Representations of Queerness in *Dni nashei zhizni* (2020), *Tetrad' v kletochku* (2021), and *Skoro konets sveta* (2023) by Mikita Franko

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Introduction

On May 14, 2025, employees of Eksmo, the Russian Federation's largest publishing house, were charged with "extremism" over the distribution of books with LGBT content.[1] The case, now well-known in Russia as the "book publishers' case" (*delo knigoizdatelei*[2]), is the first of its kind after the State Duma's recent classification of the 'LGBT movement' as an extremist organization in the country. Over ten individuals were arrested in connection with the case, including the director of distribution of Eksmo itself and the head of editorial offices of the publishers Individuum and Popcorn Books, two publishers under the Eksmo umbrella.[3] Both Individuum and Popcorn Books have recently been added to the list of organizations labeled "terrorists and extremists" for their dedication to publishing non-fiction and young-adult literature featuring LGBTQ+ topics.[4] Popcorn Books, founded in 2018 in Moscow, made headlines in recent years for its dedication to publishing books on themes that state officials may find controversial. According to the publisher's site, they focus on "books about issues of self-identification, racism, sexism, feminism, mental health issues, and many other 'uncomfortable' topics."[5] Apart from the publisher's runaway success, *Leto v pionerskom galstuke* (2020), which tells of the romance between two boys in a Soviet summer camp, several authors made their mark by pioneering writing about similar uncomfortable topics for young-adult audiences. The focus of this master's thesis falls on one of these authors, Mikita Franko, and three of his novels, each of which carves out a unique niche in the contemporary Russian literary environment.

Franko, a Russophone author from Pavlodar, Kazakhstan, published his first novel in 2020, initiating an intense wave of popularity and attention to young adult and LGBTQ+ literature. *Dni nashei zhizni* [hereafter *Dni*], which follows a same-sex couple on their journey into parenting in provincial Russia, became a bestseller and provided a glimpse into a new and developing literary tradition for the Russian-language young-adult market. Both Franko and the novel received widespread praise, sparking important conversations about the role of queerness in the literary market and in society at large. Franko, who was publicly

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[1] Kristina Safonova, "Chernyi den' dlia vsei otrasli," *Meduza*, May 15, 2025. https://meduza.io/feature/2025/05/15/chernyy-den-dlya-vsey-otrasli.

[2] In this thesis, I will be using a slightly adapted version of the 2012 ALA-LC Romanization system for Russian.

[3] Kristina Safonova and Andrei Pertsev, "My nabliudali bor'bu strakha i zhadnosti," *Meduza*, September 1, 2025. https://meduza.io/feature/2025/09/01/my-nablyudali-borbu-straha-i-zhadnosti.

[4] See Russia's violent strikes on publishing houses specializing in LGBTQ+ content: "Siloviki obvinili rossiiskikh izdatelei v ekstremizme — iz-za knig pro LGBTK-liudei," *Meduza*, May 15, 2025. https://meduza.io/cards/siloviki-obvinili-rossiyskih-izdateley-v-ekstremizme-iz-za-knig-pro-lgbtk-lyudey.

[5] "Ob izdatel'stve," *Popcorn Books*, https://popcornbooks.me/about/. Due to the closing of Popcorn Books in 2025, this site is no longer accessible.

identifying as a transgender man at the time, was nominated for GQ Russia's award "Man of the Year" in 2020, and the novel was shortlisted for the literary prize *Nos* in 2021.[6] Such attention led Franko to publish several other novels in short succession, including *Tetrad' v kletochku* (2021), *Devochka v nulevoi stepeni* (2021), and a continuation of *Dni, Okna vo dvor* (2022). Each of these novels heavily centers queer themes and adolescent experiences, such as the struggle with non-binary gender identity, struggles with mental health, and same-sex attraction. After Russian officials strengthened the "law on LGBT propaganda" at the end of 2022, increasing its application to all members of society, Franko's rise to success was hindered, but not stopped. After returning from Russia to his native Kazakhstan, he has continued to write and self-publish, while also collaborating with non-Russian publishers, such as the newly founded Kazakh publisher, Steklo, which also seeks to promote 'controversial' young adult literature.[7] Despite these setbacks, it is abundantly clear that Franko left a mark on the young-adult Russian literary scene. His fresh take on realist prose describing issues young people face daily found a dedicated readership and sparked broad appreciation for a new type of Russian writing.[8]

In the academic sphere, a growing number of researchers are turning their attention to Russian-language young-adult texts featuring LGBTQ+ themes as a legitimate subject of study.[9] Previously, few scholars had devoted their efforts to this particular topic, which lies at the crossroads of several essential fields, each with a well-established academic tradition. Several prominent researchers have written monographs on youth literature in Russia, the queer experience in Russia, and LGBTQ+ young-adult literature in English-speaking contexts.[10] The combination of these three topics, however, is only just beginning to gain

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[6] Refer to Franko's commentary on the nomination: "GQ nominated me for Man of the Year in the category 'Author of the Year'. This is a historic moment for me, not only because I was nominated in principle, but because there have never been transgender men among the participants (including those from other years)." Mikita Franko (@mikita_franko), "GQ nominirovali menia na 'Chelovek goda,'" Instagram, October 1, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CFy-ohZnVVL/.
"Literaturnaia premiia NOS," *Fond Mikhaila Prokhorova*, https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/project_archive/detail/literaturnaya-premiya-nos-2020/.

[7] "Steklo Press," *Berlinskaia knizhnaia iarmarka russkoiazychnoi literatury*, https://bookfair-berlin.de/participants/steklo-press/.

[8] In her chapter on Franko's debut novel, Manon Junggeburt discusses the popularity of *Dni nashei zhizni* on social media platforms, like TikTok, and its new approaches to discussing LGBTQ+ themes. See: Manon Junggeburt, "The Reception of Russian Young Adult LGBTQ+ Books on TikTok: The Case of Days of Our Lives," in *Reading Russian Literature, 1980–2024*, edited by Otto Boele and Dorine Schellens (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024).

[9] During the ASEEES 2024 conference in Boston, USA, I participated in a panel discussing *Leto v pionerskom galstuke* (2020) and the importance of the growing popularity of LGBTQ+ young-adult literature in Russian.

[10] For the queer experience in Russia, see Essig (1999), Healey (2018), Alexander (2022). For Russian literature for children and teens, see: Lanoux (2022). For queer Russian literature, see: Karlinksii (1991), Karlinsky (2002), Bershtein (2024). For LGBTQ+ literature for young-adults, see: Cart (2016), Linville (2016), Jenkins and Cart (2018).

traction in academic circles. This thesis will contribute to this emerging field by drawing on academic work by Russian and American scholars to form the basis of this dedicated research project on Franko's queer writing for a Russian young-adult audience.

This emerging research is necessary for several reasons. We can see that web of childhood politics and state censorship aimed at controlling narratives about young people in contemporary Russia is complex and wrought with conflict. The Putin regime has long capitalized on the narrative of 'traditional family values' to restrict freedoms and exercise control over the population. This is done through imposing the "idea of the family as the 'reproductive unit of society'; the stigmatization of any nonnormative forms of sexual behavior–first and foremost, of same-sex relationships–and the tabooing of children's exposure to any discussion of sexuality."[11] In spite of these restrictions, creatives have been working to combat these 'traditional' values through a "reorientation of narratives about childhood" in media.[12] Publishers, like Popcorn Books and its authors, like Franko, are doing vital work to undermine state-sponsored narratives of hate through providing counternarratives of different ways of being, ways that allow for more freedom and acceptance of difference.

The primary goal of this research is twofold: to understand how Franko constructs queer identity in his novels and to analyze the narratives being constructed about queerness in the Russian context today. This research is guided by questions posed by researcher Darla Linville in her work investigating queerness in English-language young adult literature. She asks the questions, "What representations of queerness and adolescence might exist? What is queerness about, beyond sexual practices? What do images of LGBTQ+ characters that are created in artistic representations tell us about queer identities?"[13] Locating these identities and uncovering their meanings is crucial to our understanding of the position of queerness in Russian society today. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in his writing on representations and their meanings, states, "we give things meaning by how we represent them–the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce…, the values we place on them…We struggle over [representations] because they matter… they define what is

[11] Ilya Kukulin, "A Military Upbringing: The Politics of Childhood, Adolescent Social Activity, and Cultural Representations in Russia in the 2010s-2020s," in *Historical and Cultural Transformations of Russian Childhood* (Routledge, 2022), 266.
[12] Elena Prokhorova and Alexander Prokhorov, "Genre Constructions of Childhood in Recent Russian TV Series: Gender, Ethnicity, Agency," in *Historical and Cultural Transformations of Russian Childhood* (Routledge, 2022), 221.
[13] Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson, "Foreword: Telling New Stories," in *Beyond borders: queer eros and ethos(ethics) in LGBTQ young adult literature*, ed. Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), xiii.

'normal', who belongs – and therefore, who is excluded."[14] In working to identify how Franko represents queerness for a young adult audience, we hope to shed light on the battleground of identity, a conflict-ridden place in today's Russia.

A crucial step in outlining this paper's theoretical foundation will be to clarify our understanding of the essential terms "queer" and "queerness." Simply put, research into queerness is informed by a practice rooted in methods that "[challenge] the normative."[15] In the *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies*, Jonathan Allan states that "queer, in this respect, is not treated as an identity category but as a *verb* indicating a way of doing things and undertaking critique."[16] Nikki Sullivan, a researcher in queer studies, defines the concept of the verb 'to queer' as "to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, [and] to delegitimize…heteronormative knowledges and institutions."[17] Philosophers and feminist theorists Judith Butler and Monique Wittig describe these heteronormative institutions as "the heterosexual complex matrix of discourses…that [have] become normalized in our culture, thus making particular lifestyles and identities seem natural, ahistorical and universal."[18] Consequently, the purpose of any work grounded in queer theory is to break down these traditionally unquestioned understandings of human identities and relationships. This paper will be relying on researcher David Halperin's definition of 'queer' as "*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant… [meaning that 'queer'] demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative."[19] As a descriptor, *queer* is used in popular culture in various ways and has taken on many meanings throughout history and across cultural contexts. The paper takes as its foundation the idea that "queer goes beyond notions of lesbian and gay identity politics… by engaging in the critique of assumptions about naturalized or innate identities, and prompting engagement with discomforting concepts such as fluidity, flux, dislocation and contingency."[20] It is important to note that

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[14] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. 3rd edition*., ed. Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans (Sage Publications Ltd., 2025), 3, 9.
[15] Nikki Sullivan, "Preface," in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 56. Here, Sullivan is quoting Ruth Goldman, '*Who is that queer queer?* Exploring norms around sexuality, race, and class in queer theory,' in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology*, edited by Beemyn and Eliason, (New York University Press, 1996), 170.
[16] Jonathan A. Allan, "63: Men and queer masculinities," in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Queer Studies*, edited by Rob Cover and Christy E. Newman (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 235.
[17] Sullivan, "Preface," vi.
[18] Nikki Sullivan, "Queer: A Question of Being or A Question of Doing?," in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 39.
[19] Ibid., 43. Here, Sullivan is quoting David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.
[20] Claire Carter, "79: Queer methodologies," in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Queer Studies*, edited by Rob Cover and Christy E. Newman, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 295.

most queer theory is based on Western, English-speaking understandings of sexuality and difference. However, there are a few crucial examples of scholars pursuing queer theory in the Russian context.[21] During the foundational conference on queer theory held in St. Petersburg by the Center for Independent Sociological Studies in 2014, researcher Aleksandr Kondakov highlighted this gap in Russian academia and brought together scholars from various disciplines to address Russian queerness specifically, stating that for Russian queer theoriests, it was important "not to give a definition [of Russian queerness], not to formulate hard truths, but to allow everyone to speak out using their own vocabulary and arguments."[22] By relying on these scholars as the theoretical foundation for this research, I will address the difficult task of identifying and discussing the many competing narratives about identity in Franko's works and their relevance for queerness in Russia today.

I will use a methodological framework adapted from Dr. Kirsten Helmer's "Queer Literacies," a six-step framework for discussing queer literature in educational spaces. Dr. Helmer's framework "Queer Literacies" was developed to help students "critically and queerly engage with LGBTQI-themed texts" by understanding the context of queerness in the text, systems of oppression within the text, and counternarratives to hegemonic understandings of identity in the text.[23] My adaptation of this framework will involve analyzing Franko's works with a focus on constructing a contextualized reading of the novels, outlining an understanding of oppression and power structures in the texts, discussing how the books trouble and denaturalize dominant narratives in society, and examining the alternative representations put forth in each case.

This master's thesis is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter is a dedicated case study to one of Franko's three novels. Chapter one discusses *Dni nashei zhizni* (2020), a novel concerning a homosexual couple and their journey raising two boys in provincial Russia. Chapter two focuses on *Tetrad' v kletochku* (2021), in which a young boy and his father grapple with the loss of a transgender family member. Chapter three will address *Skoro konets sveta* (2023), a book that is concerned with non-binary identities. Each of these novels approaches queerness from a different perspective. I will argue that in his journey as an author in the developing field of Russian-language queer writing for young-adult audiences, Mikita Franko has transitioned from writing about queerness in a very

[21] See: Kondakov (2014), Garstenauer (2018).
[22] Aleksandr Kondakov, *Na pereput'e: metodologiia, teoriia i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovanii* (TSentr nezavisimykh sotsiologicheskikh issledovanii, 2014), xvii.
[23] Kirsten Helmer, "Queer Literacies: A Multidimensional Approach to Reading LGBTQ-Themed Literature," in *Beyond borders: queer eros and ethos(ethics) in LGBTQ young adult literature*, ed. Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), 183.

normative way to developing his own voice that very queerly challenges traditionally held beliefs about gender, sexuality, and human identity.

