CREATING LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION

THE VALUE OF FANFICTION AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the social and academic value of fanfiction concerned with LGBTQ+ representation in Young Adult Literature. Since the heteronormative discourse looks upon LGBTQ+ as a controversial theme, LGBTQ+ identities and storylines in media such as literature are often stereotyped and negative. Young Adult Literature finds itself in a position where it can provide positive LGBTQ+ representation because of its tendency towards realism. However, existing power structures still prevent this genre from fully reaching its potential. This potential can be realized through fanfiction, an open discourse available on the internet. On fanfiction platforms, people with LGBTQ+ identities write the narratives they need based on official media stories, such as literature and movies. This thesis offers two comparative analyses. First, I will compare the non-LGBTQ+ Young Adult novels *The Hunger games: Catching Fire* and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*, with a selection of corresponding LGBTQ+ fanfiction. In the second part, I present a comparison between the LGBTQ+ Young Adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and a selection of corresponding LGBTQ+ fanfiction. Both of these analyses research the interpretations by fanfiction writers of the Young Adult novels on which they are grafted, highlighting their specific needs with regard to LGBTQ+ representation.

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Introduction

"I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be." (Sáenz 349)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more variants (often referred to as LGBTQ+[1]), are some of the sexual identities present in our society. However, we live in a society where heterosexuality is the norm, resulting in the necessity for a 'coming out' process, where you are made to feel different and confused if you do not conform to this norm. Media can play a big part when it comes to accepting and normalizing marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community. The power of representation in the media can be highly influential in shaping the perception of marginalized communities in society. Additionally, the media can be significant for marginalized communities because the people within that community have the opportunity to recognize themselves. When the facts of life and positive (nonjudgmental) representation are included more often in the media, there is potential to reach a larger audience. Literature is an example of a medium that can help to shape its readers and their culture at large (Epstein 10).

One literary genre that can represent marginalized communities is Young Adult Literature, henceforth referred to as YAL. YAL is a platform with the ability to reach many people who are, in accordance with its name, in the adolescent stage. This is the stage where young people are still exploring themselves, discovering the world, and searching for their place in it. When reading YAL, its readers can take information with them on their way to adulthood. These are texts that can actually shape our lives because real life experiences are portrayed in the books (Banks 34).

One of the marginalized communities for whom this aspect of representation is of great value, is the LGBTQ+ community. In this world, LGBTQ+ rights are not self-evident. Many countries still have not legalized same-sex marriages, same-sex relationships, or even same-sex romantic outings (Human Rights Watch). In some countries LGBTQ+ people experience, amongst many other hardships, homophobia, violence, torture, killing, executions, censorship and denial of recognition (Human Rights Watch). Even though many developed countries are slowly accepting the LGBTQ+ community, there still exists a noticeable lack of representation of this group in the media. When communities are not or negatively represented in media, people will either fail to recognize them and understand them as outsiders or look at them in a negative way. This can lead to homophobia, confusion, and self-hate. To prevent this, representation and the provision of information in the media are highly relevant, making

[1] I am aware of the most up to date version of the acronym that refers to all identities associated with sexual and gender outside the heterosexual norm, which is LGBTQQIAAP+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersexual, Asexual, Ally, Pansexual, plus (+) any categories not included in this list). In my thesis I use the more common acronym LGBTQ+, indicating with the '+' all other gender and sexual identities outside the heterosexual cisgender norm.

media attention a tool to use with care. Positive representation can provide a sense of recognition and therefore a sense of self-identity. If information is not provided, the LGBTQ+ community does not have the opportunity to recognize itself in the media, possibly resulting in a loss of agency, social isolation, and helplessness (Dym 5). The problem of underrepresentation is underlined by Michael Cart, who states that society is making it difficult for this community to find nonjudgmental and comprehensive representation ("Honoring Their Stories, Too").

Because of this lack of representation, the phenomenon of fanfiction has emerged. Fanfictions are texts written on special user platforms about characters from various media, such as books or movies. These are not formally published stories, but stories created by readers and viewers who engage with the medium. These stories are posted on the internet, and are therefore accessible to everyone who wants to effectively enter the open discourse. Here, everything can be written and published because there are no constraints or boundaries placed upon the platforms by the heteronormative society we live in. Foucault observes in *The Order of Discourse* (1970) that all discourse is marked by two contrary tendencies: on the one hand institutional forces that control the discourse and impose social normativity, and on the other hand the fundamental openness of discourse (52, 58). It is on the side of this fundamental openness of discourse that fanfiction positions itself, as I will elaborate on in Chapter Two.

Fanfictions can be understood as concrete interpretations capable of filling in gaps, or missing information, from the original story (Barnes 76). It is a known fact that most fanfiction users identify as LGBTQ+ (qtd. in Floegel 800). In this open discourse, LGBTQ+ people can create their own representation according to their own wishes and needs. For example, some fanfictions actually turn heterosexual characters into homosexual characters to cater to the needs of the LGBTQ+ readers. Therefore, my first hypothesis is that through fanfiction we can read and understand what the LGBTQ+ community needs when it comes to representation; we can understand their culture. However, research that attempts to understand LGBTQ+ culture and the LGBTQ+ community rarely includes fanfiction as a credible source. Even in fanfiction studies there is only a small amount of research that has explored "the relationship between expressive writing, support, and recovery, especially in relation to the LGBTQ+ community" (Dym 6).

The dominant providers of children's literature and YAL are adults. These are not the people who actually belong to that specific age group, and therefore they no longer share the specific experiences related to current adolescent lives. In comparison, fanfiction is actually written by younger people and members of the LGBTQ+ community and can thus give insights into their culture, what they require in representation, how they react to representation, and how they cope with the facts of life. Fanfiction, however, has the stigma of being unoriginal because the writers use existing characters and worlds, and often base their story on existing storylines (Bronwen 10). Therefore, fanfiction is

frequently dismissed as being worthless, and written by "the screaming fan" (Tosenberger 189). However, the LGBTQ+ community uses fanfiction to create their own representation because they rarely get this sufficiently in the dominant discourse. This leads me to my second hypothesis: fanfiction is not deserving of this stigma, as it can actually serve a therapeutic function. Fanfiction can help the LGBTQ+ community in finding recognition and acceptance (among themselves and others). This last hypothesis, if proven to be true, implies that fanfiction holds the potential to be an invaluable source for academic research. In order to provide arguments for my aforementioned two hypotheses, then, I have formulated the following research question: How can fanfiction be understood as a valuable academic source when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation in Young Adult Literature?

YAL is meant to be a platform directed at an audience that is in a developing stage of life, a stage where the "coming out process" often takes place as well. This thesis will research how fanfiction differs from YAL when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation, and how fanfiction writers and their stories react to YAL. For my comparison I will present two case studies focusing on Suzanne Collins's YAL novels *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010), and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) respectively. My discussion of these novels will enable me to establish the differences with fanfiction that this research aims to take a closer look at in Chapter Three. *The Hunger Games*, as a non-LGBTQ+ YAL story, has resulted in multiple 'rewrite' fanfictions by the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, a LGBTQ+ YAL story, was subjected to 'reactionary' fanfictions, which continued the original story where it left off.

In order to provide an answer to my research question, this thesis will be structured as follows. Chapter One will start by providing working definitions and a basic understanding of the two concepts of YAL and fanfiction. This is important because these concepts provide the foundation for my research. After establishing this foundation, Chapter Two will take up these working definitions and look at how they represent the LGBTQ+ community. In order to do this, I will first discuss the concept of LGBTQ+. This chapter will continue by discussing the struggles that come with the discovery that one has a LGBTQ+ identity, how YAL as an influential platform represents this community, and how fanfiction platforms help the LGBTQ+ community cope with their struggles and their (lack of) representation. In Chapter Three, the arguments presented in Chapters One and Two are further substantiated through a comparative analysis between the second and third volume of *The Hunger Games* trilogy and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* with their respective fanfictions. This analysis will show how YAL represents LGBTQ+ identities and how the LGBTQ+ community reacts through its fanfictions. Finally, this thesis will conclude by testing the aforementioned hypotheses and providing an answer to my central research question: How can

fanfiction be understood as a valuable academic source when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation in Young Adult Literature?

Chapter One
Young Adult Literature and Fanfiction: Definitions

This thesis will focus on two genres: YAL and fanfiction. Before diving into details, it is firstly important to define these two concepts and understand what they entail. It is only when we understand these 'genres' that we can get an understanding of how they affect, and are affected by, their readers and users. Firstly, I will discuss YAL, the primary source on which fanfiction is based. Secondly, this chapter will continue with a working understanding of fanfiction.

Young Adult Literature

In this first part of *Chapter One* I will primarily focus on the concept of YAL. The next chapter, Chapter Two, will then dive into YAL and LGBTQ+ representation. In discussing YAL, I will make two theorists interact with each other: Michael Cart and Lee A. Talley. Both have a background in YAL and/or (LGBTQ+) literature. Michael Cart is the writer of, among other output, LGBTQ+ novels, a nationally recognized expert on YAL, and former president of the Young Adult Library Association ("Michael Cart"). Therefore, his conception of YAL is valuable to include in this thesis. The second author, Lee A. Talley, is an Associate Professor of English at Rowan University in New Jersey (United States) and has edited and published multiple essays (Nel and Paul 270). Talley is not as much involved with YAL as Cart is, but has given her view of YAL. By comparing their views, I will clarify the phenomenon of YAL.

While the subtitle of this chapter is "Definitions", a better one would be "an attempt to define" when it comes to YAL, for YAL is a genre that is difficult to define. According to Talley, the term 'young adult' is not found in most dictionaries (Talley 228). I looked up the term 'young adult' myself in three online dictionaries: Cambridge, Dictionary.com and Merriam Webster. Where Dictionary.com defines 'young adult' solely as a person's stage in life ("Definition of Young Adult"), both Cambridge and Merriam Webster define 'young adult' as books in relation to the age of their readers; late teenage years or early twenties (Cambridge Dictionary; "Definition of YOUNG ADULT"). Logically, the first step in defining YAL is to look at the criterion of age. The target group's age as a stable defining characteristic of YAL, however, is something that Talley questions. In 1994 the Young Adult Library Association (YALSA) defined the category of YAL readers as being between the ages of twelve to eighteen (Talley 228). Since 1994, the targeted age group has been changed by YALSA to include 'teens' of thirteen to eighteen years old ("About YALSA"); there is no mention of early twenties. The fluctuations in YAL's targeted age group can partly be attributed to the marketing by publishers of YAL. According to Cart, through time, publishers went where the money was ("Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art" 4). Can YAL be defined solely by the age of its readers? This question is answered by Talley when she brings up the *Harry Potter* phenomenon (1997-2007): this YAL series is read by children,

adolescents and adults alike, and therefore challenges the principle of categorization solely based on age (Talley 229). While it is thus not very fruitful to define YAL in terms of age, the example of *Harry Potter* conversely shows that YAL can potentially reach a large and varied audience. What does this potential tell us about the content of YAL?

Even apart from the content of YAL mentioned in the previous paragraph, the question is whether it can be defined as a genre. Cart calls YAL a restless art because it keeps swiftly growing and changing with society and its culture ("Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art" 12). This means that YAL cannot be understood in terms of a genre such as the thriller or romance where it is relatively clear what kind of story the reader is dealing with. Instead, YAL incorporates multiple genres within itself and adapts itself to the society it finds itself in; "it has expanded to embrace a wealth of genres and forms – romance, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, novels in verse or letters, creative nonfiction and more" (2). However, YAL consists not only of many different genres; Cart has also identified some clearly visible trends among the characteristics of YAL published in 2005: narrative or creative fiction, new narrative techniques (such as letters and emails), fantasy, LGBTQ+ literature, chick lit, and dystopian novels such as *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) (7-9). What Cart means to say here, is that trends come and go within YAL. This enumeration thus again shows how YAL is ever changing, and therefore hard to define.

