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Contents

Abstract

Queer adults' relationship with queer young adult fiction (Queer YA)[1] is an under-theorised area. In addition, there has been little academic scholarship of Oseman's commercially and critically successful *Heartstopper* graphic novel series (2019-) and Netflix adaptation (2022-)[2]. This dissertation takes a queer temporalities approach to theorising adult readers/audiences' possible readings of *Heartstopper.* Previous studies of adult consumption of YA have centred on nostalgia. I argue queer adults' engagement with Queer YA entails negotiation with chrononormative theories of time, based on linear growth and progression, and queer understandings of time as non-linear and emotion-based. Central to this thesis is Abate's theory of *queer retrosity* (2019), a reparative re-imagining of the past in the absence of homophobia and resulting historic trauma. I argue that *Heartstopper* allows adult readers/audiences to experience a form of queer retrosity, reading the texts as their own speculative queer adolescence that they were never able to live within heteronormativity. However, this may elicit responses cohering around *discomfort* rather than comfort and affirmation, the preferred reading of *Heartstopper*. I argue that *Heartstopper* reflects deep-seated anxieties about queer lived experience, queer history and acceptable models of queer futurity which trigger these discomforting responses yet contain much political potential. Chapter 1 focuses on the physical and temporal world of *Heartstopper* as a problematic affective utopia, based on Ahmed (2014), Horeck (2021) and Freeman (2010). Chapter 2 reads the representation of Charlie's character in the context of Bond Stockton's theory of the queer child (2009) and Love's work on reparative engagement with the queer past

[1] I use the more inclusive term Queer YA as, like Doty, I believe it 'represent[s] unity as well as suggesting diversity' (1993: 2).

[2] Allen (2023) is the only peer reviewed journal article on *Heartstopper* to date.

(2007). Finally, chapter 3 explores *Heartstopper's* romance narrative as a problematic model of queer futurity, drawing on Ahmed (2010) and Halberstam (2011) in particular.

Introduction

I first became properly aware of the emotional affect triggered by Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* series standing in a Waterstone's bookshop in June 2022. By this point, *Heartstopper* had achieved vast commercial success, the Netflix adaptation of the original graphic novels released several months previously,[3] and was on its way to becoming a 'cultural powerhouse' (*The Guardian* Editorial, 2023). The narrative, centring on the relationship between teenage Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson, has been discussed in both the mainstream and queer media as 'one of the most important LGBTQ+ shows ever made' (Jones, 2022) which has 'changed the world' (Dawson, 2022). Since *Heartstopper's* success has become symbolic in the mainstream cultural imagination of both the progress of LGBTQ+ rights and Generation Z queer subjectivity, what more appropriate way for Waterstone's to celebrate Pride Month than an installation of Charlie's bedroom in the bookshop so fans could imagine themselves into the *Heartstopper* universe.

I came to the Waterstone's installation with conflicted feelings about *Heartstopper*. I knew that as a queer person I was supposed to love the texts, but overwhelmingly they made me sad, sometimes even angry. This was difficult to admit: there is so little cultural space for criticism of *Heartstopper* that the idea of doing so has been likened to 'hating on puppies' (Opie, 2023). What stayed with me long afterwards was not the groups of young people who paid homage to the bedroom, posing for pictures inside it or just gazing intently in reverential silence. It was my own emotions

[3] The graphic novel series had sold eight million copies in 35 countries worldwide by April 2023 (Publishers' Weekly, 2023). The Netflix series was the fifth most watched Netflix English language show in July 2023, having been viewed for a total of 53 million hours (Edwardes, 2023). *Heartstopper* has a very high rating of 98% on the critical aggregator site *Rotten Tomatoes* (2023).

- an uncomfortable mix of joy, sadness, jealousy and self-consciousness - that prevented me from sitting on the bed and taking my own selfie but also from just walking away. How do you admit to being so emotionally affected by a text created for teenagers when you're forty-three? I took a quick picture of the bedroom from the outside and left.

Most of the extensive media discussion of *Heartstopper* has been on how the texts offer queer young people 'the possibility of happiness' (Jones, 2022). They are often spoken of as 'comforting', a cultural preferred reading possibly derived from Oseman's own afterword to volume one: 'most of all people have been drawn to *Heartstopper* because it brings them comfort' (Oseman, 2018: 176). All of this, it is claimed, makes *Heartstopper* 'a lifeline for many' (Jones, 2022). In *Representing the Rainbow*, a history of Queer YA, Jenkins and Cart (2018) state that such texts are vital for young people as they offer both 'windows' into other worlds and 'mirrors' where readers can find self-affirmation (4). However, the focus of this study is the windows and mirrors that *Heartstopper* offers for the queer *adult* readers/audiences deeply invested in it.

The more I read about *Heartstopper* after that day in Waterstone's, the more I discovered that the mixed emotions I felt had much wider resonance. A number of writers have explored adults' connection with the texts (Jones, 2022; Megarry, 2022; Opie, 2023). Most, like Oseman, attribute this to the 'comfort and affirmation' (Jones, 2022) they provide. However, Dawson (2022), 'confess[es]' to feeling 'the strangest melancholy, almost *jealousy*, watching these…characters live with a freedom of

expression I was sorely denied in the 90s'. Soon afterwards I came across a discussion board on the social media site *Reddit* called 'Heartstoppersyndrome', whose thousands of adult members post about trauma caused by consuming the texts. One 36-year old man describes 'physical aches in my chest from a broken heart' after watching (18 September 2022). The volume and emotional intensity of responses to a series purportedly for young teenagers is highly unusual: no such online forums exist for *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-), for example, despite its similar themes. It is evident that far from being universally comforting, *Heartstopper* actually generates significant affective responses in queer adult readers/audiences cohering around *discomfort.*

Discomfort may, ironically, be a positive phenomenon. Ahmed (2014) points out that feelings of comfort are linked with normativity and being at ease in your surroundings. Rentschler (2017) argues that 'heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape' (148). Therefore, we should be suspicious of the cultural imperative to seek comfort. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed asks what it might mean to affirm unhappiness and discomfort, since for her unhappiness is the logical realm of less privileged groups within heteronormativity and 'can gesture towards another world' (107) that is more progressive. I argue that *Heartstopper* does have reparative potentiality, offering queer adult readers and audiences a lifeline both rooted in the past and future-oriented that can help to heal trauma wrought by heteronormativity. However, this potentiality lies not within the happiness and idealised love story of Charlie and Nick but in the texts' many implicit anxieties beneath the preferred

surface reading. These give rise to discomforting but politically powerful emotions in adult readers/audiences.

Reading *Heartstopper* as an anxious narrative makes it typical of the Queer YA genre, according to Mason (2021). He argues Queer YA *coheres around affect*, namely anxiety, rather than genre, including other forms such as TV series in addition to prose fiction. YA provides a barometer of contemporary moral concerns where 'adult anxieties about queer adolescent crises produce Queer YA as a possible remedy to these crises and Queer YA generates anxiety about whether it is an adequate remedy to these crises' (6). Given the mainstream cultural investment in *Heartstopper*, it is not surprising that the texts reflect anxieties about queer identities in 2023. However, we need to question why such cultural investment is being encouraged, with what consequences for queer lives. We are living in strange times: there are more queer characters in film and on TV than ever before, yet we are simultaneously witnessing a roll back of our hard-won legal rights in the West, whilst vicious debate continues to rage in the UK about the extension of these rights for transgender people in particular, which *Heartstopper* has found itself inserted into.[4] All of this is perhaps less paradoxical than it appears. Whilst it is tempting to read increased queer cultural representation as an overwhelmingly positive phenomenon, in reality texts often privilege 'sameness and assimilation over difference' in the form of white, cisgender, affluent queer identities (Parsemain, 2019:

[4] For example, the expansion in March 2023 of anti-LGBTQ+ laws labelled 'Don't Say Gay' laws in Florida, impacting what schools can teach about sex education and gender identity, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-65054809 and the movement in July 2023 to remove the names of lesbian mothers from their children's birth certificates in Italy, https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/07/18/italy-lesbian-mums-removed-birth-certificates/. *Heartstopper* was also referenced during a UK parliamentary debate in June 2022 about transgender conversion therapy. https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/06/14/heartstopper-yasmin-finney-luke-pollard-trans-conversion-therapy-ban/

27). We cannot, therefore, simply accept the stories and narratives mainstream culture provides as offering progressive possibilities for all queer people. We need to be willing to put a critical lens on what they offer, and purport to offer, and for whom.

I believe the discomfort *Heartstopper* generates in queer adults stems from anxieties about queer identity that Mason (2021) sees as central to the Queer YA genre. This thesis explores what adult anxieties about queer adolescence *Heartstopper* might be viewed as a remedy to, as well as the anxieties that the texts might trigger in response amongst this group and the political potential of these affective responses. Central to my argument is Abate's theory of *queer retrosity*, which she conceptualises as a new type of queer speculative fiction centring on 'the imaginative construction of a past…not dominated by homophobia and the hardships that arose from it' (Abate, 2019: 3). Whilst *Heartstopper* has a contemporary temporal setting, both the graphic novels and the TV series create the affective space for queer adult readers and audiences to respond to the texts *as history.* By this I firstly mean readers'/audiences' sense of their *own personal history,* whereby they relate their lived experience of queer adolescence (which may be a retrospective understanding) to representations in the text. Secondly I mean adult readers/audiences may be able to read the texts as *future history*, imagining a queer speculative past that might or might not offer a more utopian vision for queer futures. Such responses articulate with Queer Temporalities theories, which centre on the idea that queer people have emotional relationships to time that differ significantly from heteronormative understandings.

In the following sections of this thesis, I give an overview of the theoretical perspectives, drawn from Queer Theory and Queer Temporalities specifically, which are central to my reading of *Heartstopper*, and a summary of methodologies I use. Chapter 1 focuses on the physical and temporal setting of *Heartstopper*, which allows adult readers/audiences to respond affectively to the texts as history. In chapter 2 I analyse the representation of Charlie's character as a key site of anxiety about adolescent queer identity within the texts, and the reparative possibilities offered. Finally, in chapter 3 I explore *Heartstopper's* narrative, driven by the idealised relationship of Charlie and Nick, as a further site of anxieties about desirable queer futures and the reparative potential for adult readers and audiences. I also consider how the adaptation of the texts for the global Netflix market influences how representations of queerness have been translated and transformed from the graphic novels to make them acceptable to the mainstream.

Literature Review

Queer Temporalities as a theoretical field

This section gives an overview of the theoretical perspectives that inform this thesis. Central to my argument is the branch of Queer Theory known as Queer Temporalities. Freeman (2010) defines this as 'points of resistance to the [normative] temporal order that…propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others' (xxii). Two major foci of Queer Temporalities scholars are reparatively reading queer history and imagining models of queer futurity. Central to this, with roots in affect theory, is the concept that queer people have *emotional relationships* to time that differ from the way time is conceptualised within Western heteronormative culture. Freeman terms normative understandings of time *chrononormativity,* or 'the use of time to organise individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (3). In the West, chrononormativity looks like growing up chronologically towards a stable adulthood focused on career progression, the accumulation of wealth, marriage and parenthood. Such understandings, Freeman points out, are social constructs rooted in Western capitalism and heteronormativity, not universal truths. In many cultures around the world, time is conceptualised differently and has even been historically understood as non-linear and theorised as such: for example Chicana lesbian theorist Gloria Anzaldua's belief in indigenous spirituality of the mestiza people, allowing them to communicate with their ancestors (Hedrick, 2015). For a number of Queer Temporalities theorists too, the relationship between the past and the present is not linear but significantly more complex and emotion-based.

