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**“I’m Going to Be Straight, Just Like How My Father Would’ve Wanted”:** Adolescent Male Sexuality, Shame, and Symptoms of Mental Illness in Adam Silvera’s *More Happy Than Not* and John Corey Whaley’s *Highly Illogical Behaviour*

*Emma Salt-Raper*

**Abstract:**

While the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ identities in recent young adult fiction has received much critical attention, such novels that contain the added complex distinction of adolescent male mental illness and recovery represent an underexamined area. This article produces readings of two recent young adult texts that feature gay male protagonists who experience mental illness: Adam Silvera’s *More Happy Than Not* (2015) and John Corey Whaley’s *Highly Illogical Behaviour* (2016). It investigates how the texts’ embedded heteronormative scripts, relationships between the symptoms and the self, and frameworks of health-related shame are fraught with anxieties, producing a complex double movement that simultaneously establishes and undermines gay males’ control over their mental illnesses and recovery trajectories to move the characters between spaces of empowerment and marginalization.

**Keywords:** gay, gender, masculinity, medical humanities, mental illness, shame, young adult literature

Despite the recent rise in critical attention to young adult novels about mental illness, adolescent literature of the last 10 years that features gay male protagonists who experience conditions such as agoraphobia and depression still represents an under-researched area.<sup>1</sup> Although the twenty-

first century saw a proliferation in young adult novels that deal with LGBTQ+ themes, this article demonstrates the complex and contradictory forms and degrees that such gay visibility assumes within adolescent narratives that include boys' experiences of mental illnesses.<sup>2</sup> The article uses Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not* (2015) and John Corey Whaley's *Highly Illogical Behaviour* (2016) to demonstrate how performances of homosexuality and health-related shame disrupt models of mental illness. By analyzing power structures embedded within recovery trajectories; locations and operations of health-related shame; and complex relationships between symptoms of mental illness and the self, I identify how *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour* construct anxieties, tensions, and double movements that simultaneously empower and marginalize gay teenage characters who experience illnesses such as agoraphobia and depression.

Motivated by the need for an investigation into how adolescent male homosexuality operates in relation to issues surrounding mental health, and in the light of the recent contributions to the literature on health-related shame, I analyze the power structures framed within recovery trajectories for gay adolescent boys with mental illnesses, the contradictory fictionalizations of relationships between symptoms and the self, and the complex models of shame cast on patterns of masculinity that exist outside normative boundaries of gender performances. First, I question how the novels' complex and contradictory relationships between symptoms of mental illness and the self create tensions and complex double movements that simultaneously empower and marginalize homosexual male characters. Next, I evaluate the novels' models of recovery, which I will argue hint at the production of unanticipated frameworks of recovery for gay males, but often reproduce forced assimilation into existing, heteronormative scripts of happiness. Finally, I critically examine the fictionalization of shame

within the texts as both an internal force that evokes pain and silence and an external affective experience projected onto a marginalized individual by a dominant group.

## **Methodology**

Working across disciplines, the methodology of this project consists of a combination of literary and cultural criticism, medical humanities criticism, and sociological investigations of health cultures. It uses overarching principles of medical humanities scholarship to aid an understanding of a genre often excluded from literary criticism. The article employs a critical framework that utilizes elements of queer studies, constructs of gender, and understandings of structures such as shame and happiness to create and occupy a space between sociology, theories of medicine, and textual criticism. It seeks to use these methodologies to reframe the young adult genre and investigate the sophistication of such fictionalized health and illness narratives. This article examines *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour* in critical conversation with each other as part of a wider discussion of recent young adult literature that deals with LGBTQ+ themes. The discussion of these two particular novels allows space to discuss how understandings of culture, sexuality, and masculinity intersect with boyhood mental health and the shame that mental illness can provoke.

## **Sexuality, Gender, and Health-Related Shame in *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour*.**

### ***Broad Performances of Masculinity***

Models of masculinity in fiction written for adolescents broadened throughout the second decade of the twenty-first century to incorporate a wider range of gendered characteristics. In her

research on recent young adult dystopian novels, Jessica Seymour (2016: 629) argues that patterns of masculine performance demonstrate “a definite trend towards a different type of masculinity, one that values emotional availability, nonheteronormativity, and female sexual safety.” While Seymour focuses her criticism on adolescent dystopian novels, there is scope for this argument to be explored in relation to recent young adult literature about masculine identity. These new, broad performances of masculinity are not reliant upon culturally constructed notions of heroic masculine attributes such as strength, physical power, and individuality, but rather focus on interpretations of masculinity that validate vulnerability, inclusivity, and, to use Seymour’s term, “emotional availability.” Forms of masculinity found in the early twenty-first century have undergone a reconstruction within the second decade and, as I will go on to demonstrate, transform further within novels that deal with male mental illness. However, this change in the construction of masculine identity suggests a need for a more nuanced appreciation of how manhood is performed within young adult novels, and the new models of masculinity produce further questions that are in need of examination.

