



## QUEERING THE AMERICAN (SUPER)HERO IN CASSANDRA CLARE'S SHADOWHUNTERS NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents Alec Lightwood in Cassandra Clare's Shadowhunters Young Adult urban fantasy novels as a character that questions and subverts the tenets underpinning the association between exceptionalism and heroicity in American culture, thus fostering a reworking of the myth of the superhero in the nation's twenty-first-century imagination. In his trajectory from closeted gay boy to hero of several wars and leader of the Shadowhunters, Alec queers the hegemonic American heroic ideal by subverting the paradigm of heteronormative masculinity conventionally associated with it and promotes a model of heroism that champions cooperation, empathy, and personal feelings. After clarifying how Shadowhunter traditions mirror American national core values and introducing the Nephilim as a particular kind of (super)heroes that expose the way those values can lead to corruption and destruction if deployed to supremacist ends, I describe Alec's atypical heroism, grounded in the inseparability of the private and the public and encouraging a rethinking of what makes the America strong and good. I also explore the unusual importance given in Clare's novels to a hero's romantic and family life as a means for exploring—through Alec's queerness—the contribution of the instrumentalization of love and family to the preservation of hegemonic ideals and its negative impact on the imagined future of the nation.

*Keywords:* YA literature, Young Adult, queerness, queer hero, literature.

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This article presents Alec Lightwood in Cassandra Clare's Shadowhunters Young Adult urban fantasy novels as a character that questions and subverts the tenets underpinning the association between exceptionalism and heroicity in American culture, thus fostering a reworking of the myth of the superhero in the nation's twenty-first-century imagination. Superhero narratives—especially in cinematic adaptations—continue to affirm (white) heterosexual masculinity as the dominant cultural position and identity in the post-millennial United States, a function that, as Jeffrey Allan Brown (2019) remarks, is part and parcel of the genre's nostalgic association with the nation's tradition of exceptionalism (71 and 90–91). Based on the several similarities between Clare's fictional world and American society, I argue that, in his trajectory from closeted gay boy to hero of several wars and leader of the Shadowhunters, Alec queers the hegemonic American heroic ideal

by overturning the paradigm of heteronormative masculinity conventionally associated with it and promoting a model of heroism that champions cooperation, empathy, and personal feelings.

The Shadowhunters, or Nephilim, are part-angel/part-human warriors ordained to protect humanity from demons and unruly Downworlders—warlocks, vampires, werewolves, and faeries. They are a global but isolated community, with most members carrying out their mandate from Institutes scattered around the world and a secret home country, Idris, in the heart of Continental Europe.<sup>1</sup> Encouraged by the strict adherence to ancient laws and traditions, “a certain blood-and-thunder machismo [creeps] in uncomfortably around the edges of Shadowhunter culture ... [a] narrative of inborn strength and supremacy ... that always threaten[s] to resurface among the Nephilim” (Clare and Chu 2020, 70) and that, in the instalments of Clare’s saga set in the present-day United States, brings them on the verge of self-destruction. A teenage New Yorker who, together with his friends, starts breaking the law as much to prevent the end of the Nephilim as to protect the person he loves, Alec is the character that best highlights the tensions and contradictions that vex both Shadowhunter and American society. Despite being a secondary or marginal character in most of Clare’s books, his personal story of growth rewrites the criteria that regulate who can represent the nation and (re)define its values.<sup>2</sup>

I begin by clarifying how Shadowhunter traditions mirror American national core values and introducing the Nephilim as a particular kind of (super)heroes that expose the way those values can lead to corruption and destruction if deployed to supremacist ends. I then explore the two areas in which Alec’s atypical heroism results more subversive of American dominant ideas of heroic masculinity. Firstly, I describe how Alec’s

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<sup>1</sup> This aspect is emphasized also by the recurrence of a limited range of family names through books set in different historical periods, which helps readers link characters from a certain series with their ancestors and realize that Shadowhunter families are ultimately all related to one another. Alec belongs to one of the oldest Nephilim families. His ancestors, who appear in the *The Infernal Devices* (2010–2013) and *The Last Hours* (2020–2023), brought equal praise and shame to the family name. Emblematically, Alec’s parents rehabilitate themselves by accepting exile to the New York Institute after taking part in the failed Uprising led by Valentine Morgenstern, but their attitudes towards Downworlders radically change only after Alec openly commits to his relationship with Magnus.

