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Sapphic Representations in Contemporary Young Adult Literature

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I confirm that the work is self-prepared and that references/source references to all sources used in the work are provided, cf. Regulation relating to academic studies and examinations at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), § 12-1.

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Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven undersøker sappfiske karakterframstillinger i moderne ungdomslitteratur. Hovedfokuset i prosjektet er hvordan sappfisk identitet er framstilt gjennom en nærlesing av to skeive ungdomsromaner, *Girl Mans Up* og *The Grief Keeper*. Oppgaven undersøker hvordan seksualitet og kjønnsidentitet blir presentert og hvorvidt disse blir problematisert. I tillegg undersøkes hvordan disse ulike sidene av identitet påvirker og spiller inn på hverandre. Videre utforskes hvordan disse aspektene av identitet blir beskrevet og møtt av hovedpersonene samt deres sosiale nettverk. Prosjektet undersøker hvilke tidligere narrative tendenser som eksisterer innenfor skeiv ungdomslitteratur, og sammenligner de to ungdomsromanene opp mot de narrative tropene for å se i hvilken grad de samsvarer eller bryter med tidligere mønster.

Funnene av nærlesingen demonstrerer at de to ungdomsromanene i stor grad bryter med tidligere tendenser innenfor skeiv ungdomslitteratur. Dette inkluderer at begge romanene framstiller lykkelige forhold mellom de sappfiske karakterene, og at bøkene ikke ender tragisk. Det er også noen mønster som fortsatt går igjen, som fraværet av biseksuelle karakterer. I tillegg viser *Girl Mans Up* i stor grad en kompleks og problematisert framstilling av kjønnsidentitet. Dette blir også framstilt i *The Grief Keeper*, men her står seksualitet og kulturell identitet mest i fokus. Begge romanene har nyanserte framstillinger av sappfisk identitet og hvordan denne reagerer i møtet med andre identitetsaspekter, personer, og beliggenheter.

Abstract

This master thesis investigates sapphic representations in contemporary Young Adult literature. The focus of the project is how sapphic identity is presented through a close reading of two queer Young Adult novels, *Girl Mans Up* and *The Grief Keeper*. The thesis investigates the ways

in which sexuality and gender identity is presented and whether these are problematized. Additionally, the different aspects of identity and how they interact and effect each other is explored. Further, the thesis investigates how the different aspects of identity are described and met by the main characters as well as their social circles. The projects research what earlier narrative tendencies exist within LGBT Young Adult literature and compares the two Young Adult novels against these previous narrative tropes to discern to what degree they subscribe or break with earlier patterns.

The findings from close reading demonstrates that the two Young Adult novels to a large degree break with established tendencies within queer Young Adult literature. These include that both novels present happy relationships between the sapphic characters, and that the books do not end tragically. There are some patterns that still persist, such as the lack of bisexual characters. Additionally, *Girl Mans Up* showcases a complex and problematized depiction of gender identity. This is also included in *The Grief Keeper*, but sexuality and cultural identity is the primary focus there. Both novels have nuanced representations of sapphic identity and how this interacts with other aspects of identity, people, and places.

Introduction

While writing my bachelor thesis on the trope of the coming out story in Young Adult literature I became aware of the gap in popularity and in quantity between the different sexualities within LGBT fiction – more specifically that sapphic fiction is given a lot less attention than fiction that features gay men. This gap provides the starting point for this master thesis that aims to have a closer look at sapphic representations in Young Adult literature today. I will explore which types of characters and stories are being lifted up by literary awards, and what they could possibly imply about contemporary sapphic Young Adult literature at large. Such a focus will make it necessary to consider aspects related to identity such as sexuality, gender, and cultural background within the chosen novels. These aspects are interwoven and affect each other, and thus intersectionality becomes a useful lens to examine the complexities of identity through. Gender plays a central role in the construction of identity in general and often gains extra significance in relation to the unique experiences and expressions within LGBT communities. Similarly, investigating characters' the cultural background and setting is a central part in adapting an intersectional view of the novels to be analyzed in the thesis.

The two novels I will examine in this thesis are *Girl Mans Up* (2016) by M.E. Girard and *The Grief Keeper* (2019) by Alexandra Villasante. Through a close reading, discussion, and comparison of two novels, I will investigate some tendencies within sapphic representations in Young Adult literature. My primary focus is how the sapphic main characters are presented within the texts. Since two novels make up a small sample size, I will also compare my findings to the general backdrop of how LGBT-characters are represented in fiction, based on previous research. The reason for this is to try to discern whether there are any patterns emerging surrounding the portrayal of queer characters in these books, and to see to what degree these books break with pre-established patterns.

The aim of the project

I will conduct an exploration of Young Adult fiction and the portrayal of sapphic characters through a literary analysis of two Young Adult novels. My focus is *how the main character's sapphic identities are constructed in the text*. I will look at how those identities are constructed in terms of gender and sexuality, and lastly, I also want to look at what kind of stories are being told in which these identities appear and take the main role. This emphasis on identity makes it relevant to further examine specific aspects of identity, namely sexuality and gender. Additionally, it is relevant to explore the intersectionality of identity, as well as how identity is tied in with the narrative tropes within LGBT Young Adult fiction, for example the characters' sapphic identity as the cause of tragic endings in previous texts within the genre. I will investigate these elements through the lenses of plot, character and setting to identify the experience of sapphic identity in the texts. I will examine the intersection of gender, sexuality, and cultural background in the sapphic characters' identity. Lastly, I will investigate what kind of stories are being told where sapphic characters appear and take the main role, focusing on narrative tropes within the texts and comparing them to the backdrop of earlier LGBT Young Adult fiction.

Research questions

What kind of narrative are these Young Adult novels showcasing?

How is the main character's sapphic identity perceived and described in the novels by the protagonists and other characters?

How is the social construction of the sapphic characters' gender presented in the books? Is gender and gender-presentation explored, or are the characters gender-conforming?

What ethnicities and cultural backgrounds are present in these books, and how does this affect the sapphic characters?

Explanation of terms

Sapphic is in this paper meant to be understood as an umbrella-term containing women who have same-gender attraction. Lesbian, bisexual and other multi-gender attracted women all fit under this umbrella.

Gay is most commonly used for same-gender attracted men but is also used to signify any queer identity where same-gender attraction is present. In this paper, *gay* is to be understood as any same-gender attraction, including in women.

LGBT is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans. There are many acronyms for the community in circulation, and the popular term has changed with time. The reason why I use the term *LGBT* in place of any of the other variants (*LGBTQ*, *LGBT+*, *GLBT*, *LGBTQAI+*, etc.) is because it is the most widely used concise term that covers same-gender attracted and trans people.

Queer is another umbrella-term used in this paper to refer to the *LGBT*-community as well as individual members of the community. Additionally, I use *queer* as a synonym for the community as well in a way that encapsulates the identities that do not completely fit into any of the *LGBT* labels.

Heteronormativity refers to how heterosexuality is seen as the default state in society. People are assumed straight unless indicated otherwise. It further refers to how this assumption is built into societal norms, laws, and institutions, in terms of discriminatory laws and practices.

Cis also known as *cisgender* is a term used for people who aren't transgender, that is to say whose gender identity match up with what they were assigned at birth. A person can be cis and gay and a part of the LGBT community, and a person can be trans and straight and a part of the LGBT community. Lastly, a trans person can also be gay or bi.

Cisheteronormativity is a term that refers both to cis and heteronormativity present in society.

Description and explanation of the chosen novels

When selecting the literature for my thesis, I created some criteria to narrow in on a more specific pool of books. The books had to be Young Adult fiction and had to feature a sapphic main character. Additionally, I decided to focus on contemporary fiction and lastly, I looked into award-winning novels. It is challenging to find novels that are truly popular and also feature sapphic characters. This is why I looked into books that had won literary awards, as this can function as a figurehead for and pointer to books with the specific content I was looking for. It is relevant to note that both popularity and literary awards lean heavily in favor of books with gay men, and since I chose to focus on sapphic characters I had a more limited pool to choose from than if I had been focusing on LGBT-characters in general.

The two novels selected for this thesis have both won the LAMBDA literary award for LGBT Children's and Young Adult fiction. The LAMBDA literary award is an award given out yearly by the US-based Lambda Literary Foundation and is given to works which celebrate or explore LGBT-themes. They give awards based on different categories, such as Children's and Young Adult fiction (LAMBDA, 2020). The Stonewall book award is three awards given out yearly to English language books published in the US that relate the LGBT experience. The awards are presented by the American Library Association's Rainbow Round Table. I looked at the Young Adult novels that had received either the Stonewall or LAMBDA awards and picked out the few novels featuring sapphic protagonists. An interesting note here is that Stonewall award winners tend to be books featuring male protagonists, as I mentioned previously novels containing gay

men tend to pull ahead both in popularity and awards. *Fat Angie* is the only Young Adult book featuring a lesbian protagonist that has won the Young Adult fiction Stonewall award. Another exception is *Little & Lion*, the 2018 winner, that features a bisexual girl as the protagonist. *Hurricane Child* also features a sapphic main character but is aimed for middle grade readers. However, Stonewall has only been giving out awards to Young Adult fiction since 2010 (American Library Association's Rainbow Round Table, 2020).

In the light of the criteria described above, I have chosen the following novels to analyze in this thesis:

***Girl Mans Up* by M.E. Girard, published in 2016.**

Girl Mans Up is a Young Adult novel about Pen, a sixteen-year-old tomboy who is trying to navigate other people's expectations of her, how people react to her gender presentation and her strong feelings for other girls, as well as how to fit in with the expectations of friends and her highly traditional Portuguese parents. Respecting their wishes – which involve conforming to rigid gender roles – while being true to herself is a constant source of strife.

I have chosen *Girl Mans Up* because it is a book that features sapphic characters and that won the LAMBDA award for Children's/Young Adult Fiction in 2016.

***The Grief Keeper* by Alexandra Villasante, published in 2019.**

The Grief Keeper is a Young Adult Science Fiction novel about seventeen-year-old Marisol who is an immigrant from El Salvador applying for asylum in the United States, together with her sister. When her request for asylum is denied, she is offered an opportunity to stay in the US if she agrees to participate in a medical experiment where someone's grief and trauma will be transferred over to her, taking it away from the grief-donor and turning Marisol into a grief keeper.

I have chosen *The Grief Keeper* because it is the most recently released book featuring a sapphic protagonist to have received the LAMBDA award for Children's/Young Adult Fiction in 2019.

Theory

Previous studies on LGBT Young Adult literature

B.J. Epstein's book *Are the kids all right? Representations of LGBTQ characters in Children's and Young Adult literature* (2013) investigates some of the tendencies within queer Children's and Young Adult literature prior to 2013. The book is structured into four major areas that Epstein explores within LGBT literature, and she sorts her findings into the categories of "Issue Books", "Portrayal and Stereotypes", "Diversity", and "Sex and Marriage". I will give a summary of some of her findings to create an overview of the patterns surrounding the portrayal of LGBT characters in queer Young Adult books that already exist within the body of texts. This will enable me to compare the two novels I am analyzing to a backdrop of how LGBT-characters have been represented in Young Adult fiction, and to see to what degree the books I am analyzing break or confirm to pre-established patterns. A large quantity of these pre-established patterns presents a very homogenous and often tragic look at queer youth in literature and has been with few exceptions the story available in queer Young Adult fiction. Epstein's research also functions as a template for some of the categories I will be looking at in my close reading, namely sexuality, gender, and the intersectionality of these aspects of identity.

Epstein analyzed sixty English books with LGBT content. The focus was on whole books, and no short stories were included. The sixty books consisted of thirty-two young adult works, eight middle-grade books and twenty picture books. Her primary objective was searching for patterns around how queer people were represented in children's and young adult books (Epstein, 2013, p. 20). This included looking at what kind of books were available, as well as examining elements such as diversity within the queer community, gender, stereotypes, sex, religion, racial diversity, disability, marriage and more within these books. This overview includes books published in English before the year of 2013, and while it is not comprehensive, it will showcase some trends and patterns around how queer characters are represented in Young Adult

literature. I will be focusing more on trends relating to sapphic characters, but I will mention some aspects that concern gay men as it is still relevant to showcase a cohesive picture of LGBT Young Adult books. There is also some overlap between the different patterns as relating to the entire LGBT community, or even about intracommunity trends, like how gay men and lesbians interact in these books.

Epstein looks at the frequency of what she names as "issue books" or "problem books" within her corpus of LGBT Young Adult books. These are texts that tend to focus on queerness as a problem, rather than to be an exploration or celebration of queer identity. They might contain scenes where a character educates about queerness in a way that functions as a didactic lecture for the reader, such as going to the library and looking up "homosexuality". The reader is educated simultaneously with the character. Epstein also looked at whether the peritexts in these books had a didactic function, such as a glossary or questions for the text to be discussed in a school-setting. These are all elements that suggest that these books are intended as educational tools. She also looked at the placement of these books in bookstores and libraries – they were often put separate from other Young Adult fiction, either specifically under an LGBT section or a lifestyle shelf. Epstein points out that issue books can lead to the idea that LGBT people and topics are out of the norm. This "othering" may result in or be a consequence from people not viewing queer people as fully equal. Epstein distinguishes between two main types of issue books: books about LGBT parents and books that try to reach readers about queer people and the LGBT community (Epstein, 2013, pp. 26 - 27). The latter type will often address issues such as coming out, HIV/AIDS and bullying (Epstein, 2013, p. 39). Coming-out stories are the most common narrative in this body of works, as more than two thirds of the Young Adult books in Epstein's corpus deal with coming out. Nearly all these books show difficult things happening to these characters as they come out. In the books that are not about coming out, the LGBT person is a side character (often for comic relief), the story starts after the character is already out and focuses on the character finding a partner, or the person never actually comes out. Coming-out stories are needed, but the fact that such a large number of LGBT books for children and young adults focus on coming out and the consequences of this encourages the readers to believe that coming out is difficult and upsetting, and also that this is one of the

main issues they face. Their queerness is turned into a problem, and the lives of these characters revolve almost exclusively around their homosexuality, rather than showing their complexity as people (Epstein, 2013, pp. 74 – 75).

Many of the LGBT Young Adult books in Epstein's corpus include stereotypes around how queer characters look and act. One aspect of this is the appearances showcased in picture books. The stereotyped appearances tend to be shown through illustrations, such as two women, one with short hair and trousers, and one with long hair and a skirt. There is a tendency towards visually depicting butch/femme couples in these picture books. Epstein uses the term butch to signify a masculine sapphic woman. In this thesis, butch is understood as a chosen identity marker that signifies a masculine gender expression in a sapphic woman, as well as frequently communicates that they generally operate within the masculine social role in a relationship. Femme is frequently considered the feminine counterpart to butch. Sometimes the terms are also used in a descriptive way to signify visual masculinity and femininity, without the terms being chosen self-identifies. Moving away from picture books, Epstein finds that novels tend to go further because they verbalize what is only implied in the picture books. These novels tend to imply that it is easy to tell who is gay from their appearance and the way they act. Gay men are presented as often being femme, witty, outspoken, and wearing pink, while lesbians wear black, are artistically inclined, have short hair, and are cool and intellectual. The idea that lesbians are unattractive is not uncommon (Epstein, 2013, pp. 98 – 102).

Epstein suggests two predominant categories of sapphic women based on her examination of the picture books and novels: the butch, who is athletic, has short hair and might use a masculine name, and the feminist/intellectual who is frequently angry and discusses feminist issues and art, philosophy, and literature (Epstein, 2013, p. 108). Again, it is worth repeating that because queer Young Adult fiction feature female characters less often than male characters, there is less data available about sapphic women in these books. These categories are therefore based on a limited sample-size. On the other hand, since there is a limited number of books showcasing sapphic characters, these characters might be some of the only portrayals of sapphic women in English Young Adult literature from this period (published

before 2013). The butch character-type is shown to play sports, might use a male name, has short hair, wears little or no makeup, and is not too concerned about fashion. She is often tough and independent and will usually fall for a feminine woman. The other main type is the angry, humorless feminist, who is often interested in art, will dress in black, drink black coffee, and smoke. Besides these two main types, there are few other lesbian characters. These texts tend to present gay men and lesbians as having a limited array of feelings and traits as opposed to the straight characters (Epstein, 2012, pp. 115 – 117). In some of the texts, gay men are portrayed as extremely appealing to straight women and as smart, funny, fashionable, and lovely and loveable, whilst lesbians are not portrayed as such. Positive stereotypes or stereotypes being challenged are generally not common in these texts (Epstein, 2013, p. 124). Gay men and lesbians are seldom shown to be friends, or even to interact in these books. There is a lack of any type of queer community.

One aspect of investigating characters is related to what identities are represented in these books, and how they are portrayed. Is there a hierarchy of these aspects of identity, where the characters are gay first and everything else second? Is their story centered around their queerness? Are they one-dimensional, or are they complex? Do they face the same issues and the same fates? There is nothing wrong with having stories centered around queer identity first and foremost, and those stories are important too – the problem arises when those are the only stories that are available, especially when they posit queer identity as a problem or the source of problems. When looking at diversity in LGBT Young Adult literature, there are two main issues: The first is that there is a lack of bisexual, transgender, and otherwise queer characters. Secondly, multiple identities, and specifically, multiple minority identities are not represented either. In other words, there is a general lack of intersectionality in these works - characters may be LGBT, but they are rarely shown to be both that and Muslim, or a person of color, or working-class (Epstein, 2013, p. 132). In a couple of texts, women who identify as lesbians end up dating men. This would imply that these characters are bisexual, but this is not how they describe themselves (Epstein, 2013, p. 124). While lesbian and gay characters are included in these books, bisexual and transgender characters seldom appear. When these identities are included, they are often depicted negatively or as having limited lives, that

encourage the readers to have stereotyped ideas of what it means to be bisexual or transgender (Epstein, 2013, p. 189). In Children's and Young Adult literature, gay people are primarily presented as being white, able-bodied, middle-class, and Christian. They might not be explicitly Christian, but they might celebrate Christmas and other things that suggest a nominal, cultural Christianity (Epstein, 2013, pp. 160 – 171). These two issues regarding what representation is available may have changed since 2013, which is an element I will be keeping in mind in my analyses of the Young Adult novels.

Jiménez's paper "Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature from 2000 – 2013" also highlights this tendency towards white gay men and the lack of lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and people of color within LGBT Young Adult Literature. Her study showed that English award-winning Young Adult literature with LGBT themes from 2000 – 2013 predominately featured white, gay men as protagonists. In addition, they did not feature any bisexual and very few lesbian protagonists. The number of Young Adults books containing LGBT characters was estimated around 4,000 books published in 2013. Of these books less than 1/10th featured lesbian protagonists (Jiménez, 2015, pp. 7 – 8). Across all 21 award-winning novels, only five of the protagonists were lesbians and none were bisexual. In contrast with their gay male counterparts, the lesbian characters did not have long-lasting or healthy relationships. In fact, in the only novel to feature a lesbian relationship, the protagonist was punished and tortured for her sexuality (Jiménez, 2015, pp. 18 – 19). This follows the general trend of how queer relationships have been portrayed in earlier Young Adult fiction, and it is an alarming tendency, coupled with the low frequency in which lesbian characters are presented in Young Adult fiction in general.

As for other identities in Epstein's corpus, there were no characters that were both queer and disabled, or with mental illness or learning difficulties (Epstein, 2013, p. 182). Class is rarely addressed in these texts, and most characters seem to be middle-class. There is only one example in Epstein's corpus where the characters are gay men and working-class. There are no examples of lesbians being anything other than middle or upper-middle class (Epstein, 2013, p. 186). Epstein found no LGBT Young Adult books that featured queer people with non-normative

weights. Most characters had average weights and suffered no body image problems. There is one gay character who seemed to suffer from bulimia, though Epstein points out it is hardly discussed further in the text (Epstein, 2013, p. 187 – 188). In other words, as established earlier there is a tendency where queer characters in Young Adult literature are portrayed as being queer and otherwise not part of any other minority-groups. Being queer is presented as the only non-normative aspect of their identities. In combination with this, there is also a tendency within queer issue books that Epstein dubs the confirmation of “normality,” where LGBT characters or the children of LGBT parents are told that they are just as “normal” as the majority. This leads to the question of what is normal defined as in the first place, and furthermore solidifies LGBT people as different – continually discussing whether queer people are normal or not, suggests that they are not (Epstein, 2013, p. 40). This might speak to a desire to embrace queer people into normative society as long as they are not too queer or too different, as the intersection of multiple minority identities would make it even harder to pretend they are “normal,” if normal is to be understood as what is perceived as most common, or even what is considered acceptable or correct.

