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A 2021 survey conducted by The Trevor Project suggests that more than a quarter of LGBTQ+ youth identify as gender expansive. As more youth publicly disclose holding trans and gender expansive (TGE) identities, there is a growing need for young adult (YA) novels that reflect and affirm real TGE teens' experiences, rather than novels that offer only one understanding of what it means to be TGE. This study uses an emergent category style of content analysis, rooted in existing literature on TGE youth's experiences and in the novels, to look at representation of TGE youth in young adult novels published in 2020 by mainstream publishers in the United States. Specifically, this content analysis highlights how these novels reflect and expand on the literature and operate as dominant narratives, seen through the lenses of cisnormativity and transnormativity, and as counter narratives. These nine novels both demonstrate and challenge mainstream conceptions about TGE youth, and they validate and affirm the wide range of TGE experiences.

Headings:

Young adult literature

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LGBTQ+ literature

“BEING TRANS BRINGS ME LOVE”: TRANSGENDER AND GENDER
EXPANSIVE REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT NOVELS AS COUNTER
NARRATIVES

by
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Introduction

According to a recent survey by the Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN (2017), 150,000 teens (ages 13-17) in the U.S. identify as transgender.

Additionally, a recent survey conducted by the Trevor Project (2021) indicates that 26% of LGBTQ+ youth (ages 13-24) are nonbinary. Of the respondents, 18% of LGBTQ+ youth indicated that they are questioning whether they are trans or nonbinary and 38% indicated they are trans or nonbinary, while 44% indicated that they are cisgender (Trevor Project, 2021)—suggesting that LGBTQ+ youth who are trans, nonbinary, or gender questioning outnumber LGBTQ+ youth who identify as cisgender. A previous survey conducted by the Trevor Project (2020) shows that 25% of LGBTQ+ youth (ages 13-24) in the U.S. use pronouns other than she/her or he/him. These surveys signify that trans youth constitute a significant portion of the teen population in the U.S., and their experiences need to be recognized and their needs addressed.

Representation of transgender and gender expansive (TGE) people has risen in young adult (YA) fiction since the publication of Julie Anne Peters' *Luna* in 2004, which has been identified as the first YA book with a transgender character (Putzi, 2017). There has been a slow incline in this representation: in 2014, for instance, mainstream publishers in the United States published zero YA novels featuring TGE characters (Lo, 2014), while 2016 saw seven TGE YA novels published by mainstream U.S. publishers (Lo, 2017). Furthermore, increased representation of TGE characters in YA fiction has not led to inclusion

of a wider range of trans identities, as the few YA novels with trans characters largely include only binary trans characters (i.e., trans woman or trans man) rather than featuring other, gender expansive identities that fall outside the gender binary (Putzi, 2017).

Increased visibility of trans people in fiction does not inherently lead to social good. Of the already small number of YA novels featuring TGE major characters, all but a few feature binary trans characters, which perpetuates the view that these are the only legitimate trans identities (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Furthermore, fictional depictions of trans people can, intentionally or not, perpetuate harmful myths about what it means to be trans. For instance, when novels focus on medical forms of transition—highlighting hormone replacement therapy or gender affirmation surgery as the biggest milestones of transitioning—they contribute to ongoing objectification of trans people and the conflation of gender presentation and genitals with gender identity (Putzi, 2017).

However, TGE representation in YA novels offers opportunities for broadening readers' understanding, challenging stereotypes and myths, and reflecting the wide range of identities held by TGE youth. Trans and gender expansive people often report that their first exposure to trans identities was through media representation, and negative depictions of trans identities can inhibit gender identity exploration and formation (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). By contrast, conscientiously written representation can provide trans and gender non-conforming teens with identity affirmation and validation, allowing them to see people like themselves leading happy, fulfilling lives. This representation can also offer youth “alternative possibilities for richer, happier, fuller lives” (Banks, 2009, p. 33), showing them that gender identities and expressions are limitless and are opportunities for creativity and experimentation.

In this way, TGE YA novels can be counter-stories, challenging dominant narratives of what it means to be trans by depicting some of the wide scope of TGE identities and gender expressions. Counter-stories are valuable tools for affirming the experiences and identities of marginalized youth, as well as amplifying marginalized youths' voices and perspectives to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions held by members of the dominant social group (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). Mindfully written TGE YA fiction thus can not only offer necessary support and affirmation for TGE youth, but can also work to inform cisgender youth and adults—and, in turn, motivate them to challenge, at individual and institutional levels, oppression and marginalization of gender expansive people.

To explore this framing of TGE YA novels, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of YA novels that have TGE primary characters and were published in 2020 by mainstream U.S. publishers. This content analysis explored depictions of TGE youth as upholding or challenging dominant narratives of trans identities, expressions, and experiences. In conducting this content analysis, I hoped to equip librarians, educators, and caregivers with examples of positive and negative depictions of TGE youth, to dispel harmful myths, and to show the wide range of trans identities. This information is vital as we move to give the trans and gender expansive youth in our lives, libraries, and schools the life-altering support needed to survive transphobia and oppression.

Literature Review

Definitions and Distinctions

Before continuing, I will first establish definitions for terms and concepts used in this paper and in larger conversations about gender. Sex and gender are often conflated,

but they are separate concepts and have different bearings on identity. Sex is based on biological characteristics (usually external genitalia), and is frequently reduced to male and female; however, sex is not binary, as evidenced by the wide range of anatomy and sex traits among, for instance, intersex people (Diamond et al., 2011). Gender, by contrast, is “a construct based on socially accepted ideals of what it means to be male and female” (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p. 1728). Although gender is conflated with sex (such that people’s genitalia are used to assign their gender at birth), sex does not necessarily have any bearing on gender identity or expression. Additionally, like sex, gender is usually portrayed as a binary between man and woman, but this depiction does not capture the multitude of genders held by people.

Gender identity refers to a person’s self-concept, or how they understand their own gender, while gender expression is how a person represents their gender to the world, typically through clothes, mannerisms, or other characteristics associated with a given gender (*Glossary of Terms*, n.d.). Others cannot accurately determine another person’s gender identity based on that person’s gender expression, and a person’s chosen gender expression may not match other people’s expectations based on their gender identity.

Cisgender as a term refers to a person whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth based on their sex (*Glossary of Terms*, n.d.). By contrast, transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth (Devor & Haefele-Thomas, 2019). Transgender is often shortened to trans (sometimes trans*) to signify inclusion of various identities, including nonbinary identities, as well as people who identify as

transsexual. Transsexual is not an umbrella term—it is an identity chosen by people who view medical transition as necessary to align their sex and gender identity (Devor & Haefele-Thomas, 2019).

Gender expansive is an umbrella term that overlaps with transgender, and is often used by people whose gender identity falls outside the gender binary (*Glossary of Terms*, n.d.). Synonyms include gender variant, gender diverse, and gender nonconforming, all of which attempt to capture the wide range of gender identities possible covered by this umbrella term (Devor & Haefele-Thomas, 2019). Although gender nonconforming is the term most commonly used in the literature, I have opted to use the term gender expansive for two reasons: first, because gender nonconforming is also used to refer to cisgender people who defy conventional norms, and I wanted to use language that specifically refers to people who identify outside the gender binary; and, secondly, because gender nonconforming implicitly centers conformity, while gender expansive highlights the imagination and limitless possibilities of gender identities beyond the binary. Gender expansive includes people who identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, as well as any number of identities that fall outside the binary of man and woman. A person can identify as trans and gender expansive, or may identify as one or the other; there is not a solid or immutable difference between the two umbrella terms, and they may have different meanings to different people. Additionally, transgender, cisgender, and gender expansive are all adjectives, not nouns, meaning that a person could be described as a “transgender person” but not “a transgender.”

Cisnormativity refers to the assumption that all people are cisgender (Bradford & Syed, 2019). This assumption is the dominant social perception of gender in White,

Western society. Cisnormativity perpetuates marginalization of trans people, because it makes trans people the exception or “abnormal” (Bradford & Syed, 2019, p. 307).

Cisnormativity also perpetuates the assumption that someone’s pronouns can be determined based on their appearance (e.g., assuming that someone’s pronouns are she/her/hers because that person is perceived as feminine), or that trans people are “hiding” that they are trans if they do not openly disclose it.

Being a Trans and Gender Expansive Adolescent in the U.S.

Before discussing the increased “risks” associated with being a trans adolescent—such as experiencing physical and psychological violence, as well as higher rates of mental illnesses and suicide (Testa et al., 2014)—it is vital to acknowledge that these stem from transphobia. Being trans is not inherently dangerous, and being trans does not automatically expose adolescents to more harms; instead, it is necessary to make the distinction that transphobia, not being trans, increases trans adolescents’ risks. These risks are mitigated by factors that intervene in the face of transphobia, such as family, institutional, and peer support, as well as connections and relationships with other trans people (Katz-Wise et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2019). According to a survey by The Trevor Project (2021), TGE youth whose pronouns are used by the people they live with are half as likely to attempt suicide as TGE youth who live with people who do not use their pronouns. Similarly, TGE youth are also less likely to attempt suicide if they are able to change their name or gender marker on legal documents (The Trevor Project, 2021). This research indicates that TGE youth whose identities are validated by the people they live with and by their legal documents face decreased levels of risks associated with transphobia, supporting the necessity of support as a mitigating factor.

Many TGE youth report dangerous experiences at school: 75% report feeling unsafe at school because of their gender (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017) due to a lack of support at the institutional and individual levels. For instance, harassment at school is a common experience among TGE youth. Among LGBTQ+ youth broadly, 94% reported hearing derogatory comments about their or their peers' gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2017). Additionally, 87.4% of LGBTQ+ youth heard derogatory remarks about trans people, such as transphobic slurs, while at school (Kosciw et al., 2017). Another 16.4% of LGBTQ+ identified youth reported being physically assaulted at school because of their sexuality or gender expression or identity (Kosciw et al., 2017). At the institutional level, 42.1% of TGE youth reported that school policies prevented them from using their name and pronouns that aligned with their gender identity rather than their assigned sex (Kosciw et al., 2017).

Additionally, 70% of TGE teens reported that they avoid using bathrooms during the school day due to concerns for their safety (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017). Bathrooms often enforce the gender binary, forcing trans youth to choose whether it's safer to use the men's or women's bathroom. This may force trans youth to out themselves in order to use the bathroom that matches their gender identity, but often this means there is not a bathroom available that aligns with nonbinary gender identities, which can cause psychological harm. Even when a trans teen's gender identity aligns with one of the gendered bathroom options available, however, they may be barred from using it due to school policies that require students to use facilities that match their assigned sex: 60% of TGE students reported in one survey (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017) that they could not use bathrooms or locker rooms that

aligned with their gender identity. Many TGE youth choose to avoid bathrooms altogether at school, which can have serious negative health consequences on teens (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017).

TGE youth also experience higher rates of school and legal discipline than their cisgender peers (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017). TGE youth also tend to miss more school than their cisgender peers and are less likely to graduate high school (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN). Similarly, they experience discrimination across institutions intended to serve youth, including schools, juvenile justice, health care, and homeless shelters; this can be because of policies that require trans youth to use facilities that align with their assigned gender rather than their gender identity, which can have negative effects on their safety, or because of cisnormativity among staff, which can have negative psychological impacts on TGE youth (Wagaman et al., 2019).

For many TGE adolescents, social media functions as a major source of information and social support. Online communities offer emotional, appraisal, and informational support (Selkie et al., 2020), which may not be available to TGE youth outside of the Internet. Emotional support offers TGE adolescents empathy and trust, while appraisal support offers validation of gender identities and expressions, and informational support provide TGE youth with information about identities and opportunities (and dangers) of transition options (Selkie et al., 2020). While social media also has drawbacks—being out as trans online can expose TGE youth to derogatory comments, exclusion, and bullying—its use can offer youth the support they need to maintain resilience in the face of transphobia in their day-to-day lives, as well as positive

identity development and self-acceptance (Selkie et al., 2020). Furthermore, 96% of LGBTQ+ youth report that social media positively impacts them, while 88% report that it negatively impacts their mental health (The Trevor Project, 2021). Social media can offer support, but this source of support can also negatively affect TGE teens' emotional state.

Trans and Gender Expansive Identity Development

Most research conducted on transgender identity development has focused specifically on identity development among people who identify as transsexual, meaning they seek medical transition as a way to transition from the binary gender they were assigned at birth to the binary gender they identify with. Research with transsexual participants has depicted trans identity development broadly as a process with a finite, measurable end, whereby a person can fully realize their gender identity through medical intervention, with gender affirmation surgery as the major milestone that marks the end of their transition process (Devor, 2004). However, this research does not neatly map onto identity development across the broader trans community: for instance, gender dysphoria, or the perception that one's body does not align with one's gender identity, has been portrayed as a universal trans experience, even though many TGE adults do not experience it (Diamond et al., 2011).

Most research on identity development has excluded many TGE people whose experiences do not align with those of people who identify as transsexual. This is especially true for gender expansive people, whose experiences have not been researched to the same extent as those of binary identified trans people. Further, TGE adolescents' identity development has largely been absent from the literature.

Research with TGE people has led Diamond et al. (2011) to suggest a dynamical systems theory for conceptualizing transgender identity development. This model distinguishes trans identity development as an iterative process that does not end, unlike conceptions of transsexual identity development that identify an endpoint through completion of medical transition processes. Instead, according to Diamond et al., trans identity development is best understood as an ongoing process that involves exploring and finding new language and expressions that feel right or true in the moment, knowing that what feels right will change in the future. Identity, expression, and language morph over time, so trans people focus on finding what feels most appropriate or representative in the moment, rather than finding a permanent identity and expression. Indeed, rather than framing this process as identity development, this process may be better understood as identity and self *creation*, whereby trans people participate in ongoing processes of creating and expressing themselves (Diamond et al., 2011).

Other researchers argue that there is not one model that can encapsulate or accurately conceptualize trans identity development. Instead of trying to construct a model, then, these researchers look to common experiences among TGE people as a way of conceptualizing identity. For instance, Levitt and Ippolito (2014) identified the following common experiences: pressure to hide their identity; self-acceptance and self-exploration after hearing other trans people's stories and narratives; language as an integral part of gender formation; and identity formation as "an ongoing process of balancing authenticity and necessity" (1743). This last experience of striking a balance between "authenticity and necessity" refers to TGE people's iterative process of finding a way to express who they are and be seen in their gender identity while preserving their

own safety and survival “under discriminatory political, social, and economic conditions.” (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, 1746). Similarly, Katz-Wise et al. (2020) identified eight common themes, which overlap with Levitt and Ippolito’s: “identity processes, emotions/coping, general family experiences, family support, gender community experiences, community support, LGBTQ community, and external forces” (6).

The necessity of connection to other trans people, as identified by Levitt and Ippolito (2014), has also been supported, although only for binary trans people. Being part of a community with other trans people offers TGE people a sense of belonging and safety (Wagaman et al., 2019). Knowing, engaging with, or feeling supported by other trans people is associated with positive trans identity, as well as decreased rates of suicide and anxiety, among trans people whose identities fall within the gender binary (Testa et al., 2014). However, this same correlation has not been identified for trans people with nonbinary identities, though Testa et al. (2014) note that this may have been due to their study’s small sample size rather than due to a difference in resilience factors for gender expansive people.

Another common experience is fear and anxiety over victimization (Wagaman et al., 2019). TGE people often share the experience of fearing for their safety in the face of transphobic violence, even if they have not personally experienced violence. Indeed, learning that other TGE youth have experienced violence because of their gender identity or expression can cause second-hand trauma (Wagaman et al., 2019) and increased fears for personal safety.

However, it is critical to recognize that “common” experiences are not universal. This is especially true for TGE people who are also Black, Indigenous, or People of

Color (BIPOC), who have different experiences and identity pathways than many White TGE people (Wagaman et al., 2019). The intersection of racial, ethnic, and other marginalizations, such as socioeconomic status, affect the development of identity as well as experiences navigating the world as TGE people. Additionally, experiences also differ across varying levels of visibility of gender expression or deviance—a trans person who “passes” (or is commonly perceived as a cisgender person of their gender identity) will have different experiences from someone whose gender expression deviates from the cisgender norm (Wagaman et al., 2019).

Dominant Narratives of Trans and Gender Expansive Identity

One dominant narrative of trans identity is cisnormativity, which is the assumption that all people are cisgender. Cisnormativity makes trans people the exception or “abnormal” (Bradford & Syed, 2019, p. 307), which in turn perpetuates negative perceptions of TGE identities as illegitimate, invalid, or unnatural.

Cisnormativity operates along multiple dimensions, all of which portray TGE people as dangerous, immoral, or not deserving of respect.

One dimension of cisnormativity is the perception that TGE people are “deceptive,” using their gender expression to “trick” people into thinking they are cisgender (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017). This perception portrays TGE identities as fake, implying that TGE are only pretending to be another gender than the one assigned to them at birth in order to take advantage of cisgender people. Similarly, another dimension is that TGE people are to be pitied or laughed at: they are one-dimensional caricatures, rather than multidimensional, complex, whole people (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017).

