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**Gender, sexuality and the quest for understanding in young adult fiction novels featuring transgender characters, using Rick Riordan's *Hammer of Thor* and Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl*.**

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# Foreword

I would like to thank everyone who has helped me through this difficult journey, either by providing emotional support, academic discussion or simply by being understanding of my time in these trying days. In particular I would like to thank my master thesis office for their continual help and good cheer, and especially my advisor Cassie Falke, you are a well-spring of understanding and flexibility that can never get enough credit.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Identity and understanding

According to Aristotle, “a human being is by nature a political animal” (Phillips Simpson p. 46). Political in this sense meaning social, as we construct societies, cities, and live close to one another. We act and interact with each other; we communicate with each other. In this social web we weave we make use of so many different mediums, be it text sound, visual images, that we can manage to get our points across to each other even when facing massive obstacles. Humans and human language are versatile and flexible in this way, so much so that we can easily forget that our experiences as humans can be inherently different; that when we say the same thing, our meanings may differ. This slipperiness of language is difficult to pin down, and being able to perfectly understand someone else, someone different, is itself perfectly impossible. One can only ever get close, and even that poses great challenges.

The American poet Pat Parker wrote a poem called “For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend.” What follows are the first two lines of that poem:

The first thing you do is forget that i’m Black.

Second, you must never forget that i’m Black.

(Parker)

This poem essentially manages to point to something profound regarding the understanding of others, and there are a few things to unpack here. Firstly, how the lack of capitalization of the i coupled with the capitalization of Black infers a high level of group visibility and a low level of individual visibility. The only part of their personhood that stands out is the group to which the i belongs. Secondly though, and most importantly, this poem by Parker gets at something universal: the specificity of how a minority struggles for recognition, understanding and acceptance when operating within a majority-dominated system. Throughout history one can find any number of examples where minorities – social out-groups to the majority in-group – have been designated as unwanted, or undesirable, or in other ways have been marginalized. Independent of the basis of marginalization and discrimination, the ways in which this takes place are remarkably similar and so too are the

ways in which groups resist such marginalization. Foremost of these is perhaps the demand for equity, not just in rights but in culture and spirit.

The poem, in these two lines, make the assumption that for white people unfamiliar with the struggles of black people it is easier to, on the firsthand, familiarize them by pretending there are no differences. By ignoring the core aspects of what makes a black life – skin color, social position, disproportionate rates of incarceration etc. – a white person could more easily see ‘them’ as ‘one of us’, not as some unknowable other. That being the case however, this approach does exactly that: makes the other unknowable. This is because one simply ignores those facets of life that can make life for that minority difficult, dangerous and, crucially, different from that of the assumed majority. It becomes important then to understand these differences, and how they might operate as a consequence of systemic societal features such as an assumed standard of being, i.e. being white, being male, being cisgender, conforming to a binary understanding of gender, etc. and not fall into the trap of assuming that life is the same for everyone. The consequent step in the second line is therefore crucial. Once one has opened the door to understanding another on the basis of equality, one must strive to not oversimplify for convenience sake and instead struggle to understand the ways in which one’s differences impact our different understanding of life and society and the adversities faced by different people. In this thesis, I will go about analyzing how two novels, *The Hammer of Thor* and *If I Was Your Girl* by authors Rick Riordan and Meredith Russo, approach the themes of minority/majority struggles in general, and the struggle for gender recognition, respect and understanding specifically.

## 1.2 The two texts

Fiction proffers perspectives and worlds otherwise inaccessible to readers. As an equalizer there are few instruments at a **teacher’s** disposal that measure up to it, one does not need to live close to a museum or a theatre to access a fictional world. Literature’s potential for inquiry and its ability to open discourse are part of what makes literature so eminently suitable for learning, whether it is formalized in the classroom or simply catalyzed through the act of reading. Novels and other narratives are particularly rich regarding insight into the human condition and the great expanse of individual stories that make up our world. Great works of fiction manage to speak to our humanity and not only enlighten us about the characters and their struggles, but about ourselves and the people around us. Both works this thesis is concerned with delivers that kind of enlightenment. That being said, both works were

published in 2016 and as such there is a substantive lack of criticism and scholarship written about them so far. Because of this my use of secondary criticism will be very limited.

*The Hammer of Thor* by author Rick Riordan, and *If I Was Your Girl* by author Meredith Russo were “the 2017 recipients of the Stonewall Book Awards – Mike Morgan & Larry Romans Children’s & Young Adult Literature Award, respectively” (Amundsen). Recipients of the Stonewall Book Awards, both these novels deliver groundbreaking narratives involving LGBTQIA+ characters, in this case the T for trans. The Stonewall Book Awards are a set of awards for LGBTQIA+ fiction awarded by the American Library Association (ALA) and give out awards for adult fiction and nonfiction as well as children’s and young adult literature, of which Riordan and Russo were the recipients of the latter. The Stonewall Book Awards are named for the Stonewall riots and have been awarded since 1971 for “for exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience” (American Library Association, Stonewall Book Award: About).

Before moving on, the LGBTQIA+ acronym should be specified. Throughout LGBTQIA+ rights history the definition of who should belong to this varied ‘group’ has been an issue of contention. LGBT was an early acronym, incorporating the letters of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans, and then a Q was added for queer. Queer in this sense can mean several things, and in a sense functions as a catch-all letter, but only to some extent and only for some people. Queer occupies a very particular space in LGBTQIA+ culture, originating as a slur and being reclaimed in the 90s. Its lexical meaning originates from opposition to the norm, and existing outside of it, and through this ‘otherness’ it is very hard to pin down what being queer actually entails, for better and worse. Politically, for the term queer is inherently political with its rejection of normative behavior, it is the term’s flexibility and freedom to express its contents that has allowed and still does allow the continuation of the “struggle against normative sexuality” (Levy and Johnson p. 131). Because of this, not everyone not fitting into one of the other letters would necessarily define themselves as queer, because of its past use as a slur, due to a perceived lack of firm meaning, or for any number of reasons.

The addition of the I and A – which in most circumstances stand for some variation of intersex or intersexual and either asexual or allies – necessitates a certain degree of education with regards to sexuality, gender and gender politics. A wider-reaching sort of sex education, i.e. not exclusively focused on cisgender heterosexual relations, is arguably something most people would benefit from, independent of their gender or sexuality. Still, there is in such a

long acronym a level of confusion when the knowledge of its interpretation may seem arcane to the casual news reader finding out it's pride month, again, no matter how inclusive the letters are. Lastly though, and perhaps most inclusively, we have the +. It stands for anyone not covered by the preceding letters and given the range of flags discernable at any pride parade, it is also a given that it has a lot of groups to cover. With that in mind one might think it just as well to use one big + to make it easier for everyone to handle. However, as one of the characters in these novels would counter with, it is important to ask oneself whether what is easier is easier for everyone or just those unfamiliar with it, if it would be easier for those one would negate in doing so. Hence, I will be using the acronym LGBTQIA+ in this thesis, when referring to this community at large, and it is my hope that this small clarification will go some way towards clearing up any questions with regards to this.

### **1.2.1 Rick Riordan**

Riordan's novel *The Hammer of Thor* is the second novel in a series of young adult fiction set in a version of our modern-day world where the myths of old are real. The novels revolve around a 16-year-old Magnus Chase, unbeknownst to himself a son of the Norse god Frey, who within the very first chapter of the series explains how he died a horrifying, yet honorable death. The Magnus Chase series is set in a slightly fictionalized version of the city of Boston, seasoned with a hefty amount of Norse mythos that allows Magnus to be raised from death as an *einherji*, the honorable dead that will fight alongside Odin on *Ragnarok*. It follows the epitomal character on his adventures trying to prevent the very *Ragnarok* so many of his fellow honorable dead crave, and Magnus, in his adventures, makes friends with a large number of highly diverse people. Among others Hearthstone, a male deaf elf who uses written runes to perform magic; Blitzen, a male dwarf fashionista who rejects the expectation of solely producing functional armor and weapons; Samirah al-Abbas, aka Sam, a female Muslim Valkyrie who is also a Child of Loki who manages to juggle the responsibilities of performing well in school, making her parents proud, and reaping the souls of the honorable dead as a part-time job; lastly, a continually male or female transgender genderfluid child of Loki who embraces the chaos of their heritage and makes it their own, and who can also turn into a cheetah, by the way. This last character is Alex Fierro, and she/he enters the story in this second novel, as opposed to the others. Magnus's exploration of this new individual and the world-view-changing personal aspects they carry with them color large parts of the narrative as he needs to both grapple and struggle with being the clueless minority in the Norse world, since genderfluidity of course was a common thing in Old Norse culture.

Written from the perspective of a blonde, white, cisgender, homeless, dead boy Riordan's novel enables a truthful examination of what it means to understand someone when you fundamentally do not understand how they live their life.

Riordan is careful not to step out of his comfort zone and, applying his experience as a middle school teacher, delivers an authentic account about *encountering* genderfluidity and how it might function. In his acceptance speech for the Stonewall Award Riordan highlights his teaching experience as vital in writing about the LGBTQIA+ community, referencing a number of students he has had over the years (through pseudonyms) and how some taught him more than he taught them (Riordan, Stonewall Award). It is important to note that there is in LGBTQIA+ fiction a call for more authentic voices, that is authors who themselves have experienced the themes of LGBTQIA+ life that they write about. Riordan is certainly not part of this group of authors, in his own describing himself as an "old cis straight white male" (Riordan, Stonewall Award). A logical question then is to ask why I have chosen his work at all, if the current consensus is to strengthen works made by authentic authors. The answers to this are many, but largely it boils down to this: LGBTQIA+ themes are by their very existence not confined to the perspectives of that same community, people meet and interact with each other independent of grouping, and confining oneself to only one kind of perspective is not fruitful, in particularly when comparing two different novels. That is why the second novel in this thesis is by such an authentic author, Meredith Russo.

Riordan himself has an expansive bibliography and has published novels for children and teens for the past sixteen years, most of which make use of some form of ancient mythos. His most famous series, based on the Greek mythos, starring son of Poseidon Percy Jackson, just finished its third pentalogy last year (2020). It is in this series that we first see some of Riordan's characters 'come out' in the form of Nico di Angelo. Riordan's character Nico di Angelo is a brooding teen son of Hades, the equally broody Greek god of death. In Riordan's second Greek pentalogy he was forced, against his will, to come out of the proverbial closet by an angry Cupid, the Roman god of erotic love (see *House of Hades*). Nico's coming out is a struggle for him, even though his friends are highly supportive. This is largely because of his difficulties in not only accepting himself but also putting value on himself and his actions. Through the narrative he manages to trust himself enough to find himself a place to belong and even a boyfriend in the form of aspiring doctor, son of Apollo, Will Solace. Interestingly enough, it is a common aspect that both the relationship between Nico and Will and the relationship between Alex and Magnus in *The Hammer of Thor* contain healers as a



constituent part of the relationship. Magnus has through his father Frey many powers related to his father's domains of peace and fertility, amongst them supernatural healing. Violence is a typical theme of both LGBTQIA+ fiction and the fantasy genre as a whole, as we will see, and Riordan's choice of pairing this with tenderness and 'solace' accentuates this usually quite negative aspect of LGBTQIA+ life. Magnus's curative powers comes at a social cost however, one we will explore later.

