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EUTOPIAN IMPULSE AND REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ+ ADOLESCENTS IN
CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN, FRENCH, AND BRITISH YOUNG ADULT FICTION

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**Eutopian Impulse and Representation of LGBTQ+ Adolescents
in Contemporary Italian, French, and British
Young Adult Fiction**

‘When I began this research over a decade ago, I wasn’t entirely conscious of how queer YA was serving as a kind of wish fulfillment for me, a means of both animating and grieving the gay adolescence I never lived, spent, as it was, deep in the closet. [...] Indeed, as I sought to be repaired by the objects of my study, I often connected—unconsciously or otherwise—with those protagonists who most closely resembled me: White, cis male, middle-class, gay. It is a privilege to have access to those mirrors that many others lack.’

Derritt Mason

‘We can be activists; writing is activism. Whether it is a letter to complain to a publisher, a book review in a magazine, a thank-you note to an author, a short story, a novel, a critical essay or an academic book - we are helping to queer literature with every word we write. I hope we all pick up our pens and help literature to show that the queer kids indeed are all right.’

B. J. Woodstein

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Queer YA studies and Utopian studies: the union of two research strands	7
1.1. The representation of queer adolescence in Young Adult novels	7
1.2. The <i>utopian impulse</i> from Ernst Bloch to Tom Moylan	25
1.3. Quality of representation and eutopian impulse intensity: inverse proportionality and Queertopia	41
2. Flawed queer teenagers. Analysis of the Italian sub-corpus	53
2.1. <i>Colpo su colpo</i> : a portrait of a lesbophobic society	54
2.2. <i>Con le ali sbagliate</i> : the queerphobic side of (Catholic) religion	79
2.3. <i>Un'Alice come un'altra</i> : an Italian YA portrait of trans adolescence	100
3. Teenagers in the community. Analysis of the British sub-corpus	119
3.1. <i>Loveless</i> : asexuality and the queer community	119
3.2. <i>Boy Queen</i> : drag queen world and protective community	140
3.3. <i>Ace of Spades</i> : a queer dystopian thriller	159
4. Queer adolescents in emancipation. Analysis of the French sub-corpus	183
4.1. <i>It</i> : to become or to be oneself?	184
4.2. <i>Romance</i> : emancipation and heartbreak	200
4.3. <i>Apprivoiser l'été</i> : the road to Queertopia	212
Conclusion	231
Bibliography	239
Online resources	244
Artwork	245
Ringraziamenti	246

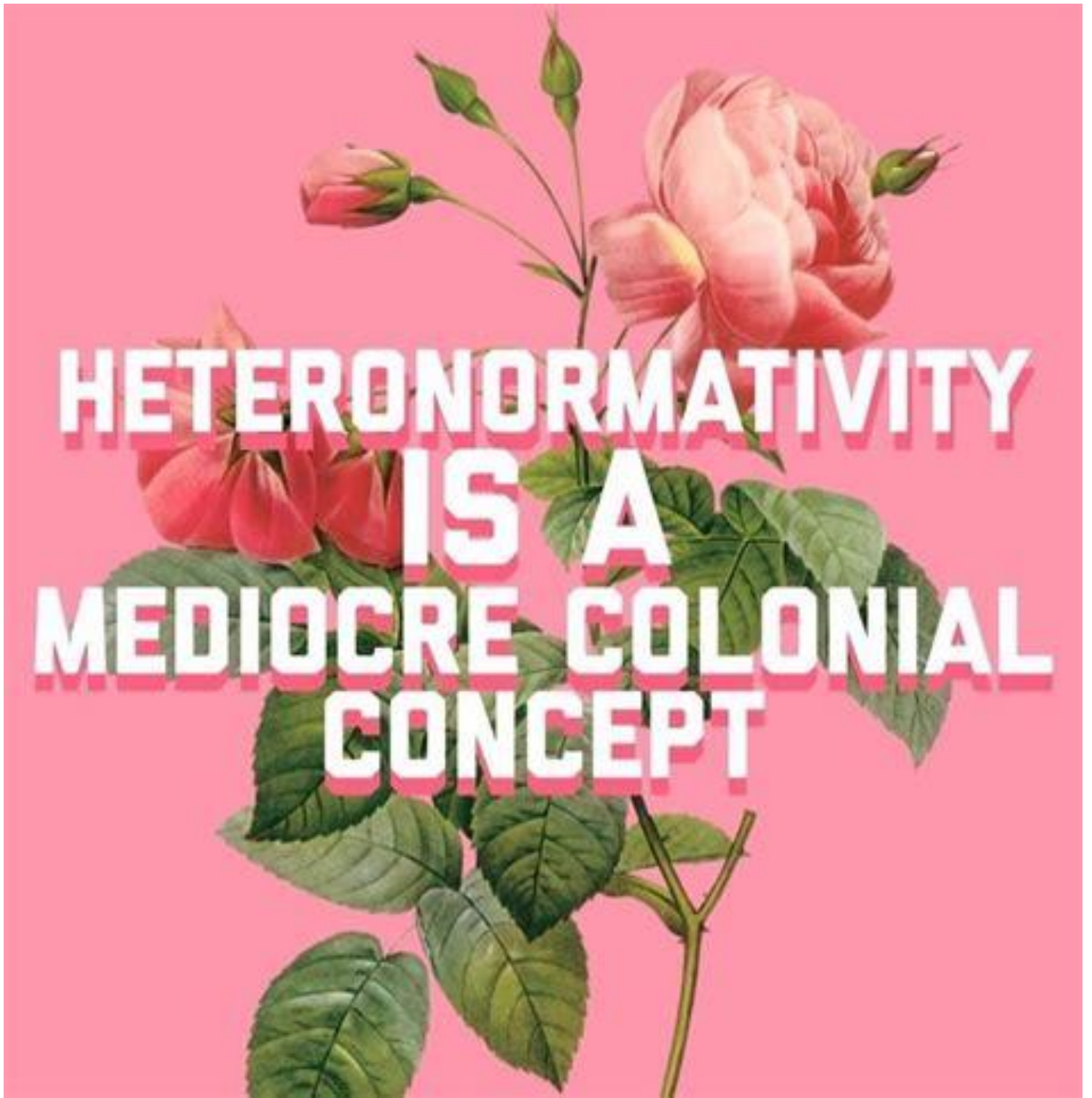


Figure 1

Introduction

Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, two psychiatrists working in the field of childhood and adolescence, published an essay in 2003 entitled *Les passions tristes. Souffrance psychique et crise sociale*. The authors suggest that, at the dawn of the third millennium, the collective vision of the future shifted drastically from a promising to a threatening one.¹ This leads to the era of ‘sad passions’ in which we currently live. Schmit and Benasayag argue that this era is the result of a series of global economic and climatic crises that have cast a bleak and troubling shadow over the future, rendering society incapable of promising new generations, namely adolescents, a fulfilling future. This pessimistic and brutal view of the present and particularly the future can be linked to the concept of dystopia. This recent change in the collective imagination has had a significant international impact on contemporary youth literature, given its widespread recurrence in writings intended for this age group.² Natural disasters, deadly viruses, misanthropic technologies, apocalypses are some of the distressing scenarios that commonly populate this genre, leaving no room for its antithesis, utopia.

Within the framework of our era of ‘sad passions,’ where can one find utopia in contemporary young adult fiction? Is there still an ideal place under which countless promises of permanent happiness have emerged throughout history? What function does utopia serve? How is it expressed? To question what is utopian in certain corners of recent European literature for adolescents, conceived and published during the transitional period from climate change to climatic boiling, is to understand the philosophical and (inevitably) political positioning of the authors of these books through the vision of adolescents developed in their novels. It is an effort to identify the message of hope they wish to convey through their writing, and the call to action they address to the young adults who read their novels.

An important contribution to the philosophical and literary history of the concept of utopia is *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*

¹ Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, trans. Eleonora Missana (Feltrinelli, 2005), 40.

² Nicola Galli Laforest, *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini: nuove distopie*, in *Hamelin* 43 (2016).

by Tom Moylan, Professor Emeritus at the University of Limerick in Ireland and founder of the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies at the same institution. The study is a watershed in the history of utopian criticism as it proposes a radical shift in the vision of the concept of utopia compared to the past. With Moylan's study, utopia is no longer viewed as a place, but as a glimmer of hope, a faint image of a future preferable to the present, a possibility for a better world. It is this concise, yet precise idea of utopia articulated by Moylan that I will explore in YA novels in this thesis.

There is a diverse range of genres in adolescent novels, however queer YA literature not only remains a little-explored genre, but the notion of utopia is also particularly present in these novels. However, equally present is a more problematic element; the discrimination that queer adolescents endure. These two elements; the presence of utopian themes and narratives and incidents of queerphobia are central to the methodology of this thesis, functioning as two opposing poles in the literary analysis.

I chose to analyse Queer YA novels from three countries, Italy, UK, and France. As a background to my subsequent literary investigation, I examined the state of LGBTQ+³ civil rights in Europe. Among the three reference countries, France and the UK have a more advanced socio-legislative situation, while Italy lags behind, ranking towards the bottom of countries in Europe.

The examination of utopian and queer criticism proved fundamental in providing me with the tools and insights necessary to understand how the idea of utopia in these novels was intrinsically linked to the modes of representation of queer adolescents. Subsequently, it became increasingly clear that the relationship between these two fields of study (utopianism and Queer YA literature) was central to this exciting and original investigation which would provide examples of how contemporary Italian, British, and French authors of queer YA novels envision, write, and bring these young adolescents to life in their narratives.

³ 'LGBTQ+' is a common abbreviation referring to a variety of non-heterosexual sexual orientations (typically lesbian, gay, and bi) and non-conforming (non-cis) gender identities (typically trans). Q (queer) is often used as a general category that can include both non-heterosexual sexual orientations and non-conforming gender identities (trans and non-binary), while the '+' is sometimes added as an expression of inclusiveness towards other sexuality/gender-based categories that LGBTQ may not encompass.' Annamari Vitikainen, 'LGBTQ+' in *Gender, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia. A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Transformation*, ed. Melina Duarte *et al.* (Routledge, 2023), 19.

The way young queer individuals are portrayed in these works that address today's world attempts to make them spokespeople for a narrative of resistance and self-affirmation. Queer teens in these novels assert their freedom to live their identity proudly in a hostile world, to which they respond by expressing the truth of their selves, projecting an image of a utopian aesthetic by affirming their right to partake in human society with the same dignity, possibilities, and desires as others.

The first chapter introduces and contextualizes the two main theoretical frameworks within this study; Queer YA Studies and Utopian Studies, detailing their relevance to the analysis of queer adolescence in literature. Divided into three sections, the chapter initially outlines both fields, highlighting the motivations for exploring these perspectives and the selection criteria for the novels examined. In this chapter I will also review key studies that explore queer representation in US, British, and French YA literature, noting recurring issues such as stereotyped portrayals and a lack of diverse LGBTQ+ representation, intersectionality, and negative role models. Jenkins and Cart's descriptive categories – homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer consciousness/community – are central to understanding trends and evolution in queer YA narratives. In reviewing prior studies, the chapter identifies a continued emphasis on queerness as a plot device, limited character diversity, intersectional underrepresentation, and stereotypical or adverse depictions. It also explores the 'utopian impulse', a concept first proposed by Thomas Moore, later developed by Ernst Bloch and shortly after by Tom Moylan and others, signifying a desire for a more inclusive, supportive social framework for queer characters. This concept informs the thesis's exploration of how queer adolescents in YA literature challenge social norms and envision alternate realities – whether through utopian communities or critical resistance to queerphobic structures. The chapter concludes with a proposal for modified analytical criteria to better encompass the nuanced experiences of queer adolescents, bringing Queer YA and Utopian Studies together to analyse how LGBTQ+ youth literature can reflect and challenge societal norms.

The second chapter examines Italian YA novels published between 2019 and 2022 featuring queer characters and explores their representations. The Italian sub-corpus

studied reveals a limited portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities, mostly confined to gay, lesbian, and one transgender character, lacking inclusion of other identities. The selected novels are: *Colpo su colpo* by Riccardo Gazzaniga (2019) which focuses on a lesbian main character who's a professional wrestler; *Con le ali sbagliate* by Gabriele Clima (2020), a novel about a gay boy who's forced to attend a conversion therapy; and *Un'Alice come un'altra* by Alice T. (2022) that features the complex life of a trans girl. The analysis highlights pervasive stereotypes and limited representation, particularly for trans identities, where queer adolescents frequently experience isolation and discrimination without supportive communities or family structures. The Italian sub-corpus lags in its portrayal of diverse queer experiences, often depicting LGBTQ+ individuals as marginalized and suffering and stands in stark contrast to the evolving narratives found in other countries. Through this analysis, the chapter evaluates the extent to which Italian literature reflects broader societal issues surrounding queerphobia and the marginalization of queer adolescents. The portrayal of LGBTQ+ youth in these novels often reinforces negative stereotypes rather than offering varied and supportive perspectives, thereby falling short in both the quality of representation and in providing a strong 'eutopian impulse', or rather the envisioning of an inclusive, supportive society for queer youth.

The third chapter investigates the representation of queer adolescents in British YA literature. The chapter focuses on works published between 2020 and 2021, comparing them with prior findings, notably from B.J. Woodstein's 2013 analysis in *Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. The selected novels include: *Loveless* by Alice Oseman (2020) focusing on asexual and aromantic identities; *Boy Queen* by George Lester (2020) which revolves around gay characters and drag art; and *Ace of Spades* by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé (2022) which covers broader queer themes and white racism against Black people. The analysis highlights advancements in the variety of LGBTQ+ representation, indicating that British YA literature increasingly incorporates diverse queer identities and communities, contrasting with earlier works that offered limited representations. These novels depict LGBTQ+

adolescents within supportive, evolving communities, unlike Italian YA novels where queer characters often face isolation. Additionally, British novels portray new family structures and parental roles appear less central in adolescent queer narratives compared to their Italian counterparts. Each novel's narrative is examined with recourse to queer visibility, community, and quality of representation, finding that the British sub-corpus offers a progressive environment for exploring queer adolescent experiences.

The fourth chapter focuses on three French YA novels that explore queer adolescence from various perspectives, showcasing the development and diversity within the genre. The selected novels, published between 2019 and 2022 are: *It* by Catherine Grive (2019), focusing on a trans boy surviving a fire; *Romance* by Arnaud Cathrine (2020) which centres on a gay boy and his struggle to find a romantic relationship; and *Apprivoiser l'été* by Marie Boulier (2022) which centres around queer and non-binary characters struggling with the relationships with their own bodies. This chapter reveals that French YA literature has made significant strides in representation and narrative depth when compared them with prior findings from Renaud Lagabrielle's 2007 analysis in *Représentations des homosexualités dans le roman français pour la jeunesse*. French YA literature's improvements are similar to British YA literature and are far more progressive than Italian YA novels. French novels portray a broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, with characters often engaging with queer communities that offer friendship, solidarity, and emotional support. This communal aspect fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment, contrasting with the isolation often depicted in Italian queer YA narratives. Additionally, French YA literature has begun to integrate scenes of affective and sexual intimacy and utilizes more nuanced language, reflecting a more mature portrayal of queer experiences than the other two literatures. The analysis highlights that while the British sub-corpus emphasizes alternative family structures, the French novels provide a balance between family dynamics and the presence of queer communities, suggesting a shift towards diverse and intersectional narratives in contemporary French YA literature.

The conclusion highlights that British and French YA literature have improved in their portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters, moving away from stereotypical narratives, and including a broader spectrum of identities, such as non-binary and asexual characters. However, queerphobia remains a recurring theme in all novels, reflecting ongoing societal challenges. A notable observation is the inversely proportional relationship between the quality of representation and the intensity of the eutopian impulse. British and French novels demonstrate an increased quality of representation with supportive queer communities and positive queer identities, while Italian literature, despite some progress, remains anchored in outdated stereotypes and isolationist narratives. Despite progress, Italian YA literature still lacks in diversity and quality compared to British and French novels, reinforcing the need for broader inclusivity in all areas.

1. Queer YA Studies and Utopian Studies: the Union of two Research Strands

This thesis draws on and develops two critical frameworks, Queer YA Studies, and Utopian Studies. This first chapter will broadly outline these two schools of thought in order to give context to the subsequent research. The chapter is divided into three subsections, the first and second of which will present and discuss the Queer YA novels and Utopian studies respectively, or rather the two the pillars of this thesis. These first two subsections will equally elaborate on the motivations for the analysis of the literary corpus and present the criteria used for selecting the corpus. In the third and concluding section, I will firstly propose some modifications to certain criteria in order to make them more consistent with the complexity of the themes studied in the selected novels. Secondly, I will set out the type of relationship that exists between the critical foundations drawn from the two fields of study, justifying the reasons that have led me to bring these two apparently irreconcilable strands of research closer together; from here I will proceed to develop new criteria for analysing and interpreting the novels under study, developed in the course of reading them and thanks to a progressive understanding of the theoretical tools at my disposal.

1.1. The Representation of Queer Adolescence in Young Adult Novels

This thesis is principally motivated by two needs. The first and most important need is to observe the 'state of health' of LGBTQ+ adolescents in Young Adult novels, of which, as is well known, adolescents themselves are protagonists and main recipients. This expression refers to the quality of representation of these specific characters regarding their queerness. In other words, I aim to observe and understand whether and to what extent LGBTQ+ adolescents suffer from certain types of discrimination attributable to their non-conforming sexual orientations and gender identities. Those who have studied and written about this precise literary niche (Lagabrielle, 2007; Epstein, 2013; Jenkins and Cart, 2006 and 2018) all reiterate the same, globally valid concept: children's and adolescent literature not

only helps these very young and young readers to better understand the world around them and their own identity, but it also helps to shape our world and the individuals in it. Lagabrielle, Woodstein (formerly Epstein), and Jenkins and Cart have analysed three Young Adult literatures in particular: US, British, and French.⁴ Their studies concluded that, in these novels, queer adolescents never have an easy time.⁵ Only in the US context is it possible to observe the evolution of queer representation over a specific time span. Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart published a monograph in 2006 entitled *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* in which they study a sample of Queer YA US literature from 1969 to 2004.⁶ They subsequently produced a second study in 2018 entitled *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature. LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, which includes an analysis of YA novels published from 2005 to 2016.⁷

On the other hand, in the French and British spheres I find only one monograph each, specifying that the focus of the English study is not exclusively limited to British YA novels.⁸ As far as the French scene is concerned, Renaud Lagabrielle published *Représentations des homosexualités dans le roman français pour la jeunesse* in 2007 in which analysis of French novels is restricted to three types: YA, children's and novels with homosexual themes.⁹ Of the 30 books included in the corpus, only six are Young Adult novels. Of the YA novels analysed by Lagabrielle, the oldest dates to 1991 (Chris Donner, *Les lettres de mon petit frère*) and the most recent to 2003 (Jean and Zad Didier, *Sweet homme*). As far as the British scene is concerned, B.J. Woodstein published *Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature* in 2013, a study which analyses picture books, *middle-grade* novels (with a target age of 8 to 12 years),

⁴ Unfortunately, there is no monographic study on the same subject in the Italian context, a gap I hope to fill with my doctoral thesis work.

⁵ Woodstein (formerly Epstein) provocatively titles her monograph *Are The Kids All Right?*, giving an overall negative answer to this question in the book's conclusions.

⁶ Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* (Scarecrow Press, 2006).

⁷ Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature. LGBTQ+ Content since 1969* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

⁸ Woodstein deals with English-speaking novels in his work (thus also American, Canadian, and Australian) but mainly British, to which my interest in this work is limited.

⁹ Renaud Lagabrielle, *Représentations des homosexualités dans le roman français pour la jeunesse* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2007).

anthologies of short stories and YA novels. Woodstein deals with an anglophone corpus (British, US, Canadian, Australian). Of the thirty-two YA novels analysed,¹⁰ nine are British; the oldest dates back to 1982 (Aidan Chambers, *Dance on my Grave*) while the most recent is from 2012 (Hayley Long, *What's Up With Jody Barton?*). From research conducted by Jenkins and Cart (2006), Lagabrielle (2007) and Woodstein (2013) offer a number of insights into adolescent representation in the novels analysed, providing a valuable starting point for this thesis.

First, Jenkins and Cart suggest a model of three descriptive categories for the three types of stories they identified in LGBTQ+ YA novels: 1) homosexual visibility, 2) gay assimilation, 3) queer consciousness/community.¹¹ *Homosexual visibility* refers to novels in which the discovery of a character's homosexual (or at least non-heterosexual) orientation is the dramatic focus of the story. The queerness¹² of these characters, therefore, represents a problem, to which the novel does or does not provide a 'solution'.¹³ *Gay assimilation*, on the other hand, refers to novels in which LGBTQ+ characters happen to be queer, just as another character, for example, happens to be left-handed or has red hair.¹⁴ The *queer consciousness/community* category refers to novels in which the queerness of LGBTQ+ characters is no longer the dramatic focus of the story, but queer identity is not intentionally celebrated; queer characters are represented within a community where they have a sense of belonging and are no longer portrayed as being in isolation.¹⁵

Overall, the corpuses analysed by Jenkins and Cart, Woodstein, and Lagabrielle in their studies fall into the first category, homosexual visibility. Jenkins and Cart, for their part, note this aspect¹⁶ underlining, however, the slow but progressive improvement in the quality of representation up to the novels of the early 2000s, noting, in fact, an increasing presence of gay assimilation and queer consciousness / community. Woodstein, on the other hand, judging her own corpus according to Jenkins and Cart's descriptors, gives a much harsher opinion: the novels in her

¹⁰ I have excluded middle-grade novels from the thirty-two novels analysed by Woodstein as the author intentionally differentiates them from YA novels.

¹¹ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, xix.

¹² That is, the fact of being queer, hence non-heterosexual/romantic and/or non-cisgender.

¹³ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, xix-xx.

¹⁴ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, xx.

¹⁵ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, xx.

¹⁶ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 2006, 133-134.

corpus fall *tout court* into the category of *homosexual visibility*,¹⁷ as do those analysed by Lagabrielle. In general, it is particularly interesting to note that all three monographs mentioned here highlight numerous common issues, demonstrating the extent to which the socio-cultural imaginary is shared across nations and continents. On a macroscopic level, there are at least five key issues which emerge from these studies:

- 1) Queerness as plot. The vast majority of the novels studied by Jenkins and Cart, Woodstein and Lagabrielle focus on the queerness of the characters as a founding issue of the plot. On the other hand, characters whose queerness is incidental to the plot and/or who are portrayed within a queer community have limited roles or are instead absent altogether.
- 2) The presence of a partial queer spectrum. There is a lack of representation of the wide variety of the LGBTQ+ community. In Lagabrielle's study, most of the novels analysed show exclusively G (Gay) or L (Lesbian) characters. There are very few cases of novels containing B (Bisexual) or T (Trans) characters, while other spectrums are completely absent.
- 3) A lack of intersectionality.¹⁸ In Woodstein's words, the recurring impression is that books 'seem to assume that LGBTQ people are white, middle-class, Christian, able-bodied, and otherwise "norm"'.¹⁹

¹⁷ B.J. Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (HammerOn Press, 2013) 242.

¹⁸ 'Coined by American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of critical race theory Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *intersectionality* refers to the study of overlapping discriminations. Understanding the critical framework of intersectionality allows for an exploration of how, for example, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, misogyny, ableism, classism, trans- and homo-hate, and hostility towards other cultures, work together. The discriminations happen on several levels, often simultaneously; they are interrelated, and create, maintain, and build up systems of oppression. Crenshaw posits that experiences of oppression cannot be understood independently but must be grasped in their interactions, where they frequently reinforce each other. It is important to note that intersectionality is not only about identity - how one identifies or is identified - but encompasses how structures help to oppress and privilege individuals or groups. The origins of intersectionality are found early among Black, Aboriginal, and Indigenous feminisms where systems of oppression like racism or sexism are recognised as linked and constituting each other. [...] Intersectionality is a framework to understand these moments and structures of opportunities and oppression within an ethos of social justice and to transform those for the better. For example, applied to white feminism, an intersectional approach would shed light on its colour blindness, hierarchies, hegemonies, and exclusivities.' This definition of *intersectionality* is taken from Katrin Losleben and Sarah Musubika, 'Intersectionality', in *Gender, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia. A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Transformation*, ed. Melina Duarte, Katrin Losleben, and Kjersti Fjortoft (Routledge, 2023), 72.

¹⁹ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 243-244.

- 4) Queer stereotypes. The use of stereotypes to portray queer characters, from physical and clothing aesthetics to social roles and expectations, to the sexual role connected to certain aspects of personality.
- 5) HIV and AIDS, and suicide. This theme partly falls under the previous issue of stereotypes but is specifically concerns the association of male homosexual orientation with HIV and AIDS and, more general, of homosexuality with suicide.

At a global level, all these elements are part of the heteronormative and heterosexist social landscape, acknowledged and criticised by all three scholars. This landscape is predominant in the novels analysed and is shapes the narrative to which queer adolescents in YA literature are subjected, for better or worse.

Naturally, each of the three studies highlights some singular considerations in their work regarding their own specific corpus of study. For example, Lagabrielle discusses the importance of the role of adolescent literature in accompanying young men and women readers in the discovery of their affective and sexual dimensions. As is the case for this thesis' corpus, the novels analysed are mimetic and therefore function as a social mirror to the lives of these adolescents. The aim of these novels is to create a meeting point between the audience's reflections and those of the characters. In this way, the novels lend themselves as true points of reference for their readers, evoking and helping to better understand sensations and feelings that can lead the reader to the fulfilment of a catharsis.²⁰

Secondly, Lagabrielle laments a general tendency to give ample space to heterosexual protagonists who are given the task of narrating homosexual secondary characters. This technique seeks to procure credit and credibility with the audience according to the concept of *code affectif*, a term coined by Vincent Jouve. *Le code affectif* refers to a precise authorial strategy aimed at stimulating the audience to pity the homosexual character, who is portrayed in a sad and suffering

²⁰ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 25, 28, 29.

manner for this purpose.²¹ Lagabrielle therefore insists on the importance of giving the homosexual character the role of narrating protagonist (afforded to a few of the novels in the study), so as to grant the character discursive and enunciative authority over their own identity and homosexuality, giving them agency. In other words, the character is given the capacity for and the power of action.²²

Thirdly, the author highlights the issue of heteronormativity²³ on the psyche of queer adolescents.²⁴ Through the social and familial pressures exerted by hetero-oriented expectations as well as the violence of homophobic discrimination (one example for all, bullying in the school environment), the heteronormative society which queer adolescents live in (both in fictional works and in reality), has negative psychological consequences,²⁵ such as self-loathing, shame, frustration, the masking of effeminacy and the omission of homoerotic desire as a form of self-control, the rejection of other queer peers, violence, self-harm and even suicide.²⁶ These are all typical behaviours resulting from internalised homophobia. Within a consideration of issues in the novels analysed, Lagabrielle discusses the function of the homophobic insult, a degrading weapon used by those in power. He notes: '[l]ordre culturel dominant rappelle constamment aux (jeunes) gais et aux (jeunes) lesbiennes, notamment à travers l'injure homophobe, qu'ils et elles sont des individus inférieurs parce qu'anormaux.'²⁷ On the other hand, Lagabrielle notes that gender stereotypes linked to young homosexuals, derive from canons of masculinity (virility) for boys and femininity for girls established by heteronormative society, denigrating and condemning any inversion of roles (effeminate boys and masculine or 'truck girl' girls).²⁸ On a positive note, Lagabrielle draws attention to consideration of the important role played by love in the first place:

²¹ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 51, 60.

²² Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 42.

²³ The term heteronormativity emerged in the context of queer theorising in the early 1990s. 'Heteronormativity designates a regime that organises sex, gender and sexuality in order to match heterosexual norms. It denotes a rigid sexual binary of bodily morphology that is supported by gender and sexual identities.' María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan, and Antke Engel, 'Introduction', in *Hegemony and Heteronormativity: Revisiting 'the Political' in Queer Politics*, ed. María do Mar Castro Varela *et al.*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 11, 12.

²⁴ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 77.

²⁵ See also Kathryn Bond Stockton, 'Why Children Appear to Get Queerer in the Twentieth Century' in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁶ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 81, 82, 92, 93, 95, 187, 188.

²⁷ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 84.

²⁸ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 92, 93, 110.

La plupart des romans recourent à un dispositif textuel qui souligne le rôle important, parfois décisif, que peut jouer l'amour dans l'acceptation de soi et la décision de révéler son homosexualité. La succession chronologique dans ces récits de la rencontre d'un personnage homosexuel dont le ou la protagoniste tombe amoureux/amoureuse et du coming-out de celui/celle-ci signifie ainsi que l'acceptation et la réappropriation positive de leurs désirs homosexuels, si longtemps vécus comme négatifs, peuvent faire naître chez les personnages homosexuels une force qui les encourage à faire savoir leurs nouvelles amours à leur entourage.²⁹

He also notes the importance of coming out:

[...] le *coming-out* apparaît finalement, en particulier à travers les rapports entre les débuts et les fins des romans, comme une expérience qui permet aux jeunes - et aux moins jeunes - homosexuel-le-s de mieux vivre, de mieux respirer, notamment au sein des relations avec l'univers familial qui ne sont plus altérées par le poids du secret. Associé parfois au sentiment de fierté, le *coming-out* est présenté comme un dépassement salutaire des barrières que l'oppression homophobe s'efforce de poser aux vies des gais et des lesbiennes. Libéré-e-s dans une certaine mesure des répressions que leur impose l'hétérosexisme, sorti-e-s de l'isolement dans lequel celui-ci les repousse, les gais et lesbiennes des récits sont représenté-e-s à la fin des récits comme des êtres réconciliés avec leur sexualité et prêts à la vivre de manière heureuse. Ce message d'acceptation et d'affirmation de soi, d'estime de soi retrouvée, est primordial. Comme l'ont montré des études, les homosexuel-le-s qui s'assument sont en effet moins exposé-e-s aux troubles psychosomatiques que la situation des jeunes homos est susceptible de générer.³⁰

The first element (love) enables the second (coming-out), activating and developing an evolutionary process in the queer adolescent aimed at increasing personal psychological well-being. Lagabrielle links this discourse to Michel Foucault's concept of *esthétique de l'existence*, drawing upon one of the most interesting assertions of his work. In an interview conducted by Alessandro Fontana and published in *Le Monde* in 1984 and later included in the posthumous collection *Dits et écrits* by Michel Foucault, the philosopher explains this concept as:

²⁹ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 125.

³⁰ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 146.

un effort pour affirmer sa liberté et pour donner à sa propre vie une certaine forme dans laquelle on pouvait se reconnaître et être reconnu par les autres [...] Une élaboration de sa propre vie comme une œuvre d'art personnelle.³¹

Lagabrielle sees this effort reproduced by the young queer characters in her body of study. Moreover, some of them even practise an attitude of 'resistance' to the power exercised by the heteronormative status quo, again drawing inspiration from Foucault's arguments:

En considérant la résistance comme le " mot-clef " de la dynamique des rapports de pouvoir au sein d'une société, Foucault entend mettre en avant la fonction productive du pouvoir. Loin d'être simplement répressif, celui-ci produit les possibilités mêmes d'y résister. La résistance est alors à comprendre comme un processus transformateur ; résister, ce n'est pas simplement dire " non " aux injonctions de l'ordre dominant, c'est, bien plus, " créer et recréer, transformer la situation, participer activement au processus".³²

Rejecting oppressive power is not enough to resist it. Resistance requires a definite positioning of the self in relation to power. Such a positioning must entail proposing an identity that differs from that of the adversary, an identity which presents itself as a possible existential alternative, even a better one. However, dialogue with the opponent and the transformative capacity of reality remain fundamental prerequisites of resistance. In the end, reality can only transform through positively redefining the semiology of the status quo or by inventing a new and original one. As Lagabrielle points out, the power of love and coming out, the use of clothing as a political counter-text for personal assertion,³³ and the socio-sanitary importance of AIDS knowledge and treatment,³⁴ equally reflect the idea of resistance as a creative and transformative skill. Similarly, the adolescent characters in these novels embody this philosophy of resistance.

Woodstein's monograph is divided into four. The first is entitled 'Issue Books', which she defines as: 'What I mean by that term is that instead of just being viewed

³¹ Michel Foucault, 'Une esthétique de l'existence', *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, 2 (1994) 1976-1988 : 731.

³² Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 180, 181.

³³ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 173.

³⁴ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 242-260.

as works of fiction about people who happen to be queer, the texts discussed in this book tend to focus on queerness as a problem [...].³⁵ The author identifies at least two problems within these so-called issue books. Firstly, the existence of a concept of social ‘normalcy’ from which queer characters are excluded and secondly, the pedagogical tendency to present plots that are ‘mini-lectures’ about queerness and queer people. Regarding the concept of social ‘normalcy, Woodstein writes:

This idea of normalcy or difference runs through many LGBTQ books for children. In such works, the issue of whether queer families are different is dealt with by attempting to confirm that they are not. This is what we might term a normalising approach, assuring readers that queer families are just as valid, just as loving, just as good, just as normal, as non-queer families.³⁶

As for forced pedagogy, she argues:

there might be what I term “mini-lectures” in the books themselves, where one character educates another about queerness in a rather unnatural way, whereby the reader is also educated. There might also be peri-texts/paratexts - that is, aspects of the book outside the fictional content itself, such as blurbs, afterwords, discussion questions, and so on - that suggest that a given book tackles or raises particular issues, some of which might be worth discussing in a pedagogical setting or learning even more about. Also, the placement of the books in libraries or bookstores and/or how the books are used in schools can reveal much about how these books are viewed.³⁷

So, while queer children, adolescents, adults and families need to be reassured in their validity and normality, their literary representation and the way such books are catalogues and sold (perhaps in a dedicated section with queer symbols and labels) marks their niche character, ghettoising them in the eyes of the general public. The scholar's concern is therefore concentrated on the fact that: ‘[a]ll this then leads to the idea that LGBTQ people and topics are separate from others; if a group can be ‘othered’, this may mean that other people do not view them as fully equal or as

³⁵ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 26.

³⁶ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 27.

³⁷ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 26.

worthy of respect or rights.’³⁸ This ‘othering’ is famously the basis for a discriminatory precedent towards LGBTQ+ adolescents (and people in general). Woodstein also questions the identity of the target audience of such literature here, because while it is true that the educational aspect of these novels should privilege their reading among a non-queer audience, ‘it can therefore seem as though the books are only considered to be relevant to those who are LGBTQ or are from LGBTQ families’.³⁹ A non-queer audience might feel the partially or fully queer content of these novels does not concern them, but is instead exclusively intended for a queer audience.

The second chapter, ‘Portrayal and Stereotypes’, and considers stereotypes and representation. She summarises at the end of the chapter:

For an audience that is not familiar with LGBTQ people or even for a young LGBTQ audience that is going through the coming-out process, these stereotyped views of lesbians and gays and their lives give the following messages: if you are a lesbian or a gay male, there are particular ways of being, and you ought to fit into one of those categories, and also that being queer means having a traumatic, anxiety-ridden life that can include rejection by one's friends and relatives. Some of these books suggest that being queer means living a constrained, and therefore sad and difficult, life. While there are of course sad and difficult aspects to everyone's lives and sympathy is generally a more useful feeling than disdain, it seems unlikely that overwhelming pity is the best emotion with which to view LGBTQ people.⁴⁰

The reported conclusions of this section are also particularly problematic. The novels in Woodstein’s corpus conveyed the idea that there are only a few ways of being queer (in particular, cis lesbian and gay people) and that these ways render these individuals easily recognisable from cis hetero people, who on the contrary seem to retain numerous ways of existing and appearing since the same stereotype is not applied to them in the rest of Young Adult or, more widely, in literary production as a whole. Furthermore, the lives of these adolescents are often described as difficult and problematic, conveying the idea that the cause of this

³⁸ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 26.

³⁹ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 26.

⁴⁰ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 129-130.

malaise stems from their queerness, problematising their identity rather than the structural queerphobia of which they are victims. What is more, these characters are frequently placed in difficult or unhealthy familial contexts (bad relations between the adolescent and their parents, or between the parents themselves, separation or divorce that has taken place or is taking place, etc.). This representation is highly problematic because it suggests not only that there is a cause to queerness (and therefore also a cure), but that it is to be found in particular in an unhappy family.⁴¹ In general, this series of unfortunate representations gives the reading public a very limited picture of the way LGBTQ+ people live and exist. Moreover, it can stimulate an equally problematic sentiment towards LGBTQ+ individuals: pity.⁴² This misleading and belittling attitude places the privileged non-queer observer in a position of justified social superiority, instead of instilling understanding and sympathy. Woodstein also notes that some of the authors of the novels analysed are not part of the queer community. She suggests that non-queer authors, in particular, are probably not very well informed about the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, both in terms of its aesthetics and its lifestyle, and advises them to inform themselves better.⁴³ She concludes by urging all authors to investigate the variety of representation of queer teenagers in their works and also suggests that queer literature and queer people should be brought into schools in order to spread LGBTQ+ culture among students so that they can eliminate prejudice and confusion about it. Such an initiative would have an enormous impact on the acceptance and understanding of queer reality and would greatly help queer teenagers in schools to experience less depression and self-hatred.⁴⁴ The third chapter is titled 'Diversity'. In this section, Woodstein reviews her corpus from the perspective of diversity and intersectionality. Her conclusions are twofold:

First of all, these books imply to child readers that sexual minorities are acceptable, but only to a certain extent, so that while lesbian and gay male characters appear in these books, bisexual, transgender, and otherwise queer characters are missing, perhaps because they are

⁴¹ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 93-94.

⁴² Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 130.

⁴³ Epstein (now Woodstein), 130-131. I would point out that, given the same problematic and stereotypical representations, the same criticism could be made of queer authors in the same studied corpus.

⁴⁴ Epstein (now Woodstein), 130-131.

deemed too challenging or inappropriate. This propagates a binary system in regard to both sexuality and gender, and does not allow children to learn about other ways of living or to see representations of themselves or their families.[...] Secondly, the texts discussed here give the incorrect impression that one cannot be LGBTQ and another sort of minority (or at least that to have a character who is both queer and something else is too much for YA and children's literature to handle at this time). While it is positive that there are books that feature sexual and gender diversity, other kinds of diversity (in terms of race, religion, ability, class, size, and age) tend to be ignored. When there is a character who is a minority in some other way, this is often not explored in any great detail, which may lead readers to believe that issues of sexuality are more problematic or stressful than other issues of identity, such as class.⁴⁵

She thus notes two additional and problematic trends which I have touched on above. Firstly, the poverty of variety of the LGBTQ+ community members is made evident by the limited representation of only cis-gay or lesbian characters. Secondly, there is a lack of intersectionality, due to the fact that these characters do not present other identity traits that might be considered minority or marginalised.⁴⁶ The resulting message is that bisexual, trans, non-binary, asexual and other queer identities simply do not exist or are not a mainstream topic. On the other hand, the choice to exclude any queer teenagers who are not 'white, middle-class, able-bodied, norm-sized, and Christian (or at least from a technically Christian background)'⁴⁷ suggests that an LGBTQ+ teenager cannot present two or more levels of intersectionality, that is, they cannot be simultaneously gay and black, lesbian and disabled, asexual, neurodivergent and Asian. In rare occasions when this does happen, the additional minority aspect is not explored, indicating that the difficulties experienced in relation to one's queerness are more stressful than any other minority or marginalised identities (for example, a disadvantaged socio-economic background).⁴⁸ Woodstein closes her reflections in this chapter by stating the need to broaden the representation of LGBTQ+ adolescents in the YA literature and encourages the presence of intersectionality in the construction of these characters, so as to better reflect society.

⁴⁵ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 189.

⁴⁶ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 189.

⁴⁷ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 189.

⁴⁸ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 189-190.

The closing chapter in Woodstein's study is 'Sex and Marriage' in which she considers sexual and romantic relationships. Here, too, the author reports stereotypical tendencies regarding the queer adolescent narratives in her corpus, and in her study, most of these narratives are exclusively L and G:

In regard to sex, young gay males blithely carry on adventurous, active, satisfying sex lives, while young gay females are shown to be tentative, nervous, emotional, and maybe even repressed when it comes to sex. What this means is presumably that authors (and editors, publishers, the audience, society at large, etc.) view female sexuality in very frozen ways, perhaps finding it too threatening to be dealt with in any detailed fashion in YA literature. Meanwhile, other types of queers are apparently not having sex at all, but whether that is better than the 'gentle', fear-tinged encounters the lesbians have is something I cannot judge. It is also worth noting the serious absence of protection, except in relation to gay men.[...] Marriage appears to a certain extent in British books and even more frequently in northern European works, and again, this could very well be because these texts were written in more accepting cultures with more flexible marriage and relationship arrangements. Regardless of where books were written and published, however, it seems that young queers do not seem to consider marriage to be an option for their future lives, and this is a rather depressing fact, in my opinion.⁴⁹

Three key points emerge from these observations. Firstly, in general, queer adolescents, even when legally recognised in their own country (UK and Scandinavian countries), do not consider marriage a possibility for their future adult life. Secondly, with regards to sex, there is a distinct delineation between the sexual style of young gay men and young lesbians. Males are represented as having a fervent and satisfying sexual activity (albeit problematically without condoms), while females are represented as having repressed and awkward sex lives.

To conclude this analysis of existing literature, let me look at Jenkins and Cart's monographs on US queer YA literature in more detail. In the first study, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, the first chapter includes a list of novels published in the 1940s and 1960s in which adult homosexual characters appear (works therefore expressly addressed to an adult audience) or YA novels in which the theme of homosexuality is only hinted

⁴⁹ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 240.

at, concluding their list with *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* (1969) by John Donovan, the first YA novel in which the main protagonists are queer teenagers. Subsequently, the scholars devote each of the following four chapters to the study of US queer YA novels grouped by decade of publication (in the fifth chapter the works studied are from 2000-2004). In each of these four sections, the novels are analysed using Jenkins and Cart's aforementioned categories (*homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, queer consciousness/community*). They devote space to specific macro-themes as they begin to become recurrent (HIV/AIDS, homoparenting, LGBTQ+ non-fiction works) and finally provide a list of queer YA novels published in the chapter's decade. In general, the authors note most of the YA novels analysed fall into the category of *homosexual visibility*:

Despite the many innovations and changes that continued to make YA literature one of the most dynamic areas of publishing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, one feature in YA novels with GLBTQ content remained constant: homosexual visibility continued to be the largest category. Even though there is clearly more visible support for GLBTQ teens in the twenty-first century than previously, discovering one's sexual identity, agonising over whether or not to come out and suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous homophobia remain as central to current YA fiction as they have been from the earliest days of the genre.⁵⁰

In the fifty-five span covered in Jenkins and Cart's research, from the first appearances of Queer YA novels to 2004, queerphobia has remained a constant in the construction of queer teenager characters in US novels (and not only, as I have seen). In these novels, guilt, self-hatred, social disdain, verbal and physical violence, only feared or even acted out all appear, including male-on-male rape.⁵¹ The lives of LGBTQ+ teenagers continue to be stereotypically associated with a condition of inevitable malaise, a narrative habit from which it is difficult to escape. Alongside this general negative tendency, however, a number of improvements can be noted that have occurred over time and are continually evolving. First of all, Jenkins and Cart recognise important positive developments in their other two categories of analysis (*gay assimilation* and *queer consciousness/community*),

⁵⁰ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 133-134.

⁵¹ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 139-140.

noting how, in the 1990s and early 2000s, more and more queer adolescents appear within an LGBTQ+ community and that their queerness is treated simply as a fact. However, these aspects are not yet preponderant in the main narrative, as discussed above. In the same reference period, Jenkins and Cart also noted the appearance of other identities on the LGBTQ+ spectrum: bisexual and transgender adolescents, absent from these narratives until the 1990s. Moreover, between 2000 and 2004 alone, the number of published queer YA novels numbered seventy-seven titles, compared to a total of sixty-six in the previous decade. Furthermore, YA literature with LGBTQ+ content is slowly beginning to be assimilated into the rest of the genre, ‘moving, that is, from being an isolated or “ghettoised” subgenre to becoming a more integrated part of the total body of young adult literature.’⁵² Indeed, the authors note a broadening of the presence of queer teenagers from novels to other textual genres such as short stories, poetry, graphic novels, comics and historical novels.⁵³ Despite these promising elements, the study concludes with a list of recommendations for authors wanting to engage in the production of queer YA novels in the future. The key points are as follows:

- 1) greater representation of non-white, lesbian, and trans LGBTQ+ adolescence, as well as homogenous families;
- 2) assimilation of the queer adolescent community into the rest of society, recognising them as a piece in the puzzle of human community and no longer as persons disassociated from the totality of the social framework;
- 3) recognition of the psychological complexity of a queer adolescent, abandoning the stereotypical narrative of their sexual or gender identity as a central or unique aspect of their person;

⁵² Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 128.

⁵³ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 130-133.

- 4) the gradual elimination of queerphobia in the representation of queer adolescents' stories, in particular of iniquitous associations such as queerness = violent death (suicide, accidents, AIDS, etc.).⁵⁴

There are striking similarities between Jenkins and Cart's conclusions and those of (above all) Woodstein and Lagabrielle. This similarity reveals much about the American, British, and French contexts with regard to gender and themes, which might allow me to trace a common 'Western' trend in the evolution of a vision of queer adolescence, both socially and literarily.

In their subsequent monograph, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature. LGBTQ+ Content since 1969* (2018), Jenkins and Cart continue their study of US YA novels through to 2016, adding four chapters on the representation of trans and intersex adolescents, and the analysis of graphic novels, comics, and non-fiction production within LGBTQ+ teen content. In relation to the lengthy list of recommendations set out in *The Heart's* conclusions, significant advances were made, which I briefly summarise in twelve points:

- The number of titles with queer teenage content published between 2010 and 2016 soared from 241 in 2009-2010 to 592 in 2010-2016.
- 429 of the 592 titles (2010-2016) feature LGBTQ+ young people as protagonists, reversing for the first time the trend that until 2009 saw more LGBTQ+ secondary characters than LGBTQ+ protagonists.
- The rise of YA novels featuring bisexual teenagers.
- The rise of YA novels featuring transgender or transsexual adolescents.
- The increased presence of LGBTQ+ parents, both mothers and fathers.
- The advancement of the literary quality of this category of novels is due to the shift in focus from the problematisation of the queerness of the characters to the originality of the plot of the story.
- A new use of humour and light-heartedness rather than stories exclusively steeped in tension, worry, terror, illness, and death.

⁵⁴ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 165,166.

- The opening of different narrative genres, that is, genres outside contemporary realism, such as fantasy and science fiction, to the representation of queer adolescents.
- The increase in the presence of non-white, non-bourgeois queer teenagers.
- The increase of novels in which in a teenage community, at least one individual is LGBTQ+.
- The rise of novels in which a cis/hetero character falls in love with another queer person and the infatuation ends in unrequited love. Previously, the opposite narrative arc was the “norm”, leaving a queer character disappointed.
- The rise of young LGBTQ+ characters of primary or secondary school age in novels, previously relegated to picture books.⁵⁵

Despite this long, commendable list of improvements, Jenkins and Cart reiterate many of their criticisms from their previous study. There does not seem to have been sufficient development, in the high number of novels labelled classed within the *homosexual visibility* (although from 2004 to 2016 novels labelled as gay visibility numbered 257, in the same period novels belonging to the category of gay assimilation amounted to 258).⁵⁶ They equally drew attention to the continued high number of gay protagonists compared to lesbian protagonists (to which I would add the low number of protagonists who identify with the other letters of the community). Intersectionality remains unsatisfactorily and unrealistically low and the number non-white queer protagonists is still too low. The unbearable link between queerness and violent death (suicide, for instance) persists along with a minimal depiction of the discovery of queer sex and sexual practices. Finally, the representation of the queer community remains poor, and a representation of a community which queer adolescents are still portrayed in isolation is still favoured.

57

In light of this brief literature review, it seems fitting to propose changing two of the Jenkins and Cart’s categories of analysis (‘Homosexual visibility’ and ‘Gay

⁵⁵ Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 67-68.

⁵⁶ Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 67.

⁵⁷ Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 109.

assimilation'), which now seem overly simple and poorly inclusive. Alongside, these modifications, I would like to introduce a fourth category that summarises and expands on those developed by Kirk Fuoss⁵⁸ exclusively for G (Gay) themed YA novels. Here are the categories thus redefined:

- Queer visibility = the queerness of one or more characters is the focus of the novel and is the subject of drama or problematisation.
- Queer assimilation = queer characters happen to be queer (as another character happens to have red hair or to be left-handed); however, they are represented in isolation and are not part of a queer community.
- Queer consciousness/community = queer characters are represented within a queer community to which they feel they belong and where they can find love, friendship, solidarity, and support.
- Queerphobia = the set of discriminations that queer characters suffer within the novel (verbal and/or physical aggression, attempts at manipulation, violent death, unhappy endings, loneliness, etc.).

As can easily be seen, the changes made seek to replace the outdated and extremely limiting category 'gay' with 'queer', which is entirely inclusive of all spectrums of the LGBTQ+ community. Beyond that, Jenkins' and Cart's concepts remain unchanged. I have chosen the new category *queerphobia*, on the basis that it is preferable to 'homobilesbotranssphobia', a term which could never be exhaustive given its failure to conclude the whole spectrum (pan, aro-ace, intersex, bigender, non-binary, etc.) and any attempts to do so would lengthen the term indefinitely and potentially infinitely, rendering it unpronounceable and too complicated to remember. The formulation of this category compensates for a lack of attention to queerphobia in Jenkins and Cart's study. Indeed, I note that even within the context

⁵⁸ Kirk Fuoss, 'A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay: The Politics of Male Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction', in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. by R. Jeffrey Ringer (NYU Press, 1994), 159.

of a queer community, queerphobia could still manifest itself, more or less severely. In cases such as this, it is important, therefore, to analyse this topic separately which regardless of much progress haunts the genre.

1.2. The *Utopian Impulse* from Ernst Bloch to Tom Moylan

As noted in the introduction, the first of two driving forces behind this study is the need to investigate the representation of queer adolescents in Queer YA fiction. Studies by Lagabrielle, Woodstein, and Jenkins and Cart demonstrate that most of these characters are often portrayed in hostile and discriminatory environments. From this conclusion, I arrive at the second key issue of this thesis, namely, determining the degree of reaction to the oppressive social context in which these adolescent protagonists are forced to live. In attempting to determine the degree of a reaction, I must assume that response from the oppressed party is unflinching and constant, eliminating the possibility of questioning or hypothesising their response from the outset.

It is important to specify the unflinching and constant nature of resistance because the opposite (a lack of resistance *tout court* or an inconstant resistance) would have at least two consequences. Firstly, it would represent a rather serious case of political incorrectness, whereby the public would be left with the unfortunate idea that the nature of discrimination against queer teenagers is normal, that there is no possible solution to queerphobia, and that these teenagers simply have to come to terms with the fact that they live a violent life. Such thinking also risks victim blaming, that is, shifting responsibility onto the teenagers themselves for the violence they suffer. Secondly, the idea that adolescents are always passive victims of queerphobia nullifies another crucial interpretative category that is essential in my study, namely, the utopian impulse. In this section, I will explore how this utopian impulse can be found in the oppositional attitude that with which Queer YA protagonists face the status quo. In other words, the existing society stands as an antagonist to these protagonists who intend to reject and overcome this social model in favour of a utopian horizon.

This utopian impulse is one of the interpretative pillars on which this thesis is based. The concept first appeared in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1953-59) by the German philosopher Ernst Bloch and has been widely taken up and developed since. The philosopher dedicates the tenth chapter of his work (*Naked Striving and Wishing, Unsatisfied*) to a careful analysis of the evolutionary arc of a specific human condition that takes on as many names as the stages of development it passes through. It starts with *urging*, defined as a first, vague, and undefined feeling of thirst that allows the individual to relate to external world (i.e., everything outside the self). From here, he moves on to *striving*, a state slightly more intense than previous *urging* that subsequently leads to *longing*, the condition of strong and clear orientation towards something outside the self, though there is no precise goal. To be satisfied, this longing must be directed towards a precise goal, which can fulfil it. Here, longing transforms into *impulse*, moving towards a clear target that has the power to satisfy it. The crucial difference between longing and impulse lies in the fact that the individual can imagine the object in their mind, transforming longing, by means of the impulse, into *wishing*. According to Bloch, wishing only occurs when the imagined wished-for object is superior to the individual's current situation. To conclude, he adds that although one can wish various things and that impulse can tend towards all of these things, only the *will* instilled in the impulse can make reaching the desired object possible and thus satisfy that particular desire. However, as long as a *wanted wish* is not fulfilled, the impulse always remains alive.⁵⁹

This idea was taken up again in 1986 in a magisterial study in the field of Utopian Studies, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, by Tom Moylan, one of today's leading academics on the subject. The importance of this work justifies a brief excursus into the theoretical context surrounding the idea of the utopian impulse discussed by the Irish-American scholar. First of all, it is worth drawing attention to a point of profound caesura with the historical conception of utopia, that is, the passage from the idea of utopia as a project to that of utopia as a dream. Casting a cursory glance over the history of utopian literature,

⁵⁹ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Basil Blackwell (MIT Press, 1986), 45-47.

a clear characteristic emerges, namely, the vision of utopia as a perfect societal project (or at least according to the author's point of view). Plato, More, Doni, Bacon, Campanella, Cavendish, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet, Morris, Wells; all of these authors published works in which the concept of utopia is depicted through concrete and well-defined proposals for alternative societies, standing in sharp criticism of those in force. Indeed, all these utopian states exhibit common features that are reflected in the economic advancement and moral superiority that consequently allow the inhabitants of these societies to live in a state of high or apex prosperity, reabsorbing or expelling individuals with problematic attitudes in relation to the prevailing norms. It was not until the 20th century that the genre of the negative utopia, or dystopia (antagonist to the utopia), was born, inaugurated by the Russian novelist Evgenij Ivanovič Zamjatin with *Us*, published in the United Kingdom in 1924. He clearly and inevitably inspired subsequent authors of the genre and their cardinal novels: Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Ira Levin's *This perfect day* (1970). Although the main objective of these works was to sharply criticise the European dictatorial regimes born in the first half of the 20th century, unmasking the failure of their original utopian project and denouncing the violence perpetrated against individuals, the plot always pivots around a science-fiction society, be it perfect or imperfect. In contrast, the theme of the dream, acknowledged by Moylan in *Demand*, emerges in the American science-fiction novels of the 1970s such as, *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ, *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Samuel R. Delany's *Triton*. Here, the claim to a utopian society project is thus replaced with a much humbler idea of striving towards it. Faith in a pristine utopian future perishes here, though the will and attempt to oppose an oppressive and undesirable status quo remain. Furthermore, these novels observe the conflict between the present world and the utopian society that opposes it, so that the process of change from present pre-utopia to future utopia, from before to after, is more clearly illustrated on a social level. Ultimately, the utopian societies in these novels are by no means perfect but contain a whole series of glaring

imperfections that hint at possible better alternatives.⁶⁰ Moylan conceptualises this new vision in his coining of the term *critical utopia*, which he explains as follows:

[u]topian writing was given new life in the novels of Russ, Le Guin, Piercy, Delany, and others. The new novels negated the negation of utopia by the forces of twentieth century history: the subversive imaging of utopian society and the radical negativity of dystopian perception is preserved; while the systematising boredom of the traditional utopia and the co-optation of utopia by modern structures is destroyed. Thus, utopian writing in the 1970s was saved by its own destruction and transformation into the "critical utopia". "Critical" in the Enlightenment sense of critique - that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation. As well as "critical" in the nuclear sense of the critical mass required to make the necessary explosive reaction.⁶¹

According to Moylan, the novels that are the subject of *Demand's* study played a crucial role in the revival of the utopian genre during the second half of the last century. The utopian genre had to self-destruct in order to completely revitalise itself, as the genre could clearly never be the same again due to the historical events of the first half of the 20th century. Here, the utopianist refers in particular to the ferocious dictatorships in Europe and Asia that arose in that period as the extreme consequence of political projects that were born as utopian but became dystopian? (the socialism of the October Revolution in Russia, Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution in China, German National Socialism, the Italian *Fasci di combattimento*, etc.). Moylan asserts that these books negated the negation of utopia in response to and in criticism of another negative utopian, or dystopian, strand. Authors like Zamjatin, Huxley, Orwell, Levin had engaged in harsh criticism of the reality of such regimes of the last century, which were responsible for disappointing the expectations of all those who had hoped (and striven) for a utopian state. Thus, the utopias of Moylan's corpus can be categorised under a new sub-genre: the critical utopia. The critical utopia plays an innovative and different role to the historical role of the traditional utopia, thus marking a clear caesura with it. These critical utopias equally stand in opposition to those authors who, as I said, wished to extinguish the utopian genre definitively through its negation, and are

⁶⁰ Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (Methuen, 1986), 10.

⁶¹ Moylan, *Demand*, 10.

equally *critical* in that, in order to be born, they must reach the threshold of critical mass sufficient, in nuclear physics, to determine an explosion.

At this point in the discussion, to better understand the idea of utopian impulse developed by Tom Moylan, it is necessary to understand in what kind of socio-political context he positions it. Essentially, the author of *Demand is* concerned that the post-World War II capitalist society has educated the masses in its economic model to such an extent that it has made human beings into automatons, i.e. passive slaves of an unrealistic model of ever greater production (and thus ever better well-being for the people). This unconscious obedience to the current production model not only oppresses and impoverishes individuals in favour of the enrichment of a small elite that wants to be the head of society but also deprives them of the capacity to imagine and enact utopia. Capitalism defuses the threat of an imagined utopia by draining individuals of their active capacity and emptying any utopian or anti-system act or thought to the point of making it a commodity or an image; in other words, an empty shell.⁶² Moylan thus asserts that this context in which his contemporaries lived (and in which I would say we still live today) is the ideological context, based on the definition formulated by Karl Mannheim in 1929 in *Ideologie und Utopie*. In this work, Mannheim, a Hungarian philosopher educated at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, establishes the definitions of *ideology* and *utopia* in a historical sense. Ideology, for Mannheim, constitutes the set of ideas which seek to maintain the status quo while, utopia, on the contrary, represents the set of ideas which seek to change it.⁶³ Thus, if capitalism is the ideology of our time, the appearance within it of any utopian element would potentially signify an attempt to overcome it. At this point, I can return to notion of the utopian impulse, which Moylan explains as follows:

Movements for racial emancipation, women's rights, industrial democracy, world peace, ecological balance, and others constantly drew upon the utopian impulse embedded in the dominant ideology of America as Utopia. That impulse was part and parcel of the continuing process of promise/denial, cooptation/revolt at the heart of a system that required the stimulus of constant dissatisfaction for its mechanisms of reification, exploitation, profit, and growth.

⁶² Moylan, *Demand*, 17.

⁶³ Moylan, *Demand*, 18.

Within this deeper understanding of utopia lies the possibility for a revived and more radical use of that impulse to resist and move beyond the current system of transnational capitalism, state bureaucracy, and male-dominated hierarchy. In liberating utopia from its enclosure and collaboration within ideology, that subversive impulse can be re-appropriated as an instrument of opposition.⁶⁴

Moylan therefore states that the utopian impulse is already an integral part of the ideological society more specifically, it is hidden within that ever-renewing dissatisfaction within individuals that is knowingly and continuously defused and exploited by capitalism to its own advantage. However, in order to make the best use of the utopian impulse as an instrument of opposition, it must be re-appropriated. To do so, the liberation of the very concept of utopia from the manipulation of the ideological state becomes imperative. It thus becomes evident that, individuals must become conscious of the mystification of the vision of utopia,⁶⁵ which the ideological society incessantly co-opts within itself. In fact, the author later adds:

For the utopian impulse, once separated from restraints of the utopian system in its idealist and totalising form, continually bases its drive in the personal experience of unfulfilled human need, rather than in instrumentally rational systemic requirements. If those whose lives are oppressed and unfree are able to dream beyond the present, then the utopian impulse as a non-exclusive activity no longer limited to imposed models will play an increasingly significant role in the oppositional project.⁶⁶

Thus, the utopian impulse, once freed from the capitalist ideological shackles, plays a crucial role in the project of opposition to the status quo, but only if it is claimed by those who not only live oppressed and enslaved lives within the

⁶⁴ Moylan, *Demand*, 19.

⁶⁵ The reasoning follows the same concept of the lord-servant dialectic theorised by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and then the same theoretical procedure as Marx and Engels in *The Communist Party Manifesto*. Proletarians must understand the deception that the bourgeoisie perpetrates to their disadvantage by making them believe that their existence depends on them. Thus, capitalism ensnares individuals in its economic-productive model by inducing them to conceive and satisfy consumerist desires by inculcating the illusion of guaranteed perpetual prosperity in them.

⁶⁶ Moylan, *Demand*, 202, 203.

system but are also capable of dreaming beyond it, that is, of visualising a desirable alternative to their present. Moylan elaborates further:

In generating preconceptual images of human fulfilment that radically break with the prevailing social system, utopian discourse articulates the possibility of other ways of living in the world. The strength of critical utopian expression lies not in the particular social structures it portrays but in the very act of portraying a utopian vision itself. The task of an oppositional utopian text is not to foreclose the agenda for the future in terms of a homogeneous revolutionary plan but rather to hold open the act of negating the present and to imagine any of several possible modes of adaptation to society and nature based generally upon principles of autonomy, mutual aid, and equality.⁶⁷

Imagining the satisfaction of an impulse already gives rise to new and diverse ways of living in the world. The task of the text is not to provide instructions for a perfect build-your-own, revolution (a situation that is very reminiscent of the now anachronistic idea of utopia as a project), but rather, to restore an ability to negate the present and imagine new societies based on the principles of autonomy, mutual aid and equity. Moylan therefore also associates utopian hope with the utopian impulse:

After this critical utopian moment, the utopian impulse must be seen for the practice that it is: neither the blueprint or idealised heaven it once was, nor the commodity packaged and sold in the present market. Revived in the politics and the art of the late 1960s, utopian hope is the expression of the tendency of human beings to resist exploitation and oppression and to desire and work for freedom and fulfilment. The radical utopian impulse is part of the historical process of social struggle and change. It is the dream that moves us on.⁶⁸

In the author's words, therefore, it seems to me that hope and impulse, within the framework of utopian discourse, almost merge. Hope, which provides the conditions 'to resist exploitation and oppression and to desire and work for freedom and fulfilment' is both the cause and effect of the impulse itself, since is the impulse is equally the dream that keeps us going. Ultimately, Moylan does

⁶⁷ Moylan, *Demand*, 25, 26.

⁶⁸ Moylan, *Demand*, 185.

not fail to recognise the lineage of the concept of the utopian impulse from the German utopianist Bloch, praising him for having restored 'the utopian impulse to the revolutionary arsenal', as well as for having 'anticipated the concept behind one of the driving forces of the opposition to domination and hierarchy that developed in the late 1960s and continues in all its discontinuity to the present day'.⁶⁹ Bloch thus not only associated the concept of the utopian impulse with the field of revolutionary semantics and symbolism, but also anticipated the emergence of the aforementioned antagonistic social movements that have followed one another from the 1960s to the present day.

In 1991, Frederic Jameson, another important utopianist like Moylan, published *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In this work, the scholar argues that the epoch of post-modernism (roughly the second half of the 20th century), which he defines as late capitalism, can be seen as the end of history since the Marxist categories of ideology and utopia no longer exist as before. According to Jameson, in the contemporary capitalist era, ideology has not disappeared altogether but has transformed in a way that has made it more difficult to detect and recognise than in previous periods. This transformation is partly due to the homogenisation of mass culture, globalisation and the imposition of new media and technologies. In this context, ideology does not disappear, but becomes more insidious, elusive, and infiltrated into cultural representations. Jameson uses the term 'schizophrenia'⁷⁰ to describe this cultural condition in which cultural fragments and references chaotically overlap and collide, making it difficult to identify a single coherent ideology. Ideology may be hidden behind discourses and representations that seem apolitical or neutral but which in fact convey deep ideological assumptions. In short, ideology does not disappear but becomes more elusive and difficult to detect in the context of postmodernism. What clearly follows from this elusive ideology is the impossibility of imagining utopia since the recognition of ideology itself is a necessary condition of imagining utopia. How is it possible to conceive of utopian thought as an alternative to a status quo that is not

⁶⁹ Moylan, *Demand*, 20.

⁷⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991), 375.

perceived to be oppressive? In this particular regard, in two passages of *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Jameson touches on the subject by clarifying his position on utopia and its function.

On the social level, [...] our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of past ones it has preserved). It suggests that at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment (something I have myself occasionally asserted); and that therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively.⁷¹

And further on in the work:

After what has been said about SF in general, the related proposition on the nature and the political function of the utopian genre will come as no particular surprise: namely, that its deepest vocation is to bring home, in local and determinate ways and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself: and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners.⁷²

Jameson reveals the short-circuit present in postmodernism, namely, the concealment of capitalist ideology, which nevertheless operates invisibly by neutralising the utopian desire of individuals, preventing them from imagining a utopia. According to the author, it therefore proves impossible to conceive of utopia in such a society, since it is precisely the capitalist ideological and cultural context that has taken away the tools necessary to realise such an imaginative endeavour. Jameson also offers a glimpse of his idea of negative utopia, which consists of recognising the impossibility of realising a perfect utopian society, on the one hand, while, on the other, affirming the need, despite this, to persevere in imagining alternatives to capitalism. Ultimately, the very function of utopia is negative because it reminds us that it is unworkable both to imagine utopia and, consequently, to not imagine it. If then, the end of utopia is marked a failure to recognise ideology, according to Jameson we must therefore also recognise the end

⁷¹ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (Verso, 2005), xiii.