Adolescent literature produced during the second decade of the twenty-first century constructs a series of categories by which male subjecthood can be understood. In their essay “YA Fiction and Masculinity(ies) in the Twenty-First Century,” Tom Jesse and Heidi Jones (2020) establish a series of “iterations” of masculinity within the genre, such as “The Sensitive Thinker” and “The Rebel Outsider,” which repurpose or revise the norms of perceived traditional masculinity. While this formulation of categories of male performance can be viewed as a limiting template that flattens the complex precarity of depictions of adolescent masculinity, Jesse and Jones’s criticism is nevertheless significant in its depiction of the changing literary landscape of contemporary young adult fiction. The proliferation of writing from 2010 about

boys experiencing mental illness further presents a rich area for the critical evaluation of masculinity, as these recent novels produce a range of performances on a complex spectrum of gendered behaviors.

### ***Power and Gendered Performance***

The degrees and forms of power available to protagonists in novels such as *Highly Illogical Behaviour* and *More Happy Than Not* is tied in complex and elusive ways to abstract power structures such as sexuality and mental illness. Rebeka Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson's (2020: xii) analysis argues that twenty-first-century young adult novels explore how "abstract constructions like race, sexuality and gender" distribute power to teenage protagonists. They go on to suggest that while the genre aims to "disassemble [social constructions] in order to put their inner workings on display for teenage readers," the adolescent characters' rebellion against these power structures "often ends in a sanctioned form" (Fitzsimmons and Wilson 2020: xiii). Though the teenage protagonist is given the potential to expose the inner workings of culturally produced power structures, such as gendered behavioral norms, they rarely break free of these systems of power. Young adult texts about mental illness add a complex distinctiveness that has not yet been included within critical discussion of gendered power structures, and as we will see, adding mental illness to the discussion of other abstract structures highlights the elusiveness of how mental illness operates in relation to gender and sexuality.

Young adult literature of the last 10 years embeds power structures that give rise to a *range* of models of masculinity. According to Jesse and Jones (2020: 115), "The Sensitive Thinker" is a male protagonist who "talk[s] freely with friends about fear and self-doubt" and values the role friends and family play in his personal journey. While this male character

displays some behaviors associated with previous models of dominant masculinity, “these components always remain secondary aspects of the character’s social persona.” Jesse and Jones establish a discrete binary within the gendered constructions of “The Sensitive Thinker,” as their approach to the complexities of gender performance argues that this model of masculinity favors only alternative modes of manhood, relegating any elements of traditional performances of masculinity to secondary aspects of the male persona. While models of masculinity in young adult writing about mental illness in the last 10 years also embody complex introspection and vulnerability, recent texts such as *Highly Illogical Behaviour* and *More Happy Than Not* complicate Jesse and Jones’s model, disrupting the discrete binary, and ideas of “traditional” and “alternative,” within the model’s constructions of manhood.

### ***Homosexuality***

While young adult writing from the first decade of the 2000s was often reliant upon violent displays of homophobia, more recent young adult fiction creates contradictory models of young male homosexuality, as traces of conformist attitudes to sexuality feature in literature of the second decade in problematic ways. These novels widen the spectrum of male sexuality while maintaining some of the conformist traditions and power structures embedded within young adult literature of the previous decade. As Patricia Kennon (2017: 27) argues in her work on young adult novels produced between 2008 and 2013, the genre creates “structures of sexual power relations that are predicated on producing homosexuality and femininity as an aspect of its constituent Other.” While externally constructed frameworks project Otherness onto gay male identities and label homosexuality as deviant in its opposition to culturally produced forms of sexual identity, the genre simultaneously attempts to challenge this marginalization of gay

characters in its rejection of depictions of violent homophobia, a clash that leads to a clear contradiction in its storytelling.

Today's young adult authors are increasingly resisting the depictions of violent, public homophobia prevalent in earlier texts, while continuing to project a sense of Otherness onto gay male characters. As Jesse and Jones (2020: 118) argue, recent novels move beyond the "typical young-adult-novel-with-a-gay-protagonist-formula" to reject the "typical goonlike villain who hurls derogatory slurs." The authors identify a prominent model of masculinity within these works that they refer to as "The Problematic Other": a male character who performs masculinity in ways that contradict normative gendered behavior while still experiencing shame and self-stigma. As I will show, these (often) homosexual male characters produce a range of internal conflicts relating to identity. The texts of the last 10 years therefore frequently reinforce the same ideology that they attempt to resist. The literature rejects the earlier discourses of homophobia by producing inclusive and flexible worlds, yet also simultaneously embeds internal, constrictive power structures of Otherness within the gay male character's identity. The novels produce tensions and contradictions between the two simultaneous models of sexual identity. As we shall see, the tensions between these two ideologies are further disrupted by the added distinctiveness of depictions of mental illness.

### ***Gay Visibility in Young Adult Novels about Mental Illness***

In his recent book on sexuality in young adult literature, Derritt Mason (2021: 8) reveals a "striking uptick" of LGBTQ+ titles at the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and this trend has "continued to skyrocket." In particular, during this time the adolescent, homosexual male emerged as a prominent image in young adult fiction, and while

this increased diversity within the genre, it also produced a series of critical questions regarding the portrayal of public displays of homophobia. Though these fictionalized depictions of violent homophobia dominate constructions of marginalized male sexualities within the genre, as I will demonstrate, adolescent novels of the last 10 years that feature homosexual male characters produce more subtle and elusive forms of prejudice.<sup>3</sup>