### 1.2.2 Meredith Russo

In their announcement of the 2017 Stonewall Book Award for Young Adult Literature, the American Library Association highlighted the authentic background of Russo, a trans woman, stating with regards to *If I Was Your Girl*: "Groundbreaking for its skill and authentic representation, this book displays the complexity, power, and hope possible when authors' #ownvoices are reflected in their art." #ownvoices refers to a movement in favor of promoting works by authors who themselves have experienced the issues about which they write, as is the case with Russo and *If I Was Your Girl*. The novel deals with the challenges the protagonist Amanda, formerly Andrew, faces living as a transgender girl trying to graduate high school in the American South. *If I Was Your Girl* was Russo's debut novel and she has since published other works relating to LGBTQIA+ themes and experiences. *If I Was Your Girl* is an interesting novel, as it regales a tale of traditional teenage heartache and romance but is coupled with authentic experiences regarding trans life. Within the history of the gay novel of old and the LGBTQIA+ novels of modern times, *If I Was Your Girl* does not fall into the trope of the 'tragic' gay we might be familiar with from older works particularly. Instead it fights to allow a happy ending for the protagonist Amanda, and not even through the love plot. Rather, the novel's focus on love and identity does it credit in that it ends it's narrative with the acquisition of self-love as an appropriate resolution, independent of the romance Amanda has been pursuing as well as avoiding throughout the text. Russo, in this, is decidedly not writing an autobiography, in any sense of the word. She does draw upon her experiences, but as she acknowledges in her author's note, she has given Amanda every chance to succeed, given her many advantages that most trans women simply do not have ( (Russo p. 295). It is, because of this, a partly idealistic version of what a trans experience *might* be like. This is an important point for Russo, as she stresses she is not in-fact an educator, and the prospect of her novel being taken as a monolithic account of what it mean to be trans "terrifies" her (Russo p. 295).

According to her publisher, “Russo was born, raised, and lives in Tennessee” (Macmillan). Riordan on the other hand is a Texan native and, as mentioned, cisgender, as such he is an interesting comparison to Russo. Russo’s novel being her debut novel marks another point of difference between her and Riordan, who at this point in his career had published twenty-six novels as well as a number of short stories and companion texts to his other novels. The main difference however is that they operate in slightly different age groups or, if one is so inclined, different levels of maturity. Russo’s novel is decidedly aimed at a more grown-up audience than Riordan’s, and the gap between target audience age from her to Riordan might be wider than the age gap between their protagonists might suggest (Amanda is eighteen whereas Magnus is sixteen). Amanda’s story features violence, like Magnus’s Norse adventure, but hers is different in that within her narrative, the violence is realistic. It has consequences in the form of hospital stays, support groups and desperate parents trying their best to help their daughter simply survive. She is not living in a fantasy world, but rather the state of Tennessee. Her story is one of depression, physical and mental abuse, and both being scared for one’s life as well as not caring for one’s life to the point of being actively suicidal. Still, the target audience is a point of contention though, as the seriousness of her story does not necessarily mean that it should only be consumed by older teens in and of itself. Russo’s text however is eloquent and complex, albeit perhaps a tad too idealistic to be called proper realism. Despite this however, the defining characteristic of *If I Was Your Girl* is its authenticity and honest depiction of what transgender lives can be like, even in the best possible circumstances.

### **1.3 YAF and the tiny T**

Situating these novels within the history of LGBTQIA+ fiction, we first encounter a number of issues. While themes of gay and non-conformative gender structures have been present in the Western literature tradition for hundreds of years, there have not been many explicitly gay or other kinds of LGBTQIA+ fiction until very recently. Early examples of progressive gender structures and LGBTQIA+ themes can be found in such well-known works as Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but both these arguably have it in common that they do not condone homosexuality in any kind. *Twelfth Night* flirts with the contemporary use of male actors in all roles to construct complex gender-bent relationships that cannot be allowed to happen until the characters realize they’re man and woman, which allows them to marry at the end, although two men are still married on stage. Dorian Gray on the other hand is a stunningly beautiful youth who in his discovery

of his own beauty through the means of being painted by a friend becomes un-aging, and through his own obsession with his aesthetically pleasing physique descends into depravity. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is complicated in this regards, as it depicts a model for gay behavior that is entirely sinful and eventually murderous in its depravity, but arguably the author's narrative weight is not spent on highlighting his deplorable behavior. It could instead be said that despite acknowledging the depravity of Dorian, the novel dedicates much text, much space, to the invocation and advocating of the existence of homosocial and homosexual behavior in the Victorian Era as well as throughout history. There is in particular a section regarding Dorian's escapades throughout the summarized time skip where artefacts and symbols of homosexual behavior and tendencies, aspects and whatnot, are given much room.

It is at this point important to recognize the limited scope in which this thesis operates. LGBTQIA+ works of fiction make up a very small percentage of published works worldwide, and of those only a few are marketed as Young Adult Fiction or as meant for children and teens. In addition to this however, given the themes of *The Hammer of Thor* and *If I Was Your Girl* we are firmly within the T-section of LGBTQIA+, a diminishingly small part of the LGBTQIA+ niche of fictional works. Representational issues have always been a problem for these groups, and the most commonly visible proof of that is the token gay character. Part of the problem with being associated as a group, which the acronym LGBTQIA+ to a certain extent invites, is the monolithic treatment and expectations of representation. The G in LGBTQIA+ has always been the most visible and present of all the letters, often coupled with cisgender women in movies, tv and novels, gay men have played the supporting role of the chatty friend for years. That is not to say that stereotypes and prejudice are good forms of representation, but at least it creates visibility. Compare that to the T for trans, and most people may struggle to name a single trans person, fictional or otherwise, no matter how much money their reality tv daughters make on screen and how many Olympics they competed in.

Although there had certainly been novels and texts aimed at younger readers previously by authors such as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, and indeed works made for adults that resonated with a younger audience like *Catcher in the Rye*, what are usually regarded as the first **modern** young adult fiction novels came out in 1967: S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* (Cart and Jenkins p. 1). Both came out at a time when in the U.S. there were concerns about the lack of racial representation in literature as much as in society at-large, children's literature was almost entirely white (Larrick). *The*

*Contender* then provided much needed representation, but as Cart and Jenkins assert, the U.S. has changed much over the years and literature is “growing more diverse and so is doing an increasingly better job of giving faces to teens from a range of races, ethnicities, cultures, classes, national origins, abilities/disabilities and religious beliefs. And yet one group of teenage outsiders – [LGBTQIA+] youth – has been nearly invisible in YA fiction” (p. 2). This is an interesting assertion, as it may have been logical to compare the representation of LGBTQIA+ youth with that of other groups in need of representation, like those mentioned by Cart and Jenkins. However, this would necessitate that even among similarly disadvantaged groups, LGBTQIA+ fiction is at a relative disadvantage in terms of being produced. The glaring fact of the matter remains that as a proportion of the population as a whole, one can only guess at the total number of people who might correspond to any of the branches of the LGBTQIA+ community, the closeted nature of it all guarantees any numbers are only estimates.

What is less of an estimate though is the total numbers of books published. If we look at all the young adult books published in the U.S. for 2009 we see that there were 5,028 young adult titles published in this year (American Library Association). Finding numbers for LGBTQIA+ young adult fiction is harder as there is no **one** industry category for this, but author Malinda Lo, drawing upon some of the work previously done by Cart and Jenkins, have tallied some approximate numbers for U.S. released novels. Granted, given the existence of smaller independent publishers, identifying and tallying **all** LGBTQIA+ young adult novels is a difficult task. As such these numbers should be not be taken as absolute, but they point to a very stark difference in terms of volumes of published YA (see figure 1 and 2). There are some discrepancies between the total numbers across the two figures seen here, this is partly due to changes in tallied publishers, but the differences are small, thirty-three as opposed to twenty-seven. Using either number, LGBTQIA+ YA novels made up less than one percent of the total number of YA books published in the U.S. in 2009. Looking at figure 2, out of those thirty-three novels only two had transgender or genderqueer protagonists. Using these numbers then it is almost pointless to compare the number of published trans YA to the total number of YA in 2009, two out of five thousand is a minute amount. Even as a part of LGBTQIA+ YA, trans YA novels made up only six percent of published novels in the U.S. in 2009 (Lo, I have numbers! Stats on LGBT Young Adult Books Published in the U.S. - Updated 9/15/11). The numbers here are volatile as well, and as is discernable from figure 2, there were years prior to 2009 where there were no published trans YA novels. Given the

numbers we're operating with, that is not surprising. The latter section of figure 1 leaves room for optimism though, as the total number of published LGBTQIA+ YA novels are shooting upwards. *The Hammer of Thor* and *If I Was Your Girl* are both from 2016 and are part of this trend.