Another dimension of cisnormativity includes an aversion toward TGE people, including violence, exclusion, deadnaming (using a TGE person's chosen name rather than the name assigned to them at birth), and using incorrect pronouns (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Other dimensions include: the conflation of sex and gender; the perception that trans people are predatory to others, especially children; the sexualization and fetishization of trans bodies; and the pathologization of TGE people and identities, or characterizing trans identity as mental illness (e.g., portraying gender dysphoria as the basis of trans identity) (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

Adjacent to cisnormativity, transnormativity is the dominant narrative of TGE identity that attempts to establish a standard for assessing the validity or authenticity of TGE identities, expressions, and experiences. Specifically, TGE people's identities and experiences are deemed valid and legitimate when they attain or match the standards of transnormativity, but otherwise are illegitimate or fake (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Transnormativity constructs a "social legitimization" (Bradford & Syed, 2019, p. 308) of identities that match the dominant narrative of what it means to be trans; this social legitimization can, in part, be upheld by representation of transnormative characters and people in media (such as on television shows, in movies, in fiction, or on the news), when TGE people's stories align with dominant narratives of trans identity (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Furthermore, the absence of this social legitimization can inhibit trans identity development, especially for trans adolescents, who may internalize transnormative standards of how trans people act, identity, and look (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Transnormativity is particularly problematic for gender expansive people, whose gender identities are rarely represented in popular culture (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

Like cisnormativity, transnormativity operates along multiple dimensions. One dimension is what Putzi (2017) calls the “wrong-body discourse”: the depiction of TGE people as being born into the “wrong body,” or TGE people’s bodies not aligning with their gender identity. This disconnect between body and identity portrays being trans as a birth defect, a malady or mis-step that must be remedied through medical intervention. Related to the wrong-body discourse, another dimension of transnormativity includes the depiction of gender dysphoria as a universal TGE experience that defines trans identity (Diamond et al., 2011). Other related dimensions include the perception that medically transitioning (and especially medical transitions that end with gender affirmation surgery) as a universal desire of all TGE people (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), as well as the perception that all TGE people knew from early childhood that they were not cisgender (Bradford & Syed, 2019).

Another dimension of transnormativity is gender binarism, wherein binary gender identities (i.e., man and woman) are more legitimate than nonbinary identities (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Furthermore, when nonbinary identities are deemed legitimate in the eyes of transnormativity, there is only one way to be “legitimately” gender expansive: specifically, being White, thin, assigned female at birth, and having short hair (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Any gender expansive person who does not match this description will not experience social legitimization of their gender identity and expression.

Additionally, transnormativity maintains that binary trans people must conform to traditional, binary gender roles. Trans women, for instance, must perform hyper-femininity in order to be deemed socially legitimate—they are only valid as women if they wear makeup and dresses, have long hair, or otherwise participate in conventional

gender norms (Bradford & Syed, 2019). This is also connected to the hyper-sexualization of transfeminine bodies, wherein trans women and other transfeminine people are sexually objectified and fetishized (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

A final dimension of transnormativity is the expectation that all TGE people experience direct violence and isolation (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Within transnormativity, a universal TGE experience is pain and tragedy. TGE people are expected to be victims of attacks and brutality, to experience depression and anxiety, to be socially rejected, and to otherwise live lives that are devoid of joy (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Although violence and fears of violence are relatively common experiences (Wagaman et al., 2019) among TGE people, they are, by no means, universal, nor is brutality a defining characteristic of what it means to be trans.

Putzi (2017) identified cisnormative and transnormative dimensions that have been common in TGE YA fiction. Wrong-body discourse is prevalent, especially in representations of transfeminine characters; in YA fiction, wrong-body discourse focuses on genitals and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts) as not matching the TGE character's identity, preventing them from authentically living in their gender identity and receiving external validation that their gender identity is legitimate (Putzi, 2017). This representation constructs trans identities as the result of a birth defect, a mistake that must be fixed. This focus aligns with pathologization and medicalization of trans identities, which Putzi argues objectifies trans characters by reducing them to their genitals, and is also classist, signifying that only TGE people who can afford medical intervention have legitimate and valid gender identities. Furthermore, wrong-body discourse ignores the

fact that many TGE people do not experience gender dysphoria and do not desire medical transition procedures, even if they could afford this intervention.

Putzi argues that this focus on external anatomy functions to make TGE characters more understandable for cisgender readers, so that these characters match transnormative expectations; defying transnormativity makes TGE characters seem less authentic or realistic for cisgender readers, who have a narrow understanding of TGE identity possibilities due to constricted representation across media. However, by catering to cisgender readers, wrong-body discourse in TGE YA fiction misses the opportunity to give all readers “the space in which to think about the complexity of gender, space in which they might see themselves” (Putzi, 2017, p. 445). TGE YA literature can help all readers to think critically about their own identities and the ways that gender is a social construct, reflection that can foster positive self-identity—especially when TGE representation offers expansive, limitless possibilities for identity and expression.

Reframing Trans and Gender Expansive Identity as an Asset

In contrast to cisnormativity and transnormativity, which depict TGE people as—by turns—defective, predatory, victims, or otherwise requiring intervention and fixing, TGE identities are not always sources of pain and suffering. Indeed, TGE people often report that their identities are assets and function as a source of affirmation. In one survey of TGE adults, 72% of participants reported feeling “extremely positive” and 25% “somewhat positive” (Riggle et al., 2011) about their trans identity. In the same survey, embracing their trans identity was associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Many participants reported that their trans identity was connected to their sense of self-confidence, strength, and self-awareness, while more than one-third of

participated reported that existing beyond the gender binary was an asset (Riggle et al., 2011). Having a positive trans identity—or the belief that being trans is an asset rather than a risk factor—leads many TGE people to engage in social justice action and fight for TGE rights and protections (Riggle et al., 2011), and—inversed—involvement in activism may also support the formation of a positive trans identity (Wagaman et al., 2019).

Furthermore, TGE experiences can be reframed in terms of resilience, or TGE people’s ability to thrive in the face of oppression. Indicators of resilience among TGE youth include a sense of belonging and acceptance, a shift in personal expectations, knowing that personal growth is ongoing and active, and connections to other TGE people who showed them that being trans and happy was possible (Wagaman et al., 2019). Hillier et al. (2019) identified seven strategies of resilience among TGE youth: “avoiding, ignoring, selectively sharing, teaching and advocating, arguing and fighting, seeking support, and making changes” (7).

This research on TGE identities as assets, and on resilience among TGE youth, are in line with the asset-based approach of positive youth development (PYD). PYD posits that a combination of external and internal assets provide youth with the support necessary not only to survive, but to thrive as they enter adulthood (Jones, 2002). External assets in PYD include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time, while internal assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Search Institute, n.d.). These assets come from communities, institutions, caregivers, and others involved in adolescents’

lives, and, ultimately, a wealth of assets available to youth can help shape youth into productive, fulfilled adults (Jones, 2002).

The goals of PYD are particularly significant for marginalized youth, who face oppression and exclusion that can inhibit positive development. When positive self-identity is an asset, positive representation of marginalized identities—such as TGE identities—can function as assets too, showing readers with those identities that, despite oppression, they can create their own happiness and fulfillment. By contrast, when people with marginalized identities are only shown limited representations of themselves in the media consume—and especially when those representations do not offer hope and affirmation—representation can inhibit identity development (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). TGE YA literature, then, has the opportunity to function as assets that support positive youth development, helping teens enter adulthood resilient and equipped to navigate oppression and marginalizations.

Trans and Gender Expansive Young Adult Literature as Counter-storytelling

In resisting dominant narratives of TGE identities and experiences, TGE YA novels provide a platform for counter-storytelling, a concept from Critical Race Theory. While dominant narratives rely on and maintain systems of privilege and reflect the assumptions and perspectives held by privileged factions of society, counter narratives challenge these privileged perspectives, “telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solórzano, 2002, p. 32). YA literature, in featuring marginalized characters, amplifies marginalized voices, combats misconceptions and stereotypes by expanding beyond the single story, affirms and validates teens’ identities

and experiences, challenges the perceptions of privileged teens, and makes oppression visible (Hughes-Hassell, 2013).

Specifically, TGE counter narratives in YA literature challenge cisnormativity and transnormativity. By moving beyond the dominant narratives, TGE YA novels can show the wide range of TGE identities, expressions, and experiences—and, furthermore, demonstrate that they are all valid, regardless of how or if they align with transnormativity. While negative and limited depictions of trans people in media can inhibit identity formation for TGE people, media exposure is often TGE people's first exposure to people like them (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). YA literature, then, can offer positive, inclusive, and expansive representations of TGE people, such that TGE readers can see themselves reflected in these stories, and see additional possibilities and futures too. TGE counter narratives in YA novels have the opportunity to validate and affirm TGE readers' identities and voices when most major trans representation in popular culture doesn't (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Pini et al., 2018; Putzi, 2017).

Methodology

Qualitative Content Analysis

To best support my analysis of transgender and gender expansive (TGE) adolescents in young adult literature, I used a qualitative approach to content analysis. By using qualitative rather than quantitative measures, I focused on the themes that emerge from the stories and voices I read, rather than counting how often a word or concept is utilized in each novel I read (Neuman, 2006). A qualitative approach yields description of social phenomena and experiences (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009), giving me the tools to analyze the ways these novels reflect and challenge dominant cultural narratives about

TGE youth. Furthermore, while quantitative content analysis tracks the presence of explicit content, qualitative content analysis can be used to “explore the meanings of underlying physical messages” (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, 309); rather than focusing on what is explicitly stated, qualitative content analysis can highlight implicit—and even unintentional—meaning and themes.

Additionally, data collection and analysis are overlapping and iterative processes in qualitative research (Bradley, 1993). Data analysis is ongoing through the data collection process, such that data analysis can impact collection, and vice versa. This overlap provides opportunities for altering data collection processes to better fit the mode of analysis, as well as adjusting analysis as new ideas and lenses emerge through collection.

According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), qualitative content analysis generally follows a linear path consisting of nine steps: data preparation; defining the unit of analysis; creating a coding scheme; testing the coding scheme; coding the text; evaluating consistency of coding; using the coded data to reach conclusions; and, finally, reporting methods and findings. However, I have utilized emergent categories rather than a defined coding scheme, so that I created and revised categories as I read the set of novels (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). These categories are also rooted in existing research on gender identity development and expression among trans and gender expansive teens, so that my research has guided my data collection and analysis while still affording space for new ideas and themes to emerge through reading the novels. My coding scheme developed as I read through my set of novels, which required ongoing revision, reflection, and assessment.

This approach to qualitative content analysis poses problems and requires diligent attention and care while collecting and analyzing my data. Because I did not create a coding scheme before reading the set of novels, I did not test the reliability of my coding scheme when used by another coder. This required that I conceptualize and utilize my emergent categories carefully—if I could not verify reliability and consistency, then I needed to keep these values in mind as I designed and used my coding techniques to carefully code these novels. I also needed to track the development and use of my categories, so that my methods were traceable after I finished data collection and analysis.

Positionality Statement

As a nonbinary person—which, for me, is an umbrella term rather than a gender identity and means my gender does not exist within the binary of man and woman—my interest in TGE representation in YA novels is influenced and shaped by my own identity and experiences. Several years after I began the ongoing process of coming out as nonbinary, I read my first novel with a nonbinary character in 2018. I discovered the joy and affirmation that comes from reading about someone who shares my identity, and the novel gave me new language for talking about myself. This joy and knowledge are, in large part, why I am interested in this topic, since the product of my research can help connect gender-questioning and gender expansive adolescents with books that may let them know themselves better, and to experience joy in knowing they are not alone. When librarians, educators, and others involved in teens' lives know what experiences are represented in existing novels, they can better connect teens with the resources they want and need.

However, my experiences as a nonbinary person may dually limit and expand my analysis. As someone who is part of the TGE community, I may have an “insider” perspective that could help me identify themes and concepts in the set of novels, which may not be apparent to a cisgender reader. On the other hand, though, my status as an insider may also limit my understanding of the texts: I needed to consciously root my analysis in the research compiled in my literature review, so that I did not limit my analysis by focusing on my own experiences and identity. I needed to analyze beyond the lens of my own experience so that my analysis can speak broadly to the variety of experiences, identities, and perspectives of TGE people.

Data Collection

In deciding which novels to analyze (see Table 1 for the list of titles), I have applied multiple limiting characteristics to narrow down my potential pool of novels. First, I analyzed young adult novels that are marketed by publishers for adolescent readers (ages 12-18, roughly), rather than also including novels marketed to middle-grade or adult audiences that have crossover appeal for young adults, because I am interested in TGE representation in novels intended for teen readers. Furthermore, I analyzed novels from mainstream publishers in the United States: this includes the Big Five (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster), as well as other large publishers, such as Sourcebooks and Scholastic. These are the publishers most likely to be in public or school library collections, and I wanted to focus my analysis on texts that are not only intended for teen audiences, but also are widely and easily accessible through libraries.

Within this pool of novels—published by mainstream U.S. publishers, marketed primarily to teen readers—I have limited the results to only novels whose primary character or protagonist is TGE. Although TGE secondary characters can offer insight into their experiences and perspectives, their words and experiences are often filtered through a cisgender character’s understanding. By limiting the pool of novels to those with TGE primary characters, I hoped to focus my analysis on their experiences, rather than a cisgender character’s understanding of their experiences. This requirement also led me to exclude titles with multiple primary characters, where fewer than half of the primary characters were TGE: specifically, I chose to exclude *Master of One* by Jaida Jones and Danielle Bennett, because one of the four main characters was transgender, as well as *Even If We Break* by Marieke Nijkamp, because two of the five main characters are transgender.

Furthermore, I chose to analyze titles published in 2020, and I identified a total of ten titles. This set of titles may offer me insight into how TGE representation is (or is not) changing over time, but my focus is on the most recent titles to better understand what is currently being marketed to teen readers. I have identified these novels using multiple tools: Ray Stoeve’s *Young Adult/Middle Grade Trans & Nonbinary Voices Masterlist*; the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s Diversity Statistics Book Search; Reads Rainbow’s LGBT YA Book Releases Lists; and user-generated book lists on Goodreads. Additionally, when I was not able to easily determine based on other data (such as book descriptions or inclusion on lists I consulted) whether a book met my criteria, I used Goodreads reviews to look for mentions of keywords such as transgender, nonbinary, genderfluid, and genderqueer.

In deciding what novels to include, I chose to exclude particular types of work. I have focused on fiction rather than nonfiction in order to read how TGE teens are represented in novels, rather than analyzing biographical or other nonfiction writing. Furthermore, I have excluded stories in anthologies, in large part because none of the YA anthologies from mainstream U.S. publishers are specific to TGE stories. Because the anthologies available span LGBTQ+ themes broadly rather than focusing on TGE characters and perspectives, I chose to exclude them from my pool of novels. I also excluded novels that are part of a series but are not the first in that series: if a novel meets my other criteria, but is the second book in a series, I have excluded it.

I originally identified a total of ten titles for analysis, based on the criteria I have outlined. However, upon beginning to code these novels, I determined that one novel I included for analysis—*Hello Now* by Jenny Valentine—did not match my criteria for inclusion. The gender of the protagonist and narrator, Jude, is never described or named. Jude does not refer to—explicitly or implicitly—their gender, making gender entirely absent from the novel. Only once are third person pronouns used in reference to Jude, when they say, “I would take my old self to one side and tell them straight out that one of the best things about the unknown is that it’s 100 percent guaranteed to surprise you” (Valentine, 2020, p. 23). Jude refers to themselves as “them” here, but they do not use third person pronouns in reference to themselves again. Because pronouns do not indicate gender identity, and because Jude does not discuss or refer to their gender identity, expression, or performance at any point in the novel, I have opted to exclude this title from analysis.

This, then, left me with a total of nine YA novels with TGE protagonists published in 2020 by mainstream U.S. publishers. This list of titles can be found in Table 1.

Table 1			
<i>Titles Included for Analysis</i>			
Title	Author	Publisher	Gender Identity of Protagonist
<i>Cemetery Boys</i>	Aiden Thomas	Swoon Reads	Trans boy
<i>Felix Ever After</i>	Kacen Callender	Balzer + Bray	Demiboy
<i>Into the Real</i>	Z Brewer	Quill Tree Books	Genderqueer
<i>The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea</i>	Maggie Tokuda-Hall	Candlewick Books	Genderfluid
<i>Sasha Masha</i>	Agnes Borinsky	Farrar, Straus and Giroux	Questioning
<i>Somebody Told Me</i>	Mia Siegert	Carolrhoda Lab	Bigender
<i>Stay Gold</i>	Tobly McSmith	HarperTeen	Trans boy
<i>This Is How We Fly</i>	Anna Meriano	Philomel Books	Questioning
<i>Under Shifting Stars</i>	Alexandra Latos	HMH Books for Young Readers	Genderfluid

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, I have used an emergent categories approach to qualitative content analysis, drawing on existing research on TGE teens' gender identity development and expression to identify themes and concepts as I read through the set of

texts. The categories that emerged, as well as their definitions, can be found in Table 2. In addition to utilizing adolescent gender identity research, I have drawn on the positive youth development (PYD) framework, which posits that teen development is best understood in terms of assets and support (Latham and Gross, 2014). According to the PYD lens, healthy young adult development is supported by assets—which include community organizations, institutions, resources, and people—and this positive development is reflected in teen competencies, community engagement, and a sense of agency (Search Institute, n.d.). PYD posits that positive self-image is itself an asset, which I have used as one way of imagining these TGE stories as counter narratives.