⁷² Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 289.

of ideology itself, at least from as far as the ideology-utopia dialectic is concerned. At this point, the inevitable conclusion I might draw from the utopianist's reasoning is the death of the utopian impulse, sanctioned by the end of utopia and the end of ideology. However, despite his criticism of postmodernism, Jameson remains convinced of the possibility for utopians and utopia itself to produce representations of radically different social systems:

What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.⁷³

In other words, Jameson argues that even though utopia may seem unrealisable, it is essential to maintain a critical and imaginative vision of the future. Jameson departs from Bloch in his discussion of the nature of the utopian impulse itself, expressing perplexing positions⁷⁴ that more closely resemble those previously formulated by Ruth Levitas.⁷⁵ Jameson seems to see the utopian impulse as condemned to extinction in *Archeologies*, but in his later work *Valences of the Dialectic*, the utopianist sees it in a more positive light:

The interpretation of the Utopian impulse, however, necessarily deals with fragments: it is not symbolic but allegorical: it does not correspond to a plan or to Utopian praxis, it expresses Utopian desire and invests it in a variety of unexpected and disguised, concealed, distorted ways. The Utopian impulse therefore calls for a hermeneutic: for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of Utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real; a theorization and interpretation of unconscious Utopian investments in realities large or small,

⁷³ Jameson, *Archeologies*, xii.

⁷⁴ Jameson is not convinced by Bloch's theory that the utopian impulse is a natural character innate to every human being, although he does not really deny this possibility. He is more in agreement with Levitas' idea in *The Concept of Utopia* where she states that this belief is problematic because it is not empirically verifiable. She proposes, on the contrary, that it is a socially provoked phenomenon, therefore not universally realisable.

⁷⁵ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse University Press, 1990), 210, 211, 222.

which may in themselves be far from Utopian in their actuality. The premise here is then that the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish-fulfillments and Utopian gratifications [...].⁷⁶

As he had already explained in *Archeologies*, here too Jameson returns to emphasise that the utopian impulse is an allegorical concept that expresses utopian desire (according to Bloch's formulation) 'and invests it in a variety of unexpected and disguised, concealed, distorted ways'. An interpretative effort is required to unearth the manifestation of the utopian impulse in the real world. And while the negative view of utopia as 'the most noxious phenomena' remains, Jameson now appears more open to the possibility that hopeful expectations might be fulfilled.

Fredric Jameson's view is rather pessimistic with few glimmers of hope. Tom Moylan maintains a more positive vision, though he remains aware of the complexity of such topics and of the criticisms and problems already mentioned above. Building on his concept of *critical utopia* formulated in the 1980s, the utopianist, together with another well-known expert in Utopian Studies, Raffaella Baccolini, theorized a similar concept, its mirror image: *critical dystopia*. Although the nomenclature may be misleading, here too I find the utopian impulse. In the introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), Moylan and Baccolini explain as follows:

In our own work, we read critical dystopias as texts that maintain a utopian impulse. Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story, dystopias maintain utopian hope outside their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future. This option is not granted to the protagonists of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*. Winston Smith, Julia, John the Savage, and Lenina are all crushed by the authoritarian society; there is no learning, no escape for them. Conversely, the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and

⁷⁶ Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (Verso, 2009), 415, 416.

opposition for those collective "ex-centric" subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule.⁷⁷

Having considered the category of utopian novels that present utopian dreams, in a departure from the traditional strand that proposes utopian projects (classical utopias),⁷⁸ I will now turn to dystopian novels. While classical dystopias narrate depressing scenarios in which there is no room for any hope or lessons at the end of the stories, critical dystopias 'maintain the utopian impulse within the work' since a glimmer of hope for a better future persists at the end of the book for the benefit of the characters and their evolution over the course of the plot. For them, a space of contestation and opposition opens in which the characters can be expected to express their utopian impulse.

This tendency of Moylan and Baccolini to generally look optimistically at the subject of utopia is found after *Dark Horizons* in their edited volume, *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*.⁷⁹ In the numerous contributions therein, the authors enrich the debate with a series of observations, references and exhortations aimed at elucidating the strengths of the subject and its field of study. Chapters within the volume consider: utopia as a desire for change for a better place and a better life;⁸⁰ the importance of community, following the macroscopic example of the utopians who contributed to this volume;⁸¹ the weight of memory as a tool for imagining the future;⁸² the awareness of the danger that utopia can represent;⁸³ the need for multiple visions of utopia, firmly opposed to a one-dimensional interpretation of it;⁸⁴ 'utopian energy', that is, the willingness and ability to create new forms of utopia;⁸⁵ the importance of choosing utopia as the

⁷⁷ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (Routledge, 2003), 7.

⁷⁸ Robert T. Tally, *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World System* (Palgrave Pivot, 2013), 3, 16, 67, 70.

⁷⁹ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds, *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (Peter Lang, 2007).

⁸⁰ Baccolini, 'Finding Utopia in Dystopia: Feminism, Memory, Nostalgia and Hope', in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 159

⁸¹ See Naomi Jacobs, 'Utopia and the Beloved Community,' 227, 229 and Peter Fitting, 'Beyond This Horizon: Utopian Visions and Utopian Practice', in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 257.

⁸² See Ruth Levitas, 'The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society: Utopia as Method' in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 49 and Baccolini, 'Finding Utopia', 172.

⁸³ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, 'Conclusion: Utopia as Vision', in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 324.

⁸⁴ Kenneth M. Roemer, 'More Aliens Transforming Utopia: The Futures of Reader Response and Utopia Studies' in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 136.

⁸⁵ Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Choosing Utopia: Utopia as an Essential Element Political Thought and Action,' in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 309

belief that the world can be radically changed. One interesting aspect that emerges from the collection is the investigation into the relationship between the vision of utopia and the space in which it fits and how it is represented.⁸⁶ This is an element discussed by Robert Tally in his *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World System*. Tally was particularly influenced by Bertrand Westphal's geocritical theory in *La Géocritique. Réel, Fiction, Espace* (2007), in which the author uses the study and interpretation of spatial theories to open up new interpretations of literary texts. In his own work, Tally sets this innovative strand of scholarship in dialogue with his own interpretation of the concepts of utopia and utopian impulse:

[...] utopia in the present configuration can only be a method by which one can attempt to apprehend the system itself. To put it another way, utopia is a means of mapping the world. Utopia is an attempt to construct or project a totality, and in this I associate it closely with Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping. As in that model, the utopian impulse reflects an effort to situate oneself in space and in history, imaginatively projecting a world that enables one to represent the apparently unrepresentable totality of the world system. This act of figuration comes across in utopian texts as a form of literary cartography. As with literal mapmaking, the artist or critic produces an imaginary, even fantastic, image of the space to be represented, developing a more or less useful tool for appreciating the world in which we live, and thereby perhaps inviting considerations of alternative maps. In other words, the utopian impulse is not connected to perfection or to an ideal state, but discloses a rigorously literary process of vision and revision that enables one to comprehend the dynamic world system in its unrepresentable excess, while also providing a practical, though provisional, guide to operating within the world. The utopian practice is not, therefore, epistemological, offering a means of knowing the world, but literary, allowing us to tell stories in different ways as means of representing ourselves and the world in the present time and space.⁸⁷

Approaching the concept of 'cognitive mapping' devised by Jameson⁸⁸, Tally argues that the utopian impulse is demonstrative of an effort made by the individual

⁸⁶ Hoda M. Zaki, 'New Spaces for Utopian Politics: Theorizing About Identity, Community and World Conference Against Racism', in Baccolini and Moylan, *UMV*, 284.

⁸⁷ Tally, *Utopia in the Age of Globalization*, ix-x.

⁸⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347,357. The conditions of a globalised economy create a gap between individual experience and the structures that define it, making its coordinates inaccessible. The question of *agency* is here rethought as a question of representation: the vectors of our global infrastructure do not lend themselves to pictorial treatment; to make the world intelligible we need a different methodology. Based on urban theorist Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960),

to represent themselves within the world, just as you might attempt to recognise where you are on a map. Tally uses this analogy to explain how the individual attempts to understand the world system in which they move and the way they operate within it.

In *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (2021), Moylan picks up on the spatial idea formulated by Tally, insisting, as always, on the oppositional character of the impulse:

[T]he emergence of the utopian impulse occurs within the ideological milieu in which an individual exists, but the impulse manifests itself as a deep change that sees the person turn against and beyond the present world system and its formative structures.⁸⁹

The utopian impulse, then, is born within a given ideological environment and could not be born outside of this environment. Moreover, the utopian impulse revolts against the educational system and structures of this ideological environment, thereby manifesting itself. Later in the same volume, Moylan discusses the idea further, with reference to Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*:

The utopian impulse [...] is the more elusive (indeed poetic) mode of learning the world, one that finds "its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices" [...]. [T]he utopian impulse, as an initial or a continuing force, drives a method of interpretation and intervention wherein practices or images can be read as allegorical figures whose radical invocation of a better world exceeds their immediate meaning - within the existing world system, in the revolutionary programme, or in the new society [...].⁹⁰

The utopian impulse, in short, is the most elusive way of learning - that is, becoming aware of - the world in which one lives, and manifests itself through undercover expressions, practices and images that represent allegorical figures calling for a better world. which cannot be immediately understood at the moment of their mere manifestation.

Jameson proposes the concept of 'cognitive mapping' as a temporary response: a method for mapping a situational representation by combining a cartographic approach with a narrative strategy.

⁸⁹ Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: the culture and politics of radical transformation* (Bloomsbury Academy, 2021), 5.

⁹⁰ Moylan, *Becoming*, 136.

To conclude this section's overview of the concept of the utopian impulse, I will turn to two fundamental topics in Moylan's latest work, which is not only interesting within the framework of Utopian Studies but which but will also prove particularly relevant to this thesis and its subsequent textual analysis. First, in the first pages of *Becoming* Moylan explains what it means to become a utopian subject, thus clarifying the title of his book:

Becoming utopian consequently names the trajectory of social subjects who break with their compliant formation (having come to re-learn the world and to imagine that it could be radically other). In this development, each newly radicalised individual, imbued with utopian desire, can, with others, engage in an education of that desire and enter into a radical utopian structure of feeling that nurtures collective solidarity and action in anticipatory harmony with all humanity and all of nature. In this sense, the utopian process is not a matter of a top-down imposition of a plan or blueprint by a designing authority but rather a dynamic amalgam of experiences by which many break with the existing world (now as strangers in what has become an unfamiliar land) and work together toward a utopian horizon. This collective movement rises out of each person and is informed by each, even as they are formed by that movement. Furthermore, this self-conscious and self-reflective dialectical process of individual and collective formation can be enhanced, indeed preserved and strengthened, by maintaining the self-reflexive and self-critical capacity of the utopian impulse to work against the grain of what is, in the name of what could be better, even within the movement, even within a realised victory.⁹¹

Becoming utopian therefore means breaking with the previous dimension of the self, re-learning the world and being able to imagine it in radically different form. Each of these individuals, imbued with utopian desire, undertakes to educate others to that same desire, entering a system of solidarity and collectivity in harmony with other human beings and the world. The utopian process thus reveals itself as an amalgamation of experiences through which many break with the world of the status quo, thereby becoming complete strangers to it, and working together towards a utopian horizon. The utopian impulse is preserved as a necessary element of self-reflection and self-criticism to fight against the core of the status quo for the benefit of this same group of individuals and the future. Moylan's other fundamental

⁹¹ Moylan, *Becoming*, 13,14.

argument, which will be essential to the subsequent literary analysis, reveals a clear stance on the interpretation of utopian hermeneutics, explicitly differing from Jameson's view:

Accepting Jameson's argument for the primacy of the negative in the utopian project, I nevertheless call for the complementary positive anticipations of political movements and the transformed horizon towards which they struggle. I then trace a line of utopian thought that stresses the positive alternatives and trajectories made possible by the utopian problematic. [...] I reaffirm the importance of the positive utopian hermeneutic, consider the ways in which readers might open a text's figuration to productive speculation on how its provisional content as well as its estranging form can disrupt the present hegemonic order, and explore what might be done to change it-not to lock in immediate, practical answers but to enlighten and enliven the articulation of a transformative agenda and agency.⁹²

Having considered Jameson's pessimistic and Moylan's optimistic approach to discussing utopian journeys, this thesis will place align with Moylan's views, accepting the negative instance of the utopian project (though not necessarily its primacy), but sustaining the importance of a positive approach to the vision and interpretation of the text, thus encouraging possible illuminations and revivals of utopian ideas and actions. This last argument, a central pillar in the utopian approach of this thesis, leads me (perhaps almost inevitably) to seal my eutopian approach to the subject of study, following the convincing warning of Lyman Tower Sargent:

We must *commit* eutopia knowing that it is *not* perfect and that, like the ideal *polis* in Plato's *Republic*, it contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. We must commit eutopia again and again because each time we do we have the opportunity, as Oscar Wilde put it, of landing there and then setting off after another. Wilde concludes that 'progress is the realisation of utopias', and while we believe in progress much less than in Wilde's day, not believing in the possibility of betterment, however flawed condemns us to live in someone else's vision of a better life, perhaps one forced upon us. As a result, denying eutopia ensures that we live in dystopia.⁹³

⁹² Moylan, *Becoming*, 19.

⁹³ Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Problem of the "Flawed Utopia": A Note on the Costs of Eutopia', in Baccolini and Moylan, *Dark Horizon*, 230.

This eutopian tendency is precisely what I discern in the novels chosen for this study. By virtue, then, of the exhortation proposed by L. T. Sargent and of the positive utopian hermeneutic claimed by Moylan, I will re-semanticize the expression 'utopian impulse' in order to better adapt it to the meaning of my theoretical-literary approach and I will henceforth refer to a *eutopian impulse*. As I will better explain in the final paragraph of this chapter, the impulse seen in the queer adolescents' protagonists of the novels that is the object of my study opposes the oppressive queerphobic status quo so as to move towards a better dimension in which to live their lives. This eutopian impulse will be central to the hermeneutic work of this thesis, since the discourses of utopian collectivity and the utopian project are too advanced for my case studies (only a few novels present rather evolved traits in line with these theories). On the other hand, the notion of impulse is ubiquitous across the corpus, albeit with varying levels of intensity, as I will see in detail later.

1.3. Quality of Representation and Eutopian Impulse Intensity: Inverse Proportionality and Queertopia

Having given a background to queer representation in YA fiction and the utopian impulse, this last section will explore the correlation I see between these currents of study. This investigation will be based on the criteria extracted and developed by the respective theoretical areas to offer an intertwined analysis of the selected body of literature. First of all, the criteria of analysis explored in the first section (queer visibility, queer assimilation, queer community/consciousness, queerphobia) shall be placed under the umbrella term 'quality of representation', referring to the ways in which queer adolescents are constructed and treated in the novels analysed. This study will additionally analyse each individual work in the light of the quality of the representation of the queer adolescent protagonists and the intensity of the eutopian impulse they demonstrate during the plot. By examining various case studies, I have come to the conviction that the relationship between these two macrocriteria is inversely proportional:

Quality of representation of LGBTQ+ adolescents

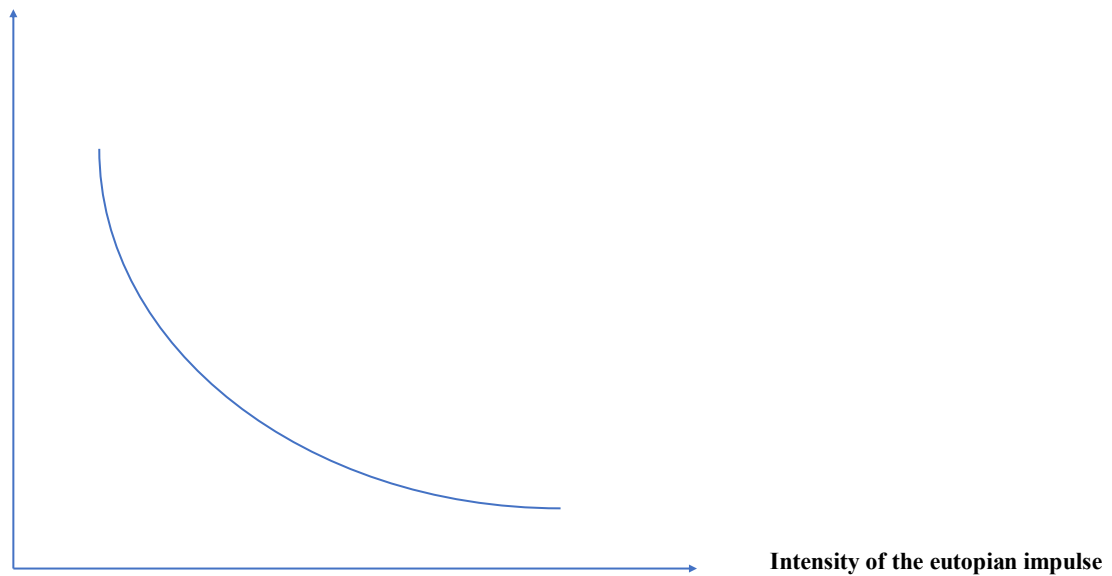


Figure 2

It is my inference that a higher the intensity of the eutopian impulse (i.e. the degree of opposition that queer adolescents bring to bear against the queerphobic and oppressive status quo) inevitably corresponds to a worse quality of representation (high level of queerphobia), and vice versa. From the analysis of selected texts- as I will discuss extensively in subsequent chapters – there emerged a chronological evolution of the relationship between these two elements that showed an improvement in the quality of representation of queer adolescents. Nonetheless, the analysis also highlighted the complexity and frequent inconsistency of scenarios. For example, there is a clear distinction between the G and L novels on the one hand, which are numerous and have improved according to the criteria in the quality of their representation over the last decade, and T novels on the other, which are laboriously but inexorably beginning to find their space in the literary landscape, while the other letters of the spectrum (B, Q, I, A, etc.) are completely or almost absent.⁹⁴ Moreover, where T-novels have begun to appear, the quality of representation is rather low (and conversely, the intensity of the eutopian impulse

⁹⁴ Which poses a rather obvious problem in that Woodstein's critique in *Are the Kids Alright?* (218) from 2013 with respect to the presence of exclusively L, G and T novels is still valid more than a decade later, a sign that the variety of representation of the complexity of the queer community still struggles to establish itself in the Young Adult landscape considered.

rather high), in contrast to the peer novels G and L, which are instead at a far more advanced stage of representation.

This draws attention to the fact that each identity on the LGBTQ+ spectrum that acquires a voice and joins the chorus is not heard immediately. Like the now better-known identities (L and G) in the past, other identities on the spectrum must go through the same process of becoming heard. This aspect is further confirmed by a scarcity of A (asexual) novels and, indeed, very few A novels appear in the corpus. In other words, it is possible to trace a definite pattern or process for the inclusion of new queer categories in YA novels. Each new identity must first be portrayed in a story at a high queerphobic level, instead of being afforded quality representation enjoyed by their L and G peers in the same novel or in others published around the same time. Low quality, queerphobic representation thus persists as a perverse baptism of fire which initiates all people on the rainbow spectrum, alongside these issues, it is worth reflecting on this genre of literature's goal. Although the quality of the representation within my corpus generally reveals an improvement in recent years of the time span considered, it should be noted that some negative stereotypes linked to the category of 'queer visibility' unfortunately still prove to be die-hard. First, the centrality of the protagonists' queerness to the plot. This aspect is highly problematic as it portrays the book as an attempt to 'normalise' LGBTQ+ people, making the story didactic and stereotypical, inevitably lowering the novel's quality. Indeed, this element was noted and criticised by Jenkins and Cart in the conclusions of their latest monograph:

Now, like the rest of young adult literature, it must continue to come of age *as literature*. Yes, it still needs to be evaluated on the basis of the authenticity of its portrayal of LGBTQ+ adults and teens and the world they inhabit, but it also needs to be evaluated as literature. Does it offer multidimensional characters? Does it have a setting rich in verisimilitude? Does it have not only an authentic but an original voice? Does it offer fresh insights into the lives of LGBTQ+ people? Does it offer other innovations in terms of narrative strategy, structure, theme? Or is it the same old story, told in the same old way that readers have encountered

too many times in the past? In short, LGBTQ+ literature must not only be an inclusive and authentic literature, it must be an artful literature as well.⁹⁵

Not only do these words inspire exhortation, but they also encourage reflection on what and how an original LGBTQ+ YA literature might look like. As a result of the juxtaposition of the areas of study discussed in this chapter, I propose that LGBTQ+ YA literature's ideal is utopian, or, better in line with my ideas, eutopian, that is, a literary place where queer adolescents (and actually people of all ages) are portrayed in a life and context completely free of queerphobia of any kind, where their queerness is seen as just another element of their personality and where they are not perceived as isolated or special but are embedded within a queer community that has a serene and proud self-consciousness. In a scenario like this, the quality of representation would be at its highest and the eutopian impulse would be either inexistent, or turned against a society that is no longer queerphobic, but still oppressive due to other reasons. I will call this eutopian literary (in)place 'Queertopia'. Previously, I have shown how the areas of study on utopia and Queer YA, seemingly unrelated fields, might parallel one another through an inversely proportional relationship based on precise criteria, namely, quality of representation and eutopian impulse. Now, the two fields are fused through the concept of Queertopia, sealing the intersection of the two areas of research as well as the goal towards which this literature should strive, as it fortunately already does. In order to explain how this concept is positioned within my study, I have produced an additional illustrative image:

⁹⁵ Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 282, 283.

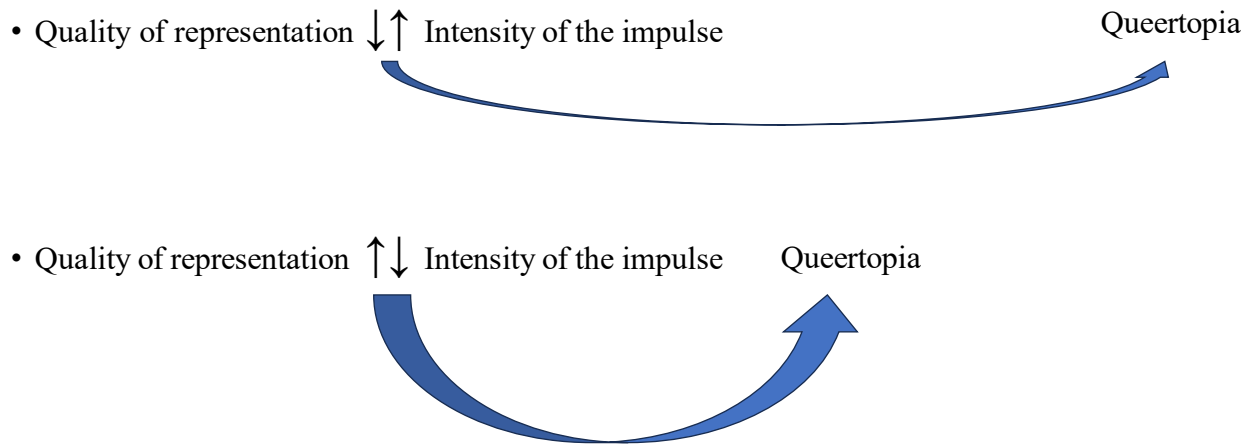


Figure 3

As could easily be deduced at this point in the discussion, the lower the quality of representation within a novel and conversely the higher the intensity of eutopian impulse, the further away it is from Queertopia. Conversely, the higher the quality of representation and the lower the intensity of impulse, the closer a novel will settle to Queertopia. Below a graph displaying this inversely proportional relationship is included with the addition of the concept of Queertopia, a further building block in my theoretical framework:

QUEERTOPIA

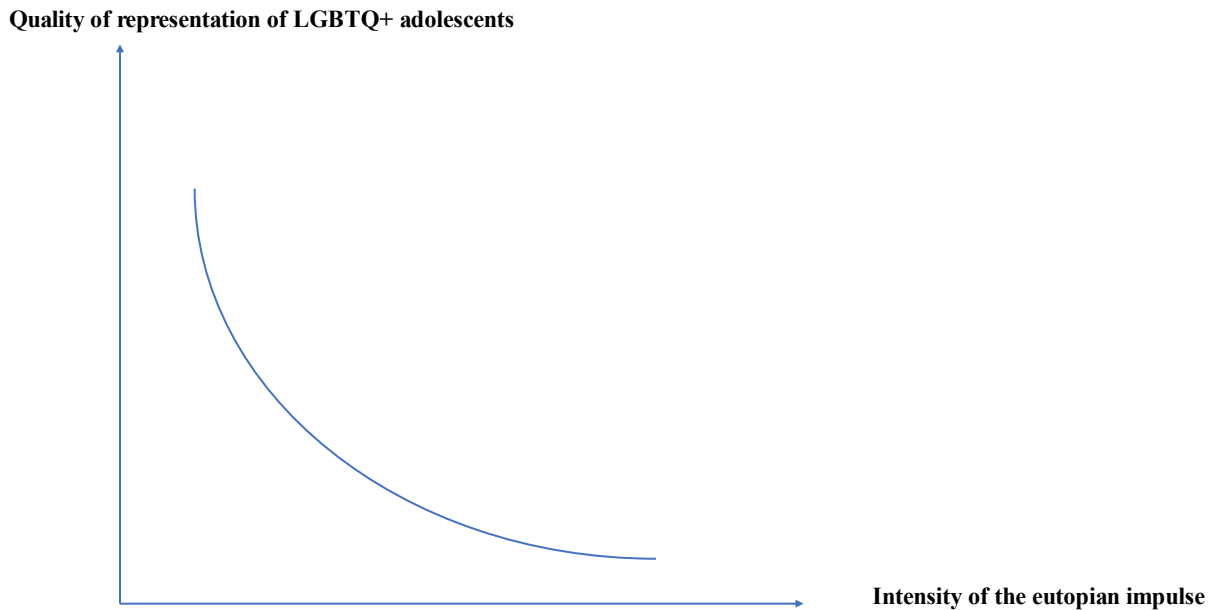


Figure 4

Undoubtedly, then, Queertopia stands above the axis of the quality of representation, as the road to its attainment necessarily passes through the gradual improvement of the lives and worlds of these adolescents until, having reached such an ideal literary place, these indicators and their relationship lose their effectiveness, finally becoming useless. Another hope which springs from this evolution is the hope, advanced by Jenkins and Cart, of increased originality in this literary genre. However, in this study, an increase in originality will be considered as a corollary to qualitative advancement, as a gradual abandonment of the heavy burden of structural and aesthetic stereotypes by this genre of novels is followed by a greater ability on the part of the authors to be creative and original as they become increasingly free of personal bias and, hopefully, editorial pressure.

Having established a clear theoretical framework, it is worth turning to questions surrounding the literary analysis which will focus on Queer YA literature in three countries: France, Italy, and the UK. In which country is literature with the best quality of representation of LGBTQ+ adolescents written and published? In which country is literature closest to Queertopia? Which corpus of literature is furthest

from Queertopia? Has the quality of representation improved in comparison previous studies? Does the literature reflect the general state of rights of the LGBTQ+ community in the reference country or does it present a different situation?

This last question is particularly important to when considering the fact that Queer YA novels, being of a mimetic nature, cannot be considered in isolation from the society in which they are written simply because, in one way or another and for better or worse, they are likely to constitute a reliable mirror of the social situation in which Queer adolescents find themselves. In this regard, it is useful to clarify the legislative (and thus inevitably the socio-political) framework in which the LGBTQ+ community is generally represented in the countries considered within this study:

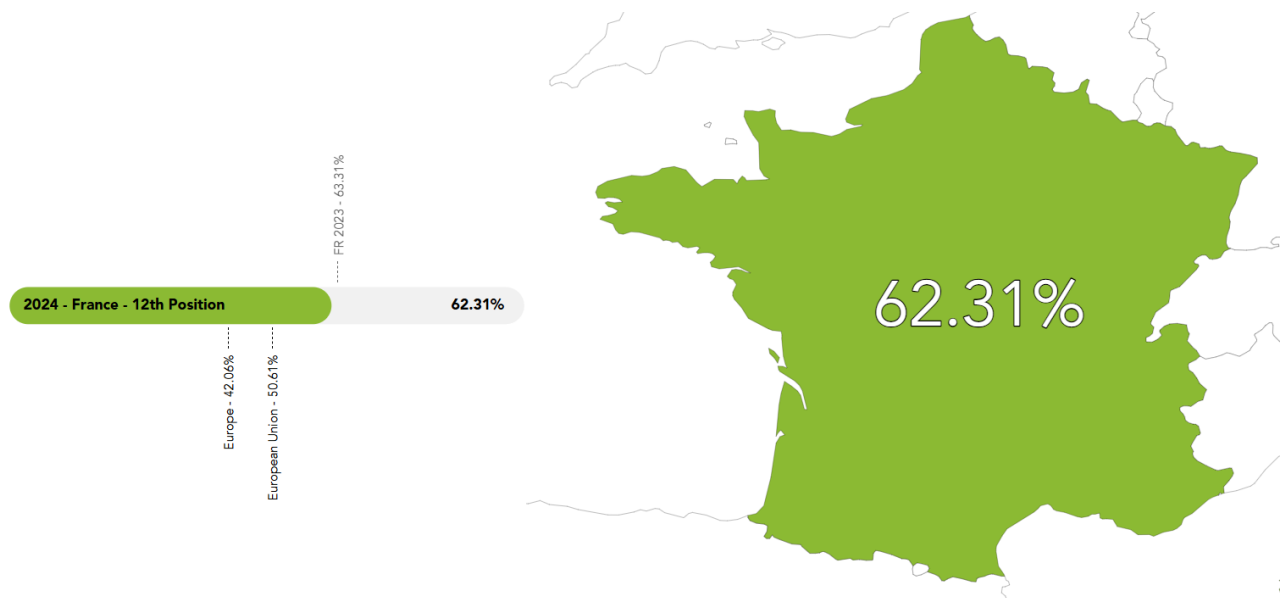


Figure 5 ⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Rainbow Map France, IGLA-Europe <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/france/>

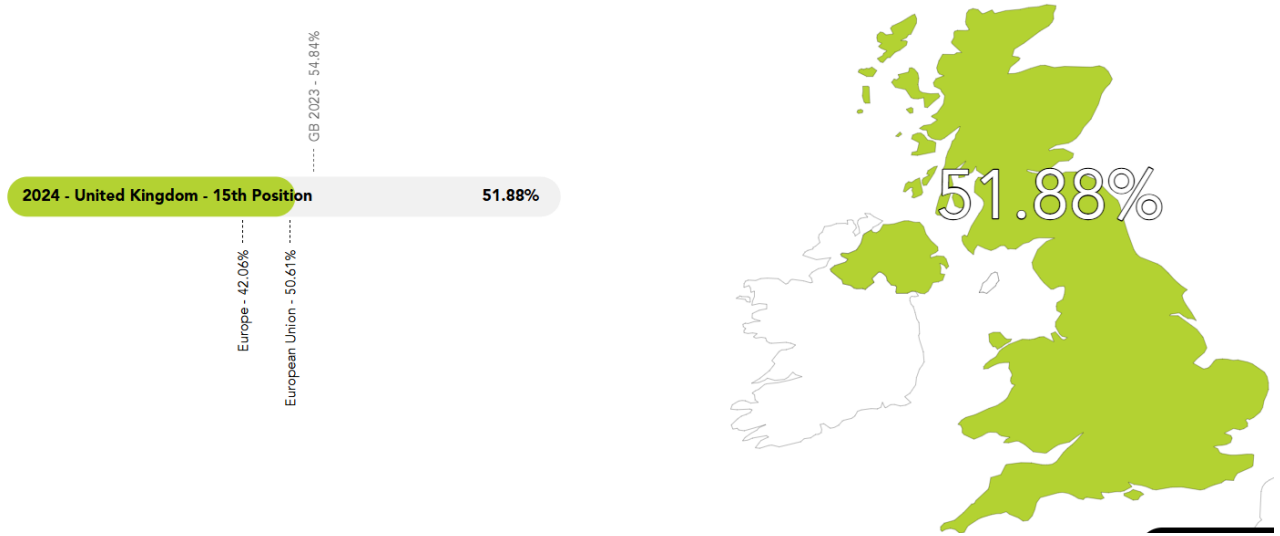


Figure 6 ⁹⁷

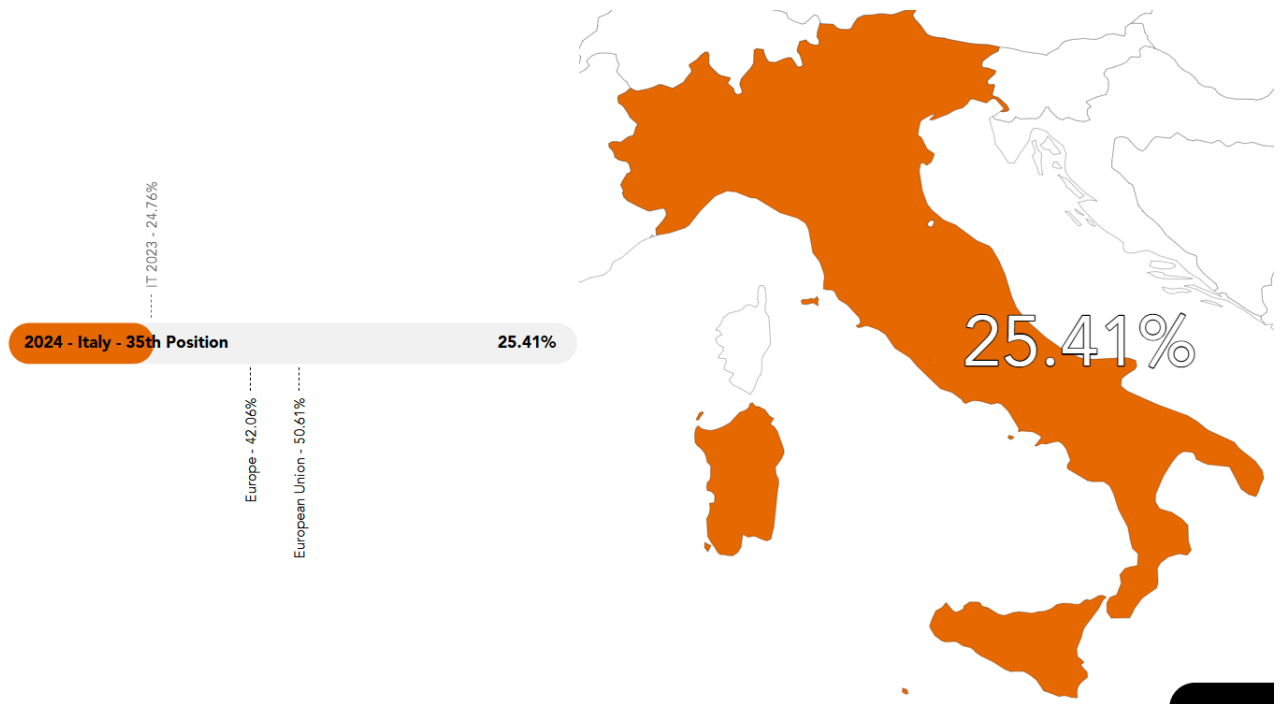


Figure 7 ⁹⁸

The images and data presented here are extracted from the Rainbow Map & Index,⁹⁹ an annual assessment tool that ranks 49 European and Central Asian countries according to their LGBTQ+ equality laws and policies. The report, issued in 2024,

⁹⁷ Rainbow Map United Kingdom, IGLA-Europe <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/united-kingdom/>

⁹⁸ Rainbow Map Italy, IGLA-Europe <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/italy/>

⁹⁹ Rainbow Map, IGLA-Europe <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/#8666/0/0>

is edited by the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe), an independent, international non-governmental organisation that networks over 700 organisations from 54 countries in Europe and Central Asia that monitor and improve the human rights of LGBTQ+ people. The map uses seventy-four legislative criteria to measure the quality of the well-being of the queer community in each country, indicating the presence or absence of each. These criteria are divided into seven macro-categories: equality & non-discrimination, family, hate crime & hate speech, legal gender recognition, intersex bodily integrity, civil society space, asylum. Each country is annually assigned a percentage that indicates the degree of legislative coverage of the above-mentioned criteria, thus providing a contextual perspective about guaranteed human rights in the specific country and more generally in Europe. Alongside these percentages, an overall ranking is drawn up. The figures above show the overall percentages and rankings for the three reference countries in this thesis. As is evident, in the sample considered, France has the highest legislative coverage, in twelfth place and with 62.51%, followed by the United Kingdom in fifteenth place with 51.88% and Italy, far behind, in thirty-fifth place, with only 25.41%.

The topics addressed in the novels selected for this study naturally correspond to a small section of the issues presented in the report. Nonetheless, this data functions as a useful yardstick against which general trends found across sub-corpora of this study can be compared. The mimetic nature of the stories contained in these novels inevitably reflects the social dimension in which the events and characters are set. The hypothesis of this study is, therefore, that each of the three national corpora considered will deliver a picture faithful to that presented by the ILGA-Europe report. According to this assumption, in the time span considered, the French corpus should present the highest degree of improvement in quality (at least in the most recent novels), followed by the UK corpus, while the Italy corpus should constitute the worst qualitative scenario (and therefore the greatest eutopian intensity).

Let me turn to the selection criteria for the novels included in the corpus. Over the course of my research, novels were selected in accordance with the following criteria:

- text-only novels;

- novels with at least one queer adolescent character as protagonist;
- novels with queer teenage protagonist characters aged 14 to 19 written between 2019 and 2022.

At the beginning of my research, I selected thirty novels (ten per corpus) written between 2014 and 2022. This corpus was subsequently narrowed down to nine novels in order to concentrate on novels published in more recent years. This choice was largely made due to fluctuations in legislative coverage across the three countries chosen. While the UK consistently placed in the top three countries in the survey from 2014 to 2019, in 2020 it dropped to 9th place as legislative coverage began to decrease, dropping from 80.25% in 2014 to 66.16% in 2020, then 63.75% in 2021 and 53.4% in 2022-2023 and 51.88% in 2024.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, France had a legislative coverage of 64.1% (8th position) in 2014, but this dropped to 55.9% in 2020 (13th place) and has slowly improved over the last four years to take up 12th place. Finally, Italy, though it ranks consistently low-down had 27.4% legislative cover in 2014, but 19.43% in 2019 and has shown steady improvement in the last five years and now sits at 25.41% coverage.

While this thesis will not concentrate on deciphering the reasons behind the decrease in legislative coverage in these countries, there has not been a steady and constant improvement in LGBTQ+ rights and welfare from 2014-2024. Moreover, 2019-2020 appears to represent a crisis point for all three countries which could be most obviously contributed to the global Covid-19 pandemic and the socio-economic crises it caused.

In short, I decided to reduce my corpus to allow greater focus on novels within this period of crisis (2019-2022) to explore the quality of representation of queer adolescents in this period.

My corpus was also selected according to the originality themes, the selection and delineation of characters and the construction of plots. From this list I had also already excluded all those novels dealing exclusively with homoparenting, queer childhood (i.e. all novels dealing with children up to the age of 11), young adults in their early twenties, novels in which queer teenagers were extremely marginal, and

¹⁰⁰ The British Social Attitudes Survey also demonstrates a recent turbulence in attitudes towards same-sex relationships from 2019-2022 and a decline in liberal views regarding people who are transgender. *BSA 40: A liberalisation in attitudes?* <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/bsa-40-liberalisation-attitudes>

novels that were not strictly textual (graphic novels). The selection of the novels collected according to these criteria therefore led to the following corpus:

Italy:

- **Un’Alice come un’altra** – Alice T. (Giunti, 2022).
- **Con le ali sbagliate** – Gabriele Clima (Uovonero, 2020).
- **Colpo su colpo** - Riccardo Gazzaniga (Rizzoli, 2019).

France:

- **Apprivoiser l’été** – Marie Boulier (Thierry Magnier, 2022).
- **Romance** – Arnaud Cathrine (Robert Laffont, 2020).
- **It** – Catherine Grive (Gallimard Jeunesse, 2019).

UK:

- **Ace of Spades** – Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé (Feiwel and Friends, 2021).
- **Loveless** - Alice Oseman (HarperCollins, 2020).
- **Boy Queen** – George Lester (Macmillan Children's Books, 2020).

The corpus thus chosen consists of three linguistic-national sub-corpora each composed of three novels, published over a four-year period between 2019 and 2022. Research which led to the selection of novels published in the UK and Italy was done in Bologna in the ‘Salaborsa Ragazzi’ library (online section ‘Herring’) and in the Cassero LGBTQIA+ Center’s ‘Flavia Madaschi’ Documentation Centre, while novels published in France were selected in Paris at the ‘Edgar Morin’ library of the USPN (Université Sorbonne Paris Nord) in the ‘Livres au Trèsor’ collection and in the ‘Kiosque’ section.

Rather than focusing on one or a few specific writers, this thesis aims to highlight common themes, *topoi*, and narrative structures. In doing this, I seek to observe and understand whether and to what extent LGBTQ+ adolescents suffer from certain types of discrimination attributable to their non-conforming sexual orientations and gender identities in these novels and to identify the elements that trigger character development and evolution through which they oppose the queerphobic status quo. The study of these aspects will be crucial in order to understand whether, as the young protagonists become antagonists to the heteronormative status quo, their personal psychological and social well-being improves (as I hypothesise) or worsens. In this way, I will assess both the quality of the representation and the strength of the eutopian impulse and the relationship between them. In paying attention to the complexity of plot construction and narrative details, I will also gain an understanding of the kind of stories the authors have tried to weave, bringing out their literary quality with the help of multidisciplinary critical studies. In so doing, I will draw more general conclusions and observe trends across the three sub-corpora. The strand of Queer YA studies inaugurated by Jenkins, Cart, Lagabrielle, and Woodstein, alongside which this thesis positions itself, not only offers a critical and theoretical overview of Queer YA production, but also strongly supports its literary potential. Hence, I shall make a further contribution to their work here.

2. Flawed Queer Teenagers. Analysis of the Italian Sub-corpus

This chapter will present an analysis of titles from the Italian sub-corpus. This sub-corpus is a particularly important focal point in this study because of the lack of previous studies on Queer Italian YA literature. The analysis to follow will examine the novels according to established criterion to show how a certain expectation of a positive evolution in the representation of queer adolescents, although understandable in an initially optimistic approach, turns out to be naïve when the facts are put to the test and has to come to terms with a much more complex panorama; As shall be shown, the complexity of the current landscape in Italian YA literature ultimately comes down to the factors discussed in the previous chapter (e.g. the lack of variety of the presence of queer teenagers who are, in almost all cases, gay or lesbian cisgender, and the very low quality of the entry of a new LGBTQ+ character, in my case, in particular, trans).

The three Italian novels selected for analysis in this paper have centre around three different queer identities: lesbian (L), *Colpo su colpo* (Riccardo Gazzaniga, Rizzoli, 2019); gay (G), *Con le ali sbagliate* (Gabriele Clima, Uovonero, 2020); trans (T), *Un'Alice come un'altra* (Alice T. , Giunti, 2022). No Italian YA novels have been found that centre around bisexuality (B) or any other queer identities, although, as shall be discussed below, Alice T.'s novel addresses bisexuality without naming it. *Un'Alice come un'altra* might even be called it a T/B novel, i.e. trans/bisexual novel).

Each novel will be introduced with a brief summary of the plot, before moving on to identifying and commenting on elements that meet the established research criteria. The analysis of each book will be concluded by means of a brief judgement on the relationship between the quality of representation and the intensity of eutopian impulse.

2.1. *Colpo su colpo*: a Portrait of a Lesbophobic Society

Colpo su colpo (2019) is the third novel published by Riccardo Gazzaniga, a writer, and police officer from Genoa. The protagonist of this story is 16-year-old Giada who studies at a humanities high school (“Liceo Classico”) in Genoa and practices French boxing or *savate*.¹⁰¹ The novel follows Giada's life between school, her relationship with her girlfriend and classmate Erica, her competitive *savate* training, her reflections on her own sexuality and the difficulty of living it out in the open in society, and her difficult relationship with her parents, in particular with her mother, who cannot accept her daughter's homosexuality and her romantic relationship with another girl. The novel, told largely from the protagonist's point of view and to a lesser extent from that of her mother Simona, her father Paolo, and her *savate* instructor Ruggero De Roma, portrays an alarming level lesbophobia. It is worth here, therefore, exploring the term 'lesbophobia', as a clear definition reveals how the discrimination suffered by lesbian adolescents takes on intersectional connotations, not being limited to non-heterosexual orientation but also extending into gender discrimination.

Braga, Ribeiro, and Caetano loosely define lesbophobia as the result of the fusion of sexism and homophobia. Sexism refers to the idea that the value of women is deemed inferior by both men and other women, while homophobia occurs when this same attitude is applied to non-heterosexuals.¹⁰² Lesbians suffer at least a double level of discrimination. If other characteristics which are often subject to further discrimination (e.g.: racialisation, low social class, disability, neurodivergence, etc.) are taken into account then the level of discrimination may easily double again. Historically, therefore, in societies in which men regulate relations towards women according to misogynist and thus sexist criteria in order to control them and enslave them, it is clear that any form of alliance between women is threatening. In the

¹⁰¹ French kickboxing.

¹⁰² Keith Daiani da Silva Braga, Arilda Ines Miranda Ribeiro, Marcio Rodrigo Vale Caetano, 'Lesbophobia in the family: techniques to produce and regulate heterocentric femininities', in *Pro-posições* 33 (2022), 5.

context of patriarchal societies,¹⁰³ therefore, lesbianism, as a form of love, union and thus alliance between women, must be incriminated and persecuted.¹⁰⁴

This clarification on the nature of lesbophobia is illuminating and is reflected in Gazzaniga's novel. In fact, in *Colpo su Colpo*, it is precisely the double lesbian matrix that, especially within the context of the protagonist's family, that continually obstructs the love story between Giada and Erica and also subjects the protagonist to continuous and unsuccessful expectations of changing her homosexual orientation.

Despite its prominence in the novel, however, the origin of lesbophobia is inscrutable. This is a recurrent but not omnipresent trait in the queer YA novels corpus composed for this thesis. In most of the cases analysed, an aetiological explanation is hardly ever supplied for queerphobia. On the contrary, it is treated as a cognitive prerequisite to reading the book. It is therefore assumed that the audience knows what lesbophobia is, that they probably expect to come across lesbophobia in a novel about a love affair between two teenage girls and that the presence of this form of discrimination is ultimately a normal plot element. The frequent occurrence of lesbophobia and other LGBTQ discrimination in these novels reflects a society in which there is an awareness of lesbophobia, but this form of discrimination is normalised. Indeed, the normalisation of queerphobia is evidenced in the continued lack of resources channelled into combatting this form of discrimination in schools as can be seen in the two 'LGBTQI Inclusive Education' reports published in 2018.¹⁰⁵ On the problematic nature of the word 'normalization' and its lexemes and its connection to the concept of heteronormativity, it is useful to quote Gust A. Yep, an expert in communication studies:

Normalization is a symbolically, discursively, psychologically, and materially violent form of social regulation and control [...]. Perhaps one of the most powerful forms of normalisation

¹⁰³ 'Patriarcato' in *Treccani vocabolario online*, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/patriarcato/?search=patriarcato%2F>, 'Complesso di radicati, e sempre infondati, pregiudizi sociali e culturali che determinano manifestazioni e atteggiamenti di prevaricazione, spesso violenta, messi in atto dagli uomini, spec. verso le donne.'

¹⁰⁴ Daiani da Silva Braga *et. al*, 'Lesbophobia', 7.

¹⁰⁵ [Education Report April 2018-4.pdf \(education-index.org\)](#) and in 2022 [IGLYO-LGBTQI-Inclusive-Education-Report-2022-v3.pdf \(education-index.org\)](#) by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth & Student Organisation (IGLYO), the largest network of LGBTQI youth and students in the world, with over 95 member organisations in 40 European countries. From the 2018 report (90-92), it can be seen that several indicators show little to no investment in schools to supervise the level of discrimination of queer teenagers in schools, train teachers in LGBTQ+ issues and prevent queerphobic bullying. These indicators show no improvement in the 2022 report (90-92).

in Western social systems is heteronormativity. Through heteronormative discourses, abject and abominable bodies, souls, persons, and life forms are created, examined, and disciplined through current regimes of knowledge and power [...]. Heteronormativity, as the invisible centre and the presumed bedrock of society, is the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalisation, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others.¹⁰⁶

All the novels within the thesis corpus present narratives which take place within clearly heteronormative societies, whose dogma does not include or tolerate the recognition and existence of queer people. This assumption consequently generates different degrees of violence depending on the narrative context. In this regard, Gazzaniga's novel offers one of the crudest and most comprehensive examples of a queerphobic heteronormative society within the corpus and does so with particular reference to lesbophobia. The novel provides a wealth of examples, so this discussion will be limited to the most salient scenes, comparing them with other passages that are also worthy of attention.

In *Colpo su colpo*, the news¹⁰⁷ of Giada's homosexuality and romantic relationship with Erica provokes repulsive or manipulative attitudes in the protagonist's parents, particularly her mother. These types of reactions, also frequent in the sample of novels under analysis, seem to have a primary emotion as a common origin; disgust.¹⁰⁸ Psychologists G. Morrison, Kiss, Bishop, and A. Morrison, in their recent article, discussed disgust as follows:

¹⁰⁶ Gust A. Yep, 'The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies', *Journal of Homosexuality* 2 and 4 (2003), 11-59: 18.

¹⁰⁷ In this regard, it should be pointed out that Gazzaniga improperly uses the term *outing* twice (on pages 102 and 116 of the novel) as it means 'having one's trans (or LGBT+) status disclosed by others without one's consent' while coming out is a 'voluntary act' as defined by Mathea Slåttholm Sagdahl in 'Transgender students and staff' in *Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia: A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Transformation*, (2023). The correct term therefore that the author should have used is 'coming out'. I would also add that in the volume *Gay ethics: controversies in outing, civil rights, and sexual science* (Binghamton: Harrington Park, 1994) ed. by Timothy F. Murphy, the various authors dealing with the subject do not come to a universal moral conclusion on the legitimacy of *outing*. While there is no doubt that it violates the privacy of the person concerned, it is also true that in each circumstance it could mean an improvement in the person's social and personal situation. Sagdahl, on the other hand, who considers *outing* in an academic work environment, regards it as an exclusively negative act because it endangers the person concerned, making him or her subject to discrimination (35-36).

¹⁰⁸ There are several studies that attempt to explain the causes of the link between this element and homosexuality in human society Wang R, Yang Q, Huang P, Sai L and Gong Y, 'The Association Between Disgust Sensitivity and Negative Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: The Mediating Role of Moral Foundations', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, (2019) 1-8; C. Nega, L. Pateraki, N. Saranti and A. Pasia, 'The Role of Disgust in Homosexuality Judgments', *The Open Psychology Journal* 9 (2016), 75-83; Todd G. Morrison, Mark J. Kiss, CJ Bishop & Melanie A. Morrison, "'We're Disgusted With Queers, not Fearful of Them": The Interrelationships Among Disgust, Gay Men's Sexual Behavior, and Homonegativity' in *Journal of Homosexuality* 7 (2019) 1014-1033.

While obviously related, we believe sexual disgust and bodily moral disgust are distinguishable on the grounds of perceived moral impropriety. Bodily moral disgust is activated when individuals believe that a sexual practice is taboo and violates a given moral code (e.g., anal intercourse between two men is against God's law), whereas sexual disgust occurs without reference to taboos and morality (e.g., anal intercourse between two men is disgusting because it involves feces). The latter occurs because, due to an absence of benign sexual variation, the perceiver cannot imagine engaging in the behaviour performed by the target.¹⁰⁹

Here the definition of sexual disgust interlocks with Yep's exploration of heteronormativity. The 'absence of benign sexual variation' referred to by the team of psychologists is the result of the violent heteronormative society that Yep describes. The point therefore lies in the fact that the sexual disgust an individual feels towards homosexual sex occurs because of a lack of benign sexual variation in sexual behaviour compared to hetero-oriented behaviour. In a heteronormative social context, as seen in *Colpo su colpo*, the collective exhibits a common lesbophobic attitude which results from precise cultural conditioning. Indeed, there is a particular passage in the novel in which Simona, Giada's mother, is noticeably uncomfortable - i.e. disgusted - by the thoughts that appear in her mind about the sexual relations her daughter might eventually have or is currently having with her girlfriend Erica:

Erica. La sua fidanzata. Era un'idea troppo difficile da sopportare, insostenibile quanto il contenuto dei messaggi in chat che aveva letto per caso e le avevano rivoltato l'esistenza. Pensarci le creava nella testa incastri di fantasie, proiettava sullo schermo della mente film di cui non voleva essere spettatrice. Quelle parole che si era sforzata di cancellare dai ricordi la assillavano in forma di immagini. Vedeva Giada mano nella mano con un'altra ragazza. Le loro labbra che si sfioravano, i loro corpi che strusciavano, le maniche...*No, no, basta, lasciatemi in pace.* A volte si ripeteva che Giada era ancora piccola, che faceva parte della crescita, ma sapeva quanto fragili fossero quegli appigli. Conosceva i dati delle ricerche, le aveva anche lette un paio di volte di recente, per lavoro. I primi rapporti sessuali avvenivano in media a diciassette anni, ma una ragazza su cinque perdeva la verginità a quattordici anni. Che poi, fra due donne, come bisognava dire? Si poteva parlare di perdere la verginità? Come facevano a... Si impose di fermarsi. Entrare nei dettagli era un lusso che la sua stabilità emotiva non era disposta a concederle.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Morrison *et. al.*, "We're Disgusted With Queers, not Fearful of Them", 1020,1021.

¹¹⁰ Riccardo Gazzaniga, *Colpo su colpo* (Rizzoli, 2019), 85,86.

G. Morrison, Kiss, Bishop, and A. Morrison also highlight the interesting link between disgust and dehumanisation, that is, denying the human character of another person in terms of consciousness and lived experience. First of all, they point out that neuroimaging studies have shown that when the brain receives these two types of external stimuli, it activates the same area, namely the prefrontal cortex, which confirms the association and similarity of these cognitive sensations. The result of dehumanisation is that one group of people are able to differentiate themselves from another, minimising the differences between their members and exaggerating the differences in relation to the other group. The dehumanised group will be seen as emotionally animalistic, they will not be considered to have the same level of cognitive maturity and only their primary emotions will be recognised where the other group boasts secondary emotions.¹¹¹ The study conducted on a sample of heterosexual people found that the highest levels of disgust and negative attitude experienced by the participants were found when confronted with examples of demonstrations of homo-affectivity.¹¹²

The findings of this study are played out in Gazzaniga's novel through the sudden change in Giada's heterosexual mother's attitude and her physical and relational estrangement from her daughter. The family's lesbophobia lowers Giada's status within the family while also hindering Erica's entry into it. Lesbophobia is also the matrix of other damaging behaviour against lesbian adolescents: shame and manipulation. Manipulation in this particular context would refer to the presentation of the possibility or even a direct attempt to change a queer person's sexual orientation or gender identity. There are several passages in the novel in which Simona thinks about or discusses Giada's homosexual orientation with varying levels of incredulity, as can be clearly seen in this passage:

Più volte si era sorpresa a pensare che Erica avesse fatto ben altro che mettere Giada contro di loro. Che avesse lavorato sulle sue debolezze, che l'avesse *convinta* di essere lesbica. Era un pensiero che non avrebbe mai confessato. Eppure la confortava. Simona non credeva di essere una stupida. Non si sentiva una reazionaria omofoba come la consideravano Erica e la Bonanno. Non si era addentrata troppo nella materia, ma sapeva bene che c'erano persone

¹¹¹ Morrison *et. al.*, 'We're Disgusted With Queers, not Fearful of Them', 1022.

¹¹² Morrison *et. al.*, 'We're Disgusted With Queers, not Fearful of Them', 1027.

che nascevano omosessuali o che si trovavano a vivere dentro un corpo sbagliato. Poverine, che potevano farci? Forse Erica Mantero e tanti altri erano davvero così, ma sua figlia, che cazzo, sua figlia attraversava una fase complicata, aveva solo sedici anni e poteva anche essere confusa; chi non è confuso a sedici anni?¹¹³

Simona hopes that her teenage daughter's homosexuality is only a brief phase that will pass relatively quickly. She tries to send her to the psychologist in the hope of 'correcting' this side of her personality. The belief that sexual orientation (or gender identity) are two modifiable aspects that can be manipulated is a frequent feature of queer literature. In 1994, Kirk Fuoss identified four censorship strategies in the construction of the plots of Gay YA novels: presence/absence, containment, unhappy endings, and transcendence.¹¹⁴ Today I recognise that these strategies are equally relevant to the entire teenage LGBTQ+ community. The most pertinent of these strategies to *Colpo su colpo* is containment:

A second political strategy, containment, acquires its potency by maintaining a distinction between doing and being, between action and identity. The politics of containment result in the representation of homosexuality as a discrete, isolatable behaviour that need not be assimilated as an enduring aspect of identity. As long as homosexuality remains an exteriorized behaviour rather an interiorized dimension of self-identity, it is still manageable, controllable, reversible.¹¹⁵

Simona attempts to contain her daughter's homosexuality. She casts her daughter's homosexual desire as the result of educational conditioning, for which she blames her husband Paolo: 'Che magari se l'avessi cresciuta senza portarla allo stadio da bambina, senza mandarla a fare a botte in palestra...'.¹¹⁶ She also invents self-styled medical explanations to corroborate her thesis: 'E comunque ci sono dottori che credono che dipenda tutto dall'educazione, dal clima che una ragazza respira intorno a sé quando cresce.'¹¹⁷ Here Simona hints at another frequent *topos* known to

¹¹³ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 86,87.

¹¹⁴ Fuoss, 'A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay', 162.

¹¹⁵ Fuoss, 'A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay', 166.

¹¹⁶ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 39.

readers of YA fiction: the use of medical treatment or consultation to 'correct' homosexual or other queer identities. Fortunately, Giada's parents do not consider sending their daughter to a doctor. However, examples of this stereotypical and harmful reaction have been found in other studies on Queer YA literature¹¹⁸ and, as shall be seen, is the case in *Con le ali sbagliate*.¹¹⁹

Characters like Simona who share the belief that homosexuality and queer sexuality (as well as gender identity in other novels) are reversible outward behaviours and not an immutable internal aspect of an individual's identity attempt to 'bring back' a perceived heterosexual identity or 'correct' homosexual identity. Though Giada's parents do not take their daughter to a doctor, they intend to send Giada to a psychologist.¹²⁰ Like the *topos* of seeking medical advice in order to contain of queer identity, sending a queer teenager to a psychologist is similarly present in both non-Italian queer YA novels (Christophe Honoré, *Tout contre Léo*, 1996;¹²¹ Donna Geppart, *Lily and Dunkin*, 2016;¹²²) and Italian queer YA novels.¹²³

When adults inevitably fail to contain and control a queer teen's identity through seeking medical, they are left only to hope that in time their daughter will undergo a change congenial to their expectations. The APA (American Psychological Association) has authoritatively expressed its views on the dangers of attempting to change the sexual orientation (and gender identity) of adolescents – a fact also noted by critics on the subject¹²⁴ – in its recent document *APA GUIDELINES for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons*. In the first section 'Foundational knowledge and awareness' the following principle is stated: 'Psychologists understand that sexual minority orientations are not mental illnesses, and that efforts to change sexual orientations cause harm'. The paragraph that follows continues:

Research examining sexual minority persons' experiences with SOCE ['sexual orientation change efforts'] indicates that such practices are ineffective and cause substantial harm, in

¹¹⁸ Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 84. The novel is *Being Emily* (2012) by Rachel Gold. The doctor who is supposed to follow the protagonist Emily's gender affirmation procedure states that her transgender identity can be 'cured' in the same way as homosexuality.

¹¹⁹ Gabriele Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate* (Uovonero, 2020), 15.

¹²⁰ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 36.

¹²¹ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 247.

¹²² Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 87.

¹²³ Cristina Obber, *L'altra parte di ME* (Piemme, 2014), 175.

¹²⁴ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?* 71

part due to reinforcing sexual minority stress and creating false hopes and treatment failures that become internalised by the consumer (APA, 2009a). Documented negative outcomes from SOCE include increased identity confusion, anxiety, anger, emotional numbness, dissociation, depression, suicidality (i.e., thoughts and attempts), intimacy avoidance, isolation, gender role conflicts, sexual dysfunction, high risk behaviours (e.g., substance use, unprotected sex), worsened family relationships, decreased sense of self-worth, lower levels of life satisfaction, loss of faith, financial costs, and delayed resolution of identity conflicts and develop mental tasks [...].¹²⁵

SOCEs are therefore condemned by the APA as unsuccessful methods and have psychologically and relationally damaging and possibly fatal consequences for the adolescents subjected to them. The level of queerphobia that Giada experiences in her family environment, particularly due to her mother's behaviour, is such that it gives rise to doubts and uncertainties about her sexual orientation as well as guilt and ultimately hatred:

Sua madre le si avvicinò con tanta foga che, per un attimo, Giada temette uno schiaffo. Ma non accadde, perché lei colpiva duro in altri modi. «Cosa c'entriamo noi, Giada? Come ti azzardi, tu, a dirci che abbiamo problemi? Dio santo, pensi di essere fidanzata con una tua amica!» sputò fuori e Giada non trovò il coraggio e le parole necessarie per rispondere. *Pensi di essere fidanzata con una tua amica*. Cosa poteva obiettare? In fondo nemmeno lei lo sapeva dire, se era fidanzata con Erica. Che poi fidanzata significava anche innamorata? Lei era innamorata di Erica? E se non l'amava, era perché non le piacevano abbastanza le donne? Perché non era del tutto lesbica. Odiava Claudio Bianchi e Michael Parodi e pure sua madre che la colpivano lì, dove faceva male. Li odiava perché, da angoli diversi, soffiavano tutti sul fuoco dei suoi dubbi, rimettevano in discussione quello che aveva cercato disperatamente di condividere.¹²⁶

Giada non aveva fatto alcun outing, semplicemente era stata scoperta e aveva reagito con una confessione che forse nemmeno voleva per poi vanificare tutto con la mancanza di coraggio. Aveva imboccato una strada, al bivio, per poi inchiodarsi senza andare avanti né indietro. “Forse non sono davvero lesbica” pensò, risvegliando antiche paure che aveva lavorato per scacciare. [...] Erica era una luce capace di spazzare via il buio e le paure, ma senza di lei le

¹²⁵ APA Task Force on Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons, *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons*, 2021, 13, <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/psychological-sexual-minority-persons.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 36.

angosce tornavano su, come un fiotto acido di cibo indigeribile. *E se non sono lesbica? Se mi sbaglio e mi piacciono i ragazzi?*¹²⁷

Thus, there is a direct link between Simona's disavowal of her daughter's homosexual orientation and Giada 's own sense of confusion about her own identity. It is useful here to note that this type of behaviour has been codified in a precise type of manipulation, *gaslighting*, whose peculiarity lies in controlling the victim by questioning their beliefs and denying rational evidence.¹²⁸ The passages quoted above provide the reader with an internal narrative for a victim of gaslighting, reflecting studies on this form of manipulation which highlight self-doubt and identity crisis as a consequence.¹²⁹ Giada later finds herself repeatedly confronted with intrusive thoughts concerning her continuous doubts about her homosexual orientation, thus aggravating her identity crisis. Fortunately, later in the novel Giada manages to escape Simona's attempts at manipulation (though it is unclear whether this change is conscious or unconscious) as she finally is able to define her own identity, setting a boundary between her and her mother, as well as the rest of the outside world.¹³⁰ The powerful influence of Simona's behaviour on Giada is equally seen in Simona and Giada's preoccupation with the judgement of others on the same subject. Following a fight at school in which Giada had reacted physically to one of her classmates who used a lesbian slur, her father Paolo picks her up from school and proposes that they go to the hospital to draw up a report for the injuries Giada sustained in case her classmate reported her:

«In ospedale?». «Sì, almeno ci mettiamo al sicuro e dimostriamo che ti sei fatta male anche tu. Poi, al massimo, tiriamo in mezzo quell'altro suo amico.». Non gli piaceva parlare così con lei, svelare quel genere di furbizia appresa sul lavoro. Ma tante cose non gli piacevano, nella sua vita, e questa era solo una in più. «Non mi ha fatto niente, Parodi. E se andiamo all'ospedale la mamma diventa pazza!». Giada aveva ragione, da quando era portavoce di

¹²⁷ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 102.

¹²⁸ Karissa Moody, "#Gaslighting" in *Counseling and Family Therapy Scholarship Review*, 2 (2019) 3. Mara Scatigno, Lorenzo Puglisi, Lorita Tinelli, *Gaslighting: la più subdola tecnica di manipolazione psicologica* (CSA editrice, 2022), 102, 109, 149, 160, 161.

¹²⁹ Scatigno *et al.*, *Gaslighting*, 173.

¹³⁰ Scatigno *et al.*, *Gaslighting*, 131.

“Coraggio e vita”, Simona era ossessionata dalla privacy, dai social network e quindi *dalla paura che tutti sappiano che ha una figlia lesbica*.¹³¹

L’angoscia di Giada era tornata ad aumentare come il dolore appena toglie il ghiaccio, rinforzata da una nuova solitudine. Avrebbe voluto essere forte abbastanza da fregarsene del loro giudizio e di quello di chiunque. Ma, dentro, qualcosa opponeva una resistenza disperata e odiosa, era la parte di lei che si curava del giudizio degli altri e schiacciava la Giada che lottava per sentirsi se non fiera – che poi fiera di cosa? Sarebbe stato come essere orgogliosi del colore dei capelli o degli occhi – almeno consapevole della sua diversità.¹³²

In all this, the role of the father, who also must come to terms with his own internalised lesbophobia, should not be forgotten:

«Ti rendi conto della figura che ho dovuto fare? Sono pure in divisa, cazzo!» disse e diede un colpo sul volante. «Come ti è venuto in mente di picchiarlo, eh?» «Mi ha offeso.» «E che ti ha detto? Si può saperlo?» «Ha detto che mi piace la figa davanti a tutti!» sbottò lei. «Lo ha detto per insultarmi.» Paolo rimase zitto, strinse il pugno destro trattenendosi dallo scaricarlo sul volante. Avrebbe tanto desiderato che sua figlia avesse reagito perché quell’insulto era falso. Invece non era così. Lo sapeva da meno di un mese e ancora gli sembrava impossibile. *Lesbica. Lesbica. Lesbica*. Quella parola gli girava nella testa come una filastrocca priva di altri versi. Avrebbe dovuto accettarlo, ma era ben lontano anche solo da riuscire a pensarci.¹³³

«Mi raccomando, fammi sapere se la vedi» gli aveva scritto Simona un’ora prima sul cellulare e quindi eccolo lì, adesso, a cercare la figlia in mezzo alla più grande manifestazione gay che si svolgeva a Genova, senza nemmeno capire perché lo stesse facendo. Forse per convincersi che era vero, che fosse lesbica sino in fondo. Perché – se lo era – allora doveva venire al Gay Pride e manifestare per i diritti, mica essere una lesbica per gioco, una lesbica all’acqua di rose che incasinava la loro famiglia per niente. O, piuttosto, era lì per non vederla, era lì sperando di non trovarla. Forse lui non era migliore di Simona e neppure di Felice, forse era altrettanto incapace di ammettere diverse declinazioni della normalità.¹³⁴

Although he must be credited with a much more open and conciliatory disposition than his wife:

¹³¹ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 32.