As established earlier, there is a clear lack of addressing the issue intersectionality in this body of works. It will be interesting to see if the books I am looking at differ from the books published before 2013 in this regard – is intersectionality still largely missing from queer Young Adult fiction? Are sapphic characters portrayed as one-dimensional characters where their sexuality is the focus, with basis in stereotypes and negative experiences? Or are these tendencies changing?

Sapphic literature

As I mentioned earlier, my main focus is on sapphic characters, and thus the question emerges: is there such a thing as sapphic literature? Bonnie Zimmerman’s two articles “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism” (1981) and “Lesbians Like This And That” (1993) examine, amongst other things, how can a text be defined as lesbian literature.

Zimmerman's papers offer some insight on how to address this issue of defining sapphic literature, and it is therefore useful to examine Zimmerman's findings in relation to lesbian literature as a background for my thesis. As mentioned earlier with Epstein's findings, having a previous backdrop of patterns within sapphic literature will enable me to see if the books I analyze confirm or deviate from earlier tendencies and patterns. Furthermore, it is relevant to reflect on what can be defined as lesbian literature and indeed if such a definition that can be made at all. As with any attempts of definitions, one risks making terms that are either too broad or too narrow, but Zimmerman presents some elements that are a common tendency within books with lesbian subjects which will grant me a basis to compare these patterns with the two contemporary novels in this thesis.

Zimmerman looks at the possibility of a lesbian literary canon and a definition of lesbian fiction. The question arises of whether there can be such a thing, due to the problematic nature of narrowing what counts as lesbian fiction in the first place. Does literature that happen to allude to sapphic themes count? Is it literature written by a lesbian author? Is it literature that later gains significance within queer reading of the text? By creating a definition, some variants will inevitably be left out. There is also the matter of subjective readings of texts that lend themselves to a text being argued as thematically queer by some researchers, and not by others. While presenting these issues that prevent a lesbian literary canon, Zimmerman nevertheless points out that there are some tendencies within literature containing sapphic women that can be observed and that might suggest at least a trend within lesbian fiction. Her findings point to a tendency towards themes such as unrequited love, longing, tension between romance and sexual desire, and lastly a pattern of subversive and complex relationships to gender in books with a focus on sapphic characters (Zimmerman, 1981, p. 20).

In the 1980s lesbian scholars were moving away from the idea of a unified lesbian experience. Lesbians of color especially pointed out the flaw in the tendency that lesbian experience had largely been presented as white, middle-class, and Western (Zimmerman, 1993, p. 3). Lesbian as one unified subject is not possible – there is no universal lesbian experience, just as there is no universal female experience, or straight, or trans, and so on (Zimmerman, 1993, p. 8). I still

consider it useful to talk about a lesbian subject based on tendencies and commonalities such as being sapphic, and then specify details in relation to whichever subject is being discussed. At the end of the day there is one unifying lesbian experience that is key to the identity of lesbian – namely, being exclusively attracted to women, romantically and/or sexually. The question of gender identity further complicates matters, and I will address this complex issue in the section about gender.

It is important to keep in mind the identities that have often been left out of the narrative within the lesbian community – to not forget that amongst others, lesbians of color, working class lesbians and trans lesbians also exist and need to gain voice and visibility. Intersectionality is therefore a useful lens to consider when looking at lesbian or sapphic identity, and I will expand upon that in a later part of this chapter. The fact that there is no universal lesbian experience is part of what makes it problematic to define lesbian literature – even though there are some common thematic elements that tend to be included in works with sapphic characters, these elements are not necessarily emblematic of an inherent lesbian experience and suggesting that these themes *need* to be present in order to make something sapphic literature will limit the range of which stories are being told. Another element that makes establishing a lesbian canon difficult is the question of what texts count as sapphic *enough*? What about sapphic literature that is subtextually queer, such as allegorical works, poems, or texts that were written by historical figures that were likely sapphic but that contained no explicit queer characters? There is no concrete answer to these questions, rather it seems dependent on individual readings of a text with a queer lens. These readings hinge on whether one uncovers sapphic elements or not, instead of trying to define what the fundamental characteristics of lesbian literature are.

Zimmerman brings up that while there can be no universally defined lesbian literature, there might be the possibility of a unique lesbian narrative space in fiction. She suggests that this space can take place when the relationship between the writer and assumed audience, or female characters in the text come together in relationship defined as lesbian. Further she references Marilyn Farwell, who presents the possibility that a lesbian narrative space might

function to blur the boundaries between certain dichotomies. Because heteronormativity contains an idea of dualism of man and woman, by disrupting these binaries, this lesbian narrative space might disrupt heteronormativity by blurring the lines between self and other, subject and object (Zimmerman, 1993, p.10). Perhaps it is the possibility of readings through a queer lens that creates this lesbian space that Zimmerman describes, through works that offer the possibility to deconstruct these binaries. I think it is important to examine what might constitute as sapphic literature, and while I think Zimmerman's notion of a lesbian narrative space is interesting, I question her usage of lesbian as a term in this excerpt. In a contemporary context, the term queer might be more applicable to this narrative space. It is unclear to me whether Zimmerman proposes that this disruption of dichotomies is inherently applicable only to sapphic characters or not, but I would theorize that this narrative space lends itself to readings of relationships between opposite-gender individuals through a queer lens as well.

Gender

Since gender is one of the aspects of identity I will be focusing on in my analysis, it is necessary to present a framework that allows me to account for gender identity, as well as its experience and representation. Following Butler's problematization of gender, I do not subscribe to gender essentialism and the idea that gender is inherently tied to biological sex, and instead find it relevant to look at gender as a construction.

In her book *Gender Trouble* (2006), Judith Butler argues for gender as a performative act. Not an act of conscious choice, but rather a set of cultural and social cues that are taught based on the sexed body, assigned at birth. Further, she argues that it is not easy to distinguish between sex and gender as categories, because the internalized behaviors that are considered a result of sex are actually what create the categories, in a way that functions as a self-perpetuating cycle. Even on a biological level, the body is too complex to neatly fit into a binary system. According to Butler, gender can be considered a verb instead of a noun. It is something we do, and through these acts our gendered identity is also created. Butler questions the sexed body as a

static, firm foundation where gender operates, by asking if the body itself is shaped by societal and political forces with interests in keeping that body constructed by the markers of sex – in other words, enforcing gendered behaviors and presentations based on anatomy (Butler, 2006, p. 175).

Butler uses drag to reframe the relationship between anatomy, identity, and performance. As she explains it, drag is a performance that plays upon the contrast of the biological sex of the performer and the gender that is being conveyed. However, Butler further points out there are three dimensions to this performance: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. These three dimensions are all separate. In actuality, the performance illustrates that the gender performance is separate from the anatomy and from the identity of the drag performer (Butler, 2006, p. 187). To pick an example where there are three clearly different elements at play: it is possible to have a drag performer with male anatomy, whose gender performance reads as female, and who is in fact a nonbinary person. In terms of contemporary examples, this is illustrated by the fact that both trans and cis women also do drag as drag *queens* and not kings. This just highlights the separation between gender identity and gender performance, where gender performance can also function as a *literal* performance.

Furthermore, Butler presents the idea of gender as a copy with no original. Drag as gender parody does not indicate an original which is being imitated – the parody is of the notion of an original in itself. If gender performance can be imitated, the parody reveals that the original identity itself is an imitation without an origin. Gender parody is a production that is read as an imitation, that has an effect of contributing to cultural and social understandings of gender (Butler, 2006, p. 188). That is not to say that gender performance is inherently done deliberately and consciously – gendered norms are culturally and socially enforced, and this also contributes to the cycle of performance, tied to the gender assigned at birth, being carried on. Butler questions what language is left for understanding the enactment of gender, when considering the body as a variable surface that is politically regulated within the culture of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. She presents the idea of gendered bodies as “styles of the flesh”, styles that are never fully consciously chosen, because the individual is still

conditioned, to some degree, by outside influences. One can consider gender as an “act” that is both intentional and performative, and as Butler puts it: “where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler, 2006, p. 189). Lastly, since gender performance constructs meaning to and is also informed by the structures it operates within, gender identities and expressions vary with geographic location and time period.

Since my thesis is focused on sapphic characters, it is relevant for me to look at various gendered expressions focused on women. As seen earlier, Butler has established “women” as a problematic category – still, within society today people are considered the gender assigned at birth unless otherwise stated. By looking at different gendered expressions and possible identities of people who identify as or are being considered as women, we open up for a more nuanced view of what that category may contain, as well as its borders and limitations. By extension, the categories of lesbian or sapphic are also identities that can be considered too fixed within the binary, as there are people who we identify with these labels who had a more fluid approach to gender identity and do not identify as women. On the other hand, it is possible to identify as a woman exclusively through the attraction to women and otherwise not identify with that gender, such as is the case with some nonbinary lesbians or butch lesbians.

In his book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Jack Halberstam posits that although masculinity can be hard to define, we have no trouble recognizing it. Furthermore, he claims that female masculinity gives us insight into how masculinity is constructed as masculinity (p. 1). As maleness and masculinity are considered intertwined, by examining alternative masculinities in fiction and reality, Halberstam examines what masculinity can be when removed from the axis of the male body. This gives insight into what masculinity can be outside of the social structures that connect maleness to power and domination (p. 2). Halberstam also states that these examples are mostly queer and female, something that is also relevant to my thesis: the prevalence of alternative masculinity in queer women. If we consider Butler’s theory of gender as a construction, the view that in order to examine masculinity we need to reframe it outside of white male bodies follows. Butler looked at drag queens to show how we can recognize gendered performances outside of the body it is typically assigned to. Halberstam’s

examination of how the shape of masculinity is showcased within female masculinity follows the same logic, in which masculinity and maleness are often conflated as the same phenomenon, while in fact masculinity is a gendered expression that can exist outside the confines of a body considered male or even a male gender identity. By examining masculinity outside of cis men, Halberstam attempts to deconstruct the notion of masculinity itself.

Halberstam examines myths and fantasies that have contributed to masculinity and maleness being considered inherently intertwined. He contrasts this by examining alternative masculinities in fiction and reality, to showcase that masculinity can exist independently of maleness. He also states that these examples are mostly queer and female, something that is also relevant to my thesis: the prevalence of alternative masculinity in queer women (p. 2).

Halberstam gives an overview of cases of non-normative and female masculinities throughout history, including Anne Lister, and the literary example of *The Well of Loneliness*. By doing this he presents why female masculinity is its own gender identity with its own cultural history, rather than a derivative of male masculinity (p. 77). Halberstam examines the theory of inversion that tried to explain homosexuality as a combined package of gender variance and sexual preference, where all deviant behavior was put into a binary system where you had lesbians acting out the roles of male and female, as they were understood in society in the 1920s. When lesbian feminists later rejected this theory as an explanation for homosexuality, they also rejected female masculinity as the primary way to identify lesbians, instead focusing on the woman-identified woman. Here Halberstam suggests that the invert of the 1920s may not be a synonym for lesbian, but instead that the concept of inversion described women who in some way felt at odds with their anatomy (pp. 82 – 83). I would like to add that it may have also been a group of women who felt socially and culturally uneasy with the social role of females in society, especially if they were already attracted to the same gender and therefore already inherently seen as deviant. In other words, the theory of inversion was a heteronormative way to try to understand homosexuality through the lens of having lesbians who presented with some degree of female masculinity fulfill the social role of “the man” in the relationship.

Furthermore, Halberstam looks at John Radclyffe Hall's stories and her life, as well as the people surrounding her to exemplify the diversity and variation of early-twentieth-century sexual identification (p. 83). He also points out that many of the examples of female masculinity from the 1920s seem more closely related to transsexual identities than they do lesbianism. The history of homosexuality and transsexuality was a shared history for a long period of time, and only diverged in the 1940s when surgery and hormonal treatments became available to and utilized by some individuals (p. 85). Here it is worth pointing out that *Female Masculinity* was written in 1998, and the range of what is considered transgender identity has evolved since then, such as transgender individuals who do not seek out hormonal or surgical procedures. This does not negate the fact that lesbians and transgender men have shared community and spaces for most of history, and that there is occasionally overlap between the identities, as seen with butch lesbians who straddle the line between being trans masculine and cis, or with nonbinary lesbians, and other gender identities that also fall under the sapphic identity umbrella.

Zimmerman has also noted that lesbian literature and culture is flexible in relation to gender and role identification, as showcased in John Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) that hinted at the tragedy of rigid gender roles. Lesbian artists and writers have always been fascinated by costuming because dress functions as a signaling of gender roles that lesbians often reject - or subvert (Zimmerman, 1981, p. 20). Considering the culture around female masculinity in the early-twentieth-century, this comes as no surprise. Halberstam also notes that John Radclyffe Hall linked her masculinity not to men's clothing but to "sartorial aesthetic that actively opposed the notion of a 'true sex' by equating gender and costume" (p. 90). This relates back to what I presented earlier with Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the idea that the sexed body is created through acts, utterances and indeed costuming, and gender itself as a socially ingrained construct. This is also evident in the fact that the gender expressions and presentations that Halberstam presented from the 1920s were culturally informed by their time.

A further area to explore is the unique gendered expression of feminine lesbians and bisexual women. To investigate this, I turn to Brightwell and Taylor's article *Why femme stories matter: Constructing femme theory through historical femme life writing* (2021). The authors argue that earlier iterations of queer femininities are relevant for contemporary femme theory and analyze what historical femme life writing reveals about femininity within the context of the U.S. lesbian feminism of their times. By looking at several texts written by or about femmes, they focus on the texts' discussion of femme identity construction, expanding understanding around femininity, femmes' relationship to lesbian feminism, the role of race in femme identity construction and activism, and femme as an erotic identity (Brightwell & Taylor, 2021, p. 19). This is relevant to my thesis as a counterpart to the earlier part about masculine identity construction and will enable me to conduct a nuanced analysis of the gender identity in the sapphic Young Adult novels I am researching.

Brightwell and Taylor focus on three memoirs written by activists through a femme lens: Hollibaugh's (2000) *My Dangerous Desires*, Nestle's (1987) *A Restricted Country*, and Pratt's (1995) *S/he*. In addition, they also look at *The Persistent Desire* (1992), an anthology on butch and femme relationships edited by Nestle (Brightwell & Taylor, 2021, p. 20). Earlier lesbian feminist theory considered femininity as an oppressive construct of the patriarchy. This view did to some degree negatively affect femmes' experience and ability to participate in the movement. Femmes were largely writing from working-class and racialized perspectives, which also gives important insight into a side of lesbian narratives that deviate from the dominating accounts of the time (p.22). Femme history is often depicted as a linear narrative, which presents the femme's origin in the 1940s and 1950s working-class bar culture, femmes' apparent disappearance during 1970s lesbian feminism, their reemergence in the 1980s and 1990s, and as an independent queer identity via the theory of gender performativity in the 1990s and 2000s. In the 2010s, the notion of femme is theorized as many things: an adjective, identity, expression, a theoretical framework that is available independently of gender identity and sexuality, which reclaims femininity. However, narrating femme identity in a linear fashion runs the risk of simplifying earlier iteration of femme into a monolithic, reductive narrative and might cut off contemporary femmes from the past (p. 22). Referring back to Zimmerman, it has

already been established that there is no one universal sapphic or female experience, and the same concept applies to femme identity.

This brings us to the question of race within feminist and lesbian spaces, and where femme identity stands in relation to this. The work of black activists and the civil rights and black liberation movements of the 1950 and 1960s have been instrumental in highlighting how to place “categories of difference”, such as race, gender, and sexuality into an economic and historical context, as well as recognizing how these interplay and affect each other. Femme life writing of the 1970s and 1980s reflects this idea of the interconnectivity of oppressions, and thus the importance of coalitional politics. Hollibaugh and Moraga state in their essay “What We’re Rolling Around In Bed With” (2000) that their racial and class backgrounds has a large impact on perceptions of their sexual identity (Brightwell & Taylor, 2021, p. 28). This is also reflected in the work of Gomez, who notes that she is frequently not read as a lesbian because she is black and often gets excluded from black communities because she is a lesbian. The queer community is largely white-oriented, and the notions of lesbianism as white is one example of this. In addition, Gomez notes that black women have been positioned as masculine in comparison to white women, and that femininity has been tied to whiteness. This is also reflected in the queer community, where there has generally been a tendency presume femmes are white women, while black women are more frequently presented as butches (p. 29).

The question remains, what are some traits that constitute femme as an identity? Femme is marked by an intentional choice of femininity. This choice of how to appear as a gendered person presents femme as a transgressive gender identity which identifies and challenges normative concepts of femininity. Brightwell & Taylor evoke Nestle’s formulation of femme identity, where Nestle (1992) expresses a notion about femme identity as being the “wrong” kind of woman. Similarly, Hollibaugh (2000) expresses how being femme corresponded with not being a “natural woman”, not merely accepting and existing within this preconceived notion of what womanhood is, but rather to actively choose femininity and push the boundaries of what that is defined as. This allows femme identity to include subjects that fall

outside the normative conception of what womanhood looks like, such as lesbians, fat women, disabled women, and women of color (pp. 23 – 24). Further, femmes might destabilize presumptions about what queerness looks like (p. 26). Lastly, sexuality and the erotic are centered in a lot of femme life writing. This indicates that femme is, similarly to butch, also considered an erotic identity. There is an intricate connection between sex, gender, sexuality, and desire within femme identity. Nestle (1987) considers the butch/femme dynamic as lesbian “erotic heritage”. (Brightwell & Taylor, 2021, p. 30)

Identity and Intersectionality

In an essay on the application of queer theory in the college classroom, Fredrick Greene (1996) defines identity in the following way:

Our identities, how we recognize ourselves and are recognized by others, is a complex construction, an articulation of historical demands on an already discursively mapped body. The most deeply experienced and personal sense of individuality and interiority is always already social (p. 331).

This interconnectivity of the personal and social is why I have chosen to look at relationships and setting in terms of the main characters’ identity. Identity is not formed in a vacuum, and it is thus relevant to look at the environment that the character exists in, and the social influences and experiences that may shape them. Identity as a complex construction necessitates a nuanced view of the many parts that makes up one person, and for that I look to the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality as a term was coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 to address the dynamic interaction of racism and sexism as these structures of oppression shape the lives of black women. The concept of focusing on the intersections of multiple identities and the way that affects lived experiences had been long emphasized by black

feminist scholars and activists (Bartlow & Harris, 2015, p. 262). It is a flexible model that emphasizes the intersections of multiple aspects of identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and the relation between identity and multiple systems of oppression (Friedman, 2015, p. 103). However, intersectionality has faced criticism for being too vague, for conflating identity and social structures, and for focusing too much on how identities relate to the oppression one experiences based on things such as race, instead of the identities and their intersections themselves (Friedman, 2015, pp. 103 – 104). Friedman further points out that intersectionality is often focused on power, inequality, and oppression, and that while these are relevant elements to keep in mind, it would be a mistake to focus only on the role oppression plays in the construction of identity (Friedman, 2015, p. 120). Throughout this thesis, the term intersectionality is used to signify that identity is a complex construction and that there is no one single aspect of someone's identity that is isolated from the rest, or from social and from societal structures and influence. That being said I will primarily focus on gender and sexuality in the following readings, as well as cultural background. The reason why I am focusing on cultural background rather than ethnicity is the presence of white immigrant heritage in these books, and therefore a framework about cultural differences is more relevant than focusing on racial constructions. I will still consider ethnicity as a part of these readings, in terms of characters of color and the predominance of whiteness in LGBT Young Adult literature.

Close reading

I will conduct a close reading, a discussion and comparison of the two books. Close reading is a common practice used in literary studies, but as Smith (2016) argues, it has a less clear-cut definition than most methodologies (p. 57). Concretely, it refers to reading a text thoroughly. For example, one might pay attention to a specific word choice in a passage or spend time finding different angles to interpret and view an excerpt from a text. However, as Smith explains, close reading does not only refer to the activity, but also to the resulting text itself:

The term close reading refers not only to an activity with regard to texts but also to a type of text itself: a technically informed, fine-grained analysis of some piece of writing, usually in connection with some broader question of interest (p. 58).

In the case of my thesis, the broader question of interest is the focus on sapphic identity in Young Adult books. By presenting elements of the text to examine and interpret more closely, I attempt to illuminate how these books construct the identity of the sapphic main characters and how this interacts with other areas such as relationships and circumstances. By presenting moments or elements of the text, I can focus on areas such as the presentation of the character's sexuality and put these within a larger context to give insight into the book as a whole as well. In the case of my thesis, I will be paying extra attention to the moments of the texts that relate to the characters' sapphic identity, but that does not mean I will be examining those instances alone. Since I am only looking at two books, this allows me to spend time putting these excerpts within a context and examine them within the whole of the books, which is also why I focus on the categories of plot, character and setting to give my reading a cohesive structure. In addition to focusing on these three categories, my reading is informed by previous research done on LGBT Young Adult fiction, queer theory, and intersectionality. This close reading of the novels along with the focus on the plot, character, and setting, will enable me to explore the narrative tropes present in the fiction, the characters' sapphic identity, gender identity and expression, as well as the presence of intersectionality in these works.