Table 2		
<i>Emergent categories and definitions</i>		
Category	Subcategory	Definition
Identity development	Exploration and formation of TGE identity	The processes by which protagonists began to understand and name their TGE identity.
	Role of other TGE people	The ways that other TGE people impacted the protagonists' identity formation.
	Social media and online information-seeking	How the protagonists used social media and other online information-

		seeking behaviors to explore their TGE identity.
	Name as self-definition	The relationship between choosing a name and understanding their TGE identity.
	“Balancing authenticity and necessity” (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p. 1743)	The different paths that the protagonists followed as they strove to express themselves and maintain their sense of safety or comfort in a transphobic society.
Perpetuating dominant narratives: Cisnormativity	Deception	The portrayal of hiding transness as deceiving others or lying.
	Aversion to TGE people	TGE protagonists’ experiences of violence, exclusion, deadnaming, and misgendering as evidence of transphobia.

	Sexualization/fetishization of TGE people	The focus on TGE people's bodies as sexually desirable specifically because of their transness.
	TGE identity as trend	Representation of TGE identities as trendy and thus illegitimate.
Perpetuating dominant narratives: Transnormativity	Social legitimization	How TGE protagonists aligned with transnormative standards of acceptable TGE identities and expressions.
	Wrong-body discourse	The portrayal of TGE people as being born in the wrong body, implying that TGE people require medical intervention to fix them.
	Gender dysphoria as universal TGE experience	The narrative that all TGE people experience gender dysphoria.

	Conformity to conventional gender roles and expressions	TGE protagonists' alignment with conventional gender norms.
	TGE stories as tragic	The portrayal of TGE stories as inherently or universally painful or tragic.
Counter narratives	Resisting the conflation of sex and gender	Challenging the portrayal of anatomical sex as the basis of or the same as gender identity.
	Resisting wrong-body discourse	TGE protagonists who push back on the idea that their bodies are innately wrong.
	Validity of TGE identities despite absence of social legitimization	TGE protagonists who recognize their gender identity is valid even when they do not experience social legitimization.

	Rejection of gender binarism	Validity of nonbinary TGE identities.
	Validity of TGE identities discovered after childhood	The portrayal of protagonists' TGE identities as legitimate even if they have not held these identities since early childhood.
	Validity of TGE identities without labels	The portrayal of TGE protagonists' identities as legitimate even when they do not have a label to express their identity.
	TGE identity as asset	The ways that protagonists' TGE identities promote positive youth development.
	Resilience	Indicators of protagonists' ability to thrive in the face of transphobia.

	Trans history	Representation of TGE identities as existing in the past rather than being new or trendy.
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Results

Using the categories that emerged as I read these novels, as defined in Table 2, I will discuss the concepts that occurred in the set of nine novels I analyzed. These categories span processes of identity development, perpetuating or internalizing cisnormativity or transnormativity as dominant narratives about TGE youth, and counter narratives as the rejection of dominant narratives and the portrayal of TGE identities as assets.

Identity Development

These novels depicted different processes of TGE identity development. Three of the TGE protagonists' TGE identity remained the same over the course of their novels, one protagonist remained gender questioning, and five developed new TGE identities by the end of their novels. Furthermore, these novels also depicted protagonists who began to understand their TGE identities after learning about or from other TGE people, who used social media and other forms of online information-seeking to understand their identities, who explored self-definition through their names, and who had to find a balance between their safety and their desire to express their TGE identities.

Processes of Identity Development

Of the nine novels included for analysis, three novels had a TGE protagonist who held the same gender identity at the start of the story as they did at the end. For these

protagonists, their identity development focused on forming new relationships to their existing trans identity rather than forming a new identity. In *Stay Gold*, Pony has known he is a trans boy for several years, and he does not question his gender identity during the novel. Instead, he initially wants to hide his transness to go “stealth” (McSmith, 2020, p. 26) because, as he explains to Georgia, “I just want to be normal. . . I want to walk into a room and not have everyone else know I’m trans” (McSmith, 2020, p. 4). At his previous school, his trans identity had become his defining feature for his friends and classmates, and he wants to pass as a cisgender boy so that he can be a multidimensional person rather than “the token trans person” (McSmith, 2020, p. 26). However, he realizes over the course of the novel that hiding his transness feels dishonest; he determines that being trans is a part of him that he cannot keep secret, and, ultimately, which he should celebrate. He declares at the end, “I’m going to say something that I have never said before. . . I’m proud to be transgender” (McSmith, 2020, p. 357). After hiding who he is to fit in, he begins to feel pride in his transness and no longer wants to keep it secret.

Like Pony, Quinn, in *Into the Real*, has known that they’re genderqueer, but must learn to accept their gender identity as an integral part of who they are. Quinn exists in three alternate realities, which—as they realize toward the end of the novel—they created in order to split up their trauma from being rejected by their family: “I couldn’t bear the torture of my reality, of my family’s rejection. So I’d built a new truth—one so vivid that I made it reality” (Brewer, 2020, p. 368). They go on to further understand that they had caused this split in order to seek validation and acceptance from others:

I broke my existence into thirds—three worlds, but with different relationships, different gender identity, different experiences . . . but one singular problem. In each reality, I’ve been looking for people outside myself to accept me for who, for what, I am (Brewer, 2020, p. 369-370).

In order to mend the split, Quinn must accept “face [their] truth” (Brewer, 2020, p. 418) and accept that they are genderqueer, even when other people do not respect their gender. Quinn decides they cannot “run from” (Brewer, 2020, p. 418) their gender identity any longer and must instead embrace their identity to be “free” (Brewer, 2020, p. 419).

In *Cemetery Boys*, Yadriel has also known he was a trans boy for several years—unlike Pony and Quinn, however, his story is not of finding pride in who he is, but of proving that he is not only a boy, but also a brujo. His father and extended family repeatedly demonstrate that they do not view him as a boy. When Yadriel’s cousin, Miguel, goes missing, Yadriel’s father tells him to “stay here with the rest of the women” (Thomas, 2020, p. 27) rather than help the other brujos search. His family also refuse to allow Yadriel to have his quinces, a ceremony in which brujx are granted their powers, unless he undergoes it as a bruja, not a brujo: “It wouldn’t work, they’d told him. Just because he said he was a boy, that didn’t change the way Lady Death gave her blessings” (Thomas, 2020, p. 24). To prove his family wrong, Yadriel conducts his own quinces, and he uses his new abilities to find out why Miguel has gone missing. Lady Death, the brujx’s patron, sees him as a boy, bestowing brujo abilities on him, proving to his family that he is both boy and brujo. When his father introduces him, at the aguelarre at the end of the story, as his son, Yadriel muses that

things weren’t magically fixed by an empowering speech, but it . . . carved out space for Yadriel to step forward and be who he was, as he was. There were still more obstacles to overcome . . . but Yadriel wouldn’t feel alone in it anymore. (Thomas, 2020, p. 342)

His father and family have, finally, accepted him as a brujo and view him as a boy, which gives him peace after years of hurt from his family repeatedly misgendering him.

In one of the nine novels included for analysis, the protagonist (Ellen of *This Is How We Fly*) questions her gender, and her identity—and emotions and thoughts about it—remain unchanged over the course of the novel. Ellen does not like “the whole idea of being a girl” (Meriano, 2020, p. 25), but she is unsure whether that feeling comes from “internalized misogyny or actual gender feels” (Meriano, 2020, p. 25). She asks herself once, “Is it normal to want both [to be both a girl and a boy], or neither?” (Meriano, 2020, p. 101). She also worries that “if I don’t know my identity as an absolute fact from birth it must be fake” (Meriano, 2020, p. 232), though she also expresses knowing that her identity is valid regardless. Ellen never finds answers to her questions, and, at the end of the novel, she is still questioning her gender identity.

In five of the nine novels, the trans or gender expansive protagonist’s gender identity changed in some capacity by the end of the novel. In three of these novels, the protagonist realizes as part of the story that they are trans or gender expansive: Flora, in *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea*; Clare, in *Under Shifting Stars*; and Sasha Masha,¹ in *Sasha Masha*. Flora has lived as Florian for years, living as a boy in order to survive on the *Dove*, the pirate ship that accepted her as a crew member. Florian is an identity that Flora can wear as “a spell of strength against the world” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 37). However, Florian as a “spell of safety” had begun “slipping, and yet she did not seem to be a female anymore, either. . . She was neither, it seemed. Or at least, she didn’t reap the benefit of either” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 93). Realizing that Florian shifted from a source of safety to being a part of her, Flora must accept that “she could hold both [Florian and

¹ I have chosen to refer to the protagonist of *Sasha Masha* as Sasha Masha, which is the name that resonates with him, rather than by his given name. He is referred to by his given name for most of the book, but from early on, Sasha Masha feels truer to who he is.

Flora] in her heart. That both might be true” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 250). She realizes that she is genderfluid, and that she is both Florian and Flora—she is not pretending to be one or the other, but that both are part of who she is.

Like Flora, Clare must reconcile her two different senses of self as she realizes that she is genderfluid. She tries to “look like every other girl” (Latos, 2020, p. 31), but starts to understand that this version of herself “doesn’t really exist. She’s a role in the movie of my life. I’ve gotten pretty good at playing her too” (Latos, 2020, p. 31). She begins to wear her dead brother’s old clothes and seeks out information about gender identity online, leading her to realize that she is not cisgender: “Even though I feel closer to female on the spectrum and want to use she/her pronouns, I identify with both genders, and feel like I can move between them depending on my mood or the day. So I think I might be gender-fluid” (Latos, 2020, p. 254). She realizes that this label is “the truth” (Latos, 2020, p. 254), and she finds comfort in knowing who she is.

Sasha Masha, similarly, starts to question who he is, even before he has the language for it. He thinks of the name Sasha Masha while trying on a dress at his best friend Mabel’s house, and the name starts to consume him: “It suddenly occurred to me that this name could change my life. I didn’t understand it yet, but I knew it had great power” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 100). He becomes obsessed with the name and what it could mean about him, but it isn’t until he meets Michelle, a trans teen, that he starts to wonder if the name is really about his gender identity: “Could I be trans? Could that be what the whole Sasha Masha thing was about? ... was this, now, the thing I’d failed to see? That in my heart of hearts, I wasn’t a boy after all?” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 181). Sasha Masha doesn’t explicitly answer that question before the novel ends, but he feels his body relax

as he imagines himself as a girl. Sasha Masha, realizes, is the parts of himself “in different corners of my memory, where I wouldn’t accidentally see them together and understand. But when I wasn’t looking, they’d banded together and given themselves a name. *Sasha Masha*, they said. *That’s us*” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 210). Sasha Masha is more than a name—Sasha Masha is who he is, even though he has tried to avoid understanding himself.

In two novels, *Somebody Told Me* and *Felix Ever After*, the protagonists know they are trans at the start of the novel and hold a different gender identity by the end. Aleks/Alexis, of *Somebody Told Me*, is bigender when the novels begins, describing their experience of their gender as “black and white. There was no gray space. I’d wake up in the morning and know whether I was a girl or a boy” (Siegert, 2020, p. 10). They have a girl-self, Alexis, and a boy-self, Aleks, and they say that these selves are not “divided by emotions or anything. [...] It’s just a construct, a state of mind” (Siegert, 2020, p. 84). These selves have different “consciousnesses” (Siegert, 2020, p. 84), different understandings of the world and their relationship to it. However, they lose their connection to their boy-self and girl-self, which they describe as feeling “empty” and like they are “no one” (Siegert, 2020, p. 224). When they almost die, they think, “We had to keep moving. All parts of me: female, male, nothing, both” (Siegert, 2020, p. 240). After they survive, though, they feel as though their two selves are no longer separate:

Alexis. Aleks. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t feel a separation between them. I was sure that would change eventually. Sooner or later, I’d wake up as one or the other. And perhaps some days I would switch in between the two. And maybe it’d suck a little less than it had before. But for now, they clung to each other so tightly it felt impossible to sever them. A third gender? Broad nonbinary? I didn’t know anything except that it was. They were me. We were me. (Siegert, 2020, p. 249)

Although they do not entirely understand their new experience of their gender—and are unsure what language or label to use—they know that this is different from how they understood their gender before. Something has changed, and now their gendered selves feel attached rather than like distinct entities.

In *Felix Ever After*, Felix has identified as a trans boy for years, but “even after starting my transition, sometimes I get this feeling. The feeling that something still isn’t right” (Callender, 2020, p. 24). He has a

niggling feeling—that being seen as a girl definitely isn’t right, but being seen as a guy isn’t totally right, either. But there’re also times when I know, for a fact, that I definitely am a guy, and I feel like I’ve just imagined the niggling, the questioning, the confusion. (Callender, 2020, p. 181)

Felix has used a particular label—trans boy—for years, but he knows that that label has never been quite right, though he cannot find a different label that feels truer to his experiences. One day, while he is spending time on Tumblr, he finds the word demiboy and knows, instantly, that this label “is right” (Callender, 2020, p. 278), though he says it “feels a little anticlimactic, getting the answer to a question I’ve been struggling with for months now” (Callender, 2020, p. 278). After struggling—since before the novel begins—with a sense that his identity is not quite right, he finds a label that “explains exactly how I feel” (Callender, 2020, p. 278). He gains a deeper understanding of who he is through the label, better knowing he is and finding the language to describe his experiences.

Impact of Other Trans and Gender Expansive People on Identity Development

Felix and Pony both begin to realize their trans identity after consuming media featuring trans people. Felix, for example, read a book with a trans protagonist—Cris Beam’s *I Am J*—when he was twelve. Reading about a trans person, Felix explains, made

“a lightbulb go off in me . . . the sun itself came out from behind these eternal clouds, and everything inside me blazed with the realization: I’m a guy” (Callender, 2020, p. 24). For Felix, it wasn’t until he read about another trans person that he figured out he was a boy. Pony, similarly, realizes he’s trans after seeing Caitlyn Jenner on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. After seeing her cover, he started looking up information online: “Everything clicked into place. After so many confusing years, I finally knew the reason for my discomfort. I was transgender. I could change, and I was no longer alone” (McSmith, 2020, p. 16).

In addition to media, meeting trans people in their real lives was integral for Sasha Masha’s and Clare’s self-definition. Sasha Masha begins to realize that their questioning is connected to their gender when he meets Michelle, a trans teen. He “didn’t think [he’d] met a trans person before” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 178), and, after meeting her, he quickly begins to ask himself, “Could I be trans? Could that be what the whole Sasha Masha thing was about?” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 180). Before meeting Michelle, trans “wasn’t a word I’d ever thought about applying to myself” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 180)—meeting another trans person was crucial for Sasha Masha as he figured out who he was. Clare, too, begins to wonder if she isn’t a girl after befriending Taylor, a nonbinary classmate who supports Clare’s self-exploration. Taylor confesses to thinking that another character is “the person who helped [Clare] discover who [she is],” and Clare corrects them, saying “No, that was *you*” (Latos, 2020, p. 237). For both Clare and Sasha Masha, meeting another trans or gender expansive person made them begin to see that they might also be gender expansive.

However, the impact of relationships with TGE peers is not always positive within this set of novels. Pony's best friend Max is also trans, and their friendship at the start of the novel is a source of support for Pony, who thinks, "It's been helpful to have a friend who is going through the same things as me" (McSmith, 2020, p. 77). However, whereas Max is "very out and proud" (McSmith, 2020, p. 78), Pony wants to pass as cisgender; whereas "Max doesn't miss an opportunity to educate someone" (McSmith, 2020, p. 81) about how to better support TGE people, Pony thinks, "Confrontation is not my thing. . . . When you're seen as different, it's best to go with the flow, pick your battles, and plan the right times to push back" (McSmith, 2020, p. 81-82). Because Max sees educating cisgender people as critically necessary, he pressures Pony to stop passing and to come out as trans at his new school:

We need you, Pony. . . . The trans community is tiny, and the war is big. We need every soldier on the field, and Pony, you are not on the field. . . . Pony, if we don't raise our voices and make ourselves known, then we will continue to lose our rights. You too, buddy. (McSmith, 2020, p. 220)

Max believes that it is Pony's duty as a trans person to be out as trans—and, in being out, to always teach others about what being trans means. Pony opts to continue passing, and thinks that, in order to pass, he needs to be silent about transphobia, which leads Max to push Pony away as a friend. Max stops talking to Pony after asking him, "Why do I have to deal with the discrimination? Judgmental looks? Dumb opinions said right to my face? While you get to slide through life with no problems? Why is it on me to be out here and not you?" (McSmith, 2020, p. 298). Max resents that Pony can pass to protect himself, while Max cannot pass and thus cannot avoid transphobia.

