A "Messy Complexity"? On Coming-Out, Identity Formation, and Community in Queer YA Romance Novels

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When entering a bookstore, one doesn't have to look far to find the designated tables and bookshelves laden with colorfully bright books labeled as Queer YA and #booktok recommendations. This phenomenon has become increasingly widespread over the last few years as the genre of Queer YA and particularly Queer YA Romance has gained in popularity, growing a community of dedicated readers, on- and offline. This reading community overlaps and merges with queer communities: "I've been thinking a lot about the idea of community. Or *communities*, plural," writes Becky Albertalli in the acknowledgments of her latest Queer YA Romance novel *Imogen, Obviously*. For her, "the word holds a good deal of messy complexity" (Albertalli, Ackn.) – a complexity often overlooked in the genre itself by critics who tend to dismiss flamboyant covers and stories written for young, teenage hearts. Likewise, even the most dedicated of readers often focus their attention on the romantic relationships portrayed rather than on the aspects of community represented in the novels. Romance plots often cannot be completed without a queer community the protagonists can refer and relate to, which is why the tropes employed in these novels tend to tie in the romantic relationship with a larger thematic exploration of identity and self-discovery.

Young adult (YA) fiction addresses an audience of "emerging adults" (Pattee 2017, 219) commonly understood to be aged between 11 and 18. It usually deals with coming-of-age-narratives, in which the main character experiences a process of maturation and self-discovery. YA Romance is a popular subgenre in which the coming-of-age happens through the means of a romantic plotline. The main character is typically a straight, cisgender female adolescent who serves as a blank projection space for the mostly female audience and finds herself through the role of girlfriend or sexual subject in line with a heteronormative adulthood (cf. Pattee 2011, 59). In Queer YA fiction, the cast of protagonists is more diverse in terms of gender and sexual identity. Their coming-of-age is intrinsically linked to their journey of self-discovery of their queer sexuality and/or (gender) identity, as is the happy-ending romance that can only follow after they discover their (queer) attraction. Just like YA Romance, Queer YA tends to follow certain genre-specific tropes, the *coming-out* being one of them. Other common romance tropes, however, must be subverted or queered to accommodate the changed subjects and gender relations. Other tropes such

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as *fake dating*, *bullying*, and a *confession at the end* are not gender-dependent or require a specific sexual orientation but are nonetheless frequently used in Queer YA Romance.

Queer YA narratives are not an invention of the 21st century: coming-of-age stories around queer protagonists have existed and continued to be produced in growing annual numbers ever since the mid-20th century, although it was only in the 1980s that the focus of these stories shifted from an inevitable punishment and/or untimely death of the queer characters towards a happy ending. In the forty years since then, the genre has continually developed to include more diverse representations of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.[2]

Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) was one of the first titles to have broken into the mainstream and was even adapted into a movie in 2018 under the title *Love, Simon*, later-on to be followed by a spin-off show on Disney+. With the new-found chance of popular and monetary success, the genre has grown exponentially and caters to an increasing demand for more diverse and intersectional[3] representations. In order to discuss a broad spectrum of LGBTQIA+ representations, this paper focuses on three examples, covering different queer identity discourses: *Imogen, Obviously* by Becky Albertalli as a story showcasing bisexuality and a romantic relationship between two women, *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender as a trans* narrative with a transmasculine protagonist in queer relationships, and *Red, White & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston as a relationship between a gay and a bisexual man. In a close reading of these examples, this paper will ask a number of questions, first of these being about the purpose romance serves in those stories. Is it necessary for the self-discovery and self-identification of the protagonists to become romantically and/or sexually involved? Which romantic tropes also known from non-queer romance narratives help convey the queer romance and which ones are subverted to queer the narrative?

A factor of utmost importance for narratives of, by, and for queer people, is the element of community. How is community constructed in Queer YA Romance novels? What role does it play for narrative development and for the characters' coming-of-age? For the purpose of this essay, our theoretical understanding of the term "community" is informed by the ten fundamental elements every community is based on, as laid out by Suzanne Keller. These elements reach from membership criteria to codes of conduct, belief systems and social exchange. They are organized in the chronological order of a community's formation

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2 Texts offering an overview over the history of the genre include Barot, Cart and Keywell, and Lewis. While Lewis' text remains rather superficial and general, Cart and Keywell go into much more detail, mapping out the development decade by decade, without, however, referencing any sources when it comes to specific data such as the number of queer YA books published. The academically most sophisticated text is that of Barot who focuses not exclusively on the evolution of the queer romance narrative (without looking specifically at YA, though) but also on that of the queer publishing industry and the cultural movements that underpin it.

3 While the term "intersectionality" was originally coined by K.W. Crenshaw in "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color" to refer to specifically political intersectionality, meaning the simultaneous belonging to two subordinated groups of women of color (cf. ibid., 360), the term has since expanded and is used more broadly to describe all instances of overlapping social categorizations like race, gender, disability, queerness, class etc.

and evolution, no. 1, turf and territory, being the very first stage of community building and no. 10, transcendence and the spirit of community, being its final step (cf. 269).

Every community starts out in a certain turf or territory [1], which provides closure and safety (cf. 267). Looking at the role of online spaces for modern-day community building, one may broaden this geographical concept to include a specific, more or less secluded domain in more general terms. Who has access to this space is determined by criteria of membership [2], which help distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Thus, community formation implies the idea of an 'us' and a 'them' (cf. Keller 266). For the queer community, membership criteria seem to be rather obvious. Identifying as queer goes hand in hand with the repeated act of coming out – to oneself, and, usually, also to others. For most people, this proclamation of belonging is tied to choosing one or more of the increasingly diverse and detailed labels available to them. The act of coming out and labeling oneself, declaring one's identity, is crucial to being accepted within the queer community. The pressures that can arise from this will also be examined in our analyses. Early on, an institutional framework [3] is put into place to govern the community and set its rules, followed by common values [4], which establish a community's priorities and goals, and a system of beliefs [5], validating the chosen way of life and justifying the pursuit of goals. This is when myths and images [6] come into play. Events or people deemed important for a community's formation, evolution, and/or survival will shape its understanding of itself, up to a point where "the fiction, the belief, indeed the myth of the community may be more significant than the actuality" (Keller 266). This may be the case in particular for such an extensive and complex group as the queer community, which, as Elena Kiesling points out, is first and foremost an imagined one (cf. 25), the ideal of a cohesive whole being more of an idea than a lived reality. As a community's self-perception grows, celebrations and rituals [7] are established, furthering a sense of togetherness and belonging (cf. Keller 267). A clear leadership [8] is formed, which is as crucial for the community's survival as it is regarded with critical ambivalence. Finally, social relationships [9] play an increasingly vital role in maintaining a community. They are personal and establish bonds of trust and mutuality. Without them, a sense of community [10], an investment of the self, which stems from the recognition of a totality beyond the individual, and therefore the last and transcending element of community, could not come to pass. In a community, all its members are interdependent.