However, despite all the different genres and forms in which YAL appears, Cart states that YAL at its core is a literature of contemporary realism (2). He explains this term by uncovering the history of YAL. Through time, even though YAL used different genres, it always stayed close to the facts and truths of life (12). For example, in 1960 YAL entailed realistic fiction with subjects such as abortion, homosexuality, drug abuse, and incest. A shift in 1974 showed teens "the truth that not all endings are happy ones", effectively at its core staying close to the facts and truths of life (3). From 1994 on the harsh realities of teen life once more became subjects of YAL: themes such as poverty, murder and escaping life at home emerged (5). YAL has thus forged alliances with different genres that fit the society/culture at specific times in history to address the harsh facts of life. Cart names this the literature of contemporary realism, and Talley calls it the politics of realism ("Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art" 2; Talley 231). Even though their definitions are slightly different, they describe the same thing: that YAL has a realistic agenda. There are of course some critics (read: adults) who want this realistic aspect censored because they believe that YAL readers are still too innocent (Talley 232). Cart strongly disagrees with these critics because telling young readers the truth, he argues, "equips readers to deal with the realities of impending adulthood" ("Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art" 12). By not shunning the facts of life, YAL is a genre that can address the needs of its readers. As appalling as it might be to some adults to include harsh truths, some children are actually living harsh lives. Rainbows and sunshine are not the reality for a lot of people, nor for

many children: "Thus, to see oneself reflected in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the blessed assurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity" ("Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art" 12).

Does this knowledge provide us with an understanding of what YAL involves? It is a beautiful phenomenon that cannot be easily grasped. YAL is a highly unstable emerging genre with a target group that varies a lot. It still is, and will probably keep on, developing to address the needs of its readers who are in transition from childhood to adulthood: a confusing and difficult time full of tension. YAL thus has the possibility to represent and reach out to many readers in a diverse and inclusive way.

Fanfiction

In my Bachelor Thesis titled *A Second Chance: The Influence of Interpretation in Harry Potter Fanfiction* (original title: *Een Tweede Kans: De Invloed van Interpretatie in Harry Potter Fanfictie*), I researched how we can understand the phenomenon of fanfiction as a literary theory. In this Master's thesis, I will take this approach and knowledge to the next level by researching and approaching fanfiction as a highly relevant literary theory that can actually make us see the culture and needs of the LGBTQ+ community. This can only be done by firstly understanding the concept of fanfiction itself. Therefore, in the second part of Chapter One I will discuss what the concept of fanfiction entails and how it works.

Although multiple definitions of the term 'fanfiction' have been given by different researchers, all of them in essence give the same definition of the concept: fanfictions are texts written by fans that are based on various media such as books, video games and movies (Barnes 71; Black 172; Bronwen 1; Floegel 785; MacDonald 1; Lanier and Schau 328). For the purpose of this thesis this means that a reader of a book writes their own story based on the narrative of said book. But how does this work? What exactly do these so-called fans write about? And what does the term 'fan' mean in relation to fanfiction? So far, the definition of fanfiction raises more questions than it answers.

The phenomenon of fanfiction starts (perhaps logically) with the 'fan'. Interestingly enough, none of the six critical sources used for this chapter actually define this concept of the 'fan', as if they assume that everyone knows its basic meaning. I find this dangerous since there are, to my knowledge, various types of fans[2]. Do they all share the same profile? In our society, the stereotypical image of a fan is associated with immaturity, where for example the teenage girl is screaming and crying in front of pop stars (Tosenberger 189), or with the image of a socially isolated weirdo (Bronwen 3). We deal

[2] Various forms of fans could be distinguished, including those who love their idols (i.e. collect all their merchandise, travel to them on multiple occasions), those who like their idol (i.e. go to one of their concerts, watch their shows/read their books), and finally there are those who find support in the work of their idol that could help through challenges they face in their daily lives. The last can also be taken as an overarching category, as one does not exclude the others. For this reason, the word 'fan' cannot simply be used without giving any context.

with a concept that is stigmatized and cannot be taken for granted. In order to define the concept 'fan' in relation to fanfiction, is essential to understand what fans actually do. Before fanfiction is written, the reader undergoes a process while reading; the process of interpretation. As previously mentioned, I have researched this process in my Bachelor thesis and I will shortly summarize my findings to better understand how fanfiction comes into existence and how to approach it.

The process of interpretation that leads to fanfiction can be understood by combining the ideas of multiple literary theories/theorists, including Roland Barthes, Terry Eagleton, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. For Barthes, a text can be seen as a space that consists of multiple dimensions from which the reader can extract different original interpretations (Barthes 4). He states that it is the reader as an impersonal function of the text in which all the text's elements come together; the reader is the unifying destination of a text (Barthes 6). Important here is to note that the text according to Barthes reaches its completion in the reader: it is a collaboration between text and reader. Lanier and Schau, who have studied fanfiction, similarly describe the writing of fanfiction as a co-creative process, since the stories of fanfiction originate from a conjunction between the primary text and the consumer's imagination (323). However, where Barthes believes that the reader figures only as an abstraction, Barnes finds that "the reader's imaginative contributions to the text depend not only on the words on the page, but also on [their] life experiences" (qtd. In Barnes 70). I agree with this conclusion since readers cannot possibly extract themselves from their personal values, cultures or experiences; they bring these with them in their readings. Thus, an interpretation indeed arises out of a collaboration between text and reader. However, it is precisely because the reader is subjective that they can create an original interpretation.

When we turn to reception theory, we see that the process of reading is about making connections and filling in gaps, as noted by Eagleton (66). In doing so, the reader imposes meaning on the text without which the text would be just "a chain of organized black marks on a page" (Eagleton 66). Eagleton thus also states that meaning can only be given by the reader, who fills in the gaps in the text. Another figurehead of reception theory is Iser. Iser holds that readers are offered various perspectives by the text which they have to relate to one another, setting both the work and themselves in motion (1674). During this interpretation process, readers can come across unexpected turns of events in the text. It is in these moments that they are given the chance to fill in the gaps in their own way, using their personal experiences from the past (Iser 1675, 1676). Both Iser and Eagleton state that different readers fill in the gaps in their own way, which results in different interpretations of a text. Both would therefore probably be interested in fanfiction, since fanfiction likewise makes use of gaps in the original story (Barnes 76). 'Gaps' can be defined as pieces of information that are missing from a text, such as character backgrounds, motivations, emotions and desires (Barnes 76). By way of an example, Barnes mentions the genre of the horror story, where a scene sometimes is scary

precisely because of what we cannot see: this is a gap that viewers fill with their imagination (Barnes 70). This means that by reading fanfiction, we can actually retrace the process of how a reader filled in the gaps when reading the primary source, using their own experiences. Fanfiction is the creative interpretation of a text: we can look into a reader's mind. This could be very valuable information when studying certain communities, if we look past the stereotype of the fan and therefore also of fanfiction.

The next theory of relevance is the reader-response theory of Fish. Whereas with Iser the focus lies on uncovering a text's meaning, Fish is focused on the *experience* of reading. For Fish, everything a reader encounters in a text is a product of interpretation, which makes reading a matter of what the reader *does* to the text ("Interpreting the *Variorum*" 2082). Experience, then, is everything: experience itself constitutes the meaning of the text, and is therefore called the meaning experience ("Is There a Text in This Class?" 3). Fish's theory can therefore be used as an argument to regard fanfiction as an integral element of the process of reading. As I have argued, fanfiction arises from the conjunction of a text and the personal experiences of a reader. The authority of the author is resisted, and the text reinterpreted. This new interpretation is thereafter written down by the reader as their own story, based on the original text. Thus by using the work of older literary theorists, we can understand how fanfiction comes into being and, most importantly, discover how interesting and valuable the phenomenon fanfiction actually is.

But what happens with the fanfiction that a reader has written? Fanfiction can be published on various online platforms. Archiveofourown.com (AO3) and fanfiction.net (FFN) are two of the biggest fanfiction platforms; both were initially designed by fans (Floegel 792). On FFN, there are over a million stories published, written about different media properties, such as movies, tv shows, musicians, and literature (Barnes 74). On these sites, fans can find their own communities who share their interests, publish their own stories and get feedback and likes (also called 'kudos') (MacDonald 2). The stories are categorized according to genre, but not in the way we are used to. Fans have created their own system, including genres such as *fluff stories,* that are supposed to be warm and fuzzy, and *angst stories*, that focus on tragedy (Barnes 75). Compared to recognized genres, *fluff* and *angst* focus on the experience of one emotion and sometimes do not even include much plot (Barnes 75). According to Barnes, another popular genre in fanfiction is the *hurt/comfort* story, which focuses on the physical or psychological trauma of a character, which is then healed with the help of another character (76). Besides the new names of the genres, fans have also created terms to identify themselves or relationships between characters. For example, with the term 'shipper' fans mean to indicate that they have an interest in a relationship between two characters, also called a 'ship' (derived from the word relation*ship*) (Barnes 75). When this ship or an event is acknowledged in the original media, it is called 'canon'. The creation of vocabulary by the fans is part of the open discourse characteristic of fanfiction, which will be explained in further detail in Chapter Two. Where for example

the writer of an acknowledged published work is limited by accepted literary conventions, the reader/fanfiction writer is not (Barnes 72). Fanfiction writers can write about anything they want and publish it online without having to worry about the literary conventions or innocence of readers. This allows them to experiment, represent and create anything to their liking. For example, fanfictions in the genre of *angst* truly revel in the tragedy of a story, not abiding by any censorship regarding the difficulties of life (Barnes 76). And when it comes to shipping, fans can bring together any characters they want and create a homosexual relationship from a heterosexual one. Bronwen writes that fanfiction, in giving readers these transformative powers, offers a voice for marginalized groups (7). This open discourse thus results in effective resistance to the 'authorial authority' (Barnes 78). Barnes even found that sometimes fanfiction writers feel that they know characters better than their original creator does (qtd. In Barnes 78).

As I have argued, fanfiction is not just some story that is written by a fan but it is so much more than that. It results from a coming together of fans who have interpreted stories and want to share their interpretation with others. This is done on online fanfiction platforms where fanfiction writers and readers can comment and give feedback on each other's stories, using their own creative language. Iser has recognized this desire to communicate one's reading experiences. He states that readers are offered different perspectives and feel the need to share with others what they have read (Iser 131). This is exactly what happens with fanfiction writers and readers: they have written down their interpretation in the format of a story and feel the need to discuss this with other readers of the same primary source. Fanfiction can thus be understood as the work of a community, or in the terms of Stanley Fish, an interpretive community: communities sharing interpretive strategies that exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine what is read ("Is There a Text in This Class?" 170). This principle is applicable to the fanfiction community as well. Fanfictions are interpretations by readers. When others read these interpretations, they can incorporate them in their own reading of a primary source and then proceed by creating a new interpretation. When they in turn write and publish their own fanfiction, the process starts all over again: it is a continuous cycle.

According to Bronwen, fanfiction is "often dismissed as derivative and unoriginal" (10). I strongly believe that this is the wrong approach when it comes to fanfiction. The fact that fanfictions are based on various media, such as movies and literature, and therefore seen as derivative, is just one aspect that is actually not of great importance, as there are many more aspects that make fanfiction a valuable source for research. Not only have people who engage with fanfiction created their own language, community and open discourse, but fanfiction allows the challenging of boundaries between authors and readers, creation and interpretation (MacDonald 2). Among other things, the process of interpretation itself can be understood by studying fanfiction. Recognizing the potential of fanfiction, then, is a good start. However, since both the terms 'fan' and 'fanfiction' are stigmatized, I hereby

propose to rename 'fanfiction' as Youthful Reader Response Literature (YRRL) and will henceforth refer to fanfiction as such. The name 'YRRL' is derived from Fish's reader-response theory. YRRL as a label evidently does more justice to the phenomenon that young people have created their own platform, community, and representation.