Chapter One – Case Study of *Dni nashei zhizni* (2020) by Mikita Franko

Dni nashei zhizni (2020) [hereafter: *Dni*] is Mikita Franko's debut novel. Initially published online in *samizdat* fashion, *Dni* quickly gained a significant following of dedicated readers from around the Internet due to the novel's revolutionary treatment of homosexuality for a young adult audience. Because of the book's sensitive subject matter, Franko never considered traditional publishing a viable option for *Dni*; his first attempts to share his work were on social media platforms such as Telegram. After facing rejection from a major Russian publishing house, likely owing to the centrality of same-sex parenting in the novel, Franko was set on abandoning the world of traditional publishing, committing himself to promoting the book online and building a readership independently.[24] However, not long after his first rejection, the young (now-defunct) independent publisher Popcorn Books stepped in, showing strong interest in bringing the novel to bookstores across the country. For Franko, who wrote the story because of its significant meaning and importance in bringing change in Russian-speaking society, this was a welcome proposal.[25] At that moment, a successful partnership was born that would see five of Franko's creations come to life under the Popcorn Books brand.

In line with Popcorn Books' other titles, *Dni* is a story that is "relevant, bold, and of major current interest."[26] The novel follows Mikita, a young boy who, after losing his mother to cancer, is adopted by his uncle and his uncle's boyfriend. In a series of episodic vignettes, Franko illustrates how Mikita and his new parental figures struggle together to build a non-standard family in provincial Russia. *Dni* is revolutionary both in its open discussion of a same-sex couple and its treatment of one of the most politicized and controversial subjects in contemporary Russian society: the LGBTQ+ "propagandizing" of children.[27] Franko

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[24] In an interview with *GQ Russia*, Franko alludes to one of the largest Russian publishers, Izdatel'stvo ACT ("Mne napisali iz bol'shogo izdatel'stva na tri bukvy"). Vadim Smyslov, "Dni nashei zhizni – kniga o zhizni rebenka v odnopoloi sem'e," *GQ Russia*, June 3, 2020. https://www.gq.ru/entertainment/dni-nashej-zhizni-kniga-o-zhizni-rebenka-v-odnopoloj-seme.

[25] Mikita Franko, "Detstvo v nedetskikh kvir-knigakh. Mikita Franko (18+)," interview by Karen Shainian, *Karen Shainian*, YouTube, February 25, 2021. Video, 1:38. https://youtu.be/bimkuPxqbYE?si=_pVtaee77IKqhGhn.

[26] Smyslov, "Dni nashei zhizni."

[27] See Meduza's article discussing a Russian gay couple forced to flee the country after being persecuted for propagandizing "non-traditional orientations" to their two adopted children: Ivan Golunov, "Byla zhizn′. A teper′ zhizni net," *Meduza*, August 12, 2019, https://meduza.io/feature/2019/08/12/byla-zhizn-a-teper-zhizni-net.

describes his first novel, rightly so, as "rather provocative," for it "is not about queer love between two boys or girls, but encroaches on the theme of family with a young child at the center of the plot."[28] Given the Putin regime's weaponization of 'traditional family values' and the increasing prosecution of queer people as a way to strengthen state power and influence,[29] *Dni*'s depiction of Mikita and his two father figures presents a striking alternative to hegemonic conceptions of acceptable identity. Counter to the "hostility toward homosexuality" and the "demonization of gay men in Russian mass culture," Franko creates an image of two loving parents struggling to adapt to the hurdles of raising children.[30] However, despite the progress it makes in normalizing the image of same-sex couples and non-traditional family structures, Franko's debut novel also falls into the trap of cementing Mikita's parental figures' non-traditional sexuality within restrictive, hierarchical structures of gender and sexuality, which ultimately prevents a greater critique of the oppressive hegemonic society around them.

Renowned literary critic, Galina Juzefovich, in her review of Franko's first novel, recognizes Franko's attempts at normalizing Slava and Lev's relationship and the family's nontraditional family unit: "The life of a child in a happy and harmonious homosexual family is boring, ordinary, and disappointingly normal…The novel does the good thing of normalizing the perception of homosexual families in our country."[31] Indeed, Franko does establish Slava and Lev as well-intentioned, normal parents, despite the nature of their non-heterosexual relationship. However, through prioritizing the nuclear family, rejecting a wider queer community, and restricting non-normative expression, Franko establishes a stark acceptable versus unacceptable binary of queer representation. Given contemporary Russia's political aggression towards communities that deviate from the state-sponsored norm, this attempt at normalization is understandable and can be viewed as a necessary step towards a more accepting society.[32]

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[28] Smyslov, "Dni nashei zhizni."

[29] In his introduction to the state of queer studies in Russia, researcher Aleksandr Kondakov dismantles the idea of "traditional" heterosexuality in Russia, stating "Homosexuality in Russia [has never been] considered non-traditional, neither from a historical nor legal perspective."
Kondakov, *Na pereput'e*, xviii.

[30] Eliot Borenstein, "Post-Soviet Masculinities: Sex, Power, and the Vanishing Subject," in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, *1st ed*., edited by Janet Elise Johnson, Mara Lazda, and Katalin Fábián (Routledge, 2021), 80-82.

[31] Galina Juzefovich, "Dni nashei zhizni — roman Mikity Franko o podrostke, vospitannom gei-paroi v sovremennoi Rossii," *Meduza*, June 6, 2020, https://meduza.io/feature/2020/06/06/dni-nashey-zhizni-roman-mikity-franko-o-podrostke-vospitannom-gey-paroy-v-sovremennoy-rossii.

[32] Researchers William P. Banks and Jonathan Alexander observe that "for writers who grew up in more homophobic times, there seems to be a desire to make gay YA texts "normative," to provide a space where the "homo" is normal, regular, accepted, valued." See: William P. Banks and Jonathan Alexander, "After

The primary task of this thesis is to outline and analyze the representations of queerness in three of Franko's novels to determine what these representations tell us about traditional and non-traditional ways of being in the Russian context today. *Dni*, set in the unspecified "provinces" but likely modeled on Novosibirsk, where Franko studied, successfully presents a range of hegemonic and subversive sexualities and gender identities. From traditional Russian masculinity based in aggression, dominance, and violence, to the educated, high-class masculinity based in intellect and reservation, to effeminate homosexual masculinity based in flamboyance and extravagance, Franko details many possibilities across the identity spectrum. Within this ecosystem of identity, identities clash, demonstrating that within Russian society, not all identities are welcome or tolerated. Franko structures the representations of diverse identities in binaries that produce "good masculinities" and "bad masculinities," or "good gays" and "bad gays." Throughout the novel, Mikki and his parents' attempts at family-building in the public and private spheres guide the reader toward the acceptance and normalization of certain identities and toward judgment and reproach of others. These juxtapositions define the boundaries of an acceptable Russian queerness, one that I will argue is based simultaneously in gay acceptability and an adherence to normative, hierarchical power structures. Ultimately, however, despite Franko's efforts to sanitize Mikita's parents' sexualities by appealing to normative structures, he asserts, through the family's decision to emigrate to Canada, that queerness, no matter how normative it may be, is incompatible with the Russian context.

To understand the representations of various identities in Franko's *Dni* and their significance in the narratives they shape of queerness in contemporary Russian society, I will be applying several important theories. In the introduction, I reference Stuart Hall, a renowned critical theorist whose work is foundational to the study of representations in mass media. According to Hall, the words we use, the stories we tell, and the images we present all serve to create boundaries of belonging and exclusion, of normalcy and insanity.[33] When identities are represented in media, they are given meanings, establishing "relations of power" as identities are "organized into sharply opposed binaries or opposites."[34] This concept will be crucial to my analysis of Franko's depictions of non-standard ways of being, especially as these depictions are compared with one another and with mainstream identities.

Homonormativity: Hope for a (More) Queer Canon of Gay YA Literature," in *Beyond borders: queer eros and ethos (ethics) in LGBTQ young adult literature*, ed. Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), 103.

[33] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. 3rd edition*., ed. Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans (Sage Publications Ltd., 2025), 3.

[34] Ibid., 9.

Now that I've established the idea of representations and their meanings, I will briefly focus on defining the most salient aspect of queerness in *Dni*, which is Franko's depiction of a range of "masculinities" throughout the novel. Queer studies researcher Jonathan Allan, in his discussion of men and masculinities, states that "there is no one way of doing masculinity, and thus there are many ways of doing masculinities."[35] This range of possible masculinities is comprised of what Allan describes as "hegemonic masculinities" and "queer masculinities." As mentioned in the introduction, the term "queer" in this sense is not used as "an identity category, but a way of doing things."[36] While hegemonic masculinities represent the singular, dominant interpretation of masculinity that all men in society should conform to, "queer masculinities" exist in opposition to traditionally accepted ideas of gender expression. Masculinity, according to Allan, is "not a fixed sign, but a floating signifier dependent upon context" that exists "in relation to other performances and possibilities of gender."[37] When we examine different representations of masculinity, we are asking questions about which masculinities are deemed "acceptable" by society and which are not. My analysis will focus on what these different representations mean for our understanding of Franko's narratives about gender, sexuality, and human identity.

As *Dni* relies heavily on representations of various masculinities, I will also present a few key points of Sean Nixon's work on "established notions of masculinity and masculine culture."[38] Masculinity has traditionally been conflated in the dominant cultural imaginary with "aggression, competitiveness, emotional ineptitude, and coldness."[39] In many cases, masculinity is defined against its binary counterpart, femininity, with masculine culture being "synonymous with men's dominance over women."[40] However, Nixon demonstrates in his analysis of depictions of masculinity over time a proliferation of masculinities and a slight departure from adherence to one type of being. This new "plural understanding of masculinity" opens the doors to an examination of how masculinity can transform, be pitted against itself, and produce non-hegemonic embodiments of gender identity.[41]

A final key component of my analysis of Franko's depiction of same-sex relationships is the idea of "homonormativity," which describes the reproduction of normative structures

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[35] Jonathan A. Allan, "63: Men and queer masculinities," in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Queer Studies*, edited by Rob Cover and Christy E. Newman (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 235.
[36] Ibid., 235.
[37] Ibid., 235-236.
[38] Sean Nixon, "Chapter 5: Exhibiting Masculinity," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. 3rd edition*, edited by Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans (Sage Publications Ltd., 2025), 256.
[39] Ibid., 257.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

within homosexuality. According to William P. Banks, a prominent researcher in the field of young adult LGBTQ literature, the concept of homonormativity arose in times of increasing acceptance of gay characters in traditional media, both in YA literature and beyond. Banks asserts that as more and more gay characters were being introduced into popular media, there was "a search for and embrace of normativity,"[42] or, in other words, the desire to create textual environments where the "'homo' is normal, regular, accepted, and valued."[43] While increasing acceptance of gay characters in literature is a noble cause, as a result of authors' efforts, a secondary countermovement emerged that represented a "very particular, very narrow view of what's visible and what's normal."[44] According to Lisa Duggan, the researcher who coined the term, homonormativity is "a new neoliberal sexual politics, a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."[45] In much simpler terms, homonormativity is the "re-creation of hetero-based arrangements by LGBTQ people" in their search for normative acceptance by mainstream society.[46] In this regard, many gay characters who exhibit homornormative tendencies may feel similar "heteronormative pressures to have 'achieved' certain goals or life milestones by particular points—such as marriage, child rearing, career status," milestones that "organize, orient, and direct life courses in ways that come to seem natural."[47] With this understanding of queer masculinities and the concept of homonormativity, I will now dive into analyzing how Franko's representations of queerness in *Dni* present alternatives to hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously upholding oppressive normative societal structures.

The analysis of Franko's representations of queerness will be divided into three sections. First, I will discuss how Franko depicts Miki's parental figures-his uncle Slava and Slava's boyfriend, Lev. Franko challenges gender norms by expanding understandings of

[42] William P. Banks and Jonathan Alexander, "After Homonormativity: Hope for a (More) Queer Canon of Gay YA Literature," in *Beyond borders: queer eros and ethos(ethics) in LGBTQ young adult literature*, ed. Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), 103.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics,* ed. Russ Castronovo, Dana D. Nelson, and Donald E. Pease (Duke University Press, 2002), 179.
[46] Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin L. Ryan, "Destabilizing the Homonormative for Young Readers: Exploring Tash's Queerness in Jacqueline Woodson's *After Tupac and D Foster*," in *Beyond borders: queer eros and ethos(ethics) in LGBTQ young adult literature*, ed. Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), 87.
[47] Banks and Alexander, "After Homonormativity," 116.

acceptable masculinities through Slava's more feminine nature, as well as normalizing the gay couple's role as parents. Second, I will discuss how Franko normalizes homosexuality and Miki's non-traditional family unit, albeit exclusively through a prism of homonormativity and gay acceptability. Finally, I will discuss how Franko vilifies non-hegemonic queerness and Western ideas of queerness, effectively cementing Slava and Lev's 'correct' version of queerness in the values of monogamy, sexual restraint and fidelity, and domesticity.

As the novel opens, the reader is introduced to the protagonist and narrator, Miki, a five-year-old boy whose mother dies from cancer very early in his childhood. Miki is adopted by his uncle, Slava, a twenty-one-year-old art student, and Lev, Slava's boyfriend. After a brief period of adjustment, Miki is introduced to Slava's 'friend', whom he is immediately very suspicious of. Miki's apprehension is shared by Lev, who was not expecting to take on the responsibility of raising a child in a same-sex couple in provincial Russia. The initial chapters of the novel explore the dynamics among the three new family members as they adapt to these unexpected circumstances. Franko immediately explores representations of queerness by establishing a non-normative family structure and working to normalize the two-father parenting team. Through Miki's perceptions and experiences of his new parents, Franko demonstrates acceptance of Slava's more female-coded characteristics and portrays two men raising a child, defying traditional understandings of Russian fatherhood.