Ultimately, however, Max re-enters Pony's life after he is attacked, and Max feels responsible for the attack because he pressured Pony to come out as trans. Pony tells

Max, “I love what you do for our community. I want to be there with you” (McSmith, 2020, p. 350). Pony came out at the dance as an act of solidarity with two classmates who were outed as queer; even after his attack, he wants to follow Max’s lead in order to stand for and with other queer people, especially TGE people. Though he resented the pressure Max put on him to be visibly trans all the time, Pony determines that he wants to educate others about what TGE people experience and need.

Use of Social Media and Online Information-Seeking

Three of the nine TGE protagonists use social media for emotional and informational support. Pony joins a Facebook group for trans teens, where he learns from other trans people, though he does not post in the group. Felix follows trans people on social media to learn more about his identity, and he spends time on Tumblr, both to look for labels and information and reading posts that affirm his identity. One post that stands out in Pony’s memory is one that “said that trans people used to be considered gods” (Callender, 2020, p. 149), which Pony remembers as a positive depiction of trans people, and he ultimately finds the label demiboy on Tumblr as well. Clare follows a trans blogger to learn more about transness as she begins to explore her identity, and she joins a forum for TGE teens, where she is supported and celebrated when she cuts her hair. Clare views these teens as “friends” who “have made me realize I’m going to be okay, that there are seven billion people in the world and some of them are like me” (Latos, 2020, p. 156); however, her online friendships do not make her feel less “alone” (Latos, 2020, p. 157) as she faces judgment from her classmates. Regardless, these three TGE teens find information about their TGE identities and connections to other TGE teens through social media, feeling supported and affirmed.

Additionally, four TGE protagonists seek out information online, such as through search engines, when they first begin to explore their gender identity. Sasha Masha searches, “How do I know if I’m trans?” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 206); as he reads, he “felt the chilly, unmistakable sense that this was exactly what I’d been experiencing most of my life” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 206). Clare similarly begins to explore her transness through online information seeking, first looking up information about her sexuality, which led her to seek out information about gender identity. Her initial search does not answer her questions and makes her “wish [she’d] never looked that stuff up” (Latos, 2020, p. 62), but she ultimately realizes that she is genderfluid after “learning about other people” (Latos, 2020, p. 192) who share that identity. After he sees Caitlyn Jenner’s cover on *Vanity Fair*, Pony seeks out information about transness online, making him realize he’s a boy, and he conducts his own “self-taught boy boot camp” (McSmith, 2020, p. 50) to learn how to pass as a boy. Felix doesn’t begin his identity discovery process online, but his doctor assigns him research on the effects of taking testosterone to make sure that is what he wants, which leads him to social media as an information source. Like Clare, Felix is not entirely satisfied with the information he finds, because “no one ever mentioned that, even after my surgery and T-shots. . . I’d still have so many questions” (Callender, 2020, p. 148). Though he ultimately finds his label online, he wishes his research had shown him people who continue to question their gender after beginning to transition.

Names as Self-Definition

For Aleks/Alexis, Felix, and Pony, choosing their names was an act of self-definition and an important way they express their identity to others. Aleks/Alexis

chooses Aleks as the name for their boy-self because, unlike the name Alex, it is not used by both boys and girls, making it more distinctly and obviously a boy's name. They tell Dima they chose Aleks out of "insecurity" (Siegert, 2020, p. 140), which made them want a name that clearly communicated their name, saying that "most of the bigender people [they've] met online do the same" (Siegert, 2020, p. 140). For Aleks, like other bigender people, his name acts as a marker of his identity, making a gendered name more desirable than a name used by people of various genders.

Where Aleks/Alexis chose the name for their boy-self to communicate gender, Felix and Pony chose their names because of what those names mean. Felix is Latin for "lucky," which Felix feels speaks to their own experiences as a trans person: "When I figured out that I'm not a girl, and I started making all the necessary changes, I knew I'd lucked out" (Callender, 2020, p. 50). Later, Ezra tells Felix that his name also means "happy" (Callender, 2020, p. 354), suggesting that Felix's name not only describes his circumstances, but also the possibility of his own—and trans people's more broadly—joy. Pony, similarly, chose his name because of what it signified: "One late night of googling names, I wrote down the characters that I wanted most. Strength, confidence, freedom. . . Like a pony" (McSmith, 2020, p. 248-249). He determined his name because of what he associated with ponies, hoping the name would reflect who he wants to be as a person.

Authenticity vs. Safety

In five of the nine novels included for analysis, the protagonists explicitly undergo "an ongoing process of balancing authenticity and necessity" (Levitt & Ippolito,

2014, p. 1743). Aleks/Alexis decides to only present as their girl-self while they live with their aunt and uncle:

Fitting right in was exactly what I needed, even if boy-me was going to hate it in about 0.0008 seconds, and probably girl-me too. . . If I hid inside my skin, I wouldn't be in direct danger. No one would notice the ugly girl. She was innocuous and easy to ignore, which was perfect, even though sometimes, just sometimes, I wished she wasn't so ugly." (Siegert, 2020, p. 8)

They believe that they are only beautiful when they are Aleks, and ugly while they are Alexis—and, after they were assaulted at a cosplay convention, they hope that only presenting as Alexis will make them “invisible” (Siegert, 2020, p. 22). Invisibility “meant no one would see me. No one would hurt me because I wasn't pretty enough to hurt” (Siegert, 2020, p. 22). When they explain this to Sister Bernadette, she says that Alexis is beautiful too, not an ugly girl or invisible as they had thought—and that, regardless of whether they're Aleks or Alexis, “being assaulted *isn't* [their] fault” (Siegert, 2020, p. 218). Aleks/Alexis works to learn that they are not invisible or safer from assault based on how they present—however, they also know that they “had to harness Aleks in. Boy-me would alienate my aunt and uncle within minutes even if it wasn't deliberate” (Siegert, 2020, p. 16). In order to live with their Catholic priest uncle and his wife, where they are far from the cosplay friends who hurt them, they have to present only as Alexis. Indeed, when their aunt sees them dressed as Aleks, she says that if they didn't change clothes to “be normal” (Siegert, 2020, p. 227), she would throw Aleks/Alexis out of the house. Even if Aleks/Alexis learns that presenting as Alexis doesn't keep them safe from assault, they do know it keeps them safe from transphobia from their aunt and uncle.

Pony, too, strives to balance “authenticity and necessity” (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p. 1743)—he hopes that, by keeping the fact that he is trans “secret” (McSmith, 2020, p.

57), he can be “normal” (McSmith, 2020, p. 164). For Pony, being “normal” means not being treated as a “token trans person” (McSmith, 2020, p. 26), avoiding heightened attention, and using the bathroom at school without being harassed. Pony believes that “if no one finds out [his] secret, the possibilities are endless” (McSmith, 2020, p. 5), and he’ll get to have “normal” high school experiences. Although passing as cisgender does allow him to blend in with his peers—and keep him safe from violent transphobia, given that he is attacked by two classmates minutes after coming out as trans—he feels dishonest in keeping his transness secret. To hide his trans identity, Pony avoids calling out transphobia from others, worrying that this will cause speculation about his gender rather than portray him as an ally: “I can’t say something without revealing my secret” (McSmith, 2020, p. 293). He feels that his silence, however, “is wrong. But I’m in too deep” (McSmith, 2020, p. 294). In order to feel comfortable standing up for other trans people, he realizes he needs to stop hiding his trans identity. Ultimately, determines that fitting in is less important to him than being true to who he is, even when it means sacrificing his safety.

Flora initially gives up her life as a girl in order to join the pirate crew of the *Dove*, because being “a slip of a girl may have been tenable in Crandon, but it wasn’t here on the *Dove*” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 2). To lift her brother, Alfie, and herself out of poverty, she kills a man and transforms into Florian in order to become a crew member, giving them both a home. The other crew members had seen Flora before she had assumed the role of Florian and know she isn’t a boy, but playing the role still grants her safety:

The men of the *Dove* knew she was a girl. Or had been one. But after the captain had ordered her to kill—and she had, unflinchingly—she had earned the respect

to be something other than a girl. Something safe. . . From then on, the crew had only ever called her Florian. (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 19)

Flora willingly gives up her life as a girl to become Florian, “a spell that kept her safe” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 22); she is not Florian, but Florian gives her “strength and courage” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 72). Once Flora meets Evelyn and falls in love, she finds that Florian “was less like a spell and more like a shackle” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 109), no longer giving her safety or strength, but instead weighs on her. As she learns magic, Flora understands that Florian was both a spell and a part of who she was:

It was true that Florian was Flora’s spell of choice. Casting him felt like a ward of protection. It had been Florian that Evelyn kissed. But where did Florian end and flora begin? For the first time, she felt that she could hold both in her heart. That both might be true.” (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 250)

Florian shifts, from being a role or spell Flora uses to keep herself safe, to becoming her, to expanding her sense of self. Through seeking safety, Flora expands her understanding of herself and realizes that she is genderfluid.

Like Flora, Clare also plays a “role” (Latos, 2020, p. 31) in order to fit in with the people around her. Clare performs femininity to “be like every teenage girl” (Latos, 2020, p. 31) and to maintain her place with her popular friends, knowing that “being popular was part of [her] identity” (Latos, 2020, p. 154). She tries to explain to Taylor why she is unwilling to stick out, saying “I just think it’s important to fit in sometimes so that we’re not alone” (Latos, 2020, p. 123); Taylor responds by saying that trying to make others more comfortable is different when it means “hiding your identity” (Latos, 2020, p. 123). When Clare decides to explore her genderfluid identity and presenting the way she feels on a given day, she struggles with bending to others’ expectations. After wearing her brother’s old clothes for a few weeks, she “[wakes] up feeling very feminine” (Latos,

2020, p. 186) and puts on a skirt and makeup, but her mother worries that Clare is bending to pressure at school to stop exploring her gender identity. Clare decides, “I’m not going to explain to Mom, just like I’m not going to explain to the other kids. So I go back upstairs and change. . . I can’t let people like Billy think they’re scaring me into dressing differently” (Latos, 2020, p. 187). Later that day, she realizes, “I thought I was taking some sort of stand today, but I guess I’m still living my life for other people and worrying about what other people think” (Latos, 2020, p. 192). She decides to stop dressing to conform to others’ expectations, even when her classmates reject her for it.

In two of the three alternate realities that Quinn creates in *Into the Real*, they present as cisgender, hiding their genderqueer identity—from others and, in one reality, from themselves—in order to avoid transphobia. In second Brume—where Quinn presents as a cisgender girl and where their parents send them to a conversion therapy camp after learning Quinn is dating a girl—Quinn has kept their gender identity a secret from everyone in their life, including themselves. As they begin to understand their gender identity through their friendships with other queer teens at the conversion camp, they realize that they had run from their gender identity because they feared further alienating their parents:

Maybe that was why I’d avoided exploring gender too deeply for so long. Because I was afraid to hurt them [their parents] any more than I already had. Their fear had been pushing all these layers down deep inside of me. There were times when I felt like I didn’t recognize the person looking back at me when I gazed into a mirror. My reflection felt smaller than who I really was inside.” (Brewer, 2020, p. 239-240)

They accept that hiding their genderqueer identity from their family has not been enough to protect them from their parents’ queerphobia, leading them to realize that they are no longer willing to hide their identity from themselves.

In third Brume, Quinn has known for years that they are not a cisgender boy, feeling “Other” (Brewer, 2020, p. 183), but they have not told anyone about this feeling. They want to tell their closest friend, Lloyd, but worry about potential dangers of coming out to someone who may be as queerphobic as the other people in their community: “If Lloyd didn’t react well, I could face different kind of violence than the kind I was used to. War was scary, but somehow it didn’t make the idea of being faced with bigotry and rejection from your friends any less scary” (Brewer, 2020, p. 184). When they ultimately try to hint to Lloyd that they are not a man, Lloyd physically moves away, treating Quinn “as though being queer were a communicable disease” (Brewer, 2020, p. 323), causing Quinn to deny that he is queer to maintain his sense of safety. Indeed, earlier, when Quinn had confided in Collins that they are queer, Collins betrayed him in battle a few days later, causing Quinn to wonder if Collins had betrayed them because he “decided that [Quinn] wasn’t As God Intended” and thus “had to die” (Brewer, 2020, p. 144). Ultimately, Quinn in third Brume, like in second Brume, realizes that they have been “running from [themselves]” and that

Fear had held me back for so long—fear of judgment, fear of rejection. But I’d kept on running, stayed quiet about being genderqueer, fell in line, kept my secret. But sooner or later, the monster was going to catch up with me. Because I couldn’t run from myself no matter how hard I tried. I had to face my truth. It was the only path to being truly free. (Brewer, 2020, p. 393)

Quinn realizes that “running” from their identity has caused them internal harm, even when it has, mostly, kept them safe from violent queerphobia, and that they are ready to “face [their] truth” of who they are.

Perpetuating or Internalizing Dominant Narratives of Identity

Across this set of novels, TGE protagonists perpetuated or internalized cisnormativity and transnormativity, two major dominant narratives about TGE youth.

Cisnormativity

Multiple novels included for analysis showed protagonists who did not question various dimensions of cisnormativity.

Deception. One dimension of cisnormativity is the perception that trans or gender expansive people are deceiving or tricking others by presenting as their gender identity, rather than the gender assigned to them at birth (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017). In four of the nine novels included for analysis, the protagonist was either accused of deception or believed that they were deceiving others; none of the protagonists, in any of the novels analyzed, countered this view and explicitly said that they were not being deceptive by choosing to not come out as trans or gender expansive. In *Stay Gold*, Pony tells Georgia that he is trans after they have kissed, and she feels as though he has “lied” (McSmith, 2020, p. 144) to her by not telling her earlier that he is trans. She tells him that he has “tricked” (McSmith, 2020, p. 151) her by allowing her to assume he is cisgender, and she says that, because of this, she “can’t trust” (McSmith, 2020, p. 167) him and thus will not date him. Georgia’s feelings that she has been deceived are not addressed again—she does not regret or apologize for these words, and Pony does not mention thinking that Georgia is in the wrong for feeling as though he lied. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Pony apologizes to his friends, Jerry and Kanji, for not telling them that he is trans, saying, “I understand if you don’t want to be friends” (McSmith, 2020, p. 333). Pony expects Jerry and Kanji to be angry with him for not telling them that he is trans earlier in

their friendship, perhaps because he thinks he has deceived them by passing as cisgender in their friendship.

In *Somebody Told Me*, Aleks/Alexis worries that they have lied to their friend, Dima, by not telling him they're bigender: "Keeping Aleks a secret from Dima. . . made me a liar" (Siegert, 2020, p. 131). Furthermore, their friend, Lee, told their friends that they're "MTF" (Siegert, 2020, p. 158), claiming that he told others for their "protection" (Siegert, 2020, p. 158). He lied about Aleks/Alexis gender identity while claiming that their gender hurt others, requiring they know the alleged truth to be protected from them. Like Aleks/Alexis, Quinn, in *third Brume*, believes that they have also lied to their best friend, Lloyd, by not telling him they do not identify as a man: "I'd never given Lloyd a chance to know, to really know me. . . How was I to know how he'd react to my truth? It felt like I'd been lying to him all this time. After all, the intentional omission of the truth is just that—a lie" (Brewer, 2020, p. 270).

Flora also worries that omitting her gender identity will cause her to lose a relationship, thinking that Evelyn will not want a relationship with her after learning that Flora is not a boy: "the man Flora had pretended to be was a lie. And Evelyn knew it. . . No wonder she'd left. To be with a real man. . . Flora was a liar, and a criminal, and, worst of all, a girl" (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 159). She believes that Evelyn will not want to be with her because Florian is a "lie," though her worries do not come to fruition, as Evelyn makes it clear that she does not care about Flora's gender or pronouns: "After all of the time spent worrying, fretting, over the lie that was Florian, and now she could be anything. She could be herself" (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 283). Though Flora, at that point,

still believes that Florian is a “lie,” Evelyn has indicated that the truth of Flora’s gender has not impacted her desire to have a relationship with her.

Aversion to Trans and Gender Expansive People. Another dimension of cisnormativity is aversion to TGE people, which is experienced by seven of the nine TGE protagonists, as evidenced by their experiences of violence, exclusion, deadnaming, and misgendering because of their transness.

