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## Learning Through Literature: LGBTQIA+ YA Literature as Activism in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

This thesis will argue the importance of LGBTQIA+ Young Adult literature in improving the acceptance of queer identities in the Netherlands. Through analysis of three case studies, this thesis will show that themes such as coming out, transphobia, and queering stories can positively impact Dutch people's way of thinking about the queer community. In Chapter One, I will explore the Dutch self-identity as progressive and how it conflicts with facts about LGBTQIA+ oppression in the Netherlands. Chapter Two will analyse literature on using Young Adult novels in a classroom setting and how LGBTQIA+ Young Adult literature can help teenagers become more openminded. Chapter Three looks at Becky Albertalli's *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* in order to establish the importance of discussing identity formation and the relation between sexuality and gender performance. Chapter Four will use Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After* to argue the importance of transgender representation in Young Adult literature and to discuss whether labels are necessary and to whom. Chapter 5 will discuss the representation of queer fanfiction in Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*, arguing that fanfiction could be employed in order to help teenagers connect to queer messages in literature. These chapters support the conclusion that LGBTQIA+ YA literature could provide the Netherlands with the opportunity to ensure the Netherlands continues to make progress when it comes to LGBTQIA+ acceptance.

Keywords: Young Adult Literature, LGBTQIA+, Queer Literature, Gender, Sexuality.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Identifying as LGBTQIA+ in the Netherlands comes with its challenges in terms of homophobia, representation, and acceptance (de Wit, de Ruiter de Wildt, Harthoorn and Weustink, Houthuijs). However, there are ways to improve the situation of queer people in the Netherlands, one of which is through the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ representation in Young Adult literature. This thesis will examine the way such novels can influence Dutch society and how LGBTQIA+ acceptance can be improved. In order to do this, this thesis will first attempt to contextualise the situation of LGBTQIA+ people in the Netherlands.

### 1.1: A Tradition of Denial

The Netherlands has a reputation of being a tolerant and progressive country, but it has been pointed out by several sources that this image is incorrect, as there is a Dutch history of intolerance in forms such as racism, xenophobia, and homophobia (Wekker, de Ruiter de Wildt, de Wit). These forms of oppression and how they are viewed in the Netherlands are related to one another. According to David Goldberg, Europe is a continent where the history of oppression is ignored or denied in order to focus on a façade of tranquillity (332).

Imperialism allowed European countries to dream of discovering new lands to settle in, to expand their homeland. This was seen as a positive concept, but in order to allow this settlement to take place, Europeans held human auctions and spread deadly diseases.

Goldberg argues that this violence was what upheld European systems, but that it was not visible due to the European self-image and the notion that colonists were doing nothing wrong by merely settling in a new place (332). The expressions of racism that were happening in that time, were not happening in Europe itself, which made it easier to pretend there was no connection between racism and Europe.

Goldberg argues that many Europeans believe the last instance of racism, especially mass-racism, was the Holocaust (339). The geographical proximity of this occurrence forced Europeans to behold the masses of minority groups forced from their homes and sent to their deaths during the Holocaust. However, events such as colonialism, that happened far away, can be denied and are therefore not discussed. This is what Goldberg argues is called historical amnesia, which causes “deafening silence in Europe concerning its colonial legacy” (337). Due to this, Goldberg argues that race has become unmentionable (337). He states that “there is no racism because race was buried in the rubble of Auschwitz”, arguing that after the Holocaust, Europeans would say they never wanted to repeat the mistakes made during that time, whilst still actively denying the racism happening all around them in present time. Goldberg argues that these denials are expressed directly through tolerance (338). He describes this concept as a power hierarchy, seeing as the person who is tolerating reluctantly acknowledges the tolerated person’s existence. The former holds an active role over the latter. Goldberg specifically points out Dutch tolerance here, stating that there is a history in the Netherlands of glorifying historical people whilst denying that person’s role in the Dutch colonial past (339). Therefore, the European tradition of historical amnesia where the denial of racist history leads to the unmentionable status of race in current society, is particularly visible in the Netherlands.

This unmentionable status of race and the denial of racism are explored by Gloria Wekker in her work *White Innocence* (Wekker). Wekker’s argument shows similarities to Goldberg’s, namely that “the memory of the Holocaust as the epitome and model of racist transgression in Europe erases the crimes that were perpetrated against the colonized for four centuries” (4). Wekker explains that the result of this is European self-identification as a colour-blind continent. She quotes Fatima El-Tayeb, who states that “framing the continent as a space free of ‘race’ (and, by implication, racism), is not only central to the way Europeans

perceive themselves, but has also gained near-global acceptance” (El-Tayeb, as quoted in Wekker 4). Therefore, the denial of the colonial past has led to the denial of racism. According to Wekker, there are paradoxes in this self-representation of non-racist. She discusses three such paradoxes, which provide insight into how Dutch self-identity clashes with historical facts. The first paradox is that Dutch people often do not identify with migrants, even though a sixth of all Dutch citizens have ancestors who migrated to the Netherlands (6). According to Wekker, Dutch people tend to be proud of such ancestry in the private sphere, but not admit to it in the public sphere (6-7). Moreover, the Netherlands expect new migrants to adapt to Dutch cultural values, for instance the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ rights, regardless of the fact that there is conflict about these values within the Netherlands itself (7). The second paradox is the Dutch attitude towards the Holocaust. Dutch people tend to think they were innocent during the second world war, a country merely occupied by German forces. However, there were already systems in place that helped the German invaders to easily identify Jewish people (12). Furthermore, Dutch people tend to forget that whilst their country was being invaded, they were perpetrating violence in Indonesia. This colony was fighting a war for independence which was brutally cut short by the Dutch government. However, in line with Goldberg’s explanation of historical amnesia, the Dutch overlook the violence in Indonesia and mostly remember the invasion of Nazi Germany. The third paradox is the fact that Dutch history is inclined to ignore or forget about the Netherlands’ imperial presence in the worlds (13). Despite topics such as imperialism and slavery being a mandatory part of the Dutch educational history canon, teachers are allowed to decide for themselves how much time they set apart for these topics. Therefore, the amount of information children get on imperialism is dependent on the teacher’s ideals and the “composition of the school population” (13).

Wekker's theory of white innocence explains the way the Dutch self-identification as non-racist is used to excuse and deny instances of racism in the Netherlands. Dutch people have the belief that their country is progressive and that any seemingly racist remarks or acts cannot be categorised as such because Dutch people are not racist (33). They often use irony to avoid acknowledging the hurtfulness and existence of racist situations. Specifically, there is a trend in the Netherlands of making racist jokes that are not perceived as such because there is this shared belief that Dutch people have a non-racist status. Therefore, the joke cannot be categorised as problematic. Wekker argues the humour in these instances comes from the shared Dutch images about black people (34). The way Dutch society influences white people to view people of colour is what leads to unacknowledged racism.

This is a phenomenon that can be extended from racism to other types of discrimination. There are more self-images the Netherlands perpetuates that are not complete truths and therefore deny the experience of minorities. For instance, the Netherlands has often been considered progressive when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights, despite the fact that homophobia and other forms of LGBTQIA+ discrimination are a reality to many Dutch people.

### 1.2: Here and Queer: LGBTQIA+ Discrimination in a Dutch Context

The Netherlands is often viewed as a progressive country when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights, but this image is not the whole truth. According to John de Wit, the Netherlands has historically been more open-minded than other European countries, but this is no longer necessarily the case (de Wit). Amsterdam was a gay tourist attraction in the 20th century, and this of course still holds true for contemporary Amsterdam canal pride. However, where the Netherlands used to be exceptional in its acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, now there are countries where levels of acceptance are the same or even higher. De Wit claims that the

Netherlands' acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities is mostly superficial. He argues the focus ought not to be on tourist events such as pride, but that we should improve attention to sexual diversity all year long, and all throughout the country (de Wit). Furthermore, this attention should be paid in the private sphere as well as the public sphere.

Historically, the Netherlands may have been ahead of many European countries when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights, but other countries have been keeping up. The Netherlands was the first country to legalise same-sex marriage, but by now this is no longer unique. In fact, according to the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (IGLA-Europe), the Netherlands are not even in the top ten most progressive countries in Europe when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights. This organisation compares the attitude of European countries based on 6 criteria. There is equality and non-discrimination, family matters, hate crime and hate speech, legal gender recognition and bodily integrity, civil society space, and right to asylum. The Netherlands checks only 13% of the laws in the category hate crime and hate speech, but scores a 100% on civil society space. Essentially, these numbers display precisely what Wekker was arguing in terms of the prevailing image not matching the actuality of discrimination. Due to the score in civil society space, Dutch people have the right to be gay or support gay people on a visible level. This strengthens the image of the Netherlands as a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people. However, as the 13% score in hate crime and hate speech shows, the underlying legislation to support this image is missing. These statistics also support de Wit's argument about pride, seeing as the Netherlands should do more than promote tourist events such as pride to protect LGBTQIA+ people.

The 2019 Eurobarometer on Discrimination by the European Commission looks into "the social acceptance of LGBTI people in the EU" and provides more insight into the extent to which LGBTQIA+ people are accepted in the Netherlands (European Commission). This



research looks into several questions to see to what extent different countries would accept certain members of the LGBTQIA+ communities or how they would react in certain situations. These include same-sex marriages, transgender identities, and same-sex couples showing affection in public. In most scenarios, the Netherlands is in a top five position. However, they score a lot lower when it comes to perception of discrimination (16). They are in sixth place when it comes discrimination of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and in ninth place in terms of discrimination of transgender people. When it comes to intersex people, the Netherlands are underneath European average, in fourteenth place. Therefore, despite showing relatively widespread acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people in Dutch society, Dutch people do admit to the existence of discrimination against this group. Furthermore, the Eurobarometer also shows each country's growth rate in acceptance of same-sex couples when comparing numbers from 2015 and 2019 (9). The Netherlands has a growth rate of 12, where ten countries have a higher rate, with Germany scoring 26. This shows that although the Netherlands have been relatively accepting of LGBTQIA+ identities for quite some time, the rest of Europe is catching up fast and may further overtake Dutch society soon. There is quite a large difference in the placement of the Netherlands compared to other countries when looking at the Eurobarometer and the Rainbow of Europe. This difference may lie in the types of information studied. The former asks questions to the citizens of each country, whereas the latter is mostly looking at legislation.

The low growth rate in comparison to other European countries as discussed in the Eurobarometer is addressed by Arjan de Ruiter de Wildt, who compares insights about Dutch LGBTQIA+ acceptance in 2016 and 2017 (de Ruiter de Wildt). This research showed that Dutch acceptance was actually going down in certain areas, such as “agreement that LGBT rights are human rights” and supporting same-sex marriage (de Ruiter de Wildt). Furthermore, Dutch people in 2017 were less inclined to say their perception of LGBTQIA+ people had

improved in the last five years. This shows that there is a need to keep up with queer activism and that the Netherlands should embrace change if it wants to stay one of Europe's most progressive countries. The statistics shown in de Ruiter de Wildt's article show that the Netherlands is still above average when compared to global LGBTQIA+ acceptance, but as the Eurobarometer shows, this might change in the next decade or so. De Ruiter de Wildt argues that laws have an influence on Dutch attitudes towards same-sex couples (de Ruiter de Wildt). Therefore, if the Dutch government were to add some of the laws missing in the Rainbow of Europe statistics, it is reasonable to assume Dutch LGBTQIA+ acceptance would increase.