The complex and at times contradictory forms and degrees that such increased gay male visibility assumes within narratives that include mental illnesses, such as agoraphobia and depression, is an ambiguous and as yet under-researched area of study. Critical gay theory on young adult literature written within the past 10 years has yet to engage with the added distinction of mental illness and recovery trajectories. This article argues that this added distinction within some young adult novels simultaneously establishes and conceals the visibility of gay adolescent boys. Though novels including *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour* do not rely upon outward displays of violent homophobia, they construct social, political, and cultural frameworks embedded within trajectories of recovery that produce heteronormative scripts of happiness rooted in homophobic ideology. Both novels reproduce existing discourses of happiness and recovery that are fraught with tensions and anxieties that simultaneously establish and undermine gay males' control over their mental illnesses and recovery trajectories, rendering these characters both visible and invisible. The texts discussed in this article attempt to construct unanticipated, distinctive, and radical models of recovery accessible to homosexual males with mental illnesses who are undermined by contradictory tensions and double movements that locate such characters in a position of marginalization and disempowerment.

As this article will demonstrate, health-related shame serves as an important feature within the discussion of narratives about mental illness. Both *Highly Illogical Behaviour* and *More Happy Than Not* use models of mental illness as a framing category and produce examples of shame within them. The concept of shame comes with a scholarly legacy, and this article extends the discussion of how shame operates within health contexts. For instance, recent research by Luna Dolezal and Barry Lyons identifies a series of progressions through which health-related shame functions, and Angela Woods's critical work on shame extends this discussion to broaden the understanding of shame and stigma within a mental health context. This article utilizes critical ideas by researchers within the realm of medical humanities research to illuminate new ways of thinking about the recent proliferation of young adult texts that feature themes of mental illness. For example, it draws upon Dolezal and Lyons's (2017a: 257) research on recognizing shame as "a powerful force in the clinical encounter" and identifying structures of health-related shame within a cultural context. My analysis will identify the varied and complex ways in which shame operates within the selected primary texts and include a discussion of the identification and admittance of shame; the relationship between shame and alienation from social groups; shame caused by viewing illness as a personal inadequacy; and recognizing shame as an emotion that leads to its multiplication.

Despite the recent rise in critical attention to health-related shame within the field of medical humanities, recent adolescent novels that intertwine ideas of shame and public, collective performances of masculinity still embody a neglected area. Young adult literature of the last 10 years differs from that of earlier in the century, as it has become less reliant upon normative performances of collective and public masculinity within male friendship groups.<sup>4</sup> Jessica Seymour's (2016: 629) article on masculine friendship groups in contemporary

adolescent novels discusses the role of young males within “care circles of dependent characters, which guides how male characters approach the performance of masculinity” and challenges normative gendered behavioral indicators. Seymour (2016: 633) argues that during the last 10 years, a collection of young adult novels have emerged that feature groups of adolescent boys who “have a remarkable capacity for empathy and emotional competence” and display “emotional intelligence and compassion,” enabling us to rethink the fictionalized dynamics between boys. However, recent criticism such as this has failed to engage with the relationship between performances of masculinity and experiences of health-related shame.

I situate my own reading of adolescent novels such as *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour* within a medical humanities understanding of health-related shame to argue that, despite the broad consensus within young adult literary criticism that depictions of young male friendship groups have become more varied and flexible as the century has progressed, masculine care circles are problematized when adding the distinctiveness of mental illness to peer friendship groups. The selected primary texts produce a polymorphous model of shame that is constructed as both an internal force to cause physical pain and silence the discussion of male mental health and as an external affective experience projected onto a marginalized individual by a dominant group, such as a male friendship group that promotes heteronormativity, stoicism, and violence. As we will soon see, in *More Happy Than Not*, a dominant, heterosexual male friendship group constructs and polices the boundaries surrounding what is shameful behavior for young males to display. Certain public displays of behavior, such as talking about the trauma of mental illness, are regarded as shameful. This behavior is observed, monitored, and violently enforced by the dominant male friendship group in the novel. As this article will also demonstrate, *Highly Illogical Behaviour* constructs a cyclical model of shame that arises from

the protagonist's symptoms of agoraphobia and causes a multiplication of feelings of embarrassment, leading to physical manifestations such as self-harm.

As I will now argue, contemporary criticism has produced a broad range of discussions surrounding the definition and understanding of the diversity of experience associated with depression. Though Bradley Lewis's text *Depression* (2012: 2) identifies some common "cognitive distortions" that characterize the illness, such as the "overgeneralization, magnification, and personalization" of negative thoughts, depression gives rise to complex boundaries that create problems when attempting to produce a single, universal understanding of the phenomenon. In the twenty-first century, depression can be examined not only in relation to the biomedical model but also through a range of other frames, such as "psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, existential/humanist, family, political, creative, spiritual, and biopsychosocial models" (ibid.). The novels discussed in this article create diverse fictionalized portrayals of mental illness that engage with some of these models in complex ways. These models of depression, and therefore our understanding of the mental illness, are also influenced by cultural frameworks. Lewis (ibid.: 69) argues that studying depression across cultures is vital for identifying the "tremendous plasticity of experience" associated with the mental illness. Viewing depression through a cultural framework offers "a window into how depression is open to cultural change" and reveals the variability of "labeling strategies" and "healing approaches" (ibid.). Understanding mental illness through a cultural lens is vital to appreciating this fluidity of depression; when critics attempt to ascertain a "single medical entity underlying wide ranging experiences," they come to recognize the "unlikelihood of stripping away layers of cultural camouflage" (ibid.: 70.). This article discusses not only the selected young adult novels' fictionalizations of cultural context, but also, to use Lewis's terms, the "labeling strategies" and

“healing approaches” associated with the experiences of mental illness portrayed within the texts.