While Keller still uses the gay and lesbian communities of the late 1940s up to the 1990s to exemplify how the mechanics of community can work (cf. 261-264), Kiesling examines the inner workings of the much broader queer community through a more critical lens and challenges its very concept. Not only does 'queerness' defy definition, she claims, it is also incompatible with the concept of 'community.' The two concepts contradict each other, since the original meaning of 'queer' implies the renouncement of a clear center, challenging traditional ideas of identity and thus community (cf. Kiesling 49). The origins of Queer Theory lie in the "critique of a society structured around certain norms and binary oppositions" (Kiesling 45) and queerness itself "emphasizes its own multiplicity and fragmentary nature" (47). One single community claiming to be 'queer' is therefore a

conceptional paradox, despite 'the queer community' being used as an umbrella term to refer to the sense of communality experienced among many LGBTQIA+ individuals. It is, however, important to note that a community is never a homogenous group and has to straddle multiple divides and reconcile many differences between its members – something the mainstream queer community is neglecting when it comes to queers in intersectional spaces (cf. Kiesling 13). Kiesling sharply critiques the overly dominant image of the white, homosexual male being utilized as a figurehead of queerness and queer culture, which "contributes to a structural homonormativity perpetuating racism, ageism, classism, and many other-isms on various levels" (13). This only furthers the marginalization of already marginalized groups (cf. Kiesling 9, 16, 28), people of color, for instance, being rarely viewed as part of the queer community (cf. ibid. 18, 35). Increasingly gaining relevance and acknowledgement in the mainstream, queer culture presents itself in as homogenous a way as possible and avoids radical politics, in order to be "readily available for consumption" (26). While becoming more and more diverse, the publishing statistics of LGBTQIA+ themed books reflect this tendency, the majority of stories, however, still feature white gay men.

One cannot talk about the modern queer community without tackling the topic of social media, enabling the creation of a worldwide queer network. Some groups that have gained public perception more recently, such as the asexual community, have even established themselves predominantly in and through online spaces. But as much as social media might enable exchange, for queer theorist David M. Halperin this development is more bane than boon. According to him, the increasing re-location of queer community and exchange into the digital space has led to the disappearance of "the queer public sphere" (440), of brick and mortar institutions such as gay bars, in which the exposure to new ideas challenging one's biases was less avoidable. The cross-generational exchange of queer values and thus the conditions for the advancement of gay liberation have been dealt a considerable blow. Following his arguments, the digitization of queer spaces is one of the main reasons why queer culture has warped itself to cater to a debate-numbing mainstream (cf. 441).

Acknowledging the complexities of queer communities in particular, we will answer our research questions on community formation, as well as the functions and subversions of tropes and romance narratives in the novels by first examining the intricacies of self-discovery, social media discourse, and allyship in *Imogen, Obviously*, before investigating themes of gender identity, intersectionality of race and queerness, and (cyber) bullying in *Felix Ever After*. Lastly, we will look at the representation of coming-out, queer historiography, and community formation through media in the shape of public support in *Red, White & Royal Blue* and untangle some of the messiness of queer community life and depictions thereof.

"The bisexuals have spoken": Community Gatekeeping in *Imogen, Obviously*

Written by Becky Albertalli, best known for her 2015 novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, the novel *Imogen, Obviously* was first published in 2023. The plot is centered around Imogen, a high school senior visiting her queer best friend Lili at college. There, she discovers her bisexuality after spending her adolescence as 'the world's greatest ally' to her queer friends and sister. Roped into a *fake dating* scenario which leads everyone at the college to perceive her as queer, Imogen soon finds that the pretense might have at least some truth to it as she begins growing closer to Lili's friend Tessa. Her process of self-discovery, however, is repeatedly complicated by community-internal 'discourse'[4] which finds its personification in her likewise queer high school friend Gretchen, who continues to insist on Imogen's heterosexuality.

One of the main themes inciting such discourse is the act of coming out, and the way it is approached by the queer community. This community is presented in two distinct ways in the novel – with a focus on its benefits on the one hand, and the issues persisting within it on the other. Even before she visits the college, the queer community forms a strong presence within Imogen's social circles, as she regularly partakes in her high school's Pride Alliance meetings.[5] The fact that she joins them only as an ally, however, leads her to perceive herself as supportive but not part of the group. This changes when her friend Lili, who is already at college, introduces Imogen to her new all-queer friend group, a "ride-or-die squad" (16) that welcomes Imogen with open arms, including her in all their activities during her spring-break visit. At this point, Imogen still considers herself a straight ally but pretends to be Lili's bisexual ex-girlfriend as a favor to her friend. This allows her to experience queer community spaces as an insider for the first time.

While grateful for the group's immediate acceptance of her, Imogen is terrified of being outed as an impostor and trespasser in their queer space. This fear is entirely caused by her own insecurities – no one in the group ever questions or judges her. On the contrary, all members of the group are shown to be wholly supportive of new additions to their community, with the standout example being Mika, a non-binary Japanese-American social media influencer. As relayed by Lili, "[they get DMs from] baby queer kids. [...] Because some of them don't know *any* openly trans people in real life" (Albertalli 387). By being out, they offer representation to trans kids, be they questioning, closeted or out themselves. Though differences persist between the members of Lili's group of friends concerning their experiences (cf. 26-28, 318-322), they are wholly accepting of each other and share common values.[6] Their differences are not equalized but rather reconciled (cf. Keller 286), with most members of the group not only part of a queer minority, but also an ethnic one. This can also be observed in the other novels that will be discussed, *Red, White & Royal Blue* and *Felix Ever After*.

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4   For the purposes of this section of the paper, the term "discourse" will be used as it is in the novel to refer to inter-community tensions (particularly in online spaces) rather than academic discourse.

5   cf. stage 1 (safe territory) of Keller's community formation (see above)

6   cf. stage 4 (common values) of Keller's community formation

In addition to these queer communities, online spaces and their views on queer topics are also featured in the novel. These spaces are, congruent with Halperin's ideas of a less open-minded digital community (cf. 440-441) and, as will be shown, similar to their depiction in *Felix Ever After*, framed as largely negative and allowing certain mindsets to go unchallenged. Imogen's friend Gretchen in particular references online discourse frequently. During the story, the question of whether or not public figures should openly disclose their sexuality is continuously asked (cf. Albertalli 255). The most prominent example of this discussion in the novel is actress Kara Clapstone who sees herself forced to come out when she receives backlash for playing a queer role as a (supposedly) straight woman (cf. 245-249). Despite her coming out, Gretchen remains critical of her, sharing with Imogen articles that further the discourse, titled, for instance, "On Privacy, Privilege, and Positionality: Is Kara Clapstone's Announcement Too Little, Too Late?" (261). The argument brought forth by Gretchen and others furthering the online discourse is that because the queer community struggles with a lack of visibility in the first place, roles of queer characters should be portrayed exclusively by queer actors, and therefore those in the public eye should openly disclose their sexual identity. There are, however, also voices calling for reason, such as Imogen's sister Edith, who sides with the actress, saying "[she] doesn't need to set her coming-out timeline according to [...] weird parasocial entitlement" (248). The consensus the novel eventually reaches is that coming out, when done by choice, is a good way to provide much needed representation,[7] while a forced coming-out is framed as unjustifiable.

