

Sister Sledge Said It Best- “We are Family:”  
Chosen Family in LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis will explore the concept of chosen, or voluntary, family as it relates to fictional depictions of young adults who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. The introductory chapter of this thesis will discuss the importance of chosen family, depictions within LGBTQ+ literature for young adult readers, and how these depictions could be more prominent within young adult media to ensure queer readers have access to these models when constructing their own chosen family bonds in the present and the future. Becky Albertalli’s *Simonverse*, a representation of contemporary realism, will show how the expansion of a chosen family can include a community and influence more than just the figures within that community; this will be presented in the second chapter of this thesis. The inclusion of multicultural communities within a chosen family will be depicted through Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life*, Adiba Jaigirdar’s *The Henna Wars*, and Sheba Karim’s *Mariam Sharma Hits the Road* in the third chapter. The fourth chapter will show how magical connections can parallel and expedite the creation of chosen family bonds in Aiden Thomas’s *Cemetery Boys* and M.K. England’s *Spellhacker*. The conclusion of this thesis will tie together the research previously analyzed with the intention of discussing how the chosen family is represented in LGBTQ+ young adult literature and media, and how these works could further model chosen family within the variety of genres reflected in these media types.



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A Thesis

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by Rachel Barlow

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## **Chapter One: “We Are Family”: Introduction to Chosen Family in LGBTQ+ Young Adult Media**

Sister Sledge’s popular song has been a staple in the gay community since its premiere in 1979, even being used in popular culture and media such as *The Birdcage* as an ironic statement that queer family can be more reliable than the conservative family of one’s blood. The idea of chosen family is one that has existed within the LGBTQ+ community and in other non-heteronormative communities for many years and has been increasingly analyzed and discussed, particularly in the LGBTQ+ literary world. According to sociology researchers such as Margaret Nelson, “Scholarship since the 1980s has done much to broaden our understanding of new forms of meaningful relationships, variations among patterns of support, and the multiple ways that people live outside of the historical ‘traditional’ nuclear family” (215). These typical families are structured by heteronormativity, by which “we mean a way of being in the world that relies on the belief that heterosexuality is normal, which implicitly positions homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal and thus inferior” (Blackburn and Smith 625). This concept is one that assumes that heterosexuality and cis-gendered individuals are the “norm,” and that anything that differs from these systems is foreign or Other. It is here that the importance of queer studies and literature is illustrated. As J. Halberstam states, these works “offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (89). Many individuals identify within the LGBTQ+ community, and it is important that all people are able to find representations of themselves within works of literature and other media.

Often, failing to fit within this heteronormative system causes marginalization or ostracization for those individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. Professors and researchers such as Mollie Blackburn and Jill Smith state that all individuals who “experience gender in

ways that are nondichotomous or in ways that are in conflict with that which is expected are policed and punished within the heterosexual matrix” (628). This is true also for those who experience sexuality in differing ways as well. When these individuals are rejected by these systems and monoliths, they fail to receive the proper support and fortification that are needed to fully grow and thrive in this space between societal norms. Many LGBTQ+ individuals must create chosen families as alternate systems of support to aid them in their growth and to help heal the wounds inflicted by systems that fail to support nonheteronormative individuals.

According to *The Sage Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*, chosen families are those involving “nonbiological kinship bonds, whether legally recognized or not, deliberately chosen for the purpose of mutual support and love” (239). The idea of supplemental and nonbiological relationships is not solely relegated to the LGBTQ+ community, and the practice is fairly common across many diverse groups and cultures; however, within the LGBTQ+ community, the practice is often one of survival. These chosen families could consist “of friends, partners and ex-partners, biological and nonbiological children, and others who provide kinship support” (SAGE Encyclopedia 239). There are many diverse variations of chosen families, and the importance of these families is different for everyone within them. Typically, these families originate as a support system when one’s biological family has rejected a member of the LGBTQ community, or the family is deficient in some regard. However, “Chosen families have expanded family bonds, not threatened them” (SAGE 241). Instead of seeing chosen families as a threat to the ideal societal norm of a nuclear biological family, society should begin to embrace the anthropological benefits of a voluntary family. According to scholars Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, a family should be analyzed “in terms of a set of social practices rather than an institution. From this perspective, ‘family’ can be

seen less as a noun and more as an adjective or, possibly, a verb... ‘Family’ represents a constructed quality of human interaction or an active process rather than a thing-like object” (37).

Instead of the traditional nuclear family that became normative in the mid-20th century and has since waned as a societal ideal, it is clear that society and researchers should begin to encompass more diverse definitions of family, not simply those who are blood or biological, but those who act as our systems of support when it is most necessary. Like traditional families, “Chosen families are not uniform in the type of support they may provide to one another. ...For example, chosen families may play a strong role in the life of a young person and then play a less prominent role as the young person ages” (Sage Encyclopedia, 239). It is particularly important to note that whether the family is biological or chosen, the necessity for this support system is particularly strong in adolescence. Having these community and familial bonds is essential, and these “influences extend beyond adolescence to play an important and unique role in an LGB child’s transition to young adulthood” (Soler, et al, 2). Coming of age is a difficult transition for most teens, if not all, and when a teenager is also struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity, this can cause even more strife during this process. It is important that these individuals find strong support systems that allow them to embrace their true selves, while also serving to protect and assist these young adults with the possible obstacles that they may face; there could not be much more deserving of the name family than these bonds.

Whether such relationships are defined as traditional or not, it is clear that more research is needed into the importance of chosen families, particularly as it relates to the support of LGBTQ+ adolescents. Throughout many studies, the lack of proper frameworks and foundations for understanding chosen families from the perspective *of* these families needs to be corrected. In

their article “Queering Methodologies to Understand Queer Families,” psychological researchers Fish and Russell have found that when researching and discussing queer families, scholars “must reflect an understanding of and responsibility for correcting the systems of oppression that situate the queer families and the individuals who constitute them. Only then will family scientists be able to assert their commitment to the understanding and strengthening of all” (20). Future scholarship must come from the perspective of chosen families and those individuals who are within those communities and with the intention of correcting the former marginalization that these families and individuals have experienced for far too long. By dismantling the societal expectation of a traditional family as superior and redefining chosen family bonds as similarly significant and profound, then the members of the LGBTQ+ community will be better represented and understood. The relationships formed within a chosen or voluntary family are just as true as those within a biological family and validity must be given to these ties just as it is to any blood relationship.

There is a popular aphorism that I have heard several times over the course of my life: blood is thicker than water. It was only recently that I discovered that, like so much else in life, we were only getting half the story. That full aphorism is that “the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.” Perhaps the idea of this covenant once meant the religious implications of Christ’s sacrifice, but within the dynamic status of language, this phrase has taken on a much different (and thankfully, secular) meaning. The relationships we form, the bonds that we forge through blood and toil—these bonds represent a secular covenant that individuals form together, and as such, they may be thicker and more sustainable over time than those of traditional family kinship, or those of the womb. Often people disparage chosen families, stating that these relationships are “less durable because what is chosen can be

unchosen” (Lewin 977); however, through study, scholars have found the exact opposite, that these voluntary kinships “become models of loyalty and resilience” (Lewin 977). It is quite clear to anyone within a chosen family that these families can be just as real and reliable as those of biological obligation. Making a choice, and continuing to make that choice every day to love and be there for someone, not from obligation, but of love, may be truer than any assumed blood imperative. Through the modern evolution of our social values and ever-changing humanity, creating bonds of choice and emotion rather than biological imperative is a step forward to altering previous heteronormative definitions of family and becoming more inclusive to all families. These bonds are imperative to real-world relationships and individuals, and it is therefore important that these relationships are demonstrated for individuals in literary forms, for quite often literature serves as a mirror for individuals, demonstrating ways to see ourselves reflected back through literary works.

Even if the family depicted does not call itself a chosen or voluntary family, the bonds formed are what are important to the characters and to the reader. The language that is used for the relationship is not what matters; instead, it is the bond itself that truly resonates through the work. Author Elif Shafak conveys this message quite clearly in the LGBTQ+ novel *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. Shafak writes:

There were two kinds of families in this world: relatives formed the blood family; and friends, the water family. If your blood family happened to be nice and caring, you could count your lucky stars and make the most of it; and if not, there was still hope; things could take a turn for the better once you were old enough to leave your home sour home. As for the water family, this was formed much later in life, and was, to a large extent, of your own making. While it was true that

nothing could take the place of a loving, happy blood family, in the absence of one, a good water family could wash away the hurt and pain collected inside like black soot. It was therefore possible for your friends to have a treasured place in your heart, and occupy a bigger space than all your kin combined. But those who had never experienced what it felt like to be spurned by their own relatives would not understand this truth in a million years. They would never know that there were times when water ran thicker than blood. (198-199)

This popular novel illustrates the message of chosen family in LGBTQ+ literature (even if it uses the oft misquoted version of the blood versus water debate), and yet this novel is about the connections needed among adults within this community. In addition to better representing LGBTQ+ adults, it is also equally as important to ensure that the young adults within this community are represented as well. Doing this through young adult literature and media is the best vehicle to represent these teenagers.

While these bonds are incredibly important for adults who have been marginalized or failed by their biological kin, they are also imperative for young adults who are suffering similar failures as they come to terms with their sexual and gender identities. Young adult literature and media play a significant role in allowing young adults to have “windows and mirrors” in fictional worlds to allow them opportunities to experience different perspectives or to see representations of themselves, respectively. Scholar Rudine Sims Bishop explains,

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange...When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and

experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirror in books. (ix)

Literature and media are often rehearsals for real life, allowing teenagers to see themselves through different characters and their similar and different experiences. By offering glimpses into other worlds, young people can also see different realities and create connections to those different experiences. These works then serve “not only as texts that can engage young people in reading by reflecting their realities and addressing their concerns, but also as narratives that can challenge and expand readers’ understandings of those who may be different from them (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Cart, 2008)” (Durand 74). It is important that there are more diverse representations in young adult literature to ensure that teenagers are not learning “a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (Bishop, x). To properly grow and improve, teachers and literary scholars must expand the horizons of the literary canon and better represent the innumerable and unique perspectives of these ever-evolving diverse youths. In this, content should reflect form; young adult literature often presents the process of changing and coming of age; to do so as a literary genre, it too must grow and change to better fit the future. However, although we may wish upon a thousand stars for the dreams of tomorrow, we must instead look at what we have now and analyze our present reality.

Young adult literature as a genre is well known for its presentation of the *Bildungsroman*, or the coming-of-age story, that illustrates the emotional and mental growth of a character from adolescence into the beginning stages of adulthood. Typically in these works, particularly those that combine the *bildungsroman* and the hero/quest pattern, the protagonist must undergo this transformation by traveling away from his or her home, stepping outside of any traditional comfort zones, or somehow overcoming an obstacle or difficulty that requires them to grow or

mature. This transformation is vital to the character and is shown through tests of the character's will, and the development of his or her identity throughout the events of the text. Young adult literature, as a specific, market-driven genre has been around for nearly a century, and not only have these novels been available to readers since the 1940s, but several of the earliest works of young adult fiction, like Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* and Madeleine L'Engle's *The Small Rain*, published in the 1940s "both also included incidental treatments of homosexuality" (Jenkins and Cart 7). LGBTQ+ young adult literature, though not then titled as such, has been around since young adult literature's introduction to society at large. Although Daly and L'Engle's novels both included homosexuality, neither was considered an LGBTQ+ work. It wasn't until 1969 that "the first young adult novel to deal with homosexuality was published" (Jenkins and Cart 8): John Donovan's controversial *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Some scholars believe that within this novel, there was a connection "between homosexuality and death ...[and this] equation haunted the early history of gay and lesbian literature" (Jenkins and Cart 15). This trope, often referred to as "bury your gays," is one that can still be seen in modern media. However, other scholars like Banks and Alexander, believe that these early works should be valued and analyzed for their merits instead of solely being dismissed for their failings. Although it was important to be critical of these early works when they were all that existed of the genre, now that LGBTQ+ literature has come so far in its expansion, it is important to reclaim these older works and put them back into conversations with more diverse texts to have a larger picture of LGBTQ+ young adult literature as a whole.

Failure to understand where LGBTQ young adult literature has been previously limits the exploration of sexuality and gender in future works. Although newer YA literature may present "a desire to make gay YA texts 'normative,' to provide a space where the 'homo' is normal,

regular, accepted, valued” (Banks and Alexander 103), with this “increased visibility has also come a very particular, very narrow view of what’s visible, what’s normal, resulting in what Lisa Duggan and other scholars have come to call ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan, 2002; Halberstam, 2005; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2014)” (103). As Banks and Alexander continue, “given the number of gay teen suicides that make the news, it’s clear that gay youth need as much support and encouragement as they can get from whatever venue” (103); yet, this can also have the unfortunate effect of enforcing homonormativity when only one type of story is published. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that as scholars and teachers, we work towards “destabilizing the idea of fixed, unitary, and essentialist identity categories, while simultaneously interrogating how identities are unstable and fluid, discursively and performatively produced, and relationally constructed” (Helmer 184). It is this work that must be taken into account when analyzing novels of the past and critiquing novels of the present and future within LGBTQ+ literature.

With the introduction of Donovan’s *I’ll Get There*, LGBTQ+ young adult literature began its start, although the novels that came out, particularly in the 1970s, were mostly considered “problem novels,” which were “driven by [their] relentless focus on social issues that plagued some contemporary teens... Highly didactic, these novels were notable for one-dimensional characterization, plot contrivance, and near-total lack of art” (Jenkins and Cart 17). Typically within these works, homosexuality was seen as a “problem” a young person had to “deal with,” and the main focus of these novels was often the teenage protagonist coming out over the course of the story. The issue with “coming-out narratives” as Thein and Kedley explain is that they constrain and limit explorations of gender and sexuality because they insist on characters’ settling on definitive sexual identities as narrative resolution rather than allowing for the kinds of complex, nuanced, and/or unsettled sexual and

gender identities that Queer Theory would suggest we all experience to one degree or another. Further, the coming-out narrative suggests that coming-out is a singular, climactic moment rather than (or in addition to) a potentially ongoing fluid process that one might experience across time, place, and space. (7)

By focusing the entire narrative of these works on the process of coming-out, these novels become incredibly narrow in their focus, often solely dedicated to “homosexual visibility (i.e., coming out and related issues)” (Jenkins and Cart 35) rather than what happens to these teenagers after this coming-out journey or while continuing their formation of identity as a fluid process.

Over the course of the 1980s, there was an increase in the number of LGBTQ+ figures; however, many of these were secondary characters rather than protagonists, and they too were subject to homonormativity as they were mostly white, cisgender males. It was not until the 1990s that things began to become more expansive; although the genre was “pronounced near death by most observers at the beginning of the decade, the form made a remarkable recovery and by 1995 was entering a period of expansion, creative growth, and literary sophistication that has continued to the present day” (Jenkins and Cart 68). Over the next two decades, several new publishers of young adult novels appeared on the scene to purposefully focus on producing works for diverse young adults, including LGBTQ+ individuals. These resulted in a large increase in the number of LGBTQ+ young adult titles, which allowed YA literature to come into its own as an art form, allowing for more unique voices to be represented. This also allowed for more narrative choices that did not solely focus on coming out as the entire journey a young adult within the LGBTQ+ community had to undergo. Instead, in the twenty-first century, novels began to include “teen characters’ lives *after* coming out” (Jenkins and Cart 99), thus showing

that having “an LGBTQ+ identity and an ordinary life are not mutually exclusive” (Jenkins and Cart 119). Instead of these young adults focusing on revealing their gender and sexual identities to their loved ones, these works began to focus on the battles that these individuals underwent after coming out. In contrast to a more traditional Bildungsroman, the queer Bildungsroman illustrated that many of the battles these young adults face are not only against the outside world but can even be against biological family members as well. It is through all of these battles that the LGBTQ+ young adults within these works are able to construct their identities not only as queer characters but as citizens of the world with unique personalities and stories to tell.

These identities take on additional facets when the Bildungsroman involves a character of multicultural heritage or nonheteronormative gender or sexual identity. The development of identity then becomes intersectional and involves not only the formative experiences that all adolescents undergo, but additional layers of prejudice, marginalization, or oppression because of facets outside of the character’s control. Since so much young adult literature focuses on transformation and change, it makes sense to incorporate the ever-changing multiculturalism of the world and diverse gender and sexual identities. There have been some changes in young adult literature with the “increasing appearance of people of color in a literature that historically has been almost exclusively white and middle class. This is no longer the case, though characters of color are still underrepresented” (Jenkins and Cart 128). There is more diversity than ever in young adult literature, and YA lit has “developed in ways that has given faces to teens of all races, ethnicities, cultures, classes, national origins, abilities/disabilities, and religious beliefs” (Jenkins and Cart 4). The intersectional identities of these teens have almost always included LGBTQ+ youth, but those members “have been nearly invisible in YA fiction” (Jenkins and Cart 4). It is essential to limit homonormativity as this “may require us to think of LGBT as white and

middle class, and characters of color as straight, as if the communities were mutually exclusive” (Linville and Carlson ix-x). This is not true, and there must be more “representation of the intersectional spaces where actual young people reside” (Linville and Carlson ix-x) because these depictions will allow for more young adults to see themselves within the mirrors these works hold up to young readers. LGBTQ+ members who also represent other cultures and religions must find these mirrors in the media that surrounds them as they are often even more vulnerable than their white counterparts. A survey by the Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Education Network (GLSEN) found that ““48% of LGBT students of color reported being verbally harassed in school because of both their sexual orientation and race/ethnicity, and 15% had been physically harassed based on both of these characteristics’ (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009, p. 23)” (Durand 74). These individuals must have authentic voices and representations to serve not only as mirrors for these experiences but also to show others windows through which they may experience the challenges facing multicultural LGBTQ+ young adults. This allows for all readers to have a better understanding of perspectives other than their own.

Thankfully, the increase in LGBTQ+ young adult literature and media is a starting point to evolving the literary canon and expanding the horizons of the literary world to better include diverse and nonheteronormative voices; therefore, using these works as places to model chosen families for young adults is imperative to ensure that these individuals may find the hope that even if their biological families are failing in serving them, or if they are experiencing difficulties in their school and social lives, there is the possibility of a different present and future where they may find their support systems within the bonds of chosen family. These families are particularly important when the characters are rejected or otherwise failed by their biological kin. Doing this is vital to ensure that these teenagers are able to see functioning archetypes in literary

and media depictions upon which they can model their own real-world experiences. It is essential that chosen family bonds are illustrated throughout LGBTQ+ literature as the queer community is not as represented as it was in the past. Jenkins and Cart write that “this may be due to the fact that out teens are now simply presumed to have a sympathetic unofficial community of friends both gay and straight whether or not they have access to formal communities like school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or teen LGBTQ+ centers” (142). If these informal communities of friendships, both LGBTQ+ and straight allies, are serving as bonds to tether these young adults when they have been rejected by heteronormative systems, then depictions of these communities must increase to showcase authentic representations of voluntary family bonds. Using young adult literature and media as a vehicle for representing these families ensures that the audience for these depictions will be made up of teenagers and young adults who most need these works. The depictions and functions of chosen families may vary depending on the genre of the novel to create both windows to new perspectives and worlds or possibly to provide mirrors for LGBTQ+ teenagers to see themselves reflected and represented in popular works of literature and media.

The concept of chosen family is illustrated throughout multiple depictions in young adult literature and media, becoming particularly poignant as it shows the importance of these bonds to adolescents who are striving to form their intersectional and formative identities. It is essential that members of marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community, have adequate support systems to further their mental and physical well-being. These support systems are not only essential for growth and happiness, but they are often lifesaving to young adults who are coming to terms with their identities, be that intersectional, gender, or sexual, identities. Tragically, many young adults deal with rejection from biological and heteronormative systems with some teenagers even facing abandonment, physical or mental abuse, or other failures by

these hegemonic forces. According to the Human Rights Campaign's 2018 Youth Report, "48% of LGBTQ youth out to their parents say that their families make them feel bad about being LGBTQ" (5). Perhaps this is why many teenagers stated that they are only comfortable coming out to their friends and chosen family, but are not yet comfortable with discussing their sexuality with their biological families. Often these young adults fear the rejection and failures of their heteronormative family units and when this occurs, they thus must turn instead to chosen and voluntary kin to meet their social and emotional needs.

Young adult literature reflects the rejections and punishments that many LGBTQ+ young adults suffer in the real world. Jenkins and Cart reveal that there has been an increase in the number of teenagers who "have been kicked out into homelessness by their parents or guardians. A recent study of homeless youth in New York City reported that the average age at which lesbian and gay youth in New York became homeless was 14.4 years, while the average age for homeless transgender youth was 13.5 years" (104). Many LGBTQ+ individuals are rejected by their biological families; therefore, chosen family may be the only support system that these individuals find throughout their lives. It is crucial that LGBTQ+ young adults see representations of these chosen bonds throughout their media to better understand how they too may construct these chosen families if they face similar rejections from the heteronormative forces in their lives. This is especially urgent for transgender young adults as many of these teenagers feel unsafe in their everyday lives, especially at schools where they are made to feel unwelcome and are often harassed because of their gender identities. Because of this, it is clear that "more information about transgender teens is urgently needed, and such information is available in young adult books" (Jenkins and Cart 162). These works may not only comfort transgender teenagers who are looking for representations of themselves, but they could also

serve to broaden the perspectives of cisgender and straight students who are learning how to be better allies to the individuals in their lives who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. This in turn could allow them to act as improved support systems for these queer individuals who may not have any connections to their biological kin or from the outside world. Depicting chosen families who integrate a diverse group of LGBTQ+ individuals would better assist these students in understanding themselves and those around them. If there are further models upon which young adults may scaffold their own support systems or chosen families, then they will be able to understand the importance of these bonds as they construct their identities and battle not only the obstacles of the outside world but possibly their biological families as well.

In this thesis, I analyze depictions of chosen families through multiple genres centered on young adults as readers and characters in both fiction and television/film media based on those novels in order to illustrate how these chosen families serve as functioning support systems that allow LGBTQ+ individuals to grow and develop even when they are failed by “traditional” biological family systems. These functions differ within the different genres under LGBTQ+ young adult literature’s large scope. Often realistic and contemporary literature serves as a mirror to better allow young adults representations that reflect the experience that they may be encountering. These novels become intersectional when the protagonists learn how to exist within the liminal space between their sexual identities and their religious or cultural identities, and their journeys also present mirrors to young adult readers who are searching for representation. Thankfully, LGBTQ+ young adult literature has come a long way in “expanding inclusion of new forms, faces, genres, themes, voices, narrative strategies, and more” (Jenkins and Cart 93) because historically, these individuals were solely present within the “problem novels” and “coming-out” narratives that were “relegated to a small and specialized niche on the

periphery of the assemblage of YA fiction described as ‘contemporary realism.’” (Jenkins and Cart 93). In the modern expansion of LGBTQ+ young adult literature, the genres that fall under this category have expanded to more unique narratives and “literary novels that are character driven and are enriched by considerations of ambiguity, complex structures, and nuanced treatment of situation and theme” (Jenkins and Cart 94). Through these, LGBTQ+ young adult literature has become truly an art form that incorporates different genres and voices within its umbrella.

Paranormal and fantasy LGBTQ+ young adult literature is one example of the expansive new realms present within YA literature, offering a window to a different world where teenagers can view expansive and fantastical worlds that demonstrate the protagonist’s growth and development in these diverse worlds. Research has shown that a chosen family is needed in our real-world lives when we are failed by the heteronormative models of society; however, literature cannot fill that void. What literature can do, thankfully, is provide “mirrors and windows” into which young adults can gaze to better model their own experiences in the future. Novels and television media focused on young adult readers and characters have gained popularity, and it is vital that those who identify within the LGBTQ+ community have the opportunity to engage with accurate depictions and representations that mirror their own or that give them a window through which to view other perspectives or worlds. LGBTQ+ young adult literature depicts chosen family as a connection between the individuals within that chosen family to systems larger than themselves throughout multiple genres, such as contemporary realism, multicultural identity quests, and paranormal fiction to better allow queer readers access to windows and mirrors through which they can peer to see reflections of themselves or others in diverse ways as they begin to construct their identities and chosen families in the present and

future. Although these windows and mirrors currently exist within these novels, because they are not as analyzed or publicized within the literary canon, queer readers may be lacking models of chosen family for their own future lives unless they are given more opportunities to access these depictions through LGBTQ+ young adult media in their lives.

