Representation of Trans* Youth in Magical Realism Young Adult Literature

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Representation of Trans* Youth in Magical Realism Young Adult Literature

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Introduction

Boy meets girl, they fall in love. Oh no, the girl was assigned male at birth – 'does that make me gay?'. Everybody finds out she is trans, they break up. The girl questions herself for a minute, but she has always known that she was a girl inside, so she can not go back to live in the wrong body. The girl gets attacked and barely survives. 'Oh my god, she could have died, let's get back together!' – they lived happily ever after.*

As someone who reads hundreds of books a year, it is par of the course that plotlines tend to repeat themselves. Especially when you have (a few) favourite genre(s). If you're like me and read so many books and also tend to forget most of them after a few days of finishing them, it's fine if the plotline is nothing new – sometimes I even welcome it. It gives me a sense of comfort to read what I expect – and to read it about people my age. So, I tend to read a lot of books marked *Young Adult Literature* and marketed towards late teens and people in their twenties. And: Repetition is okay, for me, as long as it is not over-simplified.

I read a lot of books with LGBTQ+ characters, and simplified characters are even more prevalent here. Over the last few years, I have noticed more diversity inside LGBTQ+ books (or maybe I have personally sought them out more), but one of those letters seems to be severely lacking in that department: T. While I applaud the fact that there are (at last) trans* youth represented in books explicitly written for youth, I was shocked by the nonchalance with which trans* youth was repetitively exposed to violence, outed and had made being trans* their only characteristic. When trying to put my unease about the representation of trans* youth in contemporary fiction into words, I was quickly reminded of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TedTalk on the danger of a single

story.[1] While she is talking about the single story of Africa, the essence of her criticism is applicable to many stories: "Show people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."[2] Thus, I found myself wondering, if we write the story of violence against trans* youth again and again, does it not become their only story? And the only "true" story, the only allowed story? Consequently, this kind of treatment of trans* people – and the violence against them – becomes so ingrained in literature that it becomes normalised also in real life, it is what is expected to happen to them. This thought did not sit well with me. First of all, just like any other group inside the LGBTQ+ community, there must be diversity in trans* experiences. Secondly, how can we normalise violence to such an extent that it becomes an expected motif both in literature and in life? Because media, and thus books, do not exist in a vacuum, but do have real life implications.

When looking for more books with a trans* protagonist, I stumbled across Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys.* Finally, I found a book that showed the struggles of a trans* teen coming to terms with his gender identity without any use of violence as a plotline. Simultaneously the novel shows influences of non-western culture on gender identity and community. Is it thus this non-western culture that leads to this kind of representation of trans* youth?

A genre that is based on non-western cultures and has a decolonising character is *Magical Realism.* It would hence make sense to look for more books in this genre with trans* protagonists to see how they deal with trans* representation. Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* is generally seen as the first *Young Adult Literature* book in the genre of Magical Realism. Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night,* too, deals with topics of

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[1] https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (accessed on 09.06.23)

[2] https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (accessed on 09.06.23) (09:14)

decolonisation and non-western culture, but with slightly older protagonists and Syrian migrants instead of Latinx influences. Both books have received a Stonewall Honor Award in 2017 and 2021 respectively.[3]

There has been little research done into the representation of trans* youth in *Young Adult Literature* (YAL), I'd think mainly because it has only been less than ten years since the first YAL book with a trans* teen protagonist has been published. Much research of queer studies focuses on gay and lesbian representation, and while many of the problems found there are also applicable to trans* representation, I would argue that it is necessary to not only look at trans* experience as a part of the broader LGBTQ+ experience but as a specific group.

While there is not a lot of research done in terms of trans* representation in YAL, multiple scholars have written about trans* in media, such as Sandy Stone and Jack J. Halberstam. Already thirty-five years ago Sandy Stone criticised the streamlining of trans* experience into one single experience, it is thus by no means a new topic in general. But even though Stone wrote her *Posttranssexual Manifesto* in 1987, the things she criticises the most, such as the "wrong body" narrative, are still prevalent in contemporary YAL. The repetitive insistence of many YAL stories not only on violence but also that the trans* protagonist was born in the wrong body and has therefore always known that they have a different gender identity from their gender assigned at birth, can still be found in almost all the books I've read. At a first glance, *Cemetery Boys* does not engage in this narrative, which gives me one more argument to look at Magical Realism as a genre which might allow for a more divers trans* experience.

[3] https://www.ala.org/rt/rrt/award/stonewall/honored (accessed on 13.06.23)

Going from my own personal reading experience I thus came to the following research question for this thesis: Does the genre of Magical Realism allow for a more divers representation of trans* youth in Young Adult Literature?

To try and answer this question, in this thesis I will look at three novels situated in the genre of Magical Realism already mentioned above: Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours,* Aidan Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* and Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night.* All three books deal differently with the trans* body, while bringing the decolonising characteristic of the genre into play.

This thesis is structured as follows:

In the first chapter I will create a theoretical framework for this thesis consisting of four parts. Firstly, I will give an overview of what Magical Realism is, its characteristics and it's (possible) connection to trans* literature. Secondly, I will try to define Young Adult Literature and its importance for youth. Thirdly, an overview of previous research on trans* in literature will be given and prevalent topics found in it discussed, before in the fourth part of the theory, I will focus on the representation of the trans* body (in literature). In the second chapter all three chosen novels will be discussed. I will analyse how they represent their trans* characters to ultimately be able to answer the research question in the conclusion in the third chapter.

1 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I will work out a theoretical framework for the analysis in the second chapter. To create such a framework, I have divided the necessary secondary literature into four categories: (1) the genre of Magical Realism, (2) Young Adult Literature, (3) Trans* in Literature, and lastly (4) the body (in relation to trans* literature).

The first category will allow for a broader understanding of Magical Realism in general and will permit us to place the novels discussed later within the literary field. It will also allow for a better understanding of the underlying topics often found in Magical Realism such as decoloniality.

In the second category I will try to work out a (working) definition of Young Adult Literature. As there is no consensus if Young Adult Literature should be considered a genre or not, this needs to be discussed as well. Furthermore, I will look at the importance of LGBTQ+ literature in Young Adult Literature.

The third category outlines what has been studied by scholars and how transness and trans* characters have been depicted (and received) in (YA) literature thus far. Here I will also be looking at common problems and plotlines in trans* literature such as the "wrong body" narrative.

As the body plays an important role in many Magical Realism books as well as books with trans* protagonists, the fourth category looks at different texts that deal with the trans* body.

1.1 Magical Realism

All three books analysed in this thesis can be situated in the genre of Magical Realism. To gain a better understanding of the genre itself and its importance especially for the representation of trans* characters, I will first provide a definition of the genre before outlining the relevant topics found both in magical realism and the chosen exemplary novels.

> Magical realism radically modifies and replenishes the dominant mode of realism in the West, challenging its basis of representation from within. That destabilization of a dominant form meant that it has served as a particularly effective decolonizing agent. Very briefly defined, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvellous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them.[4]

Wendy B. Faris, in her book *Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), identifies five primary characteristics for the genre of magical realism: (1) an "irreducible element" of magic, (2) a detailed description of a presence of a magical world, (3) unsettling doubts, (4) closeness of two realms and (5) disturbance of time, space and identity.[5] To understand how the novels analysed in this thesis fit into the genre of Magical Realism, an overview over the characteristics an explanation of them will follow here.

The irreducible element is something happening in the story that is inexplicable to both the narrator and the reader according to natural laws.[6] This magical element is often described in detail and similarly as any other ordinary everyday reality in the story. These elements are therefore so well assimilated into the textual environment that they rarely cause any comments by the narrator or characters, which in turn leads to a suspension of judgment in the

[4] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative.* Vanderbilt University Press, 2004. 1.
[5] Ibd. 7.
[6] Ibd. 7.

reader.[7] The irreducible element is thus the culmination of the coexistence of both the real and the magic in a story that presents them in an interwoven and inseparable way.[8]

While the irreducible element links to the *magical* in magical realism, the second characteristic Faris identifies builds onto that element and connects to *realism* by providing a detailed description of a presence of a magical world.[9] By giving very detailed, realistic descriptions of a magical presence, the created fictional world resembles the one we live in, thus creating a realistic environment. Another way in which an event or a magical presence might be embedded in the story and lead to a realistic effect is by anchoring the story in history. This is often done by including alternative versions of historical events or figures in the text, not unlike the realism's tradition, while shaping myths and legends into the collective memory.[10] The third quality Faris attributes to magical realism is the unsettling doubt that might set in before defining the irreducible element as such.[11] Here, Faris is building upon Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic, where the reader's hesitation before deciding on an explanation of a previous unexplainable event shifts the story from the fantastic either to the uncanny (explainable according to natural laws) or the marvelous (alteration to natural laws are needed).[12] In magical realism, much like Todorov's fantastic, the reader hesitates between two understandings of an event. Chanady distinguishes between the fantastic and magical realism by the purpose of the authorial reticence, which in one case (the fantastic) encourages hesitance and uncertainty, while in the other case (magical realism) naturalises

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[7] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments*. 8.
[8] Ibd. 11.
[9] Ibd. 14.
[10] Ibd. 16.
[11] Ibd. 17.
[12] Todorov, Tzvetan. The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre. The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973. 41.

the supernatural and therefore leads to the resolve of any hesitance.[13] While Faris accepts Chanady's distinction as valid, she argues that even when the text and/or the narrator does not encourage the reader to hesitate or doubt the events of the narrative, the code of realism often is too strong to overcome such doubt, thus not all hesitance is being completely resolved.[14] Magical realism therefore encompasses a strange combination of doubt and belief. Besides the codes of realism, the hesitation also stems from a clash of cultural and/or belief systems in the reader or even in the narrative itself. The influence of culture on magical realism can also be observed in the fourth characteristic that Faris describes: the closeness or near-merging of two realms. Oftentimes magical realism merges a traditional with the modern world[15] and the story takes place at the interception of those two worlds, which is frequently the in-between of the world of the living and the world of the dead. This "place of hybridity" between cultures and/or opposing systems leads to a unique space that provides space for marginalised voices.[16] As a fifth and last characteristic, Faris sees the disruption of received ideas of time, space and/or identity.[17] Time might pass differently in a magical realist narrative or space might not have the same limits as in our world, but the multiplicity that is encoded in magical realism through different cultures and different spheres or worlds, as explained above, can also extend to its characters. Similarly to Faris, Lois Parkinson Zamora observes a tendency in magical realism of individuals, times and places to transform (magically) into others, as well as shifting from the individual to