In their initial interactions, Slava, a graphic designer, is presented as the complete antithesis of Lev, an emergency room doctor. When Miki first meets Lev, his eye is immediately drawn to these stark differences: Lev is "tall, orderly, … his hair [is] combed, he [doesn't] look at all like someone who could be friends with my uncle, who only [wears] one type of pants: jeans with holes at the knees."[48] Slava, with his provocative fashion, is a "creative personality."[49] He teaches Miki how to draw, introduces him to the discographies of *Queen*, *The Beatles*, and *Led Zeppelin*, and watches cartoons with him all day long. Franko uses this binary to demonstrate how the couple exists within the oppressive framework of traditional society, exemplified best by an early family trip to the theater. Lev, who is "always dressed in suits: black or dark grey…never any stripes, checks, or patterns,"[50] challenges Slava for his insistence on defying societal norms: "could you at least put on something without holes in it? This is the theater after all…"[51] Slava, who does not want to dress like a

[48] Mikita Franko, *Dni nashei zhizni* (Popcorn Books, 2020), 10.
[49] Ibid., 12.
[50] Ibid., 15.
[51] Ibid.

"normal" person for the theater, garners "sideways glances" from other theater goers.[52] Even Slava's mother criticizes him for his lack of conformity: "[Miki] is crying all the time! And I'm to believe he was raised by men? Although you're not much better, you walk around with earrings in your ears like a lady."[53] These direct challenges to Slava's masculinity, his refusal to abide by my norms, and his ability to raise a child are key aspects of Franko's attempt to present an alternative image of contemporary queer masculinity through Slava's character. Slava and his affinity for non-conformity, creativity, and behavior deemed "feminine" call into question the dominant image of the "real muzhik," associated with violence, bravery, courage, and domination.[54] Miki, who values Slava's personality and distrusts Lev, helps frame Slava's counterhegemonic existence as acceptable and Lev's insistence on conformity as reproachable:

> "With Slava, it was easier. He told me about artists, musicians, and writers; he taught me to draw, played music for me, and I liked all of that.[55]
>
> "'Being a good person is an art…' That's a phrase that has nothing to do with this dry, strict, and closed-off person [Lev].[56]

The counternarrative that Franko brings forth in this binary dynamic between Slava and Lev demonstrates an acceptance of non-normative masculinity against the backdrop of an environment that seeks to repress non-standard expression.

In addition to normalizing Slava's feminine masculinity, Franko works to normalize the same-sex couple as a legitimate family unit. Franko depicts two fathers who, while very different in their own regard, both engage with Miki where they can, taking responsibility for child-rearing in the ways they know how. Despite continuing to perpetuate a strict dichotomy between the two, Franko crafts a representation of two men combining forces to take care of their children (a task primarily reserved for women), demonstrating a significant challenge to traditional images of Russian fatherhood.[57] Lev, with his preference for perfection and conformity, is assigned the task of supervising Miki's academic responsibilities, a.k.a. the "torturous task of helping with math homework."[58] Slava, with his artistic flair, helps Miki

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 267.
[54] Ibid., 21.
[55] Ibid., 18.
[56] Ibid., 19.
[57] "It is important to note that fatherhood has long been marginalized relative to motherhood in Russia…and it is women, as mothers and grandmothers, who are typically held responsible for maintaining family life."
Jennifer Utrata, "Single Mothers, Family Change, and Normalized Gender Crisis in Russia," in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, *1st ed*., edited by Janet Elise Johnson, Mara Lazda, and Katalin Fábián (Routledge, 2021), 507.
[58] Ibid., 67.

get dressed for the school Christmas assembly. Slava "unleases himself on [Miki] and [his] costume,"[59] whipping up a vampire outfit that helps Miki challenge traditional understandings of "correct" costumes and increases his confidence in self-expression. Slava's direct expression of creativity, unwillingness to bend to norms and expectations, and dedication to individuality shine in the more artistic aspects of parenthood, while Lev's iron will to adhere to the norm gives him the upper hand in tackling math and science homework. In direct contrast to the traditional image of the Russian alcoholic father who abuses his wife,[60] Franko utilizes this specific cooperation between Slava and his partner Lev to demonstrate the ability of two men to embody the traditionally "feminine" roles of childcare. Their success at raising Miki creates a strong counternarrative that dismantles Russian state-sponsored propaganda of queer parents engaging in activities that are harmful to children. Yet, despite this powerful challenge to hegemonic understandings of fatherhood, Franko returns again and again to a specific behavioral hierarchy that still roots the couple in a decidedly gendered binary.

In the couple, Lev continually exhibits the elements of traditional masculinity mentioned by Nixon above-"aggression, competitiveness, emotional ineptitude, and coldness." Slava, on the opposing side, must serve as the emotional moderator, bridging the gap between his partner and their young son.

> (Lev) – Sorry, I'm not good enough to talk to him about art!
>
> (Slava) – What's art got to do with it? Talk to him about something you know.
>
> (Lev) – About what? About cardiopulmonary resuscitation?[61]

Miki, who senses Lev's reluctance to open up emotionally, doesn't make any effort to treat Lev as a father figure. He treats Lev with extreme politeness and intentionally creates distance between them through his words and actions. After a while, Lev can no longer withstand this treatment:

> Both of you go to hell! Give me a break! I'm sorry, I didn't think it through, I'm an idiot, I'm an asshole, I always forget about you and your creative, fragile, sensitive nature![62]

Slava, who must facilitate communication between Miki and Lev, uses this as an educational opportunity, encouraging Miki to treat Lev with more compassion. Miki, who has been brought up valuing individuality and self-expression, chooses not to tolerate Lev's emotional outburst:

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 108.
[61] Ibid., 15.
[62] Ibid., 117.

> (Slava) – He made a mistake. And he knows that. He didn't know you would react like that. When he was younger, his dad constantly beat him, and you know, that happens to many people. He didn't think it would be so traumatic for you."
> (Miki) – "But I'm not many people!"
> (Slava) – "I already explained that to him. That you're different."[63]

This brief interaction reveals a significant aspect of the environment in which the characters are trying to build their queer family. The traditional Russian provincial masculinity, at whose hands Lev suffered greatly, represents abuse, trauma, and violence. Lev's inability to exhibit emotional intelligence comes as a result of his mistreatment by the leading representation of masculinity in his life, his father. Slava, by contrast, demonstrates a profound understanding of his partner and child, taking on the role of a mother to mediate a conflict-ridden father-son relationship.

In the scenes described above, Franko portrays Slava as a direct foil to hegemonic understandings of aggressive, cold, and established masculinity. However, the power vertical established between Slava and Lev, with Slava as the emotional mediator, defender of the child, and unique source of positivity, positions him as the dominant maternal figure within the parental configuration. Lev's avoidance of Miki, insistence on rules and order, and inability to regulate his emotions render him a traditional father figure. Miki's positive reception of Slava's non-traditional masculinity helps establish a positive counternarrative to the violent nature of fatherhood present in Lev's life and wider provincial Russia. While Franko does much to establish Slava as a clear example of queer masculinities and to legitimize the double-father family, he does not disrupt several crucial heteronormative notions of the family. Other aspects of traditionally gendered parental roles and characteristics remain largely unchanged, highlighted explicitly in Slava and Lev's hierarchical relationship.

This next section examines further how Franko's normalization of queerness can go hand in hand with the reiteration of oppressive structures, demonstrated best in Miki's journey to accepting his parents' non-traditional sexual orientation, which occurs exclusively through the lens of gay acceptability and homonormativity. Early in the new family dynamic, Miki sees Slava and Lev sleeping in the same bed, which leads to a major crisis. Mikki reflects on the meaning of two men in the same bed together, something he hasn't seen on TV except in "extreme circumstances," like war or when "the house is being renovated, and there's just simply nowhere else to sleep."[64] He doesn't understand why they would sleep

[63] Ibid., 115.
[64] Ibid., 24.

together if not forced to: "But we're not remodelling. We have a couch."[65] Not understanding much about relationships, but knowing enough from his favorite children's books to know that "love happens only between a man and a woman,"[66] Miki struggles with the thought that Slava and Lev are defying the depictions of friendship and love that he's familiar with. The next morning, he asks Slava why he would sleep in the same bed as Lev, a question to which Lev responds with expected avoidance, leaving the apartment immediately. Slava tries to explain to Mikki that two men can love each other just as men and women do in the books and movies, but Mikki fiercely rejects this narrative.

> (Slava) – Lev and I love each other.
>
> (Miki) – How's that?
>
> (Slava) – Like it usually is. Do you remember Cinderella? She fell in love with a prince. That happens to many people.
>
> (Miki) – But you're boys.
>
> (Slava) – Sometimes a man can fall in love with another man. And a woman can fall in love with another woman.
>
> (Miki) – That doesn't happen… you're lying.[67]

Miki bases his understanding of love on the heteronormative narratives he has come to accept as natural. Confronted with something different, he doesn't know how to respond. Franko leads Miki to an understanding of his parents' love through gay acceptability, described by Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan as the "neoliberal idea" that normalization and acceptance of members of the gay community occurs through positioning them as 'just like straight people, only gay.'[68] As Miki grapples with his parents' relationship, this process plays out in his mind:

> "I was furiously rereading my books that talked about love, and I didn't understand why Slava was lying. A boy couldn't be in Cinderella's place! He couldn't even fit into her glass slipper! Although, on the other hand, he would definitely go to the ball in those foolish soccer cleats, and those are always slipping off the older boys' feet when they play in the courtyard… I was forced to admit that Cinderella could be replaced with a boy without the main plot changing too much."[69]

By framing homosexuality through the prism of Cinderella, a prominent folktale establishing hyper-hegemonic gender roles and expressions of sexuality for children, Franko conditions Miki's acceptance of his parents' relationship. Slava and Lev's love is legitimized exclusively through the lens of dominant heterosexual structures.

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 25.
[68] Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan, "Destabilizing the Homonormative for Young Readers," 90.
[69] Franko, *Dni nashei zhizni*, 26.

A complementary component of gay acceptability is homonormativity. One significant addition to the concept of homonormativity beyond the "re-creation of hetero-based arrangements by LGBTQ people" is the importance of proximity to "whiteness, economic privilege, and maleness, among other traditionally normalized identities."[70] In this sense, homonormativity manifests as a desire to assimilate into traditionally hegemonic identities that wield power in society, rendering non-standard sexuality less transgressive. Gaining acceptance as a queer person in a homonormative environment is conditional on qualities despite queerness, like wealth, intellect, or traditional gender expression. In the case of *Dni*, homonormativity is evident in Miki's conditional acceptance of Lev as a father figure and, later, Lev's acceptance of Vanya, an institutionalized orphan, as his second son.

As described above, Miki is reluctant to accept Lev as a father figure. He refuses to call Lev his 'dad' and intentionally builds emotional walls between them. However, his relationship to Lev changes after Lev exhibits an exceptional capability. On a walk one day, Miki and Lev witness a car crash, in which an elderly pedestrian is hit by a car. Lev, an emergency physician, responds promptly to provide care to the victim. Miki is overcome with emotion, both by horror at witnessing something so frightening and by pride in Lev's reaction. On the walk back, he bombards Lev with questions: "So you saved her? Are doctors rescuers? You can save people so they don't die?"[71] In recounting the events to Slava, Miki, filled with adrenaline, blurts out, "and then Dad… and then Dad saved her!" His unconscious choice to refer to Lev as 'dad' for the first time exhibits the change he notices in himself at the end of the chapter: "From that moment, I looked at Lev differently. He was… like Superman!"[72] I argue that this is an example of homonormativity in practice, as Miki does not accept Lev as a father figure until he exhibits an exceptional quality. Rather than accept Lev simply because Lev is his uncle's boyfriend, Miki only sees Lev's value after he saves a woman's life.

The same practice occurs towards the end of the book, when Lev, Slava, and Miki are preparing to welcome a new member into the family. After volunteering with Slava at the state orphanage, Miki decides he wants a younger brother, specifically Vanya, one of the boys with whom Slava works. Slava, while understanding the grave challenges adoption poses in Russia, especially considering their unique family structure, is more open to the idea. Lev, however, is completely opposed. He talks about "alcoholics, drug addicts, and criminals" often present in state institutions.[73] Lev exhibits severe intolerance:

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[70] Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan, "Destabilizing the Homonormative for Young Readers," 87-88.
[71] Franko, *Dni nashei zhizni*, 34.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 291.

> Do you know who we are? We're a gay family… to put a Russian orphan, who's… how old? Nine!? You mean he's already formed, ingested all that dirt, vulgarity, and prejudice around him, which is much worse than that around us.[74]

Through Lev's intolerance, Franko establishes a boundary between the family and the culture of the orphanage, a state institution. In literature for young adults, state institutions, like schools, orphanages, or military academies, often "embody societal norms."[75] Lev's comparison of the orphanage with "dirt" and "vulgarity" can be interpreted not only as a reaction aimed at protecting his queer family, but as a class-based judgement of the Russian state institutions beneath his well-off family.

When the family eventually takes Vanya in, a similar conflict-ridden process of adaptation occurs. Vanya has difficulty adjusting to Lev's routines, and Lev criticizes him for his lack of intelligence, crass humor, and improper attire.[76] However, just as Lev had to demonstrate exceptional qualities to be accepted into the family unit, Vanya unexpectedly demonstrates an innate talent for music, prompting Lev to reassess Vanya's value as a son. After sneaking away from the rest of the group at another outing to the theater, Vanya finds an open piano and begins to play it. Lev, Miki, and Slava rush to the scene, having realized Vanya slipped away without notice:

> "He sang in such a way that you would never have believed it was the same boy who always cussed like a sailor…There, in his white shirt behind the piano, he seems like a conservatory student from a family of academics, a really genius with a bright future."[77]

The striking comparison between the environment from which Vanya emerged and the talent he exhibits demonstrates the underlying homonormativity at play. From "dirt and vulgarity" to "a family of academics, a genius with a bright future," Vanya's value is only revealed once he displays exceptional qualities worthy of a high-class environment. Miki explains this dynamic perfectly as he recounts this event to the narrator:

> "And then it all became clear: nothing else mattered. What matter did it make if you put your elbows on the table at dinner… Geniuses are allowed to do whatever they want…! That's how I got my little brother."[78]

Both Miki's acceptance of Lev and the family's acceptance of Vanya reveal that the powerful forces of hegemonic ideals about value remain, even in this non-traditional, queer family.