Summary

In this chapter I have provided an understanding of the concepts of YAL and fanfiction (YRRL), and thereby of the differences between the two genres. YAL, a concept that is difficult to define, can be understood as a genre that is in constant development in order to address the needs of its readers. Both Cart and Talley argue that YAL has a realistic agenda, which results in a possibility to reach out in an inclusive, diverse and representing way. However, this chapter also discussed that there are topics, such as homosexuality, that adults prefer to censor in YAL. Chapter Two will discuss this aspect of YAL in more detail by looking at how LGBTQ+ is represented in YAL and what role adults play in creating this representation.

In contrast to YAL, YRRL is an unofficial genre created by fans which can provide a voice for marginalized communities. Here, fans come together to share their interpretation of official media such as movies and literature; an interpretation that arises from a conjunction between a text and the personal experiences of a reader. However, both the terms 'fans' and 'fanfiction' are heavily stigmatized in society and therefore not taken seriously. I have argued that this stigmatization does not do justice to the writers of fanfiction and fanfiction itself; hence my introduction of the term YRRL. In my Chapter Two I will elaborate on the possibilities and opportunities of YRRL by discussing how YRRL writers use their work to create LGBTQ+ representation for themselves.

Chapter Two
LGBTQ+ Representation

In my previous chapter I have attempted to define the concepts of YAL and fanfiction (YRRL). YAL is an unstable and emergent genre that can address a variety of topics about the facts of life, which allows it to aim for diversity in representation. However, YAL is still controlled by the publishing world. YRRL is written by readers/fans of various media and genres, such as YAL, who fill in potential gaps and publish their stories online, thereby effectively stepping outside of the constraints of the dominant discourse.

Understanding the genres YAL and YRRL was my first step in answering my research question. This chapter will now proceed with the following question: how is the LGBTQ+ community represented in the two genres? The relevance of this question will emerge from my discussion of LGBTQ+ representation in YAL, as this will help me to understand the complementary function of YRRL and offer a better understanding of it before executing a comparative analysis. This chapter will start by shortly outlining the concept of LGBTQ+, and will continue by establishing the relation between YAL and LGBTQ+. Finally, I will shed light on the relevance of YRRL for the LGBTQ+ community and answer the question how the LGBTQ+ community is represented in the two genres.

Outlining LGBTQ+

Having a LGBTQ+ identity does not come without struggles. The struggle lies not only in self-identification as member of the LGBTQ+ community, but also in society's view and (lack of) tolerance/acceptance. Each letter in LGBTQ+ stands for a person's sexual orientation. However, the terms that are used to describe one's sexual identity are still changing. Since LGBTQ+ is a recognized and familiar term and also used in other research, I will use this when generically referring to sexual orientations other than heterosexual. The terms lesbian, gay, heterosexual, and LGBTQ+ will at times be used separately in this research.

Modern day western society is still a heteronormative society. This means that there is an inherent assumption that children are heterosexual, and that corresponding gender norms are imposed on them (such as girls playing with dolls) (Wickens 156, 150). What is the significance of this heteronormativity for LGBTQ+ people? According to Wickens, when one learns cultural and social mores in terms of a supposed fixed relation to sexed and gendered bodies one acts accordingly (e.g. in order to be a proper man/woman one must be heterosexual) (150). This results in the cultural belief that falling in love with the opposite sex is normal.

Negative connotations of LGBTQ+ identities thus have their origin in the norms and values of the heteronormative society. Malinda Lo, writer of the LGBTQ+ YA novel *Ash* (2009), identifies as a

lesbian and writes on her blog about the negative connotations that come with the term 'lesbian'. Being sexualized, ridiculed, embarrassed, branded as a man-hater or even as a racist are only a few examples (Lo, "The invisible Lesbian in Young Adult Fiction"). People who have a LGBTQ+ identity have to fight their way out of the dominant discourse and end up in a marginalized community. Finding or exploring your identity in terms of LGBTQ+ is called the coming out process, "in which someone articulates, to themselves and the outside world, a part of their identity they had previously concealed or been unable to recognize" (Dym 2). This articulation of gender identity often takes place later in a person's life as a teenager or in early adulthood (Dym 4). The coming out process is strictly linked to the LGBTQ+ identity. Since there is a heteronormative assumption of heterosexuality at birth, we do not see heterosexuals 'coming out of the closet'. This harmful assumption can cause difficulties or traumatic experiences for people with a LGBTQ+ identity when (for instance) family members disapprove of their sexuality (Dym 2, 4).

The exploration of one's identity is often a difficult process. This is partially because, according to Cart, society does not make it easy for young people to find accurate, non-judgmental and comprehensive homosexual representation or role models ("Honoring Their Stories, Too"). A person's self-identity is influenced by normative social and cultural representations (Dym 3). LGBTQ+ identity is often erased, in the sense that its very existence is denied. This can result in a struggle for an individual to come into their own self-identity (Dym 3). This sense of self-identity is of great importance because this can give a person security in their daily life (Dym 3). The media play a significant role in this process. The lack of representation and existing erasure of the community in the media are potentially harmful. When LGBTQ+ is portrayed in a negative way in the media, this can result in helplessness, social isolation, and the loss of agency (Dym 5). In the research of Dym, in which she interviewed LGBTQ+ (former) YRRL writers, interviewees have said that the negative history of LGBTQ+ in the media has harmed their own perception of LGBTQ+ identities and their place in the world (Dym 20). The study also mentioned that LGBTQ+ people have to endure "microaggressions such as being assumed straight, being misgendered, encountering homophobia, and lacking representation of themselves within the media surrounding them" (15).

In understanding LGBTQ+, I argue that it is not sufficient to simply explain what each individual letter means. The term itself is not at all free of stigma and negative connotations. Even though some people might think that we are doing great in acknowledging the existence of the community, this is far from true. People that identify as LGBTQ+ have a lot of struggles to face during their coming out process and even after they have come out because they still do not have a visible and accepted place in society. The media hold a relevant position in providing such positive representation. LGBTQ+ will not be normalized as long as negative representation predominates in society. The next part of this chapter will therefore dive into the representation of LGBTQ+ in YAL.

LGBTQ+ Representation in YAL

In the previous section I have briefly explained a few of the challenges that many people who identify as LGBTQ+ face in the heteronormative society. In our lives, the media have a great influence on how we see the world. This is especially the case for younger people, who are still learning and finding their place in the world. In this research, the medium I will focus on is literature, since reading is a very intimate medium. As Lo describes it: the words of a book are in your head and while reading, you become that book (Lo, "The invisible Lesbian in Young Adult Fiction"). Texts can actively shape lives because real life experiences are portrayed in the pages of a book (Banks 34). Chapter One provided an understanding of YAL and its possibilities. This genre holds a great potential to include positive LGBTQ+ narratives which can help young adults in exploring their identity by seeing themselves reflected in the pages. Through reading, they can see what their possibilities are and create a critical literacy of the self (Banks 34).

Representation depends on authors who write YAL and the publishers who approve the books for publishing. Here we stumble on a big paradox in children's literature and YAL: there are adults who "write, edit, translate, publish, market, stock, sell, buy, teach and give books to and for children" and decide what is appropriate for young readers (Epstein, 17). This demonstrates the power imbalance in the field of children's literature and YAL: the books are read by children and young adults, but written by adults alone (Epstein 17). Young readers have no authority or say in what they can read; they are dependent on the adults. A highly influential actor in this field is the category of publishers, since they have the power to bring more LGBTQ+ representation into the literary world. Publishers often go where the money is, disregarding age groups, and avoiding anything that might be perceived as controversial, such as homosexuality (Epstein 24). This inclination limits authors in including LGBTQ+ representation. It is known that some authors who included a LGBTQ+ character in their novels were asked to make the gay character straight, only allowing a gay narrative in the possible sequel (qtd. In Epstein 24). Lo had the same sort of experience when she sent *Ash* to a literary agent who denied it within twenty-four hours ("The invisible Lesbian in Young Adult Fiction"). And even when controversial books are published, they are aimed at a particular audience to avoid negative consequences such as lawsuits (Epstein 25). It is then mostly up to parents and teachers to provide their children with these books. However, some adults are afraid that these books will 'turn' children towards a queer identity, and thus parents may feel the need to protect their innocent children from these 'corrupting' topics (Epstein 38, 39).

I have argued that it is not easy for LGBTQ+ books to get published, but this does not mean that no LGBTQ+ books have been published at all. A relevant key to understanding the workings of representation is to consider the amount of books representing LGBTQ+ characters that are published on an annual basis. The first YA book with gay content, namely John Donovan's *I'll Get There It Better*

Be Worth The Trip, was published as early as in 1969 (Cart, "Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art" 11). According to Cart, the growth of LGBTQ+ literature has been very slow up until the 21st century. In 2015, however, a record number of sixty-four LGBTQ+ books were published (11). Even though the term 'record number' indicates that this is a very positive occurrence since more LGBTQ+ books have been written, the record is actually not that high, considering that 1543 YA books were published in 2015 ("YA Novels of 2015 (1543 Books)") of which only 4,1% were LGBTQ+. However, this is still a step forward in the right direction, considering that between the first gay novel in 1969 and Cart's article in 1997 fewer than seventy-five gay novels were published ("Honoring Their Stories, Too"). The number of LGBTQ+ books in the YAL genre keeps rising. However, whether this is a positive development also depends on how the LGBTQ+ characters and their storylines are portrayed, an issue that I will turn to now.

B.J. Epstein, whose expertise lies with (children's) literature and LGBTQ+ studies, ("B.J. Epstein"), has researched the portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities in YAL by studying multiple LGBTQ+ YA books. In her book *Are the Kids All Right?* (2013) she discusses her findings. Her main concern lies with how LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed. Their sexuality and gender identities are usually defining features of what are otherwise shallow characters (42). This means that they *are* their sexuality and gender. The consequence of this is that the characters are often stereotyped (Epstein 43). When it comes to gay male characters in YAL, for instance, they tend to be portrayed as campy, humorous, effeminate, appearance-fixated, loving musicals, gossipy and overly sexual (42, 46, 63).

Another interesting finding by Epstein is that YA books include more male than female characters, the result being that there are also fewer lesbian characters (65). When lesbian characters are represented in books, it is often the case that they do not get as much 'buzz' as books about gay boys (Lo, "The invisible Lesbian in Young Adult Fiction"). Nonetheless, Epstein has found the following lesbian characteristics in YAL: there are the butch lesbians who are athletic, short-haired and using male names, and there are the feminists/intellectual lesbians who are angry, enjoy discussions about art, philosophy and/or literature and rant about the oppression of women (65). Not much has changed since 1998 when Hayn and Hazlett identified some common LGBTQ+ characteristics in YAL: characters were underdeveloped, males were portrayed as feminine or flamboyant and females as masculine and physical education teachers who were mocked by heterosexual girls (68). As a result, LGBTQ+ characters have little development and remain very shallow in the story. The effect of this in real life is that people with a LGBTQ+ identity are not recognized as individuals but as members of a group who act in a certain way, which can result in homophobia in society (Epstein 44, 46).