I will give a short presentation of the elements of fiction that I will examine in my close reading and discussion of the two Young Adult books. As mentioned earlier, I am focusing on the plot, the characters, and the setting of the two novels.

In his book *Studying the Novel* Jeremy Hawthorn (2015) defines plot within narrative theory as "(...) an ordered, organized presentation of events and actions." (p. 147). Further, he discusses the distinction between plot and story, in that some theorists propose that causality is a key point in plot while others disagree on this point. Hawthorn ultimately distinguishes between story as the chronological narrative of events, while plot focuses on the narration of these events within the novel, whether in the same or a different order as the story. The plot might

for example move in time through flashbacks (analepsis) or flashforwards (prolepsis) and might contain omissions from the story where it is unknown what took place between one event and the next. By examining the plot, my intention is to first give an overview of the most important series of events that take place in the novels. Secondly, it will allow me to explore which narrative tropes are present, as well as what themes might emerge through this close reading of the plot.

Hawthorn writes about character that while it may seem like the least problematic term when it comes to literature, it may be a bit trickier than it seems at first. He states:

For us, “character” is intimately bound up with individualism: a character is unique, not just the property of a person but somehow simultaneously both the person and the sign or token of the person. (p. 138)

However, he goes on to caution against forgetting that these characters are carefully designed, unlike real people. He discusses the names of various fictional characters as examples of this, where the name of the character “happens to” perfectly encapsulate something about that character (p. 139). Further in the chapter he presents different character types, such as minor and major, flat or complex, and similar well-established literary terms (p. 141). The close reading with a focus on carefully examining the characters will enable me to investigate their sexuality and gender identity and how these elements are perceived and described both by the main characters’ themselves and the other characters. Some elements that I will look closely at include the characters’ positioning within the narrative, the language they utilize around identity, as well as the presence of queer sexuality, gender identity and expression. Some specific characters’ I will examine both on the level of a character analysis, and as well as a part of the setting. I will elaborate more on this under setting.

When it comes to setting, Hawthorn cautions against the oversimplification of viewing setting simply as the physical space in which the story takes place. The social and historical context of the setting is also important, as well as if it is a generalized or specific location. Paying attention to these elements can communicate something about the story (p. 156). In my close reading

specifically, investigating the setting of the novels might reveal something interesting in relation to the characters' sociocultural background, as well as give context for the space in which their identities are formed. Additionally, I will be looking at minor characters in the setting portion of my close reading. This is to further explore setting as not only time and space, but also as the social and cultural context as depicted and represented by different minor characters. This will enable me to explore the social networks that the characters exist in by examining the ways in which the flat characters may function as depositories for certain concepts.

Close reading of the chosen literature

I will be looking at the plot, the characters, and the setting in *Girl Mans Up* and in *The Grief Keeper* in this analysis. Looking at the plot will help inform my analysis of the characters' identity and motivation. It will help me unfold what themes are present in the book and what kind of story it is. This will in turn also allow me to compare it against other earlier stories within sapphic Young Adult literature, and to see if it touches upon the same tropes and elements as those stories did.

The character analysis is where I will look at the main character's identity, which will also be informed by my earlier analysis of the plot, because identity is not formed in a vacuum. It is relevant to look at how the various aspects of their identity is showcased, such as sexuality, gender presentation, and cultural background. Identity is also social; I will consequently also look at the main character's relationships with other characters.

Setting is relevant to look at in relation to the cultural and social elements that affect the plot and the characters. This is where I will discuss outside influence on aspects of identity, such as race, religion, and culture. As mentioned earlier, identity is not constructed in a vacuum, and setting will inform my analysis of the main character's personal identity and how they are perceived by others, and how the environment they exist in might have influenced this.

Girl Mans Up

Plot

At the beginning of the novel, Pen is close with her two childhood friends, Colby and Tristan. Colby is one of the more popular boys at school, and his friendship is conditional. He has a set of rules, a code, which lays out the conditions for Pen and Tristan to be allowed to continue being his friends. This code decrees Pen and Tristan have to be useful as a sign of loyalty, and in turn they are accepted as part of “the guys”. Pen specifically helps Colby pick up girls because Colby claims that having another girl approach them puts them at ease and makes it easier for him to get in contact. In terms of her home life, Pen has a strained relationship with her parents who are very strict and traditional in relation to gender roles. Also, she is uninterested in their Portuguese heritage. She does not speak the language well, does not enjoy the food, and their ideals do not seem to resonate for her. However, she has a great relationship with her older brother Johnny, who is also more integrated into Canadian culture.

There is a girl called Blake in Pen’s class that she has a crush on, after she heard Blake talk about enjoying a video game. However, Colby is also interested in Blake and wants Pen to help him as a wingman to get close to her. Colby has had a lot of casual relationships with different girls, and frequently leaves the girls heartbroken after he is done with them. One such affair was with a girl named Olivia, and one day Pen hears her being sick in the school bathroom. When Pen mentions it to Colby after school, he is clearly upset and angry with Olivia. Later, after drinking and smoking weed and playing video games in his basement with Pen, Colby declares that he is tired of the drama with girls. He states that since Pen is one of the guys, but also still a girl, she would be perfect. He kisses her and tries to coerce her into having a casual, physical relationship with him. Pen rejects him and goes home. She cuts off her hair, which is the first major step towards presenting more masculinely like she has always wanted to do.

As Pen becomes increasingly visibly gender nonconforming her parents get more dissatisfied with her appearance and behavior. The friendship with Colby is strained after the kiss happened. Wanting Pen to prove her worth to him again, Colby demands Pen to send Blake in

his direction. Instead, Pen warns Blake off Colby, who Blake did not seem interested in in the first place. The two establish a friendship instead. Blake is also friends with Olivia, Colby's ex-girlfriend, and is working with her on a project. Pen discovers that Olivia is pregnant. Slowly, Pen and Olivia start to become friends as well. As their friendship continues to deteriorate, Colby suggests that Pen sleep with him. Pen points out that, beside her not being interested, it makes her feel like they are being gay, in the meaning of two men together. Colby does not take that well, and a combination of that moment and Pen spending more time with Olivia and Blake causes the friendship to sour even further. As they spend more time together, it turns out that Pen's crush on Blake is reciprocated. They confess their feelings, and their relationship turns romantic.

Pen's older brother moves out from home after a big confrontation with their parents, because he had gotten in a fight standing up for a friend. He has also frequently gotten in trouble through verbal or physical conflicts while trying to protect Pen from various bigots, something their parents' frown upon. They consider these things to be Johnny and Pen's fault for not being "good" kids.

Meanwhile, Pen, Olivia and Blake continue to become closer. Pen and Blake start working on a school photography project together, after Olivia had to quit due to her frequent spells of sickness. Blake is still unaware that Olivia is pregnant at this point. Later that day, Blake's friend and bandmate Elliott has a party that Colby and his friends crash. A big confrontation happens between Pen and Colby, because Pen has been spending time with Olivia and lying about not having time to hang out with her old friends. A few days later, Pen keeps Olivia company when she goes to get an abortion. Colby sees them together, causing an even bigger fight. By this point their friendship is completely over and has moved into open hostility.

Pen gets a job at the video game store where Blake works. They officially become girlfriends. Later, they are caught making out in Pen's basement by Pen's mother. This is one of the catalysts that leads to Pen's mother even more fervently trying to force Pen into more traditional gender roles. This pressure from her mother causes their relationship to become more strained than ever before.

Meanwhile, Olivia joins back in on the photography project. Blake, Olivia, and Pen grow closer as friends. Pen reconnects with Tristan, with some encouragement from Blake. He would rather be with her than with Colby and his friends, further deepening the animosity between Colby and Pen. This escalation leads to Colby and his friends egging Pen's window at night, something her parents blame her for. They say that this is her fault for making herself a target by not dressing and acting more like a girl. The animosity between Pen and Colby escalates until they have a big confrontation at school, resulting in a physical fight. Pen beats Colby bloody. Someone calls the police, and Pen and Colby are both suspended. After the fight, there is a big confrontation at home between Pen, Johnny, and their parents, revealing the harassment she experienced as a child from peers, and the fact that Johnny was the one who helped her while her parents blamed her for "not being a good girl". Pen immediately leaves home and moves out into Johnny's apartment.

Pen is a lot happier when living at Johnny's place, and it is clear that he had prepared for her coming to live with him. She is allowed to attend the showcase for the photography project even though she is suspended. Olivia has moved on from Colby and is happy with Elliott, Blake and Pen are happy, Pen is still living with Johnny, and the animosity between her and Colby is laid dead after the fight. At the end of the book, Pen has forged new friendships, moved out into Johnny's apartment, she has a job she enjoys and is good at, and a girlfriend.

Characters

I will now conduct an analysis of the main character Pen and some of the major side characters in *Girl Mans Up*. This includes the love interest Blake and the main antagonist Colby, as well as their relationship to Pen. Later, I will more fully explore some of the minor background characters I mention here in the setting portion of this close reading. The reason for these characters being regarded as a part of the setting, is that I will investigate them as part of Pen's social environment and as a part of the background that shapes Pen's life and identity. As stated in the theory chapter of this thesis, identity is inherently socially as well as internally constructed.

Pen

Pen is the focalizer and the narrator of the book. This gives us more limited insight into characters like Blake or Pen's mother, in that we get to see the specific things they say to Pen and how she describes them and what she feels about them, but never any further insight into those characters' inner life. On the other hand, we get very intimate knowledge of Pen's thoughts, feelings, and impressions.

The book opens with Pen playing video games with some of her friends. More specifically, she is playing video games with Colby and Tristan who are her friends and Garrett who is Colby's friend. Pen is winning against Garrett, who immediately accuses her of cheating on account of her being a girl. This is something he consistently does, suggesting that Pen is inferior because she is a girl and treating her differently, suggesting that she gets emotional because she is on her period, suggesting she should choose the girl character in video games and so on. This behaviour angers Pen, who considers herself one of the guys and wants to be treated as such. "I pick the guy characters because they never make girl characters that look like me. They make them hot, half-naked, and full of makeup—which is nice to look at, but it's not me" (Girard, 2016, p.8). Pen is quickly established as gender nonconforming and attracted to women as seen in this excerpt. In addition, this passage reveals that Pen does not see herself reflected in games. Video games are one of Pen's main interests, and this is a common ground that helps her connect with her crush Blake later. Her interest in video games is also what helps her get a job at a video game store. Pen is shown to be interested in physical work, such as landscaping, weightlifting, and she has at the very least passing knowledge of soccer to the degree of knowing the names of some soccer players. Her interests generally lie within what is considered either masculine or more gender-neutral hobbies, with none that is considered as traditionally feminine. This is also supported by the conflict between Pen and her mother, because Pen shows no interest in learning how to cook, clean and sew, all which are considered traditionally the area of the women in the house.

Pen is clearly attracted to women, especially feminine ones. Considering there are no other masculine-presenting women in this story it is hard to say if this is a concrete preference or by chance, but she does give voice to the fact that she likes “girly-girls” (p. 111). She frequently expresses a fascination with features associated with femininity in other girls, such as various types of make-up, long hair, high heels, and so on. This sentence contains one example of this, and also illustrates Pen’s curiosity of what it will feel like for a girl to put on make-up or dress up *for her*, specifically to catch her attention or to dress up attractively for her:

“(…) Ever since then, I can’t stop staring at her, at the back of her head, at that long hair, imagining what it would be like to have a girl put on shiny lip stuff just for me” (p. 8). Pen is not interested in makeup or traditional feminine things, as illustrated by calling lip gloss “shiny lip stuff” (p. 8). However, as stated earlier, she is clearly attracted to women who do appear more typically feminine. This attraction seems especially strong if they are feminine in an alternative style or way, like Blake who leans into styles such as rockabilly and glam. This is one of many elements about Pen and Blake’s relationship that fits into a butch and femme dynamic. These terms are never used in the book, but it is still an angle I find useful to mention in my discussion of their relationship. There is a dichotomy of Pen’s attraction to feminine girls and her dislike of femininity when applied to her - that is to say, forced upon her by outside sources, in the form of her friends or parents. This presents itself in Pen’s attitude towards stereotypically feminine things as embarrassing and frivolous, but usually only when applied to herself. She can appreciate those aspects as long as they’re found in other girls, but they’re not representative of her. Sometimes these feelings seem to blend a little though, as in a general attitude that it is embarrassing to be friends with other girls, or that girly things are inherently less cool. This could stem from internalized misogyny, as made evident that Pen’s male friends also hold some misogynistic views and values. This is complicated by the fact that Pen is also not a part of the other girls she knows, both in being sapphic and that the way she experiences and expresses her gender is different from the other girls present in the book. Throughout the story she finds friendship and romance with other girls, while at the start of the book she is thoroughly alienated from any kind of female community.

There is frequent use of gendered language such as “us dudes” where Pen considered herself one of the guys from the get-go. However, she also establishes in the same sentence that she is “not even a dude in the first place” (p. 7). Pen often uses language in this way, where she will identify herself as one of the boys, but also subsequently establish that she is not a boy, sometimes within the same sentence. She is both, and she is neither. She tends to define herself as not a boy more often than she defines herself as a girl. In other words, her identity is presented as what she is not. “Tristan and I have known each other since grade one, and we started hanging out because neither of us was cool enough to hang out with the cool guys, but we didn’t want to hang around girls either” (p. 15). As showcased in this excerpt, Pen clearly does not consider herself a part of the collective identity “girls”. As mentioned earlier, she also referred to herself as part of “we dudes” even though she also remarked upon her not even being a guy right after. It is presented from the beginning of the book that Pen does not fit fully into either category. She is in-between or maybe rather outside the binary.

Later in the book, when Pen is alone with Colby and they are playing video games together at his house, she takes off her hoodie because it is warm. The sight of Pen in a tank-top and with her hat removed makes Colby consider her in a new light. Pen is uncomfortable with being displayed in this way and borrows a shirt of Colby’s to hide the shape of her body. Still, Colby is looking at her differently now:

“It’s like you’re a girl, but you’re not.”

“So?”

“So . . . it might be kind of perfect, right?”

I feel funny. Guys don’t look at me like this, just like guys don’t look at each other like that, unless they’re gay. Is this gay?” (p. 31)

This is an interesting moment in relation to Pen’s sexuality and gender identity. Because she falls outside the gender binary by being not exactly like a girl but also not like a boy, in one way every one of her romantic and sexual encounters would be inherently queered. This reading hinges on Pen identifying as something other than a girl, which she does express sometimes, but it is hard to know concretely if she feels different because she is a masculine girl or if she

would identify as something outside the gender binary if she had that language. Pen's impression of their dynamic as gay may also be traced back to heteronormativity. Heteronormativity does not just pertain to opposite sex attraction being seen as default, but also a specific type of traits expected of each individual within a heterosexual pairing. Pen's masculinity does not fit into the typical gender ideal for women, and thus she feels she fits better into the male social role.

One could also argue that in one way, Colby is reducing Pen to her sexed body – her presentation is different from what's socially expected for a girl, but her anatomy reads as inherently female to Colby who, being misogynistic, sees this as ideal: "one of the boys" but in a body that is desirable to him. This social masculinity and her complex gendered identity is part of what leads Pen to question whether that makes Colby's attraction gay. For Pen, her gender identity and presentation take precedence over a body that might be read as female.

Pen has long hair down to her waist that she usually keeps tied up and out of sight. She harbors negative feelings about her long hair, for her it was something that she wanted to change but did not dare to until circumstances pushed her into it. Colby kissing her is the push she needs to go that last step though, and she cuts it off in the next scene. As Pen herself puts it: "Sometimes, something really messed up has to happen to make you realize you need to man up" (p. 32). This is a central moment in Pen's journey throughout the book. What is happening here is a metamorphosis. Pen is stepping closer to an outward representation of how she feels on the inside. When Pen cuts her hair, it is depicted as a desperate act where she is holding the scissors so hard that she is hurting herself, but ultimately also a freeing one. She throws the locks of hair in the trash, on top of the shirt she borrowed from Colby. In a way, she is getting rid of the last thing tying her to traditional femininity in terms of gender presentation, and it is the beginning of the end of her friendship with Colby. Another reading of this could also be that it is a final rejection of heterosexuality, in that she takes the last thing about her presentation that traditionally conveys to others that she is a girl and gets rid of it at the same time as she throws away the shirt that connects her to Colby after his sexual advances. The fact that short hair is considered a typical stylistic choice for lesbians as well also plays into this reading of this

passage: by moving away from traditional feminine traits and presenting herself in a more masculine way, she is also signaling her sexuality more clearly to others. Whether this signaling is deliberate or accidental is another matter. The way Pen likes to dress and her sexuality seem to be accidentally aligned in a way that makes people assume something about her sexuality, even though this assumption is right. Pen does not give an indication that she chooses what shirt to wear in the morning based on whether or not it will make her look like she is sapphic. Still, it is interesting to note that Pen's elimination of what softened her gender presentation into being a boyish girl to definitely gender non-conforming masculine happened as a direct result of being read as a viable partner in a heterosexual context by Colby. It seems like the most upsetting part for Pen was ultimately the element of being read as a girl by the male gaze in a way that invalidated her complex gender identity, as well as what I mentioned earlier about her reading the relationship dynamic as gay in the sense of between two men.

Pen faces what Halberstam termed "the bathroom problem", where she is incorrectly gendered when using the ladies' room. A woman informs Pen that this is the ladies' room, before realizing that she is a girl. The incident ends without any escalation, but it is still something that happens and is uncomfortable enough for Pen to generally avoid using public bathrooms. Afterwards she reflects about how she has read about trans people having to avoid bathrooms due to fear of misgendering and violence:

A couple years ago, I used to be like, But [sic] I'm not trans, so why are people still jerks when I try to go take a piss? Then I realized I don't have to be trans to still confuse people with the way I look. I had my hair then. Now, there's nothing left that makes me a girl, except for the fact that I am one. But I guess that's not enough. (p. 48)

As Pen brings it up here, it is not her identity that strangers will react to, it is her gender presentation and the way her gender is read by strangers. This reading exists both in terms of the body itself and her fashion style. That is to say, when faced with a masculine-looking person in the women's bathroom, people might either assume that this is a man based on the gender presentation, or they may try to discern what biological anatomy the person has. Any perceived 'dissonance' between presentation and anatomy will likely draw attention. Being scrutinized by

strangers in this invasive way likely has a negative effect on Pen, in that she seems to experience not fitting anywhere:

USUALLY, I DON'T CHECK myself out in the mirror. Mostly because without clothes on, I weird myself out. (...) When I have my clothes on, I feel normal. When my clothes aren't on, it's like I lose something important about myself. When I think about someone else seeing me like this, it feels like they'd actually be seeing some other person. Like it wouldn't be me they'd be looking at. It's not like I want to be looking at a boy's body in the mirror. It's just that a girl's body is so . . . girl. (p. 47)

Pen seems to experience a sense of uneasiness around her body. It is not quite as severe as body dysmorphia, but it is something adjacent. As Halberstam points out, it has not been unusual for masculine lesbians to exist in a space between cis, nonbinary and transmasculine identity. Some lesbians physically transition to a more traditionally masculine body, get top surgery, and go on testosterone while still identifying as female. Other examples are women using binders, without identifying as male or nonbinary. It is unclear whether these are procedures or objects that Pen has knowledge of, and therefore it is also not possible to discern whether she has a desire to change her body to fit her sense of self better. As showcased in the excerpt above, clothes are an important part of Pen's identity. She has strong feelings of gender euphoria in terms of getting to wear masculine clothes, and gender dysphoria when forced to wear feminine clothes, to the degree when she describes dressing up in her mother's clothes "drag". This is a source of conflict between Pen and her mother, who is confused and upset that Pen keeps wearing her older brother's clothes instead of the more feminine clothes she buys for her daughter. This is one of the areas where Pen's family and cultural background intersects with her gender presentation, creating discord. Pen is unable to effectively communicate with her parents due to a language barrier. Her Portuguese is rudimentary, and they do not speak English fluidly. This language barrier between Pen and her mother further exacerbates the conflict between them. Pen is unable to communicate that she is still a girl who

simply prefers dressing masculinely, and her mother is unable to understand. It seems for Pen's mother that gender presentation and gender identity are interchangeable:

She thinks that because I look like a guy, I must be trying to not be a girl. I don't speak enough Portuguese to be able to defend myself against that, so I shrug and sigh, and ignore what I can. (p. 20)

This conflict around gender between Pen and her mother shows up in multiple interactions, both in relation to Pen's appearance and her behavior. Pen is disinterested in learning to cook and clean and would rather do the same chores as her brother, which confuses and saddens her mother. At the start of the book, Pen seems to be alienated both linguistically, culturally, socially and an outsider both in gender expression and sexuality.

