

## Imagining the Future: The (Im)Possibilities of Queerness in Two Latinx Speculative Young Adult Novels

By Cristina Rhodes

Imagining the future engages the promise of possibility. José Esteban Muñoz tells us, “[t]he future is queerness’s domain” (1). Queerness is inextricably linked to the ability for us to move forward, away from the normative and restrictive structures by which our current world operates. But, in Adam Silvera’s *More Happy Than Not* (2015) and Alexandra Villasante’s *The Grief Keeper* (2019), main characters Aaron and Marisol’s traumatic pasts inhibit their movement toward the promise of that queer future. Both characters are queer themselves, though the reader is unaware of these identities at the beginning of each book. Rather, their queer pasts have been suppressed to combat homophobia and cultural expectations for compulsory heterosexuality—in fact, both characters go to great lengths to submerge their queer identities. Aaron, for example, seeks to erase memories of his queerness, via the Leteo procedure, a memory alteration surgery. On the other hand, Marisol agrees to undergo an experimental procedure to make her a surrogate for another’s grief, an effort she sees as a gateway to citizenship for her and her young sister lest they be deported to their native El Salvador, where Marisol fears her sexuality will get them both killed. Leteo and the grief surrogacy procedure put Aaron and Marisol at immense risk, both physically and mentally. Nevertheless, Aaron and Marisol regard these medical interventions as the only way to reach a better future. Neither Aaron nor Marisol is unaware that these procedures could severely limit or even abort their futures, but they have (to their minds, at least) no other options.

When reading both books, I am compelled by Aaron and Marisol’s perilous journeys toward what they hope to be better futures. On the surface, both live in a world I recognize as my own—a world in which queer Latinxs are acknowledged as existing but not allowed to thrive. Making tangible a future in which survival and success are not just possible but accessible is part and parcel of my own activist scholarly agenda. And it is this notion that pushes me to pursue this research on Latinx speculative fiction. But, as these books demonstrate, this possibility is tenuous and easily shattered. The specter of that thriving future is omnipresent in speculative and science fiction like *More Happy Than Not* and *The Grief Keeper*, but it might not even be within Aaron and Marisol’s reach. In their introduction to a special issue for *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* on queer futurity, Angel Daniel Matos and Jon M. Wargo question, “Which youth have the privilege of tomorrows that are open, utopic, or even possible?” (5). Taken within the context of the two novels I center here, it is clear that neither Aaron nor Marisol is protected or allotted a future—just as Matos and Wargo definitively explain, “many queer, non-white, ... lower class youth simply do not have access to the material, aesthetic, practical, and ideological means to exist and thrive in the present—much less to envision realities different from the ones in which they currently live” (5). Within the specific contexts of Latinx populations, Rafael Pérez-Torres asserts, “To think of a future for Latinx and Chicanx studies, let alone to consider a Latinx futurity, may indeed be an exercise in magical thinking at odds with the exigencies of the now” (155). Simply put, Aaron and Marisol are not positioned to have the futures they so desperately try to bring to reality.

As I read and analyze, I grapple with my own concern for Aaron and Marisol’s futures, and, more broadly, for the futures of real queer Latinx youth. If, as I discuss later, Latinx studies affirms speculative fiction as the space for imagining a positive future, how can we reconcile the

futuristic elements and the ambiguous endings in these two novels? In the following sections, I demonstrate how speculative fiction could be the space for queer futurity. I then examine both Aaron and Marisol's subjection to futuristic medical procedures and the negative outcomes of those procedures. Through both case studies, I find tenuous moments wherein queer young Latinxs have a chance at the future. I ultimately determine that these moments are fleeting yet representative of avenues to imagine the future more queerly. In this way, these books provide us with a call to action. I firmly believe that Latinx studies' emphasis on the efficacy of futurity is not misguided, but it has not yet reached Latinx *children's and young adult* literature. Thus, I use this analysis as a call to imagine more inclusive futures in Latinx, particularly queer, youth literature.