Another relevant aspect to discuss is the development of the storylines of LGBTQ+ characters. Hayn and Hazlett provide a confident expectation for the future of LGBTQ+ YAL: "in many works, all characters are treated as adolescents living the teen experience, no matter their sexuality" (70). Yet,

Epstein thinks differently, considering her findings in her book dating from 2013. First of all, when it comes to the storylines of LGBTQ+ characters, a large number of LGBTQ+ YA books focus on the coming out process and the related stress. As a result, readers get the impression that both the coming out process *and* the stress are defining features of LGBTQ+ lives (Epstein 47; qtd. in Banks 34). In addition, Epstein notices that characters often experience other struggles, such as a bad relationship with their parents (57). These stories thus suggest that being LGBTQ+ is 'caused' by something else, and that characters can therefore be cured as well (57). Moreover, as mentioned by Epstein, the coming out experience "may involve rejection, verbal and even physical abuse, problems in school or with friends or peers, and potentially even death" (56). Homophobia as an overarching problem is another contemporary trend in LGBTQ+ YAL (qtd. in Wickens 1530). In these stories, authors want to portray LGBTQ+ identities as cool and ordinary, but they often do so by introducing a homophobic antagonist for contrast (Wickens 153). Epstein also finds that LGBTQ+ characters are told they are 'normal' by their parents (30). However, telling LGBTQ+ characters they are just as normal as everyone else only emphasizes that they are actually different (30).

Storylines are not the only element that is negatively represented in YAL. Romantic relations of LGBTQ+ characters are represented in a negative light as well. For example, "when characters have agreed in principle to be monogamous, they do not always follow through" (Epstein 70). In other words, LGBTQ+ relationships are often stereotyped as being unstable and promiscuous. When it comes to sexuality itself, male sexuality is represented as "wild and uncontrollable, and (…) men need to have a lot of sex, whereas women are not encouraged to express their sexual feelings" (Epstein 108). This negative romantic and sexual representation of LGBTQ+ characters results in the readers' impression that LGBTQ+ lives do not count (Epstein 108). Banks, writing in 2009, states that there is still a lack of quality LGBTQ+ YAL "filled with characters complexly rendered and experiences that mirror the often difficult and often exciting lives that young LGBTQ+ people live today" (35).

However, the question might arise why the numbers of published LGBTQ+ YAL and the storylines matter so much. The answer is that numbers can be a question of life and death. Cart, who wrote his article in 1997, believes that literature has the power to save lives ("Honoring Their Stories, Too"). In 1997, thirty percent of teenage suicides were committed out of fear, confusion and anxiety because the victims were homosexual or were suspecting it ("Honoring Their Stories, Too"). Merely recognizing the existence of the LGBTQ+ community is not enough to prevent suicides, or murders like that of fifteen- year old Lawrence King by a classmate in 2008 because of homophobia (qtd. in Banks 34). Inclusion in (YA) literature can educate people inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community. Books can offer the reader the feeling that one is not alone, and they can also offer a sense of acceptance (Cart "Honoring their stories too"). Banks, who identifies as LGBTQ+, wrote about his own experience when reading (negatively portrayed) gay literature from 1960 to 1990: "[the characters] taught me to

disconnect and move on" (33). In the period between 1980 and 1995, LGBTQ+ characters were often killed or dying in the story, or included merely as secondary characters (Banks 35). This is still a recurring theme in media such as movies and literature today: "For example, tropes such as "Bury Your Gays" or "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" proliferate the popular media landscape in the form of LGBTQ+ characters inevitably dying before the end of a narrative arc" (Epstein 4). The characters pay for their supposedly deviant sexuality. If the teenagers who committed suicide or the teenager who murdered his classmate had had access to a variety of positive LGBTQ+ books, a lot of tragic deaths might have been prevented.

LGBTQ+ and YRRL

In the section above, I have outlined the challenges of LGBTQ+ representation in YAL. These challenges, such as the obstruction of publishers, the predominance of stereotypes and of negative storylines, have a negative effect on the actual lives of young people with a LGBTQ+ identity. The LGBTQ+ community has sought to counter this lack of representation and is actively seeking out more positive ways to fill in the gaps left open by YAL to represent themselves. In this section I will argue that LGBTQ+ YRRL not only serves as an important function for its audience, but that it deserves serious academic attention.

The first question that might arise is whether YRRL has not already been sufficiently researched. Bronwen states that there are three waves when it comes to YRRL studies. The first wave took a Marxist approach and researched the power difference between the fans, perceived as powerless, and the companies who owned rights of the original stories, seen as the powerful (3). The second wave was concerned with the new media forms that came into existence because of YRRL (4). The third wave focused on the theorists' own positions in exploring "the contributions of fans to contemporary culture" (4). My description of these three waves demonstrates that the focus of YRRL studies has always been on the *outside* of YRRL, rather than focusing on what is *inside,* what YRRL actually entails for the LGBTQ+ community. This leaves the motives and, according to Floegel, "the creative practices of marginalized communities, such as queer communities, underexplored" (787). The final section of this chapter will propose a fourth approach to YRRL studies to research this underexplored aspect.

As I have argued in Chapter One and the previous section, YAL is potentially a great genre to include LGBTQ+ representation, but struggles to do so. Could this hiatus then possibly explain why such a large portion of YRRL is written by the LGBTQ+ community? Most of the users of YRRL platforms like AO3 identify as LGBTQ+ (Floegel 800). A way for LGBTQ+ people to learn about and manage their coming out process in our heteronormative society is by searching for and engaging with informal online sources (Fox and Ralston 635). Some online sources, such as AO3, are a safe place because

LGBTQ+ people moderate the interaction themselves. They can choose whether they want to be visible or not and can discover their sexuality, and experiment with it, without being seen by friends or family, something that is not an option when it comes to platforms such as Facebook or Instagram (Fox and Ralston 635; Dym 22). The study by Dym mentioned earlier discusses microaggressions and assumptions about their sexuality that LGBTQ+ people may face. Within the YRRL community, also called a fandom, they can recognize themselves as being part of a larger community (Dym 15). One interviewee said that one of the reasons they like(d) YRRL, is because it provides positive happy LGBTQ+ content, something that is seldom available in the traditional media, such as movies and books, where LGBTQ+ characters are usually tragically portrayed (qtd. in Dym 17). The study mentioned that where other non-LGBTQ+ fans of stories in media such as movies and books, can "shrug off bad writing or a mishandling of a character, LGBTQ+ people tend to invest more into depictions of their own identity" (Dym 17). According to an example given by one of the interviewees, when a LGBTQ+ character was killed off on a show, they turned to YRRL and rewrote what happened, keeping the character alive (Dym 18). LGBTQ+ YRRL writers push "back against those harmful tropes in their own writing", undoing the dominant visualizations of LGBTQ+ identity (Dym 17, 20) and providing "satisfying narratives amidst largely heteronormative mainstream media" (Floegel 787). This shows that for LGBTQ+ people, YRRL is not simply a story-publishing genre/platform. It is a way to acquire information and actively control the portrayal of their identity in the media they engage with. The interviewees told that this was especially important at the stage where they were teenagers living with their parents (Dym 16). They experienced the unequal power relations between adults and young adults; they were restricted from purchasing LGBTQ+ content, which made online YRRL an ideal medium (Dym 16). It is a space where they are not controlled by adults "and do not have to shape their stories to adult sensibilities and comfort levels" (Tosenberger 202). With YRRL, readers become the author, a position taken up by the cultural elite in the dominant discourse (qtd. in Tosenberger 186). This brings me to the very interesting phenomenon of emergent (LGBTQ+) YRRL: an open discourse is created.

YRRL originated in science fiction magazines in the 1920s and 1930s (Bronwen 1). It remained part of a subculture and very marginalized until the internet came into existence (Bronwen 1). The internet vastly improved accessibility for people in marginalized communities to engage with YRRL, which allowed them to actively participate in their community online, their own open discourse on the internet.

In Chapter One I briefly wrote about how we can understand the emergence of a YRRL through the process of interpretation. The open discourse aspect of YRRL, that relates to the actual *need* for YRRL and its coming into *existence*, however, can be understood through the works and ideas of philosopher Michel Foucault. In the next part of this section I will discuss the following sources:

Foucault's *Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity* (1997), Mark Kingston's study on Foucault titled *Subversive Friendships* (2009), and an interview between Foucault and James O'Higgins in *Sexual Choice, Sexual Act* (1982). These critical sources focus on male homosexuality; however, for my purpose I find I can apply them to LGBTQ+ in general as well. My aim in engaging with these critical sources is to explain and offer an understanding of the open discourse of YRRL.

Before I can discuss this notion of open discourse, I have to start with a basic understanding of how, according to Foucault, society perceives homosexuality. Kingston states that relationships are influenced by social norms, one of which is masculinity (7). This results in the perception of intimacy between men as effeminate (7); a negative connotation of homosexuality. The fact that heterosexuality with its social norms has long determined the dominant discourse has led to a lack and even suppression of homosexual representation in western literature (O'Higgins and Foucault 18). Where heterosexuals had a publicly available discourse when it came to the portrayal of courtship in literature and romantic norms in real life, such as dating protocols, how to show affection, and guidelines for married life, homosexuals had none (Kingston 9; O'Higgins and Foucault 18). However, instead of solely considering this lack as a negative thing, Foucault sees a more positive possibility. Since homosexuality takes place in a marginal space, outside of the masculine (heteronormative) discourse, it is disconnected from the dominant systems of power relations. It is thus practiced in a space of greater freedom that allows for social experimentation (Kingston 8). Homosexuality as a discursive practice is an open discourse, it is a space where new forms of relationships can be created. There is no authentic homosexual identity, style or way of living yet, and this absence allows homosexuals to create their own subjectivity, their own language and new life-styles (Kingston 9; O'Higgins and Foucault 22): in other words, as Foucault himself has called it, a creative cultural life (Foucault 163). Marginal spaces are created "in which novel relationships can be constructed" (Kingston 11), such as women's groups where women challenge traditional gender roles that were forced on them by the heteronormative society (Kingston 11).

At this point in my discussion of Foucault's theory, it is relevant to look at YRRL. As I have argued, heteronormative discourse is still dominating the media. YAL is not yet the ideal place for LGBTQ+ representation; thus LGBTQ+ people have created YRRL, where they can write their stories without being censored by the heteronormative society. Therefore, YRRL should be, in agreement with Foucault, considered as a valuable space for experimentation. Importantly, these spaces do not necessarily have to include sexual desire. Often, sexual desire is seen as the essential part of homosexuality; Foucault, however, "regards homosexuality as a social phenomenon that is essentially geared toward the production of novel relationships and only incidentally involves sex between men" (Kingston 10). Homosexuality includes being a member of a social group (O'Higgins and Foucault 11). Homosexuals can practice new affective forms of subjectivity and forge relationships as a foundation

for creating an alternative community (Kingston 12; Foucault 163). The open discourse of homosexuality, and by extension YRRL, as I would argue, offers:

> a space where, for once, gay people can set the conditions for social interaction. It is not just a space of refuge, but a space of greater freedom, in which people can create new identities for themselves, find community, and enrich their lives in ways that would not be possible anywhere else. (Kingston 12)

We can clearly recognize the opportunities for YRRL in this quote. YRRL is a safe space where LGBTQ+ people can create their own representation, explore their identities and be part of a community in a way that is not possible in our heteronormative society. In YRRL, we can see the needs and desires of people who identify as LGBTQ+ reflected. We can see how they create their own space with its own set of norms and values; we can see their culture reflected.

Hence, LGBTQ+ YRRL can be understood as a space where writers and readers are outside the dominant discourse and publishing conventions and are not censored or restrained by institutions (Tosenberger 185, 188). As a consequence, YRRL has become a space where LGBTQ+ identities are expected and even normal (Dym 7). Within this space LGBTQ+ people are able to experiment and encounter "alternative modes of sexual discourse", a phenomenon that has yet to be studied according to Tosenberger (186).

