

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 4 | Number 2
April 2022

When Bisexuality Is Spoken: Normalizing Bi Latino Boys in Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End*

Trevor Boffone
University of Houston

<https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl>

This article was previously published on Bepress at St. Catherine University. On June 25, 2024, the metrics were:

Downloads: 1106
Abstract views: 273

Recommended Citation: Boffone, Trevor. "When Bisexuality Is Spoken: Normalizing Bi Latino Boys in Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End*," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2022.

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 4

April 2022

When Bisexuality Is Spoken: Normalizing Bi Latino Boys in Adam Silvera's *They Both Die At the End*

Trevor Boffone
University of Houston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boffone, Trevor (2022) "When Bisexuality Is Spoken: Normalizing Bi Latino Boys in Adam Silvera's *They Both Die At the End*," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol4/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research on Diversity in Youth Literature by an authorized editor of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact sagray@stkate.edu.

In 2019, culture reporter Gwen Aviles, writing for NBC News, published an article signaling a groundswell of interest in queer young adult (YA) literature. Aviles's article, "The rise of young adult books with LGBTQ characters—and what's next," demonstrates how, within the already-burgeoning field of YA literature, the market for novels that feature queer characters is also expanding. This growth signals an increased demand among readers of YA fiction for characters and stories that speak to identities and experiences that have been traditionally left out of literature marketed towards young people. This push for more diverse and #OwnVoices YA literature specifically focuses on three categories: race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Aviles recognizes that transgender, intersex, and asexual readers still lack representation, while work by Latinx YA authors such as Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Gabby Rivera, and Adam Silvera are filling gaps for queer Latinx teens. It seems the road to nuanced queer representation in the realm of YA literature has its lows, but there are plenty of highs that must be celebrated.

By any measure, queer Latinx YA fiction is having a moment, with a rapidly-flourishing canon of novels that speak to not only a full spectrum of Latinx identity, but also a multi-faceted portrayal of queer sexualities.¹ This growing corpus of Latinx YA literature focusing on queer teens includes representative examples such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Tommy Stands Alone* (1995) by Gloria Velásquez, *Rainbow Boys* (2001) by Alex Sanchez, *Down to the Bone* (2008) by Mayra Lazara Dole, *The Mariposa Club* (2009) by Rigoberto González, *Chulito* (2011) by Charles Rice-González, *More Happy Than Not* (2015) by Adam Silvera, and

¹ Although some see Latinidad as an inclusive term, others believe the term erases Indigenous and Black portions of the Latinx community. Throughout this article, I work with an understanding that Latinidad encompasses all Latinx identities. That said, José Esteban Muñoz notes that "[i]dentity is indeed a problematic term when applied to Latinas/os—groups who do not cohere along the lines of race, nation, language, or any other conventional demarcation of difference" (38).

Juliet Takes A Breath (2016) by Gabby Rivera. Indeed, this list, in tandem with Aviles' article, signals a changing of the guard, although there is still one identity that remains almost entirely excluded from the narrative: bisexual Latino boys.

If I have learned anything from teaching LGBT Studies and engaging with the bisexual community on Twitter (not to mention being bisexual myself), bisexuality is one of the most frequently misunderstood queer identities. Bisexuals are people that can be attracted, both romantically and/or sexually, to people of their gender and people of other genders; they can be attracted to these people at different times, in different ways, and to different degrees (Ochs).² Furthermore, bisexuals comprise more than half the LGB community and over 40% of bisexuals also identify as people of color (Gates; Human Rights Campaign). Despite these large numbers, in nearly every facet of US popular culture, bisexuals face challenges regarding representation. For instance, bisexual characters in film and television are few and far between.³ Bisexuality is also underrepresented in YA fiction, and although there is a growing corpus of YA lit focusing on bisexual girls, there is a noticeable void in books written about bisexual boys of any race or ethnicity.⁴ Aside from novels such as *Honestly Ben* (2017) by Bill Konigsberg, *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (2011) by Alex Sánchez, *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain*

² I use the term bisexual to refer to a person who is attracted to more than one gender. This definition corresponds with theorist Surya Monro's understanding of bisexuality as a "strategic move that overlooks the binary composition of the word" (2).

