the cars drive in

far and side” (7). This is the first real glimpse of a queer community in the book, and a hopeful one at that. This sense of absolute freedom of identity is what most of these LGBTQ+ books lacked, and Levithan subverts that notion, and creates it in order to show that, indeed it is possible to be surrounded by your queer peers. There is also a reference to the “network” (6) the AIDS victims had to be in contact with each other, and how even though it may have been regarded as impossible, they indeed were able to be “surrounded by friends, and friends of friends” (7). This network is compared to the Internet, and in fact throughout the entire book the idea of the Internet as being an ally, and a tool of communication for the LGBTQ+ community is mentioned. In fact, this is clearly represented in the novel, as “word is spreading” (78) on the internet about Harry and Craig’s kiss, two thousand people from all over the world, namely Germany and Helsinki are encouraging them. In fact, in a matter of hours the viewing goes up to 103,039, which shows the queer community as a united front, that these people are there for each other, and want to help as much as possible, even Max wants to aid however he can. All in all, Levithan is depicting a community that supports each other, and celebrates each other, as much as the narrative voices watch over the younger generations, which directly relates to the AIDS narratives desire of queer filiation.

However, there are some critics such as Leo Bernasi, and Jack Halberstam who claims that by “saying gay community, we’re creating a complete fiction of unanimity [...] and that there’s nothing really that unites gay people” (Halberstam). This idea is completely opposite to what Levithan aims to portray and convey on his work, and what the narrative voices imply throughout the entirety of the novel: “the spirit of [our] strength – it carries through” (176). Furthermore, there is a sense of cultural inheritance

within the text.⁵ Not only do these voices' pieces of advice and warnings represent this inheritance, but also Tom Bellamy, who is "an out, outspoken history teacher" (Levithan, *Two* 109). He is the voice that carries through the history of this dead gay generation, and as teacher he is sharing the knowledge and culture of the queer community. Moreover, there are allusions to several queer authors, such as Tony Kushner (3), Walt Whitman (42) – whose poem "Two Boys Together Clinging" appears on its entirety in the novel–, and also none other than Oscar Wilde; some of these three writers' works are viewed as part of queer culture, and hence belong to this cultural inheritance. There is also a reference to another queer work: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (151), and similarly "the gay Sires" (111), i.e. "Lady Gaga, Pink, Kylie, Madonna, Whitney, Beyoncé" (111), which reiterates the idea that there is in fact a queer culture, and that queer people do in fact share some unanimity. Just as Heggstad argues "the novel itself, acts as vehicle for cultural transmission [...] a queer time capsule that imparts a lesson about what it means to be gay" (20).

It must be mentioned that this cultural transmission is not only multigenerational, but also intersectional, i.e. there are more identities considered within the gay spectrum, namely: race and gender. Firstly, the topic of gender is approached with Avery, who is a transgender boy. He is part of an oppressed minority that must struggle further to survive, in Avery's case he has had to come to terms with his gender identity, as well as his sexuality. He is also dealing with the anxiety of what is expected of him as a trans person, and in doing so, he chooses to defy gender norms by dyeing his hair pink because he believes that in order to be free and happy, he needs to get rid of the "arbitrary" (66) things "that society controls [him] with" (66). Furthermore, the

⁵ Cultural inheritance is defined as "the transmission from generation to generation of information. It includes, or at least influences, behaviour, social customs and language" (Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman qtd. in Heggstad 2).

narrative deals with the topic of body dysmorphia and how it affects a trans person not to pass as cisgender, which again correlates to the idea of the anxiety felt in AIDS narratives, as it is “[put] into question [...] of what is self and what is not self” (Pearl 48). Avery “can’t come close to love [his body]” (Levithan, *Two* 107). However, he is learning to accept himself, as much the rest of the characters are. When it comes to race, there are three gay non-white characters: Tariq Johnson, Harry Ramirez, who is Latino, and Neil Kim who is Korean. In fact, Neil compares his gay identity to being an immigrant in the United States. He confronts his parents when they ignore the blatantly homophobic commentaries that they are hearing on the radio. Then, there is a moment where her mother remembers her own experience as an immigrant, and how she did not receive support from her family, which leads her to accept the fact that Neil is gay, as much as they are Korean. This passage’s aim is to show that there is no single box that a person fits, but that identities, within the community, are all varied, and valid.