Queer Theory and Queer YA: Tensions

Whilst Queer Temporalities theories are critical to my reading of *Heartstopper*, Queer Theory has seldom been applied to the study of YA until relatively recently (Kidd, 2022). YA as a genre has tended to be viewed as 'a primarily didactic enterprise' (Mason, 2021). Ironically, the study of YA is enriched if we understand it in the context of chrononormative paradigms it structures itself around (and in the case of Queer YA, frequently works to subvert), yet those same chrononormative ideologies have arguably deterred Queer Theorists from studying YA. Edelman's *No Future* (2004), greatly influential amongst Queer Temporalities scholars as well as Queer Theory more generally, exhorts us to 'Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorised' (29). Edelman argues queerness has historically been demonised within heteronormativity through the social imperative to protect the innocent symbolic Child. For Edelman, many regressive ideals become hegemony in the name of fighting for the Child who represents hope, and reproductive futurism is cast as the only meaningful life. Queerness is thus relegated to, in Lacanian terms, 'the social order's death drive' (10) therefore to be queer is to be inevitably 'on the side of those *not* fighting for the children' (3). Edelman argues our only option is to embrace this darkness and the pleasures, or Jouissance, it offers. Despite Edelman's arguments, scholars of Queer YA have recently found much value in Queer Temporalities theories to conceptualise how the genre might perpetuate, but crucially also has the power to subvert, chrononormativity. In this sense, far from being at odds with Queer Theory, YA is '*already* a queer theory of sorts…a theoretical site in its own right' (Kidd, 2011: 186).

YA Theoretical Perspectives

The YA genre typically follows the *bildungsroman* structure in which the protagonist grows up according to chrononormative paradigms, learning moral lessons along the way. The genre is particularly concerned with 'inculcating "correct" attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of education' (Tosenberger, 2008: 188). This has tended to mean the suppression of sexuality and sexual desire, which is particularly interesting in the context of *Heartstopper:* some media articles regard the texts 'ground-breaking' due to their lack of sexual content (Opie, 2023). In chapters 2 and 3 I discuss why I consider such a reading highly problematic. As well as moralising about the 'here and now' of adolescence itself, YA typically concerns itself with desirable (and undesirable) futures, drawing heavily on visionary and utopian frameworks to 'mobilise a future-oriented purview' (Matos & Wargo, 2019:1) which is generally heteronormative in structure, conforming with chrononormativity. Such tropes stem from the frequently expressed societal 'need' to protect the innocence of the symbolic Child reviled by Edelman.

The pedagogical role of Queer YA is arguably heightened and more vital than in YA in general as it can provide models of futurity that are not heteronormative, and are sorely lacking, which promote social justice. Queer YA can map 'a world that is better…in which the conditions of queer life are at least bearable and possible' (Matos & Wargo, 2019: 10). Therefore, it is not surprising that Queer YA is often seen as a didactic rather than literary form, existing primarily to 'provide young readers with the fictional role models ostensibly necessary to their thriving' (14). This mission might be understandable, given the anxieties and trauma that exist in queer

culture about history and futurity. However, such concepts of role models might also seem antithetical to a genre exploring the liminal space of adolescence and the inherent fallibility of young people. What does 'correct attitudes' (Tosenberger, 2008) mean in the context of Queer YA and who determines this? What does it mean for a queer person to 'thrive' and how do we avoid being assimilated into heteronormativity in conceptualising all this? We need Queer Temporalities theories to help us wrestle with such difficult questions, otherwise we engage uncritically with studies such as Jenkins and Cart's (2018), reading *Heartstopper* as the quintessential, long awaited queer utopia. Jenkins and Cart frame *Representing the Rainbow* around chrononormative paradigms, though they do not use these terms. They define three linear phases of queer representation from the 1960s to the present day: *homosexual visibility* (coming out narratives); *gay assimilation* (texts with queer characters whose sexuality is incidental to the plot), and more recent *queer consciousness/community* texts (portraying characters immersed in queer communities though sometimes unclear)[5]. These phrases also align with Luciano's theory of chronobiopolitics (2007) in which 'the state and other institutions…link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change' (Freeman, 2010: 4). Freeman draws similarities between chronobiopolitics and 'a novelistic framework' which is 'event-centred, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations' (5). Jenkins and Cart are profoundly uncomfortable with Queer YA that 'perpetuates stereotypes by characterising homosexuals as lost souls doomed to either premature death or the solitary life of exile at the margins of society' (xiii). They believe that more recent Queer YA models more 'positive portrayals' of queer characters (xiii), which for them means

[5]

protagonists are happier and progress in the mode of the bildungsroman towards stable adulthood. The authors do not discuss *Heartstopper*, but it is likely that they would place it in the third category due to its surface narrative of comfort and happiness centring on Charlie and Nick's romance. However, *Heartstopper* also reflects a number of implicit anxieties that can be perceived by queer adult readers/audiences in particular about queer lived experiences and what is occluded by the assimilative turn in queer politics that queer consciousness/community texts are both born out of and work to reinforce.

Queer Temporalities and Queer YA

Scholars of Queer YA have begun to engage with Queer Temporalities theories in wrestling with questions of queer futurity, recognising the difficult task that Queer YA has in mapping possibilities without resorting to chrononormative models. Munoz (2009, 2nd ed 2019) and Ahmed (2010) have been of particular use. Munoz radically proposes that queerness is 'primarily about futurity and hope' (11) rather than the pragmatic presentism that Edelman valorises. For him it is 'an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future' (Munoz, 2019: 1). He conceptualises *concrete utopias* which are not simply 'banal optimism' but 'the realm of educated hope' (3), entailing both engagement with historic struggles of the queer past and working collectively and across intersectional lines to dismantle oppression. Munoz's work underpinned a recent edition of *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* on queer futurity (ed Matos & Wargo, 2019). Like the authors, I believe that it is almost impossible for scholars of Queer YA to abandon the idea of a better future, yet simply desiring queer young people to feel joy (another term frequently

employed in media discussion of *Heartstopper*), or comfort, is not enough. Ahmed argues that for the unprivileged, 'feeling better does and should matter' (2010: 201). We want queer young people to be happy, as 'the happy queer is a form of social hope, a sign of "how far we have come" or hope for a world where discrimination has been overcome' (113). This is the major reason why mainstream culture is, and wants us to be, so invested in *Heartstopper* and why studies such as Jenkins & Cart (2018) place value on this type of Queer YA. Heteronormativity tells us that we can and should strive towards happiness, but, Ahmed argues that happiness is much harder to achieve if you lack privilege. 'Happiness-causes', as she terms them, reside in social forms such as 'the family, marriage, class mobility, whiteness' (2010: 112). The commonality with chrononormativity is clear. Queer people have historically been regarded as unhappy, Ahmed argues, as their lives have taken different forms. To achieve acceptance by the mainstream, 'you have to be the right kind of queer by depositing your hope for happiness in the right places' (106). Ahmed memorably compares such assimilation to being a guest in the heterosexual world, with a 'moral obligation to be on your best behaviour' (106). Duggan terms this *homonormativity* (2007), from which Puar (2007) conceptualised *homonationalism*, or the ways the Western world seeks to regulate racial and national norms of queerness. I explore representation in *Heartstopper* in the context of Ahmed's work in particular.

Queer Temporalities, Queer YA and Adult Readers/Audiences

What has not been properly considered is how Queer Temporalities theories might help conceptualise *adult* queer readers' engagement with, and affective responses to

Queer YA. Adults have always been inherent in YA: as Rose argues, the irony of the genre is that 'the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)' (1984: 2), the adolescent protagonists that YA imagines are necessary products of adult fantasies and can never be wholly realistic representations. Whilst Oseman originally created Charlie and Nick in her late teens, she too has said that creating the series 'constantly brings me back to my own teenage years, which were not exactly full of queer joy' and that it 'helped me see that I've got some healing of my own to do' (Perry, 2023). *Heartstopper* can certainly be read as a 'necessary product' of the *collective* fantasy of the queer experience in the 2020s, within heteronormativity. A Netflix editorial tells us 'the world would be a little dreamier if we all lived inside the *Heartstopper* universe' (Wang, 2022). However, as I will explore, this does not seem to be true for its adult readers/viewers in particular.

While adults are clearly central to YA both as its authors and consumers (a frequently quoted 2012 *Publishers' Weekly* article claimed that 78% of surveyed adults who bought YA books were buying them for themselves), there is a still a pervasive view that reading YA is not an appropriately intellectual pursuit for adults. In her 2014 article 'Against YA', Graham argues that adults 'should feel embarrassed when what you're reading was written for children'. She looks down on the 'escapism, instant gratification and nostalgia' she argues YA offers to adult readers, likening her own transition to adult literature to 'graduating from the kiddie pool' and 'growing up'. Doll (2013) offers a more sympathetic take on adult readers' love of YA but still focuses on the 'undeniable nostalgic lure' of such stories that 'remind [her] of the person [she] used to be'.

What these writers neglect is the fact that queer adults have a different relationship with Queer YA in temporal and emotional terms than a heterosexual reader has with YA in general. For queer adults, the lure of YA cannot be simple nostalgia as we are consuming a world inhabited by 'out and proud' queer protagonists we were never able to realise ourselves within heteronormativity. Some of us might not even have been consciously aware of our queer identity as adolescents. Noting the 'obsessive love for children's media' in the queer community, Marzano-Lesnevich (2021) suggests it might have a reparative role to play for queer adults. However, the complex emotions engaging with Queer YA can elicit in the queer adult reader, going beyond simple comfort and intricately connected with Queer Temporalities theories, are not explored.