Violence. Pony and Quinn are both targeted by physical violence for being trans. Minutes after he comes out as trans at the homecoming dance, two classmates attack him in the bathroom. They verbally harass him, calling him a “freak” (McSmith, 2020, p. 319) and telling him he’s in the wrong bathroom, and then they begin to push, hit, and kick him. They remove his shirt and binder and laugh at him, and their attack is so violent that Pony believes he is “going to die tonight” (McSmith, 2020, p. 320), and he is taken to the hospital after he is found unconscious. After his attack, Pony feels “broken. Powerless. Done” (McSmith, 2020, p. 329), and he feels that it is his “fault” (McSmith, 2020, p. 329) that the boys who attacked him are in jail. Meanwhile, Quinn’s family in second Brume sends them to conversion therapy camp (although their family only knows that Quinn is dating a girl, not that Quinn is genderqueer), where they experience aversion therapy using electric shocks, and their friends have scars on their backs after being beaten for their queerness.

Exclusion. Several protagonists are excluded and ostracized for being trans or gender expansive. Clare’s friends stop talking to her after she starts to wear her brother’s clothes in order to express her genderfluid identity, and one of her classmates creates a poll on Facebook asking, “Will Clare return to school next fall as a girl or a guy?” (Latos,

2020, p. 210). Some of the votes are from fake accounts, and Clare thinks, “People hate me enough to make fake accounts just to bash me” (Latos, 2020, p. 211). She ultimately finds comfort in having new friends that support her, but she feels newly ostracized by people who use social media as “an outlet to what they’re too afraid to say to my face” (Latos, 2020, p. 211).

Aleks/Alexis is told by their cosplay friends that Alexis is ugly but Aleks is a “*bishonen*—the beautiful boy” (Siegert, 2020, p. 149), and they pressure them to only present as Aleks: “It’d be so easy to HRT with parents as supportive and cool as mine. Why are you wimping out? Are you scared? We’ll support you. You’re such a beautiful boy” (Siegert, 2020, p. 197). Their cosplay friends support Aleks/Alexis only when they can sexualize them, while one friend, Lee, sends derogatory (and untrue) texts about Aleks/Alexis in a group chat: “Did you know Alexis is MTF? . . . I’m only telling you for your protection. . . She told me that once she had her surgery, she wanted me to be the first dick inside her pussy” (Siegert, 2020, p. 158). Lee lies about their gender identity in order to simultaneously sexualize them and ostracize them, claiming that their alleged gender necessitates protecting others from them. They experience pressure from multiple people in their lives to choose one gender expression, expecting them to give up being bigender in order to appeal to them, while another friend attempts to ostracize them by lying about them to their friends.

Austin, one of Felix’s classmates, creates a gallery using images of Felix from before his transition and his deadname and anonymously puts it up in the school lobby where all of their classmates will see it. Additionally, Austin sends anonymous, vitriolic messages to Felix on Instagram, ranging from asking Felix why he is “pretending to be a

boy” (Callender, 2020, p. 124) to telling Felix, “You don’t exist. You’re nothing. Do you really think you matter to anyone? You don’t matter” (Callender, 2020, p. 265). When Felix confronts him, Austin says he put up the gallery and harassed Felix because he hoped that Ezra would “see the gallery and remember that you’re transgender and not be interested in your anymore” (Callender, 2020, p. 321). Austin specifically put up the gallery, not only because he resents Felix for “pushing it in our face that [he’s] transgender” (Callender, 2020, p. 321), but because he believes that trans people are not lovable. Austin’s ongoing harassment of Felix is the first time he “[experiences] this kind of hate for who [he] is. . . not directly” (Callender, 2020, p. 124). However, Felix does experience other forms of exclusion because of his gender identity. Marisol, who is part of his friend group, rejects Felix for being trans, claiming that him “deciding to be a guy instead of a girl feels inherently misogynistic. . . You can’t be a feminist and decide you don’t want to be a woman anymore” (Callender, 2020, p. 30). She expects Felix to keep this to himself and knows “the kind of control she had over” Felix (Callender, 2020, p. 205), and when Felix and Ezra confront her, she refuses to apologize or admit that what she said was transphobic. Marisol knew her words would alienate Felix, manipulating him into keeping her bigotry secret, and ultimately does not see how she has been bigoted.

Though Pony is not excluded on the page, he feels isolated when his friends express transphobia. Jerry and Kanji speculate about whether a woman is trans and begin to laugh at her and use transphobic slurs. Pony feels conflicted, worried that speaking up will out him as trans but also feeling the emotional impact of the slurs: “I focus on keeping any emotion off my face, but all I hear is *tranny*, *tranny*, *tranny*, *tranny*”

(McSmith, 2020, p. 293). He feels alienated by his friends' comments while speculating about another person's gender. Additionally, Georgia, the cisgender protagonist of the novel, briefly contemplates weaponizing Pony's trans identity to ostracize him as punishment for him taking someone she doesn't like to homecoming: "I'm fuming at Pony. . . I have the urge to. . . reveal his secret—the one thing he asked me not to do. Mia and Lauren would explode at the juiciness of his secret. It's on the tip of my tongue" (McSmith, 2020, p. 311). Though Georgia does not out Pony—and he comes out later in the same scene—the threat of ostracization no less looms over Pony's head if his peers find out that he is trans.

Deadnaming and Misgendering. In five novels, the protagonist is deadnamed or misgendered—and, often, both. Aleks/Alexis's aunt refuses to recognize them as Aleks, telling them, "You're a girl. . . It's just pretend" (Siegert, 2020, p. 173). The aunt repeatedly refuses to respect Aleks/Alexis gender identity when they mention being Aleks and exclusively calls them Alexis and only uses she/her pronouns to refer to them. Initially, Aleks/Alexis wants to excuse their aunt for misgendering them: "Let me give my aunt the benefit of the doubt just for today. Maybe for the next week, since there would have to be an adjustment. . . *What if it's longer than a week?* I tried to ignore the nagging worry" (Siegert, 2020, p. 12). Aleks/Alexis wants to forgive their aunt for not using their pronouns or respecting their identity, to excuse her for misgendering them. In Lee's messages to others about them, he misgenders Aleks/Alexis and calls them "MTF" (Siegert, 2020, p. 158) implying they're a trans woman rather than a bigender person. In an email to Aleks/Alexis, Lee tells them, "I hate you, Alexis. Aleks. Whoever the fuck you're pretending to be this time" (Siegert, 2020, p. 115). Lee implies that Aleks/Alexis

is only “pretending” to be bigender, much like their other cosplay friends attempt to convince them to choose to be only a boy. They are misgendered by many of the people close to them, invalidating their gender identity and pressuring them to conform to varying expectations.

Felix also experiences misgendering. In addition to the gallery—for which Austin found Felix’s deadname, which Felix had not told to any of his friends—Felix’s father also misgenders him repeatedly and only refers to him by his deadname, never by Felix. He says he is “trying” (Callender, 2020, p. 68), which makes Felix feel as though he has to

work hard to prove that I am who I say I am. It pisses me off that he doesn’t just accept it. That there’s something he has to *understand* in the first place. . . He can’t see me for who I really am—only who he wants me to be. Maybe this is fucked-up. . . but somehow, it’s his approval I need most, even more than anyone else’s. I need his validation. His understanding, not just acceptance, that he has a son. (Callender, 2020, p. 68-69)

His father’s rejection of his gender identity, even if it is unintentional, hurts Felix and makes him feel like his father does not actually see and know him for who he is.

Yadriel, like Felix, is misgendered and deadnamed by his family; after coming out to them as trans at the age of fourteen, several years before the start of the novel, “it was still a constant struggle to get them and the other brujx to use the right pronouns and to call him by the right name” (Thomas, 2020, p. 16). When his family refuses to allow him to undergo his quinces as a brujo, “It made Yadriel feel ashamed of who he was. . . It was an outright rejection of who he was—a transgender boy trying to find his place in their community” (Thomas, 2020, p. 24). Like Felix, Yadriel feels the need to “show his family what he was, *who* he was” (Thomas, 2020, p. 10), to feel seen and accepted as a boy and a brujo.

Similarly, Pony is most often misgendered by his parents, especially his dad, who refers to Pony as his “daughter” (McSmith, 2020, p. 53) and tells him, “No one will ever see you as a man” (McSmith, 2020, p. 258). When his dad asks him, after he is attacked, if he’s “going back to being a girl” (McSmith, 2020, p. 331), Pony decides to “stand up to the first bully in [his] life” (McSmith, 2020, p. 332) and explain that he has “never been a girl” and “will never be a girl” (McSmith, 2020, p. 332). Pony also talks about the emotional toll of being misgendered: “When I’m misgendered, it feels like I was trying to pull something off and got caught because I wasn’t good enough. I failed at passing as male. My self-esteem takes an immediate nosedive” (McSmith, 2020, p. 112). Pony’s dad is the main person who deadnames and misgenders Pony on page, but Georgia is also obsessed with knowing Pony’s deadname, asking him repeatedly for his “real name” (McSmith, 2020, p. 225), even though Pony tells her every time that his dead name is not his real name—Pony is. He begins to tell her his deadname to assuage her curiosity and to try to earn back her trust, but she interrupts him after deciding, “I don’t want to know that name. That’s not him” (McSmith, 2020, p. 249). Unlike Pony’s father, Georgia realizes that Pony’s deadname is not his real name, though she does learn Pony’s deadname from his dad after his attack.

Sexualization and Fetishization of Trans Bodies. Aleks/Alexis is the only character who is sexualized and fetishized because of their body. Their cosplay friends call Aleks “bishonen” (Siegert, 2020, p. 149), or beautiful boy, and their support of Aleks/Alexis as trans only includes their boy-self. Aleks enjoys this even partial acceptance, even if it comes at the price of being fetishized: “For me, at those moments, people’s reactions felt so right. I liked being viewed as a sexual object. . . . Being seen as a

beautiful boy. Not an ugly girl, or someone who was completely incompetent when straddling the gray space of binary gender roles” (Siegert, 2020, p. 150). This fetishization is grounded in their transness: “The girls dated me because I was boy enough for them to ‘not really be a lesbian’ but didn’t have a dick so I wasn’t threatening” (Siegert, 2020, p. 81). They are sexualized because they aren’t cisgender, allowing their friends to feel safe in sexually pursuing them, even as those friends undermine the validity of Aleks/Alexis’s gender. Aleks finds validation, even as Alexis is excluded and othered by their cosplay friends. However, the sexualization that offers them partial acceptance also leads their friends to orchestrate Aleks/Alexis’s assault, believing that their willingness to be viewed as a beautiful boy meant they consented to being kissed and touched by many strangers at a cosplay convention. Aleks/Alexis knows that this “was exploitation” and that “it’s not right” (Siegert, 2020, p. 149), but they worry that their desire to be validated through sexualization means they deserved their assault, causing them to reject their boy-self until they can internalize that the assault was not their fault.

Transnormativity

In addition to cisnormativity, the novels included for analysis also perpetuated transnormativity as a dominant narrative of TGE identity, or the expectation that TGE identities and expressions align with social expectations.

Social Legitimization. One dimension of transnormativity is social legitimization, which is the processes by which TGE people feel validated in their identity when their gender expression or presentation is represented in media. In their efforts to pass as a boy while Aleks, Aleks/Alexis has a history of restrictive eating: “I

worked out until my hips slimmed down to the point where I felt I could ‘pass’ as male. It was messed up on so many levels—biologically unhealthy. . . and transphobic (like I needed to ‘pass’ in order to be a real guy)” (Siegert, 2020, p. 81). They recognize that this is harmful, in part because it is transnormative to expect trans people to pass, or look like they are a cisgender person of their gender identity. Even as Aleks/Alexis gives up their restrictive eating and obsessive workouts, they can continue to want to pass: “As I dressed, I looked at myself in the mirror. . . Hideousness looked right back at me. Maybe you can just work out a little bit more, Aleks’s voice said in my head” (Siegert, 2020, p. 123). Eventually, they start to express acceptance of their body, but only because they are able to consider how they may be able to pass without restrictive eating: “maybe I wasn’t as smooth as I once was, but a lot of cis guys put on some weight in their stomachs. It’d distract from my hips because there was only so much I could do” (Siegert, 2020, p. 224). They only express acceptance of their body because cisgender men also have body fat—and because their body shape may “distract” from the other ways their body does not align with cisgender body ideals. Aleks/Alexis expresses body neutrality because they are able to re-consider how their body can still pass for a cisgender boy, not because they have given up their desire to pass.

Wrong-Body Discourse. Another dimension of transnormativity is wrong-body discourse, which is the way that language is used to describe TGE people’s bodies as “wrong” or not matching their gender and thus in need of medical intervention to “fix” them (Putzi, 2017). Pony is the only TGE protagonist whose feelings about his body—and TGE people’s bodies more broadly—explicitly reflect Putzi’s concept of wrong-body discourse (2017). He defines gender dysphoria as “a fancy way of describing the distress

of being in the wrong body” (McSmith, 2020, p. 54), implying that then trans people can acquire a “right” body through medical intervention to cure their dysphoria. Later, when he stands up to his dad, he tells him, “I was born in the wrong body. I’m not a girl” (McSmith, 2020, p. 332); he also expresses, during suicidal ideation, a desire to be reincarnated in the “right body” (McSmith, 2020, p. 271). Pony’s transness is connected to having the “wrong body,” one that he would rather die than continue to live in, because “ending my life feels like the only way out of this body” (McSmith, 2020, p. 271). Without medical intervention, Pony cannot feel as though his body reflects who he is.

Wrong-body discourse also manifests in Quinn’s understanding of TGE people. In second Brume, they meet Valerie, another trans teen, at conversion camp; they describe Valerie as “a girl who had clearly not been anatomically female at birth but was working to fix that” (Brewer, 2020, p. 92-93). Quinn fixates on the ways that they believe Valerie is “working to fix” her body, wondering if she got hormone replacement therapy with or without her parents’ consent and paying attention to the ways that Valerie’s “facial features had softened, her curves had been defined” (Brewer, 2020, p. 93) through medical intervention. Quinn’s language about Valerie’s anatomy needing to be fixed implies that Valerie’s body is wrong, that her transness is a malady whose effects Quinn can see in Valerie’s appearance, noting the ways that they think they can tell how Valerie’s body has changed (despite having only met Valerie moments before and not knowing her before her transition). Also in second Brume, Quinn thinks that “maybe my body didn’t quite fit my mind” (Brewer, 2020, p. 129), which also implies that their body is wrong and could be fixed, like Valerie’s.

Gender Dysphoria as a Universal Trans and Gender Expansive Experience.

Another form of transnormativity is the expectation that all TGE people experience gender dysphoria. Pony defines gender dysphoria, saying:

The term everyone is using now is *gender dysphoria*. It's a fancy way of describing the distress of being in the wrong body. The level of dysphoria that a transgender person feels varies and often causes depression, anger, insecurity, and sometimes suicide. (McSmith, 2020, p. 54)

His description of gender dysphoria implies that it is something that all trans people feel, though to varying degrees—and, specifically, says that all trans people feel that they were born in the wrong body, and this feeling can even “cause” suicide. He goes on to say that he wears chest binders as an “uncomfortable Band-Aid” (McSmith, 2020, p. 54) for his dysphoria: “I am so far from the body I want. This is my dysphoria” (McSmith, 2020, p. 56). He wants chest surgery as the “solution to my dysphoria” (McSmith, 2020, p. 54), the way that he can finally fix his own experience of dysphoria, which he views as a shared, if not universal, trans experience.

Alex/ks/is never specifically mentions gender dysphoria and instead speaks to their experience of “body dysmorphia” (Siegert, 2020, p. 135). For them, their dysmorphia is related to their restrictive eating habits in order to “‘pass’ as male” (Siegert, 2020, p. 81): “It was messed up on many levels—biologically unhealthy. . . and transphobic (like I needed to ‘pass’ in order to be a real guy). I knew it was bad, but when I worked out that hardcore, all my friends commented on how I got hotter as a boy every day” (Siegert, 2020, p. 81). Their dysmorphia causes them to obsess over the way their body looks so that Aleks can pass, meeting others’ expectations of what a boy’s body looks like. In addition to dysmorphia, they experience intense emotional discomfort when they are not able to dress as Aleks on their boy days: “In my girl clothes, in a bra and not

a binder, I already felt like I didn't belong in my skin. An imposter" (Siegert, 2020, p. 99). For Aleks/Alexis, they not only feel like they're lying by not disclosing their gender identity, they also feel as though their presentation is a lie when it does not align with their gender that day.

Conformity to Conventional Gender Roles and Expressions. A further dimension of transnormativity is the expectation that TGE people conform to conventional binary gender roles and expressions. In third Brume, Quinn tries to conform to hyper-masculinity. When they think about their gender identity, they tell themselves to "shake off the self-pity, get your shit together, man up" (Brewer, 2020, p. 140), as though masculinity precludes gender questioning. They recollect their dad telling them to "'man up' and get my shit together," the same message that "society reiterated to me over and over again" (Brewer, 2020, p. 165). At times, their focus on masculinity also conflates gender nonconformity and holding a nonbinary gender identity. After their first battle at the age of thirteen, their brother tells them that they are "definitely a man now" (Brewer, 2020, p. 152), leading Quinn to wonder, "Was I a man? What made me so? Hadn't I been one before I'd experienced the horrors of war? Or was that really what it took? If so, maybe I didn't want to be a man at all" (Brewer, 2020, p. 152). Here, their aversion to enacting violence through war gets conflated with their gender—as masculinity becomes tied to warfare, they want to rebel and not be a man. They express "feeling more and more like I didn't fit into the male role that society had dictated" (Brewer, 2020, p. 270). Quinn seems to conflate gender nonconformity and gender identity, as though they can either conform to violent masculinity or embrace a genderqueer identity. Their

perspective on masculinity in third Brume blurs the lines between refuting traditional gender norms and holding a gender expansive identity.