Ultimately Pen's gender performance and identity is problematized by herself and the characters around her a lot more frequently than her sexuality. Pen's masculinity was never in question, but what kind of values and behaviors that are connected to her gender identity go through a metamorphosis, from following or being a bystander to Colby's show of toxic masculinity, to choosing what kind of person she wants to be herself. The book ends with Pen coming to this conclusion: "While we head home, I think about how when I grow up, I want to be just like my brother. That's the kind of girl I want to be" (p. 292).

After being asked at the mall if she is a gay girl, Pen reflects about what labels that fit her:

I say, but I don't think of myself as being gay, because that word sounds like it belongs to some guy. Lesbian makes me think of some forty-year-old woman. And queer feels like it can mean anything, but like—am I queer because I like girls, or because I look the way I do? Maybe I don't know enough words. (pp. 55 – 56)

While this excerpt shows that Pen has not found the right language to express her sexuality yet, it also reveals something interesting about her experience of LGBT community or media. For her, the word lesbian seems to signify older women, gay seems to specify a man, queer is too imprecise. Perhaps her understanding of these words would be different if she knew other people her age who identify as such, or even if she saw this portrayed in the media she consumed more often. Or, as she says, maybe she does not have enough insight into the community yet to have found which term fits her yet. Identity markers that specifically communicate masculine, sapphic women such as “butch” are never mentioned in this book, so one might assume that Pen has not heard of this term yet. Further, Pen thinks about the fact that she is thankful that Colby does not make a fuss of who she is or who she is into. It seems like being questioned about her sexuality and her gender is commonplace for her. Because she is visibly gender nonconforming, other people in her peer group will often assume or ask her if she is a lesbian. It is further revealed that she has never talked to her parents about being exclusively attracted to women, but she assumes they know. This moment is in a way representative of the way that people who are visibly read as queer are often expected to defend or explain their identity to complete strangers, in a way that does not happen to cishet people, due to heteronormativity. On the other hand, people who are not visibly read a queer may have to come out over and over again for the rest of their life to new people, because the default is assumed to be cishet.

A while after the kiss happens, Colby tries to coerce Pen into entering a physical relationship with him. Colby’s friend Garrett has frequently joked about how Pen with short hair looks so much like a guy that it would probably be gay if she got together with a man. Pen has frequently reflected on why Colby’s advances made her feel so bad, other than her just not being interested, if it is because it makes her feel like a different kind of girl than she is or if it is something else:

“I think Garrett’s right—this whole thing is gay. Like homo gay. I like girls. Girly girls. I don’t like guys, and I didn’t think you did either.”

I don't know why I said that. I must be an idiot.

Colby puts his hands on his knees and his features drop. "Don't try to act like I'm a fag. You're a girl. You've always been a girl. You kiss like a girl, and when my hand was down your pants, I felt—"

"Shut up!" (p. 111)

This moment is interesting in relation to Pen's gender identity and thoughts around gender and sexuality. The implication here is that Pen, as a masculine girl, together with a feminine girl, is somehow less queer than a straight man with a masculine girl. This relates to the queering of the typical gender roles in a heteronormative society, referring back to Zimmerman. This is how Pen experiences this situation, even though concretely two women together is, by definition of the word, gay in a way that a man and a woman together is not. If we explore this way of thinking, does that mean that a feminine woman and a masculine woman together is not gay, or simply that because it is *sapphic* homosexuality it is not queer in "a bad way", as Pen puts it? Or is it due to having one person fit into a socially female role and the other fitting into a socially male role that somehow tones down the inherent queerness of the moment? This idea is often projected onto butch and femme couples, that those relationships are somehow a parody of heteronormative social roles instead of something unique to sapphic relationships. Would two masculine women together somehow lean more towards what Pen dubs as "homo gay", that is to say male homosexuality? This illustrates Pen's complicated and conflicted relationship to gender and sexuality. A question arises for whether Pen experiences a desire for a male social role under heteronormativity, or if it is just a desire to be able to be naturally who she is, a girl who is masculine and operates within the typically male roles in society and relationships, without being a man. As a person on the margins, that is to say, outside the binary by virtue of the complex relationship between Pen's identity and self-presentation, she experiences negative emotions and situations from her peers and family. As Butler writes, by having a standard that people need to fit into, someone will always end up on the outside of this - the standard requires there to be people on the outside, because that is what upholds the standard as correct in contrast to the deviant bodies. Pen is an example of this, and it is

important to note that widening the standard will still leave someone on the outside. The answer is to move away from the rigidness of these gender norms completely. A red thread with Pen's relationship to her gender and the outside world is a desire to be allowed to exist in peace, and for understanding that she is a girl, and her way of being a girl may be different than what is the norm, but it is still her identity.

On the bus to visit Blake at band practice, Pen and Olivia have a long conversation about alienation from her peers due to being visually different, being different but in a less visual way, and gender identity. The other teens on the bus keep throwing glances towards Pen and grinning in a mocking way. Olivia picks up on the tense situation:

“When people can see you're doing something wrong, they're really mean,” Olivia says.

“Huh?” “

If they knew my secret—if they could see it—they'd be awful to me. Right now they can't tell, so I'm safe,” she says, shifting in her seat a little to look over at me. She said the word “if.”

But she's talking again before I can ask her about it.

“You're not safe ever, are you? People can always tell with you.”

Up ahead, those guys are making jokes and the girls laugh. I can't tell if they're about me, but they probably are.

“Yeah.” (p. 120)

Pen says that she thinks that things would probably be easier if she was a boy. Olivia asks how she knows that she is not a boy, elaborating about having a friend whose cousin is transgender. Pen explains that she never feels wrong inside herself, or that she is someone she should not be. It is only how other people make her feel that makes her feel something is wrong with her, the way they react to her gender nonconformity. This conversation is where we get a more concrete insight into Pen's feelings about her own identity, and it is also a moment where Pen and Olivia start to really become friends. Pen reflecting around and putting words to her

identity, that she is a girl, even if she is different than what is the expected norm of girls and gaining a female friend is a significant point in her development through the book. Olivia points out that she likes that Pen is such an honest person. Combined with the break from Colby, this is where Pen really starts to gain the values she appreciates in other people, like her brother.

Blake

Blake is also into video games, she works at a video game store, and she is a singer in a band. She is presented as creative, brave, outgoing and temperamental. Blake is visually a very feminine girl, albeit with an alternative style. She frequently sports black makeup, big, blonde hair, black nail polish, and wears clothes such as black skinny jeans, studded pumps and boots that lace up to the knee. Blake is also described by Colby as “not fit” and by Pen as “not skinny like most of the girls he’s usually into” (p. 44). There are no more descriptors of Blake in terms of body size and judging from the context of how other characters treat her, there is little reason to think that she has a non-normative weight in terms of being fat or even chubby. Still, it is interesting to note her being bigger than the other girls Colby has been interested in, and him using that as an excuse when she rejects him, in contrast with Pen finding Blake very attractive.

After getting to know Blake, Pen starts to think differently about other girls, gradually considering them with more nuance. The start of this happens when meeting a girl with Colby at the mall:

Colby checks his cell phone. I pull mine out, then Avery does the same—it’s like a yawn.

“So, what kind of stuff do you guys do?” she asks.

I think of Blake and wonder about all the cool stuff girls could be into that they’re not obvious about.

“Gaming. Do you game?” (p. 55)

After finding out that Blake is into games, Pen starts to consider that feminine girls can also be interested in the same things that Pen likes. Blake seems to have been a breakthrough for Pen in relation to understanding that gender presentation is not necessarily indicative of hobbies and interests.

After going home together after Blake's band practice, Pen and Blake linger outside. Their relationship is still quite new, and Pen is sometimes unsure what desires she is allowed to act on. Additionally, Pen is frequently shown to be less than enthused about public displays of affection, usually holding back until they can be alone together. Such as this moment when Blake is cold and Pen wishes she could keep her warm: "Blake shivers next to me. Time's going by too fast. I wish I could put my arm around her" (p. 128). Because they are in public, and Pen is nervous about making Blake embarrassed as well uncomfortable with public displays of affection, she does not act on this desire. Pen frequently wants to step into what might be read as a male social role in the relationship with Blake. She wants to be the one to "man up" and take initiative and to take care of Blake and protect her. Blake is equally proactive, however, but Pen does not generally seem to mind. Sometimes the dynamic plays out in that Blake gives Pen the push she needs to do something, like a kiss, and then Pen is the one actually performing the action. "One of her fingers hooks around mine. Icy skin against icy skin, but it's the warmest thing I've ever felt" (p. 128). Here we see an example of Blake taking the first step. It is not that any of these actions or desires are inherently masculine or feminine socially, but the tendency in the novel leans towards this, especially combined with Pen's presentation and complex relationship to womanhood as an identity. And the contrast between her and her straight female peers, but also Blake, who is also sapphic. In a way, one might argue that this private insistence Pen has to be the active party in their relationship indicates toxic masculinity more so than a queer, butch masculinity. It is one thing to be comfortable with taking charge with a partner who wants to be more passive but Pen feels like she *should have* been the one to ask Blake out, or kiss her, not just that she *wanted* to be. This ties in with this idea of Pen multiple times talking about "manning up", "growing some balls". There is this tendency towards a negative framework around her masculinity, with femininity presented as a weak

counterpart. This is something that does evolve throughout the book, in tandem with Pen developing meaningful relationships with other girls. The evolution of Pen's mentality around masculinity and femininity is an example of how the gender binary is subverted and challenged, as she comes to realize that there is both strength in femininity and weakness in masculinity. Colby becomes an example of these negative aspects of masculinity, while Blake and Olivia are both examples of feminine strength.

Another interesting thing about Blake and Pen's relationship, is that Blake is a lot more comfortable with public displays of affection. This may be due to a difference in personality, or it may be because of the two, Pen has a lot more experience of the casual cruelty of strangers. Unlike Pen, Blake is not necessarily read as visibly queer on the same level as Pen is, though having an alternative sense of fashion is often considered one way of signaling sexuality to other LGBT peers. Still, it is reasonable to assume that Blake has not experienced harassment from strangers based on her gender presentation as not reading feminine enough, and as she has never been with another girl before, she is unlikely to have experienced homophobia targeted at herself. Pen has also never been with another girl before, but it is clear that she has experienced homophobia due to her gender presentation being read as inherently queer.

Pen also frequently feels lost in relation to what is expected from her in this relationship: if she can and if she should act like a typical boyfriend, or if Blake wants or expects something different from her, and so on:

I also think that if I were a guy, I probably would've made a move by now. The thing is, I have no idea if I should be making a move or not. It's not clear what's going on. The rules are clear when it's boy-girl.(...) But this—the way things are because it's me—well, it's all blurry to me. (p. 131)

This is also an example of internalized heteronormativity; the rules are clear when it is a boy and a girl. Gender identity and homosexuality are complicating the situation because they are

outside of the perceived norm, and Pen feels like there is no guide. This may also be due to the lack of representation in the media Pen consumes, and also because Pen does not know other lesbians or queer people in general. It is hard to discern whether she would experience this same uncertainty if she had a more feminine gender presentation, or if it is specifically because of her close proximity to a male social role whilst still identifying as a girl that complicates the matter even further. This internal conflict is resolved through Pen and Blake communicating what they want from each other. Blake does not want to be a passive part in the relationship. Pen requests being treated the same way as Blake has treated previous boyfriends, something Blake is also happy to do. This action of queering a heterosexual dynamic into something new between them is one element that lends itself to a butch and femme reading of Pen and Blake's relationship. Still, as long as those are not the terms they use for themselves, it would be incorrect to state that they are a butch and femme couple as they are chosen identity markers as well as descriptors.

Colby

Pen's internal monologues show that she is uncomfortable and angry with Colby's behavior, but for the first half of the book she pushes this away and continues to passively support his actions and statements. It is first through the relationship with Blake, her brother, and the friendship with Olivia that she starts to really act on her feelings and thoughts on the matter of how Colby treats other people.

Colby is the character who functions as a depository for sexist and homophobic ideas in the novel. He gives voice to ideas such as that there are only 'ugly' girls that are interested in other girls, because they are unable to get with guys, or if they are attractive and bisexual, they are faking it for attention (p. 86). The irony that Pen is a lesbian who he is attracted to seems lost on him, but it also illustrates the fact that, to Colby, Pen does not count because she is not typically feminine, and therefore also not part of the broad strokes he makes about girls in general. The sexism that he consistently puts forth might have been an influence on how Pen

views femininity - as a weakness to be cast aside, or as something mystical and confusing about other girls. Pen clearly has some qualms about these opinions that Colby holds, but she is still unsure about her own knowledge. Colby has been with many girls, and that leads to Pen hesitantly thinking that this must mean that he is right. He is part of Pen's environment, and arguably the one with the most influence on her for the early half of the story. His friendship has always been very conditional, similar to how Pen's parents' love and care is also conditionally hinged on her "respect" for their rules and norms.

Colby has a complex relationship to Pen's gender presentation. He was one of the first to treat her as one of the guys, until he got reminded by her body that she is in fact a girl, and then he tried to turn their friendship sexual. However, he frequently allowed for his other friends to make jokes and comments about Pen and her gender, and also often participated in making fun of Tristan for being effeminate or nerdy. After Pen cuts her hair and starts presenting even more masculine, he more frequently doubles down on her being a girl and not one of the guys, likely in an attempt to make his own attraction to her seem less queer:

"I already told him to lay off you and Tristan," he says, "so don't get your panties in a bunch." "Man, why are you saying stuff like that to me? Seriously, dude."

"I'm just messing with you because you've been extra bitchy lately, Pen," he says, and then he laughs. (p. 52)

He also frequently uses this as a way to keep his power over Pen. He recognizes that she is uncomfortable with being treated like other girls, and he uses this to showcase the fact that he could easily start to treat her like this permanently. However, when it comes to Pen's relationship to Blake, Colby is quick to view her as one of the guys again:

"(..) You gotta be tough. Even if you're not a guy, it'll probably work the same way. Guaranteed Blake looks at you and sees a dude—why else is she only giving you the time of day now that you look like that?" He pauses to shoot me a look like, *Am I right?*

“So she’ll just be acting like a regular girl about it. This is why you gotta remember where your loyalty lies.” (p. 85)

For him, female masculinity is regarded as being the same as a guy and feminine, sapphic women who are attracted to masculine women are basically just “seeing a dude”. Colby is a cis het teenage boy, so it is no surprise he does not understand the nuances of gender identity, gender presentation and attraction in sapphic relationships, but he is still a big influence on Pen, who is sometimes anxious that Blake will find out she is not interested in Pen because she is a girl after all.

After Colby tries to initiate something physically intimate with Pen, she reflects on why it was such a traumatic experience for her: “Because I felt like a homo. For the first time ever, I felt really queer. In a bad way. (...) I hate feeling like a homo” (p. 109). Pen’s own homophobia towards gay men is likely shaped by her having had a primarily straight and cis friend group who have frequently been shown to hold negative opinions about women and other marginalized groups. It could be that she has somehow adapted peer-typical attitudes against gay men, especially effeminate ones. Still, it is important to keep in mind that this is Pen’s internal reaction to sexual advances she is not interested in, that are both invalidating her sexuality and her complex relationship to her gender. However, it is still interesting to note that Pen’s sense of her gender identity is strongly connected to maleness to the level where this situation makes her feel like she is being forced into an identity as a gay man, rather than a straight girl, even as she consistently is firm on her being a girl. Additionally, the fact that she mentions this being the first time she has felt “really queer. In a bad way” (p. 109) does lend itself to the belief that she has negative opinions about gay men. There are other instances in the story where Pen thinks about gay men in a derogatory way.

Johnny

Johnny is Pen’s big brother. His given name is João, but he prefers to go by Johnny. It is

frequently mentioned throughout the book that they are similar, and it is clear that he is a role model for her, even though Pen has a lot of turbulent feelings towards him when he moves out. He is frequently shown to be one of the people who understands Pen the best and offers her unconditional support.

An example is the conversation between them when Pen asked why people keep asking if she is trying to be a guy. Johnny gives her advice about toughening up, just act the way that is natural for her and to stop listening to what other people say, especially their mother. He explains that he does not live up to the expectations that their parents set for him either: he does not want to wear suits or fancy shoes, he does not want to work at the factory with their dad, he does not want to get married or have kids. In this conversation, he effectively illustrates for Pen that even though he is conventionally masculine, within the context of their parents' expectations, he is also performing his gendered role incorrectly. Pen points out that Johnny could do those things if he wanted to without people reacting strangely to it. This is correct in terms of all of those expectations still being within his sexuality, the gender he identifies as and presents as, but as he explains the people who know him would think it was weird, and more importantly that he would feel bad if he did:

He waits and I think. It's like it all knocks on the door of my mind but it doesn't actually go inside. "Look, just because people look at you funny, doesn't mean you have to change anything. Screw 'em. Even if it's your own mom giving you hell for it. You don't have to change. Unless you want to." (p. 60)

Johnny presents the fact that there are many different ways to be a person, even within a specific gender identity. He consistently puts emphasis on Pen being the only one who decides who she is and who she wants to be. Pen gets to borrow his old t-shirts and use his gaming system when he still lives at home with their parents, he helps her fix her hair after she has cut it, he asks her about her getting a girlfriend, and is throughout the book showcased to be unconditionally supportive of Pen. When she leaves home and moves in with him in his

apartment, he makes sure she has clothes she likes, he shows her how to work out to get muscular, and he continues to make it a safe space for her.

Olivia

Olivia is Pen's first female friend, not counting Blake, with whom her relationship quickly turns romantic. Olivia helps Pen get more insight into what Blake is thinking and going through in their relationship. She is also the character who functions as a catalyst for Pen's growing understanding of how other girls are also complex and full human beings, just like she is.

It is through multiple conversations with Olivia that Pen starts to re-examine her friendship with Colby, as well the ideas she has internalized about other girls. When Pen has to try to explain that Colby is a douchebag to girls but it is not the same when it comes to her, she has no way of conveying why her situation is different:

"If he's such a douche then why are you friends with him?"

"He's like that to girls. Not his buddies."

"You're a girl," she says, then looks confused. "Aren't you?"

"Yeah, but it's not the same. Obviously." (p. 94)

As her friendship with Colby starts to deteriorate, Pen has to face the fact that the way Colby treats everyone in general has been awful, and that he has in fact treated her differently because she is a girl. When Olivia compares their situations, Pen becomes defensive:

"No, I don't," I say. "It's not the same thing."

"How?"

"Because . . . I'm not just some girl, okay?" Silence, and I stare at the TV screen.

"Neither am I," she finally says.

“Yeah, you are, okay? You’re not his friend. You don’t have history with him, and loyalty. You’re some girl he hooked up with, and the minute it got too complicated, he turned into a jerk and bailed.” (p. 150)

The question of loyalty is brought up multiple times, as this is a value that Pen holds in high regard and that Colby has always expected from them in return for his friendship. His idea of loyalty is expecting his friends to enable him to be cruel to the people around him, such as when Pen sent girls in his direction knowing that he only wanted to sleep with them and then discard them. Pen does eventually come to terms with the fact that Olivia is not ‘just some girl’, and that they are all different individuals deserving of respect. It is not hard to understand why Pen would react defensively like this, however. As someone who is gender nonconforming Pen is punished by some peers but also accepted into Colby's gang as more of “one of the boys”. Pen has this feeling of not being like other girls that sometimes manifests in ways like this - it is natural for other girls to experience sexism at the hands of her friends, but not her, because she is different from “girls” as a collective identity. Olivia tries to make Pen understand that she is also not like other girls, because they are all individuals and thus all unique and deserving of respect. As mentioned earlier, this is something Pen does come to accept as she gets to know Olivia even better. However, that uniqueness for Pen is an experience that is made a lot more visible than a lot of her gender conforming peers. However, as the story progresses Colby does end up treating Pen like he treats other girls, by attempting to reduce her down to a sex object. Pen grows and learns that other girls have varied and complex identities and are not a monolith. Still, it is worth keeping in mind that Pen’s differences are painted on her body in a way that does impact how she moves throughout the world. There are unique experiences that come with being sapphic and gender non-conforming. Similarly, Olivia is not white and this will impact how she moves throughout society on an axis that Pen does not experience. This idea of intersectionality and that everyone has unique struggles and privileges within systems of power is something that is made evident as Pen connects with more people.