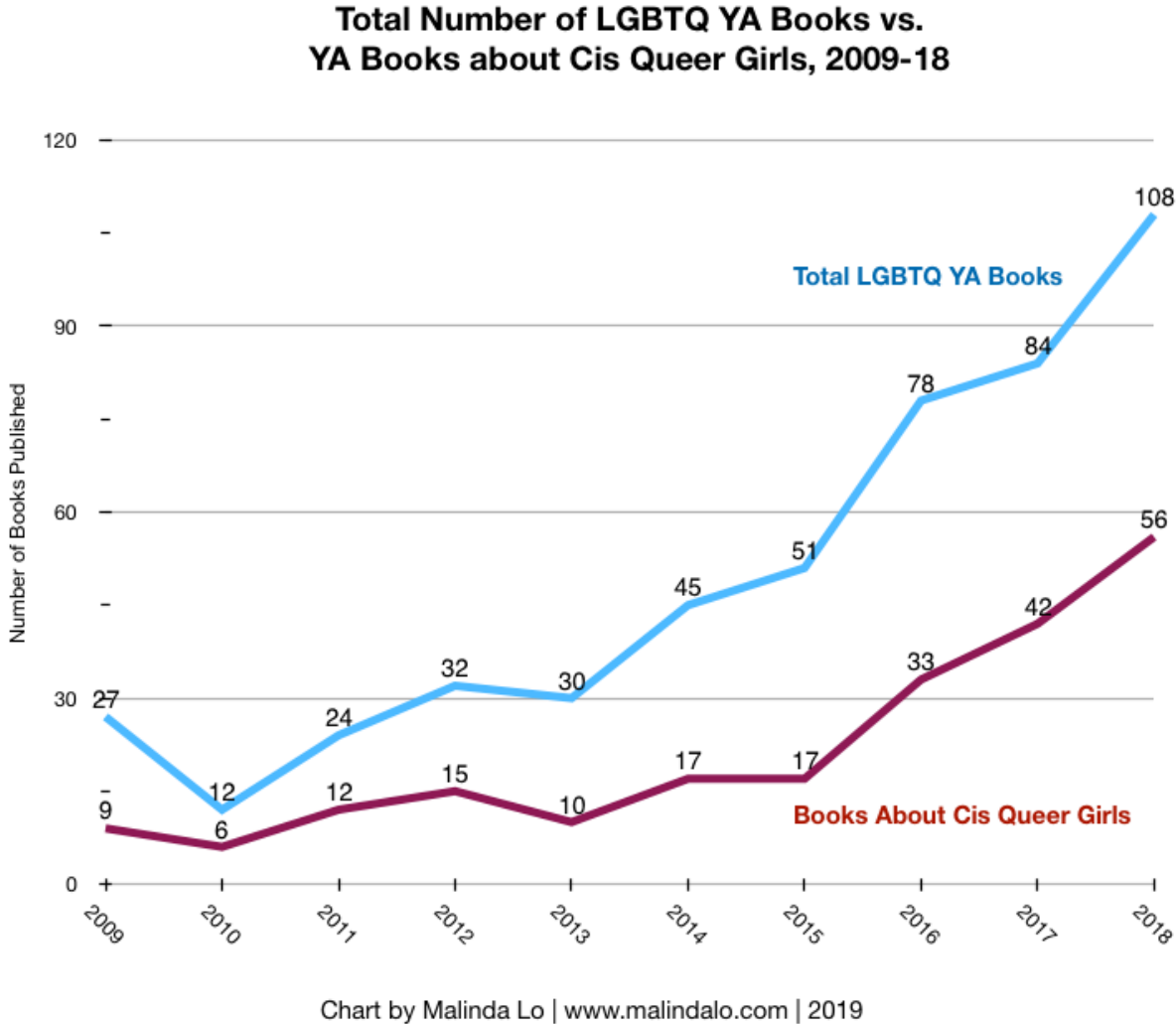


Figure 1 – Total number of U.S. published YA books with LGBTQIA+ content vs. books about cis queer girls | mainstream publishers only, from: (Lo, *A Decade of LGBTQ YA Since Ash*)

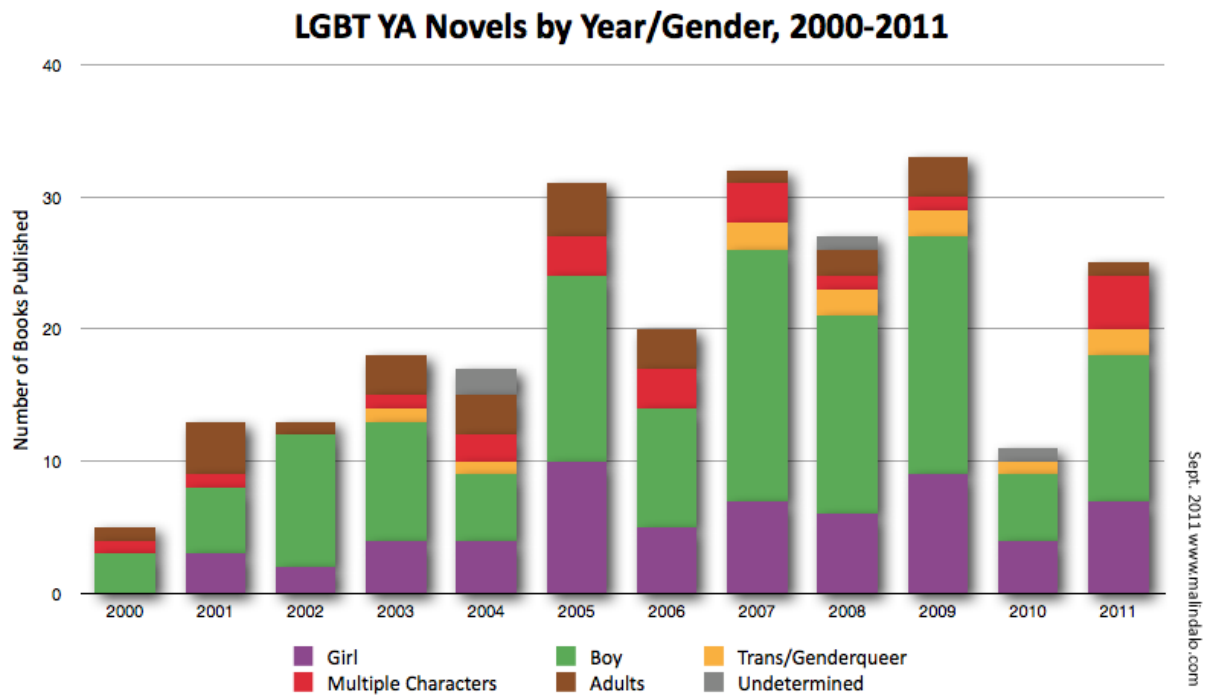


Figure 2 – LGBTQIA+ YA novels by year and gender, 2000-2011, from: (Lo, I have numbers! Stats on LGBT Young Adult Books Published in the U.S. - Updated 9/15/11)

These figures are also interesting in light of the two authors, independent of the novels. Russo, with her novel being her debut does not have much statistics related to her published work. Riordan however is a prolific author, being one of the best paid authors in the U.S. over the past decade (Temple), and selling more than a hundred million copies of his books in the U.S. alone, and being sold into another thirty-seven countries (Riordan, About). This underscores the point raised previously about trans visibility and why Riordan’s work is so important. Very few books about trans issues specifically, and LGBTQIA+ themes in general, reach that level of exposure and representation. Riordan’s position as a mainstream author, backed by Disney even, is a massive boon for trans visibility, something Riordan is himself aware of and considers an important duty:

As important as it is to offer authentic voices and empower authors and role models from within LGBTQ community, it’s also important that LGBTQ kids see themselves reflected and valued in the larger world of mass media, including my books. I know this because my non-heteronormative readers tell me so. They actively lobby to see characters like themselves in my books. They like the universe I’ve created. They want to be part of it. They deserve that opportunity. It’s important that I, as a mainstream author, say, “I see you. You matter. Your life experience may not be

like mine, but it is no less valid and no less real. I will do whatever I can to understand and accurately include you in my stories, in my world. I will not erase you.”

(Riordan, Stonewall Award)

Something to note here, lastly, is that young readers are aware of the challenges with regards to trans visibility. As Riordan mentions, his readers tell him as much, that they want to be represented. This is crucial when it comes to the educative aspects of both novels, as it underscores the importance in providing a breadth of narratives when teaching young adult fiction in particular; the association with, and recognition of the characters are key to enabling the teachable perspectives present within the narratives. Using both novels *together* in turn enables a fruitful reading of the differences between viewing the narrative from the perspective of the classroom majority (Magnus) and the knowable minority (Amanda).

## 1.4 The Norwegian Curriculum

Fiction, in the context of the Norwegian curriculum, plays an important role as both a method for teaching and as a vessel for investigating and being exposed to worlds and perspectives otherwise inaccessible to students. This is particularly important with regards to the formation of students’ identities and the school subject English plays an integral part in that formation. The Norwegian curriculum with regards to English is, and has been, governed by two distinct parts: the subject-specific curriculum and what we today, following the creation of a new set of curricula (LK20), refer to as a “Core Curriculum”. There is a key difference here, in that the “Core Curriculum” concerns itself not with the subject-specific goals of its dependent curricula, but rather pulls the focus towards a broad understanding of education and its place in society, as well as the mandate inherent to the role of education. In the previous set of curricula, LK06, there was no “Core Curriculum”, but instead we had a *general section*, known as “Generell del.” It had been passed on from the two previous reforms R-94 and L97, first established by the Ministry of Church, Education and Research in 1993 (Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet p. 1).

There are a number of changes and differences between “Generell del” and the current “Core Curriculum”, enough to warrant an entire thesis of its own, which has indeed been produced by others, but to this paper what concerns us is the changes that came about with regards to identity and personhood. In both “Generell del” and the current “Core Curriculum”, the focus of both documents was to lay forth a set of principles for education and some

guiding values that should permeate the state of education in Norway. As with many other aspects of these principles and values, the topic of identity saw a substantial development between the two iterations. In “Generell del” from LK06 the focus was largely on the acquisition of a national (i.e. Norwegian) identity rooted in a Christian-Humanist world view and its associated values. A special focus was given to strengthening Sami identity and “our collective knowledge of Sami culture” (Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet p. 5), and the document maintains the importance of common markers of identity founded on – assumedly Norwegian – historical commonalities (Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet p. 17). The wording here is largely vague and unclear as to what constitutes such common markers (Norwegian: *preg*), to the point where it is important to mention the intent here was to give a substantial amount of room for teachers to navigate and situate their education. In essence though, it would be fair to say that “Generell del” for the most part interprets the concept of identity to be largely synonymous with ‘national identity,’ within the scope of Norwegian education. There is in “Generell del” a distinct focus on fostering commonality in, rather than exploring differences of, identity. Compare that sentiment with the current “Core Curriculum” and we see a shift.

It may be fruitful to situate these curricula within the scope of the larger social shifts occurring at the time. Identity politics had perhaps not yet taken root, or trickled into the erudite halls of the Ministry of Church, Education and Research by the time the first version of “Generell del” was enacted in 1993, but it has certainly taken root in society as a whole since then, for better or worse. The concept of identity politics however is much more prevalent in LK20 and explaining its origin might help situate the current changes. According to Sonia Kruks:

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different.

This explanation melds well with the notions of LK20 and its change away from focusing on commonality, despite its role as a uniting force among the various curricula.



In LK20, the current set of curricula, the “Core Curriculum” was conceived of and established well ahead of the implementation of the associated subject-specific curricular changes. One of the consequences of this, as was intended, was that the “Core Curriculum” could work as a foundation upon which the subject-specific curricula could be formed, and as such be tied into the principles and values of the “Core Curriculum” more effectively than previously, i.e.. not simply permeating education but also the lesson plans. In the “Core Curriculum”, full title in English “Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education,” the formation of identity is a core value and indeed is the second subsection of the document, following the section on human dignity. That subsection, which contains the majority of the language concerning identity in the document, is named “1.2 Identity and cultural diversity,” showing a shift towards a focus on differences as a strength, as opposed to the iterant focus on common identity found in LK06. The very first sentence of subsection 1.2 highlights this: “School shall give pupils historical and cultural insight that will give them a good foundation in their lives and help each pupil to preserve and develop her or his identity in an inclusive and diverse environment” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education p. 5). Crucially, here the students’ identities shall be preserved and developed, not in any way assimilated or made secondary to a national identity. However, the “Core Curriculum” also develops the ideas on national identity from LK06, and emphasizes the following:

Common reference frameworks are important for each person’s sense of belonging in society. This creates solidarity and connects each individual’s identity to the greater community and to a historical context. A common framework gives and shall give room for diversity, and the pupils must be given insight into how we live together with different perspectives, attitudes and views of life. The experiences the pupils gain in the encounter with different cultural expressions and traditions help them to form their identity. A good society is founded on the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity.