<sup>2</sup> *The Mortal Instruments* series (2007–2014) revolves around Clary Fairchild who, after discovering that she is Nephilim, leads her peers from the New York Institute (among which Alec) in the fight against her father, Valentine Morgenstern, and later her stepbrother, Jonathan, who both want the Nephilim to rule over Downworld. Its sequel, *The Dark Artifices* (2016–2018) is set in Los Angeles five years later, where Emma Carstairs and Julian Blackthorn must protect their relationship, family and, eventually, all Shadowhunters from the dangerous alliance between the Cohort and the realms of Faerie. *The Infernal Devices* (set in 1878 London) and *The Last Hours* (set in 1903 London and Paris) are prequels to *The Mortal Instruments* that narrate the story of the warlock Tessa Grey and her children respectively. *The Eldest Curses* (2019–) is the spinoff trilogy where Alec and Magnus become the protagonists, a development that might have been encouraged by the characters’ increased popularity following the *Shadowhunters* TV series.

understanding of the private and the public as inseparable encourages a rethinking of what makes a Shadowhunter—and by proxy the United States—strong and good. Secondly, I present the unusual importance given in Clare’s novels to a hero’s romantic and family life as a means for exposing—through Alec’s queerness—the contribution of (super)heroes to the preservation of hegemonic discourses on love and family that prevent the emergence of an American society in which differences and change are not dreaded but valued and indispensable for the nation’s future prosperity.

### 1. SHADOWHUNTERS, (SUPER)HEROES, AND A HOUSE DIVIDED

As Heike Paul (2014) argues, the United States have historically imagined and projected themselves as an inherently good country, characterized by a sense of political and moral superiority. Narratives of destiny and exceptionalism, however, have also prevented the establishment of a just and cohesive community, especially from a racial perspective (12–14). The Shadowhunters reproduce, in a fantasy world, Americans’ self-image as God’s chosen ones with a mission of divine calling. The order is named after Jonathan Shadowhunter, who received its legendary mandate to protect humanity from demons from the Angel Raziel. While Clare imagines a post-racial society (Ho 2018, 142–43), her novels recuperate a critique of racial discrimination in the United States through the tensions between the Nephilim, who have historically shown an obsession with purity, and traditional fantasy races, namely werewolves, vampires, warlocks, and faeries. Until the late 1800s, Shadowhunters could gain wealth and prestige by freely hunting and killing Downworlders, which reflects the history of Native and Black Americans. In a way that evokes the one-drop rule principle in twentieth-century United States (Ho 2018, 147–48), while having one Nephilim parent is enough to be considered a Shadowhunter, ‘biracial’ children are extremely rare and subject to violent discrimination. Despite improvements in the last century, racial tensions and fears have regularly been exploited by conservative individuals or groups in the Clave (the Nephilim’s political body) to attempt a return to the old order. Consequently, instead of concerning themselves exclusively with demons, Shadowhunters are regularly dragged into civil wars that drastically reduce their number and ultimately risk annihilating them, such as the Mortal War and the Dark War in *The Mortal Instruments* series (2007–2014).

In a semeiotic reverse of the Cold War, the Cold Peace is the name of the terrible relationships between the Nephilim and the faeries after the latter are defeated in the Dark War. The conservative Clave faction known as the Cohort exploits this tense situation to gain support and campaign for the enforcement of a harsher state of police and severe restrictions to Downworlders’ rights, including a register of all warlocks and internment camps for werewolves. Arguably, this process mirrors the rise of far-right populism in the real United States. After another fratricidal battle toward the end of *The Dark Artifices* trilogy (2016–2018), the Cohort refuses to recognize the new Consul, its younger

members threaten to kill themselves if Idris is not surrendered to them, and finally barricade themselves in the country, cutting all communications with the other Nephilim worldwide. Idris thus fulfils its status of heterotopian place not only, as described by Eva Opperman (2018), by concealing Shadowhunters from mundanes (410), but also and especially by symbolizing the state of crisis within the Shadowhunter society.

The new Consul that the Cohort rejects is Alec. Despite being the eldest son of a respected family and the hero of several wars, Alec fails to embody the “old traditions, ... the way things always have been and always should be” (Clare 2018, 831) by being openly gay and in a committed relationship with Magnus Bane, one of the oldest and most powerful warlocks in the world. Since his first steps in politics five years earlier,<sup>3</sup> Alec has incessantly worked to dismantle unjust laws and guarantee freedom to Shadowhunters and Downworlders alike, a commitment of which his first actions as an adult warrior in the Mortal War are clearly emblematic: the Nephilim win the War thanks to the Alliance rune, which binds them to a Downworlder partner allowing both to share their respective powers. This rune discredits the Shadowhunters’ obsession with blood purity by literally rehabilitating miscegenation as strength and a means for survival. Minutes before the battle, Alec asks Magnus to be his partner, on the field and implicitly in life, by drawing the rune on the warlock’s skin and kissing him in front of all the assembled Nephilim and Downworlders.