Setting

The story in *Girl Mans Up* primarily takes place at the Catholic school Pen attends, her house, or the houses of various peers or friends. They live in Canada, in a fictional town outside Toronto. It is unclear how large this town is, but it is very small compared to Toronto, as the characters sometimes complain about nothing happening here, and there being no crime and such in comparison to a city. The story taking place in a smaller town might indicate a closer-knit community, and the fact that everyone to a large degree know about each other. This might affect the way Pen's family are very concerned with how the other people in the community and extended family see them – Pen and Johnny doing things that differ from the other in their family is seen as an embarrassment by their parents. A smaller town might also suggest that more conservative views are dominant, and that progressive views have less traction.

When it comes to Pen's home, she seems to spend most of her time in the basement where Johnny lived before he moves out later in the book. She seems to avoid the shared living spaces as much as possible, as this is where she frequently ends up in conflict with her mother. Pen's house is filled with Portuguese cultural norms and it is clear that those ideals live on there. This is contrasted with both Pen and Johnny who do not fit in with their parents' expectations in terms of respect, both in relation to how they dress, how they speak, and what activities they take part in. It is interesting to note that both in the beginning and at the end of the novel, the space that is shared with Johnny is where Pen prefers to spend most of her time. At the beginning it is the basement apartment that he lives in, and at the end of the novel it is his new apartment where they live together. These spaces both exist away from the Portuguese cultural norms that Pen is uncomfortable with, as well as being a testament to her strong bond with her brother. Pen's older brother Johnny is presented as a more integrated Canadian person as contrasted with their parents. However, he seems to be more in touch with his Portuguese inheritance than Pen is, in terms of speaking Portuguese better than her, fitting into Portuguese gender roles, and also generally being shown to appreciate cultural foods and such. Still, he does go by an anglicized version of his name, and he has a clear preference for speaking English. Pen struggles to speak and, to a lesser degree, understand Portuguese. She is

linguistically and emotionally alienated from her family with the exception of Johnny. Pen also seldomly wants to engage in her family's Portuguese tradition, such as specific holidays, celebrations, food, or conversation topics. The only times she does participate in these situations are due to obligation. This is in some ways contrasted with Colby who fits into her family's standard really well. He is a handsome, popular guy who fits into traditionally masculine roles. Pen's parents and extended family love him and are always happy when he visits. He loves the traditional Portuguese food, he laughs at all the right jokes, he has the right opinions and so on. The fact that Pen's family, with the exception of Johnny, all love Colby so much is probably a factor that increases the influence he has on her in the beginning of the novel. As Pen and Colby's friendship fall apart, Johnny becomes more prominent as a positive influence on Pen.

Olivia is the only other character, besides Pen and Johnny, who is presented to also have a strained home life. There is a stark contrast between Blake and Pen's family life and circumstances. Pen's family are really strict and concerned with respecting your elders and following traditions, while Blake's family are a lot more relaxed and casual about things. Blake does not have an immigrant background.

The fact that Pen probably lives in a small town and attends a Catholic school gives some indication as to what dominant views might exist within her peer group. As mentioned multiple times earlier, Pen sometimes gives voice to sexist or homophobic opinions. This is likely affected by her peer group, such as Colby and Garrett. She has also never been a part of a queer community, and even though Pen is secure in her own sapphic sexuality, one could argue that she has been socialized similarly to straight guy, in terms of her immediate friend group and peers. This would not be a completely accurate assessment however, considering Pen both experiences instances of homophobia, misgendering, alienation, and turmoil about her gender presentation and her place in society, something that is not usually a part of a cis het person's life. Still, her friends of many years hold these opinions. These viewpoints are therefore something she has internalized, and these are never challenged throughout the book. Pen

never meets or talks to any gay men or other queer people beyond her girlfriend Blake, and the fact that she has little access to LGBT people in the media she consumes has also been mentioned in the book. This also corresponds to Epstein's findings about queer community in Young Adult books. It is not present. Pen does live in a place that is implied to be a smaller town, in reference to how the characters talk about Toronto, and perhaps this is one of the things that play into there being no visible LGBT community there - for some queer people they do not meet other gay or trans people until they move into a bigger city or attend higher education.

I will now examine how the socio-cultural background in the novel is expressed through some of the minor characters in the book.

Pen's parents

Pen's parents are relatively two-dimensional characters compared to other side-characters like Colby or Olivia. They immigrated from Portugal and settled in Canada, before having children there. Pen's father works at a factory, and Pen's mother is a housewife. The reason why they came to Canada is never mentioned in the book, but their extended family has also settled down there. They are older than most of the parents of Pen's peers and very traditional. In all their interactions with Pen, respect is presented as a core value, but only in terms of non-questioning respect towards them as authority figures, not any form for mutual respect or understanding. Additionally, they function to serve as an example of how Pen is disconnected from her Portuguese heritage. She does not fit into the traditional ideals that her parents present, and there is a language barrier between her and her parents. In this sense, they are literally unable to understand each other more than superficially. They frequently chide Pen for not respecting them and not listening to their wishes, even when she is doing nothing specific other than wearing pants and a t-shirt instead of a dress. Pen's mother especially seems to take Pen's lack of femininity as a personal failure of her as a mother – it seems that she feels that she has failed to raise her daughter in a proper woman. They primarily function as archetypal

strict parents, gender essentialists, and devout Catholics. As such, they serve to present Pen's socio-cultural background. The main source of external conflict Pen has about her gender presentation and performance is her mother, such as her mother crying when Pen cuts her hair, grounding her, and ultimately threatening to throw Pen out of her home when she refuses to change and start wearing feminine clothes. This conflict is never truly resolved, but instead Pen is able to remove herself from the situation when she moves in with her older brother instead. In the first conversation that takes place between Pen and her mother after Pen moved in with her brother, Pen's mother reveals that she has talked to the school and that Pen is allowed to return and participate in the photography exhibition. She then goes on to express that it is alright if Pen wants to kiss girls, and that she does not need to wear boy clothes or cut her hair. She tells Pen: "You can kiss the girl and be a nice girl. It's okay" (p. 276). This communicates Pen's mother's inability to understand the distinction between gender expression and sexuality, and also showcases interestingly that she does not have an issue with Pen's sexuality but primarily with her gender expression. Further she says that it is OK if Pen *wants* to be a lesbian, signaling that she believes this to be an active choice that Pen is making. She is presenting Pen with conditional acceptance, that Pen can come back home if she tones down her gender nonconformity. Pen refuses to come back home, explaining that she liked boy things and dressing the way she did before she liked girls, and that she does not think one thing caused the other. The conversation resolved with Pen's mother giving her a bag that she packed with the rest of her clothes left at their house, something that tells Pen that she already assumed that she would not come back home. This illustrates that while people can become more open-minded and educated about LGBT topics such as sexuality and gender identity, some people might never truly accept LGBT individuals as they are. Instead, Pen finds belonging and unconditional acceptance in her older brother, her friends, and her girlfriend.

Garrett

Colby's friend Garrett also functions as an example of the bigotry present in Pen's peer group. In addition to Colby, Garrett also functions as a depository for bigoted opinions, such as sexist

and homophobic comments and actions. He is not Pen's friend, however, and holds less influence over her. Still, he is a part of Colby's gang. Garrett frequently misgenders Pen after she cuts her hair, calling her Steve. This shift in his behavior towards her is part of a larger chain reaction to the change of Pen's appearance in relation to her hair - cutting of her hair was read as a symbolic action of cutting off the last of her femininity. Further, Garrett starts pressing Pen to show her chest. This showcases that he still thinks of her as a woman simply because of her biology, and by doing this he reduces gender down to her physical body. There are other instances of unnamed characters engaging in this type of harassment towards Pen, but Garrett and later Colby are examples of how this happens even in her close social circle with people who are her friends or at the very least frequent associates. This is likely to be one of the main sources to Pen's own internalized misogyny and homophobia, in addition to her parents and extended family.

The Grief Keeper

Plot

The plot in *The Grief Keeper* is presented chronologically with intermittent flashbacks that reveal Marisol and her family's past in El Salvador. Marisol is the narrator and the focalizer, so we see the events happening through her point of view. The things Marisol says to the other characters are sometimes revealed through her thoughts to be lies or omissions of truth, and she frequently avoids thinking about details of her past because it is too painful. These moments showcase that there are elements to the story that the reader has not yet learned. The full story is only revealed through a series of flashbacks throughout the narrative.

The story opens with Marisol and her younger sister Gabi who are staying at a detention center, where Marisol is called into a credible fear interview. In the interview she retells the circumstances of why she and her sister had to flee El Salvador. Her older brother Pablo had joined a gang, and their father was being threatened by a different gang due to unpaid debts.

Then their father disappeared, and they got letters that if they did not pay off his debt they would be killed. Marisol then talks about how Pablo got in trouble with the leader of his gang, Antonio, because he wanted Antonio's girlfriend Liliana. Through Marisol's internal dialogue, the reader is made aware that this part of the story is not as true as the earlier parts. However, the reader does not know which aspects are untrue or true yet.

The plan was that Marisol and her little sister Gabi would stay with Mrs. Rosen, a woman who had previously employed their mother as a housekeeper in Colonia Escalón before moving back to the US. However, it turns out that Mrs. Rosen has passed away during the period of time when they were fleeing El Salvador. Marisol gets the impression that they will be deported. She decides to escape from the detention center with her sister. Marisol and Gabi end up hitchhiking with a middle-aged woman named Indranie. Indranie knows that they had escaped from the detention center and points out the fact that they are now in America illegally. However, she has an idea of how she can help if Marisol is willing to help her in return.

Indranie reveals that their case for asylum had been denied. Indranie and a man named Dr. Deng pitches a science experiment where they would use a biomedical device called the CTS (corticotropin transfer system) to transfer grief from a person with PTSD or other trauma over to a willing participant. The grief keeper would then send back positive feelings to the grief donor, creating a loop that can potentially cure the grief donor's PTSD. Indranie promises that if Marisol participates in this experiment during a test period of a month, she will get Marisol and Gabi's asylum request approved. Marisol agrees. After having a small chip installed, Marisol receives the CTS in the form of an ankle cuff. Marisol and Gabi are moved to where the new grief donor lives. The grief donor is a seventeen-year-old girl named Rey Warner whose twin brother had recently died. Mr. Warner is a senator, and he has been involved in the conceiving of the CTS experiment. Marisol's first encounter with Rey is when she sees a white girl with long tangled hair attempting suicide by trying to throw herself off her balcony. She is stopped by Indranie. Rey is refusing to wear the cuff, so the experiment is not working yet. Indranie then suggests that Marisol can try to convince Rey to wear the cuff, since they are around the same

age and have gone through similar experiences of loss. The implied alternative is that Marisol and Gabi will be deported if the experiment does not take place.

Marisol's first actual meeting with Rey happens later, when she sees a young boy sneaking through the garden. She assumes this is Rey's boyfriend who is waiting for Rey. However, when the boy starts speaking out loud to himself Marisol realizes it is not a boy, but Rey who has cut her hair and wearing clothes that used to belong to her brother. Rey does not want to give up her grief. Knowing that the experiment succeeding is the only thing that would keep her and Gabi in America, Marisol resolves to try to convince Rey to give it a shot. Through her attempts at convincing Rey, the two girls end up getting closer through conversations about Rey's brother, her feelings, and watching the tv-show *Cedar Hollow* together. Eventually Rey concedes to participate in the experiment. However, as the days pass it seems like the CTS is not working. Meanwhile, the two girls keep growing even closer. They go out for ice cream and spend every day watching TV together, cuddled up in Rey's room. As they grow closer in a way that leads to more physical affection, the cuff starts working. It seems that it is amplified throughout touch, and with time Rey starts to feel better and better, while Marisol sinks into a deep depression. Not only is she experiencing Rey's grief, but the cuff is also intensifying her own memories and trauma.

Throughout the story Marisol thinks back to her time in El Salvador, sometimes in full flashbacks, and sometimes through sentences that hint at something that happened earlier. These flashbacks or one-liners about her past have parts that are obscured to the reader because they are too painful for Marisol to dwell on. The details around what happened in the past are not revealed until later in the story, but these small hints build up throughout the story and give the impression that the circumstances around Pablo's death and why Marisol and Gabi had to flee El Salvador are complex. These flashbacks also introduce us to Liliana, who is Pablo's girlfriend. It becomes increasingly clear through the flashbacks that Marisol has a crush on Liliana, and it also seems like the feelings are reciprocated. However, it is later revealed that it had been a ruse to confirm Pablo and Liliana's suspicions about Marisol's sexuality, and they condemn her. The conflict between Liliana, Marisol and Pablo leads to the other events that

ultimately lead to Marisol and Gabi having to flee El Salvador. Liliana and Pablo dress Gabi up in Liliana's clothes, and deliver her to Antonio – both intended as a revenge on Marisol for being gay, and as a preventative measure to make sure Gabi does not also “become” gay. Attempted corrective rape is strongly hinted at here. Pablo realizes this is going further than he thought it would, and in his attempt to stop Antonio, he gets killed. Marisol then picks up the gun and shoots Antonio, and this is ultimately the situation that leads to Marisol and Gabi fleeing El Salvador.

In the present day, Rey is starting to feel a lot better, and she is starting to spend time with friends again. One conversation with Rey's friends about the CTS reveals that while Rey is getting positive emotions, Marisol is receiving bad ones. This is something that Rey has been kept in the dark about, and she is furious on Marisol's behalf. Meanwhile Marisol's depression builds and builds until she is about to attempt suicide by drowning in the nearby lake. Indranie stops Marisol before she can see it through and resolves to put the experiment to a halt. Everything is put into the open, including the fact that Indranie lied about Gabi and Marisol's case for asylum being denied. It is unknown whether or not their case would have been denied or accepted, as it had not been fully processed yet – when Marisol and Gabi ran away from the detainment center and Indranie found them, she seized the opportunity to coerce Marisol into agreeing to participate in the experiment. When things have calmed down a little, and the negative effects of the CTS have passed, Rey and Marisol go on a date and confess their feelings to each other.

Towards the end, Gabi goes missing and Marisol believes it is Antonio who has come to the US to kidnap her. However, Rey and Marisol find Gabi at a local party, having lied about spending time at a friend's house. Marisol's fears were unfounded, and this symbolizes the beginning of a new life, where fear of kidnappings and murder are less founded. A new interview is arranged, where Marisol reveals that she was also being prosecuted for her sexuality, and Gabi because they wanted to make sure she did not turn out gay too. The ending is ambiguous, but hopeful. We do not know if Marisol and Gabi are granted asylum or not, but the signs point to them

having a strong case, in addition to the added political pull of Rey's father and Indranie. They have found a home there.

Characters

I will now conduct an analysis of the main character Marisol in *The Grief Keeper*, as well as her love interest Rey and her younger sister Gabi. As with *Girl Mans Up*, I will look more closely at some of the minor characters under setting.

Marisol

Marisol Morales is the main character and the narrator of *The Grief Keeper*. This means the reader is given insight into her thoughts, feelings, and her impressions of other people, but not the other way around. The other characters are depicted through Marisol's impression of them, and it is how she describes these people that give the first hints of her sapphic inclination in the text.

Marisol is a seventeen-year-old girl from El Salvador, who had to flee the country due to fear of torture and death. Marisol is preoccupied with appearing like "a good American", both out of necessity as someone seeking asylum, but also as someone who has a certain impression of what American culture is like. Her view is shaped largely by the TV-show *Cedar Hollow* and the books she has read. It is therefore all second-hand information. Marisol's desire to be able to blend into American society is showcased multiple times, but the clearest example is the devastation she feels when she is informed that *Cedar Hollow* is in fact a Canadian show. Her desire to integrate into America is contrasted with her clear longing for certain aspects of El Salvador, but these feelings are complicated by the bad memories associated with the time before they had to flee, and so she avoids thinking about it that much.

Marisol has strong mastery of textbook English, but she has problems following slang. This solidifies her status as an outsider and makes her frustrated. Being an outsider is in fact a key part of her identity. She is an outsider at home in her culture and her family due to her

sexuality, and in America as an “illegal”, or eventually if asylum is granted, still as an immigrant. Both Marisol and her sister Gabi are shunned by the other kids and teens at the detention center. They are seen as outsiders because they both speak English. This further presents Marisol as an outsider, as she is shunned even by other people in the same situation as her. She is presented as different from the people around her from the start. These aspects of her identity might influence her even more to try to be “a good American” and a good sister, a good Grief Keeper, because not only is it necessary for survival, but it is vital for any hope of acceptance. Her projecting an image based on outside influences is related both to her cultural and racial identity, but this is also relevant to her sexuality. Marisol is trying to project an image that does not reveal that she is sapphic – she finds it necessary to keep it hidden.

It is important to note that the first reference to Marisol’s sexual identity appears within the context of her first being called a slur by the girl she was in love with, and later by her brother. Pablo also makes a point to refer to Marisol by both a Spanish and an English slur, again reinforcing the idea that she is an outsider because of her preoccupation with America as well as due to her sexuality. She has “betrayed” her own culture:

Do you like to kiss girls, hermanita? I have tried so hard, for so long, to keep Pablo’s voice out of my head. Are you one of those twisted girls? Tortillera? I don’t have the strength to do it anymore. You love English words, don’t you? Dyke. That’s what you are. That’s the word for you. He spits at me, a spray of shame across my face. (p. 245)

By this point in the text, Marisol has never referred to herself as gay, lesbian, or any other label that communicates her sapphic sexuality. It has been something unspoken, and shame is implied here – something that cannot be named because it is too dangerous to even think about it in detail. And Marisol’s fear is not unfounded – she has experienced some very traumatic things because of the reaction people around her have had to her sexuality. When Pablo spits in her face, it is a “spray of shame” across her face (p. 245). Marisol is ashamed because of her orientation and this shame is amplified by the confirmation of the people

around her that she *should* be ashamed. It is first towards the end where Marisol herself chooses what term to use about her sexuality, when she is interviewed about why she is seeking asylum, and states that she was in danger because she is gay.

There are ways where Marisol's sexuality likely has affected other aspects of her personality and behavior. One central trait that she has at the beginning of the novel is that she tries to make herself *less* than what she actually is. She tones down her natural way of speaking because she does not want to seem arrogant, stiff, and condescending by using an advanced vocabulary, she avoids drawing attention to herself, she tries to connect with others as little as possible. She is afraid of being a bother and a burden to people around her. After Marisol gets the news that Mrs. Rosen has passed away, she agrees to the offer of food from a guard so she can have a moment alone to cry, quickly. Here it is established that this behavior is a conscious decision to the degree that she considers it to be a rule. "I need to be alone, so I break my rule—the one that says I should be as small and unnoticed as I can be, and not to bother anyone" (p. 17). On one level, this is likely because of her precarious situation. Trying not to draw attention to herself and not making waves is a sound strategy when she is trying to just get through the process and get to safety. But, on the other hand, one could make the case that Marisol is trying to suppress and erase parts of herself as an extension of her sexuality. To be perceived as deviant in any area, the shame that comes with that, will likely manifest itself on multiple levels in a person's psyche. As Marisol settles into a safer situation and works through some of the experiences she has had around her sexuality, she also allows herself to let go of this carefully maintained persona.

Shame is mentioned multiple times, in relation to hiding her sexuality and the reason why she had to seek asylum, in relation to her sexuality itself, in relation to her grief. Sexuality is on some level presented as a source of pain and shame but presented through a lens that clearly showcases why this was wrong. When Marisol states that her life was in danger due to her sexuality, it lends credence to her application for asylum that she previously lacked. It is formally recognized that this is a human rights issue, and that the things she went through were not acceptable. Further, she is able to get out of that situation, and into a safe home for her

and her sister, a happy relationship, and promising career opportunities. As Marisol heals from the traumatic experiences she went through, she comes to terms with her sexuality and sees it connected to good things as well.

Another interesting element in *The Grief Keeper* is the tension between internal and external information, in terms of Marisol's thoughts and actions. As mentioned earlier, the reader is given insight into Marisol's thoughts and feelings, and the events that happened before the story takes place are revealed slowly throughout the book. This allows the reader unique insight into the contrast between Marisol's thoughts and her actions. Already at the beginning of the novel where Marisol is seeking asylum, it is evident that she is withholding information, something that is barely hinted at even in her own mind. In the moment when she is being interviewed, it is evident that Marisol *wants* to tell her story in full. She nearly has to bite her tongue to hold her story back, because she is afraid that this half-true version will not be enough to convince the interviewer to let them stay (p. 11). There is also the fact that Marisol has been through many traumatic experiences that she had not had the time or safety to process, and that she had not talked about this with anyone. Already there is a dichotomy between what Marisol wants and what she feels like she has to do. Later, it is made clear that the reason why she could not divulge all the details was due to the complexity of the situations that lead up to Marisol and her sister having to flee - it would require being open about her sexuality, something Marisol at that point in the text is not, seemingly even to herself. Additionally, she would also have to explain the circumstances of her brother and Liliana's betrayal, Antonio's death by her hands, and other details that she would have no way of knowing would be received well.