In contemporary critical theory, the relationship between symptoms of mental illness and personhood has emerged as a prominent theme within the construction and interpretation of mental illness identities. In her work on identity in mental illness narratives, Jennifer Radden (2008) categorizes two contrasting models concerning the relationship between symptoms and the self, arguing that these texts often depict symptoms as either alien to, or integrated within, the narrator’s identity. She identifies the “Symptom-alienating model,” in which the narrators’ symptoms emanate from an “alien, sometimes diabolical, source of agency outside the self” (Radden 2008: 21.). This model features metaphors that distance the self from medical symptoms and produces models of recovery that consist of regaining control from the external sources of authority that remove agency from the self (ibid.). Contrastingly, within the “Symptom-integrating model,” symptoms are “embraced, even valorized,” as they appear “less easily alienated” and sometimes vital to the fundamental identity of the self (ibid.: 21.). This model embraces symptoms as profound facets of identity, rather than minor consequences of a biomedical illness. As this article will now demonstrate, the selected contemporary young adult novels depict a broad continuum of varying, complex, and as yet under-researched fictionalized relationships between the self and the emotional and psychological symptoms associated with mental illness.

In John Corey Whaley’s novel *Highly Illogical Behaviour*, the relationship between self and symptoms creates a contradictory double movement: the narrative employs metaphors to distance the protagonist’s personhood from their symptoms while simultaneously engaging with a framework that relies upon an integration of these symptoms. Power structures embedded

within the novel's model of mental illness are fraught with double movements that simultaneously empower and marginalize the central homosexual male character. *Highly Illogical Behaviour* focuses on Solomon Reed, a 16-year-old boy who has been suffering from agoraphobia for over three years. He has not left his house since he experienced a panic attack at his school, during which he jumped into a water fountain in front of his classmates. While Diane Scrofano's (2019: 71) article on disability narrative theory in young adult novels about mental illness suggests that Solomon is "stubborn," has "given up" in a supposed struggle against the symptoms of agoraphobia, and has "resigned [himself] to the idea that he must never leave his house," *Highly Illogical Behaviour* constructs a model of mental illness that is more multifaceted and conflicting than this suggests. The complex and contradictory relationships between personhood and symptoms of agoraphobia in the novel are fraught with tension and cause Solomon's symptoms to simultaneously exist as integrated within, and alien to, his identity. Though Solomon imagines that his thoughts "stab him like knives" during a panic attack, and the text frequently frames his illness as an unforgiving manifestation of external agency, the novel's model of mental illness simultaneously embraces elements of Solomon's experience of agoraphobia (Whaley 2016: 62). The writing constructs metaphors that act to distance the medical symptoms from the narrator's personhood, while simultaneously employing models of mental illness that involve an acceptance of these symptoms. When Solomon remains at home, he accepts his mental illness: "[h]e wasn't bored or lonely or sad. He was safe. He could breathe. He could relax" (ibid.: 14). Such relationships between personhood and symptoms, shuttling between alienation and integration, create tensions that permeate the novel's overall trajectory of recovery.

Because of the tensions present in the relationship between self and the symptoms of agoraphobia, the recovery trajectory in *Highly Illogical Behaviour* is not a linear journey consisting of regaining control from the illness as a seemingly external, alien force. The text goes beyond mere fictionalized treatments of mental illness, and its use of literary dimensions produces a wide range of narrative possibilities and ambiguities to attend to the subtle and sophisticated nuances of mental illness. The novel's use of alternating point of view as a literary strategy reinforces the same power framework that it attempts to resist, as it ultimately disempowers Solomon. *Highly Illogical Behaviour* takes the literary form of a dual narrative that shifts perspectives between Solomon and his former classmate, Lisa. Unbeknownst to Solomon, Lisa is applying to study psychology at college, and her application requires her to submit an essay about her own understanding of mental illness. Lisa's narrative focuses upon making friends with Solomon to learn more about his agoraphobia and use his experience in her essay. Though the novel begins to construct Solomon's recovery from agoraphobia, it is simultaneously overwritten by Lisa's narrative, and Solomon's trajectory is marginalized as it becomes Lisa's "escape plan" from her own life (Whaley 2016: 17). This movement between Solomon's recovery trajectory and Lisa's "escape plan" causes Solomon's possible future to be continuously undermined by Lisa's ambitions.

These complex and contradictory relationships between symptoms of mental illness and the self create tensions that permeate both novels' trajectories of recovery. Both *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour* hint at the production of new, distinctive models of recovery from mental illness while promoting forced assimilation into existing, heteronormative scripts of recovery and happiness. *Highly Illogical Behaviour* produces a complex model of recovery that attempts to establish Solomon within a hero role while simultaneously undermining

his control over his agoraphobia. After Solomon's mother first meets Lisa, Solomon is critical of his mother's assumption that "some pretty girl would suddenly cure her son and have him walking right out the front door and straight to high school" (Whaley 2016: 6). While the novel endeavors to resist conformist trajectories of recovery that valorize heterosexuality and situate the protagonist's agency over their illness within external sources, it simultaneously subverts this endeavor by undermining Solomon's role within the recovery narrative. Lisa becomes convinced that she will "fix Solomon Reed" and though the relationship is not romantic or sexual, the novel locates power over Solomon's illness within Lisa's intervention (ibid.: 12). The text does not grant Solomon agency over his recovery trajectory, but rather problematically constructs his illness as "a problem" that Lisa is instrumental in fixing (ibid.: 155). The text establishes a recovery trajectory that reinforces the same power structures it attempts to resist. While it establishes Solomon as the hero of the novel by rejecting the notion that "some pretty girl" can "cure" his agoraphobia, it simultaneously distributes power over the recovery process to Lisa, who helps Solomon leave the house for the first time in over three years.