The homophobia that results from a large portion of the Dutch population not accepting LGBTQIA+ people, can be quite subtle and affects not only queer people, but straight people as well. According to a factsheet by the organisation Emancipator, a myriad of Dutch people claims to be supportive of LGBTQIA+ rights, but contradict themselves by stating they disagree with gay marriage, same-sex adoption, or that they would not be okay with their own child being gay (Harthoorn and Weustink 1). Furthermore, there are types of homophobia within the LGBTQIA+ community. For instance, there has been numerous discussions on whether asexuality ought to be included in the LGBTQIA+ community, or whether queer people in a relationship with someone of the opposite gender ought to be allowed to celebrate pride. As Harthoorn and Weustink point out, 12.4% of homosexual men and lesbian woman do not accept bisexuality as a valid sexual identity descriptor and 39.2% would not be in a relationship with a bisexual person (2). The latter is often justified through harmful stereotypes such as the notion that bisexual people would be more likely to engage in adultery. Additionally, homophobia is used to strengthen gender stereotypes and norms for both queer and non-queer people. It is used by straight men to force boys and men to behave in a way that society tends to categorise as 'real' masculinity (1). Homosexuality is associated

with more feminine men, which is represented as a calamity in order to force people into a one-sided view of masculinity. Paulus Houthuijs confirms this, stating that perpetrators of homophobia in the Netherlands are often young men, and that their motivation is often that the victim was thought to be looking at them weird, or that the victim was not acting like a 'real man' (Houthuijs). There appears to be a difference between the reasoning behind homophobia against men and women, as the motivation for the latter category is often sexualisation of two women (Houthuijs). Harthoorn and Weustink claim the groups of people who have the most negative view of the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community are young adults, people over 70 years old, religious people, and people from an ethnic minority (1). However, Houthuijs argues that this ties in with xenophobia, seeing as people with a Muslim background are overrepresented by the media as the perpetrators of homophobia (Houthuijs). Furthermore, de Wit argues that homophobia is sometimes actively used in the Netherlands in order to be xenophobic; Dutch people who disapprove of migrants argue that migrants ought not to be allowed to enter the country because they might attempt to oppress part of the Dutch population (de Wit).

The Dutch government has also given out statistics relating to LGBTQIA+ people in the Netherlands, although the intent may merely be to placate people instead of promoting change. The government has published a document called LGBTI equality in the Netherlands, Orange is always part of the rainbow (Government of the Netherlands). In this document, information is given on the amount of LGBTQIA+ people and marriages in the Netherlands, and how the government is protecting these people legally. No statistics on homophobia are given, apart from one table indicating which ethnic groups in the Netherlands are the most accepting of LGBTQIA+ identities (6). Rather, the focus is mainly on legislation and how discrimination is fought. This exemplifies what Houthuijs and de Wit were arguing: when it comes to homophobia, xenophobia is often at play. Furthermore, this document shows the

Dutch government wishes to push the image of the Netherlands as a progressive and accepting country, by showing which steps are being taken in order to protect LGBTQIA+ people. Therefore, the Dutch attitude towards LGBTQIA+ people may be represented as positive, but research shows that there is a large part of Dutch society that does not fit this image. Homophobia still holds a place in Dutch society, despite the fact it is often denied in favour of more positive self-representation.

### 1.3: LGBTQIA+ YA Literature in Relation to Acceptance

This thesis will discuss three case studies: *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender, and *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell. These three case studies were chosen due to their portrayal of different aspects of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the fact that they were published from 2010 onward. This will ensure this thesis reflects more contemporary queer YA literature. These novels are all from an Anglophone context. Since Young Adult literature mainly has American origins, and continues to be written by many American authors, cultural imperialism must be taken into consideration. Cultural imperialism can be defined as “the imposition by one usually politically or economically dominant community of various aspects of its own culture onto another nondominant community” (Weynand Tobin). This could be a negative thing, as the less dominant culture could start to disappear. Cultural imperialism could mean the loss of a language, traditions, or media.

In the Netherlands specifically, there is the belief that the Dutch language is starting to disappear in favour of English, which complicates the use of LGBTQIA+ YA literature from an Anglophone context in strengthening LGBTQIA+ acceptance in the Netherlands. When discussing the influence of dominant cultures such as American or British culture, Dutch people often talk about the loss of the Dutch language (de Bruin, ten Hoedt, Babelgfw, van

Keymeulen). The most common discussion on Anglicisation of Dutch language is the increase in the number of study programmes given in English at Dutch universities (Babelgww, ten Hoedt, van Keymeulen). It may seem wise to ensure students have a good grasp of the language due to globalisation and the possibility of working somewhere with non-Dutch colleagues, but the majority of the students of most study programmes end up in a Dutch working environment after completing university (Babelgww, ten Hoedt). Furthermore, having English taught at universities shows that English is becoming more prestigious and has increasingly more worth than Dutch (van Keymeulen). Losing the Dutch language would mean losing a part of Dutch culture, as language and culture are intertwined phenomena (ten Hoedt).

Therefore, English young adult literature might be seen as yet another way of losing Dutch culture, for even translated works often bring with them a focus on American society. However, cultural imperialism, especially in the form of novels, does not necessarily have to negatively impact Dutch society. It could bring with it the opportunity for imported activism. Cultural imperialism could, in the instance of LGBTQIA+ acceptance, be used to take existing forms of American activism and use them to help the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community. The genre of LGBTQIA+ YA literature does not really exist in the Netherlands. A possible explanation for this is the Dutch self-identification as progressive, as has been mentioned above. In America, there are a plethora of people who believe queer people are not treated equally to cisgender and straight people. Therefore, they believe the genre of LGBTQIA+ YA literature may provide a solution. If Dutch people are convinced there is no problem concerning the rights of queer people in the Netherlands, they may argue more inclusive literature is not necessary in their country. However, as the sources on LGBTQIA+ acceptance mentioned before show, this is not true. There is still need for improvement, and YA literature may prove beneficial. This leads to the following research question: To what

extent can LGBTQIA+ representation in young adult literature positively influence Dutch culture?

In order to answer this question, this thesis will, in Chapter 2, discuss the history of the LGBTQIA+ YA genre, and how this has been proven to encourage adolescents to become more activist. Chapter 3 will discuss *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, introducing the Coming Out genre and how this is tied to identity. This novel will be analysed for instances of gender and sexuality performance. Chapter 4 will look into *Felix Ever After*, which will provide the opportunity to discuss the place of transgender people within the LGBTQIA+ community. The concept of intersectionality will be taken into account when analysing this novel. Chapter 5 will analyse queer fanfiction through the novel *Fangirl*. This novel will show how fanfiction may be beneficial in the classroom, and how queer fanfiction fits into the LGBTQIA+ YA genre.

## Chapter 2: Exploring Young Adult Literature: Its Influence on Adolescent Activism

Young adult (YA) literature is a genre that is easy for adolescents to connect with, making it an excellent genre for teaching young people about the world. However, in order to understand how this happens, it must first be made clear what this genre entails. Furthermore, it must be taken into account how the specific sub-genre of LGBTQIA+ YA literature can help in spreading LGBTQIA+ activism.

### 2.1: A Short History of Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature can be defined as literature that is about young people and that is written with these types of people in mind (Garcia 5). Michael Cart argues that the rise of this genre came with the rise of youth culture in America. Until the 1900s, teenagers would often not finish High School and opt to move directly to adult responsibilities in the working life (4). However, due to an increase in the number of adolescents that finished High School, youth culture started to form. Cart argues that one way in which this was visible was magazines catered specifically to teenagers (6). These magazines were often very male-centred, with texts appearing on how girls ought to behave. Despite this focus on young men, they were not necessarily described in a very positive way; they were often depicted as awkward and stammering (8). After the second world war and through the success of magazines for young people, industries started to realise teenagers could be a new category to market to, the book industry included (12). Antero Garcia argues that teenagers started to spend their own money after the second world war, because they no longer had to save all the money they earned to support their families (5). Therefore, books about and for teenagers started to become profitable. Cart argues that this marketability was actually visible in the quality of books publishing in the 40s through the mid-60s (25). They were “inconsequential” stories, merely written to see if money could be earned from them (24).

Over the next few decades, the genre of YA literature saw a myriad of changes. In the 60s people realised that young adult literature could be used to facilitate the development from child to adult, an in-between phase that ought to be reflected in the genre (25). This led to the emergence of realism in YA fiction (28). There was less focus on romance. In the 70s, YA writers started to explore darker themes and developed a certain boldness (33). Cart argues that in this decade, teenagers started to have the same type of problems as adults often faced: alcoholism, drugs, sex, money, etc (35). However, Cart claims that because of this, writers started to write novels dealing with one such problem, but did not necessarily focus on depicting the people facing these problems (36). Essentially, YA novels became one-problem books. Due to the amount of political and social uproar in the 70s, the 80s became a time period where people reverted back to romantic novels (42). People wanted to escape their reality, and novels were perfect for this. In this period of time, YA books reverted back to stereotypes; the stories often depicted white girls who are only interested in boys. Their role models are their mothers, their fathers are the traditional bread-winners, and there are very few depictions of the elderly, black people, or the poor (43). The lack of diversity in race started to be noticed in the 90s, but it was soon discovered that books depicting non-white people did not sell very well (48). There was a general decrease in the number of YA books sold until around 1994, when a combination of a want of age-appropriate literature in the classroom, a rise in the teen population, and an increase in prizes for YA literature led to the renaissance of the genre (63-68). This led to the type of young adult literature we have today: a genre in between adult and children's literature that sells quite well.

According to Garcia, YA literature has not always been taken seriously (XI). It is often dismissed as superficial entertainment, not 'real' literature. However, despite its target audience being younger people, YA literature has become increasingly popular amongst adults. Garcia argues that the reason for this is that YA novels speak to the human condition,



not merely that of teenagers (XI). Therefore, this type of literature reaches a larger audience than had originally been expected. However, the strength of the connection the audience has with the books varies. This is because YA literature has historically been a white genre (1). The commercial origins of young adult literature ensured that this genre was catered to the group of young adults who had money to spend after the second world war ended. However, this group consisted of white, affluent teenagers, resulting in a genre that has historically excluded minorities. Garcia argues that it is easier to connect with a book that represents you, meaning that the YA genre is a limited one in terms of connection (1). Of course, this does not mean people who are not represented in YA novels do not read them, but their experience may be different.

The connection a reader may have with a book can be vital in helping the reader identify with the moral or message of the story, which leads to a site of social education. According to John Bushman, teenagers have a hard time connecting to classical literature, which used to be the only literature taught in secondary education (35). Bushman argues that reading classical literature in school leads to a decrease of reading later in life (38). However, this was not the case with YA literature, as these books incorporate the type of problems that young adults face, making kids more likely to choose to read such books. Furthermore, Bushman claims that students are more “emotionally and cognitively involved” in young adult literature, due to the fact that it is often written to be on their developmental level (38). This makes it easier for students to understand and discuss the texts. Bushman claims the most important concepts to include in YA books are personal ideology, value systems, and opportunities for moral development (39).

