

Popular music and AIDS Crisis Revisitation in Young Adult novels

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Abstract: *This article considers the uses of popular music in three contemporary Young Adult novels about the first decades of the AIDS crisis in the United States of America: Carol Rifka Brunt's *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012), Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019) and Helene Dunbar's *We Are Lost and Found* (2019). In particular, the last two are notable as the first Young Adult (YA) novels to properly examine the early years of AIDS from the perspective of queer adolescent protagonists. As fictions of the recent queer past, these novels foreground different aspects of 1980s and 1990s popular music and gay culture as alleviative contrasts to the oppressive reality of AIDS. If AIDS in YA literature tended to be disarticulated from gay culture (de-gayed) to avoid homophobia, then memorialising the impact of AIDS on gay culture, with its connections to popular music, has political and pedagogical effects. By highlighting the ironic, nostalgic, melodramatic, pedagogical, material, social and multimodal uses of popular music in these novels, this article builds on the limited scholarship on the representation of musical experience in YA literature, as well as offering a critical perspective on the surprising emergence of AIDS Crisis Revisitation narratives in the past few years — an ongoing and important trend that demands further investigation.*

Keywords: *AIDS Crisis Revisitation, HIV/AIDS, popular music, queer nostalgia, queer young adult literature, vicarious nostalgia*

Introduction

This article examines the uses of popular music in several Young Adult (YA) novels about the early years of the AIDS crisis in America published in the last ten years: Carol Rifka Brunt's *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012), Helene Dunbar's *We Are Lost and Found* (2019), and Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019). These novels are part of present and ongoing cultural (re)investment in AIDS history after years of silence — a cultural moment that

Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr (2017) call ‘AIDS Crisis Revisitation’. AIDS Crisis Revisitation, as I understand it here, describes the impulse to look back at the start of the crisis from the perspective of a precarious but ameliorated present in which the dust has settled on an original scene of trauma. First associated with the artistic responses of hard-hit communities, AIDS Crisis Revisitation has since culminated in a swathe of new novels, films, documentaries, memoirs, TV shows, YA novels, guides to queer history, and even children’s picture books; renewed attention to the first years of AIDS has made the act of memorialisation an increasingly central narrative in popular entertainment. In the YA novels that I analyse here, various aspects of musical culture and musical expression at the end of the twentieth century are evoked to bring that first period of AIDS to life for an implied contemporary adolescent reader. This article, then, offers a study of the uses of popular music in the dramatisation of the recent past, and an analysis of the cultural politics of representing the start of the AIDS crisis for young readers in the twenty-first century — a crisis which continues, unended and ongoing.

Published in 2012, *Tell the Wolves I’m Home* is a crossover YA novel, chosen for the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. Set in the early 1990s in upstate New York, it tells the story of June, an adolescent girl grieving for her dead gay uncle Finn, who dies from AIDS-related complications at the start of the novel. *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found* were published in 2019 and differ from almost all previous YA novels about the crisis by depicting it as a concern for queer adolescents. In *Like a Love Story*, a pair of queer adolescent New Yorkers take part in AIDS activism in 1990 and fall in love through a shared passion for the singer Madonna. Set in 1983 at the very beginning of the crisis, *We Are Lost and Found* is about a closeted gay adolescent called Michael beginning to experience the gay nightlife scene just as AIDS began to devastate it. While *Tell the Wolves I’m Home* provides a powerful example of the melodramatic possibility of musical expression in AIDS Crisis Revisitation narratives, *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found* show how popular music can be used by writers of YA literature to re-centre queer experiences of AIDS in an area of popular culture that tended to disavow them.

Although none of these novels are autobiographical, the authors of these AIDS Crisis Revisitation narratives acknowledge their personal connections to the time period and their role as its witnesses. These novels reach through time; their resonance is tied to the fact that the last decades of the twentieth century are unknowable, even mythical, for the vicarious adolescent reader born in the 2000s. As Bryony Stocker would note (2019, 78), YA novels about AIDS are not historical fictions *per se*, because the beginning of AIDS is within living memory and after the author’s birth. However, for the implied adolescent reader, the era that these novels summon might certainly *feel* like ancient history, not least because today’s drastically different outcome for HIV infection reflects a totally different temporality. Before the mid-1990s, HIV infection virtually

always led to an AIDS diagnosis and then death, whereas most HIV-positive people with access to medication today live healthy lives. The availability of HIV-preventative medicine (PrEP) continues to transform the reality of AIDS in the world today, standing for a vastly different biopolitical context in which HIV infection can be avoided without using condoms for demographics who remain at risk. Returning to a time before PrEP and anti-retroviral medication is a return to a time before same-sex marriage and the rhetoric of equality that same-sex marriage represents; a return to a time in which LGBTQ+ people tended to be invisible in mainstream media and homophobia was weaponised by church and state alike in the United States of America. It is about showing young people the ways in which the world no longer resembles itself, for better and for worse; the language of ghosts. The YA novels I discuss here package up the recent queer past from the present, dramatising its conflicts and injustices as a newly representable chapter of a newly mainstream queer history. Popular music provides a useful framework for staging this past and helps articulate its difference and similarities to the world today. By turn ironic, nostalgic, melodramatic, pedagogical, material and social, the uses of popular music in these novels speak to the fraught and emergent cultural biopolitics of the era they represent.