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[13] Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*. Routledge, 1985. 149.
[14] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments.* 20.
[15] Ibd. 21.
[16] Ibd. 134f.
[17] Ibd. 23.

the collective.[18] Zamora reasons that magical realism makes use of archetypical subjectivity that draw from collective sources which leads to a simultaneously individual and universal experience, so even if all experience is in its nature individual, people generalise their experiences to make sense of them.[19]

As has become clear in the characteristics explained above, magical realism carries an important political and decolonising tradition. Zamora observes that in magical realism the self is only politically empowered when it is connected to the communal values and traditions culture, which underlines the decolonising character of the magical realist narrative.[20] While realism is a European export, and therefore uses Western values, ideas and norms, magical realism takes the social analysis found there and builds on it but uses a different approach, different resources to do so.[21] Thus, the magic used in these texts are frequently used against an established social order, to oppose totalitarian regimes and/or assume antibureaucratic positions.[22] Faris suggests that magical realism, rather than skirting political issues, through its disruptive tendencies, provides a decolonised space for both new voices, as well as a space to question and model said political issues.[23] As seen above, this decolonising characteristic of the genre can be observed through the closeness of the realms of the living and the dead (characteristic four). Zamora writes that in magical realism those realms "reflect one another, are penetrable, permeable, mutually knowable" and are not separate like in Western tradition[24] while Faris states that the inclusion of encounters with the dead may lead to "colonized societies

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[18] Zamora, Lois Parkinson. "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 497–550. Duke University Press, 2020. 501.
[19] Ibd. 504.
[20] Ibd. 511.
[21] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments.* 144.
[22] Ibd. 139/150.
[23] Ibd. 135.
[24] Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Magical Romance/Magical Realism*. 529/531.

undergo[ing] an experience that approximates a kind of symbolic death and reconstruction of their cultural bodies through those narratives, which rediscover and affirm extinct or vanishing indigenous beliefs in the face of colonial ones."[25] Another consequence of this rebirth and questioning of Western thinking is that it makes space for other types of representation, which is even further aided by the addition of other cultures and belief systems.[26]

Consequently, we can thus argue that theoretically magical realism as a genre, through its traditions, offers space for marginalized voices as well as space for the representation of different experiences.

1.2 (LGBTQ+) Young Adult Literature

In this chapter I will give a short working definition of Young Adult Literature (YAL) before working towards a more LGBTQ+ focused overview. It will be a working definition of YAL because there is not *one* clear definition and different theorists thus differ in what they include in YAL. I will base my working definition on Michael Cart's work. Cart is a scholar on the topic of Young Adult and Children's Literature and is – amongst other works - the co-author of the book *Representing the rainbow in young adult literature: LGBTQ+ content since 1969* which will be touched upon later in this chapter.

As the name suggests, when trying to define Young Adult Literature, one might firstly look at the targeted age group of readers. The Oxford Dictionary, Miriam Webster and the Cambridge Dictionary all feature the term, however the definitions differ. While both Miriam Webster defines "young adult" as a category primarily intended towards teenagers or adolescent respectively, the Oxford Dictionary and the Cambridge Dictionary do give an age indication by

[25] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments.* 137.
[26] Ibd. 133.

defining "young adult" as books written for readers in their late teenage years or early twenties.[27] Antero Garcia writes in his book *Critical Foundation in Young Adult Literature* how in 2012 the majority of YAL consumers was 18 years or older, 30 percent even older than thirty.[28] Cart reports a similar recent increase in the age of YAL readers, but indicates that the age of YAL readers is mostly due to the marketing of publishers. While the current marketing now seems to lead to an older targeted audience, in the past the opposite could be observed.[29] In consequence, a definition of YAL in terms of age is not fruitful.

Is a definition in terms of content then more successful? In his speech *The State of a Restless Art*, Cart states that YAL cannot be understood in terms of a single genre as "it has expanded to embrace a wealth of genres and forms" and is "a notably restless art, a dynamic, risk-taking literature that grows and changes as its context – culture and society – changes".[30] He goes on to list a number of topics and genres that all can be found inside YAL, which makes it clear that YAL is susceptible to trends and therefore also content-wise hard to define.

Cart however does give us a starting point for a working definition. YAL is for him at its core a literature of contemporary realism.[31] YAL shows the real life and troubles of its readers and according to Cart "equips readers to deal with the realities of impending adulthood", thus has a realistic agenda when addressing the needs of its readers.[32] Finally, he states that one of the main

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[27] - https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/379403?redirectedFrom=young+adult#eid (accessed on 07.06.23)
- https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/young%20adult (accessed on 12.05.23)
- https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/young-adult (accessed on 12.05.23)

[28] Garcia, Antero. *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres*. Sense Publishers, 2013. 16-17.

[29] Cart, Michael. "Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art." *SLIS Connecting 5*, no. 1 (2016): doi:10.18785/slis.0501.07, pdf. 4.

[30] Ibd. 1.

[31] Ibd. 1.

[32] Ibd. 11.

values of YAL "is its capacity for offering readers an opportunity to seem themselves reflected in its pages."[33] Consequently I would argue that while YAL encompasses multiple genres and ages, the common denominator can be found in addressing the need of its readers for accurate representation in a diverse and inclusive manner.

Moving from a general approach of Young Adult Literature towards a focus on LGBTQ+ novels, it is important to note that there is not a lot of academic texts dealing specifically with trans* representation in YAL. When looking broader at LGBTQ+ studies, we must keep in mind that, as stated above, YAL is ever-changing and changing quickly. Furthermore, multiple texts (used here) build upon each other.

Thomas Crisps builds in his article about the limits and possibilities in gay adolescent fiction (2009) upon Michael Carts earlier work and identifies a tendency of authors of such novels to reinscribe heteronormative traditions. While both Crisp and Cart, in the 2018 version of his book *Representing the Rainbow,* see a tendency towards more assimilation of non-normative gender and sexual identities in YAL in the last decennia, those representations are often moulded to fit into a heteronormative narrative to reaffirm the dominant culture.[34] This reaffirmation is not surprising as most children and youth literature is manufactured by adults and depicts reflections of what society wants itself to be and viewed as.[35] Crisp argues that through the fulfilment of familiar stereotypes, which reinforce heteronormative traditions and therefore

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[33] Cart, Michael. *Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art*. 11.

[34] Crisp, Thomas M. "From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction." *Childrens Literature in Education 40,* no. 4 (June 19, 2009). 334-5.
Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969.* Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 125-129.

[35] Crisp, Thomas M. *From Romance to Magical Realism*. 335.

readers' expectations, books often create a sense of realism.[36] Cart and Jenkins observe the same tendency of using a specific topos to create realism; the use of violence against LGBTQ+ characters.[37] Those topoi can even be found in novels that don't particularly deal with LGBTQ+ topics; Crisp uses Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) as an example.[38] Crisp writes:

> Within the growing canon of gay young adult literature, authors who rely upon homophobic discourse may hope that their work will educate readers about the "problem" of homophobia, but the recurring reliance upon homophobia as a literary mechanism to engender ''realism'' in literature simultaneously implies that homophobia is too large an issue to confront and is ultimately bad, but inevitable behavior. [sic][39]

Instead of raising awareness, according to Crisp, such authors more likely achieve to reinstate heteronormativity. And while he is only talking about homophobia here, I would argue that the same is true for transphobia.

1.3 Trans* in Young Adult Literature

As I have argued based on Cart, Crisp and Garcia in the previous chapter, Young Adult Literature does play an important role in reinforcing cultural practices and therefore influences (young) readers on how to judge themselves and the world around them. All authors cited in this chapter report a lot of troubling characteristics which can be observed in (young adult) literature featuring trans* protagonists: plots driven by the "problem" of being trans*,

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[36] Crisp, Thomas M. *From Romance to Magical Realism*. 336.
[37] Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature.* 145. See also Frotscher, Mirjam M. "On the Intelligibility of Trans* and Intersex Characters in Contemporary British and American Fiction" In: Horlacher, Stefan. *Transgender and Intersex: Theoretical, Practical, and Artistic Perspectives*. Springer, 2016. 266: "The violence that is employed, and the punishment meted out to those who transgress, are not glossed over […]. In this way they play on the reader's empathy to make their protagonists more relatable."
[38] Crisp, Thomas M. *From Romance to Magical Realism*. 337.
[39] Ibd. 339.

suggesting that violence will happen just for being who you are (Cart)[40]; using trans* issues as stylistics motifs only (Frotscher)[41]; reinforcing dominant culture through heteronormativity, using microaggression on the basis of sexuality and gender identity, missing diversity, as well as justifying a worldview that paints queerness as a threat (Garcia).[42] This very brief but already quite divers summary is especially worrying when combined with Cart's statement that "more information about transgender teens is urgently needed, and such information is available in young adult books."[43] If we agree with Cart on the fact that YAL contains such vital information for trans* youth, then we must also ask, especially in light of the above mentioned problems, if this is the kind of information and representation that we wish to be portrayed in YAL.