³ Notable bisexual characters on television include *Grey's Anatomy's* Dr. Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez); *Brooklyn Nine-Nine's* Rosa Diaz (Stephanie Beatriz); *Broad City's* Ilana Wexler (Ilana Glazer) and Abbi Abrams (Abbi Jacobson); *Schitt's Creek's* David Rose (Dan Levy); *Big Mouth's* Jay Bilzerian (Jason Mantzoukas); *Riverdale's* Cheryl Blossom (Madelaine Petsch), Toni Topaz (Vanessa Morgan), and Moose Mason (Cody Kearsley). There are more bisexual characters in film, but, by and large, bisexuality is rarely represented on screen compared to gay and lesbian identities.

⁴ While my criteria for what amounts to a bisexual novel is perhaps restrictive, this is intentional. I do not mean to reduce novels that don't name bisexuality. Rather, I seek to shed light on ones that do name it and therefore demonstrate the importance of representation in YA literature. Moreover, my work here specifically focuses on Latinx YA literature that names bisexuality. Bisexuality is rare within YA literature. Even so, YA lit websites queerbooksforteens.com and yapride.org both feature many titles that fall within the umbrella of bisexuality. Few of these texts, however, depict the intersections of bisexuality and Latinidad.

Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies (2011) by Brent Hartinger, *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) by David Levithan, *Cut Both Ways* (2015) by Carrie Mesrobian, *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (2012) by Julie Anne Peters, *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice & Virtue* and *The Gentleman's Guide to Getting Lucky* (2017) by Mackenzi Lee, *Grasshopper Jungle* (2014) by Andrew Smith, and *Deposing Nathan* (2019) by Zack Smedley, representative examples are scarce.⁵ As Bonnie Kneen highlights, “The absence of bisexuality in YA fiction thus follows (and reinforces) a broader invisibility that is likely to shape most teenagers’ lived experience of bisexuality” (363). A 2009 study by Kosciw et al. supports this, revealing that over half of LGBT high school students identify as bisexual (10). And, according to the Pew Research Center, just 19% of bisexual males are fully out. Moreover, B.J. Epstein comments that when bisexuality does appear in YA fiction, it is oftentimes seen as less desirable than being heterosexual or homosexual (111).⁶ By any measure, cultural production by, for, and about queer Latinx youth has been “underestimated, overlooked, and undervalued” (Perez 141). If we know that bisexual male representation is almost nonexistent on the page and on screen, the stories of one demographic in particular—bi Latino boys—are even more noticeably absent. Indeed, by any means, the road to bisexual representation in YA literature is indeed an uphill climb.⁷

Ultimately, these facts lead me to questions: where are the stories about bisexual Latino teens? When do Latino boys get to be bisexual? If bisexuality is to truly achieve mainstream visibility, then YA literature must become responsive to this systemic lack of

⁵ As Bonnie Kneen notes, some of these novels lack multi-dimensional depictions of bisexual characters and fall into the trap of stereotypization. For more on the lack of bisexual representation in YA lit, see Epstein, Colletta, and Kneen.

⁶ What is more, although there is potentially a wealth of bisexual+ literature, many books are not marketed as such, which can impede the process of finding representative literature; if the books that do exist are too difficult to find, they are essentially rendered invisible to the community that needs them the most.

⁷ Although youth today have embraced the umbrella term “queer,” in my work as a high school teacher, Gay-Straight Alliance club sponsor, and university professor of LGBT Studies, I find that many young people identify as bisexual in addition to using queer to label their identities.

representation. And part of this responsiveness is creating an ecosystem that supports a plurality of bisexual identities that stretch across markers of race and ethnicity, in which Latino boys get the chance to be bisexual on YA pages. As this article title states, there is power when bisexuality is spoken. Although bisexuality does not need to be named to exist on YA pages, there is power in texts that openly name it, as naming normalizes bisexuality and refuses its erasure. Despite bisexuals comprising the largest demographic of the LGBT community, in tandem with the United States' growing Latinx population, there are few instances of Latino teenage bisexuality in YA literature. Latinx YA novels such as *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* by Alex Sanchez, *Dragonlinked: Dragonlinked Chronicles, Volume 1* (2013) and *The Bond: Dragonlinked Chronicles Volume 2* (2014) by Adolfo Garza Jr., and *They Both Die at the End* (2017), *Infinity Son* (2020), *Infinity Reaper* (2021) by Adam Silvera, and *This Is Why They Hate Us* (2022) by Aaron H. Aceves remain part of only a handful of books that explicitly write Latino teen bisexuality into the narrative.^{8, 9} That said, there is a sizeable corpus of YA novels that portray Latina bisexuality, such as *Wild Beauty* (2017) by Anna-Marie McLemore, *Labyrinth Lost* (2016) by Zoraida Córdova, and *The Resolutions* (2018) by Mia García. Although these novels do important work in terms of identity and representation, this is beyond the scope of my work in this article.¹⁰ Moreover, queer Latinx YA literary scholarship has largely excluded Latino bisexuality. While studies by scholars Carolina Alonso, Cecilia J. Aragón, Laura Jiménez, Marilisa