Aaron Lecklider argues that popular music should be conceptualized as central to the social context of the AIDS crisis, rather than disregarded as ‘inauthentic, unimportant, or politically disengaged’ (2004, 111). The same might be said about YA literature: an important arena for political engagement and queer representation but one which only recently — in the 2010s — began to properly examine the early catastrophe of AIDS in America from the perspective of queer adolescent protagonists. Indeed, Gross *et al.*’s (2010) collation of YA novels about AIDS published between the 1980s and 2008 finds none featuring a protagonist who is both gay and HIV-positive, despite the obvious truth that young queer people have always been, and remain, on the frontline of the crisis. This minimalisation of AIDS is due to the prevailing pedagogy of the era that sought to reduce the homophobic conflation of AIDS with gay men by in turn not representing its impact on gay men or their collective response to it. However, this pedagogy had the knock-on effect of making the painful but culturally important relationship between gay men and AIDS almost entirely invisible in children’s literature, as Robert McRuer (2011) so cogently notes. In the early 2000s, queer YA novels sometimes evoked AIDS as a shadow threat, as Thomas Crisp notes (2008), while David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) features a Greek chorus of dead gay men addressing the reader in between chapters. Even so, these depictions did not and do not solve the paucity of novels that authentically and explicitly depict queer experiences of AIDS — navigating sexual risk and uplifting HIV-positive people. It follows that AIDS Crisis Revisitation — in YA literature at least — is led by a pedagogy of communicating queer cultural history and recognising lost queer lives, rather

than navigating AIDS as an ongoing event in young people's lives. Popular music functions in these YA novels to invest their narratives with a subversive political sensibility as well as providing cues for historical authenticity.

Simon Frith, in his essay 'Towards an aesthetic of popular music' (1987; reprinted in Frith 2007, 257-74) argues that popular music has three social functions: firstly, it is bound up in identity formation, collective and individual; secondly, it accommodates the space between the public and private emotional lives of the listener; and third, it plays an important role in shaping popular memory and perceptions of time. To Frith, these have meaning due to popular music's fourth function: how it possesses the listener, and in turn, how the listener possesses it. When we listen to music that we enjoy and connect with, 'we make it part of our own identity and build it into our sense of ourselves' (143), in a way that Frith sees as more intensely personal than with other art forms. With Frith's social functions of music in mind, I want to explore how popular music is represented in these three YA novels to show adolescent identity formation in a world being changed by AIDS.

After establishing the relationship between AIDS Crisis Revisitation and YA literature, this article examines the melodramatic possibilities of popular music in AIDS Crisis Revisitation by exploring how music and playlists contribute to the implied affective demands of *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*. After that, I consider how these melodramatic connotations of popular music take on an explicit politic through the queer pedagogy of *Like a Love Story*, via the insights into gay identity that the main characters acquire through the iconic stardom of Madonna. Finally, I examine the relationship between popular music, vicarious nostalgia, and gentrification in *We Are Lost and Found*, which depicts the excitement of gay culture and popular music in a gritty, perhaps even gayer, version of New York, that explicitly no longer exists. The fact that it no longer exists is entirely the point. After offering close readings of these three novels, I conclude by offering a provisional typology of some uses of popular music in YA novels of the recent past, in the hope of providing an initial framework for future research into the representation of popular music and musical experience.

While *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* continues the long history of YA novels about AIDS which prioritise the growth of heterosexual protagonists, *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found* depict the crisis in ways which are led by living queer characters (rather than dead or dying objectified moral spectacles, as Simon Watney might add). In doing so, these two novels gesture towards the realities and horizons of queer cultural life that popular music helped to envision and brought into being at the end of the twentieth century. Accordingly, popular music is integral to the queer world-building that these novels both contain and represent, although these queer worlds are limited: popular music is for the most part whitewashed in these novels due to the scope

of each narrative and presumably the personal perspective each author brings to it. While *Like a Love Story* pays a powerful tribute to the experiences of HIV-positive black gay men, these novels follow a different context than, for example, *Pose* (Murphy *et al.* 2018), the recent television series about the black queer ballroom scene in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, and so focus on mainstream popular music without interrogating its intersection with race and racism in America. Even so, situated at the intersection of the pedagogical, the political, the ironic and the nostalgic, these works of AIDS Crisis Revisitation use popular music to depict the start of the AIDS crisis as a crucial historical period for queer people that continues to reverberate today.

AIDS Crisis Revisitation in Young Adult literature

According to Juhasz and Kerr, AIDS Crisis Revisitation emerged in the 2010s with ‘a notable increase in the production and dissemination of AIDS related media that *looks back* at the early days of the known AIDS epidemic’ (2017, original emphasis). Crucially, this renewed interrogation of the beginning of AIDS followed a period in which the crisis had lost momentum as an issue worth exploration in contemporary culture — what Juhasz and Kerr call the ‘second silence’ after the late 1990s, when new antiretroviral medication rapidly reduced the number of AIDS-related deaths. AIDS Crisis Revisitation began with counter-cultural and activist art and documentaries but has since become a sort of zeitgeist for the dominant culture, leading to the ‘sudden, rather unexpected deluge of representations of AIDS in popular media’ (Cheng *et al.* 2020, xviii), such as *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) and the iconic, pathbreaking TV series about the black drag scene in New York, *Pose* (2018). On the one hand, these examples of renewed investment in the production and circulation of images of AIDS implies that the crisis remains a beguiling moral spectacle, because the image of — for example — the socially abject, dying gay man has always had problematic currency in popular culture. However, the success of AIDS Crisis Revisitation as a renewed mode of queer representation (and a way of drawing attention to queer history) implies that the stigma of retribution that saturated AIDS has waned; or, at least, that it can now be critiqued through these new dramatizations not only of queer loss but of pride and celebration — with popular music playing a key role in both.