### Speculative and Science Fiction

Speculative and science fiction is often a space that takes our current realities to their logical, if tragic, ends. According to Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon in the introduction to *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*, "Science fiction notoriously reflects contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination, one associated with the future" (3). With this in mind, we can extrapolate that the current realities facing young Latinxs more generally, and queer young Latinxs in particular, translate to an equally oppressive future. However, studies of speculative fiction squaring on Black, Indigenous, and people of color takes a more ameliorative stance. Writing about Black women's science fiction, Sami Schalk explains "how politically astute speculative fiction can be, how it can comment on our world and make us imagine alternative possibilities" (1). What's more, according to Catherine S. Ramírez, who coined the term "Chicanafuturism," a sibling to Afrofuturism, "By appropriating the imagery of science and technology, Chicanafuturist," and in extension Latinxfuturist, "works to disrupt age-old racist and sexist binaries that exclude Chicanas and Chicanos from visions of the future" (189). Further, in their edited collection *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín assert "[Latinx] sci-fi and the speculative arts—even the most bleak, terrifying, and dystopic—project a utopian spirit through the genre's capacity for incisive social critique that cuts to the bone of our shared pasts and present" (6). This, of course, isn't to say that all Latinx speculative and science fiction is utopic in nature; rather, it works to disrupt normative systems of oppression that are currently in place.

The speculative notions of *More Happy Than Not* and *The Grief Keeper* suggest that Latinxs exist in the future and have access to cutting-edge procedures and this *should* imply that Latinxs can thrive in the future. Yet the futuristic components of Aaron's and Marisol's stories seem at odds with the inaccessibility of their future successes I alluded to in the beginning of this article. How can Aaron and Marisol exist in futuristic worlds wherein these procedures are easily performed, yet not have access to the queer futures that would provide them with agency and possibilities for growth? This conundrum is one that I grapple with in the following two sections, ultimately asserting that the future is rendered both possible and impossible in these novels, and it is this ambiguity that lays the framework for queer Latinx youth literature in our own future.

### Erased Memories - Erased Futures?

In both books, science and medicine often pathologize queerness. Though homosexuality hasn't been qualified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association since the 1970s, that does not stop homophobia and anti-queer sentiments from persisting and from influencing

medical decisions and diagnoses. For example, in *More Happy Than Not*, queerness is something that the Leteo procedure boasts to suppress or erase, via the annexing of queer memories. Memories are intimate, but ultimately fallible. According to Mark L. Howe and Lauren M. Knott, “memory does not provide a veridical representation of events as experienced. Rather, what gets *encoded* into memory is determined by what a person attends to, what they already have stored in memory, their expectations, needs and emotional state” (633, emphasis in original). Thus, memories are made up of who we are as people (Giaino 63; Robillard and Illes 1223). The impact of memory on identity and self-efficacy is significant; past experiences radically impact forward motion. Aaron’s desire for Leteo finds root in his internalized homophobia that disallows him from being fully himself. He seeks out the Leteo procedure, not necessarily to use it to erase traumatic memories as it’s billed to do, but to force himself to forget his queer desire and eliminate the possibility of a queer future.

*More Happy Than Not* opens with skepticism of the Leteo procedure. Aaron knows little of Leteo itself other than being exposed through a friend who recently received the procedure to erase memories of his dead brother. Aaron misses his friend and is curious about how Leteo works, but he is largely unconcerned. As the novel progresses, Aaron—whose own past traumas make him ponder if the Leteo procedure would help him forget his father’s death by suicide and Aaron’s own ensuing attempt to end his life<sup>1</sup>—is increasingly exposed to Leteo. Aaron and his new friend-turned-crush, Thomas, pass a protest against Leteo. When the two question people in the crowd, they’re informed, “‘A girl has gone brain dead because of Leteo ... she’s the fourth this week. We’re rallying to shut this place down’” (Silvera 81). Despite this dire prognosis, Aaron becomes obsessed with the idea of Leteo, grasping at the hope that the procedure would make him forget his burgeoning feelings for Thomas and the ensuing violence he would face as an out queer person in his home in near-future Queens, New York City. In denial, Aaron explains, “‘Leteo is this place of second chances. I read a lot of the stories provided online through Leteo’s site’” (Silvera 141). He rationalizes that he’s found stories on the Leteo website that recount a young woman who had the procedure and it “‘straightened her out’” (Silvera 142). But, the procedure isn’t foolproof. In a pamphlet that Aaron procures, he learns “‘buried memories can resurface. This is known as ‘unwinding.’ [The memories] are typically triggered by detailed reminders, often care of loved ones, of exact moments of trauma. Specific scents, sounds, or images can also trigger an unwinding’” (Silvera 147). These risks of unwinding, along with Leteo’s other risks as a type of brain surgery, do not seem to trouble Aaron, who is single-minded in his desire for the procedure.