One of the spaces where people experiment with sexual discourses is *slash YRRL*, which means "fan fiction with a gay theme" (MacDonald 1). Slash YRRL as a space directly links to the open discourse that I just discussed in connection with Foucault: "what slash writers have done is to carve out a space for themselves where they are free to tell the narratives as they wish" (Tosenberger 190). Slash YRRL is therefore unique, since it provides expressions of "queer possibilities that transform past, present, and future cis/heteronormative trends" (Floegel 787). The result of not being tied to the dominant discourse is that (slash) YRRL writers can write about anything without considering social norms. Consequently, there is no typical slash story (Tosenberger 195). Interestingly, most slash YRRL is written by women (Tosenberger 189), which means that women write m/m (male/male) romance YRRL. Where Tosenberger explains this as women resisting the dominant heteronormative society (189), Lo states that f/f (female/female) romance is too close for comfort for some queer women to write about ("The Invisible Lesbian in Young Adult Fiction"). Lesbians are not used to seeing themselves in media, which can lead to an overwhelming experience when reading or writing f/f (*Ibid.*).

This is where YRRL can be of great support. Since there is a lack of representation in the media, YRRL can fill these gaps for LGBTQ+ people; they can find themselves in slash YRRL which helps and allows them to explore and develop their identities (Floegel 790). Where women are reluctant to read

and write f/f love stories as a result of a lack of representation, YRRL allows these women to get comfortable with f/f love stories by providing positive and informative representation. This was confirmed by YRRL users whom Floegel interviewed; "It's helped me to figure out or come to terms with being gay" (qtd. in Floegel 790). YRRL is a safe place for LGBTQ+ people when they are in the coming out process because of the use of pseudonyms; they can explore their identity without any judgment from their real life surroundings (Dym 14, 16; Tosenberger 202). This is an important aspect of YRRL, as it allows LGBTQ+ people to explore their identity without having to assume that identity in the real world (yet) (Dym 27). YRRL is able to help people in exploring their LGBTQ+ identity because writing YRRL is a way to "'dig into' feelings around gender and sexuality" (Dym 16). LGBTQ+ YRRL writers can thus take control of their identity and experiences, and normalize them for themselves (Dym 16). The format of YRRL allows LGBTQ+ people to reinscribe their LGBTQ+ experiences, which are sometimes even traumatic, in their own versions and adaptations of existing stories in the media (Dym 2, 16). For example, one interviewee of Dym wrote a YRRL about gender dysphoria that applied to her, and readers commented that they saw themselves in that YRRL (qtd. in Dym 18). This means that YRRL cannot only offer personal insights and/or recovery from traumatic experiences (Dym 2), but that it actually provides a therapeutic advantage to the writers, since "writing about personal or emotional experiences has beneficial effects for physical help and subjective well-being" (Dym 2). Since YRRL offers the representation LGBTQ+ people do not receive in the mainstream media, YRRL has become a lifeline for the LGBTQ+ community (Dym 17). The fandom itself plays a significant part as it has become a way of mentoring and looking out for each other online (Dym 19). Together, LGBTQ+ people correct misinterpretations of LGBTQ+ identity in the mainstream media through YRRL.

But how does this writing of (slash) YRRL work? During the interpretative process, readers fill in the potential gaps in a text. When reading (or watching) media, such as books and movies, readers respond to possible (homoerotic) gaps left by the writer and fill these with their own desires (Floegel 790, MacDonald 2). They have learned to rewrite and correct negative and harmful LGBTQ+ portrayals in the media in a way that does no longer elicit painful feelings. Epstein, speaking of YAL, writes that in order to tackle prejudice and stereotyping, literature can help to normalize LGBTQ+ identities (76). This is exactly what YRRL does: correcting misinterpretations and creating new, alternative interpretations that are no longer modelled on a heteronormative society. Instead of just passively reading what the dominant discourse offers, young people "actively engage with a supportive artistic community as readers, writers and critics" (Tosenberger 190).

Conclusion

Since LGBTQ+ people rarely have the opportunity to see and construct their own narratives in the mainstream media (Dym 4) they have created the LGBTQ+ community, where individual narratives become community narratives. This is where they explore LGBTQ+ identities together through characters they are familiar with (Dym 7, 17). In this process, they create LGBTQ+ representation (Dym 17). According to Cart, YAL with its stories portrays the social attitudes of contemporary society ("Honoring Their Stories, Too"). YRRL, on the other hand, portrays the desires, needs and culture of the LGBTQ+ community. As I hope to have demonstrated in this section, by studying YRRL, a lot can be learned about the LGBTQ+ community.

Chapter Three
Comparative Analysis

So far, I have argued that there still is a lack of LGBTQ+ representation in YAL because of the dominant heteronormative adult power structure of our society. However, instead of passively accepting this status quo, LGBTQ+ people actively create their own discourse through YRRL. This development led me to the assumption that through YRRL, the LGBTQ+ community can be understood and researched. This chapter will argue in favor of this assumption. Based on my previous research findings I will present a comparative analysis of relevant case studies.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part will provide a comparative analysis between non-LGBTQ+ themed YAL, in this case the novels *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010) from the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins, and a selection of corresponding LGBTQ+ themed YRRL. The second part of the chapter will continue with a comparative analysis between the LGBTQ+ themed YAL novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and a selection of corresponding YRRL. My reason for choosing one LGBTQ+ YAL and one non-LGBTQ+ YAL title is that it might be interesting to look at possible differences in approach in YRRL. After all, LGBTQ+ people have to create the LGBTQ+ relationships in the *Hunger Games* YRRL themselves. Both comparative analyses will focus on how LGBTQ+ identities are represented in the YA books as compared to the character portrayals and storylines in the corresponding YRRL. I end with a brief conclusion, which will underline that LGBTQ+ YRRL not only serves an important function for its target audience, but that it also deserves serious academic attention.

1: *The Hunger Games*
The gaps in a non-LGBTQ+ trilogy

In 2008 the first part of the *Hunger Games* trilogy was published, henceforth referred to as *THG*. This novel would continue to become an international bestseller, remaining for over six years on The New York Times bestseller list ("Suzanne Collins – Biography"). In 2016, Collins won the Authors Guild Award for Distinguished Service to the Literary Community because with *THG* she had demonstrated that YAL can change lives ("Suzanne Collins – Biography"). In 2012, Lionsgate released the first movie adaptation of the eventual four, and broke multiple box office records ("Suzanne Collins – Biography"). Collins grew up with a father who was an officer in the U.S. Air Force and a Vietnam War veteran (Cunningham). It is therefore no surprise that she eventually wrote *THG*, in which war is a central theme, as she was influenced by her father's experience in the military (Cunningham).

The trilogy starts with *The Hunger Games* (2008), in which a future version of the US has been divided into thirteen districts, together forming the nation of 'Panem' which is ruled by President Snow. In this society, all districts are subservient to the Capitol. One district, District Thirteen, has been wiped out by the Capitol after the First Rebellion. As a reminder of this failed First Rebellion, every district has to send two children to the Capitol every year to serve as tributes in the annual Hunger Games. In these Hunger Games, twenty-four children fight each other to the death. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen from District Twelve is one of these tributes, together with Peeta Mellark. In order for them to survive, their mentor Haymitch, a previous victor, comes up with the plan to make the Capitol love them by framing them as two tragic star-crossed lovers. It is this narrative that saves both Peeta and Katniss from the Hunger Games. However, in the sequel, *Catching Fire* (2009), Katniss, Peeta and other previous victors have to return to the arena in 'celebration' of the 75th anniversary of the Hunger Games. While Katniss and Peeta are in the arena, playing again their roles of star-crossed lovers, a rebellion is forming in the districts inspired by Katniss's deeds during her first Hunger Games. In the arena she is surrounded by allies. One amongst them is Johanna Mason from District Seven, who tries to get out of the arena and protect Katniss during the games. Even though Katniss is left in the dark about this plan, it still works. The final book, *Mockingjay* (2010), introduces the reader to the secret underground District Thirteen where the rebellion has its base. Katniss, as the symbol of the rebellion, is charged with the task of stirring up the rebellion in the other districts that are still controlled by the Capitol. Eventually, a final battle takes place in the Capitol where the rebels come out victorious in the end.

THG trilogy has no specific LGBTQ+ representation. In fact, it focuses on the love triangle between Katniss and her male friends Peeta and Gale, the latter having stayed behind in District Twelve. Yet somehow the LGBTQ+ YRRL community has expressed its interest in a relationship between Katniss and Johanna: there are no fewer than 289 works of YRRL to be found on AO3 and 126 more on fanfiction.net that center on this relationship ("Katniss Everdeen/Johanna Mason – Works"; "Search Joniss"). The following section will analyze the existence of potential LGBTQ+ gaps that could be filled in and interpreted as such in both *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, since Johanna only appears in these two books.

As mentioned, Katniss and Peeta have had to pretend that they were lovers in the first book, *The Hunger Games* (2008). In the first few pages of *Catching Fire*, Katniss, as both the character-bound narrator and focalizer of the trilogy, already makes it clear that for Peeta this act of the star-crossed lovers has been much more than just pretense, but that she does not know how she feels about it herself (9). When Gale confesses his love for Katniss, she only responds with "I know" (97):

> Gale, I can't think about anyone that way now. All I can think about, every day, every waking minute since they drew Prim's name at the reaping, is how afraid I am. And there doesn't seem to be room for anything else. (97)

In this passage, Katniss explains her indecisiveness about choosing either Peeta or Gale. There is no room in her life for love for either of the boys. However, Katniss feels pressure from both the Capitol to keep up the charade of the star-crossed lovers in order for her family to stay alive (44), and from Gale who wants to hear that she loves him too (44). In *Mockingjay*, when things are a bit unstable between the three of them, Katniss overhears Peeta and Gale talking about whom she will choose:

> I can just catch Gale's last words through the layer of fur. "Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can't survive without." (…) There is not the least indication that love, or desire, or even compatibility will sway me. (…) It's a horrible thing for Gale to say, for Peeta not to refute. Especially when every emotion I have has been taken and exploited by the Capitol or the rebels. At the moment, the choice would be simple. I can survive just fine without either of them. (329, 330)

These words create a gap concerning Katniss's control over her own emotions and her ability to love. Gale even says explicitly that her decision will not be based on love, and indeed Katniss states that her emotions are not her own anymore: she has been forced into a fake heterosexual relationship by the Capitol. This can be interpreted as a deed of oppression by the heteronormative society which simultaneously creates the opportunity for Katniss to be interpreted as a lesbian by the reader. There are a few scenes between her and Johanna which support this interpretation.

The first scene occurs when Johanna and Katniss meet in the elevator after the opening ceremony in *Catching Fire*. Johanna hates her own costume and wishes she had Katniss's stylist: ""You look fantastic. (…) So gorgeous I wanted to reach through the screen and tear it [Katniss's strapless outfit] right off your back", says Johanna." (215). Before Katniss knows what is going on, Johanna strips down until she is only wearing her slippers (215). Afterwards, Peeta explains to Katniss that Johanna did this just to tease Katniss (216). This might seem an innocent gesture, but it could also be interpreted as Johanna flirting with Katniss.

A second moment that stands out in *Catching Fire* occurs right before the tributes are interviewed. Katniss is forced by President Snow to wear a wedding dress, and some tributes are angry that she seems to be playing along with the Capitol's show. However, Johanna shows sympathy towards Katniss: "(…) Johanna Mason actually stops to straighten my pearl necklace. "Make him pay for it, okay?" she says." (250). Katniss is confused by what she means. But a reader could interpret this

remark as signifying Johanna's understanding that Katniss is being forced into a heterosexual marriage by President Snow and the Capitol. In line with this reading, Johanna may then be seen to give Katniss the advice to stand up and rebel against the Capitol. She recognizes the oppression Katniss is experiencing.