At the end of the novel, the text's recovery trajectory produces a double movement that exposes tensions between the presupposed safety of Solomon's home and the relative dangers associated with the outside world. While a reviewer at *Publishers Weekly* commented that "Solomon's parents and grandmother are refreshingly supportive, letting Solomon take the lead as he tests the possibility of re-entry" (*Publishers Weekly* n.d.), Solomon's sexuality complicates this and creates anxieties surrounding his reintegration into society. Once Solomon begins to make friends and engage with the world outside his home, his sexuality is framed problematically when Lisa becomes worried about Solomon's romantic feelings toward her boyfriend Clark. Concerned that Solomon and Clark may be engaging in a romantic relationship,

she tells Solomon, “I’m not mad. Please don’t think I’m mad. I just didn’t expect him to reciprocate, that’s all. I thought we were safe” (Whaley 2016: 201). When Solomon then asks her if coming out to his parents is therefore “*dangerous*” (italics original), the novel exposes a constructed binary between “safe” normative heterosexuality and “dangerous” homosexuality (ibid.). Within the novel’s fictionalized models of gender, homosexuality is “safe” when it is contained and not acted upon, but once Solomon engages with the world outside his home as a gay adolescent male, his sexuality is framed as a threat.

*More Happy Than Not* (2015) centers on Aaron Soto, a 17-year-old Puerto Rican boy living in the Bronx. In this fictionalized world, scientists have developed a medical procedure called Leteo, which can suppress traumatic memories. After his father ends his life by suicide, Aaron suffers from depression and cuts his wrists in an attempt to take his own life. As the novel progresses, Aaron develops gay desires and struggles to accept his homosexuality in a deeply homophobic community. Torn between his affection for his girlfriend Genevieve and his growing attraction toward his best friend Thomas, Aaron undergoes the Leteo procedure to suppress his homosexual desires and adhere to heteronormative expectations of happiness. However, complications during the process lead to a form of amnesia that prevents Aaron from creating new memories at the end of the novel, therefore limiting his access to scripts of happiness.

This discussion of accessing scripts of happiness engages with, and builds upon, work within the wider field of the concept of happiness. Sara Ahmed’s 2010 work *The Promise of Happiness* examines the complications surrounding the notion that happiness is dependent on others, and argues that “the affective repertoire of happiness gives us images of a certain kind of life, a life that has certain things and does certain things” (Ahmed 2010: 90). In her chapter on

queer fiction, Ahmed moves away from “reading unhappy endings as a sign of the withholding of moral approval for queer lives” and instead explores “how unhappiness circulates within and around this archive, and *what it allows us to do*” (italics original) (ibid.: 89). Alyssa Chrisman and Mollie Blackburn (2019: 84) use similar principles of understanding happiness to examine structures of happiness within the novel, arguing that “the overarching societal message that suggests that heterosexual relationships lead to happiness further minoritizes gay people, like Aaron, for whom this happy object is unattainable.” Chrisman and Blackburn’s work neglects to consider Aaron’s subsequent suicide attempt as representative of a circumnavigation of these models of happiness: he tells Thomas that his death would be a “happy-ending exit strategy” as he is unable to achieve recovery from depression through the text’s normative, heterosexual modes of happiness (Silvera 2015: 82). Aaron’s access to happiness, and the choices he makes to attempt to achieve happiness, are dependent upon the influential and heteronormative power structures around him. Though Aaron undergoes the Leteo procedure through his own choice, Ricki Ginsberg, Wendy Glenn, and Kellee Moye (2017) argue that characters’ decisions to intentionally silence aspects of their own identity are often rooted within novels’ social, political, and cultural power structures and inequalities. Aaron tells a nurse at the hospital that the removal of his sexual desires is “not only what I want,” but “what everyone wants” (Silvera 2015: 166). Aaron’s depression, and his choices to attempt to access happiness, are shaped by his exclusion from the novel’s dominant heteronormative scripts of happiness.