Queer Temporalities: Engaging with History

Queer Temporalities theorists engaged with pastness, reparative reading and queering concepts of linear time altogether offer further scope for theorising adult readers' affective responses to Queer YA. The theorists discussed below, in particular Bond Stockton (2009), argue queer relationships to time differ from chrononormative understandings. This may be due to the inaccessibility of chrononormative life stages to queer people: for example, the institution of marriage was illegal until very recently and queer parenthood has historically been stigmatised at best. Many queer theorists, particularly Edelman (2004), have rejected these 'happiness causes' (Ahmed, 2010) as the regressive ideals of heteronormativity. The legacy of homophobia and resulting trauma has also cast a long shadow over queer

history and culture. Queer Temporalities scholars argue the uniquely affective, emotional relationships that queer people have to time. For Bond Stockton (2009), chrononormativity deliberately occludes the fact that childhood and adolescence are inherently queer and teleological, progress-driven time constructs are artificial. She draws on Kristeva's (1990) theory of adolescence as an 'open psychic structure' (8) rather than a fixed age, a time of fluidity that threatens 'stable, ideal law' (9). For Bond Stockton, the queer child/adolescent subverts chrononormativity as they grow not towards a normative future of marriage and reproduction but 'toward a question mark' (2009: 3). Further, rather than growing up teleologically in linear time, Bond Stockton believes that queer people undergo a 'backward birth' (6), only coming to understand ourselves as queer retrospectively rather than growing up from childhood with an assumed, societally-affirmed sexuality. This queers our relationship with history, as the past is not a fixed entity, as chrononormativity implies, but subject to changing perspectives and emotions with the queer adult's evolving understanding and emotional experience of identity and sexuality. Further, Bond Stockton believes, queer people *grow sideways*, where growth means the development of experience and understanding rather than linear, chronological ageing. Thus, the queer adult who comes out at sixty is arguably at the same developmental stage as a teenager discovering their sexuality. In this context, it is unsurprising that queer adults respond emotionally to YA in far more complex, but also more politically powerful ways than heterosexual readers. Matos (2019) argues that Queer YA itself is a form of backward birth for its authors, helping them to come to terms with their own sexual identity and associated pain, which Oseman (2023) concurs with. Similarly, for Mason (2021), the choice of Queer YA as an academic specialism is 'a kind of wish fulfilment…a means of both animating and grieving the gay adolescence I never

lived, spent…deep in the closet' (22). Both Matos and Mason draw on Bond Stockton's (2009) theory that the queer child never existed but, since queer people have never understood or been allowed to understand themselves explicitly as queer children, can only be the 'the act of adults looking back…a ghostly, unreachable fancy' (5). Bond Stockton's use of the language of hauntology, which owes much to Love's (2007) work, is evocative of the trauma queer people negotiate. I argue here that for the queer adult reader/viewer, engaging with YA can be conceptualised as its own form of backward birth, bringing them into contact with that ghostly queer child who never existed. It is the associated affects of this, both positive and negative, that I believe play out in queer adults' heightened emotional responses to *Heartstopper*.

Reparative theories in Queer Temporalities

In *Feeling Backward* (2007), Love exhorts us to embrace the political potential offered by engaging reparatively with the trauma of the queer past rather than seeking to assimilate into heteronormative scripts of happiness and comfort. For Love, 'a central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence' (1). She argues that queer theory needs to '[make the] decision to look on the dark side' (32) but rather than seeing this as an end in itself, like Edelman (2004), she believes this can serve as the basis for futurity models through acknowledging our shared experience of abjection that 'cuts through hierarchies' (Love, 2007: 14). For her, engaging reparatively with the trauma of the past 'without being destroyed by it' (1) is integral to queer studies. This is not only politically useful but essential, Love argues, as 'turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation…makes it

harder to see the persistence of the past in the present' (30). Our discomfort with the harrowing details of queer histories 'attests to their continuing relevance' (32). For Love, history is a chrononormative narrative, evolving as a teleological march towards ever greater progress, thus history is only socially useful if it can be assimilated into this narrative. In contrast, 'In psychic [as opposed to public] life the trains hardly ever run on time' (11). Since queer history cannot be mapped chrononormatively, and the past imprints itself on the present through the coexistence of pride and shame for many queer people, the solution has been to become 'deeply committed to the notion of progress' (3) and affirmative stories, rejecting struggle and trauma. Mason (2021) argues this anxiety is reflected in Queer YA, and, as I argue, in *Heartstopper.* As we can perceive in 'Heartstoppersyndrome' SubReddit posts, such investment in affirmation and assimilation works to compound queer shame and self-hatred in those whose life narratives do not fit this. Love argues that 'as long as homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past' (29) and may not even have the option to as past psychic effects are always carried with us. For Love, 'resisting the call of gay normalisation means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all of the dead' (18).

Love is influenced by Kosofsky-Sedgwick's (1997) theory of reparative reading, rooted in affect theory. Rentschler defines affect theory as 'how things feel, for whom, and with what potential' (2017: 12). Instead of searching for homophobic representations in texts, becoming upset and disheartened (what Sedgwick calls *paranoid reading*), reading reparatively can reveal ways a text might surprise by 'def[ying] our expectations, undercut[ting] our assumptions and upend[ing] our

preconceptions' (Abate, 2019: 12-13). Reparative reading is ultimately about healing by 'being affected, taking joy, and making whole' (Love, 2010: 237-8), based on the concept that as queer people, the past can never be behind us but haunts as we 'grow sideways' in our understanding of its effects. For the adult queer reader, *Heartstopper* creates critical space for such an affective response, ultimately providing opportunity for healing from past homophobic trauma. However, this becomes problematic when considering queer identities marginalised or left out of the narrative. *Heartstopper* purports to be a comforting narrative centring on the idealised romance of Charlie and Nick. However, the anxieties the texts occlude and mediate, particularly in relation to non-normative queer identities, are likely to be felt particularly acutely by queer adults who still carry trauma from historic homophobia. However, as Ahmed (2010) argues, negative affective responses may have greater political potential for queer futurity than positive affirmations of the series.

Abate (2019) draws on the work of both Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1997) and Love (2007) to develop her theory of *queer retrosity* I find particularly useful to theorise queer adult readers' affective responses to *Heartstopper.* Abate argues authors of Queer YA can engage reparatively with the traumatic queer past through imagining a type of speculative history in which, for example, queer young people in the 1980s could love freely without the shadow cast by HIV and AIDS[6]. Influenced by Munoz's theory of concrete utopias (2019), Abate sees utopian potential, rather than a simple refusal to engage with the past or an assimilationist turn, in this reparative writing of history to shape models of queer futurity. Whilst I think queer retrosity loses its political

[6] Abate discusses Saenz's 2012 novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster) in the context of her theory. The novel is set in the 1980s but imagines an alternative past in which its adolescent male protagonists are free to love each other and pursue their lives unencumbered by the trauma of the AIDS crisis.

potential for younger readers unlikely to possess queer history knowledge (due to its erasure from school curricula), it has significant potential for theorising why queer adult readers engage so deeply with Queer YA. I argue that queer adult readers of *Heartstopper* may be engaging with a form of reader/audience-directed queer retrosity, whereby the texts create the affective space for the creation of our own speculative fictional past, inhabited by Bond-Stockton's (2009) ghostly queer child, with resulting trauma. In *Heartstopper,* queer readers/audiences bring that ghostly queer child into being through a difficult identification process with Charlie and projection of desires for their past, present and future selves onto Nick. This can offer healing and reactivation of trauma in unexpected ways. Love (2007) sees considerable political potential in engaging reparatively with the past, however difficult. Queer people can affirm their negative emotions such as shame, grief and loneliness, and their roots, but, acknowledging the past can 'help us see structures of inequality in the present' (30). I argue that adult readers/audiences of *Heartstopper* can and do engage with this process through the texts, imbuing them with significantly more subversive power than may initially be apparent.

Halberstam (2011) explores the political potential in negative affect in *The Queer Art of Failure*, which offers much for theorising of Queer YA. Inspired by historical associations Love (2007) traces between queerness and failure, Halberstam argues taking a reparative approach to such representations allows us to see 'ways of knowing and being that stand outside of conventional understandings of success' (2011: 2) so we can envision a different queer futurity. Halberstam argues this entails bringing to the surface structural inequalities within heteronormativity that

make so-called failure more likely for queer people. I draw on Halberstam's work in chapter 3 in particular, in relation to *Heartstopper's* representations and narrative.

Methodologies

My chosen methodology is textual analysis, particularly appropriate since close reading of texts is central to Queer Theory itself. Queer Theory is concerned with how language (re) produces ideologies of identity, gender and sexuality heteronormativity presents as universal truths, asking critical questions of texts to make explicit assumptions and interests often deliberately obscured. Many theorists I draw on ground their concepts in detailed textual analysis. Queer as a reading practice has become an important branch of Queer Theory, 'describ[ing] those complex circumstances in texts, spectators and production that resist easy categorisation, but that escape or defy the heteronormative' (Doty, 2000: 7). Queer reading practices are innately historical, rooted in a time when homosexuality had to be 'coded' in subtle ways in mainstream texts rather than stated openly. Ironically, we may now be in a time, within an assimilative queer culture, where certain ideas about and forms of queerness must be coded. This methodology is particularly suited to a thesis about Queer Temporalities and the interplay between the past, present and future with respect to *Heartstopper* and its readers/audiences.

Queer theorists and post-structuralists both emphasise the polysemic nature of texts. Indeed, a long-running series such as *Heartstopper* with an ensemble cast makes polysemic readings inevitable. My focus is on how *Heartstopper* might offer reparative possibilities for queer adult readers and viewers. I have been careful not to make assumptions, stating these audiences 'may' or 'could' draw certain

interpretations or feel a certain way. For Doty, such polysemic readings mean that 'any text is always already potentially queer' (2000: 2) whether or not it deals explicitly with queer characters or themes. It is important to acknowledge my analysis of *Heartstopper* is one interpretation and will inevitably owe something to my own standpoint as a white, Western, queer woman in my forties. However, my thinking has been stimulated by reading wider online discussion as well as articles by queer writers in mainstream and queer publications, leading me to conclude my arguments have wider resonance amongst queer communities. It is important to highlight reading queerly does not simply mean looking for representations of LGBTQ+ identities in texts but highlighting moments which destabilise fixed, binary understandings of gender and sexuality. It is possible to arrive at queer readings of texts like *Heartstopper* which are already *explicitly* queer due to their focus on LGBTQ+ identities and themes. My analysis of *Heartstopper* can be considered a queer reading in its exploration of heteronormative ideologies the texts negotiate with and implicitly express anxieties about. These anxieties are suppressed, I argue, and have to be coded within the mainstream assimilative queer culture that valorises *Heartstopper.*

I focus here on volumes 1 and 2 of the *Heartstopper* graphic novel series (2018), and the corresponding season 1 of the Netflix series (2022) due to limitations of time and space. However, as I concur with Mason's (2021) belief that YA coheres around emotional affect rather than genre, it is appropriate to consider the Netflix adaptation and the source texts. Finally, I am particularly interested in examining aspects of the early volumes that have drawn readers and audiences to and created the *Heartstopper* phenomenon.

I also consider the multimodality of the graphic novels. Kim and Jimenez (2023) note graphic novels have long been considered a ‘”lesser” form of text than traditional print texts’ but are ‘slowly gaining traction as “real” literature’. I argue that *Heartstopper’s* graphic novel format is critical to the affective responses the series generates in the reader, which is why a number of elements, including panels and hermeneutic elements, have, unusually, been translated into the TV adaptation. I believe Oseman’s artistic style is critical to allowing adult readers to enter and inhabit the world of the series, and to read the narrative as their own imagined queer history. When considering season one of the Netflix adaptation, my textual analysis includes specific film techniques, including mise-en-scene (particularly colour, dialogue and costume), camera work, editing, sound and non-diegetic music.

Throughout, I use the word ‘volume’ to refer to the graphic novels and ‘season’ when discussing the Netflix adaptation.

Chapter 1: Queering and healing adolescent spaces: *Heartstopper's* physical and temporal world

In an *Attitude* cover feature on *Heartstopper,* the author describes visiting the Netflix set and being 'instantly transported back to my own secondary school days'. This leaves him 'sweating', wondering if 'those school memories are coming back to haunt me.' (James, 2022). It is a compelling description of the affective power the series has over its adult audiences in particular, more evocative for the way it employs the language of hauntology.