Steven Wolk elaborates on this notion of social education, arguing that young adult literature in a classroom setting could teach adolescents about social responsibility. Wolk points out that authors usually do not write in order for their texts to be turned into reading

exercises or for children to practice reading skills (664). However, if this is the only thing children are taught to do when reading books, they are not likely to discover the merit of reading, especially reading for school. Wolk argues the focus of classroom discussion on literature should be on teaching notions about current events, morality, or political and cultural identities (664). If these topics are discussed through young adult literature, social studies can be explored in a way that will feel personal to the students, as they can connect to the material they are reading. Furthermore, if the type of discussion that is nurtured in a classroom setting focusses on inquiry, the odds that the students learn something new increase (666). Due to the way inquiry requires more than a one-way transfer of information from the teacher, students will better learn to assess what they are reading and how it connects to their own lives. Sheldon Berman defines social responsibility as “a personal investment in the wellbeing of people and the planet” (Berman as quoted in Wolk 666). As young adult literature is more personal to adolescents, Wolk argues they are more likely to pick up on this through two-way discussion on YA books in classrooms.

Jacqueline Glasgow further stipulates the way young adult literature can be used to teach social studies in a classroom by arguing that critically assessing YA novels teaches children about prejudice and helps them see beyond stereotypes. Glasgow claims that reading YA can help children understand that they view the world through a specific lens (54). It will open their eyes to “alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations (54). If the book is well-written, it will provide the reader with insight into the complexity of its characters. Therefore, they will help readers understand the lives of others, which may lead to adolescents become more aware of stereotyping and their own internal prejudices. Glasgow discusses an experiment in which she paired up High School students with College students in order to see if the latter could help the former group read more critically (56-59). Glasgow concluded that the High School students had indeed developed and/or changed their vantage

point on the books they read and the characters they discussed. Thus, YA literature helps people make sense of the world around them, and become aware of their own view of the world. It stands to reason that YA novels with an LGBTQIA+ focus could therefore help readers change their point of view and possibly counter homophobia.

## 2.2: LGBTQIA+ Literature as Activism

Literature's transformative power could be used to change people's stance on the LGBTQIA+ community. Young adult books have the capacity to make their readers re-evaluate their view on the world, especially if teenagers are provided with a space for critical discussion.

Therefore, YA literature with LGBTQIA+ themes could aid teenagers in opening their mind to different sexual or gender identities.

Initially, LGBTQIA+ representation in YA literature was not very positive and it was not until more recent decades that the quality and quantity of such books started improving. As Garcia mentions, the young adult genre has historically been a white and heterosexual one (4). There was little to no LGBTQIA+ representation, and even if there were queer characters, their story did not have a happy ending (Waters). Michael Waters claims this is because giving a queer character a positive ending would have been deemed obscene. By having such characters die or end up alone, writers could fit their stories with the then widespread view that homosexuality should be condemned (Waters). Corrine Wickens confirms this theory, stating that early YA LGBTQIA+ novels often depicted homosexuality as phase, and that more progressive inclusion did not start happening until the 90s (149). This was a reflection of the state of queer rights in America, seeing as the number of YA books with LGBTQIA+ characters and the welfare of such characters increased when the queer community in America became more accepted (Waters). Transexual people of colour were leading the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, with events such as the Dewey sit-in, the Compton's cafeteria riots,

and the Stonewall riots. Waters states the first YA LGBTQIA+ novel was published in 1969, the year of the Stonewall riots. However, the first YA novel to give queer characters a more positive story came from 1982, and was subsequently banned in several places. Waters claims that by the 90s, there were roughly 60 LGBTQIA+ YA novels, of which most still had heterosexual main characters, with a homosexual, lesbian, or sometimes bisexual friend or relative (Waters). The early 2000s saw a large increase in the number of LGBTQIA+ YA novels, and people realised there was a market for such books. Furthermore, the representation expanded to queer main characters and/or protagonists, and it started to include transsexual representation. However, the majority of these books had characters that were white, and they were more likely to have a lesbian or homosexual character than any other sexuality.

The representation of LGBTQIA+ people in young adult literature is vital due to the way literature influences the values and ideologies of young people. Garcia claims that youth culture “is in part construed through the ways society reads, interprets and reflects the books of young adult literature” (5-6). Therefore, what is depicted in YA novels influences how certain issues are viewed by teens. Including LGBTQIA+ topics in the genre can make this group of people more openminded. This is confirmed by de Ruijter de Wildt, who states that “Dutch people who know an LGBT person are 60% more likely than those who don’t to believe that people with same-sex attraction should have equal rights and protections, as well as 98% more likely to support same-sex marriage” (de Ruijter de Wildt). This proves that humanizing the LGBTQIA+ community can help people accept identities unlike their own. Seeing that someone is not so different from themselves, will make people change their position, something that can also be achieved through literature, as people can connect with the characters they read about. Garcia argues that if authors of colour are not a part of the YA genre, only white authors hold the power to shape culture, which only strengthens the current

hierarchy (6). This can also be applied to queer representation, as not including such identities will only further heteronormativity.

Garcia argues that heterosexism is enforced in YA literature, which leads to limited representations of LGBTQIA+ people and a harmful continuation of heteronormativity (87-90). Garcia defines heterosexism as “dominant cultural practices and beliefs that assume individuals are heterosexual and that explicitly or implicitly promote a heterosexual—or heteronormative—lifestyle” (86). One way in which heterosexism is enforced is through the suppression of queer presence. This is often because the writer did not think to include such characters, or because either the writer or the publisher decided that their target audience was a heterosexual one and that including LGBTQIA+ characters would lead to a decline in readership (87). Another way heterosexism can be spotted in YA novels is stereotypical depictions of LGBTQIA+ people. For instance, it is often assumed that gay men dress better than straight men. If a man in a book dresses well, it will probably be joked about. In such occasions, the joke is a harmful accusation rather than an actual question about a person’s sexual identity. Therefore, homosexuality is depicted as a negative condition. Moreover, Garcia argues such depictions tokenize “LGBTQI activities as limited to the kinds of behaviors seen in other forms of media such as film and television” (88). If most media solely depict stereotypical behaviour for LGBTQIA+ people, the audience will never get a more nuanced, more truthful view of the queer community. Lastly, Garcia argues that LGBTQIA+ representation in YA novels is limited. These texts mostly focus on “men, and predominantly gay men” (90). Bisexual people, transgender people, and especially queer people of colour are underrepresented in YA novels. All in all, these enforcements of heterosexism lead to a limited broadening of the readers’ minds and less acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Young adult literature with a LGBTQIA+ topic can have a positive influence on the acceptance of this community, especially in countering heteronormativity, although there

might be complications in this process. Mollie Blackburn et al. argue that LGBTQIA+ YA books can be categorised as such through the inclusion of queer ideologies (41-3). Their paper looks into an out-of-school reading group that discussed queer YA literature. They found that books that depict stereotypical gender, sexuality, and family norms being disrupted, helped their students think about how such norms are upheld in the society around them (43). They claim LGBTQIA+ YA literature “may provide critical resources to young adult readers by countering the invisible ideologies of heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia that circulate in their daily lives” (43). Kirsten Helmer elaborates on this point and also describes limitations to the discussion of queer literature in a classroom setting. Helmer argues for the use of “counter-heteronormative” literature, as opposed to any book that merely includes a LGBTQIA+ theme, but does not actively counter heteronormativity (905). If there is no nuance in the literature provided for young adults, these young adults will learn to essentialise gender identities, which will only reinstate the otherness of queer individuals (903). These teenagers will be taught about the LGBTQIA+ community, but in a limited way that is inevitably harmful to the diverse community they are learning about. Furthermore, William Banks claims that only teaching novels that depict LGBTQIA+ struggle makes readers believe that being queer is inherently a negative experience (35). Helmer argues for the use of counter-narratives in a classroom setting. She defines such narratives as books that “trouble established normative discourses and what this means for thinking about norm-disruptive sexualities and genders” (912). In Helmer’s research, it became obvious that teenagers will still read such narratives through a heteronormative framework, due to the fact that they have always been taught to read and think like that (910). However, Helmer claims that questioning their interpretation of LGBTQIA+ books can help them break through their persisting way of thinking (910). This is why a classroom setting may be vital in such an endeavour, as it is a setting where such questioning and challenging is possible. Should teenagers read YA

literature by themselves at home, they might not notice their prevailing framework of thought if they have never been made aware of it. However, Helmer argues that even if a student cannot break binary thinking completely, counter-heteronormative novels still, to a certain extent, help disrupt the idea of what has been established as normal (910).

Useful as the classroom setting could be, this strategy will not work if teachers refuse or do not know how to teach LGBTQIA+ literature. Not all teachers are willing to teach novels with an LGBTQIA+ theme. If the schools they teach at do not have guidelines that force those teachers to do so, students will not get access to the classroom setting that may be so vital in discussing YA literature in a critical way. Blackburn et al. argue that in order to counter the heteronormative ideologies that are, more often than not, overly present in non-queer literature, teachers must be able to recognise and identify ideologies in queer literature (44). However, this may not necessarily come naturally to them. For this reason, Susan Steffel and Laura Renzi-Keener argue that teachers' education needs to include lessons on teaching LGBTQIA+ novels (30). Their research was done with participants who were mostly white women from small American towns, and these women had not been exposed to much LGBTQIA+ information until they went to college (31). Most teachers felt uncomfortable discussing queer literature and said this was because of religious values. Some others noted that they were afraid of the controversy that may follow if they were to teach queer novels in the classroom. Steffel and Renzi-Keener argue that teachers need to be challenged in their teacher programmes in terms of LGBTQIA+ topics, due to the fact that not all may have experience discussing this topic at all (34). However, even if a teacher is willing to teach LGBTQIA+ YA novels in the classroom, there is a chance that the community around the school might not accept this. According to Banks, some teachers choose their LGBTQIA+ novels based upon whether they think the choice of book will cause controversy, rather than what the novel teaches (34). Therefore, the novels that end up being discussed in class might

not have the best queer representation or the most information on the topic. Thus, in order for LGBTQIA+ YA literature to be properly discussed in class, the teachers need to be taught how to do this, and the schoolboards and community around the school need to allow it. LGBTQIA+ YA literature could have a positive influence on their readers if implemented in school's set literature beyond improving LGBTQIA+ acceptance. It could, for instance, be used as an additional form of sexual education and it could introduce sexuality education. Such education will improve the wellbeing of both heterosexual and non-heterosexual and gender diverse teenagers. Robert Bittner argues that "there is a place for queer YA fiction within the gap that currently exists between sex education and sexuality education" (358). This would benefit all students because it would improve their understanding of how sexual relationships can work and how much diversity exists in this topic. Especially in America, sexual education may be limited to teaching abstinence rather than how to safely have intercourse. In the Netherlands, sexual education may be less lacking in information, but can still be limited to a certain extent. In a research performed by Rutgers and SOA Aids Nederland, it became apparent that young adults were not happy with the amount of sexual education provided to them, as they rated it 5.8 out of 10 on average (RTL Nieuws). Furthermore, according to knowledge-centrum Rutgers, teenagers in their first few years of secondary education want more practical information and facts on sexual intercourse, whereas teenagers in their last few years of secondary school want more information regarding social relations and sexuality (Rutgers). Dutch schools have been required to provide sexual education with special attention to diversity as of 2012, but they are allowed to decide for themselves how this takes place (Rutgers). Therefore, the amount of sexual and sexuality education may vary. According to Bittner, LGBTQIA+ literature may improve such education. However, not all LGBTQIA+ YA literature actually has explicit sexual scenes, though Bittner argues it might still include sexual visibility (359). Moreover, books could



provide a private place for exploring sexual knowledge and sexual identity, whereas classroom sexual education is inevitably public (360). Furthermore, according to Blaauw et al., more discussion on LGBTQIA+ issues will improve feelings of safety for all students (234). Their research showed that heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual students at Dutch secondary schools felt safer after classes that paid attention to sexual diversity. Therefore, reading and discussing LGBTQIA+ YA literature will improve young adults' acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, make them feel safer, and work as an additional form of sexual education.