¹³² Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 35, 36.

¹³³ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 30, 31.

¹³⁴ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 112.

In realtà avrebbe preso a schiaffi pure Giada. Sì, era così, ne aveva avuto l'impulso, per un misto di rabbia e frustrazione, di collera e delusione e amore, quell'amore per cui non sopportava di vederla soffrire, non tollerava che fosse offesa ed emarginata. E provava rabbia anche verso sua moglie, che continuava a sperare che Giada non fosse ciò che era. *Lesbica*. Lui, almeno, tentava di non respingere l'idea: da quando Simona aveva scoperto quei messaggi in chat e sua figlia aveva dichiarato che le piacevano le ragazze, Paolo non pensava che a quello, provava a costruire un piccolo palazzo di accettazione di cui sua moglie minava le fondamenta.¹³⁵

These passages are striking for the way in which they expose the parent's inability (though particularly Simona's inability) to address the topic of homosexuality with their daughter and her girlfriend. Giada's parents are unable to 'justify' Erica's presence in the eyes of society or to the two teenagers, instead mystifying the real cause with silly pretexts, leading to the infantilisation of both the parents themselves and the two teenagers. Giada's parents do not consider the Erica and Giada to be endowed with sufficient critical capacity to understand the complexity of their own sexuality while they prove themselves to be incapable of resolving the emotional and value crisis of what their daughter's homosexuality represents in their personal symbolic-cultural horizon. As a result of this, Giada's parents set up defensive strategies that ultimately freeze personal evolution and, consequently, petrify family and social relationships. Gazzaniga shows that the culprit of this complex superstructure that continuously and repeatedly inflicts malaise on the young protagonists is to be found in the lesbophobic society. It is not surprising that Giada censors displays of public affection with Erica among other survival strategies.¹³⁶ Giada eventually stops trying to dialogue with her parents, obeys their request that she keep her sexual identity to herself, doesn't tell her parents about the sexual assault she suffers at school by two of her classmates, and keeps silent about her relationship with Erica. This incessant, harsh, and pervasive discrimination has as its logical consequence the emergence of highly-developed sense of guilt towards her family, which communicates that her identity is wrong and must somehow be brought 'back in line with heteronormative ideas. This social expectation returns several times in the

¹³⁵ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 107, 108.

¹³⁶ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 18, 74, 78, 79, 267.

novel and constitutes a continuous term of comparison between what is negative and should be changed (homosexuality) and what is positive and should be celebrated (heterosexuality). Young queer people, having consciously acquired the heteronormative character of society, inevitably come to terms with the choice between the asphyxiating external expectation and the personal breaking of heteronormative rules; between submitting to the desires of others at the price of their own happiness and courageously imposing their own truth at the cost of violence and social marginalisation. The violence of heteronormative expectations is seen in Simona's mourning the lost dream of a heterosexual daughter:

«Ciao. Tutto bene, fuori? Hai visto Dimma?». Giada si sforzò di non abbassare gli occhi per non rivelare che mentiva. «Sì.». «È proprio un bravo ragazzo. Mi piace.». Sua madre, probabilmente, sognava per lei un ragazzo come Dimma, che si atteggiava ad alternativo con il ciuffo, l'orecchino, i pantaloni che facevano vedere le mutande, ma era solo un inoffensivo paciocccone, senza dubbio meno alternativo di qualsiasi lesbica. Sua madre sognava. Di portarla a provare vestiti in via San Vincenzo dove andava lei o comprare profumi o prendere un caffè al bar, parlando del futuro e degli uomini, perché no. Sognava di darle consigli, accompagnarla a farsi i capelli, lisci e tagliati pari, altro che quel pasticcio ondulato e di lunghezze diverse su cui la parrucchiera non posava le forbici da mesi. Magari tingerli un po' e dare un tono più vivo a quel biondo slavato. Sognava di convincere Giada a comprare i trucchi e le scarpe con il tacco alto che le piacevano tanto, insegnandole a camminarci sopra. Sognava di cercare insieme borse di pelle morbida come le sue, risparmiando per comprarne alla figlia almeno una di marca, come la Louis Vuitton che si era fatta regalare per il quindicesimo anniversario di nozze. Magari sognava pure di condividere con lei un bicchiere di vino, quando fosse stata più grande, ma non quei bicchieri che ingollava nervosa, incazzata, un bicchiere bevuto con calma in un calice di cristallo, discutendo dei progetti per la famiglia di Giada, di quando l'avrebbe fatta diventare nonna. Sì, sua madre sognava, ma nessuno di quei sogni si sarebbe avverato e, in un attimo di empatia e affettuosa debolezza, Giada pensò che non era facile neppure per lei. Ma subito, a far da contraltare, emerse l'immagine del castello distrutto e fumante che lei e suo papà le aveva lasciato al posto del cuore.¹³⁷

In this passage, Simona mourns the loss of a heteronormative future for her daughter, but no alternative future is imagined. The absence of a possible queer future here is interesting when considered alongside studies which look into how queer

¹³⁷ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 82, 83.

adolescents imagine and plan for the future, has Woodstein has pointed out.¹³⁸ While the futures of the young LGBTQ protagonists in other novels within the corpus shall be analysed subsequently, it is worth pointing out at this stage that in *Colpo su colpo* there is no vision of the future where marriage represents a happy ending. Instead, Giada's mother mourns the loss of her possibility that her daughter might get married or start a family. What emerges instead from Giada's thoughts of dating, marriage and children is the image of a destroyed and smoking castle in place of her heart. Giada's anxiety about her own identity as a queer person does not just concern the present, but also her future.

The absence of a happy conclusion for Giada reflects a tendency in LGBTQ+ YA literature to treat queerness of their adolescent protagonists as a pivot (or one of the pivots) of the plot rather than an element of a rich personality. Queer identity is instead a problematic element, an object of hatred and discrimination. While sentimental love with a partner is another evergreen and omnipresent theme in these novels, it is by no means a panacea for all the ills generated by queerphobia.

In *Colpo sul colpo*, the sentimental love between Erica and Giada does not preclude the relationship problems between the two caused by Giada's internalised lesbophobia and her difficult relationship with her parents, especially her mother. Clearly, the parents' thoughts and comments on this aspect of the protagonist's identity have their origins in the heteronormative matrix and are demeaning, manipulative, and suffocating in nature. A double standard is applied where anything which aligns with social norm is narrated and extolled, while anything that does not fit in is to be silenced and hidden – even if, as in the case with Giada, this involves hiding one's own daughter's life. In *Colpo sul colpo*, the provincial context of the city of Genoa is one in which discrimination is more violent and more prolific. This is why Giada is in fact afraid of being seen in public in intimate moments with Erica. This fear of social judgement and ostracism is a founding element of Gazzaniga's novel which is amplified within the micro-society of the provincial town where homosexuality is an alien element that cannot be integrated.

¹³⁸ See page 19.

Another recurring negative aspect of this novel is the prejudice which the two teenage girls suffer through the lens of machismo¹³⁹. Erica and Giada recognise themselves in this stereotype associated with of lesbian girls and women. Within the novel, there are a number of examples of stereotyping of lesbian adolescents, which in some cases inevitably overlaps with a range of female stereotypes. Two of these cases are associated with the theme of sport, specifically football and boxing:

Ne avevano riso, raccontandosi tutte le volte in cui, da piccole, avevano fatto cose da maschi. Giada aveva confessato di quando, alle elementari, aveva picchiato il principe azzurro alla recita scolastica perché lei non voleva fare la dama, ma baciare la principessa. Di quando desiderava sfidare a calcio i ragazzi e le riusciva anche bene. Non era goffa come altre bambine che provavano a calciare il pallone. E questo non piaceva a sua madre. «Ma cosa fai? È uno sport da maschi!» l'aveva cazziata.¹⁴⁰

«Che c'è?» le domandò Erica sfiorandole una mano e lei si ritrasse come non avrebbe voluto. «Scusa, sono un po' nervosa.» Si detestò, per quell'ansia. Si sentiva di nuovo esposta e vulnerabile, temeva che la giudicassero, che scoprissero tutti di Erica, che fossero delusi, perché lei era div... *Lesbica*. Avrebbero pensato che era logico, per una che pesta altre ragazze sul ring.¹⁴¹

Two others refer to the male view of physical violence by a girl towards a boy:

Bianchi padre provò a reagire, malamente. «Certo, certo... Forse lei ha ragione. Ma, stando a quanto dicono i ragazzi, pare che sua figlia non brilli per femminilità, eh.» Cadde nella sala un mattone di silenzio. Giada sentì il cuore accelerare, temendo che suo padre sbroccasse e si tuffasse sull'altro genitore. S'immaginò una mega rissa lì nell'ufficio del preside con suo padre che si avventava contro i Bianchi per farsi giustizia da solo, Pandolfi che si alzava e lanciava la sua sedia di pelle per dividerli, lei che afferrava la pistola dal cinturone di suo papà e sparava in aria.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Michiyo Hirai, Mark H. Winkel, Jason R. Popan, 'The role of machismo in prejudice toward lesbians and gay men: Personality traits as moderators' in *Personality and individual differences* 70 (2014) 108,109.

¹⁴⁰ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 102, 103.

¹⁴¹ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 357, 358.

¹⁴² Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 26,27.

Nel frattempo la macchina dei Bianchi sgommò via. Il pugno era ancora chiuso. Avrebbe voluto trasformarlo in uno schiaffo da dare a Giada, perché aveva picchiato un ragazzo, perché le femmine non facevano quel genere di cose, le femmine non picchiavano un ragazzo, al massimo lo detestavano o lo amavano o lo baciavano, ma non lo picchiavano.¹⁴³

Sports such as football and boxing are traditionally associated with the male gender. A girl practising these sports associated with strength and aggression violates binary gender beliefs, leading to the assumption that a girl who plays football must be homosexual. Equally, a girl does not have the right, or at least is not given the opportunity, to use physical violence against boys and if she does so, she is unfeminine. This is not only considered as a defect, but once again violates heteronormative and gender-normative beliefs,¹⁴⁴ leading to speculation about sexual orientation. The stereotyping of queer adolescents is an aspect that has been analysed in this field of study. One of the most comprehensive studies on this topic is provided by B.J. Woodstein. In her 2013 study, the academic devotes an entire chapter to analysing her corpus on the subject of harmful stereotypes, finding in it the recurrence of a rigid, often negative stereotyping of gay and lesbian adolescents.¹⁴⁵ Woodstein, along with many other voices in the field, hopes for the gradual extinction of heteronormative stereotypes attached to queer teenagers in the YA novels to come, a chorus to which I wholeheartedly add my own voice.

Colpo su colpo presents the same problem. The continued proliferation of stereotypes underlines a seemingly trivial but in fact extremely illuminating detail; the queerphobic narrative disseminated by heteronormative society shapes the thinking of all individuals, cishet and otherwise. Therefore, a young queer person brought up in a queer-unfriendly environment will retain a false and hostile idea of the queer world and thus also of themselves, paving the way for the phenomenon of internalised queerphobia. To better explain this concept and its effects, it is worth turning to the field of psychology:

¹⁴³ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 31.

¹⁴⁴ Ja'nina Garrett-Walker, Sarit Golub, David S. Bimbi, Jeffrey T. Parsons, 'Butch Bottom-Femme Top? An Exploration of Lesbian Stereotypes' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 2 (2011) 90, 91, 92, 93.

¹⁴⁵ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are the Kids All Right?*, 129.

As a result of perceived public stigma, sexual minority individuals may develop negative beliefs about their sexual orientation, establish pessimistic anticipations about others' responses after they disclose their sexual orientation, and generate negative emotions about themselves. Specifically, LGB persons may identify with the external myths and misconceptions about their sexual orientation, and develop internalized homophobia characterised by negative evaluations, distressful feelings, and avoidance of being found out regarding their sexual orientation [...]. In addition, when LGB individuals observe discriminatory acts toward sexual minority groups, they are likely to learn that they would receive similarly negative treatment upon disclosing their sexual orientation, and thus develop anticipated stigma [...]. In addition to LGB-specific negative feelings and thoughts, LGB individuals may also develop general negative thoughts and feelings. [...] In such circumstances, they may develop a sense of guilt (e.g., believing that they are doing something wrong) and shame (e.g., believing that they are inherently inferior as a person).¹⁴⁶

Homophobia is internalised by all members of a homophobic society, regardless of sexual identity and/or orientation. The difference clearly lies in the intensity experienced between heterosexual/heteroromantic people and queer people. While queer individuals will fully experience the issues outlined here, heterosexual individuals will react to a more or less devaluing extent towards the topic. In *Colpo su colpo*, these problematic and damaging stereotypes weigh Giada down. Manipulation, internalised homophobia, and stereotyping are woven into the lesbophobic society and expressed by the heterosexual characters. It is this society that provides fertile ground for subsequent episodes of worsening violence. This is specifically seen when Giada's classmates Claudio Bianchi and Michel Parodi attack her in the school toilets. In the same harsh and disconcerting scene, two types of interrelated violence occur. The first relates to physical violence or physical abuse:

Furono rapidissimi. Claudio le infilò in bocca una palla di fazzoletti di carta, mentre Michael Parodi le torceva le braccia dietro la schiena. Giada, quando si riebbe dallo stravolgimento, provò a scalciare contro Claudio, davanti, ma lui evitò i colpi. «Tienigliele! Tienile le gambe!» ordinò Claudio a Michael, che già la bloccava da dietro. Parodi, grosso com'era, riuscì a intrecciare le sue cosce potenti su quelle esili di Giada, immobilizzandola in una morsa strana ma di tremenda efficacia. Claudio si scostò e, per un attimo, rimase fermo ad ammirare la scena. Accennò un ghigno soddisfatto. Poi caricò il braccio. *Sciak!* fece il palmo

¹⁴⁶ Fangsong Liu, Zilan Ye, Harold Chui, Eddie S.K. Chong, 'Effect of perceived public stigma on internalized homophobia, anticipated stigma, shame, and guilt: Outness as a moderator,' *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 2 (2023) 188.

sulla guancia di Giada che esplose di calore. E poi ancora, *sciak!* «Così la prossima volta ci pensi bene, prima di fare la stronza con me!» sibilò Bianchi, poi chiuse la mano e le assestò un pugno alle costole che le strappò un mugolio, sotto la carta in bocca, la saliva, lo schifo. Caricò un calcio e Giada ricordò il consiglio di De Roma. «Quando incassi contrai i muscoli, farà meno male.» Il colpo arrivò nello stomaco, ma gli addominali di Giada ressero e il piede di Claudio, in qualche modo, scivolò pure contro una coscia di Michael. [...]. «Perché ti sei offesa quando ti abbiamo detto che ti piace la figa? Eh, Pastorino? Perché? Non è vero?» le chiese vicino all'orecchio.¹⁴⁷

The second act of violence is sexual assault:

«Ah, ho capito: forse non sei lesbica! Forse ti piace l'uccello!» fece Claudio, illuminandosi e, velocissimo, slacciò la cintura, calando le braghe. Giada lo vide che si afferrava il cazzo e lo mulinava confusamente. Chiuse gli occhi per non guardare. «Dài Michael, mettila in ginocchio!» ordinò Bianchi all'amico. Giada si divincolò, cercò di gridare, mentre le scendevano le lacrime. *Oddio, no. No, non può essere.* «Cla', cazzo, non esagerare!» sentì dire a Parodi che si sforzava di tenere bassa la voce, ma non la mollava. «Che c'è? Non hai il coraggio?» lo provocò e allora l'altro eseguì. Spingendo con tutta la forza che aveva Michael la piegò a terra, proprio all'altezza della patta di Claudio. Giada dovette aprire gli occhi e vide quel pisello floscio, i testicoli che pendevano sotto e adesso erano lì, a pochi centimetri dal suo viso, ne sentiva l'odore forte. Puzza di peli, di sudore, di voglie. Si divincolò, ma Parodi stringeva più che mai. «Tranquilla che non ti scopo, mi fai anche schifo! Voglio fare altro» disse Bianchi e con la destra libera, da non si sa dove, estrasse il cellulare. Poi, con la sinistra, le spinse la testa contro il suo bacino, in modo confuso. Giada si sentì schiacciare la pelle del viso contro il suo cazzo e le sue palle. E sotto, c'era il rumore del cellulare, *clic, clic, clic*, come fossero colpi di coltello. «Ti toglierei quei fazzoletti e te lo sbatterei in bocca, ma sono sicuro che mi morderesti. Però dalle foto sembrerà che l'ho fatto!» disse Bianchi trionfante, frenetico. Poi si scostò e le alzò la maglietta, strizzandole un seno e scattando ancora. «Basta Cla', porca troia! Basta!» ringhiò Parodi spaventato. E allora Bianchi smise, ancora ghignando. Si rivestì, veloce come si era spogliato, ma doveva ancora dirle qualcosa. Le avvicinò la bocca all'orecchio. «Visto? Te la cavi con poco! Siamo pari, Pastorino. Io non ti denuncio per l'altra volta, se tu stai zitta. Da oggi tu non esisti e noi non esistiamo per te» spiegò [...]. Bianchi rafforzò il concetto tirandole i capelli. «Ma niente cazzate, capito? Stai muta oppure il cazzo te lo ficco davvero in bocca, la prossima volta. E mando in giro le foto» spiegò sventolando il suo smartphone bianco luccicante. «Diremo che ci hai portato nei bagni e volevi farci un pompino.» Giada lo guardò, incredula eppure sollevata che fosse finita, che non le facessero altro, che se ne andassero. *Te la cavi con poco*, aveva detto. «Mi hai capito?»

¹⁴⁷ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 184, 185.

disse Bianchi prendendole con forza le guance tra le mani e avvicinando le labbra alle sue. [...] Disperata, annuì. Parodi la liberò dalla sua stretta e la spinse via. Giada cadde sul suo zaino, finalmente libera, salva. *Te la cavi con poco*. La guardarono e uscirono, silenziosi com'erano venuti. Giada si tolse dalla bocca quel bolo schifoso e ormai informe di fazzoletti pieni di saliva. Un attimo dopo, vomitò nel cesso della scuola. Il tutto era durato due, forse tre minuti, come un round di boxe. E lei era a tappeto, per sempre.¹⁴⁸

The types of violence suffered by the protagonist in these two passages are the predictable result of the lesbophobic and misogynistic substratum of the novel's society. A recent public health study explains the pyramid structure of gender violence in an image:



Figure 8 ¹⁴⁹

The social dynamic of gender-based violence thus develops on five levels that evolve in intensity and severity from the bottom up, where the lower layers are necessary precursors of the upper ones. In the case of *Colpo su colpo*, the first four

¹⁴⁸ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 185-187.

¹⁴⁹ Alex Walker, Emma R. Barton, Bryony Parry, Lara C. Snowdon, 'Preventing sexual harassment through a prosocial bystander campaign: It's #SafeToSay' in *Journal of community safety & well-being*, 3 (2023) 131.

levels (from the bottom up) are all present: 'attitudes and beliefs', 'cultural microaggressions', 'harassment, threats and verbal abuse' and 'rape, sexual assault, physical and emotional abuse'. All of these actions are detrimental to the psychological and physical integrity of girls and women and find their origin in the cornerstones of heteropatriarchal society: hegemonic power located and shared in the hands of men and everything outside of them considered as their legitimate possession, even women's bodies.¹⁵⁰ These observations open up a small window into the configuration of the male social subconscious from which this whole series of unfair actions towards people of the female gender, or individuals socialised as such, take their cue.

Despite the violence portrayed within its pages, *Colpo su colpo* is a novel imbued with eutopian impulse. The two teenage girls often find themselves having to reassert their homosexual identity in order to defend its value, legitimacy, and their right to exist as such according to their being. This means fighting against the powerful heteronormative social rule and the obtuseness of those who do not accept or understand such diversity. Giada and Erica must also find a new narrative for their identities, re-telling their stories away from the dominant status quo and re-appropriating it. Despite proliferation of lesbophobia throughout the novel, Giada's resistance, and perseverance as she protects herself is comforting Erica's character demonstrates prominent levels of self-awareness, balancing out Giada's self-doubt. Indeed, her understanding and recognition of her own identity turns out to be an indispensable resource for the protagonist who needs to find the help she needs outside of herself to understand herself better and find the courage and strength to assert herself and her identity. Gazzaniga shows the development of this strength through the protagonist's re-semanticisation of words. Words used as insults and slurs in the lesbophobic society gain positive meaning in the idiolect of adolescent girls:

¹⁵⁰ Donna Dickenson, *Property in the body: feminist perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).
Ingrid Moeslein-Teising and Frances Thomson-Salo, *The Female Body: Inside and Outside* (Routledge, 2013).
Ignazia Bartholini, *Violenza di genere e percorsi mediterranei: voci, saperi, uscite*, ed. Ignazia Bartholini (Guerini, 2015).
Anita Bernstein, *The common law inside the female body* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).
Rosemary H. Balsam, 'Misogyny and the Female Body', *Psychoanalytic inquiry* 7 (2022).

Non aveva scoperto il piacere quel giorno, aveva già provato degli orgasmi in vita sua, sempre da sola. E si era già fatta accarezzare, sfiorare, ma non toccare per davvero. Non così. E ora tutto assumeva un senso diverso, una gigantesca riga tirata sopra i dubbi. *Sono lesbica. Per davvero. Sono lesbica.* Questo pensiero scintillava dentro la testa, un'insegna al neon rosso accesa nel buio che si distingueva a chilometri di distanza e solo ora Giada si rendeva conto di quanto, prima, in quel buio avesse brancolato sperduta. Di quanto fosse stata incerta, persino quando lo aveva confessato a sua madre, senza riflettere. Perché l'ho fatto? Era pentita della sua avventatezza, di aver parlato quando era ancora insicura ma anche di avere atteso troppo per stare davvero con un'altra donna e spazzare via i dubbi. Che ingiustizia si era imposta, stupido tentativo di schiacciare ciò che il suo corpo gridava da anni. [...] Il desiderio di normalità era un malato che lei aveva tenuto in vita grazie alle macchine della sua paura. Ma, quel pomeriggio, era morto in pace.¹⁵¹

In the novel, the word 'lesbian' is particularly contested. On one hand there are characters who use it to deny, manipulate, insult, and discriminate and, on the other, Giada and Erica claim the word for the representation of their identity. The conflict that swirls around the word 'lesbian' is indicative of how little alliance there is between straight and homosexual characters in the novel. Only two straight characters support the protagonist from the beginning: her friend and classmate Dimma and her *savate* coach Ruggero De Roma. The mother Simona shows immense difficulty in accepting her daughter's sexuality, as does the father Paolo, albeit to a lesser extent, and it is only at the end of the novel that they seem to succeed, at least partially, in accepting their daughter's identity.

It is thus clear that the sexual orientation of two teenage girls send some of the heterosexual characters into varying levels of crisis that is resolvable with great or little difficulty. The fact that almost all other characters in the novel react negatively demonstrates how serious a taboo queerness is in the novel. Although Giada proves to be strong and capable of defending herself, she relies (and must rely) heavily on the support and love of her partner Erica and to some extent her *savate* coach De Roma when faced with such an intense level of queerphobia. This support is crucial for the development of the protagonist's eutopian impulse:

¹⁵¹ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 252, 253.

La trovò ad aspettarla sulla porta, la testa contro lo stipite come in un video di Rihanna, con Brugola che le strusciava sulle gambe e gli occhi grandi puntati su di lei. Non appena li incrociò si sciolse, si liquefece come un ghiacciolo nell'acqua bollente. Si mise a piangere, senza ritegno. Brugola scappò silenziosa dentro casa. E ci furono le braccia di Erica ad accoglierla, braccia che la strinsero. E ci furono le sue labbra, ad assorbire le lacrime che divennero singhiozzi. senza che ancora lei avesse detto niente, ma adesso che la diga era caduta Giada non si poteva trattenere. «Claudio Bianchi. E Parodi» farfugliò con enorme fatica. «Vieni» disse Erica circondandole le spalle e la portò dentro come si farebbe con un esploratore congelato che ha miracolosamente ritrovato la strada del suo campo base. La fece calmare e poi, senza chiedere, le mise di fronte una birra. Giada non obiettò, anche se di birre ne aveva bevute quattro in vita sua e nemmeno le piaceva quel sapore amaro, come non le piaceva il fumo acre delle canne, ma si sarebbe bevuta e fumata qualsiasi cosa, in quel momento. Raccontò tutto quanto, lo sputò fuori senza mentire, senza nascondere nulla, con la testa bassa, mentre Erica teneva una mano sopra la sua, le dita intrecciate le davano la forza di andare avanti e spiegare le minacce, i pugni, il corpo di Bianchi contro di lei, il cellulare che fotografava e poi le fughe, quelle tre mattine di seguito passate a vagare per la riviera senza una logica. Erica non la interruppe, anche se più volte aumentò la stretta sulla mano di Giada per trasmetterle coraggio. E, magari, darne un pochino anche a se stessa. Alla fine si alzò e l'abbracciò. «Mi dispiace, mi dispiace tanto» le mormorò tenendo la testa di Giada stretta contro la pancia. Rimasero così, per un tempo che Giada non avrebbe saputo dire, Erica che le carezzava il viso, lei con gli occhi chiusi.¹⁵²

Arrendersi e recitare la parte della ragazzina che tutti volevano fosse, la ragazzina normale che in palestra ci va solo a fare squat per arrotondare il culo troppo piatto che si ritrovava. Sì, era un'idea molto interessante, quella sera in cui era stanca, la borsa le era pesata più che mai e quel vecchio le scassava le palle. Quella sera in cui – lo sapeva – Erica non l'amava più e sua mamma era sempre la mamma che si incazzava per il lavoro e suo padre il solito padre insondabile. Due letterine: una "s", una "i". Sì. Voglio smettere, lasciar perdere questa stronzata della savate che gli altri non conoscono o non capiscono o non approvano, lasciare 'sto sport in cui fai solo fatica, madonna che fatica, madonna quanto sudore, troppo. Mollare come Benny Paret che precipitava al tappeto sbattendoci di faccia e chiudendo la faccenda per sempre. Ma dalla bocca uscirono altre due letterine. «No» disse Giada alzando il mento verso De Roma. Si fissarono. Due gatti che soffiavano. «Bene, era quello che volevo sentire. Ora mettiti in guardia» le disse e, per la prima volta in quella sera, parve mollare la tensione.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 248, 249.

¹⁵³ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 170, 171.

Another vehicle and outlet for the eutopian impulse in Gazzaniga's novel is rage. However, rage is not always (or almost never) exhausted and transformed serenely. On the contrary, Gazzaniga stages a violent breaking point or point of no return which represents Giada reaching her limit in *Colpo su colpo*, Giada's breaking point comes after she is attacked by her classmates. She plans to retaliate physically:

Vedendola tornare a scuola, dopo i tre giorni a marinare le lezioni finendo in riviera, i due dovevano essersi persino tranquillizzati, convincendosi che lei si fosse piegata, che i rapporti di forza si fossero ripristinati, che quella stronzetta della Pastorino fosse davvero tornata al suo posto. Questo credevano. Lei, invece, era solo in attesa. Stava studiando il modo, il tempo, il luogo per la resa dei conti. Il suo corpo, in perfetta forma, era una molla pronta a scattare. Avrebbe potuto affrontarli insieme, spaccare la faccia a tutti e due, anche se – in quel caso – non ne sarebbe uscita senza niente, questo no; avrebbe incassato qualcosa, sicuro, e si sarebbe fatta male. Ma loro di più.¹⁵⁴

And eventually puts her plan into practice:

Giada attese che lui chiudesse la telefonata e infilasse il cellulare in tasca, mettendosi le mani tra i capelli corti e sbuffando, mentre si accucciava a contemplare il pneumatico sventrato. Solo a quel punto lo avvicinò. «Problemi?» chiese. Bianchi scattò in piedi e il suo sguardo si annebbiò di rabbia quando la riconobbe. «Che sfiga, eh, Claudio? Eppure stamattina la gomma sembrava a posto.» «Sei stata tu?». «Io? E come avrei fatto?» disse aprendo i palmi delle mani, senza avvicinarsi troppo. La paura era la sua forza, la rendeva attenta. «Te la faccio pagare, troia» sibilò lui, ma non era baldanzoso come suo solito, il sorriso perfetto e arrogante non esisteva più, sul volto distorto dalla rabbia. Lei non arretrò un centimetro. «Ma stavolta non c'è il tuo amichetto, eh? Non puoi fare come nei bagni, tirando fuori quel cazzetto che hai tra le gambe» si sentì rispondere Giada come se fosse un'altra a parlare, come se recitasse una parte in cui le battute le erano state impresse a fuoco nella mente. «Te lo metto in bocca per davvero!» «E mi fai altre foto? E poi?» lo provocò. «Le mando a tutti! A tutti!» ringhiò Bianchi puntandole contro l'indice e facendo un mezzo passo avanti, però sembrava uno dei quei cani rabbiosi che abbaiano e non trovano mai la forza di attaccare. Giada si mise in posizione di guardia, alzò il mento. «Eddai, allora! Che aspetti? Che aspetti, sto qui!» urlò, ma lui rimase impalato, esitante. Giada si mosse e Bianchi si spostò proprio dove voleva lei, tra il motorino e il muro alle sue spalle. Fu allora che lei partì con un calcio frontale contro la moto, vincendo la resistenza del cavalletto e spingendo il motorino verso Bianchi. Lo scooter si inclinò di lato come una nave in naufragio, lui scattò per prenderlo e provò a

¹⁵⁴ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 305.

reggerlo, ma era troppo pesante. Cadde con un tonfo e un rumore sinistro di rottura, tirandosi dietro Claudio che finì a terra pure lui. Un piede gli rimase sotto il parabrezza, il cellulare gli volò fuori dalla tasca, sul cemento. «Ah!» starnazzò, sdraiato sull'asfalto. Giada si mosse più veloce che poteva, aggirò lo scooter, arrivò a tiro di Bianchi, la sua bella faccia di merda adesso stava perfettamente a portata del collo del suo piede. [...] Fu allora che, per un solo, fugace attimo, pensò al maestro De Roma. Ci pensò, quando alzò il ginocchio in un movimento rapidissimo, ruotò sul piede che era a terra, torse tutto il corpo per imprimere al calcio la massima potenza e infine scaricò tutta la forza che aveva sul bersaglio. Ci pensò, quando evitò il viso di Bianchi e, invece della sua faccia, scelse di colpire uno degli specchietti dello scooter che volò via, lontano. Giada doppiò il calcio con un secondo, stavolta centrando il parabrezza che risuonò come cartone piegato, mentre si crepava. Infine prese il cellulare di Claudio da terra e lo lanciò contro il muro di pietra, mandandolo in pezzi. Poi urlò con tutto il fiato che aveva verso di lui, a terra. «Vaffanculo, pezzo di merda! Vaffanculo!»¹⁵⁵

These steps prove extremely important for Giada as she is finally able to confront her aggressor directly. In this way, the event is associated with a moment of high eutopian tension, in which Giada reaches her limit and reacts to her abusers. The strength of the eutopian impulse at this moment of conflict presents what I term 'queers quality representation (QQR) paradox'. Or rather, the paradox whereby a reaction to queer oppression on the part of queer individuals is a positive element in these novels, but queerphobia itself, lowers the overall quality of representation. Moreover while queerphobic violence force Giada to confront her aggressor and affirm her identity, it should be remembered violence suffered in adolescence shapes the personality and psyche of future queer adults in a deleterious way, making them more susceptible to anxiety and depression-related pathologies, as well as more likely to engage in self-harming behaviour.¹⁵⁶ These kinds of behaviours are already noticeable in adolescence when dealing with queer-phobic situations and actions. In this novel, Giada must inevitably deal with the emotional and mental consequences of such a climate: trauma, isolation, loneliness, risk of dropping out of school, etc.

At the end of *Colpo su colpo*, Giada attempts to take her own life due to a combination of events: the shock following the sudden suicide of someone remarkably

¹⁵⁵ Gazzaniga, *Colpo su Colpo*, 423-425.

¹⁵⁶ APA, *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons*, 16,17, 26, 31.

close to her, her *savate* coach Ruggero De Roma, and the physical and sexual aggression she suffers. This attack by her classmate Claudio is the result of mortification and lesbophobic-misogynistic bullying within the social context experienced by the protagonist. This framework leads the writer reflect on a critical aspect of the eutopian impulse, namely the fact that the opposition to queerphobia on the part of queer teenage characters is no guarantee of their immediate and consequent positive evolution. In fact, it is only after Giada's attack on Claudio that she goes to the bridge with the intention of throwing herself into the void.

Colpo su colpo demonstrates the need to consider the horizon of action of the eutopian impulse at a macro level. In other words, does the path for identity formation have a generally positive effect on the adolescent's growth? In short, at the end of the story, is the protagonist better off or worse off? *Colpo su Colpo*, answers these questions by suggesting that, in the end, all queer teenagers emerge strengthened by the experiences of social queerphobia they have been forced to face. However, attention also needs to be paid to the immediate aftermath of the eutopian impulse. –When social queerphobia is opposed by a young LGBTQ+ individual, –it is not without consequences for them. They may find themselves brooding over the violence they have suffered, or blaming themselves for the pain it has caused.

This is where the themes of love, solidarity, friendship, brotherhood, sisterhood or, in a word, community make a difference. All the protagonists of the novels analysed here may have the necessary resources to survive, but the emotional and psychological support they receive is not always sufficient to prevent the queerphobic climate from crushing them. In the rest of this chapter, I will place the lack of community in *Colpo su colpo* in dialogue with the communities surrounding the protagonists in *Con le ali sbagliate* and *Un'Alice come un'altra*. The relationship between personal resources and the quality of help received from community is what truly distinguishes the stories of the protagonists. Giada's story could have ended with suicide and in this way Gazzaniga's novel shows how the queerphobia and a lack of community puts the lives of all queer teenagers at risk. In the case of *Colpo su colpo*, all does not end well. The fortitude and love shown by Erica, her friend Dimma and coach De Roma are not enough to prevent Giada from walking over

that bridge, but the arrival of her parents with Erica, the real reason for her salvation, prevent her from throwing herself over the edge.

In Gazzaniga's *Colpo su colpo*, although the homosexual orientation of the protagonists is evident and thus absolutely visible from the outset, this aspect is employed as a dramatic pivot within the novel. The assimilation—and thus normalisation—of the protagonist's homosexuality and her romantic relationship is partially achieved with significant effort only at the end of the story. Giada's internalised lesbophobia means that she does not allow herself to be part of a queer community. She does not spend time together with Erica's Milanese lesbian friends' group, nor does she take part in Genoa's Pride parade for fear of being discovered by her parents. Homo-affective and homosexual acts are always explicit, but Giada feels anxious of being affectionate with Erica in public because she fears the reaction of bystanders. Giada's mother manipulates and gaslights her daughter, believing that her daughter's sexual orientation can be altered, denying her homosexuality, advancing self-styled medical theories, believing it to be a 'phase' of adolescent growth, hoping that at some point it will simply pass, and trying to send her to a psychologist. What is particularly apparent here is the parents' distorted view of reality. Simona and Paolo cling to the image of the heteronormative expectation they had built up in their minds of their daughter and are unable to come to terms with the truth. Accepting their daughter's sexuality would have meant facing their fears of social judgement and facing the fact that their daughter is not a copy of them and does not exist to fulfil their expectations.

The eutopian impulse is scattered at various points in the novel and sometimes results from the support of the positive characters around her. The eutopian tension explodes in the scene of Giada's aggression against Claudio Bianchi, an extreme breaking point generated by the anger and hatred generated by the trauma of being sexually assaulted. The novel demonstrates that to survive a lesbophobic social environment, it is necessary to counteract a degree of eutopian impulse that is superior and contrary to the intensity of the discrimination suffered. However, the ending remains problematic in that there is an obvious risk of the protagonist's violent death for reasons also related to the damage inflicted by social lesbophobia, which is providentially avoided by her parents and girlfriend.

To conclude this analysis of *Colpo su Colpo*, I present an overview in relation to the established criteria:

- Visibility queer = the protagonist's homosexual orientation is part of the dramatic pivot of the entire novel.
- Queer assimilation = the integration of the protagonists' homosexuality and their love relationship into the book's society is acquired for some characters, slowly gained by others, and missed for others; in short, not generally and totally realised.
- Queer consciousness/community = Erica has queer communities of reference while Giada is unable to approach them because of her internalised lesbophobia.
- Queerphobia = the protagonist suffers a great deal of blatantly lesbophobic discrimination within the novel: verbal, physical and sexual violence, attempts to manipulate her sexuality, in particular with the intention of explaining homosexuality with medical-pedagogical causes. Homo-affective and homosexual acts are always explicit, but the former, when performed in public, causes fear of lesbophobic reactions from passers-by.
- Eutopian tension = the novel presents an important level of this descriptor as there are numerous instances in which the lesbian protagonist must defend, assert, and have her right to freely express her sexuality recognised.

2.2. *Con le ali sbagliate*: the Queerphobic Side of (Catholic) Religion

The second novel within my Italian sub-corpus is *Con le ali sbagliate* (2020) by Gabriele Clima, a writer, illustrator, and facilitator. The story focuses on the vicissitudes of Nino, a cisgender gay teenager living in a strongly homophobic family and social environment. His parents believe that their son's homosexuality

is wrong and that it must be corrected. To this end, they induce him to move to a 'clinic' or, as his father calls it, a 'spiritual residence', run by a Catholic parish priest named Don Claudio. Neither term is in fact suitable, and the protagonist spends the first part of the novel in a parish where LGBTQ+ teenagers undergo so-called 'conversion therapies'. The term conversion therapies refers to a whole series of pseudo-religious actions and rituals, based on anti-scientific theories, which pursue the dangerous and unattainable goal of 'correcting' the individual's non-heterosexual orientation.¹⁵⁷

As shall be seen, Clima's novel explores conversion therapy in a Catholic environment and the deconstruction of internalised homophobia in the family-religious environment. As was seen in *Colpo su colpo*, this deconstruction includes the positive resemantisation of some queer terms whose meaning has been polluted by the queerphobic culture to which the protagonist had been exposed. The acquisition of courage and self-confidence is also crucial to this journey and comes about thanks to the wisdom of some virtuous characters. Similarly to Giada in *Colpo su colpo* and, as will be seen later, to Alice in *Un'Alice come un'altra*, Nino's has already come out to his family at the beginning of the novel. Although reflection on his sexual orientation comes at a later stage, the protagonist's words give an essential but very eloquent picture of the opinion he has generated and retained about this aspect of himself from childhood until his adolescence:

Che sono omosessuale lo so fin da quando ero bambino. Fin da quando mamma mi diceva sei bellissimo, Nino, e io guardavo nello specchio quel mio corpo diafano, sottile, e pensavo che quella era la mia bellezza, la bellezza di un corpo femminile. Alcuni forse, non so, lo capiscono a un certo punto della loro vita, a un certo momento si accorgono di essere così, differenti da come si aspettavano. Io invece no, non l'ho capito, l'ho sempre saputo, così, semplicemente, come una qualunque creatura appena nata sa di essere un gatto, un cavallo, un uccello, un pesce rosso, e il resto della sua esistenza è la semplice conferma di quella consapevolezza.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Elisa Scaroina 'Conversion therapies and criminal law' in *Law and LGBTQI+ people* ed. Marco Pelissero and Antonio Vercellone (Giappichelli, 2022), 295,296.

¹⁵⁸ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 149.

Nino recognises his own non-heterosexual orientation, at an early age. His awareness of his sexuality was integrated seamlessly into his consciousness without it causing him any crisis whatsoever. Nino's sexuality only is only problematic to those around him, or rather, by all those characters who represent the queerphobic status quo. This approach is observed primarily by the protagonist's parents:

Me la ricordo, mamma, il giorno che papà era tornato con quella busta in mano. «Aspettiamo papà» aveva detto, si era seduta a tavola, mi aveva sorriso, «Aspettiamo» aveva ripetuto. Poi papà era tornato, si era seduto e aveva detto «Nino» e a mamma si erano illuminati gli occhi, «io e la mamma abbiamo una sorpresa». Avevo guardato quella busta, una busta, normale, di quelle per gli invii postali. «È una lettera?» avevo risposto. Papà aveva sorriso. «No, Nino, è molto di più». «E cosa?». «Un aiuto». «Un aiuto?». «Un aiuto del Signore». «Quale signore?». «Come quale signore? Il Signore, Nino, nostro Signore Gesù Cristo». Guardo papà. «È per quella tua faccenda», aggiunge.

Mi fissa, aspettando un segno, da me, non dal Signore. «Dai, Nino, quella faccenda...che sei...capisci, no?». No, papà, non capisco, davvero. Papà sbuffa. «Dai, quella cosa...» un altro sbuffo. «Che sei omosessuale, Nino». Lo ha detto veloce, come chi sputa fuori un boccone che gli si è fermato in gola. «E quindi?» domando io. «E quindi dobbiamo capire. Capire bene, che cos'è, di cosa si tratta». Lo guardo, guardo mamma che sorride ma non dice niente. «Ma lo abbiamo già fatto, papà, non ti ricordi? L'anno scorso. Mi avete mandato da un dottore...». «Sì, sì, Nino, mi ricordo. Però non è che ci abbia dato molte spiegazioni, no?». «Aveva detto che è una cosa normale. Che certe persone sono fatte in un modo e altre...». «Me lo ricordo cos'ha detto, ma se invece non fosse così?». «È perché non dovrebbe esserlo?». «Non lo sappiamo con certezza, non si sanno certe cose. Forse non è un dottore che può dirlo, forse c'è un'altra via». «Quale via?» Papà sorride. «Quella del Signore». «Del Signore?». Papà si sporge verso di me, mi tende la busta. Sopra c'è scritto 'Per Nino', dentro invece c'è un volantino, carta liscia, patinata, una scritta porpora, elegante, una foto con un cielo, una croce, una villa con degli alberi e un cortile e al centro del cortile una fontana in cui zampilla acqua celeste, talmente celeste che sembra ritoccata in Photoshop. «Che cos'è?» gli chiedo, «Una clinica. Cioè, non una clinica, è un posto che tratta i casi come il tuo. È tipo una residenza, una residenza spirituale». Indica in basso, una foto piccolina accanto a quella della villa. «Lui è don Claudio. Si occupa di queste cose, ma lo fa con la preghiera, Nino, non con la scienza. Con la parola di nostro Signore Gesù Cristo». ¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ *Clima, Con le ali sbagliate*, 14-16.

This passage provides an initial, highly problematic picture of the family situation that Nino experiences in his home. His parents are in fact the chief executioners in the narrative, and they are the prime movers of the protagonist's dangerous vicissitudes.

Throughout the novel, the manipulative way in which the queerphobic characters use religious language is striking. For his seventeenth birthday, Nino's parents give him a letter that is supposedly 'aiuto' sent from 'nostro Signore Gesù Cristo' for 'quella faccenda' that his father cannot name. Indeed, his father's difficulty in talking about his son's sexual orientation causes him to puff up repeatedly when Nino struggles to grasp the subject. Since a visit to a doctor had not had the desired effect, the parents give Nino an invitation from a parish priest named Don Claudio who treats cases like his to 'guarire' his homosexuality in his 'residenza spirituale'. The use of manipulative religious language subsequently continues to be used by the parish priest, as seen in this first scene in the spiritual residence:

Entriamo, attraversiamo il corridoio che porta nel suo studio. «Accomodati, Nino» dice quindi. Ci sediamo, lui affonda nella sua poltrona. «Giovanni, giusto?» Guarda papà, che sorride. «È un bel nome Giovanni». «Grazie». «Tu sai perché sei qui? Tuo padre te lo ha detto?». «Sì, per la mia natura. Per la mia omosessualità». Don Claudio ride, un riso aperto, gentile. «Sono due cose diverse, Nino. La tua natura non può essere omosessuale, è Dio che te l'ha data, giusto?». «Immagino di sì» rispondo io. «E potrebbe Dio sbagliare qualche cosa?». Sorrido. «Immagino di no». «Dunque la tua natura è perfetta, esattamente come quella di tutte le creature del Signore». Sì, il ragionamento fila. «Quella che tu chiami omosessualità, Nino, non ha nulla a che fare con la tua natura. È una ferita, una ferita dell'anima. Che però si può riparare». Si alza, si avvicina alla finestra. «Non esiste una persona omosessuale, Nino, esiste solo un'anima da riportare sul cammino che il Signore ha indicato a tutti noi. È un percorso, un percorso di fede. Tu hai fede nel Signore, vero?». «Sì, certo, ho fede». «Allora qui ritroverai la via». ¹⁶⁰

In this passage, homophobic language is expressed through the discursive and lexical devices of religious language. In fact, Don Claudio's discourse is clear: homosexual people do not exist and those who define themselves as such must be led back onto 'la via che il Signore ha indicato a tutti noi'. Homosexuality is a 'ferita'

¹⁶⁰ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 18,19.

that God did not want and that must be 'riparata' so that the individual can be 'riportato' onto the 'retta via' – though faith is a necessary requirement of this return. Almost all of which are found in the domain of religious language, not only are these terms used with clear homophobic intent, but they also influence Nino's idiolect, as he acquires other people's formulas that previously did not belong to him:

Non l'avevo mai considerata in questo modo. Ritrovare la via, ritrovare sé stessi. «Allora, Nino, che ne dici?» fa papà. Lo guardo. Papà annuisce, sorride e annuisce, come se fosse lui a dover rispondere. Ma a me va bene, perché don Claudio mi piace. E mi piace l'idea che qui posso ritrovare me stesso grazie a nostro Signore Gesù Cristo. Non so se la mia sia una ferita, magari sì, magari no, ma mi piace l'idea che sia lui, a guidarmi, il Cristo. Perciò guardo papà e mi unisco al suo sorriso, faccio sì, con la testa, ok, papà, gli dico, proviamoci.¹⁶¹

The manipulative strategy of his father and Don Claudio influences Nino, and he agrees to go to the spiritual residence. There, Nino meets other queer teenagers and fraternises with two of them in particular. One is Dario:

«Be'?» mi fa. «Come ti sembra?» Guardo il purè. «Non lo so, non l'ho ancora assaggiato». Sorride. «No, intendo questo, questo posto». Impugna la forchetta, la avvicina alla cupola bianca del purè sfiorandone la superficie. «Tutto questo, insomma, cosa ne pensi?». «Non lo so. Non mi sono ancora fatto un'idea precisa». «Ma un'idea ce l'hai». «Non mi sembra male». Deve avere la mia età. Sedici, diciassette anni. «Speriamo. Non so se ne sarò capace». «Ma va', certo che lo sei». Sorrido. «Con quel nome, come puoi non esserlo?» Sorride anche lui. «Magari bastasse un nome». «Be', è una partenza». «Speriamo» ripete. «Se sei qui vuol dire che ci credi. Che i tuoi ci credono». «No, i miei no. Mia madre mi ha cacciato, qui ci sono venuto io». «Come, ti ha cacciato?» «Mi ha cacciato, di casa. Ha fatto bene. Sono omosessuale». Mi guarda, la fronte corrugata. «Sono un errore, no? E gli errori si cancellano». «Be', gli errori si possono correggere» obietto io. «Sì, è vero» fa lui, «hai ragione. Per questo sono qui. È stato mio nonno a farmelo capire». [...] «È un grande, nonno, ma si sbaglia». Lo guardo con espressione interrogativa. «In che senso?». «Che si sbaglia. Ha ragione mamma. Vedila come vuoi, ma io sono e resto sempre...» stringe fra i denti la parola, «omosessuale». [...] «Per questo sono qui» ripete Dario. «Per dare a mamma il figlio che si merita. Un figlio normale».¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 19.

¹⁶² Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 28, 29.

Another is Sabina:

«Ma scusa, tu non sei omosessuale?». «Sì». «E quindi?». «Per questo sono qui. Per ritrovare la mia strada. La mia vera strada. Come posso testimoniare la verità se ho deviato io stessa dalla retta via?». Non rispondo. Mi rendo conto che non è una domanda da niente. «Tu hai una famiglia, Nino?» mi domanda. «Sì, certo, ho mamma, e papà». Sorride. «Anch'io sto per averne una. Una mia, intendo». Si porta la mano al ventre. È incinta? Non sembra incinta. Lo è? «Che famiglia potrei essere, io, per mio figlio, se sono...» si ferma, respira a fondo come prima di un tuffo dai trenta metri. «Se sei una sentinella?» chiedo io. «Se sono omosessuale» risponde lei spiccando il salto. La guardo, seguo il suo tragitto nell'aria trasparente. «Non lo so» dico prima che arrivi all'acqua. «Non lo so, non ci ho mai pensato». «Io sì, invece. Le sentinelle sì, è il loro lavoro. Vigilare, Nino, salvare il mondo dal peccato, da gente come noi, perché la famiglia sia una vera famiglia, e non qualcosa che...». Resta in silenzio per qualche secondo, sulle labbra qualcosa in bilico, che trema. «Che Dio non ha voluto».¹⁶³

It is clear from these extracts the level of internalised homophobia that the two teenagers have introjected. Being homosexual is expressed by both Dario and Sabina as an aberrant condition that they must be freed of during their stay at the 'residenza spirituale', i.e. through conversion therapy. It is clear from their short stories that they, like Nino, come from particularly queerphobic backgrounds. Dario was kicked out of the house by his mother for his homosexual orientation while Sabina is a member of the so-called 'sentinelle in piedi', an ultra-religious Italian movement that opposes rights for LGBTQ+ people.¹⁶⁴ Dario claims that he is a 'errore', that he entered the spiritual residence precisely to correct himself because his mother 'si merita un figlio normale', i.e. heterosexual. Sabina on the other hand is frightened by the fact that she will not be accepted by the sentinels and her belief that she cannot have a family if as a homosexual.

There are, however, two essential differences between these two characters and Nino. The first lies in the fact that both Dario and Sabina appear to have arrived in conversion therapy with an advanced degree of queerphobic linguistic-psychological manipulation, whereas Nino only begins to absorb such language

¹⁶³ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Eric Louis Russell, *The Discursive Ecology of Homophobia. Unraveling Anti-LGBTQ Speech on the European Far Right*, (Multilingual Matters, 2019), 111.

first at home and then in his subsequent entry into the spiritual residence. Secondly, Nino resists the doubts about his own identity sewn by the parish priest's queerphobic religious discourse. Dario and Sabina, on the other hand, whose self-awareness and personality have already been exposed to manipulation, are devoid of self-defence. Dario and Sabina are therefore more easily manipulated by Don Claudio and Bruno, his 'ex-patient' who has been formerly 'cured' of homosexuality. This manipulation increases the adolescents' malaise and provokes worrying consequences such as Dario's explosion of anger,¹⁶⁵ and even fatal ones, such as Sabina's suicide:

Sento passi sulle scale, voci, Dario, insieme ad Angelo. «Cosa c'è?» mi chiede Dario. «Sabina» dico. «Non risponde». Angelo si avvicina. Neanche i suoi passi fanno rumore, come la sua voce. «Magari dorme» dice. «No, è sveglia» rispondo. Angelo si avvicina. Batte con le dita sulla porta. «Sabina?» Non so se sia più flebile la sua voce o il suo bussare. «Sabina?» dice Dario. «Tutto bene?». Mi guarda. «Sei sicuro che sia sveglia?». «Sì, è sveglia». «Sabina?». Un rumore, forte, qualcosa che cade, che si rompe. Guardo Dario, i suoi occhi. «Io chiamo don Claudio» dico, e mi precipito in salone. Questa volta don Claudio non ha alcuna esitazione, si alza, insieme a Lucio, e insieme mi seguono di sopra. «Sabina» dice accostandosi alla porta, bussa. «Sabina, sono don Claudio». Silenzio. «Sabina» ripete. «C'è Nino qui con me, è preoccupato. Va tutto bene?». «Non risponde, don Claudio» gli dico. «Non preoccuparti» fa lui, ma il suo sguardo lo tradisce. «Sabina» dice ancora. «Stai bene? Apri, per favore, voglio solo parlare». Ancora rumori, oggetti che cadono, poi uno schianto, sono vetri, vetri che si infrangono. «Sabina!» grida don Claudio, la mano aperta sulla porta. Fa un passo indietro. Leva il mazzo delle chiavi dalla tasca, cerca quella giusta, la infila nella toppa, apre. Sabina è in piedi, davanti alla finestra aperta. I piedi uniti, nudi, sopra i vetri che ricoprono il pavimento. Indossa una camicia bianca che le scende sulle gambe fino alle ginocchia. Guarda fuori, lontano, il suo bambino, la sua famiglia, il suo futuro, il suo nome, Sabina, da sebbene mai, onoro. «Sabina...» dice don Claudio. Sabina si gira. Non lo guarda, guarda me, e mi sorride, un sorriso dolce, solo, una carezza che mi ghiaccia il cuore. E si lascia andare giù. Non so se è Bruno, o don Claudio a gridare, non lo so perché il grido mi giunge da lontano, da un'altra stanza, da un altro mondo. È come se qualcuno mi avesse immerso la testa dentro l'acqua. E mentre guardo Sabina andare giù e la luce entrare come vento nella stanza, le tende che si alzano, si scostano, come il mare che si apre per accoglierla, Sabina vola, come un angelo, nel suo tuffo silenzioso, e tocca l'acqua e l'acqua si fa pietra, e l'angelo si schianta, si frantuma, in mille pezzi, proiettando schegge rosse sui sassi del

¹⁶⁵ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 40, 41, 42.

cortile. E Dario grida, e grida Lucio, e Angelo, e Bruno, ma io non sento nulla, sono dentro l'acqua, con la testa, con il cuore, e l'acqua si fa nera, e mi sovrasta.¹⁶⁶

When it comes to quality of representation, this passage constitutes a low point in the novel's narrative. Literary criticism on the subject is not new to such situations. For instance, twelve years on from their original study Jenkins and Cart's analysis remains unchanged: 'We note that suicide has more or less disappeared from the pages of LGBTQ+ novels as this fiction has made the transition from problem novel to contemporary realistic fiction'.¹⁶⁷ Woodstein also reports a parallel case to *Con le ali sbagliate* in her analysis of Robert Reardon's *Thinking Straight* (2008). In this novel the protagonist is forced to take part in a conversion therapy and one of his companions, takes his own life like Sabina. The priest responsible states that his suicide was preferable to life as a homosexual because dying could still mean a chance of salvation for his soul.¹⁶⁸ Lagabrielle, for his part, dedicates a specific paragraph to the issue in which he applies observations of paediatric medical matters to some of the novels in his corpus:

La question du suicide lié à l'homosexualité est abordée dans deux romans du corpus, *Le cahier rouge* de Claire Mazarid (2000) et *H.S.* d'Isabelle Chaillou, dans lesquels les personnages homosexuels ne parviennent pas à atteindre ce que Bill Ryan et Jean-Yves Frappier conçoivent dans leur analyse des difficultés à vivre l'homosexualité à l'adolescence comme le dernier stade du développement de la perception de leur homosexualité de nombreux jeunes homosexuel-le-s, à savoir le moment où ces jeunes se détachent des discours hétéronormatifs pour finalement percevoir leur homosexualité non plus comme un obstacle, mais comme une " ouverture " une existence heureuse.¹⁶⁹

Characters like Sabina choose suicide because they are unable to detach themselves from heteronormative social discourse. Their homosexuality, therefore, remains an obstacle rather than an 'opening' towards a happy life. It is useful to add that studies in the psychiatric field consistently acknowledge heteronormative social pressure

¹⁶⁶ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 58, 59, 60.

¹⁶⁷ Jenkins and Cart, *The Heart*, 166 and Jenkins and Cart, *Representing*, 297.

¹⁶⁸ Epstein (now Woodstein), *Are The Kids All Right?*, 84.

¹⁶⁹ Lagabrielle, *Représentations*, 187, 188. The study cited by Lagabrielle is: Bill Ryan and Jean-Yves Frappier, 'Quand l'autre en soi grandit : les difficultés à vivre l'homosexualité à l'adolescence' in *La peur de l'autre en soi : du sexisme à l'homophobie* (VLB, 1994), 238-251.

as responsible for teen suicide, observing that queer adolescents are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their hetero peers¹⁷⁰ and that education conducted in religious environments is an aggravating factor in this risk.¹⁷¹ In the pedagogical sphere, on the other hand, there is an insistence on the importance of bringing the topic of suicide into school classrooms precisely through Young Adult literature, so as to raise awareness of the topic among adolescents through novels and activate intra- and extracurricular forms of help and monitoring for students.¹⁷²

Unlike the US context, Italian YA novels show that the theme of suicide among queer Italian adolescents is still very much present, as seen with *Colpo su colpo* and as will be equally noted with *Un'Alice come un'altra*. The subsequent scenes between Nino and his parents are similarly problematic, where the parents persist in their manipulative attitude towards their son who suffers the psychophysical consequences. First, they belittle Sabina's suicide:

«Non è successo niente, ok, Nico?» ripete papà. Io annuisco, lentamente, ok, mi dico. Non è successo niente. «Bravo Nino» dice, e continua a mangiare. Lo guardo, mentre mangia, tranquillo, come sempre. Capitolo chiuso, quel che è successo in realtà non è successo. Guardo mamma, che sorride, anche per lei, è evidente, non è successo niente. E chi lo dice, a Sabina, che non è successo niente? A Sabina che non c'è più, chi glielo dice? Mamma mi guarda, si pulisce la bocca con il lembo del tovagliolo, lo rimette sulle gambe. E poi fa un gesto, un gesto che ha fatto mille volte, anzi di più, forse un milione, allunga una mano e allinea il coltello al bordo del quadrato disegnato sulla tovaglia. E quel gesto, fatto ora, in questo preciso momento, mi fa capire che davvero è così, davvero per loro non è successo niente. È tutto come prima, basta che le cose, quel coltello, la tovaglia, i quadri disegnati sopra siano ben allineati e tutto è come prima. Vado a letto con un senso di nausea, e mi addormento tardissimo.¹⁷³

They then arrange for Nino to meet a girl and her parents in the dark:

¹⁷⁰ Julie Tilsen, *Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth. Transcending Homonormativity and Constructing Preferred Identities* (Jason Aronson, 2013), 99.

¹⁷¹ Susan C. Vaughan, 'Suicidality in LGBTQ+ Youth', *The Psychoanalytic study of the child*, 1 (2018) 41.

¹⁷² Jeff Spanke, 'Pedagogues and Demigods. Captivity, Pedagogy, and Young Adult Literature in an Age of Diminished Expectations' in *Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity across Cultures and Classrooms* (Routledge, 2010), 165, 166, 167.

¹⁷³ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 77.

«Questa è Bella» sento mamma dire. «Bella di nome e di fatto» replica papà. Bella li guarda, abbassa gli occhi, mamma si gira, prende la mia mano fra le sue, e pronuncia tre parole; tre sole parole: «Non è perfetta?» Tre parole, e gli occhi mi si velano di lacrime. Non dirmelo, mamma, non dirmi che Bella è qui per me. La guardo, guardo mamma che continua a stringermi la mano e a osservarmi con occhi mobili e brillanti. «Non sei contento, Nino?» dice. «Bella non ha ancora il fidanzato» aggiunge l'uomo. «Hai sentito, Nino?» cinguetta mamma. «Non ti sembra strano, bella com'è questa ragazza?» Ride, per la battuta involontaria. Non riesco a guardare, sento le lacrime scivolare dalle palpebre e cadere giù, nel piatto, che ancora non ha visto cibo. Non ricordo nulla di quello che succede dopo. Solo il volto di papà, all'altezza del mio, che mi guarda, stringendomi le spalle, e mamma che dice qualche cosa mentre il primo spasmo mi contrae lo stomaco. [...] Come stai, Nino?» Mamma è fuori dal bagno, appoggiata alla porta, con la guancia. Sento il suo respiro, che scivola lungo il legno scuro. Il mio invece è ancora imprigionato in gola, impastato col sapore acido che continua a salire dallo stomaco. «Ti aspettiamo, Nino. Quando stai meglio, va bene?». Eddai, mamma, ho vomitato sulla tavola, davanti a tutti. Davanti a Bella. Non era, lei, la mia salvezza? La mia promessa di redenzione?. «Non subito, Nino, quando ti senti». «Non mi sento, mamma». «Nino». Non rispondo. Sento la presenza di mamma, del suo silenzio, sopra quella porta. «Nino». «Mamma». «Quando stai meglio, ok?». Silenzio. «Ok?». Silenzio.¹⁷⁴

Finally, the parents stoop even lower when they propose that he returns to the 'spiritual residence', this time consciously putting his life in danger:

«Allora, Nino» dice. Ci accomodiamo. «Come stai?». «Bene, meglio». «Lo vedo, sì». Sorride. «È stato un periodo difficile, ma ora è finito, vero?». «Sì, forse». «Sì, sembra anche a me». Si liscia la gamba con la mano aperta. «Allora, cosa dici? Ci riproviamo?» «A fare cosa?». «Come cosa? Quel percorso, il percorso che hai lasciato con don Claudio». Un tum, in fondo al petto. «Don Claudio ti aspetta, quando vuoi, me lo ha detto lui. Non subito, eh, se non ti senti, ma insomma, mi sembra che questo sia il momento giusto, no?». Guarda mamma sulla porta della cucina. «Non stiamo bene, insieme, Nino? Io, tu, mamma, non stiamo bene quando tutto fila liscio?». «Sì, certo». «Allora, vuoi riprovarci? Per te, per noi, per stare bene insieme». Li guardo, papà lì, davanti a me, la mano sulla gamba, e mamma ferma sulla porta che aspetta un cenno da Nino. Penso che sì, è bello quando stiamo bene, che magari devo farmelo bastare, che più di quello io non posso avere. E che forse quella potrebbe essere una formula accettabile, che se proprio non è la mia magari potrebbe diventarlo. Che posso farlo, insomma, posso provarci. Magari mi abituo. «Va bene» dico. E papà è subito contento, mi stringe il braccio, mi dice «Bravo, Nino». Va in cucina, mette un braccio intorno a mamma, le sorride, le dà un bacio. Io li guardo dal divano, e penso che in effetti è bello essere parte

¹⁷⁴ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 80,81.

anch'io di questo momento, di quest'armonia, e dovrei provare a essere felice, perché questa è la formula di mamma e di papà, e io ne faccio parte. E forse dovrei ignorare il fatto che mi senta, ora, nella formula così semplice di quest'armonia perfetta, solo, solo come non mi sono mai sentito.¹⁷⁵

To sum up, according to Nino's parents Sabina's suicide is of no note and it is strange that a girl as beautiful as Bella who suddenly appeared on a blind date still does not have a boyfriend and should be given another chance at Don Claudio's spiritual residence. Faced with these situations Nino is nauseous, he does not sleep, he cries, he vomits, he is silent, he obediently obeys, he tries to be happy for his parents and for himself, but he feels enormously lonely. The accumulation of these feelings eventually leads him to a moment parallel to that experienced by Sabina prior to her suicide:

Il resto della giornata lo passo steso a letto, a guardare il soffitto. Comincio a capirla, Sabina, come si perdeva in quel soffitto, perché se lo osservi a lungo, il soffitto cambia. Cambia forma, colore, perfino dimensioni, e diventa qualcosa che non è più un soffitto, ma tutto quello che puoi vederci dentro. Come quei disegni che li guardi per un po' e tac, all'improvviso scatta qualche cosa, e appare quello che prima era nascosto, un calice, un volto, la testa di un coniglio. Il problema è che in un soffitto può apparire di tutto, anche fantasmi, i tuoi fantasmi; e i fantasmi, se li guardi a lungo, possono portarti via. Su internet una volta ho visto la stanza di un poeta che aveva il soffitto dipinto con un cielo azzurro pieno di nuvole. Be', se il soffitto di Sabina fosse stato dipinto in quel modo, magari le sarebbe bastato aggrapparsi a una nuvola per non farsi portare via.¹⁷⁶

This passage constitutes a climax in Nino's narrative. He is faced with a crossroads: return to the 'spiritual residence' and die or run away from home. By now he has come to the realisation that his parents and home are not the safe, protective, and loving place they should be. He therefore decides to run away, planning to find refuge at the home of Tiziano, the schoolmate he is in love with. When he finally meets him at the end of the novel, the date does not go at all as hoped or imagined:

«Nino» ripete Tiziano. E intanto guarda dietro di sé, due ragazzi, che non avevo visto. Il primo lo conosco, l'ho incrociato qualche volta nei corridoi della scuola. L'altro invece non

¹⁷⁵ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 85, 86, 87.