Within LGBTQ+ young adult media, there are many diverse and exciting genres to analyze to better understand the representations of chosen families. Many young adult scholars tend to discuss young adult literature in terms of genre or theme to better frame its teaching, and so too I analyze novels that are related by their genre or theme to better understand their similar depictions of chosen family. LGBTQ+ young adult literature depicts chosen family as a connection between the individuals within that chosen family to systems larger than themselves throughout multiple genres, such as contemporary realism, multicultural identity quests, and paranormal fiction to better allow queer readers access to windows and mirrors through which they can peer to see reflections of themselves or others in diverse ways as they begin to construct their identities and chosen families in the present and future. To better understand the literary and cultural value of LGBTQ+ young adult texts, it is imperative for scholars to analyze the way these novels and authors have constructed “chosen family” networks of support for queer characters. Doing so allows us to see yet another important contribution that queer authors bring to the broader literary canon. This move also benefits teachers as studying these chosen family connections in our classrooms provides yet another way to validate the experiences of queer and questioning youth. In Chapter Two, I focus on LGBTQ+ representations of chosen family in contemporary realism. In doing so, I will explore how the idea of how a chosen family can allow protagonists to connect with their communities as a source of support and love when biological families have failed to do so. These connections can expand beyond a friend group over time and

influence others within a community, such as we see in Becky Albertalli's "Simonverse." This series includes the novels *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *Leah on the Offbeat*. Both of these works center on a specific school, beginning with the tale of Simon Spier, who is blackmailed and outed at his school in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. These works center on his relationships with his chosen family which consists of his best friends, his supportive parents and siblings, and later his romantic partner. *Leah on the Offbeat* branches from this novel to focus on Simon's bisexual plus-size best friend, Leah, and her later romantic relationship with Abby, one of their friends from the first novel. Realistic LGBTQ+ young adult literature allows teenagers who are being failed by the heteronormative systems of their lives to find depictions of chosen family bonds that serve as support systems for the teenagers in these works. Through the foursome within the Simonverse, Albertalli shows how chosen family bonds can support young adults as they journey through their lives, impacting others, and altering communities around them. that are helping these characters to also heal from their own traumas at the hands of these systems. Albertalli's novels not only show the impact of chosen families within the series but they also serve as mirrors for queer readers who will also be impacted by Simon's chosen family, taking these lessons with them into their own communities as they construct chosen families in their present and future lives.

Adding onto the foundation of contemporary realism, in Chapter Three, I discuss the multicultural identity quests that can be seen within this genre by analyzing the importance of chosen family for teenagers who identify as not only sexual minorities but also ethnic or religious minorities. When these young adults step outside of their heteronormative systems, they are failed by their biological families but also need chosen families to keep them tethered to their religious or cultural communities. To do this, I analyze Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *The Inexplicable*

*Logic of My Life*, Sheba Karim's *Mariam Sharma Hits the Road*, and Adiba Jaigirdar's *The Henna Wars*. Often there is the additional risk of rejection when a member of the LGBTQ+ family is a part of a religious or ethnic group that further marginalizes their intersectional identity. Throughout these novels, the characters struggle with not only their sexual identities but also with the effects it may have on their cultural identities as well. Many students will face rejection from others in their communities, even if their immediate family members are supportive. Many young adults are struggling to understand each piece of their identities, to create the foundation for who they wish to become later in life. Having outside influences and forces of control, which could burden them further, is often detrimental to the adolescent's mental health and well-being. It is during these difficulties that a strong chosen family can help support the teen and allow them to have access to a safe place where they can fully explore their identities without fear of rejection or retaliation. When these individuals are failed by their families, they also lose a connection to their religion or culture and it is here that chosen families serve additionally as not only support systems, but also as tethers to the protagonist's communities.

In contrast to these two types of realistic fiction, in Chapter Four, I analyze the use of windows to other worlds by examining the use of chosen families within paranormal LGBTQ+ young adult literature. Included in this topic are the parallels that are drawn between witchcraft and the nonheteronormative experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community as both battle against typical hegemonic systems. To do so, I discuss Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* and M.K. England's *Spellhackers*. Both of these works include chosen families that connect the members to each other and also to a larger magical community. So often within these texts, and within witch-centric literature, more specifically, the characters are forced to hide a piece of themselves

from the rest of the society around them. Here the reader can easily compare the struggle so many teenagers face as they come to terms with their sexual and gender identities, often choosing to keep pieces of themselves hidden from others. In each of these works, the characters find themselves forming relationships and chosen families with those who are like-minded or accepting of their magic, a clear metaphor for the often feared and hunted feelings of those within the LGBTQ+ community. When these individuals are failed by heteronormative systems, they find healing from their chosen families, and often these connections are made within magical communities.

Using this analysis, we can then further examine how chosen family is represented in LGBTQ+ young adult literature and media and how it could be better modeled in the future. Many adolescents are forming their intersectional identities and may face future rejection from their biological families or ethnic and religious communities. Depicting chosen families as valid relationships may prove useful for these young adults as they begin to find their footing in the world. There are many different methods used to depict how these support systems heal the wounds inflicted by the failures of biological families within various genres of LGBTQ+ YA literature. It is through these works that young adults must find diverse types of kinship in order to see better representations of healthy support systems from which they can model their own chosen families if biological kin and heteronormative systems are not serving their function and are unable to help their members grow and bloom. As Jenkins and Cart outline in their work *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, due to “the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ people in motion pictures and especially in series television, YA literature is now including more and more characters who ‘just happen’ to be LGBTQ+ and whose sexuality is no longer presented as being a ‘problem’ but, instead, a condition of almost quotidian being” (221).

However, the work is not yet finished. There must be more diversity in the representation of LGBTQ+ teenagers; if the trend towards more inclusive representations continues, then these works will “offer a better depiction of the complexities of the real world and homosexuality to ensure that all readers might see their faces reflected in it” (Jenkins and Cart 221). LGBTQ+ young adult literature can be used to illustrate how chosen family creates a connection among the individuals of that family but can also be used to connect these individuals to other systems; doing so through multiple genres allows LGBTQ+ readers to see “windows and mirrors” (Sims) through which they can see representations of themselves depicted and get a better understanding of others as they begin to form chosen families of their own in their present or future lives. So many of the works within LGBTQ+ young adult literature present these windows and mirrors; however, they are often not as analyzed or publicized within the literary canon, which could mean that some queer readers lack the opportunity to access authentic representations of chosen family through the media in their lives. It is this goal that must be met by teachers and scholars head-on to ensure that all readers can find comfort in literature that reflects their voices and showcases the diverse models of what chosen family can be to those who need this support the most.

## **Chapter Two: Tilt-a-Whirls and Platonic Soulmates:**

### **Chosen Family as Community in Albertalli's *Simonverse***

With the film debut of *Love, Simon*, Becky Albertalli's title character was the first gay teenage protagonist to be shown in a major motion picture; however, before the movie launched, Albertalli began a series of novels that depicted Simon and his chosen family with even more depth and heart than the movie could possibly have shown in its short 110 minutes. Becky Albertalli not only makes the most bitter and jaded of readers believe in happily ever afters (trust me, I'm one of them), but she also shows that chosen family not only affects those within that family but that it can cause a ripple effect, touching lives in an outward spiral and impacting an entire community of people in many ways. Starting with her novel *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Albertalli tells the story of a small community that is touched and impacted by the story of a teenage boy, Simon, who is blackmailed and eventually outed as gay to the entire school. It is his story, and that of his friend-family, whose stories are depicted through what is affectionately referred to as the "*Simonverse*," which continues through the novels *Leah on the Offbeat* and *Love Creekwood*.

The significance of Albertalli's novels is that these pieces depict a realistic mirror through which LGBTQ+ young adults can peer to witness how significant chosen family can be and how these family units can not only shape individuals but how they can connect us to something even larger. Starting with Simon and his chosen family, and expanding outward to new friends and chosen family, and eventually, the school community itself, Albertalli illustrates how chosen families can bond communities together and make a difference for others (even those who may not be part of those inner chosen families) who may need to be inspired by the support and guidance that can be shown or taught by those bonds. As Jenkins and Cart discuss in

*Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult literature, Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is a “superlative gay romance [that] reflects the new and heartening reality that coming out and being out no longer need to be deeply traumatic or to invite havoc in their wake. Indeed, it can be almost as natural as breathing” (135). In fact, works like “*Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, winner of the 2016 William C. Morris Award for best first novel of the year” indicate “that LGBTQ literature has come of age as literature” (Jenkins and Cart 127). In this chapter, I analyze Becky Albertalli’s novels *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *Leah on the Offbeat* to convey how chosen family within contemporary realism can depict voluntary family as not only essential to the LGBTQ+ members within that family but also to show these bonds can impact the community around them which may have future effects on other LGBTQ+ young adults within those same communities and may also affect queer readers as they construct their own chosen families in the present or the future.

**“There shouldn’t even be a default”: *Simon Vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda***

Albertalli’s series starts with the novel *Simon Vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* in which the reader meets Simon Spier, a nerdy seventeen-year-old who is coming to terms with his sexuality and identity as he grows and matures. Although he has a supportive biological family and a fantastic chosen family made of his friends, Simon is still hiding the fact that he is gay from everyone he knows. So when he finds an anonymous post on his school’s Creekwood Secrets blog that talks about the struggles of being secretly gay, Simon feels compelled to email this anonymous person, Blue, and confess that he feels this same way. Through their emails, Simon and Blue have begun a friendship where they have told each other detailed secrets of their lives, and this epistolary story blossoms into an intimate relationship where Simon is truly falling for and opening up to Blue. The problem is that Blue does not wish to meet Simon or reveal any

personal details whatsoever because he simply is not prepared to come out and destroy this perfect relationship they have over emails.

Another problem is that Simon accidentally leaves his email open at school and the class clown, Martin Addison, sees Simon's exchanges with Blue and decides to blackmail Simon into helping him with Simon's friend Abby Suso. Although Simon is outraged at the coercion of trying to set up his friend with Martin, he reluctantly agrees to try to involve Martin in more of their activities solely to stop Martin from outing Blue at the school. Simon knows that even though Blue's real name is not attached, it would only be a matter of time before someone figured it out and he doesn't want Blue outed for what Simon feels is his mistake. In his suburban Atlanta based school, Simon knows that this would not be well received, stating that "Shady Creek isn't exactly a progressive paradise. At school, there are one or two guys who are out, and people definitely give them crap. Not like violent crap. But the word 'fag' isn't exactly uncommon" (Albertalli 21). Knowing that the few students who are out are not particularly supported drives Simon to concede to Martin's blackmail to protect his secret from the rest of the school, and even from the people who love him best.

Over the course of the novel, the reader meets Simon's chosen family. Simon's closest friend throughout the novel is Leah, whom he has known since sixth grade. She also appears as the protagonist of Albertalli's second novel in the series. Leah is a plus-sized, sarcastic artist and fandom-nerd who fiercely loves her friends, seemingly with the exception of Abby, possibly because both girls *appear* to have a crush on their friend Nick. Nick is a charming Jewish soccer player whom Simon has known since they were four; Nick is very musically gifted and tender-hearted, but also a little clueless about the world around him. This seems to include most of what happens with their friends, including Simon's struggle with his sexuality and with Martin's

blackmail, Leah's supposed crush on Nick, and any uncomfortable experience along the way. Nick's romantic interest lies with Abby, and towards the end of the novel, the pair begin to date. Abby is the newest member of the close foursome, having moved to suburban Atlanta from Washington D.C., and become quickly attached to Simon. Abby is an outgoing African-American cheerleader, and as the only non-white member in the inner circle, it becomes apparent that the others do not always understand the difficulties that she faces. It is this foursome that Simon depicts as the close-knit chosen family which supports him as he battles the outside world and his own inner struggles.

As well as the four main characters, Simon's larger circle of friends also includes Leah's artist friends, Anna and Morgan, and Nick's soccer friends, outgoing and goofy Garrett, and shy half-Jewish, African-American Bram, who is very intelligent but always seems to be very quiet around Simon. These characters are all connected as Simon's chosen family, serving as his support system as he juggles these real-world relationships with his friends, his email relationship with Blue, his life at home with his family, the dramas of high school life, and his struggle to fully embrace his identity. This chosen family may have strained relationships at times, but they always come back to each other when they need it the most, and it is the strength of those bonds that support each of the young adults in this family and help them grow and mature throughout the course of the novel. Like Simon's ride on the Tilt-a-Whirl (yes, it's a Tilt-a-Whirl, not a Ferris Wheel as depicted in the movie) with Bram as he reveals himself to be Blue, there may be awful moments on the ride, but the journey is always better with the people who love you. Albertalli uses contemporary realism within the It Gets Better movement to frame queer youth as livable and survivable to provide powerful images to queer kids; using this structure, Albertalli depicts the realistic bonds of this chosen family in order to demonstrate how

these ties can not only bind a chosen family together, but they can also make an impact on the community around them and affect others through the strength of that chosen family. In doing this, Albertalli allows queer readers to see just how important chosen family can be not only to those within those families but to others around them as well. This may provide a mirror for these queer readers when they are forming chosen families for themselves in the future or it could serve as a window for those who may not experience the same challenges that the members of this chosen family undergo; allowing them to have a better understanding of how they may provide support for their present or future chosen families and how they may also impact the lives of others around them and in the community.

Often chosen family is used to replace biological bonds that have been broken when an LGBTQ+ young adult comes out and is rejected or failed by the heteronormative systems in their lives; however, Albertalli shows that chosen family can often work in *supplement* to our biological families, who may not be enough in isolation, even if they are supportive and caring, and that these chosen family bonds can help young adults throughout their entire lives. Simon's biological family does support him when he finally makes the decision to come out to them, but the path towards that confession is littered with strained and tense moments between Simon and his family. As the novel starts, Simon knows that his very progressive and liberal parents, Jack and Emily, will not disown him or reject him, a certainty that many LGBTQ+ individuals unfortunately do not share. Simon knows just how lucky he is, realizing that "it probably wouldn't be the end of the world. Not for me" (Albertalli 2). Despite knowing this and feeling this certainty, Simon still hides away this significant piece of himself from his loved ones. Instead, he listens as his father makes insensitive gay jokes as the family watches television together. The uncomfortable moments with his family are not the only reason that Simon does

not feel ready to “come out” to them just yet. Simon wants “to spend some time in my head with this new Simon” before he truly prepares himself for the onslaught of questions and curiosity that his family would undoubtedly bring. It is this onslaught that Simon is simply not ready to deal with, feeling that he is “tired of coming out. All I ever do is come out. I try not to change, but I keep changing, in all these tiny ways. ... And every freaking time, I have to reintroduce myself to the universe all over again” (Albertalli 55-56). It is not only his sexuality that causes Simon to feel like he is changing and having to “come out,” but instead every small minuscule piece of himself as he journeys towards adulthood makes him feel as though he “comes out” every time. Although change is inevitable, it is also very exhausting and that takes a toll on Simon as he battles through life as a gay teenager. This is one of the most powerful parts of Simon’s story, showing that coming out is not simply one moment but instead an endless repetition of these moments even if the large majority of people are supportive.

When Simon finally comes out to his family, it is not through his own choice but is forced because Martin has outed him to the entire school. Over winter break, after his sister Nora has shown him Martin’s post on Creek Secrets, Simon tells his family that he’s gay. After telling them, his family is very supportive with his mother and sister immediately telling him that they are proud of him for coming out. His father tries to make a joke with him, but Jack is quickly scolded by Simon’s older sister Alice and his younger sister Nora as well. Although his family is supportive, just as he expected they would be, Simon cannot feel the joy or relief that should come with expressing yourself to your family; instead, he is “exhausted and unhappy right now. [He] thought it would feel like a weight had been lifted. But it’s just like everything else this week. Strange and off-kilter and surreal” (Albertalli 164). Because this coming out was not his

own decision, the happiness that should come with this has been stolen from Simon by Martin's cruel decision.

In his despair, Simon even lashes out at those he loves best. When he comes home drunk after a night out with Nick and Abby (without the comfort of his friend Leah), Simon strikes out at his father who is expressing disapproval at Simon's drinking. Simon, in his drunken state, scoffs at his father for clearly preferring when Simon was hiding who he was. Simon's clear hurt has finally come to the surface and his father now knows exactly how much he has managed to alienate his son without meaning to do so. The following day, Jack talks to Simon and admits that he knows that sometimes he is too much and can be too light-hearted about serious matters. Jack tells Simon "Well, I'm just going to put this out there, in case the message got lost somewhere. I love you. A lot. No matter what" (Albertalli 247). Jack even admits that he knows that he "didn't make it easy for [Simon] to come out. We're very proud of you. You're pretty brave, kid." (Albertalli 247). Simon replies that he always knew his father was joking, and that it didn't have any effect on him hiding his sexuality; instead, he simply could not bring himself to talk about it because he knew that it would be a big deal. Simon mentions several times over the course of the novel how exhausting it is to have to come out and introduce yourself to the world every time you change, not only with this part of himself but with other aspects of his identity as well. He tells his father that he simply couldn't come out to them because he knew that this, like so many other things, would be a big deal and he was not ready to handle that yet. The pair mend their bond, and Simon knows that he has his biological family as well as his chosen family to support him as he deals with the obstacles he faces at school.

Although Simon's biological family is incredibly supportive, the reader sees him draw the majority of his support from his friend-family, most especially Nick, Leah, and Abby.

Chosen family is such an important structure to LGBTQ+ young adults because these bonds are voluntary, taken up simply due to love, not biological obligation; these nonheteronormative family structures are important because they not only show alternative support systems that can be life-saving for real-world teens, but they also show how chosen family can affect even those outside of the family itself and the impact that these bonds can have on the community. It is these chosen family bonds, even more than his connection to Blue, that help Simon deal with the battles he faces at home and at school. The closest of these bonds is between Leah and Simon; perhaps this is because Simon and Leah are similar people, more introverted than Abby and Nick. Simon often feels as though he and Leah are on one side of an invisible line in their interactions with others, and it is this kinship that draws them closer together and makes their bond special.

This is evident through so many of their interactions, even from the beginning of the novel. Often, Simon and Leah find themselves drawn together because Simon feels himself “kind of shrinking toward Leah. Sometimes I just know she’s feeling the exact way I am” (Albertalli 43). Over the course of the series, Leah and Simon are seen communicating with each other through a glance or side-eye after a comment; the pair even comments to themselves (in their respective novels) that they wish they could completely read the other’s mind like everyone else assumes they can. Their bond is evident to everyone, not just the friend-family, but also to the reader. Although Leah is more reserved than Simon and Abby, she shows her dedication to her friends in other ways, such as whenever there is a birthday within the chosen family. Remembering these small details shows just how much Leah pays attention to her friends; however, even within this chosen family, there are issues and obstacles that arise just as with any other family. Although the family dynamic is supportive and loving, Albertalli does not shy

away from representing the realistic challenges that come with every chosen family, ensuring that queer readers are shown that there is no idyllic perfection even within a voluntary family, but instead real individuals who must forgive each other and overcome the strife they encounter, even from each other.

When Simon sees that Nick and Leah are hanging out without him, he feels “like [he is] on the outside somehow. Not all the time. Just sometimes. But yeah. I feel irrelevant. I hate that” (Albertalli 101). And yet he doesn’t understand when Leah feels the same way later when Simon goes out with Nick and Abby and does not tell Leah. Despite how close Simon is with Leah and Nick, he chooses to come out to Abby first as they are driving home. He tells her that he is gay, and it is “the first time [he has] said those words out loud” (Albertalli 124). Simon is shaking as he tells Abby, but she accepts him with ease, telling him she loves him, and the pair hug. Later, Simon tells Blue that he came out to his friend, and “it was awkward and weird and really kind of nice. I feel mostly relieved and a little embarrassed, because I feel like I made it into a bigger deal than it needed to be. It’s funny, though. A part of me feels like I jumped over some kind of border, and now I’m on the other side realizing I can’t cross back” (Albertalli 128). Even though this bond with Abby is the newest, Simon felt it was the easiest to come out to her, knowing that their connection could withstand this sudden change. This is much different from how Simon feels about telling Nick and Leah. He says

Ever since I told Abby on Friday, I kind of thought it would be easy to tell Leah and Nick. Easier, anyway, now that my mouth is used to saying the words. It’s not easier. It’s impossible. Because even though it feels like I’ve known Abby forever, I really only met her four months ago. And I guess there hasn’t been time for her to have any set ideas about me yet. But I’ve known Leah since sixth grade,

and Nick since we were four. And this gay thing. It feels so big. It's almost insurmountable. I don't know how to tell them something like this and still come out of it feeling like Simon. Because if Leah and Nick don't recognize me, I don't even recognize myself anymore. (Albertalli 133)

Because so much of his identity is wrapped up in his chosen family, Simon is terrified that this piece of his identity will be the one that his friends simply cannot recognize, and without those bonds to tether him, Simon feels anchorless, unrecognizable even to himself. Unfortunately, Simon does not get to decide whether or not to tell his friends when Martin reveals his secret to the entire school.

Over winter break, Nick and Leah try to stop by and tell Simon what has been posted on Creek Secrets, but neither of them manages to tell Simon before they abruptly leave without warning him what is out there. The reason behind this oddness is revealed when Nora tells Simon about the Creek Secrets post outing him. As Simon's life feels like it is spiraling out of control, Abby is the only person who really takes the time to text him and check on him, although he does not answer. After coming out to his parents, Simon later meets up with Nick, Leah, and Abby. Despite worrying about how his friends will react, the scene is quite anticlimactic. Simon looks over at Leah and reveals that he is gay and that the post was true. As Simon knew they would, his chosen family accepts him unconditionally. The only hurt feelings that arise from the situation is once Leah realizes that Simon has already told Abby instead of trusting either her or Nick with the secret first. Simon asks Leah later if she is mad that he told Abby first, but she denies it, stating that because this is his thing, only he can say what is the right choice for him. What seems to hurt her feelings, though, is that he didn't feel comfortable telling her at all. Simon reassures her that he knew that she would accept him, continuing that it

was simply because she and Nick knew him so well that he couldn't imagine changing their perception of him, just as he felt with his biological family as well.

Leah accepts this answer, but her hurt feelings continue when Abby, Nick, and Simon go out without her to a feminist bookstore and later to a gay bar where Simon he gets drunk. It is at this bar that Simon meets a man named Peter, who buys him drinks and introduces him to other gay men who encourage him to live his life and enjoy being young while he still can. Each member of Simon's chosen family has been supportive as he takes steps towards introducing himself to the queer community. The next day he finds out that Abby and Nick have gotten together after dropping Simon off. He is ecstatic for the pair but knows that this will be hard for Leah. What he doesn't expect is how upset she is about them going out without her (even though he always feels the same if Nick and Leah are together without him). She confronts him, hurt enough to lash out at the person with whom she is the closest, and the bond is damaged by this last straw. Simon is upset because he hates "when Leah's mad at me. Hate it. I'm not saying it doesn't happen a lot, because there's this hidden emotional subtext with Leah, and I'm always missing it. But this feels different and worse than our normal. ... it's the first time I've ever seen Leah cry" (Albertalli 246). Simon's friend-family continues to be strained when Abby confronts him after Martin confesses to her why he was blackmailing Simon. As she fixes his makeup for their drama show's performance, Abby tells him "I get that you were in a difficult position. But you don't get to make the decisions about my love life. I choose who I date.' She shrugs. 'I would think you would understand that.'" (Albertalli 253). She tells him to have someone else do his makeup the next night and the tension between the two of them is devastating.

Now Simon has irrevocably harmed the closest bonds he has, those of his chosen family, and he has to begin repairing that damage if he wants to salvage his relationship with the people

he loves most in the world. Without his friends, Simon feels as though he has no place within the school and his community. Everything he has is on unstable ground, and he feels like he does not know where he belongs. Finally, after Bram reveals himself to be Blue, Simon feels like he has to share everything with his best friend. To confront Leah, Simon simply jumps into Leah's car and talks to her. Leah, who is so heartbreakingly insecure, feels as though Simon has replaced her with Abby (a girl who already presses on so many of Leah's weak points). Simon explains to her "'She's not an upgrade. You're my best friend.'" She snorts. 'Well, you are. Both of you. And Nick. All three of you,' I say. 'But I could never replace you. You're Leah.'" (Albertalli 283). He continues that although he came out to Abby, it was not because he trusted her more. It was because he has known Nick and Leah for so long and "'I don't have that kind of a history with Abby. But that's what made it easier. There's this huge part of me, and I'm still trying it on. And I don't know how it fits together. How I fit together. It's like a new version of me. I just needed someone who could run with that. ... But I really wanted to tell you.'" (Albertalli 284-285). The pair cry and Simon tells Leah that he loves her and apologizes for hurting her. This bond, arguably the most important in Simon's life, has finally begun to heal. With the strength his renewed friendship with Leah gives him, Simon also mends his connection with Abby and the chosen family comes back together. With these bonds in place, Simon feels more confident in facing the battles that he faces from the outside world.