In a similar vein to Silvera’s 2017 novel *They Both Die at the End, More Happy Than Not* produces tragic endings associated with death, loss, and sadness for gay characters. Though this article is situated within a larger body of work that discusses the trend of gay death and suicide in young adult fiction,<sup>5</sup> the way that the genre imagines the complex nuances of

depression still represents a neglected area of critical research. For Aaron in *More Happy Than Not*, the Leteo procedure acts as a seemingly simple solution to enable him to assimilate into heteronormative models of happiness and access a cure for his depression that has previously been inaccessible to him. He reflects: “[w]e’re going to kill the part of me that’s ruined everything. I’m going to be straight, just like how my father would’ve wanted” (Silvera 2015: 205). His desire to use what his brother Eric calls “a cheat code to make life easier” demonstrates Aaron’s attempts to integrate within these discourses of heteronormative happiness (ibid.: 268). In an online talk entitled “Gay YA Novels that Sadden and Hurt: Adam Silvera’s Oeuvre and the Politics of Unhappiness,” Angel Daniel Matos (2021) argues that these desires “echo some of the arguments present in gay YA scholarship, that oftentimes both assimilation and normalization are seen as aspirational goals for both gay teen characters and the ideological frameworks of the genre.” The insertion of mental illness complicates this argument further, as recent novels within the young adult genre that deal with depression and happiness are less concerned with breaking free from normative scripts of happiness to establish a new model of achieving contentment that includes gay characters, but instead focus upon the assimilation of gay characters into existing, heteronormative frameworks of happiness. Matos (ibid.) goes on to ask: “does happiness for gay folk involve a revolution in the organization of sexuality, desire and the body or does it simply make gays part of the same world—the world of happy people—even if we have to work to get there?” While Aaron’s recovery trajectory produces the potential to establish, to use Matos’s term, a “revolution” in the organization of sexuality and happiness, any possible resolution is fraught with tensions and contradictions.

The novel’s recovery trajectory hints at the establishment of a new discourse of happiness for gay characters of color that does not include integration into dominant, heteronormative

models of happiness, while simultaneously undermining this by rendering Aaron invisible at the end of the text. Discussing the social and cultural context in which *More Happy Than Not* is set, Katelyn R. Browne (2020: 16) argues that “by the established logic of adolescent fiction, Aaron seems doomed to die—and as a working-class, queer, Latinx teen, he has never been the mythical child futurity seeks to protect.” She goes on to suggest that the novel challenges the notion, prevalent in young adult suicide novels, that “homosexuality is fundamentally incompatible with adulthood,” particularly for Latinx characters, by presenting Aaron’s sexuality as “the most unkillable thing about him.” While Aaron does not integrate into the heteronormative norms and powers that grant a recovery from depression, Browne does not fully acknowledge the way in which the emergence of a new discourse of happiness accessible to gay adolescents of color, which does not rely on scripts of heterosexuality, is negated by Aaron’s position during the text’s resolution, enabling the novel to reaffirm the idea that a fulfilled, happy life as a gay male within a young adult novel is ultimately unachievable. After complications during the Leteo procedure, Aaron retains almost no short-term memory and will “never be in a relationship again” as it is “not fair” on his partner if Aaron cannot remember him (Silvera 2015: 283). His life also seems hopeless at the end of the text; he asks himself “why bother living” with an impaired memory, as “dying seems easier” (ibid.: 265). During Aaron’s recovery from depression, he realizes that “[b]eing gay wasn’t and isn’t the problem. It only seemed that way because of everything that branched out from it” (ibid.: 255). While his trajectory begins to move from interpreting his gayness as a problem to identifying culturally created power structures that locate homosexuality as existing outside normative realms of male sexuality, the text produces a complex double movement that undermines any realization of a new discourse of happiness. The novel’s ambiguous and contradictory ending simultaneously empowers Aaron by creating the

potential for radical and broad models of recovery from depression that are accessible to gay males, while simultaneously removing his agency and therefore his ability to access such models.

Like in *Highly Illogical Behaviour*, the use of a fictionalized narrative to attend to the complexities of mental illness allows for literary specifics and dimensions that have the potential to represent polyphonic understandings of boyhood mental illness. This is demonstrated in the text's attempt at narrative closure, which produces a dual ending that creates a series of ambiguities surrounding Aaron's recovery narrative. For example, in September 2020, Silvera published a new, deluxe edition of the novel containing an additional final chapter that creates tensions that continuously move Aaron between positions of empowerment and marginalization. Set one year after the original ending, the new chapter, entitled "More Happy Ending," features Aaron's fulfilled quest for happiness after his experience of depression. In the alternative ending, Aaron undergoes corrective brain surgery to regain the ability to create new memories and begins a close relationship with a Latinx boy who has also experienced trauma after undergoing the Leteo procedure. In his work on trauma in *More Happy Than Not*, Matos (2021) argues that "Aaron has the means to find the happily ever after that complies with reader demands and expectations. One that softens, or better said erases, a lot of the sadness and despair present in the original ending." While Matos suggests that this new ending represents the text's ultimate alignment with normative resolutions commonly found in young adult fiction, which serve to provide a sense of closure, he neglects to consider the role of "More Happy Ending" as an *alternative* ending to the text that produces an option to read an alternate conclusion, creating a narrative model in which two parallel and contradictory versions of Aaron's recovery trajectory exist simultaneously. While in the original version of the text, Aaron's amnesia leads to suicidal

thoughts and difficulties in engaging in new romantic relationships, the revised edition constructs a different narrative trajectory in which Aaron has accessed a model of happiness that grants him the agency to act on his sexual desires. These two contradictory representations of recovery trajectories create a double movement that is simultaneously empowering and disabling for Aaron's recovery from depression. This double movement is a fracturing emblematic of the tensions present in cultural productions of gay male characters who experience mental illness. The form of the text itself is a manifestation of such contradictions: the parallel endings attempt to empower him within a model of happiness and recovery, while simultaneously undermining these frameworks by locating him in a position of marginalization, disempowerment, and invisibility.

