MASTER'S THESIS

Reflecting Rainbows: LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature for the Secondary School

Sara Islam

Master's Thesis in English
FLKI/HVL/MGUEN550-1
Supervisor: Zoltan Varga
16.05.2022

Abstract

Queer students in secondary school may have a hard time finding belonging, validation, and answers to questions regarding their identities. They must therefore be given the reassurances that their lives are important and represented in an otherwise hetero- and cisnormative society, including in school. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the use of LGBTQ+ young adult literature to facilitate the all-around development of students both as individuals and as democratic citizens. I will use Emily Style's concept of *mirrors and windows* to show how LGBTQ+ young adult literature can serve as a source of identification for queer readers, as well as insight into the lives of queer youth for non-queer readers.

Utilising close reading, I analysed three LGBTQ+ young adult novels: *The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar, *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender, and *I Wish You All the Best* by Mason Deaver. I set out to analyse plot, characters, and setting to explore queer plots, gender, and intersectionality. In doing so, I based my analysis on Cart & Jenkins' and Epstein's studies on LGBTQ+ young adult literature, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Crenshaw's work on intersectionality. First, I analysed the plot, characters, and setting in the three novels separately, before developing a comparative discussion of the three novels as mirrors and windows for secondary school students.

The thesis found that contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature largely deviates from previous tendencies and stereotypes of portraying queer lives, as the novels provide positive and hopeful narratives of fulfilled queer lives. The characters in the novels experience both similar and differing experiences to each other in their exploration of sexuality and/or gender identity, and in having to conform to the hetero- and cisnormative standards of the society around them. Another important finding is that the novels also problematised the experiences of queer people who are further disadvantaged by race, religion, class, mental health, or nonconformity, and how this can make them doubly vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination.

Finally, the selected novels showed how LGBTQ+ representations can be a source of validation and reassurance for queer youth, as well as non-queer readers who can identify with other characters or situations not pertaining to LGBTQ+ topics. LGBTQ+ young adult literature can also provide insight into queer lives and into the lives of those who experience intersecting identities. Further, these texts may offer insight into the way society is inherently hetero- and cisnormative, thus allowing for non-queer readers to look inwardly and assess their own prejudices and biases.

Abstrakt

Skeive elever på ungdomsskolen har det kanskje vanskeligere med å føle tilhørighet og bekreftelse, og med å finne svar på spørsmål om deres identitet. De må derfor bli betrygget om at deres liv er viktige og representerte i et ellers hetero- og cisnormativt samfunn, inkludert skolen. Dermed er hensikten med denne masteroppgaven å undersøke bruken av LHBT+ ungdomslitteratur for å fremme danningen av elever som både individer og medborgere. For å gjøre dette har jeg brukt Emily Style sitt konsept *mirrors and windows* for å forklare hvordan LHBT+ ungdomslitteratur kan være kilde til både identifikasjon for skeive lesere, samtidig som det kan gi innsikt i livene til skeive ungdommer for ikke-skeive lesere.

Ved å bruke såkalt *close reading* analyserte jeg tre LHBT+ ungdomsromaner: *The Henna Wars* av Adiba Jaigirdar, *Felix Ever After* av Kacen Callender, og *I Wish You All the Best* av Mason Deaver. Jeg analyserte handling, karakterer og setting for å undersøke skeiv handling, kjønn og interseksjonalitet. Dermed baserte jeg analysen min på Cart & Jenkins og Epstein sine studier på LHBT+ ungdomslitteratur, Butlers teori om kjønnsperformativitet, og Crenshaw sitt arbeid med interseksjonalitet. Først analyserte jeg handling, karakterer, og setting i de tre romanene hver for seg, før jeg utviklet en komparativ diskusjon av de tre romanene som *mirrors and windows* for ungdomsskoleelever.

Funnene i denne oppgaven er at LHBT+ ungdomslitteratur i dag i stor grad avviker fra tidligere tendenser og stereotyper om skeive liv, i den forstand at den viser positive og håpefulle handlinger om tilfredsstillende skeive liv. Karakterene i romanene har både like og ulike erfaringer i deres utforskning av seksualitet og/eller kjønnsidentitet, og med å tilpasse seg hetero- og cisnormative standarder i samfunnet rundt dem. Et viktig funn var at romanene problematiserte erfaringene av skeive mennesker som er ytterligere vanskeligstilte på grunn av etnisitet, religion, klasse, mental helse og manglende konformitet, og hvordan dette kan gjøre dem særlig sårbare for fordommer og diskriminering.

Til slutt viser disse romanene at LHBT+ representasjoner kan være en kilde til validering og betryggelse for skeive ungdommer, så vel som ikke-skeive ungdommer som kan identifisere seg med andre karakterer eller situasjoner som ikke omhandler LHBT+ tematikk. I tillegg kan LHBT+ ungdomslitteratur gi innsikt i skeive liv og i livene til de som erfarer interseksjonalitet. Det kan også gi innsikt i hvordan samfunnet er hetero- og cisnormativt, og kan dermed åpne for at ikke-skeive lesere ser innover på egne fordommer.

Table of contents

I felt as if I were meeting parts of myself in the gay people I read about. Gradually, I began to feel calmer inside, more complete and sure of myself, and I knew from the way Annie looked as we talked, and from what she said, that she did also. (Garden, 1982, p. 144)

Reading about J, it was like . . . I don't know, not only did a lightbulb go off in me, but the sun itself came out from behind these eternal clouds, and everything inside me blazed with the realisation: I'm a guy. (Callender, 2020, p. 24)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Young adulthood is characteristically a period of great tensions and crises, where young adults must grapple with the changes transitioning from childhood to adulthood brings along. During this time, it is particularly important for young adults to have a sense of belonging, and for their feelings and experiences to be validated and acknowledged. The lack of these may cause young adults to feel outcast and alone. This may be the case particularly for queer youth, who often experience adversities in life due to the attitudes of others and lack of inclusion in society.

According to a survey by The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, 1 in 5 participants expressed concern or negativity regarding the possibility of having a queer child, most likely due to the fear of their child being bullied and/or having a reduced quality of life (Bufdir, 2021). Correspondingly, Statistics Norway (SSB) found that queer people are among those who report having a lower quality of living and are least satisfied with their lives, and 1 in 4 queer people between the ages 18-25 have bad physical and/or mental health (Engvik, 2022). Though these numbers are troubling, the conditions for queer people in this country have been improving with time. People are for instance less negative towards queer people now compared to a decade ago, and the visibility for LGBTQ+ topics and people is increasing.

Literature is one such area in which LGBTQ+ topics are gaining traction, portraying the lives and experiences of queer people, including queer youth. By seeing themselves portrayed in literature, queer youth may receive the reassurance that they are not alone in their experiences, finding belonging and solace in the pages of a book. As seen in the quotes above, this was the case for Nancy Garden's protagonist Liza in her trailblazing novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982) and for Felix in Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After* (2020). The quotes are taken from passages in which the protagonists find literature about queer people like themselves, after feeling confused and alone in their experiences. Their discovery of LGBTQ+ literature was therefore a turning point for their perception of themselves, allowing them to feel seen, validated, and a little less alone in their feelings. Though it is important for all young adults to feel seen and accepted, it can be an especially tasking endeavour for queer youth. For many, literature is the only source of comfort and validation.

It is the hope for queer youth to find representation and validation in literature that fuels my work with this thesis. In a time where Republican lawmakers in the US can push forward legislations banning LGBTQ+ young adult literature from schools and libraries, it is particularly important to shine a light on the topic. As nonbinary author Maia Kobabe wrote in an article addressing the book bans: "Removing or restricting queer books in libraries and schools is like cutting a lifeline for queer youth, who might not yet even know what terms to ask Google to find out more about their own identities, bodies and health" (Kobabe, 2021).

Thus, my thesis sets out to investigate LGBTQ+ young adult literature as the "lifeline" Kobabe describes and also as a source of insight into the lives of queer youth for non-queer young adult readers. This will be carried out in relation to the Norwegian curriculum for education, which in its most recent version focuses on the individual student more than ever. Although the use of LGBTQ+ young adult literature is not explicitly addressed in the curriculum, I aim to show how it may promote the values and aims regarding the furthering of students' all-around development as individuals and democratic citizens. This exploration is inspired by Emily Style's concept of literature as *mirrors and windows*, and I argue that LGBTQ+ young adult literature may serve as such mirrors and windows to achieve the aforementioned aims of the curriculum.

1.1.1 The Core Curriculum

In her article "Reading and Writing About Real Issues", Karen Hartman argues that the curriculum and English education must give students the opportunity to explore and discuss issues pertaining to their lives and experiences, particularly regarding sexuality and gender. Hartman posits that "[i]f our curriculum doesn't help [queer] students understand themselves and help others in our classes learn tolerance and acceptance, we need to rethink our curriculum" (Hartman, 2009, p. 12). She further implicates that any curriculum within education must include LGBTQ+ issues to benefit students of all sexualities and gender identities, but particularly queer students who may experience school as a hetero- and cisnormative space in which they experience a lack of representation or belonging. By opening to the choice of narratives that reflect the diversity in our classrooms, Hartman argues that we can engage and motivate students to explore issues close to their heart so that they do not feel they are alone in the world (Hartman, 2009, p. 12).

In some ways, the curriculum in Norwegian education lives up to these ideals, but in others it does not. Røthing found that the approach to LGBTQ+ topics in teaching materials and classroom education positions queerness as "the other" to normative heterosexuality,

where the heterosexual "we" must develop "homotolerance" (Røthing, 2013, p. 40-41). These findings indicate that LGBTQ+ topics and identities are not presented equally to heterosexuality, but rather dealt with as a separate topic which the heterosexual "we" must "tolerate". Røthing also found that the focus is largely on the problems queer people face, arguing that whilst too much focus on problems can potentially scare queer students, too little focus on problems also makes it harder for the "we" to sympathise with queer people (Røthing, 2013, p. 41). However, Røthing's research was based on the previous curriculum, and similar research has not yet been conducted following the implementation of the new curriculum. It is therefore difficult to assess whether such tendencies in teaching materials and classroom education are still present, though it is likely that teaching practice has not changed drastically in under a decade.

The current curriculum, commonly referred to as LK20, attempts to be more inclusive than its predecessors, but generally neglects LGBTQ+ topics in its values and aims. The curriculum mentions *diversity* repeatedly, but in failing to define and specify what this diversity entails, educators are given free reigns in determining what definition of diversity they wish to utilise. This could thus allow educators to omit LGBTQ+ topics partly or completely in the subjects that do not mention them explicitly. English is one such subject which lacks mention of anything pertaining to LGBTQ+ topics. Although the subject curriculum aims to develop pupils' insight into diversity and ways of living, this again leaves too much open for interpretation for the individual educator (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020a).

However, all subjects have a responsibility to promote the values and aims of the Core Curriculum, meaning that even though some of these values and aims are not addressed specifically in the individual subject curriculum, all subjects are required to take the Core Curriculum and its purpose into consideration. Though the curriculum mostly promotes diversity, equality, and inclusivity without defining these concepts, sexuality and gender is explicitly mentioned under the interdisciplinary topic of "health and life skills". The interdisciplinary topics are a new addition in LK20, and the topic of "health and life skills" is stated to "help the pupils learn to deal with success and failure, and personal and practical challenges in the best possible way" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). The inclusion of sexuality and gender as one of the relevant areas within "health and life skills" therefore demands that LGBTQ+ topics should inform and permeate all subjects and teaching.

Additionally, the introduction of "health and life skills" as an interdisciplinary topic reveals an increased focus on the individual student and their well-being. The curriculum states: "School shall support the development of each person's identity, make the pupils

confident in who they are, and also present common values that are needed to participate in this diverse society" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). The students are therefore required not only to understand and accept others, but also themselves and their identity. The school must "consider the diversity of pupils and facilitate for each pupil to experience belonging in school and society," and this objective of allowing students to feel belonging and inclusion is reiterated throughout the curriculum (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b).

As mentioned earlier, the students are required to understand and accept other people's identities and lives, and this insight is a central part of students' all-around development. The Education Act states: "Education and training in schools and training establishments must […] open doors to the world and give the pupils and apprentices insight into and a firm foundation in history and culture" (The Education Act, 1998, § 1-1). Through developing students' insight into other people's lives and fostering values such as human dignity, the Core Curriculum and the Education Act aim to combat prejudice and discrimination.

However, this should also entail that the students gain insight into their own complicity in perpetuating prejudices and discrimination, which is not achieved through the approaches Røthing reported. To combat the prejudice and discrimination queer people face, our education must confront the hetero- and cisnormative structures in society which allows for the exclusion and "othering" of queer people. Sumara & Davis explain that living within a heteronormative culture means we are taught to "see" straight, to "read" straight, and to "think" straight (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 202). Røthing's findings indicate that teaching materials and educators perpetuate heteronormativity by presenting LGBTQ+ topics as something separate from the experiences of the "we" in education. Not only would the disruption of such heteronormative thinking counter prejudice and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, but also broaden the learners' perception, imagination, and thinking (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 202).

1.1.2 Mirrors and windows

First introduced by Emily Style and further developed by Rudine Sims Bishop, the metaphor of *mirrors and windows* illustrates how readers (particularly young readers) see themselves and others through literature and the curriculum (in this context referred to as the materials and content taught in school). Style first introduces the metaphor in her essay "Curriculum as Windows and Mirror" (1988) where she requests a curriculum which reflects and reveals both the multicultural world around students and the students' lives themselves. Style describes

mirrors as reflecting students' experiences and validating them, and windows as insight into the experiences of others also in need of validation (Style, 1988, p. 5).

Bishop utilises the term mirrors and windows in her own essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" (1990), further expanding the concept to include the metaphor of *sliding glass doors*. According to Bishop, readers may experience that a window can turn into a sliding glass door where they can walk through in imagination and become a part of the world that has been created or recreated by the author (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). This addition to the concept further depicts how literature that may not necessarily reflect each reader's experiences may still resonate with them and invite them into the experience. Similarly, Style notes how opening to the experiences of others by glancing through the window can reveal our own image reflected in the glass, turning the window into a mirror (Style, 1988, p. 1). Thus, literature may in a myriad of ways reveal both differences and similarities between the reader's experiences and the experiences of people represented in a text.

Further, literature is in many ways a reflection of our society, and when young readers do not experience themselves reflected in the texts they read, they are taught how devalued they are in the society they are a part of. In an article praising Bishop's work and contribution to multicultural education, Alina O'Donnell (2019) states: "As long as any group sees itself underrepresented or falsely portrayed in the literary canon, then windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors will remain a relevant and useful metaphor for advocating for inclusive curriculum" (O'Donnell, 2019, p. 19). By providing a balanced display of diverse representation in literature, we can expand our understanding of who is valued in society to the point where everyone's experiences are deemed valuable. Currently, it is the white cisgender male that has repeatedly been told he is most valuable in society through many mirrors within literature, media, and curriculum, whilst other groups, such as queer and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) women and men, are so underrepresented themselves that they may doubt their own existence (Style, 1988, p. 4).

By reflecting readers' own lives and experiences, literature can help readers see themselves as part of a larger human experience, and thus become a means of validation and self-affirmation (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). However, having been exposed to the constant representation of others through windows, those who are underrepresented have been trained and expected to view the dominating groups as the "valid participants in a sport" (Style, 1988, p. 5). In other words, they are conditioned to believe that members of a certain group are the only valid and valued participants in society, which may make it harder for underrepresented groups to identify their own contribution and value in it.

Style and Bishop both point out how this not only harms those who are underrepresented, but also those overrepresented. Style states that those whose experiences are repeatedly mirrored are educated only to see themselves and "the windowed half", providing an unbalanced, incomplete, and inaccurate education for students who live in a diverse global context (Style, 1988, p. 4-5). Bishop adds that the constant reflections of the overrepresented groups in society allows them to grow up with "an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world – a dangerous ethnocentrism" (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). She further argues that these groups need literature that helps them understand their place in a multicultural world and their connection to other humans.

1.2 Aim of the thesis

In this thesis, I will explore LGBTQ+ young adult literature as a source of representation for queer youth and LGBTQ+ topics. I have selected three novels to analyse and discuss with the following main research question in mind:

> *How can LGBTQ+ young adult literature provide as "mirrors" and "windows" for young readers in secondary school?*

Two sub-questions were developed to answer this question, which also more specifically define the direction of my study:

a) *How do the selected novels portray queer plots, gender, and intersectionality?*
b) *In what ways can these portrayals be used as "mirrors" and "windows" for furthering secondary school students' development, both as individuals and members of society?*

Thus, my thesis is based on the idea of LGBTQ+ young adult literature as mirrors and windows in conjunction with values and aims in the Core Curriculum.

The background of this thesis has been explored in section 1.1, and the remaining sections 1.3-4 will provide an explanation of terms central to the thesis and the selection of novels. To further inform my study, I will in chapter 2 of my thesis provide an overview of previous studies and research on LGBTQ+ young adult literature, gender performativity, and intersectionality. This will provide a framework for the close reading of the three novels: *The*

Henna Wars (2020)*, Felix Ever After* (2020)*,* and *I Wish You All the Best* (2019)*.* I will present my analysis of these novels in chapter 3, where I will analyse plot, characters, and setting. I will begin by analysing and discussing each novel individually to answer sub-question "a" in sections 3.1-3, and later offer a comparative discussion to answer sub-question "b" in section 3.4. Lastly, I will conclude my thesis in chapter 4 where I will summarise my findings.

My thesis stems not only from insufficient research on LGBTQ+ young adult literature in general, but also from lacking research on its use in education. Additionally, I believe LGBTQ+ young adult literature does not receive the recognition it deserves for the representations it offers to both queer and non-queer readers. It is such neglect that allows the banning of LGBTQ+ young adult literature in schools and libraries to go unchallenged in the US. Therefore, my aim with this thesis is to present the merits and affordances of LGBTQ+ young adult literature in the development of young readers as individuals and democratic citizens.

1.3 Terms and definitions

Before delving into the main part of the thesis, I wish to define some central terms and definitions. Though many terms will be defined and explained along the way throughout my thesis, I find it necessary to explain some key concepts at the outset.

Young adult literature

Deriving from a need to specify the categories of literature that was neither for children nor adults, categories such as *middle grade, adolescent*, and *young adult* were developed (Crowe, 1998, p. 121). *Young adult literature* became commonly used in the 1960's, at the time referring to realistic fiction that addressed the issues and life circumstances of young readers (Cart, 2008). Since then, the definition of young adult literature has evolved, and today the category encompasses additional genres such as fantasy, science fiction, poetry, non-fiction, etc.

Literary scholars and researchers have different understandings of what they deem young adult literature and who the target group is. Chris Crowe posits that young adult literature entails literature intended for teenagers, who he categorises as those between twelve and eighteen years old (Crowe, 1998, p. 121). Though many agree with this categorisation,

Michael Cart broadens his definition of the target group to entail those as young as ten and as old as twenty-five (Cart, 2008).

Young adult literature commonly deals with issues and circumstances of its target audience, making it relevant for young adult readers by addressing their needs and interests (Crowe, 1998, p. 122; Cart, 2008). It can therefore be a source of identification and reassurance for young adults in a particularly sensitive time of their lives, as young adult literature often addresses the embarrassing, taboo, and complicated topics that they may not feel comfortable searching the answers for elsewhere.

LGBTQ+ and queer

LGBTQ+ stands for *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,* and *queer*, and the "+" represents those within the community whose sexuality or gender identity is not accurately captured within the acronym *LGBTQ* (PFLAG, 2021). Other variations of the acronym are also commonly used, but I consider LGBTQ+ to be a sufficient and inclusive term which encompasses those identifying as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender. Therefore, I will consistently use this acronym in my thesis, except for direct quotations where the original material uses another variation.

I will also alternate between the acronym LGBTQ+ and the term *queer*, using the two interchangeably to denote people or matters related to the LGBTQ+ community. Having said that, I acknowledge that the word *queer* can be divisive, since some may avoid using the term due to its historically derogatory use before the LGBTQ+ community reclaimed it. Additionally, some people within the LGBTQ+ umbrella may simply not identify themselves as queer. However, due to the term's links to queer theory, its common use for describing LGBTQ+ people and community, as well as personal preferences, I will use this term in my thesis for variety.

LGBTQ+ young adult literature

Looking at the various sources on the topic, I found that what I have chosen to refer to as *LGBTQ+ young adult literature* has been referred to in copious other ways. Some examples are "queer young adult literature"*,* "LGBTQ young adult literature", "LGBT fiction", and "LGBTQ content/representations in young adult literature". As it is not a genre or category within young adult literature per se, there is no one way to refer to it or even describe it.

I understand LGBTQ+ young adult literature as young adult literature with LGBTQ+ content where the queer themes are central or significant to the story, and my thesis is based

on this understanding of the term. Another definition could also be that it entails young adult literature where the queer person is the protagonist, but by this definition much of what is deemed LGBTQ+ young adult literature by scholars and researchers would not qualify as such. Particularly earlier works may address queer topics or involve queer secondary characters, but do not mainly revolve around queer narratives or include queer protagonists. Therefore, the definition that this thesis follows is more fitting to include these contributions to the literature. It is worth noting, however, that most contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature features a queer protagonist, like the novels in this thesis.

Pronouns

In recent years, the topic of pronouns has become central in conversations about gender identity and expression, as people who do not identify as cisgender are asserting the pronouns with which they wish to be addressed. *Cisgender* refers to those people whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth and are most often addressed using she/her pronouns if they are cisgender girls/women or he/him if they are cisgender boys/men. *Transgender* people, referring to people whose gender identity does not align with the sex assigned at birth, may also use she/her or he/him pronouns depending on their gender identity.

Some transgender or genderqueer people may wish to be referred to using they/them pronouns if they experience gendered pronouns as incorrect according to their gender identity. For instance, *nonbinary* people who identify beyond the gender binary often use they/them pronouns. Some researchers, authors, and fictional characters mentioned in this thesis will be referred to using they/them pronouns where this has been specified in the novels or external sources.