Many of Simon's battles are with the school community itself; thankfully, he is mostly supported by his chosen family and the strength of their bonds as he faces these battles. Set in suburban Atlanta, Simon knows that his school is not the most accepting place to be gay or any kind of minority. After he is outed, Simon has a run-in with a football player who walks up to him and air kisses him to embarrass Simon in front of everyone while the other kids laugh. The

only people who seem to step in are those who are within the community, as Simon is approached by two lesbian girls who hug him and give him their telephone numbers, and those within his chosen family as Leah and Abby protect him throughout the day. Even within his theater rehearsals, Simon has to deal with interruptions and homophobic behavior. Often within LGBTQ+ young adult literature, theater and music are used as settings; these settings “show an opportunity for community for teens who might otherwise be regarded as outsiders. Together they find a place where talent, dedication, hard work, and individuality are rewarded with companionship and collegiality” (Jenkins and Cart 145). However, what should be a safe place is interrupted when two boys interrupt rehearsal to harass Simon. Surprisingly, in addition to Abby who runs after the boys, Taylor Metternich, the theater prima donna, and Ms. Albright, the theater teacher, also follow Abby out of the auditorium to chase them down.

Although much of his school community does not seem to support him, Simon finds a support system not only in the bonds of his chosen family but in those who surround him in the theater department who are emotionally impacted by Simon’s battles. When Ms. Albright returns, she reassures him that “those assholes are getting suspended,” even going so far as telling him that she “will make it [her] hill to die on” (Albertalli 192). This is the first the reader has seen of a supportive authority figure in Creekwood, and she is passionate about protecting Simon, even influencing the rest of the theater department to become involved in protecting Simon later when other comments and homophobic displays continue. Simon realizes that he is

getting a little fucking tired of this. I’m trying not to let it touch me. I shouldn’t care if stupid people call me a stupid word, and I shouldn’t care what people think of me. But I always care. Abby puts her arm around my shoulders, and we watch through the wings as Ms. Albright steps onto the stage. (Albertalli 221)

As all good teachers and authority figures should, Ms. Albright is dedicated to helping Simon and to changing the environment in the school which continues to allow these horrible homophobic comments to continue. Her passionate protection means so much to Simon that at the end of their performances for the week, he wishes he had something to give her that was just from him to show her how much her support has meant to him. With Ms. Albright and the theater group's backing, including Abby, Simon starts to regain his connection to his school community. The only member of the theater class that does not support Simon is Martin himself, although he too wishes he could undo his dangerous decision. Martin attempts to apologize for outing Simon once he sees how awful the school is being, but Simon refuses to accept this gesture of guilt. After Martin declares that he didn't believe this would be a big deal, Simon turns on him

“You don't get to say it's not a big thing. This is a big fucking thing, okay? This was supposed to be—this is mine. I'm supposed to decide when and where and who knows and how I want to say it.” Suddenly, my throat gets thick. “So, yeah, you took that from me. And then you brought Blue into it? Seriously? You fucking suck, Martin. I mean, I don't even want to look at you.” (Albertalli 196-197)

Not only has Martin displaced Simon from the school community at large, making him a target for the hateful bigots within the school, but he has also altered Simon's relationship with Blue; a relationship that has become a part of Simon's chosen family as well.

The emails that Simon shares with Blue become not only an outlet for Simon to admit to his sexuality, but Blue becomes a support system just as the rest of Simon's chosen family is as well. Here, Albertalli shows that although a good love story isn't necessary to have a happy and

meaningful life, queer readers who are looking for happy endings to inspire them certainly deserve love stories. For Simon, this is in Bram who admits to being Blue; Blue, who understands just how hard it is to come out and to have the world know about your sexuality. Blue is the only person who understands just how terrifying it is to come out for Simon. Through their emails, Blue tells Simon, “Once you come out, you can’t really go back in. It’s a little bit terrifying, isn’t it? I know we’re so lucky we’re coming out now and not twenty years ago, but it’s still really a leap of faith. It’s easier than I thought it would be, but at the same time, it’s so much harder” (Albertalli 129). Through their conversations, Simon even tells Blue about his feelings about coming out, and how he feels that he has to come out with every change he experiences. He asks Blue, “Why is straight the default?” (Albertalli 146). Blue is the only person who seems to understand just how difficult it is to deal with this coming-out narrative, and Blue agrees that

It is definitely annoying that straight (and white, for that matter) is the default, and that the only people who have to think about their identity are the ones who don't fit that mold. Straight people really should have to come out, and the more awkward it is, the better. Awkwardness should be a requirement. I guess this is sort of our version of the Homosexual Agenda? (Albertalli 147)

When Bram reveals himself to be Blue on the Tilt-a-Whirl, Simon is finally given a happy ending to his love story and a face to the mysterious Blue who has supported him through so many of the battles he faced at school. As the winter carnival comes to a close, Bram holds Simon’s hand in public, and later the pair officially come out as dating to the rest of the school.

After the school talent show, which showcases Leah playing the drums in a secret band with Taylor from drama class and Simon’s sister Nora, Simon is deliriously happy and so proud

of both Leah and his sister. His chosen family and biological family work in complement to each other as they support Simon through his journey. When Simon and Bram sneak to Simon's house after the family goes to dinner, and his parents come home to catch them, Simon isn't even upset that they want to talk about it later because "maybe this is a big deal. Maybe it's a holy freaking huge awesome deal. Maybe I want it to be" (Albertalli 303). Simon's chosen family has repaired the damage that they experienced and even helped Simon feel more secure within his community as a whole. Through their connections to each other, the chosen family impacts others to make changes and reevaluate their perspectives.

Throughout the novel, Albertalli illustrates the realistic bonds of this chosen family to show that not only do these connections bring together the chosen family, but those relationships also impact the community around those individuals through the strength of their bonds and support of each other. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* not only conveys the realistic obstacles that teenagers in a chosen family face but this heart-touching novel also shows just how much the support system found within a chosen family can impact not only the members of the family but also others in connection with those members. By doing this, Albertalli is providing queer readers with validation that their present or future chosen families are just as crucial as biological ties and that these families may even change the lives of others around them and in the community. By modeling how chosen family can better the community for future LGBTQ+ young adults, the queer readers who look into the mirrors and windows provided here can understand that they too deserve a happy ending and that they can be support systems for their future friend-families and impact the world around them for future generations.

**“Let things be imperfect”:** *Leah on the Offbeat*

After the events of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Albertalli continues to show how important chosen family is by showing a different perspective within that family, taking on the story of Simon's best friend, Leah, as she tackles the chosen family's senior year and all of the drama that comes with it. Typically, when LGBTQ+ young adult novels fall subject to homonormativity, the individuals "who don't fit into such prefabricated models... are either othered as exotic or erased altogether" (qtd. in Linville 125). Because of this, there are often stereotypes and perceptions "for young people coming out that queer women are White, and possibly wealthy, and that people like them (including people of color or poor girls) do not have a place in the queer community" (qtd. in Linville 125). Becky Albertalli's *Leah on the Offbeat* not only shows the importance of chosen family but also combats these perceptions for queer readers by depicting the bisexual romance between a self-proclaimed fat girl who is part of the lower class and a questioning bisexual woman of color. Although of the "3.5 percent of the population that identified as LGBT, more than half were bisexual. ... the number of YA novels having bisexual content is depressingly small" (Jenkins and Cart 149). It is important to ensure that there are bisexual voices represented in LGBTQ+ media to allow for authentic representations of gender expression and sexuality for queer readers who are looking for mirrors to hold up examples of how they fit within the community. Throughout this text, Albertalli offers realistic depictions of bisexual young adults who are not only exploring their identities but are also constructing and reaffirming chosen family bonds as support systems when they are being failed by traditional heteronormative systems. The connections built within this chosen family not only tie each of these young adults to each other but also to their extended communities and other bonds outside of the chosen family itself. *Leah on the Offbeat* extends the story started in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* not only within the journeys taken within the chosen family

but also how the members of this family affect others around them, thus rippling outward to impact other individuals and the school community they leave behind at the end of the novel. Through this, queer readers can see how they too could impact others through the extensions created within and outside of the chosen families they may construct in their present and future lives.

*Leah on the Offbeat* focuses on Leah Burke as she battles the many obstacles facing her including the failures of her biological family, which is much different from the supportive biological family depicted in Simon's story, by leaning on her chosen family's support as she grows more comfortable with the person she is and who she is becoming. Leah, Simon's sharp-witted best friend from the previous novel, is a dramatic narrative shift from Simon. Where Simon is optimistic, even in some of his darkest moments, Leah is abrasive and sarcastic in her interactions with others, mostly due to the deep-rooted insecurities that she has held since she was a young girl. Leah says that she knows "what it's like to not be good enough, in some bone-deep fundamental way" (Albertalli 51). Despite Simon's struggles toward self-acceptance and admitting his truth to his loved ones, he does not seem to have such a struggle to like himself as he is, even as he changes and evolves. This "bone-deep" anxiety and insecurity is partially what makes Leah such a compelling character to see as Albertalli uses this perspective to extend the chosen family the readers met in *Simon* and depict just how much that support system affects not only Simon but every other member of that family as well.

Throughout the novel, Leah struggles to come out as bisexual to her friends, even though she knows that Simon is gay and would accept her with open arms. She is also battling her feelings for Abby, not Nick as Simon assumed in his perspective of the family dynamic. Leah and Abby used to be closer prior to Abby dating Nick; however, Leah lost the courage to say

anything to Abby about how she felt about the other girl, and now Leah feels it is too late to say anything to Abby and risk losing her friendship with Nick and the entire rest of the chosen family as a result. This causes her to be harsh and snarky when speaking to Abby or at any time Abby is mentioned because of her insecurities, not only about how much the other members of the chosen family adore Abby but also because her feelings for Abby make Leah angry and defensive. Leah tries to rid herself of her feelings and focus instead on the interest of Bram and Nick's friend Garrett, who Leah views as a nice person if goofy person. However, although she tries to transfer her feelings, it is no use, and Leah is irrevocably drawn to Abby once more as the two girls become closer friends, much to the joy of constantly torn Simon.

As Abby and Leah grow closer, tensions rise within the chosen family. This is brought to a head when Abby breaks up with Nick, knowing that a long-distance relationship will not work, leaving Nick devastated but Abby almost relieved by her decision. As senior year comes to an end, the foursome and the extended members of their chosen family are deciding where to go to college; because Leah does not have the money to attend an expensive private college or a college out of state, she is staying local, as is Abby who is also not as wealthy as the others seen in Creekwood High. When the two decide to go for a campus visit, staying at the dorm of a friend of Abby's cousin, things take an unexpected turn when Abby kisses Leah, not knowing that Leah is bisexual and that this is her first kiss. Leah is surprised and angry at Abby's behavior because she thinks that Abby is just using her for experimentation and is not as serious about her feelings for Leah as Leah obviously is about Abby. In Simon's story, he once said that Leah had a lot of emotional subtext, and so much of that can be seen by the reader through Leah's journey over the course of this novel. Leah is riddled with anxiety, depression, insecurities, and anger at the world around her. So much of Leah's journey is not necessarily about battling solely the

outside world but the internal demons that plague her as she strives towards some kind of self-acceptance. Because her chosen family is so important to Leah as her support system, she tries to separate herself from her feelings for Abby and decides to go to prom with Garrett who feels like a safer and more practical choice. However, love has nothing to do with practicality, and Leah quickly realizes that she doesn't "want to kiss Garrett. I don't want to kiss anyone. Except [Abby]. Which would be the wildest, most reckless, worst idea ever" (Albertalli 249). However, even practical Leah has to realize that sometimes love is wild, and things are imperfect.

The chosen family decides to go together to prom, and after a horrific start to her prom experience (Albertalli perfectly describes the meltdown every girl has had in the changing room of a store), Leah's mom and Wells, Jessica's boyfriend, convince her to try and have a good experience and let go of trying to be perfect. That evening the group finally has the imperfectly wonderful high school experience of prom night. After witnessing Nick, who has been having what can only be described as a breakdown since Abby broke up with him, kissing Taylor while dancing, Leah goes to find Abby. Abby is not upset in the least about Nick making out with Taylor and is instead upset that she and Leah could have been like Simon and Bram this entire time if she hadn't been so scared of her feelings for Leah when she first transferred. Although Leah tries to run away from her feelings and the horrible timing of Abby's realization, her mother's advice of doing imperfect things and not overthinking leads her back to Abby, and the two kiss. The pair are caught by Simon and Bram who are shocked but also incredibly happy at this new development, and all four head back inside to prom together. As they walk inside together, Leah realizes that "This is not my perfect prom night, and it's not the happy ending I pictured. It's not an ending at all. But it's mine" (Albertalli 336). Just as her mother requested, Leah has finally allowed things to be imperfect, and with her chosen family at her side, including

the girl she loves, it is the best beginning to a new chapter that she could ask for. Through Leah's story, Albertalli uses contemporary realism to hold up a mirror through which queer readers can see reflections of their experiences and also see depictions of chosen family bonds that extend outward and extend into larger influences over other individuals and communities. This allows for these readers to witness models upon which they may base their own experiences as they construct their gender and sexual identities and also form chosen family bonds in their present and future lives.

Albertalli showcases a different experience through Leah's perspective, and those differences are not only in Leah's sexual and gender identities but also in Leah's relationship with her biological family. Whereas Simon's family was a little over the top but incredibly supportive, Leah's biological family is much smaller, and although her mother is an incredibly supportive force, there are the occasional tensions between Leah and her mother. Leah is raised by a single mother, Jessica Keane, who was a teenager when she had Leah; this makes her quite different from the other parents at Creekwood. Because of the age difference between Jessica and the other parents, Leah feels like she is the "fat Slytherin Rory Gilmore" (Albertalli 3); Rory Gilmore is a reference to the early 2000s classic television series *Gilmore Girls*, which depicts a young single mother raising a teenage daughter, the aforementioned Rory. Another clear difference between Leah's biological family and those of the other Creekwood students is that Leah's father left her and her mother for a younger woman when Leah was young, and the two do not have any kind of relationship beyond him sending scant child support checks. Because of her father's absence, Leah's mother works long hours, and the family is much less wealthy than the rest of the Creekwood High School students and their families, with Leah and her mother

sharing a car. Jessica's work schedule means that she cannot do the quintessential "family" things that Leah's peers experience, such as taking Leah to college tours.

Leah says she tells her mother everything, even "to a degree that's almost pathological. ... And of course I told my mom I'm bisexual, even though none of my friends know. I came out to her when I was eleven, during a commercial break for *Celebrity Rehab*" (Albertalli 24). Even though Leah tells her mom everything, she has neglected to tell her how she feels about Abby; however, it is quite clear that Jessica knows more than she is letting on, often hinting that she knows how Leah feels. It is clear just how much Leah's mother loves and worries about Leah, but the pair are off-kilter as Jessica's new relationship with Wells also adds to Leah's insecurities. Leah feels intimidated by her mom's relationship with Wells, feeling as though she is being replaced or demoted. Part of this too is because once her father found someone else to be with, he abandoned Leah and Jessica completely. This is clearly a trauma that still holds Leah back from accepting another person into her family, and also shows why Leah holds so tightly and possessively to her chosen family as well. It takes until the end of the novel for Leah to truly come around to her mother's relationship with Wells, having begun to become more secure in her attachments to her biological and chosen family members.

Another battle that Leah and her mother experience is the entire discussion surrounding prom. Her mother tries to explain to Leah that prom made her feel like "'it was okay to care. To not be so blasé.'" (Albertalli 113). Even though Jessica was pregnant at her prom, she did not let this stop her from having a good time. Jessica stubbornly forces Leah to try on multiple prom dresses, even though she knows this already stressful time is exacerbated by Leah's insecurities and body consciousness. Leah hears skinny girls trying on dresses in the next room, and it is upsetting "Listening to them pick at themselves. It's like it doesn't even matter if I like my body,

because there's always someone there to remind me I shouldn't. You're not fat. You look amazing. Because fat is the opposite of amazing. Got it" (Albertalli 123). Finally, Leah finds a prom dress that she loves, and it makes her feel beautiful for one of the first times in her life; however, Jessica does not love the dress as Leah does, and this absolutely devastates Leah. This feeling of happiness is destroyed, and she lashes out in her hurt and anger. Her mother asks her why she always does this, tears everything down when she is upset, but Leah cannot explain it. She glares and realizes she doesn't "have an answer for that...I just know I feel like shit, and I hate everyone in the entire world" (Albertalli 125). So much of Leah's complexity is tied up in the fact that she does not understand her own traumas and insecurities, and when she is confused or upset, she lashes out in anger as a way to cope with those deep-rooted traumas. Eventually, Leah's mother turns to her and explains, "You know what I want for you? ... I want you to let things be imperfect." (Albertalli 128). This is the moment that will stick with Leah throughout the rest of the novel and the battles that she faces internally and against the outside world. Jessica looks at Leah and continues

"You just want to be the best. And you have to let that go. Embrace the suck. Let your guts hang out a little." Yeah, that's a fucking joke. Let your guts hang out. I don't even get that. Why would anyone want to live like that? Like it isn't bad enough I'm always one breath away from falling apart. ... I want things to not suck. And I don't think that's too much to ask. (Albertalli 128-129).

This is not too much to ask; however, it is not a realistic desire in the world around her. Sometimes things simply suck, and Leah must find ways to embrace those imperfect moments to truly live her life.

One imperfect moment happens when Leah is getting ready for prom, putting on the dress that she loved so much, which her mother has bought for her. However, Leah realizes that she does not have the correct bra, shoes, or purse for the event, and she and her mother try to make a last-minute dash to the store only to find that their car will not start. Her mother calls Wells, much to Leah's chagrin, but the trip to the store makes Leah warm up to her mother's boyfriend despite herself, knowing how much he cares for her mother and witnessing how Jessica feels about him as well. All Leah wants is for her mom to be happy, even if that is with Wells. Even though her mother cannot be as present as she would like to be, the bond between her and Leah is quite evident, just as the bond between Jessica and Leah's friends is during her interactions with them as well. Jessica knows just how much Leah loves her friends, and so she takes the time to get to know them, wholeheartedly approving of them and their love of Leah. Although Leah pretends to be embarrassed by this behavior, knowing that her chosen family connects to this biological piece of her family as well is a blessing and provides even more strength for Leah as she battles the outside world.

The bonds of chosen family were set up in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and they continue to be evident in Leah's tale as well. What is interesting is not only how close this chosen family is, but also how each of them has bloomed since the last novel and even begun to make extended connections outside of the tight foursome as well. Through Leah's perspective, the reader sees not only the relationship between Simon and Bram continuing but also the tensions between Abby and Nick. We also meet Anna and Morgan, who have known Leah even before she met Nick and Simon as kids; these two are also part of Leah's band with Taylor and Nora, Simon's little sister. The relationships between the bandmates become incredibly strained after Morgan is not accepted into Georgia State. At first, Morgan was upset with Leah when

Leah got in, and then she later says that the reason Abby got in was because she was black. Because Leah confronts Morgan about her behavior, Morgan eventually leaves the band. Leah's adamant stance of refusing to let Morgan's racist behavior go strains the friend group. Anna blames Leah for blowing it out of proportion, and at one point, Anna tries to get Leah and Morgan to speak again, telling Leah

“I just want things to be normal. We don't have a lot of time left.” I look at [Anna], and suddenly I'm eleven years old. A freckly mess of a sixth grader with no friends. Literally none. I'd go to school, come home, and watch TV with Mom. I'd spend lunch periods reading manga in the bathroom. It was right after my dad left, so my mom was always angry or weepy, and the thing about Morgan and Anna is that they were the first people here to give a shit about me. They were my friends before I knew Simon and Nick existed. So maybe I'm an asshole. Maybe I'm overreacting. I swear to God, someone tied a knot in my stomach. Anna shakes her head slowly. “Like, what's next? Are you going to find a reason to hate me? And Nick? What about Simon? Are you going to shut us all out because you can't deal with saying good-bye?” (Albertalli 213-214)

Although Morgan was definitely in the wrong, Leah does eventually realize that she has been trying to push everyone away to try and save herself from the inevitable pain of saying goodbye to them. Finally, Morgan comes to her senses and apologizes to Abby and to Leah. Abby tells Leah about it after the fact, saying that she forgives Morgan but will never be able to trust her again. Abby also mentions how sweet it was for Leah to stand up for her, which of course Leah dismisses as simply doing the right thing. This is one event that brings Abby and Leah closer,

something that is both wonderful as Abby is an important part of Leah's chosen family, but also brings its own obstacles as Leah is in love with Abby and has been for some time now.

Abby and Leah have an incredibly complicated relationship. Although it was not mentioned in Simon's novel, the two girls were very close when Abby first moved to Creekwood. They hung out constantly, but Leah realized that she liked Abby as much more than simply a friend. Her sharp behavior towards Abby, which Simon assumed was jealousy over Nick, was truly because Leah liked Abby too much and was insecure in her attachment to the other girl. The constant battle against her feelings for Abby, and confusion over Abby's possible flirtation with her, finally boils over when Abby breaks up with Nick, leaving Nick devastated. Because Leah has feelings for Abby, she is uncertain how to help Nick, feeling as though she has inadvertently made the situation worse as she is so connected to Abby. Leah promises Simon that she will talk to Abby about the breakup when the two girls go on their college tour together; however, this does not unravel as Leah believes it will.

Leah is incredibly surprised when Abby shows up looking happy and relieved about her breakup with Nick; this surprising development alters the dynamic between the girls, and Leah feels that she can talk to Abby like a normal person for once instead of being harsh or awkward. It is as though Leah has finally found a space to belong within her connection to Abby, feeling more secure in who she is and who they are to each other. This sense of belonging continues when the girls get to Georgia State for their college tour. They are staying in the apartment of Abby's cousin's friend, Caitlin. Caitlin casually mentions a party that is being thrown in the building by a friend of hers upstairs, mentioning to Leah that she "'would love them. They're a drummer.' That casual singular they. It isn't even my pronoun, but it feels like a hug. Because if Caitlin's unfazed by her enby friend's pronouns, she'd probably be unfazed by me being bi"

(Albertalli 167). In her connection with Abby, Leah has also found a new community to which she can belong, even playing for the band and being offered a tryout as their drummer when she attends the college next year. Although her chosen family is separating as they grow and mature, the connection she shares with Abby has led her to another community, one full of music and LGBTQ+ people like Leah. Abby continues to surprise Leah, even telling Leah about her two gay aunts, and opening up in a way she has very rarely done before, even asking Leah why they stopped being as close as they were before, which Leah has no answer for because she is not ready to admit just how much she liked Abby.

After the party, Abby kisses Leah, thinking that they are two “straight” girls experimenting with these confusing feelings. Leah lashes out, hurt and upset, because she has genuine feelings for Abby who has now stolen her first kiss on a whim. Abby apologizes, and when Leah asks if she is bisexual now, Abby admits that Leah ““make[s] [her] think about it.”” (Albertalli 202). The pair cannot figure out what to say to one another, and the night ends with both of them refusing to sleep in the bed together, awkward and hurt. On the ride home, the two girls are stilted and uncomfortable with each other, only chatting about the campus they have seen and about Leah possibly playing for the band next year. Abby thinks that Leah should sell some other artwork on her Tumblr to raise money, which will allow her to pay for a drum set of her own. Leah shuts down the conversation, embarrassed over her lack of money, and harsh and offbeat in her interactions with Abby again now that Abby knows that Leah is bisexual.

Later the next week, Abby and Leah finally speak, with Abby telling Leah that she came out to her cousins over the weekend, thinking that Leah will be sympathetic with how nervous she was to do so. Because the pair have functioned as members of the same chosen family, supporting each other even through moments where their biological families cannot, Abby

assumes that this support will still be there. Instead, Leah inadvertently reinforces every “traditional” coming-out narrative that LGBTQ+ young adult literature has when she rejects Abby’s labeling of herself as “lowkey bisexual” by refuting that ““You’re either bi or you’re not. That’s like being a little bit pregnant. . . . Lowkey bi, a little bit bi. Just be bi.”” (Albertalli 259-261). However, through Abby, Albertalli purposely renounces this narrative, and Abby refuses to let Leah pressure her into a label or to tell her how she can or cannot identify. Despite knowing that Abby is right, Leah is too upset to apologize and continues to cling tightly to her anger, which is a feeling that Leah does know what to do with. She continues pushing Abby away and leaves without the two girls having resolved anything. The next day, Leah sees Abby before prom; although Leah is going with Garrett, and Abby is going alone, it is clear that the two girls cannot keep their eyes off of each other. Once they arrive at prom, things improve between each member of the chosen family as the group dance and try to experience this last moment of togetherness before they graduate and leave. When Nick ends up kissing Taylor on the dance floor, Abby leaves and Leah rushes after her. The pair have a tension-filled moment before Leah decides to stop overthinking things and kisses Abby. This beautiful bond between the two is sealed, a connection that has given Leah so much heartache but also so much support. The two decide to become officially girlfriends and kiss until they are then caught by Bram and Simon. Leah knows that this imperfect moment is hers and that this chosen family that she has will continue to support her through all of the perfectly imperfect moments in the future.