As we will now see, both *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour* portray complex polymorphic models of shame that are constructed both as an internal force that evokes pain and silence, and an external affective experience cast onto a marginalized individual by a dominant group. Discussions of health-related shame are impeded by the reluctance to identify and admit feelings of humiliation, creating a connection between shame and denial. As Dolezal and Lyons (2017b: 208) argue, an "impediment to the investigation of shame that is shared by doctor and patients is that neither are likely to wish to discuss the matter," as conversations about humiliation can be deemed humiliating. Dolezal and Lyons (2017a.: 258) go on to suggest that although the person experiencing shame is conscious of the emotion, they are "not able to, or perhaps simply will not, identify it as shame," creating "an intrinsic connection between shame and the mechanism of denial." As I will now demonstrate, the novels fictionalize a reluctance to admit, identify, and discuss feelings of embarrassment associated with mental illnesses, creating a silence that pervades the texts' models of shame.

Another prominent feature of shame is the way that it can evoke a fear of alienation from social groups. As Dolezal and Lyons (2017a: 258) suggest, “shame is not just linked to threats to one’s identity, but, significantly, it is linked to threats to social bonds,” and as a result it is an “isolated experience that is far from trivial, often deeply disturbing and a cause of significant distress.” Dolezal and Lyons build on work by Gehert Piers and Jane Northrop to compare alienation from social groups to physical pain or the risk of death. While experiencing mental illnesses such as depression and agoraphobia can evoke shame, as these conditions represent a deviation from culturally constructed normative realms of mental health, discussing and admitting feelings of shame has the potential to endanger social connections and create feelings of abandonment. Internally produced models of shame are constructed by regarding a physical or mental illness as an individual inadequacy or deficiency and can lead to a multiplication of shameful feelings. Dolezal and Lyons (2017a: 258) assert that “patients often regard their illnesses as personal shortcomings, or as arising from personal shortcomings, or as arising from personal inadequacies.” They go on to argue that some symptoms of shame “provoke a shame spiral, or ‘loop’, in which, when shame arises it incites more shame”; the experience becomes an “iterated emotion” as its existence produces an intensification of shameful feelings (ibid.). As a result, attempts to avoid feelings of humiliation can lead to harming the self. As we will see, *Highly Illogical Behaviour* features internally produced models of shame, as Solomon interprets his agoraphobia as a personal deficiency. The text’s cyclical structure of shame provokes a multiplication of itself and leads to other manifestations of shame, such as Solomon’s self-harming behavior.

Within *More Happy Than Not*, Aaron’s male friendship group constructs boundaries regarding what is considered shameful for young males. These models originate from perceived

transgressions of gender norms associated with adolescent boys talking about their emotions, and are projected onto Aaron and Thomas through observation and violence. After Aaron tells Thomas about his father's suicide, his reflections hint at the implicit forms of shame surrounding male conversation about mental illness: "I don't talk about this a lot. Sometimes, because I don't want to; other times because my friends don't like dragging death and grief into things" (Silvera 2015: 48). Although Chrisman and Blackburn (2019: 86) describe those who live in Aaron's complex as his "neighborhood family" due to the significant role they play within the protagonist's life, the authors overlook the role that Aaron's male friendship group plays in constructing models of shame. Aaron's neighborhood friendship group performs forms of masculinity that valorize heterosexuality, stoicism, and aggression, and employ methods such as observation and violence to project shame onto patterns of male behavior that include discussions of emotions and mental illness. As Tricia Clasen (2017: 32) argues in her work on masculinity in contemporary young adult novels, acceptable expressions of male emotions are "limited to anger and frustration, and open and honest communication about feelings is practically taboo". Within Silvera's novel, Aaron's friendship group monitors open discussion about emotions such as depression and respond with anger and violence. When Aaron privately tells Thomas about his suicidal thoughts, their exchange is interrupted by their neighborhood friends, and both Aaron and Thomas "freak out for a second" while Aaron "jump[s] to [his] feet like someone just caught [him] doing something with someone [he] really shouldn't be doing anything with" (Silvera 2015: 50). The text produces an elusive model of shame in which Aaron's friendship group performs dominant, hegemonic masculinities to observe and monitor, and subsequently project shame onto, models of male behavior that embrace discussion surrounding complex and traumatic emotions. By engaging in discussion about feelings of

depression and suicidal ideation, Thomas and Aaron perform patterns of male behavior in ways that challenge the hegemonic ideals of the neighborhood family, and are subsequently violently shamed and cast out of the group.

In contrast to the model of health-related shame in *More Happy Than Not*, in which shame is located outside the central protagonist and projected onto boys who engage in discussion of mental distress, Whaley's novel locates shame within Solomon's identity. *Highly Illogical Behaviour* employs an internally constructed, contradictory model of shame in which Solomon simultaneously views his condition as a personal inadequacy while attempting to deemphasize the severity of his agoraphobia. Solomon experiences an internal form of shame associated with his agoraphobia, in contrast to people who experience "real problems" and who "got diseases" and "starved to death," while simultaneously acknowledging that he is unable to "deal with the real world" due to his agoraphobia (Whaley 2016: 189). This internalized, contradictory model of shame manifests in silence and physical hurt as Solomon experiences "a shooting pain deep in his stomach" when he considers that he has "issues with guilt" but cannot "talk to anyone about it, because he [is] afraid that would make it worse" (ibid.). This performance also evokes, to use Dolezal's term, "shame spirals" that lead to other, more physical manifestations of shame, such as self-harm. Solomon's guilt over his agoraphobia provokes a multiplication of shameful feelings and results in Solomon hitting himself to gain "[i]nstant relief" from the "tension built up from all the thoughts swirling through his mind" (ibid.: 217). Solomon's self-injurious behavior also generates further shame, as he has kept his self-harming actions secret for years. The first time Solomon hit himself, "he immediately started crying, confused and guilty, looking up at his parents like he had no idea how it had happened," producing a model of shame that incorporates a sense of disembodiment and a desire to become

disassociated from the action of self-harm (ibid.). The novel constructs a cyclical form of shame in which Solomon's embarrassment over his mental illness leads to self-harm, which in turn further creates an intensification of shameful feelings.