1.4 Selection of materials

Before presenting my selected materials, it is important I point out that although I am analysing three specific texts, they are intended as examples of LGBTQ+ young adult literature in general. During my search, I found many novels that would be just as valuable to my thesis as the ones selected, and many more have been published while writing this thesis.

I based my search on some initial criteria about the kind of narrative I wished to include in my thesis. First and foremost, the texts had to be contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature that were both appropriate and relevant for secondary school. Second, I wished to use novels where the queer characters were protagonists, not only secondary characters.

Ideally, I also wanted the queer protagonist to identify as something other than gay and/or a cisgender male, as this is an overrepresented group within the LGBTQ+ community. Instead, I wanted to explore mirrors and windows for marginalised and underrepresented groups within the LGBTQ+ community (see more on this in the theory chapter).

My third criterium was for the narrative of my chosen texts to be positive and hopeful, and to not have a negative ending. As I will expand on later, earlier LGBTQ+ young adult literature would rarely have happy endings, providing grim depictions of queer lives as doomed for unhappiness. As contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature has taken great strides to move past this trend, I wished to reflect this development by choosing texts that present queer young adults' lives as entailing both hardships and blessings.

My fourth and final criterium was for the texts to be written by authors who identified as LGBTQ+. It is possible that I would find narratives and portrayals of queer characters that were just as positive if they were written by non-queer authors, but like with my other criteria, I wished to avoid what had been done many times before and focus on an underrepresented aspect of LGBTQ+ young adult literature. LGBTQ+ literature is largely written by non-queer authors, but as Epstein posits, writers' own experiences and knowledge may influence their writing (Epstein, 2013, p. 92). Queer authors may therefore write LGBTQ+ literature differently than non-queer authors, and I have thus selected novels by three authors who all identify as queer and/or trans. However, I acknowledge that had I chosen literature by non-queer authors, they may have still qualified for the purposes of this thesis.

The Henna Wars

The Henna Wars (2020) is written by Bangladeshi/Irish author Adiba Jaigirdar. The story follows Nishat, a sixteen-year-old Bengali Muslim girl living in Dublin, Ireland. When Nishat tells her parents that she is a lesbian, they refuse to accept it as anything other than a phase and repeatedly attempt to persuade her to "choose" differently.

Nishat reconnects with Flávia, who she knew in primary school and in hindsight believes was her first crush. She soon finds out that not only is Flávia attending the same all-girl Catholic school as her, but she is also the cousin of her mortal enemy, Chyna, who earned this status due to racist and ignorant behaviour. Flávia approaches Nishat frequently at school, and they almost kiss on two occasions. When their teacher announces a business project with a cash prize, Nishat immediately decides to start a henna business as her project, but so does Flávia alongside Chyna. Flávia's incapability to acknowledge the cultural appropriation and

why this causes Nishat to get upset, makes Nishat determined to win the competition. In her endeavours to win, Nishat manages to push away her sister Priti and her friends, Chaewon and Jess.

Things get worse when someone anonymously outs Nishat through a message sent to the entire school, which causes people to avoid Nishat and her henna business. She is quickly convinced that Flávia or Chyna are responsible for outing her as a tactic to win the competition. However, Nishat later finds out that it is her sister's friend, Ali, who sent the message in her belief that Nishat was deceiving the school by concealing her sexuality. The revelation that Flávia had not sent the message allows for Nishat and Flávia to reconcile, and Nishat realises her feelings are reciprocated. They also realise they were both blinded by the competition, which neither of them end up winning.

When Nishat's parents witness how the other students have turned on Nishat, they begin to understand what she is going through and attempt to learn more about her sexuality to support her. In fact, when Nishat asks if her girlfriend Flávia can come over, their only concern is having some food ready for her. Despite not winning the competition, Nishat's family, friends, and Flávia all encourage Nishat to continue with her henna business.

Felix Ever After

Felix Ever After (2020) is written by the Stonewall Book Award- and Lambda Literary Award-winning author Kacen Callender. The story follows Felix Love, a seventeen-year-old transgender boy who lives with his father in Brooklyn. Since his mother left him at the age of ten, Felix's father has helped pay for his son's tuition and gender-affirming treatment. However, his father's reluctance to embrace him fully as transgender upsets Felix, and he often avoids going home. Felix's father eventually apologises for his behaviour and explains that although he is proud of his son, the transition has been difficult for him to wrap his head around.

Felix spends most of his time with his best friend, Ezra, at the St. Catherine's summer arts program. One day an anonymous student puts up a gallery of photos depicting Felix before he transitioned along with his deadname, the name assigned to him before he identified as Felix. Convinced the person behind the gallery is Ezra's ex-boyfriend and their former friend, Declan, Felix creates a fake Instagram profile as "Lucky" to gain Declan's trust and coax a confession out of him. Felix soon finds out Declan is not responsible for the gallery but continues talking to him under the fake name, and the two start developing feelings for each other. Under the impression that he is talking to "Lucky", Declan reveals that Ezra is in love

with Felix. When Ezra breaks up with his boyfriend Austin, Felix and Ezra kiss, but Felix quickly regrets the incident. He does not wish to jeopardise their friendship and gets into a heated argument with Ezra due to this, ultimately driving a wedge in their friendship.

Meanwhile, Felix starts receiving messages from a "Grandequeen69" who harasses him with messages about his gender identity, and Felix assumes this must be the person behind the gallery. During a conversation with Austin, Felix pieces together that he is "Grandequeen69". Austin claims he wanted to show Ezra, who he knew was in love with Felix, that Felix was not a "real" boy. Following this confession, Felix reports Austin to the Dean and he is kicked out of St. Catherine's.

Amidst all of this, Felix is still figuring out his gender identity and is not fully comfortable calling himself a boy. Through gender identity discussion groups and online research, Felix eventually finds the term "demiboy", and the label immediately feels right for him. In his elation, Felix accidentally posts a picture of himself on Lucky's Instagram account, and Declan finds out who he is actually talking to. They attempt to explore their relationship regardless, but Felix soon realises he is in love with Ezra. Felix and Ezra reconcile and confess their feelings for each other.

I Wish You All the Best

I Wish You All the Best (2019) is written by the American author Mason Deaver. The story begins when eighteen-year-old Benjamin De Backer's parents kick Ben out after they come out as nonbinary. Ben calls their estranged sister, Hannah, to come and pick them up, despite having not seen her for a decade. Hannah and her husband, Thomas, take Ben into their home and help them get enrolled in a new school. Following the traumatic events with their parents, Ben suffers from panic attacks and insomnia, and Hannah arranges for them to talk to Dr Taylor, a psychiatrist. Although Hannah is supportive in her own ways, Ben's resentment towards her for abandoning them prevents them from completely opening up to her.

At Ben's new school, they decide that they do not want to be out as nonbinary to make things easier for themself. Despite Ben's attempts to distance themself from the other students, the energetic and outgoing Nathan befriends them. Ben quickly builds a friendship with Nathan and his friends, Sophie and Meleika, and eventually develops feelings for Nathan.

A few months later, Ben realises their parents have attempted to contact them and arrange a meeting to make amends. Their parents want Ben to come back home with them, dismissing the fact that Ben is doing well at their new school and has experienced great

trauma due to their parents' actions. The parents later ambush Ben at a gallery showing in school, and a very public confrontation with Hannah leaves Ben humiliated and distraught. Ben refuses to go back with their parents and cuts all ties to them.

Ben is eventually able to come out to Nathan, who, aside from being upset over the fact that he has unknowingly misgendered Ben all along, is supportive of them. Later, the two confess their feelings for each other and begin a relationship. The novel ends as Ben is getting ready to move to California with Nathan after graduation, and their life now only consists of people who are supportive and accept them as they are.

2. Theory

2.1 Studies and research on LGBTQ+ young adult literature

Two of the most comprehensive studies on LGBTQ+ young adult literature are Michael Cart & Christine Jenkins's *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018) and B.J. Epstein's *Are the Kids All Right?* (2013). They each utilise their own approaches to present examples of LGBTQ+ young adult literature through the years and what the representations of queer characters typically looks like. These studies are particularly useful in the assessment and analysis of the chosen data for this study, as they help put the selected novels into a larger context of young adult literature featuring LGBTQ+ representations throughout the years. The studies will help identify common tropes and plots in LGBTQ+ young adult literature, and provide insight into how the literature has and is rapidly evolving.

Starting with the Stonewall riots and the publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better be Worth the Trip* in 1969, Cart & Jenkins chronicle almost six decades of LGBTQ+ representations in young adult literature. Through extensive research on the LGBTQ+ young adult literature published each decade, they point out tendencies and provide statistics regarding the representation of queer characters in young adult literature. Using Rudine Sims Bishop's studies on Afro-American representations in young adult literature, Cart & Jenkins developed a model of categorising LGBTQ+ representations into three categories: *homosexual visibility, gay assimilation,* and *queer consciousness/community* (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. xiv).

Homosexual visibility is explained as novels in which a character voluntarily or involuntarily comes out during the story, and this subsequently provides tension for the character. Though decreasing in number throughout the years, Cart & Jenkins found that most representations of queer characters can be categorised as stories of *homosexual visibility,* making coming out and the consequences of this the predominant story for the life of young queer people. The prevalence of this narrative is problematic in that it implies that all queer people must have a momentous coming out, and that this ultimately leads to difficulties and conflict in their lives. The reality is that some queer people never experience formally coming out at all, depending on circumstances such as upbringing, society, culture, and other people. Likewise, some queer people who *do* come out do not experience any trouble in doing so and may not face any significant consequences from it.

It is also worth noting that heterosexual characters in young adult literature do not have similar narratives that centre on their sexuality, but rather deal with more "universal" factors in their lives such as friendships, relationships, family, school, etc. Thus, dismissing these topics when portraying the lives of queer youth creates a greater difference between being heterosexual and being queer. Portraying queer youth as facing more hardships than heterosexual youth also perpetuates being queer as undesirable and out of the ordinary.

The second category presented by Cart & Jenkins, *gay assimilation*, involves characters who "just happen to be gay" in the same way someone can "just happen" to be left-handed (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. xv). In these narratives, the sexuality and/or gender of the queer characters is not an issue which impacts the characters' lives, rather it is treated as just another trait that makes up their identity as a whole. In other words, queer characters' sexuality and/or gender identity is treated and portrayed the same way a character's heterosexuality and/or cisgender identity would, as something that is not a dominating and controlling factor in their lives. Therefore, this approach does not portray being queer as something out of the ordinary and dissimilar to being heterosexual and/or cisgender.

Lastly, *queer consciousness/community* denotes narratives in which the queer characters are part of an LGBTQ+ community, either through informal friendships or formal groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). As the least represented category of the three, narratives of queer consciousness/community became frequent in the 1990's with stories of mainly older gay secondary characters who previously lived in a place with a gay community (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 85). In recent years, younger queer protagonists also find their queer communities of peers through GSAs or creative arts, providing an increasing number of queer characters in young adult literature who have other queer friends. As people often wish to find kindred spirits, these queer communities in young adult literature may provide a comfort and a promise of community for young queer readers.

Epstein does not take a chronological approach to her study, and where Cart & Jenkins have provided a comprehensive list of LGBTQ+ young adult texts throughout the years, Epstein states she could only gain access to a corpus of sixty texts, with thirty-two of these being young adult texts (Epstein, 2013, p. 20). Using these, she identifies patterns and recurring topics that may repeat themselves in LGBTQ+ literature, and presents four topics in her study: *issue books, portrayal and stereotypes, diversity,* and *sex and marriage.*

In her first chapter, Epstein explains how *issue books*, or problem books, depict being LGBTQ+ as a problem and perpetuate an "othering" of queer people, particularly queer children and young adults. These books can often be experienced as didactical in the way they

attempt to educate both the characters in the books as well as the readers themselves on LGBTQ+ issues. However, in their attempts to validate being queer as something "normal", they in fact do the opposite and reinforce the notion of difference between queer and non-queer people.

The next aspect Epstein explores is the ways in which the queer characters are *portrayed* and ultimately *stereotyped* in LGBTQ+ texts for children and young adults. Epstein found that both characters and plots are stereotypical, where queer people are expected to have specific personalities, traits, and lives determined by their sexuality and/or gender. They are often portrayed as recognisable or with stereotyped characteristics making them "act" and/or "look" queer, for instance when gay male characters are described as being "feminine" or "swish" (Epstein, 2013, p. 99). These characters additionally experience stress and hardships following coming out, and their LGBTQ+ identity is portrayed as the sole issue in their lives.

Epstein's third category, *diversity*, explores diversities within the LGBTQ+ community itself, as well as the intersection of multiple minority identities. Epstein identifies a lacking representation of characters who are bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer, and points out that the existing representations are problematic and raise more questions than answers (Epstein, 2013, p. 132). Additionally, a majority of the literature Epstein studied fail to acknowledge intersectionality and the fact that people can belong to and identify within several minority identities besides identifying as queer. Thus, Epstein's findings imply that LGBTQ+ literature fails to recognise and address the complexities and intersections of peoples' identities. However, it is worth noting that Epstein's study was published eight years ago, and representations of LGBTQ+ people in children's and young adult literature has since then rapidly diversified. LGBTQ+ young adult literature increasingly includes previously underrepresented groups and intersections of identities, though this still makes up a small portion of the literature available.

Lastly, Epstein presents the themes *sex and marriage* in children's and young adult literature, and what implications the texts may present about the sexual and romantic lives of queer people. This chapter expands on some of the stereotypes regarding the sex lives of queer people and explores these further, while also addressing the tendency to dismiss marriage as an option for queer people.

Though the two studies are a few years apart and make use of corpora of different sizes, Cart & Jenkins's and Epstein's studies overlap and are closely linked in their findings of previous and current representations, and in their requests for future representations of

LGBTQ+ people in young adult literature. In fact, Epstein repeatedly refers to Cart & Jenkins's study *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006), which studied LGBTQ+ representations in young adult literature between 1969 and 2004 and utilised the same three-part model as their more recent study. Epstein believes, however, that Cart & Jenkins were more positive than herself in their assessments of the representations available in young adult literature at the time, even though these did not include the progresses made in the next decade as presented in *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (Epstein, 2013, p. 242). Epstein holds onto her understanding of queer representations as primarily concerned with coming-out stories and stereotyped queer lives marred by struggles. Whilst Cart & Jenkins also acknowledge these problematic aspects, they are evidently more lenient in being able to identify positive representations which indicate an advancement in the literature as well.

Both studies agree that a vast majority of the representations is that of gay, white, middle-class, and cisgender male characters. They also agree on the need for more lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and otherwise queer characters, as well as diversity regarding ethnicity, religion/spirituality, class, (dis)ability, and body types. Additional studies also identify a homogeneity regarding queer representations in young adult literature. Laura Jiménez found a similar prevalence of white, gay, male protagonists whilst lesbian and, even more so, bisexual characters are underrepresented in her studies on the recipients of the Lambda Literary Award and the Stonewall Book Awards for LGBTQ+ young adult literature (Jiménez, 2015, p. 418). Similarly, Cady Lewis points out both gay and lesbian characters as constituting the majority of queer representations available, but argues that their narratives cannot be "lumped into one main 'queer narrative'" as there are significant differences in the lifestyles of queer people (Lewis, 2015, p. 54).

Another recurring finding in these studies is that of the monolithic portrayal of queer lives as defined by struggle and hardships. In a sense, it is realistic to portray such narratives of struggle, since many queer people coming to terms with their sexuality and/or gender do struggle with this personal conflict. However, Banks argues that the continuance of these narratives reinforces the belief that being LGBTQ+ is inherently controversial and conflicted, which is not true for the lives of *all* queer people (Banks, 2009, p. 35).

Cart & Jenkins, Epstein, and other studies ultimately indicate that LGBTQ+ young adult literature must present queer identities other than gay, include cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, and provide more nuanced portrayals of queer lives as other than inherently difficult. However, these studies are also able to reflect on how LGBTQ+ young adult literature has progressed since the 1960's, and how it has continued to improve and

evolve. Cart & Jenkins report that the amount of LGBTQ+ young adult literature has been steadily increasing, there are more queer protagonists, more bisexual and transgender characters, more people of colour, a decreasing amount of problem-driven coming-out stories, and queer narratives are more commonly met with humour rather than the doom and gloom of yesteryear (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 125-129). Lewis similarly reports that the representations are increasingly realistic and positive in their portrayals, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the ever-present room for improvement regarding overall visibility and in the framing of the stories (i.e., do they depict hopeful narratives of coming to terms with identity, or a means to "guide vulnerable readers back into a 'safe' lifestyle of heterosexuality") (Lewis, 2015, p. 53).

2.1.1 Portrayals of sapphic characters in young adult literature

Almost a decade after Donovan's contribution of the first gay young adult novel, Rosa Guy published what is considered the first young adult novel featuring a lesbian character, *Ruby* (1976). This novel, like much of the queer narrative of the time, depicts queer life as tragic, unhappy, unsuccessful, and unrealistic. Though the novel is about Ruby's feelings for another girl, the story ends when she goes back to a heterosexual relationship with an ex and the subsequent books in the series feature Ruby's character as heterosexual. Thus, *Ruby*, and similar literature of the time, demonstrate a view of homosexuality, especially for girls, as a rite of passage on the way to adulthood and heterosexuality – something to try and experiment with as a young and reckless teen, but not something that is a viable way of life (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 25). This narrative is consistent with Terry Castle's categorisation of sapphic plotline, where *dysphoric* lesbian fiction depicts female homosexuality as "a finite phenomenon – a temporary phase in a larger pattern of heterosexual Bildung", whilst a *euphoric* plotline presents homosexual desire as "radical and irreversible" and an alternative to heterosexuality (Castle, 1993, as cited in Lewis, 2015, p. 55). Though Castle's idea of lesbian plotlines is dichotomous, one can surely find lesbian narratives that applies to both plotlines or neither.

In the case of Nancy Garden's novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982), for instance, the story can be viewed as both dysphoric and euphoric. Though there are examples of dysphoric utterances made by characters regarding Liza and Annie's relationship as "a temporary phase", the novel is ultimately game-changing for its representation of both queer romance and a happy ending for the first time in an LGBTQ+ young adult novel (Lewis, 2015, 55-56). This is doubly significant as the novel portrays sapphic romance during a decade where only

23 percent of the LGBTQ+ young adult literature published featured lesbians, and the remaining 77 percent featured male homosexual characters (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 35). Though the literature featuring sapphic characters published in the following years did not further the important developments made by *Annie on My Mind*, its importance and Garden's significance within the genre was recognised following the turn of the century.

Despite the significance of *Annie on My Mind* and other lesbian representations in young adult literature, lesbian characters are still very much marginalised. Young adult writer Malinda Lo questions why sapphic young adult literature does not receive the same amount of attention and discussion as literature about male gay characters, and also why they fall short on bestseller lists and in awards (Lo, 2020). She posits that the intersection of misogyny and homophobia is at fault for marginalising queer women, where the addition of race, disability, class, etc. could further the marginalisation.

Indeed, looking at the ways in which lesbian characters are often stereotypical in young adult literature reveals the way misogyny and homophobia enables the favouring of male homosexuals over female homosexuals. Epstein describes how lesbian characters are often depicted as serious, feminist, and unattractive, and in contrast to their gay counterparts, they are not as smart, funny, fashionable, or lovable (Epstein, 2013, p. 63, 102, 124). When these stereotypes are perpetuated and make queer people appear monolithic, they can become harmful to lesbian people as they portray them as difficult and unlikeable, and the interest in their representation is therefore minimal. Recent literature with sapphic representations in many ways attempt to remedy this through diverse portrayals of female homosexual desire and relationships.

2.1.2 Other colours of the rainbow

When a majority of the literature only represents the *G* in the acronym, it becomes almost futile to call it *LGBTQ+* literature. Cart & Jenkins' and Epstein's studies only account for LGBTQ+ young adult literature up until 2016 and 2013 respectively, in which they observed and analysed the inequality in number of representations available for different LGBTQ+ identities. Since then, LGBTQ+ young adult literature has rapidly grown as queer representations in media have become more prominent, and new spaces for queer expression and community have emerged. In recent LGBTQ+ representations, there has been an increase in queer identities that were earlier underrepresented or completely neglected. For instance, there are now representations in literature and media of transgender, nonbinary, bisexual,

pansexual, and asexual people to name a few. Though these representations still constitute a fragment of mainstream media and literature, it is a step in the right direction.

Sexualities that have historically been subject to neglect and erasure are those that challenge the binary notion of either opposite-sex attraction or same-sex attraction, as for instance bisexuality does. There has been a pervasive dismissal of bisexuality as a sexual identity, as bisexuality has often been viewed as an in-between stage before eventually settling on either heterosexuality or homosexuality. Unlike heterosexual or homosexual people, bisexuals are not visually identifiable based on who they are with at any given moment. If a bisexual person is seen kissing someone of the same gender, they would be assumed homosexual, and likewise if they are seen with someone of the opposite gender their assumed sexuality would be heterosexual (Epstein, 2014, p. 118). Bisexual people (and people of other non-binary sexualities) therefore have the disadvantage of having to explicitly state they are bisexual to contradict the sexual binaries imposed onto them.

Epstein theorizes that authors, publishers, and members of society are only able to accept "monosexuals" (i.e., heterosexual or homosexual people) provided they are "not too queer", suggesting that bisexual people are deemed "too queer" to be accepted (Epstein, 2014, p. 117). Therefore, Epstein's comments imply that there is no space for actual queer people in literature, as they cannot deviate too far from heterosexuality. Homosexuality, by virtue of being a "monosexuality" akin to heterosexuality, is therefore considered more acceptable than most other LGBTQ+ sexualities which cannot be categorised as monosexualities.