By choosing a public occasion for coming out even to his parents, Alec unwittingly lays the basis for a reworking of the national paradigm of heroism that redefines its associated ideal of masculinity—from the emphasis on physical strength and heterosexuality to the marginal role of love and family in a hero’s life. In finding a sense of belonging with Magnus (Clare and Brennan 2020, 444) and refusing to follow the heteronormative directives of Shadowhunter traditions, Alec exemplifies queer reorientation in both the senses described by Sara Ahmed (2006): “a question not only about how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home’” (7). Both because and despite of his sexuality and his stance on Shadowhunters-Downworlders relationships, after the Dark War Alec becomes a role model and source of inspiration for an increasing number of Nephilim, especially the new generations (Clare and Brennan 2016, 557; 2020, 374; Clare and Chu 2020, 156), thus embodying hope for a reformed society. Furthermore, as the leader of the progressive Nephilim in exile, Alec enacts the critically utopian potential of the fantasy genre in the American cultural imaginary that Jes Battis (2007) describes as the ability to “[imagine] new ethical possibilities for us” (259). The values that Alec represents by living an openly queer life and engaging in activism with Downworlders enshrine, depending on the perspective, “what never was” (259)—a society where everyone enjoys equal

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of political participation, the Nephilim are a highly democratic society where decisions are made collectively by all Nephilim aged eighteen and above.

rights—”or what *always already*” (259 original emphasis)—since American values have theoretically always supported equality of rights but were never fully applied because of the ongoing presence of reactionary forces.

Confirming Battis’s (2007) claim that fantasy literature emerges from structures of melancholy, with their inherent elements of mourning, loss and exclusion, and that queer characters are the “most sophisticated and transgressive” outcome of this process (3), Alec is the hero that better articulates this tension between a real and an imagined America in Clare’s fictional universe. Like most fantasy quests, the Shadowhunters’ attempt to restore a lasting peace is organized around what Battis defines as “a scene of psychic lack that can only be recuperated through mythical discourse” (10): the lack of a community truly capable of living by its own founding values. In this framework, the imbrication of the personal with the political in Alec’s life represents what Battis describes as

[t]he ultimately liberatory task of the queer fantasy hero [which] is not just to have the last word, but to rewrite the *legal* or *national* lack—the quest to be fulfilled—as his or her own psychic lack, ... the partial object to be recovered, the gender to be revealed, or the personal history to be reclaimed. (11, original emphasis)

Asked by his father, Robert, whether he would be interested in taking over his position of Inquisitor, Alec immediately fantasizes about what he could achieve as the second most powerful person in the Clave: “having a hand in the making of the Law, ... put some sort of dent in the Cold Peace. Being able ... to get married” (Clare and Brennan 2020, 447). When the Shadowhunter crisis escalates and he directly becomes Consul, Alec marries Magnus in a matter of days, thus fulfilling the liberatory quest of the queer fantasy hero of rewriting Shadowhunter history by simultaneously reclaiming his personal history and having the last word against the Cohort, at least in the short term.

As the first and last line of defense in the eternal war between good and evil, Shadowhunters perform a similar function to that of superheroes, stock characters that have been shaping the notion of exceptionality in the American cultural imagination—and worldwide—for almost a century. Natalie Underberg-Goode (2022) describes superheroes as characterized by “a pro-social and selfless mission, special powers, secret identity, and a costume featuring symbolism” (15). While Shadowhunters fulfil the first of these conditions, they are closer to the superhuman than the supernatural, as their powers are essentially non-magical and consist in enhanced human abilities obtained by means of a Spartan physical training and angelic runes drawn on their skin. Most of these marks are not permanent, therefore Shadowhunters basically look like heavily scarred or tattooed mundanes. They also do not wear any distinctive costume, but a rather simple, black leather gear aimed at protecting them from poisonous demon ichor. Like all Downworlders, they make themselves and their institutions invisible to mundanes through a light magic called glamour.



Moreover, while superheroes promote a model of exceptionalism closer to the cult of the strong leader—a cult that appeals only the most conservative of the Nephilim—Shadowhunter values evoke ancient mythologies and tribal societies that predate the individualistic value system of the patriarchal and capitalist modern world, as symbolized by their runes and exclusive use of cold weapons.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Shadowhunters were not created to be lone warriors but a ‘collective subject’ that needs cooperation to survive. Accordingly, Alec’s model of leadership is the opposite of the cult of personality: his major achievement is a political alliance between Shadowhunters and Downworlders that with the Cold Peace becomes an international point of reference and support against the increasing conservatism of the Clave. He believes that, to be stronger, “[w]e have to trust people, ... [n]ot just people we love. We have to believe in people, and we have to defend them. As many people as possible” (Clare and Brennan 2020, 413), which also means giving everyone the agency and the power to question the law. While this philosophy is not without risks, it is the only way for the Nephilim to fulfil their role of protectors without it escalating into assumption of exceptionalism. Faithful to his ideals, after resolving a crisis in Buenos Aires, Alec refuses to become head of the local Institute, encouraging instead a change of leadership in the city, and once he becomes Consul he remains approachable, treating all Shadowhunters and Downworlders as his equals.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that righteous Shadowhunters uphold values that are essentially human. For example, the sense of morality that they very much need to fulfil their mission is a human quality, and not an angelic gift, which evokes the way Superman became the ultimate standard for American heroes and guardian of the national values thanks to his Texan upbringing rather than his Kryptonian origins (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013, 84). To my purposes here, and in alignment with the importance of romance in Clare’s novels, it is useful to notice that to love in human terms is another crucial ability for the Nephilim, as Magnus explains very well when he says:

they have the blood of angels in them, and the love of angels is a high and holy thing ... I look at Alec and I feel like Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*. “*Abashed the Devil stood, And felt how awful goodness is.*” He meant ... “Awful” as in inspiring awe. And awe is well and good, but it’s poison to love. Love has to be between equals. (Clare 2014, 383, original emphasis)

By repeatedly choosing Magnus above everything else, Alec personifies the triumph of human love, the one that makes you simultaneously powerful and vulnerable, and

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<sup>4</sup> The rune on the cover of *The Mortal Instruments* books, a symbol of the entire Shadowhunter universe, is the Enkeli (Finnish for ‘angel’) or Angelic Power rune, one of the most powerful marks, used to turn weapons lethal against demons and to initiate the young Nephilim. The rune is a reworking of the Futhark rune  $\mathfrak{E}$  which means “hereditary, land, possession” (Page 1987, 15). The symbol’s connection to ancient tribal cultures, distinctive identity and sense of belonging is demonstrated also by its adoption as logo by the racing car brand Cupra to mark its independence from the Seat and Volkswagen parent companies (LogoDesignerTV 2018).

consequently undermines the kind of exceptionalism promoted by representations of superheroes that conventionally restrain from focusing on romance and foreground individual displays of heroism instead.

## 2. THE MAKING OF AN ATYPICAL HERO

As explained earlier, since Clare's fantasy world closely intermingles with the real world, it is possible to conflate the Shadowhunters with the American people and see their heroes as the equivalent of superheroes, hence as an embodiment of the nation's core values. Because heroism is immanent in the Nephilim's nature and mission, Shadowhunter heroes are Nephilim who perform much greater feats than the ordinary demon hunting, such as literally saving the world. Alec becomes a hero by fighting first in the Mortal War and soon after in the battle of the Burren and the Dark War, following which he progressively comes to represent the best of the Nephilim's and by proxy of the (often unfulfilled) American principles. However, in addition to saving the world and the Shadowhunters from destruction, Alec always has the personal goal of protecting or saving Magnus. For example, in the Dark War, while other Shadowhunters heroically fight and/or die in Alicante, Idris' capital, Alec and his friends defeat the enemy in the demonic realm of Edom, where Alec has dragged them primarily to save a kidnapped Magnus. This imbrication of private life with public duty—even more evident in the spinoff series *The Eldest Curses* (2019-) that tells Alec and Magnus's adventures as a couple—represents a net deviation from the conventional arch of the American (super)hero, especially if we consider that Alec is gay.

As Underberg-Goode (2022) explains, in western tradition, superheroes are a modern revision of those heroic mythological figures that have historically mediated our understanding of the world and our actions in it, providing order to our lives and illustrating the “process of personal struggle and triumph, growth and transformation, and quest fulfilment” (19). With specific reference to American culture, superheroes were born to reflect concerns such as nationalism, social stability, and changing gender roles and, more broadly, “important human concerns [such as] crime and punishment, ethics and justice, and the responsibility of the individual vis-à-vis society” (19). It follows, as Brown (2016) underlines, that these stories have traditionally promoted a bourgeois ideology, by contributing to the creating and upholding of a patriarchal value system. For this reason, as a “rudimentary fantasy of masculine empowerment” (133), most superheroes are male and, especially when they personify the nation, heterosexual. As Brown summarizes, the superhero “is stronger than anyone, defeats every villain, is always in the right, and gets the girl” (131), all conditions that clash with the possibility of a gay superhero, firstly

because he would not be interested in women and secondly because this would overturn the conventional relegation of queer fictional characters to the role of helper or villain.<sup>5</sup>

Alec not only deviates from the heteronormative patterns of superheroism but also, and more importantly, becomes a hero through a gradual, painful process of exploration and acceptance of his sexuality. It is in this respect emblematic that prior to meeting Magnus, Alec has never killed a demon. His initial status of second-rate warrior thus hints at the fact that, to become a real hero, Alec first needs to defeat his own demons, namely his interiorized homophobia. At the beginning of *The Mortal Instruments*, Alec is an insecure eighteen-year-old with a platonic crush on his foster brother Jace and afflicted by a mix of dread and guilt for not being able to meet his father's expectations: Robert "used to joke insistently about Alec and girls. It was too painful to respond to those comments. Alec talked less and less" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 446). At first, therefore, Alec appears as the stereotypical closeted gay boy, destined to remain Jace's sidekick—a role that, as Neil Shyminsky (2011) reminds us, conventionally served the purpose of reinforcing the ideological association of the main superhero with heteronormative values (289).