(Kunnskapsdepartementet, Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education, p. 5)

This section sharpens the focus on commonality found in LK06’s “Generell del” by giving it a purpose: a shared common framework is desirable because it enables both a degree of understanding, as well as a sense of community and belonging. It is also very quick to point out the importance of protecting diversity given such a mindset, explicitly stating that

such a framework both allows and shall allow for diversity, specifying diversity in both a cultural sense as well as ideas, and asserting that this diversity is in itself a crucial good. This is key, because it strikes at part of what was lacking in the previous curriculum: the curricular admission that students, teachers and indeed all parts of Norwegian society are different, and that those differences are not something to be feared, as might have been partially inferred from LK06's focus on national identity. That the points that divide us are not cracks aiming to break our society, but rather bridges that enable us to widen our understanding of the world, to the betterment of our society as a whole. This is what constitutes a core value in the "Core Curriculum", and, as opposed to in LK06, this can be found again in the subject-specific curricula.

Actually, most aspects of the "Core Curriculum" can be found in any of the subject-specific curricula, but some carry more responsibility for certain values than others. In the case of English, we can read in ENG01-04 that:

English is an important subject when it comes to cultural understanding, communication, all-round education and identity development. [...]

Knowledge of and an exploratory approach to language, communication patterns, lifestyles, ways of thinking and social conditions open for new perspectives on the world and ourselves. The subject shall develop the pupils' understanding that their views of the world are culture[ ]dependent. This can open for new ways to interpret the world, promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudice.

(Kunnskapsdepartementet, Curriculum in English (ENG01-04) p. 1)

It is then the stance of the Ministry for Education and Research, that English is indeed important with regards to building understanding in students, and that it has a particular responsibility for enabling students to understand and develop their own identities, as well as priming them for and helping them in exploring other identities. Consequently, literature especially serves an important role in that regard, in enabling students to explore and read stories from various perspectives they would otherwise be unable to access, authentically or otherwise. This 'widening' of the world through understanding texts is hence not only a markedly good way of creating understanding amongst students for foreign concepts and situations in and of itself, but also fulfils aims of current educational policy. It is important in this context to remember that the Norwegian curriculum is a mandate from the Norwegian

state that is stewarded by the entirety of the education sector. A mandate that in this context has the explicit goal of constructing a good society through the ideal of inclusive diversity. Finding new and improved ways to achieve this through use of literature must be a goal for every teacher of literature.

In that context, I would argue that using narratives with transgender characters is a boon for educators, independently of whether simply the representation of trans issues itself is a goal or not. There are several reasons for this. Firstly it may allow students to engage with social issues from a point of interest and may be conducive to discussing civil rights and the normative assumptions we unknowingly make in society and daily life. Second, exploring such character-narratives can enable access to models for inclusiveness, no matter the obstacles faced by such characters, and it celebrates diversity as a positive in and of itself. In addition to this, exposing students to perspectives they may otherwise not be able to access does not only model inclusivity, but can proffer proof to some students that what they themselves are going through is in fact normal for many more people. It can offer perspectives on choices and difficult situations that both transgender and cisgender students, as well as all students not defined as such, can learn from and seek support from. To echo a call from the American writer James Baldwin:

You think your pains and heartbreaks are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive or who have ever been alive.

(Baldwin)

## **1.5 Gender, performativity, intersectionality and resistance**

In her preface to the ground-breaking book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler questions the basis and origin of traditional categories of gender and sex, pointing towards the fruitful investigation of “the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (Butler p. 2377). Effectively, in this she argues that, whatever identity categories that may be effected, their normative assumptions are the product of the producing culture, and that those assumptions, in so far as they may constrain discourse and self-expression, should be questioned. The consequences of this type of questioning are also the

uprooting of traditional assumptions amongst social, political and resistance movements to achieve power and agency through unity of identity. As a pioneering scholar of the 90s, it is interesting to compare this specific aspect of her stance with that of the Norwegian curricular reforms at the time, the “Generell del” harking back all the way to 1993 originally (Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet p. 1).

The focus of “Generell del” on the national identity becomes more problematic in light of Butler’s ideas, as it casts the lacking questioning of identity as a constructed concept, as a lack of willingness to understand the fluidity inherent to such unstable categories of identity as every constructed form of identity is inherently subjected to. Essentially, what it means to be Norwegian, along with what it means to be male or female, is not a locked concept, as every teacher knows, yet we still cling to normative assumptions about what it should mean, i.e. the romanticist invocation of stereotypes like cross-country skiing, brown cheese and *dugnad*. Butler would argue this concept of archetypal *Norwegianness* is a performance that cites established norms regarding what it means to be Norwegian, because there can be no ‘original’ expressionist explication of the very act of being Norwegian. This thinking is more in line with the current “Core Curriculum,” which prioritizes freedom of self-expression, through whatever modes of identity cues are desired. The shift from teaching a common identity to teaching ways of developing one’s individuality speaks to this concept. Individuality which is championed in each of these two novels.

Kimberle Crenshaw breached the topic of compounded social markers on individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups in her 1989 paper to the University of Chicago Legal Forum: *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Intersectionality has since become one of the most useful tools for analyzing structures and events where multiple social markers act in a way that offers individuals unique positions and challenges due to their intersectional nature. Although black American women were the original source of this term, both in conception and observable evidence, the potential fruitful application lends itself to all kinds of grouped markers that renders any analysis of a single constituent aspect fruitless in the face of the coactive whole. That being said, the history of intersectionality was built upon a binary understanding of categories, a marginalized group seen in conjunction with a normative one, i.e. women and men, black and white etc. In the context of both novels there are individuals featured for which intersectionality is an issue in key ways, Alex with her stereotyped non-conforming gender and heritage-based ostracization and Amanda being a

trans woman. The gendered aspect of both these characters are problematic even seen within the concept of intersectionality because of their difficulty in fitting neatly into a binary set of categories. Talia Mae Bettcher hypothesizes that this inability to conform can, in the case of referring to a trans woman, be recognized in referring to her as ‘it.’ This, she argues, is different from a simple oppression of gender, because it does in-fact not recognize the person’s gender at all (Bettcher p. 10), it subverts it into a lack of gender, a lack of personhood. Compare this with the recognition of the trans woman as a woman, we then instead encounter the problem of erasing her transness, what Bettcher refers to as her “liminal status” (Bettcher p. 10). Both Alex and Amanda operate in this space, inherently not being able to be analyzed within the paradigm of binary categories. This is particularly poignant in Alex’s case, as despite ardently maintaining her/his membership of such categories, she/he subverts the entire binary paradigm by specifically maintaining her/his membership of *both* gender categories, being both male and female, although never at the same time.

This gender upheaval and difficulty in reconciling the binary structures of traditional genders highlights the deep bond between gender, sexuality and politics. Echoing Aristotle’s claim that we are political animals, so too are our performativity and chosen expression forms of political speech and manifestations of the ways in which one might resist societal pressures and traditions. Using aspects of resistance theory, I will be drawing upon Dean Spade’s interpretations of Sandoval’s forms of oppositional consciousness with regards to trans politics. Traditionally, according to Sandoval, there have been four major forms of consciousness in various social resistance movements (specifically in capitalist social orders): the Equal-Rights Form, in which groups argue their civil rights on the basis of all humans being created equal, independent of their differences, and whatever status they have as inferior is not founded in ‘reality.’ Crucially in this form one is seeking assimilation into what Sandoval refers to as “the most favored form of the human-in-power” (Sandoval p. 55), essentially being legitimized as an equal and valid part of society. The Revolutionary Form focalizes the differences across marginalized groups – sexual, social, cultural and gender identities – and contends that these differences cannot be reconciled and legitimized in the current social order, instead advocating a restructuring of the categories upon which social dominance is ordered (Sandoval p. 55). The Supremacist Form, in which “the oppressed not only claim their differences, but they also assert that their differences have provided them access to a higher evolutionary level than that attained by those who hold social power” (Sandoval p. 56). In this form one undertakes the goal of providing society with “a higher

ethical and moral vision,” (Sandoval p. 56) i.e. an improved version of the currently flawed social order. Lastly there is the Separatist Form in which what is sought is not integration with the dominant order, nor a subversion or conversion of it, but rather the removal from it. In this form the mission is “to protect and nurture the differences that define its practitioners through their complete separation from the dominant social order” (Sandoval p. 56).

These forms have historically been seen as exclusive. However, a fifth form that functions as a flexible “kaleidoscope” of the previous four is argued by Sandoval to be a compromise-form with the potential ability to reconcile the four forms and enable a different form of empowerment and agency in modern resistance movements: differential consciousness (Spade p. 242). The differentiation between being able to move between forms of resistance consciousness ties in heavily with intersectionality. Finding oneself belonging to several groups is conducive to learning to be reactive and adaptable to circumstance, knowing what is most effective in different situations in order to achieve the goal of equity and agency. In this context one can achieve a type of agency through differential consciousness that is only enabled through the meandering between kinds of resistance, weaponizing and operationalizing what specific abilities and unique opportunities that present itself. According to Spade, “[t]he differential [consciousness] is a ‘tactical subjectivity,’ utilizing various forms to move power” (Spade p. 243), this is behavior both Amanda and Alex find themselves partaking in with great effect throughout both novels as both characters are uniquely able to maneuver between different positions, gendered and otherwise.

## 2 *The Hammer of Thor*

### 2.1 Riordan's myths

Actively making use of the Norse mythos, Rick Riordan's Magnus Chase series accesses many of the same themes and challenges that were prevalent in his Percy Jackson series, using Greek mythology. The juxtaposition of the normal with the fantastical is a common theme in many Young Adult Fiction novels, as is the escape *to* these worlds of fantasy, away from what we may to some extent consider the normal world, abound in children's literature in general. What sets the use of a mythos apart from, for example, the worlds of *Harry Potter*, *Narnia* or *The Neverending story*, is the call to the past. These myths are not modern concoctions, at least not in their roots, and this call throughout the ages is part of what makes these novels so relevant, in that they do not only make use of our modern interpretation of what those myths entail, but also enable us to see ways in which ancient societies could have functioned differently on a fundamental basis. Assumptions we make today about concepts we see as explicitly modern are challenged in this way, opening up a discourse regarding how such concepts can be developed and examined.