¹⁷⁶ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 105.

so chi sia. Tiziano li guarda, sorride. «Nino» dice di nuovo. Mi fermo a pochi passi dalla Tana. «Non ti dispiace, vero» dice Tiziano, «se ho portato due amici?» Scuoto la testa. «...No» rispondo, ma la mia voce quasi non si sente. «Perché, cioè» continua lui, avvicinandosi insieme agli altri «volevamo capire». «...Capire?». Si ferma, davanti a me, quegli occhi verdi, quel viso perfetto, quel naso, quella bocca, quelle labbra che non possono mentire. «Dai, Nino» ride. «Capire se, insomma, sei davvero...» Il cuore mi si chiude. Sento qualcosa che si rompe, come un tonfo. «...Omosessuale». Non è vero, Tiziano, dimmi che non è vero, che non sei venuto per questo. Cerco Lara, al mio fianco, la sua mano. Non la trovo, sento solo la voce di Tiziano che continua a parlare. Scuoto la testa. «...No» rispondo, ma la mia voce quasi non si sente. «Cioè, niente contro i gay! Figurati. Ma, ecco, volevamo capire fino a che punto, insomma...». «Fino a che punto sei frocio» dice uno dei due. Sento l'altro ridere. Non riesco a riaprire gli occhi, sono come serrati, per l'eternità. [...] E a quel punto il mondo si capovolge. Cerco un appoggio. Sento Tiziano che mi chiama, mi sorregge, Nino, dice. Gli altri ridono, uno dei due impugna il cellulare, sorridi, Nino, dice, sorridi. Nino, Tiziano, Nino, Lara, dove sei, Lara, Nino....¹⁷⁷

This scene is likely to disappoint any reader hoping a happy conclusion. Following so much violence and pain. However, Gabriele Clima's choice here has the merit here of representing the pervasiveness of queerphobia in the novel's society. It is not just the family, not even just Don Claudio's conversion therapy, but also the bullied schoolmates.

The shock caused by Tiziano and his friends' bullying sends Nino into a state of confusion resembling a panic attack. He runs away and his alter-ego Lara tries to calm him down but there is nothing to be done. Nino starts up his scooter and, in the catatonic state in which he finds himself, in the pouring rain and the darkness of the evening, barely survives an accident:

Strada, un'auto, che mi manca, di un soffio, l'onda che solleva, i lampioni, un viale, rumore d'acqua, di motori, luci che si muovono, una piazza, un parcheggio, conosco questa piazza, uno scooter, è il mio? È il mio scooter? Mi giro. Lara è lì, dietro di me. «Non puoi lasciarmi, Nino...» Non la ascolto, ascolto Freddie invece, vero Freddie che siamo solo noi adesso, solo noi, io e te. Canto, a squarcia gola, le mani premute sulle cuffie, *Is this the real life, Is this just fantasy...* le chiavi, lo zaino, lo apro, la voce di Lara, la voce di Freddie, le chiavi che tintinnano, sorrido, la mia mano sul quadro, il motore che si accende, parto, nella pioggia. «Nino!» Lara. «Non puoi scappare!». Il vento, la pioggia, la strada, che sfreccia nella notte,

¹⁷⁷ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 159, 160, 161, 162.

le luci, la pioggia che le infrange, il vento sulla faccia, come sugli sci, attento, Nino, vai troppo veloce, so andarci con gli sci, papà, so andarci, vai troppo veloce, Nino; e poi la pista che svanisce, il colpo, e il muro della notte che mi viene addosso.¹⁷⁸

In the final scene, Nino wakes up in hospital next to Grace and Lara. When his parents arrive, there is no indication that they are aware of the role they have played in their son's misadventures. There is, however, a moment of crisis in the father caused by his encounter with Grace, a transgender woman. He stares at her and is unable to make her fit into his 'pre-constituted scheme' of the 'natural order' of things that he uses as the philosophical pillar of his life, which Nino explains as follows:

Papà dice che c'è un ordine naturale, uno schema preconstituito che ogni individuo deve rispettare. Se qualcosa esce dallo schema, si corregge; se non si può correggere, non può stare all'interno dello schema. È molto semplice, dice, è una questione matematica, una formula. Anche le formiche seguono questa legge. Se qualcosa esce dall'ordine della colonia, le formiche lo riportano al suo stato naturale. È così da sempre, è una legge universale, che appartiene alla natura delle cose. Mi chiedo a questo punto a che natura appartengo io, papà. Se non posso rientrare in una formula, se sono fuori dall'ordine natura delle cose, chi sono, quale formula, quale ordine?¹⁷⁹

Over the course of the novel, Nino goes ruminates on this argument numerous times, criticising and gradually deconstructing it. Nino's interrogation of queerphobic discourse such as that displayed by his father provide readers with a measure of the strength of his eutopian impulse. It is also interesting to note how Nino does not allow himself to be persuaded by the negative usage of certain words, such as 'homosexual', by people in the spiritual residence:

Mi infastidisce come lo pronuncia, c'è qualcosa di sbagliato nel modo in cui dice *omosessuale*. Nel modo in cui lo dicono tutti, in verità. Perché non si può dire in modo chiaro, così come va detto? Omosessuale. Perché alcuni lo dicono piano, sottovoce, che non si senta troppo? Oppure forte, come fosse un muro da abbattere. O veloce, così finisce prima, o a labbra strette, che non si capisca, o monco, a metà, *omo*, come un detersivo che lava via la

¹⁷⁸ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 165.

¹⁷⁹ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 83.

colpa. Perché nessuno riesce a dirlo così com'è, semplice, pulito, omosessuale, così come va detto?¹⁸⁰

Similarly, Nino interrogates the word 'stortura' which Bruno uses to define homosexuality, implying that there is which must be 'raddrizzato':

Io invece sto osservando la croce, la croce di Gesù appesa sulla porta, osservo i suoi bracci, che indicano la via, come Bruno ha detto. E mi accorgo, forse per la prima volta, che quei bracci di vie ne indicano almeno tre, non una sola, escludendo l'estremità che in una croce vera è confitta a terra. Forse per questo è difficile capirla, capire la via che il Cristo veramente indica. Mi giro, verso la nicchia della Vergine, chissà lei cosa pensa, la Vergine, della croce, se è d'accordo con Bruno, se anche lei pensa che la via sia solo quella, se quello che è storto dev'essere raddrizzato. Mi viene da chiedermelo perché se anche lei pensa così, allora come spiega suo figlio lassù su quella croce, le braccia storte, le gambe storte, la testa ripiegata contro il busto, come spiega quel suo figlio di cui niente lassù è messo dritto?¹⁸¹

In these passages, Nino holds his own symbolic-religious vision that contrasts with the vision proposed to him by Don Claudio and Bruno (and to some extent Sabina). In his novel, *Clima* makes it clear that Nino is a believer in the Catholic faith. The experience of conversion therapy does not give rise to an anti-religious feeling in his protagonist, but rather causes him to draw a clear boundary between the interpretation of Christian dogma that is being inculcated in that environment and his own belief in Catholic symbolism. Nino has a positive view of Jesus Christ, he affirms that he is a 'clean' figure,¹⁸² and that the word 'homosexual' is not a dirty word. Nino sees Christ 'bent' on the cross. He is as 'bent' as homosexual people according to Bruno, which is why, for Nino, it is unlikely that the Virgin would think it right to 'straighten' anyone out. Nino equally refuses to tell Don Claudio about the kiss that took place between him and Tiziano for fear that he might tarnish the happy memory that the protagonist retains of that moment:

E io glielo direi, a don Claudio, glielo direi senza esitare che con Tiziano non c'è stato nulla, solo un bacio, due labbra che si sfiorano, due ali di libellula che si toccano per caso. Ma c'è

¹⁸⁰ *Clima*, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 29.

¹⁸¹ *Clima*, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 52.

¹⁸² *Clima*, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 16.

qualcosa che me lo impedisce. Non so spiegarlo, don Claudio, ma quel bacio, ecco, è stata una cosa bella. Magari sbagliata, come dice lei, ma una cosa bella. E se lei adesso la guarda con quegli occhi, be', ho paura che la cambi in una cosa brutta.¹⁸³

Thus far Nino's eutopian impulse operates at an exclusively intellectual level through these reflections. However, in the face of events that particularly alarm his survival instincts, the impulse intensifies thus bringing about concrete and drastic actions. The first of these events is Sabina's suicide, witnessed by Don Claudio and all four boys in the residence, following which Nino clearly and immediately perceives the need to flee.

Don Claudio sorride. Non è la testa, è un senso di vertigine, e di oppressione, che mi costringe il petto. Chiudo gli occhi, vedo Sabina, il suo volto, il suo sorriso così solo che sparisce nella luce. E vedo Dario e Lucio e Angelo, che gridano, e gli occhi di don Claudio. E un pensiero, come un lampo, mi attraversa: andare via, andare via di qui. Realizzo d'un tratto che è l'unica cosa che davvero voglio fare. Andare via, via da questa casa, via da Freddy Krueger.¹⁸⁴

The tragic event acts as shock therapy for the protagonist, who realises within seconds how dangerous his environment is. The association between Don Claudio and Freddie Krueger (a monstrous-looking serial killer who kills, as opposed to Freddie Mercury, Nino's favourite singer, who soothes¹⁸⁵) becomes frighteningly real for the boy. The eutopian impulse reveals itself here in the guise of a strong rejection of death, which has suddenly become a very concrete consequence of remaining in the 'spiritual residence'.

Nino does not only rebel against Don Claudio and the conversion therapy but also against his father's will. Nino's rebellion against his father is particularly present through Clima's use of stream of consciousness. Nino's inner dialogues with his father evolve over the course of the novel, moving apologies and justifications of his identity to a lucid declaration that inside the 'spiritual residence' there is only death:

¹⁸³ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 39.

¹⁸⁴ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 62.

¹⁸⁵ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 56.

No, papà, è proprio se resto qui, che faccio la fine di Sabina, o quella di Dario, nella migliore delle ipotesi. E sono certo che Dio non può volere questo. [...] E intanto penso mi dispiace, papà, so che non è quello che avevi immaginato, ma mentre lo penso mi accorgo che invece no, non mi dispiace. Perché dovrebbe dispiacermi? Ho fatto tutto quello che mi hai chiesto, papà, ho cercato di allineare la mia natura a quello che volevi tu, ma forse non era quello che dovevo fare.¹⁸⁶

And immediately afterwards he adds:

Ma tanto non mi importa, io lì non ci torno, nessuno può obbligarmi, neanche il Cristo sceso dalla croce. Ma lui no, sono sicuro, il Cristo non lo farebbe mai, lui che in croce è stato messo proprio perché al mondo non si allineava. [...] Ma non sono pentito, papà, era la sola cosa che potevo fare. Non so se lo capisci, se riesci ad accettarlo, ma anche se non riesci pazienza, mi dispiace. Tanto è chiaro, papà, che non ci riesci, perché so come sei fatto, e perché io non sarei qui, se tu riuscissi ad accettare queste cose.¹⁸⁷

Equally evident in these passages is how Nino never loses sight of his faith in God and Christ, which he once again puts before the deadly narrative of the spiritual residence and his father. The protagonist finally opposes his father's will, deciding to leave conversion therapy with the firm intention of never returning and resigning himself to the fact that his parents will never understand this stance. Nino cannot align his 'nature' with his father's philosophy leading to the first crack in the father-son relationship. This fracture is the origin of the second drastic decision that Nino takes when faced with a crossroads. Following his parents request that he return to the 'spiritual residence', an intense manifestation of eutopian impulse makes itself felt here again (and fortunately):

E penso che io non sono come lei, non sono come papà, io non riesco a dormire, a sorridere, a fare finta. Mi dispiace, mamma, no, non riesco. Mi alzo, prendo poche cose, lo stretto necessario, un cambio, una felpa, il pettine, lo spazzolino. Metto tutto nello zaino, le scarpe non le allaccio nemmeno; infilo il giubbino ed esco di casa, sotto una luna che mi colpisce con una luce freddissima e spietata. Monto sullo scooter, metto in moto.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 64, 65.

¹⁸⁷ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 66.

¹⁸⁸ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 88.

Rather than return to conversion therapy, it is better for a seventeen-year-old teenager to run away from home, hoping that the boy he is in love with but barely knows will take him in. This is the moment in which Nino finally begins to meet queer characters. This passage is very significant for him as these new figures prove essential in deconstructing the homophobic rhetoric in which he has been immersed up to that point, allowing him to fully positively resemantise the narrative of himself as a homosexual adolescent. Among these encounters, his encounter with Grace, a transgender woman who offers him refuge in her home after running away from home, is undoubtedly fundamental:

«A volte penso ancora a come mi sentivo. Sbagliata, colpevole, un errore della natura, come un uccello che non sa volare». Le sorrido. «I pinguini non sanno volare» le dico. «Perché hanno le ali sbagliate» dice sorridendo a sua volta. Ma è un sorriso che si spegne subito. «Ti ci fanno sentire, in questo modo, Nino. Un uccello con le ali sbagliate. E alla fine arrivi a crederci». Penso a come mi sento io, alle mie di ali, a come sono. «Io non lo so come sono le mie ali». Grace scuote la testa. «Nessuno lo sa, tesoro». Sorride. «Neanche i pinguini. Eppure eccoli lì, i pinguini, e nessuno dice niente». È vero, eccoli lì i pinguini, tranquilli, neanche sanno di non saper volare ma a loro non importa. «Fai come i pinguini, Nino: fregatene, usale, le tue ali, non credere a chi ti dice che sono sbagliate». «Sì, sembra facile». «No, tesoro, è la cosa più difficile del mondo».¹⁸⁹

Nino rejects the degrading narration of his own identity as a homosexual and creates his own self-descriptive valorising language. The protagonist thus readily inserts new words into his own idiolect, as in the case of 'penguin' with Grace:

Usciamo a mezzogiorno sotto un sole lieve che scalda senza ferire, e ce ne andiamo lungo la via, insieme, a braccetto, come una coppia, osservando le facce di quelli che incrociamo, commentando gli sguardi, le espressioni. Mi chiedo che espressione avrebbero i miei se mi vedessero ora insieme a Grace, e mi viene da sorridere, perché me li immagino, mi immagino mio padre, con la bocca aperta, e mia madre che nasconde il volto fra le mani, per non vedere, perché se una cosa non la vedi non esiste. Eppure eccomi qui, esisto, come i pinguini, e esiste Grace, e siamo qui, e passeggiamo, a braccetto.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 111.

¹⁹⁰ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 126.

Resemantisation appears alongside a re-writing of the narrative of the self in a conversation with Maya, Grace's friend who is also a transgender woman. In this conversation the word 'homosexual' shifted from having a negative adverse meaning to a positively co-ordinated one:

Mi guarda, allunga una mano, mi accarezza il dorso con le dita. «Tu sei fortunato, però. Tu sai benissimo se sei maschio o femmina». «Dici?». «Direi di sì. Cosa senti di essere?». «Maschio». «Appunto». «Però sono omosessuale». «Togli il *però*, tesoro: maschio e omosessuale. Lo vedi che lo sai?» Allarga le braccia. «Dovresti presentarti così, al mondo, Nino, maschio, omosessuale, dovresti scriverlo sui documenti». Ride. «Sai quanto tempo ti risparmiaresti?». [...] Maya parla fino a tarda sera. Di me, di Grace, di noi, dei diversi, i *freak*, come ci chiama il mondo. E di quanto è difficile la vita per quelli come noi, perché i *freak* il mondo l'hanno sempre contro. Anch'io so che è così, e forse lo sarà sempre. Ma non mi importa, almeno sarò io, almeno sarò Nino, non quello che gli altri vogliono che sia. Sarò proprio questo, *Nino, maschio, omosessuale*, da scrivere sui documenti.¹⁹¹

Lara, Nino's alter-ego, also injects new terms into the protagonist's vocabulary, which clarify the motivation behind his fear of meeting Tiziano:

«Sì, e chi sei tu?». «Una che rischia. E si fa male, se occorre. Una che vive, fino in fondo, perché è di questo che si tratta, dimmi se mi sbaglio. È vivere che ti fa tanta paura, non è Tiziano. E non è neanche tuo padre, o quel don Claudio, è vivere che ti terrorizza, perché vivere vuol dire questo, vuol dire rischiare. E tu non l'hai mai fatto».¹⁹²

Living means taking risks. Nino takes the risk that the date with Tiziano will go wrong, that his schoolmate is not in love with him, that he is heterosexual, and that he will in fact bully him for his homosexuality. Taking risks is the price you must pay to be able to live, knowing that sometimes the outcome can be painful, as I have already seen in the encounter with Tiziano and the two bullies. In short, Grace, Maya and Lara are the characters who provide Nino with the necessary resources to emancipate himself and, in so doing, increase the strength of his eutopian impulse. This is made clear in the scene in which the Nino makes his third important choice and definitively severs his bond of dependence on his father:

¹⁹¹ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 117, 118.

¹⁹² Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 152.

Penso a papà, penso a cosa direbbe adesso vedendomi qui come un cretino a pensare a Tiziano e al giardino dell'Eden. E sai che c'è, papà? Che ho deciso. Ho deciso in questo momento. Ti ho sempre ascoltato, lo sai, e adesso ho deciso di non farlo più. Perché se ascolto te, papà, io muoio. Mi viene quasi da pensare che io non possa esistere finché esisti tu, che forse è come fra Voldemort e Harry Potter, forse uno di noi due deve morire perché l'altro possa continuare a vivere. Dimmi che mi sbaglio, dimmi che non devo decidere per forza, perché non voglio ucciderti, papà... ma non posso uccidere me stesso.¹⁹³

The strength of Nino's eutopian impulse plays out through the relationship with his father. Clima's choice to map Nino's opposition to his father's queerphobia as it gradually strengthens is a particularly positive element within the novel. Nino's opposition can be traced through the novel, taking on the function of a formative path that leads him to acquire more tools and resources that build and strengthen his agentivity and independence.

Papà la sta fissando ma non dice niente. Sembra un computer impallato. Ma posso immaginarlo, quello che in questo momento il computer di papà deve processare: Grace non è qualcosa che lui possa capire, non rientra in nessuna formula, in nessun algoritmo. Eppure eccola lì, papà, eccola, Grace, con la sua parrucca, le mani grosse e nodose, e quel suo cuore, che non esiste al mondo un cuore così grande. Che sforzo enorme sta compiendo, papà, in questo momento, per far entrare Grace, e me, e mamma, che siamo insieme qui, in questa stanza, per farci entrare tutti nella stessa formula. È difficile, eh, papà? Quando non puoi leggere il mondo in bianco e nero e quella formula non ti torna più. Lo guardo. Mi fa quasi tenerezza, e mi piace che sia così, perché è come se in questo istante io e lui fossimo più vicini di quanto mai siamo riusciti a essere. E non perché mi trovo in un letto d'ospedale, ma perché fra noi c'è Grace, Grace fuori da ogni formula, Grace che modifica l'ordine naturale delle cose altrimenti le cose non funzionano. Siamo insieme, adesso, papà, te ne sei accorto? Insieme veramente. Per la prima volta.¹⁹⁴

The sight of Grace, an extraneous element, undermines the father's philosophy of the pre-established order. This order cannot function without considering that queer people like Grace and Nino also exist. This crisis represents the deep crack now inflicted on the father's system of thought that finally represents a possible avenue

¹⁹³ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 137.

¹⁹⁴ Clima, *Con le ali sbagliate*, 171.

of reunion with his son and a chance for them to be 'together for real. For the first time'.

In conclusion, while there is a high level of eutopian tension, the overall quality of representation within the novel is low. Although Nino is an openly homosexual protagonist from the beginning of the story, his non-conforming sexual orientation remains the dramatic focus of the novel. There is no queer community of reference, apart from the characters Grace, Maya and to some extent also Lara, who represent Nino's only haven in a heavily marginalised and discriminatory environment. There is no trace of integration either. The element that is most emphasised about queer people is their non-heterosexual orientation or their non-cis gender identity, often for denigrating and manipulative purposes. Throughout the novel, there are persistent attempts to control queer people by trying to change their sexual orientation from homo to hetero. In one case, this behaviour leads to the suicide of an LGBTQ+ teenager. The description of homo-affective acts is not censored, but in some cases, they are blatantly condemned. Finally, the ending of the novel is of particular importance. While protagonist evolves and emancipates himself, at the end of the story, Nino finds himself in a hospital bed following a car accident in which he could have died. There is no sign of change, acceptance, or integration on the part of his parents – although for his father there seems to be a glimmer in the crisis caused by the sight of Grace. Similarly, Tiziano, the boy Nino was in love with, does not return his love and deceitfully lures him into a violent situation in which two of his peers verbally bully the protagonist, although he eventually visits Nino in hospital and leaves him a letter of apology. The analysis conducted here has focussed on a particular configuration of homophobic language, which expressed in the religious register. This language became part of the protagonist's idiolect especially under the influence of his father, Don Claudio, and Bruno, the first users of such language in the novel, and caused dire consequences for at least two young characters in the 'residence'. Fortunately, the resemantisation enacted by the characters Grace, Maya, and Lara resignifies and enriches Nino's idiolect, producing new lexemes to help the protagonist emancipate himself.

In closing the analysis of this novel, it is worth reiterating that the novel is based on accounts of stories that really happened, as is stated at the beginning and end of the book. As made explicit in the first lines of the discussion, 'spiritual residences' are places that still exist and have not yet been banned by law in Italy. This type of analysis therefore has not only linguistic-literary relevance but also socio-political relevance. In fact, examining the use of language used in conversion therapies contributes to an understanding of the real dangers of these anti-scientific and inhuman practice and the impact they have on the psychological and physical safety of the people who find themselves unfortunate enough to be exposed to them.

To conclude the analysis of *Con le ali sbagliate*, I present a summary of the established criteria.

- Visibility queer = the protagonist's homosexual orientation, explicit from the beginning of the novel, is the dramatic pivot of the entire novel.
- Queer assimilation = the integration of the protagonist's homosexuality into the social system does not take place. The novel closes with Nino's hospitalisation following a moped accident caused by the shock of the homophobic trap devised by the boy he was in love with, Tiziano. There is no final conciliation of the parents with their son's homosexuality, neither Don Claudio suffers any consequences for his actions, and conversion therapies are not made illegal.
- Queer consciousness/community = Grace and Maya represented a small adult queer community that the protagonist can rely on. The queer teenagers of the same age with whom he finds himself in conversion therapy do not form a community as they are psychologically influenced and harassed by Don Claudio's manipulation.
- Queerphobia = the protagonist suffers a great deal of blatantly homophobic discrimination within the novel: psychological and verbal violence, and in one case an attempt at rape. In the first part of the novel there are numerous attempts to manipulate his sexuality, homosexuality is defined as correctable. There is only one homo-affective

act in the novel and when it takes place, it is done in the context of a parlour game and is therefore not recognised as emotionally sincere by the bystanders. When Nino tells Don Claudio and Bruno about it, he is reprimanded.

- Eutopian tension = the novel presents a high level of this descriptor as there are numerous instances in which the gay protagonist has to firmly defend the goodness of his homosexual orientation, save himself from life-threatening situations as a gay teenager, recognise his right to take risks in order to win love, and endure the disappointment and pain caused by taking risks.

2.3. *Un'Alice come un'altra*: an Italian YA Portrait of Trans Adolescence

The last novel in the Italian sub-corpus and the only trans novel published in Italy *Un'Alice come un'altra*, published by Giunti in 2022, by the author Alice T., a Neapolitan trans teenager, who published her first book at the noticeably young age of fourteen. The first and so far, the only Italian example of a trans YA novel, *Un'Alice come un'altra* is an autobiographical work that paints a portrait of the life of a trans teenager in Italy. The novel is set in during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when strict restrictive measures such as lockdown and curfew were in force (i.e. sometime between 2020 and the early part of 2021).

Alice is enrolled at a humanities high school and is attending classes remotely online.¹⁹⁵ As soon as the anti-curfew measures are relaxed, she organises outings in the city with her best friend, Gilda. The theme of gender identity is central to the story's narrative but hardly ever takes a serene tone. Alice is unable to live happily because of a strongly discriminatory social environment which is fuelled by stereotypes and transphobic prejudices. In fact, there are numerous scenes in which the protagonist is forced to endure and defend herself against the verbal and in some cases even physical violence inflicted on her. In this way, the novel succeeds in conveying the pervasive reality of transphobia, which is not only perceived in exclusively blatant acts (e.g., verbal and/or physical transphobic bullying) but also manifests itself through a series of small gestures and comments made by friends

¹⁹⁵ 'Didattica a distanza'.

and family members. The frequent recurrence of these micro-aggressions reveals the pervasive sedimentation of the transphobic mentality in the social fabric of the story. Alongside this, the novel is peppered with continuous reflections on Alice's own malaise caused by gender dysphoria.¹⁹⁶ The depression caused by these two elements – repeated transphobic violence and the dysphoric disorder – leads Alice to make extreme choices at a few moments in the novel. It is interesting to start with the way the protagonist presents herself:

Secondo la mia carta d'identità sono un ragazzo di quattordici anni, ma non è così: in realtà io sono una schiva, distinta e un po' altezzosa signora di settantanove anni e mezzo. A dicembre avevo finito il primo round col Centro di endocrinologia pediatrica, e adesso dovevo aspettare sei mesi. Sei mesi in cui si sarebbe decisa la mia vita. Era un percorso che non si poteva abbreviare, perché c'era un protocollo del Ministero da rispettare. Trascorso il termine, la dottoressa avrebbe deciso se ero pronta a prendere gli ormoni bloccanti oppure no. Ci sarebbero state parecchie visite da fare, la trafila era complicata. E alla fine, se fossi stata idonea, gli ormoni avrebbero fermato l'avanzata dell'intruso: quel figlio di puttana con il pene, che si è impadronito di me a tradimento mentre ero un feto che dormiva nella pancia della propria madre.¹⁹⁷

It is therefore clear that the main character is a trans adolescent, firstly from the reference to the formal incongruity of her identity card with her self-perception, ironically described as an old lady from another era. The character's identity is subsequently constructed through recourse to the process of gender affirmation that she is undergoing, with particular emphasis on the negative aspects: the slowness and difficulties of the bureaucratic process and the uncertain outcome of her eligibility for puberty blockers.¹⁹⁸ The puberty blockers are necessary to halt the

¹⁹⁶ Roberto Toni and Paolo Scudellari, 'Disforia di genere: aspetti storici di un *complexus* psiconeuroendocrino' in *L'Endocrinologo* 24 (2023). '[...] it is noted that the definition provided for gender dysphoria (DG) in the 5th Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-5 as well as in the 11th Edition of the WHO's International Classification of Diseases (where it speaks of Gender Incongruence) implies that the physical body (the somatotype derived from the sexual genotype) is associated with (but does not necessarily produce, note well) a *dissatisfaction* (devaluation/disvaluation) of what *one actually is* (complexus *perception-value* of the subject with respect to his phenotype, i.e. his structural and functional characteristics). This *dissatisfaction* is further burdened by the relationship with the outside world (the judgement and behaviour of others towards one's own experience, as an individual and as a social context), producing suffering and psychic discomfort (*dysphoria*) which, therefore, result from the refusal to belong to/recognise oneself in an unwanted *gender*.'

¹⁹⁷ Alice T., *Un'Alice come un'altra* (Giunti, 2022), 17, 18.

¹⁹⁸ These are hormones that can suspend and postpone puberty. In this regard, a recent study states that: 'Scientific literature and clinical experience suggest, in fact, how DG [Gender Dysphoria] tends to intensify with pubertal development, a time when adolescents become aware that they cannot avoid natural biological sex expression. As described above, such changes can

advance of the 'intruder', the male biological sex assigned at birth, perceived as an unwanted alien individual who has taken possession of Alice's body. Later in the novel, the author returns several times to the protagonist's passion and talent for chess and in one passage states that she wants to learn to 'sew and cook like my grandmother, and dress well like my mother'.¹⁹⁹ However, the discourse continually falls back on the double malaise that the young protagonist faces as a trans person. This discomfort is both intrinsic, arising from dysphoria, and extrinsic, caused by the set of discriminations enacted by the people who populate her everyday life. Her path to gender affirmation is experienced with particular apprehension, as can be seen from the above passage. Alice must face several and numerous medical examinations within a legally established period of six months at the end of which she may or may not be judged fit to start hormone therapy. The stress experienced by the protagonist because of the long medical-bureaucratic process, the fear of finally seeing her request rejected, or of her body being transformed by puberty in the meantime is evident:

Ma se per una qualsiasi ragione l'iter clinico si fosse inceppato, il mio destino sarebbe stato infame. Sarei stata aggredita dal testosterone, sfregiata dalla barba e da tutta una serie di disgrazie che avrebbero trasformato il mio pacco sbagliato in un inferno.²⁰⁰

In particular, Alice is terrified by the idea that her voice might change: 'La voce era una delle cose che mi facevano più paura. Era capace di dare improvvisamente vita al figlio di puttana che stava nascosto dentro di me, permettendogli di parlare al mio posto'.²⁰¹ This aspect recurs frequently in the novel. In the car, Alice hears Mrs. Palmieri say that her voice is changing, when she has to read a text aloud in an online class, when she confesses her fear of the risk of vocal change because of the lengthy bureaucratic process prior to taking hormone blockers, and when her voice

seriously interfere with psychological functioning and well-being. Blocking puberty, on the other hand, allows time for the adolescent to explore his or her gender identity and DG, gain self-awareness, and mature more calmly in planning for his or her future. For this reason, and considering the reversibility character of GnRHa, this therapeutic option can be considered an extended diagnostic phase that can be interrupted at any time the adolescent requests it. Pubertal discontinuation, moreover, is accompanied by other benefits such as the prevention of irreversible physical changes, which will allow for overall physical characteristics in adulthood that are more congruent with gender identity, should the DG persist and the person wishes to complete the RG with surgery.' [Gender Dysphoria in Childhood | The Endocrinologist \(unibo.it\)](#).

¹⁹⁹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 23.

²⁰⁰ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 105, 106.

²⁰¹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 32.

becomes hoarse because of the shouting at her parents. It is therefore no coincidence that the serene atmosphere at the end of the novel is partly constituted by the news of the start of hormone therapy.

When it comes to the second source of her malaise, there are numerous cases of devaluation, belittlement, harassment and even aggression that Alice suffers in relation to her gender identity, whether in the family, at school or on the street. Here, four key examples will be given. The first example, is the way Alice comes out as a trans person to her maternal grandparents:

«Nonna, nonno, ascoltate: ho due notizie da darvi, una buona e una cattiva. Quale volete sentire?» «Quella buona!» risposero in coro. Ero convinta che avessero sempre sospettato ciò che stavo per dirgli: «Nonni,» esclamai «io non sono gay!» [...] «E quella brutta qual è?» domandò il nonno [...] «Quindi volete sapere anche quella brutta?». Loro annuirono timidamente. Li amavo. Ma è così difficile maneggiare l'amore, in certi momenti: «Quella brutta è che sono una trans...» mormorai. La nonna svenne. Il viso di nonno invece diventò di un bel colore smeraldino. Sembrava un marziano. E masticava a palla.²⁰²

The queerphobic glaze of this passage is doubly unpleasant because Alice not only presents the fact that she is not gay as good news but also announces her transsexuality as bad news. Moreover, her grandparents respond in line with her expectations. A second example occurs when a deep family unease arises when deciding on Alice's clothing before leaving the house:

Un'altra cosa che mi lasciava scontenta quella sera era che, come sempre, non avrei potuto vestirmi come desideravo. Se l'uscita pomeridiana mi era costata un'interminabile contrattazione con collaudo finale, ora che si trattava di uscire di sera, per giudicarmi, valutarmi, e infine deliberare, si riunì il consiglio degli anziani del villaggio. Addirittura mamma chiamò nonna al telefono, per farsi consigliare.²⁰³

Alice is not free to appear in public dressed as she likes because her parents are fearful for them of their daughter's safety if she wears clothes considered too feminine. Prior to the passage quoted above, Alice's father warns his daughter: 'Non hai motivo di nascondere di essere un trans, né a scuola, né altrove...Però devi

²⁰² T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 16, 17.

²⁰³ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 125.

accettare che certe scelte, persino se uscire o meno di casa una sera, possano risultarne condizionate'.²⁰⁴ Leaving aside the problematic expression 'un trans', which misgenders²⁰⁵ Alice (Alice is a trans girl but her father sometimes addresses her using the masculine), the reason behind the parents desire to control her choice of clothing is ultimately explained by an awareness that external society (whether considered in general or in the micro-world of the city of Naples) is dangerously transphobic and does not allow teenage - and perhaps even adult - trans people like Alice to freely express their identity, on pain of social discrimination. The manipulative attitude that especially her father exerts on his daughter's appearance produces even worse emotional consequences when he asks her to dress in a male suit:

La richiesta di mio padre mi aveva trasformato in un fenomeno da baraccone. Ma volevo andare fino in fondo. Malgrado i miei sforzi per rendere femminile la mia immagine, però, non potevo negare a me stesso che in fondo vestito da maschio non stavo male: e questo mi faceva più orrore di tutto il resto. Il mio corpo non era refrattario a quel tipo di look. Provai la stessa sensazione di quando avevo usato la forza per reagire alle angherie di Davide. Ogni volta che il mio corpo sconfiggeva la mia anima, erano schiaffi per me. Schiaffi cocenti. Sberle di quelle che ti fanno bruciare la faccia. Mi venne un'angoscia tale che stavo per scoppiare in lacrime. Ma non volevo arrendermi. Mi divorava una tale ansia di martirio, che non mi poteva fermare più niente. La faccenda era chiara: alla vigilia della cura ormonale che avrebbe spazzato via per sempre suo figlio, mio padre aveva espresso una specie di ultimo desiderio. Come se il condannato fosse lui. Anche se mi assecondava, non aveva mai smesso di sperare che io guarissi. E non avrebbe smesso mai. Voleva vedermi maschio. Voleva vivere la gioia di avere un figlio normale, almeno per una volta, e io ero pronta a tutto per accontentarlo. E al tempo stesso per punirlo. La sua punizione sarebbe stata anche la mia. Ci saremmo divisi il dolore e la vergogna, l'imbarazzo e la rabbia.²⁰⁶

This is one of several scenes in the novel in which a transphobic attitude accentuates the protagonist's dysphoria as she is forced time after time to confront the stark

²⁰⁴ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*,

²⁰⁵ 'I consider the harms inflicted upon transgender persons through "misgendering", that is, such deployments of gender terms that diminish transgender persons' self-respect, limit the discursive resources at their disposal to define their own gender, and cause them microaggressive psychological harms' in Julia Kapusta, 'Misgendering and Its Moral Contestability', in *Hypatia. A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 3 (2016).

²⁰⁶ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 110.

reality of having ended up in the 'wrong package', which sends the protagonist, her parents, and everyone else into crisis:

Ma cos'ero, di talmente assurdo, strano e offensivo per la gente, da dovermi nascondere? Perché ero sempre in pericolo? Perché i miei temevano che qualcuno potesse avercela con me, senza manco conoscermi? Era dalla scuola elementare che mi chiamavano *femminiello*, anche se non l'avevo mai detto a nessuno. La chiave di tutto era il mio corpo. Non mi si perdonava di essere finito nel pacco sbagliato. Io stessa, del resto, avevo difficoltà a guardarmi. Infatti chiudevo sempre la luce, quando mi spogliavo.²⁰⁷

This passage is crucial to the novel, inviting an in-depth examination on the theme of the body. The author shows that the protagonist is well aware of the fact that her body poses a problem to herself due to dysphoria, but also to (almost) all the other people in the novel, presumably cisgender. It is therefore suggested that the seed of transphobia and, in Alice's case, transmisogyny,²⁰⁸ resides in a certain rather rigid social view of the biological distinction of the sexes.²⁰⁹

The discrimination the protagonist suffers also occurs at a legal level. As noted, this occurs in connection with the slow and lengthy bureaucratic process for hormone therapy, which, in addition to imposing numerous medical examinations on the young teenager, confronts her with the serious risk of enduring the effects of unwanted puberty. Another example is to be found in the difficulty Alice encounters when entering high school:

Ovviamente a scuola mi ero dichiarata donna. Col risultato che ero rimasta imprigionata in quella bugia: anche se era la più grande verità che avessi mai detto. Quando sono passata alle superiori è iniziato il ballo in maschera ormonale, ma non avevo potuto manco accedere alla carriera alias. Uno schifo. E, se chiedevo perché, mi rispondevano sorrisi ebeti. Facce che sembravano campanelli stonati. Fu necessario parlare col preside e con tutti gli insegnanti per mettersi d'accordo e usare un nome femminile col quale rivolgersi a me. Un diritto che mi spettava, si era trasformato in qualcosa che dovevo chiedere per favore. [...] Alla fine lo

²⁰⁷ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 63.

²⁰⁸ Fau Rosati, Martin Maric Lorusso, Cinzia Albanesi, Roberto Baiocco, Jessica Pistella e Christian Compare, 'Breaking the Binary mold: Understanding Social Representations of Nonbinary Gender Identities Among the LGBTQIA+ Italian Population', in *Psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity* (Educational Publishing Foundation, 2024) 8. The term 'transmisogyny' refers to 'a particularly debilitating stigma that combines transphobia and misogyny'.

²⁰⁹ Rosati *et al.*, 'Breaking the Binary Mold', 4.

so che vinceremo. E il bello è che a quel punto anche gli idioti avranno vinto, senza nemmeno accorgersene: perché la libertà fa bene a tutti.²¹⁰

The ‘*carriera alias*’ referred to here is a confidentiality agreement that recognises the gender identity and needs of the trans pupils, stipulated between the school, the student and, if a minor, his or her family and ‘allows students to use their chosen name within unofficial documents such as the electronic register, and obtain a new e-mail address’.²¹¹ This tool is not, to date in Italy, compulsorily recognised nationwide in the school system but is adopted by schools on a discretionary basis.²¹² From this passage it can be deduced that Alice cannot apply for such a measure in her institute, probably because it has not been adopted locally (although the precise reason is not specified). This puts the protagonist in the position of having to request an informal agreement with the teachers and the principal, aware of the contingent injustice since ‘[u]n diritto che mi spettava, si era trasformato in qualcosa che dovevo chiedere per favore’.

It is worth noting at this stage that the passage cited above is one of the numerous passages in which Alice reveals a eutopian impulse. The protagonist is optimistic about the future of civil rights,²¹³ suggesting that ‘we will win’ an ‘us’. This is suggestive of an idea of collectivity, more specifically a queer collectivity and more broadly all people who have not yet rights had their rights recognised. Alice’s socio-political consciousness is also particularly clear in another two passages²¹⁴ of the novel where she mentions the Italian MP Alessandro Zan and the bill (*disegno di legge* or DDL) signed by him against homophobia, bemoaning the law’s wreckage in the Italian parliamentary process.²¹⁵ Eutopian tension is also seen in the decisiveness that Alice shows at school in declaring herself a woman, requesting

²¹⁰ T., *Un’Alice come un’altra*, 33, 34.

²¹¹ R. Bourelly, M. M. Lorusso, M. Mariotto, ‘Riconoscimento di studenti trans nel sistema educativo italiano: criticità e prassi per una buona scuola’, *Pedagogia delle differenze - Bollettino della Fondazione "Vito Fazio-Allmayer 2* (2022) 25.

²¹² Bourelly *et al.*, ‘Riconoscimento di studenti trans nel sistema educativo italiano’, 29.

²¹³ ‘Rights enjoyed by all citizens of a state as such. These are the rights recognised by the legal system as fundamental, inviolable, and inalienable (therefore not susceptible to compression by the State), which ensure the individual the possibility of fully realising himself.’ *Treccani vocabolario online* <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/diritti-civili/>.

²¹⁴ T., *Un’Alice come un’altra*, 33, 198.

²¹⁵ Reference is made to the ‘deadlock that came about, in practice, with the vote in the Senate on 27 October 2021 on the parliamentary procedure of the so-called ddl Zan (S no. 2005), already approved by the Chamber of Deputies, in a text resulting from the unification of several bills, on 4 November 2020 and on *Measures to prevent and combat discrimination and violence on grounds of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability*, Luciano Eusebi, ‘*Colant omnes quemque: tornare all’essenziale dopo il ddl Zan*’, *Jus: rivista di scienze giuridiche 2* (2021) 287.

the activation of the alias career and demanding that school personnel call her by her chosen name²¹⁶ and address her with feminine pronouns.

Eutopian tension is also present throughout the novel, appearing hand in hand with transphobic episodes, such as Alice's second encounter with Davide, a street bully:

Infatti, tutt'a un tratto, senza motivo apparente e senza esitazione, strinse le labbra, affilò gli occhi e, alzandosi sulle punte, mi colpì. Era il suo modo di azzannarmi. E io non ci vidi più. La Alice che tutti conoscevano, me compresa, scomparve. E ne apparve una che nessuno aveva mai visto: «Hai ragione» ringhiai, riprendendomi dalla sorpresa. Schiumavo letteralmente rabbia. Una rabbia che nasceva dal profondo, alla quale mi affidai come all'unico istinto che ti può salvare mentre lotti per la sopravvivenza. Tutto avvenne da sé. La mia fu una reazione automatica, la manifestazione di qualcosa di primitivo che era scritto nel mio dna. Gli diedi uno spintone a due mani. Ero più grande di lui, e infatti riuscii a farlo sbilanciare all'indietro.²¹⁷

Una voce, dentro, si era risvegliata, e mi spronava: “E va bene, l'avete voluto voi! Volete vedere il mostro? Eccolo qua!”. E mi scatenai. Mollai in faccia a Davide un pugno vero. Così forte che quasi mi rompevo la mano. Lui barcollò. Mi guardò con certi occhi... Non capiva più niente. Tentò di reagire, o meglio cercò di farlo, quando un altro colpo della mia mano si abbatté sul suo viso. Vidi la ciccia della sua faccia ondeggiare al rallentatore come in una scena di Rocky. La sua bocca si deformò in una smorfia assurda. Alla fine, facendolo sprofondare nella vergogna, gli diedi pure un calcio in culo. E lui fu costretto a battere in ritirata.²¹⁸

This passage represents a positive moment for Alice in that she manages here to put into practice a reaction to the transphobic aggression by responding with the same weapons as the bully: physical violence. However, although the use of muscle power causes the bully to escape, this encounter ultimately results in a backlash for Alice:

Intorno a me Gilda esultava, ma io ero disperata. Avevo toccato con mano che il mio corpo, così gentile e delicato a vedersi, possedeva in realtà muscoli e forza da maschio, e mi sentii cadere il mondo addosso. Suscitando quella reazione violenta da parte mia, Davide era

²¹⁶ The chosen name is different from the registry name. In this case, the name the protagonist chooses for herself is Alice, while her registry name, the so-called 'dead name', Alberto, is a 'dead name' because it is abandoned as it does not represent the gender identity of the trans person.

²¹⁷ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 81.

²¹⁸ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 82, 83.

riuscito a infliggermi la sconfitta più tremenda, la punizione più grande: mi aveva imposto ciò che io respingevo con tutta me stessa da quand'ero venuta al mondo. Era riuscito a risvegliare tutti i miei peggiori incubi. Era riuscito a farmi disgustare di me stessa, ancora peggio di quando, dopo la doccia, mi guardavo inavvertitamente allo specchio senza coprirmi.²¹⁹

Quanto mi aveva offeso rendermi conto di essere alta, aitante, di avere le palle e il testosterone nel sangue... Non ero una donna d'altri tempi, ma un'anima-femmina, intrappolata nel corpo di un adolescente che schiattava di salute: e, vincendo quello scontro, avevo perso tutto. Davide mi aveva tolto la speranza, la dignità, la purezza. Mi aveva fatto gridare: «sì, sono un uomo, sono un maschio, ho due coglioni che tu te li sogni, e ti ho pure spaccato la faccia...».²²⁰

The physical strength shown by Alice in reacting to the transphobic aggression which causes her aggressor to flee makes clear to others and especially to herself the stark truth: her body is male, with testosterone, muscles, and male genitalia.

Alice's desire for revenge against the bully could be seen as a successful attempt to assert her own existence in the world, in accordance with the concept of the eutopian impulse. On the other hand, the consequence of this manifestation of the impulse inadvertently has negative repercussions for Alice, accentuating the incongruence she perceives between her identity and her body, an awareness constantly pushed into the background but here violently reassembled in the foreground.

This paradox shows that eutopian tension takes place within the individual carries with no guarantee of immediate and gradual improvement in personal condition. On the contrary, the effort to oppose oppression can sometimes cost dearly, as shown in the above passage. This inevitably creates a precedent to be taken into account. It should also be noted that this negative effect inexorably lowers the quality of representation of the trans adolescent, according to established criteria.

A comparable situation occurs later in the novel with more force, both in the act and in its backlash. In fact, when Alice decides that she wants to confront the thugs who want to beat her up no longer because of Davide's initial demand for revenge but

²¹⁹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 83.

²²⁰ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 85.

out of pure transphobic hatred,²²¹ the author provides a powerful image in which the protagonist, pushed into a blind alley in the centre of Naples, imagines that she is not alone:

Niente mi faceva paura, e questa consapevolezza mi diede una forza infinita. A un tratto, come per magia, non mi sentivo più sola in quel vicolo di piazza Dante, in quella tiepida sera di primavera. Ero con me stessa, con il pane delle mie certezze e con la Nutella dei miei dubbi. Vidi Gilda coprirsi il volto con le mani. Ma non ne aveva motivo: io non stavo morendo, stavo nascendo. Al mio fianco, anche se soltanto io potevo vederli, perché non sono cose che si vedono con gli occhi, c'era un intero esercito. L'esercito silenzioso e invincibile della gente che davanti all'ingiustizia e alla violenza non si piega. Che non si arrende, che non molla mai. L'esercito di tutti quelli che qualcuno considera sbagliati, ai quali il mondo ha voltato le spalle. Loro facevano il tifo per me. Erano un coro potente, cento volte più tonante di quello di uno stadio: ed era per tutti loro che io mi battevo quella sera, non soltanto per me stessa. Per questo dovevo affermare fino in fondo la mia libertà di essere quello che ero. Dovevo resistere a ogni costo, e dovevo farlo senza reagire.²²²

The feeling of belonging to the community of 'tutti quelli che qualcuno considera sbagliati, ai quali il mondo ha voltato le spalle', 'che davanti all'ingiustizia e alla violenza non si piega [, c] he non si arrende, che non molla mai', gives Alice the courage she needs to resist head-on the beating she receives from the four thugs surrounding her. This community is an 'army' and here the author uses a lexical field belonging to the language of competition, struggle, and battle.

This community which Alice finds in the alley is naturally led (or forced) to have to be the actor of a certain level of eutopian tension as far as she is in a socially disadvantaged condition that forces her to resist or fight against an unjust and violent status quo. This community could be the queer community or, more generally, all people belonging to marginalised social categories.

As was seen in *Colpo su colpo*, what I have termed the queers quality representation paradox is also active here. *Un'Alice come un'altra* still presents one of worst cases of representation of LGBTQ+ adolescence, namely, the theme of suicide, but equally has an elevated level of eutopian tension. In the course of the novel, in fact,

²²¹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 134, 135.

²²² T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 142, 143.

the protagonist makes no less than two suicide attempts: the first time abruptly, opening the door and throwing herself out of a moving car, exhausted by the continuous compliments addressed to her male appearance made by a lady friend of the family sitting next to her:

Tornavamo da una gita domenicale, quando la signora Palmieri, una vecchia amica di famiglia, vedova e mezza cecata, prese improvvisamente vita. Cominciò a cinguettare che «ero cresciuto», che avevo «cambiato voce», che mi stavo facendo proprio «un bell'ometto» e «chissà quante fidanzatine tenevo». Ero sbalordita. Secondo mio padre la signora Palmieri portava pure male: ma allora perché la tenevamo sempre appresso? «Per carità cristiana,» diceva mamma «quella poverina è tanto sola...» A un certo punto, non sapendo più come farla stare zitta, chiusi gli occhi e mi lanciai fuori, rasoterra, come una paracadutista. Mi salvò la munnezza.²²³

The second, however, occurs in a premeditated manner, by swallowing a bottle of painkillers and bottles of spirits:

La porta si richiuse e finalmente rimasi sola. Ma stavolta il buio della mia stanza non bastava a proteggermi. L'oscurità che mi circondava, nasceva dentro di me. Mi venne in mente la scena di un film in cui una strega morente esalava dalla bocca un'interminabile nebbia. Alla fine la nebbia ricopriva ogni cosa. E lo stesso stava accadendo a me con il buio. Dovevo fare qualcosa, non potevo più andare avanti così. Trovare una soluzione definitiva, perché quelle continue tensioni, quegli urti, quegli strappi non li reggevo più. Ogni volta lo strattone era più violento e io stavo per rompermi, come una corda ormai logora e sfilacciata. Me ne stavo immobile nel letto, quando a un tratto mi chiesi: ma è davvero così difficile rinunciare alla vita? E, se avessi voluto farlo davvero, come avrei potuto riuscirci, senza soffrire troppo? Pagare la scelta di morire col dolore mi sembrava una punizione eccessiva. Una maniera ci doveva essere. E più sprofondavo in quei pensieri, più tutto mi pareva un sogno. Non perché i sogni siano irreali, ma perché sono più veri del vero. Me lo chiesi senza mezzi termini: Alice, vuoi davvero morire? La risposta fu secca e decisa: sì.²²⁴

It is noteworthy that the novel opens with the very first case of a suicide attempt and continues with a hint at the second attempt that will be taken up and described more extensively in the eleventh chapter entitled 'Morire'. The reader thus is made

²²³ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 5.

²²⁴ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 159.

immediately aware of the fact that the adolescent protagonist presents some serious form of psycho-social distress to which she spontaneously responds by attempting to take her own life. Moreover, the reader retains the knowledge that at some point there will be a second suicide attempt. Fortunately, neither attempt is successful. Notably, in the second case Alice is rushed to hospital after swallowing an entire bottle of painkillers and wakes up after several hours in the sub-intensive care unit. When her parents visit her, in a particularly heartfelt moment, she manages to express to them a long-suppressed wish that is crucial for her psychological well-being:

Ero così emozionata che non riuscivo a guardarla negli occhi. Poi presi il coraggio a due mani e lo dissi: «Mi vorrei truccare...». [...] «Vorrei truccarmi e vestirmi *come mi sarebbe sempre piaciuto*. È tutto qui il mio desiderio. Se non ho potuto vivere da donna, voglio almeno morire da donna...». Non si sentì alcun rumore, ma quella frase scoppiò in mezzo a noi come una bomba. In un secondo mia madre fu colmata fino a traboccare da un sentimento che non sapevo più descrivere. [...] Anche mio padre era saltato in aria. [...] Per una volta seppi essere veloce pure lui: elaborò il lutto in due minuti. Si alzò dallo sgabello col sedile rotondo e bianco sul quale l'attimo prima s'era come accasciato, ed esclamò: «Che bell'idea, mi piace!». [...] Mi guardai in uno specchietto rettangolare, di quello che gli uomini usano nei campeggi per radersi. E smisi solo quando l'altra infermiera, venuta pure lei, cominciò a truccarmi. Era la prima volta che lo facevo in vita mia, e il tocco di quella matita e di quel pennellino sulla mia pelle erano la carezza più dolce che avessi mai ricevuto. La vita mi diceva *sì*. La vita mi diceva *vieni*. E io rispondevo: eccomi! Mi sentivo amata come mai prima d'allora. [...] Non sapevo come interpretare quell'attimo di sospensione. Sembrava che tutti aspettassero qualcosa, e non capivo che quel qualcosa ero io: come per ogni singola creatura che viene al mondo, anche con me si stava rinnovando il miracolo più incredibile dell'intero universo: ero nata. Ero una piccola, semplice natività. [...] Il mio volto si illuminò. Sembrava una magia. Davanti avevo lo specchio della favola di Biancaneve. Forse non ero la più bella del reame, ma non me ne fregava niente: perché di sicuro ero la più felice.²²⁵

This passage marks an important improvement in Alice's psychic health and in the relationship between the three members of the family in general. This scene preludes to the novel's concluding chapter, in which she presents the protagonist's situation at a distance of a few months. Her mental health is markedly improved.

²²⁵ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 190-192.

Alice has finally won her parents' permission to dress as she wishes without giving rise to endless and irksome arguments, she has started hormone therapy and has become much more optimistic and hopeful about the future.

Despite the positive ending, the novel presents a series of problematic stereotypes on the representation of trans adolescence. As was the case in *Con le ali sbagliate*, Alice's suicide attempt shows that while in the United States suicide may have 'more or less disappeared from the pages of LGBTQ+ novels' (Jenkins and Cart, 2018), in the Italian context it is very much present in all its complex problematicity. However, there are other problematic aspects linked to the representation of the trans adolescent protagonist. First of all, Alice's vision of the future is desperate and depressing for two main reasons: the dysphoric discomfort experienced with her own body (voice, sex, masculine physical strength) and the hostile social environment in which she lives (hooligans, classmates, parents, of which the relationship with her father is largely one). The aura of loneliness that permeates her life makes her imagine a sad and lonely adult future, living as a nun or librarian. Her level of agency in gender expression is limited. When she wants to leave the house, she must negotiate with her parents about her clothing and is forbidden from wearing make-up. When she talks to Brother Luigi to ask if she can take Catholic vows to become a nun, the prelate is initially accommodating but, as soon as Alice reveals her gender identity, he reacts with bewilderment and dismisses her with a hostile judgement: 'Tu non sai cos'è l'amore...'.²²⁶ Ultimately, the lack of understanding, bullying, verbal and physical violence and discrimination that Alice faces on a daily basis leave deep wounds. This leads to the loss of hope for a happy life and the decision to attempt suicide.

However, Alice finally regains hope in her future thanks to the verbal recognition of the full and deep love her parents feel for her. In fact, her parents' love grants Alice permission to openly express her gender and she finally becomes free to put on make-up and dress according to her tastes. As an immediate consequence, Alice feels reborn, regaining confidence in life and her future. In this regard, sociologist Natascha Klocker states that adult reference figures (as well as the general

²²⁶ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 183.

surroundings) have great power over the agency of children and adolescents. The degree of permissiveness of adults (alongside that of the social environment) is directly proportional to the degree of agency that children experience. The social environment can therefore 'thin' (acts and words of coercion) or 'thicken' (acts and words of empowerment) the agency of children.²²⁷ Sociologists Tey Meadows and Ann Travers, dealing specifically with trans childhood and adolescence, refer to the same concept: parents' and teachers' support for trans youth's gender expression or lack thereof play a central role in the degree of agency they do or do not develop.²²⁸ Alice's case reflects this concept. The restrictions and manipulations imposed by her parents on Alice's gender expression contribute to her depressive malaise, which becomes extreme at time – particularly in her relationship with her father, who exasperates his own apprehension once by asking her to dress as a boy one last time and by verbally attacking her: 'Vedi che succede a esagerare?', 'Ma non potevi essere *solo gay*?'.²²⁹ Parental support and permission also play a positive role in increasing Alice's *agency*, as is particularly evident in the last chapter of the novel. It should be noted, however, that the father's and mother's demonstration of deep and solid support only occurs in the hospital, following a particularly shocking and stressful event, the attempted suicide of their daughter. In any case, the clear verbal manifestation of the parents' profound love for Alice is the main element that sets a happy conclusion in motion, in the mother's words: 'Sei la nostra vita, Alice, e ti vogliamo soltanto felice!²³⁰, 'Siamo venuti a dirci cose belle! Noi ti vogliamo a casa, ti vogliamo fuori di qua, e vedrai che tra qualche giorno ce ne andremo, te lo prometto amore mio!'.²³¹ Similarly, in response to Alice's request to put on make-up, her father finally says: 'Che bell'idea, mi piace!'.²³² Without love, there would be no parental support, no strengthening of Alice's agency, and no recovery of hope for her own life and future. In short, gender self-determination and the possibility

²²⁷ Natascha Klocker, 'An example of thin agency: Child domestic workers in Tanzania', in *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives*, ed. Ruth Panelli, Samantha Punch, Elsbeth Robson (Routledge, 2007), 85.

²²⁸ Ann Travers, *The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) Are Creating a Gender Revolution* (U of R Press, 2018), 47,167; and Tey Meadow, *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* (University of California Press, 2018), 44, 45, 46.

²²⁹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 158.

²³⁰ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 187.

²³¹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 189.

²³² T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 191.

to make autonomous decisions are extremely important for young trans people to build agency and reduce the risk of future precariousness.²³³

Alice demonstrates the (e)utopian impulse that Tom Moylan defines as ‘a profound change that sees the person turn against and beyond the current world system’.²³⁴ She revolts against the oppressive social system by which she is surrounded by challenging the thugs, turning off her computer to end her teacher's harassment, demanding that her identity be recognised at school and by claiming her right to choose how she dresses. However, she cannot do it alone. She needs the help and love of people who have a deep and unbreakable affection for her. The (e)utopian impulse must and can only be a collective action²³⁵ if it is to lead to positive social change.

It should be noted, however, that the community in which Alice moves in the story does not represent the queer community, and therefore the novel does not meet the criterion of 'queer consciousness/community' as the protagonist is portrayed in isolation within the social context in which she lives and stands out as the only declared queer figure. Nevertheless, the community I refer to here exists and is the one made up firstly of Alice's parents and her best friend Gilda and secondly of the psychologist and Dr. Padula from the Centre for Gender Dysphoria at the Policlinico Federico II in Naples. This is what I recognise as an example of a 'eutopian community', one that specifically takes care of a socially marginalised member of society, supporting him or her in their life journey in the fight against the discrimination and in the blossoming of their identity. The eutopian sense of this community lies in the choice not to abandon or harm the identifiably more disadvantaged member - as this would clearly undermine the meaning of community - but above all to welcome and support him or her in his or her journey of growth and achievement of the full, solid and acquired expression of his or her identity. Marginal identities (LGBTQ+ persons, persons with physical or mental disabilities or both, immigrants, and women) who have historically been victims²³⁶

²³³ Travers, *The Trans Generation*, 172.

²³⁴ Moylan, *Becoming*, 5.

²³⁵ Moylan, *Becoming*, 210.

²³⁶ Elisabeth L. Engbretsen and Mia Liinason, 'Introduction' in *Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe: Critical Essays on Knowledge, Inequality and Belonging*, ed. Elisabeth L. Engbretsen and Mia Liinason, (Taylor and Francis, 2023), 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

of discrimination at a social, legal, and medical level, are gradually being more and more welcomed, protected and supported with the hope that in the future, a eutopia will be realised in which discrimination against such individuals will cease to exist completely, that they will be fully integrated into the social fabric, enjoying rights and opportunities on a par with individuals who are part of the so-called majority (in the Italian case this could be men – and to some extent women — who are cisgender, heterosexual, white and middle-class).

A eutopian community may also manifest itself as a community in which all the members recognise themselves in marginalised social identities and look after each other's welfare, taking care of each other.

Above, I named Alice as the novel's 'only avowed queer figure'. This expression was chosen because Gilda, Alice's best friend, is another arguably (though not overtly) queer figure within the novel. Gilda is particularly important to the novel's plot as she is fully part of the eutopian community surrounding the protagonist. What is more, she certainly constitutes one of its most important figures, since the affection and care the two feel for each other seems at several moments to cross the boundary of friendship.

Un'Alice come un'altra is particularly interesting within the Italian sub-corpus (and the corpus as a whole) because it represents the first Italian YA novel to provide an initial representation of bisexuality in adolescence. This fact is all the more remarkable since in contemporary Italian society, the representation of bisexuality in literature, even in YA literature, is almost nonexistent.²³⁷ Although never mentioning any technical terms, nor problematising the issue in any metanarrative way, it is absolutely clear that the relationship between Alice and Giada appears to go beyond friendship, though they are also both attracted to boys. Alice and Giada, one infatuated with Fofò and the other angry with her ex-boyfriend Mattia for having betrayed her with another girl, are portrayed in particularly intimate and tender moments on more than one occasion, to the point of leaving little doubt as to the nature of the feelings they have for each other, especially in two scenes, one of which is taken from chapter six:

²³⁷ Dalila Forni, 'Ancora invisibili? Rappresentazioni bi+ nei romanzi e nei *graphic novel* per un giovane pubblico' in *Politics of bisexuality: beyond the visibility of bisexual, pansexual and queer people*, ed. Aurelio Castro, (ETS, 2023), 182, 185.

«Ciao...» mormorai, abbozzando un sorriso un po' impacciato. Lei mi rispose con un bacio sulla guancia. Il profumo della sua pelle mi avvolse, e mi accorsi che, mentre si ritraeva, aveva gli occhi chiusi. Si mosse lentamente e il suo respiro caldo mi fece venire un brivido nel collo. Le guardai le labbra, avevano un disegno perfetto, un colore invitante. Anche lei doveva aver sentito il mio profumo. Lo stava assaporando e ne sembrava stordita. Quel saluto non l'aveva soddisfatta. Come non aveva soddisfatto me. All'improvviso, di slancio, ci abbracciammo. E per la prima volta, in quell'abbraccio, provai una sensazione che mi spiazzò completamente. Cosa sarebbe successo se io e Gilda ci fossimo... innamorate? Avvertii un vago capogiro. Lei sorrise con calma, mi guardò attentamente, inclinando la testa, come per chiedermi «va tutto bene?». Ma non disse nulla. Io annuii, lei si sciolse in un sorriso. Un sorriso fatto di luce, di segreti, di familiarità e di sorpresa. Un sorriso splendido.²³⁸

And the other from chapter nine:

Però nella mia voce [...] c'era qualcosa di nuovo: *anzi d'antico*, per dirla con la poesia di Pascoli (*L'Aquilone...?*). E quel qualcosa di nuovo o d'antico era che, per un attimo, mi ero sentita gelosa di lei. Di Gilda. La mia amica del cuore. Forse c'era qualcosa di così segreto dentro di me che non avevo mai avuto il coraggio di confessarlo nemmeno a me stessa. Era un salto nel vuoto da un'altezza vertiginosa, quello là... Restai in silenzio. Ascoltavo il suo respiro nel telefono. Mi tornò in mente il momento in cui ci eravamo salutate sotto il mio palazzo la sera della nostra uscita. Quell'abbraccio, quel micidiale sistema multimediale di odore, colore, forma, casualità, che è il colpo di fulmine. Per quelle vie misteriose attraverso le quali ci sveliamo quel che non sapremmo mai dirci a parole, mi sembrò che anche lei avesse seguito lo stesso sentiero. [...] «Solo con te mi sento capita...». Avevo voglia di passare alla videochiamata, ma non ce la facevo a proporlo. Lei evidentemente non ci pensava. Il nostro dialogo mi sembrava irreali. Roba che fino a quel momento avevo sentito solo nei film. Non sapevo cosa dire, la mia testa era un frullatore a velocità 3.²³⁹

The language used belongs to the semantic field of infatuation and falling in love renders the relational dynamic between the two teenagers incontrovertible. And although the self-explaining narration clearly reveals to the audience only the protagonist's feelings and reflections, the writer suggests from Gilda's reactions and comments that the amorous feeling is reciprocated. Although Alice explicitly questions the possibility that she and her friend could have fallen in love, throughout

²³⁸ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 88, 89.

²³⁹ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 121, 122.

the novel they never verbally confess their evident feelings of love, nor do they show any particular physical romantic affection. And yet it remains a fact that a romantic relationship matures between Alice and Gilda, gradually explored and understood by both of them, full of extreme manifestations of attachment, such as Giada's desperate attempt to save Alice from the thugs by beating them, and Alice's incessant thoughts of Gilda while she is in hospital, needing to let her know that she loves her and to get in touch with her. Nevertheless, in the story's closing their relationship is not consecrated by a stereotypical sealing act; yet it is hinted that it is nevertheless on the right track and still needs time to blossom.

To conclude this analysis of *Un'Alice come un'altra*, I present an overview in relation to the established criteria:

- Queer Visibility = the queerness of the protagonist, in this case her non-conforming gender identity, is unquestionably the central topic of the novel and is the subject of drama and problematisation.
- Queer assimilation = assimilation does not exist since the protagonist, the only openly queer character in the novel, is portrayed as an alien individual, different from all the others in the novel, and is moreover depicted in isolation. While Gilda is also a queer character, her identity, remains undeclared and the writer does not set up a reflective discourse on her.
- Queer consciousness/community = queer characters are not portrayed within a queer community to which they feel they belong and where they can find love, friendship, solidarity, and support. The issue of portraying the protagonist as the only trans person in the novel's society, as if she were special, alien or in any case uncommon, returns here.
- Queerphobia = the protagonist suffers a great deal of blatantly transphobic discrimination within the novel: misgendering, verbal and physical harassment and aggression, attempts to manipulate her identity in order to change it into the 'normal'

version of the sex assigned to her at birth (male), marginalisation, depressive moments and two suicide attempts.

- Eutopian tension = the novel presents an extremely important level of this descriptor as there are numerous instances in which the trans protagonist must defend, assert, and have her right to freely express her identity and to have it legally asserted and protected.

3. Teenagers in the Community. Analysis of the British Sub-corpus

In this chapter I will turn to the British sub-corpus. As has been noted, the first and last monograph to be published about young adult LGBTQ fiction in Britain was *Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*, by B.J. Woodstein in 2013. In Woodstein's study, the most recent YA novel was published in 2012. This chapter picks up eight years later with novels published in Britain between 2020 and 2021.

In this chapter, I will analyse the novels chronologically, drawing attention to narrative peculiarities in each novel. I will also ask to what extent these books have contributed to the representation of the world of queer adolescence in the Britain compared to the concluding observations of Woodstein's study. The three British novels selected for analysis in this chapter are: *Loveless* (Alice Oseman, HarperCollins, 2020); *Boy Queen* (George Lester, Macmillan Children's Books, 2020); *Ace of Spades* (Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, Feiwel and Friends, 2021). The selected texts are A-themed (aromantic asexual, or aro-ace), G-themed and G-and Q-themed (queer) respectively. In this chapter, it will be noted how queer YA novels have evolved more in the British publishing industry than in the Italian industry. In novels published in Britain, there is a greater variety of representations of LGBTQ+ adolescence and space is given to the young queer community in which the protagonists are inserted, new types of families are presented and there is a reduced presence of parents in the adolescents' stories. I will introduce each novel with a brief summary of the plot, before identifying and commenting on the passages of the books that meet the established research criteria. At the end of each section, I will examine the relationship between the quality of the representation and the intensity of the eutopian impulse.