As Brown (2016) argues, however, as a "ritualized presentation of masculinization," the emergence of a superhero relies precisely on "[t]he shift from 'less-than-ordinary' to 'extraordinary' masculinity" (134). The great emphasis that this moment of (bodily) transformation receives in contemporary cinematic adaptations of comics stories betrays the ongoing importance that the genre "[aligns] with the valorization of traditional masculine ideals such as physical strength, resiliency, power, and heterosexual desirability" (134). Queering this process, the moment that can be seen as marking the beginning of Alec's long shift from less-than-ordinary to extraordinary does not involve any bodily transformation and instead centralizes vulnerability and emotions: having failed his real first attempt at killing a demon, Alec spends one night "in a delirium of pain and poison ... watching Magnus' face in the light of the rising sun [while the warlock heals him] ... and thinking how oddly beautiful he was" (Clare n.d., n.p.). Soon after, on Alec's initiative, the couple starts dating and Alec starts killing demons, often to protect Magnus. Along with his sexuality, Alec is progressively forced to admit that peace and justice can be achieved only by fighting the Clave's politics along with the enemy (Clare 2014, 390).

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<sup>5</sup> An exhaustive comparative analysis of queer superhero narratives would require much more space than this article can provide, especially following the range of new and diverse characters that have appeared in Marvel comics and movies since the 2010s. I limit myself to noticing that, while queer readings and/or revisions of long-running characters such as Captain America and Batman mostly rely on either faultlines—that is, on problems and contradictions generated by the strategic repetitions that turn superheroes into mythical figures—or the presence of sexually ambiguous secondary characters (see Later 2019 and Shyminsky 2011, respectively), Alec is an instance of YA fantasy hero that is constructed unquestionably queer from the very beginning. In this regard, see also Robert Bittner's (2016) argument about the (im)possibility of any character just "happening to be" queer (206–207).



Alec's first steps at self-discovery take center stage in *The Red Scrolls of Magic* (2019), the first book of *The Eldest Curses* that follows his romantic-turned-adventurous vacation throughout Europe with Magnus. The novel unapologetically foregrounds queer romance right from its cover, which as Battis (2021) explains, "marks the first instance of a primary queer couple on a popular YA fantasy novel cover, depicted as a couple in no uncertain terms" (55). Alec's heroic duty is thus presented as inseparable from and often a threat to his private life: what should have been an occasion to figure out if and how he and Magnus can be together despite their differences suddenly turns into a mission to save Magnus from a demonic cult that he founded centuries ago as a joke. For the first time, Alec has to act alone to protect the person that he loves the most, by going against his Shadowhunter upbringing and beliefs. Queer sexual desire plays a central role in twisting the way this process unfolds, helping subvert conventional paradigms of heroic heterosexual masculinity. The traditionally restrained representation of the superhero's love life, due among other things to the fact that the superhero usually avoids getting too close to his potential love interest to ensure her protection (Shyminsky 2011, 294), is replaced by the search and achievement of total queer sexual fulfilment, as emphasized by the fact that bad news and enemy attacks invariably interrupt Alec's attempts at having sex with Magnus.

The multi-layered symbolism of the train in American culture contributes to portraying the complexity of Alec's inextricable relationships with both love and danger. As Aliya Whiteley (2013) explains, in American movies trains can symbolize several things, from romance and suspense to adventure and action (n.p.). Early in *The Red Scrolls of Magic*, all these meanings conflate in the Orient Express, on which Alec and Magnus travel overnight from Paris to Venice. Clare could not choose a more appropriate setting for Alec's first individual display of heroism and a first romantic trip in which he does his best to find out more about Magnus's mysterious past. While Magnus eye-witnessed its early splendor and presently recognizes the Orient Express as the nostalgic relic of a long-gone era, for Alec the train is still a novel, fascinating opportunity for romance and adventure. The Express was created to provide wealthy western travelers with a gateway to the East. If we consider that Magnus is a Euro-Asian man whose story Alec longs to discover, the train both maintains his original function and reworks it from an American perspective: since to Alec, Magnus' Asianness represents the West, rather than the East, the journey takes the contours of a frontier romance, in which the idyllic mood of a luscious dinner through the French countryside followed by a sexy making-out session in the shower is suddenly interrupted by demons.

