"Why is straight the default?": Empathy and Normalization of the Queer Male Narrative in 2010s YA Literature

For the better part of the last five decades, a majority of queer novels published for a young adult (YA) audience have been framed within the "coming out" narrative that, while inspiring sympathy within readers, has done little to create empathy and flesh out queer characters beyond the perceived "struggle" of their sexualities that such a narrative confines them to (Banks 34-35). By the mid-2010s, the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement strove for the publication of YA novels that not only invoked sympathy from readers, but for narratives promoting empathy and the normalization of previously marginalized voices. This paper will track the evolution of the movement as it coincides with shifts in the larger cultural landscape, paying particular attention to the evolvement of the queer male narrative in YA by following the publication histories of two prominent authors of queer YA, Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera. I will explore how their respective debut novels, *Simon Vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) and *More Happy Than Not* (2015), each follow the traditional "coming out" narrative, which fits both the literary and cultural backdrop of their publication dates: both novels were written and published before the Supreme Court decision declaring gay marriage legal across all 50 states in the U.S. Further, I will discuss how Albertalli and Silvera's recent co-authored novel, *What If It's Us* (2018), reflects both the larger cultural normalization of the LGBTQ+ community as well as the YA genre's push for empathetic and inclusive narratives by inserting two queer male characters into the traditionally heterosexual narrative of the romantic comedy. While relying on customary tropes such as the "coming out" narrative which ultimately inform the queer experience, Albertalli and Silvera's contributions to the queer YA canon of literature align with the cultural normalization of the LGBTQ+ community occurring in the 2010s, producing narrative that promote inclusivity and empathy from readers.