### Chapter 3: Coming Out and Identity in *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

The first case study this thesis will consider is Becky Albertalli's *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, also published as *Love, Simon* after the movie adaptation was released. This novel details the life of Simon Spier, a sixteen-year-old boy from Georgia who is struggling to keep his sexual identity a secret. Throughout the story, Simon starts to fall in love with a boy he has secretly been in contact with over e-mail. Although unashamed of being gay and not especially afraid of the reaction of his friends and family, Simon is unwilling to come out, mostly because he does not suddenly want to be seen as a different person by those around him (54). Simon's story is an interesting one to consider because of his particular trajectory of identity formation and how it affects the categorisation of *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* a "coming out novel", which comes with its own possibilities and restrictions.

#### 3.1: Coming Out as a Genre

*Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* can be identified as a coming out novel, which indicates a certain way of construing identity and challenging heteronormative ideals. Throughout the novel, Albertalli conveys an interesting conceptualisation of "coming out", as the term repeatedly points to more than just its significance to the LGBTQIA+ community. Rather, coming out is universalised as something that could relate to every part of one's identity.

Esther Saxey, however, defines the coming out genre as stories that describe "an individual's path to lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity" (1). She also states it is "a tale summing up their own journey to sexual identity and showing how their nature made itself known to them despite a hostile environment" (2). Saxey argues that coming out narratives influence the identity construction of their time (2). Sexual identities are construed in part by their social-historical context, and therefore change over time. They influence and are influenced by the literature around them, meaning that "the coming out story, which purports to describe

a pre-existing sexual identity, is simultaneously contributing to the culture construction of this identity” (5). In this light, we might read *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* as both reflecting society as it exists now and influencing the way its readers will self-identify. In her novel, Albertalli takes a definition of coming out such as Saxey’s, pertaining only to sexuality, and applies it to every aspect of identity, not merely the queer parts. Coming out narratives such as this one are important because, as Saxey argues, “the perspective of the protagonist, as both insider and outsider, allows an informed critique of heteronormative society, and its dating rituals, parenting rules and gender roles” (4). Thus, this novel could be a useful tool in the effort to make society more accepting of the LGBTQIA+ community, and less inclined to view the world through a heteronormative lens.

*Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* depicts Simon’s struggle with understanding how his sexuality fits in with his identity, and how the world around him views his identity. This struggle could play a vital part of making Young Adult readers more aware of the intricate way in which identity is formed, and how it is fluid, as it changes over time. For Simon, his struggle with identity mainly concerns itself with the way his parents view him, and how they do not want him to change. They have difficulty accepting that they cannot be a part of every change in Simon’s life anymore, like when he was a baby (250). After Simon has his first beer, he feels like he is a slightly different person and his first thought is that he does not want to tell his parents, in fear that they will make a big deal out of it (54). He is not afraid they will be angry, rather he knows they will be too interested. He mentions that every time he is dating someone new, his parents make it feel like a “coming out moment” (55). Knowing that every little change about him affects the way people view him, makes Simon worry he will never be able to stop “coming out”. Simon also worries about telling his best friends he is gay, as he is afraid that they will no longer recognise him as who they thought he was, and if they would not, he would no longer recognise himself (133). His sense of identity

is therefore deeply tied to other people's perception of him. This may also be part of the reason he is unwilling to tell his parents about his sexuality, as this could lead to them discussing how he has changed and make him feel like he has lost his sense of self. Right before coming out to his parents, Simon pours himself some coffee, which catches his mother's attention because he had never drunk coffee in front of her before. Simon describes this moment as him trying to escape the box his parents have put him in and feeling as though they slam the lid down every time he tries to open it (162). This categorising of people is depicted as something that is harmful, and that keeps people from being who they are. Coming out as a coffee-drinker and as a queer person are similar experiences in Simon's mind, as they are both part of his changing identity.

The way identity is approached in this novel reflects how everyone's identity changes throughout their lives. Albertalli's portrayal of coming out may appear to demean the importance of sexuality to one's identity. However, by highlighting other parts of Simon's identity, Albertalli confronts the reader with the extent to which sexuality is seen as a key factor in one's identity. Why should sexual preference play a bigger role in how society judges a person than other aspects of our daily routines? Simon's way of viewing every change in his identity as a coming out moment shows how people ought to accept identities cannot remain the same forever and that identities will vary. This will not only help readers understand how to accept someone with a queer identity, it will make them realise there is more to a queer person's identity than being queer.

### 3.2: Performing Gender and Sexuality in *Simon Vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*

Throughout the novel, there are multiple instances that bear similarity towards Wekker's description of denial of oppression. Wekker describes the way Dutch people often rely on a certain sense of irony in order to pass racist jokes as non-racist (34). The people involved in

the conversation will recognise the Netherlands as non-racist and will therefore not find any such comments inappropriate. Although the story takes place in North America, this pattern of behaviour is visible in *Simon V.s the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, through Simon's relationship with his father. It is established in the novel that Simon's parents would not be opposed to him being homosexual (160). Yet Simon's father does repeatedly make Simon feel uncomfortable with his sexuality. Very early on in the novel, Simon and his family are watching a tv-programme when Simon's dad comments on the sexuality of one of the contestants. He uses descriptions such as "one-man Pride Parade" and "eternal flame" (24). This establishes him as a character that might not accept Simon's sexuality, making coming out even harder for Simon. Simon's dad assumes everyone will know he is not homophobic, and that therefore it is not wrong to make a joke like that. Simon is left to figure out whether his dad is actually hostile towards gay men or if he is just trying to annoy his children. This scene is important, as it shows the readers of this book that comments such as these hurt the people around them. Even if the commenter assumes people know they do not mean it, this scene proves that the comments might still be perceived as offensive.

Although Simon's father continues to make homophobic comments, eventually there is a positive resolution to this. When Simon decides to come out to his parents, he starts by saying there is something he has to tell them. His dad immediately starts guessing: "You're gay. You got someone pregnant. *You're pregnant.*" (163). Simon goes along with the joke at first, but then looks his father in the eye and says he really is gay. Although his mother and sisters all react positively, his dad asks him if one of his former girlfriends "turned [him] off women" (164). This reaction is immediately rejected by Simon's sister Alice, who calls her father's words "heterosexist comments" (164). Simon's dad defends himself by saying it is okay to make those jokes, because "Simon knows we love him" (164). To Simon, the reaction is not unexpected, as he is by now accustomed to his father's tendency to turn everything into

a joke. Yet the comments exhaust and hurt him. This becomes evident in the third and final instance that discusses homophobic jokes. Simon comes back from a party drunk, and confronts his dad about his behaviour. He talks about “that awkward moment when you realize you’ve been making gay jokes in front of your gay kid for the last seventeen years” (238). At first his father does not really react, but a few days later he sits Simon down and apologises (247). At this point, he has realised his attitude towards the LGBTQIA+ community was actively preventing Simon from feeling comfortable around him and coming out to the family. Simon tries to shrug it off, but his father reassures him he loves him, and that he is proud of his son for coming out. This resolution to the subplot of Simon’s parents’ acceptance is something that is especially vital to Dutch young adults. Jokes such as these can be seen as a form of microaggression. Microaggression can be defined as “subtle, often unconscious forms of discrimination against historically marginalized groups” (Nadal et al. 488). Nadal et al. argue that these microaggressions are often performed by a person who believes they hold no biases and do not “participate in discriminatory behavior” (488). Nadal et al. point out that “microaggressions detrimentally impact the mental health of members of marginalized social groups”, resulting in psychological issues such as low self-esteem, symptoms of depression, and substance abuse (489). Therefore, comments such as the ones Simon’s father makes can be harmful to the well-being of a queer person, even if the intention was not to harm that person. Besides showing that homophobic comments are not to be used as a joke, the sub-plot of Simon’s father’s comments also shows how to properly apologise to the person that has been hurt. Simon’s father does not merely say sorry, he stresses his love for his son and compliments his bravery for coming out. Therefore, *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* could, to some extent, address and change the denial of oppression through jokes as theorized by Wekker, especially if this theme is pointed out and discussed in a classroom setting.

Another theme in *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* that has the potential for creating a positive change in Dutch attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community, is the theme of gender performativity. The way gender is performed is discussed in several instances in the novel. Furthermore, Simon has to figure out his sexual identity performance, which is related to the way he views gender. According to Judith Butler, feminist theories have disputed the notion that gender cannot be distinguished from sex (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520). Butler builds this argument on theory by Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and argues that the body is an “historical situation rather than a natural fact” (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 520). This does not deny the fact that certain bodies look a certain way, or have certain features, it merely means that bodies have cultural meaning. Cultural meaning can be understood as the significance given to bodies by society, as the aspects we associate with a body that are not discernible in a physical sense. The concept of cultural meaning can mean as gender, the behaviour that is associated with being a specific gender. Butler also argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 519). This notion of gender constitution through repetition is mentioned again in Butler’s book *Bodies That Matter* (177). Butler argues that we learn to present ourselves as a certain gender through the ‘citing’ of social norms (177). We are taught that pink is a colour we associate with women, through events such as gender reveal parties, or coloured clothing. Therefore, a girl might want to wear pink dresses, and be reluctant to wear blue because she’s seen that blue signifies ‘boy’.

However, Butler argues we can never quite approximate the gender norms that are presented to us (*Bodies That Matter* 176). Due to this lack of complete approximation, gender norms change over time. The gender we present ourselves as through our behaviour,

appearance, and speech is something we learn from society around us, and we often perform it unconsciously. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall argue that performance is doing something in a certain way to specify you are part of a certain group (380). Although they are specifically talking about language, such as using a specific accent or incorporating slang in your speech to identify yourself as part of a young generation, this can also be applied to gender performance. Butler gives an example of this: saying “it’s a girl” when your female child is born, is performative in the same way as a minister stating “I pronounce you ‘man and wife’” (*Bodies That Matter* 176). Therefore, gender performance is something we do, whether consciously or not, to signify the gender we associate with ourselves.

We can see this gender performance in *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* in multiple instances. There are two moments in the book that discuss men wearing dresses. The first time this happens, it is Simon explaining his history of Halloween costumes; when he was little, he would opt to wear a dress as a costume (35). This is framed as something that he considered hilarious, up until he starts to find it embarrassing (36). This positions Simon as someone who is aware of the way his clothing choices can be coded as a certain gender. The second time men wear dresses in this book is ‘gender bender’ day at Simon’s High School. Simon notes that he is not a fan of the day, although he does not specify his reasons at first (63). However, a few pages later he admits it is because he is afraid people will realise he is gay (65). He realises being feminine is stereotypically associated with gay men, but not participating would mean his friends would ask questions. Thus, Simon decides to only participate in a minimal way, especially compared to his three male friends who are all wearing cheerleading costumes (64). When discussing these friends, Simon points out that “they feel secure enough in their masculinity that they don’t care” about wearing feminine clothes; but then he does immediately observe that he feels this way as well (65). He notes that “being secure in your masculinity isn’t the same as being straight” (65). However self-



conscious Simon may be that dressing feminine or refusing to dress feminine might alert people of his sexuality, he also makes the point that gender performance and sexuality are not necessarily linked. Furthermore, Simon's friend Leah also makes a statement about gender in this situation. She is dressed *extra* feminine for 'gender bender' day, which is her way of showing that gender performance does not boil down to two categories of gender, and that the opposite of super feminine is not necessarily male (65). Leah, although identifying as female, can still perform feminine *drag* as a form of gender-bending. These few pages in the novel may be relatively insignificant to the plot, but it is significant to the readers, as they will get a more nuanced depiction of what gender performance could entail. It also breaks the stereotype of gay men wanting to be feminine, as Simon shows that this is not necessarily true.