In both the Greek and the Norse mythos we see a portrayal of gods and deities that is very much in opposition to the reverent attitudes we in the Western world may be accustomed to from a Judeo-Christian background, or most other modern religions. These characters are portrayed with flaws, and very humanlike tendencies, which points to a very different point of origin for these gods in terms of culture. Although, it is fair to say this irreverent attitude is also a product of a modern style of writing and beliefs in egalitarian ideals, and that those inhabitants of Greece and the Norse world who were practitioners of these religions would certainly treat their gods with respect. At their cores however we can observe, both from the myths themselves and their use in Riordan's novels, that the human aspect present in each of these mythical entities effectively humanizes them. Humanizes to the point of an unmasking that concerns itself with the very human consequences of fantastic and mythical happenings and events. We can understand the repercussions of being a god of peace and harvest in a society whose glorious afterlife is only for those few who have died an honorable death in battle. This is how Rick Riordan not only juxtaposes the "normal" with the fantastical, he in fact finds the normal in the fantastical, and vice versa. In this sense, these novels are not about myths and legends at all, but instead concern themselves with the many ways in which the human condition can be allowed to play out. These ways are what concerns this thesis, as the

use of myths accentuates behavior and allows us to learn about the ways in which we as modern humans interact and learn from each other in order to become the best selves we can be, in order to understand each other, and in order to overcome our differences and live peacefully with each other.

In *The Hammer of Thor*, what takes center stage is the use and exploration of gender, and to a lesser extent, and only as a consequence, sexuality, through the backdrop of the Norse mythos. Norse myths share some aspects regarding its portrayal of males giving birth with the Greek mythology Riordan previously invoked. In the Greek mythos, many might know the myth of Athena, and how she sprang fully formed from Zeus's forehead after he had swallowed her mother. Others may also know of how Zeus, tricked by his faithful, marriage-conscious wife into showing his true godly form to a mortal woman pregnant with his child, was forced to save his unborn child by transplanting the child into his leg as its mother was struck by lightning beholding his true form. Some days later Dionysus was birthed from his leg. In both these instances however, the child was originally formed inside its mother, Zeus only being enabled to give birth through divine power, effectively only as a sort of surrogate.

The Norse mythos instead takes this a step further, there we can find the story of Loki giving birth to a horse after mating with a stallion in the form of a mare. Loki, the god of trickery and deceit, is an agent of chaos in Norse mythology, as one might expect given his domain. He is not inherently evil, as the gods' patience with his many tricks may be an attestation to, but his chaotic nature feeds the path towards *Ragnarok*. In this sense, being able to shapeshift and pass into becoming anything he feels like on a whim exemplifies his wild and untamable nature. There is a duality to this though, as his role in the expansive set of myths is generally to shift between roles. He acts as a trickster who is to be beaten at his own game, he acts as the quick-witted and sly companion of a heroic God, Thor, he acts as an equal to the king of the Gods in his role as Odin's blood-brother, and he acts as a demon incarnate who has gone too far and must be punished (fettered) for his crimes. This duality of form is also highlighted by his association with the invention of the net (Rooth p. 206) and his eventual fate, being caught in a net after killing Balder, having shapeshifted into a fish whilst trying to escape his pursuers.

In investigating the form of Loki as a mythological character, Rooth, in their work concerning the nature of the character of Loki within the broader scope of historic folklore, argues the point that out of all the myths where Loki appears, only some aspects can be



construed as thoroughly Scandinavian (Rooth p. 182). This is because many of the mythological stories intertwine and borrow from different traditions, in the way that stories have a way of travelling, and in their travels change to the point where they are not discernable as their original selves, but rather can represent an amalgamation of different tropes and local variations. Sifting through these myths then is arduous work, which Rooth deemed necessary for a better understanding of the character. She argues that by not doing this, scholars may, and indeed did in fact, pick and choose various aspects of the myths that support their reading of the Loki character, regardless of the background these aspects may have. This is the reason, she points out, for the various roles Loki has been interpreted to have throughout the history of Norse scholarship (p. 182). For our concerns though, this inconclusive and elusive history of the Loki character, as one of the archetypes of the Norse tradition, is itself an aspect that lends itself to Riordan's invocation of his fluid nature, both as a gendered person within the scope of *The Hammer of Thor*, and as a literary character that *transcends* any one narrative. Loki, then, both within Riordan's novel as well as in general, becomes a character with a thoroughly dual nature, as both an ally and a bringer of destruction, trickster and companion, an enemy and a gift-giver, human and animal, male and female. As fantasy goes, this nature, many might argue, is itself fantastical. Being able to change shape at will. Riordan's masterstroke here lies in his choice to pair this fantastical, fluid godly aspect with the topic of genderfluidity in the character of Alex Fierro, a child of Loki.

## **2.2 Gender and the role of outcast in *The Hammer of Thor***

Despite being ardent about the fact that she/he is not "a poster child" (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 270) for genderfluid characters, Alex is the focus of the reader's exploration of the theme of gender within *The Hammer of Thor*. Being a child of Loki, she/he occupies a particular position of outcast within *einherjar* society, that is within the warrior society of the afterlife within the novel, the mythological inhabitants of Valhalla. She/he is variously viewed with fear and superstition, partly because of her/his affiliation with Loki, but also due to the fact she/he is genderfluid, what many inhabitants of the Norse mythological society of Valhalla, and the Nine Worlds in general, call *argr*. *Argr*, as Riordan explains both in the narrative and in the novel's accompanying glossary (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 459), means unmanly. It is a word that is loaded within the narrative, and in terms of its use we might in our 'normal' world fruitfully compare it to the word 'gay.' There are some

similarities here, exemplified in the following exchange, focusing on a resident berserker at Hotel Valhalla, Halfborn Gundersen:

Okay, what is an *argr*?" I asked. "When you first said it, I thought it was a monster. Then I thought maybe it was another word for pirate, like one who *arghs*. Does it mean a transgender person or what?"

"Literally, it means unmanly," Mallory said. "It's a deadly insult among big loutish Vikings like this guy." She poked Halfborn in the chest.

"Bah," said Halfborn. "It's only an offense if you call someone *argr* who isn't *argr*. Gender-fluid people are hardly a new thing, Magnus. There were plenty of *argr* among the Norse. They serve their purposes. Some of the greatest priests and sorcerers were..." He made circles in the air with his steak knife. "You know."

Mallory frowned at me. "My boyfriend is a Neanderthal."

"Not at all!" Halfborn said. "I'm an enlightened modern man from the year 865 C.E. Now, if you talk to those *einherjar* from 700 C.E., well...they're not as open-minded about such things.

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 77-78)

This exchange underscores a couple of things. Firstly, Magnus is very honest. He is entirely open about the fact that he had no frame of reference for what an *argr* might be, and as such he could only infer its meaning. A meaning that seemed to change a lot depending on the circumstance and who he was talking to, something to note since he first assumed *argr* meant a monster. Secondly, there appears to be some disagreement about whether or not the term *argr* is an insult or not. Comparing it to 'gay' we can find some fruitful similarities in how both words are used, drawing upon the many cases of real-world schoolyard name-calling. In the case of 'gay' there are numerous examples and studies related to its usage as a negatively charged derogative word in a context outside that of relating to sexuality. A 2015 education guide from Stonewall UK asserted that 99 percent "of gay young people report hearing the casual use of ['that's so gay' and 'you're so gay'] in school. [...] [these comments] are most often used to mean that something is bad or rubbish, with no conscious link to sexual orientation at all." (Kibirige and Tryl p. 4). This use of the word gay correlates well with Halfborn's use of *argr*, specifically stating that if the person you call *argr* is not

*argr*, then it is an insult, hence it is a derogative, a charged negative meaning that is itself distanced from the lexically inferred meaning of *argr* ('unmanly') as in someone who is genderfluid.

This is another key similarity in the use of *argr*, as its original lexical meaning is distanced from what it is used for in the novel's modern setting, i.e. someone who is genderfluid as opposed to the act of being unmanly. This mirrors gay's history of, among other things, meaning joy, or someone who is joyous. In addition to Stonewall UK's assertion, in the case of Norwegian schools, a 2016 PhD dissertation by Hilde Slaatten found that in its sample group of more than 900 Norwegian 9<sup>th</sup> graders, students "were more likely to have directed gay-related names towards a friend than towards someone they did not know. Male, but not female, [students] were also more likely to have called a friend names rather than someone they did not like" (Gay-related name-calling among young adolescents p. 7). The pervasive use of the word gay among teenaged students, and school settings particularly, should not be understated. Slaatten also found that in her study "54 per cent of the boys had called a friend gay during the past week. The same applied to 30 per cent of the girls. 40 per cent of the boys had directed the insult toward someone he didn't like, compared to 30 per cent of the girls" (Slaatten, Boys more affected by gay insults). It is the case that within the novel that the use of *argr* is not narrated in its mentioned meaning of being an insult between "big loutish Vikings," as the character Mallory defined it. Instead, we are exposed to a few instances in which Alex deals with the term, calling out Halfborn and threatening violence if he calls her/him that again, but in a friendly way. This too mirrors the use of gay. As Slaatten reported, most youngsters who use the word as a negative, but not necessarily as a slur use it with friends. The sum of these similarities essentially teaches us as readers something about the use of words and their meaning as a branding of an entire group. Alex makes it very clear in the novel that she/he wants to determine for her-/himself what is and isn't unmanly for her/him (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 238), and calling her/him an *argr* is a move against that agency by asserting what she/he is doing is objectively unmanly, which she/he refutes.

Thirdly, going back to the quote from the novel again, one can assume that *einherjar* from the 700s were relatively conservative. Now, this second point is most interesting because of its mirroring of modern behavior, similar to the mirroring of words mentioned previously. In this case, the mirrored behavior as championing one's relative progressiveness in a historic sense as a major accomplishment. That is not to say that it is not an accomplishment, but the kind of self-aggrandizing that Halfborn commits to here is common

in a lot of normative behavior within majority-dominated discourse. This then is a facet of the societal pressures and ignorance that is faced by “*argrs*” within the Norse world. There is an expectation regarding what they can and cannot be, a kind of toxic group-thinking that permeates the views the old guard, who in the case of Valhalla includes people well over a millennia old, with regards to genderfluid people. That is not to say that being regarded as an *argr* within the Norse world of Riordan is conducive to outright hostility or violence. There are no hate crimes on the basis of gender, though arguably you might not expect to find such crimes in one of Riordan’s novels. Halfborn does after all mention these social conservatives from the 700s, who we do not really meet within the novel. Still, the lack of hate crimes being the case, the systemic attitude towards genderfluid people is confined to disrespect, ignorance, and different forms of toxic put-downs and casual jabs within the narrative, primarily, as Halfborn is an example of, from the older generations of characters. In addition to this, Alex’s status as a child of Loki also exposes her/him to prejudice regarding her/his ability and willingness to fight, at all as well as on behalf of other people.

The following is an extract from the viewing of Alex’s heroic death video, shown to all of Valhalla, but primarily the table of thanes, ranging from age-old to just old, who would judge the heroics of the death and whether or not it was indeed a worthy death:

The thanes rose to their feet. Jim Bowie wiped a tear from his eye. Ernie Pyle blew his nose. Even Helgi, who had looked so angry a few minutes ago, openly wept as he clapped for Alex Fierro. [...]