Just as in Simon’s story, the strongest bond within this chosen family is the connection between Leah and Simon, but Leah is keeping secrets from Simon just as Simon did in the first novel. Although she knows that Simon is gay, she still has yet to come out to him. The pair are incredibly close and love each other dearly. In addition to her genuine love of both Simon and

Bram, Leah is also impressed and jealous of the pair because “they went for it. They had the balls to say fuck this, fuck Georgia, fuck all of your homophobic assholes” (Albertalli 9). She truly thinks “they’re so fucking brave in ways [she will] never understand” (Albertalli 328), and her admiration for the pair resonates through every interaction she has with either of the boys. Often, Leah does not say these things out loud to Simon, but there is no question how much she loves him and relies on their bond to support her when things get difficult. Although the pair are bonded so tightly, Leah still cannot bring herself to tell Simon that she is bisexual or that she has a “pointless crush” (Albertalli 136) on Abby. Just as Simon felt that he could not tell Leah and Nick that he was gay because so much of his identity is wrapped up in their chosen family bonds, Leah too is somehow unable to confess to the two boys who seemingly know her best. Leah also feels strange about coming out to Simon, especially now that she knows about his sexuality, and he does not know about hers. She says that

It’s like when Leia says I love you, and Han Solo says I know. Like everything’s slightly off-balance. It bugs me. But the thought of telling him now makes me want to throw up. I should have told him a year ago. I don’t think it would have been a big deal then, but now it feels insurmountable. It’s like I missed a beat somewhere, and now the whole song’s off tempo. (Albertalli 168)

Every time Simon talks about meeting other gay people when he goes on his campus tours, Leah feels like she should be able to tell him that he has queer friends here at home, but simply does not know it. Sometimes Simon looks at Leah and she gets “the vibe he wants me to read his mind. Like he’s sitting there, trying to pour his thoughts directly into my brain, so he won’t have to say them out loud” (Albertalli 218-219). In the same way, she wishes that Simon could simply read her mind and just know how she is feeling because it is too difficult for her to speak.

Despite numerous opportunities to tell Simon, her best friend who she loves more than anyone else, Leah simply cannot overcome her anxiety and insecurities to come out to him. Even within such a tightly knit chosen family, these bonds can still not be entirely successful in combating the battles that the members of those chosen families face, either internally or against the world.

One obstacle that each member of the chosen family battles is the realization that they will not be together following graduation as they all go to college all over the east coast. This finally hits Leah at prom, and she realizes that, like Simon, she too is devastated by the possibility of saying goodbye to these people who have been her support system for the majority of her life. She looks at Simon during prom and tells him that she misses him, realizing that she already misses these people who are still standing in front of her. This new chapter of each of their lives will undoubtedly continue and although the family will extend outwards to new locations and new communities, they will always be together. In the email ending of the novel, Simon has emailed Leah to tell her happy birthday, and Leah confirms that she and Abby have plans to stay with Bram over spring break, the entire chosen family reuniting as soon as possible. Finally, Leah, who hates sappy moments, ends her email with “Love, Leah (your platonic soul mate forever and ever and ever) (and I don’t care if I’m being corny right now, because corny is the new me, I’m turning into my mom, YEAH I SAID IT) (I love you)” (Albertalli 339). There may be distance and new members of the chosen family, but it is clear that these two will forever be connected as not only best friends but family and soulmates, against the battles of life together. LGBTQ+ young adult literature depicts chosen family as a connection between the individuals within that chosen family to systems larger than themselves; Albertalli uses contemporary realism through Simon and Leah’s stories to provide access to queer readers who are searching for mirrors and windows through which they can see reflections of themselves or

better understand others within their communities. By showing how Simon and Leah's chosen family extends and grows as the teenagers begin to make other connections, thus showing how support systems can connect us to others and impact individuals who may not be within that family, Albertalli is providing a model upon which readers within the LGBTQ+ community can base their own chosen families in their present and future lives.

Becky Albertalli's works have truly touched my soul because I was once a fat bisexual fandom-obsessed teen like Leah who always felt out of place, and I grew up to be a fat bisexual fandom-obsessed woman who finally found the chosen family that I lacked as a teenager. Reading these novels made me ache for wishing that my past self had been given the opportunity to use these novels as a mirror to see the possible families that I could build in the future. I found my chosen family later in life, and this support system has helped me through some of the most difficult moments of my entire life; together we have battled loss, love, joys, and sorrows. As an awkward sarcastic teenager who felt like the entire world was against her, I would never have imagined a support system like the one I have now. I certainly would never have thought that I, like Leah, would have a platonic soulmate with whom I share a truly remarkable connection— my very own Simon who is just a text message away. Having experienced these things, I think I am in a unique opportunity to talk to my students about things that they too may be experiencing. Knowing now what I did not know then, I can provide opportunities for my students to have access to novels that depict chosen families to better help them as they combat so many battles in the future on their journeys towards constructing support systems. My exposure to these works has also led me to numerous other series, authors, and genres within LGBTQ+ young adult literature, allowing me to find works that depict chosen families with unique narratives, diverse characters, and beautiful worlds that I could never have previously imagined.

This is the strength of LGBTQ+ young adult literature, these works can reflect back images of teenagers who have built chosen families that not only better the individuals within those families but also influence those around them—future generations will not have to wish that their past selves had these novels, they will have had this literature on hand. Realistic LGBTQ+ young adult literature allows teenagers who are being failed by the heteronormative systems of their lives to find some possible solace in the depictions of chosen family bonds that are helping these characters to also heal from their own traumas at the hands of these systems. Through *Simon*, *Bram*, *Leah*, and *Abby*, Albertalli shows how a chosen family can grow and touch lives even beyond those within the family and this can ripple outward to affect others as well; in this, Albertalli's novels reflect their content as they too impact so many beyond simply the readers but those who will also be changed because of the mirror the *Simonverse* has held up for the LGBTQ+ young adult world to see.

### **Chapter Three: Collections, Conventions, and Competitions:**

#### **Chosen Family as Multicultural Connections**

One of the most important evolutions that has occurred in LGBTQ+ young adult literature is its expanding diversity. At the genre's beginnings, most LGBTQ+ literature centered on white males who were coming to terms with their sexual identities. Now, the ever-growing genre has expanded to include characters of many different cultures, races, and religions, as well as sexual and gender orientations. These steps for representation are essential for the inclusion of all voices, and thus all types of chosen families. When analyzing the effect of including chosen family in LGBTQ+ young adult works, the connection with the characters' cultural backgrounds should also be considered. As authors Jenkins and Cart state in *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, "The stories told in young adult literature feature protagonists, voices, and issues too often rendered invisible by society. As a result, young people have a particularly urgent need to see their own faces reflected in the pages of a book and find the corollary comfort that services form the knowledge that one is not alone in a vast universe" (3). The representations of multicultural young adults within these LGBTQ+ young adult novels are essential in allowing these individuals to find authentic reflections of their experiences and feelings as they too struggle to find their places in the world. By including these intersectional pieces of the protagonists' identities, the reader can better understand how vital chosen family is as a supplemental community when it feels as though the characters' biological families and cultures have rejected them, thus causing a disconnect from their communities. It is in these heart-breaking moments that the authors illustrate the important nature of friend-family, or voluntary kin, who help repair the damage created by the double rejection and serve as a support system in the face of this failure. Often these members are of the same culture or religion, and

this connection can help the protagonist still feel bonded to their community through their chosen family; however, there are also instances where individuals within a chosen family can help support their voluntary kin as they build connections to cultural communities even if they are not part of that same community themselves. Queer readers have an opportunity to see that supporting members of their own present or future chosen families as these individuals embrace their intersectional identities is possible even if they do not share the same cultural or religious upbringing; this allows for both mirrors for some LGBTQ+ teenagers to see their own experiences in striving to better understand their intersectional identities reflected from these novels, and windows for all young adults to better understand the mindset of those who may be within their chosen families from whom they may differ in culture or religion.

In studying works within multicultural young adult literature, it is essential to study works by queer authors and those who represent cultures beyond the Western monolith. Often characters who represent both the LGBTQ+ community and a marginalized religion or culture feel a sense of liminality, belonging to both communities and yet often feeling as though they are not truly accepted by either one. Chosen family can be used to bridge the disconnect that can be felt by these characters as they search for the place where they truly belong. In this chapter, I analyze Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life*, Adiba Jaigirdar's *The Henna Wars*, and Sheba Karim's *Mariam Sharma Hits the Road* as multicultural YA novels that depict the role that chosen family, which includes friends and romantic partners as supplemental to blood kin, can play in allowing members of the LGBTQ+ community to create larger ties to not only their sexualities but also to their religions or cultures when heteronormative structures have failed these individuals. These works must be integrated into the literary canon to provide unique opportunities for queer readers to see representations of chosen family.

## NATURE VERSUS NURTURE

Word for the day: family. Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life* is a love letter to the chosen family, the tightest bonds, and the hardest traumas that bring people together. In the novel, Salvador, also called Sal and Sally, is a straight orphaned white teenager who has been raised by a gay Mexican father, Vicente Silva, and his grandmother, Mima. This novel is a twist on many LGBTQ+ young adult novels in that the protagonist is not a member of the LGBTQ+ community but is instead raised by a gay father and supports his close friend who is also gay. It is actually Vicente who is forming a family with these young adults, supplementing their families with his own after the heteronormative structures of biological families fail each of these young adults in turn. It is through these chosen family bonds that queer readers can understand how chosen family bonds can not only connect the individuals within that family to each other but also to their respective cultures as the members of the family grow and battle against the outside world and the many obstacles that await them there. In Sáenz's work, Vicente forms a chosen family made from his adopted son Sal, Sal's two friends Sam and Fito, and Vicente's boyfriend Marcos which helps support each of the members within this family as they battle the outside world, and also helps repair the connections each of these individuals have to their Mexican heritage.

Prior to the novel, a young Sal and his mother, Alexandra, are abandoned by his biological father, and Vicente intervenes as a best friend to Sal's mother and becomes Sal's adoptive father. Alexandra trusts Vicente and has become part of his family; after she was diagnosed with cancer, Vicente married Alexandra to ensure that he would be Sal's father legally. This legal connection becomes vital after the death of Sal's mother. Now, all that Sal has

of his mother is a letter she has left behind that ultimately tells him why she chose Vicente to be his father, a choice that was made due to love, not blood. Although these events occur before the novel's beginning, Alexandra reveals them to Sal and the reader, telling him that she knows Vicente has raised him well and given him this letter at the right time. As Sal faces difficult decisions about his identity and his future, particularly in regard to college, this letter does appear at the perfect moment to serve as the epiphany Sal needs to cease his vacillation between nature and nurture and embrace his chosen family and adoptive father without any further questioning. He completes his college essay and steps forth into the future knowing that he is Vicente's son. In addition to raising Salvador as his adopted son, Vicente also adopts Sal's best friend Sam both figuratively and then later literally in the novel.

Samantha (also called Sam) and Sal are closer than friends, they are truly family, and their love and support of each other shows throughout the novel. Sam's mother is unsupportive and often absent from her life, failing to be a mother to her young daughter and leaving her rearing to Vicente who becomes a father figure to Sam. This family becomes even closer after the death of Sam's mother, Sylvia, who crashes after drinking and driving. In her will, Sylvia has signed over all rights of Sam to Vicente if anything should happen to her. Sam moves into Vicente's home and the chosen family becomes legally bound. This tie not only allows Sam to belong to a nurturing family, but it also connects her to her Mexican heritage through her interactions and relationship with Mima and Vicente's family. Sam is not the only teenager that Vicente brings into his chosen family; Fito, Sal's friend who is part of a troubled family, is also eventually brought into the Silva household.

Fito does not have an easy life; adding to his difficulty living in a family of substance abusers who fail to serve as his support system, Fito is also a gay Mexican teenager. Here Fito

needs the support of a chosen family even more, as one who is financially impoverished and as a sexual and racial minority, he struggles to achieve his goals. Unfortunately, his dreams of leaving home become too real when he is kicked out of his home by his mother who does this while physically abusing him and calling him horrible and derogatory terms, most of them focused on his sexuality. As soon as Vicente finds out that Fito is staying at Sam's abandoned home, he takes it upon himself to go and speak to him. Without question or hesitation, Vicente enfolded all three teenagers into his chosen family and supports them better than their biological kin in all regards. The family goes through many obstacles, including the loss of their beloved matriarch Mima, the loss of both Sam and Fito's biological mothers, and the inclusion of Vicente's partner Marcos into their family. However, despite every challenge ahead of them, this family manages to prove that it is the nurturing and devotion one finds from unconditional bonds of support that matter, not the genetic material or the heteronormative systems of reproduction that can fail so frequently for multicultural and LGBTQ+ teenagers. Sáenz uses the bonds of this chosen family to illustrate how these connections can not only bind this family together, but he also uses Vicente's connection with his heritage to show how chosen family can provide the support needed to help each of these individuals remain connected to their cultural backgrounds. By doing so, Sáenz allows queer readers insight into the possible benefits of chosen family as these young adults construct their own chosen families in the present and in the future; not only can these queer readers see themselves reflected back within the characters, but they may also have a better understanding of the intersectional identities of their chosen kin and how they can aid them in remaining connected to their cultural upbringing.

Throughout Sáenz's work, the ever-present theme of chosen family can be seen as a healing force that often makes up for the failures of biological family, perhaps even to an

idealistic degree. This chosen family's formation begins with Vicente's adoption of Salvador. Vicente gives Sal a place to belong, not only within Vicente's biological family but also his Mexican culture as well. Despite not being Mexican through genetics, Sal is raised in the Mexican community. This separation between biological genetics and the nurturing kin of his adopted father often leaves Sal struggling to find where he belongs in this liminal space between how he was raised and what his biology says. He even manifests this struggle into physical violence on separate occasions because he "belonged to a family, and when people called me [white boy], all I heard was that I did not belong to that family. And I *did* belong to them, and I wasn't going to let anybody tell me otherwise" (Sáenz 440). This is a conflict that the reader sees throughout the novel; often, Sal wonders if his genetics have more influence over him than the love and support he receives unconditionally from his adopted and chosen family. Throughout his connections to these branches of his family, Sal begins to discover himself and embrace all of the pieces that make up this identity. By remaining connected to his father's cultural identity, Sal takes the necessary steps to self-acceptance of his own identity, and this also allows Sal a better sense of understanding for his father and for his two best friends as well. Although Sal is a fictional character, many LGBTQ+ young adult readers could find their own confusion and struggle for self-acceptance reflected back at them by reading about Sal and Vicente's chosen family throughout the novel. With this, the novel allows these readers access to mirrors that reflect back their own feelings and experiences in the world; this is important to better aid these young adults in growing as individuals and in realizing they are not alone in feeling as they do.

As well as battling his own demons, Salvador attempts to fix the lives of those around him. Many of Sal's physical battles come when he is defending a loved one, often his father who is belittled and disparaged several times over the course of the novel due to his sexual

orientation. His father tries to deter Sal from this road of violence, instilling in him all of his kindness and patience, but this does not stop Sal from feeling that he has to lash out with his fists at the injustice of Vicente's degradation. As he steps into his identity as a young adult, Sal starts to realize that it is his turn to take care of his father, just as Vicente has taken care of him for so long. Sal struggles to understand what these bonds of kinship really mean, and eventually, he discovers that this does not mean using his fists to defend his father, but instead means being there for his father through all the difficulties they face, especially the death of their beloved Mima.

Sal discovers that he has much more of Vicente in him than he expected and knows that his father had "tamed me with all the love that lived inside him" (Sáenz 15). Where Sal's biological father, with his penchant for violence and his abandonment of Sal and his mother, has failed to serve his reproductive role as a parent, Vicente and the chosen family fill this gap and heals the wounds that Sal experiences. At the end of the novel, after the loss of so many loved ones, the reader sees some peace for Sal and feels the same relief and joy as Vicente when Sal reveals the contents of his mother's letter and the essay he wrote Columbia University, proudly telling them that he is "as Mexican as my family" (Sáenz 448). As Sal burns the last remnants of his biological past, a violent father he never knew, he finally embraces the fact that "I know who my father is. I have always known" (Sáenz 445).

Sáenz has stated that he wrote this novel as a testament to chosen family, stating that he "wanted this novel to be around family and the ways we create and expand on our notions of family" (Sáenz). Every character in this novel struggles with their place in the world, most clearly through their lack of a support system outside of this voluntary family. Both of Sal's friends have their own issues with family and both build their chosen family with Sal and

Vicente, growing together as they deal with the ghosts of their biological kin and pasts. Through Vicente's adoption of Sal and the bond that Sal has with Samantha, the three have become a tight-knit family that is bonded by the love and support of chosen family. Allowing her to stay in his home after her mother's death, Vicente has given Sam the security and connection to her Mexican heritage she has lacked throughout her life while also providing the love that she needs to heal from the past and deal with her mother's loss.

Although she mourns the loss of her mother, the reader sees Sam bloom when she fully embraces the love and support that Sal and Vicente offer her. Vicente's role as a father is what ultimately binds this family together and helps heal the wounds inflicted by the loss and disregard of biological kin. For Vicente, loving Sal, accepting him as his son, and bringing him into his culture is as easy as breathing. This infinite capacity for love is not only true for his adopted son, but for Sam as well. After taking her into his home, Vicente steps effortlessly into the role of her father as well. At one point, he tells the two teenagers that "Sometimes I love you both so much that I can hardly bear it" (Sáenz 252). This love is obviously reciprocated as Sam asks Vicente to adopt her legally, and he replies that "you've been my daughter for a long time now, Sam. Adoption or no adoption. And you don't need a piece of paper to call me Dad" (Sáenz 334). In bringing Sam into his family, he reminds her that she is not alone because she belongs with them, and thus she is part of something so much larger than herself. Vicente not only brings Sam into his family but also reunites her with part of her heritage. She says that she is not a very good Mexican, and she has often never participated in some of the cultural traditions that Sal and his family have always done. Here the reader sees that not only has her blood family been ineffective as a support system, but they have also not supplied Sam with access to her heritage. Vicente provides this connection for Sam who has never known much

about her Mexican heritage before coming into Vicente's chosen family. Here, chosen family serves not only to connect these individuals together to work as a support system for each of the individuals within this family, but through Vicente, each of the young adults becomes more secure within their intersectional identities and begins to walk the path towards self-acceptance and understanding.

Not only does Vicente help the teenagers with their cultural heritage and finding their place in the world, but he also helps Fito begin to accept his sexual identity as well. The pair have an interesting bond, showing that even though Vicente comes from a supportive family, he does sympathize with the struggles facing Fito. Although Fito is Sal and Sam's friend, it is through Vicente that Fito finds his footing. Sam even jokingly asks if Fito has been adopted as well, and Vicente answers that "Some people collect stamps. Me? I collect seventeen-year-old kids" (Sáenz 283). This "collection" truly includes Fito after his mother dies of an overdose. This chosen family is utterly devastated because "Fito was my friend. And I loved him. And it killed me to see him so broken. It killed Sam, too. And it killed my dad. It's hard to fix a heart when it's been so damaged. But that was our job" (Sáenz 356). Sal feels it is their job to try and help Fito heal because they are friends, family, and when a loved one is hurting, it is their job to try and help that loved one. It is solely the chosen family that supports Fito through his loss both physically and emotionally.

As well as Vicente, his recently returned boyfriend Marcos also connects to Fito. Having a rough upbringing of his own, Marcos understands the depth of pain that Fito feels, and he talks Fito into seeing a therapist to deal with some of that anguish. Although things are easier now for members of the LGBTQ+ community than they were when Vicente was growing up, it is clear that Fito still faces many difficulties. Author Benjamin Alire Sáenz stated that he wrote this

novel around teenagers coming to terms with their sexualities and intersectional identities because he feels that adults forget that adolescence is difficult for those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. As an advocate for young adults, Sáenz weaves these issues throughout his novels, allowing the reader to feel this struggle for acceptance that the characters face. This not only presents an opportunity for older readers to remember what it was like to be an adolescent but also provides queer readers with a mirror to let them know that they are not alone with their feelings and struggles in the world. Through the novel, Sáenz shows a true reflection of chosen family, giving LGBTQ+ young adults the opportunity to understand that other people feel just as they do. Sáenz states that “Many children in this nation, in this world, are forced to create some sort of support system. And really, we all create alternative families—isn’t that what friends are? Aren’t friends the family that we choose? It is terribly important for all of us to create some kind of community where we feel we truly belong” (Sáenz). To better allow the queer readers of the future to understand that their feelings are valid and to provide the comfort that they are not alone in those feelings, works such as *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life* must be available to present these mirrors for the young adults who need to see their authentic experiences reflected back at them.

Vicente himself even tells Sal that he too felt angry and confused as a young person, showing that Sal is not alone in his feelings, just as the readers of this novel will understand that their feelings are universal as well. Vicente reveals that he tried to separate himself from his family because he thought ““my family, well, they’d hate me or they wouldn’t understand me or they’d send me away. So I just sent myself away. It was easier for me to pretend that I didn’t belong to a family. I tried to pretend I didn’t belong to anyone”” (Sáenz 115). Thankfully, Vicente came back to his biological family and brought a young Salvador with him, realizing

that he does belong to his family and Sal does as well. The Silva family also enfolds Vicente's chosen family of the teenagers as well; Mima becomes a grandmother to each of the young adults, even choosing to speak to each of them as she is dying. The loss of Mima is heartbreaking to Vicente and to the rest of the family as well. The bond between Vicente and his mother is one that the reader also sees in Sal and his Mima, both grandson and grandmother remembering their perfect day together playing in the yellow leaves of a tree.

Through her love, an infinite love that continues even after her death, the chosen family strengthens their bonds, not only with each other and their extended family but also to Mima's beloved traditions and their own Mexican heritage. This chosen family realizes that they all belong to something larger than themselves, and through their shared love and the bonds between them, they begin to heal and grow from the wounds and failures of their biological pasts. Although Sáenz creates layered and rich characters, the relationships created in this chosen family are almost entirely positive and it serves little complexity in regard to the many highs and lows that come with the topic of family. Instead, the characters in *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life* are idealistic depictions, the perfect hope one can strive to mirror as they find their place with each other in a chosen family that is simply built from friendship, support, and genuine love. It is messy, complicated, and incredibly flawed-but that is what makes it family, even if that is not logical. Multicultural LGBTQ+ young adult novels present the opportunity to showcase that chosen family can not only connect the members of that family with each other but also provide connections and opportunities for those individuals to remain connected to their cultural or religious backgrounds. Through Vicente's connection with each of the young adults in this novel, queer readers can not only see how diverse a chosen family can be, but they can also better comprehend how they could construct their own chosen families through the bonds they

have now as young adults or the possible bonds they could have as they get older. Providing an example of a gay single father not only teaches LGBTQ+ readers that they too could have those familial bonds in the future but also allows them to experience different perspectives and methods of constructing chosen families. It is essential that chosen families are depicted in a variety of ways as no two families will be exactly the same; this is something that Sáenz shows through Vicente's bond as the father figure within his chosen family. Vicente gives the young adults within his chosen family hope, but he also provides a possible role model or example for queer readers as they begin to mature and think about their own future paths and chosen families.