Although these specific cases are fictional, they are inspired by real-life occurrences. *Heartstopper* actor Kit Connor, whose initials happen to be the same as those of Kara Clapstone, was similarly forced to come out as bisexual after receiving backlash online.[8] Albertalli likewise draws from her own experience, having been pressured to disclose her sexuality when, after the success of her prior novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda,* she was accused of exploiting the queer community by supposedly being a straight woman writing queer romance (cf. Schulman). Her descriptions of said community in *Imogen, Obviously* are notably influenced by this event with Imogen's journey being an attempt at capturing those nuances that Albertalli believes are too often overlooked (cf. 419), to explore how outing yourself and using specific labels is both a blessing and a curse. The novel reveals the antagonism faced by queer individuals not just from the allocishet outside world but from within their communities. As she goes from navigating queer spaces as an ally to questioning her own sexuality, the protagonist keeps finding herself confronted with the question whether a label is truly valid without certain experiences. She is not the only character struggling with this: the underlying pressure to prove her pansexuality to her openly queer college friends is what causes Imogen's best friend Lili to invent a fake relationship between the two of them (cf. 28), a revelation that also serves as the novel's inciting incident. This suggests that claiming a label is in part a performative act, something that requires acknowledgment by others in the community.

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7   cf. stage 10 (sense of community) of Keller's community formation

8   Connor himself notes in an interview, "I knew that I was a queer man, but I didn't feel I wanted the world to know. Not because I was ashamed, but because it was private" (Edwardes).

Imogen's bisexual high-school friend Gretchen reinforces this line of thinking by highlighting the importance of labels on numerous occasions. When a student refuses to use labels at a Pride Alliance meeting at their school, for example, she expresses her discomfort with the situation, suspecting that the character in question might in truth be cisgender and heterosexual, and concluding: "I guess I just find it kind of unfair that the onus is on queer people to come out and share our labels. Allocishet people don't have to because they're the default" (220). Furthermore, when Imogen herself comes out to her friends at the end of the novel, Gretchen feels that her label is being misused because her own experiences as a queer individual are so vastly different from Imogen's, despite them both identifying as bisexual: "Ever been called a slur in front of your mom at Walmart, Imogen?" (351). Gretchen has clearly subscribed to an idea of community and labels that is based on shared suffering and universal experiences.[9] Imogen, who does not meet those arbitrary criteria due to her overall straight-passing appearance that largely protects her from harassment, is accused of "appropriating queerness because she thinks it will make everyone happy" (351). Ironically, by assuming that every unlabeled or straight-passing individual is allocishet, Gretchen only underlines the straight-by-default misconception and pushes potentially questioning characters out of the supposedly safe space created with the aim of exploring identities free from judgment and discrimination. In this, she functions as a mouthpiece for common online discourses demanding people operating in queer spaces, especially those in the public eye, to disclose their identities or else be accused of queerbaiting (see above). "Labels have meanings," she tells Imogen after her coming out, "it's how we're able to talk about shared experiences […]. That's like the whole foundation of the queer community" (395). The Queer Community, as a universal experience of queerness, however, is a myth (cf. Keller 266). Indeed, the core principle of queerness is to deconstruct norms instead of upholding them, and thus it always "emphasizes its own multiplicity and fragmentary nature" (Kiesling 47).

The multiplicity of queer experiences and communities is established in the novel when other queer characters actively challenge Gretchen's devotion to membership criteria ("Even Gretchen talking about that unlabeled kid in Pride Alliance. I'm like – how did we get here? When did we decide this stuff needed our input?", Albertalli 386). Lili, for example, points out the lack of non-white, non-Western perspectives on queer issues (cf. 388), and Edith, Imogen's lesbian sister, never goes to the Pride Alliance meetings to begin with, completely rejecting the idea of her identity requiring any outside validation (cf. 6), a sentiment also expressed by a character in *Felix Ever After*. Thus, the narrative deconstructs the myth of a monolithic queer community and highlights the strongly subjective perception of sexuality. This construction of community, especially the continuous discourse about labeling and coming out (see above), has a significant influence on Imogen's character development. Generally, Imogen likes to be the person others expect her to be (cf. 348) which proves problematic when different expectations regarding her sexuality converge. In one way or another, both parties, Gretchen and Lili's friends, label her, and she strongly suspects that it has an influence on her (cf. 302, 348). Gretchen's

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9   cf. stage 2 (membership criteria) of Keller's community formation

nicknames for Imogen, such as "heteropotamus[...]" (7) and "hetero queen" (351) are strongly reminiscent of a reversed version of the *gay best friend* trope.[10] Additionally, she tells Imogen "[y]ou're not gay" (292) and that "it's okay to be straight" (294), effectively taking Imogen's autonomy over her self-expression. The extent to which this happens leads Imogen to perceive herself as the "token straight" (387), serving Gretchen as an accessory which defines her role in their friendship ("that was my autofill," 387). Thereby, this act of labeling is not restricted to Imogen's sexuality but extends to her relationships, meaning that a change of the former would influence the latter as well. Just how deep the impact of others' influence on Imogen runs becomes apparent when Lili's friends, regarding Imogen's bisexuality a fact, point out her queer aesthetics in one instance ("bi vibes," 133). Gretchen, on the other hand, insisting on Imogen's heterosexuality, views her, but also specifically her appearance, as entirely straight. Thus, the narrative challenges the idea of a 'queer aesthetic', instead suggesting that people see what they want to see. However, Imogen only questions the friend group's (cf. 133) but not Gretchen's opinion, which she has come to take as fact due to her constant exposure to it. This continuous imposing of labels on her leads to a notable change in her self-perception, for example, "I'm hopelessly, blindingly, obviously straight. Gretchen says queer people […]" (37), thereby immediately contrasting her perceived straightness and Gretchen's queerness, repeatedly establishing Gretchen as a gatekeeper of queerness.[11] Because of these experiences, Imogen keeps it to herself when she starts questioning her straightness, at one point even doubting whether coming out is necessary for her (cf. 330). It becomes evident that Gretchen, as a mouthpiece of the online discourses, has made her hesitant, with Gretchen often referencing queerness as something sexual (cf. 293) on the one hand, and on the other overstating the importance and rigidity of labels and claiming bisexuality as her own, which initially instills a fear in Imogen of stealing labels (cf. 344).

It is Lili's uncertainty regarding her own labels that gives Imogen the courage to express and label her bisexuality (cf. 306-308, 329). Lili's differentiation between her romantic and her sexual label (cf. 389) further takes the pressure off Imogen that queerness only counts if it is sexual. Once she leaves the closet behind, its impact on her self-perception becomes obvious, "[a]ll the times I said I'm straight. All the times everyone's said I'm straight. (…) How could I miss it?" (332). Imogen finally finds empowerment in sharing her chosen label in her own voice with others (cf. 347) and acknowledges the way it shapes her reality (cf. 332).