⁸ Some readers and scholars view books such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and *More Happy Than Not* as bisexual texts. My focus here is on novels that explicitly name bisexuality.

⁹ It is worth noting that few of these books are written by openly bisexual Latino writers.

¹⁰ Notably, Latino bisexuality, while largely underspoken in YA literature, is not the only sexual identity that faces issues of representation. Trans Latinx teens remain underrepresented, for example. This, however, is perhaps changing as the variety of Latinx youth identities continue to penetrate the publishing world. The critical and commercial success of Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) and Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* (2020) signal a shift towards more representation.

Jiménez-García, and Angel Daniel Matos have made key interventions into our collective understanding of gay and lesbian Latinx identities as they materialize in YA fiction, these studies do not fully address the intersections of boyhood, bisexuality, and Latinidad.¹¹

Although all of the aforementioned texts are ripe for scholarly analysis, I now turn my attention to Adam Silvera's 2017 novel *They Both Die at the End*. I argue that *They Both Die at the End* pushes back against bisexual erasure in Latinx YA fiction while also presenting a blueprint for how Latino bisexuality might be rendered discursively explicit. As this article demonstrates, bisexuality is the norm in Silvera's novel. While this might seem inconsequential, the aforementioned research and statistics indicate that the mere act of writing Latino bisexuality into the narrative remains a radical—and powerful—act of inclusion. Novels that do so push against a mainstream erasure of bisexuality that is all too common. The intricate and subtle ways that *They Both Die at the End* addresses bisexuality render the book singular in both Latinx and YA literatures. The novel challenges some of the expectations that people have of YA queer Latinx representation and bisexual representation. As such, *They Both Die at the End* merits our critical attention.

When Latino Boys Get to Be Bisexual: *They Both Die at the End*

Born and raised in the Bronx, Puerto Rican writer Adam Silvera has burst onto the scene as a veritable force in the field of young adult literature. He has achieved something rare in young adult publishing: writing queer Latinx stories that routinely make the *New York Times* bestseller list. And these stories aren't watered-down depictions of Latinidad or

¹¹ See, for example, Carolina Alonso, "The Coming-of-Age Experience in Chicanx Queer Novels *What Night Brings* and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*;" Cecilia J. Aragón, "Representations of Sexual and Queer Identities in Chicana/o-Latina/o Children's Literature;" E. Sybil Durand and Marilisa Jiménez García, "Unsettling Representations of Identities: A Critical Review of Diverse Youth Literature;" Laura Jiménez, "Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature from 2000-2013;" Angel Daniel Matos and Jon Michael Wargo, "Editors' Introduction: Queer Futurities in Youth Literature, Media, and Culture."

queerness.¹² His novels *More Happy Than Not* (2015), *History Is All You Left Me* (2017), *What If It's Us* (2018, co-authored with Becky Albertalli), and the *Infinity Son* series (*Infinity Son*, 2020; *Infinity Reaper*, 2021) all draw upon Silvera's own positionality as a gay Latino while offering nuanced portrayals of characters who have largely been excluded from the YA canon. Silvera has already cemented himself as both the present and future of queer Latinx YA, all before his thirtieth birthday.¹³

They Both Die at the End takes place in a dystopian version of present-day New York City, in which people receive a phone call on the day they are going to die, giving them anywhere from a few seconds to nearly 24 hours to live. The phone call, made by a corporation called Death-Cast, doesn't give any information other than the fact of their impending death. At the start of the book, we meet the two protagonists: Mateo, an 18-year-old gay Puerto Rican homebody, and Rufus, a 17-year-old bisexual Cuban-American who has faced many challenges in recent years, including becoming a foster kid after he witnesses his family die. These two teenage boys are going to die, and there is nothing they can do to stop it. Silvera's novel doesn't rely on a single narrator; rather, the point of view frequently flips back and forth between Mateo and Rufus in addition to vignettes from other supporting characters.¹⁴ While some of these brief interludes from other characters may seem unnecessary at first, all of the stories converge at a later point, influencing Mateo and