### **CREATING SPACE FOR YOURSELF**

While Sáenz's work creates a chosen family that is built upon the foundation of a supportive gay father who extends his family to the young adults in his life, in *Mariam Sharma Hits the Road*, Sheba Karim illustrates a chosen family built by teenagers who are all failed in different ways by the hegemonic system of biological family and their religious community. In the novel, Mariam and her friends Ghaz and Umar create a family that supports each of its members who face rejection from their biological families, allowing them to belong to each other as something larger than themselves; these teenagers also bring each other closer to their religion and culture through their bonds as a voluntary family. Throughout multicultural identity quests, LGBTQ+ young adult literature conveys the importance of chosen family bonds as not only links to members of one's voluntary family but additionally as a connection to one's religion or culture. In *Mariam Sharma Hits the Road*, the bonds of chosen family bind not only the three teenagers together; these bonds also allow each of the three to remain connected to their heritage despite the conflicting feelings that each of them have about their religion at some point during

their journey. The trio are members of the Islamic community, although their levels of involvement with their faith vary. After Ghaz poses for a scantily clad photo that is used in a Times Square advertisement, her conservative family rejects and physically punishes her. Because of their strong connection, Mariam, also called Mars, and Umar, a devout gay Muslim young man, help her escape. The trio leaves, hoping everything will blow over, and say that they are going to the Islamic Association of North America in New Orleans. It is clear through the brief interactions that Ghaz relays about her family that she will not be welcome to return, so much so that she even thinks of staying in New Orleans when they arrive. Thankfully, she is talked out of this idea by Mars who tells Ghaz to move in with Mars and her mother and brother.

Although most of the novel focuses on Mariam's journey as the narrator of the tale, it is through her interactions with her chosen family that the story finds its footing. The failures of each teen's biological family are quite clear through the novel—Mariam's biological father has abandoned her for years and shows no interest when she seeks him out in the novel, Ghaz's parents have physically abused and disowned her after the fallout of her scandalous billboard, and Umar, a young gay Muslim who has not come out, also fears rejection from his biological parents once they know about his sexuality. It is here that Karim's novel depicts how chosen family is important in allowing those within the LGBTQ+ community to grow and understand themselves when they have the support provided to them by these chosen family bonds. Throughout the text, Umar constantly struggles with how to balance his identity as a devout Muslim with his sexuality, feeling as though he cannot live in both worlds. At the convention towards the novel's ending, a panel regarding LGBTQ+ matters in the Islamic world further shames Umar and confuses him even further on how he can best live his life. It is Mars and Ghaz who help him to heal from these wounds caused by the words of this conservative group on the

panel and they help him to see that he has to carve out his own space in this world and find a way to exist within this liminal space he has made for himself.

As the three travel, they experience numerous hardships, not the least of which is the systemic racism they encounter as they enter the south while heading to New Orleans. Through their difficult journeys and various misadventures, the trio becomes even closer than before, and they realize that not only do they belong more to each other than they do to their biological families, but they also understand that even if they rebel against their heritage, it will always be a part of them. Umar, a member of the LGBTQ+ community is the most devout of the three, and through his struggles to accept his conflict with his religion and sexuality, all three characters are brought closer to understanding their intersectional identities. In addition to beginning to embrace these complex aspects of their identities, the three teenagers step into their roles as family members for each other and come to embrace the fact that “Blood doesn’t mean much if it’s not tied to love” (Karim 186). The reader is drawn to the connection between these very different young adults and the strength of their love for one another. Through each of the characters, the reader experiences the role of chosen family as a way to support its members when they are failed by the heteronormative systems that surround them; however, there are also limitations that even the best support systems face.

The importance of Karim’s work is that it addresses head-on the limitations for chosen family to completely heal the past failures of biological family as well as the rejections that LGBTQ+ individuals face from conservative members of their religion. Each of Karim’s characters’ biological families fail to provide the support and love necessary for these teenagers to grow into themselves and build stronger connections with their culture and religion. It is only through each other that they find their anchors in life.

Despite the novel's focus on Mariam as the protagonist of the novel, it is through Umar's journey that the reader understands how even in works where the LGBTQ+ character is not the narrator, depictions of straight allies as chosen family for LGBTQ+ youths can help them grow and navigate the complexities of their identities, especially for those within more traditional cultures or religions, such as Umar. This can be particularly important for queer young adults who will see this as significant and may later build chosen families that include straight allies within them. Umar's journey focuses on belonging, just as Mariam and Ghaz's do over the course of the road trip. Each of them is searching for acceptance and a sense of belonging; ultimately, they find that in each other and begin to find it within themselves as a result of the road trip and its many obstacles. The connection these three have is one that is truly deeper than others know. The trio has not known each other very long, and this seems remarkable when the reader can feel just how genuinely they care for each other. When the friendship began, it was a serendipitous meeting that grew into a support system that could handle the storms of rejection each of the three would face from their families. Mariam states that the three met outside a party, where she felt immediately connected to them, stating that though she "barely knew Umar and Ghaz...it gave me pleasure to hear them laugh" (Karim 44). From that moment on, they are inseparable and become as close as siblings. They protect each other, keep each other's secrets, and try to lead each other down the best paths. The necessity of chosen family is shown through Mariam's inner thoughts as she witnesses both Ghaz and Umar struggle with the rejections they have or will face from their biological families. She realizes that

No one, it seemed, could ever really escape their families. They'd continue to haunt you, through technology or memories or an aching for what once was, like the pain of a phantom limb... I could try to ease my friends' hurt, but nothing I

could do or say would change their families' attitudes. I'd seen it in my own naani, this stubborn clinging to notions of right and wrong that supersede even love. (Karim 222)

Mariam does not understand how any family could ever put something over their love for each other, and it is this dedication to her friends that ultimately keeps them together and gives each of them a place to belong within the chosen family. This family's impact is most obvious for queer readers through Umar's growth over the course of the novel, giving the reader hope that he will begin to be more accepting of himself with the continued support of Mariam and Ghaz. Through the bond the three have as chosen family, each of the teenagers better understands themselves and steps closer to self-acceptance as they form their intersectional identities. In doing so, LGBTQ+ readers can see windows and mirrors through which they can see representations of themselves or gain a better comprehension of the experiences of others with whom they may construct chosen family bonds in their present or future lives.

Like his friends, Umar has been, or expects to be, failed by the heteronormative systems that surround him. He struggles to find where he belongs within his own family and his religious community. Although Ghaz and Mariam seem to be more atheist than Muslim, Umar is incredibly devout. There can be a stereotypical dichotomy between religion and sexuality however, by creating a character that is firmly dedicated to his faith and also identifies as gay, Karim has created a character that illustrates the importance of accepting that most people live in the liminal space in-between. Umar knows that "Some people don't like me because I'm gay, some people don't like me because I'm Muslim, and some Muslims don't like me because I'm gay." "And I bet some gay people won't like you because you're Muslim," I stated" (Karim 241). Here Karim has shown the difficulties that those who exist within both the LGBTQ+ community

and other cultural or religious communities may have in reconciling both pieces of their intersectional identities. Through the support of his chosen family of Ghaz and Mariam, Umar learns how to better live within the space he creates for himself within both of these pieces of his identity although there is still much work to be done as he strives toward self-acceptance. This too may provide a model for future queer readers who may struggle with the same experiences of living within the liminal space between their sexual identities and other cultural or religious upbringings. This also shows that some stories do not always have a perfect ending. This is one of the strengths of Karim's work, that none of the characters have a perfect idyllic ending but instead each has a messy and far too real journey ahead of them of which they have only begun.

Umar is a layered and complex individual who experiences realistic uncertainty as he begins to accept and explore his sexual identity. One of the greatest obstacles that Umar faces is the fear of rejection from his biological family. Because of his dedication to his faith, and this fear over his parents' reaction, Umar has not yet come out to anyone other than Ghaz and Mars. Umar believes that his parents will react similarly to the way that Ghaz's parents did when they saw her billboard, and he dreads the day that they will no longer support or love him the way that they do now. He can predict that "there will be men who stop shaking my dad's hand in the masjid. They all see me as the sweet boy who does the breast cancer walk with his mother every year, who will be a successful doctor like his successful parents. Imagine the gossip when they find out otherwise." (Karim 227). Umar continues that his father will only care about the opinions of those he respects, but his mother cares about the opinions of everyone she ever meets. He reflects back on a previous "Pakistani guy who came out" (Karim 227) and Umar says he can still remember the things they said about this gay man, the gossip that spread at a party his parents hosted. Here, Umar feels as though there are conditions to his biological

family's support where there seem to be none with those of his chosen family. His extremely conservative parents have failed to present an open-minded outlook in the past, particularly regarding Umar as he grew into his identity, so he has been forced to hide his truth. When the trio attends a "cross-dressing" party in Philadelphia, Umar reveals that in addition to being gay, he has a drag persona named Tabitha Generous. As he reveals Tabitha to his friends, he also has strict limitations on what he will and will not do or wear. One of these limitations is that Umar refuses to wear high heels after a traumatic incident when his father caught him wearing his mother's high heels. Even when he steps into his persona as Tabitha, a moment where the reader sees Umar become truly free at the party, he cannot bring himself to disappoint his parents further, even though they are not there to see it. This incident as a child has stayed with him years after the fact. Umar tells his friends about the incident, revealing

When I was little, I liked to go into my parent's closet and try on my mom's heels. I was walking in them and somehow I fell and hurt my ankle, and it was my dad who heard me cry out in pain. His face when he saw me, lying there with my mother's fake leopard skin stilettos half on my feet and one of my mother's dupattas around my head. It was the same expression he had when he came to a parents' day at kindergarten and someone offered him a slice pizza with pepperoni. (Karim 77)

In the face of Umar's exploration with his gender and sexual identity, his father immediately shuts down and rejects any possibility of this continuing. It is not only Umar's parents, but also his sister who Umar knows will reject him when he comes out. He has heard her say disparaging things about gay people before. He tells Mars and Ghaz that "She's like, 'I totally accept that there are gay people, but why can't they keep it quiet? I don't go around flaunting my

heterosexuality everywhere.’ Oh, and she also said gay men could never be as good parents because two good gay men still could never equal one good mother.’ ‘Well, you’ll have to prove her wrong,’ I said” (Karim 224). All of these situations together have given Umar such a complex about his sexuality that he refuses to discuss his sexuality with anyone outside of his chosen family and hides his feelings instead. Because he is constantly hiding his emotions and true self, Umar is incredibly reserved, even around his two closest friends, and is reticent about showing or releasing his emotions. Mariam explains that even “Though deep down he was a hopeless romantic, a sucker for a cheesy rom com, he was uncomfortable verbalizing his own sentimental emotions. His preferred method of expressing he loved you was making fun of you” (Karim 47).

The only time the reader truly sees Umar free and at his happiest is at the “cross-dressing” party the three go to together. All three of them are in drag and they accidentally eat laced brownies in the kitchen of this party. The combination of drugs and the freedom that Umar feels when he is dressed as Tabitha Generous combine to allow him to completely let go of his inhibitions. Mariam watches him on the dance floor and realizes that “We’d seen Umar dance plenty of times, but never with such utter abandon” (Karim 89). After the teens leave the party, Umar begins to sober up and reflect on his behavior. He asks the girls “Do you think only Tabitha Generous can dance like this?” (Karim 91), but Mariam tells him that “You’re the same person underneath the makeup and clothes,” to which Umar tells her that he “can’t stay hidden forever, Mars. I gotta dance. I gotta live.” (Karim 91). This experience is the first real time that Umar comes out of his shell and embraces his identity as “A beautiful, proud, sensuous, gay, *Muslim* man,’ Umar said” (Karim 125). Typically, Umar is incredibly reserved and represses the majority of his emotions, preferring to hide them away from even his

chosen family. This experience as Tabitha allows Umar to begin to unleash more of his emotions with the safety of his chosen family supporting him.

All three of the teenagers release their emotions when they decide to stop and scream after a run-in with a racist waitress in a diner. The constant terror that haunts the trio because of the almost tangible judgment they feel as they travel through the south is heartbreaking to the reader, and the brief moment of catharsis is a wonder to behold. The three teens stop their car and decide to simply scream. Mars tells us that:

the entire car was reverberating with the resounding pain of Grandma Bigot and having your parents lock you in your room and deadbeat dads and homophobic dads and lost loves and the rising temperatures of ocean and islands of floating trash, of the trials of being you and trying to find your place in such a screwed up world. If anyone else heard, I bet they understood, because one of life's sad truths is that not all of us receive love but every single one of us knows pain. (Karim 149)

While Ghaz and Mariam also deal with rejection from their families, it is Umar who truly feels untethered; he often feels too gay to be Muslim and too Muslim to be gay. Ghaz tells him that perhaps he needs to ““make space for yourself”” (Karim 71). Umar must learn to embrace all aspects of his identity and find a place where he belongs in the liminal space between both communities. With this moment, Karim has illustrated how the support of chosen family can help the members of the LGBTQ+ community bloom and feel secure within their intersectional identities, even if those chosen family members are straight allies and not part of the queer community. This allows all readers to see how they can be better allies, even if they are not the

readers who see the reflection of themselves in the representations of the queer characters in the novels.

Just as Ghaz and Mariam serve as Umar's support system within the chosen family, Umar acts as a connection between the girls and the teens' religion. It is Umar who keeps the bond between his two friends and their cultural upbringing alive even if the girls are not as devout or active within the community as Umar. When Ghaz and Mariam attend the convention with Umar, they seem to abstain from most religious activities. It is only through Umar that they remain connected to their culture because, despite some of their previous reticence or apathy towards their religion, Umar reminds them that "if you leave the community, how can you ever make it better?" (Karim 227). In spite of his inspiring words, Umar remains confused about how his sexuality fits with his religion, and this discomfiture is furthered at the convention. Along their trip, Umar opens up to the girls that he knows Allah made him this way, which is difficult to reconcile with the fact that his sexuality is often considered a sin by many conservatives in his community and in his family. The only way Umar can think to reconcile his sexuality with his faith is by making peace with the fact that Allah "is so merciful that, even if it did turn out to be a sin, He'd forgive me." (Karim 230). This angers Ghaz who loves Umar so much that she hates to see him in pain. She wishes that she "could unburden him of his guilt." (Karim 233), but Mariam tells her that Umar has "to figure that out with his God. No one else can do it for him." (Karim 233). Although Ghaz wants to protect Umar from the conservative nature of some of their community and from the possible future rejection of his biological family because she loves him dearly, there are limitations to what any support system can achieve. There are simply some things that we cannot protect our loved ones from, no matter how hard we may wish to do so;

this message is illustrated clearly when the trio gets to the convention and they walk into a horribly hurtful moment that they could not have foreseen occurring.

Once they arrive at the convention, the trio attends a panel on LGBTQ+ issues, naively assuming that this panel will be speaking about their experience as members of this community. They quickly realize that this was a false assumption and that they have walked into the exact opposite. When the speaker begins, despite a promising start that Islam does not have an issue with homosexuals, he further continues that acting upon one's sexuality is where Islam begins to have a problem. Umar is already conflicted and this panel, which should have been full of hope and acceptance, instead pushes him further into himself and his shell. The only positive to come from this is that they introduce themselves to Ali, another young gay male, whom Mars befriends after seeing how upset he is at the message being conveyed. Ali and Umar quietly exchange numbers, and Ali even has information about a camp that is specifically for LGBTQ+ Muslims, individuals like Umar who exist and thrive in this liminal space. This interaction is one of the few moments where Umar has found someone who can relate to his experiences as a gay male, and it is the only moment where we see another Muslim character also dealing with sexuality issues. Even though Ghaz and Mariam love him as much as possible, there is clearly a limitation in how much they can understand the difficulties that Umar faces. Although they may not understand exactly how Umar feels, they do support him as he explores his sexual identity.

After the disaster of the convention, the three teens walk down Bourbon Street to a gay club to help Umar deal with the emotions of the day. At the gay club, a drag show is taking place, and it is here that Umar interacts with members of the LGBTQ+ community. One of the drag queens, a Britney Spears impersonator, tells Umar that he is “too beautiful to keep hiding” (Karim 284). This is a message that resonates with Umar as he begins to explore his identity as a

gay Muslim man. The drag queens that Umar meets are all kind to him and seem to be invested in making sure he is comfortable with what he is doing. Umar is at his happiest and ironically seems freest in these moments when he disappears into a crowd that makes him feel seen. Although he is a hit with the drag queens, Umar feels like “I don’t belong at the IANA convention...but I don’t quite belong here, either.” (Karim 283).

Umar’s decision to talk with Ali from the IANA convention, and to attend the LGBTQ Muslim camp that Ali tells him about gives the reader hope that Britney’s advice will ring true and Umar will stop hiding. Umar may not belong at the gay club or at the IANA, but perhaps with Ali and the LGBTQ Muslim camp, Umar will find the strength to carve a place for himself. This too may inspire queer readers to find the place where they belong in their real-world lives as they form their chosen families in the present and their future experiences. The reader knows that Ghaz and Mariam will support Umar as he finds the strength to find his place because “For all our quibbles, we loved each other fiercely” (Karim 125-126). It is this love that carves a place where each of them belongs. Family means belonging to something larger than yourself; for the trio, this means belonging to each other and to their Muslim heritage as well. Although they are often torn by the events of their lives, Mars feels that “All three of us in flux, our friendship serving as an emotional anchor. If any of this ended in an explosion, I hoped it would be one that made us burn brighter, stronger than before” (Karim 97). As the novel ends, there have been many explosions-those of expectations, hopes, and future plans. Each of these young people is struggling to find their place in the world, but through their love for each other and for their, sometimes begrudging, connection with their community, they will always have a place to call home-a belonging that does not supersede love but is instead built on it. Karim uses these three unique chosen family members to show that the bonds of voluntary family not only attach us to

one another but can also bond us to systems larger than ourselves; this allows future LGBTQ+ readers to see just how they too can carve a space where they will belong even if they have not yet found that place or formed their chosen family bonds.

## **CULTURE ISN'T THE SAME AS ART**

Just as Karim's characters exhibit the necessity of carving out a space for oneself that lives in the liminal space between a religious community and one's sexuality, so too does Adiba Jaigirdar in *The Henna Wars*. Jaigirdar illustrates characters that embrace parts of their cultural communities, but do not feel as though they can fully step into their sexual identities because they feel torn between themselves and their cultures. *The Henna Wars* also demonstrates that chosen family can include both friend-family and romantic partners who can help to heal the protagonist feel more comfortable living in this liminal space when heteronormative systems fail to aid them. However, this novel also shows that not even chosen family is perfect, and sometimes it requires individuals to work out their problems with the members of their chosen family to better grow within themselves so they can use the support they gain to further heal their connections with biological and cultural communities. Jaigirdar uses these characters to present the experiences of realistic chosen families, with all of the flaws of reality, to illustrate that chosen family has the ability to support us and help us as we grow and battle against not only the outside world but also with our parents as well. It is this reversal of typical *bildungsroman* formatting that serves to highlight the importance of the bonds of chosen family for the young adults of the LGBTQ+ community because they will battle multiple fronts as they strive towards self-acceptance of their intersectional identities.

Jaigirdar's protagonist, Nishat, is part of a Bengali family that has moved to Ireland. After attending a relative's wedding and seeing how happy her parents are, Nishat makes the decision to come out to them as a lesbian. At the same time, Nishat is reunited with a former childhood friend, Flávia who always understood the difficulties that Nishat faced as a child of a different race in her elementary school, and now that they are again attending the same school (and the same wedding), sparks fly between the pair. This too helps Nishat make the decision to come out to her parents. The only person who knows about her sexuality at this time is her sister and best friend, Priti. Nishat knows that it is time to embrace herself, which starts with revealing her truth to her parents. Nishat's parents do not react well to Nishat's confession, however, simply staying silent and dismissing her. Nishat's sister attempts to comfort her; however, this failure by her biological family causes a rift that takes almost the entire novel to repair.

Although she feels many frustrations with her culture, Nishat still seeks a connection to her Bengali upbringing, which she finds in the art of henna. Henna is not only a connection to her culture but also to her beloved grandmother, Nanu, who is an important member of Nishat's support system. Nanu encourages Nishat to continue with her henna, telling her just how amazing her art is especially for a beginner. It is unsurprising when she chooses to continue this practice for a competition held by her business class at school. It is through this class that the reader is introduced to two of Nishat's best friends, Chaewon and Jess, with whom she is quite close, but who are still ignorant of Nishat's sexuality and her parents' reaction. Nishat does not tell them because she does not know "if I can stand to lose my family and friends all at the same time" (Jaigirdar 56). Because they do not understand that Nishat's drive is because she feels as though that culture has rejected her, Chaewon and Jess are confused by Nishat's single-minded idea to create a henna business when fellow classmate and school bully, Chyna decides to create

a henna business with Flávia. One problem with friend families is that they are often formed by individuals who were friends before strengthening their bond. Chaewon and Jess were friends before the inclusion of Nishat into their group, so their frequent conformity pushes Nishat aside quite often. When she is insistent on continuing her henna business, the pair make their own group for the business competition, which causes tension with Nishat's chosen family as well as her biological one.

Amidst all of this turmoil in her life, Nishat is suddenly outed to the entire school via text message. She incorrectly assumes that Flávia has told Chyna, and she is heartbroken to find out that it was Priti who has told her best friend Ali who has, in turn, outed Nishat to the entire school. With her choice stripped from her, Nishat is devastated but refuses to back down and competes despite constant harassment and ostracism from her peers, even resulting in the destruction of her booth at the business class showcase. Jess and Chaewon put aside their earlier disagreement and come to Nishat's side to support her during this difficult time, strengthening their bond and friendship. Flávia too rallies to Nishat's side and even begins to see that perhaps henna is not a good idea for her to use as an art form, as Nishat tried to explain to her earlier. With her friends and a tentative romantic partner at her side, Nishat has the strength to continue her henna business and even forgive her sister for unintentionally causing this strife.

Although Nishat's friends have begun to serve as emotional support once more, Flávia tells Nishat that she is not ready yet to be out and Nishat refuses to ever hide again; with this chasm between them, the pair split their budding relationship, but still, remain kind and supportive of each other. When the winners of the competition turn out to be Jess and Chaewon, Nishat is happy and proud of her beloved friends. Chyna, the school's resident mean girl, makes snide comments about this clearly being a choice made for the "exotic" and Nishat stands up for

her friends and for herself. Surprisingly, with this start, her friends and Flávia follow suit and the school turns its back on Chyna and her racist comments. Flávia and Nishat are reunited, giving each girl the support of the other for the future obstacles that may come. Finally, towards the end of the novel, Nishat's parents begin to educate themselves and start to support their daughter. Thankfully, both Nishat's chosen family and biological family repair their broken bonds and connections and Nishat is more secure in where she belongs in her school, in her families both chosen and biological, and in her culture. No family is perfect, biological or chosen, and this novel showcases realistic difficulties that many teens may face.

*The Henna Wars* offers a more realistic view of chosen family in that it is flawed and often not as perfect as other works may depict. Jaigirdar's novel provides a significant contrast to both Saenz and Karim's novels in that the chosen family itself can be seen as a flawed support system, just as biological kin may be for these teenagers, and each member of its family must overcome their wounds of the past to better heal and help one another. These wounds are not only biological failures but can be created from those within the chosen family as well. Jaigirdar showcases a chosen family that is formed by flawed individuals who must learn how to forgive and accept one another's faults so that they may support one another better in the future and repair the damage of the past to better step forward united into the future. With this, LGBTQ+ young adult readers can see realistic representations of chosen family which will serve them as they later create these bonds for themselves. As with all families, not everything can be perfect, and having these authentic mirrors of chosen family can truly better the understanding of the queer readers as they construct their own bonds to support themselves if they too are failed by the heteronormative systems that surround them in their everyday lives. Nishat, Jess, Chaewon, and Flávia must all overcome their pride and the misunderstandings between them to move

forward as a family that supports each other. This allows Nishat the space and support she requires to further heal her relationship with her biological family and with her culture.

Nishat's biological family fails to accept her because of their own prejudices and preconceived notions, which causes her to rely on her chosen family to help support her. This is true from the beginning of the novel even as Nishat comes out to her parents and they respond with silence. The devastation that Nishat feels is not only with her parents but with the strict cultural expectations that they hold for her. She snaps at her sister with her resentment that "it's not just Bengali relationships that are complicated, is it? It's this weird, suffocating culture that tells us exactly who or what we should be. That leaves no room to be anything else" (Jaigirdar 15). Nishat feels conflicted— torn between her family and their heritage and the identity she has started to piece together for herself. Here the heteronormative expectations that her parents hold are failing to serve Nishat as she does not fit into this system. Her mother even tells her that "Muslims aren't gay" (Jaigirdar 123). This clearly is not true, but Nishat does not know how to get through to her mother. Although many Muslims can and do accept members of the LGBTQ+ community, Nishat's mother tries to convince Nishat to make a different decision and to choose her family over her sexuality, as though she can simply chip away this piece of herself. Nishat agonizes that this choice "isn't between being gay and straight, it's between them and me. Who do I choose?" (Jaigirdar 147). Nishat is torn between her biological family and her identity, but Nishat refuses and decides instead that she has to stop her shame and pick herself. Because her chosen family does not know about her sexuality, they cannot help Nishat in this choice, and she simply has to attempt to pick up the pieces herself because of her inability to communicate effectively with her friends.