Historical representations of the AIDS crisis in popular culture speak to its lucrative reliability as a tragic and dramatic narrative, but the popularisation of AIDS Crisis Revisitation also implies a decision to pay attention to what was for a long time overlooked and marginalised. New YA novels about AIDS offer a mode of memorialization and mourning that was not available in YA literature at the time. As Cart and Jenkins note (2018, 85-86), the few YA novels published in the 1980s and 1990s that depicted the AIDS-related deaths of queer people tended to represent those figures as isolated caricatures of abjection

rather than autonomous subjects connected to queer cultural life and community. Gay HIV-positive characters were often represented as social pariahs with no access to the queer community that aspects of musical culture — such as gay nightclubs, or the diva worship of pop singers like Madonna — stand for. Perhaps the most obvious example of this pattern of alienation is that in many early YA novels about AIDS which feature dying queer characters — such as M E Kerr's *Night Kites* (1986) and Penny Raife Durant's *When Heroes Die* (1992) — those characters come home to the heteronormative suburbs to die, fleeing from an urban community that remains unseen within the pages of the novels themselves. While these communities, such as the gay enclaves of New York and San Francisco, were in fact sources of solidarity and power for queer people in the first decades of AIDS, within the suburban settings of early YA novels about AIDS they appear as distant and mysterious sites of contagion.

The emergence of AIDS Crisis Revisitation in YA literature is an example of the change in queer representation that Katelyn R Browne (2020) forecasts in the field: the slow transition from YA narratives that misuse and otherise tragedies of queer death — suicide, violence, symbol-laden accidents and AIDS — to a newer sort of queer representation that probes and challenges the relationship between queerness and the tragic. AIDS Crisis Revisitation tends to be reparative; the key difference in YA literature is that the pedagogy behind AIDS discourse in YA literature is no longer to de-gay the crisis to widen awareness among heterosexual young people *in the present*, but rather, to celebrate queer community and teach about its role in the fight against AIDS *in the past*.

With this aim in mind, AIDS Crisis Revisitation narratives emphasise the popular music of their historical period to help construct aspects of that period and signify the sometimes competing social narratives and cultural ideas that music and musical cultures gave shape and voice to. Indeed, popular music is a useful metonym for a gay culture that remains, for various reasons, complex to portray in a mainstream context. Music's deep association with melodrama, memory, sex and nostalgia means that the use of popular, as well as other types of, music in these novels goes hand-in-hand with their affective potential; fundamentally, these novels are led by grief and motivated around its exposition. These affective responses in turn constitute what I want to emphasise as the absolutely pedagogical motivation of AIDS Crisis Revisitation, as I see it; a sort of dialogue between generations of queer people, especially explicit when it takes place in the arena of YA literature, because that intergenerational transaction is so inherent to the scope and form of the YA novel. The desire to revisit and re-engage with AIDS is not only a history lesson but also a counter-narrative, rebutting the heteronormative and amnesiac narratives of AIDS in the mainstream, that forget the role of queer solidarity and pride, as scholars such as Sarah Schulman (2012, 1-20), Lucas Hilderbrand (2006, 307) and Deborah Gould (2009, 245-48) have powerfully argued.

Popular music, as Frith might note, has an obvious relationship to this attempt to *feel* history, because musical experience and an affiliation with popular music are so bound up in cultural identification, emotional connection, and popular memory.

While these novels cannot escape their context as simulacra of the recent queer past, the references each makes to popular music constitute found objects that nevertheless verify the truthfulness of the overall representation of an adolescent experience of a barely glimpsed queer world changed forever by AIDS. Bound up in melodramatic possibility, the songs in these novels are to be utilised by the implied reader as multimodal extensions of the affective experience of the tragic narratives and the vanished social worlds they represent.

As Frith puts it, popular music is organised ‘around anticipation and echo, around endings to which we look forward, choruses that build regret into their fading’ (1987, 142). The experience of listening to popular music is always the anxious joy of evanescence: the song ceases, it vanishes, and so the feelings it produced must be produced again, so the song is replayed. Like time itself, we cannot get enough of it. Textually, these popular songs are deployed to garner the sense of something that has *already ended* or that *can only represent its own ending*, the looping nostalgia of musical experience in a time and place that only exists in historical representation. Ephemeral but everlasting, the enduring value of twentieth-century popular music is its own kind of haunting, as Mark Fisher might tell us. Musical culture of the past, to Fisher, was ‘central to the projection of the futures which have been lost’ (2014, 27). In other words, in these novels, popular music provides an emotional connection not only with lost pasts, but also unrealised horizons.

Reading, listening, wallowing: *Tell the Wolves I’m Home*

Popular music is connected to melodramatic expression — the creation of a moment in which it becomes possible to declare moral truth and pathos without ambiguity or hesitation, the stuff of a million pop songs or what Peter Brooks calls ‘the theatrical impulse itself’ (1976, 40). In YA novels, the melodrama of popular music plays an important role in the affective responses that these novels invite in their implied readers. Musical expression can be used to support melodramatic moments by amplifying the emotional gravitas of the issues at stake, legitimising the desires and anxieties of young people. By bringing these anxieties and desires to the surface, musical expression offers a way to grieve the loss of an older gay relative, or provides a source of respite and community from the repression endured by closeted queer young people scared of AIDS.