¹² Some critics view the Latinidad in Silvera's body of work to be "atmospheric." That is, atmospheric Latinidad lacks nuance and only paints Latinidad onto the characters rather than fully exploring the complexity of Latinx identities. José Esteban Muñoz touches on this concept in his discussion of playwright María Irene Fornés, whose works rarely, if ever, feature Latinx characters yet are definitively Latinx works (14). In other words, Latinx literature does not need to be entrenched in identity markers to effectively convey Latinidad.

¹³ For critical studies of Adam Silvera's work, see Alyssa Chrisman and Mollie V. Blackburn, "Interrogating Happiness: Unraveling Homophobia in the Lives of Queer Youth of Color with *More Happy than Not*;" E. Sybil Durand and Marilisa Jiménez-García, "Unsettling Representations of Identities: A Critical Review of Diverse Youth Literature;" William Orchard, "Endless Happy Beginnings: Forms of Speculation in Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not*."

¹⁴ This narrative tactic leads to something common in YA literature: the unreliable narrator.

Rufus' narrative. Once Mateo and Rufus get the infamous call, they become known as "Deckers," join a social media app called "Last Friend," meet each other, and eventually spend their last day together. As the two boys become friends throughout the day, they build community. According to Juan Flores, the Spanish term "comunidad" is comprised of two parts—"común," or what people have in common; and "unidad," or what unites them (193). In the case of Mateo and Rufus, they are drawn together by their similarities (age and death, for example), and they are united by the queer friendship that is intrinsically tied to their Latinx identities. That is, they come together through a shared sense of what José Esteban Muñoz calls "feeling brown," a "manera de ser, a way of being in the world" that ties people together through their shared sense of "feeling like a problem, in commonality" (39). Muñoz adds that "feeling brown is feeling together in difference" (39). Rufus and Mateo come together through sharing the same problem: they are two queer Latinos who are going to die. While feeling brown, the two boys process grief, imagine what could have been, make peace with the past, check off items on their bucket lists, and fall in love. Oh, and they both die at the end.

While this might seem like a depressing story—after all, it is about two teenagers who are about to die—it is more so a book that celebrates reasons to live.¹⁵ We live for the people we love, Silvera tells us. We live for the experiences we get to have. As Mateo and Rufus come to learn, their *Death Day* is truly about living their life to its fullest extent, and doing so with people they love. Moreover, within this universe, there is no surprise regarding death. During a January 24, 2021, Twitter question and answer session, Silvera

¹⁵ Notably, the novel engages with the way that death is perceived and approached in many Latinx cultures. This influences the tone of the book and adds another layer of nuance that engages readers with Latinidad.

responded to several reader questions about how Rufus and Mateo view death. People can opt out of the Death Cast phone call, he wrote, meaning that the two boys both accept the rules of this universe and don't try to avoid the outcome ("People can opt out..."). A follow-up question asks if Silvera is afraid of dying: "I wrestle with mortality a lot, especially dying ahead of my time. That's how I conceived Death-Cast to KNOW when it's your last day" ("I wrestle with mortality..."). Another reader asks Silvera if Rufus and Mateo are happy in the afterlife, to which Silvera responds, "I like to think so" ("I like to think so"). This Twitter conversation reveals Silvera's motivations for writing his novel, while also conveying Rufus and Mateo's approach to their Last Day. Dying, then, is simply another part of life, and, although their day has moments of dread and defeat, ultimately they are able to celebrate the day in queer community.

They Both Die at the End is noteworthy for the ways that Silvera allows bisexuality to be spoken. Whereas Mateo's queerness is never explicitly addressed or given a name—he never says he is gay—Rufus' bisexuality is frequently presented in a very matter-of-fact way. Although bisexuals can exist without being named, as Jennifer Colette proposes, texts that do not name bisexuality are not "effective representation" of bisexuality (86).