Unfortunately, choosing herself is not an easy thing to do as she faces constant bullying and harassment and is even outed unexpectedly from a text message. Nishat tries to focus on her henna and her original designs as a source of comfort—a connection to a heritage that she loves, even if she feels like it has rejected her. Even here, Nishat faces difficulties; when her booth is destroyed at the showcase, she is stunned by the hatred she is facing simply because she is a lesbian and Muslim. However, in the face of so much hatred, a small step is made towards repairing the bond with her biological family. Her parents show up for the showcase and are astonished at the destruction; her mother shows her support by asking Nishat to do her mehndi for her. This is the first step towards reconciliation, a confirmation that Nishat is making her Nanu proud and celebrating her culture by sharing her talent.

One day, Nishat's mother calls her up to her room to brush her hair and finally discuss Nishat's sexuality. She continues that she has been reading about members of the LGBTQ+ community, showing a willingness to learn that seems unexpected but pleasant. Ammu reveals that she just could not understand how something like this was possible, having never met a lesbian before. She had assumed that differing sexualities did not happen “to Bengali girls. Not to my daughter” (Jaigirdar 352-353). Nishat tells her that it is not something that happened, it is who she is. Although her parents may not understand, they have begun to accept Nishat and this important part of her identity. After witnessing this growth, Nishat then tells her parents about Flávia and this first overlap between her family and culture and her sexuality is a great success, much to the relief of Nishat, Flávia, and the reader who has been on the journey with the girls as well.

As well as her parents, Nishat's sister Priti occasionally fails to properly support and understand Nishat throughout the course of the novel. It is her betrayal of Nishat's trust that

leads to Ali outing Nishat and resulting in Nishat being bullied and devastated. The tension with Priti starts with Nishat noticing the tension between Priti and her friend Ali, but not bringing it up. Due to this, she does not expect the issues between her sister and Ali to increase to the point where Ali outs Nishat to the entire school. Priti justifies it, telling Nishat that she had to talk to someone about the difficulties they were facing at home and she thought Ali could be trusted. Nishat is understandably upset with her sister for sharing something that was not hers to tell, and also for allowing Nishat to believe that Flávia had done this. This leads to an argument between the sisters, and Priti berates Nishat about her focus on the competition and her relationship with Flávia instead of the tension in the household and their sick grandmother. Because this behavior is so unexpected for Priti, Nishat is stunned, and it seems that another part of her life is falling apart in front of her. However, after a brief Skype conversation with their grandmother, reconnecting with her priorities and her family, Nishat and her sister are reconciled. Both their biological bond and their friendship are repaired, and this helps Nishat repair other relationships as well.

In addition to the failings of her biological family, there are occasions where Nishat's supplemental chosen family is not always perfect either, and she must repair the damage of these broken bonds to help her accept her intersectional identity and repair the damage of her rejection by the heteronormative systems in her life. Nishat, Jess, and Chaewon are close, but there are still clear distances between them. Nishat never told the other girls about her sexuality, only feeling that she could trust this part of herself to Priti. Jess and Chaewon are also much closer with each other than they are with Nishat because they were friend-family before they met Nishat and brought her into their bond. With this connection already in place, it is sometimes difficult for Nishat to feel she belongs with her friends. There is also the division that comes

between the trio in regards to race and cultural appropriation. Part of this issue arises because Jess is white and does not understand the difficulties that Nishat and Chaewon face as different nationalities and religions. When Nishat discusses Chyna's racist and incredibly problematic comments, Jess dismisses this as Chyna simply being rude to everyone. She even continues to ignore Nishat's claims that Flávia and Chyna doing henna is cultural appropriation as neither is from a culture that uses the art of henna. Jess disregards Nishat's feelings, saying that henna is in other countries and claiming that Flávia is African-American, so it is acceptable. However, this is not the case as Flávia is Brazilian and Irish. Jess feels that Nishat is making too big of a deal of this and using "the race card" (Jaigirdar 160). The confrontation ends when Nishat leaves, refusing to compromise and refusing to back down. With this splintering, Nishat only has her sister, Priti, and surprisingly Flávia to turn to for support.

The trio manage to repair their relationship after Nishat is outed; Jess and Chaewon try to comfort and support their friend after Nishat confirms to them that she is a lesbian and not ashamed of her identity. Her friends are supportive and sympathetic, and Jess apologizes for her behavior regarding Chyna. Nishat accepts Jess' apology, choosing to forgive her insensitivity with the hope that she can do better in the future about understanding her privilege and ignorance. After the destruction of her booth later, Jess and Chaewon help her salvage what they can and make decorations for her new stall, including a poster that displays the colors of the lesbian flag, laminated for safety. Even if her school does not support or condone her pride, Nishat's chosen family has proudly declared themselves allies, advocating for her the best way they can. Despite knowing she will not win the business competition, Nishat is still proud of what she has managed to accomplish, with the strength her support system has given her as well as the connection she has forged with her heritage. Although her chosen family members are not

within her community, by supporting Nishat as she battles against the outside world and her family, these voluntary kin help Nishat gather the strength to heal her connections with her biological family and with her culture as well. This allows young adult readers to see representations of their own struggles with their intersectional identities even as it allows other allies to see that they can support the members of their chosen families as those individuals strive towards self-acceptance.

Finally at the end of the contest, the winners are announced, and Nishat is ecstatic to hear that Jess and Chaewon have won. As soon as they step off stage, the trio hug, sobbing and laughing, and Nishat says “it feels like a huge weight off my shoulders...Like at the end of the day, none of that really mattered...Because I’m still here and I have my friends, my sister, my family. And things will be okay” (Jaigirdar 361). Nishat’s chosen family has been healed, and she has realized that these people who love her and support her are the most important things in her life, no matter what comes next. This is where she belongs, connected with her culture, her community, and bonded with her loved ones. With the growth that Nishat has experienced through forgiving her friends and even apologizing for her own shortcoming and issues, Nishat can also forgive her parents for being unsupportive and begin to heal the bonds that this failure has broken within her biological family.

As well as her friends, Flávia, who later becomes Nishat’s romantic partner, also serves as a member of Nishat’s chosen family and supports her in her endeavors. It is here that Jaigirdar shows that even if a member of one’s chosen family is not of the same cultural upbringing, this does not mean that they cannot help one another find and repair connections to each other’s cultural or religious heritage. This is one lens through which young adult readers can possibly understand how they may find support in their own future or present chosen family members,

even those outside of their cultural or religious communities, to better connect themselves to their individual heritages. Although Flávia is not Bengali, by helping Nishat accept her sexuality, she also serves as a safe place for Nishat to begin to grow stronger in her connections with her culture through henna. The pair bond over the expectations of their parents and their cultures. Although Flávia is Brazilian, she too deals with the pressures that come with being a person of color. Nishat is surprised that their parents have the same beliefs:

They shifted us halfway across the world, risking our culture, putting us in the middle of two nations, and given us an identity crisis, all because they believe it gives us more opportunities. It's strange to think about how much our parents really sacrifice for us. But then, I'm stuck on the fact that Ammu and Abbu can leave their entire world behind, yet they can't pause for a moment and consider who I am. How can they sacrifice everything for me and Priti, but they can't sacrifice their closed view of sexuality to accept me as I am? (Jaigirdar 79-80)

Throughout the novel, Nishat's relationship with Flávia is tumultuous; it is friendly and yet competitive, flirtatious yet confusing. Each of them seems to understand pieces of the other and yet they are not the same. Although they may come from different cultures, Flávia gives Nishat comfort and support she cannot find from other members of her chosen family, fulfilling a need that is not met by either her friends or her biological family.

Flávia is particularly helpful to Nishat as she struggles with existing in the liminal space between being a Muslim girl who lives in Ireland, attends a Catholic school, and is a lesbian. Flávia can empathize with Nishat's struggle better than Jess and Chaewon, even though Flávia is not publicly out and comes from a different religious and cultural background. Throughout the novel, the two girls struggle with the many battles they have within themselves

and with the outside world. Flávia even shows up at Nishat's stall to tell Nishat that she has always impressively refused to bow down to social standards and is confident in her culture, which Flávia finds admirable. In Flávia, the reader finds someone who is finally not only accepting of Nishat's culture but appreciative of her dedication and connection. Flávia subsequently kisses Nishat but then reveals that she is too hesitant to come out to everyone, despite the fact that her mother already knows she is bisexual and has accepted it easily. This causes jealousy in Nishat because her own coming out "has cost me my family" (Jaigirdar 317). Flávia continues that the reason she was so panicked after their almost-kiss at the party was because of the stereotypes of over-sexualization often thrust upon Brazilian girls in addition to the similar judgment that comes with being bisexual; this makes Flávia feel that she would never hear the end of it if she did come out. Nishat understands and the pair begin a tentative next step in their relationship until Flávia tells Nishat that she cannot confront Chyna after the destruction of Nishat's booth because Flávia is afraid she knows these people will bully her as they do others and will question her sexuality. Although Nishat understands Flávia's hesitation, she knows she cannot go back into hiding even though it will cost her Flávia, who has become important not only as her first crush but as a member of her support system. Nishat refuses to be ashamed of her sexuality, of who she is, not even for the important members of her chosen family. Flávia, although devastated, understands Nishat and her decision to live authentically and openly, and so the girls temporarily split, although they remain cordial during the remainder of the competition.

After the confrontation with Chyna, both Chaewon and Flávia also stand up to the bully, with Flávia taking Nishat's hand and walking out together. After the adrenaline of the moment has worn off, Nishat is concerned about Flávia's actions, knowing that she was not prepared to come out to everyone yet, but Flávia has decided that she is ready to be proud of her own

identity. She tells Nishat that she wants to stand up for herself and her sexuality; she is ready to come out and claim a space for herself, just as Nishat has done-even if it is a difficult and painful process. Flávia knows that she has her mother and Nishat, and perhaps even Nishat's chosen family, to soften the blow for her as they have done for Nishat.

The novel ends when Flávia surprises Nishat with her previous business' Instagram page- it has been revamped by her friends, Flávia, and Priti. Nishat's chosen family has gotten together and brought *Nishat's Mehndi* back to life. Nishat is convinced to continue with what she loves and to reclaim her culture through the art of henna. Together, both Nishat and Flávia have forged a path and have begun to make space for themselves in their respective cultures, families, and school where they can feel safe and belong. With these first steps, the girls can begin to repair the damage that they have previously experienced through the failings of their biological families and also the hindrances caused by the imperfect bonds of chosen family as well. LGBTQ+ young adult novels with multicultural protagonists depict how chosen family bonds can connect individuals to systems larger than themselves; in *The Henna Wars*, Nishat is connected to not only her chosen family, but to her culture as a whole and this experience gives her the strength to heal the other connections she has with her biological kin and the expectations of the heteronormative systems in her life. It is essential that these works continue to present authentic representations of queer teenagers to allow future readers to see reflections of themselves within the novels and gain a larger understanding of how they could construct their own chosen families from their friends and romantic partners if they are failed by their biological families and other heteronormative forces.

Family comes in many forms. When the characters of a novel represent not only specific sexualities or genders within the LGBTQ+ community but also certain cultures or religions that

are underrepresented, these intersectional pieces of one's identity become even more significant. Maintaining these pieces when one feels isolated or torn apart from one's culture or religion can be difficult. This is where the importance of chosen family can be shown. Throughout these novels, the authors have shown that it is possible for friends or voluntary family to fill or ease the voids that are left behind when one is rejected from their family or community. In these cases, forming one's identity is not simply done as an individual process. As author Sáenz discussed:

We form our identities by looking at people we identify with or people our own age that we admire. My friends gave me a different perspective on myself, and they taught me how to be generous, taught me that kindness mattered, taught me how to forgive, and also taught me how to ask for forgiveness. My friends expanded my universe, taught me words, gave me a sense of self-worth... My friends are not *like* my family—they *are* my family. (Schulman)

Each of these novels shows young adults who are learning from their chosen families; not only how to be better loved ones, but how to find themselves and their connection to things larger than themselves. It is only when these friends, these families, are together and trying to purposely overcome their differences and perspectives that they can fully understand and grow as individuals. Being a part of a family, all types of family, is a messy business; often, there are heartbreaks, misunderstandings, and everyday difficulties that can come between loved ones. Through their bonds as a chosen family, these characters grow within their communities and within themselves as people. Through each of these novels, LGBTQ+ young adult readers can truly understand the message that being part of a family means belonging to something even bigger than themselves, something as big and as infinite as love. LGBTQ+ young adult literature illustrates that chosen family can act as a nexus among the individuals within that chosen family

but also to systems larger than themselves, such as cultural or religious communities. Through these diverse and authentic representations, queer readers can access the windows and mirrors through which they can peer to see reflections of themselves or others to provide alternate perspectives as they begin to construct their identities and chosen families in the present and future. It is a necessity that young adults have these representations so that they can find comfort in knowing that they are not alone and their feelings are valid and shared with others. These windows and mirrors currently exist; however, they are not as analyzed or publicized within the literary canon. Because of this, queer readers may not have models of chosen family for their own futures unless they are given more opportunities to access genuine representations of chosen family in unique and diverse ways throughout LGBTQ+ young adult media.

## **Chapter Four: Cute Ghosts and Corrupt Corporations: Magical Connections as Chosen Family**

Throughout literary history, witches and other magical practitioners have been Othered and seen as outcasts in mainstream society; therefore, it makes sense that with the expansion of LGBTQ+ young adult literature, many of these novels have paranormal or fantasy settings. Paranormal young adult literature can provide windows through which LGBTQ+ teenagers can see alternate worlds and diverse ways to grow and live authentic lives. There are many parallels that can be drawn between witchcraft and nonheteronormative experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community, so when characters are experiencing Othering due to both aspects of their identities, it is compounded. To deal with these often ostracizing experiences, the characters in these works find or create chosen families, typically including other members of the magical and LGBTQ+ community. So often within these novels, and within witch-centric literature, in particular, the characters are forced to hide a piece of themselves from the rest of the society around them. Here the reader can easily compare the struggle so many teenagers face as they come to terms with their sexual and gender identities, often choosing to keep pieces of themselves hidden from others. In many works, the characters find themselves forming relationships and chosen families with those who are like-minded or accepting of their magic, which not only serves as a metaphor for the often feared and hunted feelings of those within the LGBTQ+ community, but it also adds a deeper layer of exclusion when those characters are within the LGBTQ+ community as well.

Within works of supernatural young adult fiction, the connections the characters who identify within the LGBTQ+ community create become not only paranormal connections or groupings but also become larger than that and are the bonds that form chosen or voluntary

families. These works create windows through which LGBTQ+ youth can look and see unique ways that the individuals within these worlds bloom and create chosen families when they are failed by biological relations and heteronormative expectations. In this chapter, I analyze Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* and M.K. England's *Spellhacker* as magical young adult novels that depict different methods of illustrating how magic within a fantastical world can be used to create bonds that connect members of the LGBTQ+ community to each other as they form chosen families after being failed by heteronormative systems and can also connect these individuals to their magical communities as well. LGBTQ+ young adult literature depicts chosen family as a connection between the individuals within that chosen family to systems larger than themselves; paranormal fiction as a genre within YA literature allows authors the opportunity to use magical connections as catalysts through which individuals can create chosen family bonds or allow the magical community to serve as a secondary system to biological family with which these queer young adults must repair their connection through the support of their chosen family. Because these novels depict these chosen families in such a manner, queer readers in the future can use these works as windows into new worlds where they may see alternate depictions of chosen families and members of the LGBTQ+ community, allowing them to experience interesting and new ways for chosen family to help support each other through the failures of heteronormative systems through the magical fantasy realms that these authors have created.

## **BLACK SHEEP AND QUEER PACKS**

Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* shows that when magic comes from the system that is rejecting a young adult, it can cause a division between the magic of one's biological family and one's sexual and gender identity; therefore, sometimes an outside perspective from within one's

chosen family is the only one that can alleviate the wounds from these heteronormative failures. This novel serves as a reminder that blood, culture, and religion are not all it takes to create a family; sometimes it comes down to love and dedication. Throughout a text that weaves a spell around its reader, drawing each of us into the society built on *brujx* magic, the true strength of family is tested, and the bonds of love are what save each of the characters, and the magical society itself. Thomas' novel focuses on gay and transgender Yadriel, a *brujo* raised in a Hispanic family that has been blessed by Lady Death with magical powers. Each female witch, or *bruja*, in Yadriel's family has the ability to use animal blood to heal, while each male witch, or *brujo*, has the ability to raise spirits and send them to the afterlife. Within this novel, Thomas uses magic in two very different ways by showing magic as a system connected to biological family, from which Yadriel, the protagonist, feels disconnected because he is a transgender teenager who has been rejected; however, in this fantastical world magic also serves to reaffirm Yadriel's gender as he is blessed by the patron with the powers of a *brujo*, or male witch, thus showing a higher being's affirmation that Yadriel knows who he is. Here magic creates a unique experience in this fantastical world that allows a member of the LGBTQ+ community to be accepted through a magical connection that later leads Yadriel down the path to finding his chosen family and healing the bonds with his biological family and the magical community they share.

Despite being raised as a *bruja*, Yadriel has always known that he was a *brujo* instead. Even as a child, a failed healing incident convinced him and his mother that this was not the right path for him. Because he could not heal, he was not considered a *bruja* by his community, thus they assumed he had no magic and canceled his quinces, which is a magical ceremony that allows a *brujx* to be blessed with their full magic by their goddess Lady Death. The other *brujx*

thought this was from the “dilution of magic slowly working its way through their lineage. But Yadriel and his mom knew the truth” (Thomas 32). It was simply because he is not meant to heal like a *bruja* because he is a boy. Before her untimely death, Yadriel’s mother was his biggest champion and tried to make the rest of the community accept Yadriel for who he is; however, after her death, most of the other *brujx* ignored Yadriel and his father and grandmother are only tacitly accepting, often actively misgendering him.

Unfortunately, his community refuses to accept Yadriel and does not let him undergo the quinces ceremony. With the help of his cousin Maritza, a *bruja* who does not use her powers because they require animal blood and she is vegan, Yadriel secretly does his quinces ceremony and is given the powers of the brujo by Lady Death, confirming his identity to himself.

Tragically, this excitement is cut short when Maritza and Yadriel feel the death of their cousin Miguel. Although he is eager to help, Yadriel is not allowed because his father does not accept him as a *brujo*; Yadriel’s uncle Catriz is also not allowed as he is magicless and is therefore seen as an outcast like Yadriel. While all the men are searching, Yadriel and Maritza sneak out to help as well, but no one can find Miguel’s body or spirit. Maritza and Yadriel come across a St. Jude medallion in an abandoned church, and Yadriel uses it to summon the spirit of its owner. He believes this will be their missing cousin and is shocked when it is the spirit of Julian Diaz, a boy from school, instead.

Julian has no idea how he has been murdered and refuses to let Yadriel send him to the afterlife until they find out what happened to his friends. Julian’s friends, Omar, Luca, Rocky, and Flaca, his chosen family, are mostly LGBTQ+, just as Julian himself is gay, and they are all street kids whose parents are unsupportive, dead, or have been deported. After finding out his friends are safe, Julian begrudgingly allows Yadriel and Maritza to question his older brother,

Rio, about any information he could have about Julian and his disappearance, but he too has little information and believes Julian to have simply run away. There are very few leads and now that he knows his chosen family is safe, Julian agrees to be sent to the afterlife after one last perfect day which he spends with Yadriel, even kissing him.

At the end of Julian's last day, the pair pass through the cemetery which has begun to be decorated for Día de Los Muertos. Julian has a terrifying seizure where it looks like he was dying and then mysteriously vanishes. When Yadriel and Maritza try to find him in the old church where they found his necklace, they find their uncle Catriz instead. He has been using dark magic to summon the jaguar god Bahlam. He is slowly sacrificing human souls, including Julian and Miguel, to the god Bahlam, hoping he will swallow up the spirits who will come during Día de Los Muertos and then grant power to Catriz. His uncle tries to tell Yadriel that he is doing this for them, the outcasts. Yadriel and Maritza are hurt trying to fight off their uncle, but Yadriel manages to grab the sacred necklace used to harness the power; however, the ceremony has already started, and the jaguar god wants his sacrifice. Yadriel tries to save his uncle from Bahlam, the jaguar god, but Catriz is dragged down to Xibalba, a type of hell dimension. The human sacrifices, including Julian, are all dying, but Yadriel refuses to let this happen and he sacrifices himself to bring them all back to life. As Yadriel is dying, Maritza gives up her vow to never use her powers and uses the spilled human blood to save Yadriel's life.

After a brief stint in the hospital for all involved, and some minor bragging by Maritza for saving Yadriel's life, Julian and his chosen family are reunited and safe. Yadriel too is safe and he is even *finally* allowed to have his proper quinces ceremony where all of the spirits of those *brujx* who have died including his mother, and even his beloved Julian (now fully corporeal in nature), attend to see him properly gifted by Lady Death. Yadriel's father and the

*brujx* community have made the first steps into properly accepting him into his magical community, and Julian and his chosen family will no doubt continue to help Yadriel as he steps fully into the LGBTQ+ community as well. Yadriel states, “Things weren't magically fixed by an empowering speech, but it opened doors and built bridges. It carved out space for Yadriel to step forward and be who he was, as he was. There were still more obstacles to overcome and battles to fight, but Yadriel don't feel alone in it anymore. No, it wasn't the end. It was a better beginning” (Thomas 342). Throughout the novel, the reader can see how Yadriel is failed by the majority of his biological family, and it is only through Julian and his chosen family that Yadriel can begin to find his place in the LGBTQ+ community; it is with this group of rejected young adults that Yadriel finds his pack, just as Julian did. Because of Yadriel's connection to magic, he finds his chosen family in Julian and Julian's friend-family; this new space to view chosen family is something that only supernatural LGBTQ+ young adult literature can offer to queer readers as a window into magical worlds. This new experience shows how magic can serve as a bond to help queer individuals form chosen family bonds when they are failed by biological family systems and need support to face the obstacles that await them in the outside world and even within those traditional biological families as well. Because magic serves as a connection to the spiritual world as well, Yadriel is connected not only to his biological family but also all of the *brujx* that have come before. With Julian's help, Yadriel realizes that this connection, and the connection he creates with Julian and Julian's chosen family, are just as meaningful as his bond to his biological kin, thus validating not only these queer characters but also queer readers who may have experienced a dissonance between their sexual and gender identities and religion or spirituality in the past.

Author Aiden Thomas uses both Yadriel and Julian to depict how important it is to have familial support, especially as a member of the LGBTQ+ community; if one cannot find this through biological family, then many young adults use chosen family to heal those wounds of failure and rejections. Thomas has stated this purposeful intent in an interview:

Chosen family and the family one is born into are major themes in *Cemetery Boys*. Yadriel struggles with the gendered role of magic in his brujx community, while Julian wants to make sure his friends (who are his chosen family) are safe. I wanted to use Yadriel and Julian’s families to show the nuance to what makes a family—and also to align with their journeys as characters. (“Q & A”)

It is important for Thomas to show how essential it is to find a strong support system, such as the one that Julian has with his chosen family and Yadriel has with his cousin and best friend Maritza, and later with a romantic partner in Julian, and Julian’s friends. Finding a chosen family who can heal the emotional wounds caused by the failures of biological family is particularly important for Yadriel to gain throughout the novel as he is not only alienated from his biological family, but also from the community that should come with his supernatural gift. Here, instead of following the traditional format of a *bildungsroman*, or coming of age story, where the LGBTQ+ young adult moves beyond their families to later battle the outside world, Thomas’s novel depicts the battles that many queer youths with their traditional biological families in addition to the obstacles they will experience from society and the outside world.

Although Yadriel had the support of his mother before her death, when she was gone, the rest of the *brujx* community ostracized him because of their lack of understanding. The only support Yadriel has is from his best friend and cousin Maritza. Yadriel tells the reader that when he finally came out to Maritza as gay and transgender, it was an utter relief to finally have the

truth out there. She is his constant source of familial support and truly shows to be his best friend throughout the course of the story. Other than Maritza, his mother was the only person Yadriel had as his champion. She protested that he should be given a quince to become a full *brujo*, but the rest of the community refused. They said that if Yadriel would not go through the ceremony as a girl, he would not go through the ceremony at all—this is the tradition that they cling to so stubbornly from the past. After his mother’s tragic death, Yadriel is left without her support and his community ostracized him further, only speaking to him when necessary, or even misgendering and deadnaming him. With this failure by his biological family, Yadriel is left without a family but also without the connection needed to maintain his bond with the magical community as well.