Heartstopper's physical and temporal world creates the possibility of affective responses in the reader/audience critical to reparative readings. As queer adults, we need to believe this could be our own personal history, as well as the site of *future history. Heartstopper* offers significant potential for queer reparative healing and futurity in two key ways. Firstly, the texts explicitly queer the archetypal adolescent spaces of YA: the school and the bedroom. School, historically the site of homophobic trauma, is re-imagined as a comforting, caring space and the teenage bedroom is transformed into a communal space for queer love, healing and community bonds rather than a space of isolation and despair. Secondly, the texts' temporal landscapes offer queer readings of time, where the past imprints itself on the present, allowing adult readers and audiences to identify with and heal from trauma. In this chapter I use the expression 'physical and temporal world' rather than 'setting' to indicate the expansive way I view this, including a range of medium-specific techniques that create these effects (and affects).

Research in 2019 by a UK LGBTQ+ charity found that almost half of pupils surveyed did not feel safe at school and were regularly subject to homophobic and transphobic bullying.[7] In *Heartstopper,* school is experienced by Charlie and Nick as an increasingly safe and queer space, where they find acceptance and comfort. This utopic world is created in the graphic novels and intensified in the TV adaptation through specific affective atmospherics. Munoz (2009) sees potentiality itself as an affective structure, producing utopian feeling to displace political pessimism and imagine social transformation. In *Heartstopper,* the representation of school offers the potential for a queer utopia, although this is problematised by the textual anxieties that Mason (2021) argues are always implicitly present in Queer YA.

Drawing on Dyer (2002), Horeck (2021) argues affective atmospherics can be used in Queer YA to depict 'what utopia would *feel like* rather than how it would be organised' (Dyer, 2002: 18). She analyses Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019-) and *Schitt's Creek* (2015-2020) as examples of Queer YA, articulating with Mason's (2021) multi-media definition of the genre. There are many similarities in the way *Heartstopper* develops its physical and temporal world, though ultimately less successfully than the other two shows. Like Moordale in *Sex Education* and the titular Schitt's Creek, *Heartstopper's* setting is non-specific: an isolated, nameless bubble in the south of England where outside world concerns never intrude on Charlie, Nick and their schoolmates. To emphasise the lack of regional specificity, Charlie lives on Britannia Road. Whilst the non-specific setting could be attributed to Netflix's transnational marketing strategy, these details draw directly from the graphic

[7] Survey conducted by Diversity Role Models in 2019
https://www.openlynews.com/i/?id=340c7ab2-fe98-4394-b4b9-bf468a5ddc24

novels and appear to represent a conscious attempt to create a queer world readers/audiences anywhere and of any age can project themselves into. Further, the school that Charlie and Nick attend is called Truham, seemingly referencing utopia in its associations with the word ‘true’ and the film *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998), which also offers an ultimately failed version of utopia in a picture-perfect fictional town. There are ideologies of white, Western, capitalist heteronormativity in *The Truman Show* which can be perceived in *Heartstopper.* In addition, Charlie’s friend Tao, who is of Asian descent, has the film poster on his bedroom wall. Horeck quotes Laurie Nunn’s, creator of *Sex Education,* claim (from Levine, 2019) that ‘Moordale’s not a real place: it’s almost like a comic book, a teenage utopia’. McCloud (1993) argues that readers can more easily identify with abstract drawings in comics while detailed and realistic depictions create distance. In *Heartstopper,* Oseman’s distinctive artwork style is critical to the emotions the texts generate in readers. The narrative is told in simple, black and white drawings akin to art a teenager might create in a school jotter, the panel edges frequently jagged, as if ripped out from a school notebook. With the exception of Charlie’s, and to a lesser extent Nick’s, bedrooms, only the barest background detail is given to indicate where characters are, for example the outline of furniture and posters in the classroom where Charlie and Nick first meet (fig 1). Thus, the queer adult reader can insert themselves easily into the scene being depicted and the narrative, recalling their own (likely difficult) school experience and imagining an alternative past such as Charlie and Nick’s world. This is a form of reader-directed queer retrosity (Abate, 2019).

Fig 1: pages 8-9 of *Heartstopper* volume 1.

Fig 2: page 2 of *Heartstopper volume 1*

Truham is central to the graphic novels: we see the school library where Charlie kisses closeted, abusive Ben and the clock ticking before we see either boy. From the second panel, this archetypal communal school space, structured around chrononormativity, learning and rules, is queered by Charlie and Ben's kiss, which continues into the third frame. The school is portrayed in some detail by Oseman in

the opening pages, including the school bell, its ring captioned in panels to add to affective atmospherics for the reader, corridors and classrooms (fig 2).

The Netflix adaptation makes use of a wider range of medium-specific techniques, particularly colour and hermeneutic elements such as the falling leaves iconic to the graphic novels, to queer the school, which is likely to trigger affective responses in viewers and has the effect of making school seem even safer than it does in the graphic novels. Though the viewer is aware of the homophobia that Charlie previously experienced, and is still present at first in his secret relationship with Ben, the affective atmospherics ensure that we feel harm will soon be overcome and Charlie is fundamentally safe, which he soon is. Corridors and classrooms are usually depicted in the primary colours of blue and yellow, the colour yellow strongly associated with Charlie and queerness throughout the series. Charlie's water bottle and lunch box as well as his group's lunch table, representative of queer community, are all yellow. Charlie's queerness imprints itself physically and symbolically on the school building, subverting heteronormativity coded by the colour blue, such as the PE changing rooms, school bus and the other, non-queer lunch tables. Before Nick acknowledges his attraction to Charlie, his clothing and bedroom are also blue, changing thereafter to a multicoloured palette. The queering of the school is also shown through rainbow-hued reflections of sunlight that appear in front of Nick when he and Charlie first meet. As the boys' relationship is more established, the same rainbow-hued reflections appear above the characters as they kiss outside Charlie's house and the following day a rainbow is depicted in the sky above the school. Further, hermeneutic elements iconic to fans of the graphic novels and symbolic of queer feelings such as cartoon falling leaves, electric sparks and love hearts

frequently appear around the school. This emphasises the fantasy utopic world of the text and the queering of the school space as Charlie and Nick imprint their love on their physical world. This is clear from opening scenes as Charlie walks the school corridors, adorned with leaves and a beach motif that foreshadow aspects of Charlie and Nick's love. Seagulls represent Nick's feelings for Charlie and are seen and heard as he thinks of Charlie at the end of episode one. In the final episode of season one, Charlie and Nick cement their relationship as boyfriends and intention to 'come out' publicly as a couple at the beach. Motifs of trees and falling leaves symbolise Charlie and Nick's developing relationship, appearing in moments significant to their love story. The leaves imprinted on the school walls in episode one clearly anchor for viewers that Charlie and Nick's love will not only last but be validated at school.

Charlie and Nick are able to express affection increasingly openly around the school as the narrative progresses, holding hands, hugging, running away from Sports Day hand in hand and kissing openly in a school corridor. These physical expressions of queer love that would have been, and often still are, forbidden at school can, Ahmed argues, ''impress' differently upon the surfaces of social space, creating the possibility of social forms that are not constrained by the form of the heterosexual couple' (2014, 165). If comfort is about 'fitting, sinking in to your world, extending into the space and the space into you' (2014: 148) then Charlie and Nick increasingly find comfort in their everyday, previously heteronormative world as the narrative progresses, without having to hide their queerness. Their love literally alters the fabric of the school building, symbolised through the leaves and waves on the school walls and the changing colours around the school. Further, the school blazer badge

depicts a tree which gradually blossoms with their relationship development during season one, further emphasising how Charlie and Nick extend into and queer this adolescent space. The queering of the school through Charlie and Nick's love story offers a healing from past homophobia for adult readers/audiences, though discussions on *Reddit* show that this also triggers grief and envy in some. However, such negative emotions can also be politically useful, signalling towards a better world for young queer people in the future.

The safe, explicitly queer space of openly gay Art teacher Mr Ajeyi's classroom, which does not feature in the graphic novel volumes one and two, is a physical world that adult queer audiences may relate more directly to, and which functions in several interesting ways in the text. This space, with multicoloured walls symbolic of pride and diversity, including work by queer artist and AIDS activist Keith Haring, provided Charlie with a refuge from school bullies in the past. In the Netflix adaptation, Charlie confides in and receives ongoing support from Mr Ajeyi.[8] This room also becomes a safe space for Nick and Charlie to meet as their romance develops. The space is symbolic of what Horeck (2021) calls the utopic 'restructuring of social relations around an ethics of care'. Mr Ajeyi tells Charlie when he was at school, declaring your feelings to someone of the same gender was never an option: he 'just repressed it and suffered'. Mr Ajeyi's room gives voice to the impact of past homophobia on school life as well as offering reparative healing from this in the teacher's care. However, there are implicit textual anxieties present that adult queer audiences may pick up on, namely who receives this care and comfort in the

[8] In the graphic novels, Mr Ajeyi only appears much later as a teacher at Higgs, the nearby girls' school, though he is still Black and openly gay.

would-be utopia and who does not. Mr Ajeyi's likely intersectional marginalisation as a queer Black man is never explored, and while the shadow of HIV and AIDS that had such an impact on gay men of Mr Ajeyi's generation is symbolically present in Haring's art, this trauma is never voiced. Season one also glosses over the fact that Truham has clearly not been a safe space for Black, transgender Elle, who spent every lunchtime in Mr Ajeyi's room but still describes the school as 'a hellhole'. Further, reference is made to a teacher who is a 'massive transphobe', refusing to respect Elle's chosen name. However, again such anxieties are never given significant textual space. Mr Ajeyi's room allows queer adult audiences to perceive the progress that has been made in the care this space gives Charlie. However, it also speaks to the disconnect between the less positive aspects of queer history – isolation, shame and tragic death – and present-day acceptance previous queer generations fought for. Crucially, the space reflects how the recent assimilative turn in queer politics has marginalised the 'most vulnerable' and the 'least presentable', according to Love (2007). In *Heartstopper* only certain types of queer bodies are able to extend themselves into and achieve a level of acceptance in the school, a point I will explore further in representation and narrative. This is one of the anxieties, or *discomforts,* which is a likely cause of negative affective responses in *Heartstopper's* adult readers/audiences in particular and prevents Truham from being a true queer utopia.

Despite these anxieties, Mr Ajeyi's classroom is significant not only as a space of queer care and nurturing but as one where time itself may be experienced queerly by audiences, in an emotional rather than in a linear sense. The space can be read as a site of *temporal drag* (Freeman, 2010), where elements of the past imprint

themselves onto the present. For Freeman, temporal drag is about 'retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present' (61). The contrasting of Charlie's openness about his sexuality and feelings for Nick with past generations' repression and suffering, represented by Mr Ajeyi's experiences and Haring's artwork, invite queer adult audiences to relive their own past adolescent experiences and rewrite them as an act of queer retrosity through identification with the character of Charlie. I will discuss this identification further in chapters 2 and 3.