The notion of gender and sexuality as something that is performed and therefore visible is brought up again when Simon comes out to his friend Abby. When he gathers his courage to tell Abby he is gay, she meets him with acceptance and love, telling him she is "honoured" that she is the first person he tells (124). The conversation that follows is interesting to analyse in light of sexuality performance:

"Are you surprised?" I say.

"No." She looks at me directly. Lit only by streetlights, Abby's eyes are almost all pupil, edged thinly with brown.

"You knew?"

"No, not at all."

"But you're not surprised?"

"Do you want me to be surprised?" She looks nervous.

"I don't know," I say. (125)

Simon wonders here whether there was something about him that Abby could have perceived already, a reason for her to know he was gay before he told her. She ensures him that she did

not know, yet she does not find the concept of Simon as a gay man unbelievable. Essentially, Simon is asking about his sexuality performance. He is asking whether his sexuality had always been noticeable and visible, if he had distinguished himself from his straight friends through his behaviour or clothing choices.

In the movie adaptation of this novel, a character was created specially to be juxtaposed with Simon's sexuality performance. This character, Ethan, performs his sexuality in a more stereotypical way: he is fashionable and feminine, has chin-length hair and is most often seen with a group of female friends. When he is shown coming out to his friends, it is obvious they had seen this coming (00:20:07-27). Ethan's character is supposed to point out the fact that Simon can easily pass as straight, and that no one was expecting him to be gay judged by his gender and sexuality performance. However, the moment between Abby and Simon shows that you don't need to perform your sexuality in a stereotypical way in order to be recognised as such. Although Simon does not perform his sexuality in the way Ethan does, Abby has no issues seeing Simon as a gay person because she knows the way he acts and dresses do not amount to his sexual preference.

To Simon in the novel, his sexuality is linked to his gender performance to a certain extent, as becomes obvious when he apologises to his father for not being much of a boy (250). Although his conversation with Abby shows that Simon is not necessarily recognisable as gay in terms of his appearance, he shows here that he does consider the possibility that being gay makes him less of a boy. His statement is immediately refuted by his father, who says he is an "awesome boy", and that he is "like a ninja" (250). The stress on the concept of a ninja, something associated with the interests of young (fight-obsessed) boys, is Simon's father's way of showing he is no less of a boy due to being gay. The instances of discussion on gender and sexuality performance can help young adults in recognising that the way someone presents themselves does not necessarily point towards a certain gender or sexuality.

Simon may not be a stereotypical gay man, yet the content of this novel will prove to any reader that Simon is queer, and that therefore gender and sexuality are not always immediately visible. *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* provides its readers with a more nuanced view of the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

### 3.3: Leah and Victor's Perspectives

As previously mentioned, *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* was adapted into a movie called *Love, Simon*, which was enough of a success to warrant a spin-off series called *Love Victor*. Furthermore, the novel was followed by two novels set in the same place and a novella that collects emails of Simon and his friends at college. The second novel in the series, *Leah on the Offbeat*, is set one schoolyear after the first novel and is narrated by Simon's best friend Leah. Both this novel and the series provide additional representation that the original novel did not offer. In Leah's novel, she explains she is bisexual and has feelings for her friend Abby. However, she has yet to come out to anyone except her mother. In *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Simon argues that it is easier for girls to be gay (21). He says this in response to homophobic acts, and argues that girls have to deal with less violence and name-calling, and more with fetishizing. This aligns with the research done by Houthuijs, who argues that women in same-sex relationships often deal with greater sexualisation (Houthuijs). Leah addresses this issue in her novel as well. At a party, Leah has a deep conversation with Abby in the bathroom, and they come out holding hands (88). They are spotted by Garrett, who is shown throughout the story to have a crush on Leah. Garrett immediately gets excited and asks the girls to go back in with him, even when they tell him he misinterpreted the situation. This moment shows how some men find it exciting when they see two girls together, and how girls are sexualised even when they have not confirmed their sexuality. It positions women as objects for men's pleasure, as in this situation the man sees their sexuality

as an opportunity for his own pleasure. To this extent, Simon's statement holds true.

However, Leah's perspective shows that she also struggles with being LGBTQIA+, just like Simon. One of the aspects of bisexuality Leah points out is that some people think it is easier to be bisexual because you can choose to be in a relationship with someone of the opposite gender. Leah notes it would be a lot less trouble if she decided to date Garrett but knows she cannot choose to feel the same way about him as she feels about Abby (226). Later in the novel, Leah makes the point that she could pass for a straight girl (301). She and Abby could be holding hands and kissing each other's cheeks, but girls who are merely friends show this behaviour as well, meaning it would not necessarily stand out as queer. This complicates Leah's sexuality, as she could be excluded from the LGBTQIA+ community due to passing as straight. Therefore, Leah's perspective in *Leah on the Offbeat* provides additional information and representation to the LGBTQIA+ community, offering a representation of bisexuality that was not in *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

*Love, Victor* expands upon the amount of representation in *Love, Simon* in multiple ways. The series did reasonably well in the Netherlands. The demand for the show was "1.9 times the demand of the average tv series in the Netherlands" (Parrot Analytics). Moreover, 64.1 % of all shows accessible in the Netherlands are watched the same or more. Therefore, the show is on the upper side of average. Furthermore, it was watched a lot more in the Netherlands than most romantic comedies were (Parrot Analytics). The show centres around Victor, a teenage boy who has recently moved to Creekwood and goes to the same school Simon used to go to (Aptaker & Berger). He struggles with his crush on a classmate, and his relationship to his family. The series points out that not everyone's family is bound to be as accepting as Simon's. It shows Victor struggling with his gaining acceptance from his parents and his grandparents, who are shown to be slightly homophobic. This is an important issue to address, as both Simon and Leah have very little problems coming out to their parents. Both

of them know they would be accepted no matter what, which is not the reality for a lot of teenagers coming out to their parents. Furthermore, *Love, Victor* discusses the fact that in some situations, it is easier to pretend to be someone you are not, due to the way this will allow you to blend in with the people around you and avoid judgement. Victor decides to try to date a girl, claiming he is attempting to figure out his sexuality, but denies the fact his feelings for his friend Benji are stronger than his feelings for his girlfriend. Therefore, *Love, Victor* offers a more complicated experience of being LGBTQIA+ as an American teenager, especially seeing as Victor is not white, like Simon and Leah. These more diverse representations can offer Dutch young adults the opportunity to learn about and understand different identities.

#### 3.4: Simon in the Netherlands

*Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* was translated into Dutch by Astrid Staartjes and published by Blossom Books in the Netherlands in 2016. It can be gleaned from the reviews of this translation on Dutch literature blogs that the novel improved LGBTQIA+ acceptance amongst its readers. Many reviews of the Dutch translation comment upon the queer themes of the novel, though of course this is inevitable when discussing this book. What is often highlighted in regard to this novel is the importance of diversity (Junes, Vivian, Edriënne). Timothy Junes points out that there are not many coming of age stories with a homoromantic plot (Junes). Edriënne highlights the importance of diversity in characters, arguing that it is not as interesting to see the same sort of characters in every piece of literature, and that *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* offers a good reprieve from this (Edriënne). Furthermore, some reviews mention the importance of reading from a queer perspective (Edriënne, Hoefmans, Marlies). These reviewers note their surprise at how easy it was for them to adapt to this new perspective, and how they believe such stories help people in understanding LGBTQIA+

individuals. Marlies argues that it is vital that the main character of this novel is a teenager, as this makes it easier for young adults to connect to this character, and for them to discuss the novel and its queerness (Marlies). These reviews show that Dutch people are noticing the way this novel influenced them and could therefore influence the Netherlands. They are picking up on the messages that could be taken from the novel, although the format of a review does not really allow them to go into depth. However, it can be gathered from these responses to *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, that this novel could positively influence Dutch attitudes towards the LGTBQIA+ community, perhaps especially in a classroom setting where there is ample space to discuss the details and messages of this novel.

#### Chapter 4: The T is not Silent: Transgender Representation in *Felix Ever After*

Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After* depicts the life of transgender teenager Felix, and his story teaches Young Adult audiences about issues that transgender people face, intersectionality, and the artificiality gender. *Felix Ever After* is set during the summer, when Felix is attending an art program at his summer school. Felix goes to school one day to find an art piece on display with old pictures of him before he transitioned, which are captioned with his deadname. Whilst attempting to discover who did this, Felix re-evaluates the relationship he has with his friends and how they treat his gender. The book also details his strained relationship with his father, who has a hard time accepting Felix for who he is, and his mother, who left the family a long time ago and therefore does not know about Felix' gender identity. This book is one of few mainstream YA novels to have a transgender person as the main character, which could provide a significant opportunity for exploring this part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Furthermore, through Felix' character, young adults can get acquainted with the concept of intersectionality and become aware of gender stereotypes.

##### 4.1: The Importance of Transgender Representation

Transgender representation in YA literature can play a vital role in creating a more open attitude towards gender and making transgender identities visible and normalised. Lal Zimman argues there is a vital difference between the experiences of trans people and people who are part of the LGTBQIA+ community due to their sexual preference (54). He states that "queer organizations and scholars alike often treat sexual orientation and gender identity as analogous" (54). Thus, even within the LGBTQIA+ community, transgender issues are grouped together with sexuality issues, when trans people differ from society's norm due to gender, not sexuality. Zimman argues that the coming out genre, specifically coming out as transgender, contests "the ideologies that sustain the very marginalization and

denaturalization of queer identities that makes coming out necessary in the first place” (75). Linda Parsons agrees with this, arguing that providing people with literature that has transgender representation will help them open their minds (939). Parsons’ research detailed teachers who read several books with transgender characters and concludes that reading about transgender people fostered empathy (934). It made the teachers, most of whom said they had never met a trans person before, think they would be more sensitive to trans people’s issues if they were to meet a trans person one day (942). Therefore, literature with trans themes helps people empathize with and learn about the transgender community.

*Felix Ever After* also shows, within its own storyline, how trans-themed literature can have positive effects on people. Felix realises he is a boy after reading a book about a transgender boy (25). He describes this experience as a lightbulb going on (25). Furthermore, Felix describes the way a *lack* of representation can affect a person. He discusses how people who fall in love in movies are, more often than not, white heteronormative couples (219). Because of that, Felix mentions that it is difficult for him to imagine someone falling in love with him and to believe he deserves “the kind of love you see in movies” (219). Therefore, transgender representation in YA books, the sort that Felix reads as well, could help bridge this gap.