Cart himself acknowledges that especially novels with trans* characters are driven by the problem as is "common to groundbreaking fictional treatments of previously unacknowledged issues".[44] And while Cart reports novels that suggest that life as a trans* person is dangerous simply for who one is, he does not offer any explanation as to why trans* representation looks like this or the implication of such representation.[45]

As YAL as a whole grows, there is an increase in the presence of trans* characters to be observed. Mirjam Frotscher reports a change away from a sensationalising and voyeuristic tone towards a more realistic and empathising tone over the last years, which she attributes to a big part to (auto)biographical

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[40] Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature.* 163f.
[41] Frotscher, Mirjam M. *On the Intelligibility of Trans* and Intersex Characters in Contemporary British and American Fiction.* 256.
[42] Garcia, Antero. *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature*. 87-89, 93.
[43] Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature.* 162.
[44] Ibd. 163.
[45] Ibd. 164.

accounts of trans* authors.[46] At the same time she argues the importance of fictional representation as fictional accounts of trans* characters in mainstream media can be read as an increase of awareness and interest in lives that fall outside of the sex/gender binary.[47] Fiction thus has the potential to re-establish previous illegible lives – such as trans* lives - through language. Frotscher writes: "In novels, language has the power to create or to threaten bodies. Novels can support or threaten their characters' subject-status by granting or barring a language that expresses their reality."[48] Using trans* issues as stylistic motifs only thus threatens trans* bodies.

In her book *Undoing Gender,* Judith Butler explains how humans are produced through recognition, and can therefore be undone by withholding that recognition. So recognition becomes a site of power, where it is decided "who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not".[49] Furthermore she writes that "[…] one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is imaginary. […] But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author".[50] Gender thus needs to be understood as something that is done with or even by society around oneself. It is hence necessary to understand gender as a historical category, that is to say that it is a "way of culturally configuring a body, [which] is open to a continual remaking, and that 'anatomy' and 'sex' are not without cultural framing".[51] This means that the terms of gender designation are not fixed but subject to constant remaking according to the current culture and society.

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[46] Frotscher, Mirjam M. *On the Intelligibility of Trans* and Intersex Characters in Contemporary British and American Fiction.* 253f.
[47] Ibd. 254.
[48] Ibd. 255.
[49] Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender.* Routledge, 2004. 2.
[50] Ibd. 1.
[51] Ibd. 9f.

Maria Lugones argues in her article *Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System* that gender itself is a colonial introduction and many colonised cultures did not have the sexual binary that was introduced by European colonisers.[52] Moreover Qwo-Li Driskill writes:

> "While homophobia, transphobia, and sexism are problems in Native communities, in many of our tribal realities these forms of oppression are the result of colonization and genocide that cannot accept women as leaders, or people with extra-ordinary genders and sexualities. As Native people, our erotic lives and identities have been colonized along with our homelands."[53]

They too argue that not only the lands of Native people have been colonised, but their identities alongside it. Driskill thus bases homophobia, transphobia and sexism in Native communities on the introduction of the colonising culture. They further explain that it is impossible to describe in English what they are, as neither *trans* nor *queer* do accurately express what they identify with, as "at heart, if there is a term that could possibly describe me in English, I simply consider myself a Two-Spirit person."[54] As becomes clear here, in other (in Driskill's case: Native) non-western cultures, there is a possibility, a space for gender(s) outside of the male/female binary, but the English language does not extend far enough to include this space. Halberstam summarises this fact when they write "that other terms exist in other communities and that these other terms indicate the function of gender in relation to a specific set of life experiences".[55]

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[52] Lugones, María. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186/195.
[53] Driskill, Qwo-Li. "Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 2 (2004): 52.
[54] Ibd. 52.
[55] Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. University of California Press, 2017. 36.

As stated above, many YAL texts might now include trans* or LGBTQ+ characters, but still use them to reinforce both the dominant culture and heteronormativity. To break away from such a heteronormative representation of trans* characters is therefore also to break away from the dominant (colonising) culture.

1.4 The Trans* Body

In this chapter I will briefly summarise previous research on the topic of the trans* body relevant to the novels I will analyse later on. I will again focus on Jack J. Halberstam, as well as Sandy Stone and Andrea Long Chu.

In their book *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* Halberstam observes, based on a study by J.R. Latham, what we have already encountered above, that "transgenderism both in queer theory and in medical practice has been streamline into a singular phenomenon cancelling out the wide range of experiences".[56] Both Halberstam and Latham thus advocate for a broader recognition of the trans* body, especially since the trans* body is and was often used to embody "emergent narratives of self and other, being and becoming".[57] Halberstam furthermore writes that the trans* body is not easy to represent and has to either "reveal sites of contradiction on the gender-variant body (through nakedness perhaps, which risks sensationalizing such bodies) or through other kinds of exposure, violent, intrusive, or otherwise."[58]

The streamlining of the trans* experience in a single story and also a single body has also been criticised by Sandy Stone. In her 1987 *Posttranssexual*

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[56] Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. 33.
[57] Ibd. 30.
[58] Ibd. 89

Manifesto Sandy Stone writes about the erasure of a trans* persons past. [59] She states that the "highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase h/erself, to fade into the 'normal' population as soon as possible", as to gain acceptability in society.[60] Stone pushes against this trend of "passing" by erasure (of the pre-transition body) and advocates for a multiplicity of voices and experiences within the trans* community. She writes that while passing means to successfully live in the gender of choice, it also means the "denial of mixture", erasing a considerable amount of one's history (up until the point of medically transitioning).[61] Moreover, she brings up another issue; the "wrong body" narrative. In her manifesto, Stone recounts the beginnings of the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program and how the narrative of being born in the wrong body came to be. In essence this narrative takes the sense of "being born in the wrong body" as a – or rather *the* – criterion for being trans*. Stone states ultimately that the 'wrong body' has come to define being trans*.[62]

Even though it has been more than thirty-five years since the first publication of Stone's manifesto, the "wrong body" discourse is still an unresolved issue, as becomes clear when reading Andrea Long Chu's article, *The Wrong Wrong Body*, from 2017. In this article Chu not only confirms Stone's observation about the "wrong body" narrative but elaborates further on it. She compares Juliet Jacques memoir (*Trans: A Memoir* (2015)), which shows according to Chu the "overwhelmingly underwhelming ordinariness"[63] of a trans* live, to Caitlyn Jenner's media attention in 2015, which was staged "as if transsexualism were some curious condition in which *extraordinarily beautiful*

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[59] Stone, Sandy. *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto*. 1987. Accessible via: https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.pdf (accessed on 13.05.23).
[60] Stone, Sandy. *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto.* 13.
[61] Ibd. 14.
[62] Ibd. 15.
[63] Chu, Andrea Long. "The Wrong Wrong Body." *TSQ: Transgender studies quarterly* 4.1 (2017). 142

women became trapped in men's bodies."[64] Hence, most often there is not only a specific right body, but also a specific, sensationalised wrong body.[65] Here again, the effects of the Western culture can be seen, as Stone remarks that this culture only allows one "right" body per gendered subject, while everything else is a "wrong body".[66] But ultimately, Chu argues, that the trans* body is at once embodied as well as socially constructed.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Halberstam observes that (historically) especially trans* men are underrepresented.[67] This becomes even more evident when looking at the historical accounts Sandy Stone uses as examples in her manifesto. Coincidentally, all three novels chosen for this thesis all feature trans* boys/men.

Ultimately, when looking at trans* bodies we must then combine Stone's insistence on self-representation of trans* persons instead of the standard narratives and Halberstam's observation that is hard to represent the trans* body as it is fragmentary and internally contradictory.[68]

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64 Chu, Andrea Long. *The Wrong Wrong Body.* 144., emphasis in original.
65 Ibd. 144.
66 Stone, Sandy. *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto.* 15.
67 Ibd. 33.
68 Halberstam, Jack. *Trans**: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. 88f.

2 Representation of Trans* Youth in example books

To answer the research question three stories in the genre of Magical Realism will be used as examples in this thesis: Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours,* Aidan Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* and Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night.*

The three books all feature a trans* protagonist and magical elements but deal differently with the issues surrounding the representation of a trans* character and/or body. In this chapter I will firstly look at McLemore's book, especially how it deals with questions of (shaping) the trans* body. Then I will look at Thomas' novel, with a focus on the influence of magic on gender identity and the use of ghosts in the story. Lastly, I will focus on Joukhadar's story. Here again I will concentrate on questions of the trans* body as well as the influence of language and the act of naming on the representation of trans* characters in the novel.

2.1 *When the Moon Was Ours* – Anna-Marie McLemore

McLemore's novel *When the Moon was Ours* (2016) is seen as one of the first Young Adult books in the genre of Magic Realism featuring a trans* protagonist. It tells the story of an Italian-Pakistani trans boy, Samir, and his best friend Miel, a Latina girl who grows roses from her wrist. They have been inseparable since Miel appeared from inside a water tower as a young child and Samir started hanging moons all over town for her. During the novel the two teens start a romantic relationship, which is influenced and complicated by Sam's mother's worry about the town finding out about Sam's gender assigned at birth, Sam's feelings of Miel seeing him naked and Miel's own struggling feeling about the rose growing from her wrist. There are also four beautiful sisters, the Bonner sisters, who are rumoured to be witches who are able to

make any man fall in love with them, which gave them the nickname *las gringas bonitas.* But when at the beginning of the story the oldest sister returns to town after having given birth to a daughter, the spell they had on the men of the town seems to have waned. As Sam resists their advances but seems to fall in love with Miel, they want Miel to give them her roses, as they think those are the source of Miel's magic and will bring back the Bonners' strengths. They threaten to expose Sam's gender if Miel does not give her roses to them, which in turn makes the relationship between Miel and Sam even more complex. In the course of the book the reader, along with Sam and Miel, gets to know the woman, Aracely, who took in Miel after she appeared out of the water. It turns out that Aracely is actually Miel's brother Leandro. The night their mother tried to drown the bad (that seem to cause the growth of her roses) out of Miel, Leandro went into the water after them and all three of them did not make it out of the water alive. Leandro was subsequently shaped into a woman to match his inner self by the water.