When Katniss is in the arena in *Catching Fire*, Johanna finds her and brings two other allies to protect her. However, Katniss is under the impression that Johanna hurts them, at which Johanna retaliates: "Who do you think got them out of that bleeding jungle for you?" (386). A little while later, Johanna explains her actions: "Haymitch said if we were to be allies I had to bring them to you" (390). Johanna has risked her life for Katniss just to be allies. No further information about Johanna's thoughts is provided, which again leaves a potential gap. Risking your life for someone is not a step to take lightly.

Later in the story, Johanna and Katniss have to fulfill a task together that may save the group from getting killed. However, they fail, as the other competing tributes have found them. It is Johanna who immediately takes action, which is misunderstood and misinterpreted by Katniss: "Johanna attacked me. Smashed that cylinder into my head. Cut my arm" (372). However, the true reason is only mentioned later to Katniss by Haymitch: "Johanna knocked you out to cut the tracker from your arm and lead Brutus and Enobaria [two other tributes] away from you" (466). Again, Johanna has risked her life just to save Katniss, which creates another gap and thus another opportunity for interpretation for the reader regarding Johanna's feelings for Katniss. The consequence of these actions is that Johanna is captured by the Capitol and almost tortured to death, something Katniss learns in the last part of the trilogy, *Mockingjay* (296). Johanna must have known these consequences and regardless made the choice to save Katniss. Did she do all this just because Katniss was the symbol of the rebellion? Or was there something more?

In *Mockingjay*, after Johanna has been rescued from the Capitol and finds herself in District Thirteen with Katniss, Katniss convinces Johanna to train with her so they can fight with the rebels:

> "Fine. I'll train. But I'm going to the stinking Capitol if I have to kill a crew and fly there myself," says Johanna. "Probably best not to bring that up in training," I say. "But it's nice to know I'll have a ride." Johanna grins, and I feel a slight but significant shift in our relationship. (235)

This shift in their relationship is of great relevance; it hints at the possibility of there being something more between Johanna and Katniss. It leaves open possibilities: a potential gap involving their emotions and relationship. This potential gap gets even bigger when Johanna is fired from the hospital, despite still having a trauma. Johanna does not have a room where she can stay and Katniss states her intention as follows: "She won't be alone. I'm going to room with her" (238). This happens during the

time when Peeta has turned against Katniss because of his torture in the Capitol, and Katniss and Gale are not doing well either. Katniss is, for a moment, engaged with neither of her male love interests in the story. Instead, she shares training sessions and a room with Johanna. In other words; they are able to spend time together, not all of which is accounted for. This leaves a big question mark; what could have happened during all this time they are together?

Even though the moments between Katniss and Johanna are not extensively described and do not become the primary focus of attention, there are still multiple potential gaps to be found here. As only Katniss's point of view is represented, the reader is left in the dark about Johanna's emotions, motives and sexuality. This leaves room for the reader's imagination. In the next part I will analyze how these gaps are filled by YRRL.

The power of YRRL: from non-LGBTQ+ to LGBTQ+

In the previous section, I highlighted some of the gaps in *THG* involving the portrayal of the characters and their relationship in order to understand what exactly YRRL writers do when transforming a non-LGBTQ+ storyline into a LGBTQ+ narrative. In this section I will analyze how YRRL writers have interpreted these gaps through a LGBTQ+ lens, and how their needs are reflected in the resulting LGBTQ+ storyline. As previously mentioned, 415 works of YRRL have been written about the relationship between Johanna and Katniss. I have selected three works of YRRL for my analysis. My selection criteria are twofold. First, the alternative storyline should be situated during the narrative time span of the trilogy of *THG*. The motivation behind this time criterion is that I want to research what YRRL writers want to change in a non-LGBTQ+ narrative, as this reflects their needs in LGBTQ+ representation. As *THG* does not initially offer LGBTQ+ representation, the YRRL shows how they interpret the gaps and create their own representation in an existing and ongoing storyline, by making the originally straight characters members of the LGBTQ+ community. Secondly, the respective YRRL should offer different interpretations of the gaps. The basis for these selection criteria can be found in the aim of this research. I want to research and demonstrate the different alterations that are (being) made to the original narrative. This is relevant to see both the LGBTQ+ interpretations of the YRRL writers, and their contribution to LGBTQ+ representation.

The title of the first YRRL, written by MobBob[3], speaks for itself; *Catching Fire: adapted for Joniss audience*. 'Joniss' is the ship name that refers to the relationship of *Jo*anna and Kat*niss*. At the beginning of the YRRL, MobBob leaves a note: "I have always believed that Johanna was hitting on Katniss. To prove my point, I have rewritten some scenes from Catching Fire from Johanna's POV [point of view]" (MobBob). This note shows how YRRL lends itself to the reader-response approach discussed

[3] As mentioned in Chapter Two, authors of YRRL use pseudonyms to stay anonymous. I will use these pseudonyms when referring to the authors. Since I do not know the genders of the authors, I use they/them pronouns.

in my Chapter One: YRRL is the creative interpretation of a reader. MobBob is clarifying Johanna's actions, one of which occurs during the elevator moment. They start by describing Johanna's thoughts on Katniss: "There was just something about her [Katniss] that Johanna couldn't quite put her finger on that made her irresistible. Something that made Johanna all too willing to risk her life for her" (MobBob). Here MobBob already clarifies Johanna's actions later in the arena when she risks her life for Katniss, thereby filling the gaps in the original. MobBob even uses the same conversation lines that are used in *Catching Fire*: ""So gorgeous I wanted to reach through the screen and tear it [Katniss's strapless outfit] right off your back." *Was that too obvious?*" (MobBob). Here, MobBob emphasizes that this YRRL takes place during *Catching Fire*, but from Johanna's point of view: she is flirting with Katniss.

The next gap that is filled concerns the moment before the interviews where Katniss has to wear a wedding dress:

> Johanna decided to show some compassion. She went over to Katniss, using the pretext of adjusting her pearl necklace. When she was done she leaned in. She really wanted to kiss Katniss at this moment. (...) Instead she whispered, "Make him pay for it, okay?" (MobBob)

While in the book Katniss is confused by Johanna's action, the YRRL by MobBob fills this gap by clarifying that Johanna shows compassion for Katniss because she has romantic feelings for her. This is again shown in the rewrite of the moment when Johanna saves Katniss in the arena from the other two tributes. After Johanna has cut the tracker out of Katniss's arm, she runs away: "She [Johanna] was going to lead him as far away from Katniss as she could" (MobBob). Whereas in *Catching Fire* Katniss misinterprets Johanna's action, MobBob shows what actually happens during the moment itself: Johanna wants to protect Katniss, endangering her own life in the process. This is something, according to MobBob, that she was already willing to do at the beginning of the YRRL.

This last moment has also been rewritten in the second YRRL that is relevant for my analysis, by PeachyBaby in *My Girl on Fire*. This YRRL focuses on Johanna's point of view as well. However, unlike MobBob, PeachyBaby has chosen to take another direction instead of following the events of *Catching Fire*:

> Why is it that this one girl (…) can break this lovely façade I've made for myself? (…) She screams, my thoughts race. If she doesn't shut quick whoever broke the line will find us, and soon. My hands are full so I press my lips to hers, effectively silencing, but I nearly forget the task at hand as she kisses me back. I pull back, before kissing her again as I yank the tracker out of her arm. (PeachyBaby)

In *Catching Fire* the reader receives no information about Johanna's motives, other than Katniss's misinterpretation. Where MobBob only wrote that Johanna had feelings for Katniss but still kept to the original story, PeachyBaby actually includes a kiss between the two women, which emphasizes their romantic connection. Moreover, PeachyBaby suggests that this is not a reckless kiss, but motivated by Johanna's romantic feelings for Katniss. Katniss does not pull back, but in fact kisses Johanna back, thereby creating a positive LGBTQ+ moment.

A third YRRL, *Lovers,* by the author Seaunicorn, starts by noting that: "The last hundred or so pages of Mockingjay had a serious lack of Johanna Mason… so I fixed that. This is a condensed alternate ending to the series." (Seaunicorn). Seaunicorn has rewritten parts of *Mockingjay,* following the events of *Mockingjay* but slightly altering them. Seaunicorn, unlike the two aforementioned works of YRRL, writes from Katniss's point of view and shows the development of Katniss's romantic feelings towards Johanna.

As mentioned, Katniss and Johanna are training in order to fight with the rebels. In *Mockingjay*, Katniss passes her test but Johanna fails it, something Katniss does not react to at all (253). In *Lovers*, however, Katniss responds differently:

> When Johanna fails her test, I know not being able to fight in the Capitol will eat her alive until there's nothing left of her but that morphling [painkiller] drip. I don't know what possesses me to, but I say, "If she doesn't go, neither do I!" (…) I have been looking out for her since we moved in together, and they know it. (Seaunicorn)

Katniss looks out for Johanna this time, and recognizes that Johanna's joining the team in overtaking the Capitol is what is most important for her at this moment. In *Lovers*, the aforementioned gap concerning Katniss's and Johanna's rooming together is filled as follows:

> The night before we're due to leave, I come back to our room to give her [Johanna] a small bundle of pine needles that I collected for her. I want them to remind her of what we're fighting for while we're in the Capitol. "Smells like home," she whispers and her eyes glisten. A single tear falls down her cheek and I reach over and wipe it away with my thumb. (Seaunicorn)

They share a special and intimate moment that brings them closer. Katniss takes care of Johanna and does something that is of great value to her. Later in *Mockingjay,* Katniss's sister Prim is burned alive. In *Lovers*, Katniss wants to save Prim, which would kill her, but Johanna stops her: "It's Johanna's turn to hold me back. She throws her arms around me and the flames jump from my skin to hers. She

screams in pain but doesn't let go. She saves me and gets burned in the process" (Seaunicorn). It is a recurring theme that is found in Joniss YRRL: Johanna and Katniss both protect and take care of each other as a growing couple.

MobBob and PeachyBaby have rewritten parts of *Catching Fire*, filling the gaps from Johanna's point of view, which is missing in the primary source. Seaunicorn, by contrast, rewrites the ending of *Mockingjay*, providing more presence for Johanna in the story, which results in the bond between Katniss and Johanna during their time together in District Thirteen. In conclusion, I would say that all three YRRL writers provide positive LGBTQ+ representation through their interpretation.

This first part of the chapter has shown that YRRL writers can fill in potential gaps in a non-LGBTQ+ themed book, queering the storylines of the original in the process. In my next section I will analyze a LGBTQ+ YA novel and examine the different approaches in some corresponding YRRL.

2: *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*
A LGBTQ+ YA Novel

The YA novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), henceforth referred to as *ADDSU*, was written by sixty-six year old American writer Benjamin Alire Sáenz. Sáenz was born in Old Picacho, New Mexico. He studied humanities, philosophy, theology and creative writing, and was a priest in El Paso, Texas, for a short while before he started teaching creative writing at the University of Texas ("Benjamin Alire Sáenz"). With *ADDSU*, Sáenz has won twenty-seven awards and honors, among which the Stonewall Book Award, an award that recognizes exceptional LGBTQ+ representation in books ("Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe"; "Stonewall Book Awards"). For Sáenz himself, *ADDSU* is of special value as it served a therapeutic function. Sáenz was abused when he was a boy, which caused him to experience difficulties in coming to terms with his sexuality and coming out only at the age of fifty-four. *ADDSU* helped him to accept his sexuality (qtd. from "Discovering Sexuality Through Teen Lit").