It is notable that the queer past also imprints itself on the wider school in Stephen Fry's voice-over as Truham's Head teacher, who is never seen but makes announcements in episodes one and eight that seem not only superfluous but incongruous to the narrative timeline. For example, he describes Sports' Day as 'a bunch of teenagers crashing into each other' in a way that seems almost non-diegetic. Younger audience members are most likely to know Fry as the voice of the *Harry Potter* audiobooks, but adult queer audiences may associate him with past representations of male homosexuality, rooted in repression and tacit mainstream acceptance gained through being white, affluent and non-sexual.[9] Whilst on one level, the inclusion of Fry's voice identifies *Heartstopper* as part of an established queer canon and further queers the school as a physical space, this example of temporal drag seems to reflect implicit anxieties in *Heartstopper* that only homonormative representations of queerness can achieve acceptance by the institutions of power in heteronormativity. This may trigger negative affective responses in adult audiences as a result.

[9] Stephen Fry, an English actor, writer, director, TV personality and LGBTQ& campaigner, is one of Britain's most recognisable and influential gay men. He arguably represents a certain type of white, affluent, non-sexual, normative gay man in mainstream culture.

Charlie's bedroom also functions in this dual way as both a queer physical space of healing and a site of temporal drag where the adult reader/audience can experience and process past trauma, imaginatively (re)constructing a better past and future for themselves and others. Significantly, Charlie's bedroom is the only place in the graphic novel depicted in fine detail, carefully replicated in the Netflix adaptation (fig 3). Despite his past trauma, the focus is on Charlie's bedroom as a place of safety and the expression of queer love with Nick, and queer community and care, such as during friends' sleepovers. This offers a reparative reading of the queer adolescent bedroom, which would more likely be a place of loneliness and despair for older generations of queer people. However, the mise-en-scene of Charlie's bedroom, replicated from the graphic novels, seems to suggest temporal drag through details which suggest the past imprinting on the present. For example, the posters on Charlie's wall - Radiohead, Muse, Daft Punk and The Strokes – all depict bands from the 1990s and early 2000s rather than contemporary groups[10]. Whilst such details could be designed to represent Charlie's individuality and 'geekiness', they also allow older queer audiences to project themselves into these spaces like readers can do more easily in the emptier spaces of the graphic novels. It was only retrospectively that I realised this was what I was experiencing at the Waterstone's installation. The temporal drag enacted in Charlie's bedroom provides the space for adult audiences to relive and potentially heal from their own adolescent trauma. Further, the mise-en-scene also allude to a 'pastness' about Charlie himself, an idea I will return to in the following chapter as it is central to queer adult identification with

[10] Tao's bedroom, never depicted in the first two volumes of the graphic novels, features posters in the Netflix adaptation for films released in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006).

his character. This 'pastness' is further suggested by the poster he has for *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel about repressed queerness.[11] Love (2007) exhorts us to not reject our queer ancestors but to embrace our shared history of social violence to affirm the impact this has had on us, as stubbornly clinging to wholly positive queer representations like Jenkins and Cart's (2018) project seeks to do denies the injustice and hurt of homophobia. This is a further example of reparative potentiality in *Heartstopper* that adult audiences may particularly identify with.

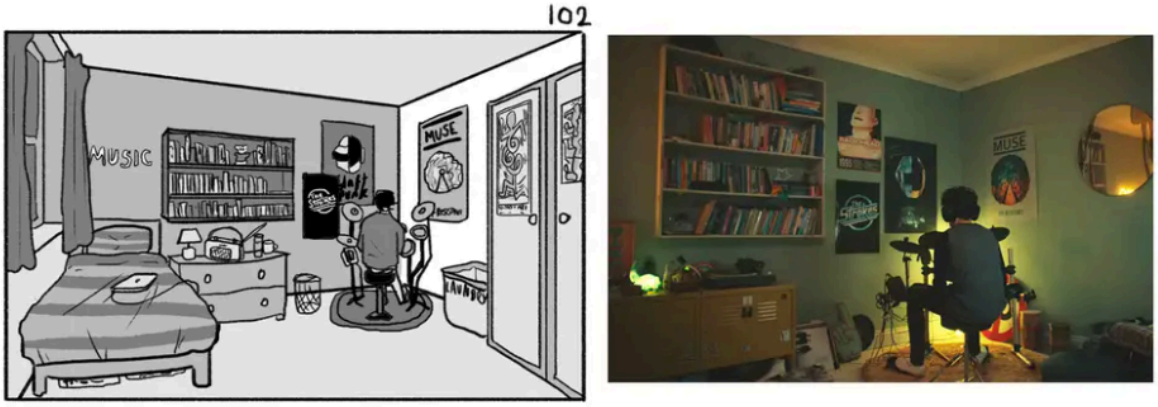

Fig. 3: Charlie's bedroom in the graphic novel and the Netflix adaptation.

Despite the anxieties present in the depiction of setting in *Heartstopper,* it is difficult to argue that every queer young person's experience of the spaces they inhabit daily should not bear more resemblance to Charlie and Nick's than adult readers'/audiences' likely experiences. In *Heartstopper,* school is reparatively constructed as a queer space where Charlie and Nick are nurtured, safe, and loved, whilst Charlie's teenage bedroom becomes a site of queer happiness, intimacy and community rather than isolation, loneliness and despair. This is an important aspect of the fantasy utopic world of *Heartstopper* that readers/audiences appear to find

[11] Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) centres on an implicit gay relationship between Charles Ryder and his wealthy friend Sebastian Flyte.

such comfort and joy in. There is a wider point about the purpose of Queer YA here: if it is to provide more optimistic models of queer futurity, is it fair to expect it to be entirely realistic? In chapter three I will explore the problems with the fact the makers *do* stress the 'authenticity' (Ingold, 2022) rather than speculative nature of the texts, with resultant triggering of negative affective responses in queer adult readers/audiences. Whilst the physical and temporal world of *Heartstopper does* provide them with the space to revisit past trauma and to heal from this by reimagining a more utopic queer past for themselves and future of generations, there are implicit anxieties that this utopic world might only be inhabitable by certain types of queer bodies whose desires align with heteronormative ideologies. In the following chapters, I explore how these anxieties can be perceived in the representations and narrative.

Chapter 2: ‘I wish I’d met you when I was younger’: The representation of Charlie as emotional rescue in *Heartstopper*

In episode five of the Netflix adaptation, sixteen-year old Nick tells Charlie ‘I wish I’d met you when I was younger’. His words might jar with an adult viewer who could likely only dream of an adolescent romance like theirs at this age, yet they powerfully encapsulate the emotional rescue queer adults seem to seek in Nick’s character in particular. Nick is *Heartstopper’s* truly desirable queer character. This is summed up by a post on the ‘Heartstoppersyndrome’ *Reddit* discussion page titled ‘Nick Nelson is ruining my love life’ (19 Aug 2023). It is tempting to laugh but there is real poignancy in their claim ‘I have been looking for Nick in everyone I meet’. Another post states, ‘What I would give to have someone holding me tight and caring for me like Nick does for Charlie,’ (21 July 2022) while a third poster coins the motivational phrase ‘Be your own Nick Nelson’ (21 July 2022). Chapter 3 will explore this explicit desire for emotional rescue through the dream of Nick and romantic love adult readers/audiences express. However, this chapter focuses on the more complex and discomforting, yet potentially more empowering emotional rescue offered through identification with Charlie’s character.

I have never seen a post on *Reddit* that expresses a desire for Charlie as a dream boyfriend or states ‘Be your own Charlie’. Charlie is the undesirable character who we nevertheless cannot help identifying with as queer adults. One poster writes: ‘I’ve been Charlie. The one who would apologise for breathing, a person who feels like their existence is a burden to the world.’ (9 August 2023). Love (2007) argues ‘the relation to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair and loss

but also by the shame of identification' (32). Identification with Charlie invites *discomfort* rather than comfort, triggering memories of the anxieties, trauma and shame of our own queer adolescence which often remain very much with us in the present. The representation of Charlie also reflects wider societal and cultural anxieties about how we can rescue ourselves and future queer generations from the same trauma and abjection.

The project of emotional rescue is central to queer reparative studies. Love claims 'queer critics promise to rescue the past when in fact they dream of being rescued themselves' (2007: 33). For her, the assimilative turn in queer politics from the 1990s onwards reflects a desire on our part to be rescued from feelings of shame, isolation and self-hatred that older forms of queer experience often represent and which endure within our heteronormative society. We have seen how theorists such as Mason (2018; 2021) and Matos (2019) view Queer YA as a form of engaging with and seeking healing from the difficult queer past. Love notes the tendency of queer critics to want to 'rescue or save' (2007: 8) more negative historical representations of queer subjectivity by transforming such stories into narratives of progress and possibility. She argues it is only within darker representations that we will be able to find identification and a community across time with others who have experienced the same abjection, engendering lasting repair from our trauma as queer people. She believes within a heteronormative world we are all 'isolated, lonely subjects looking for other lonely people' (2007: 36). However, as Mason (2021) points out, we can also find darker representations in contemporary Queer YA, haunting what appear straightforwardly positive narratives with implicit anxieties about what we want to rescue ourselves and other queers, and how this can be achieved. We have

seen how the temporal world of Charlie queers chrononormative understandings of time. The representation of his character is the principal site of anxieties in the texts, offering a complex portrayal of the struggle in queer culture between assimilation into chrononormativity and our queer emotional relationship to time which allows us to understand that the past, present and future co-exist in an often-uneasy relationship.

For queer adult readers/audiences, this undesired identification with Charlie might offer the possibility of reparative healing that we desperately need. The discomfort elicited by this may offer more political possibilities than the comfort that the textual world assumes to offer through Charlie and Nick's romance. Our textual meeting with Charlie offers a different form of emotional rescue, enabling us as queer adults to (re) discover our inner 'ghostly queer child' (Bond Stockton, 2009) who we were never able to fully bring into being because of homophobia and repression. Like the difficult queer representations of historical literature that Love (2007) discusses, Charlie brings to the surface our repressed and internalised shame. We need to resist the textual and cultural imperative to 'rescue' Charlie by ignoring darker associations his character has and blindly embracing the positivity in his idealised romance with Nick, as Love argues queer critics do when working with older, more negative models of queer lives. Being open to the discomfort that Charlie provokes in us as queer adults might allow us to recognise our socially and cultural imposed pain and ultimately heal from it.

Far from being ground-breaking in its representations, *Heartstopper* in fact replicates common character tropes in Queer YA first theorised by Crisp (2008). With the

evolution of queer rights and resulting explosion in Queer YA in the 2000s, Mason (2018) conceptualises a new trope: the Earnest Elfin Dream Gay (EEDG), a modern iteration of Crisp's Sensitive, Understanding Doormat to the Tragic, Closet Jock protagonist. The EEDG is based on and serves the same 'patriarchal lie' as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl of 'straight' YA, defined only in relation to his love object. In *Heartstopper* both Charlie and Nick conform to the EEDG trope: 'pure', 'relentlessly agreeable' and defined by their 'urgent want to love' (Mason, 2018), though Nick's character also draws on the Tragic, Closeted Jock. Mason sees the EEDG as a problematic 'vessel for and product of gay wish fulfilment' (2018) within an assimilative queer culture, reflecting our desperate desire to be loved as but also our anxieties regarding the forms of queerness that mainstream culture will and will not accept. It is particularly interesting here to consider some ways in which the representations of Charlie and Nick have been mediated to make them more acceptable to a global, mainstream Netflix market.