3.1. *Loveless*: Asexuality and the Queer Community

The first novel chosen for analysis in the British corpus is *Loveless* (2020) by Alice Oseman, an internationally known writer and graphic novelist. The novel was selected as the winner of the 2021 YA Book Prize, the annual award organised by

the British magazine *The Bookseller* in collaboration with the Edinburgh International Book Festival. This novel caught my attention because it centres around new identities (and issues) in the LGBTQ+ community, namely asexuality and aromanticism.²⁴⁰ *Loveless* is particularly interesting because it falls into the category of #OwnVoices novels. This appellation indicates texts in which the protagonist shares a marginalized social identity with the author. The protagonist in *Loveless*, like the author Alice Oseman, identifies as *aro-ace* (aromantic and asexual). Unlike her allosexual peers,²⁴¹ the main character Georgia Warr faces a number of challenges all derive from the absence of a social narrative about asexuality and aromanticism. It is worth clarifying, therefore, that asexuality is a sexual orientation in its own right while aromanticism refers to a romantic/affective orientation.

Loveless is a coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist Georgia discovers the importance of being part of a community. She finds community in her group of friends and in the Pride Soc, the university club of queer students in the English city of Durham where the novel is set. In Pride Soc she meets people with whom she identifies and finds – and even accepts – her own identity. This is not an easy task. *Loveless* makes it clear very early on that Georgia, initially unaware of her sexual and emotional orientation, has grown up in a society where falling in love is seen as the supreme goal in life; a society steeped in stereotypical content about the vital importance of being in love with another person in order to achieve happiness. The protagonist struggles for a long part of the narrative on the one hand with an obsession with finding a partner with whom she might experience perfect romance, and on the other hand with the bewilderment and confusion caused by the experience of lack of both sexual and romantic attraction to other individuals. This confusion is further amplified by the manipulative social context. At an ideological level, she is surrounded by the narrative that destiny is only fulfilled through love and that love is only found in a couple. At a relational level, she is influenced by

²⁴⁰ Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever 'Asexuality' in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3 (2021): 498, 502,503, 513. In the cited pages, the authors explain that, among its various possible definitions, asexuality generally corresponds to an individual's lack of sexual attraction to others, while aromanticism represents an individual's lack of romantic attraction to, again, others. They also specify that these two characteristics do not necessarily come together. An individual in these categories may present both or just one of these orientations.

²⁴¹ Brunning and McKeever, 'Asexuality,' 498. People who experience sexual attraction, a term therefore opposed to 'asexual'.

the relationships she weaves with her friends and college classmates and to a smaller extent with her family members. In fact, it is important to note that *Loveless* is a novel where space is mostly given to young people and truly little is given to adults. By contrast, the presence of adults in the Italian sub-corpus is much more pronounced. Moreover, in *Loveless*, the main community is a community of queer youth. Indeed, alongside Georgia, who is aro-ace cisgender, there is Pip, a cis lesbian; Jason, a cis hetero and son of a cisgender gay male couple; Rooney, a cisgender bisexual/pansexual; and Sunil, a homoromantic asexual.²⁴² It should also be noted that Pip and Sunil are particularly intersectional characters since the former is of Latino descent while the latter is of Indian descent. Within this group young adults in their early twenties struggling with their first year of college (apart from Sunil who is already a junior), Georgia must contend not only with her own ignorance on the subject of aro-ace orientation but also with that of others. Oseman sketches intelligent and realistic portraits of queer people (young and old), offering a much deeper psychological picture. At the same time, she debunks the tokenistic idea that queer people always need to be portrayed in an exclusively positive light. The most intense and complex relationship proves beyond doubt to be with Rooney, Georgia's new college friend and roommate. In *Loveless*, there is no moment when the protagonist realises her own sexual identity and shares it with her friends (who are equally unaware of the existence of aro-ace orientation). Instead, among the characters closest to Georgia, Rooney is the one who most of all tries to help her explore her own sexuality in numerous parts of the novel. As much as Rooney's stem from a genuine desire to help – unlike other novels in which characters intentionally manipulate queer protagonists – Rooney's reasoning and advice are ultimately counterproductive for Georgia, provoking more confusion through attempts to convince herself that she can feel sexual and romantic attraction to other characters in the novel, for example, one of her best friends, Jason.

Are you aware that Jason is into you?' The words hit me like lightning. *Are you aware that Jason is into you?* Jason. One of my best friends in the entire world. We'd known each other for over four years, we'd hung out more times than I could count, I knew his face as well as

²⁴² The term 'homoromantic' refers to a person who experiences romantic attraction to individuals of the same sex.

my own. We could tell each other anything. But he hadn't told me *that*. What? I croaked, my breath gone. Rooney laughed. Are you joking? His crush on you is so obvious it's actually painful to watch.' How was this *possible*? I was excellent at recognising romantic feelings. I could always tell when people were flirting with me, or each other. I *always* knew when Pip and Jason had crushes on people. How had I missed this? 'He's a really lovely guy,' said Rooney, her voice softer, as she sat on the sofa beside me. 'Have you really not considered him?' 'I ...' I started to tell Rooney that I didn't like him like that, but ... did I even know what romantic feelings felt like? I thought I'd had a crush on Tommy for seven years and that turned out to be nothing. Jason *was* a really lovely guy. I mean, I loved him. And suddenly the idea was swirling around my brain and I couldn't stop myself *wondering*. Maybe this was like all those American romcoms I'd spent my whole teenage life watching; maybe Jason and I were *meant to be* like the two leads from *13 Going On 30* or *Easy A*, maybe 'he'd been there all along', maybe I just hadn't tapped into my romantic feelings because I felt so comfortable and safe around Jason and I'd just written him off as 'best friend' when in fact he could have been 'boyfriend' instead. Maybe, if I reached out, if I *pushed myself* - maybe Jason was the love of my life.²⁴³

It is clear from the passage how Rooney's trigger Georgia's intrusive thoughts prompted by the dogma of social narrative long grafted into the protagonist's mindset. The news of Jason's feelings for her and her awareness of the affection she feels for him in return lead her to produce stereotypical, almost deterministic visions about the future of their relationship. Georgia reflects on the possibility that the two of them were '*meant to be* like the two leads from *13 Going On 30* or *Easy A*, that if she '*pushed*' herself perhaps Jason would become the love of her life. The reference to the two films testifies to the influence of cultural products on Georgia. The narrative about love she has consumed through these products leads her to ignore her own perceptions and thoughts that try to warn her about the discomfort her body is experiencing as, pushed to the extreme, she finds herself in an intimate situation with Jason, and forces herself to kiss him.

It was like a siren suddenly going off everywhere around me. Like a burglar alarm that wakes you up so hard you can't stop shaking for half an hour. Looking back, it was almost hilarious. Whenever someone tried to kiss me, I went headfirst into a fight or flight response. His eyes focused on my lips, then darted back up. He wasn't like Tommy. He was trying very hard to

²⁴³ Alice Oseman, *Loveless* (HarperCollins, 2020), 115.

work out whether this was something I wanted. He was looking for the signals. Had I been giving off the signals? Maybe it would have been easier for him to just ask, but how do people phrase that in a non-cheesy way? And to be honest, I was glad he didn't ask, because what would I have said? No. I would have said no, because it turned out I just couldn't lie to anyone except myself. As he moved towards me, only a fraction of an inch, I imagined the Countdown timer music starting to play. I wanted to try. I wanted to want to kiss him. But I didn't actually want to kiss him. But maybe I should do it anyway. But I didn't want to. But maybe I wouldn't know until I tried. But I knew that I already knew. I already knew what I felt. And Jason could tell. He moved back again, clearly embarrassed. 'Uh... sorry. Wrong moment.' 'No,' I found myself saying. 'Go on.' I wanted him to just do it. I wanted him to rip the plaster off. Yank the bone back into shape. Fix me. But I already knew there was nothing to fix. I was always going to be like this. He met my eyes, questioning. Then he leant in and pressed his lips to mine.²⁴⁴

This passage shows the extreme consequence of a hypersexualised and hyperromanticised social context for an asexual and aromantic individual. Georgia's learnt ideas about love are so entrenched that she doesn't pay attention to the deafening internal 'siren' activated to protect her from the imminent, dangerous, and consciously unwanted intimate moment with Jason. Ignoring these inner alarms has terrible consequences but also results in epiphany.

Looking back, that probably should have been an indicator of me not really wanting to kiss anyone, but years of films, music, TV, peer pressure, and my own craving for a big love story had brainwashed me into believing this was going to be something amazing, as long as I gave it a shot. It was not amazing. In fact, I hated it. I think I would have felt less uncomfortable if someone had dared me to start singing on public transport. It was not Jason's fault that it was not amazing. I didn't have anyone to compare him to, obviously, but objectively, he was perfectly fine at kissing. He didn't do it too deep or forcefully. There were no teeth incidents, or, God forbid, tongue. I knew what sorts of feelings kissing was supposed to bring up. I'd read hundreds, possibly thousands of fanfics by this point. Kissing someone you like was supposed to make your head spin, your stomach twist, your heart speed up, and you were supposed to enjoy it. I didn't feel any of that. I just felt a deep, empty dread in the pit of my stomach. I hated how close he was. I hated the way his lips felt against mine. I hated the fact that he wanted to do this. It only lasted for a few seconds. But those were some very uncomfortable seconds for me. And, from the look on his face, they were for him too.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Oseman, *Loveless*, 228, 229.

²⁴⁵ Oseman, *Loveless*, 230, 231.

This turns out to be one of the most intense and painful moments of Georgia's journey in *Loveless*. Even though, reflecting on her experiences, the protagonist was aware of her orientation on some level. As she puts it: 'I knew that I already knew'. She knew that acts of intimacy with Jason would make her feel sick, but she does it anyway because she has been conditioned by cultural products: 'years of films, music, TV, peer pressure, and my own craving for a big love story had brainwashed me into believing this was going to be something amazing.' Georgia's uncertainty about her identity is not resolved, however, by the realisation that she has no desire for sexual or romantic relationships with another person. At this point in the novel, Georgia is not only missing the language she needs to describe herself, but this part of herself is not yet fully established. Moreover, her new understanding about her orientation it is not easy to accept, and she faces a period of mourning.

It was knowing, with absolute certainty, that I was never, ever going to fall in love with anybody. I had spent my whole life believing that romantic love was waiting for me. That one day I'd find it and I would be totally, finally *happy*. But now I had to accept that it would never happen. None of it. No romance. No marriage. No sex. There were so many things that I would never do. Would never even *want to* do or feel *comfortable* doing. So many little things I'd taken for granted, like moving into my first place with my partner, or my first dance at my wedding, or having a baby with someone. Having someone to look after me when I'm sick, or watching TV with in the evenings, or going on a couples' holiday to Disneyland. And the worst part of it was - even though I'd longed for these things, I knew that they'd never make me happy anyway. The idea was beautiful. But the reality made me sick. How could I feel so sad about giving up these things that I did not actually want? I felt pathetic for getting sad about it. I felt guilty, knowing that there were people out there like me who were *happy* being like this. I felt like I was grieving. I was grieving this fake life, a fantasy future that I was never going to live. I had no idea what my life would be like now. And that scared me. God, that scared me so, so much.²⁴⁶

When Georgia realises that she is repulsed by sexual and romantic relationships she feels grief because she realises she will never have everything she has been taught to want and achieve. Paradoxically, all those desires and their objects never belonged to her. Georgia, therefore, has never herself desired the goals that the

²⁴⁶ Oseman, *Loveless*, 233, 234.

hypersexualised and hyper-romanticized society has forced upon her, but the fact that she has come to realise with certainty that she will never pursue them causes her to feel loss. Moreover, she cannot quickly extricate herself from this sense of loss since she is unable to imagine a viable alternative to the one narrative which society has always presented her with. This fragile state means that she is easily influenced by Rooney, who good-naturedly but dangerously convinces her to kiss her in order to figure out whether or not Georgia might like girls.

'I just don't want to see you give up without *trying*.' She was boring me, and I realised that it was because what I was doing wasn't giving up. It was acceptance. And maybe, just maybe, that could be a good thing. 'I don't want you to feel like you're going to be sad and lonely forever!' she said, and that was the moment I broke a little. Was that all I would be? Sad and lonely? Forever? Had I doomed myself by daring to think about this part of me? Was I just accepting a life of solitude? As soon as those questions hit me, they opened the floodgate to all the doubts I thought I'd been fighting off. *Maybe it was all just a phase. Maybe this was giving up. Maybe I should keep trying.* Maybe, maybe, maybe. Fine, then,' I said. 'You wanna try?' I sighed, defeated, *tired*. I was so tired of all this. Yeah. Go on, then.' It couldn't really be any worse than the one with Jason, could it? And so she leant in. It was different. Rooney was used to deeper, longer kisses of an entirely different type. She led. I tried to imitate her.²⁴⁷

Once again, social pressure leads Georgia to give in to another attempt at sexual and romantic intimacy, this time with a girl, which she knows in her heart will fail. She feels the same way she did when she kissed Jason, but this time she is stronger from that experience and describes the event with greater awareness.

I hated it. I hated it just as I had hated the kiss with Jason. I hated how close her face was to me. I hated the feeling of her lips moving around against mine. I hated her breath on my skin. My eyes kept flickering open, trying to get a sense of when this was going to be over, while she put her hand on the back of my head, pulling me closer to her. I tried to imagine doing this with a person I liked, but it was a mirage. The harder I tried to think about that scenario, the quicker it disintegrated. I was never, ever going to enjoy this. With anybody. It wasn't just a dislike of kissing. It wasn't a fear or nervousness or 'not meeting the right person yet'. This was a part of me. I did not feel the feelings of attraction, of romance, of desire, that other

²⁴⁷ Oseman, *Loveless*, 275, 276.

people felt. And I wasn't ever going to. I really hadn't needed to kiss anyone to work that out.²⁴⁸

Georgia hates the experience of kissing another person, confirming her feelings about it. The only change from the kiss with Jason is her greater sense of acceptance of that part of herself. Georgia is beginning to consider this part that she had never understood or acknowledged but which had always been present in her. At this point in the novel, her ace aro orientation begins to become part of the protagonist's identity as she slowly leaves the sense of loss and self-hatred behind. As I have seen, the self-hatred is particularly common in the experience of queer adolescents. This process of integration necessarily leads Georgia to want to better investigate this side of her personality and identify it with a language that can make it recognisable. The queer teenager needs to name and define herself. To this end, the protagonist follows her own intuitions, deciding to seek help from those who know more than she does and turns to Sunil.

There was a pause. I could have left. It would have made sense for me to head home. But instead I found myself talking. [...] I didn't even know how to begin to explain it properly. It felt like something I'd made up in my head. A dream I couldn't quite remember properly. And a word. A word that Lloyd had spoken with such malice, but Sunil had defended. A word that had sparked something in my brain. I'd finally made the connection. 'Uh ...' I was grateful I was a little tipsy. I pointed at his pin - the one with black, grey, white, and purple stripes. 'Is that ... the flag for, um ...being asexual?'²⁴⁹

The fact that she stays and talks with her homoromantic asexual friend to understand more about herself instead of choosing to go home is already a small example of the eutopian impulse present within this novel. The pin of the asexual flag that Sunil wears sheds light on the importance of the visibility of symbols as here it is used as a pretext by Georgia to introduce the topic. She is not sure what asexuality is, and Sunil patiently explains it to her, even giving details about himself:

²⁴⁸ Oseman, *Loveless*, 276, 277.

²⁴⁹ Oseman, *Loveless*, 194, 195.

Asexuality means I'm not sexually *attracted* to any gender. So I don't look at men, or women, or anyone, and think, *wow, I want to do sexy stuff with them.*' This made me snort. 'Does anyone actually think stuff like that?' Sunil smiled, but it was a sad smile. 'Maybe not in those exact words, but yes, most people think stuff like that.' This shook me. 'Oh.' 'So, I just don't feel those feelings. Even if they're someone I'm dating. Even if they're a model or a celebrity. Even if, on a basic, objective level, I can tell that they're conventionally attractive. I just don't feel those feelings of attraction.' 'Oh,' I said again. There was a pause. Sunil looked at me, contemplating what to say next. Some asexuals still enjoy having sex, for a whole variety of reasons,' he continued. I think that's why a lot of people find it confusing. But some asexuals don't like sex at all, and some are just neutral about it. Some asexuals still feel romantic attraction to people - wanting to be in relationships, or even kiss people, for example. But others don't want romantic relationships at all. It's a big, big spectrum with a whole range of different feelings and experiences. And there's really no way to tell how one specific person feels, even if they openly describe themselves as asexual.' 'So ...' I knew it was a little invasive to ask, but I just *had* to. Do *you* still want relationships?' He nodded. 'Yes. I identify as gay as well. Gay asexual.' As ... as well?' 'The technical term is homoromantic. I still want to be in relationships with guys and masculine folks. But I feel very indifferent about sex, because I have never looked at men or any gender and felt sexual attraction to them. Men don't turn me on. Nobody does.' So romantic attraction is *different* from sexual attraction?' 'For some people they feel like different things, yes,' said Sunil. 'So some people find it useful to define those two aspects of their attraction differently.'²⁵⁰

Sunil's explanations clarify the dimensions of asexuality and aromanticism for Georgia, and being able to talk to him not only clarifies certain aspects of herself that she had not well understood until then, but also, to some extent, reassures her that she is not alone. Georgia's slow but determined path of becoming aware of her own identity leads her to completely lose the feeling of mourning towards the false myths instilled in her by society and make way for a new emotion, anger.

I'm not sure when I realised that I was no longer feeling melancholic distress about my sexuality. The *woe is me, I am loveless* mood had just gone. It was anger, now. I was so angry. At *everything*. I was angry at fate for dealing me these cards. Even though I knew there was nothing wrong with me - lots of people were like this, I wasn't alone, love yourself, whatever - I didn't know how to get to the point where this would stop feeling like a burden and instead feel like something *good*, something I could *celebrate*, something I could *share with the world*. [...] I was angry at the world for making me hate who I was. I was angry at myself for

²⁵⁰ Oseman, *Loveless*, 196, 197.

letting these feelings ruin my friendships with the best people in the world. I was angry at every single romance movie, every single fanfic, every single stupid OTP that had made me crave finding the perfect romance. It was because of all of that, no doubt, that this new identity felt like a loss, when in reality, it should have been a beautiful discovery. Ultimately, the fact that I was angry about all of that just made me angrier because I knew I *shouldn't* feel angry about any of these things. But I did, and I'm trying to be honest about it, OK? OK.

251

Anger is one of the *leitmotifs* of the novels analysed. All queer adolescents in the face of the queerphobia of society and other queerphobic characters feel this explosive emotion to a greater or lesser extent. Anger arises from the understanding that the pain experienced is a wound inflicted on their own identity, on their queer being, an element that the outside world has wanted to pass off as non-existent or a mistake to be corrected or a something morally depraved; a crime to be punished. It is not surprising that this anger that young queer people feel for a part of themselves feels 'like a burden' when instead it should 'feel like something *good*, something I could *celebrate*'. Georgia's words here are universal to all queer adolescents, not just the aro-ace adolescents. Georgia is angry with the world and its cultural imagery which has excluded aro-ace individuals. What should have been a discovery is actually experienced as a loss. Anger is the most common representation of the eutopian impulse in all the novels studied in this thesis. A second common element is the help that the community of people surrounding the protagonist offers as an additional stimulus to that impulse. What is different about *Loveless* is that the community in this novel is made up almost exclusively of queer adolescents, whereas in the Italian sub-corpus the presence of adults, straight or queer, is much more pronounced. In the case of the acceptance of one's aromantic and asexual orientation, Georgia's friends play a key role.

And then I said it. 'I think I might be ... asexual. And also aromantic. Both of them.' Sunil stopped walking. 'Yeah?' he said. 'Uh... yeah,' I said, looking at the floor. Um. Don't really know what to do about that.' Sunil stayed very still for a moment. Then he moved, his arm dropping away from me and turned so that he was standing directly in front of me. He put

²⁵¹ Oseman, *Loveless*, 297, 298.

his hands on my shoulders and bent a little so that our faces were level. There's nothing to *do*, Georgia,' he said softly. 'There's nothing to do at all.' And then the photographer started getting impatient and shouted at everyone to get organised, so Sunil marched us over to the scrum and we squeezed into the third row next to a couple of his friends, and as he turned away to chat to them, only then did I realise that what I'd said was undeniably true. I knew that now. Sunil turned back, squeezed my shoulder and said, 'You're gonna be OK. There's nothing you have to do except *be*. But... what if what I *am* is just... nothing?' I breathed out and blinked as the photographer took the first shot. What if I'm nothing?' 'You're not nothing,' Sunil said. You have to believe that. Maybe I could do that. Maybe I could believe that.²⁵²

I get that it sounds weird. I could feel myself going red. Would I ever stop feeling embarrassed about explaining this to people? 'It's not weird. 'It sounds weird, though.' 'No, it doesn't.' 'It does.' *Georgia.*' Pip smiled, a little exasperated. 'You're not weird.' She was the first person who'd said that to me. I hated that I still felt, sometimes, underneath it all, that I wasn't normal. But maybe getting over that would take time. Maybe, little by little, I could start to believe that I was OK.²⁵³

[S]o as it turns out, I am aromantic asexual. [...] R - Wow ... I didn't even know that was a thing!!! I always assumed it was like ... you like guys or girls or some sort of combo. G - haha yeah same hence all the confusion. R - It sounds really difficult to figure out ... I'm proud of you!!!!!! It was far from a perfect response to someone coming out. But it was so distinctly Rooney that it brought a smile to my face.²⁵⁴

The support of Sunil, Pip, and Rooney, her most important friends along with Jason, is indispensable for Georgia to be recognised in her aro-ace identity and to be loved as such. This support helps Georgia to integrate this side of herself that had she had not understood previously. This gradual process is evidenced by the way in which the protagonist personally begins to unpick the status quo's worldview, increasingly abandoning the stereotypical ideas learned from the monolith of romantic culture and opening her mind up to possible anti-deterministic alternatives for a person's relational destiny. For example, when she wants to lift Rooney's mood, caught in a moment of sadness due to the thought of not having and not being able to achieve a romantic relationship in the future, Georgia begins to recite a catchphrase to her, but immediately interrupts herself:

²⁵² Oseman, *Loveless*, 283, 284.

²⁵³ Oseman, *Loveless*, 379.

²⁵⁴ Oseman, *Loveless*, 291, 292.

Rooney said nothing. 'Anyway, you're only eighteen, you've got so much time -' I started to say, but didn't know how to continue. What did I mean when I said that? That she'd *definitely* find the perfect relationship someday? Because I knew that wasn't true. Not for me. Not for *anyone*. It was something adults said all the time. *You'll change your mind when you're older. You never know what might happen. You'll feel differently one day.* As if we teenagers knew so little about ourselves that we could wake up one day a completely different person. As if the person we are *right now* doesn't matter at all. The whole idea that people always grew up, fell in love and got married was a complete lie. How long would it take me to accept that?²⁵⁵

New alternatives to the social diktat on interpersonal relationships begin to make their way into the protagonist's consciousness to the extent that she is able to withstand even her family members' uncomfortable questions and statements on the subject. First with her mother:

Did any boys ask you to be their date to the ball?' 'Mum. British universities don't do that. That's American schools who do that.' 'Well, it would have been nice, wouldn't it?' 'Everyone just goes with their friends, Mum.' Mum sighed. 'You're going to look *so beautiful*,' she cooed. 'Make sure you do your hair nicely.' 'I will,' I said. Rooney had already offered to do it for me. 'You never know - you might meet your future husband tonight!' I laughed before I could stop myself. Two months ago, I *would* have been dreaming of a perfect, magical meet-cute at my first university ball. But now? Now I dressed for myself. 'Yeah,' I said, clearing my throat. 'You never know.'²⁵⁶

And then with her grandma:

Or met any nice young men? I bet there are lots of lovely boys in Durham'. I didn't hate Gran for being like this. It wasn't her fault. She had been raised to believe that it was a girl's primary aim in life to get married and have a family. She had done just that when she was my age, and I think she felt very fulfilled because of it. Fair enough. You do you. But that didn't stop me from being deeply, deeply bored. 'Actually,' I said, trying as hard as I could to keep the irritation out of my voice, 'I'm not really interested in getting a boyfriend.' 'Oh, well,' she said, patting my leg again, 'plenty of time, my love. Plenty of time.' But my time is now, I wanted to scream. My life is happening right now.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Oseman, *Loveless*, 241, 242.

²⁵⁶ Oseman, *Loveless*, 252, 253.

²⁵⁷ Oseman, *Loveless*, 303, 304.

Although it is important to note that in this novel Georgia will never come out to her family about her aro-ace orientation, it is important to recognise that , alongside her own personal and legitimate awareness that she is not ready for this step, that minimal space is given to them in the plot and that the writer's focus remains with the protagonist, her journey of self-discovery and her relationship with her queer peers. Indeed, her peers are themselves caught in their own stories of personal evolution, a theme to which I will return subsequently. What is particularly important, however, is the completion of the evolutionary cycle that leads Georgia to finally recognise her identity as an asexual and aromantic person and gain self-confidence, another major common goal of the queer adolescents in these novels.

The crux of it all was that I did not feel sexual or romantic feelings for anyone. Not a single goddamn person I had ever met or would ever meet. So that really was me. Aromantic. Asexual. I came back to the words until they felt real in my mind, at least. Maybe they wouldn't be real in most people's minds. But I could make them real in mine. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted.²⁵⁸

Georgia's confidence further increases thanks to the intervention of an adult, the protagonist's cousin Ellis, also an aro-ace character, who enlightens Georgia about the kinds of love that can exist for people like them and to whom and what it should and can be directed.

Then Ellis said, 'But I'm older now. I've learned some things. 'Like what?' I asked. Like the way friendship can be just as intense, beautiful and endless as romance. Like the way there's love everywhere around me - there's love for my friends, there's love in my paintings, there's love for myself. There's even love for my parents in there somewhere. Deep down.' She laughed, and I couldn't help but smile. I have a lot more love than some people in the world. Even if I'll never have a wedding.' She took a big spoonful of ice cream. 'There's definitely love for ice cream, let me tell you *that*.'[...] 'It's a real sexuality, [...] I'm...aromantic asexual.' That wasn't the first time I'd said those words. But every time I said them, they felt a little more at home in the air around me. [...] 'My friend said I don't have to do anything. He said all I need to do is to *be*.' 'Your friend sounds like a wise old sage.' 'That just about sums him up.' Ellis started driving us out of the car park. 'I don't like doing nothing,' she said. 'It's

²⁵⁸ Oseman, *Loveless*, 297.

boring. 'So what do *you* think I should do?' She gave this some thought for a moment. Then she said. 'Give your friendships the magic you would give a romance. Because they're just as important. Actually, for us, they're *way* more important.'²⁵⁹

So, an aro-ace person, outside the sexual and romantic dimensions, is more than capable of feeling love towards friends, family members, food, passions, etc. In particular, the magic an allosexual person gives to a romantic relationship is the same as the magic an aro-ace person gives to friendship, which is thus recognised as a cardinal relationship for all aro-ace people. It is only after understanding this essential lesson that Georgia realises that the loneliness she had always felt was also a lie, since true love had always been right in front of her.

I have always felt lonely, I think. I think a lot of people feel lonely. Rooney. Pip. Maybe even Jason, though he hasn't said so. I'd spent my teenage life feeling lonely every time I saw a couple at a party, or two people kissing outside the school gate. I'd felt lonely every time I read some cute proposal story on Twitter, or saw someone's five-year-anniversary Facebook post, or even just saw someone hanging out with their partner in their Instagram story, sitting with them on a sofa with their dog, watching TV. I felt lonely first because I hadn't experienced that. And I felt even lonelier when I started to believe I never would. This loneliness - being without Jason and Pip - was worse. [...] I loved Jason and Pip. And now they were gone. I had been so desperate for my idea of true love that I couldn't even see it when it was right in front of my face.²⁶⁰

The absence of her two best friends Pip and Jason, with whom she previously quarrelled, causes Georgia to feel deeply lonely and, in turn, to realise how deeply she loves them. Something similar happens to Rooney towards Georgia, confessing to her just before the novel closes the bizarre and unsettling love, she has realised she feels for her:

'But you know what I realised on my walk?' she said. 'I realise that I love you, Georgia.' My mouth dropped open. 'Obviously I'm not romantically in love with you. But I realise that whatever these feelings are for you, I ...' She grinned wildly. 'I feel like I am in love. Me and you - this is a fucking love story! I feel like I've found something most people just don't get. I feel at home around you in a way I have never felt in my fucking life. And maybe most

²⁵⁹ Oseman, *Loveless*, 316-318.

²⁶⁰ Oseman, *Loveless*, 300, 301.

people would look at us and think that we're just friends, or whatever, but I know that it's just...so much MORE than that.' She gestured dramatically at me with both hands. 'You changed me. You...you fucking saved me, I swear to God. I know I still do a lot of dumb stuff and I say the wrong things and I still have days where I just feel like shit but ... I've felt happier over the past few weeks than I have in years.' I couldn't speak. I was frozen. Rooney dropped to her knees. 'Georgia, I am never going to stop being your friend. And I don't mean that in the boring average meaning of 'friend' where we stop talking regularly when we're twenty-five because we've both met nice young men and gone off to have babies, and only get to meet up twice a year. I mean I'm going to pester you to buy a house next door to me when we're forty-five and have finally saved up enough for our deposits. I mean I'm going to be crashing round yours every night for dinner because you know I can't fucking cook to save my life, and if I've got kids and a spouse, they'll probably come round with me, because otherwise they'll be living on chicken nuggets and chips. I mean I'm going to be the one bringing you soup when you text me that you're sick and can't get out of bed and ferrying you to the doctor's even when you don't want to go because you feel guilty about using the NHS when you just have a stomach bug. I mean we're gonna knock down the fence between our gardens so we have one big garden, and we can both get a dog and take turns looking after it. I mean I'm going to be here, boring you, until we're old ladies, sitting in the same care home, talking about putting on a Shakespeare because we're all old and bored as shit.'²⁶¹

This revelation by Rooney, another emotionally charged moment in the novel, provides me with an opportunity not only to observe that friendship can have a deep meaning and intensity for allosexual people as well, but also to make some observations about the main characters. Oseman succeeds in giving space to other queer teenagers in *Loveless* alongside the protagonist. Rooney, for example, as much as her behaviour was problematic and misguided albeit unconsciously so, she also embarks on her own journey of discovery of her sexual identity. In the first half of the novel, the reader sees her having many casual sexual encounters with boys and even recounting at one point the troubled love affair she had during her school days with a boy. In the second half, on the other hand, the stormy relationship between her and Pip is narrated, which soon proves to be a flirtation and will eventually turn into the beginning of a romance. For these reasons, Rooney remains undecided between the possibility of being bisexual or pansexual. She, too, as well as Georgia, demonstrates a eutopian impulse when she rejects the heteronormative

²⁶¹ Oseman, *Loveless*, 413, 414.

idea that romantic love, from a value standpoint, should always be considered above friendship:

'I ...' I looked down. I didn't want her to see me. But Rooney was looking at me, eyebrows furrowed, so many thoughts churning behind her eyes, and it was that look that made me start spilling everything out. 'I just care about you so much ... but I've always got this fear that ... one day you'll leave. Or Pip and Jason will leave, or... I don't know.' Fresh tears fell from my cheeks. I'm never going to fall in love, so... my friendships are all I have, so... I just ... can't bear the idea of losing any of my friends. Because I'm never going to have that one special person.' 'Can you let me be that person?' Rooney said quietly. I snorted loudly. What d'you mean?' 'I mean I want to be your special person.' 'B-but ... that's not how the world works, people always put romance over friendships -' 'Says who?' Rooney spluttered, smacking her hand on the ground in front of us. 'The heteronormative rulebook? Fuck that, Georgia. Fuck that.'²⁶²

Sunil also demonstrates eutopian impulse when he argues with Lloyd, a gay cis-male member of *Pride Soc*, who criticises him for his exaggerated inclusiveness in the circle towards queer people who profess to have what Lloyd calls '*made-up internet identities*'.

Don't you ever get *tired*, Lloyd? Because I do.' 'It's my right to voice my concerns about the society. You've changed all the events we do and now you're letting in way too many people!' 'Letting in too many - what planet are you *on*?' 'I saw the fucking flyers you were handing out at the Freshers' Fair! *Asexual and bigender* and whatever. You're just gonna let in anyone who thinks they're some made-up internet identity?' There was a short silence, and then Sunil spoke again, his voice hardened. You know what, Lloyd? Yes. Yes, I am. Because *Pride Soc* is inclusive, and open, and loving, and *not run by you anymore*. And because there are still sad little cis gays like you who seem to take other queers' mere existence as a threat to your civil rights, even *freshers* who are showing up here for the first time - some of them likely *never* having been to a queer event in their whole lives - just trying to find somewhere they can relax and be themselves. And I don't know if you're aware of this, Lloyd, because I know you don't recognise any pride flag that isn't the fucking rainbow, but I actually happen to *be* one of those *made-up internet identities*. And guess what? I'm the president. So get the fuck out of my formal.'²⁶³

²⁶² Oseman, *Loveless*, 412, 413.

²⁶³ Oseman, *Loveless*, 192, 193.

This scene is particularly interesting in that it presents an obvious case of lateral violence. Lloyd, a cis-gay male character, belittles or denies the existence of queer identities unknown to him as well as the specific ones he mentions: 'asexual' and bigender'. The situation is made more dramatic by the fact that Sunil is his interlocutor, an individual who identifies as asexual and is also of Indian heritage. This instance of lateral violence exemplifies the kind of violence that one member of the LGBTQ+ community may inflict on another member. One might suppose that members within the LGBTQ+ community would treat each other as equals due to sharing a non-heterosexual/romantic orientation and/or a non-gender identity but, as I see in this case, Lloyd believes he is entitled to a higher position in society because he is white.²⁶⁴ For example, Lloyd, by virtue of being male and cisgender falls into more powerful social categories than, for example, cisgender lesbian women, transgender or non-binary people, ethnic minorities and lower class individuals. Sunil, however, stands up to his queer-phobic comments and kicks him out of the welcome event for queer freshmen at Durham University organised by Pride Soc. Sunil turns out to be one of the most positive examples for Georgia, not only for the fact that he is an asexual person and has helped her better understand her identity, but more importantly for his deep sense of ethics, selflessly putting time and effort into creating a welcoming and protective community that serves other queer teens. Sunil's modesty also reveals the eutopian impulse in his thinking:

I'm not a superhero, or anything. I don't want to be. A lot of the freshers see me as this, like, queer angel sent down to fix all their problems, and I'm not, I'm really, really not. I'm just a person. But I like to think I'm making a positive impact, even if it's a small one.' I suddenly got the sense that Sunil had been through a lot before he'd become this person - confident, eloquent, wise. He hadn't always been the self-assured president of a society. But whatever he'd been through, he'd done it. He'd survived. And he was making the world a better place.²⁶⁵

Even a small positive impact can help make the world a better place after surviving, as a young queer person, a queer-phobic past. And the community that Sunil seeks

²⁶⁴ Duy Tran, Corrinne T. Sullivan, Lucy Nicholas, 'Lateral Violence and Microaggressions in the LGBTQ+ Community: A Scoping Review' in *Journal of Homosexuality* 70 (2023): 1311.

²⁶⁵ Oseman, *Loveless*, 182, 183.

to create and give space to flourish can be lifesaving for other queer teens, such as Georgia.

I hadn't met a lot of openly queer people before. There'd been a crowd of people at school who Pip hung out with from time to time, but there could have only been about seven or eight of them, max. I don't know what I expected. There was no particular type of person, no particular style or look. But they were all so friendly. There were a few obvious friendship groups, but mostly, people were happy to chat to whoever. They were all just themselves. I don't know how to explain it. There was no pretending. No hiding. No faking. In this little restaurant hidden away in the old streets of Durham, a bunch of queer people could all show up and just *be*. I don't think I'd understood what that was like until that moment.²⁶⁶

Community is thus where people belonging to the same social category can be themselves freely, without fear of discrimination, even if there may be possible threats within the community itself – as Sunil's exchange with Lloyd demonstrated. Community is also a place where one can meet people with whom one can identify perfectly or almost perfectly, and who dampen the sense of loneliness felt until then. This is not only the case for Georgia as she meets Sunil and Jess – Sunil's bisexual and aromantic friend – but also for Pip, a lesbian of Latin American descent.

Back in our home town, sometimes Pip had felt alone in a way that Jason and I just couldn't make better. She often said she wished her family hadn't moved out of London, because at least there she'd had her grandparents and a big community around her. When she moved to our tiny Kentish town aged ten, that community was gone. Pip was the only Latina in our school year. With that, and figuring out that she was gay, Pip had definitely drawn the short straw in terms of people in her neighbourhood who she could relate to and bond with on a deep level due to shared life experiences. 'I'd forgotten how good it felt to be surrounded by so many Latinx people, you know?' she continued. 'Our school was so white. And even being here in Durham - Durham as a whole is so white. Even Pride Soc is pretty white overall!' She gestured around her, and when I looked, I realised how correct she was - with the exception of Sunil, Jess, and a handful of others, most faces in the room were white. I'm starting to feel how much it affected me to just ... be around white people all the time. Like, being gay and Latina meant that I just ... didn't know anyone like me. As good as it felt to finally have a few queer friends in sixth form, they were all white, so I just couldn't fully relate to them.' She chuckled suddenly. 'But I met this gay dude at LatAm Soc and we had a massive chat about

²⁶⁶ Oseman, *Loveless*, 181.

being gay and Latinx, and I swear to God I'd never felt so understood in my life.' I found myself smiling. Because my best friend was thriving here.²⁶⁷

The knowledge and relationships formed in the coming together of people who belong to the same marginalised social category leads to a sense of understanding and belonging. In this community, individuals flourish, dispelling that sense of loneliness that cisgender and white-majority heteronormative society (as made clear by Pip's words) instils in individuals excluded from the norm. This concept is masterfully explained by Sunil, in a speech to members of *Pride Soc*:

Pride Soc isn't just about doing queer stuff,' Sunil continued, and that got him some laughs. It's not even about finding potential hook-ups.[...] 'No. It's about the relationships we form here. Friendship, love and support while we're all trying to survive and thrive in a world that often doesn't feel like it was made for us. Whether you're gay, lesbian, bi, pan, trans, intersex, non-binary, asexual, aromantic, queer, or however you identify - most of us here felt a sense of unbelonging while we were growing up. Sunil looked one more time at Jess, then back out at the crowd. 'But we're all here for each other. And it's those relationships that make Pride Soc so important and so special. It's those relationships that, despite all of the hardships in our lives, will continue to bring us joy every single day. He raised his glass. And we all deserve joy.²⁶⁸

So, the relationships that are formed between people in the same community, the queer community in this case, have solidarity and, possibly, happiness, as a goal. This is a goal which LGBTQ+ adolescents are also entitled to 'in a world that often doesn't feel like it was made for [them].' In this community, even an aromantic, asexual teenager like Georgia can find a form of love that is both achievable and in keeping with her identity, friendship.

Everyone raised their drinks then cheered for Sunil as he stepped down and Jess buried him in a hug. That was it. That was what everything was about. The love in that hug. The knowing look between them. They had their own love story. That was what I wanted. That was what I'd had, once, maybe. I used to dream of a spellbinding, endless, forever romance. A beautiful

²⁶⁷ Oseman, *Loveless*, 186, 187.

²⁶⁸ Oseman, *Loveless*, 335.

story of meeting a person who could change your whole world. But now, I realised, friendship could be that too.²⁶⁹

Loveless offers its readers a complex situation. On the one hand, the protagonist Georgia goes on a journey of discovery of her own identity. This evolution leads the protagonist to a moment of transformation in which she feels unprecedented anger towards the world around her, that is, the social dimension in which she was born and grew up absorbing a whole series of normative dictates about how her sexual and affective life should have functioned. The anger described in the novel provides a picture of the profound incongruity between her personal experience and the horizon of social expectation, as well as the suffering caused by this contradiction. The eutopian impulse here is seen in Georgia's aversion to the social structure as she realises that it has always lied to her as well as manipulated her. This same eutopian impulse allows Georgia's to move past the mourning she feels initially at discovering she is asexual and aromantic and she is eventually able to celebrate this epiphany. Georgia's eutopian impulse is strong and a number of other queer teens in *Loveless* also experience a eutopian impulse, as highlighted in the discussion. Sunil is inspiring and is clearly conceived as a guide within the novel. Indeed, Sunil affirms the founding purpose of *Pride Soc* in front of its members: to ensure that queer students have a community where they feel they belong, where they can have friendship, love, and solidarity and where they have a better chance of survival and of flourishing in a world that was not made for them. Through Sunil's mission statement, Oseman offers a positive portrayal of queer youth (albeit with some negative aspects)²⁷⁰ and delivers a eutopian manifesto for an alternative society. Sunil's speech is reminiscent of the 'utopian programme' Jameson and Moylan discuss in their treatises. *Pride Soc* indeed offers a systemic alternative that is committed to realisation in a given totality,²⁷¹ an alternative that I might call a 'eutopian association,' to be added to the various forms of utopian realisation

²⁶⁹ Oseman, *Loveless*, 335.

²⁷⁰ The idea of a world hostile to queer people is clearly shown in Sunil's speech, hence the need for a community of protection, opposition, and alternative.

²⁷¹ Moylan, *Becoming*, 136.

proposed by Jameson.²⁷² Indeed, my hypothesis of analysis predicts that a better representation of the LGBTQ+ community should be matched by a lower intensity of the eutopian impulse, as queer characters appear in contexts that are increasingly free of queer-phobic discrimination. Such an environment would naturally decrease the need for queer characters to oppose the status quo. *Loveless*, however, constitutes an incredibly special case. There is a constant presence of the queer community through the Pride Soc and through Georgia's circle of friends. Many of the queer characters happen to be queer, but some of them – especially the protagonist – embark on a journey of discovery and coming out related to their orientation. This journey is made at the cost of great suffering which is caused by social expectations contrary to lived identities. This suffering is seen in the novel through the lack of representation at the general social level, the ignorance of the circle of friends and acquaintances with respect to some queer identities, and the mixed reactions to coming out. This novel demonstrates that no matter how advanced a work may be, when it comes to assimilation and community, each new identity on the LGBTQ+ spectrum that acquires a voice and joins the chorus is somehow due the same process of visibility that other better-known identities (L, G, B and T) have gone through. In the Italian sub-corpus, for example, this is what happens to Alice in *Un'Alice come un'altra*, as the first Italian T-themed YA novel. Clearly, this view is limited to the literary landscape that is the subject of this study. In fact, *Loveless*, despite being a novel that is in many way advanced in LGBTQ+ representation, nevertheless turns out to be littered with queerphobic imagery and situations, for example Georgia's suffering in her journey of discovering her own identity, Lloyd's aphobia,²⁷³ Pip's fear of romantic loneliness as a lesbian, Rooney's initial manipulation of Georgia.

Finally, I present a summary of *Loveless* in relation to the established criteria.

- Queer visibility = the protagonist's discovery of her aromantic asexual orientation is the focus of the novel and is the object of problematisation. It should be added,

²⁷² Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 5. Jameson's forms of utopian realisation are: the utopian city, the utopian revolution, the utopian commune or village, and the utopian text.

²⁷³ Joshua G. Parmenter, R. V. Galliher, A. D. A. Maughan, 'LGBTQ+ emerging adults' perceptions of discrimination and exclusion within the LGBTQ+ community' in *Psychology and sexuality* 12 (2021): 5.

however, that there are numerous other queer adolescents whose non-heterosexual orientation is visible from the moment they appear in the novel and is never problematized, even for those who reflect on their identities, for example when Rooney reflects on the possibility of being bisexual or pansexual.

- Queer assimilation = all queer characters happen to be queer except the protagonist, whose recognition and integration of her aro-ace orientation happens with difficulty towards the end of the novel.
- Queer consciousness/community = queer characters are represented within a queer community to which they feel they belong and where they find love, friendship, solidarity, and support. It is noticeable, however, that Alice Oseman does not sugarcoat Pride Soc or Georgia's friendship group. Some queer characters engage in problematic behaviour. For example, Rooney's manipulation of Georgia and Lloyd's aphobia.
- Queerphobia = numerous instances of aphobia are evident. Asexuality as an existing sexual orientation is denied by several characters in the novel (Rooney, Ellis' parents, Lloyd, by Georgia herself) and only a few finally acknowledge it.
- Eutopian tension = the novel exhibits an important level of this descriptor as there are several instances in which the protagonist Georgia opposes the social narrative that excludes the existence of people of asexual and aromantic orientation and the aphobic behaviours she experiences from some other characters. Some other queer characters, such as Sunil and Rooney, also exhibit eutopian impulse at various levels.

3.2. *Boy Queen*: Drag Queen World and Protective Community

Boy Queen (2020) by George Lester (a.k.a. 'That Girl') is a novel that portrays the world of drag art authentically and positively. Drag art is a form of artistic and performative expression in which a person, often referred to as a 'drag queen' or

'drag king', disguises themselves and adopts exaggerated characteristics of the opposite gender or a gender different from their own. This may include clothing, make-up, voice, behaviour, and other characteristics typical of a particular gender, often in a theatrical and satirical manner. The story features Robin Cooper, a sixteen-year-old cis-gay boy living in the county of Essex, east of London. Robin is very passionate about drag queen culture and talent shows; with his best friend Natalie, a pansexual character, he has watched every season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a US programme that pioneered drag art. When Robin receives a rejection letter from a London dance academy, he enters a period of anxiety and depression because of the agonising uncertainty of his future after school. His life turns around when he attends an evening of Dragcellence, a drag queen show in the club 'Entity'. Robin becomes mesmerised by the queens' performances and plays with the idea of trying his hand at drag. Unfortunately, the protagonist of this novel also must deal with queerphobic episodes that, although they fortunately have a marginal role in the plot, still occupy considerable space in the novel. I will discuss the most significant moments of queerphobia. First, the novel references a previous physical assault Robin suffered. Robin tells his mother that he is going to the Entity club with his friends for his birthday and she does not welcome the news.

'I don't think you should go,' she blurts before she can stop herself. 'After everything that's happened, Robin, you really want to go back there? You really want to go to a gay bar in Southford? I just don't want anything to happen to you. Not again.' The memory of it hits me like a truck. I was waiting for Greg in Southford one afternoon last summer. Natalie was away, in Grenada with her family until pretty much the day before we went back to school. Greg was running late because he was looking after his little brother. A crowd of people approached me. I didn't notice them at first because my headphones were in, and my feet were tippy-tapping on the pavement while I waited. I didn't notice they were there until one of them yanked my headphones out of my ears and started yelling in my face. I recognised some of them. There were faces of boys and girls from my school, some of them I could name, many I couldn't. I pleaded with them to leave me alone, but they wouldn't. Then the first punch came. It came out of nowhere and I couldn't even say which one of them it was, but when I stumbled one of them caught me and held me so they could do it again. When Greg got there, he had to pull a guy off me. He punched him, and it wasn't long before they were all running scared because Greg was making enough of a scene that people came over to see what was going on. He picked me up. He dusted me off. He bundled me into his car

and he got me home. I had a black eye, cuts across my face, blood pouring down, bruises blooming across my stomach where they'd kicked and kicked and kicked, more blood pouring from a split lip. I looked like I'd been through hell. And I had.²⁷⁴

There are three elements worth addressing in this passage. Firstly, the homophobic attack occurred at the hands of a group of boys and girls who attend the same school as the protagonist, which means that Robin's school is not a safe place for him. Secondly, Greg has a solid and protective friendship with the protagonist, so much so that he manages to force the group of bullies to leave and saves Robin. Robin's mother's nervousness about her son returning to the club plays a dual role in her analysis of the situation. On the one hand, she wants Robin to be safe, but the fear aroused by the attack makes her apprehensive enough to try to dissuade him from going back there.

You're so effervescent, Robin. I don't want you to make yourself a target.' I shake myself from the memory, trying to find my resolve. 'Mum, do you have any idea how homophobic you sound right now?'. 'Robin-'. 'I know I'm camp - it happens to be something I like about myself. Sure, if there's a bigot out there looking for a target, then there I am, but I can't dim myself, Mum. You taught me better than that. I can't be afraid all the time.' And as much as I didn't want to, I sort of did become a little more afraid. After it happened, I shrank. I didn't leave the house for the rest of the summer. Greg came round to keep me company because Natalie was away. My shoulders rounded a little more, I'd walk with my head down, I didn't look at anybody in case it provoked them. And I knew it was stupid, and I knew it wasn't anything that I had done that made it happen to me, that made me into a target. All I'd done was exist, but I thought that maybe if I made myself smaller they wouldn't see me next time. When Natalie got back, she noticed straight away. She thought I was more downbeat than usual. I told her I was just distracted, that auditions were pulling my focus. I felt too embarrassed to tell her. I wanted it all to be over, and dredging it up again just felt like too much. I'd healed by the time she got home and I just didn't want to have to go through it again. 'I don't want you to get hurt,' Mum says when she's regained her composure.²⁷⁵

The memory of the violent episode puts mother and son in crisis as it forces them to relive the trauma of that time. On the other hand, Robin's mother suggests that his effeminacy is the cause of the assault instead of looking to the homophobic

²⁷⁴ George Lester, *Boy Queen*, (Macmillan Children's Books, 2020), 93, 94.

²⁷⁵ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 94-96.

criminal behaviour of the attackers. Robin lucidly realises the gravity of his mother's words and in fact accuses her of homophobia. It should also be noted that the protagonist's reaction is imbued with eutopian tension as he positively reclaims the negative associations his mother ties to his effeminacy with a sharp response. However, his mother's apprehension is justified by the seriousness of the episode and by the fear that, if Robin goes to the same place, it could happen again. The consequences Robin experiences as a result of the attack also needs special attention, namely his self-confinement in the house and his fear at the thought of going out into the street and meeting someone who might attack him again. This scene offers the first brief example in *Boy Queen* of a queerphobic episode and the traumatic backlash that can follow. A similar incident was seen in in *Un'Alice come un'altra*, when she is attacked by transphobic thugs and later sinks into a depressive period, attempting to commit suicide. The fear of attracting unwanted, not to say dangerous, attention in public is evident when Natalie, another close friend, suggests to Greg and Robin that they put on make-up before going to drag night at the Entity club.

Natalie goes back to doing her face in the mirror, Greg and I taking seats on the bed and on the floor respectively. I watch her add highlight to her cheekbones that makes them pop like you wouldn't believe. She glances at me in the mirror, a mischievous look in her eyes. 'Greg,' she says, waving an eyeliner pencil at him. 'Can I tempt you?' Greg snorts. No, I'm good. 'Come on, Greg, you're going to a drag night and you're wearing chinos and a polo shirt. Live a little.' 'Robin is wearing a shirt and jeans - why aren't you bothering him?' 'Thanks, buddy,' I say. 'Thanks for having my back.' 'Come on, Robin,' she says, coming towards me with a fan brush packed with highlighter. 'No,' I say, pushing it away, the powder puffing up into a glittery cloud. 'What? You look good in it,' she pleads. 'When you do your shows, you're always wearing make-up. How is this different?'. 'In practically every way!' I reply. Stage make-up is one thing, a little bit of base and some eyeliner so I don't get washed out on-stage, but wearing it out? I might as well have a neon sign over my head saying, 'Please kick the shit out of me.' And I don't want Mum to worry more than she already is.²⁷⁶

There are two levels of anxiety expressed here that should be taken into account. Firstly, he fears becoming a target for homophobic aggressors because of what

²⁷⁶ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 112, 113.

would be seen as an accentuation of his queerness, namely, the make-up. Secondly, Robin also takes on his mother's anxiety about what might happen to him. To make the picture more complicated, Lester inserts a detail which is as noteworthy as it is controversial, namely the secret relationship between the protagonist and one of his bullies, Connor.

And then Connor happened. Which made it all the more complicated. The people who were kicking the shit out of me weren't just a bunch of assholes with a flouncy gay boy vendetta, they were people at my school. Connor's friends. He was there and he saw the whole thing happening. He didn't say anything. He didn't do anything. Probably because he didn't know me. Not yet. We didn't start seeing each other until a month or so later, when he apologised for what had happened, apologised for not stepping in, for not doing something. If Greg hadn't been there to stop it, who knows what would have happened. But when I asked Greg not to tell what happened, or that Connor was there, he promised that he wouldn't. When he found out I was dating Connor, he thought I was out of my mind, but he hadn't been there when Connor had talked to me. He'd not heard about his homophobic family, about his asshole friends that he couldn't really get away from.²⁷⁷

The situation becomes complex. Connor was present at the attack on Robin, the perpetrators were his friends from school, and although he did not actively participate in the physical violence against the protagonist, he is nevertheless an accomplice as he did not intervene in any way to prevent or put an end to the assault. Instead, it is Greg who arrives to defend Robin and bring him to safety. Connor, as can easily be deduced, is not openly gay and has kept his sexual orientation secret, because of his particularly homophobic family and group of friends. This therefore also leads him to keep his relationship with Robin concealed, with whom, for instance, signs of affection in public are completely off the table. Connor's reluctance to make their relationship public obviously influences the protagonist.

I want him to do something. I want him to take my hand and squeeze it and tell me it will be OK. I want him to wrap me up in those big arms of his so that, even for just a second, the world falls away. But he doesn't because we're in public, and today I let it affect me a lot more than it usually would.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 97, 98.

²⁷⁸ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 54, 55.

Robin, similarly, does not initially share the news of this relationship with anyone as he knows that his circle of friends and family would find it problematic on several levels. The only one who knows about it is Greg, who, in fact, does not approve. The unhealthy character of this relationship reaches becomes particularly problematic when Connor and Robin meet by chance outside the Entity club while the protagonist is wearing make-up.

What do you-? What are you doing here? What's . . . ?' He trails off and looks at my face. He can't find the words and I suddenly realise what I must look like to him. A boy standing in the middle of town, a face covered in bright colours, a war paint that is supposed to make me fearless, but which right now makes me want to curl up into a ball and die. Why are you wearing *that*? 'The make-up?' I ask dumbly. Of course the make-up. What do you think I'm talking about?' he hisses. 'You look weird . . . like a . . . What are you doing, Robin? It's disgusting.' The word is like a dagger in my chest. It punctures my heart and I bleed out any bit of confidence the make-up had given me when I'd first put it on. Disgusting?! I echo. It comes out like a squeak. I expect him to say something else, to correct himself, to apologise, but he's just staring at me. What the fuck are you doing here?' A new voice comes from nearby. Connor is still staring at me, his mouth a little open. He doesn't know what to say. 'Oi, queerbait, I'm talking to you.' I turn my head, ever so slightly, and see that Connor isn't alone. I was so focused on him, so fixated, I didn't even think to check my surroundings, to be careful like we usually are. Ryan appears at Connor's side, his eyes locked on me, wide, angry. He was there when it happened the first time. Oh shit, what was I thinking coming outside? Connor's other friends are around him too. Thomas, Sean, Will, Zach, every one of them staring at me. 'I was just-'. Speak up!' Zach shouts. 'I'm here,' I say, pointing behind me at Entity. 'I'm here with my friends.' 'Faggot boy at the little faggot club with his faggot friends?' Ryan spits. The other lads laugh, backing him up. Every time he says that word it's like a thousand cuts. 'Ryan . . .' Connor starts. 'What? This little faggot trying it on with you?' he grunts. Another thousand. Connor looks past Ryan to me. 'Yeah,' he says. 'Little faggot.' Another thousand. Though coming from Connor, more like a million. It's a word I can't stand. I hate giving power to words, but that one gets me something rotten. And I can feel my eyes filling up because I don't know what to do, and I don't know what to say, and I'm thrown back to what happened over the summer and have no idea how to defend myself right now because all I can think is how it shouldn't be happening *here*. This is supposed to be a sanctuary. How can it be that I'm only a metre away from the doors and I'm already having this kind of shit thrown at me, just because I've got a bit of make-up on my face. Is this what the world is like? We get these little pockets of queerness to thrive in, but the rest of it is a straight man's playground and they can call me that word if they want. Why are there people walking by on

the street, watching this happen? Watching as Ryan steps closer to me, getting right up in my face now while I cower away, desperate to go back to Entity, back to the safety of those four walls.²⁷⁹

This is the second severely homophobic event in the novel, this time played out in the narrative present of the story. Not only does Connor not support Robin's aesthetic expression, but he also even insults him, stating that his make-up is 'disgusting'. Furthermore, when his bully friends arrive, personally responsible for the earlier physical assault, one of them, Ryan, heavily insults Robin with the homophobic slurs 'queerbait' and 'faggot'. At this point, Connor also insults Robin by calling him 'little faggot'. This event profoundly shakes the protagonist, who feels within himself a pain equal to 'a thousand cuts' with each insult. Robin is fortunately rescued by Entity's bouncer and Seth, a student who has just arrived at Robin's school and with whom he is flirting. When Robin goes back into the club, it is time for him to perform a song on stage, but he is unable to sing under the emotional weight of the event.

Robin gone? It's Michael Bubl . He's cocky when he performs, he's a badass (you know . . . sort of). The way to do it is big and bold, but I'm up here like a mouse, barely whispering the words. Natalie knows something is wrong. The encouraging look has vanished from her face and been replaced by big, concerned eyes. The bridge comes and the notes aren't there and I am butchering this song in front of the entire room. People start talking, whispering to one another, maybe wondering what the hell I'm doing, what I'm playing at, why I even bothered to get up here, and I want to explain to them what happened outside. *It's disgusting*. I want to wipe the make-up off my face, wipe this entire night from existence. Is there a make-up wipe big enough? *It's disgusting*. I wipe a tear from my eye because now I'm crying apparently, unable to stop the tears from falling down my face because this is horrible. I'm hot and embarrassed and wishing the song away, but it is the longest four minutes of my life. I push into the last chorus, battling my way towards the final note, which I reach for and miss by a mile. Natalie can't hide the disappointment on her face, Greg winces, Seth is still trying to look supportive, still trying to smile, but it's a struggle. The song ends and the applause is modest to say the least. And I rush from the stage before they can even call another name before anything else can happen to make this night worse. But I don't go to my friends, I don't go to Seth, I hurry back outside because this doesn't feel like a sanctuary right now. It feels like a nightmare. I push through the doors and into the night, turning down the alleyway

²⁷⁹ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 190-193.

down the side of the pub and leaning against the wall. Tears roll down my face, but I try not to make a sound. I don't want anybody's attention right now; I just want to disappear. I should have just said no when Natalie told me it was happening.²⁸⁰

This passage highlights once again, though to greater effect, how queerphobic slurs, acts and aggressions are deleterious to the psyche of queer characters, lowering the quality of their psychophysical health. It is also worth noting that *Boy Queen*, like all the novels in this sub-corpus, also subverts reader's expectations of a perfect happy conclusion often seen in novels for children or teenagers. This aspect of the novel is particularly noticeable in obvious situations of injustice that remain unresolved. For instance, Robin never considers reporting her aggressors and the subject is not even touched upon by the author. Similarly, there are no consequences for the bullies who taunted Seth at his old school. Instead, Seth, a victim of queerphobic bullying, is eventually expelled from the institution following his attempts to defend himself.

I got kicked out of my last school for fighting,' he says. Someone outed me, I still don't know who, and I wasn't really ready. So there was a group of guys who took it upon themselves to make my life hell, every damn day. Then it reached a point where I couldn't take it any more. I kicked the shit out of a guy and nearly put him in hospital.' What?' I knew Seth was a bit of a badass, but I never thought for a second this would be why he was here. 'And what happened after that?' 'Well, everybody saw me hitting this guy, so plenty of witnesses, plus all of his buddies going against me and . . .' He trails off and shakes his head. And I got expelled. 'Even though he was bullying you?' The school didn't see it that way,' he says. I didn't report the bullying so I didn't have a leg to stand on. I got expelled and my parents sent me to live with my grandparents. Took me away from my friends, from my brothers, and now I'm here. Why do you think I don't give a shit what anyone at this school thinks?' He laughs.²⁸¹

Seth's experience narrates not only the lack-lustre investigation into bullying at his old school, but also the grave injustice committed against Seth, who was kicked out of his school and alienated from his friends for trying to defend himself against his queerphobic peers. However, unlike Connor, Seth can disregard the thoughts and judgements of others, remaining loyal to his own identity and prioritising his own

²⁸⁰ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 196-198.

²⁸¹ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 312, 313.

well-being. In this, the characters of Connor and Seth are antipodal. Besides Seth, other queer teenagers in the novel also manifest flashes of eutopian impulse at various points; all except Connor. Connor's character is both problematic and interesting as he reveals how other characters who are close to Robin boldly display their deep connection to him through clear protective attitudes. Greg, for example, fights off Robin's homophobic attackers and Seth stands between Robin, and Connor and the other bullies outside Entity. There are several other moments when characters close to the protagonist intervene to defend Robin against Connor. For example, Robin's mother orders him to let her son go and leave when she realises that the conversation between the two teenagers has taken a turn for the worse:

I can't be with you any more, Connor. So you don't have to do this. Just go and-'. He reaches forward and grabs hold of my wrist. 'Come on, Robin, just come for a walk with me. After everything we've been through, you can't just-'. Mum opens the door to the hallway and stares daggers at me. She looks at Connor's hand wrapped round my wrist, at the tears blooming in my eyes. 'What's going on?' she asks. 'Connor was just leaving,' I say, trying to pull my wrist free. His grip is tight. He won't let go. 'No, I'm not. We're just talking.'. 'This doesn't look much like talking,' Mum says, her voice firm. Suddenly she seems worried, and I don't blame her; this doesn't exactly scream 'healthy relationship'. 'What's your name? Connor?'. 'Yes.'. 'Will you let go of my son, please?'. 'But-'. 'Oh, believe me, Connor, that wasn't a request.'. Connor can't see the signs because he's known my mother for all of two seconds, but she is about to unleash some kind of horror on him like none he has ever seen before. If he knows what's good for him, he'll run fast and run far. 'Either you let go of my son, or I will make you let go.' He releases my wrist and takes a step back. 'Robin, please, I just-'. Mum steps in front of me. 'I think the conversation was over some time ago, Connor,' she says. 'Now run along.'. 'Mrs Cooper, please, I-'. 'Connor,' she says. Go.²⁸²

Similarly, Natalie instructs Connor to leave, repeating Robin's own request. She then explains Robin just how problematic Connor's attitude is:

Robin-'. 'You heard him, Connor. Just go.' Natalie is behind him and her timing is so perfect I want to cry and kiss her wonderful, wonderful face. Connor gives me a last, pleading look, then walks away, back towards the school, back to wherever his friends are, back to his other

²⁸² Lester, *Boy Queen*, 294, 295.

life, the one that doesn't have me in it. 'Impeccable timing,' I say. 'How do you do that?' She shrugs. 'It's a gift.'²⁸³

Connor also becomes jealous of Seth when he realises the sentimental nature Seth and Robin's relationship. After he and Seth force him to leave, Connor grabs the protagonist's arm to pull him towards him, but Seth intervenes:

Connor grabs hold of my other arm and pulls me closer to him, his breath on my face, hot, wet, stinking of cigarettes. His grip is so tight I'm wincing, tears threatening to squeeze from my eyes. 'Robin, I-'. 'That's enough,' Seth announces, grabbing hold of Connor and practically dragging him off me. 'He asked you to let go - he clearly doesn't want to talk to you - maybe you should just go.' Connor pushes Seth hard in the chest. 'Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?'. Seth stumbles but recovers and pushes Connor back. He trips over his own feet, almost falling to the ground. 'Robin won't stand up to you, but I will,' Seth says. 'Now back off. 'Make me.'. 'I think I just did,' Seth snaps. I'm shaking. I don't want anyone getting hurt because of me, least of all Seth. Now walk away. His friends are approaching now - they know something is up. Other students are gathering too, sniffing a fight from a mile off. Connor steps towards Seth and he pushes him again, harder this time so Connor actually lands on the ground. 'Don't get up,' Seth shouts. 'And stay away from Robin, OK?'. Connor stays down and Seth turns to walk away, but before I have a chance to breathe a sigh of relief, Connor is back on his feet and has launched himself at Seth, the two of them gripping each other and wrestling to the ground.'²⁸⁴

Fortunately, Robin does not need to be defended by others against Connor throughout the novel. After the homophobic episode that happens in front of Entity, Robin manages to stand up to Connor and neutralise him, rebuking him harshly for his insults, thus imposing a clear boundary beyond which Connor must not pass. This undoubtedly represents one of the strongest and most demarcated demonstrations of eutopian impulse on Robin's part.

Robin?' Connor says, and I turn to face him, fixing him with the harshest stare I can manage. 'No,' I reply, walking past him and to the bike sheds. I can hear him following me. I know what he wants, I know what he is expecting, but I do not want to deal with it right now. Robin-'. 'Please don't,' I say, checking my phone and feeling my heart jump at the fact that it

²⁸³ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 273.

²⁸⁴ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 306, 307.

is already getting close to half past three. I still have to get home and then actually get to Southford. At this rate I'm not going to make it. 'I just wanted to talk to you.'. 'I think you said enough yesterday,' I say, and I see the words stab him. He looks hurt and I do my absolute best not to feel the slightest bit of sympathy towards him. 'It's complicated.'. 'I know it's complicated - it's always complicated,' I snap. 'But last night you stood there and you let that happen to me. You didn't stand up for me *again*, Connor. What the hell?' 'Robin . . .' He trails off. None of it sounds like an apology and it's making me angry. I like him. I like him a lot. But then there is Seth, sweet and lovely Seth, who just gave me his number and wants to spend time with me. It's not complicated, it's not making me upset, it's just light. All of this Connor stuff feels too dark right now. 'Will you move so I can get to my bike, please?'. No. Connor. Robin. 'I have places I need to be,' I say. 'You have to let me explain,' he says. 'When I saw you, I didn't know what to say.'. 'That's funny, because you seemed to know exactly what to say,' I reply, and I can feel myself getting upset, and I don't want to get upset in front of him, nor do I want to show up at Entity with tears in my eyes. The word you chose was *disgusting*, Connor.'. I'm sorry. I open my mouth to speak then stop. I don't know what to say to that. I steel myself and move towards him, and there is the briefest moment where I can tell that he thinks I'm going to kiss him and it scares him. He flinches backwards and moves out of my way. I take a deep breath, keep telling myself not to cry, and unlock my bike. Robin, please-'. 'I don't have time for this, Connor,' I say. I have to go. And I don't know if I'm talking about right at this very second or us as a thing entirely, and I can see he's thinking the same thing. I ride off, trying to push thoughts of Connor out of my head, trying not to think about Seth and his perfect face, the fact that I lied to Natalie, to my mum. None of that matters right now; all that matters is that I make it to this freaking club and that Kaye actually lets me in. I swing home and get changed, before heading off again, pedalling like my life depends on it, because it feels like it does.²⁸⁵

The construction and treatment of Connor renders the novel more realistic, reflecting an increasingly common trend in Queer YA fiction. Connor does not evolve beyond the fragile situation he finds himself in and continues to walk a tightrope between his public and private life. As observed above, this is another way in which the author avoids foisting a deceptively feel-good narrative which promises that everything will be fine in the end. Rather, the writer is concerned with telling a complex and problematic truth. Some adversities do not always turn out for the best and not everyone is saved in the end. Connor's story in *Boy Queen* is testament to this.