The inner life of the characters also gets explored through the use of the CTS ankle cuff, in that it contributes to pushing Marisol and Rey together in a way that might not have happened otherwise. This connection of their emotions spurs them into taking actions – even though Marisol is also motivated by the need to do a good job so that she can stay – and later affection and desire for Rey. The CTS cuff is also what directly pushes Marisol into starting to process her trauma, as she gets flashbacks to what happened when she had to flee El Salvador. This process

does make things worse before they get better, leading to Marisol entering a state of deep depression. Time, along with support from Rey and Gabi, helps her come back from the brink.

When Zimmerman writes that longing is often a thematic presence in sapphic literature, this referred to the longing between a subject and an unavailable romantic object (Zimmerman, 1981, p. 20). This type of longing is very much present in *The Grief Keeper*, but the novel also features a more broadly applicable sense of longing – for belonging, for beauty, for safety and love. Longing is present in Marisol wanting to be a “good” American, wanting to perform womanhood correctly, wanting to be able to let go and break down and not be responsible for her own and Gabi’s safety and survival.

The first time Marisol meets Rey, she mistakes her for a boy because she is dressed up in a leather jacket and has short hair. She reads her gender presentation as a man for multiple moments and is surprised when she recognizes that she is in fact a woman. Her shock of seeing a woman with short hair is a stronger reaction than what is common in contemporary times, where women having short haircuts is not that uncommon. Later in the book when her younger sister Gabi wants to cut her hair shorter, Marisol is skeptical of the idea. There are some implied opinions in relation to gender presentation here that are never stated clearly, but that are indicative of Marisol having a somewhat traditional view on what men and women should look like. The idea that women are expected to have long hair, or at least that women are prettier with longer hair is one of these. Still, Marisol does fall in love with Rey who does have short hair throughout the entire time they know each other, so this is likely a bias that Marisol moves past. Marisol’s initial thoughts of what a beautiful girl is intersects with her idea of what a good American is - women who are tall, white, blonde, thin, with long hair and so on. Marisol’s idea of beauty in America is both colored by what she has seen on television, as well as what Mrs. Rosen has told her. “Mrs. Rosen used to say that my English was good enough that I could be on TV in the States, if I were taller. Thinner” (p. 17). The implication here is that there are some core physical traits that would need to be changed for Marisol to fit into the American beauty standard. This idealized American woman is often what Marisol uses as a comparison for her own looks, and negatively affects her self-image. Marisol is described as

pretty by other people on several occasions, but she does not seem to have internalized this message.

Marisol is throughout the novel only shown to be attracted to feminine women. Her inner thoughts around the women that she is attracted to reveal that femininity itself seems like an attribute she is fascinated by. This is in terms of her noticing and appreciating features such as elaborate makeup, long hair, skirts, dresses, floral perfumes, earrings, and other jewelry in the women she is attracted to. There are no masculine or androgynous female characters present in the book, so whether Marisol's attraction is exclusively towards feminine women is not clear. One can still make an educated guess that Marisol has a specific type of woman she is attracted to, based on the pattern of women she does find attractive in books, as well as what types of women she thinks or fantasizes about.

There is occasionally an element of envy coloring Marisol's attraction to other women. Rey is a white American, rich, she is allowed to have her trauma removed, she flaunts her privilege and lack of understanding of it. Rey does not think about the people who have to clean up after her, she does not consider how her behaviors are causing suffering to her friends and family. As mentioned earlier Marisol often measures up her own looks to an idealized image of the American beauty standard for women. Rey is presented as being close to this ideal. This does to some degree factor into Marisol's attraction towards her, as she frequently compares her to one of the lead actresses on the tv-show Cedar Hollow who she also used to have a crush on. In some way, Marisol seems to be attracted to this ideal as well as wanting to fit into it.

Throughout Marisol's flashbacks the reader is given insight into the family dynamic back in El Salvador. There was a clear hierarchy of affection in terms of distribution of attention, love, freedom, and material goods. Gabi was the favorite, but Pablo was afforded more freedom on account of his gender. This dynamic is showcased in moments such as when Marisol's dad came home from a trip. "Gabi would get the first and best kisses, then Pablo. I would get the last kisses, the half-hearted, tired ones" (p. 34). Marisol's identity as the eldest daughter leaves her with more responsibility than Pablo and less affection than Gabi got, at least from their father. We can see this in her behaviors throughout the story, where she generally places others' well-

being in front of her own. This is a mentality that has been taught and expected of her from her family and her environment overall.

Rey

Rey is the grief donor and Marisol's friend and, later, love interest. She is one of two confirmed sapphic characters in the book. It is her grief and trauma Marisol is receiving through the CTS ankle cuff. Rey is not aware that Marisol's is a participant in the experiment due to her asylum being denied, and she is under the wrongful impression that they will both get better through the use of the CTS device. Rey and Marisol are the same age, same gender, they have had a similar traumatic experience in losing a brother. When Marisol meets Rey for the first time, she is immediately attracted to her: "I want to laugh. She was wild, beautiful, and destructive. How could I relate to her in any way?" (pp. 89 – 90) Marisol does not feel like she will be able to relate to her. Rey might function as a foil to Marisol who needs to keep herself calm and gathered, who considers herself plain, and whose primary goal is to protect and nurture her younger sister. This also relates to their differences both in class and status as rich and poor, as a white American and a Latina refugee.

Rey is not gender nonconforming but does cut her hair short after the loss of her twin-brother Riley, in order to feel and look more similar to him. Directly following the event she is clearly depressed and neglects things like basic hygiene, and she only wears her PJs and Riley's leather jacket. When Rey starts to recover from her depressive period and feels better due to her grief being transferred away to Marisol, she starts dressing very femininely. After this point she remains very feminine until the end. Rey's privilege allows her the space to deviate from the norm in a way that is inaccessible to Marisol. She has the opportunity of cutting off her hair and not 'performing femininity' when depressed, without any apparent social consequences. Later she is able to switch over to extravagant, hyper-feminine fashion (while having short hair). Both these extremes would have likely been unavailable for Marisol, especially in El Salvador, where being gender nonconforming in any way would be punished. Eccentric femininity that does not cater to the male gaze would also likely be punished, such as Rey's short hair paired with flower crowns and extravagant dresses. Marisol is framed as performing more soft, non-threatening,

modest, maternal femininity compared to Rey. In America, Marisol's status as an immigrant would still block her from having a safe space to explore various gender performances in the way that Rey does. She feels the need to keep her head down and make no ripples. Lastly, there is also a question of funds to spend on makeup, hair styling, expensive dresses, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, class is relevant in the dynamic between Rey and Marisol and the conflicts that arise between them. Marisol is in a situation where she is the equivalent of an indentured servant, or someone being coerced into a medical experiment. This inherently leads to a power imbalance between Marisol and Rey, one that Rey is not conscious of. Conflicts arise because of Rey's behavior which is due to her privilege, such as not knowing what her maids' names are, not caring that she makes the work of the housekeeper more difficult, and similar situations. It is also evident in the way that Marisol and Rey have similar experiences but widely different reactions to them. While Rey breaks down after her traumatic experiences, Marisol has to keep it together because she and her sister are still in a precarious situation.

The TV show *Cedar Hollow* is the first thing Marisol and Rey really bond over. When they watch it together, they end up calling each other "Amber" and "Aimee" after the two main characters of the show. Rey later points out that she believes Amber has a crush on Aimee, much to Marisol's surprise, and this marks a turning point in their relationship – Marisol is now aware that Rey is positive towards the idea of sapphic women, potentially sapphic herself, and lastly might be hinting that she is interested in Marisol. However, she has some issues trying to discern whether Rey's affection is more platonic or if it is romantic. The bracelet is a key element in Rey and Marisol's relationship, but it does not illuminate what the feelings are about – they are just the pure, negative feelings transferred from Rey to Marisol. "It's a tragedy that I can feel so many of her emotions and not know if any of them are for me" (p.221). One interesting element of Marisol and Rey's relationship is that through the transference of emotions, the boundaries between the two are blurred. This is a narrative that can be read as queer if we consider Zimmerman's idea of a lesbian narrative space. These two people of the same gender and same age are now also sharing an emotional, psychic bond in a literal sense. The boundaries between self and the other fade. Still, as Marisol points out, she can only feel

the emotions – she does not have insight into the cause of them, or what they are directed towards. Additionally, since Rey is only transferring the negative and receiving the positive, while Marisol is saddled with all the negative emotions in the end, for a while their relationship is parasitic. Rey is unaware of this, but she is still the reason why Marisol ends up falling into a deep depressive state. This could be read as the negative effects of trauma and mental health issues on a relationship, even if there is no *intention* to do harm. Communication is the key to reverse this process, as Rey demands the project be put to a stop when she finds out what is happening to Marisol, and they both start to heal in a more organic way. Rey did benefit from the CTS bracelet while they were connected, but in a way where she started going through both extreme lows and extreme highs emotionally. Her emotions started leveling out in a positive way around the same time as her crush on Marisol developed – perhaps this also led to her arriving at a mental state where she could start to process her trauma, or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe she first needed to start processing her trauma before she could reconnect with other people, such as falling in love with Marisol. The text lends itself to both readings of the trajectory of Rey's feelings.

There are allusions to Rey experiencing cultural and familial homophobia. She mentions her dad not being on-board with her sexuality at first, and she is hostile to the idea of Christians. When Rey first meets Marisol, she assumes that Marisol is a Christian and she expresses disdain for “bible-thumpers” (p. 105). One thing that could potentially be inferred from this is Rey experiencing homophobia within a religious context, and showcases that homophobia still happens to people with other privileges.

Since Marisol has also experienced the loss of a brother, Rey assumes that they are going through a similar situation, but the reality is that Rey's privilege is fundamental to her being able to break down without any bigger consequences. Marisol's loss is also complicated because her relationship with Pablo was clearly strained towards the end. This is also a contrast between the two characters. Rey had the unconditional love of her brother, while Marisol's brother became abusive when he learned about her sexuality.

Gabi

Gabi is Marisol's younger sister who is twelve, and the youngest person in their family. She lived a more protected childhood than Marisol and Pablo, due to Marisol taking care of her almost more in the role of a parent than an older sister. Gabi is shown to be a cheerful, intelligent, and outgoing girl, and seems less burdened by their past in El Salvador than Marisol is. This could also be due to Gabi being presented through Marisol's impression of her, so the reader is not given any insight into her inner life in the same way as with Marisol. It is clear that she wants to share in with the responsibilities and worries of her older sister more, but Marisol is adamant about protecting her from the uglier side of their situation, such as hiding the negative effects of the CTS device.

Gabi adapts very quickly to life in America as contrasted with Marisol – she gets to go to school, integrated into society, makes friends, and sneaks out to go to parties with her new best friend. Meanwhile Marisol has to stay at the mansion due to the experiment and is prohibited from a normal life. This follows the dynamic that has existed between Marisol and Gabi since before they left El Salvador, where Marisol will sacrifice herself to provide for Gabi. There are moments where Gabi showcases that she is stronger than Marisol thinks, and that she also wants to reciprocate the care that her sister has shown her. Particularly when Marisol is experiencing both her own and Rey's trauma through the CTS device, Gabi tries to support and cheer her sister up.

Gabi might have a somewhat subversive gender presentation within the context of El Salvadorian culture or at least not conforming "enough" or "the right way." She wants to dress up in combat boots and leather jackets and seems to be leaning towards a more alternative biker-style. She is interested in books and motorcycles. Her perceived gender deviance in El Salvador ends up being punished even if it is very mild, though this is also in relation to the idea of Marisol's sexuality being a potentially corrupting influence.

Her main function in the narrative is as the catalyst for action, both in the flashbacks about the series of events that lead to Marisol and Gabi having to flee El Salvador, and in the present-day

story in America. The narrative is pushed forward due to Marisol's main motivation of protecting Gabi is throughout most of the book. However, as Marisol becomes closer with Rey, her motivation also shifts to include wanting to protect and be close with Rey.

Liliana

Liliana is a character only present in Marisol's flashbacks of El Salvador. She is first presented as Pablo's girlfriend but is later revealed to be at least emotionally involved with Marisol, who is in love with her. Liliana appears as a flat character, but a closer reading of her might imply subtextual depth. She functions as a catalyst for Marisol's sexuality being revealed to her brother and the subsequent series of events that lead to her having to flee. She is briefly a love interest, and the first woman Marisol has a crush on (who is not fictional).

Marisol's moments reminiscing about Liliana paint a picture that Liliana and Pablo got together quickly, and while they outwardly seemed in love, there was a sense of intimacy that existed only between Liliana and Marisol:

I wore the scent of limes whenever we walked together, Pablo holding Liliana's hand—they were *novios* within a week—and me on her other side. She held Pablo's hand, but she whispered and laughed with me. (p.100)

The situation between Marisol and Liliana is ambiguous to the reader because it is both colored by Marisol's infatuation and understanding of the events, as well as being given no insight into Liliana outside these romantic encounters with Marisol. Still, as seen in the previous excerpt, Liliana is shown to take great interest in Marisol, and this friendship quickly develops into what might be considered a hidden flirtation between the two. However, it is hard for the reader to discern whether Liliana was in love with Marisol as well, and what actually happen between them. The memory of these events is colored by Marisol's wishes and assumption of what was going on, more so than what might have actually happened, and whether Liliana's affection for Marisol was romantic or platonic in a more sisterly or friendly way:

(...)She puts her lips to my hair and kisses my head. The anger drains out of me. I think, for sure, she must know. How my heart beats faster, how I dream about the way her skin looks under the neon bar lights. I think we are in this secret together. All I have to do is wait. (p. 97)

Marisol *thinks* they are in this secret together, but this is her interpretation of what is happening. However, Marisol also remembers moments that make it seem like Liliana was in love with her as well. “*You know I stay with Pablo so I can see you, right?*” Liliana’s voice repeats in my head like a curse” (p. 198). These remnants of what happened in Marisol’s past are scattered throughout the text, making it hard to really what it was that truly happened back then. This might be an extension of Marisol herself being unsure of what was real and what was not in her relationship with Liliana – whether there was actual affection there or not. In addition, Marisol went through a traumatic event that possibly affected how she would remember the other elements in her life before that.

In El Salvador, there was a one day a sudden increase when Liliana would show up at Marisol’s home to take her out, going shopping and spending time together. Marisol never questioned where Pablo was, or why Liliana was not spending time with him – she was just happy to spend time with Liliana. Some time later, Marisol visits Liliana at the bar and she suddenly does not seem happy to see her anymore. Still, she lets Marisol stay for a bit and brings her into her arms:

I’ve wanted this for so long, this feeling that I should have had with boys and never did. But it’s happening at a speed I can’t understand. Something feels wrong. I try to breathe, to catch my heart before it runs out of my chest. I need a second to think. “*¿No me quieres?*” Liliana asks. I can’t tell if she’s joking or if she means it. She can’t mean it. She can’t think I don’t want her. Lilí’s feather earrings tickle my nose. She lowers her head to me, and I think of the *tacones altos* she always wears, making her taller than me. Her lips move above mine, and I don’t have a thought in my head other than the sound of her breathing, the warmth of it on my skin. “It’s true,” she says with a cruel laugh, “*sos tortillera*”. (p. 213)

This is the moment where it is revealed that Liliana tried to kiss Marisol to test whether or not she was a lesbian. Marisol, and by extension the reader, does not know whether all the previous days of spending time together alone was build up to this trap, or whether Liliana actually did fall for Marisol. It is ultimately unclear whether Liliana is acting as the bait in a carefully laid trap or whether Marisol and Liliana actually fell mutually in love, and Liliana ended up going to Pablo with the information about Marisol's sexuality as a way to repent and suppress her own sexuality. The reason why the latter might be the case, is due to Liliana's emotional response after confirming that Marisol is a lesbian, in terms of stating that she is not like Marisol, she is a real woman. "'Go home to Mamá, you twisted thing,' she spits. 'I'm a real woman, the way God intended. I wouldn't soil myself with one like you'" (p. 213). There is clearly a religious influence at play in Liliana's homophobia here, and additionally it is clear that homosexuality is here culturally associated with not being "a real woman".

Another reason that might suggest that Liliana is in fact a closeted sapphic woman is that before Marisol fell in love with Liliana, there would be no discernable reason to assume that Marisol was sapphic. Thus, this might imply Liliana was spending time with her of her own volition and not as part of a larger scheme. If one follows this reading, that Liliana is a closeted sapphic woman who then got together with Pablo and decided to out Marisol, it could function as a symbolic narrative around conversion therapy. By holding desperately onto religious, traditional gender roles and being "a real woman, the way God intended" (p. 213), and going back to being with a man, Liliana is attempting to "cure" herself of what she considered a sin. One last thing that strongly suggests that Liliana was struggling with internalized homophobia, is what she says to Marisol when Antonio and Pablo kidnapped Gabi:

"Your sister won't be confused like us." Liliana looks up at me. "Don't you want that?"

"Don't you want her to be happy?"

"I want her to be herself."

"You mean, you want her to hate herself."

"Is that what you do?" I step closer to her, but she pushes back, knocking over the cleaner. The smell of bleach spreads through the room.

“Yes! Don’t you?” (p. 288)

The fact that Liliana says “confused like us” instead of “like you” in this excerpt, as well as her expression of self-hatred lends credence to the idea that she is in fact sapphic and her attraction to Marisol was genuine. What events that made her pull back from the situation is unclear, as that is something Marisol is not privy to either.

In the end, it is strongly suggested that Liliana in fact had real feelings for Marisol. The narrative alludes to internalized homophobia and conversion therapy by religious influences. This potential reading shows Liliana having been “cured” of her sexuality, with allusions to conversion therapy methods such as being with a man. This is not presented definitively as the reader does not know if Liliana is a lesbian, bisexual, or ultimately straight, but it is at least strongly suggested that she is sapphic and suppressed through the cultural, social, and religious ideas around womanhood and heteronormativity that she has internalized. Liliana is presented as an idealized version of what conventional femininity should be like in women within the context of El Salvadorian culture – which gives an element of irony to the, albeit unclear, romantic tension between Marisol and Liliana. Based on Pablo’s later actions with Gabi, it is clear that being sufficiently feminine is viewed as a way to somehow prevent queer attraction in sapphic women. One might speculate that Liliana’s carefully maintained femininity is to somehow keep this sapphic attraction at bay. Since it is never confirmed whether Liliana is really attracted to Marisol or just playing a role in order to trap her, it is impossible to say definitively. Still, it is a possible reading of her character.

Lastly, an interesting thing to note about Liliana is the similarity between her and Rey, showcased in this excerpt:

Instead, I let myself remember Liliana and her feather earrings. We stood outside el Club Atlético. “Mira, hermanita, what Pablo bought me,” Liliana said, lifting her long hair to show me her tiny ears. The earrings were long, almost touching her shoulders, shaped like feathers the colors of sunset. First dark orange, then gold, then light blue

turning darker to azul marino. She laughed and twirled, letting her feathery earrings fan out with her golden hair. (p. 187)

Liliana was also beautiful, expressively feminine through clothes and accessories, had long, blonde hair and a wild energy about her in contrast with Marisol's more subdued personality. These are some of the features that attracts Marisol to Rey later.

Setting

The Grief Keeper takes place in a reality that seems close to our present day, with the additional science fiction element of one new technological advancement. This technology presents a medical way in which people can transfer their grief to other people, but through the course of the novel the consequences of this are shown to be too big for the characters involved to cope with any longer. But once the bracelets are removed the changes in the relationship between Marisol and Rey have already intensified to a level where they experience how relationships can help a person be able to deal with grief and trauma in an organic way, through communication and spending time together with a loved one. This is also shown through Gabi, who can make friends in school and participate in a new, safer life in America, as well as through Rey starting to spend time with her friends again.

El Salvador

Marisol's flashbacks and reminiscing of the past all take place in El Salvador. One must be careful with assigning bigotry as a trait to a culture at large. Homophobia can be found all around the world, regardless of the dominant culture of that region, just as there is a lot of diversity within any given cultural group. However, having societal systems and prejudices in place, for example based in the legal system, religion or social norms will influence people within the system to become prejudices. Bigotry is learned. So, it is more likely for someone to end up homophobic if they are raised within a society where it is, for example, punishable by death to be homosexual.

When she still lived in El Salvador as a sixteen-year-old Marisol was working at a salon with her mother. She was also expected to take care of Gabi, and generally not allowed to go out and dance and spend time with friends like Pablo did. This implies that it was expected for teens to work, and it seems children were expected to grow up quickly. This could be unique for Marisol as the eldest daughter, however, as she was also expected to take care of Gabi. There is clearly a gendered component to this, as Pablo did not face the same expectations and responsibilities.