Imogen's character development is strongly influenced by the way labels alter self-perception and the way in which they shape community overall. This impact of labels extends to her relationship with Tessa. It takes her a rather significant amount of time, in line with questioning her straightness, to even label her feelings as a crush, which Gretchen yet again attempts to deny her (cf. 306). As can be seen, and as is typical for the genre, the

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10   Khamis and Lambert define this kind of stereotype as harmful: "[T]hey necessarily reanimate power dynamics and keep the consuming/consumed gay male friends of contemporary commercial US and global TV within the histories and practices of oppression" (123).

11   cf. stage 2 (membership criteria) of Keller's community formation

progression of Imogen's romantic relationship and her journey towards self-discovery are tightly linked. This connection is further underlined by the subversion of common literary themes, most prominently the *fake dating* trope, which is utilized as a tool to modify various other genre stereotypes. Her fictitious former relationship with her best friend Lili allows Imogen – who, as an ally, would otherwise never insert herself into queer spaces in that manner unless it were a favor (cf. 66-67) – to push past the boundaries of her perceived reality. Being accepted into the queer community without the need to justify her presence within it due to everyone already considering her queer (cf. 387) leads her to understand that sexuality might be more fluid than she once thought (cf. 65-66) and to finally reconsider the label imposed on her by others (see above). The *fake dating* scenario she is caught in therefore has a direct effect on Imogen's exploration of her queer identity, which in turn is crucial for her romantic storyline to turn out successful. Contrary to what is the norm, however, this particular romance does not take place between the two characters pretending to be in a relationship, therefore distinguishing it from *Red, White & Royal Blue*, where the forced friendship between the two protagonists progresses into a relationship. Nonetheless, it is by means of pretense that romantic interest is first facilitated, with Tessa, an out lesbian, only approaching Imogen because she considers her queer (cf. 48). This open display of affection, then, is what allows Imogen to acknowledge the attraction she feels towards her (cf. 108-110) even before coming to terms with her own bisexuality: "I mean, I'd be losing my mind over Tessa if I were queer" (116). The idea that, in the adolescent romance novel, self-discovery results from romance (cf. Christian-Smith qtd. in Pattee 2011, 59) is thus simultaneously subverted and confirmed: while her romantic interest in Tessa allows Imogen to discover her queer identity, a romantic happy-ending can only take place once this has occurred.

Yet in order to be able to publicly admit her feelings for Tessa, Imogen must first disclose her queerness to those still perceiving her as straight (cf. Albertalli 292, 329-330). Simultaneously, she feels the need to reveal to Tessa that she was dishonest about her past relationship with Lili before continuing to work on their romance (cf. 338, 344, 345). This, however, requires a revelation of her priorly assumed heterosexuality: "There's just no way to spin it without admitting to Tessa that I wasn't out to begin with. That I thought I was straight. Even though I'm not. And I wasn't" (347). Accordingly, Imogen finds herself in a position where she is doubly closeted and therefore required to make multiple confessions, a state similarly experienced by the protagonist in *Felix Ever After*, though differing in its focus on sexual rather than both sexual and gender identity. By means of the altered *fake dating* trope, there is another common theme that is subverted. The *coming-out* trope, central to many queer romance novels, in this case does not merely entail coming out as queer but concurrently as 'formerly straight,' thereby challenging the idea of heterosexuality as default which Gretchen upholds (see above). Furthermore, the repeated confessions required of Imogen, as well as the fact that by the end of the novel neither her sexuality nor her relationship are disclosed to everyone in her life (cf. 379, 407, 413), support the notion that the act of coming out is seldom a solitary, concluded event. Even when all prerequisites for her to experience a romantic happy ending are fulfilled (cf. 404), as will be shown to also

be the case for *Red, White & Royal Blue* and *Felix Ever After*, her personal journey is thus implied to remain ongoing.

"Do I want to be a boy, or do I love boys?" – Complex Identity in *Felix Ever After*

In the novel *Felix Ever After*, written by Kacen Callender and published in 2020, the main character Felix is a 17-year-old transgender boy, who struggles with his identity and later identifies as a demiboy. Mainly, questions of love and self-worth are explored. In the end, Felix gets what he always wanted: a loving relationship.

An important plot device commonly used in romance stories is the *overcoming of adversities*. These adversities can further character growth and alter the characters' relationships. What might be unexpected for a queer novel is that matters of Felix' sexuality and gender identity are not the most prominent points of Felix' narrative, how other people perceive him and interact with him is. *Felix Ever After* starts with someone leaking Felix' deadname and his pictures from before he transitioned. One major hurdle he experiences and must overcome is his need for revenge against the culprit. To get his revenge, Felix creates a new Instagram Account under the pseudonym "Lucky". His goal is to get close to Declan, whom he believes to be the guilty party, get to know Declan's darkest secret and then disclose it to the public. However, while Felix is enacting his plan, he and Declan start to slowly fall in love with each other. This results in two separate confession scenes. In the first, Declan confesses his love to Lucky, which Felix ignores (cf. Callender 220). In the second, after Lucky reveals his identity, Felix is the one admitting his feelings for Declan, who does not want to interact with Felix again (cf. 282).

Declan and Felix are not the only ones in the novel to confess their feelings to each other. The other potential relationship develops between Felix and his best friend Ezra. When Ezra first mentions his romantic feelings towards him, Felix refuses to hear him out (cf. 257). Later on, the final confession involves Felix and Ezra during a pride march. This results in a new relationship, where both partners are ready to admit and act on their feelings for each other. That the location of this scene is a pride parade seems only fitting, especially when the people there begin to cheer for Felix and Ezra (cf. 336f.). These confessions are typical for a romance novel and seem to be nearly identical to heterosexual love confessions with the exception being the latter one's location. The only queering in these instances is achieved through the character constellations. That this element is not foregrounded but takes place in a matter-of-fact narrative construction speaks for the novel's attempt at normalizing LGBTQIA+ relationships by mimicking and adopting tropes of heteronormative romance novels. In contrast to this normalizing effort, queer labels play a major role in the plot. In *Felix Ever After*, multiple ways of looking at labeling oneself are mentioned. Unlike his best friend Ezra, who feels most comfortable without any labels (cf. 81f.), Felix finds security and confidence in labelling himself. He feels relieved after realizing that he identifies as a "demiboy" (278). Therefore, Felix figuring out how to label himself functions as a prerequisite for his character growth. This might also be due to the intended target audience being young adults and, thus, people who are still figuring themselves out. A queer character is scarcely the focus in a straight YA romance novel (cf. Pattee 2011).

This stereotype is turned upside down in *Felix Ever After*. Nearly every character mentioned in this novel is queer in one way or another. Labelling thus gains a new power to drive the narrative by constructing a community of queerness and/or Otherness which is not disrupted by heteronormative claims to a normative base reading, so to speak.