Of course, it is possible that there are several characters in LGBTQ+ young adult texts through the ages who could conceivably identify as bisexual, only their sexuality has not been explicitly stated. However, the repeated concealment of bisexuality undermines its existence and does not allow its acceptance if it is never mentioned and put into words, thus contributing to furthering bisexual invisibility and the "bisexual closet" (Epstein, 2014, p. 118-119). It can certainly feel forced and unnatural to constantly label a person or character's sexuality, but dismissing a sexuality in itself is unnatural. Thus, constant reminders that bisexuality is in fact an existing and valid sexuality could increase its visibility to the point where asserting it would no longer have to be necessary.

Like sapphic characters in young adult literature, bisexual characters are subject to harsh stereotypes and unappealing lives of unhappiness and hardships. Because bisexuality is often thought to be an in-between stage between sexualities, bisexual characters are often accused of being indecisive and promiscuous for their attraction to more than one gender (Epstein, 2014, p. 119-120). Due to internalised biphobia, these characters often chastise

themselves for not being able to choose between being gay or straight, and they often settle for either one to avoid additional misery. These narratives only perpetuate the binaries of sexuality and the impossibility of sexuality existing on a spectrum, as well as encouraging the idea that queer lives are filled with anguish and frustration. Bisexual characters are also villainized through stereotypical portrayals as promiscuous, selfish, cheaters, treacherous, and carriers of AIDS in the straight community (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 157; Epstein, 2014, p. 117).

LGBTQ+ young adult literature of recent years is attempting to remedy the historically dismal and offensive representation of bisexual people through positive portrayals and generally *more* portrayals. As pansexuality, asexuality, and polysexuality are also acknowledged as sexual identities, we see an increased acceptance of queer characters who do not conform to heteronormativity and dismiss monosexuality as the only acceptable form of sexuality.

2.1.3 Transgender representations

The first transgender character in a young adult text appeared as an adult character in Francesca Lia Block's short story "Dragons in Manhattan" (1996), and it would take another seven years until the first novel featured a transgender teen when Julie Anne Peters published *Luna* in 2004 (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 162). Since then, transgender representations in young adult fiction have steadily increased, and the understanding of what being *transgender* entails has evolved to include characters who are for instance intersex, nonbinary, and demiboy/-girl. A possible reason for the late inclusion of transgender characters can be the continual lack of understanding regarding what being transgender means, as transgender people have long been excluded, even from the LGBTQ+ community itself (Epstein, 2013, p. 143). Since this aspect of the rainbow flag has been neglected even longer than lesbian and bisexual representations in young adult literature, there are fewer studies on transgender representations.

As has been the case for most LGBTQ+ young adult literature, stories about trans people often imply a stressful and difficult life as trans characters are kicked out of their homes, subjected to violence, and face rejection. Though this paints a dismal picture of what being transgender entails for a teenager, these narratives are sadly the reality for many transgender people and particularly youth. Transgender people often come to the realisation that they are trans at a young age, and what can follow is hatred towards themselves and their body, hatred towards the circumstances that prevent them from expressing their gender identity, viewing themselves as freaks, and feeling like they are in a prison (Cart & Jenkins,

2018, p. 175). It is therefore a topic that demands sensitivity and careful attention, particularly when it comes to literature aimed at younger audiences who may find it difficult to understand.

Gender-affirming surgery, which refers to the "surgical procedures that can help people adjust their bodies to match their innate gender identity more closely", often becomes a topic of discussion in LGBTQ+ young adult literature (PFLAG, 2021). However, some of these texts have garnered criticism for the ways in which gender-affirming surgery is portrayed. The texts tend to be oversimplified in their failure to acknowledge the cost and counselling that is required, and seemingly devalue those who are not able to or do not wish to seek surgery (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 175). A focus on surgery as an inevitable step for transgender people perpetuates the gender binary with the idea that anatomy determines our gender and that it is not acceptable to deviate from this. This in turn leaves no room for transgender people who dismiss the gender binary.

Epstein references Prosser (1997) in saying that "transgendered subjects [are now] speak[ing] for themselves," and Epstein argues that transgender people may not in fact be speaking for themselves in children's and young adult literature since none of the authors in her corpus identify as transgender (Epstein, 2013, p. 143). However, Epstein's study is almost a decade old and many transgender children's and young adult authors have emerged since its publication. Much of the earlier LGBTQ+ young adult literature is written by heterosexual and/or cisgender authors, and though there strictly speaking should not be limits to who can write which stories, writers' own experiences and knowledge can be a good resource in influencing their works. This could be a reason why recent queer literature, which is increasingly written by queer authors, treats LGBTQ+ characters and topics more sensitively, respectfully, realistically, and positively than earlier works.

2.2 Gender

The distinction between *sex* and *gender* is prevalent in queer studies, gender studies, feminist studies, and related fields. This differentiation was first addressed by psychologist Robert Stoller, who prefaced his book *Sex and Gender* (1968) by discerning sex as referring to "the male and female sex and the component biological parts that determine whether one is male or female" and gender as the "tremendous areas of behavior, feelings, thoughts, and fantasies that are related to the sexes and yet do not have primarily biological connotations" (Stoller,

1968, as cited in Green, 2010, p. 1457). Sex is therefore widely understood to be pertaining to physical and biological attributes, whilst gender concerns itself with a person's characteristics.

Accordingly, the World Health Organization (WHO) refer to *sex* as "the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs", and provide the following definition of *gender:*

> Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. (WHO, n.d.)

Gender can therefore be understood as culturally and socially contingent, and one's perception of gender may vary depending on cultural, geographical, and temporal factors.

Based on one's gender, whether actual or attributed, certain expectations emerge in terms of how to act in a given context. The *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines *gender roles* as "[a] set of behaviour patterns, attitudes, and personality characteristics stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine within a culture" (Colman, 2015). This definition places emphasis on gender roles as pertaining to *masculinity* and *femininity,* which are gendered characteristics that are commonly attributed to males and females respectively.

Similarly, the *Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies* provide their own definition: "The phrase gender roles describes norms of behaviour and attitudes in a given culture attributed to people on the basis of their sex to which people are expected to conform" (Griffin, 2017). They go on to state that gender roles may change over time, and that "[s]ome cultures also recognize a third sex, or gender roles that are less binary, or where traits considered feminine or masculine are enacted across genders" (Griffin, 2017). Like gender itself, gender roles rely on cultural, geographical, and temporal factors which determine which gender roles are constructed and maintained. It is therefore arguable to what extent gender roles can govern our perception of gender, as they are constantly constructed and reconstructed. Accordingly, gender roles are not inextricably tied to bodies, characteristics, emotions, and other aspects of people's lives.

In the 1990's, academic Judith Butler explored and challenged these notions regarding gender and gender roles through her publication of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

Subversion of Identity (1990) and later in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993) and other works and essays. Exploring how gender is constructed through repeated discourse and actions, Butler suggests that gender is not an underlying essence which produces gender expressions, rather that the repetition of speech and acts is what creates the illusion of gender as a reality.

2.2.1 Gender as performative

Taking inspiration most importantly from Foucault, Beauvoir, Lacan, and speech-act theory, Butler developed the concept of *gender performativity* in her anti-essentialist critique, *Gender Trouble* (1990). The premise of gender performativity is firstly Butler's claims that the anticipation of an internal essence of gender is what produces gender on the surface, and secondly that performativity is not a singular isolated act, rather a repetition of acts and speech which maintains the understanding of gender. In other words, gender is not an internal essence and something that we *are*, rather something that we *do* performatively through repeated acts which creates the illusion of an essence of gender.

The idea of gender as a stable internal identity has been prevalent throughout culture and time, where we have long been under the impression that gender is simply something we *are*. However, Butler argues that there is no such thing as a stable gender, and that it is the words, acts, gestures, and desires that produce the fantasy of an internal gender which is sustained on the outside, that is on the body, and through discourses (Butler, 1990a, p. 111). Acts and speech associated with the feminine and masculine are through repetition sustained and naturalised to fabricate the illusion of an internal essence of gender and perpetuate the gender binary. Thus, Butler dismisses "woman" and "man" as coherent or stable identities, as they are constructions that depend on repetition and regulation for their existence, a point which some have argued can delegitimise any identity categories as stable or "natural" (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 121).

Butler also suggests that sex is a social construct, not something one is born with. Stating that "sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along", Butler puts forth the idea that the body has "always already been interpreted by cultural meanings", implying that what we understand to be assigned female or male sex are cultural constructs, much like gender (Butler, 1990b, p. 12). In a later interview, Butler expands on her thoughts of sex and gender as something which is constructed before we are able to grasp its effect on us. Butler states that assigning gender at birth is "an enormous discursive practise that acts upon us" against our will at a time when we are vulnerable to the assignment (Ahmed, 2016,

p. 485). This discursive practice ultimately affects us and may influence our understanding of our body and gender identity. For instance, when a person is assigned female at birth, they are given a feminine name, addressed using she/her pronouns, and later attributed the colour pink and other culturally feminine signifiers. What ultimately determines this course of discursive action is the attribution of *female* to an individual born with certain genitalia, and this attribution is therefore not exempt of cultural construction and imposition.

An important aspect of Butler's theory of gender performativity is the *repetition* and *naturalisation* of acts and speech which creates the illusion of the gender binary that is performed. Gender does not have an origin and is culturally and temporally constructing and reconstructing, and it is the repetitive *doing* of gender that sustains it. Butler posits that the performativity of gender is a public action, as it concerns the maintenance of the gender binary which is not attributed to a subject but is "understood to found and consolidate the subject" (Butler, 1990a, p. 114). When this pattern is repeated over time, it becomes naturalised and deemed both legitimate and essential, thus creating the fantasy of an internal gender identity.

This repetition and naturalisation of the gender binary is important in maintaining what Butler calls the *heterosexual matrix,* explaining the term through the notion that "for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990b, p. 194). As McCann & Monaghan illustrate, this for instance entails a person assigned female at birth (sex), who ideally grows up as a feminine woman (gender) and is attracted to a man, someone of the opposite sex/gender (desire) (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 121). Thus, the gender binary is understood and challenged by Butler as a construct that not only maintains the idea of an internal essence of gender constituted by certain acts, but also as a construct upholding the normative heterosexuality. Binary gender norms and heterosexual desires are therefore culturally and temporally naturalised through repetitive acts and speech, constructed aspects which have been made to become the norm which prohibits any deviations.

According to Butler, the gendered bodies are many "styles of the flesh" where gender is a *corporeal style,* an intentional and performative act (Butler, 1990a, p. 113). The concepts of *styles* and *performativity* have often been subject to misinterpretation, as many believe Butler describes performativity as a literal and conscious performance of chosen styles to convey gender. However, the *stylization of the body* does not refer to theatrical bodies which perform the illusion of gender actively and deliberately, rather the mundane ways in which

bodily gestures, movements, and various styles legitimise the illusion of a gendered self (Butler, 1990a, p. 114). As with the imposition of gender, the performativity of gender is done onto the body, making it a normalised and automated act, not something that is done by the subject intentionally and with deliberation.

2.2.2 Misinterpretations and drag

Butler's game-changing ideas of gender performativity as introduced in *Gender Trouble* has through the years been subject to both acclaim and criticism, and many have misinterpreted what she really means by performativity. Butler states in a preface provided for *Gender Trouble* in 1999 that it is difficult to define performativity accurately, particularly as her own views on the concept have changed over time through the criticisms and interpretations of others (Butler, 1990a, p. 94). Much of the misinterpretation could be due to Butler's infamously complex prose, but Butler herself argues that the language describing performativity cannot be simplified precisely because the concept is complex. Since Butler's understanding of gender is that it is constructed and maintained through acts and speech, she posits that these radical views cannot be defined through the very grammatical constraints that upholds gender and this must therefore be at the expense of our comprehension: "the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself" (Butler, 1990a, p. 97). An example to support this argument may be the emerging use of the pronouns they/them when referring to a singular person. Though this strictly speaking is not grammatically correct, the limitations of pronouns is only available within the constraints of the gender binary and must therefore be challenged through ungrammatical usage.

Another commonly misinterpreted aspect of *Gender Trouble* is Butler's analogy of drag as an example of the construction and performativity of gender. *Drag* is a (literal) theatrical performance or parody of gender, where those performing femininely are called *drag queens* and those performing masculinely are called *drag kings*. Butler presents drag as consisting of three contingent dimensions of corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (Butler, 1990a, p. 111). For instance, a drag performer may have been born with male genitalia (anatomical sex), identifies as nonbinary (gender identity), and is performing in drag as a woman (gender performance). When it is difficult to distinguish real from unreal in these instances, what is naturalised knowledge and cultural inferences of what gender should look like is destabilised (Butler, 1990a, p. 100). Thus, drag can be *subversive* as it challenges gender norms and naturalised notions of gender, and reveals how gender is in fact a construct. Commenting on the topic of drag later, Butler explains that drag is not

presented as an example of subversion per se, and goes on to detail how drag instead illustrates the indecisive experience of a body as male or female, putting the reality of gender into crisis (Butler, 1990a, p. 99-100).

Further, Butler posits that drag is not an imitation of reality, rather an imitation of an imitation. Because gender is a repetition of acts and speech that result in the performativity of gender, gender is in and of itself imitations naturalised through repetition. Therefore, there is no "real" women or men who are parodied through drag, but instead the assumption that a natural gender exists is parodied (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 131).

2.2.3 Taking trans identities into consideration

Despite misconceptions and a historically erroneous labelling of transgender people as "cross-dressers", doing drag and being transgender are not the same since the former is a performance and the latter is a lived experience. Therefore, whilst Butler mentions drag in her 1990 publication of *Gender Trouble*, she does not actually address transgender people. In a preface nine years after the first publication of *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that were she to rewrite the book, she would have included discussions on transgender people and intersexuality (Butler, 1990a, p. 102). Having experienced LGBTQ+ communities prior to writing *Gender Trouble*, Butler conveys her hope for the legitimacy of bodies that are deemed "false, unreal, and unintelligible", and the dissipation of violence imposed by restrictive bodily norms (Butler, 1990a, p. 95, 101-102). Despite not addressing the issue in detail, Butler hopes that challenging and revealing the gender binary and the gender norms imposed onto our bodies may legitimise transgender identities and create a more inclusive gender norm.

Queer and transgender studies researcher Saoirse O'Shea claims that though Butler's arguments questioning the reality of sex and gender are important for trans people, many trans people inhabit an animosity for Butler. This is particularly due to her "limited understanding of, and allegorisation of, camp drag" as an example of trans people's lived lives (O'Shea, 2020, p. 7). O'Shea argues that some readers of *Gender Trouble* may attribute a hyperbolic and camp gender performance to all those doing drag or identifying as transgender, although, as both O'Shea and Butler point out, there are differing ways of doing gender. O'Shea goes on to state that some transgender people may conform to the gender binary and stay within the heterosexual matrix in hopes of "passing" as cisgender, and others may be outside the matrix altogether as nonbinary. Ultimately, binary gender is done, undone, underdone, redone, and refused in diverse ways through transgender lives (O'Shea, 2020, p. 8).

However, O'Shea points out the problematic aspects of Butler, such as her overly simplistic collapsing of diversity into drag and her inability to capture the lived lives and experiences of transgender people in the allegories she uses (O'Shea, 2020, p. 8, 11). Prosser also identifies that when Butler addresses drag, she does not add anything to contradict the notion of transgender as camp or performative (Prosser, 1998, p. 28). Failing to address these aspects of transgender identities, which have the potential of being misconstrued, provides the opportunity for misinterpretations and for readers of Butler's theory to conflate camp drag and transgender identities. One of Prosser's main arguments is against the reading of transgender people as inherently queer and subversive. He clarifies that though Butler does not make this argument explicitly, her work lays out the opportunity for this reading, again highlighting how Butler's failure to elaborate on her writings' implications for transgender people sets the reader up for misinterpretation.

Lastly, it is pertinent to mention the implications of Butler's theory for nonbinary and genderqueer people. Although Butler expresses a wish to legitimise marginalised bodies and gender through the disruption of the gender binary, some nonbinary and genderqueer people may argue that their very existence depends on the existence of the binary. As a nonbinary person themself, O'Shea addresses this dilemma as they raise the question of whether they would become "an unfeeling, genderless robot" if they did not experience gender and dysphoria if the gender binary was undone (O'Shea, 2020, p. 10). O'Shea argues that gender dysphoria, referring to the distress experienced when a person's assigned gender does not correlate with how they identify, is not necessarily self-loathing, but an aspect of what both does and undoes their gender identity. Thus, removing the gender binary would eliminate an aspect of their identity, and O'Shea adds that they cannot undo gender altogether without ceasing to be nonbinary (O'Shea, 2020, p. 11). Therefore, Butler's hopes of disrupting the gender binary and the heterosexual matrix, though an idealistic thought intended to increase the inclusivity and acceptance of diverse understandings of gender, may not necessarily be as uncomplicated for nonbinary and genderqueer people.

2.3 Intersectionality

In the 1980's, legal feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw identified tendencies to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive, using Black women as an example to illustrate this in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine" (1989). This introduction to intersectionality concerns itself

with the legal experiences of Black women whose discrimination cases would only be treated as either a case of sex discrimination or race discrimination, but not both at the same time. Crenshaw's argument is that this approach does not wholly capture the experiences of Black women, which are predicated by the intersection of race and gender simultaneously.

Crenshaw explains the negligence of intersectionality as a single-axis framework where treating experiences of Black women as pertaining to race discrimination is "viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks", whilst treating them according to sex discrimination puts the focus "on race- and class-privileged women", thus erasing Black women (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). The thought is that there is only one factor that causes the discrimination of Black men and white women, and that if it were not for their respective race or gender, they would be white males and therefore exempt from discrimination. Black women, on the other hand, are doubly marginalised as they are neither most privileged in their race, nor in their gender. Therefore, by only focusing on either race or gender, Black women's experiences are compared to those more privileged and who therefore have different experiences of marginalisation and discrimination.

In a later essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991), Crenshaw posits that not only are the experiences of Black women not represented in the law, but they are also missing from discourses of feminism and antiracism. Crenshaw states: "Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). These discourses, like the discrimination laws, compare Black women to the most privileged in their group of race or gender, marginalising them within a discourse that is intended to do the opposite. Though this may not be intentional, disregarding how intersections of marginalised traits can create different experiences within a group does little to further equality and antidiscrimination. By ignoring the differences that occur *within* the groups, the discourses further the tension *among* groups (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242).

To further elaborate on the implications of intersecting traits, Crenshaw uses two analogies which illustrate the experiences of Black women and others with multiple marginalised traits. First, Crenshaw compares the discrimination of Black women to traffic in an intersection:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars

traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

In my understanding of this metaphor, those with one marginalising factor (for instance Black men or white women) do not travel through any intersections and therefore know which direction the discrimination stems from. Those with no marginalising factors (white males) are not out in the traffic at all and therefore are not exposed to any possibility of discrimination. Black women, as the metaphor illustrates, will always experience traffic at the intersection of race and gender. Crenshaw clarifies that though this means that their experiences of discrimination can be similar to Black men and white women, they will most often be different due to the experience of double discrimination with the combination of race and sex (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Second, Crenshaw asks us to imagine a basement containing all those disadvantaged by race, gender, sexual preference, age, and/or physical ability. In the floor above reside those who are not disadvantaged at all. The people in the basement are stacked on top of each other reaching towards the ceiling, with those multiply disadvantaged at the bottom and those disadvantaged by only one factor at the top. Those in the floor above wish to correct some aspects of domination by opening a hatch, so that those who "but for" the ceiling would be in the upper room can get through. Those who are able to get through the hatch are only those with a single disadvantage, whilst "[t]hose who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151-152).

Crenshaw presents this analogy to describe how Black women, who are disadvantaged by two factors, cannot conclusively say that "but for" their race or "but for" their gender they would not be marginalised, whilst those disadvantaged by a singular factor can say this. Those who only have one marginalised trait are therefore deemed most privileged within their group, as their ability to reach those with no marginalised traits is greater than that of those who are multiply marginalised. For instance, Black men are marginalised within the category of race, but are privileged in their gender as men and would therefore not be marginalised at all "but for" their race. Black women, however, are marginalised both in their race and their gender, and are therefore not privileged and are not as easily able to access privilege.

Crenshaw's metaphorical basement contains people who are multiply disadvantaged ranked by the number of these disadvantaging factors, those with the most factors on the

bottom and those with only one on top. Below Black women there will therefore be those disadvantaged even further by other factors, such as sexuality, physical ability, religion, etc. It is also worth mentioning that if they are Black transgender women, their experiences of these intersections may be different from those of Black cisgender women. Therefore, the more someone does not belong to those most privileged within their groups of identity, the further away they are from those in the floor above.

2.3.1 Intersectionality and queer theory

Though Crenshaw's essay on intersectionality was written within a context of legal studies and Black feminism, her theory has since evolved to other disciplines within humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, and has accordingly adapted to the discourse and research protocols of these (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 792). This development in studies on intersectionality has provided further insight into not only the experiences of Black women, but also the experiences and discriminations faced by those with other intersecting identities.

Although the term *intersectionality* has gained relevance within feminism and is now "something of a buzzword in feminist spaces", it was previously used in queer critiques (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 74). During the 1990's, academics and activists critiqued the separation of race and sexuality in what would be known as "queer(s) of colour critique", where they challenged the implicit whiteness of queer theory, which they no longer deemed radical and revolutionary due to its focus on a singular form of oppression (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 180). According to queer critiques, queer theory was only concerned with the oppressions of being queer, disregarding those who, for instance, were also oppressed based on race. Like Crenshaw's criticisms of the feminist and antiracist discourses, queer critiques criticised queer discourses for comparing queer people with intersecting oppressions to those most privileged within the group.