There are mentions of religiousness, such as seen with Liliana earlier in this text. Other than those direct references to God, Marisol subscribes to an almost spiritual personification of *La Mala Suerte* or bad luck. Whether this is her own personal idea or a cultural one is unclear.

There are elements of crime and corruption present in the description of El Salvador. ““You claim that you and your sister’s lives are both threatened by violence and death by gangs in your country. And that officials, the police, and the government are corrupt or unable to protect you—is that correct?”” (p. 8) When questioned as to why she is seeking asylum, Marisol struggles to answer the question as to *why* she and her sister are being threatened, and why the police and the government are unable to protect them. The truth of Marisol being persecuted for her sexuality which is revealed later in the books explains this. This implies that Marisol has grown up in a place that is systemically hostile towards her sexuality. This context is important to keep in mind when looking at the other elements surrounding Marisol’s identity and feelings around her own sexuality. Liliana, Pablo, and Antonio are all negative examples of the effects social stigma and pressure has on people, keeping them trapped in a cycle of violence and trauma, ultimately resulting in Pablo and Antonio’s deaths. This is also what leads to Marisol and Gabi having to flee El Salvador.

It is established through Marisol’s flashbacks that there are societal issues in El Salvador such as gang trouble, gambling, alcoholism, crime, and strict traditional gender roles that punish those who deviate from them. However, Marisol also remembers positive elements, such as the food, places, the people, the weather and so on. She recalls it being a chaotic, lively, and beautiful place, even if it was dangerous at times. El Salvador is where Marisol has lived her entire life. It

has had a huge impact on her as a person and the people around her and their attitudes towards her, before and after being outed.

It is further relevant to consider gender as a performance being influenced by specific cultural norms. What is feminine in El Salvador might not be the American image of femininity that Marisol encounters later. This might be the reason why Marisol was so shocked when she first saw Rey's short hair. In El Salvador Gabi is considered almost a woman by Pablo when she is twelve years old. The implication is that children have to grow up faster here. There is also as previously mentioned a markedly gendered difference in what is expected from Marisol versus Pablo, in terms of responsibility, appearance, and behavior. Another element related to the portrayal of gender norms in El Salvador are the implied beauty standards. These are conveyed through Marisol's gaze, both her thoughts about herself and other women, and also expressed through other characters such as Mrs. Rosen. This can be seen in the makeover Gabi is forcefully put through where Pablo, Liliana and Antonio put a lot of makeup on her, as well as We also see it in Gabi's makeover, Liliana. Marisol's internal monologues, *Cedar Hollow*.

America

When Marisol leaves the detention center and gets to see more of America, she frequently compares it to what she has seen on TV. "The mall looks exactly like the ones on *Cedar Hollow*, with lots of American stores lined up on both sides like boxes of jewels" (p. 93). What she is observing seems unreal and artificial to her. Marisol is standing on the outside looking in on a place that she does not have full access to, as an asylum seeker. Unlike Gabi, she does not get to go to school and primarily stays at the mansion with Rey. Marisol also describes Washington as "almost too clean to be real" (p.32). This reflects Marisol's idealized vision of America, as well as tells us something about El Salvador via her response to Washington. The implication here is that El Salvador is, if not dirty, a less clean place. There is also the contrast between her first experience of America was staying at the detention center, versus what she does see of America later. When she is with Rey the only places Marisol sees are the places where rich people go. This further alludes to the poverty in El Salvador, as contrasted with the material

wealth Marisol observes in America. Notably, because she is staying with Rey, she never gets to see any of the poverty present in America.

Rey lives in a large mansion with an extensive garden. Marisol and Gabi live in the carriage house together with the housekeeper Olga and her husband, the gardener Manny. The mansion and the carriage house are where large parts of the story unfold. The juxtaposition of privilege and those without is starkly presented also through the fact that Marisol is granted a temporary safe space as long as she functions as an indentured servant. Most of Marisol's introspection and breakthroughs in relation to her grief and her trauma happen in this mansion, where there is time and space to really process the complicated feelings she has around her sexual identity, her brother's death, and the subsequent consequences of that situation for her and Gabi.

Marisol has a superficial understanding of the US. She is standing on the outside and not experiencing it. This element of things being superficial or artificial ties in with how the CTS's grief transfer is inherently an artificial way of removing emotions and trauma, resulting in one part taking on all the burden. The splendor of certain parts of American cities is the result of the exploitation of the working class, and also the dark history of slavery contributes to enduring inequality. These elements of the setting and Marisol's not having experienced these darker sides of America yet does fit into how the transferal of grief can be read as a metaphor for encouraging people in vulnerable positions to participate in drug trials and similar experiments, as well as low-cost labor.

The girls from *Cedar Hollow* that Marisol wants to emulate are not real people. They are media constructions of what an American teenager looks like or even what they should look like - they are an idealized version of youth, femininity and class that requires suspension of disbelief from the viewer who is familiar with what most American teenagers actually look and act like. However, because Marisol's knowledge of America is mainly provided through pop culture and fiction such as TV shows, movies and books, it makes sense that she would take these elements at face value. On some level, Rey's economically privileged background also supports this unrealistic ideal of America that Marisol holds. The fact that *Cedar Hollow* is revealed to be a

Canadian show is pivotal because it fully breaks the illusion for Marisol. This moves her towards accepting that there is no right way to be a woman, to be an American citizen, and so on which is implied through her journey towards self-acceptance towards the end of the book.

Pablo

Pablo is Marisol's older brother, who was two years older than her. He died during the series of events that lead to Marisol and Gabi having to flee El Salvador. He is therefore only present throughout the flashbacks that take place throughout the book, or in Marisol's thoughts in the present day. He is homophobic, and reacts violently to the reveal of Marisol's sexuality, believing her to be a corrupting influence on Gabi. He is shown to have a lot of disdain for Americans, whom he thinks of as unfairly rich and as stupid.

Already as a child he is portrayed as criticizing perceived weakness in his sisters' – he constantly tells Marisol "don't be butter" (p. 13). This was a way to communicate do not be soft, weak, and easily pliable.

Pablo is complicit in the sexual violence Antonio attempted towards Gabi, but he tries to stop Antonio when he realizes exactly what it was Antonio was planning. It is this resulting scuffle that leads to his death.

Pablo's main purpose in the narrative is to serve as a mouthpiece for these bigoted opinions, as well as functioning as the figurehead of Marisol's trauma. She remembers his death and is unable to mourn him properly because what he did to her and tried to do to Gabi. He is the main element from her past that she cannot bear to linger on, but also what she is expected to bond with Rey about. In many ways, Pablo functions as the heart of Marisol's negative experiences, both in relation to her shame around her sexuality, the moments with Liliana, with Antonio, the attempted assault on Gabi, and lastly, the trauma of his death.

Antonio

Antonio is the primary antagonist in the novel. He is the person who gets Pablo involved with

the gangs, and he functions as a personification of the corruption and criminality of El Salvador. He is the driving force behind Liliana outing Marisol, and the attempted corrective sexual assault on Gabi. In the end he is killed by Marisol after shooting Pablo. When Gabi goes missing towards the end of the novel, having snuck away to go to a party, Marisol is hysterically convinced that it is Antonio's men that have come for them for revenge. Even after his death, Antonio remains as a symbol of all the traumatic events Marisol experienced while living in El Salvador.

Olga and Manny

The housekeeper and the gardener who work for Rey's father. They are both Hispanic and with an immigrant background and serve to further emphasize the contrast between Marisol and Rey's walk of lives. Marisol is closer to them than she is Rey, in terms of life experience and privileges. Throughout the book they also bond with both Marisol and Gabi, especially the latter, further solidifying a sense of found family at the end of the book.

Comparison and discussion

For the comparison of the two novels, I will return back to the research questions and examine these findings in light of those. First, I want note some of the general similarities and differences between the novels.

Both books are told from a first-person point of view, where the main character is the narrator and is also the focalizer. This is common in Young Adult literature in general and is a choice that allows the reader intimate insight into the main character's thoughts and feelings. In *The Grief Keeper* this is complicated to some degree because Marisol withholds information from herself due to it being too painful to think about, and a similar situation does happen in *Girl Mans Up* when Pen is angry with her parents for not having protected her as a child. The reader is only given insight into what has happened earlier when the main character focuses on it, and it takes

time for the whole picture to be revealed. In addition, there is also the element of whether or not they are reliable narrators, as their experience of the events are subjective and limited. This is especially the case in *The Grief Keeper*, where part of the story is told through Marisol's memory of traumatic events, and it is thus sometimes hard to discern what was actually happening.

Do these Young Adult novels reiterate or overcome the narrative tropes that previously characterised LGBT Young Adult fiction?

As Epstein found in her investigation of LGBT Young Adult literature, there were no characters who identified as bisexual in the books in her corpus. She pointed out that in some texts, women who identified as lesbians did end up dating men, without the way they described themselves changing (Epstein, 2013, p. 124). This lack of bisexual characters in award-winning LGBT Young Adult literature was also noted by Jiménez (Jiménez, 2015, pp. 7). Blake is the only character in either book who is seen as both being involved with men and women, and her sexuality is never discussed. She never identifies as a lesbian or a bisexual, because she does not describe her sexuality in any point in the novel. One might argue that this is a progressive thing, in terms of moving beyond the need for labels, and in that she might be considered a character where her sexuality is not a focus. However, considering the lack of visible bisexuality in LGBT Young Adult literature at large, it falls into the earlier trope of leaving bisexuals out of the narrative.

Pen falls within the butch type of lesbian that Epstein identified in her research. This is something I want to discuss further under the gender section of this chapter. Marisol does not fit into any of the main types of lesbian characters that Epstein illuminated in her research, and neither does Rey or Blake. One *could* argue that Blake might fit into the angry, art-interested feminist lesbian, except for the fact that she is probably bisexual, even though this is not confirmed either way in the text.

In both books sexuality is presented by some characters as being a choice that one makes. This is framed by the narratives as bigoted and uneducated opinions, influenced by a desire to

confirm to the status quo and concerns about what other people will think. The characters who hold these opinions face strong consequences in *The Grief Keeper*, where both Pablo and Antonio die as a consequence of the situation they end up in when trying to force heterosexuality onto Gabi. While they die as a larger consequence of being involved in the gangs, one can argue that in this particular instance it is the intention of trying to cure Gabi of her supposed homosexuality that leads to their demise – when Pablo realized what Antonio was planning on doing to his little sister, he tries to stop him, and is killed by Antonio in the resulting scuffle. Marisol then shoots Antonio, whether as a knee-jerk reaction, in revenge, or in self-protection is unclear. In *Girl Mans Up*, Pen's parents who try to force their children into strict gender roles end up with both their children leaving home and maintaining a careful distance from them. Colby ends up losing his friends and the girl he was in love with. Of course, these things happen as a result of many choices made by the characters during the course of the story, but it seems to be no coincidence that the characters with the most bigoted opinions are the ones who face dire consequences or alienate the people around them. Another element that adds to this, is that both books contain and focus on sapphic relationships that end on a healthy and happy note, something that deviates from earlier findings within sapphic Young Adult literature. The roles have in some way been reversed in these two books, in the sense that the oppressors are unhappy at the end, and the people from the marginalized group get their happy ending. These books are moving away from the tragic endings and misery due to sexuality. There are still trials and difficult experiences present in both of these books, but they don't end with alienation from society, torture or death – *The Grief Keeper* is the book where Marisol's identity as a lesbian is causing her the most harm, but this is presented within the context of society and cultural prejudices and the book ultimately has a hopeful ending. It is also worth remarking that the main cause of distress in *The Grief Keeper* is due to the exploitation of Marisol as an immigrant, though reactions to her sexuality was the reason she had to flee her country. Ultimately, one could argue that the characters that held the most bigoted opinions are the ones that end up with unhappy endings. This could suggest these opinions are presented within the universe as being wrong, cruel, and morally corrupt. As previously mentioned, in earlier LGBT fiction the queer characters would often end up unhappy

or dead to signal the tragic endings of what was perceived as a failure of morality. If one compares these two contemporary novels with this earlier tendency, this suggests that the trend may be changing in the opposite direction. At the very least, these novels indicate that the genre is moving away from unhappy endings for their sapphic characters.

Interestingly, both books have a central identity marker other than sexuality as the main source of internal and external conflict in the books. In *The Grief Keeper* this is in combination with Marisol's sexuality, but her status as an asylum seeker is a driving force for the happenings of the book, even though her status as an asylum seeker happened due to her social circle in El Salvador's reaction to her sexuality. In other words, these elements of her identity are intertwined and serve as catalysts for the events happening around her and how she responds to them. This is something that differs from the earlier tendency in LGBT Young Adult literature, where the characters were usually queer first and foremost, and other aspects of identity were seldomly explored or problematized.

In *Girl Mans Up*, Pen's gender identity and presentation is the main focus. Even though she is openly sapphic and actively pursuing a relationship, her sexuality is not really what the people around her react to. Her sexuality is also not what Pen herself spends time reflecting around on the same level of her gender presentation and how that fits in to the narrow ideals of the gender binary, how she is expected to act within a relationship between two women while desiring to move within a more masculine social role.

Longing is a common theme in lesbian literature, and it is very present in both of these works – not only longing in a romantic sense, but certainty that too, but also the longing for a community, for a safe and accepting place in society. Pen spends a lot of time fantasizing about being with girls, longingly staring at their long hair or as they apply make-up, and this behavior features even more prominently and frequently with Blake before they get together.

Marisol experiences this sense of longing with Liliana, with the female main character in *Cedar Hollow*, and lastly with Rey. Interestingly, in both books the main character does end up with the person they longed after, breaking with the pattern Zimmerman identified, where the

longing is unrequited or prevented by society itself. Of course, the latter is generally more relevant when looking at historical fiction or contemporary fiction set outside of North America. If *The Grief Keeper* took place in El Salvador throughout the whole story, Marisol may not have been able to get together with her love interest, such as in the case of Liliana.

Shame around sexuality is prominent in *The Grief Keeper*, which also aligns with *The Grief Keeper* containing a coming out story in the way that *Girl Mans Up* does not. Coming out narratives in Young Adult fiction often explore the queer character's shame around their sexuality before they are able to fully accept themselves. In *Girl Mans Up*, Pen does not necessarily struggle with shame around her sexuality, but more external negative opinions due to her gender presentation. She does however experience internalized misogyny and homophobia (towards gay men), the former of which alleviates considerably when she makes female friends. Both struggles around self-acceptance, internalized homophobia and misogyny are present in these books, but ultimately there is a change throughout the story from shame towards self-acceptance, in both books.

How is the main characters' sapphic identity perceived and described in the novels by the protagonists and the other characters?

Marisol has been alone in her identity for most of her life, until she comes out by forming a relationship with Rey towards the end of *The Grief Keeper*. Her experience of being tricked, forcibly outed and ostracized by her brother and Liliana was for a long period of time the sole point of reference she had around how people will treat her based on her sexuality. It seems like she had internalized some ideas about sexuality before she fell in love with Liliana, in that she tried to have romantic feelings for boys and was worried when that did not happen. But unlike Liliana, who expresses that she hates herself because of her potentially queer sexuality, Marisol never seemed to have internalized shame to that severe a degree. Still, it is first through her connection with Rey that Marisol first gets to experience someone viewing her sexuality as something good and natural.

In *Girl Mans Up* sexuality is presented in multifaceted ways. It is sometimes presented as a choice by some characters, sometimes as not an important by others, as a trend, as an inherent part of someone, and as an intrinsic part of Pen's complex relationship to gender. For example, Pen's mother has trouble understanding why Pen is gender non-conforming, why she cannot just dress femininely and be sapphic. Or alternatively, she is unable to understand that Pen is not trying to be a man. She cannot understand that Pen is not gender non-conforming *because* she is a lesbian, but that those are two different aspects of Pen that happen to influence each other and often exist in tandem within the same person. As I mentioned earlier, both books explore the fact that sapphic sexuality is presented as inherently complicating the characters' womanhood, even in the case of Marisol who has no moments of deep reflection around her own gender identity.

An interesting and unique element of *Girl Mans Up* is that Pen rarely has to come out to people as queer – she is generally read as LGBT by strangers based on her gender presentation. Whether strangers read her as trans or a lesbian is something that depends on the person. This is something that seems to both annoy Pen at the same time as she wants girls to know that she is available as a romantic partner. This is most likely a case of wanting to signal to other queer women that she is queer, while not attracting the attention of straight women and men and having to frequently explain or even defend her identity. Her family is an exception to this reading of Pen as queer based on appearance, however, in a way that underscores how sexuality is visible or invisible when moving through different spheres of one's environment. Pen's mother expresses that it is alright for her to want to be with other girls, as long as she presents femininely, as ultimately her issue is that Pen does not fit into her cultural ideal of "a nice girl" because of her masculine gender presentation and interests.

The language used around sexuality is quite varied in both novels but does not really take up a lot of space. Pen has this internal discussion about what label feels right for her sexuality and her gender identity. She does not have the right words to explain her sexuality but is exclusively attracted to women. In the case of Marisol, the first vocalization of her identity was her being called slurs by Liliana and her brother, first in Spanish and then in English, but she later self-

identifies and puts a word on her identity as “gay”. Blake’s sexuality is never defined or discussed, but she has previously only dated guys before dating Pen. Whether she is bisexual or now coming out as a lesbian is unknown. This lack of discussion of her sexuality contributes to the phenomenon of bisexuals absent from LGBT Young Adult literature, as mentioned earlier. Similarly, Rey never defines her sexuality in *The Grief Keeper*. On one hand, one could argue that this lack of discussion and definition around sexuality has a normalizing effect, in that sexuality does not have to be explained and defended. The other side of this is that some sexualities, such as bisexuality, will inevitably be erased if not directly stated with words. A woman who is together with a man and then later with a woman, may be bisexual, or she may have been a closeted lesbian. In addition, when shying away from using sexuality labels, this can accidentally convey these as ‘forbidden’ words and lead to further stigmatization. Lastly, not including discussions and terms around sexuality can make it harder for people to figure out where they fit – such as Pen not knowing what label to use for herself.

How is the sapphic characters’ gender portrayed in the texts? Does gender identity and expression get problematized?

With Pen it is not coming out as a lesbian that is the main focus-point in her story, but rather her complex relationship to gender and womanhood without traditional femininity. She finds peace and certainty with her gender identity through community, by forming strong social bonds with other girls, as well as following her older brothers’ example for what kind of masculinity she wants to embody. She discards the cultural ideals around respect from her parents or Colby’s code and finds her own understanding of what it means to be a good friend, partner, and what lies in the expression of “manning up”. Still, Pen’s attraction to women is frequently mentioned in the text as a part of her as a person.

It is important to point out that the limited number of lesbian characters in the corpus Epstein examined in her research runs the risk of presenting a small part of a larger puzzle. When looking at all the Young Adult fiction LAMBDA and Stonewall winners that have sapphic main characters, *Girl Mans Up* is the only one with a strictly masculine main character. I cannot and

do not wish to make generalizations, but *Girl Mans Up* goes against the grain in that it depicts a masculine sapphic protagonist, which is a rarity despite the fact that it is common stereotype. What I mean by this is that Pen's masculinity is an important part of her and her story, and she is actively choosing masculinity and rejecting femininity as a part of her gender presentation and identity. Of course, this only reflects what type of sapphic Young Adult literature that is award-winning. I do not have the opportunity to conduct a large-scale examination of the frequency of masculine sapphic characters being included in Young Adult fiction in general, but I would like to point out that in pop culture at large, masculine sapphic characters are underrepresented. Of course, this might not indicate anything about gender presentation in sapphic characters in Young Adult literature as a genre, but in terms of representation, it is important to shine light on the fact that while the stereotype for a lesbian might be a masculine woman, it does not seem like pop culture at large reflects this. It is also important to note that many lesbian women are butch, or masculine, or have a unique relationship to gender, and that it is interesting to note that media about sapphic women might not reflect this. It is hard to say why there is this lack of masculine female characters in sapphic fiction, but one hypothesis is that it is more palatable and less challenging for the audience when a character is still gender conforming even if queer in other ways. Another explanation could be the fact that masculine lesbians is a known stereotype to the point where creators want to avoid it due to it seemingly being a cliché, even if that is not the reality in contemporary representations of sapphic characters.