With this first direct personal attack since the beginning of their vacation, the Orient Express brusquely transforms into the equally iconic setting of a battle between good and evil, with Alec fighting a horde of demons on top of the speeding train to save Magnus. This 'race to the rescue'—a cross reference to an action movie staple as old as American

cinema itself—immediately aligns Alec with a wide array of popular (super)heroes—from Spider-Man and Batman to Indiana Jones and Ethan Hunt, but also betrays the script according to which spectacular feats are aimed at making the hero desirable to his heterosexual love interest: Alec is not trying to save a damsel in distress, but a man who is already his boyfriend and far more powerful than him (and semi-immortal). Furthermore, as is often the case with Alec’s early steps as a hero, the episode results in a half-failure. Alec almost dies (again) from demon poison but not after managing to free Magnus, who then uses his magic to save them both. While this might seem to undermine Alec’s status of hero, I argue that, in the broader context of his romantic vacation, Alec’s anticlimactic performance serves the purpose of branding him as a hero that stands out for having “the truest heart ... and the strongest faith in other people” (Clare 2014, 394–95) rather than for his exceptional physical prowess. It is unsurprising, then, that Alec eventually saves Magnus from the cultists not with a particularly heroic gesture but by proving that he knows him well enough to recognize him among dozens of magical replicas. He also sets the cultist leader free instead of delivering her to the Clave, which frames him as a hero for whom justice is always accompanied by mercy. That Alec is setting an example is confirmed by the fact that five years later a werewolf who witnesses his fight on top of the train calls for his help in Buenos Aires as the only Shadowhunter that she trusts—an episode to which I return later.

### 3. ENTER THE HERO’S FAMILY

In *The Lost Book of the White* (2020), Alec and Magnus’s adventures resume with parenting responsibilities added to the list of Alec’s atypical preoccupations for a hero. This time, his philosophy that union is strength is even more important to guarantee that when the mission is over their son, Max, still has at least one parent. While the couple’s Shadowhunter friends accompany them first to Shanghai and then to Diyu (hell in Chinese mythology) to heal Magnus from a wound imparted with a mysterious magical spear, the last heroic call is still Alec’s. Acting on a hunch, he asks Magnus to use the Alliance rune again and, when he literally throws himself on the magic spear in the remote chance of sparing Magnus from death, their conjoined powers overcome the magic of the weapon, preventing it from killing Alec. Two years later, as he is about to adopt another child, Alec remains as selfless as uncharacteristically focused on his romantic life for a hero: during a two-days mission in Buenos Aires, Alec constantly thinks of home, watching pictures of Magnus and Max to remind himself “what he was fighting for” (Clare and Brennan 2020, 396). This, however, does not stop him from risking his life saving all the werewolves women trapped in a collapsing building, an event for which he is hailed as a hero but that he summarizes to Magnus as “[nothing] exciting ... I found Rafe [sic. their new child]. I missed you. I came home. ... All I did was think about being worthy of coming home to you, ... [i]t was nothing much” (457). In light of the fact that soon after

Alec and Magnus will finally get married, it might seem that Clare ultimately represents queer love in conservative terms, that is, as aping heteronormative relationships. Contrary to that, I maintain that Alec and Magnus's multiracial and queer family exposes and subverts the ideological exploitation of love, family, and children in western hegemonic discourses of reproductive futurism, unmasking both the role that such discourses play in the Clave's schism and the contribution of superhero narratives to upholding conservative ideals.

Overall, Clare's saga foregrounds love as the universal language of the heart. From this perspective, Alec's insistence on having the right to an egalitarian marriage should not be seen as an assimilation of queer love to heteronormative social canons but rather as a testimony to David M. Halperin's (2019) claim that all love is inherently queer, in that it is a highly individual experience and radically incommensurable with established social forms (419). After all, the problem for Alec is not marrying a man—since same-sex marriage among Shadowhunters has always been so unthinkable that it has never been explicitly prohibited by law—but marrying a warlock. Alec and Magnus's wedding ritual is presented as the celebration of a union between cleaving souls that occurs regardless of the ceremony itself (Clare 2018, 862). This conceptualization on marriage is offered also by Mogan, a couple of ancient faerie weaponsmiths who gives Alec and Magnus matching swords that only soulmates can wield in *The Lost Book of the White*. One of the faeries addresses Alec as Magnus's husband and, when Alec shyly explains that they are not married, replies: "Do you see rings on *our* hands? And yet Mo Ye and I have been married since before the sea was salt" (Clare and Chu 2020, 179, original emphasis). Therefore, when Alec marks his skin with the wedding runes that symbolize his unbreakable union to Magnus, those runes perform the function that Ahmed (2006) ascribes to the lines that over time "become the external trace of an interior world," making visible "[w]hat we follow, what we do" (18). By marrying a Downworlder, however, Alec also queers said function by transforming his wedding runes into marks that refuse to blindly reproduce the restricting, inherited significance of pureblood Shadowhunter marriage and reorient their meaning toward union rather than exclusion.