Pony, similarly, wants to fit in with cisgender men in order to pass as one of them and avoid arousing suspicion about his transness. When Kanji and Jerry admit Pony into their friendship, he revels in the way that he finally fits in with the guys, even though he feels that this requires he not confront their homophobia or transphobia: “It’s conflicting. When I hung out with dudes at my old school, they still treated me like a girl, and I hated it. Not a problem here—these guys are hitting all the notes” (McSmith, 2020, p. 118). Pony views queerphobia as part of masculinity, so, to fit in, he calls Kanji a “homo” (McSmith, 2020, p. 117). Pony believes this is “guy talk, and there’s nothing I can do to change it” (McSmith, 2020, p. 117). He views their queerphobia as an integral part of their masculinity, and so mimics it in order to pass as a boy.

Pain and Tragedy as a Universal Trans and Gender Expansive Experience.

An additional dimension of transnormativity is the assumption that all TGE people experience pain and tragedy, and especially the assumption that their lives will be full of ongoing violence. Quinn’s life is framed in terms of their pain and trauma due to transphobia in their life. Their family rejects and invalidates their genderqueer identity. Their brother throws a beer bottle at Quinn’s head after they come out, asking them, “You think Mom and Dad are gonna feel bad for you because you’re some oppressed queerbait? It’s not gonna change a fucking thing” (Brewer, 2020, p. 364). Their mom tells them, “You’re only a teenager! You don’t know what you are” (Brewer, 2020, p. 365), and their dad calls them a homophobic slur. After their dad gets angry about Quinn’s gender while driving, causing a car accident that kills him and Quinn’s mom,

their brother abandons them. The trauma of being rejected by their family causes Quinn to split their life into three realities to avoid bearing the weight of their rejection and death, but none of these realities offers Quinn an opportunity to find happiness. In all three, they face monsters, whether literal or human; even in first Brume, the only reality where they are accepted as genderqueer, they are constantly fending for their survival. They ultimately choose to live in first Brume, knowing the dangers but wanting the freedom to be true to their genderqueer identity. After they make the choice, the fog lifts in first Brume, implying that the monsters may no longer terrorize the town—however, we as the reader do not know what comes next. When Quinn chooses this reality, they know that they may never find happiness, but instead will know freedom, even at the cost of pain and isolation.

Like Quinn, Pony does not have a life without violence or pain ahead of him. Pony is brutally attacked immediately after he comes out, and Georgia uses this to write an article for the school newspaper, in which the only statistics she cites are about violence faced by trans youth. This article is a call to action for cisgender readers, where she shares Pony's story and experiences without his permission, to discuss anti-trans violence as "constant threats against their lives" (McSmith, 2020, p. 341), as though violence is the central defining experience for TGE people. Georgia calls on cisgender readers, saying TGE people "need our help to feel safe enough to shine" (McSmith, 2020, p. 342). Even before the attack, Pony experiences ongoing and explicit suicidal ideation, contemplating if he would "add to the statistics on the posters in the LGBTQIA Center, but. . . right now, ending my life feels like the only way out of this body" (McSmith, 2020, p. 271). In Pony's mind, because of the focus on the same statistics that Georgia

highlights in her article and because he does not feel supported in his trans identity, death seems connected to being trans. Indeed, Pony's dad tells him after his attack, "Keep this going and you'll end up back here again. Or worse" (McSmith, 2020, p. 332), which Pony does not deny. To everyone in Pony's life, including himself, anti-trans violence and trans death are inevitable, something that defines transness—as opposed to trans joy, community, and strength.

In this same depiction of TGE lives as innately or immutably tragic, Georgia is positioned not only as an ally, but a savior—despite her own shortcomings as an ally and ongoing displays of transphobia. After Pony is attacked, she writes an article in the school newspaper decrying transphobia while also emphasizing a deficit narrative about TGE people, and she organizes a rally of classmates and school officials who support Pony and stand against transphobia in their community. Additionally, Georgia organizes crowdfunding for Pony's top surgery, and she stands up to Pony's dad, telling him, "Well, now you have a son named Pony, and if you don't accept that, you will lose him. Maybe we all will" (McSmith, 2020, p. 345). Georgia, in these final moments of the novel, becomes an ally to be applauded; her father stands in for the reader, telling her, "I am so proud of you for turning this moment of hate into love" (McSmith, 2020, p. 354). She acts as Pony's savior, finally making Pony's dad respect his gender identity enough to donate to Pony's top surgery fund after denying him gender affirming surgery, and bringing together a community to support Pony, which makes him decide to not attempt suicide and to finish high school rather than dropping out.

Despite the way that Georgia's allyship is portrayed once she embraces her role as savior, she displays ongoing transphobia until she sees her peers accept him when he

comes out as trans at the homecoming dance: “No one really cares that. . . Pony is transgender. I mean, there will be plenty of whispers and gossip, but those are just words” (McSmith, 2020, p. 316). However, only a few pages before, when she gets to the dance, Georgia contemplates outing Pony as trans as retaliation against him for taking a girl she resents as his date to the dance. She thinks, “I have the urge to return the favor and reveal his secret—the one thing he asked me not to do. Mia and Lauren would explode at the juiciness of his secret. It’s on the tip of my tongue” (McSmith, 2020, p. 311). She is stopped before she can out Pony because her date comes up to her and they start dancing—she does not stop herself from outing him because she recognizes that doing so would be wrong, but is only stopped because she is interrupted.

Georgia accepts Pony’s transness because she sees most of their peers accept it, after she has spent the majority of the novel holding Pony’s transness against him. Until she sees that her peers will not turn against Pony once he comes out, she refuses to date him—and worries about being seen with him at all—because she believes that her proximity to Pony will cause her peers to ostracize him: “I would be paranoid that his secret would get out. What people would think of me” (McSmith, 2020, p. 166). Rather than stand with Pony when she believes that her peers will not even tolerate his transness, she alienates him. Georgia tells Pony that not disclosing his transness meant he “lied” (McSmith, 2020, p. 144) and “tricked” her (McSmith, 2020, p. 151); she is obsessed with knowing “who Pony was before transitioning” (McSmith, 2020, p. 224), searching online for pictures of him pre-transition and asking him how it felt “to be a girl” (McSmith, 2020, p. 225) and what his “real name” (McSmith, 2020, p. 225) is; and she treats him like an encyclopedia about trans definitions and experiences rather than seeking out

information on her own—until she looks up statistics about violence against trans people for her article. Georgia is held up in the novel as not only an exemplary ally, but as Pony’s savior; however, her allyship only begins when she knows it is safe for her reputation to be associated with Pony. Until then, she others Pony, saying transphobic things to him even as she expects him to educate her, rather than finding information independently to better support him. Pony is portrayed as needing Georgia in order to have a chance at happiness, but he also faces transphobia and exclusion at her hands.

Counter Narratives

All nine novels included for analysis functioned, at least in some capacities, as counter narratives. Including dominant narratives in the text—even those that contain them without criticizing them—does not preclude these texts from challenging other dominant narratives about TGE identities and experiences.

Challenging the Conflation of Sex and Gender

Sex and gender were distinct entities in the minds of the protagonists of these novels, though cisgender characters occasionally conflated the two concepts. Georgia, for instance, worries that dating Pony will make others think she is “gay or whatever” (McSmith, 2020, p. 268). Pony tells her that dating him would not mean she is gay, saying, “You like guys, and I’m a guy. Body parts don’t define the gender, the person does” (McSmith, 2020, p. 268). Though Pony himself feels as though he “was born in a girl body” (McSmith, 2020, p. 143), he tells Georgia that his assigned sex is not the same as his gender. Georgia’s homophobia and insistence on her straightness coincides with the transphobic conflation of sex and gender, making her unwilling to pursue a relationship with Pony until she can accept that he is a boy. Yadriel’s family’s refusal to allow him to undergo his quinces as a brujo is similarly rooted in a conflation of sex and

gender, arguing that Yadriel's gender identity will not "change the way Lady Death [gives] her blessings" (Thomas, 2020, p. 24). However, Yadriel proves their argument wrong when Lady Death gives him brujo abilities, seeing and respecting his gender as distinct from his assigned sex. Furthermore, when Austin anonymously harasses Felix and tells him, "You were born a girl. You'll always be a girl" (Callender, 2020, p. 144), Felix knows that is not and has never been a girl. Felix thinks, "It's no one else's right to say who I am, or what I identify as. . . I know [Austin] isn't the only person in the world who would think my identity is based on the gender I was assigned at birth: (Callender, 2020, p. 144). Despite Austin's conflation of sex and gender, Felix knows that his gender identity does not have to align with the one he was assigned at birth to be valid, and he knows that he alone can say what his gender is.

Trans and Gender Expansive History

In several of these novels, the TGE protagonist learns or talks about trans people in history, challenging the idea that trans identities are just a fad. Yadriel had thought he was "the first trans bruja" (Thomas, 2020, p. 183), but Julian tells him "there's no way" (Thomas, 2020, p. 183). Realizing that he is not the first, even if he does not know the names of the trans bruja that came before him, comforts him and makes him feel less "isolated" after being "convinced that he was a one off, an outlier no one knew what to do with" (Thomas, 2020, p. 184). He thinks, "There was no way he was the first, and he wouldn't be the last" (Thomas, 2020, p. 184). When Sasha Masha meets Andre's drag mother, Coco, he sees Coco's "hall of ancestors" (Borinsky, 2020, p. 155), which shows images of queer and trans people from history. Coco tells him, "Just remember, dear. . . People like us, we've been here forever" (Borinsky, 2020, p. 155). Like Yadriel, Sasha

Masha learns that he is not the first person to have questions about his gender. On Tumblr, Felix learns that “trans people used to be considered gods in a bunch of different cultures and religions” (Callender, 2020, p. 149), realizing that trans people can be celebrated rather than othered. By contrast, Pony considers “how hard it was for trans people” (McSmith, 2020, p. 218) in the past, wondering, “How many didn’t transition, living life trapped in bodies that didn’t feel like their own” (McSmith, 2020, p. 149). For Pony, trans people in the past shared his own struggle of not being able to make the changes he wants to see in his body to reflect his identity. In all of these cases, these four TGE protagonists connected to and learned from TGE people in the past, realizing that they are not alone.

Challenging Wrong-Body Discourse

Like Pony, Felix dreamt of being reincarnated and “born a boy” (Callender, 2020, p. 24) before he began to transition; as a child, he had dreams, too, “where I’d be in a different body, the kind of body that society says belongs to men. I’d be so effing happy, but then I would wake up and see that nothing had changed” (Callender, 2020, p. 23). Unlike Pony, however, Felix never explicitly says that his body was “wrong” before he got his chest surgery—he does not imply there is a wrong or right body, but instead discusses the necessity of being seen by others as a man. After he begins to physically transition, he thinks to himself, “In a way, I guess I did experience reincarnation. I’ve started a new life in a new form” (Callender, 2020, p. 25). Further, when his father had asked him if he would still want to be on testosterone if he were isolated, Felix tells him, “But that’s the point. . . I’m *not* on a deserted island. I don’t want people to look at me and decide what my gender is, based on how I look now” (Callender, 2020, p. 147).

Felix's body is not itself wrong; however, his body pre-transition did not align with others' expectations, causing them to not see him for who he is. He does not distinguish between a wrong and right body, but he does want others to see him as a boy—which, for Felix, necessitates medical intervention.

Furthermore, even though Felix did, before beginning his transition process, express a desire for a “different body” (Callender, 2020, p. 23), he does not discuss physically transitioning as a universal desire shared by all TGE people. He describes gender dysphoria as what his doctor “first called the feeling I have when I see myself and I know that I don't look the way that I'm supposed to—the discomfort I used to have, in seeing my hair long and a chest that wasn't flat” (Callender, 2020, p. 172). He does not define gender dysphoria as feeling as though he is in the wrong body, but instead recognizes it as the sense that his gender presentation does not match his identity or desired expression. Felix mentions feeling “lucky” that he was able to get top surgery and recognizes that “not everyone who wants surgery can afford it” (Callender, 2020, p. 25). This comment validates that TGE people may not want gender affirmation procedures—and, simultaneously, does not invalidate the TGE identities of people who want but cannot afford such procedures. Later, Felix expresses not wanting to pursue additional gender affirmation surgery beyond his top surgery: “there are parts that I don't have that most guys do, parts that I don't even want” (Callender, 2020, p. 221). He also stresses that he has “been lucky enough to see most of the changes” (Callender, 2020, p. 172) that he wants to see in his body, emphasizing the focus on how he wants to perceive himself, not a desire to align with a specific image of how a boy looks. Felix knows that his

gender identity is valid, even if he does not want to pursue other forms of gender affirmation surgery.

Validity of Identities Despite Lack of Social Legitimization

Felix expresses pride in being Black and trans, but he also recognizes that the intersection of these identities shapes his life: “I love that I have brown skin. I love that I’m queer, and I love that I’m trans. But sometimes, I can’t help but think how much easier my life would be if I was someone like Austin” (Callender, 2020, p. 155). He does not want to be white and cisgender, but he knows that his life would be “easier” if he was. Additionally, he does not experience social legitimization, specifically because of his intersecting marginalizations:

The love interests in books, or in movies or TV shows, are always white, cis, straight. . . It becomes a little hard, I guess, to convince myself I deserve the kind of love you see on movie screens. . . I guess it just feels like I have one marginalization too many, sometimes. (Callender, 2020, p. 219-220)

Felix is aware of the ways that representation—and lack of social legitimization—make it difficult for him to believe he can be loved, and he ultimately expresses that his marginalizations actually are an asset. After he confront Austin, Felix thinks to himself, “I start to feel a little sorry for Austin. I think of. . . all the different types of people, different genders and ages and races, a quilt of identities that ties us all together. The people he’ll never be able to meet, to learn from and love” (Callender, 2020, p. 323). Felix believes that his own intersecting ideas bring him community and connection, which Austin—a cisgender, white, gay guy—will never get to experience.

Rejecting Gender Binarism

These nine novels expand the narrative of which TGE identities are legitimate or valid. Two of the protagonists are trans men (Pony and Yadriel), two are questioning

their gender (Ellen and Sasha Masha), and the other five protagonists hold expansive gender identities. Flora and Clare are both genderfluid, Quinn is genderqueer, Aleks/Alexis is bigender, and Felix is a demiboy. These five protagonists identify outside the gender binary, going against the transnormative portrayal of binary gender identities as the only legitimate identities.

Validity of Identities Discovered as a Teen

None of the protagonists in these nine novels knew their gender identity as children—indeed, Felix and Aleks/Alexis both realized they were TGE at the age of twelve, while Yadriel, Pony, and Quinn realized at the age of thirteen. Clare is fifteen when she learns she is genderqueer, Sasha Masha is a junior in high school (so around sixteen years old), and Flora’s age is not given, though she is a teen; meanwhile, Ellen has just graduated high school and is actively questioning her gender, and she does not find an answer to her questions before the novel ends. These protagonists’ experiences counter the transnormative narrative that TGE people’s identities are valid if they understood these identities in early childhood (Bradford & Syed, 2019), and Ellen expresses that this narrative invalidates her questions about her gender. Ellen feels as though her gender cannot be valid because “if I don’t know my identity as an absolute fact from birth it must be fake (which I know is not true! But my brain doesn’t listen!)” (Meriano, 2020, p. 232).

Validity of Identities Without Labels

Another way that TGE stories can function as counter narratives is by rejecting the notion that TGE people’s identities are only valid if they have and use a label to express their identities. At a gender identity discussion group at the LGBT Center, Felix

asks the other attendees how “do you even know your gender identity in the first place?” (Callender, 2020, p. 275). Bex, who is leading the discussion and is nonbinary, tells Felix that “some [TGE people] go on questioning forever” which is “okay, too” (Callender, 2020, p. 277); another attendee, an older man named Tom, tells Felix that younger people have “much more space to . . . explore and celebrate themselves” (Callender, 2020, p. 277). Although Felix ultimately finds the label demiboy to communicate his identity, other TGE people tell him that he is allowed to not have a label and to “go on questioning forever” (Callender, 2020, p. 277). Furthermore, Sasha Masha and Ellen alike do not find a label for their identities: Ellen continues questioning whether she might be nonbinary, and Sasha Masha realizes he might be trans, but does not determine exactly what that means for him. Even without having a label to express their identities, Ellen and Sasha Masha both are validated in their identity development processes. Ellen’s friend, Xiumiao, recognizes Ellen’s gender feelings as legitimate, even if Ellen cannot make sense of what her gender feelings mean. Sasha Masha is preparing to tell his parents about Sasha Masha when his novel ends; he thinks, “What did it mean, what did it mean, it didn’t matter” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 224). Sasha Masha knows who he is, even if he does not find a label to fit his identity.