Take for example the first work of AIDS Crisis Revisitation in YA literature, the crossover bestseller and Oprah Winfrey Book Club book, *Tell the Wolves I’m Home*. Unlike *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found*, *Tell the*

Wolves I'm Home does not implicate a queer adolescent reader. As a fiction of the recent past, it is perhaps less concerned with the pedagogical demands of queer history as with redramatising the commonplace narrative of grief for heterosexual readers about dying gay men — emblematic of what Cindy Patton (1996, 36) might call an ideology of *compassionate heterosexuality* in early social responses to AIDS. This difference in reader can be gleaned from the peritext of the novel, which features reviews from women's glossy magazines. To be clear, I do not mean to imply anything pejorative about women's magazines — far from it — but wish to show how this novel belongs to a different tradition of AIDS representation than *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found*.

As I have already mentioned, *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* is about a young female protagonist in upstate New York in the 1990s, who mourns the loss of her beloved gay uncle to AIDS. Both classical and popular music appears as a cue for setting the scene, building the affective dimensions of the narrative. For June, the adolescent protagonist, Mozart's *Requiem* is synonymous with her dying gay uncle, Finn, and becomes an obvious metaphor for his AIDS-related decline: 'It lulls you into thinking it's pleasant and harmless, it bubbles along, and then all of a sudden, boom, there it is rising up and menacing' (7). After Finn's death, June meets her uncle's mysterious partner, Toby, who has been hidden from her due to the homophobic context of their family life in the mid-1980s. Toby gives June her uncle's cassette tapes of the *Requiem*, and the music becomes a way to express their shared grief that is ultimately proven to be a point of commonality and unity between Finn's outcast HIV-positive lover and the suburban, heteronormative family. Brunt's novel is written with the quintessentially retrospective and even mournful logic of historical representation that typifies the objective of AIDS Crisis Revisitation. Yet it exemplifies what Browne would call an early cliché of AIDS representation, in which young people become better citizens — which is to say, responsible and compassionate heterosexuals — by bearing witness to the AIDS-related abjection and death of an older gay relative.

Interestingly, *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* contains various listen-along playlists in the paratext, which includes a discussion of the choices Brunt made when deciding to reference contemporaneous pop music in the narrative: 'If I wanted to be dishonest, I would have filled the book only with music I really liked, but I wanted to be honest, so instead I put songs in there that felt right for the time and place' (371). The listen-along playlists endorse what Katie Kapurch has called the melodramatic impulse of girl culture, in which the representation of music works to amplify (so to speak) the emotional lives of the girl characters, thereby 'building intimacy between reader and narrator' (2016, 102). The playlists literally encourage the reader to enter, in the author's own words, a suitably 'melancholic and wistful' (Brunt 2012, 372) mood, and so fulfil the basic tenet of melodrama (*song* and *drama*) by offering an aural backdrop to

amplify the pathos of the narrative. The role of popular music in these novels therefore speaks to the history of melodramatic expression, a maligned but crucial aspect of YA literature, because popular music helps draw out the affective potential of the texts themselves for the implied adolescent readers as well as adolescent characters.

Through these playlists, the implied girl reader of the novel is thus encouraged to identify with June's grief for her dead uncle through listening to suggested songs like Queen's 'The Show Must Go On' (375) and other 'teenage girl romantic' songs such as Kate Bush's 'Wuthering Heights' (374). Brunt's statement about the playlist implies that there are songs which would feel wrong and dishonest for the time and place, and so that the objective to render AIDS in a way that feels truthful can be achieved by going beyond prose and into the deeper truth of music. Drawing attention to the role of music in YA literature — whether for the character or the implied reader, to create the right scene or as a multimodal extension of the text itself — highlights the affective utility of YA novels in young people's lives. Likewise, heeding the role of music in AIDS Crisis Revisitation narratives — as an object of nostalgia and as the soundtrack to grief — makes space to recognise the worthiness of that nostalgia and the belatedness of the articulation of that grief.

The pattern established by *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* is replicated in other recent YA novels which take on the work of AIDS Crisis Revisitation from the perspective of the grieving adolescent girl who comes to understand her place in the world through bearing witness to queer death: Cornelia Jensen's *Skyscraping*, published in 2015, and J C Burke's *The Things We Promise*, published in 2017. Both novels make use of the same *Entwicklungsroman* narrative, to quote Roberta Trites' term (2010, 10-15) — a classic developmental narrative, which in this case involves an adolescent girl who experiences emotional maturation by bearing witness to the AIDS-related death of an older gay relative. As with surely most fictions of the recent past, popular music is used in each to help the impossible attempt at representing a vanished world; but the popular music of 1990s New York and Australia is not directly thematised as it is in *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*. Seen in retrospect as fictions of the recent queer past, the deaths of the HIV-positive relatives are imbued with unproblematic virtue and grieved with melodramatic pomp.