Charlie Spring bears a striking physical similarity to Mason's EEDG, cisgender and white with 'distinctly adorable features: cute hair, dazzling eyes, twinkish stature…' (2018) carefully rendered in close-up in the graphic novel panels and TV adaptation. Both Nick and Ben describe Charlie as 'really cute' and he is repeatedly portrayed in volume one as 'small and weak' (42) (fig 4 & 5), in binary opposition to the larger, blonde Nick. Volume one emphasises, for example, how Nick's clothing would 'all be too big' for Charlie (153). These child-like physical qualities, which recall Bond Stockton's (2009) ghostly queer child, feminise Charlie, defining queerness in regressive binary opposition to hegemonic masculinity which is represented by Nick. This might trigger difficult memories of homophobic bullying in older queer readers.

In *Heartstopper,* reader/audience identification with Charlie is facilitated from the beginning of the texts through medium-specific techniques such as close-up panels/shots and costume. The graphic novels open with a series of close-up panels tracking Charlie's changing facial expressions from pleasure in his kiss with Ben to anxiety walking through the corridors of the school to the class where he first meets Nick. Oseman's simplistic artwork encourages this identification: McCloud (1993) argues that unlike more realistic drawings which create distance between reader and character, cartoon-like characters enable us to enter the narrative world and see ourselves. Readers of the graphic novels are therefore likely to arrive at the Netflix adaptation already identifying with Charlie. For audiences who are strangers to the source texts, the Netflix series makes such identification possible from the beginning of episode one through the replication of comic panels on screen showing extreme close-ups of Charlie's shining eyes and wide smile as he sends text messages to Ben.

Charlie's clothing in the graphic novels and TV adaptation further encourages reader/viewer identification with his character. Mayer (2020), notes how in TV dramas that elicit particular affective responses in their audiences, 'Clothing…becomes a 'beloved object' that 'reach[es] out and touch[es] the viewer' (34). Crummy (2022) specifically mentions Charlie's distinctive Fjallraven backpack (fig 6) as a factor that makes the text 'endearing'. Charlie's Converse trainers (fig 7), also replicated from the graphic novels, have, like his backpack, inspired fan artwork and tattoos. Significantly, the backpack and trainers acquire importance in the

narrative because they symbolise his developing relationship with Nick and the idealisation of romantic love, rather than Charlie himself. This again highlights the undesirability of Charlie as a character in himself. In chapter 3 I will discuss this further.

Fig 4: Charlie's character in Heartstopper vol 1 (2018: 42)

Fig 5: Charlie's character in Netflix season 1

Fig 6: Charlie's backpack in season one.

Fig 7: Charlie's Converse trainers in volume one.

Aspects of Charlie's appearance that might particularly resonate with queer adult audiences in season one, but significantly do not seem to elicit the same positive

affective responses as his backpack and trainers, are the ones which convey a sense of ‘pastness’ about him: his clothing and his mobile phone. Charlie wears a child-like duffle coat and woollen jumpers that, like his appearance, connote child-like qualities and vulnerability. This aspect of Charlie is further implied in episode four/volume two (334) when Nick plays with Charlie’s hair after they admit their feelings for each other, a gesture which seems parent-child-like. Charlie’s clothing would also place him comfortably in a text set in any time period in the past century, whereas Nick’s contemporary leisurewear connotes the modern-day setting. Charlie’s clothing can, like his bedroom and Mr Ajeyi’s classroom, be read as a form of temporal drag (Freeman, 2010), emphasising the way the queer past continues to imprint on the queer present and future. Charlie’s phone, on one level symbolic of contemporary adolescent subjectivity, can be read as a further example of temporal drag. The words ‘gay panic’ depicted in extreme close-up on his lock screen in the opening credits of episode one carry both contemporary and historical resonance for queer audiences. To today’s queer adolescents, ‘gay panic’ means being flustered and embarrassed around your ‘crush’. To older queer generations, the words undercut Charlie’s hope and romantic desire for Ben at the start of episode one with fear and shame. This is further emphasised by the link with the homophobic ‘gay panic’ law still in place in many countries that provides a form of legal defence against a murder charge on the grounds of defending oneself from sexual advances by a person of the same gender. Although the graphic novels and particularly the Netflix adaptation downplay the impact of the homophobia Charlie still experiences at the start of the narrative, Charlie’s lock screen suggests he, like many amongst the queer adult audience, carries this trauma with him, and firmly roots it in heteronormativity’s fear of queer sexual desire. This is a significant aspect of

Charlie's character I will return to below. The 'gay panic' lock screen represents the way that contemporary queer culture is always in the act of negotiating with and transforming elements of its difficult history, like the character tropes of Queer YA themselves, although this is often occluded by the presentism of assimilative queer culture. Charlie's phone represents the difficult queer past Love tells us we should not forget as we need such painful identifications for our own healing.

Charlie's inner shame can also be perceived in his desperation to be loved, like Mason's EEDG. On the surface, he offers a chrononormative role model for queer adolescents, structured around stable growth and morally correct behaviour like the bildungsroman protagonist of classic YA. At the start of the texts, being on time for class is more important to Charlie than kissing Ben in the library. He also finds it 'very chaotic' in opening scenes of season one that Nick is doing his homework on the way to class. Charlie is firmly associated with safety, cleanliness and order: his friendship with Nick deepens after he is assigned by a teacher to help Nick clean up after spilling ink all over himself. Further, Charlie is high-achieving at sports: we are told that 'no one's beaten [his] time' at running (29) and he quickly displays 'perfect' tackling at rugby despite never having played before (59). In the Netflix adaptation, Charlie's academic excellence is further emphasised by him being 'amazing at Maths'. We could read Charlie's character as reflective of anxieties Ahmed highlights about being the 'right kind of queer' with a 'moral obligation to be on your best behaviour' (2010: 106) in order to be accepted. Charlie exhibits anxiety in the texts about how he is perceived, constantly apologising and in episode seven of season one believing that him 'just existing is annoying for people'. These queer anxieties about chrononormative role models can also been seen when Charlie is depicted in

a high angle shot sitting on the painted tree motif on Mr Ajeyi's floor, which symbolises chrononormative growth and change. Here, Mr Ajeyi's room reflects implicit anxieties in Queer YA about the tension between chrononormative models of growth and development and the darker realities of the queer experience older audiences are likely to relate to. It is possible to see ourselves as queer critics in the character of Mr Ajeyi, caught between the desire to 'rescue' Charlie and secure a positive future for him yet acutely aware that within heteronormativity this is only made available to certain individuals who fit these culturally ascribed norms.

What Charlie perhaps represents most of all is assimilative queer culture's unwillingness to sanction any kind of failure in its role models. Bond Stockton (2009) and Halberstam (2011) emphasise the inherently unruly nature of childhood and adolescence which heteronormativity marshals into stable adulthood. Queerness is Othered within this narrative as failure according to Edelman (2004). Halberstam (2011) develops his position further, seeing this failure status as a way to deconstruct societal power structures that make success possible for certain bodies and not others: 'failing is something that queers do and have always done exceptionally well' (3). Halberstam's work seems to have a natural affinity with YA, a genre centring on a liminal time which is 'amoral and antiteleological' (119). However, the fact his work has not been taken up by Queer YA scholars speaks to the profound discomfort queer adults have with the idea of affirming failure as any kind of model of futurity for queer young people, as Charlie's anxiously perfect behaviour also does. Heterosexual characters in YA may fail; queer ones apparently may not.

Edelman (2004) would argue the greatest act of failure queer people commit is the failure to direct their sexual desire 'appropriately' towards reproductive futurity. *Heartstopper* has been praised in both the mainstream and queer media as revolutionary for its portrayal of queer love as 'innocent' and 'pure' (Ingold, 2022). Opie (2023) argues that he has 'seen plenty of gay kisses and gay sex scenes…but never…a simple hug celebrated with such unabashed joy on screen'. We might dispute the extent to which gay sex scenes are actually depicted in mainstream texts. However, they are certainly never depicted in Queer YA, and the very absence of sex amounts to a significant anxious *presence* in *Heartstopper*. Edelman and Bersani (2008) both explore the shaming of gay male sex and desire within heteronormativity. For them, healing from homophobia trauma is only possible for queer men if sex and desire are dissociated from such shame. Tosenberger (2008) explores how YA works to regulate sexual desire based on heteronormative ideologies and the continued suppression of sexual content within Queer YA. Queer adult audiences are likely to perceive the same sanitising of the queer adolescent experience that drag queens Trixie Mattel and Katya Zamo do in their 'Trixie and Katya React to…' series (YouTube, 2022): 'for the first time on Netflix we *don't* see teenagers having sex'. In what is effectively a queer reading of *Heartstopper* (interestingly lent weight by an introduction from Joe Locke and Kit Connor, the actors who play Charlie and Nick), Trixie and Katya identify a range of examples of coded queer desire, including an arcade machine that the characters kiss beside being called 'Maxx-Grab' or Nick inviting Charlie to come to his house to 'meet his dog' as a coded way of expressing his sexual attraction. It is a hilarious but worrying reading, drawing parallels between today's assimilative queer culture and the homophobic Hays Code that regulated the film industry from the 1930s to the 1960s.

This again highlights the way that the past continues to imprint on present and future queer lives. It is to me extremely problematic that the only characters in *Heartstopper* who verbalise queer sexual desire or even reference gay sex are bullies and abusers. In volume one Ben tells Charlie he is 'so hot when you're angry' (80) before kissing him without consent, while one of the rugby team asks Charlie in volume two if he thinks Nick is 'hot' and tells him 'you'd soooo jump on that DICK' (484). Both of these lines are edited out of the Netflix adaptation, revealing how 'commodification as a process depends completely upon a heteronormative set of visual and erotic expectations' (Halberstam, 2011: 95). Locke and Connor appear to implicitly acknowledge what cannot be spoken by Netflix in their sanctioning of Trixie and Katya's reading. Crucially, in erasing gay sex and desire, the Netflix adaptation also erases the fact that it is cultural *fear* of gay male sex acts that drives homophobic behaviour and engenders shame. As Trites points out, '[d]enying the corporeality of homosexuality too easily divorces it from pleasure, which potentially disempowers gay sexuality' (2000: 114). We could read Charlie helping Nick clean up the blue ink from his exploding pen as a textual desire to cleanse the narrative and the characters of 'dangerous' gay male desire and pleasure. The Netflix adaptation further reflects heteronormative ideologies by sanitising the graphic novels to ensure sexual desire is anchored to romantic feelings. Ben prefaces his assault of Charlie in episode one by telling him 'I like you but I'm figuring stuff out', 'like' being the most passionate verb that is used in *Heartstopper* characters to express desire. The sanitising of Ben's character also emphasises the unwillingness within Queer YA to make queer characters failures by virtue of being true 'bad guys': his character is significantly less physically menacing than he appears in the graphic novels. Meanwhile the textual message is clear that Charlie's desire for Ben - implied

through the song lyrics ‘I wish you thought that I was pretty so that I could turn you on’ as he walks to meet him - makes him vulnerable and violates heteronormative moral codes. Again, this recalls Hays-era texts and the required coding of queer desire through subtle film techniques. For queer adult readers and audiences, such suppression of sexual desire is likely to inculcate further queer shame and give rise to at least some of the outpouring of negative feeling in response to the texts.