The most striking moment of gender identity, expression, and the relationship between these two being problematized, is the moment in *Girl Mans Up* when Pen defines Colby's attraction to her as something that paints him as a male homosexual. This part of the text gives insight into some internalized homophobia that Pen has, but further serves to highlight how complex her feelings around her own gender identity is. It could be read as her defining masculinity and femininity as attributes as more relevant than gender identity – she identifies as a girl, Colby as a boy, but because they are both masculine it is akin to being gay. This does however go against what she gives expression to in other parts of the text, where she wants people to understand

that she is a girl regardless of her gender expression. There seems to be some conflicting ideas and feelings here for Pen. She goes through a lot of growth throughout the novel, and perhaps in the future she will find new ways of expressing the complex feelings she has around gender. This is one of multiple places where the lack of any form for queer community makes itself visible.

It is also interesting to note that Blake starts noticing Pen first after she has cut her hair –and thus becoming more visibly queer. Pen’s gender expression and her sapphic identity are very intertwined in how people read her as queer *because* she is gender nonconforming, but she herself considers these two aspects of herself to be separate. This is what she explains to her mother after moving out, that she liked masculine activities and clothes before she knew she liked girls – they might interact, but they are not inherently connected. On the other hand, romantically Pen wants to operate within a social role that is the same as Blake’s earlier boyfriends. This implies that in some areas her gender expression and her sexuality intersect in a way that creates a specific dynamic.

The Grief Keeper does not have any masculine female characters, but unique relationships to the different aspects of gender identity and expression are still explored, here mostly within the context of cultural gender norms. Liliana and Rey are both generally leaning towards high femininity compared to Marisol, but Rey has moments where she does not perform femininity at all and then moments where she is very into dressing up. Liliana had constant level of feminine gender expression until the kidnapping of Gabi happened, which is the only moment where she did not wear makeup or dress up. Within El Salvador, it seems like Marisol’s gender presentation might have been enough to suggest that she was sapphic to Antonio, Pablo, and Liliana, but this is not the case in the US. Rey mistakenly reads Marisol as a fanatical Christian upon first meeting her, rather than as queer. This is also seen with Gabi, who was read by Antonio and Pablo as being gender nonconforming enough that they needed to make sure she performed femininity more to avoid “becoming gay”.

Further on the topic of the problematization of gender identity and expression arises the matter of beauty standards. It seems within Pen's social circle and her own private thoughts that she feels little pressure to conform to beauty standards. Beauty standards and the pressures around this are only brought up by her group of male friends about other girls. Pen seems to fall outside of this expectation by the virtue of her gender nonconforming presentation. However, there is pressure from her family and society to present herself more feminine, which inevitably would then be colored by contemporary beauty standards as is evident with all the other feminine female characters. Blake is consistently characterized by others as very beautiful, to the degree where it is the main thing other people remark upon when it comes to her. Immediately after being rejected by Blake, Colby tries to play it off as her not being pretty enough for him. On the other hand, when Pen rejects his advances, he never tries to weaponize her looks against her. Rather, he tries to manipulate her through their friendship. Returning to Pen's gender presentation, it seems like she feels some desire to fit in to male beauty standards more so than traditional female ones, such as wanting to lift heavy weights and get visibly strong, dressing in a way that is mature, casual, and trendy, having a well-maintained, short haircut, wearing cologne, and making other more masculine-coded fashion choices. Yet, she does not seem to have any big complexes around not meeting these standards. She does not seem to have an ideal that she tries to live up to, that she is comparing herself to – her aesthetic wishes seem to be primarily related to her gender presentation, with little influence from societal pressures in terms of beauty. This may be because as a gender nonconfirming girl, she is already outside what is commonly deemed "acceptable", and thus the expectations of beauty for women *or* men do not apply. Still, Pen's view of masculinity is not formed in a vacuum, she is influenced by media, her social circles, her family and so on. It is remarked upon many times throughout the book that Pen looks like a younger version of Johnny, and further, Johnny is frequently pointed out to be an attractive man by other people. Perhaps Pen already fits well within a male beauty standard. However, due to the dichotomy of her gender presentation and her identity, Pen does probably not truly fit into this beauty standard, because it is based in cisheteronormativity. A better place to look in terms of a

masculine beauty standards, fashion or ideals might be within the LGBT community, and that is not present in *Girl Mans Up*.

Blake is the only sapphic character who is shown to be attracted to masculine girls. She is initially attracted to Pen specifically *because* of her masculinity, and they get to know each other only after Pen has cut her hair short and is visibly more gender nonconforming. Blake makes it clear that this masculine gender presentation in women is more attractive to her. However, since Pen is the only masculine female character present in both novels, there is no other opportunity to showcase whether the other sapphic characters are attracted to a range of gender presentations in women or not. One could argue for a butch femme reading of Pen and Blake, but as they are chosen identity markers it would not be accurate. Still, they do fit into some of the patterns that are highlighted in theory discussing femme/butch dynamics. These patterns include Blake's attraction to Pen's masculinity as a girl, and Pen's attraction to Blake's unique, actively chosen femininity. Additionally, the relationship dynamic they both want where Pen is operates within the same expectations that Blake had for earlier boyfriends, while Blake does not want to fall into a passive role also fits the femme/butch dynamic. Perhaps if these were identity signifiers that Blake and Pen were familiar with, they might identify with them, but this is something that is not possible to know for sure.

Another interesting element in relation to gender is how both Marisol and Pen view the object(s) of desire in both books. Stereotypically feminine attributes are consistently highlighted – so, for example, long hair, wearing sweet perfume, wearing clothes such as skirts and dresses, high heels, heavy makeup, lip gloss, nail polish and so on. This is contrasted with both main characters, even in Marisol's case, who is generally feminine but a more "neutral" femininity. There is a tendency towards more "exaggerated" or "stylistic" femininity in the case of the love interest. This is more complex than just gender, as it also has to do with cultural and class relations between the different characters, such as Rey coming from a wealthy family and having access to a lot more diverse fashion than Marisol. One could also argue that Marisol is not in the right situation where she can focus on her fashion choices, and she is showcased to be fascinated with the looks of the girls on the TV-show *Cedar Hollow*, especially the flashier of

the two leads. In terms of Blake, her family is a lot more lenient with how she expresses herself as they are a much more liberal family than Pen's. Both Marisol and Pen are attracted to primarily *visual* femininity. Pen's attraction increases when she realizes that Blake is interested in things that are not traditionally feminine, like rock music and video games, but she appreciates Blake's feminine gender presentation. As for Blake's interests, it might purely be because that means they have shared interests, something that is natural to want in a partner. Similarly, Marisol and Rey first bond over the teen girl drama series *Cedar Hollow*, though they also bond over their similar trauma. Their bonding process is also a little different due to the science fictional nature of the novel, and the empathy link between them.

In *The Grief Keeper* conventional beauty itself is treated as a feminine obligation. These beauty ideals are culturally determined, as I have written about earlier. Examples of this is Marisol's desire to fit into the perfect American ideal, if she was a little taller, thinner, and blonde. These are the aspects of Rey and Liliana that she frequently remarked upon as being attractive, and she also stated that the accessories and clothes that made them beautiful were not made for her. This element of beauty as being presented as an expectation from gender confirming women is also present in *Girl Mans Up*, i.e., in terms of Colby's views of women and how Pen in a way escapes this expectation by being masculine.

This leads me to the social constructs of race and gender and the intrinsic or relational qualities of gender and beauty within their communities. This part also belongs under the next section about intersectionality, but I will be focusing on gender and such it is relevant to address here. One example is, as mentioned earlier, Gabi is considered on the gender nonconforming side in El Salvador in *The Grief Keeper* due to her family's culturally affected thoughts about gender. In *Girl Mans Up* she would in all likelihood be considered a different *version* of feminine, like Blake is. Of course, this would be colored by Pen and her gender expression and thoughts about gender norms. There are multiple aspects of gender that interact, such as how one presents, how one identifies and how one is perceived. These might not overlap or sync up.

I would argue that the some of the qualities of gender are relational in terms of the point of view of whoever is observing the person – that is to say, in one way gender lies in the eye of the

beholder, based on the observer's own social and cultural bias. This relates to how someone's gender identity is commonly guessed through either their features or their presentation. Additionally, what is considered feminine and what is considered masculine is also informed by the dominant culture. This is not to say that gender identity itself is *actually* determined based on how one is observed, but rather that one aspect of gender is how it is perceived and consequently how you are treated and socialized based on your gender presentation. Gender nonconformity being socially punished is an example of this, because of the perceived disconnect between gender identity, presentation, and performance. Other examples of this external social element include Pen being interpreted as a man by strangers when in public bathrooms based on her gender presentation, despite it being the women's bathroom which should signal her gender identity. However, which bathroom a person uses is often times more a question of safety than of gender identity in terms of trans individuals. Other examples of this socially contingent perception of others' gender identity and presentation is the contrast between Rey cutting her hair short without it changing peoples' gendered opinion of her, while when Pen does this, people's perception of her gender changes. This further ties back into intersectionality, in that even the concepts of femininity and masculinity are culturally contingent. Rey's other attributes allows her more leeway before her gender presentation is considered deviant, such as her being upper-class and living in a more liberal setting than Pen's Catholic school environment and her Portuguese-immigrant background. This element of how outside observers interact with gender presentation relates to Pen's frustration over constantly being mistaken for a boy, or asked if she is a boy, if she is trans, and similar questions about her identity that she has to explain and sometimes defend to people. However, on the other side, people cannot know what gender identity someone has before talking to them – it is common to make educated guesses, but those guesses will then be based either in bio essentialism in terms of an assumption around what gender the person was assigned at birth, or in how they present. Perhaps the only way to avoid misgendering people would be to approach everyone with the assumption that gender identity cannot be inferred from presentation. This would result in more of the conversations that Pen dislikes, but if they were normalized in the way where no one was singled out perhaps it would cause a paradigm shift in how gender identity

and presentation is approached in society. This is not a definitive solution, as there are issues to every approach, but it is worth considering what changes would have to be made to prevent this alienation of people who in any way fall outside the artificially constructed binary of gender in society.

How does intersectionality affect the main characters' sapphic identity?

The previous section on gender already covers some of the elements on how intersectionality affects the main characters' sapphic identity, such as the focus on Pen's gender expression and Marisol's cultural background as an El Salvadorian asylum seeker.

Both novels present complex and nuanced identities, and the texts showcase how the different aspects of the characters' identity interact and shape their experience of the world. The main characters are either themselves immigrants or come from first generation immigrants. Cultural identity is featured and problematized to a larger degree than in earlier LGBT Young Adult fiction. The most obvious example being *The Grief Keeper* where Marisol's identity as El Salvadorian and an asylum-seeker is highlighted and a focus point in the books. Her cultural background intersects with her sexuality in a way that leads to her being an outsider as a key part of her identity. She is an outsider at home in her culture and her family due to her sexuality, and in America as an "illegal", or eventually if asylum is granted, still as an immigrant. Her identity as an asylum seeker, with no money and considerable trauma affects how she views and interacts with the world and is contrasted with Rey who is in a more privileged situation. All the different elements of Marisol's personality affect the choices she makes. This is also the case when comparing both books, such as Pen's masculinity resulting in unique experiences and issues that Marisol does not experience. In *Girl Mans Up*, Pen's parents have a hard time understanding her refusal to fit into gender norms, especially cultural gendered norms in relation to wearing dresses, cooking, and cleaning, instead of working outside and doing construction work. These complex, intersectional identities are the kind of representations that Epstein pointed out were lacking from LGBT Young Adult fiction. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that Young Adult fiction in general is going in this direction. It could simply be due to the fact that these are award-winning books. In other words, Stonewall

and LAMBDA might have picked out these books because they are, amongst other things, more diverse than the other finalists that year.

Both novels explore the influence that social and cultural areas have on personal identity, such as queer sexuality and gender expressions resulting in individuals internalizing the idea of themselves as outsiders. This is evident in Marisol keeping everything and everyone at a distance for most of the book, needing the artificial influence of the CTS bracelet to start breaking down the walls she had built. In *Girl Mans Up*, we see this with Pen in a myriad of ways – she is not one of the boys, not one of the girls, she does not know where she could look to find people with similar experiences as herself. In both novels these experiences are intensified by the homophobic and sexist opinions of their peer group or families, as well by the dominant ideas in the cultural setting of where they live, such as the Catholicism in *Girl Mans Up*.

Cultural identity is also a topic in both books, however in quite different ways. Marisol's struggles around her identity as an asylum-seeker in America relate more to her wanting to be the perfect American girl, while Pen feels at odds and removed from her family's cultural heritage. The two novels explore the theme of belonging in two very different ways, but ultimately end with a similar message, namely one of found family being what is the most important. This idea of found family, that you get to choose where your home is and who your family is, is inherently a very queer theme. When faced with the question of whether the family you were born into will love you unconditionally or not, it is natural that people might then seek belonging somewhere else. This is partly why it is interesting to note the lack of queer *community* in both books, which is also an important part of many LGBT people's lives.

There are some emerging themes that relate to intersectionality in both of the novels, such as the relationship between sapphic identity and womanhood. Pen is disconnected from womanhood and femininity but is still a girl. Throughout the book Pen tries to figure out what kind of girl she is, considering she is so different from her female peers and what she sees in media such as in video games. As she becomes more secure in her unique and complex gender identity, she figures out that she wants to follow her brother's example. Personality, values,

and how you look are not gender dependent. *The Grief Keeper* also explores the connection between womanhood and sexuality. While Marisol fits into a traditional idea of what a feminine girl looks like, some of the other characters perceive her as inherently gender non-conforming due to her sexuality. In a way, being sapphic is portrayed as inherently performing womanhood incorrectly. This is why Antonio, Liliana, and Pablo attempt to prevent Gabi from “turning gay” by putting her in more mature, feminine clothes, as well as attempted corrective rape. They force her into performative hyper-femininity as a ‘cure’ for homosexuality - and here I mean performative in the literal sense, as in being forced into a costume and associated behaviors on a stereotypical level. So, in both books, sapphic sexuality is presented through the main character or other characters’ opinions as disconnected from womanhood. One element of this could be that many aspects that are typically associated with traditional womanhood are rooted in cisheteronormativity. In both books these readings of gender are affected by the cultural context. Gabi and Marisol are only considered to be performing womanhood incorrectly in El Salvador, and Pen faces the most pressure to adhere to very traditional gender roles from her conservative, Portuguese parents. In both novels perceived gender nonconformity is punished by other people in their lives, such as the attempted sexual violence against Gabi and Pen being threatened with being thrown out on the street.

The main characters’ varied portrayals of gender identity and gender expression impact their experiences as sapphic, such as Marisol experiencing desire and envy for her love interest. There is sometimes some internal confusion around if she wants to date specific girls or *be* them. In contrast, this type of merging of desire and envy does not apply to Pen. Pen wants to be seen as different from “just a girl” in that she wants to appear as a “logical” partner to girls. She wants to be like a boyfriend, but she does not want to be a boy. Ultimately, both books explore the fact that sapphic sexuality complicates how the characters’ gender identity is being perceived, either by the main characters themselves, or by the people around them.

As mentioned earlier, sexuality is not the main focus in either novel, but rather how sexuality intersects with aspects of gender and cultural background. This makes intersectionality a lot more present and relevant than in what Epstein found in earlier LGBT Young Adult literature.

One problematic aspect of this, is that it is harder to separate specific elements to discuss because they intersect to the degree that one risks losing some nuance when trying to examine for example gender identity on its own. Class, ethnicity, and trauma were all things that affected and complicated Marisol and Rey's relationship in *The Grief Keeper*. In *Girl Mans Up* the intersection of Pen's gender expression and her family's cultural background was the main source of conflict in her life. Both novels explored how these different aspects of identities can shape each other, both positively and negatively.

I want to emphasize that this is not to say that sexuality is not an important focal point in these books, because it still is. However, the identities of the characters are presented as complex and intertwined, more in line with intersectional theory. Pen's relationship to her sexuality is complicated by her complex gender identity, while Marisol's relationship to her sexuality is affected and confined by her current situation as an immigrant and also by her cultural heritage. These books reflect, in line with Zimmerman, that there is no universal lesbian experience.

END

While two books cannot speak to a larger trend within the genre, it is worth paying attention to what stories are being lifted up by awards, as well as keeping in mind that this is still a relatively niche demographic within Young Adult literature.

These two books indicate that changes are happening in regard to how sapphic characters are being presented in Young Adult literature. They offer new stories and perspectives in some areas, and in some they fit with earlier patterns. Both novels have happy endings compared with earlier tendencies within LGBT Young Adult literature, as well as representations of healthy and happy sapphic relationships. The language used around sexuality in these novels still follow what Epstein found in her research, namely that bisexuals seem to be missing from the narrative completely. The sapphic characters in the novels were either white or Latina, but

both books contained main characters with an immigration background albeit in two different ways. The texts contained to a large degree both nuanced depictions of sapphic identity, the complex relationship between sexuality and aspects of gender, as well as how these elements of identity intersect.

Ultimately, my main findings in *Girl Mans Up* were related to Pen's gender identity and expression, as well as how this intersected with her cultural background and social circle. This is not a surprising result, considering the title of the novel itself suggests that there is a focus on subverting gender norms. *The Grief Keeper* had a less obvious focus point in terms of identity, but Marisol's experiences as an asylum seeker and the trauma she had experienced earlier was a large part of the novel. However, Marisol's identity as a sapphic woman was perhaps explored in larger degree in this novel than Pen's sapphic identity was in *Girl Mans Up*. Marisol's journey included something similar to a coming out story, while Pen was already out at the start of the novel.

The gender section of my comparison chapter is by far the lengthiest, and this is to some degree because both novels touch on the topic of gender in different ways. It is also because gender identity and expression in both novels seemed to be an intrinsic part of the sapphic identities and relationships explored in the text, and it was therefore very challenging to separate gender and sexuality in the discussion of those elements. This again is something that speaks to how intersectionality is applicable here, that it is hard to examine one aspect of identity without also mentioning the others.

There are some interesting findings that fall outside of the sphere of the research questions in this thesis that are still important to note. A thing to remark upon was the strong presence of how identity is shaped by social influence in the novels. Both books explore the influence of social and cultural spheres in their life, such as Marisol's internalized shame around her sexuality after the event with Liliana and Pablo, and Pen's emulation of toxic masculinity and resulting tendencies towards internalized misogyny and homophobia. Further, the novels explore how this impact can also promote positive changes in their lives. Both Pen and Marisol heal and grow as people through the social bonds they form with other people and settle more

fully into being comfortable in their identities. Found family takes a central stage in their happy endings.

Another interesting find is the role of media. The power of representation is an interesting part of both *The Grief Keeper* and *Girl Mans Up*. One obvious example of this is Marisol's romanticizing of America – how she believed the TV show *Cedar Hollow* to be the perfect representation of American culture, only to find out that it is Canadian and not very accurate. Television further has a hand in impacting beauty ideals. This is especially obvious in *The Grief Keeper*, where Marisol bases her understanding of American beauty ideals based on what is shown on TV, as well as what Mrs. Rosen tells her, which is also framed as what is beautiful on the screen. *Girl Mans Up* has instances of allusions to real video games, such as a horror game with gay representation and *Street Fighter*. In *The Grief Keeper* *Cedar Hollow* is a fictional show that Marisol and Rey both felt had subtextual sapphic elements. This also ties in to one of the reasons I wanted to write this thesis, in that representation is important. It is relevant to examine what types of characters and stories are available for people to consume.

Interestingly, whether or not the characters can see themselves reflected in the environment and culture around them and the impact of this is present in both books. Marisol and Rey bonding over *Cedar Hollow* illustrates how queer people can see themselves reflected in media that does not actually contain LGBT representation, as with their romantic reading of the relationship between the TV characters Aimee and Amber. Queer subtext or romance coding having to read between the lines to see themselves in media. Even if this does not take the main stage, it is still included as an important part in relation to how the characters construct their identity and their understanding of it. Pen is confused about the rules of how to act in a relationship within a masculine role while being a girl - if she had a queer community to ask, or butch representation available to her, those questions may have been answered. This is not to say that there is not any queer representation available to Pen if she had searched for it, but it is evident that it is not so easy to come by as to naturally be something she is aware of. The term 'butch' is never used in *Girl Mans Up*. In a way, this also communicates something about growing up as a young LGBT teen. Since they are not born into a community of people who have the same marginalized identity as themselves, which will usually be the case in terms of

race, community must be found through other means. Representation is an element that might make it easier to learn about the experiences they are going through.

These two novels indicate that sapphic characters are being represented with more nuance than in earlier literature. There is some overlap of the topics that are being explored in these books, in terms of identity, cultural background and belonging, but even where this intersection exists the two novels end up presenting very different aspects of these topics. It would be interesting to continue monitoring what kind of changes that take place around sapphic characters in LGBT Young Adult fiction, as well as what stays the same in the future. I especially hope that future books might include more of what has been missing in earlier works, such as more racial diversity within the LGBT characters, a sense of queer community, and bisexual as an acknowledged identity.

Literature:

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