Alec and Magnus's children are equally subversive of Shadowhunter laws and traditions. As Ahmed (2010) points out, the queer family is a decision, not a point on a (straight) line (114). Max's and Raphael's adoptions both involve a conversation between Alec and Magnus. Additionally, like every child in a queer family, their arrival is not quite ordinary and, additionally, follows a history of rejection. Max is abandoned for being a warlock when he is only a few months old, and Raphael, despite being a Nephilim orphan of the Dark War, is raised by a werewolf woman when the Buenos Aires Institute is taken over by Clive Breakspear (a member of the Cohort)—a clear example of how corrupted laws punish those whom they should protect the most. In this context, Alec and Magnus's family aligns with Ahmed's description of the queer family as a dwelling place where

children inherit points of deviation from the norm but these deviations do not lead to exclusion (114). Rather, they are celebrated as strengths: having experienced the walls of the New York Institute as a prison and thought of himself for a long time as a cause of unhappiness to his parents, Alec is committed to never reproduce the same situation in his own house (Clare and Brennan 2020, 446). Consequently, he thinks that Max and Raphael should be free of constructing their own identities, regardless of conventional expectations. While Magnus is willing to teach Raphael some simple magic tricks, Alec agrees to give Max a Shadowhunter training.

In Alec and Magnus's queer family children are not resources to exploit to perpetuate a patriarchal status quo but independent people bound to and taken care of by their parents based on unconditional love. This approach clashes with the old beliefs enacted by the youngest members of the Cohort. For example, to demonstrate that they are not bluffing when they threaten suicide to force Alec and his supporters out of Idris, a Cohort girl kills herself without hesitation upon her leader's command, who then shouts to Alec: "Can you build your new Clave on the blood of dead children?" (Clare 2018, 832). These words exemplify how the new generations are instrumentalized and exploited in a society shaped by ideals of purity and supremacy—ideals that lead to civil war and self-destruction. Alec's commitment to redressing this situation, both politically and as a parent, is symbolized by his actions in battle precisely in Buenos Aires, soon after he coincidentally meets Raphael. During his mission there, Alec dismantles a collaboration between a warlock and Breakspear's mercenaries aimed at experimenting on werewolf women to find a way for warlocks to reproduce. Raphael leads him to the place where the experiments are carried out and, in the attempt to protect Alec, is almost killed by Breakspear, who does not hesitate to hit a child with his full strength. In response, Alec breaks Breakspear's hand (Clare and Brennan 2020, 430)—literally the hand of a corrupted law that supports and is supported by an ideological exploitation of biological reproduction—thus symbolically breaking the cycle of hegemonic traditions that prevent his and other unconventional families from being acknowledged. As a fellow Nephilim in a relationship with a faery tells him in *The Lost Book of the White*, "Your family ... just by existing, by being so prominent in the Clave, you are doing much. *Your* family—if the Clave is to survive, that is their future. It must be" (Clare and Chu 2020, 351, original emphasis)—words that prove true when Alec becomes Consul.

The multiple levels on which Alec's family violates Shadowhunter traditions manifest also in the way most of the times Alec is simultaneously discriminated for being gay and in love with a Downworlder. For example, Breakspear calls Lily, the vampire woman who accompanies Alec to Buenos Aires, his "Downworlder whore" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 365). Since Magnus's prominent position as a warlock makes it very unlikely that Breakspear does not know that Alec's partner is a man, his slur/assumption betrays a simultaneous contempt for both Downworlders and gay love, a love whose name

Breakspear does not dare to speak. Soon after Max is adopted, the same interplay between miscegenation and queerness in unsettling Nephilim mores spurs a Shadowhunter girl to ask Alec's sister when she will give her parents "a real grandchild" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 407). To the objection that Max is not imaginary, the girl replies:

A Shadowhunter child, to teach our ways. Nobody would give those people a Shadowhunter child. Imagine a warlock around one of our little ones! And that kind of behavior. Children are so impressionable. It wouldn't be right. (407)

"Those people" and "that kind of behavior" equally refer to Alec and Magnus's sexuality and to the fact that Magnus and Max are warlocks, making it difficult to determine whether and which one of these deviations from Shadowhunter normative life patterns trumps the other. As Ahmed (2006) argues, heterosexuality serves the purpose and mechanism of social reproduction, illustrated by the straight vertical and horizontal (blood)lines of family trees, by allowing for the replication of the father's biological and cultural image (83). It thus "becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life" (86), a requirement that implicitly frames children as resources. Alec's family exposes these mechanisms and rewrites the Nephilim's concept of a good family. In biological terms, Alec appears as a reproductive 'dead end' not only for being gay but also for choosing Magnus as his partner, since warlocks cannot reproduce. Therefore, his ability, to paraphrase Ahmed, to "return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good" (21) relies exclusively on the possibility of this return to follow unconventional directions, such as having his adopted warlock son (another reproductive dead end) recognized as equal to a Shadowhunter biological child.