Moreover, Mateo spends his Last Day coming to terms with being gay, a radically different experience compared to that of Rufus, who has already accepted this integral part of his Latinidad. Given these premises, Silvera's rendering of Rufus recalls Lázaro Lima's proposal that queer identity practices "provide alternative social imaginaries and templates from which to envision forms of national inclusion that establish greater continuity between the past, the present, and the futures of queer Latino communities and aesthetics" (10).

Rufus' characterization offers a key intervention into unraveling the nuances of Latinx

queerness. Much like the protagonist Emilio Rodríguez's 2017 play *Swimming While Drowning*, Mila, who is battling homelessness while coming to terms with his queerness, Rufus pushes against traditional racial and ethnic scripts by troubling the notion of masculinity and what it entails to live a life on the streets. As I write in "Young, Gay, and Latino: 'Feeling Brown' in Emilio Rodríguez's *Swimming While Drowning*": "Although these urban youths wrestle with the expectations of masculinity, they both actively reject the major identity script of Latino urban identity: the cholo, which has all-too-often become the stereotypical image of Latino men" (146). As *They Both Die at the End* and *Swimming While Drowning* demonstrate, writing alternative identity practices works to push against the stereotypes of Latino urban youth identity. This is to say that cultural work such as *They Both Die at the End* is a process of "broadening the identities of young Latinos" (Boffone 146).

Rufus's narrative begins in an unexpected way. When we meet him, he is physically assaulting his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend, Peck. He is surrounded by the "Plutos," who at first appear to be a gang, but in reality are anything but that—they are a group of teens who live at the same foster home and have become a chosen family. Or, as Cherríe Moraga proposes in her play *Giving Up the Ghost*, they "make familia from scratch" (58). That is, Rufus imposes a queer chosen family structure on the "Plutos." This group rejects the heteronormative family unit that Richard T. Rodríguez proposes has always traditionally existed in Latinx cultures and dominated community structures (2). Rodríguez suggests that we re-imagine family structures by unpacking what family means for those that don't necessarily fit within its traditional confines (3). In the case of Rufus, as a bisexual family leader, he encourages his friend group to create familia from scratch with him. Although we

do not know the sexualities of his friends, they inevitably queer popular notions of what urban life is like for youth of color. For example, Silvera initially paints Rufus as a stereotypical (straight) homeboy before unraveling the character's identity in such a way as to create something entirely original. In fact, Rufus's bisexuality would likely be shocking to a reader who entered the text without any previous knowledge. When we meet Rufus, he is entrenched in machismo and toxic masculinity. It is through this stereotype that Silvera disrupts the notion of masculinity and effectively forges Rufus' queerness. Here, Silvera's depiction of the homeboy stereotype reveals the complexities of identity and how, more often than not, youth identities don't fit neatly into a box. They are nuanced and full of contradictions.

As a bisexual Latino, Rufus's journey parallels Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *Nepantla*. *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word signifying being between different spaces. According to Anzaldúa, this in-between space, despite being "unstable, unpredictable, precarious," and "always-in-transition," is a site in which transformations can materialize (1). *Nepantlerxs* are a threshold people who "move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system" (Keating 6). As a place of in-between-ness, invisibility, and transition, *Nepantla* particularly speaks to the bisexual coming-of-age experience. *Nepantla* can signal confusion, pain, a loss of control, and anxiety: all things that are embodied in stories of teenagers working through their bisexuality. In the case of Rufus, he is left on the streets following the death of his parents and sister, and therefore must develop survival skills and new forms of queer family. Yet, as we see from his relationship with the Plutos, the struggles he endures are matched by the brotherly bonds he creates with his friends. When Rufus meets Mateo, he moves through

Nepantla, coming out on the other end as a more self-assured queer teen who has accepted his place in the world and his fate.

In *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*, Maria San Filippo theorizes the issue of visibility in her exploration of bisexuality in media: “Bisexuality is both visible and invisible [...] due to the slippage between its representational pervasiveness and the alternating measures of tacit acceptance, disidentification, or disavowal that render bisexuality discursively un(der)spoken” (4). Effectively, bisexuality is both unspoken and underspoken. Silvera’s novel pushes against this invisibility and underspokenness shortly after the reader meets Rufus. His violent turn soon leads to a clash with the police, who unexpectedly show up at the foster home looking for him. Rufus flees out the backdoor, finds himself alone, and downloads Last Friend in a last-ditch effort to find company with another Decker. In this profile, he puts his sexuality on full display alongside other key identity markers:

Name: Rufus Emeterio

Age: 17.