However, I will now consider two more recent examples of AIDS Crisis Revisitation in YA literature that foreground queer adolescent experiences, and which, in doing so, offer ways to examine the relationship between popular music and gay culture that AIDS Crisis Revisitation entails. David Halperin acerbically summarises the apparent sentiment that in the twenty-first century, 'young queers [...] don't like to be labelled, they don't feel the need for a separate, distinct social world, and they don't identify with gay culture' (2012, 410). AIDS Crisis Revisitation undermines this because it unavoidably draws

attention to a biopolitical context in which gay life was not only separate from the mainstream — a subculture, rather than subsumed — but attacked by it. To use fiction to return to this previous temporality is paradoxical, because on one hand, it drums up the abjection and homophobia of AIDS, and yet on the other, it looks back nostalgically to a time in which the gay urban enclaves of New York City were abuzz rather than shrinking due to gentrification and the mainstreaming of gay identity.

Popular music as queer pedagogy in *Like a Love Story*

Popular music is key to the identity formation of the closeted protagonists in *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found*. It provides a point of affiliation with queer culture that alleviates the pain and anxiety brought into their lives by the spectral threat of AIDS. As melodrama, the relief that popular music provides for young people is how it seems to perfectly articulate emotional responses to important and unfair situations, as with so many cliché-ridden love songs. In *Like a Love Story*, the melodramatic possibility that popular music opens up is immediate, obvious, and instructive, embodied by the subversive superstardom of Madonna. *We Are Lost and Found* also makes ironic and dismissive references to ‘that new singer, Madonna’ (4), presumably to deflect from the stereotypical conflation between gay identity and Madonna. *Like a Love Story*, however, transforms the stereotype into a source of power, foregrounding it as a useful politic for gay cultural and sexual identification rather than an embarrassing or irrelevant cliché. After his arrival in New York, Iranian immigrant Reza is obsessed with Madonna’s music as soon as he discovers it; he expresses certainty that his obsession is bound up in ‘something deeper, like she is saying all the things that I want to be saying’ (91). While Reza is haunted by thoughts of ‘dying men with lesions’ (13) that he sees in the future that awaits him as a young gay man, Madonna’s music and counter-cultural celebrity provide a symbolic release valve for the repression of the closet.

Indeed, the antidote to shame and fear that Madonna represents is key to what I see as the queer pedagogy of the novel. By queer pedagogy, I mean the deliberate, defiant messages about gay pride and culture that are woven throughout the narrative and which focus on the diva status of Madonna and the vitality of adolescent musical experience. Reza becomes friends with Art and Judy, two queer and queer-friendly Manhattanite adolescents who spend their time talking about Madonna and taking part in AIDS activism with Uncle Stephen, an HIV-positive older gay man. By meeting these three characters, Reza learns about gay culture in America, empowering him to learn more about who he has been all along. The trio read and discuss Uncle Stephen’s ‘Queer 101 notecards’ (37), a narrative device that works as a sort of primer on gay culture shared among the three: ‘#28 Crawford, Joan, #53 Fucking Reagans,

The, #54 Garland, Judy' (56). Uncle Stephen discusses the index cards at numerous points across the narrative as he prepares to die from AIDS-related complications. The unsubtly pedagogical — even outright didactic — context of the cards is both ironic and all-too serious; a good-humoured but no less political allusion to the moral panic that homophobic politician Anita Bryant whipped up around older gay men and lesbians' supposed recruitment of young people in the 1970s, with added pathos due to Uncle Stephen's accelerating decline. The cards poke fun at the idea that queer culture is something that can be learned and revised like algebra, and yet demonstrate the very real *need* to pass down queer history from generation to generation, lest it be forgotten — particularly true of the 'plague years'. Moreover, the novel itself fulfils that need within the queer pedagogy of AIDS Crisis Revisitation in YA literature.

The index cards are represented within the narrative and discussed between the characters, as well as appearing in the paratext between chapters as direct address to the reader. Madonna's entry stakes a claim on the pop singer as 'not just a singer, not just a dancer, not just a performer' but 'a revolution' (330). Uncle Stephen's words invoke the plural pronoun to drum up the vision of a community of queer Madonna fans to which the adolescent protagonists (and implied reader) are now able to belong: 'She's turning this world around and showing us how to follow in her footsteps' (331). The plural pronoun is invoked again by Art in conversation with Reza about Madonna with his explanation that 'divas' are 'popular with gays' because 'we can see what's hiding behind the artifice' (66) — virtually paraphrasing Halperin's theorization of diva worship as a collective facet of gay identity. In this regard, the queer pedagogy of *Like a Love Story* is exemplified in how the novel successfully asks the implied reader to take popular music seriously, affirming its relationship to queer theory and the politics of repression.

The novel's representation of Reza and his friends' devotion to Madonna is an example of this queer pedagogy in action; the icon provides a point of affinity, community, and contemplation in a narrative which is otherwise structured around the melancholia of Uncle Stephen's abject decline. The singer is invoked as an ironic icon of gay identity, just as Halperin notes (2012, 112-14) that aspects of mainstream popular culture like Broadway and techno music (or in this case, Madonna) become shorthand for gay culture even while remaining part of an otherwise homophobic mainstream. Take, for example, Art's response to Reza's early denial that he is gay:

No, honestly ... WHAT THE FUCK? I know I read the signs right.
MADONNA! (Nazemian 2019, 105)

As physical objects, Madonna's vinyl records bring into signification what cannot be spoken out loud while Reza remains isolated in the closet: 'I reach into the Madonna section to pull out another record, and as I do, our hands graze each other' (67). By holding the records together, Art and Reza's eyes 'are

locked in some secret shared space we never knew existed until just now' (67). In this vignette, their shared but unspoken knowledge of the potential that Madonna represents for the lives of young closeted people even provides a way of vacating the heteronormative world.