However, Parsons brings up the question of whether the transgender representation should come in the form of the narrator being trans or one of the other characters. She argues that when the main character is cisgender, it is easier for cisgender readers to relate to them, perhaps making them more invested in the book and more likely to pick up on the message (937). On the other hand, this privileges cisgender characters and alienates the trans character. Parsons also argues that the book need not necessarily end with the trans character transitioning to an opposite sex, as this reinforces gender binaries and provides no space for non-binary or other gender non-conforming people (937). Furthermore, Parsons notes that



books that focus solely on violence against transgender persons will “portray the transgender characters as victims of oppression rather than as people living satisfying lives” (936).

Including non-violent themes and plots would help readers realise that trans people live lives much like their own.

*Felix Ever After* provides its readers with an insightful representation of transsexuality, both positive and negative. Callender shows on multiple occasions that there are certain things Felix struggles with as a trans person. This is a very essential part of the plot, as throughout the novel Felix attempts to identify the person who made a gallery installation of Felix’ Instagram pictures from before he transitioned (31). One of the first hardships Felix goes through is the realisation that, after the gallery, people around him now know his deadname and what he looked like before transitioning. Therefore, the pictures that are put up make him feel like he cannot escape his past identity and gender. Furthermore, Felix’ narration often includes facts about transsexuality that serve to enlighten the reader when it comes to the difficulties trans people face. For instance, Felix’ father has a hard time accepting him, especially letting go of the image he has of his ‘daughter’ (330). He is shown to be openminded enough to allow Felix to transition, regardless of the fact it is incredibly difficult for him to pay for it (25). This confuses Felix, as his father still refuses to say his name, and often misgenders and deadnames him (22). Felix even says that, on the nights his father has been drinking, he says that Felix will always be his “little girl” (22).

Felix’ father eventually apologises for his delay in accepting Felix and for how this must have been frustrating, but underscores his love for his son (330). This interaction is important, because it deals with the complicated way identity is constructed, and how one’s identity may diverge from but still feel defined by the way others view them. Therefore, coming out as transgender means the people around you must redraw the picture of you they have in their minds, and *Felix Ever After* shows that this is no easy process.

Another way in which the challenges of being trans are highlighted is when Felix recalls statistics or facts about the transgender community and experience in his narration. For instance, when discussing his own transition, Felix points out that he was lucky to get to change his body at all (24). He discusses that not everyone can start hormone treatment, and that paying for this treatment and top surgery can be incredibly expensive. He explains his father had to do a lot of paperwork and assess Felix' health insurance, whilst still paying a lot of money himself (25). Furthermore, when Felix starts to get offensive messages from someone who attacks Felix' gender identity, he discusses the stark reality of transgender people in the USA: being erased from politics, being refused proper healthcare, not being allowed to use the right bathroom, teenagers being thrown out of their parents' house for being trans, and adults losing their jobs (124). Felix explains that these phenomena come down to the fact that trans people's life expectancy is in their early thirties. Felix also points out that although he's always been aware of these facts, they felt distant until he himself became the victim of hate messages (125). Thus, *Felix Ever After* also has a didactic function, in that it informs its readers about the contemporary situation of trans people in America. The facts of this situation are given in a way that is interesting to the readers, seeing as they pertain to the main character and this may help them connect transgender issues as presented through the novel to the world around them.

*Felix Ever After* also shows how transgender people, especially those that transfer from female to male, are often argued to be misogynistic by transphobic people (particularly by TERFs, or "trans-exclusionary radical feminists"). Moreover, trans women are often erased from LGBTQIA+ history. Felix does not consider many of the people he talks to during the book his friends, except for Ezra and later Leah. But one of the people he is around most is Marisol, whom Felix used to date and still feels awkward toward. When remembering how things ended between them, Felix mentions how Marisol called him a "misogynist" for

transitioning (30). Felix was shocked and did not know how to respond apart from asking why she would call him that. To this Marisol says: “you deciding to be a guy instead of a girl feels inherently misogynistic”, adding that “you can’t be a feminist and decide you don’t want to be a woman anymore” (30). To Marisol, transsexuality, or at least transitioning, is a choice. Felix knows he never decided his gender, only followed what felt right, but there is a part of him that internalises Marisol’s words and believes them (30). As Marisol believes transsexuality to be a choice, she cannot comprehend the notion of not wanting to be female, as to her this is intrinsically misogynistic. She doesn’t understand Felix was never a woman to begin with. Eventually Marisol is challenged on her opinions, and the general consensus in their friend group is that she is wrong, showing the reader that Marisol’s interpretation of transsexuality is not one they should replicate (206). Misogyny related to transsexuality is brought up again when Felix goes to a LGBTQIA+ support group and the group leader Bex brings up the way transgender identities, especially those of transgender women of colour, tend to be erased even within the LGBTQIA+ community. Bex brings to attention the way other queer people forget the Stonewall Riots were led by transgender women of colour, arguing that it is hard to be proud of who you are when even your own community does not want you to exist (273). Another support group attendee, Sarah, argues that cis white men who are gay are “one identity away from what they’d consider *normal*”, and that therefore LGBTQIA+ women are often pushed to the side-lines (273). *Felix Ever After* complicates transsexuality by relating it to gender, showing that there are further implications of being trans beyond being judged for not identifying with the gender you were given at birth.

*Felix Ever After* is the type of YA book that is important for adolescents to read, as it does not merely describe the struggle of transgender people, but it also teaches adolescents in general how to stand up to transphobic people and how to support their transgender friends. Throughout the novel, Felix’ best friend Ezra is his biggest supporter. Not only do they spend

a lot of time together, Ezra is constantly ensuring Felix does not internalise transphobia and letting no one get away with treating Felix disrespectfully. The former happens quite subtly, for instance when Felix talks about questioning his identity even after coming out as trans and notes that he “put [his] dad through so much” (105). Ezra immediately interrupts him to let him know he did not cause the bad reaction he got, therefore ensuring Felix does not blame himself for his father’s reaction to his identity. This is echoed later in the book when Felix, by himself, realises it is not his fault if his friends get angry with other friends who make transphobic comments (206). Therefore, it is shown that Ezra’s support of Felix pays off, that it helps him realise he is not to blame for other people’s behaviour toward him. Furthermore, Ezra and Leah both call people out when they imply there is something wrong with Felix due to his skin colour, gender identity, or sexuality. One instance of this is when their classmate James says he thinks Felix is “weird” (157). James tries to argue there is nothing wrong with him finding Felix weird, but Leah shuts him down by asking if he’d think the same thing if he were “white and straight and cis” (158). She argues people like James decide they dislike anyone with a diverse gender identity or sexuality and get defensive when called out on it. Furthermore, Leah also points out the way people like James will make jokes about the LGBTQIA+ community, pretending as though it is a joke whilst giving queer people around him the idea that he means what he says (159). When Felix finally opens up about Marisol calling him a misogynist, Ezra challenges her, and Felix mentions Leah is still arguing with her once Ezra and Felix leave (207-8). Leah and Ezra are vital characters, not merely to the plot, but to the reader’s interpretation of the reality of transsexuality in this world. Ezra and Leah show the reader what to do if someone starts to make transphobic comments in front of them. Therefore, *Felix Ever After* teaches trans people that they are not to blame for transphobia, and it teaches straight or cisgender people how to be an ally to the transgender part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

#### 4.2: Assigning Labels in *Felix Ever After*

As a result of having a transgender protagonist, *Felix Ever After* depicts the assigning of gender in society and spotlights an interesting debate around whether gender roles ought to be destroyed or validated. Felix' transgender realisation was related to the way he felt about his body and how he was forced to present his gender. Felix states that when he started figuring out his identity, he did not want to wear dresses or play with dolls (23). However, he admits he has no problem with these objects themselves, rather he disliked that they were "things society had assigned to girls" and being forced "into the role of *girl*" felt wrong to him (23). When discussing dreaming of a different body as a child, Felix notes he dreamt of "the kind of body society says belongs to men" (23). To Felix, his clothing, toys, and body are things that are gendered. This is similar to how Butler describes gender; Felix echoes Butler's notion of bodies having cultural meaning, by noting that certain bodies are associated with maleness. Felix also claims dresses and dolls are assigned to girls, therefore showing his awareness of the artificial aspects of gender. Butler's concept of 'citing' gender norms in order to show your gender is something that is both restricting and freeing to Felix. He does not like that the body he was born in signifies he is expected to like objects such as dresses and dolls, but he also knows that changing his body means escaping from those gender norms and changing the expectations that come with them. If he transitions, people might interpret his body as his real gender, male.

*Felix Ever After* also discusses sexuality and the question of whether labels are necessary to define one's sexual identity. When talking to his friend group, Felix becomes aware that every person present is part of the LGBTQIA+ community (79). They all find a sense of comfort in this, because of their bad experiences being around homophobic straight people. The conversation that follows is an interesting one to analyse in light of sexuality and

identity labels. Ezra's boyfriend Austin brings forward the fact that some straight people believe that TV shows with queer characters are making people gay (80). This idea is immediately disputed by several characters. Austen states that the opposite is, in fact, true: "It's like we're all brainwashed from the time we're babies to think that we have to be straight" (80). Marisol adds to this by noting that straight people enforce sexuality on young children, often in the form of speculating whether two toddlers of opposite genders will get married later in life (80). This discussion is similar to Butler's notion of citing gender: in a way people also cite sexuality, as they are taught from a young age that heterosexuality is the norm from which they should not deviate. They are taught to interpret the world around them through a heteronormative lens. Breaking free of such a way of citing the world leads to outrage, in the same way a man wearing a dress does.

*Felix Ever After* presents several debates on the necessity of labels. When Ezra is asked about his sexuality, he explains he does not care much for labels (81). To him they feel limiting, as putting himself in one category could mean he would never explore other options. Ezra wonders whether labels would still be necessary if there were no "straight people, no violence or abuse or homophobia" (81). Therefore, Ezra believes people use labels because there is a norm from which to deviate and he argues that if there were no norm and no one using violence to uphold that norm, maybe people would not feel the need to categorise themselves. However, both Leah and Ezra admit that labels can be important. Leah argues labels "connect us" and help "create community" (81). This discussion on whether labels are necessary is continued in Felix' LGBTQIA+ support group (183-4). The issue on the table is whether traditional gender roles are more harmful than they can be helpful. One woman, Sarah, argues traditional gender roles are harmful because not everyone can live up to them, as they limit a gender to a certain set of expectations. However, Zelda points out that to some people, it is easier to identify themselves through such roles. Wally then argues that a decision

must be made on what matters more, “validation through traditional gender roles, or the destruction of those roles” (183). If traditional gender roles lead to phenomena such as the patriarchy and misogyny, it could be argued there should be no gender at all. However, gender is a vital part of identity for some people. For transgender people, it may be important to present themselves as a certain gender in order to be accepted and recognised as such. To others, gender roles may be restricting. Eventually the issue is resolved by Tom, a character that is noted to hold a lot of respect in the room, as he argues there is no need for an all-encompassing answer, and that people ought to try not to judge each other too much, especially within the LGBTQIA+ community (183-4). There is variety in the queer community, and though some may want to use labels to understand who they are, others may wish to be seen as an individual without being categorised.

Near the end of the novel, Felix attempts to deconstruct gender roles without the judgement Tom was discussing. He is sat in a café and is drawing the people around him when he realises he is assuming the gender of his subjects, as any of them may be trans, or non-binary, or not have a label at all (272). Instead of thinking about ‘man’ or ‘woman’, Felix starts to describe the visual aspects of the people he is drawing. Therefore, he describes a person with wrinkles, someone with green hair, a blazer or braces. Felix describes this experience as really looking at his subjects, instead of “seeing who I assume them to be” (272). In this moment, Callender gives the reader vital insight into how to approach gender identity, especially that of strangers. Through this novel, the reader learns not to judge people too harshly, and not to assume anything about anyone. This teaches readers to treat others with respect, regardless of gender identity.