²⁸⁵ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 213-215.

Connor also demonstrates psychological complexity. To summarise character and context briefly, Connor is an undisclosed cis-gay teenager. The reason he has yet to disclose his sexual orientation is most obviously due to his homophobic family and violent, homophobic peers. Whenever he finds himself in public with Robin, with whom he has a hidden romantic relationship, he deeply fears the idea that he might be seen with him, or worse will be seen being affectionate with him. When he crosses paths with Robin in front of Entity, he says his make-up is 'disgusting' and calls him 'little faggot' in front of his homophobic friends. Even after this scene, Connor proves to be a constant thorn in Robin's side, constantly insisting on seeing him. At times he puts his hands on him to restrict his movement and does not move away when Robin explicitly asks him to do so. A domineering and disrespectful attitude like this often becomes grounds for intervention by characters close to the protagonist, who manage to neutralise him. In the discussion of *Colpo su colpo* I spoke of the concept of 'internalised homophobia',²⁸⁶ i.e. the introjection by all individuals in a queerphobic society of a negative view of everything that is outside the dominant hetero-normative binary. In a word, everything that is queer. Connor's character represents the extreme consequences that internalised homophobia can have on a queer individual. Fear of other people's reactions, of marginalisation, of verbal and/or physical aggression, in short, fear of the possible manifestations of queerphobia. This fear of queerphobia frightens the queer individual so much that they not only mask their queerness but also engage in queerphobic behaviour to the detriment of others, both in order to better camouflage themselves among canonical heterosexual individuals and to externally project the hatred, guilt and shame they feel towards themselves onto other queer individuals. While Connor is not the main character of the story, the lack of catharsis for this figure testifies to what has been said above. The reality of queer teenagers' lives is full of painfully complex situations and not all these situations are resolved. In this case, Connor's internalised homophobia is so deep-rooted and entrenched that it is impossible to dissolve. The same case is seen with Nino's companions, Dario, and Sabrina, in the conversion therapy in *Con le ali sbagliate*, where Dario sees himself as a mistake to be

²⁸⁶ Liu *et al.*, 'Effect of perceived public stigma on internalized homophobia, anticipated stigma, shame, and guilt: Outness as a moderator.', 188.

corrected and Sabrina commits suicide. Similarly, Lloyd in *Loveless* is a particularlyophobic and transphobic cis-gay boy. This recurring pattern of unresolved internalised queerphobia, both and especially on the part of queer and cisgender individuals sharpens the literary quality of these novels, as it devotes space to a controversial theme of the queer world rather than concealing or sweetening it.

A hugely different discourse surrounds Robin. The protagonist is a boy with a sweet and sensitive soul, who has feelings for Connor. He sees the fragile and wounded side of him and finds it hard to detach himself from it, needing the help of his circle of friends, without which he would find it extremely hard to cope on his own. In this regard, here are a few examples that testify to the support and love shown by the people closest to Robin, who prove essential to his journey to gain and strengthen his self-confidence and his choice to pursue his artistic career as a drag queen. His mother, for example, gives him one of her most important speeches in the novel when she encourages him not to lose heart in the face of life's major disappointments, such as the rejection from the performing arts school to which Robin had applied:

'Maybe I'm just not good enough,' I say as I get downstairs. Mum looks up from the table. There's a cup of tea where I usually sit, a couple of biscuits next to it. Biscuits for breakfast - these really are dark times. Robin, it's a setback-'. 'No, come on, Mum, maybe I'm not,' I say. 'I might be, like, school good, but not professional good. Maybe I just don't have it. Not everyone can do it, you know. There are so many people that-'. Stop it,' she says, banging a hand on the table. Robin, this is a minor setback. The knockbacks are there to make you stronger. At least give it a chance to settle before jacking it all in to become a hairdresser.'. What's wrong with being a hairdresser?' 'Nothing's wrong with being a hairdresser, Robin, but it's not your dream,' she says. 'Don't let them take that away from you.' [...] She holds me a little longer. I don't want her to let go. It feels safe here. Like nothing can hurt. And I know I'm being a baby, but I don't care because this situation is killing me. 'You're going to be OK,' she says. 'It's not the end of the world.' 'Then why does it feel like it is?' 'Because you've just had all of your hopes and dreams dashed.' She says it so casually, like I've not just had my heart ripped out of my chest. Wow.'. 'But you need to pick yourself up and carry on.' Mum releases me and puts her hand on my cheek. 'It just means that when you get there it will taste all the sweeter.' Her attempts at making me feel better are sort of working. I just wish I had some kind of guarantee that she is right because suddenly everything seems so uncertain. It's

like I was following a map, and now someone has taken this giant eraser and scrubbed out the road. 'You're determined, you're focused, you'll figure something out,' she says.²⁸⁷

Another key figure for Robin is his best friend Natalie, who encourages him to pursue drag art, accompanying him to buy make-up and communicating her enthusiasm for his commitment and talent:

I watch the tutorial again, finding out just how difficult it is to get my eyebrows to lie flat and, after following step by step, brush stroke by brush stroke, I have an incredibly messy desk and a totally finished face. It doesn't look half bad. I snap a picture and send it to Natalie. BITCH! YES! It's OK? Honey, you are a WORK! OF!ART![...] Natalie's encouragement gives me the painting bug. I double-check Mum's shifts and start to paint my face as often as I can. It's a long process to get things to go right, to get my eyebrows flat, to get the contour in the right place. But every time I do it I get a little better, and every time I follow a tutorial I get closer and closer to looking like the queen at the end rather than a busted mess. The process is weirdly calming, and a pretty decent distraction from the other things in my life. When I'm painting my face, I'm not thinking about my current chaos, I'm just thinking about the face. You free? Hey. Hey???? I ignore message after message from Connor as the days go by, instead filling my group chat with Natalie and Greg with photos of the faces I've been painting. Natalie replies exuberantly to them with gratuitous emojis; Greg does the absolute best he can. But I know I need more than paint: I need to ask for help. It's Natalie who tells me where I need to go.²⁸⁸

The training Kaye Bye provide Robin with is especially important. Kaye Bye becomes his 'drag mum', who teaches him how to do make-up, dance and act, fine-tuning Robin's performance as Mae Bee at the Entity club. Robin is grateful to Kaye Bye.

I turn back to the mirror and continue taking off my face, trying to hide the smile that is tugging at the corners of my mouth 'Something like that, yeah. Thank you, Kaye.'. 'For what dear?' she says. For the opportunity, for the chance to-' 'Don't go into a big speech now, my darling,' she says. 'It's far too late and Mama's had too much to drink for any of that sentimental shit.' She pauses. 'But you're more than welcome. It's a pleasure to have you as part of the family.'²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 47-49.

²⁸⁸ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 166-168.

²⁸⁹ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 376.

'Family' is a key word in Robin's training as a drag queen in Entity. Unsurprisingly, it is a good synonym for 'community'. The recognition of the queer club as a safe space where Robin feels comfortable in his own identity is well expressed when Robin enters the club for the first time and observes the situation:

There are people everywhere, some sitting around small tables, looking over at a small stage in the far corner where I assume the queens will be performing later. Behind the stage, sparkly silver streamers hang down, moving as if they have a life of their own, glittering in the lights. There are speakers on high stands at either side of the stage pumping out music that makes me feel at home and a small, hobbit man sitting behind a sound desk, shoulders hunched, glasses on, staring at a MacBook screen. Other people are standing around high tables, all chatting conspiratorially, smiling, happy. There are men holding hands with men, women kissing women, men in crop tops and make-up, people dressed so freaking fabulously it's like I am on an entirely different planet. And I don't think I ever want to leave.²⁹⁰

The significance Robin gives to Entity is not new to this study. In *Con le ali sbagliate* Nino gives immense importance to Grace's house, while Georgia feels safe in Pride Soc in *Loveless*. These numerous examples testify to the common need of queer people as a marginalised category to have safe places where they can meet with their peers, network, and community without worrying about authentically expressing their identity without fear of reprisals. Entity is doubly important to Robin in that it not only provides him with a sanctuary, but it is also the place where he suddenly discovers his passion for drag art:

And there's a sort of overwhelming pressure in my chest that is something like suffocating and having too much air at the same time. It's a sensation that is so familiar to me that I'm taken back to the exact time I last experienced it. When I was sitting out on the field with Natalie at the height of summer almost five years ago and I told her that I thought I was gay. I actually knew for sure that I was gay as heck, but that's how I worded it at the time. For some reason, the drag-queen thing feels like coming out all over again. We make it to the common room and sit down around one of the tables. I can barely meet their eyes. Maybe it's weird, but I want to do it.' 'Drag?' Greg asks. 'Yeah,' I say as plainly as I can. 'I felt something when I was watching her.' 'Like what?' Natalie says. 'It was the same as when I went to see *Singin' in the Rain* in the West End. Like, I loved it so much, like the rest of the audience did,

²⁹⁰ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 118, 119.

but then there was that extra little something that had me wanting to be up there, to be doing it,' I reply, the words tumbling out of my mouth. This was pretty much how I answered questions during the interview portion of my drama school auditions. When I saw that show, I could see myself doing it and it filled me with this sort of *need*. And I got that same feeling when I was watching Kaye Bye on Friday night. There was something about her, the way she performed, that made me want to get up there and do it.'[...] Haven't you ever thought about doing it before? Natalie asks, hardly able to contain herself. 'Like, didn't *Drag Race* ever do that?' I shrug. Yeah,' I say. 'I mean, I've watched them lipsyncing and walking the runway and thought, "Wow, I'd love to do that," or even that I *could* do that, maybe, but seeing it happen two metres from your face is different. Like, I want to do *that*. I think.'²⁹¹

The drag show Robin and his group of friends attend is a euphoric epiphany for him, especially thanks to the Kaye Bye's performance. His desire to become a drag queen (and the sense that he already is one in his heart) makes him feel as if sharing this information is a second coming out. This is especially the case with his mother and almost seems to suggest that drag art could be an identity on the LGBTQ+ spectrum in its own right. This experience then convinces Kaye Bye to take Robin under her wing, disobeying his mother and playing hooky from school, eventually pulling out all the stops to prepare his first drag performance in a fortnight, demonstrating a remarkable degree of emancipation and eutopian drive.

The week continues like this; I take every opportunity I get to be driven off to Southford by Seth, learn something off Kaye and then rush back to school for class. On Tuesday, we try different dresses, some where I'm tucked, some where I'm not, to see what works for my body shape. On Thursday, Kaye has a few of her Dragcellence family members show me what they do, how they perform, giving me ideas. If Seth isn't free, I'm off in one of the dance studios at school, practising in a pair of heels. Priya has been sending me videos from the classes, new combinations to learn. Along with those I repeat exercises I've done in my dance classes at school, praying no one walks in and catches me. [...] But it's my choice, isn't it? The show is in a week and I don't feel anywhere close to ready. This could be a chance to actually do something next year, to perform and get paid for it rather than waiting for my next opportunity to come along. I have to do it.²⁹²

²⁹¹ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 141-143.

²⁹² Lester, *Boy Queen*, 290.

The fact that Robin feels a sense of duty towards his drag training and that his life depends on it, provides a clear measure how vitally important his passion for drag art is. In pursuing this path, Robin demonstrates a remarkable level of emancipation, but the support and love given to him by Seth also make the story particularly romantic, reinforcing the novel's quality of representation:

Come on,' Seth says, taking my hands. 'Close your eyes if it helps.' So I do, and he's holding my hands and we're dancing, just j-j-just dancing. And maybe it is gonna be OK. I open my eyes and Seth is smiling at me, grinning so broadly it's like his face is going to split in two. Yes! Yes! That's what I'm talking about!' Kaye calls, but it sort of vanishes because here's Seth and here I am and we're just dancing like there's nothing else happening in the world. The music is in my veins and I can't stop myself from singing along as I go, and I'm performing, in a way, and it's all for him, and a little bit for Kaye, I guess, but my eyes are fixed on Seth. Then I stumble over my own feet, tripping and almost falling forward. Seth lets go of my hands and suddenly has his arms wrapped around my newly cinched waist. I look down at him, because I'm taller than him now and he's grinning, a little out of breath, his eyes twinkly as ever.²⁹³

Seth becomes a particularly positive and constant presence in Robin's life, softening and enriching it. Seth defends Robin from Connor, picks him up from home in the morning to drive him to school, comforts and encourages him, takes him to Entity every time he has to practise drag with Kaye Bye and even manages to help him through nerves when performs as Mae Bee for the first time. Their romance is built by Lester in a slow and gradual way, which allows the reader to patiently savour the long and romantic courtship between the two, which reaches their first kiss just before the end of the novel, just before Mae Bee's performance, at a time when she needs Seth's support more than ever before:

Neither one of us moves. His hands are still on my shoulders, his eyes still locked on mine, and there is that energy between us again. I know he feels it too - he has to. And then he's leaning in. And that magnetic pull, that spark that I feel around him, that buzzing in my entire body is pulling us together. And our lips are touching. The world around me falls away, the club, the alleyway, the distant sounds of pedestrians, of traffic, of anything other than this one moment. His hands move from my shoulders to the small of my back and he's pulling

²⁹³ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 257, 258.

me closer and I reciprocate, desperate to have my hands on him. But I feel like I blink and it's over, the two of us standing there in the alleyway, our foreheads touching like we're characters in a film. He's smiling. I'm smiling. My face hurts from smiling. Smile, smile, smile. 'I need to go inside,' I say, breaking the magic, still struggling to believe that it actually just happened. 'I know,' he says, taking a breath. 'I'll see you after. Give them hell.' I nod. He kisses me one last time, sweet and fleeting, and it gives me the energy I need to step back inside and go upstairs to get ready for the show.²⁹⁴

Robin goes from feeling down to feeling ready for the performance as Mae Bee. These last two passages represent a small part of the intimate and romantic moments between the two teenagers. Lester develops their relationship in a gradual, tender, and captivating way. On stage, Mae Bee suddenly discovers that Seth is not the only person among her close friends to be there that night:

I spin and find someone else in the audience to focus on and almost stop dead when I see her. Mum. She's sitting with Natalie, Greg and Priya, each of them absolutely beaming. Mum has tears in her eyes, Natalie is smiling. They must know that it's me. Greg must have told Natalie that I was going to be here and . . . I don't have time to think it through. I have to keep going, keep performing, keep mashing my mouth around to this glorious song. There's the build-up. I'm raising my arms as Barbra is belting 'Here I am'. I tear off my skirt and throw it to Natalie, the crowd goes nuts, there is screaming, whooping, cheering, and I am lip-syncing and spinning around that stage like it's mine because in this moment it is. And before I know it the song is over and I am curtsying, Natalie handing me back my torn-off skirt as I totter from the stage and back over to Kaye and Pristine to the sounds of applause, to people chanting my name and if I could just live in one moment forever, it would be this one.²⁹⁵

Robin's first performance is an enormous success, the whole community of his loved ones are there for him. Through drag, Robin finds a means of expressing and affirming his passions: singing, dancing, acting. Drag art becomes a form of emancipation for him, one that restores meaning and purpose to his life at a time of crisis, restores his personal value and gives him the strength to face adversity. The queer (and non-queer) community offers Robin crucial support. The protagonist's relationships with friends, family and members of the drag scene are crucial to his development. In particular, the novel explores how these connections influence his

²⁹⁴ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 355, 356.

²⁹⁵ Lester, *Boy Queen*, 361, 362.

growth and well-being. Romantic relationships are also experienced and play a key role in his path to self-acceptance and success. These characters function as mentors and allies, encouraging him to persevere and not let hatred and discrimination pull him down. Like the other novels in the sub-corpus, *Boy Queen* emphasises the importance of finding a welcoming and supportive community that offers a sense of belonging and acceptance in the process of personal growth. Robin and the other queer characters also often confront homophobia directly, not only verbally but proxemically and sometimes even physically. They respond to injustice with firmness and pride, not allowing the hatred of others to determine their value or behaviour. Robin shows remarkable resilience in the face of homophobia. As he grows, he learns to react to homophobia in a constructive manner, as is seen through his changing relationship with Connor. This process helps him develop greater confidence and a stronger sense of identity. In sum, *Boy Queen* offers a positive vision of how authenticity, community support, perseverance in self-discovery, resilience, and the power of self-affirmation can help queer characters stand up for themselves and thrive despite adversity.

By means of conclusion, I present summary of *Boy Queen*, with respect to the established criteria.

- Queer visibility = the queerness of the protagonist and the other queer characters is not the focus of the novel.
- Queer assimilation = queer characters happen to be queer. However, one of them, Connor, exhibits a prominent level of internalised homophobia. Not only is he closeted (i.e. he has not yet disclosed his homosexuality openly), but he is also deeply afraid of public displays of affection with Robin for fear of being seen by others and acts with verbal and physical violence against his queer peers.
- Queer consciousness/community = queer characters are represented within a queer community to which they feel they belong and where they can find love, friendship, solidarity, and support. In the case of this novel, the community refers

not only to the protagonist's circle of friends but also and especially to the drag queen community at the Entity club.

- Queerphobia = there are instances of both physical and verbal queerphobic discrimination against the protagonist Robin. I would add that Seth also suffers violence, as is evident from the account of his experience at the school where he was previously enrolled. Seth is outed, bullied, and ultimately expelled from the school due to the institute's poor judgement after Seth fights with his bullies. I suggest that Seth suffers a further type of violence, which in this case I would call institutional violence.
- Eutopian tension = the novel presents a satisfactory level of eutopian tension, emphasising that the protagonist Robin does not always succeed in enacting and/or prevailing in his own opposition to the queer-phobic people and incidents he is forced to confront. On some occasions, the intervention of his other queer peers, such as Natalie and Seth, and non-queer peers, such as Greg and his mother, is necessary.

3.3. *Ace of Spades*: A Queer Dystopian Thriller

Ace of Spades writer Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé was published in 2021. It is a compelling and complex novel, combining elements of thriller, dystopian fiction, and social criticism. Set in a fictional context, the story follows two queer students, Devon and Chiamaka, who are attending their final year of school at the Niveus Private Academy, a fictitious prestigious private high school in the United States. The pair are co-protagonists, and the story is narrated alternately by the two characters sw. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, they become the targets of a mysterious individual who goes by the name Aces. This stranger begins to reveal their darkest and most intimate secrets, endangering not only their reputations, but also their lives. The novel explores themes such as racism, class discrimination and homophobia shedding light on the hidden power dynamics within the elite educational institution. The narrative unfolds through mounting tension as Devon

and Chiamaka try to discover who Aces is and why they have been targeted, finding themselves forced to confront not only the mysterious enemy, but also the frightening reality of systemic oppression. Àbíké-Íyímídé's novel stands out within the queer YA genre for two main reasons. Firstly, because *Ace of Spades* exhibits elements of dystopian thriller, differentiating itself from mimetic fiction which is typical in queer YA literature. Secondly, because two Black queer teenagers are the protagonists. In fact, it should be specified here that the main theme in *Ace of Spades* is white supremacist racism towards Black people and the shocking level of discrimination the protagonists suffer. However, Devon and Chiamaka do not only suffer discrimination in the form of racism. They come from contrasting social backgrounds. Chiamaka comes from the rich and affluent neighbourhood city while Devon comes from the poor and degraded part of town. Of all the characters analysed in the thesis corpus, Devon is undoubtedly the most intersectionally complex as he suffers discrimination on at least three levels: sexual orientation, skin colour and social class. Chiamaka, on the other hand, suffers discrimination because of her skin colour and gender. Chiamaka's queer sexuality is something she discovers over the course of the novel, but it is never the subject of discrimination. Devon comes from a single-parent family. Like *Boy Queen* and as will be seen in *Romance*, the only parental figure present is his mother. Devon's family is working-class, and he lives in the city's suburbs. This accentuates her feeling of alienation at Niveus, a school attended almost entirely by the white offspring of wealthy, upper-class families.

There are many things I hate about Niveus, like how no one (besides Jack) is from my side of town and how everyone lives in huge houses with white-picket fences, cooks who make them breakfast, drivers who take them to school, and credit cards with no limit tucked away in their designer backpacks. Sometimes, being around all of that makes me feel like my insides are collapsing, cracking, and breaking. I know no good comes from comparing what I have to what they have, but seeing all that money and privilege, and having none, hurts. I try to convince myself that being a scholarship kid doesn't matter, that I shouldn't care.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades* (Feiwel and Friends, 2021), 9, 10.

The weight of the social difference between Devon and the rest of the students at the school is a *leitmotif* of the novel. Devon often feels uncomfortable that he comes from a financially fragile background, that his enrolment at Niveus was made possible by a scholarship and not by his family's financial well-being. His mother juggles three jobs to support him and his younger siblings. Devon believes his father is in prison but later discovers that he has actually been dead for some time. There are often money problems at home and occasionally Devon deals drugs to help his mother with expenses. The social environment in Devon's neighbourhood is particularly hostile, as he reports in a few lines.

I grew up here. Right here, with the rest of these boys. We went to the same elementary school. We witnessed things no kid should see, like snitches getting stabbed and shot, fathers being handcuffed and taken away. We went to middle school together too, until one day an older guy, Malik, decided to beat me so hard after school that I had to drop out. I remember everyone joining in-even the boys I thought were my friends. They were shouting slurs, laughing as I screamed and bled. The words 'bitch boy' and 'fairy' rang in my ears as they punched and kicked. Just like that, the boys I grew up with were no longer my boys. They were the boys I was made to be scared of.²⁹⁷

The area in which Devon lives is particularly evocative of an underworld. His middle school years were made difficult by bullying. This bullying is recalled by the protagonist and clearly involved not only verbal violence but also physical aggression. When he starts at the Niveus Academy, for the first three years nothing much happens, and his school life is isolated but peaceful. The novel narrates Devon's fourth and final year of school, when the mysterious individual Aces disrupts his private life. Devon is not outed at school or at home, so he jealously guards the secret of his homosexuality. Until Aces sends a message to the mobile phones of all the students in the school with a compromising photo of Devon.

"Hey, Devon ... Are you okay?" she asks, face filled with pity-which is really weird, because one, I don't suffer from resting bitch face, so I assume I look fine, and two, Mindy and I are acquaintances at most. "Yeah, you?" I ask, because apparently we care about each other like

²⁹⁷ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 112, 113.

that now. "Yeah, of course. I just wanted to come over, because I know how hard it must be with the picture circulating and everything." "What picture?" Her mouth drops open. "You haven't seen it?" she asks. I shake my head, trying to look unbothered. I glance up; the people behind Mindy are blatantly rubbernecking at us now. "What picture?" I repeat, my voice breaking a little. It's like my body knows before my mind that whatever she's talking about, it's not good. Mindy fumbles around in her bright red designer bag and pulls her phone out, tapping, then presenting the screen to me. I blink, looking at her phone closely. It's a picture of two guys. I glance back up at her, because what has this got to do with me? But then a weird thought pulls my eyes back down to the picture. It's not just two guys, it's two familiar figures—one with a bruised neck, and the other, a face I know all too well. I see it every day in the mirror. They are in a room, their lips locked. My stomach flips and jerks out of my body, heartbeat stopping altogether. *Oh my fucking god.*²⁹⁸

In fact, the photo shows Devon himself passionately kissing his schoolmate and ex-boyfriend, Scotty. This is a clear case of outing as has already been seen in *Colpo su colpo* and in *Boy Queen*. Devon is visibly shocked by the news, but he is fearful about the effect of this disclosure of his homosexuality not at school, but in his neighbourhood.

I'm a few blocks from school, trying to prepare myself for the stares and whispers before I go inside. *It's no big deal. It's no big deal.* Even though it is. I haven't even come out to Ma yet, and now everyone at school knows. I never planned on coming out at school. Not because I'm worried about being bullied, it's just ... When I was dating Scotty, he wanted to keep it a secret because he wasn't out, and I figured he was worried about losing his friends from the football team. Then, when we weren't dating anymore, I figured no one would care who I dated – not that it's their business anyway. If anything, I worried about the information somehow getting back to my neighbourhood, and then to Ma. That's my biggest fear, her knowing. When I think of Ma finding out, I think about how disappointed she'd be. The thought keeps me up at night and makes me feel sick to my stomach. First, she'd stop making eye contact; then she'd stop talking to me. After that, who knows. I remember when that guy from *Prison Break* came out and Ma said, "What a shame," shaking her head like being gay is something pitiful. I don't know what I hope for. Maybe that somehow she'll be okay with it, with me, even though she loves her Bible more than anything in the world.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 22, 23.

²⁹⁹ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 40, 41.

At least two pieces of information can be gleaned from these passages. Firstly, it is clear that Devon had not come out at school yet, since at the time of his relationship with Scotty, Scotty was not yet out and was worried about losing the friendship of his football teammates. Here Àbíké-Íyímídé references the difficulty of being openly queer in a sports team, in particular a football team. Scotty fears that his homosexuality is likely to be a reason for the other players to break off their friendship with him, assuming their heterosexuality. Devon, on the other hand, who has no contact with Scotty's football team, is nevertheless asked to keep silent about his sexuality and does not here appear to question the legitimacy of Scotty's request. Finally, in this passage the reader learns that Devon's greatest fear is that his mother will learn of his queerness. Earlier in the novel he senses his mother's aversion to the subject and fears that the news would disappoint her. This fear of disapproval is another *leitmotif* in Devon's narrative. In addition to his homophobic vision of his mother (which later turns out to be unfounded), Devon also holds a similar picture of his father. During his last prison visit before his father received the death penalty, he decided to confide in his father:

I shrug; he's never asked me that before in my life. "I dunno." Dad smiles. "Yes you do. Tell me what you want to tell me." I'm not sure how to tell him exactly. It's not something I fully understand. "Guys in my class keep talking about all the girls they like. Keep asking them out, keep talking about it," I start, pausing to see if he's still with me. Dad nods, and so I continue. "But I don't think about girls like that. I don't want to ask them out, or kiss them." Dad nods again, then looks up at the ceiling a little, before returning his gaze to me. "I was eleven when I started asking girls out. Takes time, don't worry; you'll be a heartbreaker like I was in no time. [...] You don't worry about that, son. Your perfect girl is waiting for you to spot her too." I nod, feeling a little better. It's just a matter of time.³⁰⁰

In an almost explicit declaration of his own non-heterosexual orientation, Devon's father nevertheless excludes the possibility that his son might like boys and tries to reassure him by telling him that the time will come when he feels attracted to girls. Although at the time of narration, the father has not been a part of Devon's life for many years, it is necessary to emphasise that this protagonist perceives that he has received negative reinforcement about his homosexuality in the past from both his

³⁰⁰ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 319, 320. Italics in original.

father and mother. Another episode that contributed to his decision to keep a low profile concerns the mention of a girl from his neighbourhood coming out:

I think about her finding out, remembering the time this girl in my neighbourhood came out. I remember Ma telling me how her family kicked her out. Ma had looked disgusted, muttering, "I just don't understand." And I remember thinking that she would never understand me either. I think about it and how this week has been so shit and how I hate school and never want to go back.³⁰¹

The girl discloses comes out to her parents and they throw her out of the house. Devon's mother comments negatively, although it is not clear from the author's account whether her judgement is directed at the behaviour of the girl's parents or at her non-heterosexual orientation. The fact remains that Devon takes his mother's words as a reproach of her sexual orientation and becomes convinced of her inability to understand his homosexuality, corroborating his decision not to reveal anything to her. Devon also fears the consequences of the boys in the neighbourhood and his former middle school friends seeing the picture of him kissing Scotty:

The guys in my neighbourhood, the ones I used to go to school with before I got into Niveus, they'd kill me if they saw that picture. Toss my body into the garbage disposal once they were done with me. These guys watch me on my walk home, staring me down, smirking. Sometimes they yell shit. Other times they push me to the ground, then walk off laughing. The picture would make things in my neighbourhood ten times worse.³⁰²

This passage illustrates the seriousness of the queerphobia which pervades Devon's social context. Devon not only continues to be subjected to discriminatory behaviour in the street by his peers but is even aware that the dissemination of the photo testifying to his homosexuality would make things 'ten times worse', perhaps even driving people in his neighbourhood to kill him. The complexity of the situation is equally demonstrated by Devon's friend, schoolmate, and neighbour Jack, who comes from one of the few white families in the poor neighbourhood

³⁰¹ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 79.

³⁰² Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 41.

where the protagonist lives. We gradually learn of Jack's hatred of Devon's homosexuality, without, however, any specific reason being explained.

I remember when I first told Jack I liked guys, and the pained expression on his face. I remember the way he handed me his game controller and said he needed to go and check on the burgers in the oven. I remember feeling so shitty, but taking the controller and finishing the level he was on and not bringing it up again. Jack hated it when I started dating Scotty. He was never happy, and I told myself it was because Scotty was a dick, not because he *had* a dick. Jack would "joke" about girls that he knew with short haircuts and muscled arms who I could date, like who I'm attracted to is as trivial as appearance. And he would flinch when I spoke about Dre.³⁰³

This resentment is never justified or resolved by Jack, who, instead of worrying about Devon's psychological well-being following his outing, lashes out at him, blaming him for the scandal and fearing for the safety of his younger siblings.

He's angry. "Did you see that picture ... going around?" He doesn't say anything at first. Just stares at me, his brown eyes unreadable. "They're gonna kill you. They won't let you deal for them like before." My heart hasn't stopped beating this fast since yesterday. "Who?" I ask, playing dumb. "You know who." I say nothing. Jack sighs. "I don't know what you got yourself into, man, but I want nothing to do with it. I can't have my brothers targeted." I grab Jack's arm as he tries to turn. He pulls it back, looking around all uncomfortable. "I can ... I'll talk to Andre. I can tell him to sort this-". "Course you can," he says, the disgusted look on his face unsurprising but still painful. I wish he wouldn't look at me like that whenever I mention Andre. "I can't do this right now." He moves back a bit, looking at me one last time. "I'm sorry." And then he's gone.³⁰⁴

The news of Devon's homosexuality in his neighbourhood would therefore not only harm him but also the people connected to him. Not only Jack, but also his brothers, who have nothing to do with Devon. In the micro-society of the protagonist's neighbourhood, where the law of numbers and force prevails, the notion of guilty by association prevails. If one then considers that the indictment in question is not an action, but rather an individual's sexual orientation, one can easily imagine the depth of moral degradation to which the community in that neighbourhood falls

³⁰³ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 180, 181.

³⁰⁴ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 46, 47.

prey. Jack's hatred of Devon's queerness might here find a possible, albeit unhealthy and unacceptable, explanation.

Following the photo, Aces commits further violence against Devon, this time much more serious. He circulates a video in which Scotty and Devon are seen having sex. Here again, Jack's selfish and aggressive behaviour comes to the fore:

"Hey, Richards!" some guy shouts as I walk down the hallway. I stop to look at him. He smirks before wrapping his arms around himself, kissing the air and making smooching noises. It's not even been a full week and already senior year is sucking on a level I never imagined it could. Exiting the double doors of the school brings me a sense of peace. Because at least now, the school day is over and I can go home. A hand grabs my arm and jerks me into an alley by the main school building. I'm thrown against the brick wall and I hiss, my back throbbing in several places as I collide with the rough surface. "Do you want to get killed?!" Jack shouts. "No-". "Then why the fuck is your fucking sex tape floating around the fucking school?" *My what?* Oh my god. I might throw up. I can't breathe... My legs are shaking... My head is spinning. "I need to find Scotty, I manage. *I need to kill Scotty.* A part of me wants to ask to see the video, see how bad it is, but I don't know if I can handle that. Jack says nothing. His face is scrunched up, and he's breathing hard. I don't know what it is about his expression, but it makes me feel like I should be ashamed of myself. Like I should feel dirty. Before he knew I was gay, Jack didn't look at me like that. He was the first person I told, back when we were still in middle school. Before I came out, life was us having each other's backs, sleepovers, and video games, while Ma was away at work, when we had no one but each other. Now it's this: Jack hating me for something I can't change. The both of us wishing things could go back to the way they were before I said those words.³⁰⁵

Again, Jack is immediately judgmental and aggressive towards Devon, instead of taking care of his friend. Here the narrator states that Jack's behaviour began after the protagonist's coming out and that no particular problematic attitude had ever manifested itself on his part prior to this. Devon admits that Jack hates his homosexuality. This drives him to distance himself from Jack, despite their previously strong friendship. The dissemination of video with sexual content without the consent of the persons filmed is a criminal act and is referred to in legislative language as 'revenge porn'. There is no real motive for revenge on the part of, as is made clear in the latter part of the novel. Instead, the video is sent to

³⁰⁵ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 73, 74.

exert psychological pressure to get Devon (and Chiamaka) to drop out of school. It would therefore be more accurate to speak of 'nonconsensual sharing' of personal sexual content.³⁰⁶ It should also be considered that Jack's reaction is particularly serious since, he is well aware of the risk that Devon runs as a homosexual in their neighbourhood, but nonetheless Jack completely ignores the his friend's well-being and instead blames him for the events. Both Jack's attitude and the possible violent reaction of the neighbourhood hooligans to seeing the photo and video released by Aces are objectively aggravating queerphobic acts of outing and nonconsensual sharing. For this reason, I call them acts of 'secondary queerphobia', taking from the expression 'secondary victimisation', used to refer to the blaming of a person (particularly a woman or girl) who is a victim of rape or sexual harassment.³⁰⁷ Other ways in which queerphobia functions in the small society of Devon's block are seen in the break-up between Devon and his boyfriend Dre (or Andre). After photo with Scotty comes out, Dre suggests that it would be better to keep their relationship within the confines of the Niveus academy, as the discovery of his relationship with another boy could jeopardise Dre's reputation as the ringleader of a group of drug dealers. However, when Aces reveals that Devon sometimes works as a drug mule for Dre, Dre breaks off the relationship with him and kicks him out of the house, leaving him to be beaten up by his henchmen.

"Get out." Dre's deep voice cuts through my memories. My eyes are watering as I shake my head. He comes close to me now. "Get out. Please, get out." Closer... I shake my head again. He presses his head against mine, digging into my skull, but I don't care. I grab him and he kisses me, long and deep, and I cry, tears tickling my chin as they leak down my face. I hold him and we kiss and kiss until he's pushing away and shouting. "Get out." He shakes his head, moving back a little. "Get the fuck out!" he yells, wiping his face roughly. I jump back as the doors burst open. Two of his boys bust in. Leon is one of them. "Want us to drag him, Dre?" Leon asks, his eyes avoiding mine. I look back at Dre, who looks at me with red eyes that are glassed over with regret. "Just get him out. Don't want him dealing my stash anymore." The knife in my chest turns and my heart crumbles. I close my eyes as they drag me away, pushing me down the stairs so I stumble. They shove me out so hard that I fall to the ground. I can

³⁰⁶ Manuel Gámez-Guadix, Estibaliz Mateos-Pérez, Sebastian Wachs, Michelle Wright, Jone Martínez, Daniel Íncera, 'Assessing image-based sexual abuse: Measurement, prevalence, and temporal stability of sextortion and nonconsensual sexting (revenge porn) among adolescents' in *Journal of Adolescence* 94 (2022): 790.

³⁰⁷ Amelia Roskin-Fraze, "'Terrifying and Exhausting': Secondary Victimization in Title IX Proceedings at U.S. Higher Education Institutions Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications' in *Feminist criminology* 18 (2023): 117.

feel so many eyes on me. The boys outside-the boys I was made to be scared of-ready, waiting. There is silence before it happens. The wind rustles through the trees nearby. A lighter clicks. Then footsteps. And before it happens, I remember the first time Dre told me he loved me. It was days after we started dating and months after the first time we kissed. Only weeks after I'd ended things with Scotty. We were listening to music in his apartment, the place he was before here, arguing over senseless shit, and he just said it. I remember thanking him for his honesty, and we started laughing. I said I love you hours later, and everything was so light. Was that wrong? Us saying that so early on? The first blow hits my side and I hiss. *I love you*. The second blow hits harder. I think that this, paired with Dre's words, is as painful as a gunshot. *I love you*. The rest of the blows come at once, puncturing me over and over. Someone punches my eye and I scream. *I love you*. I feel it swell up. I can't see. I can't see. I can't.³⁰⁸

Dre's love for Devon does not outweigh the importance of his own reputation as a chief drug dealer. Having been exposed in his boyfriend's school is already extremely dangerous for him and he cannot let his sexuality be revealed outside the school. For this reason, he not only leaves Devon but also lies to his hooligans about the break-up to hide the fact that they were together, leaving him to their beatings, designed to punish and intimidate him. However, when Dre is imprisoned for drug dealing and Devon goes to visit him, the protagonist discovers that the fate of homosexual boys is always the same:

"Just some guys, told me they'd heard of you and me, and-" Dre's face scrunches up as he starts silently crying. "They beat me every night, said they wanna knock sense into me."³⁰⁹

I just let myself drift, aching as I think about Dre and how it hurts to see him here, where they beat him for being a boy who likes boys. This world isn't ideal. This world, our world, the one with houses as crooked as the people in them. Broken people, broken by the way the world works. No jobs, no money; sell drugs, get money. That's what this world is, that's how it works. I don't want it to be like that for me. I don't want to stay here. And I don't want Dre in here either.³¹⁰

Both the prison and the poor and degraded neighbourhood they come from are dangerous places for their homosexual boys, as they risk being beaten and killed

³⁰⁸ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 115, 116.

³⁰⁹ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 323.

³¹⁰ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 326.

simply because of their homosexuality. The unfairness of the micro-society of Devon's neighbourhood is particularly disturbing. Indeed, it is not surprising that the protagonist dreams of leaving his home and that the difficulties he continually experiences as a homosexual, Black teenager from a working-class background cause his hopes to crumble.

I used to tell myself this wasn't permanent, that I'd live somewhere someday where I wouldn't have to share a bed with my brothers or sit in this home of mismatched things. But who was I kidding. Boys like me don't get happy endings. The stories I was fed about working hard and being able to achieve anything... That's all they are, stories. Lies. Dangerous dreams.³¹¹

The psychological burden of queerphobic discrimination that Devon must endure is wearisome and pervasive. Although it is passed over quickly and without particular insight, at the end of the novel Devon tells Chiamaka that he tried to commit suicide.

I can see why. It's really peaceful here. I sit up, crossing my legs. I'm about to tell him how nice it is here, but he's speaking again. "I tried to kill myself here, years ago," he says. I look at him. That's ... surprising. "Oh," I say. Because that's all I can think to say in response to that. "I think I thought it would be nice ... to just die-drown, in my favourite place. Now I find other ways to drown and cope," he says. "What stopped you?" I ask. He doesn't respond at first. "Someone followed me here ... pulled me out, didn't let me do it," he says quietly. "Sounds like a good person." "He is," Devon says. We sit in silence, just watching the waves.³¹²

Although Devon does not explain why, the most likely motivation behind the attempted suicide is internalised queerphobia. A boy, anonymous in his story, saves him from the extreme act (on a re-reading of the novel, this could be Dre).

Chiamaka's tale of queerness stands in stark contrast to Devon's experience. First of all, it is interesting to note that the author never defines the Chiamaka's queer identity. The high school girl does not demonstrate the need to reflect on this issue at any point, and her identity remains open. In *Ace of Spades*, Chiamaka recounts that she has had several boyfriends among her schoolmates, but only in order to

³¹¹ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 338.

³¹² Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 405.

achieve a high social standing in the Niveus. The only one for whom she claims to have had sincere feelings is Jamie, the son of one of the richest and most prominent families in town and a benefactor of the school, who however does not reciprocate the same interest. Jamie, however, soon tells her that he has started a relationship with a schoolmate she especially likes: Belle. Chiamaka sees them together often when they first get together and notices Belle pays more attention to Chiamaka herself than Jamie. Quickly realising Jamie's manipulative and hostile attitudes towards Chiamaka, Belle leaves him, continuing to see the protagonist instead:

I'm sure people are surprised after the Aces blast about me and Jamie hooking up that Belle and I are hanging out. It's the opposite of what usually happens: Boy is a massive dickhead to both girls, girls fight each other, boy is left unblamed as girls antagonise each other. I'm glad it isn't like that with me and Belle.³¹³

This expression of sisterhood is an excellent example of emancipation for both girls since, as Chiamaka acknowledges, it confronts the stereotype that two girls should antagonise each other over a boy who is not worth it. What is more, Chiamaka begins to feel unspecified and apparently loving emotions towards Belle, which she initially fails to encode, until she finds the courage to do so.

"Are you OK?" Belle asks, looking worried now. "I'm confused, trying to work out whether we are friends or not." I surprise myself as the truth just slips out. Belle looks a little hurt by the statement, but I didn't mean it the way it came out. "I thought we were." "What if I don't want to be friends?" I don't want to say the rest out loud. "You don't want to be friends?" Belle looks really hurt, which makes my body feel like heated explosions are going off all at once. "I don't." Belle nods and puts the toothbrush down. "OK, that's fine," she says quietly, before walking past me. I think I want her to leave, stop confusing me, but at the same time, I don't want her to go. I want her to stay and let me explain. "I think I like you in a non-friend way... I-if that weirds you out, you can go," I say, stumbling over some of my words. I look down, and even though I can't see her, I know she's still in the room. I didn't hear the door close. I keep going. "I just don't think I can be friends with you if it weirds you out or if you don't feel the same way-for now at least. I was friends with Jamie for ages, and I always wanted more ... I don't want to repeat that again,' I say without taking a breath. This is embarrassing. Closing my eyes, I add, "So leave, please, if that's not something you want

³¹³ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 203.

too." In the distance I can hear screams, from the gym or the grounds outside, but there's dead silence between us. The sound of the door opening and then slamming shut shatters something inside me. I breathe out raggedly, turning around to look at the empty room. Only I'm met, face-to-face, with the smell of vanilla and blond hair and pink lips that smile at me. Belle leans in, closing her eyes, and kisses me. And then, within nanoseconds, I'm kissing her too.³¹⁴

Àbíké-Íyímídé's portrayal of Chiamaka's new and intriguing experience and her unexpected feelings for another girl is positive. While Belle's interest in the protagonist is clear, it was not assumed that this interest was actually of a sentimental nature, nor that Belle herself was also queer. On these points the author later provides more reflection and information:

I don't know exactly what it means or why Belle is the only girl I have ever thought about in that way, but I don't want to examine my feelings; I just want to like her and not think about my parents or the people at Niveus and their judgments and opinions. "I'm bi," Belle tells me. "And I'm out, but I wasn't sure about you-I mean, everyone sort of knows all the things about you ... like the guys you dated-and I didn't want to assume anything! But you pretty much hated me while I was with Jamie, so I thought the most we could ever be is good friends ... until Wednesday." She says "Wednesday" with a playful smile. "I didn't realise I liked you until Wednesday ... Well, I guess I was denying it," I say. "And for the record, I never hated you." "Right...," she says after a long pause. We've reached Belle's house now. We stand, looking at each other like it's a contest. I try not to blink, in case it *is* a contest. Then she blinks, and I win. "Can I kiss you again? We never really got to finish, which I think is so unfair," Belle asks, moving closer. "Just to be fair," I say, and she kisses me again, this time uninterrupted. From watching TV and reading books, I always got the idea that a girl liking someone who isn't a guy is meant to be a big deal and that there should be this pressing self-hate that comes with it. I feel almost weird with being *this okay* with being attracted to Belle, but then again, there's nothing weird about this in my mind; it feels right.³¹⁵

It turns out, therefore, that Belle has disclosed her bisexuality and there is no mention of queerphobic treatment in the novel. Chiamaka, for her part, has no particular problem with the feelings she has for Belle, nor does she care about the judgement of others on this subject. She does not analyse her feelings and is

³¹⁴ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 221-223.

³¹⁵ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 243, 244.

comfortable with how she feels towards her schoolmate. All this despite the negative narrative received from books and television, in which the image of one girl having feelings for another is stereotypically portrayed as dramatic and/or self-hating. As Chiamaka recognises and accepts her feelings for Belle, she also neutralises these degrading ideas which have their origins in cultural products. What instead unites the two protagonists in terms of their queerness is the way in which they are able to be intimate with their partners. In fact, the scenes in which Devon is physically intimate and kisses other boys passionately are far more numerous than those of Chiamaka with Belle. By contrast, for both protagonists, only one instance of sex is alluded to. In the case Chiamaka and Belle, it is particularly vague.

Belle is all I can think of, all I can see. I follow her path to the bed and place my hand on her pale cheeks, lifting her face up so that the blue stares into my brown. Placing my head on hers, I breathe her in again, her scent making me want to dissolve forever and forget about everything. The mission tomorrow, how scared I am, how my future is hanging in the balance. Our lips touch, and move, deeper and deeper, and I feel myself falling forward. I feel her falling, and then we collide, her back springing off the mattress. [...] *I'm just glad you don't look at me like I'm other or something*, I think to myself, but I don't say it, because I'm not sure if she'll get that completely. Belle nods, a sly smile on her lips as she reaches up to her shirt and starts to unbutton it. "Want to continue not talking?" she asks, the yellow of her bra making everything inside tingle. 'Not talking is my favourite thing to do,' I tell her. ³¹⁶

While in the case of Devon with Dre, it is hinted at in an allusive and hasty manner:

His thoughts are screaming, but then as if swallowed by a vacuum, there is complete silence. All worry disappears and all that matters is right now, not the future versions of us that might regret this, just present Andre and me, who both want to do this, kiss the pain away for a little while. Dre moves off the bed and goes over to the drawer in his desk, pulling out some condoms. I look away from him now and up at the ceiling, listening to the sound of the rain hitting the windows and the wind angrily crying out, letting it drown my thoughts. His weight tilts the bed as he leans over me and joins our lips together again. I want this moment to last as long as it can; I want to be here with him for as long as I can. Like always he's gentle, and considerate, making me feel special, kissing me all over. And then, when we are finally done and I'm in his arms, I let myself cry. ³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 257, 258.

³¹⁷ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 200.

While this is one of the very few examples in the entire corpus in which the use of condoms is referred to, the sex scene between the two boys is glossed over, replaced by romantic phrases and a focus on the surroundings of Dre's bedroom. Thus far, this corpus has yet to present an accurate and direct description of sexual scenes between queer teenagers. Indeed, the only two novels to do so in this corpus will be the French *Romance* and *Apprivoiser l'été*. Another element that unites Devon and Chiamaka in the construction of the plot is the privileged relationship of love and support that they weave with their mothers. As noted earlier, Devon's father is long deceased, although he believes him to be in prison, while Chiamaka does not have a good relationship with her father's family, who are racist towards her and her mother because of their skin colour (her father is white Italian and her mother black Nigerian); in particular, she expresses resentment towards her father for never being able to defend her mother from her family's racial hatred. The mothers are the only family figures with whom the protagonists show bonds of affection and support. For each of them, there are two particularly intense moments of maternal proof of love. With Chiamaka, it is the moment when her mother finishes styling her hair into tight braids, according to Nigerian culture, and explains to her the meaning of her name and surname:

"Although, like your dad and I, my parents came from different worlds. While they were both Nigerian, they were from different tribes. My mother was Igbo and my father was Yoruba. I felt lucky growing up to have that mix of such rich cultures, and I wanted you to feel that too. I wanted you to see your name and feel the richness of where you're from. I wanted you to know that when I call your name, Chiamaka, I'm saying *My daughter is beautiful and smart, and she brings me so much joy*. Her eyes are glassy as she takes my face into her hands and kisses my forehead.³¹⁸

In Devon's case, however, the most significant moment is surely that of his coming out:

"It's only gotten really bad now. They keep talking about me." "Saying what?" she asks, eyes glassy and concerned. I can't do it. I feel so fucking sick. I've known I'm gay for years. I have known and I got comfortable with it-but at times like this, when I know life could be easier

³¹⁸ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 254, 255.

without my sexuality, I wish I hadn't been born with the burden. "Do you know a boy named Terrell?" I ask, because I don't want to have to tell Ma that the rumours detailing my sex life with a rich white kid from school and the dealer she told me not to be friends with are true. I don't want to weaken her heart, cause her pain. Ma looks shocked. "You remember Terrell?" she asks. Ma knows Terrell?. "I ... know who he is, but I can't remember him." She turns, putting the oven off, before moving toward our dining area and taking a seat on one of the lawn chairs. I stay where I am. Ma looks at me. Straight at me. "I wanted you to come to me about your sexuality in your own time. After the Terrell incident, you couldn't remember, and I didn't want to bring it up." *My sexuality?* I rush over to the trash can in the corner and throw up. My body is finally doing what it's threatened to do this whole time. It's all water; I haven't eaten today. The lawn chair scrapes against the ground and then Ma's there, rubbing my back, over and over. I hate this feeling so much. What does she remember that I can't? "We don't have to talk if you're not ready, Von." I shake my head. It's out there now. No turning back. The tears mix with my running nose as I bend over, hovering above the trash, trying to breathe. "I'm gay," I choke out, daggers diving into my gut, shaking my entire being. I'm not sure if it was loud enough for her to hear. "Yeah, I know," she says, and something washes through me. I'm not sure if it's relief. More tears mix with the nastiness that is snot.³¹⁹

She wipes my face. Wipes away the tears, the snot, and whatever else sticks. "You don't care that I'm gay?" I ask, because that's what scared me most. I feel a little lightheaded as she shakes her head. "Don't do drugs, stay out of trouble, do well in school, date whoever you like. That was the only thing I ever said to you." I'm crying again, body jerking forward as the tears spill. Mama pulls me into her arms. I never thought the conversation would happen this way. "I love you so much, I just want you to be happy," she says quietly. *You too, Ma. I want you to be so happy.*³²⁰

This scene is particularly important for Devon as not only does he discover that her mother was already aware of his queerness and that sexual orientation had never been a problem for her, but Devon is also released from the anxiety and fear that his mother would react negatively to his coming out. This revelation sheds new light on the negative comments made by the mother earlier in the novel, namely the coming out of a character in the TV series *Prison Break* and the disowning of a girl in the neighbourhood after her coming out to her parents. Another important element is the level of eutopian impulse that the two protagonists manage to bring

³¹⁹ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 301, 302.

³²⁰ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 304.

to bear against their white former friends from Niveus, when, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that they too, together with the entire student body, faculty and management of the school had secretly acted to sabotage them and force them to leave the school. In the case of Chiamaka, her relationship with Jamie is particularly important. The two call each other best friends in the first part of the novel, and there are references to their having slept together at a party. The relationship between the two gradually deteriorates, as Chiamaka begins to realise that Jamie has been manipulating and gaslighting her for a long time, convincing her that a positive version of herself does not exist. Chiamaka's love affair with Belle, Jamie's ex-girlfriend, stings the boy to the core and he tries to take revenge on the protagonist, thinking that she is still easy to manipulate.

"What now?". Silence. "You and Belle? And you can't deny it. I've seen the pictures." What pictures?. "And Aces don't really lie, do they?" he spits. I narrow my eyes at him, a thought hammering through my mind. I wonder if he knows the girl is really alive. I wonder if he knew all along ... "Want me to apologise for kissing a girl you aren't even with? Want me to say I'm sorry for breaking the best-friend code? Oh wait, we aren't best friends. We aren't even friends. Want me to beg for your forgiveness for liking someone without your fucking permission?" His eyes widen, but before he speaks, I continue, because that's what happens when you hold so much back without release. "You didn't like Scotty or Tanner. Didn't like Georgie or Paul. You hate it when I'm with someone else, because you think you can control me, control my body. Well, you can't, Jamie."³²¹

This scene is the first direct confrontation between Chiamaka and Jamie, in which the girl firmly demonstrates her ability to stand up to a boy who thinks he can control her body, her thoughts and her actions. Finally unmasked in his racist and dehumanising view of Chiamaka and left vulnerable because his image of himself as a virile and domineering white male has been damaged, Jamie physically assaults her.

I'm not going to let what he said hurt me. I won't give him that power over me. I'm Chiamaka fucking Adebayo-I don't need some prick telling me who I am and who I should be. "Are you done with your speech?" I ask, not waiting for a reply before continuing. "Call me a whore, I don't care. But you, Jamie, you bring it up because you do care." He raises an eyebrow.

³²¹ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 280.

"You care that a girl like me can do what she wants, and not give a crap about what you or anyone has to say. You care that you liked it, and that your racist parents and this racist school gave you one job-to get close to me and then stab me in the back-but instead you liked it, every second of it. You liked kissing me-". "Shut up," he growls. "Liked the sex, the sneaking around-". "I said shut up!" Jamie yells. Which only gives me more energy. "You care that I kissed your girlfriend." I smile, even though it hurts. "You care that we did more than kiss-". He pushes me back against the wall hard, and I laugh in his face, more tears falling. But they aren't sad tears. It feels like I'm free. Like I'm flying.³²²

These passages are particularly remarkable precisely because the fight is not about Chiamaka's queerness but about her gender and skin colour. In fact, Jamie's perception of power is rooted in his belief that as a Black woman, Chiamaka is inferior to him. Chiamaka is thus not defending her queer identity (however implicit this is within the complexity of her personality), but rather her gender and ethnic identity. In Devon's case, on the other hand, the eutopian impulse that the protagonist demonstrates in opposing some of his antagonists stems, above all, from a desire for self-determination as a queer person. This is seen in relation to Scotty, Devon's ex-boyfriend and the sole owner of the photo and video circulated to discredit the protagonist:

"Scotty," I start, wanting so bad to tell him how glad I am now that I don't have to see his face all the time, or trust someone who is a compulsive liar, or feel that anxiety I used to feel that he was going to tell me something like *I'm sorry I did it, it won't happen again. I love you, Von*. Direct quote, FYI. But I don't. Because I'm not that person. He is. I squeeze my eyes shut now, pushing away the fears that won't stop intruding. Of what people might think of me-what Ma might think of me- hating myself for being with him for that long. I was so stupid, not realizing Scotty was a dick way sooner. I think I'll spend the rest of my life judging myself for ever thinking Scotty was even remotely attractive. "Fuck you," I say instead, before turning around, ignoring his loud response.³²³

Later, the same attitude, to a much higher degree of impulse this time, is observed when Devon confronts Jack, his former best friend who betrays Devon because of his unresolved hatred of Devon's homosexuality. Moreover, Jack attempts to hide racial hatred behind his homophobic hatred. By then, Jack has crossed the line.

³²² Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 379, 380.

³²³ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 78.

"And you did ruin everything. I can't go back to high school, I can't graduate, I can't do anything. You *knew*, for God knows how long, and you fucking helped them," I shout. "What did I do to you that was so bad? You were my best friend ... I love ... I loved you." Jack is looking away again, fingers gripping the glass, knuckles turning white. "You should go," he says. I shake my head. "No, you don't get to do that," I say, stepping forward as Jack tries to close the door again. I can feel the glass against my shoulder, crushing me. When he realises I won't budge, he pushes me back and I stumble slightly, stunned for a few seconds before I push him back, stepping in now. "Leave," he says, chest heaving. I look at him and I think about how we don't know the people we think we know at all. How people who are meant to love you, leave you-like Jack, my pa ... Andre. I can feel my fingers shaking, insides rattling, as I think of how many people leave and keep leaving. Like there is something wrong with me ... like I'm not good enough. Jack knew how much my ma struggled, and he watched, knowing this would all happen. Before I can calm down and think about the consequences of what I want to do to him, I'm pushing him again, and again, he's staggering back. Now I'm punching him and he isn't fighting back; he's letting me hit him over and over, until my knuckles ache and his face is bleeding. My eyes blur as his face becomes splotches of white, purple, and blue. We're both crying; Jack is on the floor and I am on top of him.³²⁴

As noted at the beginning of this section, the main focus of this novel is the white supremacist racism that the two protagonists are forced to face. However, when taking Scotty's character into account, in more than one passage of the novel, he also seems to suffer from the homophobic climate within the school. Before the photo of the kiss between him and Devon was circulated, he also lived his homosexuality in secrecy, fearing to lose the friendship of his football teammates. For a while, he even pretended to be Chiamaka's boyfriend to avoid suspicion. On the contrary, after the photo is sent around the school, he seems almost enthusiastic about the attention that other schoolmates are starting to give him, while the video does not seem to affect him much. Indeed, Devon's anger and upset seem to annoy him, or at most irritate him, and he dismisses him with a few sentences, almost completely ignoring him, while he stares at his phone, scrolling through social network pages. These latter elements present themselves in a somewhat enigmatic way, at least until the protagonists discover that the secret Ace of Spades sect is made up of all the white people in the school. Since it was Scotty himself who

³²⁴ Àbíké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 361, 362.

supplied the digital materials to Aces to spread them inside Niveus and target Devon, it is therefore safe to assume that the school population was all already aware of his homosexuality, except Devon and Chiamaka. At most, Scotty may have come out to Aces to become a member and secure protection within the school. Belle, in fact, is also a member of Aces and was aware of the protagonists' sabotage plan from the beginning, which is why Chiamaka breaks off his relationship with her. This element was equally seen with the queer characters of Lloyd in *Loveless* and Connor in *Boy Queen*. While it is true that all queer teenagers are victims of the homophobic hetero-cis-normative system of which they are part, this does not prevent them from becoming accomplice executioners. Hence, Scotty and Belle's characters also fit into the group of queer teenagers who use an unfair idea of social hierarchy that places them on a higher podium than their LGBTQ+ peers. As was seen in *Loveless*, Lloyd asserts that asexuality and non-binarism are invented identities on the internet which are not authentic like his of cis-gay identity. Connor bullies and manipulates Robin so that no one, especially his bully and homophobic friends, will discover his queerness. Scotty and Belle, for their part, use their own whiteness as a level marker between themselves and Devon and Chiamaka, playing active and/or passive parts in Aces' sabotage plan against the protagonists. In contrast, the queer Black teenagers, Devon, Chiamaka, Terrell, and Dre, though they are themselves both victims and perpetrators of the homophobic and racist society in which they live, they are able to help, love and forgive each other. Devon eventually forgives Dre when he visits him in prison. Even the community of unknown Black protesters who burst into the school dance where Devon and Chiamaka suddenly find themselves at the mercy of all the members of Aces is an indication of the Black brotherhood and sisterhood that the author wants to emphasise in the novel. Therefore, it can easily be concluded that the main contrast depicted in *Ace of Spades* is not so much between heteronormative society versus the LGBTQ+ minority (although this aspect exists to a lesser degree) but between white supremacists and the Black community.³²⁵

After triumphing over Aces and watching the Niveus school burn and fall to pieces following a mysterious explosion, Àbíké-Íyímídé closes the novel by shifting the

³²⁵ Suzie Telep, 'Racialisation' in *Langage et société*, special issue (2021) 289.

timeline sixteen years forward, presenting the image of Devon and Chiamaka as adults, fulfilled in their professional and personal lives. Devon is a music teacher, living with his mother and Terrell, his husband.

I watch him sleep soundlessly, chest rising and falling, rising again. Beard overgrown, scruffy, head clean-shaven-always. The room is dark, despite it being early in the afternoon, and I have somewhere to be, but I get sucked into his beauty and find myself trapped. I let my eyes fall to his bare back, where my favourite tattoo of his is, the one with numbers. I run my fingers over the date written on his back, then I lean in and kiss it. "If you're gonna touch me, at least touch me somewhere it counts," his sleepy voice mutters. "You'd love that so much, wouldn't you, T?". His dimples pop out and he laughs. "Why are you up so early?" he moans. "Firstly, it's twelve thirty, and secondly, I have a doctor's appointment at one." "You just want an excuse to see her," he says, turning to face me now, squinting. "God, I'll never get tired of looking at your face," he muses out loud. My heart is beating fast but steadily. 'I'll never get tired of looking at me too,' I reply, leaning in, giving him a quick kiss. "That so?" he says, wrapping his arms around my shoulders, trapping me. "Mm-hmm..." I kiss him again. When I'm with him, I feel like I'm falling in love all over again. I'll never get tired of him. It's one of the only things I'm sure of.³²⁶

For her part, Chiamaka studied medicine at Yale as she wanted to and became a doctor. She has a pregnant partner/wife named Mia, and has not only maintained a close relationship with Devon but they have in fact founded an association to oppose and tear down all white supremacist schools like Niveus, trying to prevent Black teenagers from being enrolled there:

"How's Mia?" I ask with a smile. "She's good, very pregnant, but good...", she replies, still not looking up at me. "I actually wanted to tell you something," she adds, still shuffling through papers. "I found out that this Black student, Rhys Johnson, is applying to Pollards. I got members of the society to speak with his family, get them to reconsider, but they want the best for him, and the best in that town is Pollards." "So what, we just let them enroll him?" I ask. Chiamaka nods. "We'll keep an eye on them; have people watching out for him. Plant someone on the inside. Anything to make sure we never let another Black kid get hurt by places like Niveus again."³²⁷

³²⁶ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 411.

³²⁷ Àbiké-Íyímídé, *Ace of Spades*, 413.

Of all the novels studied so far, *Ace of Spades* is the only one in which a clear and positive stance is taken regarding queer teenagers' futures. At the end of the novel, we see them not only fulfilled in their careers but also in their love and family lives. This represents a significant improvement on what Woodstein noted in 2013.³²⁸ In general, it can be agreed that Devon and Chiamaka show remarkable resilience and inner strength, and it is this that allows them to defeat their powerful enemy. Despite homophobia and ostracism, they manage to maintain a strong personal identity and not let queerphobia and racism define them completely. Their determination to remain true to themselves is a key element of their characterisation. Devon and Chiamaka support each other, and their friendship and romantic relationships serve as a source of strength and comfort, helping them survive in Niveus' hostile environment. The narrative offers a complex and truthful portrait of the challenges faced by queer people in hostile environments. Devon and Chiamaka, despite their vulnerability, use their intelligence and courage to challenge queerphobia and racism. The protagonists confront their aggressors and come into direct, even physically violent conflict with them. Their active resistance to systemic oppression exhibits a clear form of the eutopian impulse. The novel also examines how class and racial privilege affect the characters' opportunities and experiences, showing the disparities in treatment between privileged and under-privileged students. This theme is metaphorically represented through the mysterious individual known as Aces, who exploits and reveals the protagonists' secrets in order to humiliate, intimidate, control, and sabotage them. The story explores how corruption and complicity among the members of the school help to maintain and perpetuate an unjust and oppressive system. The strength of the relationship between Devon and Chiamaka is central to the novel, as it demonstrates how solidarity between marginalised individuals can serve as a powerful tool of resistance against social oppression.

By means of conclusion, I resume *Ace of Spades* herein relation to the established criteria of analysis.

³²⁸ See page 19.

- Queer visibility = the queerness of the protagonists is not the focus of the novel, but it should be noted that in Devon's case this theme occupies a lot of space in the character's narrative and often in a negative way, leaving little opportunity to explore his personality deeper. The only interesting thing we learn about Devon is that he plays the piano, has a passion for music and wants to study this subject at university. In contrast, the opposite narrative is found in Chiamaka's story, whose queerness is treated as just another side of her personality, while other themes occupy her reflections (her identity as the child of foreign parents and her gradual regaining of control over herself, escaping the racist and misogynistic manipulation of a boy, namely Jamie).
- Queer assimilation = while Chiamaka's queerness is discovered over the course of the novel but perfectly assimilated into her character's complexity, the same cannot be said for Devon, given the severe bullying, and at times acts of criminality, to which she is subjected. All queer teenagers are initially depicted in isolation. Only some of the Black teenagers – Devon, Chiamaka, and Terrell, – gradually form a small community.
- Queer consciousness/community = the Black queer characters Devon, Chiamaka and Terrell gradually form a small queer community to which they feel they belong and where they can find love, friendship, solidarity, and support.
- Queerphobia = the picture painted by the novel is particularly problematic. Devon has a long and violent history of homophobic bullying, both verbal and physical, suffered mainly at middle school. It is safe to assume that Terrell also faced the similar problems at that time. In Niveus, Devon is subjected to outing and nonconsensual sharing, the latter of which is a punishable offence. Devon is terrified of coming out to his mother for fear that she might disown him and recounts that he even tried to commit suicide once. The fear of coming out is also visible in the account of Scotty's character, although this may have been a set-up aimed at controlling and manipulating Devon. The queer characters suffer a range of discrimination within the novel (verbal and/or physical

aggression, attempts at manipulation, violent death, unhappy endings, loneliness, etc.). Apart from the news of a girl being kicked out of the house by her parents after her coming out, there is a completely different narrative for the queer girls in the story. Belle makes no reference to any kind of hostile or problematic episodes concerning her open bisexuality, and Chiamaka's queerness is an intriguing discovery for her, but one that is absolutely acknowledged and embedded in her character's identity and psychological profile, without any particular clamour.

- Eutopian tension = Devon and Chiamaka demonstrate a high degree of eutopian impulse, which is, however, mainly due to the opposition they establish against the white supremacist Ace of Spade sect. The two teenagers have to defend themselves by affirming Black pride, rather than queer pride. Chiamaka also individually leads a struggle to neutralise the gender discrimination to which she is subjected, after she is manipulated and controlled by Jamie for a long time and publicly humiliated by Aces. Devon is undoubtedly the character who most must struggle against the queerphobia that the members of Ace of Spade inflict on him.