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[74] Ibid., 295.
[75] Andrea Lanoux, Kelly Harold, and Ol'ga Bukhina, "Russian Adolescent Fiction after 1991," in *Growing Out of Communism : Russian Literature for Children and Teens, 1991-2017*, *(*Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2022), 183.
[76] Franko, *Dni nashei zhizni*, 311.
[77] Ibid., 313.
[78] Ibid., 315.

Through these two cases, Franko reveals that despite the normalization of queer families, oppressive societal norms are still present and even influence acceptance into this counterhegemonic family unit.

The third component of Franko's depiction of queerness in his debut novel concerns his vilification of non-hegemonic queerness. At first glance, this concept may seem counterintuitive, as queerness itself should be counterhegemonic. However, as Lisa Duggan and other researchers have demonstrated above in their discussions of homonormativity, some identity expressions under the LGBTQ+ umbrella strive to adhere to hegemonic notions of being, despite their non-traditional sexual orientation. In this section, I will discuss two crucial scenes in which Slava and Lev, as a homosexual couple in Russia, exhibit homonormative thinking. In two separate vignettes, including the family's attempt to connect with another same-sex couple and an anecdote describing how Slava and Lev met, Franko demonstrates the couple's adherence to hegemonic ways of thinking in their complete denigration of effeminate Russian queerness, their insistence on monogamy, sexual restraint, and fidelity, and their preference for the culture of domesticity.

At one point in the novel, Lev and Slava decide that they need to branch out and meet other same-sex couples with children to foster solidarity among queer families in their provincial Russian environment. Miki notes that his parents "did not have any friends from the LGBT community," or rather, "they did, but their lives changed and became more isolated when I appeared in the picture."[79] Isolation from the queer community is not in itself a representation of homonormative ways of thinking. Many parents will tell you that raising a child has a way of drawing your attention away from social activities you may have previously enjoyed. In this case, Slava and Lev's affinity for homonormative ways of being manifests itself in their reaction to the first gay couple they meet: Grisha and Gosha, a pair of effeminate, "stereotypical" gay men. Miki tags along during the first outing to a cafe, and describes the two men in a rather alarming way:

> "Once I'd seen an image of a gay person in a Russian TV show, the refined, effeminate boy, but my parents told me that it was a ridiculous, inaccurate representation, that I shouldn't bother paying attention to it. However, Grisha was very similar to that character; he was even dressed in pink, like he wanted to win the competition for the maximum adherence to stereotypes."[80]

Immediately, Slava and Lev erect a boundary between 'ridiculous, inaccurate' representations of queerness and their own embodied queerness. For Miki, this enables the thinking that

[79] Ibid., 150.
[80] Ibid., 151.

‘adherence to stereotypes,’ such as wearing pink, is inherently wrong. Even Lev is shocked by the existence of this type of queerness in this environment: “I never even thought that people like this exist?”[81] As the meeting goes on, Grisha and Gosha are portrayed as vulgar, sexually promiscuous, obsessed with social media, overly effeminate, and invasive of personal boundaries. Grisha and Gosha, as they proclaim themselves, “try not to fall into raising [their own child] in ridiculous gender stereotypes;”[82] they gift Miki a Barbie doll instead of a toy car or toy soldiers. The outlandish couple is framed through Miki's and his parents' overwhelmingly negative reactions. Miki goes as far as to compare them to “something slimy and unpleasant…,” like “bugs [you] flick off yourself in the summer.”[83] Lev’s outright negative reaction to them establishes his internal homophobia and desire to be as “normal” as possible: “You guys are straight-up professional gays. I understand a lot, but you have to do something else besides be gay. For example, I’m going to work the night shift at the hospital.”[84] Lev reveals here an important part of homonormative thinking, which is that being gay should not be a dominant component of personality or personal expression. Rather, your primary value should come from success in your professional life or social class. Even Slava, who acts as Lev’s foil throughout the novel and often encourages Lev to be more accepting and open-minded, suggests that they not make any more efforts to meet other gay couples after their negative encounter with Grisha and Gosha: “Listen, guys, you’re nice guys, but we have a family, a normal, classic family, got it?”[85]

As in the depiction of queerness in Slava and Lev’s relationship, Slava and Lev are positioned on a contrasting binary as “normal, classic” gays, while Grisha and Gosha are positioned as “stereotypical,” and even “professional” gays. Franko suggests here that this specific representation does not fit within the spectrum of acceptable Russian queerness. While the novel as a whole does a whole lot for normalizing same-sex relationships, this scene in particular is quite problematic in its judgment of those who cannot or choose not to fit into a normative framework of gender and sexuality expression.

The second example is an anecdote describing how Lev and Slava met. In 2005, Slava, a 17-year-old first-year art student, and his sister go to a gay club in their town.[86] During the night, Slava meets Lev, a fourth-year medical student who wasn’t particularly

[81] Ibid., 153.
[82] Ibid., 151.
[83] Ibid., 153.
[84] Ibid., 155.
[85] Ibid., 154.
[86] Ibid., 180.

keen on being there in the first place ("I hate those places").[87] After striking up a conversation, the two decide to go for a walk outside the club, as Slava shares Lev's disdain for such establishments ("I hate gay clubs").[88] As they get to know each other outside the confines of the queer meeting space, Lev and Slava discuss their negative view of several aspects of "mainstream" gay culture, such as TV shows, clubs, and promiscuous behavior. Slava, who only knew about gay clubs from the American TV show 'Queer as Folk,'[89] which gave him the impression of "dark, smoke-filled halls with half-naked people and a dangerous amount of sex."[90] Lev, who is also familiar with the American TV show, shares Slava's distaste for sexual promiscuity and reassures Slava of his commitment to pure intentions: "I'm not planning on tricking you into anything."[91] What's interesting in this case is that Franko is continuing to weaponize polarity by establishing the American, Western representation of queerness in total opposition to Slava and Lev. While American queerness is rooted in sexual promiscuity and hedonism, found in one-night stands and euphoric club nights, Slava and Lev represent the "good gays," who respect boundaries and maintain fidelity to each other.

> (Slava) – "I'm against one-night stands."
>
> (Lev) – "What about one-life stands?"[92]

Taken together, Franko's representation of Slava and Lev's queerness falls quite neatly into a homonormative scheme. As Lisa Duggan explains, homonormativity is a way for "conventional gays" to normalize their homosexuality while still maintaining the oppressive heteronormative structures of "domesticated, depoliticized privacy."[93] Slava and Lev's insistence on isolation, refusal to engage with other queer couples or establishments of queer community, as well as their disdain for queer cultural materials, demonstrate this pervasive adherence to hegemonic, normative domesticity. In his discussion of homonormativity in youth literature, Nathan Taylor argues that this approach "ignore[s] what is queer about being queer."[94] Franko should not be criticized for this approach, however, given the necessity of narratives normalizing homosexuality in homophobic Russian spaces.

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[87] Ibid., 182.
[88] Ibid., 184.
[89] The pilot episode of 'Queer as Folk' also begins with an underage boy, Justin, sneaking into a gay club and seducing an older man. Only, the plot diverges from *Dni* as the couple engage in very graphic sexual intercourse. See: *Queer as Folk*, episode 1, "Premiere," directed by Russell Mulcahy, aired December 3, 2000, Cowlip Productions.
[90] Franko, *Dni nashei zhizni*, 181.
[91] Ibid., 185.
[92] Ibid., 188.
[93] Duggan, "The New Homonormativity," 179.
[94] Nathan Taylor, "U.S. Children's Picture Books and the Homonormative Subject," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 9, no.2 (2012): 148.

This chapter has described Franko's first attempt at writing queer characters, and his subsequent works exhibit an expansion of what may seem like a narrow view of queerness in *Dni*.

Chapter Two – Case Study of *Tetrad' v kletochku* (2021) by Mikita Franko

In his author biography on the Popcorn Books website, Mikita Franko defines himself as an author who writes about "ordinary topics."[95] Franko clarifies that the themes of non-normative sexuality, non-traditional family structures, and the struggles of growing up in provincial Russia are ordinary in that they "[touch on] issues that everyone knows about, but for some reason no one writes about."[96] It is this insistence on framing his work as "ordinary" that shines through in Franko's debut novel, *Dni nashei zhizni*, in which the narrative normalizes a same-sex family to the point of falling into the trap of homonormativity. As I demonstrated in my first case study, Franko's depictions of Slava and Lev's queerness in *Dni nashei zhizni* challenge many traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, especially as it pertains to the vital concept of the family in Russian culture. However, in seeking to achieve normalization of homosexual relationships, Franko relies on the framework of gay acceptability and homonormativity, which gives Slava and Lev's queerness permission to exist solely through the structure of the standard nuclear family. Other expressions of non-hegemonic, flamboyant, or overtly sexual queerness are strongly criticized; they do not belong in the understanding of acceptable queerness in the Russian context. However, when compared to subsequent works, this narrative of restricted queerness is expanded. This chapter's case study on Franko's second novel, *Tetrad' v kletochku* (2021), will demonstrate that after his debut novel, Franko moves beyond homonormative depictions of queerness, a trend that represents a shift in Franko's own positionality as an author and an innovator in the realm of contemporary Russian LGBTQ+ literature for young adults.

Tetrad' v kletochku (2021) [heareafter: *Tetrad'*], published in the same year as *Dni (2020)*, is Mikita Franko's second novel. In many ways, *Tetrad'* represents a continuation of the themes present in Franko's debut novel. Set in an unnamed location outside Russia's capital, the novel depicts the many challenges the main characters must face as they navigate the oppressive environment of the provinces and mainstream society's adherence to traditional values. *Tetrad'* departs from its predecessor primarily in its treatment of traditional

[95] "Mikita Franko," Popcorn Books, https://popcornbooks.me/authors/mikita_franko/.
[96] Ibid.

ideas of the family. While *Dni* upheld hegemonic notions of the nuclear family, *Tetrad'* challenges this idea, paving the way for counternarratives that offer diverse ways of thinking about queer family building. In the first pages of the novel, the reader is introduced to sixth-grader Ilya and his father, who are moving to a different city to start a new life after Ilya's mother's unexpected suicide.[97] Ilya, who develops a severe case of obsessive-compulsive disorder as a result of the trauma, is forced into a completely new environment and struggles to adjust. Through Ilya's experiences at school, Franko leads the reader on a journey that takes Ilya from a place of extreme hurt to a place of acceptance and healing. While the novel addresses an entire spectrum of topics pertinent to a young adult audience, including homophobia, xenophobia, eating disorders, mental health crises, and struggles with gender identity, I argue that the primary counter-narrative present in *Tetrad'* is one of rejecting the hegemonic dominance of the nuclear family unit. *Tetrad'*, unlike *Dni*, demonstrates how Ilya and his single father, after overcoming adversity, form a new tight-knit community based not on traditional ideas of blood relation, but on progressive ideas of queer family building.

To analyze Franko's depiction of non-standard family structures, I will briefly introduce the theoretical concept of queer family building. Queer family building is a notion that encompasses the practices involved in forming family ties outside the traditional boundaries of the heterosexual nuclear family. The foundational monograph on queer family building was written by Kath Weston in 1991 on the basis of ethnographic research in the queer community of the Bay Area in California. In her ground-breaking research, Weston describes how members of the Bay Area queer community, often rejected from their biological families as a result of their sexualities, turned to each other to establish new familial units. This research took place in the turbulent 1980s, a time of crisis in the American queer community due to the AIDS epidemic, and led to "the emergence of a discourse on gay families [and] a reconfiguration of the terrain of kinship that continues to generate controversy among heterosexual and gay people alike."[98] As I approach the analysis of Franko's depiction of queerness and family in *Tetrad'* against the backdrop of *Dni*, I will rely on the initial provocation in Weston's ethnographic study: "are gay families assimilationist, or do they represent a radical departure from more conventional understandings of kinship?"[99]

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[97] Mikita Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, (Popcorn Books, 2021), 5.
[98] Kath Weston, *Families We Choose : Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (Columbia University Press, 1991), 1.
[99] Ibid., 2.

As Weston demonstrates in her study, there is "no such standardized creation" of "the gay family."[100] She observed that queer individuals, through forming horizontal connections with like-minded peers, engaged in the practice of building "chosen families," which "introduced something rather novel into kinship relations."[101] In addition to children or lovers, networks of friends could be included in the understanding of family through taking on roles previously delegated exclusively to relatives, such as mutual support, love, and care. In studies of chosen families in the 21st century, we see a continuation of this practice, in which "these 'families we choose' [are] based on a sense of social and emotional belonging rather than heteropatriarchy and biogenetics."[102] By acting in opposition to traditional understandings of biological families, chosen families "undercut procreation's status as a master term imagined to provide the template for all possible kinship relations."[103] In this regard, the counternarrative presented by queer family building is that in opposition to traditional understandings of how families are created, "choice can become a key element of how [chosen family] kinship is constructed."[104] This foundational aspect of chosen families and queer family building will be relevant for this discussion of Ilya and his father's attempts to create a new support network after their original family unit is destroyed.

This chapter will be divided into several sections that follow the novel's progression, taking the reader through four months of Ilya's life as he moves to a new city and adjusts to an unfamiliar environment. The first section will address the original family dynamic and the tragedy that serves as a catalyst for Ilya and his father's journey. The second section will discuss the environment that enforces a predominantly heteronormative worldview on Ilya. The third section will examine the characters and situations that challenge Ilya's deeply-held beliefs, leading to an embrace of a completely new outlook. The final section will analyze how Ilya and his father ultimately transform their initially unfamiliar, hostile surroundings into a welcoming home. In this chapter, I argue that Ilya's and his father's journey represents a traditional experience of queer family building. First, the pair experiences the significant loss of the ideal nuclear family unit rooted in the foundation of two biological parents and a child. Then, after facing this loss, Ilya struggles to overcome his previously held hegemonic

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[100] Ibid., 3.
[101] Ibid., 136.
[102] Tina Büchler, "Family Matters," in *Claiming Home: Migration Biographies and Everyday Lives of Queer Migrant Women in Switzerland* (Verlag, 2022), 212.
[103] Weston, *Families We Choose*, 213.
[104] Ellen Lewin, "Lesbian and Gay Kinship: Kath Weston's 'Families We Choose' and Contemporary Anthropology," *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 976.

beliefs about identity and family structures. Finally, Ilya and his father build a new family community based on acceptance, support, and love. This process demonstrates the progression that many queer family units undergo as they transition from assigned families to chosen families. For Russian queerness, Franko's representation of this journey illustrates that even in an environment where heteronormative norms are upheld by the state and enforced through a range of institutions, queer family units can still be built and maintained as shelters and safe spaces.