Yadriel’s connection to magic changes when he and Maritza sneak out to perform his quince in secret. She is his only truly supportive biological family member, even making Yadriel a *portaje*, a magical blade that the *brujo* use. Like Yadriel, Maritza is an outcast from their society because she refuses to use animal blood to perform magic, but she has instead studied how to create magical blades with her father. His one supportive family member has come through for him and even managed to pursue her own nontraditional dreams in the process. With this, Yadriel is able to complete his quinces with Maritza as his only witness. Even here, in a moment that should be public and celebrated by his family, Yadriel has only himself and his best friend. Although this moment may be secret, it is not any less significant when Lady Death bestows *brujo* magic on Yadriel. He is finally connected to not only Lady Death but to the other *brujx* before him, those “who’d emigrated from all over-Mexico and Cuba, Puerto Rico and Colombia, Honduras and Haiti, even the ancient Incas, Aztecs and Maya—all bestowed with powers by the ancient gods. A mix of beautifully nuanced, vibrant cultures that came together to

make their community whole” (Thomas 9). Although he may feel connected to the previous *brujx*, it is clear that this generation of Yadriel’s biological family is not entirely supportive.

It is difficult for the reader to watch his remaining family, including his father and his Abuela, often misgender him or continue to treat him as they did before Yadriel transitioned. This is also quite obvious in the pronouns they use when referring to Yadriel in Spanish. In a language where so much is explicitly gendered, it is heartbreaking to see Yadriel’s biological family continually refuse to use male pronouns or even further to say that he will always be their little girl in Spanish. Although his biological family may not be purposefully hurting him, their failure to accept Yadriel’s true identity is often painful nonetheless, and yet Yadriel is often seen attempting to correct his family or forgiving them when they make these horrible and devastating missteps. Yadriel feels as though he is often forgiving his family for their failures and has become tired of it:

He was tired of forgiving. He was tired of fighting to just exist and be himself. He was tired of being the odd one out. But belonging meant denying who he was.

Living as something he wasn't had nearly torn him apart from the inside out. But he also loved his family, and his community. It was bad enough being an outsider; what would happen if they just couldn't-or wouldn't- accept him for who he was?

(Thomas 29)

Clearly, Thomas conveys that educating his family and forgiving them is quite exhausting to Yadriel and estranges him from his family with the exception of Maritza and his Tio Catriz, who are both also Othered by the family. Although Maritza’s rejection is lesser, possibly because it is self-imposed because of her choice to be a vegan, she too feels the isolation to some degree and supports Yadriel in his choices. However, the estrangement takes a darker turn in Yadriel’s uncle

Catriz and drives him to summon the jaguar god and betray Yadriel's trust. It is only later that Enrique, Yadriel's father, realizes that he and this community are partially to blame for Catriz's dangerous decision to do whatever it takes to try and get power because they were so unfair to them and ostracized him (and Yadriel) so much. All Yadriel has is Maritza for biological support until finally, his family accepts Yadriel, even holding his quinces ceremony on Día de Los Muertos when all of the spirits of former *brujx* can watch. It is here that Yadriel's Abuela calls him a masculine pet name and begins to make amends for her previous failings. The spirit of Yadriel's mother is at the quinces, and she tells Yadriel how proud she is of him and who he is. His father finally accepts him as a *brujo*, and the community begins to open up for Yadriel; however, it is a long road to fully healing the wounds they have inflicted.

Because Yadriel feels alienated and different from everyone around him, and he is failed by the majority of his biological family throughout the book, his connection to Julian, and Julian's connection to his chosen family becomes integral to Yadriel's growth and self-acceptance, which later helps him heal the bonds with his biological family and magical community. It is through his magical connection that Yadriel even meets Julian, and therefore, magic serves as a catalyst for Yadriel to begin forming his chosen family and repairing the damage from failing heteronormative systems. Other than Maritza, Yadriel does not seem to have any close family connections to speak of, chosen or otherwise, and certainly no connections to the LGBTQ+ community. He exists in a liminal space, torn between his culture and his identity. This lack of chosen family changes when Yadriel and Maritza accidentally summon the spirit of Julian Diaz who is uncertain how he came to be in this church when the last he was aware, he was being jumped by a man while protecting his friends. Yadriel is forced to explain what happened to Julian while also telling him about the *brujx* community; this confession

reminds Yadriel of coming out in a sense, which makes Julian's easy acceptance refreshing to see. Later, after an accidental misgendering, Yadriel does come out again to Julian as transgender and Julian will accept this easily as well. In fact, Julian will even come out to Yadriel, confessing that he is gay. Throughout their conversations later that evening at Yadriel's house, Julian will discuss his chosen family, a group of street kids, most of whom are transgender or otherwise members of the LGBTQ+ community. Julian tells Yadriel, "Queer folks are like wolves. ... We travel in packs" (Thomas 125). Despite also being a queer person, Yadriel has no pack except for his cousin and uncle, neither of whom identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community; therefore, not only is Yadriel separated from his community because of his sexuality but he is also separated from the queer community as well.

Julian's easy acceptance of him is one step closer to expanding Yadriel's small circle of trusted family and healing some of the wounds from his biological past. Thomas states that Julian's chosen family is a very deliberate message. Julian's mission is

to keep his queer found family safe while navigating a world that has written them off. The only family Julian has by blood is his older brother, Rio, so he's created a family of his own. Julian's family is one that's formed under the bonds of personal experiences, especially under forms of oppression. Often time, queer kids who aren't accepted by their families find each other and become each other's family. Along with the cultural oppression many Latinx kids face—like being written off by society or having their parents taken away due to deportation—these queer kids literally survive by relying on one another.

("Q&A")

To explain who his friends are, Julian points them out to Yadriel in the yearbook, and Yadriel realizes that he has heard of or seen most of Julian's friends before. While flipping through the yearbook, they spot Julian's picture, which was cute and featured Julian with a full and bright smile. As payback for Yadriel's teasing, Julian suggests they look at Yadriel's yearbook photo, but Yadriel stops him. In the yearbook, he is still listed as his deadname because he has not yet been able to get it legally changed due to the cost. Yadriel leaves the room, and when he returns, Julian has written Yadriel's chosen name in black Sharpie under the yearbook photo. Julian is not only a positive ally but also a member of the LGBTQ+ community who better understands the value that Yadriel has placed on his chosen name. Coming out is difficult for Yadriel each time, but Julian makes this process incredibly easy and is a stalwart force beside Yads with no questions asked, just as a chosen family member should.

The reader meets Julian's own chosen family after a bargain is struck that Julian will go peacefully to the afterlife if they can check on his friends first. They are the most important thing to Julian, clearly even dearer to him than his own safety. When Yadriel, Maritza, and Julian find them, they are hidden away in a secret spot and are all incredibly concerned about Julian. Julian confirms the reader's suspicions that these teenagers come from unsupportive homes and are even homeless on occasion when he asks if they are sleeping here again, although his friends cannot hear him because he is a spirit. Upon introducing himself as a new friend of Julian's and asking where he is, Yadriel takes a good look at each member of Julian's chosen family. He then realizes that he knows Julian's friend Flaca because she "was the first openly trans person Yadriel had ever met...He remembered the first time Flaca wore a skirt to school, and how he'd stared. Yadriel thought it was both incredibly brave and terrifying all at once" (Thomas 146). As the first trans person he had ever met, Flaca was inadvertently a beacon of hope to Yadriel. Here

Yadriel has found a connection, someone with whom he can relate and who knows what he has experienced as a transgender teenager. Although these individuals are not connected to Yadriel's magical community, they help him connect with the LGBTQ+ community with which Yadriel has not had any contact prior.

After finding his connection with Flaca, Yadriel finds that he also recognizes Rocky because she, just like Julian, is a dedicated and loyal friend who is passionate about ensuring that her chosen family member is not discriminated against or punished for acting in accordance with her identity. It is clear that Yadriel admires Flaca and Rocky, not only for their bond but because of Flaca's confidence and authenticity. After seeing her bravery, Yadriel is inspired to wear his binder to school, and they have a small interaction. Yadriel says that when he wore the binder, "No one else had seemed to notice, but when he sat down next to Flaca, she looked him up and down, smiled, and said, 'Looks good.'" (Thomas 146). Although Yadriel has not yet joined this small family, members of it have already accepted him into the fold before they have even properly met. Flaca even knows to ask for Yadriel's real name instead of his dead one, giving her approval again once she hears it, something that warms Yadriel. Because Yadriel has not had a queer family before, a pack as Julian calls it, he has not had this easy acceptance (or approval for that matter) of his name and his identity before.

Even though these teenagers are not part of his magical community or biological family, they seem to understand him in a way that others have not been able to do. It is little surprise that later on in the novel, Yadriel tells Julian that he wishes he could "trade my family for yours" (Thomas 185). Although he knows that Maritza and his uncle care for him, it is still a marvel for Yadriel to see Julian's family. He continues that "They weren't even blood, but in the short time he'd interacted with them, he could see how fiercely they cared for one another. Especially

Julian. ‘I wouldn’t trade them for the world,’” (Thomas 185). Julian’s love for his chosen family is evident in every interaction he has with them. He clearly shows concern over the bruises and cuts on Luca’s face and frets over where the others are staying now that he is gone. Omar, one of the others in this family, has attempted to step into the leadership role that Julian has left behind; he is incredibly protective of the others and does not want to say anything to Yadriel and Maritza because he does not know or trust them with this family that has been built when they were all rejected by heteronormative systems.

Just like these teenagers whose reproductive families have failed to serve as proper support systems, other teens are on the street and some of them have been reported missing. Tragically, not many people care because these street kids have only the small chosen families they have created, and these groups are not seen as legitimate by legal systems. Although these are individuals within a fictional magical world, these are the all-too-real issues that many LGBTQ+ young adults face, and here Thomas’ novel may hold up mirrors to queer readers who may have to rely on friend-family when they too are rejected by their biological families. Thomas shows how this chosen family supports one another as they try to deal with the obstacles facing them in the outside world and from the heteronormative systems of their past. To better protect themselves, Yadriel thinks that this small family should go somewhere safe, but Omar says that ‘Not everybody’s got places they can run off to when they’re in trouble... We take care of each other,’ He stood tall, his chin jutting out stubbornly. ‘Blood of the covenant,’ Omar told Yadriel, holding his hands out at his sides. Julian sighed and said in a defeated tone, ‘Is thicker than the water of the wound’” (Thomas 152). This popular phrase when said in its entirety gives it a different meaning altogether from its typical uses, and it also differs from its religious origins. Yadriel’s accidental repetition of Julian’s words causes the found family to figure out

that something is going on because only Julian has ever used that same malapropism when repeating the token phrase. Omar kicks Yadriel and Maritza out immediately, fearing for the family's safety and taking up Julian's mantle as the head of this chosen family.

After leaving Julian's chosen family, Yadriel and Maritza meet Julian's biological brother Rio, who has been taking care of Yadriel and the rest of the chosen family. Julian and Rio's father was killed in a drive-by prior to the novel, and their mother ran off when Julian was born. Because of this, Julian and Rio have always been on their own, failed by typical biological systems, and together they have taken in the other street kids whose parents are unsupportive or who have been deported. Although Rio is not helpful, assuming that Julian ran away, the confrontation leads Julian to open up more to Yadriel about his chosen family and his feelings about the treatment of other members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially Yadriel and his treatment within the *brujx* community. Julian brings up the fact that there must have been others from within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly nonbinary, intersex, agender, or transgender individuals who were *brujx* if this community has been around for thousands of years. They were just not allowed to be themselves. These individuals would have been able to do magic, just as Yadriel has proven he can in summoning Julian. Julian does not understand why this is not enough for Yadriel or his family. Julian is a truly supportive individual who looks out for others, especially those in his chosen family as he knows that they need his support to help each of them grow and mature within themselves.

Julian continues that his friend Flaca is still a girl, even if she is not passing or not on hormones. The same was true for Yadriel. Thankfully, Yadriel's family is more supportive than Flaca's; her family kicked her out when she told them that she was transgender, and now she lives with either Julian and Rio or a cousin of hers that is close by. Even if they are more

supportive than Flaca's, it's clear that Julian is still angry on Yadriel's behalf, just as he would be for anyone in his chosen family. Although the pair have only been thrust together for a few days, they have already become quite close, and Julian already regards Yadriel as someone to protect. Despite his rough and abrasive behavior, Yadriel is charmed and feels connected to Julian who has understood him as no one else has ever done. This bond, and even the ease with which Julian's voluntary kin accepted Yadriel (until the panic set in), begins to strengthen Yadriel's confidence in his own identity. Because of his connection with magic, Yadriel has found a bond with Julian and his chosen family that helps Yadriel find his footing as he battles against the traditional expectations of his biological family and the magical community from which they come; thus magic serves as both a catalyst for chosen family but also works as a secondary community which rejects Yadriel due to his sexual and gender identity. It is only through his connection with Julian and Julian's friend-family that Yadriel has the support needed to truly take steps towards healing the wounds caused by these heteronormative systems. This healing begins with Julian's understanding and support for not only Yadriel but for all of the members of his chosen family who also identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Julian continues discussing the members of his chosen family, telling Yadriel that Luca, the kind young boy from earlier, was a former gang member who was looking for somewhere to belong, even if it means enduring abuse from his biological family or from the gang he was in until Rio got him out. All of Julian's friends suffer from the failures of heteronormative systems—Rocky is in a group home and Omar's parents have been deported. Rio and Julian take care of everyone, a family made from those who need it the most. The support and love that Julian has for his chosen family are truly special, and it makes Yadriel feel included in this

family even though he has only known Julian for a few days. Because he is part of a queer pack, talking with Julian is easy. Thomas writes,

For the first time in a very long time, [Yadriel] didn't feel like a lost cause. It was nice to have someone to talk to about this stuff. He had his Tío and Maritza, of course, but there were still degrees of separation between their experiences. When he came out, there was a lot of legwork and explaining to his Tío and Maritza about who he was. It took time and a lot of emotional work on Yadriel's part. But with Julian, there was no training involved because he already understood him. It was...easy. Yadriel hadn't known it could be painless and simple for someone to see him as he was. (193)

Julian becomes much more than a friend to Yadriel, but at this moment he is a supportive figure in Yadriel's life, welcoming him into the "pack" and allowing Yadriel to finally be himself without any strings or education required. This easy and simple bond between the pair only strengthens on what they call Julian's last day; after this, Yadriel intends to send Julian to the afterlife. The two boys spend their perfect last day, and finally, Yadriel asks Julian if he has any regrets or anything that he wishes he had done. In response, Julian, who never speaks Spanish because it was his father's language before he died and explains that the language now feels too intimate, asks to steal a kiss in his beloved Spanish. It had been too hard after the loss of his father to speak Spanish, but the reader sees Julian reclaiming his father's language as Yadriel has healed some of the pain he felt when speaking it. This relationship has allowed each of the young men to reclaim part of their identities and feel more comfortable within their own skins.

Later, after the fight with Yadriel's uncle in the church, Yadriel is rushed to the hospital following his attempt to sacrifice his life to save the injured individuals from his uncle's ritual.

Although Julian is hurt and has just been brought back from the brink of death, he continues to protect Yadriel as Yadriel's biological family rushes to take him from Julian. When Yadriel's father, Enrique asks if Julian is a friend, it feels as though "The word burned. '¡Mi querido!' he snapped viciously... 'Don't touch him!' Julian all but snarled" (Thomas 321). It is only when Enrique promises to let Julian see Yadriel after he has been taken care of that Julian can get the care he needs at the hospital. When he wakes up, his chosen family is there, utterly relieved to see him alive. Julian sees "his friends stood huddled by his bed. Omar's eyes were bloodshot and he looked pissed. Rocky was pale, and there were tears freely running from Flaca's puffy eyes. Luca openly gaped like he was staring at a ghost" (Thomas 325). This found family is finally reunited and safe at last. Julian is so glad to see them, and after some tears and reconciliations, he asks again about Yadriel. When the pair are reunited, they are finally happy and safe. Julian comes to Yadriel's quinces ceremony, even though Rio was not going to let him go; thankfully, his friends intervene because "Even if they didn't understand the secrecy, they were still ride-or-die for Julian" (Thomas 334). Regardless of the circumstances, this family will always be there for each other, even if it is simply to allow Julian to see his boyfriend's ceremony. It is there that Julian, who has welcomed Yadriel into his chosen family and given him a support system when he did not have one, is welcomed into Yadriel's community and meets the rest of the *bruja* including Yadriel's mother.

At the quinces ceremony, Yadriel's father begins to talk about his failings and how the *bruja* as a heteronormative system has failed.

"Our traditions should grow and change with every generation. Just because we follow the ancient ways does not mean we can't also grow. I have been shown that these past few days," Enrique said. "I failed my son, Yadriel, as both a father

and an elder...he tried to tell me who he was, but I didn't listen. I didn't

understand...But now I am listening, and I will learn to do better.” (Thomas 339)

Julian and his chosen family have helped Yadriel find his footing in the queer community, even before they met during the novel. The love and confidence that they have inspired in him will allow Yadriel to move forward into his magical community and hopefully find some peace with himself and with his biological family. There will be obvious difficulties ahead, but with Julian and his friends, and Maritza at his side, the reader has hope that Yadriel will finally be able to move forward as a *brujo* and hopefully inspire this traditional community to grow and change to better support all of its members to avoid failing future generations. Throughout his novel, Thomas shows that magic can exist as a secondary system in addition to biological family, which may cause the queer teen depicted in the novel to battle both systems as they come into their own gender or sexual identities. Thomas also shows that magic can bring with it fantastical affirmations that simply do not exist within the real world. While there is, sadly, no force in the real world that blesses transgender individuals with magic to reaffirm their gender identities, this illustration gives a window to a magical world where queer readers can experience that affirmation through Yadriel's experiences in the fictional world. *Cemetery Boys* conveys that magic may also serve as a guiding force that helps the LGBTQ+ individuals depicted find their way as they form their identities and create bonds of chosen family to heal the wounds from the rejections they have previously faced from the heteronormative systems in their lives, one of which could be a magical community if it is tied to a biological or traditional family structure. Magic serves many purposes throughout the paranormal fiction genre as it falls under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ young adult literature, and in Thomas' work, Yadriel uses his gifts to find his chosen family who support him as he battles against his biological family (in this case, quite

literally) to change the traditional norms that have been rigidly enforced and make his magical community one that is supportive of all individuals.

### **THE FAMILY THAT STEALS TOGETHER**

Like Thomas' depiction of Julian's chosen family created by queer individuals and street kids, M.K. England, a nonbinary author who creates and emphasizes the importance of queer fantasy worlds, concocts a spell-binding family made of orphans and outcasts, both magical and non-magical individuals, who remind the reader what real family can be when built by chosen bonds. England's work *Spellhacker* is powerfully and painfully realistic, and even with the magical world-building that absconds with the reader's imagination, they still manage to capture the voice of the diverse characters that make this little friend family come to life. *Spellhacker* centers on a dysfunctional chosen family that runs jobs for a black market of maz, the street name for magic, siphoning it from secret underground tunnels and selling it for a profit. In England's novel, magic serves as a catalyst, both in positive and negative ways, to bond these individuals together as a chosen family that has supported each other throughout the years after they have been failed by the heteronormative systems in their lives. Through this depiction, queer readers can see how necessary chosen family is to members of the LGBTQ+ community who have been unable to find support systems in biological family members, even in fantastical worlds that incorporate magical elements within them. Through this depiction, queer readers can access windows to a unique fantasy world that uses magic as a force that can both form and sever family bonds, thus illustrating the realistic benefits and obstacles that can face chosen families even in the real world.

The novel is narrated by Diz, a technology-savvy hacker who was orphaned at a very young age, having witnessed her mother's death due to the spell plague that hit the city due to a spill of magic, killing and infecting millions. She has only one biological family member, a cousin named Davon, whom Diz thinks of as an older brother. Her best friend is Ania, who does not live with the rest of this chosen family and is seemingly the most different from the other three. Ania is from an incredibly wealthy family, which brings some small resentment and confusion as the others are destitute orphans who grew up together in group homes. Ania is a techwitch who is only able to use magic and cast magical spells due to Diz's skill with technological creations that allow Ania to use that magic, or maz as England refers to it in the novel. Ania is the only one of the group who has money and both of her parents, although they are shown to be neglectful and unsupportive of Ania throughout the novel. She is the mother figure of the chosen family, along with her on-again-off-again significant other Jaesin, who has played the father role since he met Diz and Remi in a foster home as children. He has been with Diz and Remi through numerous group homes and foster system changes, and now they live together in a small apartment. Jaesin is the muscle of the group; he is the strength physically and emotionally, ensuring they are all safe. Jaesin takes care of the most basic of the family's needs; when he cooks, he even makes sure it fits within Remi's special immune-support diet. The last of the groups is Remi. Remi is a nonbinary spellweaver and Diz's romantic interest in the novel. They also grew up with Jaesin and Diz in the group homes, which is how the trio met when they were young. They are naturally skilled at weaving and handling maz, even being called a prodigy at some points, but they are spellsick because of the plague that occurred before the action of the novel. This disease is slowly killing them, and they must stick to a strict regimen of diet, exercise, and medicine that doctors have prescribed. Together these four misfits have formed a

chosen family built from love and necessity, as each member of the group has been neglected or orphaned by their biological family and must rely on each other to survive and bloom.

With the exception of Ania, the family lives together in The Cliffs. It is “The dumping ground for the city’s plague orphans” (England 30). However, this family is splitting up, “ten years of friendship, two years of running jobs together, and now it’s over...Before they all move away and abandon [Diz] here” (English 15). Because they do not have enough money to go to college in Kykarta, the city the four have lived in their entire lives, Remi is going to a cheaper college in Jattapore and Jaesin and Ania are moving with them to this area too, with Jaesin getting a job there and Ania going to a private school. Instead of choosing to go with them, Diz is staying in the city she knows so well, even if it is the place that has seen the worst times of her life. The city itself is almost a part of Diz’s family, even though it is a toxic piece that is holding her back from moving on with her life. Diz simply refuses to leave, but she also refuses to communicate her feelings to her family. She is even thinking of taking a job with Maz Management Company (MMC), a corporation that controls all of the maz in the city, which the reader later finds out is actually responsible for the “accident” that led to the spill of maz which caused the spell plague in the city. Diz’s cousin Davon has helped her get this job, and he is the last biological relative to whom she can turn when she feels her chosen family is abandoning her.

Each of the teens is going their different way, and this would be the first time in ten years that this family would be separated. Diz does not handle this thought very well, and instead of talking about it with her friends, she continually blocks herself off and banter her way through. When they are offered one last siphoning job, stealing a new form of maz from MMC, Diz gives in to the temptation when she finds out that the money would be enough for Remi to stay in the

city, and the friend-family would be intact. She accepts the job because she is so desperate to keep the family together; little does she know, this job is a setup. When they accidentally leak maz into the city, it changes the course of the family's lives forever, bringing them even closer together.

After the accidental spill, and the discovery that it was a purposeful malfunction by MMC, the family must find out exactly what is going on with the new strand of maz, which leads them to a former professor who studied maz, Professor Silva, (and his adorable husband John) who went missing many years ago on the run from MMC. It is with his help that the chosen family uncovers the truth of MMC's corruption and the dangerous drilling that caused the spill of maz which created the spell plague. Together, the four teenagers must fix the damage done by MMC and find a way to shut down the corrupt corporation forever. Unfortunately, every victory comes with loss and this unfolds through Davon's betrayal. Davon struck a deal with MMC to give up the rest of Diz's crew and the professor if he could keep Diz safe. Although he loves her to the best of his ability and has attempted to protect her, ultimately he has made the choice to pick security over loyalty. It is through this betrayal that Diz cuts all biological ties and realizes that only her chosen family can truly be called her real family. After a successful operation by the teenagers to escape Kykarta and shut down MMC's illegal drill that is still destroying the natural maz resources, Diz and her family are rescued by Professor Silva and his husband John who bring them to their houseboat where they can travel together to their next adventure. Diz realizes, "Yes, I'll miss Kyrkarta. I'll even miss Davon. But my true family is out here. Wherever they go, I go" (England 402). Each of the young adults in the novel has realized that they are better when they are together, and with the addition of the professor and his husband, the reader can only hope that this family will be safe and that they will begin to repair the

failures of the past, both created by their heteronormative families and even the flaws of their chosen family, and together they can embrace the future that awaits them.