But, under the surface of Aaron’s longing for Leteo in *More Happy Than Not* is the reality that Aaron has already undergone the procedure before the book’s opening. In fact, his buried memories are unwound during a violent fight with his neighborhood friends over his close and queer-coded friendship with Thomas. Silvera details:

“There’s an explosion in the back of my head, a delayed reaction. Blood fills my mouth. This is what death feels like, I think. I scream like someone has turned a hundred knives inside of me, spitting up blood as I do. And I’m not crying because of the attack. I’m crying because there’s new noise in my head, and it builds from a couple faded echoes into an uproar of jumbled voices—all memories I once forgot have been unwound.” (155)

While the Leteo procedure was ultimately fairly straightforward when first performed, its unwinding has dire consequences. The fight and the aftereffects of the Leteo procedure damage

Aaron's brain irreparably, giving him a type of anterograde amnesia wherein he cannot form new memories.

Speaking about the blurred lines between fact and science fiction vis-à-vis memory alteration, Elizabeth A. Phelps and Stefan G. Hofmann explain, "even when the intention of memory editing is to reduce pain or protect someone, there can be unexpected consequences" (43). Unexpected consequences are an understated way to describe what happens to Aaron. Unable to form any new memories, Aaron is relegated to live in the past and relinquish his future. He "[plays] Remember That Time a lot," a game that he had initially devised to play with romantic partners to rehash their best moments, but now uses to help himself maintain the memories he does have (Silvera 253). The Leteo procedure so damages Aaron's brain that it is beyond repair. He maintains "hope in what ... Leteo [hopes] for" (Silvera 254). That is, he rests in the possibility of a cure, even as one does not come to fruition by the end of the novel. Rather we are left with the image of Aaron cycling through his existing memories, an action that situates him in the past rather than the future.

That *More Happy Than Not* leaves Aaron still relying on a medical procedure is both alarming and hopeful. We know that Aaron's first procedure did not end well. The idea that Leteo would even attempt an operation to erase someone's sexuality when conversion therapies are largely outlawed is problematic and detrimental to imagining a future in which queerness isn't maligned or rejected. Yet, the idea that Leteo is seeking to right their wrongs with Aaron signals that medical science will make significant strides in traumatic brain injuries. Regardless, Aaron's future is left in the balance and his queerness, that which he sought to destroy, is still present.

It would seem, then, that Aaron's future may be tenuous, but it is one in which his queerness still exists. In this way, *More Happy Than Not* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of rejecting one's self. Through Aaron's tragic life, Silvera tells us that the future is dependent on accepting all memories, even those that are painful and especially those that are deeply about ourselves such as one's sexuality. Yet, the tepid view of Aaron's future we receive is not one that provides any comfort or solace to young queer and/or Latinx readers. While I don't contend that all books need happy endings and that we should sugarcoat the realities of homophobia and prejudice, I do find it alarming that Aaron exists in a near-future world, but his own future is all but lost. What queer future does *More Happy Than Not* promise? Despite Aaron's own assertion of his approximate happiness, the prognosis for other queer young Latinxs, based on *More Happy Than Not*, isn't good.