## **Conclusion**

I argued at the beginning of this article that despite increased visibility of gay characters and the recent proliferation of young adult novels about mental illness, the complexities and nuances surrounding outcomes and resolutions for gay male characters experiencing mental distress in recent young adult literature represent an under-researched area. Despite young adult literature's shift away from portrayals of violent homophobia during the first 10 years of the twenty-first century, prejudice ideology manifests in more subtle, contradictory, and elusive ways in adolescent novels that deal with complex mental states, such as *More Happy Than Not* and *Highly Illogical Behaviour*. These two novels represent the *potential* to construct distinctive, unanticipated, and nonheteronormative trajectories of recovery for gay male characters; to provide opportunities to establish power structures that locate agency over mental illness within the gay teen narrator; and to cast off shame associated with male experiences of, and honest discussions surrounding, mental distress.

However, within the selected primary texts, fictionalized relationships between symptoms and the self, power structures within recovery trajectories, and models of shame are frequently fraught with complex and contradictory tensions and anxieties, which locate gay male characters in a precarious space between empowerment and marginalization. The findings that I have presented suggest that the complex fictionalized relationships between symptoms of mental illness and the self create sophisticated contradictions and anxieties. These conflicts permeate the

novels' trajectories of recovery and establish power structures within models of mental illness that are fraught with double movements that simultaneously empower and undermine the agency of homosexual male characters. As this article has demonstrated, the selected primary texts hint at the production of imaginative and distinctive models of recovery from mental illness accessible to gay boys, while promoting forced assimilation into existing, heteronormative scripts of recovery and happiness. This investigation has also argued that a polymorphous model of shame pervades the texts, as both an internal force that creates pain and silence and an external affective experience projected onto a homosexual, marginalized individual by a heteronormative, dominant group. The findings in this article raise important questions about the need for investigation into more positive representations of gay characters within young adult literature concerning mental health and recovery—representations that produce a broader range of distinctive, sophisticated outcomes and resolutions for protagonists. The arguments outlined also suggest a further need for discussion of fictionalized, imaginative, and polyphonic ways of imagining mental health—such as the productive use of symptoms associated with protagonists' mental illness that many people would deem problematic—to enable gay characters with mental illnesses to establish and occupy a new space and gain agency over their illnesses and trajectories. This article's findings raise further questions about adolescent novels that construct gay characters negotiating and resolving various challenging aspects of their mental states, such as shame and the desire to return to normative realms of mental health, to accept their illnesses as innovative, complex, and productive imaginings of cognitive difference. These arguments have demonstrated the need for discussion of contributions to the young adult genre that provide resolutions for gay male characters that are not focused upon a return to culturally constructed normative realms of mental health, but instead produce thoughtful and productive ways of

imagining mental health beyond linear binaries of recovery and illness to highlight the fictionalized cacophony of gay boys living with states of mental health that do not take singular forms.

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## Notes

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1. See, for example, Scrofano (2019) and Wickham (2018) for criticism on the recent proliferation of young adult texts about mental illness.
  2. For instance, for criticism on the history of gay young adult literature and culture and the recent increased visibility of LGBTQ+ characters in the genre, see Mason (2021).
  3. See Crisp (2009). Crisp is highly critical of the way that these novels use homophobia as a literary device to invoke realism. The genre’s depictions of homophobia as an embedded power structure used to engender realism “impl[y] that homophobia is too large an issue to confront and is ultimately bad, but inevitable behaviour” (ibid.: 339). The increased canon of gay young adult literature produced during the early 2000s often relies upon homophobic discourse as a mechanism to invoke realism, making it seem inevitable and therefore a “natural” response to the emergence of the adolescent gay male in the genre. Rather than dispelling prejudice and promoting diversity, the proliferation of writing about homosexual males reinforces the same

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ideological process it supposedly rejects through its use of homophobia as an inevitable and natural issue associated with homosexuality.

4. Normative modes of male behavior dominate the representations of boys' friendship groups in the genre up to 2010. These constructions of public, collective performances of masculinity are problematic as they marginalize displays of male subjecthood that exist outside normative models of gendered behavior. See Bean and Harper (2007). As Bean and Harper (*ibid.*: 12) argue, masculinity and femininity are constructed as polarized oppositions, and narratives within the young adult genre from the first decade of the twenty-first century depict "serious repercussions for those who might resist or transgress gendered and/or sexual norms" in a public sphere. As I will go on to show, these "serious repercussions" manifest as stigma and shame in many characters and play a prominent role in more recent young adult texts that feature boys discussing their mental health.

5. For example, see Browne (2020).