Gender: Male.

Height: 5’10”.

Weight: 169 lbs.

Ethnicity: Cuban-American

Sexuality: Bisexual. (...)

Final Thoughts: It’s about time. I’ve made mistakes, but I’m gonna go out right.

(72-3)

In this instance, Rufus' profile pushes against the ways that bisexuality is rendered discursively unspoken and underspoken. Doing this, San Filippo posits, resists "the monosexist assumptions of dominant cultural discourses," assumptions which largely (re)inforce a gay-straight binary of sexuality (35). This binary renders bisexuality invisible, which is particularly concerning for teenagers, as it limits queer teens' understanding of their plural desires (Kneen 362). We can see how Silvera pushes against this binary through Rufus's openness and outness. Indeed, in this moment Rufus is confident in his sexuality; he puts himself out there in such a way as to reject the notion that bisexual males must be in the closet or on the down low. Yes, he admits to having made mistakes, but he's not making them anymore. His Last Day will be done the right way, as an out bisexual Cuban-American teen.

Rufus' outness counters Mateo's closetedness. In this case, Silvera flips the traditional script in which gayness is easier to name and is thus a more viable identity than bisexuality. In *They Both Die at the End*, bisexuality is the norm and gayness is messy. Routinely, Mateo attempts to give voice to his queerness, but continues to fall short. When the two boys visit Mateo's father who is in a coma at the hospital, Mateo attempts to finally come out to his father:

It's time I tell you a story for once. You were always asking me—begging me, sometimes—to tell you more about my life and how my day was, and I always shut down. But me talking is all we've got now, and I'm crossing my fingers and toes and unmentionables that you can hear me." I grip his hands, wishing he'd squeeze back.
 "Dad, I ..."

I was raised to be honest, but the truth can be complicated. It doesn't matter if the truth won't make a mess, sometimes the words don't come out until you're alone. Even that's not guaranteed. Sometimes the truth is a secret you're keeping from yourself because living a lie is easier. (Silvera 117-8)

Gayness is unspoken. It is hidden. Even with his father who can't hear him, Mateo can't say it; he can't say those three words: "I am gay." In contrast, Rufus' coming-out is very matter of fact and something he feels he *must* do, in response to the impending death of his parents and sister.

After Rufus casually mentions that his sister was the first person he came out to, Mateo asks if he ever came out to his parents:

"On our last day together, yes. I couldn't put it off any longer." My parents had never hugged me like they did on their End Day. I'm really proud I spoke up to get that moment out of them. "My mom got really sad because she'd never get a chance to meet her future daughter- or son-in-law." (Silvera 176)

Admittedly, coming out to one's parents on their Last Day is not a normal situation, even in the alternate universe that Silvera constructs. Perhaps knowing that you will never see your child again influences the queer rite-of-passage. Even so, Silvera flips the trope of Latinx parents being unaccepting of queerness with the love that Rufus is met with after coming out. In this instance, the only thing that matters to his parents is supporting their child and ensuring that he knows they loved him for who he truly was.

Although *They Both Die at the End* is not part of the romance genre, the narrative does hinge around Rufus and Mateo falling in love. Neither boy is a fully reliable narrator, but each leaves the reader with nuggets of flirtation and questioning the other boy's

motivations and romantic interest. In perhaps the novel's most euphoric moment, Rufus and Mateo go to Clint's Graveyard, a club for Deckers to celebrate their final day on earth. At the club, the two boys sing karaoke to "American Pie" by Don McClean before being whisked off-stage. While the two boys have danced around kissing throughout the day, in this moment Mateo finally takes Rufus' signals and kisses the boy he now loves:

I drag him offstage, and once we're behind the curtain, I look him in the eyes and he smiles like he knows what's about to go down. And he's not wrong.

I kiss the guy who brought me to life on the day we're going to die. "Finally!" Rufus says when I give him the chance to breathe, and now he kisses me. "What took you so long?"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I know there's no time to waste, but I had to be sure you are who I thought you were. The best thing about dying is your friendship." (...)

"And even if I never got to kiss you, you gave me the life I always wanted." (308-9)

While Mateo initiates the kiss and appears to have been the most influenced by the unexpected friendship, Rufus has been affected just as much. After the kiss, he admits that he had been "so damn lost the past few months" and was filled with doubts (Silvera 309). He needed help to find himself again. And, as evidenced in the novel, the intrinsic bonds of queer love and friendship are exactly what Rufus needed to become a better version of himself. Although he had accepted his bisexuality and, in turn, been accepted by his family, something was missing: Mateo.