Typical for the genre is that the protagonist always seems to be more on the shy and observant side. They are seldom outgoing and extroverted, which might be due to the fact that they are supposed to serve, according to Pattee, as a blank projection canvas for the reader (cf. 59). Felix also falls into this stereotype but because of his friends trying to include him in their outings, he starts to come out of his shell. In the end, with the help of social media and the support of his community, Felix leaves the shadows and begins to stand in the spotlight, as seen during his speech after being publicly acknowledged for his artistic talents. This construction of an online community touches on but is also starkly contrasting to the 'discourse' community in *Imogen, Obviously* (see above). Shyness, introversion and online community support are all elements in the theme of coming out which is intricately woven into Felix' journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Felix undergoes two significant coming-out experiences. He already had his first coming-out as a transgender man before the novel begins. During a flashback, readers are shown how anxious he was and how his parents did not accept his identity immediately (cf. Callender 24). Later, when he comes out as a demiboy, he posts a picture of himself smiling with the caption "Guess who's a demiboy?" (279). Felix' mindset during this coming-out is the opposite of the previous one. He feels more secure, carefree and confident (cf. 278f.). These experiences are pivotal in shaping his identity and navigating the societal and personal challenges he faces. However, in contrast to both *Red, White & Royal Blue* and *Imogen, Obviously*, Felix' self-discovery is not directly tied to his romantic relationships. For him, everything is happening at the same time; his attraction towards Ezra and Declan does not influence his feelings about his gender identity or sexuality. Thus, a subversion of the idea that self-discovery results from romance takes place (cf. Christian-Smith qtd. in Pattee 59).

One aspect of Queer YA is the theme of community. The book shows multiple real-life communities, the two primary ones being Felix' group of friends, and the LGBT Community Center's gender identity discussion group. Through them, the novel stresses the importance of community which guides young adults in their lives by offering acceptance and tolerance and giving them information in accordance with shared ideas Keller calls "the bedrock of community," specifically the ninth and tenth stage of community formation (cf. 266-267). However, the communities in the novel do not portray united utopias in which everyone is happy; on the contrary, what Felix goes through in his close circle of friends shows what is examined as a "conceptional paradox" in the introduction of this essay. The diversity and fragmentation, to paraphrase Kiesling (see above), of queerness shatters the image of a safe space in a community for Felix as he experiences both solidarity and transphobia within it. The first community in Felix' story consists of his classmates with whom he attends a summer program before applying for university. Despite sharing similar queer and POC spaces, they do not neccessarily stand in solidarity with one another. Keller argues that "[f]or community to exist, individuals must

not only be close to one another but moving toward collective goals as well" (8). Felix, however, is still alienated by his fellow community members for different aspects of his identity, as he is a person of color, queer and transgender; and the suffering comes not only from outsiders, but from within too. The main transphobia he faces comes from his ex-partner, Marisol. In spite of being a radical feminist, her beliefs do exclude Felix specifically as "you can't be a feminist and decide you don't want to be a woman anymore" (Callender 30), making her one of the biggest bullies in the plot. Later, Marisol states that she will only date girls from now on (cf. 75), and that Felix is a misogynist for being a transgender boy. She dismisses transgender men and says she only supports transgender women and claims this as feminist (cf. 205f.). She further tries to exemplify her point by saying: "[s]o calling me out in front of everyone and making me look like an ass is your idea of loving and respecting women?" (207) and ends her argument by reflecting on the transphobic gallery portraying pre-transition Felix and stating: "I'm happy whoever it was did it" (207). This is not the last time Felix faces transphobia from someone within the group of friends as it is shown at the end that the person responsible for the gallery is Austin, a white, gay, cisgender boy who is also the cyberbully who kept harassing Felix. Even though he tries to justify his acts by claiming his love for Felix' eventual boyfriend Ezra,[12] Austin continues to make transphobic comments against Felix and trans people in general. People like Austin and Marisol show how, even though community can function as a safe space for its members, this community-internal safety is not always guaranteed. The role they play in the plot shows the lack of a homogeneous community, and how the image of such a homogenized and utopic community in the mass media is not a realistic one. Despite being a psychological stressor to those affected, however, community-internal transphobia can also enable a solidarity that protects the victim of their hate and therefore creates a community of adversity. The other friends in Felix' group are not quite knowledgeable about trans* identities, but the novel makes sure to show that most of them try to be good friends, or that their problems with Felix do not come from any of his identities.

The LGBT Community Center's gender identity discussion group fills that gap and thus plays an important role in the novel. What is presented in these scenes is not only the safe space to argue and discuss, but also the place to learn, putting a didactic spin on the novel. Consisting mainly of older queer people, the discussion group helps Felix in facing the future and what it may bring. Playing the role of mentor to the teenage protagonist, members of the discussion group make Felix see new perspectives of gender identities and their reflections in society, especially in queer communities. Contrary to the dynamics in Felix' friend group, the older people in the Community Center present themselves as allies to all the other members of the queer community, trying to take the high road so as not to offend another person in accordance with the didactic part of the novel. In the first meeting Felix attends, the "elderly man" Tom calms a heated discussion by saying "[t]here isn't much point to passing judgement on our community. We already get enough judgment

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12 The jealous and/or scheming competitor or enemy is also a trope of classic heteronormative romance novels and is to be subsumed under the category of obstacles. The punishment of the jealous party always focuses on their morally wrong motivation for interfering in, usually, the protagonist's life.

from others" (184), showing a different approach to talking about problems than Felix' friends and harking back to an older ideal of a community of adversity which precludes harsh criticism from within. However, despite their occasional disagreements, the group of friends consisting of Ezra, Leah, Marisol and other friends with a minority background create spaces for similar discussions.

While the discussion group talks about whether to abolish gender and labels completely (cf. 183), Ezra thinks about it on a personal level by stating that not defining himself with any label is best for him despite Leah's point on the need of labels in today's society. The same discussion takes place in the community center – if with a different perspective – to show that the questioning of gender as a concept and the need for labels do not just vanish when people grow up. This discourse also emphasizes that beyond a personal experience for certain characters the questioning of gender is interdependent with other questions like sexual orientations and thereby creates community. The older people of the discussion group build more upon their arguments and show how Felix should enjoy being a teenager in addition to questioning himself continuously (cf. 277). This results in Felix' second coming-out as a demiboy. Felix introspects after all the discussions he sees in the groups he is associated with, enabling him to be true to himself. The mentoring he receives is visible in his actions in the course of the novel, especially towards the end, whether it is the communities that advise living through the hardships, or the supportive art teacher who suggests confidence and self-love (cf. 172), which result in the self-portraits showing his true self. Felix first coming out as transgender is a defining moment. Internally, he grapples with understanding his true self, pondering whether he wants to be a boy, or loves boys (cf. 80). The question asked here highlights the intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation, showing that coming out is a multifaceted process, which encapsulates the nature of his self-discovery and the anxiety that accompanies it. Externally, Felix faces transphobia, exemplified by the public exposure of his deadname and pre-transition photos (cf. 31). The bullying exacerbates his anxiety and mental health struggles, pushing him to seek control and validation through revenge. The impact of this experience is profound, as Felix reflects that he cannot escape who he used to be and that he is stuck in the past. This illustrates the emotional turmoil and sense of entrapment Felix feels, emphasizing the psychological impact of coming out in a hostile environment.