These criticisms persist to this day, as some argue that queer theory and queer discourses still largely deal with middle-class issues or may neglect class altogether. The single-axis framework Crenshaw identifies therefore applies to the treatment of queer issues also, where queer people's experiences are all compared to the experiences of those most privileged within the group, disregarding the differences in experiences that occur for those who are additionally oppressed. When attempts are made to account for other traits, however, critiques argue that these are segmented into dimensions of oppression rather than being understood as intimately connected (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p. 180). Thus, the

particular experiences that occur due to intersecting identities are treated as mutually exclusive, much like how Crenshaw found that Black women's experiences are treated as either Black experiences or experiences of women, though very often they are in fact intertwined.

A failure to analyse intersectionality within queer spaces allows for the oppressions within the LGBTQ+ community itself to go unnoticed. As I briefly commented on earlier, LGBTQ+ identities (other than homosexuality) have habitually been subject to oppression and a lack of acceptance not only within hetero- and cisnormative spaces, but also within the LGBTQ+ community. Studies on trans identities have uncovered how "sexist and transphobic homonormative gay and lesbian spaces can be", thus revealing a need for other spaces for transgender people to experience support and security (Brown, 2012, p. 543). Tendencies such as this highlight how lumping all queer people into the same category entails comparing the experiences of people who exist on a large spectrum of identities, and these may therefore face widely different experiences which cannot be compared or equated.

Addressing the nuances of identities within the LGBTQ+ community through an intersectional approach is therefore crucial if there should be any hope of combating hetero-, cis-, and homonormativity. This would entail also looking at other forms of diversity within the LGBTQ+ community, the most significant being race. There is increasing interest within queer research to consider intersections of sexuality and race, which reveal oppressions within the LGBTQ+ community as these studies have found that homonormative spaces can be "deeply racist and privilege an invisible whiteness" (Brown, 2012, p. 543). Comparing the experiences of all queer people regardless of race is therefore problematic as it puts the experiences of those who are white and queer at the forefront and erases queer people of colour and their experiences of oppression from the same people who are representing them.

Other intersections with sexuality and gender are less researched, though they are just as necessary to explore. Religion is one such aspect which is rarely researched within intersections of LGBTQ+ identities, even though religion has traditionally been central in regulating and policing sexuality (Brown, 2012, p. 544). Many religions are often accused of being queerphobic due to their historically anti-LGBTQ+ stance, although there are many religious communities and spaces that resist this. Consequently, religious queer people may experience oppression from several directions due to the intersections of sexuality, religion, and potentially other traits. For instance, a queer Black Muslim may face discrimination within religious, heteronormative, political, and/or racial spaces.

In the past two decades, the emergence of *homonationalism* has given further reason to address the intersections of sexuality, race, and religion, particularly regarding Islam. Resulting from a post-9/11 animosity towards the Arab Muslim, the growing acceptance of queer people evolved into "Western ideals of modernity" which aided in positioning Muslims and the East as "the backwards, homophobic 'others'" (Bonane, 2019, p. 257). This can be understood using Crenshaw's basement analogy: by distancing themselves from Muslims and vilifying them as queerphobic, LGBTQ+ movements that utilise homonationalist rhetoric and discourse can remain accepted in the floor above.

Discriminations and stereotyping due to the intersections of race and sexuality is not only an issue in the U.S., but also in Norway. The Queer Migrants in Norway research project surveyed and interviewed queer immigrants between 16 and 61 years old and found that they are vulnerable to and particularly affected by discrimination and marginalisation (Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm, 2018, p. 141). The participants report that they experience discriminations from the majority population, from those with similar ethnic backgrounds as themselves, and within queer spaces. Thus, the stereotype of the "homophobic Arab" is rife in Norway as well, with many queer immigrants and Muslims reporting exclusion from queer spaces due to the assumption that Muslims from a queerphobic background cannot be queer themselves (Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm, 2018, p. 142). The rejection from their own communities is reported to inhibit the participants' ability to live openly, and many queer immigrants are therefore vulnerable to marginalisation and isolation.

2.3.2 Intersectionality in LGBTQ+ young adult literature

Taking into account my exploration of intersectionality and its role in queer theory, it may be clearer why many studies on LGBTQ+ young adult literature are concerned by the abundance of white, gay, middle-class, and cisgender male representations. Though the increasing representation of queer people in general is significant for the furthering of a diverse and inclusive young adult literature, this representation will remain limited and insufficient when the diversities within the LGBTQ+ community are continually underrepresented. The repeated representation of those most privileged within the LGBTQ+ community furthers the erasure of those who experience intersections of multiple oppressive structures. As a result, their oppression is further enabled as it will go uncriticised and unchallenged.

Thinking back to Crenshaw's basement-metaphor, the white, gay, cisgender male characters can say that "but for" their sexuality they would be able to join those who are not burdened at all in the floor above. The constant depiction of this group therefore neglects the

many others who are not able to or must struggle to reach above the ceiling, providing a skewed and limited picture of queer people and what they may look like. By doing so, some readers are prevented from gaining insight into lives and experiences different from their own, and some readers are not able to see representations of others like themselves.

Moulaison Sandy, Brendler & Kohn conducted a study on intersectional representations in LGBTQ+ literature, and although this study focused on adult literature, I would posit that some of their findings can be applied to LGBTQ+ young adult literature also. In particular, the study noted that when one identity was underrepresented, it would appear less often alongside an additional underrepresented identity (Moulaison Sandy, Brendler & Kohn, 2017, p. 442). For instance, bisexuality was the least represented sexuality in their selected texts and Latino was the least represented ethnic group, so according to Moulaison Sandy, Brendler & Kohn's findings, the likelihood of bisexual and Latino representation simultaneously would be rare. Additionally, they found that there were no protagonists with three underrepresented identities, indicating that racial minorities are highly unlikely to appear alongside other minority groups (Moulaison Sandy, Brendler & Kohn, 2017, p. 443). Thus, LGBTQ+ representations in literature largely comprises of characters who "but for" their sexuality are not otherwise marginalised. This leaves those who for instance are queer and simultaneously BIPOC, transgender, working class, religious, or disabled substantially underrepresented, worse yet if they embody several of these traits.

These tendencies hinder the possibility of providing young adult literature which can foster inclusivity and promote diversity, as well as aid in the development of young readers' identities. Scholars turn to young adult literature as texts that "challenge and expand readers' understandings of those who may be different from them", and at the same time offer reflections of readers' realities (Durand, 2016, p. 74). Presenting the lives and experiences of diverse LGBTQ+ youth is therefore important in addressing young adult readers' needs and concerns, and in expanding their understanding of what it means to be queer. Increased visibility of LGBTQ+ young adults who embody intersecting identities can also help combat discrimination, bullying, and exclusion, and challenge the pervasive whiteness within queer discourses.

2.4 Close reading

Close reading entails a careful reading of a text to uncover its themes and how it is constructed, revealing the detailed and often concealed ways in which the stylistic consistency and rhetorical effect of the given text are produced (Castilla, 2017, p. 136). While not entirely

a methodology, close reading has been linked to New Criticism and is deemed a prominent feature in literary studies, as many approaches to literary analysis involve reading individual texts closely (Smith, 2016, p. 57-58).

New Critics utilised close reading by focusing solely on the text and disregarding the surrounding context in which it was written. The literary approach therefore garnered criticism in the 1960's for its "ahistorical approach to the literary text, which is understood as a totalised self-contained entity that transcends its immediate social and historical context" (Lukić & Espinosa, 2011, p. 105-106). It was later reclaimed by feminist literary studies, cultural studies, and others, as close reading became "detached from the restrictive theoretical framework of New Criticism" and became an important tool in literary studies (Lukić & Espinosa, 2011, p. 107).

A close reading can be conducted using theory or questions that can guide the analysis and provide the lens with which to read from. In my analysis, I will focus on different narrative elements to explore the themes of the chosen novels. This analysis will thus provide insight into contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature, and through my later discussion I will further delve into this literature as mirrors and windows for young readers.

First, I will investigate the plot to explore queer narratives. According to Mario Klarer, *plot* refers to "the logical interaction of the various thematic elements of a text which lead to a change of the original situation as presented at the outset of the narrative" (Klarer, 1999, p. 15). Further, the plot entails events and conflicts which drive the story and reveal its thematic aspects. By looking at plot, I will identify tendencies of LGBTQ+ young adult literature within the selected novels. This will be informed by my research based primarily on Cart & Jenkins's and Epstein's studies.

Second, I will look at the characters to investigate sexuality and gender as presented in the novels. A *character* is a figure in a text and can be the main character (protagonist) or a secondary character. As is common for much of young adult fiction, all the three novels analysed in this thesis are first-person narratives, which means the action of the text is mediated through a person involved in the action itself (Klarer, 1999, p. 21). As the narrator in all three novels is the protagonist themselves, the reader is given access to the protagonist's own thoughts and reflection regarding their sexuality and gender. Thus, analysing these characters and their exploration of identity will help gain insight into what the novels ultimately have to say about sexuality and gender. Additionally, looking at how the characters around the protagonists perceive them will provide insight into the novels' thoughts on

LGBTQ+ identities. Butler's theories on gender performativity will provide the basis to explore the characters' gender performativity and their sexuality.

Lastly, I will look at the setting in the novels to explore intersectionality. Klarer describes *setting* as "the location, historical period, and social surroundings in which the action of a text develops" (Klarer, 1999, p. 25). Setting will be investigated as the social surroundings that reveal the intersections of the protagonists' identities and the ways in which this affects their understanding of themselves and their identity. According to Klarer, the setting is often carefully selected by the writer to indirectly support the plot, characters, and point of view (Klarer, 1999, p. 145). The protagonists in the selected novels all experience intersections at some level as queer people who are marginalised or disadvantaged in additional ways. Crenshaw's theory and work on intersectionality will therefore inform my analysis to further explore these intersections and their implications.

Though divided into three separate aspects here, the exploration of plot, characters, and setting continuously overlap. In literature, the various narrative elements cannot be viewed as self-contained and isolated elements, but rather as interdependent elements which reveal a full meaning through their interaction with each other (Klarer, 1999, p. 28). Therefore, the three narrative elements, as well as the theories used to explore them, will often be discussed in their interrelatedness.

3. Analysis and discussion

I will now present my analysis and discussion of *The Henna Wars*, *Felix Ever After*, and *I Wish You All the Best*. As I described earlier, the novels will be analysed with a focus on plot, characters, and setting to explore queer plots, gender, and intersectionality as presented in the stories.

The analysis and discussion seek to answer the research questions in this thesis:

How can LGBTQ+ young adult literature provide as "mirrors" and "windows" for young readers?

a) *How do the selected novels portray queer plots, gender, and intersectionality?*

b) *In what ways can these portrayals be used as "mirrors" and "windows" for furthering secondary school students' development, both as individuals and members of society?*

I will first provide an individual analysis of the plot, characters, and setting in each novel to address sub-question "a" in sections 3.1-3. Then, I will move on to answer sub-question "b" in a discussion where I look at all three novels in a comparative view in section 3.4.

3.1 *The Henna Wars*

3.1.1 Plot

The protagonist and narrator of Adiba Jaigirdar's novel *The Henna Wars* (2020) is Nishat, a sixteen-year-old lesbian Bengali living in Dublin with her parents and sister, Priti. The story follows the aftermath of the decision Nishat makes in the opening line: "I decide to come out to my parents at Sunny Apu's engagement party" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 1). Nishat reveals that she has spent years going through various scenarios of how she would come out to her parents before finally deciding to go through with it. She is prepared that her parents will experience anger, confusion, and fear, but is surprised when they ultimately react by staying silent. Overhearing their conversations, Nishat realises her parents think her sexuality is influenced by the people and culture of Ireland, chalking it up to being a phase she will grow out of if they simply ignore it. Thus, Nishat's parents only have a few conversations where they urge her to "make a different choice" to spare them of the shame of having a queer child (Jaigirdar,

2020, p. 147). They even go so far as to enlist the help of Sunny Apu, their close family friend, in the hopes that talking to someone older and newly married (to a man) may make Nishat snap out of her "phase". Nishat remains unwavering during these conversations, insisting that her sexuality is not something she has chosen, nor something she can choose to dismiss.

Based on Cart & Jenkins's model to distinguish the different types of queer narratives within LGBTQ+ young adult literature, Jaigirdar's novel can be categorised as a story of homosexual visibility since one of the major events in the story is Nishat's coming out to her parents, and later her outing at school. As is the case in many novels depicting homosexual visibility, Nishat's sexuality is not easily accepted due to the conservative environment both at home and at the Catholic school that she attends.

According to Castle's classification of sapphic plotlines, *The Henna Wars* exhibits traits of both a dysphoric and a euphoric plotline. The dysphoric plotline, depicting sapphic sexuality as a phase towards an inevitable heterosexuality, is portrayed through Nishat's parents, who understand Nishat's queerness as a form of rebellion or rite of passage. Their insistence that it is something Nishat has picked up from somewhere and will eventually grow tired of, trivialises Nishat's sexuality and dismisses its reality as an intrinsic part of her identity. However, the parents' views do not reflect the views promoted by the novel itself. Indeed, the novel strongly portrays the euphoric plotline, which presents homosexual desire as a "radical and irreversible" alternative to heterosexuality (Castle, 1993, as cited in Lewis, 2015, p. 55). As Nishat is both the protagonist and narrator of the novel, her views and reflections on her own sexuality are more prominent to the plot, and these are consistent throughout the story in portraying queerness as an intrinsic truth that is not inherently a problem, but is treated as such by outer forces. Additionally, the novel portrays sapphic romance warmly and positively, and the conflicts that arise between Nishat and Flávia are spurred on by factors other than their sexualities, like the competition and Nishat's rivalry with Flávia's cousin.

At the same time, Nishat's insecurity regarding her parents and their lack of acceptance plays a crucial role in how she deals with other, unrelated, conflicts that arise after her coming out. Nishat experiences conflicting emotions as she does not regret coming out, but simultaneously feels something adjacent to shame and regret over the fact that her parents did not react as she had wanted. The burden of these conflicting feelings is out of Nishat's control, so she channels her anger and frustration over her situation into the business competition, which she has some control over: "How can I convince them that right now, the

business competition, the henna, the urge to win, is the only thing keeping me going? That it's the only solid thing in my life right now? When everything else feels up in the air, out of control?" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 156). Additionally, the fact that Flávia and Chyna appropriate her culture in also choosing henna as their business idea fuels Nishat's desire to win even further. Two integral parts of her identity are threatened, her sexuality and her culture, but she only has some semblance of control on the latter. Moreover, henna becomes a therapeutic and motivating coping mechanism for Nishat, providing both a distraction and an outlet for her emotions.

Due to her parents' reaction to her sexuality, Nishat is discouraged from coming out to her friends, Chaewon and Jess, preventing her from confiding in them about her problems. As a result, Nishat pushes her friends away, although this was exactly what she feared would happen if she came out to them in the first place. This conflict is a particularly good example of how the inherent problem in the novel and Nishat's life is not her sexuality itself, but the attitudes of those around her and her own actions. Certainly, Nishat experiences many stresses and obstacles in her life, but it is not her sexuality itself that causes these conflicts, rather the social environment that works against her ability to live her truth. The mere fact that Nishat can find peace and happiness once the most important people in her life accept and support her, demonstrates how it is possible to live a fulfilling and successful life as an openly queer person.

A pivotal part of the story is when Nishat is outed through an anonymous text to the entire school, where the anonymous sender claims that Nishat's sexuality goes against the school's Catholic ethics and morals. Though Nishat is initially under the impression that Flávia or Chyna have outed her to win the competition, it is Priti's best friend Ali who is the culprit. An interesting choice in the novel is to virtually ignore the character of Ali, as Nishat exchanges only a few words with her and the character does not get fully developed. Though Nishat briefly explains that Ali is not her biggest fan, the only other information the reader receives about Ali is through Priti. The lack of information about Ali leaves questions about her motives for outing Nishat, which might be due to the Catholic morals she mentions in the message, but could also be based on jealousy over Nishat and Priti's close relationship.

Nishat never confronts Ali, nor does she report her to the school as Nishat wishes to avoid any further discussion on the matter. She tells Jess: "I'm not ashamed of it. It's who I am. I'm comfortable being a lesbian. I'm just… I'm not a spectacle" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 232). In the wake of Ali's message, the girls at Nishat's school treat her as exactly that, a spectacle to judge. Although the combination of a bad coming out at home and an involuntary outing in

school leaves Nishat on the verge of a breakdown, she remains persistent not to allow anyone to get the impression she is ashamed of her sexuality. Nevertheless, she expresses regret and resentment over being deprived of the opportunity to control her coming out, saying she felt she was "stripped of my choice. Of my identity, even. Like I've become passive in my own life" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 215). No matter how strong and confident someone may be in their identity, outing someone is still a violation of their right to control their own story and to whom and when it is revealed.

3.1.2 Characters

For the character analysis, I will mainly focus on Nishat, as her exploration of her own sexuality and identity is central to the narrative. I will then provide an analysis of Flávia and Priti, two people in Nishat's life who play an important role in the events that unfold following her coming out.

Before the analysis of the characters, it is worth addressing the abundance of female characters and the lack of male characters in the novel. Since Nishat has a sister, goes to an all-girl school, and is a lesbian, the most important people in her life are female. Though these factors do not necessarily hinder her ability to acquaint herself with males, Nishat expresses her general disgust and disinterest in them, indicating acquaintances with males is not something she would want. The only time she finds herself with male peers, Nishat describes them as having "pimples all over their cheeks and foreheads and AXE body spray so strong that my nostrils are overpowered from outside the room", highlighting her indifference and disgust towards boys (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 131).

The only recurring male character is Nishat's "Abbu", her father, whilst any other male characters, uncles, and teachers are only afforded a few lines in a single scene. Even the father is not a prominent figure compared to Nishat's "Ammu", her mother, who primarily deals with the difficult conversations in the family. Nishat also repeatedly remarks specifically how her mother has stopped talking to her, only noting the same in her father a couple of times. Whether this is because Nishat has a closer relationship to her mother or because their family is a matriarchy is hard to say, nevertheless it characterises their family dynamic.

It is difficult to determine whether Jaigirdar has consciously created a hyper-feminised environment in Nishat's life, or whether it is a coincidence. In many ways it can be deemed a positive aspect of the novel, as it can be analysed as a feminist act to subvert a traditionally male-dominated societal order, not to mention a male dominated literature (Epstein, 2013, p.

108). On the other hand, it may also perpetuate stereotypes of queer women and feminine presenting people as inherently disinterested in men and/or masculinely presenting people, to the point where they may be viewed as misandrists.

Nishat

As a Bengali Muslim living in Ireland, Nishat experiences conflicting feelings of belonging and unbelonging in both the Bengali and the Irish communities. Though she is very much in touch with her Bengali culture and embraces all it brings with it, her sexuality conflicts with what is expected of her as a Bengali girl and causes her to question the culture's values. Nishat does not feel completely accepted at her school either, both due to her culture and later her sexuality. As a person of colour attending a predominantly white school in Dublin, Nishat experiences a lack of belonging as racist and ignorant rumours about her and her culture have circulated for years. When she is outed to her peers, the rumours and comments are instead spurred on by homophobia. With Chyna at the helm, the girls at Nishat's school are constantly finding new reasons to exclude her from social events and treat her as a pariah.

Besides her culture and sexuality, Nishat also believes she is not likeable and sociable enough to be accepted by her peers. When she and Chyna were both new to their school, Nishat remarked that it was easier for Chyna to make friends as she was "more talkative, more charming, more *everything* positive" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 62). Regardless, Nishat does not wish to be friends with the girls at her school, considering the way they treat her. She is content with the friendships she has with Chaewon and Jess, in addition to her close friendship with her own sister. Nevertheless, the active exclusion and judgement from her peers impacts her self-esteem and confidence as her identity is subject to constant scrutiny and attack.

With Sunny Apu's wedding a prominent event in the beginning of the novel, Nishat provides insight into her own thoughts and reflections regarding weddings and the gendered expectations that come with it. Nishat points out the anxiety that bubbles up within her upon seeing Sunny dressed in bridal attire, which could be due to the wedding being the catalyst for her decision to come out. Additionally, marriage is often a complicated topic for queer people for whom it, as a culturally and historically heterosexual institution, may not be possible or even desirable at all. However, it was not the impossibility of marrying which prompted Nishat's coming out, rather the impossibility of marrying *a man*. Nishat, who comments on Bengali weddings as "so palpably heterosexual that it's almost nauseating", tells her parents: "I think in the future I won't want to marry a boy at all. I think I'll want to marry a girl

instead" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 1, 6). Thus, it is not the fact that Nishat dismisses the institution of marriage altogether that prompts her coming out, rather her wish to rectify her parents' vision of what marriage for her may realistically look like.

Though Nishat is not a fan of getting dressed up, wearing make-up, and other such gendered conventions, she admires femininity and feminine expression in others. At the wedding, Nishat notes how happy and exuberant Sunny appears, detailing her attire and beauty at length. Reflecting on the possibility of her own wedding ever occurring, Nishat also hopes to wear the same traditional clothing and jewellery she sees on Sunny. Additionally, Nishat admires beauty in others, though she does not see it in herself. When discussing her "type" with Priti, Nishat claims her type is "beautiful girl. Which is a lot of them", having already pointed out Flávia's beauty previously (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 43). Therefore, she attributes and appreciates feminine expression in others, but does not enjoy or admire them on herself, which again is an indication of her lacking self-esteem.

When it comes to dating and approaching other girls, Nishat exhibits the insecurities and awkwardness most young adults experience in dealing with relationships and dating for the first time. She regards Flávia more highly than herself and may view her as unattainable due to this, on one occasion commenting on the fact that she is not in Flávia's league. The arduous process of Nishat navigating her feelings for Flávia is made doubly challenging with the added uncertainty of whether Flávia is queer at all. When Priti says Flávia is most likely straight, Nishat agrees, thinking: "taking my hand at the wedding was nothing. Straight girls do that all the time. That's why being a lesbian is so confusing" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 50). Thus, she expresses frustration with how much harder it can be to interpret another girls' behaviour towards her, as straight and lesbian girls may act similarly.