ADDSU introduces its reader to the fifteen-year old protagonist Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza, a Mexican-American boy who lives in El Paso. He thinks a lot about everything and has difficulties making friends. During a summer day at the pool Ari first meets Dante Quintana and they instantly become friends. Since Ari is both the character bound narrator and focalizer, the reader learns about his thoughts, feelings and life, in which Dante plays a big part. Throughout the story, Aristotle and Dante encounter a number of grim experiences. First, Ari saves Dante from being hit by a car but ends up severely injured in hospital himself. After this accident, Dante moves away for a year with his parents and the two friends are separated. During this year, Dante writes Ari letters in which the reader learns that Dante is questioning his sexuality. When the two friends are reunited, it is not long before Dante ends up in hospital after being beaten up because he was kissing a boy. Ari is enraged by this assault

but does not understand why. The final pages of the book provide this understanding, when he finally discovers his feelings for Dante, and comes to terms with his sexuality.

The first pages of *ADDSU* include a dedication from Sáenz: "To all the boys who've had to learn to play by different rules" (Sáenz). This dedication shows that *ADDSU* is specifically written for a gay audience, and Sáenz states with this sentence that being LGBTQ+ means that you do not follow the heteronormative 'rules' of society. The struggles that come with being LGBTQ+ are emphatically addressed by Sáenz in *ADDSU*. The first page of Chapter One already focuses on this theme and sets the tone for the rest of the book with one sentence that describes Ari's feelings throughout the story: "I was miserable" (Sáenz 5). However, both the reader and Ari do not yet know why he is miserable, as Ari initially links his feelings to his age (Sáenz 5). Because Ari discovers his sexuality only at the end of the book, this leaves the impression that being LGBTQ+ means feeling miserable during the time it takes to come to terms with one's sexual orientation. This is a characteristic that is typical of LGBTQ+ representation as shown in Chapter Two.

The reader experiences the coming out process of Ari, which continuously has a negative connotation: "I wasn't a real boy. I was a fraud" (Sáenz 28). This allows for the interpretation that being homosexual equals degradation of the male gender. Ari's struggle for identification takes up a central part of the book: "I always felt that I didn't belong anywhere. I didn't even belong in my own body" (81). LGBTQ+ identification is thus portrayed in terms of an identity crisis. At one point Ari even wants to ask his mother when he will know who he is (148). Knowing Ari is homosexual, these constant descriptions of Ari as feeling lost provide the message that people with a LGBTQ+ identity are just flat, as discussed in my Chapter Two: they are LGBTQ+ and nothing more. Close to the ending of the book, Ari wonders "if all boys had that darkness inside them. Yes. Maybe even Dante", referring to something inside him that always made him feel bad (299). Since Dante has already come out at this point and Ari discovers his sexuality soon after this quote, the 'darkness' and this 'something' can only refer to homosexuality. In summary, following the characterization of Ari in *ADDSU*, having a homosexual identity results in feeling miserable, not knowing who you are, abnormality, and darkness. However, it is not just Ari's characterization that results in negative LGBTQ+ representation.

In the course of the narrative, Ari finds out about two secrets that concern LGBTQ+ identities. The first is the truth about his aunt Ophelia, who has passed away. Ari and his parents are the only ones in the family who attend the funeral. When Ari asks why, his mother answers: "They didn't approve of your aunt. (…) She lived with another woman. For many years" (285). Besides the sad fact that Ophelia is not accepted by her own family, the entire storyline of the two women is a negative representation of LGBTQ+: Franny, the woman Ophelia loved, has died of cancer six years before Ophelia (290). The second secret that comes to light is the real reason why Ari's brother is in prison: he killed a transvestite (331). This has been a dark secret in Ari's family: his own brother killed someone

with a LGBTQ+ identity. Even though the two women and the transvestite are not central characters, it is noteworthy that these other LGBTQ+ characters are thus seen to have miserable storylines as well. This underlines my argument that being LGBTQ+ in this book equals tragedy.

Additionally, the storyline of Ari and Dante is itself also a tragic one. At the beginning of the story, Ari saves Dante from being hit by a car, and when Dante tells two girls about his heroic actions, this angers Ari, as he does not want anyone to know that he has saved his friend (111, 265). No reason is given why Ari wants to keep the event a secret, which leaves a potential interpretative gap for the reader. This gap can be filled by taking Ari's hidden feelings for Dante into consideration. Telling people about the accident might make people think that Ari is a homosexual. Ari is, however, not the only one who ends up in hospital. Dante does so as well later in the book, after having been beaten up because he was kissing a boy (304). Even though the first hospitalization cannot be linked directly to being LGBTQ+, the hospitalization of Dante is a direct cause of his identifying as such.

Throughout the novel, Ari is resistant when it comes to his homosexuality. At one point he says explicitly to Dante: "I don't kiss boys" (248), and he is even interested in a girl whom he ends up kissing (216). Since Ari ends up acknowledging that he has been in love with Dante all along, the whole narrative can in retrospect be seen as centering on Ari's struggles with his sexuality: he resists his feelings. Dante, on the other hand, has figured out his sexuality halfway through the story when he and Ari are separated for a year. Since the reader only gets to read Ari's point of view and the letters from Dante to Ari, not much depth is provided for Dante's discovery and feelings. The information that is given is focused on Dante's coming out in a letter to Ari: "*And I keep wondering what they're* [Dante's parents] *going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. (...) I hate that I'm going to disappoint them, Ari*" (227). As mentioned in my Chapter Two, the coming out process is a common theme in LGBTQ+ storylines. Dante's letter underlines this statement. Discovering your sexuality is so much more than coming out to your parents; however, Dante's complete discovery is not represented.

The account of Ari's eventual discovery of his sexuality is very brief. At first, Ari does not even realize it himself. At the end of the book his father has to spell it out for him: "Ari, the problem isn't just that Dante's in love with you. The real problem – for you, anyway – is that you're in love with him" (348). Instead of this being a positive moment, the fact that Ari is in love with Dante is presented as a problem for Ari himself. Being in love with a boy is not represented as a normal state, but as an issue. His father continues:

> You saved his life. Why do you suppose you did that? Why do you suppose that, in an instant, without even thinking, you dove across the street and shoved Dante out of the way of a moving car? (...) Why would you risk your own life to save Dante if you didn't love him? (348)

The potential gap in meaning left by the question why Ari saved Dante, and why he acted as he did throughout the narrative, is filled by this quote. Ari did not want people to know that he saved Dante because he found his love for Dante problematic. Ari confesses to his parents that he is ashamed of his feelings for Dante, and gives the following reason: "I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be. (…) I hate myself" (349). Being homosexual is not normal in Ari's eyes and leads to self-hate. This is another example of the negative representation and connotation of LGBTQ+ identities. Even though the book ends with Ari thinking "How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?" (359) after they have kissed, the only positive LGBTQ+ representation is found in these last two pages. Compared to everything else that happened and has been said in the rest of the narrative, this is not a lot. It is therefore interesting to analyze how YRRL writers have edited *ADDSU*. How do they write about the homosexual relationship? How do they portray Ari's narrative?

The power of YRRL: rewriting LGBTQ+ representation

In my previous section I have shown how *ADDSU* contains a lot of negative LGBTQ+ representation: a transvestite gets murdered, Ophelia and Franny, the lesbians, are not accepted by their family and get killed by cancer, Dante ends up in hospital after being beaten up for kissing a boy, and Ari feels miserable throughout the whole story since he only finds out in the final pages that he is gay. In this section I will answer the question how YRRL writers have approached *ADDSU*.

Interestingly, on AO3, most of the 209 works of YRRL on Aristotle and Dante are situated after the time covered by the narrative ("Works Matching 'Ari/Dante'"). My selection criterion for the YRRL I have chosen is that the works of YRRL have to relate to and reflect on events of the original narrative. The basis for my criterion is similar to that which I used for the YRRL of *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*: I want to research and demonstrate how YRRL writers have interpreted the original narrative (in this case a LGBTQ+ novel), and how YRRL writers have altered and reacted to this novel in order to fit their LGBTQ+ needs.

The YRRL *Imperfect Skin*, by Kenneyb, takes place not long after the ending of *ADDSU*. Ari and Dante are lying in the back of Ari's truck in the middle of the desert, a recurring setting in *ADDSU*. Dante reveals that he was drawing something the night he was kissing another boy and got attacked:

> "I thought you didn't like people seeing your art until it was finished." Dante smiled. "You're not *people,* you're Ari." After being handed it [the drawing], Ari slowly unfolded the paper but a part of him knew what he should be expecting. It was a drawing of him, unfinished and a little messy but somehow still the most beautiful thing he'd ever had the pleasure of seeing. The night that started it all was also the night he'd been busy drawing him of all things – of all people. (Kenneyb)

What Kenneyb does here, is to turn a tragic moment in the past into a more positive one. Dante was still kissing another boy and got attacked because of that, but before these events happened he was drawing Ari. This drawing is a tiny intimate detail in which Dante expresses his love for Ari. The fact that Ari is the only one who gets to see this drawing shows how special Dante's love for Ari is. Kenneyb has made the terrible memory of Ari and Dante a little better by filling it with positive representation.

The next YRRL, *Names*, by Fadeawayradiate, fasts forward fifteen years and discusses a few memories of Ari over the course of those fifteen years. However, the reader is first briefly updated on what happened after the ending of the book:

> The Mendozas and Quintanas knew their sons were together, and it wasn't like Ari and Dante could be very public about their relationship to anyone else while they were still in high school. Neither of them were ashamed of it, but the fear of what might happen if people knew was a big enough motivator for them to both keep the relationship quiet. Until college, that is. (Fadeawayradiate)

Fadeawayradiate offers a brief insight into what happens after the book ends. Ari and Dante keep their relationship quiet as a result of the attack on Dante. Fadeawayradiate does not go into details, but makes it clear that they are not ashamed of loving each other. This is relevant as Fadeawayradiate chooses not to linger on the negative events and advances to happy moments; starting with college. At first, the two keep their relationship a secret here as well, only kissing when they are not seen by anyone (Fadeawayradiate). However, things begin to change when they are seen kissing in the hallway: "Approximately five seconds later, Ari met Dante's friend Chris for the first time, as he ran head-first into the happy couple (…) Ari had frozen at first and looked to Dante immediately, positioning himself just in front of him" (Fadeawayradiate). Ari's first response is to protect Dante from any beatings like the one he got last time when he was seen kissing a boy. However, instead of experiencing a negative reaction as in *ADDSU*, they get a genuinely positive one: "Chris laughed as he locked the door to his room behind him. "Who's this?" he asked, nodding towards Ari" (Fadeawayradiate). Instead of displaying any tendency towards violence or bullying, Chris just laughs at having interrupted the kissing couple. Dante answers happily: "This is my boyfriend Ari" (Fadeawayradiate). Ari reflects on this as follows: "That was the first time Ari could remember hearing Dante use that word. Boyfriend. He said it so *proudly*" (Fadeawayradiate). It is the first time the couple make their relationship public to someone outside their family and it does not result in a negative experience. It turns out that "Dante had met Chris at a local LGBT meet-up, just off campus. It had turned out to be almost entirely made up of students who had found a way to form a community even if the school wouldn't allow it to be an official club" (Fadeawayradiate). Fadeawayradiate has forged a whole community whose members

have together created a space for themselves within the heteronormative society that is represented through the school. This can be interpreted as another instance where the LGBTQ+ YRRL community has contributed to the open discourse.