Uncle Stephen's queer pedagogy highlights derided or ignored connections between camp, melodrama, popular music, gay culture and politics, right up until his deathbed. Just before his death, Uncle Stephen surprises Art, Reza, and Judy with tickets to a Madonna concert — an event which transcends the fear and shame that AIDS and homophobia represent in Reza's life. He feels unity surrounded by 'mostly women and gay men' (343) and declares that 'we are dancing, we are singing, we are forgiven, we are glowing, we are understood' (*ibid.*), verging upon the gnostic. That sensation of a powerful mysterious catharsis is affirmed by his expression of 'faith' at the end of the Madonna concert because 'if the world could bring together this woman with these songs and these dancers in this place with me in it, then creation must be more powerful than destruction' (348). Political parallels are drawn once the trio return to Manhattan to tell Uncle Stephen about the concert as he lays dying, and draw an equivalence between Madonna's performance and their earlier participation at an AIDS protest:

You were at the concert with us. And at the protest. (364)

In other words, popular music is represented as serious business for the challenge of gay identity in the biopolitical context of AIDS in the late twentieth century. In the final chapters, Uncle Stephen asks for popular music to be played at his funeral, calling for:

Songs that are at once sad and celebratory. He explains to us that the best dance songs are full of longing. They're about the desire to celebrate desire, because a dance floor is a place to morph your sorrow into grace. (369)

His final words tie his death as a HIV-positive gay man in a homophobic biopolitical world to the freedom that popular music provides — an alchemy that transforms pain and abjection into power, virtue and beauty, like the alchemy of melodramatic expression that Linda Williams (1998, 42-88) describes elsewhere.

The end of the novel flashes into the future, or the year 2016; the recent queer past meets the politics of the present. A final reference to the Orlando massacre of that year — in which forty-nine people were murdered in a hate crime at a gay nightclub in Florida — explicates the queer pedagogy of the novel, speaking to the contemporary urgency of protecting gay culture. In the paratext, Nazemian then draws on his own adolescent love of Madonna as a parallel to Reza's, describing the singer as 'a portal into other queer art' which allowed him to see 'queerness not as a death sentence, but as a community and

an identity to be celebrated' (Author's note). The queer pedagogy of popular music leaves behind the dreamlike world of the text itself to be compounded by the reality of the tragic and the autobiographical.

As Halperin argues in his remarks about the under-recognised cultural power of the diva, 'those who are relegated to the ranks of the unserious have no reason to behave themselves' (2012, 253). *Like a Love Story* may seem unserious and over-the-top. This is because it makes use of tenets of melodrama that tend to be derided as unserious and over-the-top but which in fact play an important role in the novel's attempt to retrospectively portray the calamity of AIDS. The loss represented by AIDS in popular culture is a double loss — first, the loss of lives, and then the lost opportunities to represent AIDS in ways that feel authentic and affirm the virtue of those impacted. As an attempt to repair this second sort of loss, *Like a Love Story* manages to re-gay the tragedy of AIDS in America by making it into an affirmation of queer cultural history. As symbols of the traumatic past and the queer horizons of the future, the characters of *Like a Love Story* express the melodramatic vitality of queer expression in the face of AIDS rather than underplaying it. If previous representations of AIDS tended to de-gay the crisis, then *Like a Love Story* uses a pedagogy of popular music — and the superstardom of Madonna — to re-gay the crisis and centre queer experiences of it in YA novels.

Gentrification on the dance floor: *We Are Lost and Found*

Popular music is about vicarious nostalgia. By vicarious nostalgia, I refer to Christina Goulding's definition (2002), which describes the nostalgia of an individual who covets a time before they were born, such as the implied adolescent reader of these novels. This sort of nostalgia is as associated with retro culture as with perhaps more academically familiar theoretical conceptualizations of yearning: it draws attention to the quotidian role of 'things, objects, entities, items, *stuff*' (Cervellon and Brown 2018, 24, my emphasis). In the twenty-first century, the physical aspects of popular music are suffused with a collective sense of loss that surrounds an obsolete material culture and changing social worlds. Directed by this, the representation of popular music in *We Are Lost and Found* throws into sharp relief subsequent technological change and the gentrification of New York. Of course, an emphasis on material culture is part of the world-building in all historical narratives; in the 2010s, cassette tapes, vinyl records and CD players are important signifiers for an aesthetic attempt at a previous and increasingly retro world. For example, in *We Are Lost and Found*, Michael, the protagonist, speculates whether 'CDs are really going to be a thing' (106). Later, his friend James claims that 'the jury is still out' on CD players because there is something to be said for 'the scratches and pops' of vinyl (134). At the end of the novel, Michael loses his virginity with a college student, whose room is made up in

seventies décor: ‘He takes the cassette out and puts it into a boombox on the dresser, the only thing here that belongs to this decade’ (241). Michael’s surprise is ironic. It draws attention to the vicarious practice of retro culture which has become commonplace since the 1990s, and which the novel itself exemplifies. These ironic depictions of musical material culture speak to the fabric of future nostalgia that the vinyl records, the CDs and the audio cassette have become woven into — the miscellany of the ‘global epidemic of nostalgia’ that Svetlana Boym (2001, 4) famously diagnosed in the late twentieth century and which the digitisation of musical experience in the twenty-first century only underscores.