### Undocumented Futures

On the surface, Alexandra Villasante's *The Grief Keeper* has a more inclusive and hopeful ending that belies its horrifying premise. In *The Grief Keeper*, Marisol is forced to participate in an experimental medical trial or else risk deportation. Like Aaron, who has no future unless he trusts in Leteo to undo the damage they inflicted on him, Marisol must trust that her participation in this trial will result in legal citizenship status. Upon escaping a detention center with her younger sister, Gabi, Marisol is picked up by the mysterious Indranie and taken to another government facility. There, she is introduced to Dr. Deng, who explains that Marisol must participate in this trial or else be deported. The trial "is the corticotropin transfer system, or CTS. It allows the chemicals, the stress factors—released into the body of a person suffering trauma—to be transferred to another person, a 'clean' subject without the same trauma burden" (Villasante 41). Unlike Leteo, which covers memories, CTS leaves "the memories of the trauma ... intact ... but

the feelings ... are greatly reduced. For the aggrieved person, in a matter of weeks it feels as if the trauma is in the distant past. Painful but vague. Remembered but distant” (Villasante 41). Marisol is told little about CTS itself. In fact, when she goes for surgery to receive the CTS implant, she’s not even sure what’s happening and wakes from anesthesia confused. When Indranie asks if her neck, where the subdermal implant is located, is sore, Marisol replies, ““I didn’t know there would be an implant”” (Villasante 50). Indranie insists this information was in the paperwork Marisol signed, but this assumes that Marisol has the legal status to sign away these rights. She’s a minor, undocumented, and not a native English speaker. She is abused in this system and misused for these medical purposes.

What’s more, even though the CTS procedure is meant to soothe soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder, Marisol isn’t assigned to help a soldier, but a teenage girl, Rey, whose father is an influential man in the government. Much like Marisol, Rey doesn’t know what’s happening with CTS. She is unaware that Marisol is the one serving as her surrogate, taking all of Rey’s depression into her own body and living with the very real psychological and physiological consequences. When Rey discovers this, she explodes, ““Who the fuck are they to decide who suffers and who doesn’t?”” (Villasante 262). Rey thinks CTS was meant to be symbiotic, that it ““was supposed to help *both* of us”” (Villasante 274, emphasis in original). Instead, Rey accuses, ““you didn’t tell me that Marisol was acting like some kind of grief keeper. Like she was a dump where I could safely throw all of my privileged-ass pain”” (Villasante 274). Rey, who is white and affluent, further expounds, ““Did you think I’d be okay with this? That because she’s an immigrant, I wouldn’t care? As long as I got rid of my grief, I’d be okay with ruining another girl’s life?”” (Villasante 275). Indranie then likens Marisol’s participation in the CTS trial to immigrants taking the jobs that white people typically do not want, like cleaning and farm work. Rey rejects this and continues to advocate for Marisol, insisting that her undocumented status should not have been reason to subject her to CTS. In the end, after the one-month CTS trial, neither Rey nor Marisol continues with the procedure. Marisol is given an asylum hearing in which she testifies that she has been a ““target to gangs in El Salvador”” because ““[she is] gay”” (Villasante 303). The interview concludes with Marisol unsure if she and Gabi will be granted legal citizenship, but the implication is that Rey will use her father’s political clout to sway the decision in Marisol’s favor.

Despite Rey’s advocacy for Marisol and the abortion of the CTS trial, Marisol is never truly in charge of her own future. The choices she makes give her some feeling of control, but she is always beholden to those with more power and social capital than her. That Marisol is subjected to the horrors of this medical trial due to her undocumented status is in keeping with contemporary medical treatment of detained migrants and other asylum-seekers. According to a report put out by New York Lawyers for the Public Interest:

“ICE ... routinely: deny vital medical treatment such as dialysis and blood transfusions to people with serious health conditions; subject sick people in need of surgery to unconscionable delays; ignore repeated complaints and requests for care from people with serious symptoms; and refuse basic items such as glasses and dentures to people with medical conditions.” (1)

To the government, undocumented immigrants like Marisol are disposable. While she is not deprived of medical care per se, she is certainly not treated well within medical settings. The government doesn’t care if Marisol lives or dies during the CTS trial or even after because she doesn’t officially gain legal citizenship status by the end of the novel. Her future is neither their

priority nor their problem. Everything Marisol does, despite barriers, is to seek a better future, but the reader can't even be sure if she gets it. Much like Aaron, who has a hope for the future, all Marisol can do is hope that her and Gabi's application for asylum is accepted and rely on others with more power, like Rey and Indranie, to advocate on her behalf. Marisol and Aaron never have any power over their individual futures.