Nishat also uses this uncertainty regarding Flávia's sexuality as an excuse not to consider the possibility of her feelings being reciprocated. For instance, when Flávia makes a move to kiss Nishat, she immediately attempts to find explanations that excuse Flávia's actions as platonic: "I want to think this is just something girls do - that it means nothing. But I'm one hundred percent sure that the way she's looking at me is not the way friends look at each other. […] Is there a heterosexual explanation for why she's inching forward?" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 191). This response may be caused by her general insecurity and lack of experience, since accepting Flávia's behaviour as flirting would mean having to take their relationship a step further. It could also be due to Nishat's unresolved issues with her parents, as their disapproval of her sexuality may hinder her from taking her feelings for Flávia seriously. Additionally, the tensions of the business competition impede Nishat's ability to

accept Flávia as anything other than a rival, and Nishat interprets their almost-kiss as a ploy to faze her from the competition.

Flávia

Flávia is Nishat's rival and love interest in the novel. Though they knew each other in primary school, Flávia moved away with her mother and older sister before returning to Dublin at the beginning of the story. Flávia has a Brazilian mother and an Irish father, and thus experiences challenges being multicultural.

Flávia admires Nishat for the pride she displays in her identity as Bengali and lesbian, a quality it is clear Flávia covets for herself. She reveals her own insecurities to Nishat, expressing feelings of having to supress and conceal both her culture and her sexuality to her family and peers: "Like I don't really feel Brazilian sometimes, you know? Especially around Chyna and her side of the family. It feels like they want me to be something else altogether, and it's just easier to conform. I want them to like me. To accept me" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 313). As a Black Brazilian, Flávia expresses the feeling of needing to adjust her identity and culture to fit in and please her father's side of the family, including Chyna, since they are prejudiced towards non-white and non-Irish people. Her mother puts added pressure on her to "show up" her father's family, who Flávia explains "assume that because my mom is Black and Brazilian, and still has an accent, she isn't smart enough or good enough or whatever" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 187-188). Therefore, Flávia's mother wants her daughter to prove her father's family wrong by getting better grades than Chyna, something Flávia ultimately fails to do.

Regarding her sexuality, Flávia tells Nishat that her feelings confuse her, though she believes she is bisexual. However, the prejudices and stereotypes people have of her due to her culture prevents her from coming out to people other than her mother: "all the boys think because I'm a Brazilian girl, I'll be up for anything. You don't know the way they look at me, the things they say" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 317-318). Though she does not elaborate on this, she also mentions the connotations of carnivals and partying, indicating that the prejudice people hold of her, and other Brazilian girls, concerns their supposed promiscuity. Flávia goes on to explain that revealing she is bisexual would exacerbate these perceptions, stating she "would never hear the end of it" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 318). Bisexual people have typically been portrayed as promiscuous, indecisive, and greedy, with their attraction to more than one gender often mistaken as hypersexuality (Cart & Jenkins, 2018, p. 157). Therefore, Flávia's

identity consists of two aspects which are often subjected to stereotypes and sexualisation, and these deter her from coming out.

Flávia mostly fears coming out to Chyna, revealing that her cousin does not understand Flávia's issues regarding her culture and the way people perceive her. Their relationship is a complicated one as they are very different from each other, both in terms of culture and personality, despite having grown up together. This is perhaps best exemplified in the fact that Nishat regards Chyna as her enemy and Flávia as her crush, exhibiting polar opposite feelings for the two. Though Flávia assures Nishat that Chyna is not actually as bad as she appears at school, Flávia may be simply excusing Chyna's behaviour out of family obligation. Flávia has experienced Chyna's prejudice and hypocrisy herself but chooses to conform to meet Chyna and her family's expectations, not confronting Chyna until the very end. At that point she also decides to come out to Chyna, telling Nishat that she has become inspired to no longer be "the kind of person that lets things pass by. I want to be the kind of person that does something, and stands for something" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 369).

However, Flávia also exhibits ignorance regarding Nishat's culture and the significance of henna. As an artistic person, Flávia views henna as just another artform for her to explore without understanding that it is much more than that. Aside from it being an act of cultural appropriation, meaning the adoption of a cultural element in an exploitative and unacknowledging way, it is also dismissive of Nishat's relationship to henna and the significance it holds for her. When Nishat later attempts to explain to Flávia why it is hurtful for her to be doing henna, Flávia does not comprehend that what she is doing is cultural appropriation, stating: "this is how art works. I think you don't really get it because you're not an artist" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 137). This comment is both condescending and ironic, as Flávia does not understand that she is appropriating South Asian culture precisely because she is not South Asian herself. It is not until Flávia is able to identify how she has compromised her own culture that she realises the error of her ways. She admits that she thought she could do henna simply because she liked it, without considering its cultural significance.

Priti

Priti is Nishat's younger and only sibling. With only a year's difference between the two, the girls share a close bond with each other, and Priti is the only person Nishat confides in. However, their relationship experiences some conflicts in the story, as Nishat does not show the same level of support and attention to Priti as she receives from her younger sister.

Nishat's issues cause her to neglect the problems of those closest to her, and Priti is the one this impacts the most as she is left to deal with her own issues and tensions alone.

Priti is Nishat's biggest support in her life, encouraging Nishat in her henna business and providing both help and advice in difficult situations. Nishat had already come out to Priti long before coming out to her parents, and Nishat recalls that Priti was as supportive of her sister's sexuality then as now. However, she immediately disapproves of Nishat's crush on Flávia, and discourages Nishat from pursuing a relationship with her.

Priti feels like she is losing her best friend Ali to her new boyfriend, as Ali has repeatedly neglected Priti in favour of spending time with her boyfriend. Perhaps the possibility of also losing Nishat to a potential relationship motivates Priti's disapproval of Flávia. Although Nishat often refers to her sister as social and likable, Priti does not have any other friends apart from Ali and Nishat, and therefore Priti does not wish to lose them both.

When Ali is caught as the person responsible for outing Nishat to the school, Priti ends her friendship with Ali for good. However, Priti never confides in Nishat about what is going on in her life, and instead attempts to deal with Ali's betrayal herself so as not to add more stress and pressure on Nishat. Priti later reveals she has been walking on eggshells around her sister after Nishat came out to their parents, at the expense of keeping her own problems bottled up. Because Nishat had become so engulfed in the henna competition and her parents' inability to accept her sexuality, Priti did not feel like she could add to Nishat's stresses by telling Nishat about her own problems. At the same time, Priti expresses frustration over Nishat's inability to view the situation from her family's perspective. Whilst supporting and understanding Nishat's struggle to be accepted by their parents, Priti also understands things from the parents' perspective, arguing that "they just want to be able to look people in the eye when they go back to Bangladesh" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 285).

Nishat often remarks that she believes Priti to be the ideal daughter: "I might be the older sister but Priti always shines brighter than me" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 108). Believing that her sister will be the one to meet their parents' standards and expectations regarding education and relationships, Nishat says Priti will "bring home the good grades and one day you'll marry a guy that they approve of" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 149). Nishat, on the other hand, will never marry a man, and would therefore not meet her parents' expectations of her. When discussing Priti's potential to marry a man, Nishat also points out that even if the man was no good, their parents would still approve of him simply because he is a man. She implies that their parents would rather their daughter married an unsuitable man as opposed to someone of the same gender, no matter their suitability otherwise.

Nishat's life largely revolves around family and school, and I will therefore look at these two social arenas in the story. First, I will provide an analysis of her family and culture, the values and expectations imposed on Nishat, and how her sexuality is dealt with within her family. Then, I will explore the situation at school with Nishat's peers, focusing on their treatment and subsequent appropriation of her culture.

Family and culture

Nishat's family are Bengali Muslims who moved from Bangladesh to Ireland when Nishat was a child. The family attempt to remain connected to their Bengali culture in Dublin, although they do not know many Bengali people other than Sunny Apu's family. Weddings are therefore an avenue to meet and connect with other Bengalis, though there are significantly fewer weddings in Ireland than there were in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, it is evidently an important aspect of Nishat's family and culture.

The significance of weddings and marriage gives an indication of what is valued in Bengali culture, which appears to be the maintaining of traditions and customs which ultimately uphold the heterosexual matrix. Nishat's parents, despite being a heterosexual couple, did not escape such expectations either, since their marriage was what is called a "love marriage", meaning they married out of love for each other. Nishat's mother explains why this was a problem, saying: "If I had pretended I had never spoken to him before, never known him, that he was a stranger who I liked the look of and nothing more, then nobody would have spoken about us in hushed whispers like we were shameful" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 352). The problem was therefore that Nishat's parents had spent time with each other in secret prior to getting married, something their family did not approve of.

The notion of *shame* is prevalent in their family and culture, as any deviation from the traditions and customs brings shame not only onto the deviants, but also their families. Nishat's mother explains that she is ashamed of what she and Nishat's father did, claiming they continue to be shamed and judged for their choice to marry each other and move to Ireland. Nishat's parents therefore wish that their daughters never experiences the shame and judgement they did. However, they soon realise that Nishat does in fact experience this as she is not accepted for her sexuality. Nishat's parents do not know any better than what had been taught to them during their upbringing and they act misguidedly according to what they think is right for the well-being of their daughter. When they later realise the error of their ways,

Nishat's parents make the attempts needed to adjust and unlearn the notions of shame and duty that was ingrained in them.

Nevertheless, Nishat experiences their initial rigidity as limiting and oppressive, growing to dislike the very culture she otherwise proudly embraces. Immediately following her coming out, Nishat experiences resentment towards her parents and the Bengali culture: "It's this weird, suffocating culture that tells us exactly who or what we should be. That leaves no room to be anything else" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 15). Nishat experiences that her culture polices what is acceptable and not, and that its rigidity inhibits its members. She experiences an example of this at a celebration with Bengali guests who boast about the career she can have, leaving her with the thought that she "*can be anything she wants to be, except herself*" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 204).

Nishat's parents have left their home behind, sacrificing everyone and everything they know and love, so that their daughters can have as good a life as possible. However, Nishat expresses her frustration as they are still not able to accept her identity: "they can't pause for a moment and consider who I am. How can they sacrifice everything for me and Priti, but they can't sacrifice their closed view of sexuality to accept me as I am?" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 80). Perhaps it is precisely because they have sacrificed everything else that Nishat's parents are reluctant to let go of the traditions and morals that they have been enculturated into, no matter how unreasonable this may seem to Nishat. To her parents, Ireland is a much more progressive and liberal country where it is acceptable to be queer, but they do not wish to adopt this culture as their own as it would compromise the little they have left of the Bengali culture. It therefore makes sense that it is the events around the business competition and the other girls ostracising Nishat which open their eyes. This revelation allows them to realise that people in Ireland may not be as accepting and free of judgement as they had thought, and that Nishat at the very least should be supported and accepted by her own family.

School and peers

Upon starting secondary school, Nishat immediately became friends with Chyna. However, Chyna's pursuit of friends and popularity came at the expense of Nishat when she untruthfully told the other girls in their class that Nishat had digestive issues "because Indian people eat so much spicy food" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 67). Though Chyna spearheads the bullying of Nishat in secondary school, her peers did not become racist and ignorant overnight. Nishat recalls being made fun of in primary school for the Bengali food she ate, and she was forced to eat her lunch in the library away from the other kids. However, much of the discrimination Nishat

faces from her peers is not as obvious, as there are several instances of microaggressions, meaning subtle instances of racism and discrimination. For instance, the girls at the school mispronounce Nishat's name as "Nesha" on two occasions despite being repeatedly corrected, implying that her name is inherently difficult to pronounce just because it is not Irish (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 65, 128). To make matters worse, the same girl who is not able to pronounce Nishat's name correctly praises Chyna (who is white) at the same party for having "such a unique name", further highlighting the discriminatory and racist attitudes the students hold towards their non-white peers (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 66).

The girls at Nishat's school also express racist stereotypes regarding gender roles within the Bengali culture. When Nishat leaves a party early, rumours about the reason for her departure immediately start circulating, as Priti later explains:

Somebody said that it was because you'd never seen a boy before so you freaked out. […] They were saying all of these things about you and asking me ridiculous questions. Like had you really never seen a boy? Is it illegal? Are we going to be married off when we turn eighteen? Did we have to sneak out to even go to the party? (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 139-140)

These assumptions appear to stem from the belief that brown and/or Muslim girls are restrictively sheltered, and that their parents are inherently strict and conservative. Similarly, Ali wonders if Nishat being a lesbian means that their parents would force her to marry a man, and whether she would be killed in Bangladesh for her sexuality. This concern is hard to believe as genuine, however, considering Ali does not care for Nishat's well-being at all when she outs her to the entire school.

Chaewon and Jess, Nishat's only friends, do not defend Nishat from their peers, and at times they do not understand Nishat's claims of racism and discrimination. When Nishat attempts to explain why Flávia and Chyna doing henna is cultural appropriation, Jess misguidedly argues that Flávia being Black makes it acceptable since henna is used in Africa as well, even though Flávia is Brazilian-Irish. She accuses Nishat of "making a huge deal out of something that's not even there" and "playing the race card", disregarding Nishat's feelings and experiences of discrimination (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 160). Chaewon, who is Korean, is also subjected to racism and discrimination at the school, but since she shies away from conflict, Chaewon does not stand up against any of the girls, including Jess. This upsets Nishat, who

asks herself: "Shouldn't we have some kind of solidarity between us? We're both Asians. We're both minorities. I would stand up for her" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 174).

It is not until the end of the novel that Chaewon, along with Nishat and Flávia, confront Chyna for her racist tirade and cultural appropriation. Although Flávia's appropriation of henna upsets Nishat, what is doubly hurtful is the other girls' careless indulgence and exploitation of the culture they had spent years mocking, demeaning, and insulting. It is a pervasive practice amongst the girls in the school, and by Chyna in particular, to select parts of different cultures to mock and parts to appropriate and claim for themselves. In appropriating henna, Chyna neglects its cultural significance and use, even disregarding cultural accuracy when she decorates her henna stall with Japanese Sakura and arranges a Holi party months before the actual celebration. Through this blatant indifference to accurately display the cultural expression they exploit, many of the girls at their school show that they do not respect other cultures and only concern themselves with what is profitable and advantageous for themselves.

3.2 *Felix Ever After*

3.2.1 Plot

In Kacen Callender's novel *Felix Ever After* (2020)*,* seventeen-year-old Felix Love, the narrator of the story, depicts the events of a summer whilst attending St. Catherine's summer arts programme in New York. As a coming-of-age story, the novel deals with Felix's exploration of himself, his role in other peoples' lives, and his place in the world at large. His anxieties and struggles are made doubly challenging due to the fact that he is transgender, providing further conflicts and hardships for him in various aspects of his life.

The catalyst for the events that unfold in Felix's story is the transphobic gallery that is put up at his school, depicting old photographs of Felix before his transition along with his deadname. This incident upsets and traumatises Felix, and his search for the classmate who did it quickly turns into an obsession. The situation worsens when he receives anonymous messages from the person responsible, in which they accuse Felix of "pretending to be a boy" and harass him with other transphobic remarks (Callender, 2020, p. 124). He initially suspects his classmate Declan due to his animosity towards Felix and his best friend Ezra, who is also Declan's ex-boyfriend. Felix catfishes Declan on Instagram as "Lucky" with the intention of obtaining and subsequently exposing Declan's deepest secret as payback for the gallery.

However, Felix realises Declan is not responsible for the gallery and the messages after all. Instead, their conversations reveal that both Declan and Ezra have feelings for Felix, which on the one hand causes added confusion and turmoil in Felix's life, yet on the other hand proves as a contradiction to his belief that he is unlovable.

A prevalent source of anxiety and anguish in Felix's life is his lack of experience regarding relationships and love, as he in the first pages of the novel states: "What is it like to even love someone at all? My name is Felix Love, but I've never actually been in love" (Callender, 2020, p. 2). This lack of experience consumes Felix, who has never been kissed, never been in love, and never had anyone profess their feelings for him. Felix constantly feels like he is a bystander to his friend's experiences, witnessing them fall in love and be physical with each other whilst he has never, and thinks that he will never, experience the same.

Another reason for these worries is his gender identity, since Felix believes that being a transgender person hinders other peoples' ability to love him. Felix recalls briefly dating Marisol and how she ultimately rejected him because he is transgender, further enhancing his fears as Felix deems the rejection proof that he is unlovable: "I wanted to date her so that I could prove I'm worthy of love. Instead, she managed to solidify this slowly growing theory that I'm not" (Callender, 2020, p. 30). At this point, Felix has yet to come to terms with how he identifies, since he has begun questioning whether he is completely a boy or not, and this becomes an added obstacle for his romantic prospects.

However, it is ultimately his relationship with his mother, or lack thereof, which has triggered his insecurities. Having left her family when Felix was ten years old, Felix's mother has not been a part of his life for seven years and as a result has not witnessed his transition. Although he came out to her in an email at the age of twelve, she never replied and does not reply to the final email he sends either. Evidently, Felix's mother never provided an explanation of exactly why she left, leaving Felix to believe it was a lack of love that prevented her from returning. Therefore, Felix's need to prove that he is lovable stems from the need to prove that others can love him, even though his own mother does not.

As a result of this, Felix is also afraid of being abandoned by those he himself loves. When Ezra reveals his feelings for him, Felix pushes him away fearing he will ultimately abandon him: "It's so perfect that the fear of it all ending, of him realizing that he doesn't love me anymore, of him leaving me the same way my mother left, fills the hollow in my chest" (Callender, 2020, p. 258). Losing Ezra is a particularly daunting prospect since Felix would not only lose someone who has feelings for him, but also his closest friend. Ezra is a source of

comfort and solace when times are tough for Felix, and so potentially putting their friendship on the line initially deters Felix from pursuing a relationship with him.

In contrast, Felix does not have the same fears when attempting to explore a relationship with Declan, who until recently was not his friend. Regardless of their previous relationship, Felix states that he knew their romantic relationship would not work due to the way in which it began, as Declan falls in love with Felix whilst he is deceiving him:

> I knew our relationship wasn't going to work, but I let myself fall for him anyway. […] It's almost like I was looking for the pain and the hurt, because it was easier to live with the idea that, even though I want love, I'm not the kind of person who deserves to be loved. (Callender, 2020, p. 326-327)

Felix provides the same reasoning behind his attempts at reaching out to his mother, considering he knows she may never respond to him and yet he still has hopes to receive a reply from her. He knows that he should expect pain and loss from his relationships with both Declan and his mother, whilst a potential relationship with Ezra is uncertain and may end in a way Felix had not expected or wished for.

In the end, Felix defies his fears and confesses his feelings to Ezra in the middle of a Pride Parade, an event he initially avoided for being too emotional. The novel highlights many aspects of the LGBTQ+ community in New York City, depicting places like the Callen-Lorde clinic for LGBTQ+ people and the LGBT Center where Felix goes for a discussion on gender. It is therefore clear that Felix has access to the appropriate treatments and counselling, which ultimately helps him further research and figure out his gender identity. Felix's friend group also consists only of queer people, although he is the only transgender person in their group.

Thus, the novel belongs to Cart & Jenkins's category of queer consciousness/community, as it portrays different queer communities in Felix's life and the importance these have for him as a transgender and queer person. Throughout the story, however, Felix experiences insecurities regarding whether he belongs within the LGBTQ+ community, considering he still questions his gender and feels like a fraud for doing so. The support he receives when seeking help at Callen-Lorde and the LGBT Center puts his mind at ease, as they provide reassurance that the process he is going through is valid and does not negate his ability to identify within the LGBTQ+ community.

In the following character analysis, I wish to analyse Felix with a focus on the exploration of his gender identity. Thereafter, I will analyse Ezra and Declan's characters in parallel, since they are both Felix's love interest in the novel and share many similarities regarding family and wealth. Lastly, I will analyse the character of Felix's father and how he deals with Felix's transition.

Felix

The protagonist and narrator of the story, Felix Love, is a Black seventeen-year-old living in New York with his father. Felix attends an art program at St. Catherine's school and aspires to study at Brown University. He is consistently described by others and himself as a talented and skilled artist, and he gets even better as he learns to paint self-portraits in which he embraces himself and his flaws.

Felix initially exhibits low self-esteem and complexes regarding himself, largely due to the belief that he is unlovable. Additionally, he experiences that his multiple marginalising traits as Black, queer, and trans sets him apart from his peers:

> I guess it just feels like I have one marginalization too many, sometimes. So many differences that I can never fit in with everyone else. I can feel people are uncomfortable with me, so I end up feeling uncomfortable, too, and then I end up standing and watching everyone else make connections, fall in love with each other… (Callender, 2020, p. 220)

Although he is proud being both Black and trans, the constant rejection and pushback he faces due to his identity occasionally cause him to waver in his pride. His insecurities particularly rise upon receiving the transphobic messages from Austin, which trigger his growing feeling of being a fraud for still questioning his gender identity.

Felix realised he was transgender when he was twelve years old, after years of experiencing misery over being pushed into the gender *girl.* Feeling like he had lucked out in life when he came out and began his medical transition, he chose the name Felix because of its meaning, "lucky". After Felix began transitioning, he switched schools to St. Catherine's, allowing him to begin with a clean slate at a school where nobody knew his deadname or what he looked like before. However, he does not hide the scars from his top surgery and states that the topic of his gender identity has "come up in conversation enough times that I'm

pretty sure everyone is fully aware" (Callender, 2020, p. 33-34). Therefore, he does not have any problem with people knowing that he is transgender and does not attempt to conceal it, but nevertheless wishes to erase everything associated with his life before his transition as he does not identify with the gender that was assigned to him.