Alex might as well have been a statue. Her eyes stayed fixed on the dark place where the video screen had been, as if she could make her death rewind by sheer force of will.

Once the ovation quieted, Helgi raised his goblet. “Alex Fierro, you fought against great odds, with no thought for your own safety, to save a weaker man. You offered this man a weapon, a chance to redeem himself in battle and achieve Valhalla! Such bravery and honor in a child of Loki is...is truly exceptional.”

Sam looked like she had some choice words to share with Helgi, but she was interrupted by another round of applause.

“It’s true,” Helgi continued, “that we have learned not to judge Loki’s children too harshly. Recently, Samirah al-Abbas was accused of un-Valkyrie-like behavior, and we forgave her. Here again is proof of our wisdom!”

More applause. The thanes nodded and patted each other on the back as if to say, *Yes, wow! We really are wise and open-minded! We deserve cookies!*

“Not only that,” Helgi added, “but such heroism from an argr!” He grinned at the other thanes to share his amazement. “I don’t even know what to say. Truly, Alex Fierro, you have risen above what we would expect from one of your kind. To Alex Fierro!” he toasted. “To bloody death!”

“BLOODY DEATH!” the crowd roared.

No one else seemed to notice how tightly Alex was clenching her fists, or the way she glared at the thanes’ table. My guess was that she hadn’t appreciated some of his word choices.

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 86-87)

The verdict here is clear. The thanes are thoroughly of the opinion that Alex’s death was indeed worthy, so much so that these manly (male) thanes were ‘reduced’ to showing tender emotions, crying and blowing their nose. The traits they’re performing here are ironically perhaps some of the ‘unmanly’ aspects they seem so keen on passing the burden of on to Alex. Throughout the scene Alex instead appears aggressive, with her/his clenched fists and glare, what can be considered generally ‘male’ or ‘manly’ traits in so far as the Norse traditions are concerned. The thanes are oblivious to this though, instead reveling in how much they loved the death scene. Alex is less enthused regarding it, as she/he would really rather still be alive, and the thanes’ treatment of her/his death doesn’t do much to change that sentiment. Here again we see this self-aggrandizing behavior that Halfborn first showed us, though to a more shameless degree. It is an example of a death that, within the framework of the undead warrior culture that is the Hotel Valhalla, was honorable and noble enough to warrant a standing applause from warriors who have seen countless honorable deaths. It is clear then that Alex’s death was, in Helgi’s own words, exceptional. And yet still Alex cannot escape the brand that she/he bears, it is an accomplishment that is entirely colored both by her/his status as 1) a child of Loki, and 2) being genderfluid. Helgi suggests, that these

intersectional aspects of Alex would make it harder for her/him to achieve what she/he has achieved. Hence it is an even bigger achievement because his/her starting point in life was so much worse than Helgi's assumed majority, i.e. those who are not related to Loki and are not *argr*, as he continues to insist on calling her/him. Alex's accomplishment then, in the eyes of the thanes and assumedly much of Hotel Valhalla, becomes outstanding then *because* she/he is a child of Loki and genderfluid, not despite of it. Effectively Helgi is undercutting her/his achievement by connecting it to those aspects of Alex that is marginalized within Norse society, reminding everyone present what they would normally "expect from one of [her/his] kind."

Magnus's perspective on this scene is itself interesting, as none of these things seem to be lost on him. He is perceptive and, whatever the reason might be that he is so focused on Alex and observing her/him, he is able to navigate for the reader the reasons why Alex is angry at the end of the scene, quipping about how the thanes act as if they "deserve cookies" for their recognition of Alex's heroism, as this is in their eyes proof why they were right to *forgive* Alex's half-sister Sam for being accused of bad behavior. There is a certain level of almost Dr. Seuss-y absurdity in how brazenly the thanes manage to turn Alex's actual death, remember this is a video of a sixteen year old kid dying fighting off demonic wolves, into another feather in their own caps for being so very accepting of types of people other lesser people would surely not give the time of day. The impunity of it all, reading of the thanes so vocally championing their own progressive wisdom while at the same time putting down Alex at every possible turn is infuriating as a reader, and is certainly intended to have that effect. The thanes are absurd, and while Magnus notes that Sam is ready to oppose this behavior, Alex most certainly is not, despite being visibly furious at the thanes. One may read a lot into their different reactions, as Sam in her position as *valkyrie* sees herself as having a public image to uphold in Valhalla, especially as she was singled out. Alex instead, while certainly not appreciating the thanes' words, are not of the opinion that she/he has anything to prove to anyone other than her-/himself, and whoever she/he deems worthy of proving anything to.

This act of self-determination is a theme for Alex, as she/he reiterates in chapter thirty as Halfborn refers to her/him as an *argr* to her/his face, "'What have I told you about that term?' Alex said. 'I will decide what is manly, unmanly, womanly or unwomanly for me. Don't make me kill you again'" (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 238). An invocation of Alex's tactical subjectivity, Alex takes the stand here that social norms are inadequate in terms of determining the relative meanings of being a man or a woman, it is the case that

these meanings are self-determined. The friendly threat that accompanies this invocation however is both lethal and inert given Halfborn cannot die unless he is killed outside the Hotel Valhalla. On the other hand, the sentiment conveyed is crystal clear, Alex is not someone to stand for slander or clueless name-calling, emphasis on clueless. Which raises the question of why she/he did not speak up during the scene with the thanes. Part of the answer here is that Alex does not care about the thanes themselves, they have not given her/him any reason to. Another part of the reason though would assumedly be that she/he realized that in the situation where her/his death was being scrutinized, nothing good would come of her/him correcting them when they were flaunting their good senses. Her/his disadvantage as a Norse social pariah ensured that in squaring up against the highest ranking members of the godly realm other than the gods themselves, she/he could only allow herself/himself to be “honored” so as to not bring more shame on those who she/he shares her social markers with, other genderfluid trans people and her half-sister Sam. Sam and Alex are as different as night and day in terms of thinking, and way of life. Sam with her stringent structure, and Alex with her/his embracement of chaos and freedom. Yet, in the eyes of the thanes they are both the same untrustworthy children of Loki. Alex clearly is not afraid to speak her/his mind, as she/he had already corrected Helgi on her/his correct pronouns earlier in the scene, loudly too, for all in the hall to hear. Alex, as well as Sam, is facing a social blockage that prevents her from receiving the recognition others not associated with Loki would in the same circumstances. In this sense, she/he knows when to pick her battles, she/he recognizes that her/his ability, this tactical subjectivity, is limited in the societal sense, while also offering a flexibility that enables different forms of resistance, like the way she dealt with Halfborn.

A more epitomal example of Alex’s tactical subjectivity comes near the end of the novel, in the modern recreation of the old Norse myth about Thor dressing up as a bride in order to get his hammer back. The original mythological story goes that Thor would pose as an Aesir goddess who in exchange for the hammer would marry the giant who had stolen it. In *The Hammer of Thor*, the giants are of course already wise to this plan, having already gone through it once before. Because of this a more believable stand-in is needed for the bride. Alex is quick to volunteer for this, or rather she/he takes charge of the position, leaving no room for discussion, citing how she/he “” can definitely pull off a lace appliqué wedding gown better than [Thor]!” (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 365). Alex is exceptionally poised to take on this role, being able to shapeshift into Samirah, the expected bride, if need be, and also being most used to resisting Loki’s influence, which was expected to be a

problem for whosoever posed as the bride. Additionally, Alex can be spectacularly dangerous if needs be, which indeed it ended up being. The symbolism here is important with regards to Alex's role in the novel. Prior to this point she/he had been narrated as deadly and dangerous, not someone you would cross, likened to an "alpha wolf snap[ping]" (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 291), an unstoppable force of flexible chaos, akin to Loki. She/he does not take the role of Loki though, instead she/he plays the part of Thor, humanity's hero in the old myths. One might add at this point that Alex's name of course derives from Alexander/ra, doubly gendered and originating as meaning either 'defender of men' or 'savior of warriors' depending on the circumstance. Fierro in turn means iron. This scene is, in other words, saturated with symbolism in Alex taking her/his role as the linchpin of the entire operation, what is effectively a weaponization of her/his fluid performative nature, her/his tactical subjectivity hard at work.

## 2.3 The emphatic perspective

Magnus, being the protagonist, plays a pivotal role in the narrative. In our context however, he is not as interesting in the role of proactive hero, but rather as tentative and reactive observer, and observe he does a lot. *The Hammer of Thor* uses first person narration, and the reader is limited to Magnus's perspective on everything. He is not omniscient, he is in fact very open about the times when he is clueless, and the narrative makes use of this to scaffold the reader's approach to all things in the novel, but particularly with regards to Alex and her/his gender. Readers are primed for Alex way before she/he even enters the narrative actively, as when Magnus is hunting the goat-killer in chapter two and we come face to face with his gendered assumptions:

'I hate this guy,' I said.

'How do you know it's a guy?' Jack asked.

The sword had a point. [...] The goat-killer's loose black clothes and metal war helmet made it impossible to guess his or her gender, but I decided to keep thinking of him as male for now. Not sure why.

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 13-14)

Magnus gets his subconscious assumptions checked in this scene, by his sword. A normal occurrence within the novel. Key here though is that Jack grounds him, just with a



casual question, poking holes at his constructed reality. Magnus readily admits that he does not know why he assumes the gender of the culprit, but he does. He does not think much of it, because what does it matter what gender he assumes when he does not yet know them? What complicates this though is that Magnus just sentences prior had specified that the killer was bipedal, which he took to mean that he could rule out “goat-on-goat homicide” in that the killer must be humanoid (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 13). *Humanoid*, not in-fact human. Magnus here shows that he is able to juggle the tensions of being thrown into a world of fantastical species and recognizing the ways in which he could otherwise be biased to assume aspects of other people, e.g. whether they are human or not. It is interesting then, that this ability does not extend to gender, but rather is confined in a sense to the physical realm of specific differences. Magnus, like most people, is used to having to mentally assign genders to new people on a daily basis in order to correctly engage them with the appropriate pronouns etc. His behavior is therefore not unusual in any sense, this is valid, but the grounding he gets from Jack is appropriate: his projection is unfounded. Independently of whether readers recognize this particular application of Magnus’s projection of gender, what arises from the text is the reader’s confrontation with the slipperiness of gender in the context of one’s subconscious biases and Magnus grapples with this. He is “Not sure why” he is doing it.

This priming regarding the special position of gender as something that even Magnus is not prepared to surrender to the fantastical reality he has ended up in, is then expanded upon in his first encounters with Alex Fierro. Encounters, he first interacts with her/him in the form of a cheetah. A cheetah that only rushes past him and claws up his sneakers in a run-by (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 33). Magnus, in this scene, is not at all concerned by the fact that Alex is in-fact a shapeshifter, this is simply part of the realm in which he lives, weird things happen on the daily. Compare this then with the scene a couple chapters later when he first meets Alex’s human form, on the battlefield. He is struck by her/his beauty and how intensely dangerous she/he seems, but the climax of his musings happens when Alex specifies that she/he currently use she/her pronouns and that they should call her as much until such time as she tells them otherwise:

Mallory crossed her arms. “He doesn’t even have a weapon.”