Tetrad' opens with Ilya and his father taking an exhausting, more than 12-hour bus journey from the city where Ilya was born to a new, unnamed city in the Russian provinces.[105] The reason for this journey is not mentioned initially; Ilya refers to his previous city as "town S" and the day everything changed as "day S." Later in the novel, Franko reveals that Ilya and his father decided to leave their hometown after Ilya's mother's suicide. While Ilya does not know it at first, he comes to find out that his mother's drastic decision to end her own life came as a result of her inability to fulfill her wish of transitioning from female to male. Franko frames the start of Ilya's and his father's own transition from a heteronormative family model to queer family building through Ilya's mother's queer crisis.

Before the events of the book take place, Ilya's mother struggles to identify with the heteronormative expectations of motherhood and femininity, becoming violent, depressive, and despondent instead of caring, gentle, and cheery. As a result, Ilya's father seeks a divorce, which involves state institutions and their hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality in the private, family sphere.[106] In court, the judge accuses Ilya's mother of not fulfilling her "maternal duties," to which she responds, "I'm tired of this life, it's not mine, it was forced onto me, I'm tired of pretending to be a wife and mother."[107] The court, as an institution of the Russian Federation, responds as one might expect: "A child needs a mother… No father, however good he may be, can completely fill the lack of maternal love."[108] This divorce hearing and ensuing custody battle take place within the framework of a Russian institution that severely stifles expressions of queerness and enforces heteronormative structures of family building through state dominance over individuals. In her article on family and gender politics in Russia, Michele Rivkin-Fish describes Russia's implementation of traditional values through laws and institutions as a widespread strategy to establish control, through which "interventions in the intimate sphere of gender and family are a key site for the

[105] Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, 5.
[106] Ibid., 90.
[107] Ibid., 92.
[108] Ibid.

deployment and transformation of state power."[109] The court's attempt to prevent Ilya's parents' divorce and its insistence on maternal obligations exemplifies the importance of the "matrifocal family [in Russia]…where the mother-child unit is more central culturally than fathers or the mother-father conjugal relationship."[110] As Ilya discovers much later in the novel, the pressure from these heteronormative structures and the complete lack of an outlet for honest gender expression lead his mother to decide to exercise the ultimate act of agency by taking her own life.

In their new town, Ilya and his father, while still reeling from experiencing personal tragedy, encounter new forms of hegemonic gender norms. The legitimacy of their single father-son family unit is constantly questioned. Ilya's father's ability to raise a child without the support of a female figure is challenged by their new neighbors. Ilya doesn't know how to respond to this type of questioning, which he finds invasive and not grounded in any evidence:

> (Neighbor) – But where's the child's mother?
> (Ilya) – She hung herself.[111]
>
> (Neighbor) – How is [your father] alone? Men, by their nature, aren't capable of raising children, cooking, or cleaning. You need a woman (*baba*) for that.
> (Ilya) – What a weird way to refer to a woman. But my dad and I have made it a year by ourselves, how could that be if he wasn't capable?[112]

From the neighbors' perspective, the simple fact that their family unit lacks a maternal figure constitutes a violation of the most "natural" laws dictating family structure. With their questioning and the use of the disparaging term '*baba*' to indicate the superiority of domesticity in the definition of womanhood, the neighbors attempt to enforce the hegemonic views of gender roles most prevalent in Russian mainstream society. In her chapter on the gender crisis in Russia, Jennifer Utrata, while conceding that exceptions to this trend exist, paints a picture of a traditional Russian culture in which "fatherhood has long been marginalized relative to motherhood…[where] women, as mothers and grandmothers, … are typically held responsible for maintaining family life."[113] By not seeking to replace the female figure in their family unit through remarriage, Ilya's father is criticized, and his ability to fulfill the role of parent is called into question. And, while single-mother family units may be

[109] Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Pronatalism, Gender Politics, and the Renewal of Family Support in Russia: Toward a Feminist Anthropology of 'Maternity Capital,'" *Slavic Review* 69, no. 3 (2010): 702.
[110] Utrata, "Single Mothers, Family Change, and Normalized Gender Crisis in Russia," 506.
[111] Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, 35.
[112] Ibid., 41.
[113] Utrata, "Single Mothers, Family Change, and Normalized Gender Crisis in Russia," 507.

accepted by society due to perceived female superiority in domesticity, a single-father family unit is inconceivable. For Ilya and his father, this tragic situation represents the mold of dominant heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality that must be broken on their journey to eventual queer family building.

Now, I will discuss the social and institutional framework that shapes Ilya's initial understanding of gender and sexuality–an understanding that is formed in the starkly heteronormative institutions of education and family. When he first starts at his new school, Ilya faces several challenges. He gets into misunderstandings with his classmates, who do not tolerate the ways his obsessive-compulsive disorder manifests itself. Ilya also struggles with his shy nature. He complains to his father that at school, "you have to become part of a society, to try to get along with everyone, and I'm too introverted for that."[114] Ilya correctly recognizes that educational institutions are primarily about socialization, or teaching young people how to become functioning members of society. In his provincial Russian school, Ilya learns quickly that being in society means conforming to strict behavioral norms and disparaging those who refuse to meet them.

Despite his awkwardness and strange behavior, Ilya manages to attract the attention of two classmates and potential friends who are not bothered by his social ineptitude. However, these two classmates, Artem and Bibi, are themselves both targets of severe institutional oppression and social ostracization. Artem is the target of homophobic violence. He was once caught kissing another male student, which led to extreme punitive consequences: Artem was beaten up by five of his classmates after school, and his love interest was sent to a military academy to correct his "unnatural" sexuality.[115] Both punishments demonstrate the dominant response to expressions of non-standard queerness. Non-conformity is responded to with physical violence and institutional oppression aimed at "correcting" deviant identity. Even the teachers, who should protect vulnerable students from their peers, participate in enforcing homophobic narratives. In response to hearing claims that Artem has AIDS from being gay, the teacher chastises the class: "Stop this now. [Artem] can't have AIDS. Only drug addicts and degenerates get AIDS."[116] While attempting to control the students' attacks, Artem's teacher participates in propagating harmful stereotypes about individuals living with AIDS. Her voice is heard loud and clear: such a shameful disease could only be carried by social

[114] Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, 48.
[115] Ibid., 66.
[116] Ibid., 122.

outcasts. These instances illustrate with extreme clarity the hegemonic position towards anything other than traditional representations of heterosexuality.

Bibi, on the other hand, is the target of xenophobia and racism. Originally from Tajikistan, Bibi has trouble with Russian and makes a fair number of grammatical and vocabulary mistakes. Her classmates treat her with contempt, making fun of her native language and cultural background.[117] Instead of referring to her by her given name, the other kids in class call her "Bibi-what,"[118] "Stink-face,"[119] or a number of racial slurs.[120] The other kids in class also avoid her physically; they don't want to be touched by someone they view as dirty and smelly.[121] They criticize her traditional dress and mock her lack of access to the popular fashion brands worn by other students. This isn't a problem for Artem, who doesn't view any of these characteristics as a reason not to be friends with someone. However, after he and Bibi are the only two classmates willing to approach Ilya, Ilya becomes the next target for the class bullies.[122]

In response to becoming the new target of bullying, Ilya begins to participate in Artem's and Bibi's oppression. He embodies the hegemonic views that he has grown up with, incorporating the hateful attitude toward diverse sexualities and immigrants into his behavior. When Artem offers to sit next to Ilya so that Ilya won't be sitting alone, Ilya responds, "Why would I want to sit next to a faggot?"[123] In addition to calling Bibi by her pejorative nickname, "Stink-face," Ilya also chastises Bibi for making so many grammatical mistakes, particularly those related to verb endings, which reflect gender. After correcting her a number of times, he thinks to himself, "My head hurt from listening to her distorted speech. I thought if I just helped her with her Russian homework, she would stop sounding like a total idiot."[124] It is quite revealing that Ilya's violent responses to his classmates rely primarily on attacking their sexuality and expressions of gender. Both Artem, who is rumored to be gay, and Bibi, who forgets to use the feminine endings of verbs, pose a threat to Ilya's traditional understanding of gender and sexuality. By participating in the violence against them, Ilya is trying to hold on to a hegemonic worldview instilled in him by societal institutions, a worldview that remains at risk of shattering due to his changing family structure.

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[117] Ibid., 54.
[118] From the Russian, *Bibicho?* (*Бибичё*?).
[119] "Stink-face" is my translation of the perjorative nickname, *Voniuchka (Вонючка)*.
[120] Ibid., 58.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., 55.
[123] Ibid., 59.
[124] Ibid., 88.

The school, as an institution of society, in addition to providing the space for socialization, takes on the responsibility of promoting a standard view of the family. As an assignment, Ilya and his classmates are tasked with giving a short presentation about the most exceptional member of their family. During the presentations, Ilya notes that "most people talked about great grandfathers, how they went to war…[while] others talked about dads who were firefighters, police officers, or doctors. Not a single person mentioned their mom."[125] The presentations reveal the students' association of exceptionalism with masculinity, military achievements, and professions engaging in courageous service to the state. This view is not surprising, as Eliot Borenstien notes in his discussion of post-Soviet masculinities, due to "the continued hegemonic power of military service and military institutions in the construction of masculinity in the mass media and popular culture [in Russia]."[126] Artem, however, provides a striking alternative to this idealized version of masculinity and father figures. When asked to talk about his most exceptional family member, Artem mentions his live-in nanny, who "raised him, taught him to read, always supported him, and became the most important person in his life."[127] After silencing the cacophony of laughter from the other students, the teacher challenges Artem, reinforcing traditional ideas about legitimate kinship:

> (Teacher) – But a nanny isn't a relative. Why don't you tell us about your father? I'm sure he has an interesting story.
>
> (Artem) – Maybe, but I don't know anything about his story. He's always working.[128]

Artem comes from an extremely well-off family; his father is the director of a bank, and his mother is from a family of generational wealth. Both of his parents, however, do not fulfill the roles assigned to traditional heterosexual parents. His father is always traveling on business trips, and his mother is constantly vacationing in the Bahamas, both with their own separate extramarital lovers.[129] In Artem's case, the role of parent was assumed by his nanny, and he values this relationship, considering her the closest member of his family, despite the lack of traditional blood ties. This is the first example Franko gives of queer family building. By rejecting his traditional parents, Artem claims a new parental figure outside of his biological family, establishing a connection based on love, care, and trust. Of course, as we see in the teacher's response, this type of relationship and family structure is not acceptable in mainstream society. For Ilya, this is the first introduction to an alternative family structure, one that is not defined by strict societal norms or values.

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[125] Ibid., 69.
[126] Borenstein, "Post-Soviet Masculinities," 83.
[127] Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, 69.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., 116.

Unfortunately, Artem's presentation of new practices of queer family building is, by itself, not enough to dissolve Ilya's adherence to hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality. Ilya retains many of his traditional views, even if the foundation is beginning to crack. A significant part of the plot of *Tetrad'* revolves around a cassette tape that Ilya's mother left for him, which contains various recordings from the divorce court case and a personal voice message describing the struggles she was going through. Ilya can only listen to this tape on a cassette player belonging to Bibi's father, as no one else has the necessary equipment. A pivotal moment in the novel comes when Ilya goes to Bibi's house to listen to the tape, despite not wanting to interact with her and her non-Russian household. He notes that Bibi and her family are "strange and unpleasant people, in old clothes with holes in them… Everything about them is different."[130] By addressing the differences between them, Ilya is already establishing a clear binary between acceptable and other ways of being. Bibi, with her Tajik background, is something different, something "strange and unpleasant." While listening, Bibi and Ilya discover together that Ilya's mother wanted to transition and was suffering from severe mental health issues due to her inability to express her true gender identity. Ilya experiences a significant shock in this moment, as he feels that his understanding of his mother, his family, and the world in general is starting to break down, all in the presence of Bibi, whom he does not respect or value:

> "I saw the happy pictures of her parents on the shelves, this miserable, but at the same time caring life, this dumb sleeping dog in the chair, and I felt like the most unhappy person on Earth, the farthest thing from normal, and Bibi, who had witnessed the destruction of my family, became disgusting to me like nothing else."[131]

It is inconceivable to Ilya that someone so unnatural as Bibi, who does not conform to any acceptable notions of Russianness, femininity, or socio-economic standards, could at the same time have such a "normal" family. Bibi's family, with two loving heterosexual parents, a dog, and a warm environment, is offensive to Ilya, whose own family unit has crumbled under the pressure of heteronormativity. In this moment, Ilya lashes out at Bibi, calls her racial slurs, and flees her house in tears.[132] The revelation that his mother could potentially be a second father, and that she was suffering greatly as a result of this desire, serves as a catalyst for the destruction of Ilya's heteronormative worldview. He does not accept his situation immediately, however, and instead turns to his father in accusation. When Ilya

[130] Ibid., 79.
[131] Ibid., 93.
[132] Ibid., 93.

brings up the contents of the tape, his father admits to knowing about his mother's identity. Ilya cannot accept this:

> (Ilya) –"Why are you lying?"
>
> (Ilya's father) –"I'm not lying. I wouldn't even be able to make this up."
>
> (Ilya) I burst into tears, because in my view of the situation, everything stopped making sense, and I didn't want to admit that he was telling the truth."[133]

Ilya may refuse to accept the truth, but through Artem's presentation of non-standard family structures, the juxtaposition of Bibi's marginalized position as a second-class citizen with her ideal home life, and his father's confirmation of his mother's gender crisis, Ilya is brought to accept that his previous understanding of the world no longer applies. This painful experience sets the stage for the next step in his transformation to acceptance, which I will analyze in the following section.