This positive coming out experience of Ari and Dante is repeated when the YRRL fasts forward to a few years later, when Ari and Dante move into their first apartment. Dante has been talking to the new neighbor and Ari walks in on them, being careful not to touch Dante because he does not want the neighbors to hate them for being queer (Fadeawayradiate): ""Oh, hey! Amanda, this is my partner Ari." (…) "Nice to meet you too! You two are both so handsome, I can't believe you're a couple," she gushed, looking a little embarrassed as she realized what she was saying" (Fadeawayradiate). Again, Dante and Ari have come out to a stranger, a bit afraid of her reaction, but they are accepted and even complimented: ""Handsome?" He [Dante] smiled at Ari and laughed. They were both in a sort of disbelief about how well Amanda had reacted to them" (Fadeawayradiate). Both meetings with someone outside their family who finds out that Ari and Dante are a couple, result in positive experiences. In this YRRL, Fadeawayradiate has tried to rewrite the negative experience Dante had when he was kissing another boy long ago in the original story. Fadeawayradiate has also made Ari's miserable feelings that persisted throughout *ADDSU* disappear and filled Ari with pride and happiness when he is first called Dante's boyfriend. This is underlined when the YRRL ends with Ari proposing to Dante: ""Will you marry me?" Ari's chest ached with how happy and in love he felt. The feeling only multiplied when Dante nodded" (Fadeawayradiate). The self-hate, misery, tragedy, and drama are gone; there is only love and pride.

Yasaman has also taken a closer look at Ari's feelings but combined these with his family history, in the YRRL *A Map of the World Without Darkness*. The story takes place twenty years after the ending of *ADDSU* and starts with Ari reading the letter exchange between his aunt Ophelia and his mother. However, this time he focuses on the love between Ophelia and Franny, a topic that was barely touched upon in *ADDSU*:

> But now, removed from the self-centeredness of youth, he saw the shape of what Ophelia and Franny had been to each other. He saw the rage and despair and heartbreaking love in Franny's struggle with cancer. (…) He couldn't stop thinking about how Ophelia wasn't always allowed to be with Franny in the hospital during her cancer treatments. Ari couldn't help but remember that his father had told him that he had asked for Dante at the hospital after the accident and surgery. Sixteen and unable to comprehend what he felt for Dante, Ari had asked for him. (Yasaman)

Yasaman delves deeper into the tragedy of Ophelia and Franny that was implied in *ADDSU*. This time, however, Ari compares the situation of the two women to that of himself and Dante. Because Ophelia and Franny were not married (at that time same-sex marriage was not legal yet), Ophelia was not allowed to be with Franny in the hospital. In the YRRL, Ari and Dante are not married either. This parallel causes Ari to remember how he was in the hospital and would not have been able to have Dante by his side if something had happened. Yasaman shows with this quote that Ari has been in love with Dante throughout *ADDSU*, but was not able to understand his feelings and therefore only discovered them at the end of the book.

A little later in the YRRL, Ari finds his own correspondence with Dante dating back to the time when Dante was away for a year in *ADDSU*. In one of these letters, Dante wrote that someday he wanted to marry a boy (Sáenz 227). This sentence, together with the letters of Ophelia, strike Ari:

> Dante had wanted to get married to a man at seventeen, and Ophelia would have married Franny the moment she could. So why haven't he and Dante gotten married? Why shouldn't they get married? (Yasaman)

The love and tragedy of Ophelia and Franny have opened Ari's eyes and moments later, he asks Dante to marry him (Yasaman). Yasaman has thus taken the tragedy of Ophelia and Franny for a starting point, but has given it a positive twist. If it had not been for their love and the struggles they faced, Ari would not have made the connection with his own love for Dante, which also has not been without difficulties. Ari would not have realized that he and Dante now have an opportunity that Ophelia and Franny did not have: they can get married. Just as the title of this YRRL indicates, Yasaman has turned the darkness of the past into a positively bright future for Ari and Dante.

3: Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how YRRL can create the positive representation that LGBTQ+ readers need. Non-LGBTQ+ oriented texts are not excluded from the practice of writing LGBTQ+ YRRL, on the contrary, great efforts are made by the LGBTQ+ community to create and improve LGBTQ+ representation in non-LGBTQ+ YAL. Once again I would therefore argue that for future research, YRRL should be regarded as a serious academic source. This section will discuss the results of my comparative analysis in this chapter, before moving forward to the general conclusion of my thesis as a whole.

In my Chapter Three I have presented two case studies to substantiate the argument made in my Chapters One and Two, testing the differences between YAL and YRRL through the comparative analysis of *THG* and *ADDSU,* and some of their respective YRRL. *THG*, a non-LGBTQ+ YAL novel trilogy,

offers its readers a heterosexual love triangle where Katniss is forced to be in a heterosexual relationship. However, as I have argued, potential homosexual gaps are left open when it comes to Katniss's relationship with Johanna. These gaps have been filled in, to the effect that both Katniss and Johanna were rewritten as lesbian characters by their readers. Scenes were rewritten from Johanna's point of view; in other cases, the plot was altered to insert her in the story. Johanna's actions were motivated through the love she felt for Katniss. Positive LGBTQ+ moments were thus created: Katniss and Johanna were seen to protect, support and love each other, resulting in Katniss being freed from the repressive heterosexual discourse. *THG* YRRL provides a lesbian twist to the distinctly straight original narrative by filling the potential gaps.

ADDSU, a LGBTQ+ YA novel, was found to represent homosexuality negatively and thus demonstrates the findings of my research in Chapter Two: Ari is miserable throughout the book, thinks of himself as not a real boy, does not know who he is and states that there is a darkness inside him. This YAL novel portrays LGBTQ+ as the cause of an identity crisis and a negative experience. The recognition of Ari's homosexuality in the last pages of the book results in self-hate. Additionally, both Ari and Dante end up in the hospital as a consequence of their being homosexual: Ari because of his love for Dante, and Dante because he is caught kissing a boy. The other LGBTQ+ characters, Ophelia, Franny, and the transvestite, get negative storylines as well. *ADDSU* thus sends a rather negative message to the LGBTQ+ community about their identity. YRRL, I argued, is capable of transforming this negative representation into a more positive narrative by providing stories that take place after the ending of the book but refer back to events in the book. Ari's character portrayal in the YRRL discussed was not miserable as in the original story. Instead, he was shown to be proud of being Dante's boyfriend, partner and eventually husband. There was just love, pride and support: a clear message from and to the LGBTQ+ community when you read between the lines. In sum, the *ADDSU* YRRL presents positive LGBTQ+ representation.

Since *THG* trilogy did not offer any LGBTQ+ representation, YRRL writers undertook to create their own representation by exploring the homosexual gaps and change the narrative to suit their needs and desires. *ADDSU* on the other hand already provided LGBTQ+ representation, which meant that the purpose of YRRL here was not to create a rewrite of the existing story. This is seen in the approaches of YRRL writers discussed: instead of filling in the gaps and rewriting the original narrative, they wrote stories that took place after the timespan narrated in the book. They reflected on negative events in the book and this time, they turned them into positive experiences. Because of the already existing LGBTQ+ representation, YRRL writers were given the possibility to change this representation to suit their needs. The big difference between *THG* and *ADDSU* YRRL is: where *THG* YRRL writers *create* LGBTQ+ representation, *ADDSU* YRRL writers *transform* negative aspects of LGBTQ+ representation into positives ones.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that YRRL deserves serious academic attention. More specifically, in conducting my research, I hope to have demonstrated how YRRL can be understood as a valuable academic source when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation in Young Adult Literature.

Research has shown that YAL is difficult to define because it keeps growing, changing and developing along with society and culture themselves to address the needs of its readers. Because of the realistic agenda of YAL, it has the potential to be an inclusive and diverse genre. One of its diverse themes is LGBTQ+ identification, which comes with struggles because of the dominance of heteronormative discourse in society. As Cart states, society does not make it easy for young people to get access to accurate and nonjudgmental non-heterosexual representation ("Honoring Their Stories, Too"). The reason for this is the big paradox in the publishing world of YAL: it is controlled by adults, who often consider sexuality that does not conform to the heteronormative standard controversial. If LGBTQ+ content gets published at all, characters are often stereotyped, unhappy, and their sexuality and gender define them entirely. Moreover, character portrayal and the storylines of LGBTQ+ characters are often focused on the 'coming out process' and the stress associated with this revelation, which causes rejection, verbal and physical abuse, and sometimes even death (Epstein 56). Positive representation can lead to a better understanding of LGBTQ+ people, for themselves as well as others.

Since society is lacking positive LGBTQ+ representation, the LGBTQ+ community has created its own representation: YRRL. YRRL can be understood as texts written by fans that are themselves based on various media, such as movies and literature. I approached YRRL as a heuristic lens and thus a literary theory in its own right that hinges on a creative process of interpretation: the reader gives meaning to a text, using personal experiences as a point of reference (Eagleton 66; Iser 1675, 1676) to fill in gaps in the original story (Barnes 76). In other words, YRRL can be explained as the result of the reader's experience-based interpretation, which connects YRRL with reader-response theory. Since YRRL is not bound by the constraints of the publishing world or the dominant heteronormative society, YRRL writers can write and publish whatever they want; positive LGBTQ+ representation can thus emerge through, for example, slash YRRL.

However, YRRL is not just written for the general purpose of representation. It can also reflect the needs of the LGBTQ+ community, and thus serve a therapeutic purpose. On these online platforms, users can choose to be invisible and therefore safely experiment with and discover their sexuality, thereby reinscribing their LGBTQ+ experiences. Through YRRL, users also learn from each other by recognizing their own feelings, emotions, and thoughts in YRRL written by others. Where mainstream

media portray LGBTQ+ characters in harmful and tragic ways, YRRL pushes against these tropes by undoing the dominant visualizations of the LGBTQ+ identity (Dym 17, 20).

People who engage with YRRL have created a discursive space outside the dominant discourse in which they provide positive LGBTQ+ representation, a development made possible thanks to the internet. The LGBTQ+ community thus has an opportunity to create its own subjectivity and cultural life (Foucault 163). This means that we can see the needs, desires, and the culture of the LGBTQ+ community reflected in this genre. However, this aspect of YRRL has not yet been studied so far. A plausible reason for this omission is the stigmatization of the term 'fanfiction' and 'fans' in general. Fanfiction is often dismissed as derivative and unoriginal (Bronwen 10), and the writers of fanfictions, the so called 'fans', are seen as immature (Tosenberger 189; qtd. in Bronwen 3). Looking at what I consider to be the academic relevance of my findings, I think it is unproductive to use the name 'fanfiction' for the type of research I propose while it still has these connotations. Therefore, as I discussed in my Chapter One, I renamed fanfiction into Youthful Reader Response Literature (YRRL).

In my previous chapter, I discussed and compared two case studies. I found that *ADDSU* YRRL transforms negative aspects of LGBTQ+ representation of the original narrative into positive ones, whereas *THG* YRRL creates LGBTQ+ representation by filling in gaps in the original narrative.

This thesis provides several starting points for future research, and I will now conclude with some recommendations. Where this thesis focused on rewritings of YAL, there is an even bigger 'queering' at work in YRRL based on tv show characters. Moreover, other critical approaches could also prove productive for the study of YRRL, such as feminist studies: how does YRRL approach the female gender? A further point for consideration concerns the fact that the case studies discussed by me focused on homosexual men and women. Research could be expanded to include the broader field of LGBTQ+ identities and discuss, for example, bisexuality and transgender identities found in YRRL. Another potentially interesting field when studying YRRL could be the combination of LGBTQ+ and religion and/or cultural differences. Interviewing YRRL writers and readers could be of high value in carrying out any of these proposals for future research.

In conclusion, by studying YRRL we can read and understand what the LGBTQ+ community needs when it comes to representation; we can understand their culture. Providing positive representation not only for themselves, but also making it accessible to other readers, is of high relevance for the LGBTQ+ community. My hopes are that this thesis may serve as the start of a new approach to the cultural analysis of YAL YRRL, where YRRL is recognized as an open discourse for the LGBTQ+ community and justice will be done to YRRL writers and their stories.

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