“She,” Alex corrected.

“What?” Mallory asked.

“Call me she—unless and until I tell you otherwise.”

“But—”

“She it is!” T.J. interceded. “I mean, she she is.” He rubbed his neck as if still worrying about a rifle bow tie. “Let’s get to battle!”

Alex rose to her feet.

I’ll admit that I was staring. Suddenly my whole perspective had flipped inside out, like when you look at an inkblot picture and see just the black part. Then your brain inverts the image and you realize the white part makes an entirely different picture, even though nothing has changed. That was Alex Fierro, except in pink and green. A second ago, he had been very obviously a boy to me. Now she was very obviously a girl.

“What?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” I lied.

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 50)

Leaving aside the way in which TJ perfectly summarizes the oppressive form ‘it’ can take when inserted in place of a gendered pronoun, this is perhaps the most important moment in the entire novel. The scene brings to the forefront the fact that Magnus, and the reader assumedly as well, is more surprised by the fact that Alex, who everyone had referred to as ‘he’ or ‘son of Loki’ up to this point, is fluid. She can change into a he, and back. Not *just* into a cheetah. By any conventional standards, being trans or genderfluid, or both as Alex is, would be not nearly as surprising as being able to shift species and become a cheetah, or a weasel, or a dog, all of which Alex has shown she can do at this point in the novel. Yet the point that gets protested by Mallory is not the fact she can change here entire body to basically anything living, but rather it is Alex’s pronouns. Incidentally, we cannot know the exact reason why she protests, it may well be because she wants to clarify Alex’s point, or negotiate it, but the way TJ interject makes clear Alex’s position, as she has already managed to make it clear: Alex does not negotiate her gender, with anyone.

This scene where the realignment happens, his perspective being flipped inside out, is Magnus's effective starting point. Alex is an enigma to him, and he spends the entirety of the scene simply observing Alex, his only utterance, interestingly enough, being the lie "nothing." The fact he calls it a lie speaks to his position as outsider. Alex asks if there is something, and Magnus can tell that provoking her further would be a bad move. His entire perspective has been inverted in a matter of seconds, yet it was all "nothing." Magnus has only recently died and become part of Valhalla, there are many, many aspects of Norse culture and society he knows little of, genderfluidity and transness being only some of the things he is clueless about. It is interesting however, that in terms of those topics specifically, we see in *The Hammer of Thor* and inversion of our real-world status quo with regards to gender knowledge. Magnus here occupies a point of ignorance that, as opposed to what you might see in our real world, is not shared by his peers. The dynamic of majority/minority is flipped on its head here, whereas in our world it might be said that it is the role of genderfluidity to be a concept that needs to be addressed, here it is Magnus's ignorance that needs addressing. He thinks he *should* know this; he thinks he *should* be at ease with it and understand it, and these assumptions mark the start of Magnus's journey of understanding throughout the novel.

As we explored earlier with regards to the word *argr*, Magnus is not shy of asking when he needs to know something and he trusts those he is asking not to gouge his eyes out or slit his throat in a non-resurrect-able circumstance. He treads carefully around Alex however, perhaps for a number of reasons e.g. attraction, new acquaintance, deadly garroting skills etc. It is only by chance that he manages to open up the topic of her gender with her, as he absentmindedly inquires as to her gender simply because the legendary Skofnung sword only can be unsheathed with no women present:

"So can I ask...?" I waved my hands vaguely. I didn't have the words.

"How it *does* work?" She smirked. [...] I'm just"—she mimicked my hand-waving—"me. Trying to be me as best I can."

That sounded fair. At least it was better than her punching me, garroting me, or turning into a cheetah and mauling me. "But you're a shape-shifter," I said. "Can't you just...you know, be whatever you want?"

Her darker eye twitched, as if I'd poked a sore spot.

“That’s the irony.” She picked up a letter opener and turned it in the stained-glass light. “I can *look* like whatever or whoever I want. But my actual gender? No. I can’t change it at will. It’s truly fluid, in the sense that I don’t control it. Most of the time, I identify as female, but sometimes I have very *male* days. And please don’t ask me how I know which I am on which day.”

That had, in fact, been my next question. “So why not call yourself, like, *they* and *them*? Wouldn’t that be less confusing than switching back and forth with the pronouns?”

“Less confusing for who? You?”

My mouth must’ve been hanging open, because she rolled her eyes at me like, *You dork*. I hoped Heimdall wasn’t recording the conversation to put on Vine.

“Look, some people prefer *they*,” Alex said. “They’re nonbinary or mid-spectrum or whatever. If they want you to use *they*, then that’s what you should do. But for me, personally, I don’t want to use the same pronouns all the time, because that’s not me. I change a lot. That’s sort of the point. When I’m she, I’m *she*. When I’m he, I’m *he*. I’m not *they*. Get it?”

“If I say no, will you hurt me?”

“No.”

“Then no, not really.”

She shrugged. “You don’t have to get it. Just, you know, a little respect.”

“For the girl with the very sharp wire? No problem.”

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 270-271)

Alex’s admission here strikes at the heart of gender performativity, she can look like and act however she feels, but she is unable to control the specifics of her inner being. That is not to say that there are aspects within her that are inherently male or female, in an essentialist sense, but rather that the way she is herself is fluid, and prone to shifting between gendered stances. Her performativity in this sense relates to what she said in chapter thirty, “I will

decide what is manly, unmanly, womanly or unwomanly for me” (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 238). Her genders are male and female, but what that means is entirely up to her and what she chooses to have it mean, the frames are set, but she paints the pictures, Alex pictures – not genderfluid or transgender pictures.

Magnus’s question about pronouns here is highly didactic, it is once again an example of Riordan holding up a mirror for Magnus to view his own subconscious assumptions. There is this emphatic self-association going on here that is hard to rid oneself of. Usually empathy is a uniquely positive thing, but, in this case, it is an example of erasure. Magnus forgets that what is easier for him might not be for others. He is effectively, until he realized, ignoring what makes Alex Alex, she is genderfluid, but binary, not something in the middle or intersex. Her gender identity is not ever in question, except perhaps when it shifts, and treating it as such is not conducive to understanding her. He realizes this much however and accepts it as fact without necessarily understanding it. This in turn is Alex’s point, it is not a crime to not understand someone else, they won’t kill you for it, and you don’t actually have to understand them at all either. Using Sandoval’s forms of oppositional consciousness, we can point to her use of the separatist form here. Alex’s focus is not on being a part of Magnus’s world, rather she wants to be herself as much as possible, for no other reason than that. Understanding someone’s identity is difficult and trying to define each and every aspect of it might well be impossible, both for oneself and outsiders. Language is finite in that regard, and yet we define ourselves through it, to the point where we make new categories and words for what we experience and define ourselves as. This evolution of individuality does not need to be understood by everyone one meets, as Alex exemplifies here, rather it is only a point that it should be allowed to manifest itself, “Just, you know, a little respect.”

The point Alex makes about respect connects to a more confrontational conversation they have later on in the novel. In chapter thirty-seven Alex has a bad cut on her forehead, and Magnus insists on healing it. She has refused for a while up to this point, but it has gotten so bad she acquiesces. The reason why she is reluctant is because Magnus has mentioned that as he heals someone from serious wounds, he might glimpse into their psyche, as he had done with Hearthstone previously. Alex does not want this because she does not want Magnus “nosing around in [her] business” (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 291), as she puts it. Previously, Alex was scared of becoming an *einherji* because she/he thought it might mean she/he would be stuck as one gender forever, and that was a no go. Possibly, in this interaction with Magnus, she is afraid he might also try to ‘fix’ her gender, tamper with her in

the same way her father Loki has tried before. It is one of the instances where Alex allows herself to trust someone, after some pushing anyway. Healing, in this context, might construe a threat to Alex, since ‘healing’ for all intents and purposes is setting something back into its ‘proper’ shape and form. It is a normative function, in some way, in as much as there is a clear understanding of there being a preferred way for flesh and bodies to be, i.e. not punctured or cut. The scene may stand as a metaphor for Alex’s experiences with a hostile foster family, a hostile street environment when she/he lived on the street, and a general sense of hostility with regards to her/his interactions with normative society at large. Magnus signify that society in this scene, and his continued attempts at making Alex open up mirrors the fact that Alex has not had much cause for trusting many people in her/his life. In this sense it is a dual victory for both. It is an achievement for Magnus’s journey of understanding Alex to have managed to leverage their situation at a time when Alex might be partially open to trusting someone to help her/him again, specifically Magnus with healing. Consequently it is a big step for Alex to be courageous enough to put her-/himself in the line of fire, trusting Magnus not to cross her/his boundaries.

The crowning moment of Magnus’s arc however comes near the end, when in chapter fifty-five he makes a seemingly off-the-cuff comment as he enters Alex’s room in Hotel Valhalla, “Dude...” (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 444). Alex does not comment immediately, but as Magnus is about to leave again, they talk about it:

When I got to the door, Alex said, “How did you know?”

I turned. “Know what?”

“When you walked in, you said *dude*. How did you know I was male?”

I thought about it. At first I wondered if it had just been a throwaway comment—a non-genderspecific *dude*. The more I considered, though, the more I realized I’d genuinely picked up on the fact that Alex was male. Or rather, Alex *had* been male. Now, after we’d been talking for a few minutes, she definitely seemed like a she. But how I’d sensed that, I had no idea.

“Just my perceptive nature, I guess.”

Alex snorted. “Right.”

“But you’re a girl now.”

She hesitated. “Yeah.”

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 446-447)

This scene largely speaks for itself, but it is crucial in the sense of the larger theme at play here. Magnus has learned to know Alex through the course of the narrative, picking up on subtle cues that even he himself is unaware of. Somehow he has managed to tune in to Alex’s frequency on some level, subconsciously perhaps, and managed to understand the things about Alex that Alex her-/himself is unable to explain, what effectively perhaps simply **cannot** be explained at all: how she/he knows she/he has switched genders. The explanation for this is both lacking and telling at the same time, for there are no clear-cut reasons for it happening. Simply the passage of time in company with each other is the only real explanation, though with this perhaps there is inferred a level of understanding on the subconscious level. The one thing we can say perhaps is that Alex’s gender is expressed in some undefined way, but recognizably so. The fact that Magnus is able to interpret her/his cues, even if unconsciously, is proof somehow that Alex’s gender is not only possible, but also observable, it is tangible, even through subtle tells.