When Felix receives his testosterone treatments, he reflects on how it not only gives him the changes he wants to see himself, but also the changes he wishes others to see in him. His father raises the question of whether the hormone treatments would be necessary were Felix on a deserted island with no other people, to which Felix replies: "I'm not on a deserted island. I don't want people to look at me and decide what my gender is, based on how I look now" (Callender, 2020, p. 147). Therefore, Felix is afraid of the ways in which other people perceive his gender according to the way he *does* gender, as he does not want people to mistake it for something it is not. Connecting this back to Butler's gender performativity theory, the idea that Felix may not need gender-affirming treatment if he were on a deserted island reiterates Butler's notion of gender as sustained through its performativity. A part of affirming Felix's gender is therefore that others also infer him to be a boy, which is done through the public action of maintaining his gender identity on the outside. Through the naturalisation of his gender and body, Felix aims for people to look at him and not experience any doubt regarding his gender, and this is done through acts and speech such as opting for gender-affirming treatment and choosing a masculine name.

However, Felix begins to experience uncertainty regarding whether he is a boy, though he is adamant he does not identify as a girl. He explains that sometimes he is certain that he is a boy, whilst other times he experiences a "niggling" feeling "[l]ike something isn't quite right" (Callender, 2020, p. 106). Despite feeling frustrated with the many possible labels, they do not deter him from finding one that feels right, as he explains that without a label he would "feel anchorless—drifting with no one to say if what I'm feeling is real—if this emotion is something that I've made up in my mind, or if it's something that others have felt, too" (Callender, 2020, p. 178). Felix again highlights the importance of the acts and speech which contribute to sustaining and legitimising his gender, as he does not feel like he can be at peace in his body and how he experiences it if he does not have the words to describe it.

Having "made this big deal about being a guy" in coming out and convincing his father to help with the medical transitioning, Felix feels shameful and guilty for further questioning his gender identity (Callender, 2020, p. 58). He is afraid that this doubt makes him a fraud and that other trans people will call him out on it. He also fears that the nurse at the clinic will tell him he is "pretending to be trans, and I'm not allowed to be a patient at

Callen-Lorde anymore" when he wishes to talk to her about questioning his gender identity (Callender, 2020, p. 148). The fact is that he is transgender regardless of what identifier he wishes to use for himself, because he ultimately rejects his assigned gender. However, it is difficult for Felix to realise this amidst his uncertainties since he does not have a label to validate what he is feeling.

When the term "demiboy" eventually resonates with him, the revelation of his gender identity sheds a weight off his shoulders:

> The confidence that spreads through me. I know that this is right. It's kind of amazing, that there's a word that explains exactly how I feel, that takes away all of my confusion and questioning and hesitation—a word that lets me know there are others out there who feel exactly the same way that I do. (Callender, 2020, p. 278)

Thus, Felix finds a term which accurately describes how he experiences his gender, as sometimes identifying as a boy and other times neither identifying as a boy or a girl. This also allows him to feel more confident and to loosen up his expectations and pressures which he has imposed onto himself, allowing him to put aside the feeling of having to prove something to others.

Ezra and Declan

Ezra Patel is Felix's best friend, and Felix often describes himself being in Ezra's shadow since he is more outgoing and does not shy away from parties and dating. The two are frequently mistaken for boyfriends, but Felix and Ezra, who are both queer, consistently deny that there is anything more to their friendship. It is not until later in the story that Felix learns that Ezra's affection towards him is in fact more than platonic.

Felix, Ezra, and Declan were inseparable during their first year at St. Catherine's, but when Declan dumped Ezra, he became what Felix calls "the mightiest of all assholes" (Callender, 2020, p. 48). Declan later tells Felix (under the impression that he is Lucky) that Ezra's feelings for Felix was the cause of their breakup. To make the relationship between the trio more complicated, Declan also falls in love with Felix as Lucky, and Felix begins to develop feelings for both Ezra and Declan.

However, Felix's feelings towards Ezra prove to be stronger than his feelings towards Declan, as he constantly thinks about Ezra and points out that "as much as I've missed Declan, I've missed Ezra even more" (Callender, 2020, p. 292). Felix and Ezra have been

practically joined at the hip during all three years at St. Catherine's, with many peers pointing out how they follow each other like lost puppies. Felix and Declan, on the other hand, have had a turbulent relationship ever since Declan distanced himself from Ezra and, subsequently, Felix. The fact that Felix immediately believes Declan is responsible for the gallery is also indicative of how he regards him and what he thinks he is capable of doing. Their relationship and feelings for each other later in the story are based on a lie, as Declan believes he is falling for another person and Felix initially has malicious intents with the deception. Although they later attempt to date with all cards on the table, they are ultimately aware of the fact that their relationship was doomed from the beginning.

Ezra and Declan share very similar backgrounds in terms of wealth and family. Ezra's family are part Black and part Bengali, and they are known for their opulence. Since the story is narrated through Felix's point of view, the reader is first given the impression that Ezra, who lives in an expensive apartment his parents bought for him, takes his family and their money for granted. When Ezra reveals he does not wish to make use of his parents' wealth to go to college, Felix becomes upset as he feels Ezra is wasting his privilege whilst Felix himself must struggle for the same opportunities. However, Felix fails to realise that while he has a clear plan of his future after graduation, Ezra does not. Ezra tells Felix: "not knowing what I want to do, not wanting to be forced to follow my father's footsteps and freaking out about it— that's all real and valid, too" (Callender, 2020, p. 120). Therefore, wealth and privilege do not take away the pressures of having to choose a path in life for Ezra, who experiences the abundance of opportunities as inhibiting rather than liberating.

Felix's first meeting with Ezra's parents implies that whilst his father may be detached, Ezra's mother cares for him and shows genuine affection. However, Ezra corrects Felix's assumptions by telling him that his parents do not care about him any further than to show him off to their guests, making Felix re-examine the Patels' family dynamics: "I start to wonder if there's a place Ezra ever feels . . . I don't know—safe, maybe, somewhere he can go and know that he'll be loved, no matter what. Even if my dad messes up, I know that he loves me. Does Ezra have that, too?" (Callender, 2020, p. 111). Despite his jealousy of Ezra's wealth, Felix realises that his best friend does not live an easy and care-free life. In fact, Felix may be better off than Ezra since his own father supports him regardless of their financial situation, whilst Ezra's parents emotionally neglect their son.

Similarly, Felix realises that Declan, who he thought benefited from his father's fortune, has been disowned due to his sexuality. Felix and Declan compete for the same scholarship to Brown University, and Felix frequently expresses his frustration over this as he

believes Declan's father can pay his son's tuition. In his conversations with Declan, Felix (as Lucky) learns that Declan's father disowned him when he came out, and that Declan now relies on his grandfather who does not have the money to pay for his education.

Ezra and Declan thus illustrate an underlying theme in the novel that one cannot judge a book by its cover. At one point in the story, Ezra tries to reason with Felix regarding his hatred towards Declan, explaining: "maybe we don't know the full story. […] It's easy to assign roles to people. Easier to just think that Declan Keane is an asshole, and that's that" (Callender, 2020, p. 104). It is interesting that Ezra is the one to defend Declan, perhaps implying that he may understand that Declan's life can be complicated despite his wealth because this is the case for Ezra's own life. Felix himself does not allow the same benefit of the doubt to either Ezra or Declan, perhaps because his life and struggles are widely different from theirs.

Felix's father

Felix's father is a hard-working man whose self-proclaimed passion is not his work but his family. Despite financially struggling, Felix's father opts for the best alternatives for Felix's schooling and gender-affirming treatment, leaving him with no money for himself. Felix frequently praises his father for his support, although this mainly regards his financial support in terms of tuition and treatment.

However, his support is initially lacking when it comes to Felix's gender and in embracing him as his son. Felix repeatedly remarks how his father, who himself is never referred to by name in the novel, is unable to utter Felix's name: "Maybe that's what's most confusing of all: Why would he pay for my hormones, my surgery, my doctor's visits, everything—but refuse to say my real name?" (Callender, 2020, p. 25). Felix puzzles over the contradiction since his father financially supports the transition without being able to accept the fact that he has a son, not a daughter.

However, his father is not intentionally transphobic, nor does he ever tell Felix that he does not accept his gender and transition, but he never assures him that he supports it either. This causes Felix to think the worst, and he believes that his father does not accept him as his son. This belief is fuelled by his father's repeated incidents of misgendering and deadnaming Felix, which Felix claims his father does not always apologise for. In the instances where he does attempt to apologise, however, Felix does not stay long enough to accept it, often running away to stay with Ezra.

When Felix learns that he is a demiboy, he is initially hesitant to come out to his father again considering it did not go well previously, but eventually decides that "now, more than ever, I feel the need to be real about who I am—to tell my dad the truth" (Callender, 2020, p. 329). Ultimately it is this conversation that mends their relationship, as the two talk about their feelings regarding Felix's transition and the way his father has reacted to it. His father apologises for his behaviour regarding the matter, explaining that he has been slow in understanding Felix's gender identity. He clarifies that it has been difficult to use Felix's name because "your name's been the last piece of you I wasn't ready to let go of—I just wasn't ready", as he explains that it has been difficult discarding his idea of who his child was (Callender, 2020, p. 320).

In the end, Felix's father assures him that the most important thing is that Felix is happy, and praises his son for being brave and true to himself: "You've been so courageous, just by being yourself, even knowing that the world won't always accept you for who you are. You refuse to be anything but yourself, no matter what. I look up to that" (Callender, 2020, p. 321). It turns out that the main problem was a lack of communication between the two, as Felix's father did not wish to burden Felix with his own difficulties adjusting to this new reality. However, this attempt misfired, since Felix was burdened regardless in the belief that his father did not support him.

3.2.3 Setting

In analysing the setting in *Felix Ever After,* I wish to explore Felix's experiences of transphobia and discrimination, particularly looking at Marisol's and Austin's comments. Thereafter, I will provide an analysis of the social setting regarding money and class, where I will explore Felix's perspectives on education and privilege.

Transphobia and discrimination

Felix experiences that his intersectional identity as Black, queer, and trans offers more problems than advantages in his life. Although all his friends are queer and some are BIPOC, none of them are also transgender and therefore cannot relate to or even understand many of the issues Felix faces. As a trans person, Felix is constantly at risk of being met with transphobia and judgment, but he is additionally exposed to racist and homophobic prejudice as a Black and queer person: "To know that there are people out there who hate me, want to hurt me, want to erase my identity, without ever even seeing me or knowing me, just like

there are people out there who hate me for the color of my skin— it's enraging, infuriating, but it also hurts" (Callender, 2020, p. 144).

Marisol and Austin are two characters who explicitly and blatantly exhibit ignorance and transphobia towards Felix. When Marisol briefly dated Felix, she broke up with him citing that she could not date a misogynist: "you deciding to be a guy instead of a girl feels inherently misogynistic" (Callender, 2020, p. 30). She argues that identifying as something other than the gender assigned at birth, specifically female, makes that person hate the gender they dismiss, which is a flawed and highly erroneous logic. Marisol's assumptions thus display an ignorance towards trans matters which, regardless of her intent, exhibit transphobic attitudes which could be hurtful and damaging to trans people.

Similarly, Austin continually subjects Felix to transphobic remarks negating the validity of his gender identity, with comments such as "[y]ou were born a girl. You'll always be a girl", "[y]ou're pathetic, pretending to be a boy", and "[y]ou don't matter" (Callender, 2020, p. 144, 232, 265). These comments grow more personal in nature when Ezra breaks up with Austin, proving that his messages stem from a place of jealousy and hatred towards Felix since Austin thinks Felix is the reason Ezra is not interested in him any longer. He therefore uses Felix's gender against him for something that is completely unrelated, since Felix's gender identity is an easy and vulnerable target. In the same way that Ezra and Declan's lives are not as they seem, Austin represents a more sinister example of how looks can be deceiving. Austin originally seems likable and harmless, causing Felix not to suspect him of any of his wrongdoings.

The transphobia Felix experiences from Marisol and Austin are examples of how people in the LGBTQ+ community are not monolithic, and that discrimination and prejudice occurs across and within the community as well. This discrimination may be more prevalent towards non-white and non-cisgender queer people, making the most likely perpetrators white, gay, and cisgender men, as Sarah, a transgender person at the LGBT Center, points out: "Gay cis men, especially white men—it's like they're one identity away from being what they'd consider normal, so they hold that identity over us, enjoy their privilege and power in their little elitist group, try to push the rest of us away" (Callender, 2020, p. 273-274). This statement can be connected back to Crenshaw's "but for" theory, as Sarah's claims that white, gay, and cisgender men believe that they would not be a part of a marginalised group "but for" their sexuality. Sarah also says that white, gay men feel they are superior to those with multiple marginalised traits, indicating that they may participate in perpetuating the discrimination of those more marginalised than themselves.

Indeed, Austin furthers the discrimination and abuse of Felix, who is multiply marginalised as a Black, queer, and transgender person. He also attempts to position himself as victimised by Felix's identity, claiming: "It's not like it's easy to be gay, even if we are in Brooklyn, even if this is New York City, and now we have to deal with people like you taking our identity, taking our space" (Callender, 2020, p. 321). With this transphobic comment, Austin invalidates Felix's sexuality by suggesting that trans people are not welcome in queer spaces equally to cisgender queer people. Austin exhibits a lack of understanding for Felix as a multiply marginalised person, failing to see that if it is difficult for himself to be queer in their community as a white, cisgender male, it will be harder for someone who is Black and transgender also. It is ironic that of the two, Austin faces the least resistance in life and yet he shows more bitterness towards his situation than Felix, who in contrast carries all aspects of his identity with pride and does not victimise himself.

Money and class

There are unmistakeable class differences between Felix and his peers, considering he is attending a private school his father can barely afford. Although Felix and his father had previously lived in Brooklyn, where Ezra also lives with his wealthy family, they had to move to a smaller apartment in Harlem when their rent was increased. Thus, they moved from a gentrified middle-class neighbourhood to a neighbourhood associated with the lower class.

Felix's mother earned more than his father and was responsible for the income in the family, and Felix and his father therefore barely hold up after she leaves. The fact that much of his father's money goes into medical bills to support Felix's transition and his tuition makes Felix feel guilty, and he experiences an added pressure to feel deserving and appear grateful for what he is given. He particularly feels a pressure to excel in school despite feeling creatively uninspired, stating:

> My dad's going to be disappointed. He'll smile and say that he's proud of me, but how could he not be disappointed? He's given up everything for me, for this education, so that I could do something great with my life—and instead, I'm sitting here with nothing but a blank, white canvas. (Callender, 2020, p. 64)

Felix therefore believes that excelling at school may make his father feel that paying for the tuition is worthwhile. However, his father never expresses any expectations of what Felix

should achieve in school, and the pressure Felix feels is mostly due to his own expectations of himself.

Not only could his failure at school mean that he lets his father down, but it also minimises Felix's chances of getting into Brown University on a scholarship. For Felix, getting the scholarship for Brown University means "giving a giant middle finger to the Declan Keanes of the world—the people who take one look at me and decide I'm just not good enough" (Callender, 2020, p. 16). Though this desire largely regards proving that Felix as a trans person is good enough for Brown, it is also about showing that he, as a lower-class Black person, qualifies for a prestigious university, despite what white upper-class people may think.

Thus, Felix harbours some resentment and prejudice towards those wealthier than him, which eventually causes a conflict with Ezra. Felix repeatedly comments on Ezra's privilege as something he envies, stating that Ezra has "his entire life laid out for him on a golden platter" whilst Felix himself must "claw and scrape and battle" for what he wants (Callender, 2020, p. 7). The contrasts between Felix's and Ezra's attitudes regarding money and class is also exemplified when Felix attends the Patels' extravagant gala. Whilst Felix experiences discomfort amidst the New York elite, Ezra is not as self-conscious as he gets drunk and acts raucously. Felix, who feels he must prove he belongs here, is embarrassed due to Ezra's behaviour. However, Ezra himself does not show any signs of embarrassment, perhaps because he knows that he belongs here no matter how he acts.

3.3 *I Wish You All the Best*

3.3.1 Plot

I Wish You All the Best (2019) tells the story of Benjamin De Backer, an eighteen-year-old nonbinary person. To clarify, Ben uses they/them pronouns, but they remain closeted as a nonbinary person to everyone except their immediate family, their online friend, and their psychiatrist. Therefore, some quotes may refer to Ben using incorrect pronouns and misgendering them, but these are the errors of characters who are not aware of their gender identity.

Upon coming out to their parents as nonbinary, Ben is kicked out of their home in Goldsboro and ostracised by their parents. Due to this, Ben is forced to begin their life over again as they move to a new town, enrol in a new school, and live with their estranged sister,

Hannah, in Raleigh. Though they did not have any friends or anything worth missing in Goldsboro, Ben has trouble adjusting to their new reality. However, their move to Raleigh is also a blessing in disguise, as they receive the supportive network they sorely lacked when living with their parents. This support is for instance found in Hannah and their psychiatrist, Dr Taylor, who in their own ways help Ben deal with their problems and anxieties. Some of Ben's peers at their new school are also sources of support and comfort, even though they do not know Ben identifies as nonbinary. Nathan is an especially important figure in Ben's new life, as he quickly gains Ben's trust and proves himself to be a reliable friend. Ben soon develops feelings for Nathan and eventually confides in him about their parents and their gender identity.

As is characteristic of homosexual visibility novels, Ben's experiences regarding coming out is central to the narrative and their coming-out story is described as painful and difficult. The moment where Ben comes out to their parents is depicted through flashbacks after they have been thrown out, as they recall: "Mom and Dad both sat there speechless for a few seconds. Dad was the first to react, asking for an explanation. […] Then the yelling started, and everything was moving so fast. I couldn't talk or make any sense of what they were saying" (Deaver, 2019, p. 14). Ben's father proceeds to tell them to get out of their house, whilst Ben's mother remains silent, but that is not to say that she does not condone her husband's decision. When Ben pleads with their mother to stop their father from forcing them out of their home, she does nothing to stop him and instead expresses her disapproval with Ben's gender identity. Thus, Ben's parents cast Ben out with no money, no mobile phone, and not even any shoes.

This experience leaves Ben traumatised and conflicted as they cannot reconcile with the fact that their parents, who they believed would love and support them, would be capable of unfeelingly casting their child away. Following this rejection, Ben is repeatedly asked whether they still love or miss their parents, a question they do not have a straightforward answer to: "Maybe I don't love them; maybe they don't deserve that love anymore. I think I might. And I think I might hate them too. One thing I do know is that I miss them. I don't know why, but I do. I hate that I do" (Deaver, 2019, p. 159). It is clear Ben is torn as they know that what their parents did to them is unforgivable, and yet they are unable to completely villainise their parents.

When Ben's parents eventually reach out to them, their parents attempt to persuade Ben that they have changed. Ben's mother tries to explain that she and her husband were "*confused about what was happening*" and that they were "still trying to wrap our heads

around it" (Deaver, 2019, p. 210, 225). She and Ben's father explain that they have been seeking help to understand their child and what it means to be nonbinary, but they continue to criticise Ben's choices and misgender them without apologising or correcting themselves. Therefore, Ben quickly realises that their parents have not changed at all, and they receive the closure they need to sort out their feelings:

> Before all this, I don't know what I believed about them. Even that night on the roof, I told Nathan I might still love them. I don't think I did then, but there's really no telling what I thought exactly. Now I know for certain. They don't deserve my love. And I sure as hell don't need theirs. (Deaver, 2019, p. 291)

Thus, Ben decides that they are better off living with their sister, and that they do not wish to have any contact with their parents at all. As painful as this decision is for Ben to come to terms with, their parents' behaviour during their visit provides reason enough for Ben to realise that their parents' presence in their life is harmful to them.

Even though Ben's coming out to their parents is turbulent and distressful, every other instance of them coming out to somebody goes strikingly better. However, Ben is not quick to come out to people, and each time doing so involves a fear that people will not accept them. This is a worry caused by their parents' reactions, making Ben afraid that others will react similarly and reject them. After some hesitation, Ben is able to come out to Hannah, Thomas, and Dr Taylor early on, although this is largely out of necessity.

In Nathan's case, however, Ben cannot bring themself to come out to him until towards the very end of the novel when they have received the reassurances and closures from other people in their life. Throughout the story, Ben continually explains that although they know Nathan is not the type of person to reject someone due to their identity, they cannot risk the possibility of it happening nonetheless. Ben's inability to come out to Nathan also hinders them from telling him about their feelings, as they worry that Nathan deserves someone who leads a less "complicated" life. Talking to their online friend, Mariam, Ben explains:

> **Me:** *He deserves something simpler.*
> **Me:** *And I'm not that*
> **Mariam:** *Don't you think that's his call to make?*
> **Me:** *I don't want to hurt him*
> **Me:** *And I don't want him to hurt me.* (Deaver, 2019, p. 261)

Ben's fear of rejection or being a burden to Nathan therefore stands in the way for them to be truthful with him. However, Ben's reluctance to come out to Nathan means they are forced to endure the painful experience of being continually misgendered by their crush. When Ben eventually comes out to Nathan, he apologises for unknowingly misgendering them all along.

When Ben is finally able to come out to the people most important to them, they embark on a new journey post-graduation working with Mariam to educate people on nonbinary issues. With Nathan as their boyfriend, they are able to identify which people add positivity to their life and attempt to hold on to those relationships rather than the ones that add negativity. This adds to their newfound confidence in their gender identity, as the support they experience helps them feel validated and accepted.

3.3.2 Characters

In my character analysis, I will analyse the character of Ben with a focus on their self-image as a nonbinary person and the self-criticism they experience. The second character I will analyse is Ben's sister, Hannah, and the last character will be Nathan, Ben's friend and crush. In the analysis of both Hannah and Nathan, I will focus on their characters in relation to Ben and the role the two play in Ben's life.