As Rufus nears death, the spokenness of his bisexuality has one remaining act. While the duo is about to kiss again backstage, Rufus' eye drift away and he smiles. His friends have arrived at the club. Up until this point in the narrative, it has been hinted that his

friends know he is bisexual, but it has never been explicitly mentioned. The forwardness that Rufus exhibits by naming his bisexuality in his Last Friend profile hints at a certain level of outness. When the Plutos see Rufus and Mateo embracing, there is uncertainty as to how the open display of queerness will be accepted. The Plutos group hug Rufus. Rufus narrates, “‘I love you guys,’ I say. No one cracks homo jokes. We’re past that” (Silvera 317). In this world, in this friend group, being bisexual is normal. Being bisexual isn’t taboo. Latino boys can be bisexual. Latino boys can kiss cute boys that they have been flirting with all day. They can even do it in front of their posse and ex-girlfriend.

They Both Die at the End imagines a new normal. It envisions a new world in which queerness is not frowned upon or something that should be hidden. Queerness in this world doesn’t have to be worked through or figured out. It simply is. It just exists. That Adam Silvera paints the rules of this world through a bisexual character is even more noteworthy. It is bisexual Rufus who provides gay Mateo with a roadmap to understanding and accepting his sexuality. Gone is the trope of the bisexual teen realizing they are different and then working through their sexuality, before ultimately realizing that it’s okay to be bisexual. It’s normal.

Conclusion: Imagining a More Inclusive Publishing Industry

In the introduction to *Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing*, Lázaro Lima argues that “Queer Latino writing, understood as such, functions as narrative acts against oblivion” (8), effectively signaling the resistant and dissenting character that queer Latinx writing embodies. The act of writing by queer writers of color exemplifies the sociopolitical activism in which the pen becomes a weapon to redefine “gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, economics, and political inclusion” (Lima 8). By inserting a bisexual Latino teen into

the narrative, *They Both Die at the End* by Adam Silvera offers an alternative route to resisting oppressive systems and structures, calling attention to Lima's notion that queer Latinx aesthetics not only offer resistance, but (re)imagine, (re)construct, (re)member, and (re)envision an original, unconventional branch of queerness that considers the full spectrum of Latinidad (8).

But even so, despite Silvera's successes with *They Both Die at the End*, I return to the central questions that led me to begin this research in the first place. Where are the stories about bisexual Latino teens? When do Latino boys get to be bisexual? As the demographics of the LGBTQ+ community in tandem with the queer community's increased level of acceptance in the United States reveal, there is no shortage of readers who are interested in stories about bisexual teens. The Latinx population continues to grow at a rapid clip, showing there is also a growing body of young readers who want to see their identities represented on the page. And, of course, young adult literature is one of the few categories of publishing that continues to become more relevant. Adam Silvera is no stranger to this, as *They Both Die at the End* experienced a renaissance of sorts in 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Silvera's novel became one of the more popular books discussed on BookTok, a TikTok subculture dedicated to YA literature. Naturally, TikTok's influence extended into the commercial realm, as well. The novel re-entered the prestigious *New York Times* Young Adult Paperback bestseller list, steadily climbing throughout 2020 and even reaching second on the list in January 2021, a position higher than when the book debuted over three years prior. As teen TikTok viewers know, there is a hunger for queer Latinx stories like those penned by Silvera.

So, if the readership exists, then where are these stories? Why aren't they being told? If we are to make the change we wish to see in the world—if we are to create an inclusive world—then we must interrogate the gaps in the publishing record. We must shape a world in which bisexual Latino boys get to be the protagonists in their own stories. We must shape a world in which these young readers know that, yes, they can be Latino *and* bisexual. The possibilities are endless. We just have to imagine them.