### **Impossible Pasts, Presents, and Futures**

Though we may long for a concrete resolution, the open-endedness of *More Happy Than Not* and *The Grief Keeper* acts as a blank space upon which to inscribe a better future, if not for Aaron and Marisol, then for others like them. Much like scholars<sup>2</sup> have theorized that the queer and inclusive "x" in Latinx "offers a unique opportunity to do the work of imagining alternate worlds to those of our terrifying present," the unresolved endings of both novels could open paths to imagine new and more inclusive futures (Hudson para. 7). But it is a task that requires immense power of imagination. Our history and present conditions have taught us that for queer youth, particularly queer youth of color, the future is not ready to unfold before them unfettered.

According to a qualitative study by Toomey, et al., "Minority stressors and preparation for bias related to sexual orientation were positively associated with depressive symptoms and negatively associated with self-esteem" (3597). That is, the co-occurrence of racism and homophobia deeply impacts youth of color's abilities not only to accept their queered sexualities but also negatively impacts their quality of life in general. In keeping with Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, the concomitant effects of homophobia and racism are what prevent Aaron and Marisol from having any present agency. What's more, another study reveals, "As a result of myriad minority stressors, many LGBTQ youth, particularly youth of color, become detached from supportive and protective institutions, including family and school" (Gamarel, et al. 290). These young people feel helpless and, often rightfully, that the adults in their lives will perpetuate the homophobia that is prevalent in the surrounding social structures. Added to this, for characters like Aaron, whose low socio-economic status, and Marisol, whose undocumented status, already mean they have little access to protective measures, they are even more vulnerable to the abuses of Leteo and CTS.

Interestingly, though, the Leteo procedure and CTS are both carried out by other minoritized individuals. William Orchard highlights, "the procedure is presented as a technology that emerges from the Latinx community rather than as one that is imposed upon it" (para. 6). Likewise, Marisol is selected for the CTS trial by Indranie, who mentions she is the daughter of immigrants, and Dr. Deng who is coded as an East Asian person. Often, minoritized peoples are complicit in their own oppression. For instance, social structures within Latinx communities, like machismo, code behaviors that reinforce heteropatriarchal ideals (Gattamorta and Quidley-Rodriguez 744). Likewise, Rachel M. Schmitz, Julissa Sanchez, and Bianca Lopez found, "Overall, LGBTQ+ Latinx youth are less likely to disclose their sexual and/or gender identities to parents compared to [w]hite LGBTQ+ youth, and there is evidence that Latinx families are less accepting of gender and sexual diversity" (19). These harsh realities that preclude Latinx youth from accessing support structure bar them from future efficacy.

And fictional worlds fare no better. Queer fiction for children, according to Thomas Crisp, is often grounded in heteropatriarchal ideals (336). Instead of imagining queer adolescents as proprietors of their own futures, literature for young readers reinforces the centrality of heterosexuality and its continued supremacy into the future. What's more, in her analysis of

award-winning queer children's book, Laura M. Jiménez notes that children of color are largely absent (419). Taken together, these factors reinforce my assertion that the future is not (easily) accessible to queer young Latinxs. Aaron and Marisol's futures are tenuous at best. The few moments in which their futures seem accessible are not enough to prove that queer Latinx youth have the future speculative fiction espouses.

### The Power of Imagined Futurity

Yet, I don't want to, nor can I, leave this article on such a dire prognosis. Recent events, like the Pulse and Parkland massacres and the detention of children at the border, make imagining queer Latinx futures more imperative than ever (cárdenas 26). But, as Lysa Rivera explains, "Writing about the future from the bottom up or from the margin to the center, is itself an act of agency and will" (433). It requires an immense power of imagination, but speculative fiction for young readers may be up to the challenge. In "Science Fiction and Latino Studies Today...and in the Future," Fabio Chee explains, "Latina/os and African Americans share similar goals when it comes to science fiction: to counter the injustice of bias, racism, and systematic discrimination that negates them a place in the future, as it did to them in the past" (115). Put another way, speculative fiction is a mechanism by which we can test out theoretical paths to futures with more equitable conditions. It might be out of the realm of possibility to say that our future encompasses medical advances like Leteo or CTS, but right now our future is full of new technologies and present oppression. The new future hypothesized through speculative and science fiction can instead seek to undo our present oppression. In a way, by upsetting the dominant order, these imagined futures are distinctly queer.