2.1.1 Body

As is already obvious through the very brief summary of the plot of the book above, there are different ways *When the Moon was Ours* deals with issues of the body. Following I will identify different methods used in this book to describe the (trans)body and discuss how they influence the reading of those bodies; namely the magical element of water and the concept of *Bacha Posh.*

In the very first sentence *When the Moon Was Ours* (WMO), the reader encounters the element of water and is introduced to its significance: "As far as he knew, she had come from the water." (1)[69]. It awakens a sliver of doubt in the

[69] All the quotes following are cited from: McLemore, Anna-Marie: When the moon was ours. Wednesday Books. 2018.

reader about the credibility and possibility of 'her' – which is later introduced as Miel – coming from the water while simultaneously introducing the reader to the magical element of water. In just one sentence then McLemore manages to include all five primary characteristics of Magical Realism Faris suggested and I previously discussed.

When looking at the influence of water on the body in *When the Moon Was Ours* there are two things to consider: firstly, the metaphor of water and fluidity and secondly, the sudden transformation by the water (without any in-between or transition).

Historically, water is often coded as both life threatening as well as life giving.[70] Both sides can also be observed in this novel. As examined in the first sentence of the novel above, which provides the first example of the shaping powers of water in this story, Miel comes out of the water, thus is given life (again). At the same time, it was water (the river) that took her life in the first place, when Miel, Leandro and their mother drowned in the river. Hence, the water is also life threatening in this story. But Miel is not the only character shaped by the water. While Miel emerges from the fallen water tower – at approximately the same age that she was when she went into the river, although no time reference is given – Leandro is also rebirthed by the water when it shaped him into Aracely, a grown woman. In Leandro/Aracely's case, "[…] the water took Leandro, folded him into its current, brought him back as the girl he's always wished he could grow into" and "[…] made the outside of her show the truth in all ways, not just by making her a woman, but by making her old enough to match her bitter heart" (102).[71] The metaphor of shaping water is even more interesting in Leandro/Aracely's case because historically

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[70] Strang, Veronica. "Lording It over the Goddess: Water, Gender, and Human-Environmental Relations." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 1 (2014): 89f.

[71] Ultimately Aracely is not brought to the town by water but "had appeared one summer along with a hundred thousand butterflies" (16).

water was often seen as a female characteristic[72] and it begs the question if the water does know her "real" gender.

As seen from Aracely's example, the power of the water in this novel exceeds the power of shaping that can be observed in nature – think of stones in a river bed – and crosses the border into the magical when it has the power to shape a body anew. Furthermore, the metaphor of water is twofold here: on the one hand, water and fluidity is often used in metaphors connected to the trans* body, as a manner to describe a transition, an in-between, on the other hand, water, and nature in general, as well as its supernatural powers are deeply rooted in native traditions and myths and thus also rooted in magical realism.[73]

The metaphor of transition is taken to the extreme, as it skips all the in-between steps and goes immediately to the end result. But the sudden transformation of Aracely, while it does not unfold on the pages of the novel, is still an important part of the story, as it does exactly what Sandy Stone had already been criticising thirty years earlier (as discussed above), namely transform a body without a transitioning period and completely erasing its past.

Once Sam learns how Aracely was shaped by the water he is contemplating "[i]f he gave himself up to it [the river/water], maybe it would do to him what it had done to Aracely, turning him into what he truly was." (131). At the same time, he is not entirely sure what that "true" body would look like, if it would be the boy he lived as or someone who actually wants to be a woman. He mostly expressed his wish that the water would make the decision for him, that the water would see his "true" gender, either as a girl or as a boy, and make his body to match whatever he was "meant to be" (132). He

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[72] Strang, Veronica. *Lording It over the Goddess*. 86/88.
[73] Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Magical Romance/Magical Realism*. 536.

goes on to say the following: "He wanted to be a girl who wanted to be a girl, or a boy who was, in a way, no one could question, a boy." (155).

While this shows discontent with his body, it does not fit the prevalent "wrong body" narrative as discussed in chapter 1.3 completely. According to that criterion of being trans*, Sam should have felt a deep sense of being born in the wrong body and thus felt no connection to his female body. The doubt displayed in his thoughts leads me to question this however. As can be seen in the previous examples, Sam struggles with making the decision about the path his body should take. That Sam would not agree with, or could be an seen example of the "wrong body" narrative, can, in my opinion, be concluded from his statement of acceptance of all parts of his body, even if they were breaking him (166).

It is noteworthy that the doubt Sam has about if the water would shape him like it had Aracely is never voiced as a doubt of the water's ability itself but rather as a general doubt if it could work for him. In the passage following we will see the same doubts reflected when discussing the concept of *Bacha Posh*.

In *When the Moon Was Ours* the reader learns from the very beginning of the novel that Sam's gender assigned at birth does not match the gender expression portrayed in the novel - without actually labelling him as trans*. This difference is hinted at as the reason "why he never took off his shirt" (15) but also how Miel "understood that with his clothes off, he was the same as he was with them on" (13). I would argue that the reason Sam's gender identity is never specified in the book is due to his struggle on how to identify himself throughout the novel. As this character development is central to the story of the book it would not make sense to label Sam, especially not at the beginning of the story. To understand Sam's own understanding of his gender we also have to look at the concept of *Bacha Posh.*

Quickly into the story the concept of the *Bacha Posh* is introduced, a Middle Eastern legend Sam's grandmother tells him, a concept through which Sam defends his way of living to himself and those around him. [74] *Bacha Posh* are girls "[d]ressed as boys. Girls whose parents decided that, until they were grown, they would be sons." (35). With the inclusion of this concept the book opens up a space for Sam to explore his gender identity without having to dive into questions of being trans*. At the same time, as the reader only learns about *Bacha posh* through Sam, who has only a vague memory of his grandmother explaining it to him, the whole explanation does lack some depth. Sam explains that he was four when he decided that he wanted to be a *Bacha Posh* and that the reason he wanted to be a *Bacha Posh* was so he could take care of his mother while she had no sons. For Sam "[t]his had been temporary, him living this way, with his breasts bound flat and his hair cut as short as his mother would let him." (34). He acknowledges that (most) *Bacha Posh's* would go on to live as women again, as wives and mothers. And that if they missed something, it was the freedom to be unhindered and not being boys (36). For Sam though, the problem was different:

> He couldn't be a girl. But maybe if he waited out these years in boys' clothes and short hair, he would grow up enough to be a woman. He would wake up and this part of him would be gone, like rain and wind wearing down a hillside. (36)

As seen in the citation above, even though Sam knows he doesn't want to be a girl, he still carries the hope that one day he might want to be a woman. And while this book does offer Sam space to (temporarily) live with a different gender expression, it does not offer any space to explore a non-binary gender

[74] The concept of *bacha posh* is an actual lived practice in Afghanistan (and parts of Pakistan). Like Sam describes in the novel, it is a practice in which girls are not meant to live as boys or men forever but only until they reach puberty. There has only sporadically been evidence of the practice but it is still lived today, especially with the decreasing rights of women in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. (Corboz et al, 587f.)

identity. Such a third gender or non-binary gender can often be found in non-western cultures (as stated in chapter 1.3) but is not mentioned in this novel at all.

Ultimately, Sam does realise that the concept of *Bacha Posh* had mostly been a way for him to justify his gender expression while he had no way to express the way he felt. He concludes that he wishes to be a boy and wished that there would be space for a body like his:

> [H]e had made the mistake of believing his discomfort would be like theirs; theirs was less often a wish that they could be boys, and more a longing for the ways boys were allowed to take up as much space as their bodies could fill.
>
> But he wanted both. He wanted to be a boy who grew into a man, and for there to be space in the world for him. (208)

Throughout the novel, the reader experiences Sam's struggle of wanting to live in a different gender than the one he was born into. He states that "No one else, not his mother, not even Miel, could understand this wanting to live a life different from the one he was born into, so much so that his own skin felt like ice cracking." (105). At the same time, I would argue that this is only partly true. While no one who has not personally experienced this kind of struggle might come close to understand it, Sam's environment does empathise with him. For example, Miel observes that Sam "didn't seem to realize that he was growing *into* it" (61, emphasis added) instead of *out* of being a *Bacha Posh*. There seems to be no judgment in Miel's observation, rather a comprehension that Sam would never go back to live as a woman. Furthermore, Aracely might not have had to live long with questions about her gender identity, but she might very well understand Sam's want of living a different life than what he was born into.

Ultimately, we must notice that both approaches to the (trans*) body in WMO can be found externally. The water is an external force that can shape bodies,

but there is no clear answer on how it does it or how to elicit such a change by the water. One can assume, like Aracely, that "[w]e don't get to become who we are for nothing. It costs something." (154), but even the price of losing everything but their body might not be the price that another person might have to pay. The concept of *bacha posh* is a cultural mode that works in Sam's favour because it gives him an explanation for why he is doing something that he has (initially) no words or explanation for. Only when time goes on and he would eventually have to make some changes, if he would follow the track lined up for him by the concept, this explanation starts to fail him.

Last but not least it is noteworthy to mention that the town in which WMO takes place might seem accepting and inclusive at first, but does turn out quite the opposite on second glance. The people of the town are quite happy with Sam hanging up moons all around town to scare away the nightmares of their children and have no problem using Aracely's help to cure love-sickness. They are even somewhat accepting – or maybe rather indifferent – towards the fact that Miel just seemed to have shown up out of nowhere, that she is growing roses out of her arm or that the hem of her skirt is forever wet. But it comes to other, less magical, differences between Sam and the rest of the town, they are not as easily accepted. Miel knows that when she says:

> God knew what words, or worse, this town would have for a boy who'd been born female. They would wrap their contempt and their cruelty in the lie that they wouldn't have cared, if only he'd told them. (117)

Miel thus realises that while the town judged Chloe for having a baby or would scorn Peyton for being lesbian, they would hate Sam and make it seem like his own fault too. On top of that the town would be somewhat able to hide behind the argument that it all could have been avoided if Sam would just have been honest and that this was the thing they are having the most issues with.