Ben

Ben realised they were nonbinary after years of confusion when they discovered Mariam's YouTube channel, in which Mariam spoke about their own experiences as a nonbinary person. Since then, Ben has not exhibited any doubts or hesitation in identifying as nonbinary, but nevertheless finds it difficult being out to other people with the knowledge that it is not something everybody will accept or even understand. Therefore, they are unable to dress and present themself as they would wish to, as this would deviate from the gender norms they are expected to conform to.

In general, Ben experiences discomfort and unease when observing themself and their body, and frequently point out flaws and insecurities regarding their appearances. In doing so, Ben compares themself to other nonbinary people whose bodies and appearances they desire, whilst also acknowledging that not all nonbinary people wish to appear similarly:

Their smooth, hairless, acneless faces, their trimmed hair that always seems perfect. These things I could never be. Because no matter how hard I will it, my body isn't

how I want to see myself. Not that there's anything wrong with those kinds of enby people, I just … it's hard to describe. Bodies are fucking weird, especially when it feels like you don't belong in your own. (Deaver, 2019, p. 49)

Ben later attributes these insecurities to gender dysphoria, meaning they experience distress due to the incongruity between the way in which their body and gender appears on the outside and the way in which they identify. They even compare this feeling to their experiences prior to coming to terms with their gender, stating: "It's the same feelings I had before I realized I'm nonbinary. […] Like nothing adds up" (Deaver, 2019, p. 169). However, Ben remarks it is too late for hormone blockers and they do not wish to operate on their body, leaving their insecurities unresolved as it is uncertain whether they grow to accept their body and appearances.

Ben's experiences of incongruity between body and gender illustrates how it is not only the gender binary of male or female that can be performed and sustained on the body, but also the essence of a nonbinary gender. Although nonbinary people have not been subjected to the same expectations of gender roles and attributions as those who identify within the gender binary, Ben still experiences that they have certain expectations of their body to feel a correlation with how they experience their gender. Although simultaneously acknowledging that some nonbinary people do perform their gender as Ben is currently doing, they nevertheless do not view their current state as sufficiently emulating their gender identity.

In terms of how they wish to present themself to experience congruity, Ben expresses an inclination towards feminine attributes and attire. For instance, when they go shopping with their sister, Ben attempts to convince Hannah to buy an item from the women's section for herself so that they can borrow it. At the same time, Ben expresses that they are not ready to wear feminine clothing publicly and that they "know exactly what would happen if I dared to go out in public dressed like that", implying that they wish to avoid the judgment they would receive if they did not conform to the gendered expectations from people around them (Deaver, 2019, p. 68).

Ben is in general concerned with other people's expectations of them, as they often make decisions based on what other people would expect them to do and worry about their reactions when they deviate from this. For instance, Ben succumbs to peer pressure when they attend their first party and are offered alcohol by classmates they barely know. Although they repeatedly assure both Hannah and themself that they will not drink due to their anxiety medication, Ben is unable to ignore their desire to meet people's expectations: "But

everyone's staring at me now, expecting me to take the shot. I don't need to do this, why should I care what these people think about me? But there's that shame again, this desire to impress these people" (Deaver, 2019, p. 146). This desire to blend in with others may stem from Ben's experiences of attempting to conceal their nonconformity as a nonbinary person. Thus, Ben either compromises their own needs in favour of other people's expectations of them, or distance themself from other people completely so that there are no expectations to be met at all.

Ben is also quick to chastise themself for any error or setback in their life, including their bad experience when coming out to their parents. When they tell Nathan about being kicked out of their home, they tell him it was because "I did something I shouldn't have, made a big mistake", placing the blame on themself and not their parents who make the decision to throw Ben out (Deaver, 2019, p. 159). They exhibit a similar self-criticism in their paintings, which they are otherwise praised for by others. Ben themself are only able to point out the flaws and mistakes in their artwork, which Nathan at one point calls them out on. In response to this, Ben remarks: "I don't think he realizes how difficult it can be to forget all the mistakes when I know they're my fault. When I know I should've caught them. 'It's hard to be proud of something you messed up, even if everything around it is perfect'" (Deaver, 2019, p. 246). This comment could, when read between the lines, also apply for Ben's feelings regarding their coming out; although Ben is proud of their identity and for having the courage to come out to their parents, they also blame themself for how things turned out. At the same time, Ben is aware that no matter how much shame and guilt they feel over their situation, they are better off in their new life with people who support them.

Hannah

Hannah Waller, Ben's sister, had not seen Ben since she ran away from home ten years ago, and during this time they never reached out to each other. Ben explains that they kept updated on their sister's life through social media, as she never told either Ben or their parents anything about her new life with Thomas. Throughout the novel, the relationship between Ben and Hannah is complicated as Ben feels gratitude for what their sister has done for them after their coming out, but at the same time cannot forgive her for abandoning them.

Hannah would often get into arguments with her parents when she still lived with them, and the arguments with her father would get very heated. When he one day hit her after she had sex with her boyfriend at the time, Hannah decided to leave her family. Although she left her number for her then eight-year-old sibling, Ben did not feel like it helped them in the

situation their sister had left them in: "I think it was supposed to be comforting, but really, it just made me mad. Because she'd left. She'd left me with them, to fend for myself" (Deaver, 2019, p. 48). However, Ben experiences conflicting feelings as they believe Hannah has atoned for her betrayal through the support she has offered: "All the things she's done for me. Jesus, I don't have any right to be angry at her. The clothes, the food, getting me into school, giving me a bed" (Deaver, 2019, p. 269). With the help of Dr Taylor, Ben and Hannah are able to open up to each other about their feelings regarding their relationship and all they have been through together. Although they do not tell each other the things they wish to hear, the conversation leaves room for their relationship to mend itself, and Hannah reveals what really happened ten years ago.

Regardless of their conflicting feelings, Ben receives exactly the help they need from Hannah after their traumatic experiences with their parents, remarking that Hannah is "the only reason I've made it this far" (Deaver, 2019, p. 271). Aside from providing all the necessities, Hannah also offers support and acceptance regarding her sibling's gender, and shows genuine curiosity and interest in Ben's life. When Ben comes out to their sister after being picked up from Goldsboro, Hannah is quick to ask her sibling what their pronouns are and tells them that "it might take some getting used to, so I want you to correct me when I mess up", proving that she wishes to get it right (Deaver, 2019, p. 20). Similarly, she asks Ben if she is allowed to call them "bro", and when they offer the alternative of "sib" (short for sibling), she consistently uses the term when addressing them.

Nevertheless, there are times where Hannah is either oblivious of Ben's needs or mistakenly upsets them in her attempts to be protective. When they go shopping, Hannah unthinkingly heads towards the men's section of the store and is not able to take Ben's hints about their desire to wear feminine clothing. On the same trip, however, she spots Ben admiring nail polish and helps them both buy and apply it on themself.

In protecting Ben from their parents, Hannah is blinded by her own feelings and hatred towards them. She ends up causing a scene in front of Ben's peers and teachers when she confronts their parents, leaving Ben mortified and angered by her actions. Hannah believes she is fighting on behalf of her sibling, but the conflict only creates more tension in her relationship with Ben. These mistakes prove that Hannah is not perfect and may make occasional blunders, but is at the same time trying to make things right for Ben and has their well-being in mind.

Nathan

Nathan Allan is the first person Ben gets to know at their new school in Raleigh when he is tasked with showing Ben around. As an extremely extroverted and sociable person, Nathan continues to show an interest in Ben and attempts to include them in lunchbreaks with Sophie and Meleika. As the two spend more time together, Ben becomes aware of their feelings for Nathan early on, whilst Nathan's feelings for Ben are not revealed until later. At this point, Nathan also realises that he is bisexual, but his sexuality is not explored any further.

Ben is at first slightly annoyed by Nathan as he "can be a little … suffocating. In a good way. If there really is a good way to suffocate. He just seems so eager to do everything" (Deaver, 2019, p. 44). In contrast, Ben is much more reserved and they are therefore hesitant to let Nathan into their personal space. This does not deter Nathan, as he continues to pursue Ben's friendship and never holds their reservedness against them. The two become close friends, as Nathan becomes a person Ben can rely on in social situations and someone to confide in when things are particularly difficult. Although Ben tells Nathan that their parents kicked them out of their home, they do not come out to him until much later.

Apart from when things are good with Hannah, Nathan is the only source of positivity and comfort for Ben. There is a comfortability and an ease between them, as Nathan even helps Ben through one of their panic attacks at a party. However, Nathan repeatedly misgenders them unknowingly, which Ben experiences as doubly hurtful coming from someone they like. Nevertheless, Ben surprisingly states: "When I'm with him, it already feels like I'm out, that he knows. Because he makes me feel more like myself than anyone I've ever known" (Deaver, 2019, p. 291). Ben therefore feels seen and comfortable with Nathan and rationally knows that he would not react harshly to their gender, but Ben's insecurities ultimately hinder them from coming out to him. When Ben eventually discloses how they identify to Nathan, he only becomes very upset when he realises he has misgendered them all along. He tells Ben: "I'm not going to be perfect. With the pronouns. I'll go ahead and admit that, but I'm going to try my hardest to remember" (Deaver, 2019, p. 316). Nathan, like Hannah, is therefore aware that he may make mistakes, but reassures Ben that it would not be purposefully.

3.3.3 Setting

In analysing the setting, I wish to first explore Ben's background and upbringing in a conservative environment. I will then explore the topic of Ben's mental health and the help they receive from Dr Taylor, as this is a central part of their experiences in the novel.

Background and upbringing

It is clear from the beginning that Ben's parents are controlling and have high expectations of their child. They particularly express an interest in Ben's education, where they expect Ben to get top marks: "It'll be all As, except in English, which will probably earn me a 'We're not angry, just disappointed'" (Deaver, 2019, p. 1). When Ben later decides not to pursue further education immediately after graduation, they reflect on how it never really was their desire in the first place, but their parents' expectation of them.

Ben believes that these expectations to some extent stem from their parents' fears of Ben disappointing them like Hannah had done. Ben recalls the shift in their family dynamic when their sister left:

> After that, Mom and Dad changed. I sort of became the punching bag for all of Dad's issues. He didn't actually hit me, but overnight, I essentially became an only child. The focus of anything and everything. If I did something wrong, it was blown way out of proportion. It was almost like they'd seen what'd happened with Hannah and were determined to make sure I didn't turn out the same way. (Deaver, 2019, p. 48)

Although both Ben and Hannah acknowledge that their situation was bad to begin with, Ben receives the short end of the stick as their parents' strictness and control only worsens. Their parents believe that a tighter control on Ben's life will prevent them from leaving as Hannah had done. However, this tactic only pushes Ben further away from their parents, as they feel unsafe and frustrated by the limitations in their life.

Occasionally, the parents also comment on Ben's appearances and indicate that they do not approve of the way Ben presents themself. For instance, both Ben's mother and father comment on Ben's long hair even before they come out as nonbinary. Their parents continually police and restrict Ben to conform to their expectations and standards, which adhere to binary gender roles. When Ben is getting ready to come out, they reflect on whether their parents "ever entertained the idea that I was anything other than their perfect son," as this is what they believe their child is and what they attempt to control them into being (Deaver, 2019, p. 4).

There are several other small hints which indicate that Ben's upbringing was very strict and controlled. For instance, when they are not able to contact Mariam after being kicked out, their online friend asks whether they got their phone taken away again, implying

that Ben's parents had previously disciplined them in this way. Although Ben never elaborates on the punishments they would receive and for what, it is clear they had at least never been hit. Nevertheless, Ben's childhood was characterised by restrictions, as they frequently recall things they were unable to do, such as go to parks and own pets. Their memories of spending time with their parents are marked by incidents of either injury or disappointment. Out of the two, though, Ben had a better relationship with their mother than their father, as all of Ben's good memories from their childhood are related to their mother. Although the dynamics between Ben's mother and father are never explored, it is indicated that the father calls the shots in the family and the mother goes along with his decisions. It is also the father who persistently continues to call Ben his "son" and expresses his wishes for his child to conform to masculine conventions.

However, Ben's mother is not completely faultless in the treatment of Ben and the trauma they go through. Ben comments on the control she exhibited towards them during their upbringing, stating that she looks scared when they finally cut all ties to her because "for the first time in a while, she isn't getting what she wants from me" (Deaver, 2019, p. 254). The expectations and restrictions were therefore not only dictated by Ben's father, but also their mother. She also dismisses the pain and struggles Ben experiences due to their parents' action, as she accuses Ben of hurting *them* for not contacting the two after being thrown out of their home.

Mental health and therapy
Ben develops anxiety and experiences panic attacks in the aftermath of their parents' rejection. Their panic attacks are triggered in times where Ben feels unsafe and the attacks worsen when their gender is involved, for instance at the party where they are repeatedly misgendered by unknowing peers. Similarly, the thought of having to come out to people triggers their anxiety as they fear the reactions of others.

The novel depicts Ben's panic attacks realistically, detailing how they have trouble breathing and thinking rationally in the moment. When Ben is afraid that their parents have found them in Raleigh, they cannot make themself believe that it is in fact Hannah and Thomas who have come into the house, and not their parents: "Because what if that's Mom and Dad on the other side of that door? Nearly every part of my brain is screaming that it can't be, but there is still that chance, no matter how slim it is" (Deaver, 2019, p. 72). Thus, their anxiety is heightened regarding their parents, and particularly during their first months

after they come out. As the story progresses and they settle more into their life in Raleigh, the panic attacks subside.

One of the most important people in Ben's mental health journey is Dr Taylor, a psychiatrist who specialises in LGBTQ+ youth. Though Ben is at first hesitant to meet with her, they ultimately come to appreciate Dr Taylor's help. Dr Taylor represents the ideal psychiatric help one could receive, as she meets Ben with respect, understanding, and trust, and gives them the tools they need to overcome their fears and insecurities. Eventually, Ben begins to think of Dr Taylor when they experience difficulties, remarking that some incidents are "something to tell Dr. Taylor, not Hanna" and that they "feel like the only person with the right answer would be Dr. Taylor" (Deaver, 2019, p. 163, 211).

It is possible that Dr Taylor's help resonates with Ben because she is a psychiatrist specialised in treating LGBTQ+ youth, and perhaps Ben would not have had a similar experience with someone who did not have these qualifications. Ben's parents attempt to explain that they too have been visiting a psychiatrist who has helped them understand their child's gender identity. However, this psychiatrist is either not qualified to speak on nonbinary issues or Ben's parents simply are not putting in the work themselves, since they continue to disregard Ben's needs. Their father even offers to take Ben to their own therapist, saying: "maybe he can help you work through some of the things you've been dealing with. And help you with this nonbinary business" (Deaver, 2019, p. 227). It is uncertain whether his comment is indicative of the type of counselling he is receiving or his own inability to utilise it, but the father's suggestion can be interpreted to mean that their psychiatrist will help change Ben's mind rather than help them come to terms with their traumas.

3.4 The novels as mirrors and windows

In this section, I wish to take all three novels and the analyses of these into consideration as I answer sub-question "b" of my thesis: "*In what ways can these portrayals be used as "mirrors" and "windows" for furthering secondary school students' development, both as individuals and members of society?"*. I will therefore discuss the possibilities the three novels offer to be used as mirrors and windows for students.

3.4.1 The novels as mirrors

As stated in the introduction of my thesis, the Core Curriculum presents values and aims which seek to acknowledge and promote the individuality and diversity of students. Education

should accommodate for the development of students' confidence and understanding of themselves and their identity, which, as explored throughout this thesis, is particularly pertinent for queer youth. One of the most (if not *the* most) important factors for queer youth to develop and understand their queer identity is visibility and representation of people and lives like theirs. Hence, I will discuss how the three novels in this thesis are examples of such representation to be utilised in education for queer students to experience visibility and validation of their identities.

All three authors included in this thesis dedicate their novels to readers who may identify with the characters depicted in their stories. Jaigirdar dedicates *The Henna Wars* "to queer brown girls" (Jaigirdar, 2020). Callender prefaces *Felix Ever After* with the dedication: "*For trans and nonbinary youth: You're beautiful. You're important. You're valid. You're perfect*" (Callender, 2020). Deaver states in the author's note of *I Wish You All the Best* that they wanted the novel to "help people feel less alone, no matter how or why they related to Ben – or even Nathan, or Hannah, or anyone else in this book. I wanted for readers to be able to see a piece of themselves in these words" (Deaver, 2019). The three authors are thus aware of the impact literature can have in representing and reflecting readers' own lives and experiences, and this awareness is also evident in their stories in which they depict diverse characters in a realistic and validating way.

In both Jaigirdar's and Callender's novels, the importance of mirrors in literature is directly addressed when Nishat and Felix reflect on their experiences reading LGBTQ+ literature. When Nishat is bracing herself to come out, she considers how media and literature only portrays tragic stories of coming out for primarily white, gay, secondary characters. This makes it difficult for her to envision a positive outcome to her own coming out, since she does not have a relatable frame of reference to offer her any reassurances. In contrast, Felix's experiences reading LGBTQ+ literature was exactly what helped him realise he was trans, as he explains reading Cris Beam's *I Am J* (2011) resonated with his own experiences of his gender and helped everything click into place.

Thus, the novels depict how representation can be pivotal for queer peoples' understanding and acceptance of their own identity, doing so in an almost self-referential manner as the novels themselves may be validating for *their* queer readers. The experiences Nishat, Felix, and Ben face offer the same message to their queer readers: you are not alone, and your experiences are valid. All three protagonists feel lonely in their identities, but they are ultimately given the reassurances that their experiences regarding their sexuality and/or

gender are valid. This in turn provides the same assurances for readers who may be facing similar insecurities and challenges, thus becoming self-affirming to readers.

Contrary to what LGBTQ+ young adult literature has perpetuated over the years, the three novels provide reassurances that queer lives are not inherently stressful and unhappy (Epstein, 2013, p. 63). Certainly, the three protagonists experience their fair share of adversities and conflicts, but they are ultimately able to resolve these conflicts and find joyous aspects in their lives. Nishat, Felix, and Ben all find and experience love and relationships, a happy deviation from earlier LGBTQ+ young adult literature in which queer romances rarely had a happy ending. Their love stories are told with warmth and honesty, and the conflicts that arise in the characters' relationships are plausible and legitimate. Such realistic portrayals of queer love dismiss the stereotype that queer relationships are characterised by impending doom, and instead offer hope for young queer people that their experiences of love are as valid as those of heterosexual and/or cisgender people.

Additionally, Nishat, Felix, and Ben express pride and confidence in their identities, if not consistently throughout the story, at least by the end. The three characters may therefore be deemed positive role models for young queer readers, who might view the protagonists' resilience and pride in their identities as inspirational. However, their ability to withstand hardships is not achieved in solitude, as the three protagonists all have supporting family and/or friends to offer guidance and support. This may allow further reassurances to young queer reader in showing that it is always possible to find support somewhere, which is particularly important to remember when some people are not supportive. For instance, Ben's parents do not accept their child being nonbinary, but Ben is nevertheless able to find acceptance elsewhere.

The three novels also present diversity in terms of LGBTQ+ identities, a trend I have previously established is characteristic of recent LGBTQ+ young adult literature. There are representations of lesbians, bisexuals, demiboys, transgender, and nonbinary people – all identities which were either sorely underrepresented in earlier texts or not represented at all. These novels therefore contribute to the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ identities in offering a multitude of experiences readers can resonate with. Some readers may pick up *Felix Ever After* and finally make sense of their own feelings regarding their gender identity when they learn the term *demiboy*, for instance.

Not only do the novels offer diversity in terms of LGBTQ+ identities, but also regarding the intersection of several diverse identities. As Moulaison Sandy, Brendler, & Kohn state, previous LGBTQ+ literature would rarely represent characters who experience

the intersection of two or more underrepresented minorities (Moulaison Sandy, Brendler & Kohn, 2017, p. 443). However, Nishat, Felix, and Ben all experience being marginalised and disadvantaged in more than one way, and experience difficulties within each identity individually as well as in the intersections of them. These characters are therefore not only role models for queer readers, but also Muslim, brown, Black, mentally ill, and nonconforming readers. I would also posit that they can mirror people who experience intersections beyond the ones portrayed explicitly in the novels, as they represent people who are able to assert themselves and embrace all aspects of their identities despite the odds stacked against them.

3.4.2 The novels as windows

Jaigirdar's, Callender's, and Deaver's novels provide insight into the lives of queer youth, depicting both what sets queer youth apart from their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers, as well as the similarities between them. A common tendency in earlier LGBTQ+ young adult literature was to only focus on the differences, as queer youth's lives were often portrayed as only revolving around their queer identity, whilst their heterosexual and cisgender peers were portrayed dealing with more universal themes and topics of life (Kanner, 2002, p. 713). Admittedly, a central part of Nishat's, Felix's, and Ben's stories are their experiences with their sexuality and/or gender, but they also face stresses related to their families, friends, love, bullies, and school. Thus, the three stories depict how queer young adults lead similar lives to heterosexual and cisgender youth in terms of experiencing the same pressures and stresses, although they may have added issues in life due to their queerness. Through these novels, heterosexual and/or cisgender readers can gain some understanding of what kind of hardships their queer peers may experience, which in turn can foster feelings of compassion and solidarity.

It is relevant to note that the novels do not come across as overly didactic, as they never lecture the reader on LGBTQ+ issues or insist on the "normalcy" of queer sexuality and gender. Epstein found that what made some LGBTQ+ texts issue books was their didactic depiction of LGBTQ+ topics and "othering" of queer people (Epstein, 2013, p. 26-27). Issue books commonly attempt to "normalise" LGBTQ+ topics and identities, but misguidedly present them as something separate and different from hetero- and cisnormative issues. The three novels analysed in this thesis do not make these errors, as they do not insist on the "normalcy" of LGBTQ+ identities. Rather, the way the three stories and characters are

depicted implicitly illustrate both the differences and similarities between queer people and non-queer people.