### 4.3: Intersectional Identities in *Felix Ever After*

Felix' life is influenced by the fact he is a part of multiple minorities, something that influences the way he views himself and the way his story progresses. Although Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, the general concept had been considered and discussed before. For instance, Sojourner Truth, in her famous speech 'Ain't I a Woman', discussed the way white men would argue women "need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches" (Truth). However, as Truth points out, black women were not treated as such. This shows that there is a distinction made in society between white women and black women, even when race is not mentioned in an argument. Crenshaw argues that anti-discrimination based on race or gender often focusses on those that are privileged in every way except for their race or gender (65). Therefore, these movements focus on the most privileged of the marginalised, such as cis-het black men or cis-het white women. People who are a part of multiple minorities at once, such as black women, are often left out of this discourse. However, Crenshaw argues it is vital to examine black women as a separate group of people from black men or white women, due to the way their specific experience differs from that of the latter two groups (58). Crenshaw stresses the importance of not grouping all women or black people together, as this would inevitably lead to even more disparities between marginalised people. She argues that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (58). Notably, Crenshaw mentions that black women do not experience the "sum or racism and sexism", but rather face a different oppression altogether and that this oppression ought to be taken into account when discussing black women's issues (58). Felix' story needs to be analysed through an intersectional lens as well. Felix is black, trans, gay,



and poor, and these multiple minorities shape the way his story progresses and the way his identity is formed.

Felix appears to be aware of how his being a part of multiple minorities affects the type of oppression he faces, although he does not mention how his identity is not the sum of other oppressions. He notes the similar way people react to him being trans and him being black (144). In both cases, people judge or hate Felix without knowing him, based only on one aspect of his identity that he cannot change about himself. Felix appears to see these aspects of his identity as separate identities that make up who he is as a person. He notes that “every identity” he has makes him more different from everyone else (219). This specific wording suggests that to him, being black, being gay, and being trans are all separate experiences. This differs from Crenshaw’s understanding of intersectionality, as she specifically argues that someone who is a part of multiple minorities does not experience oppression as the sum of several oppressions, but rather a new form of oppression in itself (58). When discussing the feeling that he will never experience what it is like to be loved, Felix notes that it feels as though he has “one marginalization too many” (219-220). Therefore, he is aware of the way falling into multiple minorities affects his life, although he does not point out the way a new type of oppression is formed because of it.

Seeing intersectionality in YA novels like these can teach teenagers about the way oppression works, and it is beneficial to both hetero and non-hetero students. Something Felix points out in *Felix Ever After* is that sometimes people live in a “bubble of privilege” that is filled with people who are exactly like them (323). This can be true for people who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and for those who are not. If white, cis, hetero people never interact with or learn about people who are different from them, they will never escape their bubble of privilege. However, people who are a part of one minority, for instance cis, white, gay men, similarly exist in such a bubble if they do not try to understand people with

intersectional identities. Felix argues that these people are scared of those who are different and therefore do not try to understand them (323). Felix notes they will never experience the world the way he does, in a more complex way.

#### 4.4: Felix' Place in Dutch Culture

*Felix Ever After* has not been translated into Dutch as of yet. However, there are some reviews on literature blogs of the untranslated book. Monisha argues that the novel depicts not only Felix' search for his identity, but that of all of the characters (Monisha "Boekrecensie: Felix Ever After"). She states that it is a story about labels and that the characters are all trying to see which labels fit, through their life experiences and learning from their mistakes. Livia Peeters and Paula both mention the importance of Felix as a black, queer, and transgender character (Peeters, Paula). Furthermore, they agree upon wanting a Dutch translation of the novel.

As became apparent through the 2019 Eurobarometer on Discrimination by the European Commission, transgender people are less accepted in Dutch society than cisgender people who identify as queer. The Netherlands was in ninth place in terms of discrimination of transgender people, whereas they were one of the most accepting countries when it came to homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual acceptance (European Commission). Furthermore, as Zimman argues, transgender people's issues are often grouped together with those of people with non-hetero sexual identities (54). Therefore, a LGBTQIA+ YA novel such as *Felix Ever After* could perhaps positively influence these numbers and create a specific understanding of the transgender community within the LGTBQIA+ community.

## Chapter 5: LGBTQIA+ Fanfiction in *Fangirl*

Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* depicts the life of Cather ("Cath"), a freshman in college who is navigating her relationship with her twin sister, her mental health, and her experiences writing fanfiction. Cath is allowed into an upper-level writing class, which is the one thing in university she is truly excited about. However, Cath gets into an argument with her teacher, Professor Piper, about whether fanfiction can be considered creative work. This leaves her to re-evaluate her writing and what she considers to be original work. To Cath, fanfiction is the only type of writing that is exciting and that she truly wants to engage in. Like many fanfiction writers in real life, Cath mostly writes LGBTQIA+ fanfiction. More specifically, she writes homosexual fanfiction, adding such representation in a pre-existing, popular novel that was otherwise lacking this. Fanfiction is a place where normative or mainstream YA literature can be queered, and it could play a role in teaching young adults about the LGBTQIA+ community.

### 5.1: Queering YA literature Through Fanfiction

Forms of fanfiction existed before the internet, but it flourished online in the early 2000s, particularly amongst teenage writers. Nathan Hynes argues the first instances of fanfiction can be considered people engaging with the *Star Trek* franchise from the 60s onward (Hynes). These stories were written and published in fan-made magazines, which meant the stories were limited to the resources and preferences of the editors of such magazines. Bronwen Thomas traces the origins of fanfiction to an even earlier period of time, namely to science fiction magazines in the 1920s and 1930s (1). Despite the different opinion on what can be called the earliest form of fanfiction, Thomas and Hynes agree that the internet played a crucial role in making it as popular as it is today. Thomas argues that "fanfiction remained a fairly underground and marginalized activity until the advent of digital technologies and the

World Wide Web” (2). Through the introduction of the internet, younger readers were now given the opportunity to engage with literature through fanfiction as well, as opposed to merely those adults with the opportunity to buy and/or write fan magazines.

Kerri Mathew and Devon Christopher Adams define fanfiction as fiction “based in the worlds created by the authors, but young fans extend, elaborate, or appropriate the text for their own purposes” (Mathew and Adams). They argue that young fanfiction writers often take their craft extremely serious, having made their own language for discussing it and creating online communities, awards, and rules. Mathew and Adams claim that fanfiction can result in young adults having a better understanding of the literature they are engaging with, stating that “fan fiction provides evidence that young people can not only read and respond to literature, and do so voluntarily, but can also craft their responses in sophisticated, polished writing” (Mathew and Adams). Therefore, fanfiction (“fanfic”) could be a useful tool in attempting to encourage as well as to examine how young adults engage with and analyse literature. This could be any type of literature, seeing as fanfiction is still written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century about classic material such as Jane Austen’s novels. Examples of these are the *Pride and Prejudice* fanfic *Character Study* by irislim, *Persuasion* fanfic *No Longer in Silence* by Intheblackholeoffandoms, and *Sense and Sensibility* fanfic *Four Weeks* by scarletseeker113 (irislim, Intheblackholeoffandoms, scarletseeker113). These stories were all written between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, 2021 and published on the website Archive of Our Own. This shows how actively people are still engaging with classic literature, but in a way that is entertaining and interesting to them in our modern age. Fanfiction could help teenagers to interact with many types of literature, both specifically written for them such as YA, or more classical literature.

With the lack of limitations on internet fanfiction came the opportunity for fanfiction writers to add representation to works of literature that were previously lacking diversity.

Hynes argues that “the internet provides these fan authors with a means of publication outside of the formal publishing process, meaning that there are significantly less limitations imposed on works of fanfiction” (Hynes). As Garcia points out, publishers of YA novels often do not allow writers to add LGBTQIA+ representation, for fear it will not sell well enough (87). The internet has websites such as Archive of Our Own and Fanfiction.net, which allow people to publish just about anything, as long as it conforms to certain community guidelines, such as only accessing adult content if you are 18 years or older, or not uploading content that is harmful to others (Archive of Our Own “Terms of Service”). Therefore, queer content can easily be uploaded to such websites, and those who feel their favourite books, shows, or movies are lacking in representation can create it themselves. A very integral part of fanfiction is altering the source content. This may be in the form of a different ending, a new couple, or a different universe altogether, but fanfiction will always deviate from the original literature’s author’s intent to a certain extent.

Queering a previously non-queer story is something that happens often. Hynes points out that on the website Archive of Our Own, which has a useful tagging system, of all tagged stories there are 42.6% tagged as male/male romance (Hynes). In comparison, 21.3% was tagged as there being no romantic relationship, and 15.4% was tagged as female/male romance (Hynes). Notably, female/female relationships are far less common, yet the large number of homosexual stories indicates the popularity of gay fanfiction. Thomas points out that works of fanfiction “provocatively play with the various elements of the storyworlds on which they are based” (7). She argues that slash fiction, fanfiction that portrays male/male relationships, are particularly known for “controversial transgressions” (8). Therefore, fanfiction writers have created an online community where queerness is the norm, not the deviation. This community differs from society as a whole, where being LGBTQIA+ is not normally accepted to the same extent. However, Hynes points out the way fanfiction could

transport its acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community to society as a whole. He states that “fan-authored works have the power to challenge societal norms such as heterosexuality, cisgenderism, and traditional masculinity” (Hynes). Although Hynes does not point to how this challenging works in detail, it can be ascertained from Mathew and Adams’ theory on fanfiction as a tool in the classroom that teenagers connect more to the material they are reading if they are writing fanfiction about it (Mathew and Adams). Similar to the way young adults may connect on more to YA literature as opposed to classical literature, writing fanfiction may allow young adults to comprehend the discussed material more thoroughly. This can be applied to the queer community, as writing LGBTQIA+ fanfiction could force teenagers in a position where they have to face what being queer means. It could help them see how underrepresented queer people are in most works of fiction, and make them think about what it would feel like to face the type of issues that LGBTQIA+ people often face. This could make them more openminded toward the queer community. Combined with the usefulness of using LGBTQIA+ YA literature to teach children, queer fanfiction may revolutionise teaching teenagers to be more accepting towards diverse identities.

### 5.2: Cath’s Representation of Queer Fanfiction Writers and the Originality Question

*Fangirl* is an example of the connection fanfiction writers have to literature and how they engage with it. It shows how fanfiction is often seen in society and to what extent it could be considered plagiarism. Cath is an avid reader, mostly of fantasy works, and she has been writing fanfiction for most of her teenage life. The novel takes place in 2012, but the snippets of fanfiction at the end of most chapters show that Cath has been writing fanfiction as early as 2006 (61). Therefore, Cath started writing somewhere around the age of twelve, which led her to major in English and take an advanced writing class. The novel shows how integral a part fanfiction has become in Cath’s life, how seriously she takes it. When her twin sister Wren

makes a mean comment about Simon and Baz, the characters Cath writes about most, Cath is shown to be very upset (67). To her, Simon and Baz are “untouchable”, the one thing Cath and her sister still agree upon (67). Cath writes fanfiction nearly every night, and dedicates a lot of her time to it (15). *Fangirl* gives some insight into how fanfiction communities work. Cath writes her stories about the fiction Simon Snow series, and it is mentioned that throughout the years she has become one of the most famous writers in the Simon Snow community (29). Not only does she have teenagers all over the United States reading her stories, she has become an international success. For instance, she mentions she is “weirdly popular in Japan” (29). On fanfiction websites such as Archive of Our Own, there are a plethora of nationalities and languages to be found. The filtering system that makes this website so easy to navigate has over a hundred different languages (Archive of Our Own “Search Works”). Therefore, *Fangirl* reflects just how many people interact with fanfiction, and how every show, book, or series that is being written about has its own community, where certain fanfiction writers are regarded as authors in their own right. This large number of people engaging with fanfiction is explained in the novel itself. At the end of one of the chapters, there is a fictional news article that argues that fans of books written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can have instant access to the fan communities through the internet. Therefore, as Hynes and Thomas argued as well, *Fangirl* explains to its readers that people from all over the world are brought together online through their shared love for literature.