This seemingly strange acceptance of magical things happening is easily explainable when we remind ourselves of the characteristics of Magical Realism, in which a magical thing can and will be described as something ordinary instead. In this case it is however worrying because, in this novel, not only the magical aspects are presented as normal, ordinary occurrences, but also the homo- and transphobia. And as Chanady writes: "If the abnormal is described as normal, then reader response is determined accordingly."[75] This then means that as homophobia and transphobia is described as normal, we can expect readers to accept it as normal too.

In the following chapter on *Cemetery Boys,* I will argue that being open and honest about being trans* does not mean automatic acceptance as the townspeople of WMO would like to claim. Yadriel struggles with different problems surrounding his gender identity and transphobia in his community.

2.2 *Cemetery Boys* – Aiden Thomas

The novel by Aiden Thomas (2020) tells the story of a Latinx trans* boy, who, while trying to prove he is indeed a brujo and trying to summon his murdered cousin's ghost, mistakenly summons another boy's spirit. While trying to find out what happened to both the cousin and Julian, the Colombian spirit, he and Yadriel, the Cuban-Mexican brujx, first start a tentative friendship before finally falling in love.

In this chapter I will firstly analyse the influence of magic on gender identity, sense of belonging and community. Then I will look at the embodiment of the ghosts/spirits in the story and their connection to the representation of trans*ness.

[75] Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic.* 36.

2.2.1 Magic and Gender Identity

As we have seen as one of the characteristics of Magical Realism according to Faris, there is a closeness of two realms in magical realism texts. In *Cemetery Boys* (CB), the realm of the living and the realm of the dead merge in the cemetery Yadriel lives in. The Latinx community Yadriel, the protagonist of *Cemetery Boys*, is a part of, is blessed with powers given to them by Lady Death: "The powers of life and death: the ability to sense illness and injury in the living, and to see and communicate with the dead." (2)[76]. While those are the powers all brujx have, only the women can heal injuries, while only the men can cut the ties that tethers spirits to this world and release them to the afterlife. For Yadriel, as a transgender boy, to be blessed with the power of the brujo by Lady Death and therefore have his own portaje, was what he wanted most in the world (9). Receiving his powers and having his own portaje for him would mean being a "real brujo" and that he could also prove it to everybody.

This question of who you have to prove your gender identity to is already raised on the very first page of the novel when Yadriel states that he was finally going to prove that he was a brujo (1). This need to prove himself to everyone is reiterated at least five times in the first four chapters already (pages 16, 17, 24, 39, 62, out of twenty-five chapters). When Yadriel explains to Julian how he did the ritual to gain his full powers with just Maritza (his cousin and best friend), Julian suddenly asks him if he is trying to prove to his family that he is a brujo or if he is trying to prove that he is a boy (84). For Yadriel this is the same thing but he can't or won't explain it further. I would argue that for Yadriel, being a brujo is inextricably linked with being a man as you can not be the first without being the latter in their community. Julian however doubles down and is wondering that if summoning him (as a spirit) is not enough to prove anything, for *whom* it is not enough: Yadriel or everybody else. A while later the both of

[76] All the quotes following are cited from: Thomas, Aiden. *Cemetery Boys*. Swoon Reads, 2020.

them have almost the same conversation again. Julian again asks why Yadriel has to prove "anything to *anyone*" and tells him "You don't need anyone's permission to be you, Yads," (183). This is a very affirming and positive thing to say, even if Yadriel cannot really accept the sentiment at that point.

Even after multiple conversations with Julian about the topic, Yadriel has not completely given up on the notion that he had to prove himself and his brujo-abilities to his community. It is a notion that spans the whole novel, as becomes clear when the resolve of the story in the epilogue features the same wording: "When Enrique spoke again, he looked at each new brujx in turn. 'You are here because you have already *proven* you are exactly what you were meant to be.'" (340, emphasis added)

But Julian goes even further in one of their conversations and questions Lady Death: "Like, is this Lady deciding who counts as a man and who counts as a woman? What about nonbinary people? Or intersex? Or agender?" (183) Even if the novel does not hint toward an answer to these questions, it is nonetheless interesting that they are included in the story at all. The same is true for the second part of the conversation between the two boys, when Julian is adamant that "[t]here is no way y'all have been around for thousands of years without there being one person not fitting into the 'men are this, women are that' bullshit. Maybe they hid it, or ran away, or I dunno, something else, but there's no way you're the first, Yads." (183f). He does not believe that Yadriel is the first brujx ever, who does not fit the gender binary. Again, the novel does not give any answer to the question if there has ever been a brujx that didn't fit into the western gender binary, but the way the conversation is written, it strongly suggests that there had to be *someone*. Before this conversation, it is easily understandable for the reader why the brujx community might be hesitant to let Yadriel have his quinces, how Yadriel's

father might just want to prevent him from the hurt of not getting his powers. But the way Julian phrases it, the reader must indeed wonder how there has not been a similar situation in the community before. Especially if we consider the fact that often non-western cultures knew – or still know – third or non-binary genders, as described in chapter 1.3. We must then assume that this specific community either never had such genders or has lost its history of such through colonisation. As Yadriel states in a later, different context, the brujx have an oral history and as a reader we therefore have to assume that if such a situation similar to Yadriel's has happened before, it has not made it into the orally repeated history of the community. Ultimately a story such as Yadriel's can then be seen as decolonising gender in this community and culture or at least as a starting point. Because a passage such as the following, shows that there is still a long way to go for this fictive community:

> Being transgender and gay had earned Yadriel the title of Head Black Sheep among the brujx. Though, in truth, being gay had actually been much easier for them to accept, but only because they saw Yadriel's liking boys as still being heterosexual. (13)

By seeing Yadriel as heterosexual for liking boys, his gender identity as a male is being ignored and such a view of Yadriel is thus transphobic. He states that "belonging meant denying who he was" and that in the past this denial had "torn him apart from the inside out" (29). At the same time, he states that he loves his family and his community but is afraid of what might happen if they can not accept him. As it is, they tend to struggle with using his name, the right pronouns and would sometimes rather ignore him than even try to use the right words.

The situation in this story is then not that different from Sam's situation I discussed in the previous chapter. Here again, the community around the protagonist is accepting of magical things but not of being trans*. The mothers of both protagonists and the very few good friends (Miel, Maritza) are however

very open and accepting. In contrast to Sam, who feels like no one understands how he feels in his body and his struggles, Yadriel has found a person in Julian who understands him or at least where there was no emotional work involved in being himself and where it was "painless and simple for someone to see him as he was" (193).

Normally, brujx were presented to Lady Death when they turned fifteen and were blessed with their magical power (9). But since Yadriel is transgender, his quinces was postponed indefinitely (10)[77], which lead to him wanting to do the blessing ritual himself, which happens in the first chapter of the novel and is ultimately successful. It became clear already a few years prior that it was very unlikely that Yadriel had any healing power, the magical power of the bruja. When his mother tried to teach him when they came across an injured cat, his intervention actually made the injury worse (30f.). That experience alone could also just have meant that Yadriel did not possess any magical powers at all, but with the success of the brujo ritual it proves that the magic in this story is aligned with the characters gender identity and not their sex. Lady Death, as the manifestation of magic, thus seems to see deeper than the body of a person. This leads to Yadriel wishing he could talk to her and wondering if she could "see him for who he really was? What his own family couldn't?" (16).

So, like in WMO, here again, a magical presence can sense the "true" gender identity of a person. But in CB, this presence that holds all the power does not just shape this person into their "true" form and hence skipping any transitional period. Rather, here it allows Yadriel to feel affirmed in his gender identity without actually doing anything *to* him. I would therefore argue that in

[77] At first it is not clearly explained why his quinces was postponed. A little later it is stated that after Yadriel refused to have a quinces as a bruja (thus as a girl), Yadriel's father, the leader of the community, wouldn't let him have one as a brujo, as he and the other adults did not expect Yadriel to receive the powers of a brujo. "Just because he [Yadriel] said he was a boy, that didn't change the way Lady Death gave her blessings.", they told him (24).

this story an approach to expressing gender identity is chosen that leaves more space of development while giving a positive, affirming environment on the basis of ancient cultural traditions. At the same time, like WMO again, this novel does still subscribe to the “wrong body” narrative. This can, firstly, be seen in the fact that there is even a magical presence needed to affirm one’s gender. Secondly, by connecting certain powers to certain genders – healing for women, cutting ties for men – and Lady Death being able to see those powers independent from a gender assigned at birth, this story reinforces both the gender binary as well as the idea that gender is innate. Moreover, one has to wonder why such a magical presence would change the body of trans* protagonist – like in WMO – or show them that their magical powers do indeed not match their assigned birth gender. Why would such a powerful magical presence change the body but not the mind, that is to say the experienced gender identity, instead of the gender assigned at birth? Especially in a genre such as Magical Realism to change either should be possible. But by repeating in this novel again, that a such a magical presence (only) sees the “true” gender identity, the novel repeats the notion that gender identity is innate, and not something constructed. This stands in direct contradiction to what Butler argues and has been discussed previously (see chapter 1.3)

2.2.2 Ghosts/Spirits

In this subchapter I will analyse the position of the spirits in this novel in connection to the literary tradition of Magical Realism.

As previously stated, there is a merging of the world of the living and the world of the dead, in the terms of Faris, in *Cemetery Boys*. One of the consequences of this merging is the existence of ghosts, or as they are called in this story, spirits. Zamora writes that in some novels ghosts might represent transitional periods of the novelist. They are a metaphor for a sense of cultural

displacement, the feeling of the displacement of traditional communities and the resulting feeling of being torn "between past and future, between hostile and unrelated worlds".[78] Ghosts as in-between beings themselves make thus a great metaphorical embodiment of this feeling. I would argue that we should consider a combination of Faris and Zamora and consequently consider the ghosts in CB an in-between of the land of the living and that of the dead as well as a connection between the lands of their ancestors (thus Central and South America) and urban Los Angeles, between traditions and modernity. Furthermore, for the brujx to receive the powers that they have had for "thousands of years" (34), they still need their ancient rituals. So, the existence of ghosts, and the brujx powers, form a direct link to the beginning of their culture and defy the usual understanding of time.