In the previous case study on *Dni*, I discussed how Franko presented several counter-narratives of alternative masculinities that challenged traditional ideas about what it means to be a man. In *Tetrad'*, Franko also activates a similar counter-narrative by presenting Artem and Ilya's father as two male figures that defy hegemonic masculinity and directly challenge Ilya's embodiment of queerphobia and xenophobia. After Ilya confides in Artem about the contents of the cassette tape, Artem takes some time to research the transgender experience, opening up his worldview to include more diverse understandings of gender and sexuality:

> (Artem) – I didn't know much about it before, but I read a few articles, and I think it was probably difficult for him.
>
> (Ilya) – Who's 'him'?
>
> (Artem) – Your parent. I read about being transgender.
>
> (Ilya) – About what now?
>
> (Artem) – What do you mean 'about what'? You, what, didn't even try to find out what that was? … Do you think they invented the internet just so you could read about bacteria?[134]

Instead of rejecting the unfamiliar, Artem embraces curiosity and the willingness to adapt his worldview to new phenomena he encounters. Ilya, who struggles with breaking out of the powerful framework instilled by traditional Russian institutions, is pushed to engage with his mother's queerness, to embrace discomfort, and to change his point of view.

Ilya's father also represents a direct challenge to traditional masculinity. Throughout the novel, he defends Ilya's non-standard behavior and creates space where his obsessive

[133] Ibid., 99.
[134] Ibid., 124.

compulsive symptoms are not judged, but rather accepted: "my son can be whoever he wants to be."[135] This position of complete acceptance does not pass to Ilya right away, as I've demonstrated above. Ilya maintains several harmful homophobic and racist views of his classmates, which his father addresses through several stern conversations:

> (Ilya's father) – Why do you call her "stink face?"
>
> (Ilya) Because she's dirty, she has old clothes, and a dangerous amount of bacteria and oily food at home. Oh, and she's from Tajikistan."[136]

Ilya's father responds that Bibi's country of origin does not give Ilya any right to call her disparaging names, after which Ilya begins to refer to Bibi by her given name.

A second crucial expression of non-traditional masculinity comes in the form of Ilya's father's acceptance of his own role in contributing to his partner's suicide. He takes accountability in front of Ilya for not handling the situation with care, for not taking the time to understand what his partner was going through. He expresses deep regret for involving the state and causing such harm to Ilya unintentionally: "I didn't mean to, but I made a mistake. I never had instructions in life: what to do if your partner hangs themselves."[137] From this tragedy, Ilya's father transforms, developing a profoundly different understanding of radical acceptance. He mirrors Artem's challenge to Ilya, encouraging Ilya to open his own mind to the possibility that difference should be accepted rather than punished: "You should read about it all. About gays, lesbians, migrants, vegans, drug addicts - about everything. You don't know who your wife or children might end up being."[138] Franko positions Artem and Ilya's father in direct opposition to the traditional Russian masculinity that exerts dominance over others. They are juxtaposed with the Russian state, which continues to foster "a social and cultural environment that is increasingly hostile to the very concept of gender," where "men are manly because that is what men are, and that is what men must be."[139] At this point in the novel, Ilya can no longer ignore the challenges to his hegemonic worldview. Despite not wanting to admit it, he values his father and Artem as individuals and becomes open to investigating their point of view. The next section of my analysis will discuss the methods through which Ilya finally breaks free from his previous ways of thinking.

I will now present the two methods through which Ilya is able to broaden his horizons to include non-standard expressions of gender and sexuality into his understanding of what's "normal." Most crucial to what this transformation says about queerness in the Russian

[135] Ibid., 33.
[136] Ibid., 81.
[137] Ibid., 126.
[138] Ibid., 127.
[139] Borenstein, "Post-Soviet Masculinities," 87.

context is that both of these sources are of Western origin. The first source is given to Ilya by his father. He receives a copy of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999)*, an American novel written by Stephen Chbosky, which tells a strikingly similar story of a young boy who is an outcast at school and is taken in by two similarly outcast friends, forming a trio where he learns the strength of accepting difference. In reference to Russia's harsh censorship laws restricting books with LGBTQ+ content,[140] Ilya objects, "but [this book] is marked 18+," to which his father replies, "some books you can't wait to read… You need them now."[141] Intrigued by the prospect of engaging with restricted material, Ilya devours the book and is introduced to a main character who also traverses the difficult path from social isolation to acceptance by embracing queer joy and family-building. In a discussion with his father, Ilya admits his past behavior was problematic:

> "My dad and I talked about the book together, and he told me people are mean to others because of 'prejudice,' like when I thought [Artem] would want to turn me gay even though he'd never even tried to before."[142]

Inspired by this conversation, Ilya takes Artem's advice and turns to *Wikipedia*, another internet source that, despite hosting articles in thousands of languages, was developed by American computer scientists. He stays up for hours that night, reading about eating disorders, homosexuality, being transgender, migration, and addiction.[143] Reflecting on his experience with traditional institutions of knowledge production, like his school, Ilya notes that "most of our teachers are starting to seem like dummies… I seriously don't even know how you can learn anything from them…"[144] After engaging with these materials and confronting his own prejudice, Ilya stops trying to fix Bibi's grammatical mistakes, accepts Artem's sexuality, and even starts referring to his late parent as his other dad.[145] This change is rendered complete when he remarks that "everything should be normal now,"[146] indicating that the turbulent journey from loss to queer awakening and acceptance is complete. This transformation, catalyzed by an American young adult novel and an internet encyclopedia, undermines the traditional methods of control exercised by the Russian state, allowing Ilya to engage with convincing counter-narratives of gender, sexuality, and acceptance of difference that encourage him to change his hegemonic views. This process represents the final step

[140] See Russia's violent strikes on publishing houses specializing in LGBTQ+ content: "Siloviki obvinili rossiiskikh izdatelei v ekstremizme — iz-za knig pro LGBTK-liudei," *Meduza*, May 15, 2025. https://meduza.io/cards/siloviki-obvinili-rossiyskih-izdateley-v-ekstremizme-iz-za-knig-pro-lgbtk-lyudey.
[141] Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, 104.
[142] Ibid., 112.
[143] Ibid., 128.
[144] Ibid., 123.
[145] Ibid., 130.
[146] Ibid., 131.

towards Ilya's journey to building a new, queer family in his new town, which I will describe in the next section.

The final section of this chapter wraps up with a description of the concluding scene of the novel, Ilya's birthday party. After experiencing a drastic shift in his own perception of his peers and himself, Ilya reaches a state of radical acceptance of difference. He does not judge himself for his neurodivergence, Bibi for her cultural background, or Artem for his sexuality. Both are accepted by Ilya as equals, not in spite of their differences, but because of their value as friends. He notes that upon arriving in the city, he and his father "didn't have anyone except each other," but now, after building relationships with his classmates based on acceptance, there is a group of tight-knit, loving friends in his apartment.[147] Reflecting on the value of these connections, he states, "the most important thing is that now we are next to each other, we can support each other, and strengthen our foundation."[148] Bibi, Artem, Ilya, and his father are starting the process of building a new family unit, not built on blood ties, but on support, love, and genuine connection. As Weston describes in her research on queer family building, this process is "closely associated with the experience of love… through which people establish and confirm mutual, enduring solidarity."[149] Traditional models of kinship structures lose their authority over queer families in this process.

It is also important to note the structure of Ilya's and his father's journey to queer family building, which began with a significantly painful loss and the shattering of previously deeply held hegemonic beliefs about gender and sexuality. Pavithra Prasad, in her work on queer kinship, highlights the significance of loss in queer family building: "as queer people, we know loss as an inevitable part of becoming queer…Queer kinship heals these wounds in ways that are immeasurable."[150] I argue that we can analyze Ilya's transformation as a queer transformation, regardless of his own sexuality, as the loss of his originally hegemonic understandings of sexuality and gender gave way to a new worldview that positions itself in direct opposition to the dominant view promoted by traditional Russian institutions of the state, such as courts and the education system. As the novel ends, Ilya looks around at his new friends and, as I argue, queer family, and remarks, "finally, everything is okay (*normal'no*)."[151] By ending the novel with this image of queerness and acceptance and

[147] Ibid., 223.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Weston, *Families We Choose*, 116.
[150] Pavithra Prasad, "In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 7, no.1 (2020): 114.
[151] Franko, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, 223.

asserting its normality, Franko is establishing a counter-narrative to the traditional heterosexual family presented by mainstream culture as the only acceptable option.

In this second case study, I have argued that Franko's second book, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, represents a departure from the normalization strategies employed in his first novel, *Dni nashei zhizni*. By presenting Ilya and his father as survivors of a tragedy that rips open their traditional understandings of normative family structures and ways of being, Franko creates a story of queer acceptance and rejection of heteronormative values, rather than seeking acceptance through adhering to existing ideas of normativity. *Tetrad'* portrays Artem, a character with a non-normative sexuality, Bibi, a character with a non-normative cultural background, and Ilya's father, a character with a non-normative expression of masculinity, as the forces that confront Ilya and his hegemonic beliefs. By referencing Western models of queerness and acceptance, Artem and Ilya's father encourage Ilya to reflect and change his outlook on himself, his parents, his friends, and his world. After overcoming the struggle of changing his normative views, Ilya is able to engage in queer family building, creating a new unit of support with his friends and his single father in an environment that does not view this community as an acceptable source of love, support, and family ties.

Chapter Three – Case Study of *Skoro konets sveta* (2023) by Mikita Franko

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I discussed Mikita Franko's debut novel, *Dni nashei zhizni*, and his second novel, *Tetrad' v kletochku*, both published in the first year of his career as a professional author. The first, *Dni*, describes the life of a young boy living with two fathers and focuses on normalizing same sex relationships through the prism of homonormativity. The second, *Tetrad'*, breaks down the two-parent two-child normative family unit narrative presented in his first book. This significant step marks a shift in Franko's writing away from presenting queerness through the lens of normativity, choosing instead to disrupt the ideal of the nuclear family. Franko produces a non-normative family structure built horizontally by expanding the definition of kinship to include friends within the fold, countering the idea that family relations are only legitimate through blood ties.

Taken together, we can see a clear shift in Franko's presentation of queerness–from a normative demonstration of non-traditional sexuality to an expansion of the idea of family, a crucial, and highly regulated, institution of heteronormative society. In this third and final case study, I argue that Franko's novel, *Skoro konets sveta (2023)* [hereafter: *Skoro*],

represents another powerful step along this path. In this novel, the last to be officially published in Russia, Franko crafts a gripping story of self-discovery: Oliver, a young orphan raised in the oppressive Russian state childcare system, is adopted by a Russian-American family and taken to the United States, where he undergoes a significant identity shift. Despite not directly discussing issues of non-traditional sexuality, I argue that Franko achieves a very queer story. Franko writes a queer novel, not in the sense of 'LGBTQ+,' but through a positionality that "[counteracts] and [delegitimizes]…heteronormative knowledges and institutions."[152] This novel, when combined with *Dni* and *Tetrad'*, can be read as another powerful advancement towards a depiction of queerness that is not tied to representing specific sexualities but is actively dismantling oppressive heteronormative social frameworks, regardless of the characters' orientations.

This critical expansion of the concept of queerness in Franko's literary works mirrors his own journey as a person and a literary figure. After the breakout success of his first novel in 2020, Mikita Franko was thrust into the media spotlight, gaining attention from literary circles and mainstream society alike. From the start, Franko was forced to make a decision about his new public persona. In an interview with the media platform, *Takie Dela*, Franko quickly rejected the early classification of "queer author."[153] In this interview from 2021, Franko argued that the classification of queer is not justified; his book may feature queer characters, but it would be a mistake to apply such a restrictive label. Franko described his view of queer literature as stories "about gay romances…or gay love, when at the center [of the novel] is some situation tied explicitly to sexual orientation or identity."[154] This position represents a very narrow, but very popular, understanding of queerness, defining the concept exclusively through non-standard sexual orientation. This line of thinking, that queerness is directly synonymous with the term 'LGBTQ+', strips queerness of its power as a positionality against normative society, reducing it exclusively to a label applied to those who fall outside traditional heterosexuality.

By 2024, however, in an interview with the queer literary journal, *Vslukh*, Franko stated that he had eventually accepted the title of 'queer author.'[155] Franko admitted to having trouble with the distinction "queer" at first: "I felt that the title of queer author was forcing

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[152] Nikki Sullivan, "Preface," in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), vi.
[153] Mikita Franko, "Kogda bolit serdtse, mozhno ob"iasnit' etu bol'," Interview by Aleksandr Finiarel', *Portal Takie Dela,* February 18, 2021, https://takiedela.ru/202,1/02/kogda-bolit-serdce-obyasnit-yetu-bol/.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Mikita Franko, "'IA sobral v sebe samye nepopuliarnye identichnosti' – Mikita Franko – Epizod 03.05," Interview by Leo Veles, *Literaturnyi kvir-zhurnal «Vslukh»,* YouTube, May 5, 2024, https://youtu.be/09HN9lx8YVo?si=qEQBntP-stUHyXw4.

me into a certain restrictive framework… that if I was a queer author I couldn't write anything not queer."[156] As he conveyed to renowned queer literary critic Konstantin Kropotkin, Franko eventually accepted the title after deciding he didn't want to explore anything beyond queer themes in his work. However, a critical point from which this chapter will emerge is Franko's discussion of *Skoro*, a book that he described as "an exception" and "a rarity" in comparison to his other novels.[157] In Franko's other works, queerness dominates as a main theme through the characters' non-traditional sexual orientations and their struggles therein. Franko is right to describe *Skoro* as an exception, since none of the novel's main characters are openly LGBTQ+. However, in this chapter, I will argue that *Skoro* is not an outlier or an exception but one of Franko's most queer novels in its firm rejection of heteronormative understandings of static identity categories and stable binaries. Despite considering the novel a departure and a rarity, Franko has unknowingly written a very queer story that challenges restrictive models of thinking and advocates for self-determination and existence in the uncomfortable space outside traditional society.