All in all, Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing* shows the reality of a marginalised community that is trying to flourish and to be accepted into society. By approaching the subject of gay identity through this lost generation as well as through these contemporary teenagers, he is creating an intergenerational bond between them. At the same time, he is showing that there is a hope for a better future for the LGBTQ+ community.

4. Conclusions.

As it was stated in the Introduction of this end-of-degree dissertation, the aim was to analyse David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* from the perspective of an AIDS narrative as well as from a young adult perspective, focusing especially on the LGBTQ+ content of the book.

A key aspect treated throughout this dissertation is the fact that there is a gay literature, culture, and identity. This has been proved through a brief capitulation of American gay literature, from Whitman to Levithan himself. The idea that an intersectional homosexual identity was also starting to develop is showed in the Harlem Renaissance, and from this point up to the Stonewall when the gay rights movement started to claim and this praise queer identity. Although it is not clear what this identity compromises, there is a clear idea that you ought not to be ashamed, but, in fact, you owe yourself to be proud for who you are.

AIDS literature's legacy is, as it was mentioned before, cumulative, and Levithan's novel has shown exactly that. He has proven throughout the narrative of this young adult book, that there is always going to be a connection between this lost gay generation and the generations to come, as this gay identity will forever create a bond among them, hence creating the idea of an intergenerational gay identity. By doing this, Levithan has supported the belief of a cultural inheritance, at the same time he is showing that there is a queer community that will always be there to help those younger generations.

On the whole, *Two Boys Kissing* is a book in which AIDS forms a frame of the narrative, at the same time it is appealing to the younger gay generations. It is about contemporary gay teenagers that face the realities of their identity, and how it will affect

them in the future. By giving the voice of the narrative to this lost generation, Levithan is resurfacing the trauma, and loss suffered because of the AIDS epidemic, and them narrating the story is a way to remember that the community should not accommodate to this reality, but fight for their identities, and rights, as this generation did. In the end, Levithan is trying to show that this epidemic was not really that long ago, and the LGBTQ+ community should always remember their history, so it will not repeat itself, and at the same time conveying that there is hope for a better future.

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6. Conclusiones.

Como se ha comentado en la introducción de este trabajo de fin de grado, el objetivo de este era analizar *Dos Chicos Besándose* de David Levithan siguiendo la perspectiva de las narrativas del SIDA y también desde la perspectiva de la literatura juvenil, enfocándose especialmente en el contenido LGBTQ+ del libro.

Un aspecto clave tratado durante este trabajo es que existe una literatura, cultura e identidad gay. Esta afirmación se ha demostrado a través de una breve recapitulación de la literatura gay estadounidense, desde Walt Whitman hasta el propio Levithan. La idea de que identidad homosexual es «interseccional» empezó a florecer en el Renacimiento del Harlem, y siguió desarrollándose hasta los disturbios de Stonewall que marcó el movimiento de los derechos civiles homosexuales en el que se empezó a reclamar y ensalzar la identidad queer. Aunque no está completamente defidido lo que esta identidad supone, una idea está clara y es que no se debe estar avergonzado de ella, sino que uno se debe a sí mismo estar orgulloso de quién se es.

El legado de la literatura del SIDA es, como se ha mencionado anteriormente, acumulativo, la novela de Levithan ha mostrado exactamente eso. Se ha demostrado durante la narración de este libro juvenil que siempre va a existir una conexión entre la generación perdida por el SIDA y las siguientes generaciones, ya que esta identidad gay crea un vínculo entre ellas, lo que crea una identidad gay intergeneracional. Con su narración, Levithan apoya la creencia de una herencia cultural, al mismo tiempo que alega la existencia de una comunidad queer que siempre estará ahí para ayudar a estas generaciones más jóvenes.

En conclusión, el SIDA estructura la narrativa de *Dos Chicos Besándose*, al mismo tiempo que apela a las generaciones gays más jóvenes. Dicho libro, cuenta la

historia de adolescentes gais que se enfrentan a la realidad de su identidad y cómo esta les afectará en su futuro. Dándole la voz de la narración a esta generación perdida, Levithan hace resurgir el trauma y la pérdida sufrida por la epidemia del SIDA, y estas voces narrando la historia es una manera de recordar que la comunidad no debe acomodarse a esta realidad, sino luchar por sus identidades y derechos como esta generación perdida hizo. En definitiva, Levithan está intentando mostrar que esta epidemia no pasó hace tanto tiempo, y que la comunidad LGBTQ+ siempre debe recordar su historia, para evitar que se repita, y al mismo tiempo da a entender que hay esperanza para un futuro mejor.