The three novels also address and debunk stereotypes and misconceptions that are pervasive regarding the LGBTQ+ community and queer people. Most notably, the novels show that people within the LGBTQ+ community are not a monolith, and that there is an array of identities and experiences. Equating the experiences of all queer people would therefore be erroneous, as not only are the experiences of queer people different across the identities, but also within each one. These differences also imply that everybody who identifies within the LGBTQ+ community are not automatically accepting and understanding of each other, as people within the community can be equally homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic as heterosexual and cisgender people. This is illustrated in *Felix Ever After*, where Felix experiences transphobia from Marisol and Austin, who are both queer.

Additionally, the stories erase the misconception that being queer is a choice, a misbelief that both Nishat and Felix are confronted with. Nishat's parents believe their daughter has chosen to be a lesbian and beg her to "make a different choice," whilst Marisol tells Felix she believes he is a misogynist for "deciding to be a guy instead of a girl" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 147; Callender, 2020, p. 30). Nishat and Felix express their frustration with these erroneous assumptions, as they describe that their realisation of being queer stemmed from feeling like something was wrong or off about themselves. If it were as easy as simply choosing one's identity, then Nishat and Felix, as well as Ben, would not have spent years attempting to figure out what they truly identified as, and which sexuality and gender identity resonated with them.

Lastly, the three novels address the belief that certain people cannot be queer due to their culture or religion. Nishat is told that "Muslims aren't gay" and her mother explains that she thought "it was just something that happened here. Not to Bengali girls" (Jaigirdar, 2020, p. 123, 352). Similarly, Ben's mother tells them that "God doesn't want this for you, Ben" (Deaver, 2019, p. 11). Nishat's and Ben's parents' convictions prevents them from keeping an open mind and attempting to understand their children's sexuality and gender, as they believe that religion and queerness is irreconcilable. Misinformation like this can be harmful to queer people who are religious or belong to a certain culture, as it makes their queer identity harder for others to believe in and accept if they think that people "like them" cannot be queer. The notion that religious people cannot be queer also adds to homonationalistic ideas of religious people (particularly Muslims) as inherently homophobic, which in turn could make LGBTQ+ spaces unsafe for religious queer people.

Jaigirdar's, Callender's, and Deaver's acknowledgement and disconfirmation of these and other stereotypes can for some readers be enlightening and educational. Although it is possible to formally present such misconceptions and provide information as to why such stereotypes are problematic, authentically illustrating the impact they can have on queer people's lives and other people's understanding and acceptance of them may be more effectual. These novels do exactly that, as they offer realistic and tangible examples of fictional queer young adults who are affected by prejudices that many people hold in reality as well.

In observing the lives of queer youth through the window of literature, non-queer readers may also become aware of structures in society which are beneficial to themselves, but not queer people. First and foremost, heterosexual and cisgender people do not have to come out to the people and society around them, whilst queer people must come out in some form at several points of their lives. Ben reflects on this fact, stating: "If you're queer, your life has the potential to become one long coming-out moment. If I ever want to be called the right pronouns, I'll have to correct people and put myself out there first" (Deaver, 2019, p. 53). This implies that although coming out does not always have to be a momentous occasion, queer people are forced to repeatedly inform others in their lives of their LGBTQ+ identity in some way. However, this also means that queer people are vulnerable to being outed involuntarily, like Nishat and Felix are, and this can be both damaging and hurtful to the person that is outed.

The three protagonists also illustrate the difficulties of experiencing different expectations regarding their sexuality and/or gender in a hetero- and cisnormative society. Nishat's deviation from normative heterosexuality is only visible in connection to her romantic relationships, whilst both Felix's and Ben's deviation from the gender binary largely concerns their appearances. Both Felix and Ben experience that other people's expectations of their gender influence the way in which they present themselves, and they are concerned with *doing* gender to appear a certain way. In Felix's case, he does not wish there to be any doubt about his masculinity, and he is therefore concerned with sustaining his gender through gender-affirming treatment. At the same time, he is not concerned with covering up his top-surgery scars, exhibiting that he is more worried of people misgendering him than he is of people knowing he is transgender. Ben, on the other hand, actively attempts to conceal their gender by allowing people to believe they identify as a boy. The male gender is therefore repeated and naturalised on Ben's body through adhering to the gendered expectations this entails, including in speech and pronouns. Although Ben is more comfortable appearing

masculinely and femininely simultaneously, they are afraid of the repercussions of deviating from the gender norms.

These three characters' deviations from normativity illustrate how hetero- and cisnormativity can be limiting to those who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender. These depictions can therefore offer insight into the heterosexual matrix Butler described of a stable sex and compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990b, p. 194). This binary structure only benefits those who conform to its limitations, leaving those who deviate to experience the consequences of nonconformity. These consequences are often not directly inflicted, rather they are enforced through various structures in society which are not adapted for the needs of those who do not conform.

Ben's story in particular reveals how society is characteristically binary, leaving little to no room for people who identify outside the gender binary. For instance, Ben experiences that some public spaces are divided into "male" and "female", such as clothing sections, changing rooms, and restrooms. Ben is therefore forced to choose between two gendered spaces, despite not identifying with either category. Ben also experiences that language is gendered in many ways, as they are repeatedly addressed as "man" or "bro", and they later discover that there are no adequate alternatives to "boyfriend" or "girlfriend". The lack of any equivalent term for someone who is neither "boyfriend" nor "girlfriend" only highlights that the gender binary is the norm and that anything else is an exception or deviation from this. Such instances further illustrate how society is not adapted to the needs of queer people, and in Ben's case makes them feel alienated from the people around them.

3.4.3 The window becomes a mirror!

Literature may not strictly be either mirrors or windows for readers, and often it is in fact both at the same time. Style explains: "The delightful truth is that sometimes when we hear another out, glancing through the window of their humanity, we can see our own image reflected in the glass of their window. The window becomes a mirror!" (Style, 1988, p. 1).

Thus, readers who do not identify with the queer characters in Jaigirdar's, Callender's, and Deaver's novels may nevertheless find their mirror in other aspects of the stories and the characters' lives. The three novels may serve as mirrors for people who experience difficult family situations, mental health issues, struggle with relationships, and struggle in school. This again speaks to the novels' focus on not only LGBTQ+ issues, but also other issues and struggles several young adults face. In addition, the novels portray love and relationships in such a way that it is not something restricted that only queer people can relate to, rather it can

be relatable for anybody who experiences love and infatuation. Nishat, Felix, and Ben all experience the uncertainty and awkwardness of crushes and first loves, a feeling most young readers can relate to regardless of sexuality or gender.

Further, the windows can become mirrors when readers use the insight they have gained to understand their own attitudes and biases. In developing an understanding for the lives of queer youth and the aforementioned prejudices and misconceptions they face, readers may be able to look inwardly and assess how they themselves view and treat queer people. This is a particularly important aspect of students' all-around development, as the curriculum states that students must learn "to act in a considerate way and develop awareness of their own attitudes" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). Thus, when non-queer readers read LGBTQ+ young adult literature, such as the novels in this thesis, the window they are looking into has the opportunity to turn into a mirror and allow for self-reflection of their own attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues.

This self-reflection may particularly be valuable to readers who can identify with the characters close to the protagonists, such as Nishat's parents, Priti, Felix's father, Ben's parents, or Hannah. These characters must all come to terms with Nishat's, Felix's, and Ben's queer identities, and some of them find this harder than others. They can therefore be mirrors for readers who have a close relation to a queer person, and who may be unsure how to show acceptance and support of them. For instance, Nishat's parents' journey of acceptance may resonate with readers who also find it difficult to reassess beliefs and morals they have been enculturated into to be able to accept queer loved ones. Perhaps some readers will read about Felix's father and realise that they too must be better at communicating their own journey towards understanding and accepting a queer person in their lives. Hannah may also reassure readers that although they may make mistakes in attempting to support someone who is queer, what ultimately matters is that they are trying.

4. Conclusion

With this thesis, I set out to explore how LGBTQ+ young adult literature could be a means to foster students' individuality and belonging in education and society, as well as a way to open doors to the world through the depiction of other lives than those of white, heterosexual and cisgender people. In doing so, I took into consideration the values and aims of the Core Curriculum regarding the governing of students' identities and understanding of themselves and others. I also considered Style's concept of literature as mirrors and windows and connected this to my understanding of the curriculum, where the implication was that teaching materials should be mirrors and windows to achieve the curriculum's values and aims.

I discovered that the three novels analysed in my thesis present some tendencies characteristic to LGBTQ+ young adult literature through the ages, but largely reflect the changes and improvements of recent LGBTQ+ young adult literature. Mainly the focus on the coming-out story is still a prevalent trend, as the plot in two of three novels in this thesis is that of homosexual visibility. These novels perpetuate the notion of coming out as something that is a daunting and pivotal occurrence that is unavoidable in queer peoples' lives, and in both cases the big coming-out story is characterised by a lack of acceptance and support from others.

However, the novels largely deviate from the problematic trends of earlier LGBTQ+ young adult literature, as they portray queer protagonists who represent diverse LGBTQ+ identities and who have other aspects of their identities and lives that do not regard their queerness. Additionally, the narratives are hopeful and have happy endings, and they continue the legacy of *Annie on My Mind* in portraying positive and fulfilling queer romances. Also, the protagonists' LGBTQ+ identities are not depicted as inherently problematic, rather it is the people around the queer characters who are presented as the problems and the ones who must change.

Regarding the characters and their experiences as queer people, Nishat, Felix, and Ben experience resistance from others and a pressure to conform to hetero- and cisnormative standards. They all experience being labelled and put into boxes according to other peoples' perception of them, and in their own ways must break out of these. They also struggle with the expectations of them as queer people, and experience different forms of uncertainty and insecurities regarding their sexuality and/or gender. The queer characters in the novels prove

that coming to terms with one's sexuality and gender is a process, where it is normal to be unsure and to continually question what you identify as, sometimes even after coming out.

The three protagonists also experience insecurities regarding themselves as individuals, as all three think they are unlikable or unlovable. This may be due to the adversity they experience themselves and have seen other queer people experience, as well as the lacking representation of successful queer relationships. Nishat, Felix, and Ben are all quick to interpret rejection to mean that they are inherently unlikable, failing to see when they receive love and support from those around them. They all have at least one person in their lives who is a source of comfort, and they are therefore able to share the burdens of their lives with someone. The three novels prove that this ally can be found in anyone: a sibling, friend, partner, parent, or even psychiatrist.

Lastly, my analysis of the setting in each novel revealed the ways in which the characters' intersecting identities impacted their lives as multiply marginalised. Nishat's, Felix's, and Ben's stories illustrate how the less advantages a person has in society, the more vulnerable they are to bullying, lack of acceptance, lack of support, and in experiencing adversities in general. In their intersecting identities, the three protagonists also experience different types of prejudices and perceptions of their queer identities from different areas, such as religion, ethnicity, class, etc. The lacking understanding and insight the people around them have of LGBTQ+ issues prevent the protagonists from being accepted and supported, and this becomes an added stressor for them all.

The three characters particularly experience difficulties at school as their primary social arena, since their schools are not adapted to their needs and are not able to sufficiently protect them from judgment and scrutiny from the other students. Nishat and Felix also experience that their LGBTQ+ identity is weaponised against them by jealous and bigoted peers. Though the attacks against them most likely stem from issues unrelated to their identities, it is easy for the perpetrators to target what is already vulnerable and exposed as this causes the most hurt and damage.

Regarding the novels as mirrors and windows, all three novels and their authors acknowledge the impact and difference LGBTQ+ young adult literature can have on its readers as representation of authentic queer lives. The three novels present their own examples of how queer youth often find it difficult to figure out their identity, and how they become reliant on sources like literature, media, internet, or other queer people for answers.

As mirrors, these novels validate queer people's lives and identities, assuring young queer readers they are not alone in their experiences. This is not done in a way that presents

queer identities as something "other" than or as an exception to the hetero- and cisnormative. Rather, the novels present queer experiences of desire as human and as such comparable with heterosexuality. Additionally, the novels can present mirrors for more than queer readers, as they depict an array of experiences, situations, and dilemmas in life that can resonate with different people, regardless of sexuality and gender.

The novels also provide a window into the lives of queer youth to those who may not know what these lives may look like. They also provide an insight into the LGBTQ+ community and the many diversities within the community itself, and how the struggles of being not only one minority but several can add to the pressures and stresses for a queer person.

The three novels also illustrate the ways in which society is hetero- and cisnormative, something heterosexual and/or cis people do not have to consider, but which queer people have no other choice than to deal with. This entails matters non-queer people may take for granted, from bigger issues to smaller ones like being able to use the correct restroom, or never having to explicitly state one's sexuality and gender. These revelations as presented in the novels may open non-queer readers' eyes not only to society at large, but also to themselves and the ways in which they perpetuate the hetero- and cisnormative structures. Thus, young readers may recognise and revaluate their own biases and prejudices, in turn developing their understanding and acceptance of others.

Students cannot partake in a society and a world they have only seen a fraction of, and diverse representations in the teaching materials used in education is therefore paramount to students' all-around development as individuals and democratic citizens. Both Style and Bishop posit that repeatedly mirrored groups need literature to help them understand their place in a multicultural and diverse global context, which they can receive in windows of other lives and experiences than their own (Style, 1988, p. 5; Bishop, 1990, p. ix). In line with this, the Core Curriculum states that the education should "open doors to the world", and diversity and inclusivity are values emphasised throughout the curriculum as important for students' all-around development (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b).

Literature, as has been established, can contribute to expanding peoples' views and insight into the world and lives of others through the representation of diverse narratives and experiences. When O'Donnell interviewed teachers regarding the mirrors and windows metaphor, the teachers noted the curricular and pedagogical injustices perpetuated through only reading books by cisgender, straight, white men. They also commented on their responsibility as teachers to provide students with multiple layered, complex, and

contradictory narratives (O'Donnell, 2019, p. 18-19). Considering the Norwegian Core Curriculum gives some freedom in the selection of materials, it is therefore up to the individual schools and teachers to make use of this freedom and choose their literature and materials consciously. Choosing these in terms of mirrors and windows may contribute to more conscious choices benefitting the students' views and acceptance both of themselves and others in society.

To conclude this thesis, I wish to stress that there is still great need for further research not only on LGBTQ+ young adult literature in general, but also on its use in education and as teaching materials. Increased visibility and attention on LGBTQ+ issues as pertinent within education is vital, particularly since there are no specific instructions in either curriculum or teaching materials about presenting LGBTQ+ topics. With the merits of LGBTQ+ young adult literature as presented in this thesis, it should not go overlooked as a resource for the all-around development of students and governing of their individuality. Though the literature has something to offer for all students, it is ultimately queer students who are the most vulnerable and in need of representation and validation. These students may experience adversity and resistance in their life and in society at large, and the school should therefore provide as a place where they experience belonging and acceptance for who they are.

References

Primary sources

Callender, K. (2020). *Felix Ever After*. Faber & Faber

Deaver, M. (2019). *I Wish You All the Best.* PUSH

Jaigirdar, A. (2020). *The Henna Wars*. Hodder & Stoughton

Secondary sources

Ahmed, S. (2016). Interview with Judith Butler. *Sexualities, 19*(4), 482-492.
    https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1363460716629607

Banks, W.P. (2009). Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures.
    The English Journal, 98(4), 33-36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40503258

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors. *Perspectives: Choosing
    and Using Books for the Classroom, 6*(3), ix–xi. https://scenicregional.org/wp-
    content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf

Bonane, A. (2019). Queer Muslims, autonomous organising, and the UK LGBT+ movement.
    In E. Evans & E. Lépinard (Eds.), *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements*
    (p. 255-270). Routledge

Brown, M. (2012). Gender and sexuality I: Intersectional anxieties. *Progress in Human
    Geography, 36*(4), 541-550. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0309132511420973

Bufdir. (2021, November 30). *Holdninger til lhbtiq-personer*. Bufdir.
    https://bufdir.no/Statistikk_og_analyse/lhbtiq/Holdninger/

Butler, J. (1990a). Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions. In S. Salih & J. Butler (2004), *The Judith Butler reader* (p. 90-118). Wiley-Blackwell.

Butler, J. (1990b). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge

Cart, M. (2008, May 8). *The Value of Young Adult Literature.* American Library Association. http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/whitepapers/yalit

Cart, M., & Jenkins, C. A. (2018). *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content Since 1969.* Rowman & Littlefield

Castilla, C. R. D. (2017). Close reading. In M. Allen (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (p. 137-139). SAGE Publications. https://dx.%3Cwbr%3Edoi.%3Cwbr%3Eorg/10.4135/9781483381411.n58

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis, *Signs, 38*(4), 785-810. http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.1086/669608

Colman, A. (2015). Gender role. In *A Dictionary of Psychology*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 25 Jan. 2022, from https://www-oxfordreference-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199657681.001.0001/acref-9780199657681-e-3416

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139-167. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Cri" by Kimberle Crenshaw (uchicago.edu)

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241-1299. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039

Crowe, C. (1998). Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature? *The English Journal*, *88*(1), 120-122. https://www.jstor.org/stable/821448

Durand, E. S. (2016). At the Intersections of Identity: Race and Sexuality in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature. In D. Linville & D. L. Carlson (Eds.), *Beyond Borders: Queer Eros and Ethos (Ethics) in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature* (p. 73-84). Peter Lang

The Education Act. (1998). *Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training* (LOV-1998-07-17-61). Lovdata. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1998-07-17-61

Eggebø, H., Stubberud, E., & Karlstrøm, H. (2018). *Levekår blant skeive med innvandrerbakgrunn i Norge.* (NF rapport 9/2018). Retrieved from https://www.kun.no/uploads/7/2/2/3/72237499/levek%C3%A5r_blant_skeive_med_innvandrerbakgrunn.pdf

Engvik, M. (2022, February 18*). Dårligere levekår blant ikke-heterofile*. Statistics Norway (SSB). https://www.ssb.no/sosiale-forhold-og-kriminalitet/levekar/artikler/darligere-levekar-blant-ikke-heterofile

Epstein, B.J. (2013). *Are the Kids All Right?: the Representation of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Lit.* HammerOn Press

Epstein, B.J. (2014). "The Case of the Missing Bisexuals": Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers. *Journal of Bisexuality, 14*(1), 110-125. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2014.872483

Garden, N. (1982). *Annie on My Mind.* Square Fish

Green, R. (2010). Robert Stoller's Sex and Gender: 40 Years On. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*(6), 1457-1465. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-010-9665-5

Griffin, G. (2017). Gender roles. In *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*. Oxford University

Press. Retrieved 25 Jan. 2022, from https://www-oxfordreference-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001/acref-9780191834837-e-165

Hartman, K. (2009). Reading and Writing About Real Issues. *The English Journal, 98*(4), 12-13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40503253

Jiménez, L.M. (2015). Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature from 2000-2013. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 19*(4), 406-422. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1057795

Kanner, M. (2002). Young Adult Literature. In C. J. Summers (Ed.), Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage (p. 712-714). Taylor & Francis Group

Klarer, M. (1999). *An Introduction to Literary Studies.* Routledge

Kobabe, M. (2021, October 29). Opinion: Schools are banning my book. But queer kids need queer stories. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/10/29/schools-are-banning-my-book-queer-kids-need-queer-stories/

Lewis, C. (2015). How Far Have We Come? A Critical Look at LGBTQ Identity in Young Adult Literature. *Language Arts Journal Michigan, 30*(2), 53-57. https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2072

Lo, M. (2020, February 10). The Invisible Lesbian in Young Adult Fiction. *Malinda Lo.* https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2020/2/4/the-invisible-lesbian-in-young-adult-fiction

Lukić, J., & Espinosa, A.S. (2011). Feminist Perspectives on Close Reading. In R. Bukeima, G. Grifiin, & N. Lykke (Eds.), *Theories and Methodologies in Postgraduate Feminist Research: Researching Differently* (p. 105-118). Routledge

McCann, H., & Monaghan, W. (2020). *Queer Theory Now*. Red Globe Press

Moulaison Sandy, H., Brendler, B.M., & Kohn, K. (2017). Intersectionality in LGBT fiction: A comparison of a traditional library vendor and a nontraditional eBook platform. *Journal of Documentation*, 73(3), 432-450. https://doi-org.galanga.hvl.no/10.1108/JD-07-2016-0092

O'Donnell, A. (2019). Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors: the Enduring Impact of Rudine Sims Bishop's Work. *Literacy today, 36*(6), 16-19. https://search-ebscohost-com.galanga.hvl.no/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=136262469&site=ehost-live

O'Shea, S. C. (2020). 'I, Robot?' Or How Transgender Subjects Are Dehumanised. *Culture and Organization, 26*(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2018.1429440

PFLAG. (2021, January). *PFLAG National Glossary of Terms.* PFLAG. https://pflag.org/glossary

Prosser, J. (1998). *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Columbia University Press.

Røthing, Å. (2013). Selektiv inkludering og fravær av sex: homoseksualitet i norske naturfagsbøker. In A.B. Grønningsæter, H.W. Kristiansen, & B.R. Lescher-Nuland (Eds.), *Holdninger, levekår og livsløp - forskning om lesbiske, homofile og bifile* (p.22-36). Universitetsforlaget

Smith, B.H. (2016). What Was "Close Reading"?: A Century of Method in Literary Studies. *Minnesota Review, 87*, 57-75. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633173

Style, E. (1988). Curriculum as Window and Mirror. *The National SEED Project.* https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/curriculum-as-window-and-mirror

Sumara, D. & Davis, B. (1999). Interrupting Heteronormitivity: Toward a Queer Curriculum Theory. *Curriculum Inquiry, 29*(2), 191-208. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3185891

Utdanningsdirektoratet. (2020a). *Curriculum in English (ENG01-04).* Udir. https://www.udir.no/lk20/eng01-04?lang=eng

Utdanningsdirektoratet. (2020b). *Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education*. Udir. https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/?lang=eng

WHO. (n.d.). *Gender and health.* World Health Organization. Retrieved 25. January 2022 from https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1