Against all odds, this possibility materializes when Alec's father manifests his acceptance of the warlock baby with a funny innuendo that acquires significant implications if Alec's family is to embody the future of the Clave. Since the child's skin is blue, like Alec's eyes and Magnus's magic, Robert asks Magnus whether he has magically made the baby for him and Alec (Clare and Brennan 2016, 553–54). By welcoming the possibility that magic was used to give a Shadowhunter-Downworlder same-sex couple the equivalent of a biological child, Robert is equating this reproductive path to heteronormative Nephilim parent-child blood relationships, and this despite the baby in question being a warlock. The Lightwoods' acceptance of the child as their equal is further demonstrated by their suggestion to name him Max after their late youngest child, thus officially making a warlock part of a Shadowhunter family. What might appear as an attempt at assimilation that leaves the Shadowhunters' alleged superiority unchallenged is in actuality an offer of affection and protection to a child that has been abandoned with the note "Who could ever love it?" (528). After all, the Lightwoods are aware that the naming might be only temporary, since warlocks choose their own name when they are old enough to define their identity.

Even more interesting is the way in which, by being adopted in a Shadowhunter family, Max potentially enters and expands the Nephilim—and by proxy American—canons of patriotic heroism. Max’s skin is described as “[t]he blue of Captain America’s suit” (Clare and Brennan 2016, 528). This analogy projects Max, a child who has no way of conventionally reproducing his Shadowhunter fathers’ inheritance (neither biologically nor in socio-cultural terms) as the future of the core values of the American-like Nephilim society personified by Alec. As Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon (2016) explain, Captain America’s costume presents him as “an embodiment of American pride and superiority, a character created as a defender of the values of the United States” (56). However, differently from other superheroes, who maintain ownership of their costumes and associated roles, the identity of a national personification such as Captain America is the result of an “act of appropriation,” planned and regulated by those national authorities that carefully chose him as a candidate worthy of representing the nation and entrusted him with a costume that allows him to become a national symbol across time (58). While the above-mentioned analogy endows Max with the same function, the fact that, contrary to Captain America, Max owns his blue skin subversively makes him a natural candidate for embodying the nation and its values, despite the fact that most Shadowhunters would never entrust a warlock with that power. Moreover, the possibility that a warlock could finally uphold and personify Shadowhunter values makes Max an emblem of the positive, profound changes effected by his unconventional family. By being semi-immortal, Max projects these changes into a potentially endless future, even more consistently than the way the static national symbol of the American flag survives across time through Captain America’s iconic stars-and-stripes costume.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Raised to believe in the Nephilim’s exceptionality and superiority over mundanes and Downworlders, Alec has to accept his queer identity and love for a warlock in order to become a man and a true hero. As the laws of his people reveal themselves a threat to Shadowhunters, too, Alec understands that war and injustice are caused not by nonconformity to Nephilim traditions, but by the latter’s dependence on immobilism, systemic racism, and heteronormative notions of reproductive futurism. By embracing the true, positive values of the Nephilim, such as their human capacity for compassion and selflessness, in what are currently the latest pages of Clare’s fantasy saga Alec finally appears as a confident man, unafraid to confesses that

when one day people look back on me and what my life meant, I don’t want them to say, “Alec Lightwood fought in the Dark War” or even “Alec Lightwood was Consul once.” I want them to think, “Alec Lightwood loved one man so much he changed the world for him.” (Clare 2018, 856)



Since Shadowhunter society mirrors the national core values of the United States, Alec encourages Clare's readers to question the association of heroicity with the dominant idea of masculinity that (super)heroes have contributed perpetuating for at least a century, in comics and especially on the big screen. Whereas male (super)heroes are expected to show physical prowess, relative emotional detachment and heterosexual desirability, Alec embodies new paradigms of strength and righteousness, rooted in the coexistence of authority and kindness, power and feelings.

Because Shadowhunter mores discriminate against queer people as much as against Downworlders, Alec, Magnus and their children highlight the intersectionality of oppression and the inextricable relationship between private and public good. As a queer fantasy hero with a complex and carefully explored coming-of-age journey, Alec challenges the normative traditions upheld by the Cohort and by far-right Americans with peace politics based on mutual respect, cooperation, and equality, and a family united not by blood but by choices and unconditional love. Through his position as Consul and the rise of his family as a symbol of the future of the Clave, Alec allows a gay man with interracial adoptive children to represent the Nephilim and the United States and (re)define their core values. Thanks to the speculative potential of the fantasy genre, Clare's readers can thus witness the dawn of a new hopeful age in which everybody can participate in the making of a more just nation.

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