Works Cited

- Alonso, Carolina. "The Coming-of-Age Experience in Chicanx Queer Novels *What Night Brings* and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*." *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Fiction*, edited by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera, UP of Mississippi, 2020, pp. 175-89.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria E. "Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces." *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, edited by Gloria E. Anzaldua and Analouise Keating, Routledge, 2002, pp. 1-5.
- Aragón, Cecilia J. "Representations of Sexual and Queer Identities in Chicana/o- Latina/o Children's Literature." *Voices of Resistance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Chican@ Children's Literature*, edited by Laura Alamillo, Larissa M. Mercado-López, and Cristina Herrera, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 105-19.
- Aviles, Gwen. "The rise of young adult books with LGBTQ characters—and what's next." *NBC News*, 10 March 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/rise-young-adult-books-lgbtq-%20characters-what-s-next-n981176>.
- Boffone, Trevor. "Young, Gay, and Latino: 'Feeling Brown' in Emilio Rodriguez's *Swimming While Drowning*." *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Fiction*, edited by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera, UP of Mississippi, 2020, pp. 145-58.
- Brown, Anna. "Bisexual adults are far less likely than gay men and lesbians to be 'out' to the people in their lives." *Pew Research Center*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/18/bisexual-adults-are-far-less-likely-than-gay-men-and-lesbians-to-be-out-to-the-people-in-their-lives/>.

- Chrisman, Alyssa and Mollie V. Blackburn, “Interrogating Happiness: Unraveling Homophobia in the Lives of Queer Youth of Color with *More Happy than Not*.” *Engaging with Multicultural YA Literature in the Secondary Classroom: Critical Approaches for Critical Educators*, edited by Ricki Ginsberg and Wendy J Glenn, Routledge, 2019, pp. 83-92.
- Coletta, Jennifer. “The Missing B Word: Compulsory Binarization and Bisexual Representation in Children’s Literature.” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018, pp. 85-108.
- Durand, E. Sybil and Marilisa Jiménez García. “Unsettling Representations of Identities: A Critical Review of Diverse Youth Literature.” *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, n.p.
- Epstein, B. J. “‘The Case of the Missing Bisexuals’: Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers.” *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2014, pp. 110-25.
- Flores, Juan. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. Columbia UP, 2000.
- Gates, Gary J. “How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?” *The Williams Institute*, April 2011, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/how-many-people-lgbt/>.
- Human Rights Campaign Foundation. “At the Intersection: Race, Sexuality and Gender.” *Human Rights Campaign*, 2009, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/at-the-intersection-race-sexuality-and-gender>.
- Jiménez, Laura. “Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature from 2000-2013.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2015, pp. 406-22.

- Keating, AnaLouise. "From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2006, pp. 5-16.
- Kneen, Bonnie. "Neither Very Bi Nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2014, pp. 359-77.
- Kosciw, Joseph G., et al. "The 2009 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools." *Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)*, 2010, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512338.pdf>.
- Lima, Lázaro. "Genealogies of Queer Latino Writing." *Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing*, edited by Lázaro Lima and Felice Picano, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, pp. 3-13.
- Matos, Angel Daniel, and Jon Michael Wargo. "Editors' Introduction: Queer Futurities in Youth Literature, Media, and Culture." *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2019, n.p.
- Monro, Surya. *Bisexuality: Identities, Politics, and Theories*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Moraga, Cherrie. *Giving Up the Ghost*. West End, 1986.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *The Sense of Brown*, edited by Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o, Duke UP, 2020.
- Ochs, Robyn. "Bisexual." *Robyn Ochs*, 2021, <http://robynochs.com/bisexual/>.

- Pérez, Daniel Enrique. "Entre Machos y Maricones: (Re)Covering Chicano Gay Male (Hi)Stories." *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michael Hames-Garcia and Ernesto Javier Martinez, Duke UP, 2011, pp. 141-6.
- Rodríguez, Richard T. *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*. Duke UP, 2009.
- San Filippo, Maria. *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*, Indiana UP, 2013.
- Silvera, Adam. "I like to think so." *Twitter*, 24 Jan. 2021, <https://twitter.com/AdamSilvera/status/1353451218283028482?s=20>.
- . "I wrestle with mortality a lot, especially dying ahead of my time. That's how I conceived Death-Cast to KNOW when it's your last day." *Twitter*, 24 Jan. 2021, <https://twitter.com/AdamSilvera/status/1353451446063124481?s=20>.
- . "People can opt out of the Death-Cast call. There was more emphasis on this in an earlier draft. It's something I will revisit if I get to return to this world." *Twitter*, 24 Jan. 2021, <https://twitter.com/AdamSilvera/status/1353457835674279938?s=20>.
- . *They Both Die at the End*. Harper Teen, 2017.