The closure of record stores is connected to the advent of the internet; the birth of the first iPod predates the contemporary teenager, announcing a world in which everything is instantly accessible with a Wi-Fi connection. Nostalgic appreciation for old musical cultures is also to do with yearning for previous ways of life, and so connects to one of the most obvious underlying themes of AIDS Crisis Revisitation: gentrification, which Sarah Schulman calls ‘the monster that ate New York’ (2012, 19). Schulman argues a direct correlation between the mass death of many gay people in urban enclaves such as the West Village and the subsequent gentrification of those neighbourhoods. *We Are Lost and Found* portrays a dirty, seedy but vibrant former New York. The subway is evoked with ‘the smell of piss and vomit, and lights that dim when we hit certain parts of the tracks’ (Dunbar 2019, 5). Times Square is represented in accordance to its old image as a ‘sexual playground’ (Greteman 2018, 116) during a time before AIDS and before gentrification. Consider Michael’s description of an impulsive trip there:

There’s a buzz here. A dark and sexy underground buzz highlighted by the groups of sailors cruising in groups, dress whites shining against the grime of the X-rated movie houses and hot dog carts. Prostitutes, tourists, people strung out in doorways, business people hailing taxi cabs with their squealing brakes and cigarettes roof ads, and plumbing smoke from the subways. (Dunbar 2019, 105)

The image evokes the long-lost, mid-to-late twentieth-century Times Square that Samuel Delany described as a vanishing place of sexual and social possibility (1999, xiii-xx), a time before what Eric E Rofes has called ‘the Disneyfication of New York’ (1998, 103) — a sexual and cultural gentrification. This old version of Times Square is the sort of gay sexual subculture that was — and indeed still is — complicated to represent within the scope of the YA novel and the pedagogy it works within, but Michael does not condemn it or express fear. Rather, he finds a certain peace in ‘this crush, this hum’, even going so far as to note that in ‘the music of this noisy, gritty, frenetic city, somewhere is a place I belong’ (Dunbar 2019, 106). Through the musical metaphor, the ungentrified city is painted as harmonious rather than discordant. The vignette avoids condemning the era of sexual hedonism that AIDS — alongside gentrification — was already beginning to undo, although Michael’s

comments still imply there to be a final destination of sorts rather than open sprawl of possibility. The key irony of the scene is that, unbeknownst to Michael, the harmonious disharmony of the urban space around him will be broken by a future that he cannot yet imagine; a future that the implied reader is by definition trapped within.

The rhythm of the city speaks to its demise just as music always calls to its own ending; the representation of this older, queerer, unknowable New York is suffused with the intimation that it no longer exists and its implications. With this vicarious nostalgia of AIDS Crisis Revisitation, whether through AIDS or gentrification, New York is a city of ghosts. Of course, this obsession with loss is not without precedent. Especially read today, AIDS literature involves mournful old visions of New York and San Francisco. However, these new narratives address an implied adolescent reader of the twenty-first century, speaking into a publishing environment that was hostile to queer cultural life during the era they represent, offering up that history for belated recognition.

Perhaps the centre of this nostalgic turn towards a vanishing New York is *The Echo*, a gay nightclub which Michael and his friends attend throughout the novel, able to trick the bouncer with their fake IDs:

New York is sticky hot in summer, and really, what did he care if one more I'm-queer-but-nobody-really-knows-it kid added his sweat to the already wet brick walls of the basement club? (Dunbar 2019, 23)

Music is everywhere in *The Echo*, even in the name, adding to its context as a space of freedom for the young queer adolescents to dance away their fears about the epidemic unfolding around them: 'I could go dancing every night and just forget, forget, forget' (41).

Random people called to the same pulsing beat at exactly the same time [...] Tonight, I need this mad crush of people and noise. (56)

The noise of the nightclub music is the opposite of language; it is the void that overwhelms it because 'it's too loud to talk, too loud to hear, too loud to think' (23). The nightlife runs throughout the novel as a seemingly never-ending party of anonymous bodies that transcends time and space, where 'time stretches and retracts' and 'you can lose yourself in the overlapping beats as one song bleeds into another' (25). Michael embraces his embodiment of what Judith Butler, referring to Mary Douglas, calls the polluted homosexual body of the AIDS crisis; a panic icon of 'pollution and endangerment' (1990, 180) that needed to be contained. Despite worrying that 'no one is ever supposed to have sex again' (Dunbar 2019, 52) because 'no one knows what's causing this damned thing' (53), for Michael, the dance floor is an arena of contagion and even public penetration:

I'm aware of every beat. Every move of my arms. Every breath.

[...]

I open myself up and let it fill me. (56)

Notably, Michael does not have sex until the end of the novel, yet his time on the dance floor clearly sublimates his libido, a rehearsal for his desire and the anxiety that orbits his desire. This fusion of the nightclub and his fears about AIDS alleviates the isolation of Michael's worries — which take place in a totally different setting as private scrawls on a wall in a bathroom at his high school — by transforming verbalised anxiety into the physical, nonverbal pursuit of constant pleasure. The fear of AIDS is not a reason to abandon the hedonism of the dance floor *per se* but rather an impetus to embrace the pleasure principle as a tonic itself.