Family dynamics are crucial in Felix' coming-out story, highlighting the heteronormative family as a community of importance. His relationship with his parents, particularly his mother, is complex and filled with a yearning for acceptance and validation. Felix' father struggles to fully understand and accept Felix' gender identity, leading to tension and misunderstandings in their relationship (cf. 24). Felix also writes tentative emails to his mother, hoping to be affirmed as both a boy and her son (cf. 20f.). The fear of rejection and the need for acceptance from his parents reflect the broader societal challenges faced by many transgender individuals. Felix' hesitation about sending these emails reveals his uncertainty in himself and his relationship with his mother. Felix' coming-out as a demiboy further complicates his journey as this identity challenges his understanding of gender. He reflects on this complexity, saying that he might not always be a boy, but identify as another

gender. This admission requires Felix to navigate new terrains of self-acceptance and community recognition, particularly in the context of family. His struggle to articulate his identity underscores the fluidity of gender and the continuous nature of self-discovery. Additionally, the love triangle that develops adds layers of tension and self-reflection to Felix' journey as he navigates his feelings for two different people. The realization highlights his growth and his understanding of love as acceptance, mirroring his own journey toward self-love.

Social networking platforms are also depicted as instruments of power and control. Felix suffers from cyberbullying from Austin's fake profile, "grandequeen69," which harasses him with transphobic messages. The anonymity provided by these platforms allows individuals to craft identities that diverge from their real selves. Under the pseudonym Lucky, Felix uses his newfound anonymity to build a connection with Declan on Instagram (cf. 47), whereas Austin uses it to torment Felix (cf. 57), highlighting the duality of social media's impact. Social media is not merely a tool for revenge in the novel. It also plays a pivotal role in Felix' journey of self-discovery. He finds clarity about his identity through a Tumblr post defining "demiboy" (cf. 227f.), a revelation that resolves his confusion about his identity and is crucial to the narrative's progression. Initially a source of harassment and frustration, social media becomes the medium through which Felix finds himself. The characters' interactions with social media reveal much about their personalities and motives, highlighting its advantages and disadvantages, as well as its potent role in their lives. Compared to *Red, White and Royal Blue*, social media and online communities are of a very different nature (see below).

"History, huh?" – Queer Communities in *Red, White and Royal Blue*

Red, White and Royal Blue (from here on abbreviated as *RWRB*) is a Young Adult Queer Romance novel written by Casey McQuiston, published in 2019 and subsequently adapted into a film in 2023. Set in the year 2020, it portrays a utopian reality that diverges from the 2016 political landscape in the United States and the United Kingdom. The novel follows Alex Claremont-Diaz, the First Son of the United States, and Prince Henry of Wales, as they have to stage a friendship to prevent media backlash. This develops into a high-stakes relationship which they must keep hidden in order to maintain their public image.

Community does not exclusively mean queer communities in *RWRB*. Unlike in the other novels, it is depicted primarily as direct support from friends and family as well as indirect support in the form of media reception and historical quotes, and not as much as an exclusionary mechanism within queer spaces. While it serves as a crucial element that encourages their self-discovery, part of it initially acts as a form of pressure that interferes with their relationship. Alex' immediate community appears in the form of the White House Trio (from here on abbreviated as WHT) which consists of him, his older sister June and their best friend Nora who is the daughter of the vice president. Their bond is publicized and considered a brand in US media: "It was a bold new plan: three attractive, bright, charismatic, marketable millennials – Alex and Nora are, technically, just past Gen Z

threshold, but the press doesn't find that nearly as catchy" (McQuiston 28). But they also have a genuine friendship and support each other with their various strengths.

In contrast to the other YA novels discussed, these characters are already of age, although Alex' "bisexual awakening" (207) is relatively late compared to the other protagonists'. Alex, who previously is convinced that he is straight, starts to question his sexuality when he and Henry share their first kiss. When he cannot stop thinking about Henry, he comes to the realization that "straight people […] probably don't spend this much time convincing themselves they're straight" (112). He asks Nora for advice and while she cannot give him the answer he wants to hear, she – being bisexual herself – shows her full support (cf. 121). He is later confronted by his sister, who has found out about his relationship with Henry, and is relieved when she still supports him. In addition to this, Alex' parents prove to be accepting of his bisexuality and relationship, despite the political ramifications that his mother might face (cf. 236). His self-discovery is strongly tied to romance, as it is the realization that he is romantically (and sexually) attracted to Henry which makes him aware of his bisexuality.

RWRB explores the intersectionality of queer identities; this happens particularly in Alex' character as labels do play a role in his maturation process. It is important to Alex to be recognized as bisexual and not as gay and as both Mexican and Texan, not simply one or the other (cf. 113, 393). To the public, Alex has been assumed to be straight because he has dated girls before (cf. 110). This ties into the preconceived notion that queer individuals must identify themselves (in Sedgwick's understanding of the performative and repetitive nature of coming-out, cf. Sedgwick) because straight and cisgender people are considered the default, similarly to the way it is shown in *Imogen, Obviously*. In *RWRB* it might be the fact that the public feel like they are owed this information considering Alex' position as a public figure.

Henry's community, on the other hand, is more divided. He has his sister Beatrice and his best friend Pez, who already know about his sexuality and support him. In contrast to Alex, Henry has known early on that he is gay. He has been sexually involved with other men before but without being romantically connected to them (cf. McQuiston 172). Alex is the first man he loves, but he did not expect Alex to actually love him back (cf. 273). He is, however, afraid of coming out to his other family members. His older brother Philip is a constant reminder for Henry for how an heir to the throne of the United Kingdom (although not first in line) should behave. Because of this, he feels conflicted in his own identity as the public image he has to maintain is vastly different from his queer identity. He has previously used his media attention to appear straight by being publicly seen with women (cf. 119). Here, we can observe the trope of *fake dating* that plays a role in YA queer romance novels. His behavior is also (although in a media rather than purely personal context) an evasion tactic which is part of the construct of the closet in Sedgwick's sense of the word. When he eventually comes out to his brother, Philip is not surprised by Henry's homosexuality, but rather surprised that he will not continue to keep it a secret (cf. 298). As Henry expected, Philip cares more about their reputation and upholding tradition, than Henry's personal happiness.