In *Skoro*, the protagonist Oliver exhibits this radical self-determination by rejecting his birth name, Georgiy, in favor of the moniker of his favorite literary character, Oliver Twist. By rejecting the identity imposed upon him by parents who left him on his own as a baby, Oliver forges a unique path, constructing an identity that better reflects his own view of himself. At several points throughout the novel, Franko highlights this specific power of naming as a tool of identity construction. Oliver and other characters decide to reject the titles assigned to them by society, directly challenging the notion of fixed identity categories. In light of Franko's own journey with forming an identity and public persona different from the one assigned to him at birth,[158] I will read the characters' struggles with names and their power over shaping their own identity through a queer lens, relating these experiences to the

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[156] Mikita Franko, "Terpenie kvir-pisatelia Mikity Franko," Interview by Konkstantin Kropotkin, *Kvir-besedy*, YouTube, October 22, 2024, 22:20, https://youtu.be/EWMF21Ssysk?si=33oCNE7Cym7Ia2bW.
[157] Ibid. 86
[158] In late 2025, Franko made a significant announcement that his personal identity no longer fit with the the public image he had been embodying for over five years. In a message to his followers on Telegram, Franko stated that he no longer identified as a transgender man, and would be henceforth using feminine pronouns and returning to his birth name, Dasha, in his personal life. This touching message reveals Franko's discomfort with gender stereotypes and outlines his inability to successfully imitate standard gender performances, either as a girl or a transgender man. His attempts to demonstrate a gender that would be "understandable" by society proved futile. The "classic story of a transgender person" who realizes they were born in the wrong body and achieves emotional fulfillment upon medically transitioning did not fit him or his identity. Returning to his birth name and gender presentation, while an imperfect solution for him, represents a significant exercise of agency over identity and self-determination. See: Mikita Franko (@mikita_frank0), "Privet! IA tut nizhe sryvaiu plastyr′ s rany," Telegram, October 24, 2025, https://t.me/mikita_frank0/835.

identity forming practices of transgender and non-binary individuals when choosing names that better reflect internal gender identities.

To understand the significance of these cases in the novel, I will rely on several key aspects of critical and gender theory concerning the relationship between gender identity, gender performance, and the act of naming. The analysis in this chapter is based on non-binary researcher Toby Finlay's essay, "Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory."[159] In this essay, Finlay advances Judith Butler's infamous theory of gender performativity, including crucial discussions of subjectivity and the power of naming for transgender and non-binary individuals. According to Judith Butler, mainstream society is constructed around the concept of a "heterosexual matrix" in which the heterosexual orientation and male-female binary are dominantly portrayed as "natural, ahistorical, and universal."[160] Within this matrix, people are divided into two "natural" gender categories based on physical sex characteristics and are expected to embody these gender categories in a range of ways from birth to death. Butler famously challenged this heterosexual matrix by theorizing that gender is not a "natural, pre-discursive characteristic of human beings,"[161] but is a system of behaviors that are internalized and "performed" in order to subjectivize individuals as legitimate figures within the clearly defined binary apparatus. Under this heterosexual matrix, individuals must embody the gender characteristics assigned to them in order to render themselves "recognizable" and "intelligible" subjects in society.[162] Finlay argues that this binary heterosexual matrix "exercises constraint over non-normative ways of being,"[163] deligitimatizing individuals who do not fit into this strict schema. Both Butler and Finlay discuss "interpellation," a concept developed by philosopher Louis Althusser and one of the most important mechanisms of implementing the heterosexual matrix. Subjectification through interpellation consists of societal institutions "hailing" or "calling" individuals with certain labels. Individuals effectuate this subjectification by internalizing and embodying the labels, or "responding" to this call.[164] Interpellation manifests itself most directly in the form of enforced labels such as gender markers on birth certificates and the names assigned to children at birth. When an

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[159] Toby Finlay, "Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory," *Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts* 4, no.8 (2017).
[160] Nikki Sullivan, "Queer: A Question of Being or A Question of Doing?," in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 39.
[161] Ibid., 59.
[162] Ibid., 60.
[163] Ibid., 59.
[164] Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert, "Post-structuralism," in *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory* (Routledge, 2013), 162.

individual responds to the specific labels imposed on them by society, they are accepted into the heterosexual matrix and are legitimized as "intelligible" subjects. When an individual rejects these labels, they transgress the heterosexual matrix, becoming an illegitimate and "unreadable" subject. Finlay, to help justify why certain individuals find it difficult, even impossible, to answer society's interpellation, cites philosopher Mladen Dolar's idea of a "pre-subjective, pre-discursive self" that exists within each person and helps form the basis of identity. This helps explain the "trauma of subjectivization" of trans and gender non-conforming people when the pre-subjective, pre-discursive self does not match the labels applied by society, triggering a conflict that must be resolved.[165] Finlay explains that it is in this conflict between the pre-subjective self and society's interpellation that trans and gender non-conforming people can exert agency over their own subjectivization by rejecting imposed markers and choosing their own names and identities, effectively challenging traditional mechanisms of gender intelligibility under the heterosexual matrix. This crucial understanding of taking agency against the normative structures of identity determination will serve as the foundation for my analysis of Oliver's relationship with his own name and sense of self.

The following sections discuss and analyze Franko's depictions of queerness in *Skoro*. As mentioned, Franko departs from describing characters who identify with non-traditional sexual orientations or gender expressions. However, Franko achieves an undeniably queer story by questioning the hegemonic mechanisms by which predetermined identities are imposed on individuals in society. In describing Oliver's problematic journey with his own identity as he is adopted into a different country and cultural environment, Franko lays the foundation for a discussion of fluid, unstable identities. I will argue that by establishing the strict heterosexual matrix through rigid binaries of gender expression and state ideology and by placing Oliver in opposition to this matrix of binaries, Franko normalizes uncertainty and challenges common understandings of coming out as the successful endpoint of queer becoming.

The opening of the novel establishes the notion of a hegemonic heterosexual matrix through which pervasive ideas about "natural" gender and sexuality influence our understanding of names and identity. As an orphan in a Russian state childcare center, Oliver

[165] Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2 (1993): 77.

dreams of being adopted. He fantasizes about his ideal mother and father who will one day rescue him from the oppressive environment of the orphanage into a loving, safe family:

> "Natalia and Oleg… Natalia and Oleg… I repeated these names all day with different intonations. I was trying to feel them. Natalia felt like something soft, viscous, and sweet - like honey. Oleg felt like something ringing, unbending, like steel. Natalia and Oleg…"[166]

In these first lines of the novel, Franko immediately introduces the strong connection between names as reflections of identity, gender, and the strict masculine-feminine binary. Oliver understands intuitively how names and societal interpellation are related. Each name presupposes identity characteristics that are applied to the name's bearers. Oliver repeats these associations to himself over and over, increasing their potency and the connection between the labels and the idealized versions of subjectivity that they imply. This first instance of the connection between names and identity establishes the heterosexual matrix that will be challenged later in the novel as Oliver and other characters defy the labels society assigns to them.

As the novel continues, Franko outlines several ways in which the state institution and other children impose restrictive identity labels on Oliver, interpellating him as a marginalized member of society and forcing him into submission within the hierarchical identity matrix. Oliver was born with HIV and, according to caretakers at the orphanage, "mild intellectual disability."[167] Though many potential parents take interest in adopting him in the first years of his life, Oliver never ends up in a loving family because caretakers and orphanage administrators consistently label him as "contagious," "a moron," and "slow" (*otstalyi*) in front of possible families.[168] These labels limit Oliver's chances of finding a new home by problematizing his identity and casting him as an outsider in traditional society. The other children quickly pick up on these labels, implementing the nickname "AIDS-boy" (*spidoznyi*) to bully him.[169] Oliver cannot resist these instances of interpellation, in which he is forcibly subjectivized as these specific marginalized categories. Even when attempting to put up a fight, Oliver is met with extreme resistance from authority figures in the state institution: "You're not healthy! You're! Not! Heal-! Thy!"[170] Through violent enforcing of these specific labels, the hegemonic apparatus is repeatedly imposed on Oliver. Oliver internalizes these identity markers by responding to them, effectively embodying them in his response. When thinking about what he wants to be when he grows up, he can only muster

[166] Franko, *Skoro konets sveta*, 5.
[167] Ibid., 10.
[168] Ibid., 50.
[169] Ibid., 45.
[170] Ibid., 12.

out a weak, "I'm mentally slow. I'm intellectually disabled. I'll never get hired. Only as a plumber or a wall painter."[171] The names that the state institution and other children use to interpellate Oliver into subjectivity force him into this specific identity category and determine his way of thinking about himself.

Franko does not resign Oliver to complete submission, however. Instead, he instills in Oliver an innate "pre-subjective" self that does not align with the specific identity categories imposed on him, thereby creating a conflict between his sense of self and the imposed labels that will serve as the catalyst for Oliver's identity transformation later in the novel. Instead of going by his birth name, a label that he was born into, Oliver decides at a young age to identify himself with his favorite literary character, Oliver Twist, with whom he believes he shares many similarities, both in life circumstances and personality traits. Potential parents and orphanage caretakers consistently challenge this manifestation of self-expression:

> (Visitor #1) – What's your name?
> (Oliver) – Oliver.
> (Visitor #1) – Oliver? How unusual![172]
> (Visitor #2) – The boy's name's not Oliver. Do you mean Oleg?... In Russia, no one names their children Oliver, especially not in orphanages.
> (Oliver) – My name's Oliver because I wanted it that way and because I'm like Oliver Twist. And I know better what name fits me, way better than the people who left me at the orphanage.[173]

In this example, Oliver is directly challenging the label of government name imposed on him at birth. As in the beginning of the novel, Oliver understands the direct relationship between names and identity:

> "I read Oliver Twist at the age of eight, and every day since then, I've never wanted anyone to use my real name. I didn't like my real name: it seemed stupid, bulky, clumsy, like an awkward piece of furniture, standing in the middle of the room that doesn't quite fit in either corner…"[174]

This specific internal monologue reveals the conflict between Oliver's pre-subjective self and the forced interpellation of his government-issued name, creating an opportunity for Oliver to subvert imposed labels through active self-expression. Franko additionally introduces the discomfort that comes with existing "in the middle" and "not quite in either corner." I choose to understand this aspect of Oliver's birth name as a crucial component of Franko's critique of established binaries and the heterosexual matrix later in the novel. At first, Oliver is unable to live with the discomfort of a name that doesn't perfectly fit his idea of himself. By choosing his own name, Oliver is exercising agency in his self-expression, defending his

[171] Ibid., 32.
[172] Ibid., 9.
[173] Ibid., 25.
[174] Ibid., 196.

subjectivity against mainstream society, which does not read him as a legitimate member. In these cases, he is taking the first steps in directly opposing the heterosexual matrix of enforced identity.

Two characters aid Oliver in developing his positionality in relation to normative impositional structures. A new girl at the orphanage, Vika, and his adoptive mother, Anna, both inspire Oliver and challenge the heterosexual matrix that hegemonic Russian institutions enforce on the children. First, I will discuss Vika and her influence on Oliver, after which I will analyze the multiple contributions Anna makes to Oliver's journey of self-discovery. Vika, in describing her own journey with identity and naming, introduces Oliver to the concept of identity fluidity. When they meet for the first time in the orphanage, Vika affirms Oliver's chosen name and recounts a time when she also rejected her given name, reinforcing the idea that individuals can exercise agency over the labels society dictates for them:

> (Vika) – I'm Vika.
> (Oliver) – I'm Oliver.
> (Vika) – For real?
> (Oliver) – Yes, I chose it, so it's real.
> (Vika) – Exactly. In elementary school, I had people call me Zhanna for two years, can you believe it? Just because I wanted it that way. In honor of Jean D'Arc!
> (Oliver) – And then?
> (Vika) – And then it got boring, and I told them that I didn't want to be Zhanna anymore. But when I was Zhanna, it was also for real, you know?
> (Oliver) – I know.[175]

Vika and Oliver both evoke the idea of authenticity of their preferred identities. Even though mainstream authorities deny it, both characters insist that their chosen names are "real." By affirming this authenticity within one another, Vika and Oliver demonstrate that identity partly emerges from within, from the conflict between the pre-subjective self and pre-determined labels, rather than from the hierarchical system of subjectivity into which individuals are born. This approach, as Finlay describes, directly challenges the normative imposition of identity categories by disrupting the stability of names as fixed signs. The fluidity of Vika's identity also serves to support this point. Vika exhibits a crucially queer positionality in highlighting that her identity is not static, but can adapt as she evolves as a person. For Oliver, this will prove foundational to his experience of his identity as he is adopted from the oppressive Russian environment into a loving family in the United States.

The second character that destabilizes the heterosexual matrix imposed onto Oliver and the other children in the orphanage is Oliver's adoptive mother, Anna. Born in Russia, Anna moved to the United States for her education, married an American, and became a legal

[175] Ibid., 106-107.

citizen in the process. As soon as she meets Oliver, she becomes the polar opposite representation of every oppressive aspect of Oliver's native Russian environment. They encounter each other for the first time in the girls' bathroom as Oliver is attempting to fix the masculine "football" haircut, forced onto him by his caretakers.[176] Anna is not shocked by any of this, by Oliver's name ("she didn't say that I had a strange name"[177]), by his presence in the girls' bathroom, or by his feeble attempts at defying oppressive norms. She cuts his hair for him, establishing her position as a defender of self-expression and an antagonist of the heterosexual matrix. She also challenges the ways in which Oliver is interpellated in Russian society: she tells him it's impossible that he can only be a plumber or wall painter and that there's "no such word as moron."[178] In her opposition to these violently enforced categories, Anna stimulates Oliver to grow bolder in his own defiance of these norms. Both Vika and Anna stoke the conflict between Oliver's pre-subjective self and the violent interpellation he experiences, encouraging him to pursue his path of self-expression and identity exploration.