England's novel shows how magic can create bonds with individuals who form chosen families through these connections to better support each other through the obstacles that they face from heteronormative systems. By creating this fantasy world, England forms a new space for queer readers to experience the construction of chosen family by LGBTQ+ individuals in their journeys to battle against society and the outside world as well as the ghosts of their biological pasts. The world built within *Spellhacker* illustrates the necessity of chosen family for members of the LGBTQ+ community, even within these magical worlds when biological family systems fail to support these individuals. The loss of biological family makes the necessity of chosen family even more evident in England's novel than in many of the other novels seen in LGBTQ+ young adult literature. Each of the four main characters has been either orphaned or neglected by their biological parents. With the exception of Ania, the other three members of the family have grown up in foster and group homes, none of which ever became permanent fixtures in their lives. Not only are they lacking biological family, but even the foster system fails these three young adults, and it is only with each other that they find a familial bond.

Ania, who is raised by her biological parents, is shown to be neglected and is only given true love and support by Diz and the others. Ania even states when the teens hide at her house that although her parents are home, ““they never come down here. They never even speak to me unless spoken to”” (England 144). Although Ania's family is neglectful, they do provide her with the financial security that the other teenagers lack. They have to work for themselves to make a living, which is part of what drove them to siphon maz to sell on the black market. Ania's biological family is wealthy, and she is often seen using that wealth to better support her chosen

family in any way that she can; however, the other three are quite stubborn and refuse to use her money unless it is necessary. Ania's rich upbringing is a point of contention within the family as Diz realizes she has never even been to Ania's house or met her parents. Ania keeps her biological and school lives separated from the chosen family; by doing this, Diz feels as though they are not as important as Ania's "real" life. This feeling of abandonment is only resolved at the end of the novel when the chosen family comes together to defeat the corrupt corporation, and Ania abandons her own biological family for her chosen one. This is not seen as a great loss to Ania, who has always held her bonds with the other three teens as more authentic than her biological family.

Even if biological family is not purposefully malicious, such as Ania's is seen to be in their passive neglect of her, it can still create scars from which the family members will have to recover. Diz has a perpetual and self-sabotaging fear of abandonment, which the reader later finds out to be caused by the deaths of her parents. Although her father simply never came home from an accident at work (probably the drilling incident that MMC caused with their greed), her mother died with Diz as a witness. Diz often cannot stand to be touched, and occasionally has panic attacks where she flashes back to the scene of her mother's death. Diz sees her mother's body

in the corner of the grimy bathroom she'd lost the energy to clean, her face mashed against the filthy tile floor with a trickle of bile at her lips, her skin so ashen, and her arm twisted under her in a way that couldn't be comfortable, but she was dying at the time, or dead, dead already, and who cares about comfort then? Who cares about a seven-year-old girl alone in a run-down subsidized apartment with a dead body, too frozen and beaten down to do anything but vomit

into the toilet, add to the mess, but not cry, never cry, not until Davon came and made the call and made a promise and held everything together. (England 272)

Because Diz witnessed this incredibly traumatic event at such a young age, she has been terrified of abandonment ever since. She simultaneously feels that she must be strong and keep her emotions to herself so she is not a burden while also feeling devastated that her chosen family is leaving her behind just as the majority of her biological family has as well, even if it was involuntary. With this, England has shown that even within fantastical worlds, there are some things that chosen family simply cannot heal altogether, thus presenting queer readers with the very real truth that although magic can help bring a family together, it cannot protect the members of that chosen family from heartbreak and loss, a truth that resonates even from a fictional realm.

The only biological family that is present in the novel is Diz's bond with Davon, her cousin. Davon is Diz's "one bit of real family left in this world, my cousin who's more like my big brother in every way that matters" (English 31). Throughout the novel, Davon is seen as a protective force for Diz, aiding her when she needs. It is this bond that she holds on to, especially when she thinks her friends are leaving her. However, despite being a positive force in her life, Diz purposely keeps him separated from her chosen family for "a lot of reasons" (England 157). Perhaps part of this is because she feels torn between which of her connections should matter more. Davon works for MMC, and that puts a strain on her relationship with him because she and her friends are constantly stealing from MMC. Her friends see this corporation as completely corrupt and even protest when Diz tells them that Davon secured a job for her there. Although she agrees with them, she knows they are leaving and she will be left behind with only Davon to rely on, as she has always done in the past. She often tells Davon that she wishes they had been

siblings for real, but Davon reassures her that “‘Why can’t cousin mean just as much? Why does a certain mix of blood get to decide?’” (England 160).

Ironically, it isn’t blood at all that decides how close a family can be for Diz as her real family is not made of blood at all, but of her friends who have taken care of her. After all, they are the ones who have cared for her for the majority of her life. She lives with her chosen family, not Davon who did not adopt her when she was orphaned even though he was given the chance to do so as he was 18 at the time. Throughout much of the novel, Diz is torn between her connection to the last member of her biological family and the city of Kykarta and her chosen family who is leaving for a different city. She feels as though she cannot leave Kykarta “whose streets are like the lines of my fingerprints” (England 319), and this too is Diz clinging to a connection with her biological family and the lives they had there before their deaths.

Eventually, she is given no choice but to abandon Kykarta when Davon betrays Diz’s chosen family and turns them in to MMC, making a deal to protect himself and Diz, even expunging her warrant and offering her a job, but sacrificing her chosen family to do so. He offers her a chance for the two of them to “finally live like a family again” but Diz realizes “He has no idea about real family” (England 338-339). She refuses to become part of the corrupt corporation, even destroying them completely, and tells Davon, “‘You have it all wrong,’ I say, looking back to Davon. ‘They are my real family.’” (England 340). Davon is left behind in Kykarta when Diz and her motley crew escape after destroying MMC and exposing everything the corrupt corporation has done, and although Diz still loves him and the betrayal hurts, she knows that she has picked family over blood and that is the truest love there is.

Diz’s family is made of a crew of very diverse individuals and the love they share is genuine, despite all of the obstacles that they face. England’s novel depicts the many struggles

(both real and fantastical) that can arise in any chosen family and how these individuals overcome those challenges to emerge with a new understanding of what it takes to keep a family together despite the tempests it may face. The chosen family starts with Diz, Jaesin, and Remi meeting as children. To compensate for their lack of biological family, the three orphans become tightly knit from a very young age. In fact, Diz reveals in flashbacks that it is only through Remi that she and Jaesin became less fearful of maz, and Diz even “figured out that I could work with maz too-to contain it, control it. Make it safer. I started to work on ware, then build my own...If Remi and Jesin had given up on me back then, I might have never found my talent” (England 253). This is what led Diz to create and sell her maz tech, and it is Remi’s need for maz that fully required the family to begin siphoning (although the money definitely helped that process as well). Through this moment, England shows a new catalyst to the creation of chosen family that cannot be achieved within contemporary realism as magic is the force that drives this family together and keeps them together as they siphon the magic and run the maz underground trafficking what they have siphoned from MMC. Jaesin very quickly adapted to a father role prior to the beginning of the novel, and with the later addition of Ania, the family has responsible “parents” to ensure that both Diz, who is reckless and impulsive, and Remi, who is infected and vulnerable with the spellplague, are safe and cared for.

To say that it is confusing to watch this tightly knit crew unravel is an understatement. These four have literally grown up together, so it is simply baffling for the reader to watch as the other three friends seem blind when we can so clearly see Diz spiraling out of control as her family makes plans to leave Kykarta without her. It is impossible to believe that Diz truly thinks “Maybe our black-market gigs are all that’s been keeping us together the past two years, and now that they’re over, we’re over. Maybe we should have drifted apart long ago” (England 50).

However, it is quite clear that Diz has abandonment issues, and as she finds it impossible to communicate her pain and fears, she instead lashes out and pushes her family away. She feels as though she must look out for herself and that the only person she can count on is Davon. England does a beautiful job of showing that this is one of the drawbacks of a chosen family; often proponents of heteronormative systems do not believe that chosen kin can hold as much significance as a biological or legal family, and this can put doubts into the minds of others, sometimes including those within the chosen family. This is exactly what happens with Diz.

Diz feels as though she is not as important to her friends as they are to her, simply because they are not technically blood-related. England creates a realistic obstacle within a fantasy world, juxtaposing the magical setting with the real-world issues that LGBTQ+ teenagers face to give new spaces of support for the queer characters within this world, which queer readers will view as they peer through the windows into these fictional worlds. Instead of communicating her fears and her doubts to her family, Diz bottles up her emotions and becomes resentful and angry, driving away the people she loves most in the world. Even when Remi, Diz's love interest, begs Diz to ask them to stay with her in Kykarta, she can't. She freezes, "totally unable to form any words that might actually work for this situation. I don't need them. I can live without them... They'll only end up leaving me eventually anyway. Them staying now would only delay the inevitable" (England 107). Diz has been abandoned and failed by so many people in her life that she feels that it is inevitable that her chosen family will leave her as well, so she fears the day that they too will leave. Instead of talking to her family about these feelings, she simply digs in her heels about leaving Kykarta and watches the last few days of her family crumble around her.

When the opportunity for the last job comes in, Diz jumps on the possibility of keeping the family in Kykarta with the money; however, it all unfolds far differently than she expects. Through the journey, Diz's connections to each of her family members grow and evolve. Her connection to Jaesin is the oldest as the two met in the foster home as children and they have lived with each other since. She is the only one who seems to know everything about Jaesin. There are hints that Jaesin knows about addictions and life on the streets. Diz mentions this, but never pushes, "I bite my lip and restrain myself from asking further. He had a bad year when we aged out of the group-home system and moved into our first flat at fourteen. We don't talk about it" (England 94). Diz makes mention of this later in the novel as well, stating that this is something that he has never even told Ania, his significant other as it happened before they were dating. Despite his checkered past, Jaesin has become the father figure of the family and takes care of each of the other three, making sure they are all safe and well-fed. He constantly worries about each of them, and Diz can see that care easier for others than she can for herself, watching as "Jaesin reaches out and pulls Remi in for a hug, clutching them to his chest like the big brother he is, blood be damned" (England 351). He clearly cares for each of them in his own way and has no qualms showing affection with each of them, even though Diz does not like physical touch. This bond is one that seems very strong from the outside looking in, but even though Diz and Jaesin have no secrets from each other, she still refuses to discuss her true feelings with him. Jaesin seems to understand her despite her refusal to speak, and he finally gives Diz a sharp reality check, telling her

Isn't avoidance your default way to deal with everything? You never wanted to leave with us anyway. You cared more about yourself and this city than about your ten years of friendship... You don't want to join us? Fine. Stay here and rot

in everything you refuse to get over...even though there are people right here who care about you, who are offering you another option...I've always known where we stood with you. I guess I just thought you might change your mind before we actually all fell apart. (England 147)

As with most stubborn people, it takes uncovering a corrupt conspiracy, tracking down a missing professor and his adorable husband, getting attacked, blackmailing a corrupt board, destroying an illegal mining operation, getting shot, and waking up on a boat in the middle of the ocean before Diz is able to completely admit her fears to her family. However, Jaesin's speech rattles her and their journey begins to make the two realize that even if they have known each other their whole lives, they may still have a lot to learn. Although maz orphaned these two characters, it is also what has kept them together for so long, helping them form this chosen family which has supported each of them as they battle society and the outside world through their coming-of-age journeys.

Just as maz brought Jaesin and Diz together, it has also been the catalyst for the connection between Ania and Diz as well. Although they have not known each other for a long period of time, Diz feels that Ania is her best friend; however, she realizes over the course of the novel that while magic brought them together, money issues have caused Ania to keep secrets to herself. In fact, during the course of the novel, Diz finds herself in Ania's house for the very first time. It takes seeing Ania's massive bedroom for Diz to realize that she barely knows the girl she calls her best friend at all. This of course only exacerbates Diz's feelings of inferiority and abandonment. Although they had always known that Ania had money, seeing it in person was a completely different situation for all of the friends. Ania is the most forgiving of Diz's rough edges, even though she is one who has known Diz for the shortest amount of time, she is the one

who seems to understand her best. She is also the one who Diz is the most comfortable touching, even allowing her to hug her. When Ania and Jaesin rekindle their relationship, Diz watches them “double checking each other’s suits with lingering hands and intense eye contact...Looks like mom and dad are getting back together after all” (England 358). She is pleased to have them reunited as she always thought they were strange exes to begin with, far too in love with each other to stay away for long. Ania is Diz’s closest friend, and often Diz refers to Ania as the voice in her head, the voice of reason that she hears when she is being irrational or reckless. Ania is the person who always pulls her back from the edge of panic, so it makes sense that she is the one who seems the most forgiving of Diz’s mood swings throughout the novel, and she welcomes Diz back with open arms when Diz wakes up on the boat at the end of the novel after being shot as the crew took down MMC’s drill. Although this bond is the newest, the pair have been brought together through the fantastical forces of this magical world to prove that blood does not make a family and time does not necessarily determine the strength of chosen family.

Just as magic brought the rest of the family together, so too did it bring Remi into Diz’s orbit, thus creating a bond not only of friend-family but of a romantic interest as well. Although the pair have been friends since childhood, just as they have been with Jaesin, there is clearly a deeper connection; however, Diz keeps her distance from Remi. At first, Remi thinks this is because of their spell-sickness, but quickly realizes this is simply because Diz has difficulty showing her emotions, particularly about the family leaving Kykarta. Remi constantly asks Diz how she feels, but Diz refuses to admit that she does not want them to leave. Finally, Remi echoes Jaesin’s sentiments, although to a much softer degree, “I don’t have to think it’s fair or right for you to lash out at us for not doing something you refuse to admit to wanting. We’re not

mind readers, Diz. If you want something, you have to say so. And we can't hang in limbo until you decide you're ready to actually have an emotion" (England 229).

Although it is difficult for Diz to admit, she does eventually get up the courage to kiss Remi and admit that she loves them. Remi has been part of Diz's life for so long that they have always been family, this connection has always been there and has simply blossomed into something more. The pair are constantly putting themselves into danger for each other, fighting after the fact, flirting in their own strange way, and loving each other more than anything. After she is shot by MMC, Diz awakes on the houseboat, and the first thing she sees is "Remi's head is pillowed next to my hip. They're asleep right on top of my hand" (England 391). Despite their own dangerous adventure into the heart of the maz that was being drilled, Remi's sole concern was Diz's healing. They refused to leave her side until she woke up, and the pair are happily reunited with each other and the rest of their crew on the boat as they sail away from the city that has been their home for so long. The reader can only hope that each member of this dysfunctional chosen family learns how to communicate a little better under the tutelage of Professor Silva and his husband John, who seem to be the perfect science husbands to serve as this family's guardians as they sail towards the horizon. Diz knows "we've got more to do together, this weird little family of ours" (England 399), and the reader knows that despite what hardships may await them in the future and in spite of the failures of each character's past, this chosen family will always have each other to grow and heal as they sail towards a better future. Throughout England's magical world, maz is a connection between the members of this chosen family novel, acting as a catalyst, both in positive and negative ways, to bond these individuals together as they battle the obstacles that face them in the outside world and within themselves. It is only through their connection with each other that the crew can survive the hardships that they

must overcome to ensure that they have reached a peace within themselves and also have begun to restore balance to the magical community in which they live. Through England's depiction of chosen family, queer readers can see how these voluntary kin bonds can support the members within that family to heal from the wounds of the past to find a better understanding and acceptance within themselves. As a work of paranormal fiction, *Spellhacker* presents new spaces for characters who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and thus for the queer readers who will access these windows into unique worlds to see diverse depictions of chosen family bonds which illustrate that not all chosen families will be the same and that each of these differing family structures must be embraced and celebrated.

The genre of paranormal young adult literature has been a favorite of teenagers and adult readers alike, for good reason. Within the boundaries of this genre, the sky's the limit and magic is a part of everyday life. When this genre delves into the world of the LGBTQ+ community, the protagonists and their magical connections are often not only simply bonded by paranormal circumstances, but by the love that unites chosen families. These families often expand and include those beyond the realms of magic, but this also serves to show that chosen kin means belonging to something larger than oneself. Communities, even magical ones, should be inclusive of all characters to allow themselves to build stronger connections; this is true of chosen families as well. Even if these characters are not magical themselves, allowing them access to magic allows them to explore their full identities, or it allows them to understand the full depths of Othering that their family members are experiencing. Being part of a chosen family means being part of something larger than oneself; for these protagonists, this means belonging not only to the people they love but to their supernatural communities as well. Finding these chosen families that can heal the failures of their biological families is the real magic for these

characters. It is through these supernatural works that queer readers can see through windows into fictional worlds where chosen family bonds can be created through magical connections or experiences, and alternatively see situations where magic is tied to biological family. In these latter cases, LGBTQ+ teenagers may have to battle both systems to embrace their full sexual or gender identities. In this, LGBTQ+ young adult literature differs from the traditional *bildungsroman* to show that not only must these queer young adults battle the outside world or society, but they must also struggle against their families and possibly magical systems if those systems are tied to these traditional heteronormative systems. It is only through the support of their chosen families that these young adults can face these obstacles and begin to repair the damage done by the failures of these heteronormative monoliths. As queer readers peer through these windows into fictional worlds, they can view new ways for chosen family to support each other throughout the magical works that LGBTQ+ young adult novels depict.

## **Chapter Five: “Living life is fun and we’ve just begun”:**

### **Conclusion to Chosen Family in LGBTQ+ Young Adult Media**

When I was a very little girl, I quickly realized that blood does not make a family; love does. As a slightly more seasoned human (we don’t say old), I have finally found my own chosen family and although there may not be any blood shared between us, there have been innumerable tears, traumas, laughs, meals, hugs, moments, and lives that have been shared which more than make up for any missing DNA. I cannot go back to that scared little girl to tell her what she will create in several years' time, but I can look at the children in my classroom who are also being failed by their biological families and I can possibly provide them with hope. This is the power of LGBTQ+ young adult literature; it can provide that flicker of hope to those who need it, even if these works are fiction.

LGBTQ+ young adult literature has evolved throughout the past several decades as it has moved away from the problem novel and has stepped forward into diverse genres and become more inclusive and expansive. This expansion must continue to better represent the many unique young adults within the LGBTQ+ community who may be looking for mirrors or windows in literature through which they can see their own voices and experiences depicted. Within these works, there must also be models of functioning and healthy chosen families who support queer characters if they have been failed by heteronormative systems. Real-world statistics tell us that there has been an increase in the rejection and failure of these systems for LGBTQ+ youth, and thus these young adults may be constructing chosen families as support systems and life-saving bonds when they have nowhere else to turn. Within LGBTQ+ young adult literature and television there must be more purposeful and authentic depictions of chosen family bonds as real and meaningful family units to better validate how support systems that defy “traditional” social

constructs are legitimate and crucial to many queer readers. Over the past century, there has been an increase in the titles published for LGBTQ+ young adults; these works have also begun to diversify and expand to include larger narrative journeys and more diverse characters and genres within YA's umbrella. It is important that authors continue to use these works to model chosen families for young adults to ensure that queer readers may understand that there are alternative methods for support if their biological families are failing to serve them or if they are dealing with battles within their school and social lives. Demonstrating these voluntary family connections is crucial in allowing young adult readers to see functioning archetypes as models upon which they can base their own real-world experiences in forming chosen family bonds.

Young adult literature is not a substitute for a support system and a family that loves and nurtures the young adults within the LGBTQ+ community who are failed by their heteronormative systems. There is no substitute for family bonds. However, while there are many depictions of a "traditional" nuclear family within the mainstream monolith of popular media, there are far fewer depictions of chosen families who are also functioning and supportive systems for those who do not have supportive biological kin. Furthering depictions of nontraditional families can provide real-world young adults with models that teach them that even if their family defies heteronormative ideals, that does not mean that it is inferior in any regard. Once these young adults have seen depictions of these types of friend-family, they may better understand how to form and foster chosen families if their biological families fail or reject them. These bonds could be life-saving for so many young adults who might not otherwise have healthy connections and supportive systems in their lives to better allow them to mature and grow into their full identities within the LGBTQ+ community. It is critical that scholars further analyze the way these LGBTQ+ young adult novels have constructed chosen family systems of

support for the queer young adults within these novels to further understand the literary and cultural value of LGBTQ+ young adult texts. Doing this provides another opportunity for us to understand the important contributions that queer authors and narratives bring to the larger literary canon. This additionally affords teachers more space to validate the experiences of queer and questioning youth. It is this goal that must be met by teachers and scholars head-on to ensure that all readers can find comfort in literature that reflects their voices and showcases the diverse models of what chosen family can be to those who need this support the most.

The most significant way to further our goals as teachers is to use this information to further support LGBTQ+ young adults in the classroom by validating their experience through teaching and using this topic within our lessons and discussions. There are many ways that teachers could enact this goal, such as the suggestions by the National Council of Teachers of English, which include acknowledging “that coming out is a continual process, and support students and colleagues as they explore and affirm their identities,” cultivating “classroom materials and libraries that reflect the racial, ethnic, economic, ability, geographic, religious, and linguistic diversity within LGBTQ+ communities,” including “reading and writing opportunities that reflect the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities, including literary works, informational articles, and multimedia texts,” challenging “practices and policies that censor, deny, or dehumanize LGBTQ+ students, educators, families, and communities,” and advocating “for the creation and support of LGBTQ+ affirming spaces in [our] schools” (“Lesbian...”). Because so many students within the LGBTQ+ community face hostile school environments, it is imperative that teachers become advocates and support systems for these individuals who are more vulnerable to violence and prejudiced behaviors than their cisgender classmates. Incorporating discussions of chosen family as an integral part of modern childhood and maturation allows for

teachers to open the curriculum to better validate family models that do not reflect the stereotypical nuclear family that heteronormative systems have affirmed. Discussing non-biological kin is not only important for young adults within the LGBTQ+ community but also to students who are also part of nontraditional family units as more individuals are each year.

There are many ways that teachers can validate and support their queer students, including advocating and understanding the intersectional identities of these students. Using and discussing texts that depict multicultural queer protagonists and characters can help aid in our fight against intolerance and ignorance. The NCTL states that an inclusive and “expansive curricula must also include varying experiences that highlight race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, sexuality, and culture, and how these multiple identities affect a person’s experience of their gender” (Bavisotto, et al). This statement feels particularly relevant to my own classroom as many of my students are Mexican and African-American, and those who are exploring their sexual and gender identities may also face additional obstacles as they try to piece together their intersectional identities. Giving these students the safe space they need for such explorations and providing them with support if they face difficulties from family members is the least that I can do to serve as a system of support for the unique students who walk through my door.

One tiny way that I create this safe space is by allowing my students the opportunity to journal each day, not only about the topics at hand, but also through weekly “Vent Posts.” These journal prompts, given each Friday, allow for students to have a space where they can discuss any topic they would like. These journals are only seen by me, and the comments and discussions that the students and I have there range from a love of cheesecake to questioning their sexual identities. So many of my students become comfortable with discussing private topics there, knowing that I will not judge or out them, that even after graduation I have had

former students email me to “vent” about their current lives. Even if I teach them for only a short period of time, I invite these students into my life and my heart, and I serve as a member of their chosen families as they begin to mature and construct other voluntary family bonds. This is not a revolutionary idea; I am not a perfect Pinterest teacher, but my students know that I love and support them, and this support is meaningful to so many who may not have biological family systems that serve them as they need during their journeys. Many of these students may face discrimination and harassment in their battles against the outside world and even from their biological families, but they know that as soon as they walk into my classroom, such behavior will never be tolerated. As a young adult, I was bullied relentlessly by my peers and could not find any supportive staff members to intervene; I never want my students to ever go through that experience without knowing that there is someone who will be on their side. I cannot protect my students when they leave my cinder block walls but I can serve as a system of support for them at school, which so many of these young adults need.

One way to further support our LGBTQ+ students is to incorporate texts that represent the diverse individuals within our classrooms. Providing mirrors and windows for these students is crucial in showing our students that they are not alone and that there are others who experience similar situations and emotions. This includes showcasing alternative family bonds as valid and life-saving support systems to our students. As the NCTL instructs,

We must acknowledge that books lend a voice and language to students who may not have had access to such messages otherwise. Therefore, students of all gender identities and expressions—those who demonstrate those identities visibly while they are in our classes *and* those who may live their gender more expansively after they leave our classrooms—deserve to see themselves in books and other

curricular materials and confirm the wide spectrum of identities that do not exist in a vacuum, but are a part of an ever-growing and changing world. (Bavisotto, et al)

Although these novels are fiction, the hope that they can inspire, the possibilities for a bonded chosen family that they can depict are all too real for the beautiful young adults in the LGBTQ+ community that need them in the real world every single day, and that is why so many individuals continue to read them, why an ever-expanding community of diverse authors continues to write them, and why I will continue to champion them loudly and passionately until I have no breath left to give.

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