Once Henry encounters the WHT, he becomes more confident about his identity, but not enough to come out to the rest of his family. Both Henry and Alex are confident about labeling themselves gay and bisexual, respectively. However, the agency of coming out on their own terms is denied to them, after their relationship is leaked to the press. When the royal family finds out about it, they are not accepting of Henry's identity. Even as Henry confirms the images and emails to be the truth, his grandmother, the Queen, denies that reality and offers to cover up the leaked footage. The Queen wants him to preserve the heteronormative image: "Your role in this family is to perpetuate our bloodline and maintain the appearance of the monarchy as the ideal of British excellence, and I simply cannot allow anything less" (351). Heteronormativity is put on a par with excellence, cementing heteronormative family ideals and gender and sexual roles as the foundation not only of the monarchy but of the country itself. Catherine, Henry's previously absent mother, intervenes at the last moment to support him. Catherine criticizes the Queen for her outdated views, highlighting that they only represent a segment of the entire population (cf. 354). Heteronormativity is a compulsory foundational element of the monarchy with the line of succession to the throne making it a necessity to produce an heir. Although there may be members of the royal family who are queer, we may assume that they are pushed to the margins. By including a gay Prince in its narrative and discussing the ramifications of his sexual orientation for the monarchy, *RWRB* queers the monarchy's outdated views on the heteronormative family image.

As Henry acknowledges his homosexuality in front of this grandmother, and shortly after to the world, he reconciles his "own well-being with the common good" (Keller 268). Henry and his immediate community are aware of the historical and political significance of Henry coming out publicly. His coming-out therefore becomes an act of transcendence, moving away from purely individualistic concerns to collective community interests, as described by Keller in her 10th pillar of community. Henry acknowledges that his ability and willingness to live authentically in the spotlight is directly connected to the well-being of the larger queer community in *RWRB*. As Henry and Alex emerge onto one of Buckingham Palace's balconies together, they take responsibility for the community's fate by actively contributing to its progress. Henry's immediate community exemplifies the ambiguity of community. It is at the same time a place in which Henry finds acceptance and love, while it is also pervaded by tension and rejection.

Apart from the immediate communities, the online community in *RWRB* plays a crucial role in the narrative, reflecting contemporary social media culture(s) and specifically its impact on public figures. Supporters and fans of Henry and Alex create an online support system, writing fanfiction about them, rooting for the couple, and engaging in discussions and speculations about their relationship (cf. 146, 322). The reader is, however, exposed to two distinctive sides of social media as it also contributes to spreading misinformation and rumors, enhancing the public pressure on the characters. Alex, for instance, uses social media to maintain his universal appeal, ensuring his Golden Boy public persona as his self-worth is heavily based on the reception of this public persona (cf. 112). McQuiston shows that there is a difference between the immediate communities and the public community

that forms in support of the couple's relationship and LGBTQIA+ rights in general. The narrative creates friction between the types of community displayed by pitting the Royal Family's reaction to the coming out against general public opinion: "The ideal conception of community, where everything seems possible often clashes with real-life communities in which nothing comes easily" (Keller 266). The online community manages to manifest in the real world to unite in real-life demonstrations. This ideal notion of community as depicted in the novel underlines the utopian character of *RWRB* and forms a resolution to the obstacle in the plot. It culminates in Alex' mother winning the re-election by winning the state of Texas (cf. McQuiston 413).[13] The couple's media presence results in the community not being exclusively queer, but more so a support network including both queer people and allies.[14]

The media eventually become a source of support that emphasize the positive reactions from the public. They serve as a tool to fabricate a certain image to the public which is later used against them in the form of the leaks. At the beginning, Alex and Henry have a long-standing feud fueled by the media which reaches its peak in the so-called "Cakegate" incident, a media scandal in which they accidentally destroy the cake at Prince Philip's wedding (cf. 21). While they are forced to stage a friendship in order to avoid media backlash and repair diplomatic relations, this incident acts as the catalyst that leads to their romantic relationship. After their relationship is leaked, the news show the public fully supporting the couple (cf. 354-355). The global demonstrations in support of their relationship create a worldwide community. They highlight the power of community in the fight for acceptance as well as the necessity for representation of LGBTQIA+ relationships in mainstream media. Additionally, they act as a resistance to the institutions and conventions attempting to keep Alex and Henry apart. The media's role transitions from a source of conflict to a platform advocating acceptance and a changing attitude towards LGBTQIA+ relationships, thereby presenting a queering potential for fundamental institutions of state which, traditionally, are foils for thinking concepts like the family and relationships in general.

Henry and Alex find their sense of a historically constructed community through their emails in which they quote historical figures that hint at possibly queer relationships like King James I and George Villiers, Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Wolf, Radclyffe Hall and Evgenia Souline, Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickock, Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, and Henry James and Hendrik C. Anderson (cf. 288, 293, 295, 297, 239, 247). These figures range from poets and artists to political activists and kings from European and American history. Through these quotes they can explore their identities in relation to their political roles and recognize the historical significance their relationship will

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13 The importance of the existence of a perfect community in fiction needs to be stressed. As Keller states, "with real-life communities [...] nothing comes easily" (266). By emphasizing the supportive nature of the public reaction and coming together, the novel advocates for the improvement and rectification of societal norms and expectations.

14 McQuiston does not explicitly explore the transition from online community to real-life community; it is, however, reasonable to assume that the protests are a result of online networking.

have, as Alex states: "Thinking about history makes me wonder how I'll fit into it one day, I guess. [...] History, huh? Bet we could make some" (241). These quotes offer them a form of comfort and community that they cannot find anywhere else as they can relate to the emotions and challenges that these historical figures experienced and use them to express their own queerness. Alex uses history to his advantage and addresses the American people by comparing his relationship to beloved couples in American presidential history, saying: "And so, I am not ashamed to stand here today where presidents have stood and say that I love him, the same as Jack loved Jackie, the same as Lyndon loved Lady Bird" (373-374). It is used as an attempt to appeal to the American people by invoking these presidential couples and in doing so have his own relationship with Henry be seen as something to be remembered, instead of admonished. Presidential couples in the US fulfill not only a political but also a performative role. RWRB shows a revolutionary potential in this regard, queering the very notion of the nuclear family, not only with Alex' relationship but also with Ellen Claremont being a divorced president with a new partner. By queering the heteronormative family image of POTUS the novel emphasizes that the head of a state does not necessarily need to be a straight married individual with children. The normalizing of these relationships creates a queer historiography as it also highlights the queer blanks in official historiography.

What sets *RWRB* apart from the other YA novels being discussed, beside the characters' age, is that politics is a main driving factor for the plot. The novel is set in a fictional and utopian 2020 with a divorced female president, her Mexican-American children and a world that seemingly has moved forward in a direction of acceptance and tolerance. It is initially a political motivation that moves the relationship between Alex and Henry forward; their duties as political figures bind them together. While there is a political motivation for their initially faked friendship, their love, in turn, becomes political. Politics, unsurprisingly, is also a source of conflict. The main antagonist, Jeffrey Richards, is portrayed as the evil Republican who does not hesitate to leak private emails to damage his political opponents or abuse both men and women on his staff to assert his power (cf. 378).[15] His aim to expose Alex' sexual orientation and the scandalous relationship with Henry, the second in line to the British throne, shows his own views on the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as exploits society's internalized homo/biphobia[16] (cf. Carnes 142-143). Comparing Richards to the bullies in *Felix Ever After* and the gatekeeper in *Imogen, Obviously,* he is not a fully developed character but rather a foil that serves the specific purpose of antagonizing the main cast. He serves as the ultimate obstacle with his own political agenda and advances the development of the romance plot, by providing the basis for the crisis. The novel lacks any

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15 Richards' sexually abusing both men and women is used as a power move to threaten his staff, it is not used to indicate his sexual attraction, and his sexuality is not explicitly stated in the novel.