*Fangirl* paints a certain picture of fanfiction writers; it shows what stereotypes about these writers exist and to what extent these may be true. When studying in the library, a girl sitting opposite Cath notices her Carry On, Simon T-shirt, depicting a scene from the fanfiction Cath is writing. The girl and Cath have an excited conversation about fanfiction, and how reading it can be like having “a secret life” (212). Cath surveys the other girl, noting that “she didn’t *look* like a creepy shut-in” (212). Therefore, Cath’s view on fanfiction readers

is quite negative: people who do not leave their room and interact with the world around them in a way considered normal. This view may be influenced by the fact that Cath fits these stereotypes. She prefers to stay inside and write instead of going out, she does not drink or smoke, she does not have many friends, and she sometimes prefers to be with fictional characters instead of real people. In Cath's case, this is partially due to the fact that she has mental health issues that make it difficult for her to interact with people. When talking to her friend Levi about what fanfiction is and what it means to her, she notes her relief and excitement of being able to talk to someone about it (127). She states most people who find out about it think she is "a freak and a nerd and a pervert" (127). Thus, *Fangirl* depicts people in the fanfiction community as anti-social and a little weird, an image that Cath to a certain extent fits in with, but the girl in the library proves to the readers that not everyone who likes fanfiction is like Cath.

One of the questions posed in *Fangirl* is that of the originality of fanfiction. As Hynes points out, fanfiction is often seen as unskilled and unoriginal work, seeing as it is based on someone else's work (Hynes). Hynes argues this may be due to the fact that mostly women write fanfiction, stating there is a "historical tendency to reject things that women are interested in" (Hynes). In *Fangirl*, Cath struggles with writing her own fiction, as she is more interested in exploring the same universe she has always written about. Professor Piper, who teaches the advanced writing class Cath takes, asks her to stay back after class one day and explains her latest assignment, a piece of fanfiction that Cath was really proud of, is plagiarism (109). Cath does not understand, arguing that although she does not own the characters, it is not illegal for her to write about them as long as she does not try to sell her story (109-10). Professor Piper does not relent, and Cath is sent home with a warning, something that stays with her for a while. Later, when talking to Levi, Cath again tries to argue fanfiction is not plagiarism (128). Levi agrees with Cath to a certain extent, but also



notes that Cath should not have handed in fanfiction in a fiction writing class, making a distinction between the two. The question of whether fanfiction could be considered the author's own work is not fully answered in the novel, although perhaps Levi approximates an answer. Perhaps fanfiction is different from fiction to a certain extent, seeing as it originates from an existing piece of fiction, but it is still the fanfiction writer's own story. The difference between the fanfiction and the original story are what makes it original, and these differences are important because they can enrich the original work.

One aspect of fanfiction that is highlighted throughout the novel is that of queering the piece of literature a fanfiction is based on, which is something that happens quite a lot in the fanfiction community. The concept of queering can be understood as situating oneself or something in opposition with heteronormativity. Lee Edelman argues that the value of queerness "lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself" (18). Society views heterosexuality as the norm, the persisting reality. Therefore, "to queer" is to oppose the heteronormativity that is viewed as reality. In literature, queering can mean searching for heteronormativity or gender binaries, and analysing them in a more diverse light. To Cath, queering means taking a text and inserting opposition in the form of homosexuality.

Cath argues most people think queer fanfiction is dirty, and whenever she talks about it she expects people to react badly. Reagan, Cath's roommate, confirms this belief when she notices Cath's "*gay* homemade Simon Snow Posters" (48). When Cath reveals she writes queer fanfiction, Reagan does not want to talk about it, stating that "it's already hard enough to make eye contact with you" (48). When Cath discusses her fanfiction with Levi, he keeps pointing out that her stories are queer, something which he finds "distracting" (127). As Cath is creating a story with her writing partner Nick, she decides to name their narrator after him

and make him gay (57). She notes how he “got over the gay thing pretty much immediately”, something for which she praises him (57). Yet Nick is surprised, and he and Cath both laugh about it. All three of these examples show how queering a story is often perceived: as something funny, distracting, or weird. Yet within the fanfiction community, queering the original source material happens far more often, as can be gleaned from Hynes’ numbers on the website Archive of Our Own (Hynes). Therefore, queering stories is normalised in the fanfiction community, something which *Fangirl* shows fanfiction readers sometimes forget about. Cath notes that sometimes when she reads queer fanfiction, she forgets that her two favourite characters were not in love in the original novel (213). The space that is created for queer stories in online fanfiction does not exist in real life. This is exactly why this space is so important, and could play a key role in teaching young adults LGBTQIA+ acceptance through literature. It would provide them with a situation where they will not be judged for writing about queer characters or creating queer characters where they were originally missing. This would both teach them a more inclusive space is a possibility, and allow them to explore the LGBTQIA+ community online. Furthermore, writing queer fanfiction forces teenagers to think about their view on LGTBQIA+ people and makes them imagine what it is like to be queer.

### 5.3: *Fangirl* and Queer Fanfiction in the Netherlands

*Fangirl* has been translated into Dutch under the same title by Jeannet Dekker and was published by van Goor. Although the Dutch language may not have a suitable word for fangirls, the concept of the fanfiction community is not unfamiliar in the Netherlands, as becomes obvious through reviews of *Fangirl* published on literature blogs. Emmy van Ruijven argues that *Fangirl* will be relatable for anyone who has been a fan of something, especially those that obsess over books (van Ruijven). Although there is no mention of

queerness in most of the Dutch reviews, there are a few comments on the pieces of Cath's Simon Snow fanfiction that can be found throughout the novel. Most concern the question of whether the inclusion of fanfiction at the end of most chapters is a worthwhile inclusion or if it takes away from Cath's story. Yara and Monisha both argue that the pieces of fanfiction are disruptive (Yara, Monisha "Recensie Fangirl"). Yara argues it is interesting to try and understand why Cath is obsessed with Simon Snow, but that she wanted to read more about Cath herself (Yara). Monisha states that she did not like Simon and would have preferred if the novel purely focussed on Cath (Monisha "Recensie Fangirl"). On the other hand, Joost, van Ruijven, and Willemijn Gigase argue the inclusion of fanfiction improves the story (Joost, van Ruijven, Gigase). Gigase states that the pieces of fanfiction helped her understand why Cath likes Simon (Gigase). Furthermore, Gigase points out that Rowell has continued to write three books about Simon Snow's story, in which Cath's story is not mentioned. Therefore, Gigase liked the inclusion of fanfiction in the novel because it sets up Simon's own story. Joost argues that he could see a connection with each piece of fanfiction and the storyline of *Fangirl* (Joost). However, he argues that the instances where Cath reads her fanfiction aloud to Levi are disruptive, because it interrupts romantic moments between the two of them. Van Ruijven points out the fact that the Simon Snow series that appears in *Fangirl* was written to be very similar to the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling (van Ruijven). She finds this humorous, but also states that because Harry Potter is mentioned in *Fangirl* and therefore exists in the universe Rowell created for Cath, the similarities between Simon and Harry become a statement. Van Ruijven argues this shows that fandoms and fanfiction have a life of their own, that they can exist in their own right next to the original work.

Although these reviews mention their own connection to fanfiction and how they feel about the fanfiction in the story, none of them are concerned with queerness. Therefore, the reviewers either accept queerness as an inevitable part of fanfiction or did not think it

important or disconcerting enough to point it out. Had it been discussed, it might have proven a source of insight into the Dutch attitude toward LGBTQIA+ fanfiction and toward queering stories. As it is now, one might wonder if the reason any mention of queerness is left out of the Dutch reviews of *Fangirl* is because the reviewers feel uncomfortable commenting on it due to their personal biases against queer people, or because they are accepting toward queer people and therefore did not find it noteworthy.

## Conclusion

As has become evident in this thesis, LGBTQIA+ YA literature influences society, and Dutch society is one that could benefit from this. The complicated way the Netherlands self-identifies as progressive when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights is not entirely in line with facts about LGBTQIA+ people in the Netherlands. Although acceptance of queer people in the Netherlands is far more widespread than in some other countries, progress is in decline despite the fact that the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community is still being disadvantaged and disrespected. YA literature could provide a suitable way of strengthening LGBTQIA+ acceptance in a Dutch context. The Netherlands does not really have a LGBTQIA+ YA genre and therefore such books could be taken from an anglophone context. The YA genre could prove suitable for teaching young adults about society and helping them create or change their worldview. This is especially true in a classroom setting, where there is room for safe and critical discussion.

The three LGBTQIA+ YA novels discussed in this thesis each brought forward certain representations of the LGBTQIA+ community, and would ensure interesting discussion in a classroom setting. *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* introduces readers to the coming out genre and portrays the intricate way in which identity is formed and expressed, and how gender and sexuality performance tie into this. *Felix Ever After* opens the discussion on transgender representation in the YA genre. It critically assesses the position of trans people within the LGBTQIA+ community and how the problems they face differ from most, especially those with an intersectional identity. *Fangirl* represents the fanfiction community, a group of people that often queers the YA genre. Fanfiction is a safe space to interact with or write about the LGBTQIA+ community. Furthermore, writing fanfiction could be a useful way of having young adults interact with and learn about the LGBTQIA+ community.

Therefore, LGBTQIA+ YA literature is already positively influencing its readers, which could be used in the Netherlands to ensure people are more openminded when it comes to the queer community. It is important to note that my case studies are all from 2010 onward. As pointed out by Saxey, queer literature reflects and influences the time it is written in, due to which LGBTQIA+ literature must be kept track of in order to understand how this is happening (5). As my case studies show, the amount and type of representation has increased in recent years compared to the past decades, where representation was limited to a select amount of novels about homosexual and lesbian people, often with an unhappy end (Waters). Future research needs to be done on the type of LGBTQIA+ YA literature that will be published in the next few years, so this can be compared to the representation of the queer community we have now. Furthermore, such research ought to reflect the societal status of queer people in the country of interest, in order to further strengthen the notion that LGBTQIA+ YA novels are indeed improving the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people.

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## Plagiarism Statement



Universiteit Utrecht

Faculty of Humanities

Version September 2014

## PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

### **Fraud and Plagiarism**

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;

- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour.

Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.

Name: Renske Rademaker

Student number: 6253075

Date and signature:

29-06-2021

Renske Rademaker

Submit this form to your supervisor when you begin writing your Bachelor's final paper or your Master's thesis.

Failure to submit or sign this form does not mean that no sanctions can be imposed if it appears that plagiarism has been committed in the paper.