4. Queer Adolescents in Emancipation. Analysis of the French Sub-corpus

The fourth and concluding chapter of this thesis will turn to an analysis of the French sub-corpus. As was noted in the introductory chapter, the first (and last) monograph on the subject of LGBTQ+ YA novels published in France was *Représentations des homosexualités dans le roman français pour la jeunesse* by Renaud Lagabrielle from 2007. The most recent YA novel in Lagabrielle's study was published in 2003, leaving a gap of 16 years between the French novels selected for this sub-corpus which were published in 2019, 2020 and 2022. The analysis in this chapter will examine the novels in chronological order and consider not only the narrative peculiarities specific to each work but also the extent to which these books have contributed and/ or reflect the world of queer adolescence in the French literary landscape. The observations made here will then be compared to the concluding observations of Lagabrielle's study. The three French novels selected for the analysis are *It* (Catherine Grive, Gallimard, 2019), *Romance* (Arnaud Cathrine, Robert Laffont, 2020) and *Apprivoiser l'été* (Marie Boulier and Thierry Magnier, 2022). The novels are T-themed (transgender), G-themed and Q- and NB-themed (queer and non-binary) respectively. In this chapter, it will be noted how French queer YA novels demonstrate a similar level of evolution as the novels analysed in the British sub-corpus and show clear progress when compared with the Italian sub-corpus. Indeed, when compared with Italian Queer YA novels, the French novels selected demonstrate a greater variety of representations of LGBTQ+ adolescence, a greater degree of emancipation in queer characters and greater importance is given to young queer communities. On the other hand, the French novels studied here give less space to new types of families than the novels in the British sub-corpus. Similarly, though the presence of parents in the adolescents' stories is much reduced when compared to the Italian sub-corpus, the French novels still give more space to parents in these narratives than the novels studied in the British sub-corpus. An important novelty with respect to both the Italian and British sub-corpora is the space given to scenes of an affective-sexual nature and the use of language both formal and informal belonging to an affective-sexual semantic field. I will introduce each novel with a brief summary of the plot, and then go on to identify and comment

on the passages from the novels selected that are relevant to the established research criteria, giving a brief overview at the end of each section of the relationship between the quality of the representation and the intensity of the eutopian impulse.

4.1. *It*: to become or to be oneself?

It (2019) by Catherine Grive follows the story of Jo, a fourteen-year-old transgender boy from Paris. The book centres around the protagonist's process of understanding his FtM ('female to male') transgender identity and coming out to his parents, and the consequences of this. In the background, the story observes the vicissitudes of the De La Tourmente-Poiret family, made up of Jo and his parents, who are saved from a fire that broke out in their neighbour Mrs. Heidi Chopard's house and spread to theirs. Taken in by neighbours and then moved to a neighbouring guesthouse, the family must cope with the grief of losing their home and their belongings. During this time, Jo feels that something is changing in him, in the way he perceives himself and, in his need, to assert himself, translating externally his vision of self-identity. Jo's first personal reflections presented in the novel concern the short-circuit between what society expects of him as a girl and how he feels about himself in relation to it. In other words, Jo begins to interrogate the social expectations that come with his sex assigned at birth, allowing the novel to deal with gender dysphoria.

Je fais partie des solitaires, de ceux chez qui les mots ne viennent pas facilement, mais les images si, qui ont besoin de se créer une bulle pour être eux-mêmes. L'ai-je toujours été ? Pas du tout. J'ai développé cette nature à force d'être perçue comme une personne différente. Une personne personne née fille, qui le voit quand elle est nue devant sa glace, mais chez qui quelque chose ne colle pas. Comme si elle portait un masque, un masque de fille, en l'occurrence. Une personne personne avec ses goûts propres, que ses parents respectent, qui l'emmènent faire du karting, jouent avec elle au petit train, l'inscrivent au judo quand elle le réclame, ne lui offrent pas de Barbie à Noël.³²⁹

³²⁹ Catherine Grive, *It* (Gallimard, 2019), 26.

Jo feels that he lives in a social context where he wears 'un masque de fille'. His desires do not align with those that society creates for and instils in girls. Society expects Jo to reflect desires of girls but, on the contrary, he actually feels more aligned with the 'goûts propres' that match those conceived for boys. Moreover, his atypical personality, different from the norm, is a reason for his marginalisation by other peers, resulting in the isolation of the protagonist. Jo is keen to emphasise that he is not a loner but has become because he has been excluded by others. Jo also recounts that the only time this dissonance between his biological sex and his transgender identity did not cause problems from a social point of view was in kindergarten when it was permissible to be both genders in the eyes of his classmates. From primary school onwards, however, his transgender identity became a problem for others.

À la maternelle, tout se passait bien. Une période de ma vie des plus heureuses, être un enfant, un garçon *et* une fille en même temps. Indéfini. Inclassable. Facile. C'est en primaire que ça a commencé à se compliquer. Je voyais leurs coups de coude pour me désigner, je subissais leurs moqueries. J'encaissais cette question, justement - tu es un garçon ou une fille ? - qu'ils envoyaient poser par un plus jeune, un petit nouveau. Je ne comprenais pas ce que je faisais de travers pour mériter ça. Je prêtais mes jouets et mes livres, j'apportais des cadeaux à leurs anniversaires, je les invitais en vacances, mais je me sentais toujours exclue. Le temps n'avait rien arrangé. Le jour de la rentrée, à l'énoncé de mon prénom, le nouveau prof balayait la classe du regard sans s'arrêter sur moi, cherchant une tête de fille. En grandissant, vers la cinquième, d'exclue par les autres, je suis devenue rejetée. Plus par les garçons que par les filles, plus tolérantes. Encore que. Chloé et ses copines ne m'ont pas épargnée. Il faut dire que je tirais pas mal la gueule à cette époque. Je m'habillais mal, des Tim crados, des vêtements sans forme, mi-racaille, mi-loseuse. Pour éviter qu'on me parle, je ne quittais pas mes écouteurs, ma casquette enfoncée bas sur le front qu'ils s'amusaient à faire tomber d'un mouvement vif de la main, comme une claque en l'air. J'ai traversé une période plus douce, quand je me suis mise à les fournir en clopes piquées à mon père. Les filles venaient me demander mon avis sur des fringues, sur un garçon qu'elles ne comprenaient plus, me faisaient des confidences. Le jour où mon père s'est arrêté de fumer, j'ai retrouvé ma solitude, ma différence.³³⁰

³³⁰ Grive, *It*, 58-60.

The concise account of the protagonist's social life at school from kindergarten to middle school gives a clear picture of the constant transphobic attitude he had to endure throughout that time. Jo was taunted, marginalised, his transgender identity rejected more by boys than by girls. He was also bullied by one of his classmates, Chloé, and her friends, although it is not specified what kind of harassment he suffered, whether only verbal or also physical. Jo's account of his isolation reaches a climax through the memory of interaction be limited to requests for his father's cigarettes. Once the cigarettes ran out, however, he was ignored again. Another indication of Jo's gender dysphoria is his terror of appearing to people as a girl and being treated as such:

Une bande de garçons passait en riant, faisant mine de se taper dessus. Je les ai observés. Ils étaient beaux, ils avaient confiance. Sans savoir pourquoi, cela n'avait aucun rapport, j'ai pensé aux poissons dans la rivière de notre maison dans la Drôme. J'ai pensé à ceux que j'allais attraper cet été et qui ne se doutaient encore de rien. J'ai repris le miroir resté sur la table. En y plongeant le regard, je me suis demandé à quoi on voyait que j'étais une fille. La forme de mon nez légèrement en trompette ? L'arrondi de mes joues avec cette petite marque de naissance sur la pommette gauche, très fine, comme une cicatrice ? Mon regard vert qui tire sur le turquoise quand il fait beau ? Ma silhouette plutôt mince, mais très musclée ?³³¹

In *Un'Alice come un'altra*, Alice also showed the same deep anguish at being perceived as male when using brute force or when dressing in male clothing. Another significant element of Jo's experience that returns repeatedly throughout the novel is his obsessive with other boys. Jo compares himself constantly with other boys, observing their proxemics and taking care to absorb details about that, so that he will appear as a boy in the eyes of others. On the other hand, the positive aspect of gender euphoria, that is, the sense of happiness when one feels in agreement with one's own gender identity,³³² whether observed personally or recognised by others.

³³¹ Grive, *It*, 43.

³³² Ruby Grant, Natalie Amos, Teddy Cook, Ashleigh Lin, Adam Hill, Marina Carman, Adam Bourne, 'From euphoria to wellbeing: Correlates of gender euphoria and its association with mental wellbeing among transgender adults' in *International Journal of Transgender Health* (2024): 1.

Chaque fois qu'on me prend pour un garçon, je ne peux m'empêcher d'en ressentir une forme de fierté, de soulagement, de justesse. J'ai passé beaucoup de temps à les observer, en classe, dans la rue, à la piscine, tellement je les trouvais... beaux ? forts ? vrais ? Vrais. Au début, j'ai cherché à les imiter, mais je ne trouvais jamais en quoi, avant de me rendre compte que leurs gestes impatientes, leurs mouvements de tête comme des coups de boule quand ils riaient, leurs corps fermes, denses, leurs regards étaient les miens. Nous étions pareils. En tout cas, moi, je me voyais comme eux. Nous jouions ensemble au stade d'à côté. Avec mes cuisses musclées, mes épaules dessinées, j'étais rapide. J'étais précise. Je gardais le ballon longtemps contre mon torse plat, avec mon corps libre, affranchi, heureux, sans autre peur qu'on m'ordonne de lâcher le ballon, me dise que c'était un sport réservé aux garçons.³³³

Les jours passent, ce n'est pas toujours facile, des choses m'échappent, la première vision de mon visage le matin, ma voix qui n'est pas celle que je voudrais, des hésitations - un garçon tient-il son verre comme ça ? reprend-il du fromage ? déteste-t-il Céline Dion ? -, mais tout continue à bien aller et même à devenir de plus en plus évident, mes jambes qui avancent, mon sexe, mon destin.³³⁴

It should also be noted that, in addition to male pronouns and adjectives, Jo also favours the nickname 'It'. This nickname was invented by her schoolmate Chloé to mock him, but Jo actually appreciates the neutrality of the pronoun and decides to take it up:

- Et toi, voici ta chambre, Joséphine. - Jo, maman. Tout le monde l'appelle Jo. Tout le monde, sauf Thomas, Amanda, Julie, Joëlle et tous ceux qui préfèrent m'appeler par mon surnom, " It ". C'est Chloé qui, en quatrième, m'a baptisée ainsi, " It ", du pronom anglo-saxon indéfini. Certains m'appellent toujours comme ça. Ils croient me vexer, c'est le contraire. Ce neutre me convient.³³⁵

Jo's decision to reclaim 'It' as a name takes power away from Chloé's transphobic mocking. The resemantisation and appropriation of the offending term is a remarkable and original example of a eutopian impulse. Moreover, the neutral English pronoun offers further insight into Jo's preference to identify as a non-binary person as well, an element that becomes clearer as the novel progresses. In the summary of his previous school experience, kindergarten was '[u]ne période de

³³³ Grive, *It*, 62.

³³⁴ Grive, *It*, 135.

³³⁵ Grive, *It*, 21.

ma vie des plus heureuses, être un enfant, un garçon *et* une fille en même temps'. Thus, in kindergarten Jo feels as if he belongs to both (or neither) genders. However, the author chooses underline Jo's trans identity through an explosive act of birth/rebirth, comparing it to the eruption of a volcano.

Il est sept heures le lendemain matin quand la guerre éclate vraiment, sept heures zéro quatre quand elle s'achève. Dans ce laps de temps, la terre s'est mise à gronder, des milliers de paroles confuses ont déboulé de partout, des loups ont hurlé à la mort. J'ai serré les poings en attendant la grande éruption du volcan et son lot de pierres projetées, de lave dégoulinante et de cendres. Soudain, une couche chaude a recouvert mon corps comme un sarcophage et, depuis, je ne peux plus bouger. Mais derrière le masque, mes yeux s'agitent, mes pupilles vibrent comme des papillons attirés par la lumière. Je n'ai pas peur, je n'aurai plus jamais peur de rien. La lave craque, l'enveloppe de pierre s'ouvre, je me dégage. Je suis un garçon.³³⁶

The passage is particularly evocative and original. The powerful and fearless declaration of one's gender is a manifestation of eutopian impulse in that the metaphorical image presented suggests the strong and courageous deployment of one's identity in the face of a fear instilled by society. The protagonist also demonstrates remarkable agency, primarily in deciding on his own aesthetic and by reproducing his identity through his clothing and hairstyle.

Cet après-midi, avec l'argent que mes parents m'ont donné pour me racheter ce que je voudrais " d'utile et pas trop cher ", elle m'a convaincue de prendre cette chemise à très fines rayures au rayon Hommes de chez H&M, une veste courte en tweed et des godillots dans une friperie. Quand je rentre à l'hôtel, que je réessaie mes achats, que je constate à quel point ma démarche est plus fière, mon regard plus assuré, mes gestes sont plus nets, je sais que je vais exécuter cette intention cent fois reportée de me couper les cheveux encore plus courts qu'ils ne sont déjà. Je prends les ciseaux à ongles, je m'approche le plus possible du crâne et j'y vais. Clac. Par petits coups secs. Clac, clac. Secs et réguliers. Clac, clac, clac. Ça y est, c'est fini. Je ne m'emmerderai plus avec mes cheveux. Tels qu'ils seront coiffés le soir, tels qu'ils seront coiffés le matin.³³⁷

The joy derived from self-expression is proportional to the degree of self-

³³⁶ Grive, *It*, 129.

³³⁷ Grive, *It*, 107, 108.

legitimation that Jo recognises himself. The more he acts as he is, the more he becomes who he is, improving his psychological well-being:

Les regards croisés des garçons. Je ne serai jamais elles. Je serai le garçon croisé. Elles tournent à l'angle de la rue. À la dernière minute, une des filles se retourne et me sourit. Je lui plais. Dans le jardin du Luxembourg, je m'arrête pour regarder des garçons jouer au foot. Je suis des leurs maintenant. C'est dans cet état d'esprit d'allégresse, de plénitude électrique, que je rentre à l'hôtel. Mes parents prennent l'apéritif dans le salon. J'ouvre la bouche, y lance une olive. D'où me viennent tous ces gestes ? Où étaient-ils, tout ce temps ?³³⁸

Notably Jo's schoolmates intervene when Jo's bully Chloé, angered by the support and recognition of the community of Jo's trans identity, tries to take revenge.

Tu es un garçon ? s'étonne Justin. J'inspire. - Oui, je le sais maintenant. J'en suis sûr. - Je croise le regard de Chloé, le soutient. - Comment ça se fait ? demande-t-elle, tendue. - Comment ça se fait que je le sache ? En fait, je l'ai toujours su, mais j'ai eu une sorte de révélation. - Comme de croire en Dieu ? s'interroge Marcel. - Mouais, si tu veux. - Comment ça se fait que tu sois un garçon, je veux dire, potato, m'agresse Chloé. Je hausse les épaules. - J'imagine qu'il y a eu un bug à ma naissance. Ou avant, à ma conception, enfin quand mes parents m'ont fait, quoi. Quentin se retient de faire une blague à la con. De toute façon, on ne l'aurait pas entendue. Les questions surgissent de partout. - Tu vas te faire opérer ? - Mettre une bite ? - C'est possible, ça ? - T'es con. - Ben pourquoi ? - On va te couper les seins ? - Elle n'en a pas. Je l'ai bien vu en EPS. - Tu pourras avoir des enfants ? - Tes parents savent ? - C'est la seule question à laquelle je réponds. - Oui. Mes parents savent et ils comprennent. - Ben putain, marmonne Chloé. Et là, elle baisse les yeux. Je suis fier. - Tu vas changer de prénom ? - Ben non. Bonjour, je suis un garçon et je m'appelle Joséphine. Mais évidemment que je vais changer de prénom ! - Ça va, ne t'énerve pas. Tu as déjà choisi ? Je me concentre. - Rien... Merde. Pourquoi je n'arrive pas à le prononcer ? - A-dri-en. - Adrien ? - Oui. - Tiens, comme mon neveu. - Ah oui ? Super. - Oh, ça va. Ils font un pas en arrière, pour voir s'il me va, ce prénom. Brice trouve que ça fait vieux, Quentin, pas assez " couillu " et Thibaut, pas assez fantaisiste. Finalement, il ne me va peut-être pas si bien. Mais un prénom, ce n'est pas grave, j'ai encore le temps. Ce n'est pas le plus important. Le plus important, c'est de l'avoir annoncé au monde entier. Enfin, mon monde entier. Et de pouvoir m'exprimer au masculin, désormais.³³⁹

³³⁸ Grive, *It*, 132, 133.

³³⁹ Grive, *It*, 162-164.

Alongside the expressions of solidarity from his peers, Jo, who by now has chosen 'Adrien' - which I will use from now on to refer to the character - as his new chosen name, also receives the invaluable support of a number of adults who help the protagonist understand himself better and to reflect carefully on the psychological significance that the fire in his house has had on him. Among them is Claire, his drawing teacher at the Grande Chaumière, the Academy of Fine Arts in the Montparnasse district of Paris:

- Dessiner, c'est exprimer des sentiments, c'est une chose, mais parler aussi. S'auto-ri-ser. Parler. - Alors je commence à lui décrire cette sensation de ne pas être née dans le bon corps, comme un extérieur qui ne correspondrait pas avec un intérieur, de porter un masque depuis ma naissance. Elle ne me regarde pas, elle marche, les mains dans les poches, d'un pas pressé, un peu voûtée. Au bout de la rue, elle pousse la portetambour du Sélect, un café devant lequel je suis passée mille fois sans jamais y entrer. Elle se dirige vers une petite salle au fond. Je reprends mon récit, le récit de ma vie, en essayant de ne pas y mettre de colère, d'amertume, d'aversion pour mon propre sexe, des sentiments que je n'ai jamais eus. À la fin, ses yeux se ferment. - Tu crois que ta maison brûlée y est pour quelque chose ? - Non, j'étais comme ça avant. Elle les rouvre. - Moi je crois que si. Avec l'incendie, c'est comme si de toutes petites vis s'étaient desserrées en toi, libérant ta parole, la force de t'exprimer. Le signal attendu. - C'est possible, et puis qu'est-ce que ça change, de toute façon ? - Rien, c'est vrai. C'est la première fois que je me sens comme une grande personne, un adulte qui peut avoir raison sur un autre adulte. - Tu sais, il n'y a que toi pour connaître *la vérité de toi*. Personne ne peut t'aider autrement qu'en t'accompagnant. Il faut aller dans ton sens, ne pas te fragiliser. Je le sais parce que j'ai un ami à qui c'est arrivé. Il s'appelle Adrien. Il s'est beaucoup confié à moi pendant sa... sa métamorphose. Il est heureux aujourd'hui. - Alors, toi, tu sais ce que je dois faire. - Oui, je sais. Danser. - Danser ? - Danser tant que tu entendas la musique. Danser sans te demander pourquoi, même si tout te paraît insensé. Et dénouer peu à peu toutes ces choses durcies en toi. Tu as peur ? Tu as l'impression que tout va de travers, que le monde entier se trompe ? Voilà pourquoi il te faut danser. Danser tant que la musique durera. Fais de ton mieux. Il est là, le secret. - Je la quitte sur ces paroles étranges et sur sa proposition, acceptée, de me faire rencontrer son ami, Adrien, après les vacances.³⁴⁰

Drawing means expressing one's feelings, authorising oneself and speaking out. Claire encourages Adrien to express himself through his art and so he transfers his

³⁴⁰ Grive, *It*, 125-127.

masculine identity into his art too. This detail is particularly noteworthy since drawing is an activity that the protagonist performs very often in the novel. Grive in fact enriches the protagonist by giving him with this great passion. In fact, the only object Adrien saves from the fire is his sketchbook. The passage just quoted testifies to the crucial importance of Claire in Adrien's metamorphosis, acting as a mentor to him. In one short speech, Claire provides the protagonist with tools and pillars on which to base a greater understanding of himself and the effect certain experiences have on him, as well as practical philosophies to implement in his future life. When she learns of the fire that destroyed Adrien's house, Claire asks him if he thinks that this incident has had an influence on him. When Adrien says he does not think it affected him, she suggests that, on the contrary, the fire was needed to unscrew something within him. It allowed him to finally express his own self with his own words. The same possibility is put to Adrien by his psychologist:

- Il s'est passé quelque chose récemment dans ta vie ? - Quelque chose du genre quoi ? - Une rupture amoureuse, un déménagement. - Un incendie. - Où ça ? - Chez moi. Nous vivons à l'hôtel. Mais ne me dites pas que c'est à cause de ça que je veux être un garçon. Je veux être un garçon, parce que je suis un garçon ! - Je ne dis pas ça du tout. J'évoque la possibilité que l'incendie, l'explosion de tes repères, ait ouvert des vannes en toi, et te permette d'exprimer des choses enfouies très loin... Un peu ce que m'avait dit Claire, en fait. - ... Et parmi ces choses enfouies, l'impression de ne pas être ce que la nature a pourtant prévu pour toi. Le sentiment confus d'une erreur. Oui, celle d'être né garçon dans un corps de fille.³⁴¹

- Si on prend des hormones masculines, on devient vraiment de l'autre sexe ? - Ta question est intéressante mais, comment dire ? Je ne la comprends pas trop. Voyons... Il réfléchit. - Dis-moi, ta question, ce ne serait pas plutôt : " Où est mon vrai moi ? " "Je fais une moue du genre " votre remarque est excellente, c'est la bonne, la seule à se poser ". Je peux y aller, maintenant. - Penses-y. Rien ne t'oblige à me répondre aujourd'hui.³⁴²

Although presence of a psychologist recalls stereotypes, it is nevertheless true that in order to begin the journey of gender affirmation, an individual requires the approval of a psychologist, as seen in *Un'Alice come un'altra*. I note that this professional figure is here portrayed in a positive way since, although notion of

³⁴¹ Grive, *It*, 169, 170.

³⁴² Grive, *It*, 170, 171.

sending a queer teenager to a professional to 'cure' them may linger in the background (a theme to which I will return in a moment), the psychologist supports Adrien's well-being. The same benefit was observed in the case of Alice in Alice T.'s novel.³⁴³ What is more, both Adrien and Alice experience events that enable them to begin the journey of appropriating their true gender. In Adrien's case it is the fire in his house, while for Alice it is the coming out of an FtM person in the TV series *Private Practice*.³⁴⁴ I define such phenomena as 'gender triggers', precisely because they have the function of triggering the process of integration of the perceived gender, and abandoning that assigned at birth. Another adult who comes to Adrien's support is a friend of Claire's, named Adrien, a trans man, from whom the protagonist takes his chosen name. Here, the teenager begins to realise the bureaucratic hurdles he will face in asserting his gender.

- Tu as de la chance, poursuit-il, la procédure pour changer de sexe est plus simple qu'à mon époque. Tu n'as plus besoin de voir un avocat. Mais ça reste compliqué. Tu t'es renseigné un peu ? Tu sais ce que tu devras faire quand tu seras majeur ? - Oui, je vais devoir rencontrer un juge. Il me faudra lui apporter des preuves du " sexe vécu ". Une expression qui m'avait laissé perplexe avant de lire sur un site qu'il s'agissait de démontrer qu'on vit au quotidien comme étant du sexe qui n'est pas celui de sa naissance. Comment ? En montrant qu'on sait faire la cuisine, lancer une machine quand on veut être une femme ? Ou qu'on sait planter un clou, se repérer sur une carte, si on veut être un homme ? Je pourrais lui poser la question, mais son air sévère et sa façon de ne pas me regarder dans les yeux m'en découragent. - Attends, encore une chose et je te libère, me retient Adrien. Je sais que c'est difficile, mais ces questions, il se trouve qu'à moi, on ne me les avait jamais posées. Alors c'est pour te les éviter quand il s'agira d'affronter la suite. Je dis bien affronter parce que c'est une guerre que tu enclenches. Il faut être certain de vouloir la mener jusqu'au bout. - Je sais ! - Je me lève, il me rattrape par le bras. - Sache que j'ai juste changé d'enveloppe, mais qu'au fond je reste le même.³⁴⁵

The process of gender affirmation is a war, as is also said twice in *Un'Alice come un'altra*, and the protagonist will have to go all the way after starting it. He will have to provide absurd evidence to nonsensical demands, such as providing evidence of 'lived sex' in the past and 'lived sex' in the present. And the institutions

³⁴³ See page 114.

³⁴⁴ T., *Un'Alice come un'altra*, 21, 22.

³⁴⁵ Grive, *It*, 174-176.

where he will have to work through this bureaucratic process are grey and unfriendly, as are the people who work in them. The author provides an example of this on the day Adrien goes to court to explore the place where he will have to make his name change official.

Dans la rue, les regards sur moi - pressés, stylés, citadins, circonspects, indifférents - n'ont pas changé, c'est le mien qui n'est plus le même. Il est plus clair, plus enjoué. Le monde entier est devenu mon ami. Je n'ai plus peur de rien. Tant mieux, aujourd'hui est un grand jour pour moi. Je vais au tribunal. J'arrive devant un immeuble gris, avec devant deux gros cendriers gris, et des gens habillés de gris qui fument leur clope grise avec leur ennui imprimé en gris sur leur visage. Des gens à qui il va falloir que j'explique un jour qui j'ai été et qui je suis *vraiment*. Des gens qui vont me faire signer des papiers pour prouver que je suis bel et bien un garçon, enregistrer ma nouvelle identité. Dans le hall, je parcours la liste des différents services, pour m'imprégner des lieux et trouver l'inspiration. Car il y a une chose que je vais pouvoir faire très vite, c'est de trouver mon nouveau prénom et l'officialiser ici même, un jour, avec l'accord de mes parents. ³⁴⁶

Getting his parents' agreement proves to be difficult early on. Adrien's mother and especially his father are both against their son's gender affirmation. Of the numerous moments in which his parents demonstrate transphobic attitudes, I will quote three passages that are particularly problematic, and representative of the general attitude manifested by the parents towards their son. The first example highlights how Adrien appears undoubtedly male to the other people who see him, except to his parents, who call him a 'garçon manqué'.

Votre fils s'en remet ? Il n'a rien perdu qui ne soit " irremplaçable " ? À cet âge-là, on est sensible... - Notre fils ? Nous n'avons pas de fils. Le regard ahuri de M. Gilles passe de ma mère à moi, de moi à mon père, de mon père à ma mère, avant un lent retour sur moi. Et là, contrairement à chaque fois, aucune lumière ne s'allume pour dire " mais oui, bien sûr, suis-je distrait, où sont mes lunettes, cette bouche, ce nez, ce front ne peuvent être que ceux d'une fille ". Cela fait des années que je caressais de l'œil cette frontière, la passant et la repassant en imagination, grisé comme un enfant qui éteint et rallume l'interrupteur d'une lampe, nuit, jour, nuit, jour, mais cette fois, enfin, il semblerait bien que je viens de la franchir. - Je suis désolé. Je te présente mes excuses, dit-il, sincèrement gêné. Je vais pour le rassurer quand mon père lance en riant : - Oh, ce n'est pas grave, nous avons l'habitude ! - Mais son rire

³⁴⁶ Grive, *It*, 131, 132.

sonne faux et le visage de maman reste grave. Nous mangeons nos calzones en silence. C'est qu'on savoure, disent nos sourires. Mais c'est autre chose qui nous empêche de parler. C'est moi. - Jo a toujours été un garçon manqué, fait finalement ma mère, l'air de s'en excuser. Mon père se tourne vers moi. - Sa nouvelle coupe de cheveux n'arrange rien. Heureusement que ça repousse ! sourit-il en me donnant une petite tape derrière la tête. Mais revenons à notre sujet, notre fille (et là, il me regarde, les yeux plissés) a tout perdu, sa chambre était juste à côté du départ du feu dans la chambre de Mme Chopard.³⁴⁷

The parents' humiliation of their son in front of others results in a scene of public transphobia after Adrien comes out as a trans boy. Adrien must survive a sudden barrage of insulting and degrading questions about his identity, to which he constantly replies with a single and definitive phrase: 'Je suis un garçon'. Behind the strength of resistance of this unwavering affirmation lies his eutopian impulse. However, in the face of his parents' exhausting insistence, he decides to replace this phrase with another weapon, silence.

En mangeant, en sortant des toilettes, pendant que je dors, à tout moment, surtout quand je ne m'y attends pas, leurs questions absurdes, maladroitement, inattendues, abruptes, jaillissent en rafales. - Qu'est-ce que tu cherches en voulant être un garçon ? - Je ne veux pas être un garçon. Je suis un garçon. - Pourquoi tu veux changer ? - Je suis un garçon. - C'est pour pouvoir faire tout ce que tu veux ? Mais aujourd'hui, les garçons et les filles ont la même vie. Alors, dis-nous. - Je suis un garçon. Garçon. - Jo, tu vas trop loin ! - Ah bon ? Trop loin ? Je ne connais pas. C'est où ? - Tu veux ressembler à papa ? - Je suis un garçon. - Qu'est-ce que tu trouves que les garçons ont de plus que toi ? - Je suis un garçon, je répète comme une manivelle rouillée. Mais la phrase n'entre pas dans leurs têtes, alors je finis par ne plus la dire. - Tu as peur d'avoir des enfants ? - Tu crois qu'on ne t'aime pas comme fille ? - Tu as mal quelque part ? - Tu as l'impression qu'on ne s'occupe pas assez de toi ? - Tu nous reproches quelque chose ? - C'est à cause de Claire ? C'est elle qui t'a mis ces idées absurdes en tête ? On ne veut plus que tu la voies. Tu entends : plus jamais ! - Si tu veux jouer dans le film, on peut y réfléchir, tu sais ? - À quoi tu penses ? Leurs visages cernés attendent ma réponse. Mais pendant ces deux jours, je ne dis rien.³⁴⁸

The third and last example can be seen in the dialogue between the parents and the psychologist when Adrien is also present. Both parents show intense resistance to

³⁴⁷ Grive, *It*, 109-111.

³⁴⁸ Grive, *It*, 145, 146.

accepting their son's condition, continuing to use feminine pronouns and to call her by her *dead name*, Joséphine, belittling their son's gender identity by seeking the psychologist's support. The father is the parental figure who, as in other passages of the novel, displays the most obtuse attitude:

Un homme en costume nous fait signe d'entrer. Son bureau est propre, monacal, rassurant. Il me désigne ma place, juste devant lui, et nous examine l'un après l'autre, avant de s'arrêter sur moi et de lâcher d'une voix très douce et très grave : - Aujourd'hui, tu veux donc laisser parler le garçon en toi qui frappe à la porte depuis trop longtemps. [...] - Monsieur, vous allez un peu vite en besogne. Notre fille, Joséphine, traverse une période difficile. Mais de là à dire que... enfin, cette histoire de petit garçon... comment savoir si ça n'est pas juste une mode ? - Une mode ? - Oui, mon mari pense que la dysphorie de genre est à la mode, intervient ma mère. - Et vous, vous en pensez quoi, madame ? - Moi, je suis perdue. Trois dans son lycée veulent changer de sexe. Je trouve ça sidérant. Comment ça ? Je les connais ? Elle a appelé mon lycée ? C'est qui les deux autres ? Pourquoi elle ne me l'a pas dit ? Le psy se tourne vers moi. - Tu as quel âge ? - Quatorze ans. - C'est une décision très difficile, la plus difficile de toute ton existence. Moi-même, à mon âge, j'aurais du mal à la prendre. Ça me soulage qu'il dise ça, il me comprend donc un peu. - Aux États-Unis, embraie le psy, on donne à des enfants de huit ans un traitement pour bloquer leur puberté afin de gagner du temps. - Mais c'est horrible ! s'exclame maman. Je suis d'accord, moi aussi, je trouve ça horrible. - Peut-être, madame, mais plus tôt la transformation est réalisée, moins les risques de regretter sont grands. Il tourne son regard vers moi. - Tu n'aimes pas les gens de ton sexe de naissance ? - Pas du tout. Je suis un garçon, c'est tout. - Ta réponse est tranchée. Quand ce n'est pas clair, c'est beaucoup plus difficile. Tout le monde souffre. - Mon père lève les yeux au ciel et commence à s'énerver contre moi. - Vous, les jeunes de votre génération, vous ne savez pas ce que vous voulez. - Mais enfin, je sais très bien ce que je veux ! - Non, tu ne sais pas ce que tu veux ! Un jour, tu veux un iPhone, le lendemain, tu veux un Samsung. Un jour, tu veux manger bio, le lendemain, tu veux manger des Herta. Un jour, tu veux partir au ski, le lendemain à la campagne... Non, mais n'importe quoi ! De qui parle-t-il là ? Pas de moi, en tout cas. - Un jour, tu veux faire Histoire, le lendemain, tu veux faire Droit. Un jour, tu veux... Ma mère pose la main sur son bras. - Euh, je crois qu'on a saisi l'idée, mon chéri. - Bref, docteur, conclut mon père, légèrement essoufflé, vous me confirmez : à l'adolescence, on est perdus ? - Il est difficile de généraliser. - C'est ça, ne prenez pas de risques surtout, lui balance mon père, la mâchoire crispée. Ça commence à mal tourner. Alors je fixe un papier tombé à côté de la poubelle pour oublier où je suis. Il y a comme ça des conversations dont on est

exclu, dont on ne peut même pas imaginer de quoi il est question. Mais ce n'est pas le moment. Là, je comprends de quoi il est question. Il est question de moi.³⁴⁹

However, not all of Adrien's family welcomes his coming out with astonishment and hostility. His experience with his parents is counterbalanced by a much more serene moment with his grandmother Marie-Antoinette. Though Adrien was tense about his grandmother's response to the news, he is happy and serene after she shows only support and encouragement. What is more, she asks him if he has already chosen a new name.

- Bon, assez de mystères, vous allez me dire ce que vous faites ici ? Son regard passe de visage en visage et s'arrête sur le mien. - Je suis un garçon. Elle va pour dire mais non, tu es fille, mais devant nos airs à tous, elle comprend. - Tu veux dire que tu veux devenir un garçon et tout ? - Oui. "Et tout et tout, me faire opérer tout ça, on verra plus tard. Pour l'instant, je n'en sais rien. On va avancer étape par étape. Elle se ressert un verre, laisse passer un temps. Une goutte coule sur son menton. - Au fond, ça ne m'étonne pas. Je t'ai toujours connue garçon manqué. Tu jouais au foot, enfin tu me diras, les filles jouent au foot aujourd'hui, tu mettais des jeans, oui bon ce n'est pas trop un critère non plus, bref, tu n'étais pas féminine. Mais c'était ton style et il était super. Il était toi. - Je suis content qu'elle réagisse comme ça. Je sens que quelque chose se détend, cède. L'horloge de l'entrée sonne. Un, deux, trois...neuf coups. - Ce serait quoi, ton nouveau prénom ? À cette question, posée par ma mère, dans ce certain silence, je comprends qu'ils vont accepter. Un jour, pas du tout de suite, dans longtemps peut-être, mais ils vont accepter. - Rien. - Rien ? - J'ai mal prononcé. Je recommence. - Ad-rien. - Ah, Adrien, répètent-ils en chœur. - Adrien. Adrien de La Tourmente-Poiret. - Pourquoi Adrien ? Parce que c'est le premier prénom qui m'est venu à l'esprit. Parce que Adrien, l'ami de Claire qu'elle me fera rencontrer après les vacances.³⁵⁰

It is the only case of the novels in the analysis corpus in which an older family member is more supportive and encouraging than younger family members. In this case the grandmother is much more supportive of her grandchild's coming out than his parents. This, however, does not mean that the father and mother cannot also eventually begin a slow and gradual journey of absorbing the news that they have always had a son, integrating Adrien into their daily lives.

³⁴⁹ Grive, *It*, 166-169.

³⁵⁰ Grive, *It*, 157-159.

- Ah, tu arrives bien, mon lapin ! - Mon lapin, trésor, mon cœur, ou rien du tout, depuis le rendez-vous avec le psy. Je suis reconnaissant à mes parents de leurs efforts pour n'utiliser ni le féminin ni le masculin. Je considère ça comme une autorisation tacite. Mais j'ai besoin de marquer une pause dans ce mécanisme que j'ai enclenché. Tout va trop vite, j'ai l'impression de ne plus rien gérer. [...] - Une nouvelle vie va commencer. Tout m'échappe, le temps s'affole comme la roue dans la cage du hamster, comme la boussole sous l'orage. Il me faut une chose à laquelle me raccrocher. Mon courage. J'envoie un texto à Raphaëlle. - Emmène-moi là-haut.³⁵¹

Mention of Raphaëlle here, brings us to Adrien's love life, to which Grive devotes a small but significant space. It is clearly understood in the novel that Adrien only feels attraction towards girls but that he has yet to display any affection physically, nor does this happen in the novel. There are two moments which are worthy of mention in this respect. The first describes the protagonist's feelings and reflections during his observation of Prune Schouppe, daughter of the neighbouring couple who shelter Adrien's family immediately after the fire, as she undresses in the bedroom, in front of him.

Prune arrive quelques minutes plus tard. Elle se déshabille devant moi, comme ça, tranquille au son d'un air de reggae : " No Woman, No Cry ". Je la regarde se regarder dans le miroir, en culotte et soutif, tirer la peau de son ventre qu'elle trouve trop rond, se consoler avec ses cuisses fines, creuser ses joues, les gonfler, examiner son front avec un miroir grossissant, viser un bouton, sourire en grand, en petit, jouer avec ses cheveux brillants. C'est à elle, la collection dans la salle de bains ? Je me demande si je pourrais lui en emprunter. Elle ne me dira pas non. Elle est plutôt sympa, finalement. Et assez jolie, tout compte fait, même si elle n'est pas mon genre. Quel genre, d'ailleurs ? Les autres filles, je les ai toujours regardées comme si je n'en étais pas une moi-même. Elles m'intimident et m'attirent en même temps. Elles m'attirent comme un pays inconnu, pour leur mystère, en ce que nous avons à comparer, à nous apporter, comment nous pourrions nous compléter.³⁵²

La voilà qui commence à jouer avec ses lèvres, en tirant sur celle du bas, en sortant un peu sa langue, la passant sur ses dents. Pense-t-elle à un garçon ? Je me suis souvent imaginée embrassant une fille, mais je ne l'ai jamais fait et, de toute façon, aucune ne me l'a demandé. Les garçons, des baisers ils m'en ont proposé, que j'ai d'ailleurs acceptés sans me faire prier, mais cela ne m'a rien fait. Comme de sauter dans un lac de montagne et de ne pas sentir l'eau

³⁵¹ Grive, *It*, 181, 182.

³⁵² Grive, *It*, 57, 58.

sur la peau. Ou de vouloir s'embrasser contre la surface d'un miroir. Il manque quelque chose.³⁵³

The second moment, in the last pages of the novel, when Adrien's best friend Raphaëlle proposes a walk across the city's rooftops, she seems to flirt with Adrien, getting closer and closer to him. However, there, and then, Adrien does not feel ready to kiss anyone.

- Je ne te crois plus. Putain, tu veux changer de sexe, et tu as peur du vide, non mais allô quoi ! - Je me sens con. Elle le sent, elle s'en veut. - Tu vois, Jo, - dit-elle d'une voix adoucie, d'en haut, tu vois les autres avant d'être vu, c'est ça que j'adore. - Je comprends. - Non, on ne le comprend que quand on l'a vécu. Sa voix semble chargée de sous-entendus. - Moi par exemple, poursuit-elle, je t'ai vu avant les autres. - Ah oui ? Et tu m'as vu comment ? - Comme une belle personne, s'avance-t-elle un peu. Son visage s'approche du mien. Elle va m'embrasser là ? Mais je ne veux pas, moi ! Je ne suis pas prêt à ça. Pas encore. - Le masculin et le féminin réunis, poursuit-elle. Androgyne. Comme David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Prince qui ont décidé de ne pas choisir. - Elle avance la main et me retire un cil sur ma joue. Ah j'ai eu peur. - J'y arriverai un jour, à t'emmener là-haut, Jo, j'y arriverai. - On se quitte sur ce vœu pieux. Qui peut m'obliger à changer de sexe ? Ne peut-on pas être un garçon avec un sexe de fille ou une fille avec un sexe de garçon ?³⁵⁴

This closing last scene in the company of Raphaëlle, sitting on a high rooftop in Paris, enjoying the spectacle of the city has a romantic atmosphere.

In conclusion, the central themes of *It* are the protagonist's path of discovery, acceptance, and disclosure of his transmasc identity and the transphobia that the protagonist faces in his journey before and after coming out. The journey of growth and maturation, recognition and acceptance of his gender identity helps Adrien to develop greater confidence and self-understanding. The novel also highlights the different forms of transphobic discrimination that the protagonist experiences, both from peers and adults. These transphobic prejudices manifest themselves in several ways in the novel such as bullying, marginalisation, rejection, and disparaging comments. The relationship between Adrien and his parents and grandmother is also explored. The relationship with is also an important theme. The protagonist

³⁵³ Grive, *It*, 60.

³⁵⁴ Grive, *It*, 178, 179.

often must deal with family members' incomprehension or hostility towards his identity. The support of friends and the building of a support network are crucial in dealing with the turbulent period he goes through as he discovers and blossoms in his gender identity, mourns the loss of his home and lives a nomadic life. Reflecting more generally on Grive's novel, the author wanted to narrate the experience of a young trans boy by conveying the subtle and fundamental message that trans people do not 'become' trans but 'are' trans, in the sense that they have always been trans. There is, however, a clear difference between being trans and being aware of it. A trans person is always trans in their own existence. What differs in each person's experience is the moment in life when they discover it.

By means of conclusion, I list a summary of *It* in relation to the criteria established.

- Queer visibility = Adrien's gender incongruity is easily recognisable from the very beginning of the novel and the author makes this noticeably clear through the character himself.
- Queer assimilation = Adrien, as the only queer teenager in the novel, is represented in isolation and his transgender identity is the central theme of the novel.
- Queer consciousness/community = there is an absence of a queer community; Adrien is the only queer teenager in the novel. The only other queer person is Adrien, the trans man with whom the protagonist through his art teacher, Claire.
- Queerphobia = the protagonist suffers from transphobic acts in the form of verbal aggression and marginalisation by his schoolmates though only Chloé is named as a bully. He is also victim to verbal aggression and attempts at manipulation by his parents.
- Eutopian tension = the degree of Adrien's eutopian attitude can be seen in the strength and determination he demonstrates in the manifestation of his

transgender identity, the resistance and conflict he engages in with his parents, particularly his father, to assert and defend his identity, and the determination to go all the way in his gender affirmation journey.

4.2. *Romance*: Emancipation and Heartbreak

Romance (2020) by Arnaud Cathrine follows Vince, a 16-year-old Parisian boy, over the course of a school year. Like *Boy Queen*, this novel devotes significant space to the construction of a queer protagonist grappling with specific aspects of his teenage life. In this novel, queerphobia is still present but to a lesser extent than in the other case studies and without it being the pivot of the plot. On the other hand, as in Lester's work, here too I see an example of a single-parent family, in which Vince, like Robin, has a remarkably close and confidential relationship with his mother, a source of stability and haven, despite moments of tension. In *Romance*, the young protagonist's journey to self-discovery takes place through the relationships and experiences he weaves with those around him. His homosexuality is clear from the beginning of the novel and is presented as a piece in the complex puzzle of his personality and not as a central and characterising element. Vince is a teenager with a strong inclination for reading thanks to the influence of his mother who is a bookseller mother. He is gifted in the humanities and plans to enrol in the Philosophy course at university and dreams of a love affair with a boy. The latter is undoubtedly the trait the author emphasises most. Vince often fantasises about falling in love with a boy with whom he can have a dreamy romance. His urgent need for a sexual and romantic relationship is made even more evident by the infatuation he feels every time he sees a boy he likes on the street. All these boys are noted down by Vince in his personal diary, in a list entitled *Garçons volés* ('Stolen Boys'). Vince describes these boys physically in detail and fantasises about them, imagining a possible sexual/love relationship with each one. Furthermore, the protagonist has a real obsession with an American gay pornographic film actor, Oliver Saxon, whom he mentions several times throughout the novel and with whom he even manages to speak briefly. On the side of these imaginative and

virtual relationships, Vince tries to have a serious and real date with one of his schoolmates, Pablo. Unfortunately, the date does not end well.

J'approche mon visage du sien. Je cherche ses lèvres, pose les miennes un peu à côté. Son haleine me parvient : quelque chose comme un souvenir d'ail, ou d'algues ? Sa langue entre dans ma bouche. J'ordonne à la mienne de rappliquer. Par politesse. C'est un baiser plutôt bref, je crois. Mais qui me paraît interminable. Pablo promène de gauche à droite le faisceau blafard de son portable. - T'inquiète, on va le retrouver. Il est joyeux. Il a l'air très heureux du moment que nous venons de passer ensemble dans la rosée boueuse du parc. Moi, je ne veux plus embrasser personne de ma vie.³⁵⁵

Again, one of the central themes of the novel is the relationship between Vince and his best friend Octave. The two have a symbiotic relationship, spending most of their time together, both in and out of school. Their relationship is initially platonic, with Vince feeling nothing on his side and Octave keeping his sexual relationship with Vince a secret while he is seeing their classmate, Louise. Things change abruptly while they are on a Christmas trip with their mothers to the island of Fuerteventura. In a race they crash into a hedge, finding themselves clinging to each other and Vince feels sexually aroused towards his friend for the first time. The awkward situation makes him run away from Octave and over the next few days he begins to observe his body from a sexual point of view. In the meantime, he discovers that Octave has read his secret diary with the list of *Garçons volés*. Vince is unable to imagine why Octave read his diary, nor does he dare to ask him. However, the reader is already given a clue as to Octave's interest in Vince at this stage in the novel. In fact, a little later in the novel, the accumulated tension between the two suddenly erupts into a sexual relationship:

Le souffle d'Octave près de ma nuque. Son bras replié à quelques centimètres de moi. Son corps allongé, le mouvement d'un pied, de son profil sur l'oreiller. Et puis, sans que je sache comment ça arrive (je sais juste que *ça arrive*), sa main se pose à plat en bas de mon dos. Une poignée de secondes. Elle remonte le long de ma colonne. Elle redescend. J'ouvre les yeux. Je suis tout à fait réveillé à présent. Je ne sais pas ce qui se passe et en même temps je le sais très bien. Je sais que tout ne tient qu'à un geste : celui de me retourner vers Octave. Ce

³⁵⁵ Arnaud Cathrine, *Romance* (Robert Laffont, 2020), 131.

que je fais. À partir de là, tout va très vite : il me serre contre lui, je le serre aussi, nos bouches se cherchent, se trouvent, nos lèvres se collent, nos langues se parlent pour la première fois, ce n'est pas du tout comme à la piscine quand il m'avait réanimé en me faisant du bouche-à-bouche : là, son souffle a un parfum dont je ne savais rien, je connaissais son haleine, depuis le temps, mais pas le parfum de son souffle, le souffle vient de loin, du ventre, et ce parfum m'étourdit, nous bandons l'un contre l'autre, je retire mon caleçon, il retire le sien, sa bite se colle sur mon ventre, elle est chaude, je la caresse, sa peau est douce, je quitte la bouche d'Octave, j'embrasse le bas de son cou, ses mamelons, son nombril, je respire ses poils, je prends sa bite dans ma bouche, sensation d'un letchi sur ma langue, je le suce, Octave gémit, m'encouragement, puis c'est lui qui me le fait, *oh my god*, un truc de fou, je caresse sa nuque à bascule, puis j'ai encore envie de l'embrasser, je veux encore sa bouche, je veux tout, encore, encore.³⁵⁶

First of all, it is important to note that *Romance* is one of the two novels³⁵⁷ containing explicitly sexual vocabulary to describe an intercourse between two queer teenagers in this corpus (and other studies). The corpus for this thesis is particularly poor in this type of representation. This finding suggests that, at the authorial/editorial level, there is a conservative view of the 'appropriateness' of queer sex in YA novels. Language in the descriptions of sex scenes is particularly controlled, which results in the absence of informal, vulgar, and popular sexual language. Indeed, apart from *Romance*, not even the formal terminology for naming the sexual organs during the scenes in question ('penis', 'vagina') could be found in any of these novels. Reference to sex, if present, is often achieved through periphrases, metaphors, and similes. This is most likely to soften the impact of scenes of masturbation and / or sex. While Vince discovers that he has deeper feelings for his friend, Octave becomes increasingly detached, trying to make him understand that he does not reciprocate Vince's love. This leads the protagonist to experience moments of intense frustration, which will find their first climax in the two most queerphobic episodes of the novel.

Qu'ils l'aient fait juste après la cantine ou juste avant le début du cours ne change rien : ils l'auront fait devant celles et ceux qui travaillaient là ; ça a dû glousser, ricaner, frémir de plaisir à l'idée de nous voir entrer. Je ne sais pas qui, Lilian au moins, Lilian j'en suis sûr, avec

³⁵⁶ Cathrine, *Romance*, 180, 181.

³⁵⁷ The other one is *Apprivoiser l'été*.

la complicité d'une bonne partie de la classe, celles et ceux qui les auront vus faire, celles et ceux qui auront découvert en même temps que nous ces mots écrits sur toute la hauteur et la largeur du tableau. Bingo : nous pénétrons dans la salle, Octave et Gabriel devant, Rokia et moi derrière, et je devine avant même de voir : un silence particulier imprègne la pièce, le silence qu'on perçoit dans l'espace sans doute : là où il n'y a pas d'air. Quelques rires étouffés. Je me cogne dans Gabriel, je suis le regard d'Octave, statufié à quelques mètres du tableau, c'est bien pour lui et moi, ce cadeau.

Octave
suce la bite
de Vince

Octave
Vince
gros
PD

Après, tout va très vite : je fonce au fond de la classe et je me jette sur Lilian, la paume de la main à plat sur sa gueule et l'autre autour de son cou, ils sont plusieurs à tenter de m'éloigner, de me faire basculer en arrière, il y a la voix stridente de Dassin qui découvre tout en même temps : les mots au tableau, la baston, et la voix des autres, je ne sais pas qui, ça crie, pour que je lâche Lilian, pour que je me calme, mais je ne me calme pas, je lui envoie un genou dans les couilles, il se casse en deux, quelqu'un me ceinture et me traîne en arrière, je trébuche et me rétame, Lilian gueule, Dassin gueule, tout le monde gueule, je me relève, une armada de paires de jambes me sépare de Lilian à terre, des poignes embusquées s'apprêtent à me retenir pour le cas où je retournerais sur le ring.³⁵⁸

This scene is followed by Octave's violent reaction to Vince:

[...] Octave se met à courir, je cours aussi, je l'appelle encore, il bifurque aux chiottes et s'enferme, je frappe à la porte et lui ordonne d'ouvrir, je tambourine, il finit par déverrouiller, je le serre dans mes bras, ça cogne dans nos cages thoraciques, je le serre de toutes mes forces, je n'ai plus que ça pour me défendre de ce qui vient d'arriver, mon corps contre le sien, l'odeur de son cou. Puis Octave se détache de moi lentement. Ses yeux sont rouges. D'une main, il me fait reculer de quelques pas, sans cesser de me fixer. Et j'entends avant d'entendre, je sais les mots qu'il va prononcer avant qu'il n'ait à le faire, ces mots qui vont répondre à ceux écrits au tableau. Droit dans mes yeux, il dit : - À partir de maintenant, ça n'existe pas. Je ne

³⁵⁸ Cathrine, *Romance*, 259-262.

comprends pas. Et, en même temps, je ne comprends que trop ce qu'il veut me dire. - Nous, ça n'existe pas. Ça n'a jamais existé. Il me pousse brutalement, avec l'intention de me faire tomber. Une seconde fois : je m'écroute à terre. Moi, le gay-baston, le gay toujours- furieux, le gay-tapant-pour-un-oui-ou-pour-un-non, je sens alors les baskets d'Octave me bombarder, je me protège le visage et j'attends que ça s'arrête (mais ça continue), les coups dans le ventre dans le dos dans les tibias dans les avant-bras dans le cul.³⁵⁹

Lilian is the bully of the novel. First, it is remarkable to observe how Vince reacts with physical violence against Lilian. This type of reaction is not particularly foreign to novels of this specific genre. For instance, in *Un'Alice come un'altra*, the protagonist physically responds to transphobic provocations. Physical violence represents one of Vince's various (and legitimate) configurations of the eutopian impulse in the novel. The second noteworthy aspect is the level of internalised homophobia,³⁶⁰ i.e. the contempt that a queer person feels for himself due to his queerness, due to the queerphobic social narrative. Although not directly addressed, it is plausible to suggest that Octave is a bisexual character, given that he maintains his relationship with Louise while secretly exploring other areas of his sexuality with Vince. Indeed, in Cathrine's later novels (*Romance* is the first book in a trilogy that includes *Les nouvelles vagues*, 2021 and *Octave*, 2022) this assumption is confirmed. It is therefore not surprising that Octave flees the classroom in reaction to Lilian's intentionally homophobic outing. Instead, it is very surprising that, having taken refuge in the school toilets with Vince, he brutally beats him up to vent his anger, as if the protagonist were somehow responsible for the situation. Octave's sudden physical aggression towards Vince would thus seem to be a consequence of his internalised homophobia, which leads him to impose silence on his best friend about their sexual relationship and then, when he is outed, to blame him for his attraction to the male gender, as if it were a morally reprehensible. Thus, Octave projects the hatred he feels towards himself onto Vince, feeling entitled to physically assault him. In this way, I see how social queerphobia can play out at its most extreme, turning one queer person against another queer person. This last

³⁵⁹ Cathrine, *Romance*, 262, 263.

³⁶⁰ Liu et al., 'Effect of perceived public stigma on internalized homophobia, anticipated stigma, shame, and guilt: Outness as a moderator.', 188.

observation increases the understanding of the seriousness of this scene, as it further informs the reader of the worrying level of consequences that internalised homophobia can bring. Lilian's character is certainly one of the most striking cases in relation to this topic. Well before the queerphobic scene at school, Lilian and Vince had already had a similar confrontation. At a party organised between schoolmates at Octave's house, when Vince chooses songs to play, Lilian shouts at him to stop choosing 'tarlouze' ('faggot') music and Vince responds with a punch.

De loin, Lilian me fixe avec un agacement qui me réjouit. Je chante en play-back le refrain, en prenant soin de bien articuler, *VIRILITÉ ABUSIVE*. - C'est quoi ce truc de merde ?! Lilian, le retour. - T'aimes pas ? Je lui adresse mon plus beau sourire. Il donnerait tout pour que je le craigne, mais je continue à balancer la tête au rythme de " Kid ". - Va te resservir un verre de jus d'orange pour passer le temps, dis-je. - T'en as encore beaucoup, des trucs de tarlouze, comme ça ? - Répète : j'ai pas bien compris ? - T'as très bien entendu. - Je voudrais l'entendre une seconde fois pour être sûr. Il lâche un rire sardonique. - T'as dit tarlouze ou partouze ? - T'as un problème, toi ! crache-t-il. - Moi ? Non. Crois-moi : le secret, dans ces cas-là, c'est de frapper le premier.³⁶¹

A few days after this event, their high school principal Saligaut summons them both to his office, ordering them to apologise to each other about what happened at the party.

On toque à la porte. - Entrez ! Je sens un souffle refroidir ma nuque. C'est lui. Je ne me retourne pas. Je perçois sa silhouette qui s'assoit sur la chaise à côté de moi. - Vincente, Lilian : saluez-vous. Nous nous serrons la main vite fait. Il a un coquard à l'œil droit et les mâchoires contractées. - Je voudrais que chacun d'entre vous présente ses excuses à l'autre. Vous avez tous les deux passé la ligne jaune : Lilian en insultant ton camarade, Vincente en ayant recours à la violence physique à son encontre. Qui commence ? - C'est lui qui a commencé, dis-je dans un rôle de protestation. Saligaut plante ses yeux dans ceux de Lilian. Le directeur trouve-t-il - derrière son paravent d'arbitre - une sorte de réparation à ce qu'il n'a jamais connu lui-même en pareil cas lorsqu'il était lycéen ? Je crois que oui. - Je m'excuse, Vince...(Toute petite voix.) Saligaut se tourne vers moi. - Qu'en dis-tu ? - J'accepte ses excuses. Je regarde Lilian du coin de l'œil : il fixe un point au loin à travers la vitre. J'ajoute à son intention : - Il ne faut pas que tu aies peur d'être gay. - J'ai pas peur ! - Yes. Tu as très peur. - Vincente, à toi, suggère le directeur. - Je m'excuse de t'avoir frappé. - Lilian ? - J'accepte. - Bien, conclut Saligaut. Et

³⁶¹ Cathrine, *Romance*, 19.

pour finir, je vous conseille de méditer cette phrase d'Albert Camus : " Un homme, ça s'empêche. "Parfois, Saligaut me fait penser à un curé. - Vous pouvez regagner votre salle de classe."³⁶²

In the last lines of the scene, it is interesting to note how Vince turns to Lilian and invites him not to be afraid of being gay. This exchange suggests that Vince intuitively senses his schoolmate's homosexual orientation and, by venturing to suggest it to Lilian directly, he confirms his intuition. In fact, in the rest of the trilogy, in addition to Octave's bisexual orientation, Lilian's homosexuality is also revealed. He hates and represses his homosexuality so much that he projects his contempt onto other queer peers and translates his emotions into queerphobic bullying. Ultimately, Octave and Lilian are two characters who demonstrate the heavy psychic and behavioural consequences of internalised homophobia. Vince, on the other hand, an avowed gay man, is much stronger than them in this respect, resisting this queerphobic social narrative. He emerges unscathed from his experience with Lilian, while he is shocked and heartbroken by Octave's sudden attack in the school toilets, not only because it is his best friend but also because he is deeply in love with Octave. It must be specified, however, that the ensuing depression that Vince faces is not due to Octave's queerphobic behaviour – queerphobia is here responsible for Octave's estrangement from Vince – but to the heartbreak that arose as a result of his Octave's rejection.

The last part of the novel is devoted to Vince's attempts to heal the fragile state he finds himself in, finding in adults the most supportive allies. First, he visits his attending physician, Dr Adelstein, to whom he recounts in detail the symptoms of his malaise:

- Alors que se passe-t-il, mon jeune ami ? Je me suis entraîné sur le chemin, pour faire tenir ça en deux ou trois phrases, les symptômes on verra après, d'abord le nerf de la guerre. - C'est un garçon. Il m'a quitté. J'étais très amoureux. Depuis je meurs. Elle esquive un sourire un peu étonné, méditant la solennité de ma déclaration. Pas de rhume de saison, pas d'otite récidivante, juste la mort. - Je vais plus au lycée depuis une semaine. Je pars le matin, je laisse ma mère ouvrir la librairie et je rentre à l'appartement en loucedé. - Tu fais quoi toute la journée ? - Je mesure sur une échelle de 1 à 10 le cafard dans ma poitrine. Je pleure environ

³⁶² Cathrine, *Romance*, 58-60.

toutes les trois heures. - Qu'est-ce qui t'a décidé à venir me voir ? - Le proviseur a appelé ma mère. Elle m'a gaulé. - Là, tu dirais que le cafard est à combien sur ton échelle de mesure ? - Comment se passent tes nuits ? - Mes nuits ? C'est... n'importe quoi, docteur Adelstein. Je m'endors à vingt et une heures et je me réveille en sursaut à une heure trente. Toujours une heure trente. Je vais à la cuisine. Je mange tout ce que j'ai été incapable d'ingurgiter au dîner, du camembert, des carrés de chocolat au beurre salé, du pain durci et de la confiture d'oignon. Je stationne dans le salon comme un mec qui ne reconnaîtrait pas l'endroit où il habite, je suis aussi paumé que mon chat Alzheimer, je finis par me repérer à l'air encore pollué par le tabac de ma mère. Je retourne dans ma chambre et je détaille les meubles, les objets un à un, je sais pas pourquoi je fais ça, ça m'apporte rien. Avec la fatigue accumulée, j'ai l'impression d'avoir un masque brûlant sur le visage et du givre sous la peau. [...] Je cherche à me réchauffer contre son corps, ma main cherche sa cuisse, pardon de vous parler comme ça, docteur Adelstein, mais je ne peux pas dire les choses autrement, ma main cherche le profil de ses fesses, son torse bombé, la plante de ses pieds. Je tâte son fantôme, j'empoigne son vide. Je me retourne, j'occupe tout le lit en diagonale, comme j'ai toujours fait. Comme ça, pendant des heures. Et puis, je finis par sombrer. Mon corps prend les commandes et m'oblige à disparaître, enfin. Mais là, le pire est à venir. Le matin. Quand je me réveille. Je m'étire. Et, brusquement, je me souviens. J'avais oublié que lui et moi c'était fini. C'est comme si on me l'annonçait. Je n'en reviens pas. J'ai envie de mourir. Et c'est ce que je commence à faire, ça va me prendre toute la journée : je meurs. - Le docteur Adelstein acquiesce brièvement. - Tu sais comment on appelle cette maladie ? Je fais non. - Si, tu le sais. Un chagrin d'amour. - Et il faut prendre quoi comme médicament ? Elle a un petit rire affectueux. - Le traitement de fond, c'est le temps. [...] - Au moins, on sait que tu as un cœur qui fonctionne parfaitement.³⁶³

Faced with Vince's poignant tale, the doctor reiterates the diagnosis of the protagonist's condition: unrequited love. Adelstein therefore assures him that he is not suffering from any illness and confirms, on the other hand, that he has a perfectly functioning heart. The only solution for what he is experiencing is time, the patient flow of which will eventually cure him. His mother also comes to his rescue in her own way, advising him to read, as a good bookseller, some novels about broken hearts, to encourage the catharsis of his heavy feelings:

- Tu parles tout seul ? - Ma mère, les yeux mi-clos, sur le seuil. Elle fait un pas, observe les livres éparpillés à mes pieds. - C'est quoi ce bordel... Il est deux heures du matin, Vince. - Je cherche un livre pour oublier Octave. Ton Yourcenar, je le connais par cœur à force... Elle esquisse un sourire attendri et s'approche de l'amas au milieu du milieu duquel se tiennent

³⁶³ Cathrine, *Romance*, 270-273.

mes deux pieds nus. Elle se penche, examine les couvertures et les titres. - J'aime beaucoup cette phrase, murmure-t-elle. - Laquelle ? - *Ton Yourcenar, je le connais par cœur à force.* J'adore mon fils. - Mais ton fils est malheureux. Je lis lequel ? Elle s'accroupit. - *L'Agrume*, peut-être. - Ça raconte quoi ? - Une histoire d'amour un peu... ratée. - La mienne était cruellement courte mais extraordinairement belle. - Je suis heureuse de t'entendre en parler au passé. - Dans ma tête, c'est toujours au présent. Désespérément au présent. - Oui, lis *L'Agrume*. Elle a une très jolie distance sur ce qui lui arrive. Ça te fera du bien. - Maman... t'as eu combien de chagrins d'amour dans ta vie ? Elle se relève, manifestement embarrassée par la question. - Je n'ai jamais compté... - En gros ? - Deux ou trois ? Comme tout le monde. - Mon père, c'était un chagrin d'amour ? - Non. - Tu me raconteras un jour ? - Je te raconterai le jour où tu voudras vraiment savoir. Est-ce que là, tu veux vraiment savoir ? - Je ne sais pas... - Le jour où tu seras sûr. - Tu as parlé d'Octave et moi avec Hélène ? - Hélène a très bien compris ce qui se passait. Depuis le début. Je prends *L'Agrume*. - Il va falloir retourner au lycée après les vacances, Vince. - Je veux pas le revoir ! - Un jour, tu regarderas Octave et tu te diras : c'est étrange, il y a quelque temps j'étais amoureux de lui et, maintenant, il ne me fait plus aucun effet... - Et si ça n'arrivait pas ? Pourquoi on ne pourrait pas aimer la même personne toute sa vie ? - Non, il faut être deux pour faire une histoire, Vince. Ton amour va finir par s'épuiser.³⁶⁴

Although improving the quality of life of queer characters takes time, the appearance of the eutopian impulse itself remains a crucial step in achieving it. Vince, for instance, shows this not only in opposition to Lilian's homophobia but also in the search for tools to cure him of his depression. This depression is a response to Octave's rejection but also to his estrangement from his friend due to the complex homophobic situation at school, without which Octave would not necessarily distance himself from the protagonist. In any case, Vince gradually manages to overcome his depression thanks to the affection of the – mostly adult – community of people around him. As in the case of Alice, here too the protagonist is not represented within a community of queer peers, yet a circle of support and affection exists and proves decisive for his recovery. Indeed, after a brief time Vince reopens the Grindr app to chat and meet new guys. He even manages to talk to Octave, even though he treats him particularly coldly, to convince him not to leave school because of the homophobic incident. Vince's attempt to convince Octave is testimony to the eutopian impulse present in *Romance*.

³⁶⁴ Cathrine, *Romance*, 280-282.