16 According to Neil Carnes , it is also noteworthy that the internalization of any bias against the LGBTQIA+ community may arise in members of the community as well. He gives an overview of the history of queerness while also looking at personal experiences within the queer community, showing that beside the struggle of coming out, there is friction with societal norms that have been internalized. (For instance: "And still [...] had all of these internalized masculinity kind of things. He was [...] short and would get physically abusive sometimes when that would come up" (99).)

other form of the classical bully character / gatekeeper character due to its setting and the age structure of the characters compared to the characters from *Imogen, Obviously* and *Felix Ever After*.

As mentioned in the introduction, the romance genre is strongly tied to certain tropes. In this case, the novel uses the *fake friendship* trope rather than the *fake dating* trope. Their fake friendship turns into a relationship, which in turn is downplayed as a friendship in public. When rumors about their relationship spread, they attempt to fake a relationship between Alex and Nora and between Henry and June (cf. McQuiston 307-309). Furthermore, the typical *enemies-to-lovers* trope is subverted here. Although they seem to strongly dislike each other in the beginning, they both realize later that they have always been drawn to each other. While most other Queer YA romance novels are often coming-of-age stories with young protagonists, *RWRB* has protagonists in their early twenties. Seen within an overview of this specific sub-genre, these 'older' characters may serve younger readers as potential identification figures for a potentially positive future life. They also normalize discovering your sexuality later in life and show that you can come out at any age, thus queering the coming-of-age narrative. The genre also establishes certain expectations with its readership, one being the expectation of a happy ending. *RWRB* is no exception to this:

> after absolutely everything [...] the whole accidentally-falling-in-love-with-your-sworn-enemy-at-the-absolute-worst-possible-time thing, they made it. (414)

The novel allows the reader to experience an ending which includes resolutions of the conflicts presented, fulfillment of the romantic relationship between Henry and Alex, personal growth and self-discovery as well as an optimistic future. Alex and Henry enter an official courtship as dictated by the British monarchy. Henry moves to New York and establishes homeless shelters for queer youth; it is alluded that Alex will attend NYU Law School; finally, Ellen Claremont wins her second term as President of the United States (cf. 399, 413). Their happy ending and the acceptance of their relationship, by society and institutions alike, signals a move towards a more inclusive society.

Conclusion

All three novels discussed here share certain tropes which can be identified as typical for the genre. At the same time, they lay different focuses and approach processes from different angles, therefore allowing a diverse readership to engage (if not even identify) with the characters and their stories. While Imogen, in *Imogen, Obviously*, realizes with hindsight that signs of her queerness have been there all along, it is not until she develops romantic feelings for Tessa that she starts to question her sexuality. Romance and self-discovery go hand in hand; one cannot be fully realized without the other. Similarly, Alex' self-discovery in *Red, White and Royal Blue* is significantly influenced by his romantic relationship with Henry as well as his personal ambitions. His feelings for Henry catalyze his exploration of his sexual identity and ultimately force him to navigate complex social and political landscapes. For Henry, in turn, who is already certain about his sexual identity, their romance results in a public coming-out and him challenging the heteronormative role he is forced into as a member of the British Royal Family. The story of the eponymous main

character of *Felix Ever After* differs in that his self-identification process focuses on gender, rather than sexual identity. Romance plays a secondary role in his personal development, as it is not directly tied to or responsible for the self-discovery he is put through in the narrative. The feelings he has for others do not influence how he feels about himself. Likewise, the three novels employ or play with other tropes of the genre. The subverted *fake dating* trope in *Imogen, Obviously* enables her process of self-discovery, since it creates a reversed closet, with Imogen's straightness temporarily hidden and her bisexuality a pretense turned reality. In *RWRB*, the subverted tropes such as *fake dating, fake friendship* and *bullies* further both Henry and Alex' self-discovery and drive the romance plot forward. In contrast, the tropes in *Felix Ever After*, although numerous, are plot rather than queering devices, as well as staples of the genre, such as the stereotypical confession at the end.

In all the novels, (social) media play a significant role. In *Felix Ever After*, social networking platforms are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, enabling his anonymous bully and on the other hand leading him to his self-identification as a demiboy, they are about as ambivalent as the representation of community itself in the novel. Felix experiences bullying and transphobia from within the queer community, mirroring Kiesling's critical view of "the" queer community as a unified group (cf. 25). But he also meets mentor figures who put emphasis on the need and goal to stand together as one community despite their differences. This portrayal of community ties into Halperin's criticism of the internet as a force leading to the disappearance of offline queer spaces that cultivate exchange between different groups and cross-generational exchange and support, resulting in many distinct sub-communities and echo chambers prone to turning on each other (cf. 440f.). In *RWRB*, the media prompts the main conflict of the novel. Additionally, it enables subverted tropes such as *fake dating, fake friendship* and *bullies* to further both Henry and Alex' self-discovery and drives the romance plot forward. Alex and Henry's close social communities are established as support networks providing a backdrop against which their romantic relationship develops. The novel further explores the construction of a global and public community as well as an imagined historical queer community, illustrating the transformative power of community in the advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights as well as the power of a modern media machine which ties in seamlessly with social media. In *Imogen, Obviously* (social) media is part of the storyline, but does not play such an important role as in the other two novels. There, community is largely constructed as a pluralistic concept consisting of various experiences. Certain aspects of community are framed positively, such as the creation of a safe territory or social relationships, as defined by Keller (cf. 267). Others, especially the idea of membership criteria, are critically deconstructed. Throughout the novel, Imogen has both positive and negative experiences with queer communities, feeling welcomed and supported by Lili's college friends while receiving constant dismissal from Gretchen who represents moralizing online discourses. The "messy complexities" of queer communities and the interactions within them are thus revealed.

While the three novels show a cross-section of what is currently available on the market in the genre of Queer YA Romance, they also give a glimpse into what is still lacking.

Aromantic and asexual characters for example are scarce or reduced to minor characters.[17] It would be a worthy endeavor to investigate what role romance plays in these novels, whether (and if so, how) it plays a role at all or is only there to be rejected and further leads to self-discovery. In the latter case, potential alternative structures and happy-endings should also be examined. Other less-discussed identities and labels include for example pansexual, intersex, and non-binary characters, and queer individuals with disabilities, exploring other intersections than that of queerness and race. Delving deeper into the different letters of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, focusing on individual diverse stories rather than forcing a universal narrative, will quite certainly solidify our major insights into the Queer YA Romance genre: that what appears messy and trivial at first sight might actually be complex and profound.

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