Like *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*, the vicarious nostalgia that AIDS Crisis Revisitation elicits in the implied adolescent readership of *We Are Lost and Found* is perhaps most obvious from the paratext. In one of the novel's three afterwords, an AIDS activist speaks to the implied reader as a witness of the old New York that the novel attempts to convey; the city is described as 'exciting, if dangerous around the edges', a place where 'rents were relatively cheap, and gay life was thriving, at least in certain neighbourhoods' (271). The author acknowledges that *The Echo* was inspired by three different nightclubs that she frequented in the city, 'all of which have since closed' (*ibid.*). Therefore, while the remaining afterword pushes the reader to consider the devastation of AIDS and its ongoing effects in America and around the world, the novel is still motivated by ambivalence towards the recent queer past rather than exclusively tragic retrospection.

As Boym notes, nostalgia is like irony: 'not a property of the object itself but a result of an interaction between subjects and objects, between actual landscapes and the landscapes of the mind' (2001, 354). The vicarious nostalgia of AIDS Crisis Revisitation involves a precarious interaction between different interpretations of the past: the awful past, which we wish had never happened; and the grieved past, the world changed by AIDS, which should never have been lost. Through looking at the material and social contexts of popular music in these YA novels about AIDS, I have tried to show how AIDS Crisis Revisitation offers visions of the recent queer past that might be coveted by young queer people today within an ostensibly freer but in some ways more restrictive present. Above all, perhaps, this interaction between past and present social worlds is a quest for authenticity — a nostalgia for 'a time before nostalgia' (Boym 2001, 355). In particular, aspects of popular music and musical experience work in *We Are Lost and Found* to mourn the impact of gentrification on gay urban enclaves, even as the novel highlights the dangers of such a pivotal moment in the first years of AIDS.

Conclusion

In the cultural work of *AIDS Crisis Revisitation*, the intergenerational relationship between adult author and adolescent reader in YA literature has an obvious application with a decidedly reparative potential. As an interface between past and present, these novels grant the implied reader access to a scene of queer history that was for a long time unrepresentable in these terms within the pedagogical limitations of the YA novel as a social form at the end of the twentieth century. In these narratives, popular music becomes a sort of transactional archive of cultural memory between generations, as in other YA novels about the recent queer past that involve popular music such as the work of David Levithan and Eleanor Rowell. Reference to different songs and artists constitute found objects — a multimodal expansion of what is textually represented, for a publishing context in which one can summon more or less every song ever released in milliseconds. The contemporary reader is obviously unable to attend the concerts and nightclubs which are represented in *Like a Love Story* or *We Are Lost and Found*. That impossible longing of the vicarious nostalgic drives these novels as much as the ethically urgent project of mourning that constitutes AIDS memorialisation. (Indeed, that nostalgic yearning for live music and human connection has surely redoubled tenfold by the changes to youth culture brought about by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.)

Like the suggested playlist from the paratext of *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*, these novels describe, and rely upon, popular music as a metaphoric and actual soundtrack for the implied reader to instantly access on any contemporary streaming service. As a multimodal extension of the narrative experience, the inclusion of real songs, singers and bands — not only Madonna, but the niche British musical acts referred to in passing in *We Are Lost and Found* — imitates their cinematic rivals such as *AIDS Crisis Revisitation* film and television shows like *Pose* and *120 BPM* (2017). The popular music of the past, then, can easily be possessed in the present — or rather, summoned to haunt us with the memories and futures of the past. A sort of ekphrasis, these references to real-life popular music draw attention to the failure of the novels to represent what cannot be retrieved; the novels are mere simulacra, because ‘the quest is impossible’ and ‘what we are searching for is a lost object, which really cannot be found’ (Steedman 2001, 77). Popular music is integrated into both adolescent identity formation and the queer cultural memory of AIDS in America. Its representation in these novels provides an important interface between the ideological construction of adolescence and the cultural politics of queer consciousness; depicting queer experiences of the crisis as part of the pedagogy and values of the contemporary YA novel, rather than its opposite.

To conclude, I want to summarise the uses of popular music which I have identified in my readings of *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*, *Like a Love Story* and *We Are Lost and Found*. This summary provides a flexible and provisional

typology for future research into how popular music is used towards the representation of the past in YA literature.

These uses are: nostalgic and ironic, melodramatic, pedagogical, material, social and multimodal. *Nostalgic* and *ironic* uses of popular music involve deploying popular music to construct a sense of the past — a past which historical narratives can never retrieve but rather attempt to simulate through the inclusion of signs of the past. *Melodramatic* uses of popular music, meanwhile, are those that utilise music's power over our emotional lives — by affirming the affective response of not only the adolescent character but the adolescent reader, melodramatic uses of popular music amplify the moral stakes of the narrative at hand. Building on the melodramatic, *pedagogical* uses of popular music are those which deliberately foreground aspects of musical expression as key to the novel's overall message or advocacy. *Material* and *social* uses of popular music include allusions to disappearing musical artefacts and cultures that young people today cannot comprehend or remember. These include artefacts like CDs, vinyl, cassette tapes (what Simon Reynolds would call the retromania of contemporary culture). However, popular music also provides a means of exploring destroyed, forgotten or abject social worlds, such as the crucial relationship between popular music and gay culture in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, I have identified the *multimodal* use of popular music to describe the ways in which references to popular music augment the cinematic and affective scope of the narrative experience by functioning as a suggested soundtrack for the implied reader.

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