C'est Vince. Silence. - Qu'est-ce que tu veux ? La voix d'Octave grésille dans l'interphone.
 - Que tu m'ouvres. - Pourquoi ? - Je veux te parler. Silence. Son souffle, soupir. - Je peux pas, là. - J'ai froid ! - Rentre chez toi. - Pas avant de t'avoir parlé. - Parlé de quoi ? - Je sais que tu quittes le lycée. Silence. - Pour aller où ? Silence. - Pourquoi je viendrais pas dans le même ? On serait tous les deux ! - T'as pas compris, Vince. Je pars vivre chez mon père. Silence. Affligé. - Montpellier ? - Oui. Voix presque inaudible. - Octave, tu peux pas faire ça ! Voix étranglée. - Rentre chez toi, Vince. - Mais je veux te voir ! - Pas moi. - Comment tu peux décider ça ? - J'ai rien décidé. C'est comme ça. - J'ai froid, putain ! Ouvre ! - Salut.³⁶⁵

This scene, in the last pages of the book, further convinces me that Vince is the teenager with the strongest and most mature personality in the plot. He is proud of his own identity and does not live in the shadows. He stands up for himself, is curious in exploring the potential of his emotional world with other teenagers, is aware of his own feelings, loyal to his friends, and able to ask for help if necessary. His maturity is also evident in his political consciousness, as he argues with Principal Saligaut, also gay and an adult ally who is supportive of Vince, about the dignity that homosexual people hold and with which they deserve to be treated in society:

- Lilian m'a dit que je passais de la musique de " tarlouze ". Saligaut est visiblement consterné. Comment expliquer cette solidarité ? Le directeur est-il sensible à ma cause en raison du nom pourri qui lui a valu de se faire insulter lui aussi ou Saligaut est-il... - Monsieur Saligaut, vous êtes gay ? C'est sorti tout seul. - Tout à fait. Je ne saurais admettre de tels comportements homophobes dans mon établissement. - Bonne chance. Il se penche au-dessus du bureau, comme s'il s'apprêtait à me faire une confidence. - Je précise entre parenthèses, mon cher Vincente, que répondre à la violence verbale par la violence physique n'est jamais une solution. Ça m'aurait étonné que je n'aie pas droit à un petit couplet moralisateur...- Je parviens pas à me maîtriser dans ces cas-là. - Tu as déjà pensé à faire de la boxe, par exemple ? - Je sais : ça défoule. Ma mère me l'a déjà proposé mais ça me soûle. - Saligaut m'adresse un regard réprobateur. - Ça me... m'ennuie. Il semble réfléchir à une solution alternative. - C'est le monde qui doit changer, monsieur Saligaut ! Il sourit. - Je suis très sérieux ! Le monde doit être post-gay ! Il fronce les sourcils. - Qu'est-ce que tu entends par... post-gay ? - Un monde où les homosexuels pourraient se définir par autre chose que leur sexualité. J'ai lu plein de trucs là-dessus. - Le droit à l'indifférence ? - Moi, ça me gave, euh, ça m'ennuie d'être différent, d'être un *problème*. Je ne suis pas un *problème*. Et vous non plus. Et je ne suis pas

³⁶⁵ Cathrine, *Romance*, 294, 295.

que gay. Même si j'y pense beaucoup. - Tu me parles d'un monde idéal, là...- Il faut forcer le monde à être idéal ! Comme il faut forcer les gens à respecter la loi : ce que m'a dit Lilian est interdit par la loi ! Et d'abord, je lui demande pas de m'accepter, il n'y a pas à lui *demander* la charité : il m'accepte et c'est tout. Je ne suis pas un problème, je vous dis : il n'est pas question de m'accepter, ni vous ni Pablo. - Parce que Pablo Buisson est gay ? - Vous aviez pas remarqué, peut-être ?! Il lâche un rire affectueux. - Et il le sait ? - Quoi ? - Qu'il est gay ? - J'en ai jamais parlé avec lui. Mais il sait que je sais qu'il sait que nous savons. - Nous ?! - C'est une expression, mais je me perds dedans à chaque fois. - Toujours est-il qu'avant de devenir une catégorie de la population " indifférenciée ", il faut *s'affirmer*, Vincente. Il y a un combat politique à poursuivre. - C'est ce que j'ai fait samedi soir. - Autrement qu'avec les poings ! Tu sais que tu as cassé une dent, je suppose ? Je fais oui de la tête. - Tu n'es pas fier de toi, quand même ? - Je me sens coupable. - Tout de même. - Sauf que jusque-là, c'est lui qui gagne ! Je me sens coupable alors que si ce bâtard d'homophobe ne l'était pas à la base - coupable - rien ne serait arrivé ! - Tu es mûr pour le combat politique, me félicite-t-il.³⁶⁶

Vince's speech to the principal fits with one of the ideas underpinning the study of this thesis: the problematic nature of the society's treatment of queer people. The principal reproaches the protagonist for the use of violence in managing the response to a queerphobic attack. To this injunction, Vince responds that it is the queerphobic society that should be blamed, not him, who is the victim of it. It is the world that must change, finally ceasing to see queer people as a problem so that 'les homosexuels pourraient se définir par autre chose que leur sexualité'. A world in which queer people do not have to ask non-queer people to accept them but in which the latter must accept and recognise the former, simply because they exist. This ideal world is also defined by the protagonist as 'post-queer', a solution that echoes this thesis' notion of 'Queertopia'. The protagonist, being particularly mature for his age, possesses an overriding political awareness of his identity in the world. In this respect, Vince is remarkably similar to Alice in *Un'Alice come un'altra*. He shifts the responsibility for queerphobia from its victim, who is required to be accepted by the dominant social group as if their own minority existence were somehow problematic, to its perpetrator, demanding that society change its view of queer people, stop ostracising them and recognise their human dignity and disavow any misplaced notions of hierarchy. The discussion so far in this paper shows that there

³⁶⁶ Cathrine, *Romance*, 56-58.

is still a long way to go on this issue in YA literature. On the other hand, of all the novels observed up to this point, *Romance* certainly demonstrates the most progress, coming closer than the other novels to the Queertopia criterion, according to the categories of analysis and evaluation advanced in this study.

Below I offer a summary of *Romance* according to the established criteria of analysis.

- Queer visibility = the homosexuality of the protagonist Vince is clear from the beginning of the novel and is not the dramatic pivot of the story.
- Queer assimilation = only Vince and Pablo experience their homosexuality as one among many aspects of their personality while the other queer teenagers, Lilian and Octave, never admit their queerness, and attempt to keep this a secret until the end of the novel, making their queerness a distinguishing feature of their characters.
- Queer consciousness/community = unfortunately, in the novel there is no real queer community within which Vince is embedded.
- Queerphobia = in general, there is an exceptionally proficient level of support and integration of Vince's queerness in the family and at school. Nevertheless, there are some serious homophobic incidents, featuring Lilian when he orders Vince at a party to stop choosing "faggot" songs and when she writes homophobic insults on the class blackboard about Vince and Octave, outing the latter. Octave punches Vince out of anger and shame caused by Lilian's outing. Elevated levels of internalised homophobia are seen in both Octave and Lilian.
- Eutopian tension = Vince is certainly the only one among all the queer teenagers in *Romance* to show straightforward signs of the eutopian impulse. In response to Lilian's queerphobic behaviour, physically assaults him twice. This impulse is also demonstrated when he tries to support

Octave in the school bathroom and when he tries to convince him not to leave school because of it. The eutopian tension also manifests itself in the moments when Vince asks his mother and Dr. Adelstein for help with his depression caused by his estrangement from Octave. Finally, but perhaps most impressively, Vince's political positioning in his conversation with principal Saligaut is a clear expression of eutopian impulse as he affirms society's responsibility to change its attitude towards queer people by eradicating queerphobia, integrating queer people and recognising their equal human dignity.

4.3. *Apprivoiser l'été*: the Road to Queertopia

Apprivoiser l'été by Marie Boulier, published in 2022, is a novel that considers the queer body at both an intimate and political level, or rather, in terms of an individual's own personal relationship with their body and in terms of the queer body in society. The main protagonist of this book is 15-year-old Olivia, and the plot takes place during the summer, in the south-east of France, somewhere in the region between Montélimar, Avignon and the Ardèche national park. Olivia is a bored teenager who has no idea how to spend the summer and, initially, is completely out of touch with her sexuality. Moreover, the protagonist experiences strong discomfort regarding her body; an element that will soon prove to be central to the narrative. When the issue is first touched upon, Olivia expresses herself in these terms.

Après l'épisode des règles, pour m'éviter les taquineries de mes frères et l'enthousiasme gênant de mon père, j'avais écrasé ma poitrine dans une brassière ultra serrée, avait opté pour des t-shirts plus larges et n'avais rien dit à personne. À part à So, évidemment. " Bientôt le boule ! " hurlait-elle de rire, elle qui, a contrario, bourrait ses soutiens-gorges vides de coton hydrophile pour un effet push-up. N'empêche que sur la plage des Tounus, on ne peut pas faire illusion. Je suis la seule à entasser les couches de tissu sur mon corps replet. Chacun semble assumer avec naturel son ventre rebondi, sa fesse ramollie, ses seins pointus et son sexe poilu. Il a raison sur un point, mon père. Observer les autres ne m'aide pas particulièrement à accepter mon corps mais ça le normalise. Je le perçois unique et singulier, parmi les autres corps uniques et singuliers. Je le répète à Sonia à chaque fois que je reviens

d'ici : qu'on s'en fout de ses p'tits boobs, qu'on s'en fout de sa petite taille, qu'elle est belle comme un cœur et que le regard des garçons ne définit pas qui elle est. C'est l'objet de l'éternel débat entre nous, parce que moi je n'ai que de la gueule. Je répète que nos corps sont parfaits tels qu'ils sont mais je planque le mien. L'ambivalence de la vie, dirait ma mère, le regard loin, certainement les pensées ailleurs derrière ses phrases toutes faites.³⁶⁷

In the first pages of the book, Olivia reveals the deep discomfort she feels because of her large breasts in an ultra-tight top. By contrast, her friend Sonia, for example, wears a push-up bra to give the impression of having larger breasts, which suggests that she also experiences her own form of discomfort with her body, but for the opposite reason to the protagonist. At the beach, in fact, the protagonist is uncomfortable undressing or completely avoids undressing altogether, envying the people around her who do not seem to have any problem showing off their bodies without being particularly attractive and/or athletic. The relationship with her own body begins to change when she meets Éole at the beach; a 19-year-old teenager who is enthusiastic about dancing. Éole, a gender-neutral name used in both masculine and feminine form, presents themselves as a non-binary person. In fact, from the clothes they wear and their physical appearance, Olivia is unable to define their gender. When it is the protagonist's turn to introduce herself, she uses the name by which she is often called by the people who know her: Olive. Éole remarks that they both have gender-neutral names casing Olive to reflect on her identity. The meeting is particularly positive for Olive, so much so that she invites Éole and their comrades from the political dance collective Queer Moustache to take part in a village festival to be held shortly thereafter. At the festival, Olive admires them as they dance, amazed by the non-conformist aesthetic presented by Éole and the other teenagers in the collective.

Éole est venu-e accompagné-e. Un groupe de personnes tout aussi atypiques l'encadre dans la nuit. Iel fait les présentations mais je ne retiens pas les prénoms. L'une d'une d'entre elles a les cheveux bleus, un autre porte un débardeur décolleté qui laisse deviner, sur son torse plat, deux grandes cicatrices à hauteur des seins. Ce qui me semble être un garçon porte une robe lamée et des faux cils drus qui contrastent avec son crâne rasé. Éole s'est vêtu-e, comme le jour de la plage, d'un t-shirt court, d'un short en jean et de tennis en toile. Ses cheveux sont

³⁶⁷ Marie Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été* (Thierry Magnier, 2022), 40, 41.

relevés en chignon sur le dessus de la tête et je remarque que sa nuque est tondue. Presque toute la bande arbore des tatouages.³⁶⁸

While for the protagonist, the group's nonconformity is a breath of fresh air, the same cannot be said for her friend Sonia and the villagers.

Elle les jauge. Je devine qu'elle ne sait pas trop quoi penser de ces personnages exubérants qui détonnent totalement dans le paysage. J'appréhende sa réaction pendant les quelques secondes de silence qui me paraissent durer des heures. [...] Quand je rouvre les paupières, je remarque les regards perplexes et, il me semble, un peu envieux, de ceux du collège qui n'ont pas bougé d'un poil, adossés à leurs scooters. Nous faisons sensation aussi parmi les adultes du village qui ne mouffent pas mais observent, parfois étonnés, parfois attendris, la drôle de troupe que nous formons. Je devine tout contre moi les corps moites, renifle les odeurs chaudes de sueur, comme un petit animal enivré de sensations.³⁶⁹

The author makes a point of highlighting that within the social context of the village the group of flamboyant queer teenagers is not particularly welcome. Nevertheless, none of the bystanders indulge in explicitly queerphobic behaviour. For her part, Olive is thrilled by the encounter with the collective and is increasingly curious to see them again and get to know them better:

J'ai envie d'en apprendre davantage sur ce drôle de personnage. Un millier de questions encore. Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire, ne pas s'identifier exactement comme un garçon ? Et puis qui sont ses ami-e-s, cette troupe joyeuse et colorée, atypique, dont j'ai attrapé les mains et contre les corps desquels j'ai dansé, sauté, senti mon cœur battre, alors que je ne les connais même pas ? Est-ce que c'est venu d'eux, cette sensation de liberté ? Cette joie brûlante dans le ventre ? Bref, j'ai envie de revoir Éole. Et surtout, j'ai envie de retrouver dans son sillon l'aura de douceur, le pétillant que j'avais tant aimés lors de nos deux rencontres.³⁷⁰

The freedom in the physical and aesthetic expression of the body that the collective express and Éole's non-binary gender identity resonate deeply with Olive. She becomes thirsty for information on the subject and hungry for the company of these individuals and asks her friend Samuel to accompany her to see the Queer

³⁶⁸ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 57.

³⁶⁹ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 57, 58.

³⁷⁰ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 69.

Moustache's dance performance at the Avignon theatre festival, without hiding how invigorated she feels in their presence.

- Le truc, tu vois, c'est qu'on voudrait aller à Avignon pour voir la troupe jouer vraiment et faire quelques interviews ! - Ton père vous y emmène tous les ans voir des spectacles, non ? - *Come on*, Sam. Éole a dix-neuf ans ! Je vais pas aller écrire un article sur ellui en tenant la main à mon père. - Sur quoi ? - Sur ellui. C'est un mélange de lui et d'elle. On dit iel aussi, c'est neutre, c'est pour ne pas dire il ou elle. Il lève un sourcil. - Tu t'es lancée dans un truc compliqué, là, non ? - Pas tant que ça. Enfin si, un peu, il y a encore des choses que je ne comprends pas mais je t'assure que quand on passe un peu de temps avec elleux, ça devient plus clair. Iels sont tellement incroyables, si tu savais ! Tellement libres !³⁷¹

This passage offers an example of how Boulier uses the contemporary inclusive language evolving in France to refer to non-binary people.³⁷² Similar usage was not present in the Italian-language novels. In order to convince her friend/lover Ivan to travel to Avignon with her to write an article on the Queer Moustache performance for a journalism internship, she shows him a video of the show:

Iels ont une page Facebook et on a découvert encore plein de choses. En fait, la troupe est composée de profils hyper différents et ce qu'iels veulent mettre en avant, c'est la diversité des corps dans l'espace public. Une petite vidéo de présentation montre des passants dans les rues de la ville, des passants classiques aux peaux blanches, aux corps minces, vêtus de shorts et de t-shirts. Le son, ce sont des voix off qui s'enchaînent, dénonçant l'uniformisation des corps. Je reconnais celle de Malicia : *Où sont les gros ? Où sont les peaux noires ? Et d'autres : Où sont les corps trans ? Où sont les lesbiennes ? Ça fait un peu fouillis mais la conclusion, récitée en chœur, résume bien leur objectif : Nous existons, nous sommes des nomades du genre et du désir, nous revendiquons le droit d'être vu-e-s et reconnu-e-s. Nous jouons notre spectacle, Tomber les masques, pour la première fois au Festival d'Avignon. Venez nombreux et nombreuses.*³⁷³

One of the ways in which *Apprivoiser l'été* approaches the theme of the political queer body is through the members of the queer dance collective. Their aim, as is clear from the passage quoted above, is to use public space to give visibility to

³⁷¹ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 117.

³⁷² My Alpheratz, S. Prévost, F. Neveu, L. Hriba, B. Harmegnies, "Français inclusif : conceptualisation et analyse linguistique" in *SHS Web of Conferences* 46 (2018).

³⁷³ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 101, 102.

bodies that do not conform to the pre-established social model (white, athletic, able-bodied, skinny, straight, cis). In fact, the eutopian impulse in this novel is demonstrated not so much by Olive, who undertakes a strictly personal path of deconstruction of shame and acceptance of her own body, as by the Queer Moustache collective, who with their bodies and their art pursue an intersectional militant activism aimed at the dissemination and recognition of the existence of queer people and their fat, black, hairy, coloured, tattooed bodies. In this respect, the most eutopically powerful and impressive scene is the performance they put on at the Avignon theatre festival:

Les membres des Queer Moustache se dévêtent. Les tissus tombent au sol dans un mouvement ample. Les robes pailletées jettent des éclats aux quatre coins du parc dans le reflet du soleil. Je retiens mon souffle. C'est maintenant. Je les trouve beaux, ces corps. [...] Ici, dans le parc des Doms à Avignon, les corps sont poilus : des poils longs et d'autres courts, des bruns frisés, des blonds fins, des blancs clairsemés, des noirs rêches, des poils sous les bras, sur les torsos, au dessus du nombril, en toison sur les sexes. Et puis des peaux ridées et d'autres tendres, des camaïeux de beiges et de bruns, des cheveux courts, longs, rasés, tressés, des ventres maigres desquels on voit les côtes saillir et des replets dont les bourrelets pendent par-dessus le pubis, des ventres en deux, trois parties, des fesses hautes et d'autres molles, des vulves de toutes formes, des pénis, des testicules, des seins énormes, des tétons minuscules perdus sur des torsos immenses, des cicatrices sur la poitrine, sur les avant-bras, sur les ventres, des tailles hautes et des tailles basses. Je les trouve tous beaux, ces corps nus, exposés, vulnérables et forts en même temps. Je les envie de leur bravoure. De se montrer. [...] Malicia, toujours nue, se baisse pour attraper un micro : Nous sommes gros et grosses, nous sommes racisé-e-s, nous sommes trans, pédés, gouines, queers. Le micro passe dans une autre main. Nous existons, nous sommes des nomades du genre et du désir, nous revendiquons le droit d'être vu-e-s et reconnu-e-s. Les voix se succèdent : Nous n'acceptons plus la normalisation galopante car nous sommes des êtres en mutation, des êtres en expérimentation et nous pensons que chacun et chacune a le droit d'exister dans son entièreté, fût-elle minorisée. Et d'explorer les limites de son genre et de son désir. Nous prôtons la destruction de la catégorisation binaire et hiérarchisée. Nous nous tenons ici, à Avignon, face à vous, dans un désir d'habiter le monde d'une façon plus juste, plus consciente, plus libre, plus heureuse. Nous nous sommes débarrassé-e-s du carcan des apparences, nous avons brûlé nos vieilles peaux, celles d'un monde patriarcal, raciste, homophobe, transphobe. Nous avons fait TOMBER LES MASQUES et nous nous tenons nu-e-s devant vous. Regardez-nous. REGARDEZ-NOUS. REGARDEZ-NOUS. Iels scandent, maintenant, nu-e-s dans le soleil cru de juillet qui les expose sans filtre à nos regards, Regardez-nous regardez-nous et nul ne

songerait à détourner les yeux devant la puissance de l'injonction. Le public est bouche bée. Personne ne pense à s'insurger. Je vois quand même que tout le monde n'est pas cent pour cent à l'aise. Je n'ai pas compris l'intégralité du discours mais les corps parlent : les voix, les postures, les regards sont empreints d'une détermination qui imposerait le silence à n'importe qui. Quelqu'un rompt la torpeur d'un applaudissement lent. C'est très étrange, ce claquement sourd dans la foule muette. Ça réveille. Petit à petit, l'ovation se répand et tout le monde frappe dans ses mains.³⁷⁴

The performance is a great success, and the astonished audience reacts with a standing ovation. However, it should be noted that the city and festival context of Avignon makes it more likely that a performance that so directly challenges social morality will be well received. By contrast, the same show presented previously in a village square receives the opposite treatment:

Tout à ma joie, je mets un moment à percevoir les vociférations des badauds. *C'est un attentat à la pudeur ! Quelle honte !* Je suis stupéfaite. C'est si beau, pas du tout vulgaire ! Une sirène de police me fait sursauter. Quelqu'un a dû les appeler. Les agents claquent les portières bruyamment avant de se diriger vers le centre de la place en vociférant et en agitant les bras. Je reste plantée là. Je suis sidérée par la brusquerie avec laquelle les hommes en uniformes interrompent le spectacle et enveloppent les corps d'Éole et ses ami-e-s dans des couvertures de survie. Iels sont poussé-e-s violemment tandis que les policiers leur crient des injures homophobes. La troupe se laisse disperser docilement. Sur leurs visages étincelants, la lumière rouge des gyrophares esquisse un dessin tremblant. [...] Je cligne des paupières et regarde autour de moi. Les badauds n'ont pas bougé de leurs tables, leurs cafés, leurs marmots, leurs jeux de cartes. Passé le spectacle, celui des artistes et celui de l'intervention policière, ils ont repris leur routine tranquille comme si rien n'était arrivé. Je me sens très seule. Tout ça s'est passé si vite et ça ne fait moufter personne.³⁷⁵

The situation is particularly shocking for Olive because in a short space of time she witnesses a chain of dramatic events. The nudity of the performers outrages passers-by to such an extent that they call for the police to stop the show, who shout homophobic insults at the members of Queer Moustache and take them away, to the indifference of all the other bystanders. The sense of injustice instils in Olive a deep sense of loneliness. This scene shows that not everyone everywhere is ready to

³⁷⁴ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 129-132.

³⁷⁵ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 76, 77.

witness and understand an artistic and political event like this, and that there is still a long way to go to make as many people as possible aware of the issues related to queer bodies. Similarly, during the documentary film festival organised in Olive's grandmother's village in Ardèche, the protagonist watches a short film about the difficulties faced by young queer people living in rural settings.

J'ai surtout été marquée par un autre court métrage qui racontait la difficulté des jeunes homosexuels ruraux à se trouver des modèles, à rencontrer des partenaires. L'histoire suivait le parcours d'un type dans la vingtaine, un peu arrogant, un peu désemparé, qui se confrontait à beaucoup de préjugés et de refus. J'ai été très émue par ce parcours initiatique, ça m'a beaucoup parlé. Je me suis imaginée ici, dans dix ans, projetant un film sur les Queer Moustache. Finalement, nous sommes nombreux et nombreuses à nous chercher. Je ne fais pas figure d'exception. Ça m'a rendue un peu triste de constater que ça devait être une lutte pour tout le monde, et en même temps ça m'a mis du baume au cœur. La communauté des atypiques, ceux qui ne se retrouvent pas dans les modèles classiques.³⁷⁶

Olive recognises her own plight in the documentary's portrayal of the situation of queer youth in rural and provincial areas who grow up without positive queer role models and who are subjected to queerphobic discrimination. Though the scenario is bleak, she is comforted by the fact she is not alone in feeling marginalised in society and is motivated and heartened by the idea of creating a like-minded community. Moreover, the idea of making a documentary herself about Queer Moustache can be read as her personal desire to contribute to the LGBTQ+ community in spreading knowledge and culture about queer people and issues. In this way, we see the way in which Olive's passion for film making emerges over the course of the novel. After watching Queer Moustache's performance, Olive gradually realises that there is nothing wrong with her body, it is simply different from other bodies:

Je ne sais pas pourquoi mais à chaque fois que je la regarde, ça me colle des frissons ; ces voix qui s'entrechoquent, qui réclament le droit d'exister. J'ai envie de crier : moi aussi, moi aussi ! et en même temps, j'ai du mal à me trouver légitime de me sentir proche d'elleux. Pourtant, je sens que j'ai changé depuis que je connais Éole. Je me sens moins à part avec mes brassières serrées et mes petits cheveux qui partent dans tous les sens. J'apprends à aimer mon visage nu face au miroir de la salle de bains, ses taches de rousseur, son menton un peu

³⁷⁶ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 217, 218.

rond, ses grains de beauté disséminés. Je suis différente de Sonia, je n'ai pas besoin de m'apprêter, de me maquiller. C'est son truc à elle, mais je commence à sentir que c'est OK que ça ne soit pas le mien.³⁷⁷

From the moment she meets Éole and Queer Moustache Olive begins introspective work on the vision of her own body, valuing it and recognising herself as a girl who is different from other girls and women. This journey is particularly rich because in addition to healing of her relationship with her body, Olive also grafts inclusive language into her idiolect and asks Éole for explanations about their non-binary gender identity.

- Bon, mais Éole, je voulais te demander un truc, quand même... ce que tu m'as dit, la fois où l'on s'est rencontré-e-s... Tu sais... que tu ne te reconnais pas trop comme un garçon, ça veut dire quoi exactement ? Je veux dire, c'est pareil pour tout le monde ici ? Éole se marre.

- Ha oui, tu y vas cash ! J'aime bien ta curiosité, Olivia. C'est pour ça que je t'ai proposé de venir. J'ai le sentiment que toi aussi, tu te sens un peu... - iel cherche ses mots... - un peu à part, non ? Je rougis. Iel poursuit, tandis qu'Ivan se serre contre moi pour écouter. - Toi, Olive, tu te définis comment ? Fille ? Garçon ? Chaton intersidéral ? La case D ? - Ben, fille. Je crois. - Et toi, Ivan ? - Moi je suis un mec, ça se voit, non ? Éole insiste : - Pourquoi tu dis : je crois, Olivia. Tu n'es pas sûre ? - C'est pas ça, c'est juste que je me suis jamais posé la question. Déjà, j'ai une...ben... tu sais, une... - Elle a une chatte, quoi ! gueule Ivan. Je le fusille du regard. - Ouais enfin, une vulve, un utérus, des seins. Logique. - Peut-être que toi ça te paraît logique d'associer tes organes génitaux à ton genre - quoique moi ça ne me saute pas aux yeux, dear, mais on en reparlera. Peut-être que pour toi, Ivan, ça ne fait aucun doute que tu es cis. Mais plusieurs personnes pensent que les choses ne sont pas si binaires que ça. Perso, le corps avec lequel je suis né-e ne correspond pas exactement à comment je me sens. Je ne me sens pas tout à fait fille, pas tout à fait garçon. Je suis entre les deux. Les individus que vous voyez ici se définissent comme la grande et complexe famille des Queers. Moi j'aime bien lui mettre une majuscule et une emphase, à ce mot, mais queer, c'est un terme un peu fourre-tout qui inclut celles et ceux qui ne se reconnaissent pas dans les normes de la société.- OK, mais quand tu as dit qu'Ivan est cis, ça veut dire quoi exactement, cis ? - Bon. Regarde Alix là-bas. - Alix est né dans un corps que toi tu pourrais appeler " de femme " et pourtant il a toujours senti que ça n'était pas lui. Alix est un garçon. On peut dire qu'il est transgenre, ça veut dire que son genre de naissance, fille, n'est pas le même que celui que, lui, sent comme étant son identité, son lui profond. Toi, en revanche, tu es cisgenre, ça veut dire que pour toi les deux correspondent. Mais être Queer, c'est bien plus élastique que ça !

³⁷⁷ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 102.

On peut s'y reconnaître si on est lesbienne, bi ou homo. Et plein d'autres choses puisqu'il y a autant de façons de se vivre qu'il y a d'individus. C'est très hétérogène. Tu vois mieux ? - Oui, je crois. Je vois *un peu* mieux, mais ça reste trouble quand même. Je sens qu'il va me falloir du temps pour digérer toutes ces informations.³⁷⁸

In summary, an individual's reproductive organs cannot dictate their gender identity because there are countless people, such as Éole and Alix, who have grown up to discover that their gender identity is different to their sex assigned at birth. Alix is an AFAB transmasculine person³⁷⁹ while Éole is a non-binary AMAB person.³⁸⁰ In general, Éole points out that the adjective 'queer' encompasses anyone who feels they do not belong to the social canons of identity, something that they also glimpsed in Olive and the reason why they invited her to attend the collective. The positive influence of Éole and *Queer Moustache* is felt in Olive's relationship with her body.

Je crois que j'ai trouvé un peu de cette joie auprès d'Éole. L'énergie de ses danses, le spectacle des Queer Moustache, tout cet univers est aussi déstabilisant qu'enivrant. Je me suis sentie beaucoup moins seule avec ce corps hyper féminin que je peine à apprivoiser, que j'étouffe sous les bandages. J'ai souvent repensé au genre auquel j'appartiens. Je me sens fille, je crois. Je suis cisgenre, si j'ai bien suivi ce que m'a appris Éole. J'aimerais simplement l'être moins ostensiblement.³⁸¹

Quand je passe devant le miroir de l'entrée, je m'observe longuement. Éole m'a offert un *binder* quand nous nous sommes revu-e-s la semaine dernière. C'est une sorte de gilet couvrant qui compresse les seins. Avec, je me sens plus moi-même, plus libre de mon corps. Je trouve ça merveilleux.³⁸²

Olive feels female cisgender but feels freer after the binder given to her by Éole reduces the size of her breasts, making them less conspicuous. The influence of Éole's and the collective certainly proves to be crucial in improving Olive's relationship with her own body. However, the decisive act that allows Olive to immerse herself in the understanding of her gender identity is masturbation, in

³⁷⁸ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 87-89.

³⁷⁹ Transgender boy 'Assigned Female At Birth'.

³⁸⁰ 'Assigned Male At Birth'.

³⁸¹ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 175, 176.

³⁸² Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 239, 240.

which she explores her sexual fantasies and discovers the types of bodies she feels attracted to.

À demi assoupie, je rêve que des créatures fantasmagoriques envahissent ma chambre. Leurs peaux sont bleues, vertes ou jaunes, incrustées de diamants et de paillettes. Elles ondulent dans mon espace, se collent au mur, rampent au sol et s'accrochent aux montants de la fenêtre. J'entends le clap clap clap des hauts talons de l'une d'entre elles, des chaussures rouge brillant rehaussées de plateformes noires. Elle défile entre mon lit et mon placard en souriant, s'arrête, lève élégamment la jambe pour la poser sur la chaise de mon bureau. Une main accroche l'escarpin, décroche la bride et glisse sur la cheville, remonte la cuisse, relevant dans une lenteur qui m'exaspère la pièce de coton qui recouvre la peau. J'ai le ventre en feu, partagée entre la terreur et le désir. Je voudrais aller moi-même arracher le pagne, dénuder le corps. Je ne me reconnais pas dans cette témérité. C'est comme si je sortais de moi-même. Que je devenais une Olivia plus agressive, plus provocateur. Je remarque que l'une des créatures, d'une pâleur déconcertante, les cheveux blond cendré et le visage dévoré par de grands yeux noirs, m'observe avec intensité. Iel est adossé-e à la fenêtre et porte un costume d'homme : le pantalon ample lui arrive aux chevilles et renferme une chemise en lin qui bouffe à la ceinture. Un gilet sans manches complète l'ensemble. Ses traits me font penser à ceux d'une femme mais sa stature, sa façon de se tenir - bassin en avant, épaule nonchalante - me laissent à croire que c'est un homme. Il y a un mot pour ça, mais je ne m'en souviens plus. Iel s'approche, s'accroupit près de mon lit et souffle doucement sur mon visage. Son haleine est épicée, pomme chaude, cannelle. J'ai envie d'approcher ma bouche encore plus près, d'ouvrir mes lèvres pour respirer plus fort ses effluves. J'ai envie d'attraper ses hanches pour l'attirer près de moi, l'allonger contre mon corps. [...] Je suis envahie, traversée. *Il faut te dépuceler de la bouche, Olivia*. Je pense : Oui, oui je veux le faire. Alors pourquoi chaque fois que j'approche mes lèvres, la créature disparaît, me laissant dans une solitude frustrante ? - Je te veux, je te veux, je murmure entre mes dents. Iel me sourit. Ses yeux se plissent malicieusement. - Bientôt, Olive. Tu es des nôtres, maintenant. Des leurs ? Non, je ne crois pas ! J'aimerais bien leur ressembler, avoir cette aisance, cette fluidité, cette beauté atypique mais ce n'est pas le cas. Je n'ai rien de spécial. *Il faut te dépuceler de la bouche, Olivia*. Rah, ça m'énerve, cette voix qui boucle et boucle. La créature frotte son visage sur ma joue, contre mon oreille, mon cou, le haut de mon torse. Je gémiss. C'est trop bon, cette peau blanche contre ma peau dorée. J'en veux encore. J'ouvre les yeux brusquement, le souffle court, la poitrine en feu. Ma chambre est telle que dans mon rêve, mais aucune créature magique n'y fait aucun show. Elle n'est peuplée que du silence de la nuit. ANDROGYNE ! C'est ça le mot que je cherchais : androgyne !³⁸³

³⁸³ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 79-82.

Olive begins to discover of her own body and the pleasure it can give her alone but also learns about the bodies which she is sexually aroused by. This is fundamental to the appropriation and affirmation of her own identity, which culminates when, in one of her frequent masturbation sessions, she finally reaches orgasm.

Comme chaque soir, je dépose mes doigts en coque sur mon sexe, prête à activer mon petit rituel d'endormissement. Une main sur ma vulve, les doigts écartés, j'appuie doucement. Comme la dernière fois, je me sens picotée dans le ventre. Comme la dernière fois, c'est bon et déroutant. Mais ce soir, je frotte plus fort et ça revient. La petite flamme grandit. Je prends conscience que la douleur n'en est pas une mais plutôt une contraction diffuse de tout mon bas-ventre, autour du petit endroit chaud que je caresse maintenant avec beaucoup d'insistance. Je devine mes joues qui s'empourprent. J'écarte doucement les grandes lèvres de mon sexe, et je fais glisser deux doigts de haut en bas. Le plaisir s'intensifie, ma caresse aussi. Mon sexe s'humidifie, mes doigts glissent tout seuls, ils glissent vite, je frotte leur pulpe sur la boule que forme mon clitoris. Je grogne entre mes dents. Instinctivement je me cambre, j'ai envie de mettre ma main dans le fond de mon sexe, j'ai envie de dévorer le monde, je ne comprends pas cette férocité soudaine de mon corps. Mes doigts remontent, trouvent mon clitoris, le dépassent à peine et sur la petite veine qui le surplombe, se mettent à masser la peau en cercles concentriques. C'est tellement bon que je dois me retenir de crier. Tout mon corps se raidit, maintenant, la chaleur se diffuse dans chacun de mes membres et enflamme jusqu'au moindre de mes cheveux. Le feu me traverse, de part en part. Je mords très fort mon bras droit pour ne pas hurler avant de me laisser retomber, hagarde, corps rompu, sur le matelas de mon lit d'enfant.³⁸⁴

This act, like the fire that burnt down Adrien's house and the episode of *Private Practice* for Alice, constitutes Olive's gender trigger.

Pour un petit moment encore, je veux que ça m'appartienne. Je ne laisserai personne abîmer cette découverte-là. J'ai un corps. J'ai un corps et j'ai le super pouvoir de le rendre heureux. Haha ! Je me sens très gaie, soudain. Je ne suis pas une gamine. J'ai un corps. J'ai une présence, j'existe, j'exulte et ils vont tous le découvrir. Fébrilement, je me précipite sur mon sac de classe, fouille dans ma trousse pour dénicher une paire de ciseaux. J'attrape une première mèche de cheveux et tranche dans la masse soyeuse. Je tente encore, à hauteur des oreilles. La radicalité de l'acte m'excite follement. Je tressaille à chaque claquement des lames

³⁸⁴ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 60, 61.

contre ma peau. Le métal froid éveille des frissons délicieux dans ma nuque. J'ai envie de rire et de pleurer en même temps. Une fois ma tâche terminée, je m'ébroue doucement et, quand je relève le visage sur mon reflet, je reconnais à peine la jeune femme de l'autre côté du miroir. La coupe irrégulière et très courte me donne un air mutin. Je reste figée devant mes yeux brûlants, encore auréolés de paillettes d'or, mon menton victorieux, mes lèvres humides et entrouvertes. Sans réfléchir, j'attrape le flacon de parfum offert par maman plus tôt et dépose quelques gouttes entre mes poignets, que je frotte sur ma nuque, et aussi, j'ignore pourquoi, au creux de mes seins où coule déjà un peu de sueur. J'inspire. Je me sens belle. Je me sens grande. Je me sens puissante. Je viens d'avoir quinze ans, et mes doigts trempés sentent l'odeur de mon sexe, et mes cheveux sont courts, et mon regard fier. Je sens en moi un changement, à la fois immense et imperceptible. Une idée farfelue me reste dans la tête : c'est comme si, désormais, je m'étais mise à habiter mon propre corps.³⁸⁵

The act that triggers the emergence of Olive's own gender consciousness is immediately linked to a moment of gender euphoria, in which the protagonist heads to the bathroom to give herself a fresh look. Gender expression thus modelled according to one's own desires reinforces self-esteem, as is evident in the passage quoted above. In this case, the distance between the gender trigger and gender expression is minimal, whereas in Adrien's case the distance between the two events is much greater. In Alice's case, her gender trigger is narrated in a flashback with no details of the time period between this trigger and her subsequent gender expression.

Another essential element in *Apprivoiser l'été* is the ample space the author devotes to scenes of autoeroticism, physical intimacy, and sexual intercourse. In this, the novel surpasses Cathrine's *Romance*, standing out as the novel within the entire corpus that most addresses the theme and language of eroticism from the perspective of queer adolescents. In particular, Olive experiments with physical intimacy with Sidonie who she met in the Ardèche village where the documentary film festival was held. This part of the novel is punctuated by intimate situations in which Olive and Sidonie spend a lot of time together, chatting, confiding, laughing, and kissing:

³⁸⁵ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 62, 63.

Le soir, après la séance en plein air qu'on ne manque jamais, c'est le temps des câlins. Samuel s'éclipse galamment. Je suppose qu'il a compris. Sidonie et moi passons des heures à nous rouler des pelles, enlacées dans la nuit qui relâche enfin la chaleur pour s'attédir tranquillement. Sido n'essaie jamais d'aller plus loin et moi je dois lutter de toutes mes forces pour ne pas la dévorer tellement son corps, sa peau, sa voix réveillent le moindre de mes sens. Mais je sais que ça serait ouvrir une porte que je ne suis pas prête à franchir.³⁸⁶

It is noticeable here that discomfort with her own body begins to trouble the protagonist again. She feels sexually attracted to Sidonie but showing her own body still makes her feel vulnerable and remains too difficult a boundary to cross. It is something she needs to approach more slowly and gradually. Olive has mixed feelings after the first attempt at a sexual encounter with Sidonie.

J'ôte mon short et mes espadrilles. Quelque chose me retient au moment d'enlever mon t-shirt. Je porte mon éternel maillot de bain sportif mais l'idée qu'elle observe mon corps, qu'elle découvre mes seins qui pointent sous le tissu, mes hanches qui se dessinent me donne envie de pleurer. J'ai tellement envie d'aller vers elle, de l'étreindre mais pas avec ce corps. Je repense à mes rêves érotiques. Ce personnage androgyne que je désirais tant, je voudrais l'incarner aujourd'hui. Femme oui, mais femme-liane pas cette ultra-féminité que je tiens de ma mère et qui ne me ressemble pas.³⁸⁷

On the one hand, Olive is terrified by the idea that Sidonie might see her naked body. She tries to embody an androgynous being like those she had seen in her erotic dreams. Besides being an object of desire, this sexual attraction to androgynous bodies also mirrors her identity. Boulier's terminology in describing Olive's gender with the expression 'femme-liane' is suggestive, as if it were something more natural, wild, or somewhere in the middle between masculine and the feminine, rejecting the 'ultra-féminité' of her mother as well as her friend Sonia. However, when she and Sidonie attempt to have sex, Olive feels overwhelmed.

Sa main glisse doucement de mon épaule à mon buste, s'approche de mes seins et me fait sursauter. Je m'éloigne brusquement. C'est trop intense. Je me sens pétrie d'une pudeur immense qui me colle un malaise gluant dans tout le corps. Je ne veux pas qu'elle touche mes seins. Je ne veux pas jouir à côté d'elle. C'est comme si sa peau qui m'était si familière une

³⁸⁶ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 207.

³⁸⁷ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 200, 201.

seconde avant devenait soudain ennemie. J'ai envie de me planquer, de pleurer et de m'enfuir en même temps. Sidonie me regarde, désespérée. - J'ai fait quelque chose de mal ? - Non, oh non. Je pense à Mamie. J'essaie de me souvenir de ses histoires de chakras mais rien ne me revient. Je respire doucement.³⁸⁸

In an attempt to find a solution, Olive confronts Éole, asking them whether they also feel any particular fear or discomfort at being touched. At this point, Boulier returns to the concept of body dysphoria.

- Ça t'est déjà arrivé d'avoir très envie de quelqu'un mais de ne pas vouloir être touché-e ? - Silence. Je l'entends soupirer. - C'est l'histoire de ma vie, Olivia-jolie. Tu te doutes bien que mon rapport à mon corps n'est pas simple. Il y a un terme un peu technique pour ça, ça s'appelle la dysphorie de genre, dans mon cas. Pour toi, je ne sais pas. Tu sais pourquoi tu n'as pas envie d'être touchée ? - C'est pas que je me trouve moche mais... je sais pas, c'est comme si c'était pas vraiment mon corps. Je veux dire, avant j'étais très musclée et plutôt plate, et ces dernières années, tu sais, il y a des formes qui apparaissent... bon... je me reconnais pas vraiment. Et puis, c'est comme si mon corps criait Je suis une femme ! quand moi j'ai juste envie d'être tranquille, tu vois ?³⁸⁹

The fact that Olive feels uncomfortable with her body does not stem specifically from body insecurity, but from an incongruence, indeed dysphoria, between the body she has and the one she perceives she wants/needs to have. In Olive's case, she states in several passages in the novel that she is a cisgender girl/woman but also feels that her identity is more complex. She does not feel male, but neither does she feel completely female either. In my opinion, what the protagonist experiences is not a case of gender dysphoria so much as 'body image dissatisfaction', a widespread phenomenon among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls, which represents the degree of dissonance between real and ideal self-image.³⁹⁰ The discomfort arises from comparisons with friends and family³⁹¹ (her mother and Sonia) who represent for Olive an ideal that does not align with her own body, which she therefore sees as wrong. Olive's case is unusual because she clearly does

³⁸⁸ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 202.

³⁸⁹ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 214.

³⁹⁰ Elizabeth M. Damstetter and Neelam A. Vashi, 'Body Image and Body Image Dissatisfaction' in *Beauty and body dysmorphic disorder: a clinician's guide* ed. Neelam A. Vashi (Springer, 2015), 83, 84.

³⁹¹ Damstetter and Vashi, 'Body Image and Body Image Dissatisfaction', 85.

not want her own body to resemble the ultra-feminine bodies of her mother and friend, but she is unsure of how to change to feel more positive about her body. When she brings herself to orgasm, she feels euphoric and also achieves gender expression. However, sexual contact with a partner still remains an obstacle to overcome. On the second attempt at intercourse, Olive manages to go deeper into the relationship with Sidonie.

Je m'assois près d'elle. Nous commençons à nous embrasser. Très vite, j'ai envie de plus. Je veux la toucher, je veux sentir sa peau. Je le lui dis. Elle se lève, défait les attaches de sa salopette qui glisse à ses pieds, ôte son t-shirt et apparaît devant moi, en culotte et la poitrine nue, belle comme le jour. Ses seins sont plus petits que les miens, et s'écartent de son buste, chacun dirigé sur un côté. Elle a les tétons clairs. J'ai envie de les prendre dans ma bouche. Je m'approche, à genoux devant elle, pose ma tête sur son ventre duveteux. Elle caresse mes cheveux. Nous restons un moment enlacées ainsi, sa main gratouillant mon crâne, mes lèvres immobiles, posées au-dessus de son nombril. Elle s'agenouille et je glisse dans son cou. Je le picore de baisers, puis son visage adorable, ses yeux clos, ses joues, ses lèvres, ses épaules. - Je peux ? - Oui. J'ai envie. Ma bouche effleure son buste. Je souffle doucement. Elle rit et gémit en même temps. Je m'approche de ses seins, je les embrasse du bout des lèvres, baiser papillon. - Plus fort s'il te plaît. J'attrape un téton dans ma bouche et c'est l'explosion dans mon ventre. J'ai la tête qui tourne. C'est trop bon de l'entendre soupirer tout près de moi, trop bon de sentir que c'est moi qui lui donne ce plaisir-là, et trop douce la sensation de ce sein potelé sous ma langue. Je brûle de l'intérieur. Je sens sous mes vêtements mon sexe palpiter. Je remonte pour attraper sa bouche, l'embrasser fort. Ma langue tourne autour de la sienne, nos salives s'emmêlent. Elle me serre contre elle. Une de ses mains glisse sous ma chemise. Je l'arrête. - Non. Je le sens pas, ça. - OK, désolée. Tu veux qu'on ralentisse ? - Je veux bien continuer mais juste ne me touche pas les seins, d'accord ? - D'accord. Elle pose sa main dans le bas de mon dos, juste au-dessus de mes fesses et joue doucement de ses ongles sur ma peau électrique. - Comme ça, ça va ? - Oui, comme ça, ça va. J'ai du mal à m'abandonner pleinement à la sensation. Je suis tiraillée entre la puissance de mon envie, cette sauvagerie que j'ai ressentie à chaque fois que j'ai joui et qui me pousse à la mordre, l'agripper, ouvrir ses jambes, dévorer son cou, et la peur qu'elle me voie comme ça, animale, hors de contrôle. Sa main glisse dans ma culotte, attrape une de mes fesses. - Ça ? - Oui... Je me perds dans nos baisers tandis qu'elle masse doucement mes fesses. Instinctivement je me cambre, pour approcher ma vulve de sa caresse. J'ai envie qu'elle glisse une main entre mes cuisses et qu'elle me touche comme je me touche quand je suis seule.³⁹²

³⁹² Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 220-222.

Alongside the tenderness of the scene, in which both girls experience sex for the first time, Boulier inserts two sexual practices that clearly make sexual intercourse not only sweeter but also more respectful and pleasurable: communication and consent. The realism of the description is also to be appreciated, avoiding any pornographic or voyeuristic elements. Olive and Sidonie gradually discover each other's bodies, asking and explaining what they can and cannot do, proceeding tentatively in their absolute inexperience and sexual immaturity. The conclusion of this first time sees Olive help Sidonie reach orgasm.

À un moment, je la sens bouger et mon désir se réveille. Je voudrais attraper ses hanches, y cogner mon bassin. Je voudrais pénétrer son sexe. - Sidonie. - Mmh ? - J'ai envie que tu jouisses. - Maintenant ? - Tu veux ? - Je crois que oui. Mais toi ? - Je me sens pas trop prête. C'est grave ? - Non, je crois pas. Mais tu es sûre que... ? Je la fais taire d'un baiser. Notre étreinte se fait plus intense. Ma jambe glisse entre ses cuisses, sa main est sur ma nuque. Je grogne. Je ne sais pas trop comment m'y prendre. - Est-ce que tu veux que je le fasse, moi ? - C'est possible ? Elle éclate de rire. - Olivia ! je ne t'ai pas attendue ! - Non mais c'est pas ce que je voulais dire ! Oui, oui je veux ça. Je m'allonge face à elle. Elle glisse ses doigts dans sa culotte. L'excitation me rend me téméraire et je mordille carrément son sein. Elle se touche de plus en plus vite. Je devine ses doigts glisser sur son sexe de haut en bas, s'arrêter pour frictionner son clitoris avant de repartir chercher la mouille, tandis que j'embrasse son visage, ses bras, son cou et ses seins. Elle se contracte, je passe un bras au-dessus de son épaule et l'embrasse passionnément. Elle jouit comme ça, serrée contre moi, ma langue sur sa langue et juste après qu'elle a fini, elle se met à pleurer et à rire en même temps.³⁹³

In the pages following this scene, Olive and Sidonie ultimately reveal that they are in love with each other. At this point, some might suggest that Olive is a cis-lesbian girl with BID ('body image dissatisfaction'). However, the author outlines a far more interesting situation regarding this issue, precisely at the moment when Sonia, problematically, states convincingly that Olive's sexual experience with Sidonie determines her homosexuality.

- D'ailleurs, à propos de moi...- Mmh ? - ... - Nooooooon. Tu l'as fait ? - Je sais pas si on peut dire ça comme ça. Mais j'ai rencontré une fille. Je lui raconte mon histoire avec Sidonie.

³⁹³ Boulier, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 223, 224.

- Je suis trop jalouse, là ! Mais avec une fille ? - Ben pourquoi pas ? - Mais alors t'es lesbienne ? C'est pour ça que tu m'as sauté dessus ? - Franchement, So, je sais pas si je suis quelque chose... - Si tu sors avec une fille, j'appelle ça être lesbienne. - Je sais pas, c'est pas si simple, je trouve. J'ai surtout l'impression que je me cherche. Et avec Sidonie, c'était simple et évident, je ne me suis pas posé dix mille questions. Et je t'ai sauté dessus parce que j'étais trop teubé et que j'ai tout mélangé ! - Mais tu aurais voulu être avec moi ? Parce que désolé, mon chat, c'est pas parce que j'ai renoncé aux gros nuls que j'ai renoncé aux mecs ! Je souris. - Mais non, pfff... Je voulais pas être avec toi. J'étais perdue, pleine d'émotions contradictoires, je ne sais pas, je me suis laissé porter par un élan. Mais j'ai bien compris en rencontrant Sidonie que ça n'avait rien à voir. Toi, tu es ma pote, ma pote de toujours... Et elle... Pfiou...³⁹⁴

Like Chiamaka in *Ace of Spades*, Olive does not feel the need to define her sexuality. Although she is clearly a queer character from the point of view of sexual orientation and gender identity, Olive, like Chiamaka, prefers to give importance to the content of her emotions and the feelings they arouse in her more than to give her identity a name or names. She feels free to choose whether not to define herself or not. In general, of all the novels analysed in this study, *Apprivoiser l'été* is undoubtedly the one that comes closest to the idea of Queertopia. Although queerphobia does feature in the novel, it receives much less attention and space than the other novels in the corpus. The novel instead centres around the personal relationship queer people have with their own bodies and the way queer bodies are viewed in society. The reader follows Olive as much through the exploration of her own sexualities and identities as through her relationship with her family, the exploration of her parents' history and the strengthening of family ties. Significant space is also given to the birth and maturation of her passion for film making and the world of cinema. The affective-sexual theme is widely explored, and the related semantic language is particularly rich. Moreover, and non-binary character, Éole, makes an appearance for the first time. Éole is a great source of inspiration and support for Olive, and in the novel they constitute an obvious political figure not only because of the activism they carry out with their comrades in the queer collective Queer Moustache (similar to the Pride Soc in *Loveless*), but also because

³⁹⁴ Boulter, *Apprivoiser l'été*, 231, 232.

of the queer and militant terminology Boulier has them explain at various points in the novel.

In conclusion, I provide here a summary of *Apprivoiser l'été* according to the established criteria of analysis.

- Queer visibility = queerness, although it represents one of the main elements of the novel, is not its main focus.
- Queer assimilation = most queer characters happen to be queer, while Olive gradually discovers that she is queer, this fact is never problematised by her.
- Queer consciousness/community = queer characters are represented within a queer community (Queer Moustache) where they feel they belong and where they can find love, friendship, solidarity, and support. Through her encounter with Éole, Olive gravitates towards this collective and it becomes a source of inspiration for her. The novel also bears witness to the fact that one can momentarily or permanently distance oneself from a queer community, as happens to Éole when they decide they want to stop their work as an activist to devote themselves more to dance.
- Queerphobia = the most serious instance in this novel is when the police shout homophobic insults at the Queer Moustache collective during a performance and force them to stop the performance, dispersing them. Other moments worth observing include the tacitly judgmental reaction of Sonia and the other villagers to the arrival of the members of the queer collective on the dance floor at a village festival and the denunciation of the short documentary festival film that Olive attends which exposes the queerphobic provincial context in which queer youth are born and grow up.

- Eutopian tension = the eutopian impulse present in this novel is demonstrated not by the protagonist but by the Queer Moustache collective, hence by the queer characters Éole, Malicia, Alix, etc., who defy social norms with their art, exhibiting their bodies and clothing, asserting the right to the existence of their queer bodies and identities through very strong acts of assertion that cause scandal and uproar in heteronormative society.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, I will first return to the three questions posed at the end of the first chapter. I will then present a graph as a visual aid to demonstrate the inversely proportional relationship between the quality of representation and the intensity of the eutopian impulse. Finally, I will conclude with a section on other general observations gathered from the analysis of this corpus.

Quality of Representation

In the first chapter of this thesis, I asked if the quality of representation seen in each sub-corpus had improved compared to the corpora studied by previous critics. Having examined the nine novels in this corpus in detail, it is evident that in the British and French sub-corpora there has been an improvement in this respect when compared to the previous critique of Queer YA novels published in France and Britain from the 1980s to 2012. However, expressions of queerphobia continue to persist, manifesting in a range of ways across all the novels in the corpus. The Italian sub-corpus remains rooted in the stereotypes identified in the studies of the previous two decades. In order to provide a more comprehensive answer to this first question, I will compare the state of my findings to each of the five general concluding remarks reported by the studies of Jenkins, Cart, Woodstein, and Lagabrielle that I listed in the first chapter.³⁹⁵

- 1) Queerness as plot. The vast majority of the novels studied by Jenkins and Cart, Woodstein and Lagabrielle focus on the queerness of the characters as a founding issue of the plot. On the other hand, characters who are casually queer and/or portrayed within a queer community have limited roles or are absent altogether.

The queerness of characters is still present as a basic plot element in some novels, but the number of main and especially secondary characters whose queerness is presented as a secondary aspect of their personality has increased considerably.

³⁹⁵ See pages 10 and 11.

Moreover, where a novel does centre around the queerness of the protagonists, these ones are at least enriched through personal interests and passions that make them more complex and interesting.

- 2) The presence of a partial queer spectrum. There is a lack of representation of the wide variety of the LGBTQ+ community. In Lagabrielle's study, most of the novels analysed feature exclusively G (Gay) or L (Lesbian) characters. There are very few cases of novels containing B (bisexual) or T (trans) characters, while other queer identities are completely absent.

The diversity of representation of the LGBTQ+ community has generally increased. This is most noticeable in the British novels studied. In addition to gay and lesbian cisgender characters, the presence of bisexual and trans characters with a variety of different sexual orientations is increasing. New identities are also emerging such as asexual and/or aromantic individuals who distinguish between romantic and sexual orientations, pansexual characters who feel a romantic and/or sexual attraction for an individual without attaching importance to sex and gender identity, and non-binary characters who do not recognise their gender identity within the male/female binary scheme.

In the French context, trans, bisexual, and non-binary adolescent characters dominate in the novels studied.

The Italian novels studied offered the poorest representation with only one trans, bisexual teenager, while all other characters are all cisgender gay and lesbian.

- 3) A lack of intersectionality. In Woodstein's words, the recurring impression is that the books 'seem to take it for granted that LGBTQ people are white, middle-class, Christian, able-bodied and otherwise "normal"'.

The British and French sub-corpora show a good degree of intersectionality, presenting queer adolescents from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. No novels in these two corpora deal with the issue of religious background and queer identity. The Italian sub-corpus, on the other hand, does not present any particular intersectional characteristics. If one considers that the degree of intersectionality of lesbian adolescents, as female (and therefore victims of

misogyny) and homosexual (victims of lesbophobia), is well established across the sub-corpora, the only particular case of intersectionality is found in Alice in *Un'Alice come un'altra* as a transgender and bisexual girl. All Italian queer teenagers are generally white, from middle-class families, Christians, or presumed Christians. No disabled or neurodivergent adolescents were found in any of the sub-corpora.

- 4) Queer stereotypes. The use of stereotypes to portray queer characters, from physical aesthetics and clothing to social roles and expectations, to the sex role associated with certain aspects of personality.

The stereotyping of queer teenagers, although considerably reduced in some novels (the British and French sub-corpora), has not yet been overcome.

In line with the general social expectation that all adolescents should be heterosexual and cisgender, queer characters often conform to the following heteronormative socio-sexual attitudes:

- a) Gay teenagers must be masculine and not effeminate.
 - b) Teenage lesbians must be feminine and not tomboyish, for example by avoiding combat sports and exercising physical violence on boys.
 - c) Aro-ace adolescents are denied their own identity, under the general assumption that it is impossible for the absence of sexual and romantic attraction between individuals to be a naturally occurring characteristic.
 - d) Transgender people are repressed in their gender expression (i.e. in the aesthetic expression of their personal identity) and are denigrated by the idea that homosexual orientation is more acceptable than transgender identity, and therefore that a gay but cisgender person is better than any transgender person.
- 5) HIV, AIDS, and suicide. These issues partly fall under the previous issue of stereotypes but particularly concern the association of male homosexual orientation with HIV and AIDS and, more generally, homosexuality with suicide.

The theme of suicide as a consequence of homosexuality is unfortunately still present today. It can be found in all the novels in the Italian sub-corpus and in the

British novel *Ace of Spades* – although a suicide attempt is only mentioned briefly. On the other hand, the theme of HIV as a consequence of queerness has fortunately disappeared, although it should be noted that out of nine books analysed in which there are scenes of sex between queer teenagers only one, *Ace of Spades*, mentions the use of some form of contraceptive. This problem was already noted by Woodstein in her study *Are The Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*, 2013).

Before beginning this study, I asked if there is one sub-corpus that presents a better quality of representation of LGBTQ+ adolescents (and lower intensity of eutopian tension) and therefore positions itself closer to the concept of Queertopia. In general, the study showed that the French and British sub-corpora presented the best quality of representation due to the novelty and variety of the queer characters presented, the fact that most of the characters had complex personalities, and that they are often represented within a community and never in isolation. This improvement in representation does not detract from the clear articulation of the queer experience. As *Loveless* and *Boy Queen* clearly demonstrated, a high quality of representation (prominent level of integration and presence of queer community) does not necessarily correspond to a low level of the eutopian drive. Characters in these novels nonetheless had to resist extreme instances of queerphobia. However, the French sub-corpus offers a superior level of representation still thanks to the French authors' effort to construct narratives with complex and multifaceted queer characters where queerphobia is less central. It is worth noting, however, that in accordance with the established criteria of analysis, the distance between these two sub-corpora is minimal.

Finally, I asked whether there is a sub-corpus that presents an inferior level of representation. Unfortunately, the novels in the Italian sub-corpus revealed a particularly low quality of representation.

The Relationship between Representation and Eutopian Impulse

The graph below offers a visual aid for the relationship between the quality of representation and eutopian tension in the novels studied. For the Italian sub-corpus, all three novels demonstrate important levels of eutopian impulse, but an exceptionally low quality of representation.

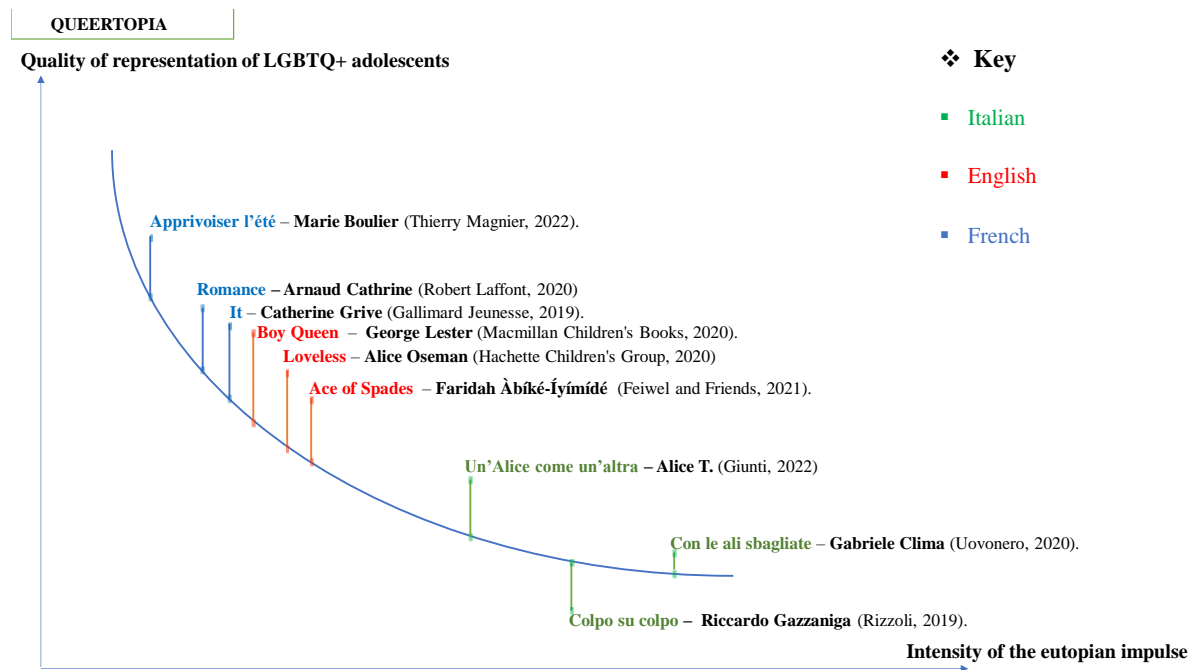


Figure 9

Additional Findings

The quality of representation of the queer adolescents analysed in this corpus undoubtedly shows improvements compared to the previous studies by Jenkins and Cart, Lagabrielle, and Woodstein. The French sub-corpus shows the highest level of representational quality, while the English sub-corpus it is not far behind. The Italian sub-corpus, on the other hand had the lowest level of representational quality. Despite the overall improvement across the corpus, some problematic elements remain in the representation of queer adolescents. Each new identity of the LGBTQ+ community represented in the Young Adult novels analysed must undergo a process of becoming visible. In other words, when a linguistic-national

sub-corpus accommodates an emerging queer identity, this identity becomes the dramatic centre of the novel's plot, implying a lowering in the quality of representation and its placement in a highly eutopian context. This is demonstrated by the cases of *Un'Alice come un'altra* in the Italian sub-corpus with its trans character, and by *Loveless* in the English sub-corpus with its asexual and aromantic characters. It is extremely interesting to note that all the queer teenagers in the analysed corpus are never represented as superheroes or superheroines, but as fallible and human characters. Queer teenagers in all the novels must overcome the difficulties and queerphobia imposed on them by the heteronormative and homophobic status quo with the help of other characters with whom they establish a solidarity, love and, in many cases, community. It is also remarkable to note that all the novels analysed feature social queerphobia and the reactive response of young queer protagonists to it. All these adolescents are confronted with queerphobic social contexts against which they must resist, shape, and assert their identities. Whether the primary intent of the writing is political, educational, or artistic, all the authors in this corpus write characters who oppose the heteronormative and queerphobic social narrative that threatens to annihilate their identities. Indeed, this shared authorial will might be termed European. These novels oppose the general and dominant heteronormative, patriarchal, and masculinist society that regulates relationships between individuals in terms of identity and sexuality. On the other hand, Queer YA novels need to address the presentation of sex in the genre. The subject is rarely touched upon and, when it is, it is often done in a nuanced and hasty manner. *Romance* and *Apprivoiser l'été* are the only novels in this corpus in which sexual language is used in precise and direct terms. I also note that among the few instances where there are queer sex scenes, only in *Ace of Spades* mentions the use of contraceptives. Even in my readings of queer YA novels excluded from the corpus, I observed that when contraception was mentioned in sex scenes (a rare event in itself), condoms were the only contraceptive method presented. I strongly believe that the queer YA genre must further open itself up to the narration of teenage sex not only by portraying it more frequently but using sexual terminology in the descriptions of these scenes. This language could be vulgar, draw on slang or dialects but it should be verisimilar and

a language that is realistically used by teenagers. The world of contraceptives, much more expansive than just condoms, must also be explored. In the future, I hope for the appearance of contraceptives also for women (or, more generally, for people with wombs), the use of *sex toys*, and a much broader representation of the sexual dimension, including unorthodox practices such as fetishes, BDSM, role-playing, etc.

On the other hand, as far as the concept of Queertopia is concerned, none of the novels studied perfectly coincides with this ideal value. Nonetheless, while some of the works taken into consideration position themselves at a great distance from it (namely the Italian sub-corpus), others meet it halfway (the British sub-corpus), and others come closest to it (the French sub-corpus). All the novels in this corpus, apart from the dystopian thriller *Ace of Spades*, fall into the mimetic genre, and it is therefore assumed that their main purpose is to portray modern society as faithfully as possible. While the data provided by the European observatories on the status of the rights of the European LGBTQ+ community (ILGA and IGLYO) can provide us with a detailed and factual picture of the critical queerphobic issues in the countries the novels refer to, it is important to consider the possibility that the novels in this corpus may not necessarily reflect levels of queerphobia in their respective countries. However, the positioning of the sub-corporuses in graph above is reflective of the last ILGA report in which France ranked twelfth, the UK fifteenth and Italy thirty-fifth. It could therefore be suggested that the study criteria used to analyse the three sub-corporuses go some way to confirming the statistical data presented. The picture of societies produced across the various sub-corporuses align reasonably faithfully with the vision of society which emerges from the data on the standard of living of the LGBTQ+ community. It is therefore possible to hypothesise that future improvement in the legislation which represents and champions queer communities in the countries in this study would coincide with an improvement in the quality of the representation of LGBTQ+ adolescents in YA novels. Unfortunately, however, the opposite would also be true. While I cheer for the first option, I close this study with the intention (and the suggestion for those who read and are interested in the topics studied here) to open and extend this research to all the borders of the European continent and beyond. The prospect of

observing how LGBTQ+ teenagers are portrayed in YA literature in the four corners of the world is fascinating and exciting. Personally, I am left pondering the thought of the countless possibilities of representation I might encounter in queer YA literature worldwide. It is undoubtedly intriguing to interconnect as many literatures as possible, to see if the eutopian impulse is present everywhere in these books, and to discover that, somewhere, some of them have already reached Queertopia, waiting for all the others to do so.

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Artwork

Claudia Cerulo, *Save Pessimism For Better Times*, opera selezionata nella CFA 'Fuck War' di CHEAP, 2024, [CHEAP Street Poster Art Festival](#).

Johanna Toruño, *Heteronormativity is A Mediocre Colonial Concept*, artwork by The Unapologetic Street Series, 2024, [The Unapologetic Street Series](#).

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Figure 10

Claudia Cerulo, *Save Pessimism For Better Times*, opera selezionata nella CFA 'Fuck War' di CHEAP, 2024, [CHEAP Street Poster Art Festival](#).