With Anna's appearance in Oliver's life and the increasing probability that he will be adopted into her family, Franko establishes another binary that plays a significant role in Oliver's identity formation. Anna, who is understanding, kind, and accepting, is positioned as the representative of a new country and culture that stands in stark opposition to Russia. While Russian state institutions and hegemonic culture are oppressive, violent, and normative, Anna describes America as a land of accessibility, which treats individuals as equals and cares for people with different identities.[179] In their interactions with Oliver, each pole of this binary treats the other with contempt and assigns labels that delegitimize the opposing position. Oliver's caretakers call Anna and her American husband crazy (*nenormal'nye*) and insist, based on their understandings of state-sponsored televised news reports, that "scary, sick people live in America" who "force their children through sex changes."[180] Anna, after hearing this from Oliver, discredits Oliver's caretakers' claims ("what a fool"[181]) and the reports they are based on: "God, Oliver, that's nonsense! Who told you that? The TV? Don't watch the TV!"[182] By assigning each other labels like "crazy" and "fool," Anna and the caretakers frame themselves against one another, at opposite ends of an

[176] Ibid., 30.
[177] Ibid., 31.
[178] Ibid, 40.
[179] Ibid., 41.
[180] Ibid., 53.
[181] Ibid., 41.
[182] Ibid., 54.

ideological and identity spectrum that Oliver must navigate. This binary creates desire within Oliver to re-position himself away from the oppressive Russian environment towards the US, a land seemingly free of constraints. He thinks to himself that if the adoption doesn't go through, he'd even rather be euthanized than continue living in the orphanage.[183] Franko uses this binary to lay the foundation for Oliver to experience a profound identity crisis, prompting him to question the binary's existence and, in turn, the possibility of life outside it.

After a tumultuous process of jumping through hoops to effectuate the adoption, Oliver and his new family depart Russia and arrive home in Salt Lake City, Utah. From this point, Franko works to destabilize the America-Russia binary that was established before Oliver's official adoption. Oliver is confronted with a range of experiences that shake the foundation of his idealized version of the United States. He realizes McDonald's burgers aren't as good as he'd hoped, Salt Lake City doesn't look as beautiful or interesting as New York in the movies, the kids he meet use homophobic slurs against him, and several parents are prejudiced against his HIV status.[184] During his first day of school, he notices the same tendencies of children toward violence and judgement, rather than acceptance and understanding. In this moment, he realizes that "it's as if [he'd] never left the [orphanage]."[185] These experiences help destabilize Oliver's idealized perception of the United States and Americans as an ideal identity category. Anna, in her transformation from Russian to American citizenship, represented a possible future identity for Oliver, who never felt comfortable with his assigned Russian name and instead identified with an Anglicized identity category. As Oliver encounters experiences that shatter his perception of America as a land where his identity, previously oppressed in Russia, could be expressed freely, he begins to question the stark binary he valued so dearly.

Some aspects of the United States, however, do offer Oliver the opportunity to exercise radical self-determination. Two societal institutions that previously violently interpellated Oliver into normative categories allow for the free exploration of identity. First, Anna initiates medical testing that will emancipate Oliver from the label of "intellectually disabled." After testing, a licensed examiner concludes that he's a normally functioning boy. This label that constrained Oliver in the Russian context has no authority in his new home, allowing him to break free from this identity category to assume control over his own fate:

> (Oliver) – And what can I be when I grow up now?
> (Anna) – Whatever you want.

[183] Ibid., 39.
[184] Ibid., 77, 84.
[185] Ibid., 202.

(Oliver) – Like, whatever?
(Anna) – There's nothing holding you back now.
(Oliver) – So, like even a doctor?
(Anna) – Even a doctor.
(Oliver) – Even an astronaut?
(Anna) – Even an astronaut.[186]

In this new context, the state apparatus is not enforcing this specific identity category onto Oliver, which previously boxed him into an "intellectually challenged" subjectivity that restricted his future individuality. Rather, the environment allows lifting this forced category, opening the door to self-determination.

The second prominent social institution that allows for identity autonomy is Oliver's school. Anna introduces Oliver to the idea of officially changing his name to match the public persona he's been identifying with for years.

(Anna) – You can ask the teachers to call you Oliver. I'll warn the principal about it. We won't make it in time to officially change your name.
(Oliver) – Change my name?
(Anna) – Well, yes. So you can be Oliver officially for everyone, not just for us.[187]

In this new context, school administrators, rather than dismissing Oliver's attempts at self-determination, are willing to engage seriously with his desire to challenge the label of his birth name. Rather than enforcing the rules of the matrix that Oliver was born into, the American school and legal system allows for divergence from the norm.

This opportunity, however, initiates an identity crisis. When faced with the opportunity to align his pre-subjective self with the name he finds most fitting, Oliver is suddenly struck by the finality of this decision. The culmination of many years of desiring a different identity has led to this moment, but Oliver isn't sure how to proceed:

"But now, when Anna said I could get rid of this mess of a name printed on my official documents, I suddenly started to doubt myself, and out of nowhere, I felt my name was deeply mine. I felt it so deeply that, for the first time, parting with it seemed impossible."[188]

Throughout the novel, Franko has used his characters and their interactions with names, such as Vika's fluidity and Oliver's defiance, to establish the connection between identity and labels. In this moment, once Oliver faces the chance to finally align his legal name with his internal identity, potentially resolving the conflict between his pre-subjective self and societal interpellation, a new crisis emerges. Rather than accepting the name change as the fulfillment of desire, as the final realization of his true self, this experience profoundly challenges Oliver's perception of identity.

[186] Ibid., 195.
[187] Ibid., 196.
[188] Ibid., 196.

As a result of this conflict, Oliver ultimately decides to renounce the literary moniker he has associated with his identity for most of his conscious life in favor of returning to his birth name, Georgiy. In class, when asked to present himself, he hesitates for a moment, then declares to his peers, "I'm Georgiy Voronov. This is my name. I'm from Russia."[189] As is expected when an individual initiates a drastic identity change amongst peers who already know you under one label, Georgiy faces backlash from friends in his close circle and even from his adoptive father, Bruno. His American peers and American father push back against this decision, refusing to adapt to this "foreign" sounding name:

> (Bruno) – Maybe George would be better?
> (Georgiy) – But that's not my name.
> (Bruno) – Yes, but it's easier for us to pronounce.
> (Georgiy) – Listen, you have a weird name too, but I didn't ask you to come up with a different one![190]

This is a critical advancement in Franko's discussion of identity formation and queer opposition to normative systems of identity regulation. America, with its apparent culture of self-expression and the right to self-determination, resorts to the same restrictive system of subjective intelligibility that Oliver lived under in Russia. Georgiy, who dreamed of going by Oliver, was in line to be accepted by his new community because Oliver, an English name, fits into the traditional heterosexual matrix that dominates society. However, once Georgiy decides to identify with his native Russian name, he opposes the American heterosexual matrix and falls out of intelligibility once again. With this shift, Franko questions the legitimacy of the idea that queer liberation is achieved once a desired state of identity is reached, as is portrayed in many traditional YA coming-of-age queer narratives.[191]

Franko cements this argument by allowing Georgiy to exist outside the idealized binary promoted within the dominant heterosexual matrix. After his decision to identify with his Russian name, Georgiy experiences an uncomfortable in-betweenness:

> "For a while, I existed without a name: no longer Oliver, but not yet Gosha, as if I was existing in the space somewhere between a reject orphan and a normal boy…"
> "Every day, in front of the mirror, I reminded myself of my name: Gosha, Gosha, Gosha. I repeated it as many times as it took until it started to feel real."[192]

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[189] Ibid., 199.
[190] Ibid., 200.
[191] Amanda Haertling Thein and Kate E. Kedley describe the tendency of YA novels to center coming out and coming-of-age as "pivotal rites of passage" that indicate a character, once broken, is fully complete. They problematize this pairing. Franko's novel, *Skoro*, does not follow the traditional queer young adult 'coming-out' plot that centers sexuality and the normative narrative of the 'successful' transition from hiding one's sexuality to embracing it. See: Amanda Haertling Thein and Kate E. Kedley, "Out of the Closet and All Grown Up," in *Beyond borders: queer eros and ethos (ethics) in LGBTQ young adult literature*, ed. Darla Linville and David Lee Carlson (Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 3.
[192] Franko, *Skoro konets sveta*, 200.

This is a telling example of the performativity of identity categories that, when performed, create a synergy between the pre-subjective self and the exhibited identity performance. In this immediate period following Georgiy's identity transition, he exists outside of the acceptable framework of subjectivity for his peers and his new community. In a similar fashion to his early struggles with his birth name, a name that existed "in the middle of the room" and "didn't fit into either corner," Georgiy is uncomfortable with this position outside acceptable identity categories. However, Franko uses this discomfort to illustrate the restrictive nature of the enforced binary categories society accepts as natural, both in Russia and in the United States. It is uncomfortable when individuals who don't fit imposed identity categories must deviate from acceptable norms. Through Georgiy's experience, Franko creates a counternarrative that deconstructs the necessity of adhering to labels imposed by society. Furthermore, Franko destabilizes the widely implemented narrative in queer YA literature that moving along a path from oppression to achieving your desired identity category is the only acceptable queer journey. This is demonstrated in Georgiy's decision to remain fully in the space between identity categories. When asked about his national identity, Russian or American, he answers, "Maybe both, and maybe neither."[193] Rather than seeking acceptance from his new community by adhering to their norms, Georgiy continues to challenge normative structures by embodying an identity that challenges the idea that identities are fixed. Franko, through demonstrating Georgiy's identity crisis and inability to feel complete in his new community, is highlighting the pervasiveness of the heterosexual matrix and its totality in all areas of society. Franko challenges the idea that identity categories are natural, and allows Georgiy to exist somewhere in between the poles of Russia and America. He presents a narrative that rejects stable identity categories and allows Georgiy to exist beyond intelligibility, staying true to himself as his identity evolves over time and across different environments.

These themes, including the power of naming, the fluidity of identity, and the impossibility of fitting perfectly within the binary, are strikingly present in *Skoro* and critical to Franko's representation of queerness. As Russia and Franko's native Kazakhstan continue to increase their oppression of queer people, Franko's portrayal of identity beyond the binary in *Skoro* and the open discussion of his own struggles with gender and identity are crucial to creating a representation of queerness that actively undermines state-sponsored attempts at instilling truly restrictive heteronormative ways of thinking and being. True queerness is

[193] Ibid., 227.

about challenging the concept of stable identity, embracing nuance, and accepting identities that may not be digestible or readable by heteronormative society. Though the characters in *Skoro* may not identify as LGBTQ+, they exhibit a queer positionality in the sense of destabilizing traditional, hegemonic norms enforced on them by mainstream Russian society.

Conclusion

Queer expression within Russia is facing a crisis. With increasing attacks on the LGBTQ+ community and increasingly stronger censorship rulings, it has become harder and harder for anyone, not just authors, to make their voice heard when it comes to discussing experiences outside of the state-defined norm. However, several authors and independent publishers dedicated their efforts to making stories of resistance known, despite the high risks. Unfortunately, within the last two years, many of these publishers and authors have been persecuted by state and non-state actors, forcing queer literature back into the underground in Russia. Over the last several years, a handful of researchers have turned their attention to Russian-language queer literature for young-adult audiences, a subject that lies at the intersection of the heavily politicized fields of youth literature, the queer experience in Russia, and Western LGBTQ+ thought. This thesis has attempted to contribute to this emerging field by relying on scholars in each of these branches of study. Following the tradition of analyzing queer texts in the English-language context, I have attempted to address representations of queerness in the Russian-language context through three novels by one of the most popular young-adult authors writing in Russian.

Mikita Franko, while Kazakh-born, has published more than six books discussing queerness in the Russian context. In this thesis, by analyzing his debut novel, his second novel, and his last novel officially published in Russia, I have demonstrated a clear progression in Franko's depictions of queerness over time. In the first case study on *Dni nashei zhizni* (2020), I demonstrated that Franko's representation of Slava and Lev, a gay couple thrust into complex world of parents, does the important work of normalizing homosexual parents in a toxic environment that seeks to demonize them. However, through appealing to normative structures like the nuclear family and elitist socio-economic hierarchies, Franko simultaneously defined acceptable Russian queerness through the vilification of non-standard queer expression. In the second case study on *Tetrad' v kletochku* (2021), I demonstrated Franko's departure from the normative framework present in his first novel. Ilya and his single father, by overcoming significant loss and experiencing a queer

awakening, managed to reject hegemonic understandings of what a family needs to look like, instead finding comfort and solidarity in a new, horizontally structured chosen family. In the third case study on *Skoro konets sveta* (2023), I demonstrated that, despite not featuring any LGBTQ+ main characters, Franko's representation of Oliver/Georgiy's journey of self-discovery can be read as very queer. Through his experiences in Russia and the United States, Oliver/Georgiy discovered the power of names imposed by society and learned to exercise agency over his identity by not conforming to either pole of the Russia-West binary. This final case study demonstrated Franko's transition away from queer as a synonym for LGBTQ+ towards queer as a positionality against hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality.

There is much left to study within the topic of Russian-language queer young-adult literature. Even within Mikita Franko's work, I believe the most pressing area of study will be the effects of total censorship on authors and their ability to discuss non-normative characters and plots. Since the closure of Popcorn Books, Mikita Franko has self-published a number of novels, including two spin-off stories in the *Dni nashei zhizni* universe. The importance of understanding how queer authors avoid censorship and struggle to maintain their connection with their dedicated reading community despite pressure from state authorities cannot be overstated. I hope that this topic continues to gain attention from scholars in the Russian literature community.

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