In CB it is the brujo's task to release spirits who are tethered to the world of the living by an artifact from their life. This release does not have to happen immediately, but should be done before a spirit turns "maligno", thus loses all their remaining humanity, because "[b]eing trapped between the land of the living and the land of the dead wore on a spirit, chipping away at their humanity" (3). By stating that spirits have humanity to begin with, does make them human without an actual body. While the brujx can *see* the bodies of the spirits and can *feel* their presence, they can not actually *touch* them. Zamora writes:

> "Death is dramatized as a metamorphosis from one state of consciousness to another, rather than a radical interruption or change of form."[79]

This metamorphosis from one state to another is then perfectly executed in this novel, when we see a human transition from living body to "living" spirit – that

[78] Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Magical Romance/Magical Realism*. 541.
[79] Ibd. 524.

is to say a spirit who is not yet released to the afterlife -, to a dead spirit who only can come back during Dia de Muertos.

It is never completely explained how it was possible for Julian to appear as a spirit while he was not yet completely dead. As Yadriel remarks in the novel, there is no encyclopaedia to look up any facts about spirits, only the oral traditions the brujx history to rely on (199). The way Julian's spirit bleeds and feels pain seems to hint towards his humanity and the fact that Julian is in fact still alive. When his spirit flickers and even disappears for a few moments afterwards, it seems as if a dead spirit is dying again. It would be interesting to see if Yadriel (or any other brujo) could have summoned the spirit of Julian again if he had died at that moment.

It is also interesting to look at the function of Julian, the spirit, in this novel. Let's keep Zamora in mind who wrote: "Magical realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable, and ghosts are often our guides."[80]. We can see this guiding feature of Julian in the novel too. It is his insistence to see if his friends are okay, as well as both Yadriel's and Julian's need to solve Julian's murder, that guides the trio to different places in East Los Angeles. But even in a less literal way is Julian guiding Yadriel. As discussed above, it is Julian who questions Yadriel's need to prove himself and thus guides Yadriel's self-development.

In the following chapter, when discussing *The Thirty Names of Night*, a different way of incorporating a ghost into a story will be discussed and the differences between them pointed out. In this novel, the ghost plays less of a guiding role as the narrator is on a journey of self-acceptance and searching for a name.

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[80] Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Magical Romance/Magical Realism*. 498

2.3 *The Thirty Names of Night* – Zeyn Joukhadar

The third and last novel that will be looked at in this thesis is Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020). It parallelly tells the stories of Laila Z, an artist whose family immigrated from Syria to the US in the 1930s, and an unnamed narrator, a trans* man who later names himself Nadir, in current New York City. Both stories are interwoven with magical stories of birds, queer love interests and the search for their place as Syrian Americans in a hostile environment. The unnamed narrator[81] lives with their grandmother after their mother died five years prior. They can still see her ghost sometimes and talk to her. In this story the narrator struggles to accept their body, struggles to overcome their painting block all the while searching for a bird that only Laila Z and their mother have ever seen. Every other chapter is an excerpt of Laila Z's diary that she writes to a childhood friend, which she calls "Little Wing", and details her immigration to the US, her life there and her falling in love with a trans* man. In my analysis I will mostly focus on the narrator (and their chapters), as we do get to know more about them than Laila Z's future partner.

While Joukhadar's characters are older than the protagonists of the other two novels, this book showcases nonetheless the same struggles as the other two novels of fitting in in a tight-knight community, finding peace in one's own body and the process of naming themselves.

Like *When the Moon Was Ours, The Thirty Names of Night (*TNN) deals with issues of the (trans*) body. Unlike WMO, this novel does not focus as much on the decision of the protagonist which gender identity they want to portray, but more on the slow acceptance of their body, all the while grieving the past, as well as questioning what it means to be masculine and the process of naming.

[81] I will use "(unnamed) narrator" and the pronouns they/them for the protagonist of the story for the discussion of the parts of the books where they haven't named themself yet (thus up to chapter 17).

Thus, this chapter will be split in three parts, first examining the issues of the body in this novel, secondly, the ghost in the story and thirdly, analysing the influence of language and naming on the representation of trans* characters in this book.

2.3.1 (Gendered) Body

Over the course of the novel a development of the narrator's feelings towards their body can be observed. In the beginning of the story, the wish of the narrator to be "unbodied" or transparent (3/75)[82] is clearly stated, and accounts of dissociation from their body can be found, such as:

> My skin feels like a shoe three sizes too small. I begin to dissociate from my body. I grow heavier, sleepier, far away. (153)

The negative feelings towards their body are clearly communicated to the reader, when the narrator tells them about their urge to scream, their resignation regarding their body (75),

> […] a despair rises in me that I can't explain, that alarm bell that has been going off in me every day since I began to change, that agonizing feeling that this body does not belong to me but to all the people who insist on how I should exist inside of it, that unshakable twinge that tells me that something, perhaps everything, is very, very wrong. (76)

In this quote we can not only read about the negative feelings the narrator has towards their body but also the unexplainable feeling of wrongness they have. On top of that are the expectations and opinions of everyone around them of how they should live in their own body.

While the focus of this book might not be on the narrator deciding if they want to live either as a woman or a man (as seen in WMO), it does use plotlines that

[82] All the quotes following are cited from: Joukhadar, Zeyn. *The Thirty Names of Night: A Novel.* Simon and Schuster, 2020.

encourage a "wrong body" narrative reading. Already in the passage above, this feeling of wrongness is clearly stated. Furthermore, when the unnamed narrator remembers the first funeral they attended, they remember it as the same their "body started conspiring against" (71) them, as they had gotten their period. They go on to describe how they always knew what they were when looking in the mirror and that everyone else was wrong about their body, that they "knew what [their] body was supposed to feel like, even if [they] couldn't name it."(72) It is this sense of always having known that one is born in the wrong body, of one's body not fitting the mental image of oneself without the words to explain it, that can also be found in the book as seen in the quote below, that is at the base of the "wrong body" narrative as discussed in chapter 1.3.

> The only words I had back then were for what I knew I wasn't – a girl. But how to explain this feeling that my body was a tracing of something else, and not all the lines matched up? (72)

But the narrator also clearly realises that a lot of their struggles with their gender identity comes from outside sources. They state that they knew what they were but it did not fit what everybody expected them to be, or that everybody had opinions about their body. The narrator reflects on the eugenicists and homophobes of the early twentieth century who thought to be able to read and police queerness on a body. They wonder if this thought of people ascribing meaning to their body that they have no control over is the reason why they want to erase their body, why they "don't want to make [themselves] legible" (136). They state that their "truth isn't inscribed on [their] body. It lives somewhere deeper, somewhere steadier, somewhere the body becomes irrelevant." (136). In this sense TNN does chose another way of dealing with the "wrong body" narrative than the other two novels discussed in this thesis.

Throughout the novel the story touches upon questions of the gender binary and how society influences the narrator's experience and opinions of this binary. Through the narrating style (as will be discussed in the following subchapter), the reader is directly involved in the narrators struggle with those questions. The narrator's experience with the binary of gender expression is (best) explained when they reminisce about their puberty. They had talked with their mother about the possibilities to make them feel better in their body and with their femininity: "what if it's just a matter of finding the right haircut, the right outfit, the right boyfriend, the right femininity" (233). While their mother might never have given in to expectations that were placed on her, the narrator also realises that those expectations are different for them. The expectations are different partly because expectations of what a woman should be are generationally coded, hence are different for them than for their mother. On the other hand, their struggles are farther reaching than "marriage and a child" (233). They felt like their "body came with borders" (233) and tell the reader how they changed multiple things about themselves, like how they walked, their haircut, with whom they hung out with, because of other people's opinions. They finally state: "I have tried all the ways I can think of to make myself fit." (233)

The narrator also realises that most of what they know about masculinity (and therefore also femininity) is what society has taught them all their life:

> I have been taught all my life that masculinity means short hair and square-toed shoes, taking up space, raising one's voice. To be soft is to be less of a man. To be gentle, to laugh, to create art, to bleed between the legs – I have been taught that these things make me a woman. I have been taught all my life that to dance is to be vulnerable, and that the world will crush the vulnerable. I was taught to equate invincibility with being worthy of love. (261)

With that idea of masculinity in mind, it is not surprising that the narrator was struggling with their own gender identity. Just taking the simplest example of the quote above, the narrator did not have short hair until far into the story, so already because of that simple fact it is hard for them to see themselves as masculine. In consequence, as becomes clear through the passages above, the narrator experiences what Butler has referenced: that gender (expression) is not one's own but is taught; it is shaped by one's community and is culturally framed. This story shows how gender identity is also at the same time constructed by outside influences and personal feelings of one's body, thus how complex the question of one's gender identity is. The narrator shows how they both need the acceptance of their environment but push against their expectations at the same time.