Trans and Gender Expansive Identity as an Asset

Only two of the novels explicitly position trans identity as an asset, pushing back on the transnormative narrative that all TGE people experience ongoing pain and lead tragic lives. Rather than portraying TGE identities as a source of pain, positioning their TGE identities as an asset emphasizes the pride and joy that TGE people can find in their identities. At the end of *Stay Gold*, at the rally that Georgia organizes in support of Pony

after his attack, Pony declares, “I’m going to say something that I have never said before. You’ll be the first to hear it. But not the last. . . I’m proud to be transgender” (McSmith, 2020, p. 357). Pony has felt as though he needs to hide his transness in order to fit in, but, after his attack and after he finds out that many of his peers support him, Pony discovers pride in his trans identity. His transness is no longer something he wants to hide from others, but instead is something that positively affects his self-image.

Felix also expresses pride in his trans identity, though he celebrates and honors his transness throughout *Felix Ever After*. He feels shame in questioning his gender, but he nonetheless feels pride in his trans identity, explicitly saying “I love that I’m trans” (Callender, 2020, p. 155). Felix also says, “I feel like trans folk are superheroes. It’s a little like I’m Peter Parker, bitten by the T-shot, magically going through all these changes—or like Captain America, getting that experimental drug” (Callender, 2020, p. 149). For Felix, his transness makes him feel powerful, equating getting his testosterone shot to gaining superpowers. At the end, Felix reclaims the lobby—the space where Austin put up the gallery—with his own self-portraits, “reflections of who I am, and how I see myself, and how the world should see me too” (Callender, 2020, p. 346). Felix uses his art to change the narrative about him, to celebrate himself and his transness, knowing that he alone “gets to define” who he is (Callender, 2020, p. 350). At the opening of his gallery of self-portraits, he tells his peers,

It could’ve been easy to say I was hurt because I’m trans, because someone singled me out for my identity, but there’s something weird about that—something off, about suggesting that my identity is the thing that brought me any sort of pain. It’s the opposite. Being trans brings me love. It brings me happiness. It gives me power. . . It makes me feel like I’m a god. I wouldn’t change myself for anything. (Callender, 2020, p. 350-351)

Felix's identity is not only a source of pride, but it is a source of joy and love. His transness empowers him.

Another way that TGE identities function as assets in these novels is the way that identity discovery is described as an epiphany, a positive moment of self-discovery. When Flora understands that "she could hold two identities in her heart at once" (Tokuda-Hall, 2020, p. 256), she is finally able to use her magic to repair a mirror; understanding her identity allows her to take control of her magic. Felix experiences two moments of joyful self-discovery. First, when he reads Cris Beam's *I Am J* and learns from the trans protagonist, he feels as though "not only did a lightbulb go off in me, but the sun itself came out from behind these eternal clouds, and everything inside me blazed with the realization: I'm a guy" (Callender, 2020, p. 24). Then, when he finds the word demiboy, he describes feeling a "confidence that spreads through [him]" (Callender, 2020, p. 278), and he wants to "scream it" (Callender, 2020, p. 278) and share his new sense of self with everyone. Pony, too, has a moment of realization where "everything clicked into place" (McSmith, 2020, p. 16) that felt both "unbelievably exciting and absolutely terrifying" (McSmith, 2020, p. 16). Pony's moment of discovery may scare him, but he also finds comfort in understanding who he is. Though Sasha Masha does not have a moment where he fully understands himself and his TGE identity, he does realize that, "Suddenly I wasn't in a rush to tell everyone I knew about Sasha Masha, because I woke up knowing that Sasha Masha was me. Simple as that" (Borinsky, 2020, p. 214). Sasha Masha no longer seeks external validation because he knows who he is, finding peace in having this sense of self-understanding.

Additionally, allies are portrayed in multiple novels as parts of support systems that help TGE people feel accepted, rather than as necessary saviors for TGE people who will otherwise lead tragic and isolated lives. Yadriel's best friend and cousin, Maritza, helps him conduct his own quinces so he can prove his identity to his family. Julian also acts as any ally, scratching out Yadriel's deadname in his yearbook and keeping guard so that Yadriel can use the boys' bathroom at school safely, all without requiring Yadriel educate him about transness. Ezra, Felix's best friend, calls out Marisol's transphobia and refuses to be her friend, while Leah learns, over the course of *Felix Ever After*, how to support Felix, eventually calling out Austin for his harassment of Felix once she learns what Austin did. Lloyd calls out another camper for deadnaming Valerie in second Brume, and Timmy tries to fight the men who laugh at Sasha Masha for wearing a dress. In these novels, allies act to support the TGE people in their lives, directly challenging transphobia and working to protect TGE people from harm. They do not seek or receive commendation for their allyship and instead function as parts of a support system as TGE protagonists come to understand their identities as assets.

Resilience

These novels also offer different representations of TGE youths' experiences of and strategies for resilience. According to Wagaman et al. (2019), the indicators of resilience among TGE youth are a sense of belonging and acceptance, a shift in personal expectations, knowing that personal growth is active and ongoing, and connections to other TGE people who demonstrate that it is possible to be both trans and happy. Pony experiences a sense of belonging and acceptance at the rally held by his peers and school administration after his attack, which helps him feel "proud to be transgender" (McSmith,

2020, p. 357) for the first time. Yadriel's expectations shift, from expecting his family to completely accept him to now knowing that he is not "alone" (Thomas, 2020, p. 342) in facing transphobia. Aleks/Alexis recognizes that they will continue to grow and change as a person, including in their identity. Michelle and Taylor demonstrate to Sasha Masha and Clare, respectively, that they can be TGE and experience joy and acceptance. These protagonists all demonstrate an indicator of resilience, though no protagonist demonstrates multiple indicators.

Hillier et al. (2019) outline seven strategies of resilience: "avoiding, ignoring, selectively sharing, teaching and advocating, arguing and fighting, seeking support, and making changes" (p. 7). These strategies can be seen among the protagonists of these novels: Aleks/Alexis selectively shares their TGE identity to protect themselves; Pony wants to be like his friend Max and begin to educate others about TGE people's needs; Felix and Sasha Masha both seek support through gender identity discussion groups; Yadriel avoids situations where he thinks he might be harassed, such as the boy's bathroom; and Quinn ignores transphobia rather than bringing transphobic attention their way.

Discussion

Models of Identity Development

In representing TGE identity development, five of the novels reflect a dynamical systems theory, wherein TGE youth participate in ongoing self-creation: Felix, Sasha Masha, Clare, Flora, and Aleks/Alexis all hold a different gender identity than the one they held at the beginning of their novels. Furthermore, none of these characters' understandings of their gender preclude finding or defining a new identity after the end of

their novels, either. Indeed, Aleks/Alexis recognizes that their new experience of gender “would change eventually” (Siegert, 2020, p. 249), and that, although they do not know how to label their new experience, “it was us” (Siegert, 2020, p. 249). They only need to know that how they feel in the moment is as legitimate as how they felt before and how they will feel in the future. Aleks/Alexis—like Felix, Sasha Masha, Clare, and Flora—experiences ongoing gender identity creation, leaving open the possibility that how they define and relate to their gender identity may change again in the future. This aligns with a dynamical systems theory of gender identity, as these protagonists do not hold a single, static identity and instead are open to ongoing change and growth as they better understand themselves (Diamond et al., 2011).

However, even the protagonists whose gender identities remain the same over the course of their stories—Yadriel, Pony, and Quinn—do not all necessarily align with the conceptualization of trans identity development as having a finite end of gender affirmation surgery (Devor, 2004). Neither Yadriel nor Quinn express a desire for medical intervention to realize their gender identities, rejecting the notion that TGE people require gender affirmation surgery in order to be themselves. Pony, by contrast, does explicitly want gender affirmation surgery as a “solution” (McSmith, 2020, p. 55) to his dysphoria, implying that surgical intervention will allow him to fully realize his gender identity. Even the protagonists who do not align with Diamond et al.’s (2011) dynamical systems theory of TGE identity development do not necessarily adhere to the notion that TGE people’s identity development ends when they receive gender affirmation surgery (Devor, 2004). Instead, Yadriel and Quinn challenge this binary between iterative identity creation and finite gender realization through medical

intervention, opening up further possibilities wherein TGE people do not need to reach a transition threshold or milestone for their identities to be valid.

Looking instead to Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) common experiences (pressure to hide identity, necessity of hearing other trans people's narratives, role of language in identity development, balancing safety and identity, and anxiety over victimization), we see these reflected explicitly across the novels included for analysis. However, as Levitt and Ippolito emphasize, these are common, not universal experiences. Although many TGE youth may share these experiences, not all of them do—which is also reflected in these novels, where no two protagonists share identical experiences.

Aleks/Alexis is pressured by their aunt to hide their boy-self and by their cosplay friends to hide their girl-self, while Clare similarly feels pressured to hide their genderfluid identity in order to feel respected by her peers. Furthermore, knowing and learning from other TGE people is critical for the identity development of four of the protagonists: Felix realizes he's trans after reading a novel with a trans protagonist; Pony discovers his identity after learning about Caitlyn Jenner's transition; Clare begins to explore her gender identity after meeting Taylor, a nonbinary classmate; Sasha Masha begins to realize he's trans after meeting Michelle, another trans teen; and Yadriel decides to wear his binder to school for the first time because of Flaca's "fearlessness" (Thomas, 2020, p. 146). The pursuit of labels as a way to communicate their identity—with Felix's journey to finding the label demiboy and Clare's final determination she is genderfluid—as well as the use of names as a vital form of self-definition speak to the critical role of language in gender identity formation. Additionally, multiple protagonists have to find a balance between "authenticity and necessity" (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p.

1743): Aleks/Alexis, Pony, Flora, Clare, and Quinn all work to figure out how they can be true to themselves while maintaining their sense of safety and belonging in the face of transphobia. Finally, multiple protagonists experience fear of victimization by violent transphobia—as Felix does after Austin begins to harass him, as Aleks/Alexis does after their assault, as Pony does after he was harassed in the boy’s bathroom at his previous school, as Quinn does in second and third Brumes, and as Sasha Masha does when strangers laugh at him for wearing a dress.

Because no two protagonists share identical identity development journeys, these novels expand the narrative about how TGE youth discover and explore their identities. These protagonists share some common experiences, but their journeys of self-discovery are highly individual, challenging the idea that TGE identities are rooted in the same experiences, or that only TGE people who share certain experiences are valid in their identities.

Dominant Narratives

In depicting the dominant narratives of cisnormativity and transnormativity, these novels by turn perpetuate and challenge these dominant narratives about TGE youth.

Cisnormativity

Across these novels, different dimensions of cisnormativity are perpetuated, either through the protagonists internalizing or not explicitly refuting these dimensions. The depiction of TGE people as tricking cisgender people by not disclosing their transness is a dimension of cisnormativity that appears in both these capacities: Aleks/Alexis, Flora, and Quinn all believe that they have lied to their loved ones by not disclosing their TGE identity to them and allowing them to believe that they are cisgender, while Pony does

not argue with Georgia when she asserts that he has “tricked” her (McSmith, 2020, p. 151) by not telling her he was trans earlier in their still new friendship. Both capacities perpetuate the notion that TGE people owe cisgender people an explanation of their identity, even when they do not know or trust the cisgender people around them. In a society where TGE people face increased risk of violence, harassment, and exclusion due to systemic transphobia, TGE people often choose to pass as cisgender in order to preserve their own safety and mental health. By perpetuating the narrative that TGE people are deceptive and dishonest when they choose to pass (and that this dishonesty is grounds for excluding TGE people, as Georgia chooses to ignore and ostracize Pony as a friend after accusing him of lying) these novels also perpetuate the dominant narrative that TGE people who choose their own safety over the comfort and curiosity of cisgender people deserve violence and exclusion.

Similarly, Pony internalizes aversion to TGE people, another dimension of cishnormativity that is manifested as violence, exclusion, deadnaming, and misgendering. When his attackers are arrested, Pony experiences “guilt” because he believes it is his “fault” (McSmith, 2020, p. 329) that they are in jail—rather than recognizing their arrest as their fault for attacking him, he believes that his attackers are innocent, implying that he somehow deserved violence because of his transness. By claiming guilt for his attackers’ punishment and, thus, for his attack, Pony perpetuates the narrative that violent transphobia is excusable, if not justifiable. Furthermore, when Georgia considers outing Pony as a form of revenge—a choice that is taken from her when she is interrupted—this form of exclusion is also justified. Georgia never addresses her desire to out Pony as retaliation, which she believes at the time will ostracize him; because she does not

address the malicious desire to expose Pony to exclusion and violence, *Stay Gold* normalizes this course of action. Outing Pony and exposing him to violent transphobia is excusable, perpetuating the idea that trans people deserve transphobia.

By contrast, however, aversion to TGE people is largely refuted by other TGE protagonists as they experience exclusion, violence, deadnaming, and misgendering. Felix does not excuse his father's, Marisol's, Austin's, or James's aversion to his transness, refuting their claims to innocence and asserting his right to be respected in his transness. Furthermore, although Pony's dad deadnames and misgenders him throughout the novel, Pony ultimately recognizes that his dad "is a bully" (McSmith, 2020, p. 332) and that his aversion to Pony's transness is inexcusable. Yadriel, too, knows that his family's ongoing deadnaming and misgendering are not somehow his fault and that he "deserved to be angry" (Thomas, 2020, p. 135) and that he does not "have to absolve people of their guilt" (Thomas, 2020, p. 136). Like Yadriel, Aleks/Alexis also understands that they do not have to "forgive" (Siegert, 2020, p. 71) their former friends who invalidated their gender identity and crossed their boundaries. By giving these protagonists space to hold their anger, to prioritize their own needs over the guilt of cisgender characters, and to confront bigotry, these novels challenge the idea that TGE people deserve transphobia. These TGE protagonists are entitled to their anger and to demanding that their gender identity be respected by the people around them.

Another dimension of cisnormativity is the fetishization of TGE people, which Aleks/Alexis both desires and resents. Aleks enjoys being viewed as a "beautiful boy" (Siegert, 2020, p. 149), as a sexual object by his cosplay friends, but this same sexualization leads his friends to think he is not allowed to say no to sexual advances.

Aleks/Alexis struggles with a desire to feel validated and desired in their transness while still wanting to be respected as a person, not a sexual object. Ultimately, they recognize that they are entitled to consent and are allowed to change their mind, and also that they are valid even without their former friends' sexual attention and validation.

Aleks/Alexis's wish to be sexual and be respected not only in their transness but in their personhood rejects the idea that TGE people are only valid when they can be fetishized; Aleks/Alexis is allowed to enjoy their sexuality while still being viewed as a whole person, rather than being reduced to their ability to be fetishized by the cisgender people around them.

Transnormativity

Like cisnormativity, the TGE protagonists of the novels included for analysis by turns internalize, perpetuate, and refute various dimensions of transnormativity. A manifestation of social legitimization is Aleks/Alexis's restrictive eating habits as an effort to minimize their curves and pass as a boy; this desire to pass, to the point of developing unhealthy eating and exercise habits, is a quest for social legitimization for their boy-self. In choosing to give up this relationship with food and their body, though, they pursue social legitimization by hoping to pass as a boy who carries weight in his stomach, rather than giving up their desire to pass at all. For Aleks/Alexis, social legitimization of their boy-self is still the goal when they present as Aleks, supporting the narrative that TGE people must match a particular image of transness to be valid.

Both Pony and Quinn perpetuate wrong-body discourse, another dimension of transnormativity: Pony explicitly describes himself as being "born in the wrong body" (McSmith, 2020, p. 332), while Quinn describes another trans character as "clearly not. . .

anatomically female at birth but . . . working to fix that” (Brewer, 2020, p. 92-93). In their description of trans people as having the wrong body, Pony and Quinn have support the narrative that TGE identities are the result of a defect or a malady that necessitates medical intervention. This perspective in these novels depicts TGE identities as unnatural, representing them as biologically abnormal and a mistake that must be corrected.

Similarly, by discussing gender dysphoria as a universal experience for trans people—even if their experience of it “varies” (McSmith, 2020, p. 54)—*Stay Gold* ignores the existence of TGE people who do not discuss gender dysphoria as all. Leaning into this narrative of gender dysphoria as a universal experience invalidates TGE people who do not share this experience. In attempting to conform to masculinity, Quinn in third Brume and Pony play into the transnormative narrative that TGE people are valid only if they align with conventional gender norms.