Shane T. Moreman, in his analysis of queer youth literature, explains, "the potentiality of the queer future is made manifest within moments of reflection upon the dominant messages queer youth receive. This potentiality becomes discursive change when we devise lessons from the past to negotiate better messages for our present queer selves and queer communities" (187). In other words, we need to understand where queer Latinx youth have been to understand where they could go. I opened this article with a discussion of the trajectory of oppressive present to queer future. For Aaron and Marisol, memories of their traumatic pasts move them toward the futuristic and dangerous endeavors of Leteo and CTS. Their hope that these procedures offer a transformative future is suffused throughout their individual narratives.

Their hope renders that ameliorated future both possible and impossible. Resting in the unspoken stretch of the end of both novels, the future is sort of like Schrödinger's cat—both present and absent, possible and impossible, easily imagined and unimaginable. I feel as if I could squint and see it in the distance, or perhaps it is a mirage. In this way, José Esteban Muñoz's hypothesis that "queerness is not yet here" links to the possibility rendered by these books' open endings (1). Angel Daniel Matos further explains, "According to this approach, queerness is thus a rejection of presentist modes of thinking, a striving for a future with different possibilities and outcomes—even though one recognizes that this future may always be out of reach" (39). I suppose, as I meditate on Aaron's and Marisol's tragic pasts and presents, I have to question: Are their futures out of reach? Is the future truly an impossibility for queer Latinx youth?

For nearly the totality of *More Happy Than Not*, Aaron does not want to take his queerness with him. And, though Marisol could use the persecution she faces for her sexuality as a valid claim to asylum, she instead initially concocts an entirely different story and buries her queerness. Yet the plot progression of both novels reveals that queerness cannot be concealed. Aaron's

unwinding brings back his relationship with one of his neighbors and the CTS trial pairs Marisol with Rey and provides them with the opportunity to forge a queer relationship. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz calls us to “think about our lives and time differently” (189). In this way, Muñoz and the absence of an explicitly queer future in *More Happy Than Not* and *The Grief Keeper* provides us with a space for imagination. When we think about time differently, we engage in processes not dissimilar to Aaron and Marisol, who seek to reimagine their pasts to influence their present and future conditions.

Imagining a better future, both in and out of Latinx literature, is no small task. *More Happy Than Not* and *The Grief Keeper* give us glimpses of a future in which queer Latinx youth can seek possibilities, even if those possibilities never fully resolve into positive change. Instead, alongside my urging that we think of time and the linkage between the past and future queerly, I assert we read these two novels as the infancy of a corpus of speculative queer Latinx young adult literature. They are the early drafts of what I hypothesize will be a robust genre that seeks to (re)imagine the possibilities of queerness in a better future. In the end, reading for queer Latinx futures means accepting the necessity for imagination and the promise of a better tomorrow.

## Endnotes

Thank you to: Pete Kunze for finding that source I lost; and to the Shippensburg faculty/staff writing group for their support as I revised this article.

1. Interestingly, Katelyne R. Browne theorizes that Aaron attempts suicide three times: “once by slitting his wrists, and twice by pursuing a treatment known as ‘the Leteo procedure,’ which promises to completely erase one memory from a patient’s brain” (16). Browne’s theorization here—that the Leteo procedure is akin to attempting death—reifies my assertion that Aaron is not afforded the possibility of a future.
2. Indeed, Hudson isn’t the only scholar to note this. Author and scholar David Bowles has penned a series of popular and sometimes vilified articles on the Indigenous implications of the “x” in Latinx as well as its origins with queer, U.S.-based Latin Americans. Ricardo L. Ortiz also explains that “[t]he x acts here instead as a suspension in time’s unfolding, a pause to consider and to accommodate what might take place next in the place of and as an alternative to gender, especially heteropatriarchal, binary cis-gender” (203). The connections between the queer origins and futuristic implications of Latinx are exigent for my analysis.

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