The weight of a gendered body is made visible in the first pages of the novel. As the narrators struggle with their IUD is first introduced in the story, the reader is taken along to a visit to the gynaecologist (3-5). It becomes clear quite quickly that the narrator's pain is not taken seriously by the doctor, which the narrator themselves describes as follows: "By the look on his face, he doesn't take this seriously. […] In his mind, a woman should be used to these things. […] My insufficient, unnameable suffering is my own problem." (4). The feeling of unequal treatment of the female body (and thus their pain etc.) continues just a few sentences later when the narrator visits an exhibition at the Met Museum that is aptly titled *Representations of the Body* (5). While looking at the paintings the narrator states:

> In that moment, my body and the bodies of all the woman I know are on the wall as sexualized ciphers for the desires of white men. (5)

Being desired and/or sexualised by white man is thus, by this reasoning, something that is inherently linked to a female body. That a female body's

value is connected to men is further explored when Reem and the narrator talk about one's usefulness, specifically for women: "Everybody tells you to be yourself as long as you've got value – for a job, for a man." (211). I would argue that these instances of sexism in the story do further influence the narrator's struggle with their gender identity, as they themselves state: "It is one thing to have a body; it is another thing to struggle under the menacing weight of its meaning." (6)

Ultimately, it is only after the narrator has (somewhat) accepted their body, accepted that there "is no magic strong enough to bring [their body and mind] into harmony" (163), that the tone of their accounts of their body changes towards a more positive feeling of their body. During the whole novel the narrator multiple times expresses their wish for "another way to exist in the world than to be bodied" (3). This wish is often expressed in a metaphorical way by referencing nature (for example "stems of orchids" (3), "a person shaped beam of light" (162) or "winged creatures" (108)). Faris suggests that birds and especially (their) flights can be seen as analogy for a new narrative perspective, a perspective that suggests the existence of a different dimension within the ordinary world.[83] I will here just accept that there is indeed another layer to the world depicted in this story, without pointing out all the characteristics introduced in the first chapter. This other world might be inhabited by ghosts or birds or both. Birds, or "winged creatures", do play an important role in this story, as literal birds as well as metaphorically. Laila, in her diary, tells the reader a story of when she was just a child, a woman in her village tried building a machine so she could fly like a bird (26). Hawa does not survive this flight and Laila is the only one to witness her death. Faris theorises that such flights, as they are frequently found in Magical Realism,

[83] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments*. 50/53.

might represent an escape.[84] Later on in the novel, Laila also wonders if Hawa flew into the sky to escape "the slow bending" of her back and the burden she was made to carry (124f.).[85] Laila Z also writes about how already the elders in her family said that "the birds went before [them], long before the first of [their] family set off across the sea" (61). Like in this analogy, the birds and their migration across the sea and land, can be taken as an example of Laila Z's family's migration to America, as well as Nadir's migration through his grief and his struggles with his body. Like birds transgressing borders of countries, the narrator transgresses borders of his body, as he says so himself (11).

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that all situations in which the narrator references nature in connection to bodies, it is done so in a more hopeful manner. When the narrator and Sami, the narrator's friend and love interest, go dancing, the place is filled with people, people with "large bodies, small bodies, bodies that twirl and shake and fill the room. This is not dancing, but a becoming of winged creatures." (108) Even when the two stand in an empty plot, grieving their mothers and Sami is weeping, the narrator muses:

> "We stretch our bodies without letting go of each other's hands; we exorcise our grief. We twine and bend while the owls look on. I am reflected in Sami's eyes. I am not a girl in that moment, or a boy, but a person-shaped beam of light, and we see each other as we are, as energy that has willed itself into these bodies because the desire to dance is the first kind of longing." (162)

As becomes clear here, even with both of them grieving there seems to be a positive undertone in their "exorcising", by dancing. At that moment they are not a boy and a girl but just energy that had to be bodied to be able to dance.

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[84] Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments*. 86f.

[85] It is also interesting to note that the same story is also told by the narrator's grandmother, in a similar way (13). It might be seen as a foreshadowing of the link between the two parts of the story that is only later revealed. Like in CB, we here again see the tradition of oral history.

Only after naming themself, Nadir does not feel invisible anymore: "It is the first time I've made love to a boy as a boy, which is to say that this is the first time in my life that I have been naked and not been invisible." (264) I will go more in depth of the act of naming oneself in the next chapter.

But even with this evolvement of acceptance throughout the story, not all situations lead to a positive experience, the development is thus not linear, as it nearly never is. Back at a women's clinic the narrator is "[…] tempted to discard my body and never come back to it, […] the doctor's gloves on my skin make me want to crawl out of myself. My blood is a fact, like my body, in a conversation that I will not always be a part of." (215)

While, as I have argued, also TNN does not succeed in escaping the "wrong body" narrative, the narrator does show resistance to another part of that narrative that Sandy Stone heavily criticises: the erasing of one's past. When the narrator comes out to his sister and states "I am pretty sure I'm a boy." (212) and Reem, the sister, accuses him of "throwing himself away and starting over" (212), the narrator rejects this notion and states: "I'm not starting over. You're not losing me. I've been here the whole time." (212). Here we can thus see the two opposing interpretations of a coming out as a trans* person. While Reem feels the need to mourn her sibling, the narrator cannot understand this notion as it is only saying out loud what he has known to be true already for a long time.

2.3.2 Ghost

In TNN we again encounter a ghost. In this story the ghost is the narrator's dead mother. Not only the name – ghost versus spirit – is different compared to CB, there are a multitude of differences, which makes the two barely comparable.

Joukhadar's ghost is not a constant presence in the novel – at least not in the same sense as Julian is in *Cemetery Boys.* The narrator's mother's ghost does appear throughout the story, but is not always there. She seems to suddenly appear, and while it is never clearly written in the story, she seems to disappear just as suddenly again. There seems little logic as to when the ghost does emerge, the only common denominator is the location of the narrator's (and his grandmother's) apartment. Furthermore, the narrator tells the ghost: "You have been around more often. […] Summer must be getting on." (9) I conclude thus that the ghost is around more often in summer, which is also around the time of the mother's death's anniversary.

Another difference is that this ghost does not seem to be able to talk. While the narrator does have conversations with her, the mother does not answer – or at least not with words. She leaves behind a smell of thyme that does remind the narrator of the past or of forgotten Arabic words, moves through the house and smiles at the narrator. Because the narrator continues to talk to their mother's ghost, it becomes almost forgotten that the ghost does not talk back, especially when the narrator states that they have an agreement to not *talk* about certain things (9).

In TNN there is an owl that comes to the apartment almost as often as the ghost of the mother. It is never explicitly stated who the owl represents but it is treated almost the same way as the ghost. Since the day the mother died, birds have never left the narrator in general. But I would argue that if the ghost can take the shape of a bird, it would be the owl who represents the mother. It is also this owl that accompanies the narrator to the old building where Laila used to live and guides the narrator inside (21). This thus links back to the overall importance of birds in this story as discussed previously.

Finally, with the existence of a ghost in this story we can make a connection to a certain culture or community again. As the narrator says themselves, "all the other Arabs [they] know believe in ghosts" (130). This story thus only works in this specific setting, works only because of the narrator's cultural history that makes seeing the ghost of their mother even possible.

In conclusion I would thus argue that the ghost in this story entails less humanity as the spirit in *Cemetery Boys*. While the ghost might have a guiding function – in the search for the ominous bird, through the narrator's painter's block and their grief – it appears a lot less frequent than Julian. She can not talk, it is unclear if she can move things and her appearance does lead to a lesser amount of feelings than Julian's (or any other spirit in CB) does.

2.3.3 Language

When examining *The Thirty Names of Night* on the basis of language, two main topics can be found: firstly, the mode of narration, and secondly, the act of naming (oneself).

The story opens with an account of sparrows falling from the evening sky around the narrator, who directly addresses a person they lost five years prior. The use of second-person present tense narration leads to an identification of the reader with the addressed person, even if it is clear that someone else is actually addressed. Ernst van Alphen observes that "especially the mode and temporality of narration are responsible for how the reader will relate to the narrated events. The events as such do not necessarily affect us. The mode and temporality of narration produce the intensity that constitute affect."[86]

[86] Alphen, Ernst Van. "Affective Operations of Art and Literature." *Res (Cambridge, Mass.)*, no. 53/54 (2008): 27.

The term "affect" originates from the Latin *affectus* which means passion or emotion, and affects occur from interacting with objects, environments or people.[87] Affects are dependend on one's social and cultural context, and even historically shaped sensibility.[88] Affects therefore can evoke very different feelings or thoughts in different people.[89] A way to produce affect, according to van Alphen, is through identification; either through idiopathic identification (projected likeness) or heteropathic identification (becoming like the other).[90] Van Alphen writes:

> […] it is because they [art and literature] are fictional that they are so eminently suitable to solicit such heteropathic identification; the otherness of others can be experimented with outside of the reality check of politeness, discretion, ignorance, and modesty.[91]

In van Alphen's terms it is thus heteropathic identification at play in this novel. Van Alphen sees this kind of identification more affectively powerful, as "the reading experience is one of continuous engagement instead of distanced signification."[92]

That the process of naming oneself is an important part of this story becomes clear very quickly when opening this book as the dedication of the book reads *"For those who name themselves".* Just one page further, next to the number of the chapter, the name of the narrator is crossed out. It is thus unclear at first who is speaking.

Lacking a name, according to Halberstam, "challenge[s] the idea of character and raise[s] questions about the ability of naming to capture all the nuances of

[87] Alphen, Ernst Van. *Affective Operations of Art and Literature*. 23.
[88] Ibd. 26.
[89] Ibd. 25.
[90] Ibd. 29.
[91] Ibd. 29.
[92] Ibd. 29.

human identification."[93] Lacking a name is thus not unlike the lack of recognition based on one's gender according to Butler.

That the narrator does not like their deadname, if it wasn't clear by the crossed-out name in the chapter header, becomes even more obvious when they see Qamar wearing a choker symbolising their name: "I cannot imagine loving one's own name enough to wear it as an adornment." (107) After they come out to their sister, the narrator reminisces about the northern bald ibis and how it has gotten extinct. They tell the reader how their mother spoke to them about this bird and wrote down "Nadir" next to reports of the ibis, which means "rare" in Arabic (212f.). When the narrator and Sami have to go to the clinic in the next scene, Sami asks the narrator what he should call them. "Nadir", replies the narrator (215). This scene takes place at the end of the fifteenth chapter, which makes chapter 17 the first one, of four remaining chapters, with an official name on top of the first page of the chapter.