Ahmed (2010) tells us, ‘to narrate unhappiness can be affirmative’ as it can ‘gesture towards another world’ (107). There is much to discomfort us in the representation of Charlie’s character because his experience revisits the pain and trauma so many of us suffered as young people within an even more homophobic world. However, there is a reluctance amongst queer adults to name this unhappiness, a discomforting and reluctance even to speak the identification with Charlie that is implicit in so many posts on *Reddit*. We could find emotional rescue through Charlie’s character by speaking aloud the pain we identify with in his experience and allowing ourselves to become angry about the constraints Charlie lives within in to believe himself loveable. This might offer a genuinely progressive form of comforting through the challenging of heteronormative ideologies. Speaking about quintessential YA author Judy Blume, Lena Dunham states that her protagonists offer progressive possibilities for female readers as ‘she allowed young women to be as complicated and messy and dark and light and funny as we are’ (Amazon, 2023). Unless young, queer protagonists can be allowed to be the same three-dimensional characters, we still have a long road to travel towards authentic and empowering queer representation in YA. Instead, as I will explore in the following chapter, *Heartstopper* firmly locates emotional rescue for Charlie and the reader in an idealised romantic love that buys

into the ‘happiness causes’ (Ahmed, 2010) of heteronormativity. As adult readers/audiences, we can only heal our own ghostly queer child that we meet in Charlie by placing him, and ourselves, in the arms of Nick and the comfort of a romantic relationship that cannot be allowed to fail.

Chapter 3: 'I want to be with you forever': Narrative, romance and emotional rescue in *Heartstopper*

Heartstopper is at heart a romance. The sugar-coated love story of Charlie and Nick defines *Heartstopper* in the mainstream cultural imagination, anchored by Netflix promotional shots which give the narrative a romantic comedy feel (fig 8&9). Love (2007) points out binary opposition in the way homosexuality is experienced within heteronormativity as either 'a stigmatising mark [or] a form of romantic exceptionalism' (3). On the surface, *Heartstopper* gives us the latter type of representation, where 'beautiful, benevolent, and well-liked' queers, as one *Reddit* poster describes Charlie and Nick, (16 Aug 2023) fall in love in a way that is 'impossibly cute' (Crummy, 2022). However, the anxiety the text seems to reflect is that only models of queerness that can assimilate into heteronormativity may become a source of queer pride. This stigmatises the shame and trauma that continues to be the lived experience of many LGBTQ+ people.

Like the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, both Charlie and Nick acquire their narrative significance and self-actualisation as protagonists through romantic love. The privileging of romantic love as the ultimate source of happiness and success in life is further anchored in Oseman's Afterword to volume two: 'Everyone deserves the time, space and support to figure out their feelings and identity…I promise that one day you will find someone who loves you just the way you are' (576). Mason (2018) believes queer adults are drawn to YA romance for its healing qualities: 'We're all just emotionally damaged queers, and all we want is someone to love us...'. Despite Oseman's claim, the received message of *Heartstopper* for many readers/viewers seems to be that love and acceptance can only be achieved by being the 'right kind

of queer', to borrow Ahmed's words (2010: 106). This message is transmitted not only through Charlie and Nick but also, as discussed, in the representation of Ben, Elle and Mr Ajeyi.

The dream of Nick that so many adult readers/viewers express is ultimately the dream of being the right kind of queer, redeeming yourself from queer shame by placing your hopes for happiness in the arms of a queer body acceptable within heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2010). Charlie and Nick's romance presents the classic Cinderella narrative with a queer spin, their first kiss even occurring in an empty ballroom after they escape the modern equivalent of a royal ball: an opulent sixteenth birthday party. However, their romance is not as reparative or as revolutionary as it might appear, or the media presents. Nick's character is even more idealised than Charlie: very attractive, popular and an athletic 'rugby lad' (23), a status that Netflix elevates to 'rugby king'. The same *Reddit* poster who confesses to Nick ruining their love life states: '[Nick] has raised my standards to an unattainable level' (19 August 2023). However, none of us, particularly damaged queer adults, can ever 'be our own Nick Nelson'. Instead we accord ourselves the socially shamed status of Charlie, waiting to be rescued and healed by our true love like the lowly Cinderella.

Whilst Nick's sexuality is in flux in the narrative, we are never in doubt that his devotion to Charlie is unwavering. In season one Charlie and Tao agree Nick 'looks like a Golden Retriever', giving his affinity with dogs in volumes one and two an explicit contemporary link with the 'Golden Retriever boyfriend' archetype who is

endlessly loyal, gentle and unproblematic. The representation of Nick is anchored to chrononormativity, like Charlie: in episode one of the Netflix adaptation he refuses Charlie's offer to do his Maths homework as 'then I won't learn'.

Fig 8: Promotional shot for the Netflix adaptation

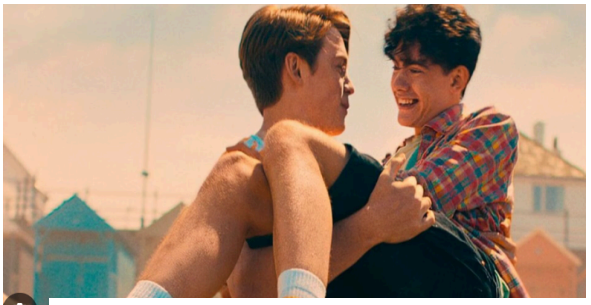

Fig 9: Promotional shot for the Netflix adaptation

Charlie and Nick's romance, which begins in earnest after Nick rescues Charlie from Ben's abuse, could be read as a straightforward example of queer retrosity (Abate, 2019), wherein the school heart-throb actually reciprocates your secret crush. Many queer adults will relate: one Reddit poster states 'I wish that what Charlie and Nick had could have been my life as a teen and maybe things would've been better through those rough years' (6 August 2023). What nobody asks is whether it is problematic in 2023 that the idea of romantic love as the ultimate form of self-actualisation that feminists have fought against for decades is here presented and accepted, by mainstream culture at least, as the quintessential queer dream. Further, as Mason asks, 'now that boy gets boy [in Queer YA], what boys actually get the boy? What boy do they get, and at what cost?' (2018).

The portrayal of Charlie and Nick's relationship is problematic not only in its suggestion that only a perfect queer is worthy of love but also its replication of

heteronormative binaries which recall regressive and homophobic ideas about queer relationships. Nick embodies stereotypically masculine physical strength, sporting prowess and protectiveness that wins him admiration from the school ‘lads’, whilst the physically smaller Charlie is usually feminised in the texts through his physical frailty and emotional vulnerability, and represented as a victim. This binary is anchored repeatedly in the narrative, not only through actions such as Nick paternally ruffling Charlie’s hair, but through repeated close-up panels which are replicated in the Netflix adaptation of Charlie’s feet on tiptoe, bracketed between Nick’s bigger, sturdier frame. These images are depicted so frequently that they could almost be read as fetishized. The one occasion where Charlie displays strength and protectiveness towards Nick – in episode four (volume 2: 299) when Nick breaks down over his confused sexuality – is undermined by Nick’s quick resumption of the stereotypically masculine role. Despite his presumed emotional turmoil over his sexuality, Nick never fails to be there to protect and care for Charlie and never says the wrong thing at any point, even when coming out to his mother or rejecting a girl’s advances in the Netflix adaptation. We can perceive the anxious textual conflict here between queer relationships to time, in which the younger and more vulnerable Charlie is ‘older’ in a queer, sideways sense than Nick (Bond Stockton, 2009) due to his greater life experience as an out queer person, and the imperative towards chrononormativity and heteronormative relationship paradigms demanded of a mainstream Queer YA text.

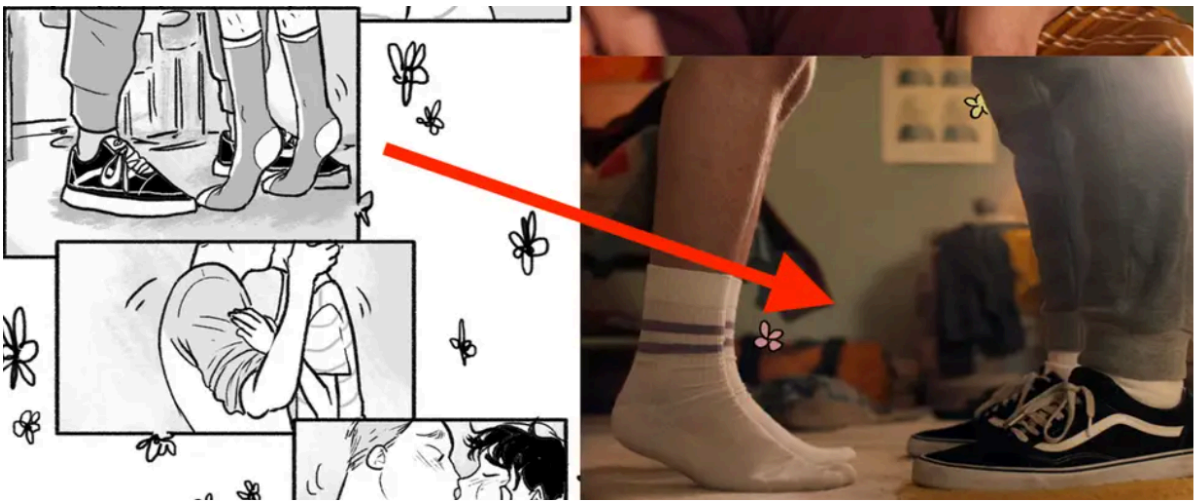

Fig 10: The physical contrast between Charlie and Nick depicted in volume two p290/season one episode 4.

A further anxiety reflected in the texts is that only certain expressions of queer love can assimilate into heteronormativity. Chapter 2 discussed Charlie's character and the suppression of gay male sexual desire in *Heartstopper*. The portrayal of Charlie and Nick's relationship is also devoid of any sexual element. Nick's feelings for Charlie are anchored as explicitly romantic and non-sexual from the narrative's beginning. This is made clear through the binary opposition between Nick (safe) and Ben (dangerous) that is established through Nick's rescuing Charlie. It is further emphasised in episode one of the Netflix adaptation by Nick turning the blue pen mark 'mistake' he accidentally draws on Charlie's hand into a smile. This action further emphasises the message anchored through Ben's character that excessive, uncontrolled sexual desire is another type of queer failure that must be avoided by the heroes within *Heartstopper*. Trixie and Katya read Charlie and Nick's frequent smiles as a further coded expression of sexual desire in the texts, necessary to appeal to a mainstream audience but for them laughably unrealistic for two adolescent boys in love: 'Why would you have sex when you can just smile at each other forever?' (YouTube, 2022). Chapter 2 discussed how the non-sexual nature of

Charlie and Nick's relationship is positioned as revolutionary. However, it is highly problematic if YA centring on heterosexual characters, most famously Judy Blume's 1975 novel *Forever…*[12], can depict fairly graphic sexual activity in a loving teenage relationship without censure but nearly five decades later this is still unthinkable in Queer YA.