Another dimension of transnormativity seen in these novels is the depiction of tragedy as a universal TGE experience, seen most starkly in the portrayal of transphobic violence as inevitable in *Stay Gold* and happiness and acceptance as unattainable in *Into the Real*. The emphasis on risks associated with transphobia—which are discussed as risks of being trans—in *Stay Gold* equates being TGE with facing violence, exclusion, and other forms of transphobia, as well as experiencing mental illness. In *Into the Real*, Quinn can only choose whether to be true to themselves in deciding which reality to live in—they cannot escape the prevalence of monsters, only which type of monster they face. They choose a world where they are “free” (Brewer, 2020, p. 322) to be genderqueer, but where they are too focused on survival to consider their gender; this is their greatest

chance at happiness, a world where their gender is legitimate but only because everyone around them has to spend too much time working to survive to be capable of transphobia. The elevation of this as the best option available to Quinn depicts TGE people's lives as being inescapably painful, with no opportunity to be happy, only to be true to their gender identity. In both these novels, then, TGE people can choose to be safe or to be true to themselves, but they cannot be happy.

Counter Narratives

This set of novels also functions as counter narratives by showing possibilities for TGE identities and experiences that do not follow the dominant narratives of cisnormativity and transnormativity.

Pony, Yadriel, and Felix all reject the conflation of sex and gender, asserting that their gender identities are valid despite the cisnormative expectation that someone hold the same gender they were assigned at birth based on their anatomy. By challenging the idea that anatomy determines gender, these protagonists legitimize transness and validate TGE identities.

In explicitly discussing his body without ever referring to it as wrong or requiring fixing, Felix expands the narrative about TGE expressions, normalizing TGE people who do not want to physically transition or seek out medical intervention. This also normalizes and validates TGE people who are only interested in some forms of gender affirmation care, even if that means they go against the transnormative narrative that TGE people should want to look cisgender. He moves beyond wrong-body discourse when expressing his need to physically transition to affirm his gender, challenging the idea that his transness is a defect or an abnormality.

Felix does not experience social legitimization because of the intersection of his identities as Black, trans, and queer. However, he disproves his own fear that he will never experience love because he does not look like popular cultural love interests—he finds love with his closest friend, Ezra, after realizing he was pursuing people who would never love him. Felix does not experience social legitimization, but he recognizes the validity of his identity regardless—and knows that he is valuable as a person and a love interest. In addressing the fact that he does not see people like himself in popular media, Felix expands on the image of what transness can and does look like to include trans people who are not white and who are queer.

Five protagonists identify beyond the gender binary and undermine gender binarism, a dimension of transnormativity: Felix is a demiboy, Flora and Clare are genderfluid, Quinn is genderqueer, and Aleks/Alexis is bigender. These five protagonists offer different perspectives on some of the many possible gender expansive identities, showing that a wide range of identities are valid. Indeed, this reflects a recent survey by the Trevor Project (2021), which suggests that gender expansive identities are more widely held than was previously understood, with 26% of LGBTQ+ youth identifying somewhere under the nonbinary umbrella. These stories, like gender expansive youth, reject gender binarism, and legitimize the wide range of identities held by gender expansive teens.

Furthermore, these novels also expand depictions of which TGE identities are valid to include TGE people who discover their identities after early childhood and TGE people who not have a label to communicate their identities. None of the protagonists knew their gender since early childhood, despite the narrative that TGE people must

know their gender from a young age; in this representation, these protagonists actually reflect the literature rather than transnormativity, since many TGE people learn they are not cisgender and begin to make sense of their gender after childhood (Bradford & Syed, 2019).

Several of these novels depict TGE identity as an asset, challenging the deficit narrative that TGE people resent their gender identity or suffer because of their transness. By showing that TGE people can find not only pride in their transness, but can also find joy and strength through it, *Felix Ever After* in particular shows that a positive self-image can be rooted in—not developed despite—a TGE identity. TGE people can find strength, happiness, positive self-worth, and other positive understandings of themselves when they value their TGE identity as an integral part of who they are and how they move through the world. Embracing a TGE identity functions as an asset for youth by supporting their development and promoting a positive self-image.

These novels also depict TGE protagonists exhibiting different strategies and themes of resilience. Indeed, these protagonists all survive, if not thrive, in the face of different manifestations of transphobia, showing the many different ways that TGE youth can flourish within a transphobic world. These protagonists demonstrate the different means of resilience that can support TGE readers as they navigate transphobia in their own lives, challenging the idea that TGE youth have to be limited by the transphobia they face.

Finally, these novels also function as counter narratives by showing that TGE people existed in the past, challenging the narrative that TGE identities are new or just a trend. Because these novels portray TGE people as historical, too, they legitimize TGE

identities and validate them as an ongoing mode of expression. Though TGE identities would be legitimate even if they were entirely new, these identities are rooted in the past, and showing TGE youth that people like them existed in the past, too, offers them a history that includes and reflects them.

Absence of a Dominant Narrative is Not a Counter Narrative

Although many dimensions of cisnormativity and transnormativity are explicitly addressed, perpetuated, and challenged by these novels, there are also dimensions that are absent from these novels. Though the absence of a dominant narrative does not actively perpetuate that narrative, it also does not dispel it or expand on it, passively maintaining space for that dominant narrative to continue shaping popular understanding of TGE youth. In this way, the absence of a dominant narrative is not the same as a counter narrative. There are multiple common themes and experiences, as well as dimensions of transnormativity and cisnormativity, that are not addressed in most of the novels included for analysis.

A dimension of cisnormativity that is absent from most of these novels is the pathologization of TGE identities, or the portrayal of TGE identity as stemming from mental illness, such as gender dysphoria. None of the novels included for analysis portrayed TGE identities as rooted in mental illness—but none of them explicitly address or reject this dominant narrative, either.

Similarly, the relationship between social legitimization, or the validation of TGE people when their identities and expressions match an established norm, and racial identity is only addressed by Felix, who has to overcome his internalized fear that he does not deserve love because he does not see people like him falling in love in popular media.

Five of the protagonists are white: Pony, Sasha Masha, Clare, and Quinn are explicitly white, while Aleks/Alexis is Russian Jewish; although Aleks/Alexis is described as having olive skin, their skin tone is not discussed as precluding them from whiteness, and, because whiteness is the default in the U.S., I will include them as a white protagonist for the purpose of this analysis.

None of these characters address or suggest a connection between their whiteness as a privilege and whether they experience social legitimization of their TGE identities, although the literature suggests that white TGE youth are more likely to experience social legitimization because popular media is more likely to show TGE people who are white (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Sasha Masha is the only white protagonist who addresses his race at all, recognizing that his whiteness allows him to pursue invisibility, which is impossible for his friend Tracy, who is Black. However, recognizing white privilege in this context is not the same as recognizing the role white privilege has on having his gender identity more readily validated or accepted. Because none of the white protagonists of these novels address the relationship between white privilege and mechanisms of identity legitimization, these novels maintain whiteness as the norm. Although transnormativity overwhelmingly portrays TGE people, and especially people with gender expansive or nonbinary identities, as white, the white TGE protagonists do not recognize the influence of their whiteness on how their gender identity is legitimized, ignoring the ways that white privilege supports the validation of their gender identity.

Flipping this, four of the TGE protagonists are Black or people of color: Flora and Felix are both Black, and Yadriel and Ellen are Latinx. Felix is the only protagonist, across the nine novels, who addresses a connection between his gender and racial

identity, expressing a sense that he has “one marginalization too many” (Callender, 2020, p. 220). However, it is not the responsibility of BIPOC characters to actively address and challenge racist transnormativity as a mechanism of exclusion and invalidation of their identities. Unlike white protagonists’ silence, which cannot function as a counter narrative, the existence of BIPOC TGE people can, in and of itself, push back on the dominant narrative that TGE youth are white. By showing TGE characters who are not white—and who have different relationships to their racial and ethnic identities—these novels offer an expanded image of who can be TGE. Like Felix, Yadriel has a positive sense of identity as a brujo, which connects his racial, cultural, and gender identities as an asset; Ellen struggles with feeling as though she is not Latina enough to claim her identity; and Flora’s Black skin marks her as other, as part of the colonized rather than a colonizer in her fantasy setting. By showing TGE characters who hold different racial and ethnic identities, and relate to and understand their identities differently, these novels act as a source of social legitimization themselves, offering BIPOC TGE readers affirmation that their identities are valid. These novels show that TGE people do not always resemble mainstream media, but their identities are legitimate nonetheless; in this way, then, even though these novels do not explicitly address social legitimization, the Black and Latinx identities of these protagonists do position these novels as counter narratives.

Additionally, activism as a source of affirmation and positive identity for TGE youth is not reflected in these novels. TGE people often experience affirmation of their identities and create a positive perspective on their trans identity through activism and social justice involvement (Wagaman et al., 2019). However, this theme is not reflected in any of the nine novels included for analysis, and none of these TGE protagonists are

involved in activist efforts or organizing. This absence supports a narrative where TGE identity development and positive development happen on an individual, rather than collective, level, and also avoids recognizing the ways that systemic transphobia, rather than individual experiences of transphobia, creates ongoing harm faced by many TGE youth. The protagonists of these novels find a personal sense of empowerment, but they do not find or pursue collective empowerment, placing identity development within the individual rather than recognizing the potential of youth organizing for identity development. Youth organizing and a focus on the collective as a way to understand systemic oppression can support social justice youth development, which may help youth externalize blame for their experiences and challenge systems of oppression (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Problematizing #OwnVoices for LGBTQ+ Stories

When I began conceptualizing my research questions, I wanted to explore which titles are #OwnVoices—meaning the author shares a marginalized identity with the protagonist, or, in this instance, the author is TGE. However, I ultimately decided not to prioritize this lens of analysis. Using #OwnVoices as a lens for deciding which works to include in a library collection, for instance, can privilege the voices of TGE authors who feel safe sharing their TGE identity publicly. With LGBTQ+ identities, including TGE identities, requiring people to announce their identity or identities hyper-publicly can violate their sense of safety. Out of respect for the privacy of LGBTQ+ authors who may not feel comfortable sharing—or just may not want to share—their identities with readers, I decided not to use #OwnVoices as a lens of analysis.

However, I will mention, that of the nine novels included for analysis, four of the authors publicly hold a TGE identity: Kacen Callender, the author of *Felix Ever After*; Aiden Thomas, the author of *Cemetery Boys*; Tobly McSmith, the author of *Stay Gold*; and Z Brewer, the author of *Into the Real*. I want to mention the #OwnVoices nature of these works largely to point out that #OwnVoices cannot be used as a shortcut for determining if or how a story functions as a counter narrative. Both *Stay Gold* and *Into the Real* perpetuate the narrative that TGE stories are universally stories of pain or trauma. Though these novels do have elements of counter narratives—Pony finds pride in his trans identity, and Quinn is genderqueer, a gender identity that is often regarded as invalid or fake—both perpetuate multiple elements of the dominant narrative about TGE people. Because #OwnVoices is often used as a metric of authenticity and, thus, quality, the use of this label can obscure the fact that both *Stay Gold* and *Into the Real* perpetuate some deficit narratives about TGE people and their experiences.

Deadnaming on Page

Deadnaming is one manifestation of aversion to TGE people that causes psychological and emotional harm to TGE people. In the nine novels included for analysis, multiple characters are deadnamed by other characters: Felix, Yadriel, and Pony are deadnamed, as is Valerie, a trans secondary character in *Into the Real*. In *Felix Ever After* and *Cemetery Boys*, although Felix and Yadriel are deadnamed, their deadnames do not appear on page. By contrast, in *Stay Gold* and *Into the Real*, Pony and Valerie's deadnames are on the page; rather than cutting off the character speaking to say they used the TGE character's deadname, as happens in *Felix Ever After* and *Cemetery Boys*, these novels put the characters' deadnames on the page.

Media guidelines put out by LGBTQ+ advocacy groups urge journalists not to deadname TGE people featured in news stories: GLAAD, for instance, recommends, “Do not reveal a transgender person's birth name without explicit permission from them. If the person is not able to answer questions about their birth name, err on the side of caution and do not reveal it” (n.d.). Though best practices from journalism do not neatly map onto fiction writing, GLAAD’s recommendation speaks to the harm caused by deadnaming a TGE person. Putting a person’s deadname on the page rather than generally referring to its existence may cause harm to TGE readers, who may not want to vicariously experience explicit deadnaming when they already have to face it; additionally, without addressing the harms of deadnaming, these novels do not explain why this practice causes harm. When Pony’s father deadnames him to Georgia, she allows it to slide without telling him that what he has done is wrong; when Collins deadnames Valerie, another character corrects him, but the harm is not addressed further. By putting these TGE characters’ deadnames on the page without acting to explain why deadnaming is wrong, these novels—even unintentionally—excuse the practice and perpetuate a focus on TGE people’s birth names over their chosen names.

Limitations and Future Research

Because of the methods I used to determine which novels matched my criteria for inclusion, it is possible that there are novels that fit my criteria but which I did not come across in my research. Additionally, my criteria intentionally excluded novels with a TGE protagonist, if there were more cisgender protagonists than TGE protagonists, which means that not all novels featuring a prominent TGE perspective were included for analysis. Furthermore, this content analysis does not aim to make generalizable claims

about TGE representation in mainstream YA novels in the U.S.; this analysis is specific to these nine novels and does not speak to trends, shifts, or themes over time.

One possibility for future research is to compare the representation of TGNC protagonists with representation of TGNC secondary characters, to determine if there are differences in how TGE people and their identities and experiences are depicted when they are shown through the lens of a cisgender protagonist's perspective. Another possibility is to mimic the form of this content analysis to look at TGE representation in mainstream YA novels published in the U.S. in 2021. According to Ray Stoeve's YA/MG Trans & Nonbinary Voices Masterlist, there are thirteen YA novels with TGE protagonists published by mainstream U.S. publishers that will be published before the end of 2021 that were written by TGE authors. This number does not include novels whose authors are cisgender or are not publicly out as TGE, meaning that the number of titles that would fit the criteria I used for this content analysis that will have come out by end of 2021 is likely even higher. Because there are more TGE protagonists depicted in YA novels in 2021 than there were in 2020 or prior years, 2021 titles may offer a wider range of representation and greater insight into the use of dominant and counter narratives in TGE YA storytelling.

Another research possibility is looking at the impact of genre on the TGE stories told. Of the nine novels included for analysis, seven are realistic fiction, while *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* is fantasy and *Into the Real* bridges fantasy and dystopian fiction. Though I do not have the data to make generalizations, it stands out to me that none of the YA novels from mainstream U.S. publishers with TGE primary

characters are science fiction—meaning that none of these novels show TGE people living in the future.

An additional possibility for future research is tracking the TGE identities depicted in YA literature over a period of time. In the nine novels included for analysis, there were no trans girl protagonists. Though I do not have the data to determine whether this gap is part of a trend in mainstream YA publishing in the U.S., Malinda Lo’s analysis of LGBTQ+ representation in YA books shows that, in 2017, there were four YA novels from mainstream U.S. publishers with a transgender girl as a protagonist (Lo, 2017), but no such novels published in 2018 with a trans girl as the primary protagonist (Lo, 2019). This indicates that, even though TGE stories are being published at higher rates, there are still gaps in whose stories are told—and raises the question of why trans girls are not primary protagonists as often as trans boys and gender expansive characters have been in recent years.

Conclusion

Coco, Andre’s drag mother, tells Sasha Masha and Andre that he questions the value of representation and visibility:

Representation is chump change, darling! I’m sorry to break it to you. People who hold power don’t like to put themselves at risk. . . I’ve had my heart broken too many times to think that visibility changes everything. I don’t think it changes who steps up and who stands back. Where were the white cis faggots at Stonewall? And where are they now, with Black and Brown trans sisters getting murdered in the dozens? For some people, visibility is about saving a life. And for other people, it’s about making things more comfortable. But again, my dears, it’s not about comfort. Safety, yes, please. But comfort? Comfort is overrated. (Borinsky, 2020, p. 152-153)

Coco is a queer elder who has seen increases in representation and visibility, but he does not believe this inherently benefits queer people because representation is not the same as

action. Visibility can make people “comfortable” living under systems of oppression and lead to complacency, especially among people with privilege who may be unwilling to risk losing their own power. Cisgender readers may see trans representation and feel that enough has been done to challenge transphobia; similarly, white trans readers may see themselves reflected in the pages of a book and become comfortable within a transphobic society, rather than fighting to end the violence that disproportionately impacts Black and Indigenous trans women and trans women of color. Rather than commending representation as a good in and of itself, Coco believes that queer people “have a chance to build something totally different, we who live differently, who see that the way things are isn’t the way they have to be” (Borinsky, 2020, p. 151).

TGE stories can function, as Sims-Bishops states, as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. They can reflect and affirm TGE readers, and they can show all readers different experiences and possibilities and expand their understanding of the world. Although these functions are all crucial, they do not replace action, as Coco points out. TGE stories within a library collection can save a life—however, a library collection, no matter how thoughtfully and intentionally curated, can still promote comfort rather than create change. Even a collection of counter narratives cannot replace the work of amplifying the voices of TGE teens, challenging bigotry within the library and the community more broadly, and advocating for TGE community members.

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