There are two things noteworthy about the act of naming in this novel. Firstly, it is interesting that the act of naming coincides with the climax of the plotline of the IUD. It is at the same moment that Nadir finally names himself that he can get rid of the IUD, about which he had already complained before but was ignored. And when he is tempted to discard his body again by feeling the doctor's hands against his skin, he "holds on to his name" (215) to get through the moment. Secondly, and more importantly, we have to take a closer look at the chosen name. In the novel itself, only the Arabic translation of the name is given: "rare" (213). Especially in combination of the story of a rare ibis, as well as the whole storyline throughout the book about the search for the very rare *Geronticus simurghus*, a fictional bird, the name fits well, even more so because it's a masculine word in Arabic. But when looking at *Nadir* in English, a very opposing meaning appears. The Oxford Dictionary defines Nadir as "The

[93] Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. 2.

lowest or worst point (*of* something); the place or time of greatest depression, degradation, etc.".[94] I would argue that this dissonance in meaning visualises the journey of acceptance of themselves and grief the narrator embarked on in this story, as well as the simultaneity of both the lowest point and a sense of hopefulness found in finding a rare bird. Furthermore, I would argue that this very different meaning of the same word in different languages reiterates the importance of language in one's experience of self, culture and the world. Halberstam also touches upon this point when they write that names and language should be looked at with the knowledge that is has a multitude of meaning and context, as an ever-changing ecosystem.[95] As observed in chapter 1.3, Judith Butler argues that gender identity is produced by or at least with one's environment, which is in turn shaped culturally. Gender identity is thus nothing innate but is produced by interactions and over time. Language hence structures the self and gender identity both.

Not only the narrator has lost their name. When immigrating to the United States, Laila and her family had their names changed to be easier to pronounce in English. While Laila herself could keep her name as it was "all right", her brother's name was too uncommon (Issa) so it was changed to Joseph (92). Their last name "would have to be adjusted for transliteration into English. […] just like that it was as though our family name had never existed" (92). When writing about this day in her diary/letters to Little Wing, Laila questions if Khalo Tala – her aunt who came to the US years prior – also "had to give up her name to that piece of paper" and whether she would think that it was a fair trade (93). But unlike the narrator, no member of Laila's family had a choice when they had to change their names.

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[94] https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124787?redirectedFrom=nadir#eid (accessed on 07.06.2023)
[95] Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. 9.

3 Conclusion

In this thesis, I analysed three young adult novels in the genre of Magical Realism on how they represent the trans* character(s) in their story. Naturally, three books do not paint a conclusive picture of trans* representation, their representation in YAL or their representation in Magical realism, but it does give some indication of a general manner in which they are represented. It lets us identify some tendencies and issues that allow for a better understanding of why the representation of trans* characters takes certain shapes. In this conclusion, I will touch upon the two main issues I identified in this thesis: the "wrong body" narrative and the act of naming (oneself).

When setting the framework for this thesis, it became clear that the "wrong body" narrative, which had already been criticised by Sandy Stone in the eighties, is still a prevalent plot device in trans* young adult literature. During the analysis of the three books used for this thesis, this was confirmed, as some form of this narrative can be found in all three novels.

In *The Thirty Names of Night*, this feeling of wrongness in their own body is voiced the clearest. The narrator tells the reader that they have always struggled with this sense of feeling disconnected from their body, but are lacking the words to explain it properly. Through the concept of *Bacha Posh*, Samir in *When the Moon was Ours*, seemingly has the words to express his conflicting feelings surrounding his gender identity, but as he becomes older, he struggles with the limitations of this concept as his personal experience of gender identity doesn't fit it anymore. *Cemetery Boys* though less explicit, still subscribes to the "wrong body" narrative. Even as Yadriel seeks approval and acceptance in his community, the novel still reiterates that, initially, there is something wrong with Yadriel's body.

In both WMO and CB the trans* protagonists wish for a magical presence to align their body with their gender identity or at least confirm it. In WMO we know that the water does have the power to change a body to make the outside "show the truth in all ways" (WMO 102), as demonstrated by Acarely's transformation. In CB there is never an option discussed that Lady Death (or any other magical presence for that matter) could actually change Yadriel's body, but it is still her power that solidifies Yadriel's gender identity when she bestows the power of the brujo upon him.

Nadir, the narrator of TNN, might not have words to express their gender identity at the start of the novel, but grows into it throughout the story until they more or less accept their body for what it is. They realise that there "is no magic strong enough to bring [them] into harmony" (TNN 163), thus unlike the other two protagonists, they realise that their acceptance of their body and gender has to ultimately come from within. And while the acceptance of their personal gender identity has to come from within, it becomes clear through the reading of all three books that gender identity itself is constructed by personal feelings as they interact with outside influences such as the community the protagonist lives in, their culture, and societal expectations.

Ultimately, there are a few interesting things to note when looking at the depiction of the "wrong body" narrative in the three novels. Firstly, it's noteworthy that there seems to be a clear distinction between different "wrong bodies". Like Sandy Stone and Andrea Long Chu already noted, there is only one *right* "wrong body" in western culture. In WMO, Miel's body is barely discussed as something wrong or abnormal, even though she grows roses from her wrist. Sam's body on the other hand is a problem, because his body does not fit societal expectations. Although magical occurrences are commonplace in these novels, acceptance of other non-ordinary aspects, including gender

identity, is not necessarily more prevalent, at least not in *When the Moon was Ours,* as described above.

Secondly, while all three novels employ the "wrong body" narrative, I would argue that they do present different trans* experiences. The different cultures, communities, and expectations significantly influence the protagonists' experience of gender identity in each novel and hence also influence how they deal with it. Furthermore, each community emphasizes different issues, contributing to diverse storylines.

This leads us to further observations. While both Sam and Nadir struggle with their gender identity and don't seem to feel like they fully belong on either side of the gender binary, neither novel allows space for a third gender or a non-binary gender identity. This is especially striking in the case of *The Thirty Names of Night*, as there is a supporting character in the book that is non-binary. It begs the question why there is no space for the narrator specifically to explore their gender identity outside of the gender binary. Even when the narrator comes out to their sister, it does not seem as if they are completely sure with their decision of identifying as male, as they follow up their coming out with: "I want to tell Reem that maybe I am something there is no word for, but I am afraid that I am already invisible enough to her as it is." (TNN 212). In WMO it seems that a third option, something outside of the gender binary, is never even on the table for Sam, neither in his own opinion nor is it mentioned by outside sources.

This invisibility of a possible gender identity outside of the binary and the limited exploration thereof might stem from a western, colonising world view, as we have seen that many colonised cultures did not have a binary view of gender. *Cemetery Boys* does raise the issue of non-binary genders in a conversation between Julian and Yadriel (CB 183). While it is not the protagonist that questions if his gender identity may lay outside the binary,

Julian questioning the practices of the brujx raises the same questions in the readers and makes them question their views and practices. I would therefore argue that CB does work towards a more decolonised society, even if it does not suggest any clear answers to the questions raised in the novel. But it does show that the gender binary is not a sustainable way of looking at gender and that the colonised culture must have been more inclusive in the past. Finally, the story does encourage its readers to think about those questions, which, in my opinion, is already a big step above many other books which just state their representations as facts.

A lingering, unanswered question concerns the assumption that the body must change to align with the character's inner gender identity, even in the genre of Magical Realism. If there is a magical presence that is capable of altering reality, why isn't it possible for this magical power to change the mind, or alleviate the body dysphoria of the characters? The approach as it is taken in all three books, where the body has to change to fit, does ultimately suggest that gender identity is innate to a person. This is also done without any clear argument as to why is has to be innate.
It would be interesting to see a novel that would turn this assumption around and change the mind to fit a body. Personally, I assume that the idea that gender is innate is still too prevalent in general society – contrary to Butler's arguments – that it is too hard for authors to imagine such an alternative narrative, even in a non-realistic setting.

The importance of naming oneself has become especially clear in the analysis of *The Thirty Names of Night*. While the whole novel is a story of self-discovery and self-development, it is also closely tied to the narrator's journey of finding a name that fits their gender identity, and the act of finally naming himself *Nadir*

empowers him like nothing else in the story. As Halberstam has stated, a lack of name takes away (some of) a person's humanity. In my opinion, this also leads to a reduced humanity in Nadir and therefore levels some of the differences between them and the ghost in the story. And while we don't know the deadname of neither Nadir nor Yadriel, we know that both of them struggle with being called their deadname and/or the wrong pronouns and therefore have a bad relationship with names in general. Moreover, the absence of a name (deadname or new name) in TNN reflects the lack of recognition the narrator experiences in general, based on their gender, religion and ethnicity.

The significance of naming is further emphasised through the chosen name in TNN. *Nadir* holds significantly different meanings in English and Arabic – *rare* versus *the lowest point* – which adequately showcases the importance of language in the process of shaping one's (gender) identity and their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. In this specific case the name does hold even more significance as it also describes the journey of grief and self-acceptance of the narrator.

Last but not least, *The Thirty Names of Night* also addresses the act of naming in the context of immigration and cultural assimilation. When Laila and her family immigrate to the United States, their names are changed, to make it easier for English speakers to pronounce them. This can be seen as a reflection of a general pressure to conform to a new cultural environment but also leads to a certain erasure of one's past – like Sandy Stone criticised. Just like in terms of a non-binary gender, this shows how colonising cultures imposed themselves upon other cultures, and so the fact that the narrator calls himself Nadir ultimately can be seen as an act of decolonisation, of taking back and preserving his cultural heritage.

To answer the research question of this thesis, if the genre of *Magical Realism* allows for a more divers representation of trans* character in Young Adult Literature, I would argue that it does indeed allow for a more divers representation. However, based on the books analysed in this thesis, this diversity is less than what I expected from a genre that has a decolonising character and seems to generally accept non-ordinary, magical things at face value. All three analysed novels employ the "wrong body" narrative, to varying degrees, but with the effect that the focus of the trans* representation still stays on the body and the need to change that body to fit an innate gender identity. Nevertheless, the different cultural lens employed by the genre does allow the reader to see the influences of different cultures, communities and languages on gender identities as well as on trans* characters in general. This does allow for a less streamlined and a somewhat divers representation of trans* experiences.

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