Whilst there is no sexual activity or verbalised desire in Nick and Charlie's relationship, there is a great deal of physical contact of a gentler type. Much of Charlie and Nick's developing relationship in the texts is conveyed through the affective dynamics of touch rather than dialogue or action. This is emphasised through close-up panels and shots in the graphic novels and Netflix adaptation (Fig 11).

[12] Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) was ground-breaking in its explicit portrayal of a teenage sexual relationship. It is still regarded as the germinal YA text of its kind. It became a bestseller and has never been out of print.

Fig 11: Close-up panels/shots depicting touch between Charlie and Nick, with hermeneutic 'sparks'.

Series of pages in the graphic novels and long scenes in the Netflix adaptation pass with them touching, hugging and kissing: Charlie and Nick's first kiss in volume one lasts a full eight pages uninterrupted by dialogue (249-257). This emphasis on touch serves to create textual gaps that allow readers/viewers to insert themselves into the narrative in reader-directed queer retrosity, without the intrusion of perspectives that are clearly not their own. The simple, black-and-white artwork Oseman uses adds to this feeling, allowing us to see ourselves reflected rather than another (McCloud, 1993). The affective power of touch is intensified again through hermeneutic electric sparks and fireworks in both the graphic novels and the Netflix adaptation. Opie (2023) goes as far as to describe *Heartstopper* as a narrative structured around hugs, which 'document a timeline of growing confidence and queer comfort'. Whilst I disagree that these affective atmospherics actually *do* comfort many readers/viewers, his is a perceptive point that relates to Love's (2007) discussion of touch as a metaphor for the queer relationship to the past, drawing on the work of Dinshaw. Charlie and Nick's frequent, loving touches, hugs and kisses in *Heartstopper* may temporarily provide the embrace that we as queer adults longed for in our own adolescence, bringing to the surface our repressed desires for love that give rise to the emotional responses on *Reddit.* As Love states, 'queer history is, in a sense, nothing but wounded attachments' (2007: 42). One *Reddit* poster describes *Heartstopper* as 'basically porn. But not sexual' (22 August 2023). Whilst ironic given *Heartstopper's* suppression of sexual desire, this is not as far-fetched a statement as it might appear. Williams (2019) notes that pornography is an affective genre…capable of eliciting 'extreme corporeal responses' mimicking the embodied responses of texts' protagonists. Williams coins the term the *frenzy of the visible* to

theorise how the concomitant rise of visual pornography and the increasing sophistication of moving image technology created an '"excess" of the visible that seemed more "real" than…non-photographically based depictions'. Both the graphic novels and TV adaptation of *Heartstopper* create space for a similar 'frenzy of the visible' centred on affective touch that could be read as fetishized in its detailed, excessive portrayal. This may also explain why some *Reddit* posters discuss 'devouring' the texts with an 'obsession' (18 September 2022) akin to consumers of pornography. It may be that *Heartstopper* allows us as queer adults to vividly imagine what love and affection would have felt like in our adolescence. However, the texts cannot truly replicate this touch the same way melodrama can elicit tears or pornography can elicit sexual arousal. Instead, what we feel is the acute longing and sadness of the lack of touch. As one *Reddit* poster puts it, 'I want it to be my life, but it isn't, and it probably won't ever be' (16 Aug 2023). Their wording is strikingly similar to the 'demand and desperation' that Love believes 'characterises the relation to the gay past': 'You will be mine; you could be mine – but you probably won't be mine' (2007: 33). Like the physical and temporal world of the texts, the affective atmospherics of Nick and Charlie's romance narrative allows us to come within touching distance of a romanticised, speculative past with the ultimate awareness we can never truly enter the text, recapture our queer youth and feel such embraces. If we could allow ourselves to feel the full force of anger at this loss and direct it towards its true source - historic homophobia wrought by heteronormativity - the happy ending *Heartstopper* gives Charlie and Nick could have true reparative potential, bringing about more positive beginnings and life experiences for future queer generations. However, as with the physical and temporal world of the texts,

the fundamental issue is the affective utopia established only allows certain types of queer body to extend into and imprint themselves on the space and feel its comfort.

In *Heartstopper,* it is not only sexual desire is elided but any suggestion Charlie and Nick's relationship might not last forever. This reflects deep-seated queer anxieties about long-term romantic love and marriage as the only acceptable forms of relationship within heteronormativity, as opposed to the shame of gay male promiscuity which Edelman (2004) discusses. Fans of the *Heartstopper* graphic novel universe will already know that Charlie and Nick's love endures from Oseman's prose novella, *Nick and Charlie,* which takes place two years after volume one but was originally published in 2015, plus several online comics set when Charlie and Nick are in their 20s[13]. For readers/audiences lacking this knowledge, the texts quickly make the permanency of their love clear: in episode one Charlie fantasises about Nick confessing undying love by saying 'I want to be with you forever'. The Netflix adaptation intensifies this idea and the romantic mood with the use of the colour pink and swirling hearts and leaves (Fig 12). Further, hermeneutic swirling leaves symbolising chrononormativity, growth and development throughout the texts appear at key moments in their relationship, such as when Charlie and Nick first practise rugby or share their first kiss after declaring their feelings. In episode eight, leaves are even depicted on the wall of the train, symbolic of life journeys, as they go to the beach and affirm their commitment to each other (Fig 13).

[13] Oseman's mini comic *Adoption,* published on *Tumblr,* is set when Charlie and Nick are in their mid-twenties and still together.
https://heartstoppercomic.tumblr.com/post/161885945994/mini-comic-adoption-meet-25yo-charlie-and-26yo

Fig 12: Charlie fantasises about Nick declaring that he wants to be with him forever. Volume one p40/Episode one

Fig 13: the hermeneutic tree and leaves that symbolise chrononormativity, growth and development imprinted on the train in season one episode eight.

Charlie and Nick's romance is devoid of any internal conflict. Despite Oseman's claim to portray 'real life…one normal, loving relationship' (Aasland, 2021), the two never argue or come close to breaking up like an adolescent couple might. This recalls Ahmed (2010) and Halberstam's (2011) theorising of heteronormative narratives of success and failure. What *Heartstopper* actually offers is an idealised fantasy romance. Several scenes of the Netflix adaptation in particular – Charlie and Nick making snow angels in soft-focus and kissing under a blue and yellow umbrella in the rain – resemble a Hallmark Christmas romance and a Hollywood musical respectively. In episode eight of season one/volume two, Nick even carries Charlie into the sea, evoking the trope of a husband carrying his new wife over the threshold in romances and fairy tales (541). Again, the heteronormative binaries of masculine

and feminine, protector and protected are emphasised as well as the monogamous, long-term nature of their relationship (Fig 14).

Fig 14: Charlie and Nick affirming their commitment to each other, Nick carrying Charlie into the sea.

The hermeneutic cartoon hearts, leaves and flowers which are animated and intensified in the Netflix series, augmented by non-diegetic music, also work to banish the possibility of doubt on the part of the reader/audience about whether Charlie and Nick will stay together. For example, when Nick thinks about Charlie on the way home after rescuing him from Ben, the Wolf Alice track ‘Don’t Delete the Kisses’ is heard, its lyric ‘I see the signs of a lifetime, you till I die’ clearly anchoring the impossibility of relationship failure. These techniques seem to be intended to give comfort by removing the possibility of love going wrong, but actually evoke discomfort in adult viewers. One Reddit poster feels ‘angry and sad at my past

younger self, feeling that I robbed myself of potentially finding something similar to [Charlie and Nick's] bond in my youth' (4 May 2022). What is striking and poignant about the many posts like this is the turning of anger on ourselves rather than heteronormative power structures, attesting to the emotional damage wrought by our traumatic queer history. If we could allow ourselves to feel this justifiable anger, as Ahmed (2010) exhorts us to, *Heartstopper* might offer more potentiality for queer young people of the future. As Edelman (2004) points out, 'The efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests in us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it' (18). At the end of Blume's *Forever…*, the 18-year old protagonist breaks up with her first love, the first boy she has had a sexual relationship with, reflecting 'I will never be sorry for loving him…I think it's just that I'm not ready for forever' (1975: 208). It feels much more poignant than Charlie and Nick's fairy-tale romance to me because it feels real. If heterosexual YA characters and their relationships were allowed to 'fail' happily like this fifty years ago, we need to allow queer characters to do the same in 2023. Perhaps the truest reparative potential in *Heartstopper* lies in allowing ourselves as queer adults to question why we are so attached to its narrative of romance and rescue, and what we seek rescue from, so that we can imagine more progressive queer futures. As Mason (2018) states, 'We need queerer dreams – many more of them'.

Conclusion

I like to imagine alternative non-endings to *Heartstopper.* In one, Charlie breaks up with Nick, telling him he will probably always love him but they're too young to settle down. They're heartbroken but they cope. Nick moves away for university and Charlie goes into Sixth Form. He doesn't get voted Head Boy but becomes an unofficial role model to younger queer pupils coming to Mr Ajeyi's classroom. He talks to them about his own difficult experiences and reassures them being unhappy and making mistakes is allowed. Sometimes he's even late for class. Charlie obsesses to Tao about a new classmate, who's Black, non-binary and '*super*-hot' but Charlie's not sure he's ready for another relationship. In the final scene, he's on his bed reading a book Mr Ajeyi lent him about 1970s gay counter-culture. He shares one of the pages on his Instagram Stories, captioning it 'my queer grandparents'. This type of non-ending feels more real to me. I'm sure Netflix would hate it, but if we as queer people also hate it, we need to ask ourselves why.

Matos and Wargo state 'we have to be wary of elevating and celebrating youth literature and media that elevates such a narrow and normative vision of what a queer future can and should look like' (2019: 10). This thesis has explored the reparative potentiality Queer YA offers for adults through the process of reader/audience-directed queer retrosity that *Heartstopper* makes possible. I argue that instead of seeking comfort in assimilative representations, we need to get comfortable with discomfort. We need to allow ourselves to feel the negative feelings arising from historic trauma that fundamentally heteronormative utopias such as *Heartstopper* elicit in us and direct this not inwards, compounding our existing queer

shame, but outwards, towards dismantling the power structures that only allow certain non-normative bodies to assimilate into them, on their terms. Perhaps the lesson *Heartstopper* really has to teach queer adults through all of its implicit textual anxieties is that instead of being our own Nick Nelson, we need to be our own Charlie Spring, with all the discomfort it brings. We need to be prepared to embrace the possibility of, and the possibility in, unhappiness to heal ourselves and heal the experience of queerness for future generations.

All research generates more questions than it answers. We are only at the beginning stages of the theorising of *Heartstopper* as a queer cultural phenomenon. There is much critical work to be done on the later volumes and Netflix series as well as the texts' marginalised characters who do not fit so easily around the heteronormative dinner table. There is considerable scope for audience research, particularly amongst queer adults. Study of *Heartstopper* as a specifically graphic novel medium would be welcome; this is an under-theorised area of Queer YA. What is certain is that Queer YA, as a principal theoretical site through which cultural anxieties about queerness are mediated, will continue to offer exciting, and discomforting, possibilities for queer lives and queer futurity in particular. Through Queer YA, we can 'begin to untangle the knotty tensions between pessimism and hope, assimilation and countercultural resistance, and a focus on a damaged past and present vis-à-vis a future that can offer us queer alternatives for liveability, for being.' (Matos & Wargo, 2019: 9).

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