### 3 *If I Was Your Girl*

#### 3.1 Narrative perspective, compare *The Hammer of Thor*

Russo's novel *If I Was Your Girl* starts out dynamic, as we meet Amanda on the move, in a bus, on the road heading towards her new home. This dynamism continues throughout the novel, moving the first-person narrative between events, skipping periods in-between at times in favor of narrating memories. These memories modify the story by juxtaposing the mostly uplifting present part of Amanda's life, with the difficult, at times heart-wrenching past she endured, both as Amanda and Andrew. This aspect of the narrative is commendable in that it offers light alongside a very authentic darkness, a darkness that always threatens to, and eventually does spill over into the present. Themes of violence are prevalent, physical and emotional violence both from other people to the protagonist, as well as from the protagonist onto herself. On the very first page, Amanda is drawn into her own thoughts, remembering being caught in a girls' bathroom by a schoolmate and followingly being throttled by said schoolmate's father, reminiscing in the feeling of "his rough, swift hands on my neck and shoulders. My body hitting the ground" (Russo p. 7-8). This stands in stark contrast to the almost cartoonish violence of *The Hammer of Thor*. Amanda is not so removed from reality, and because of that the violence she suffers is more visceral and impactful because the risk for her, although not on the level of world-ending catastrophe, could very well spell the end of her life. She could be killed for being who she is. This adds another layer as she is routinely subjected to or is actively avoiding being subjected to hate crimes. Although Alex faces some backlash and is routinely discriminated against in *The Hammer of Thor*, the level of discrimination never reaches the level of active harm. This is partly a consequence of the societies in which these novels operate, Riordan's Norse world generally being more accepting of non-heteronormative gender expressions than the rural Tennessee and suburban Georgia of Russo's novel.

The core of the issue here, meaning the different uses and depictions of violence, I would argue is two-pronged: the different stakes at play and the portrayal of the narrative. It seems counterintuitive perhaps for a world-saving narrative to be less intense than going to school as an eighteen-year-old, but that is the case here. Take this excerpt from *The Hammer of Thor*:

[W]e both skidded across the floor—straight into one of the bubbling pits.



News flash: Pits of boiling liquid are *hot*.

Had I been a regular mortal, I would have died in seconds. Being an *einherji*, I figured I had a minute or so before the heat killed me. Hooray.

(Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor* p. 417)

The tone here is certainly one aspect, the snarky ‘hooray’ at the end, while a loveable aspect of Magnus’s narrational style it does not convey much severity in the given situation, despite the deadly risk he’s in. Secondly, and perhaps most glaringly, being an *einherji* he is not so easily killed, even when not in Valhalla. Magnus has a figurative safety net when dealing with danger, one that Amanda decidedly does not have, as exemplified by this excerpt from perhaps the most haunting scene in the novel:

His shadow stretched out past mine. I remembered Mom telling me how frightening men were, all men really, how helpless it often felt to be a woman among men, and for the first time I understood what she meant.

I reached into my bag again, reaching for my phone, when the punch came. Something thudded against the side of my skull as the dark around me turned red and all the night sounds of the road were replaced by a ringing in my right ear. I stumbled like a drunk away from the road until I scraped my bare shoulder against a tree and clung to it. Parker was on me before I could fully grasp what had happened, his face inches from mine and his forearm braced against my throat, cutting off just enough of my oxygen that I started to gag and see stars.

“No,” Parker hissed, “that’s not how this works. You made me look like a dickhead for months, and now you don’t got Grant to look out for you. You don’t get to play hard to get any more.” I could barely hear him, and his features were blacked out by the bright headlights of his truck. I tried to speak but all that came out was a gagging sound. “You coulda had this the easy way. Now let’s see how close you are to the real thing.”

(Russo p. 249-250)

This scene, as with most of the novel, is highly descriptive. It painstakingly goes through each part of the clearly very short experience in minute detail, slowly prolonging and

capturing each little constituent part that makes this encounter so terrifying. The impending doom of the shadow, her mom's warning words, the dull thud of the punch dizzying her to the point of no immediate retaliation. Parker had been foreshadowed as a menace throughout the novel too, as a reader you recognize this and the aching drawn out chapters portraying him leading up to this point adds to the predatory symbolism of not knowing when he will eventually pounce. Fittingly enough he chose the moment Amanda was most vulnerable, as predators are wont to do both in nature and society. Male predatory behavior is a theme in the novel in general, as the text especially makes use of the male gaze to paint scenes casting different men, mostly older ones, as perverted beholders. This creates a constant air of danger, reminiscent of what fear Amanda might have felt being continually afraid of being 'revealed' as trans in the early stages of the novel.

The scene also captures the specific marginalization that Amanda encounters. Although the position she finds herself in is one that can be understood as a possibility for any woman, and even to a lesser extent some men, the foreground of what she is experiencing is crucially intersectional. Part of the reason Parker is after her is that he knows she's exposed, in all senses of the word, and part of that exposure is a defense for his behavior. He is not only saying that her behavior invited him, but also that because of her 'lie' about her gender, she deserves it. She becomes a target for physical harm because he deems her male enough for that, as well as a target for sexual abuse because he deems her female enough for that, the consequence of these lines of reasoning together however is that she is not in-fact good enough to be either, as can be gleaned from the last sentence of the quote when he asks how close to being real she is. This notion of somehow guiltily hiding theatrics while just living her life is something Amanda struggles with throughout the novel and is only something that finds a resolution in the last few chapters. Parker's words dig deep into her simply because she used to think it was entirely true, that she was living a lie instead of her own truth.

### **3.2 The twist of the love plot**

In the end, Amanda realizes that she is living her truth, and it ends up empowering her. This is a twist given the forms of empowerment she had in the early stages of the book. Moving to Lambertville Tennessee mainly to get away from harassment and schoolyard bullying, one might not expect Amanda to be a social butterfly, and she really isn't in the beginning either. It takes a lot of work for her to work through her issues to the point where

she's comfortable just taking up space in the school, as is clear in her first interaction with Grant:

I started to put my things away and realized my hands were shaking. I believed [Grant] was earnest, or at least I wanted to, but my fear had been carved into me over years and years, and it wasn't going to be reasoned with or ignored.

(Russo p. 23)

Her fears are partly akin to those of Alex, they have both been hurt too much too many times for them to trust someone just because they're acting nice towards them. Amanda is, at this point, focused on her plan. Her plan to move out of state to live with her father in order to graduate without having to look over her shoulder everywhere she goes. Her plan to move away for college afterwards, and just escape (Russo p. 23). As with so many plans though, life happens, and as if invoking the tropes of *The Ugly Duckling*, the girl who thinks herself ugly, flawed, and a freak is treated like she's a beautiful young woman. She turns many heads, for better or worse, at the football game that takes place right after she moves there, and in making friends with a number of girls as well as actually flirting with a guy for the first time, her social sphere widens considerably immediately. This supportive sphere offers Amanda a boost in confidence that she's never really had a taste of before, just from being able to live life as what one might call a 'normal' teenager. The fact she's never had this before is part of why she feels as if she's living a lie, but she can't get enough of it. She breaks with her plan to feed her starved sensibilities on the emotional feast that is human connection between peers. She wants to feel validated; she wants to be wanted and be beautiful. She trusts people, and eventually the wrong people.

One of the girls she made friends with right off the bat was Bee, and she'd the only one at the school she ends up telling about her being trans. At the school dance, Bee drunkenly outs her just as she got crowned homecoming queen along with her then boyfriend Grant who became homecoming king. The betrayal Amanda suffers here is impactful, as it stems from the only openly LGBTQIA+ student at the school, the one person she thought she could trust, the one person she was wrong about. As the narrative spirals into the attempted rape with Parker and Amanda's dad sending her back to Georgia, we are treated to another memory, one we also knew was coming at some point, the attempted suicide. The novel poses these two incidents beside each other, even though they are three years apart, and the impact

is noticeable. These low points in Amanda's life, these individual tragedies, so amplified by being posited together, these *attempts* are just that. Attempts. The darkest times before the dawn, and after each there follows a shining sunrise. The novel here underscores the deadly challenges trans youth face and, as is the case throughout most of this novel, juxtaposes it with the potential for happiness, the prospect of joy. Those emotions Amanda only rarely got to feel.

Knowing this, it might have been a stretch to say this novel decisively does not conform to the trope of the 'tragic gay' character, Amanda suffers a lot. Her ending is profound, however. Happy, but not because her boyfriend took her back after finding out she was trans, that's an unresolved issue in the novel, and is best left as such. Not because her friends all accepted her for who she is and she finally got through to her father and resolved their issues, not mainly at least, as this quote exemplifies:

As I spoke I thought back to what Virginia had said weeks before, about getting anything you wanted if you let yourself believe you deserved it. For as long as I could remember, I has been apologizing for existing, for trying to be who I was, to live the life I was meant to lead [...] I realized, I wasn't sorry I existed any more. I deserved to live. I deserved to find love. I knew now – I believed, now – that I deserved to be loved.

(Russo p. 293)

What the love plot actually resolves into isn't romantic love, or platonic love for another person, but rather self-love. Amanda's personhood is able to constitute itself outside a need for outer validation from others, because she has enabled herself to love herself, and so enabled herself to be loved by others. This is something she largely refuted previously, what eventually lead to her attempted suicide. This previous trauma, the lack of self-worth and not allowing others to love her has haunted Amanda for many years. As Amanda confides in her mother while trying to apply make-up for the first time, she mentions this. Telling her about how she thinks she looks stupid and that she's not a boy or a girl any longer. That she's just broken. When she ends the tirade by saying it would have been easier if she was dead, her mother counters starkly: "Easier for who?" (Russo p. 230). This sentiment resonates partly with the lack of understanding Magnus shows when he asks Alex why she does not just go by *them* or *they* instead of she and he. Both Magnus and Amanda are sadly ignoring the other's

perspective, entirely, focusing instead on how it would be easier for themselves. Both these counters act as catalysts for the narrative, Amanda being brought out of a depressive spiral and Magnus being realizing his ignorance.

### **3.3 Amanda's ideal position**

Lastly, Amanda occupies a specific kind of space within trans literature, and the trans community at large which makes her story partly problematic. It is the case with Magnus Chase too that he is particularly open-minded after having lived on the street and befriended a number of social outcasts through various means. Hence, that the story of him getting to know Alex operates within ideal circumstances too, but it being fantasy and a lighter theme at that, it might be expected. Amanda's story however has a stark authenticity to it that is partly problematic because her background is entirely ideal. This is a conscious decision on the part of Russo, as mentioned in her introductory summary, as she wanted to give her every opportunity to succeed. This ideal position, which was constituted, according to Russo, by Amanda:

[knowing she is transgender] from a very young age. She is exclusively attracted to boys. She is entirely feminine. She passes as a woman with little to no effort. She had surgery that her family should not have been able to afford, and she started hormones through legitimate channels before she probably could have in the real world.

(Russo p. 295-296)

In their totality, this selection of attributes and happy circumstance enabled a story for Amanda that let her experience her life with only a, in Russo's words, slightly different medical history compared to other girls her age (Russo p. 296). That being the case however, if one were to look at Amanda's character through the lens of intersectionality, with specific attention to the trans aspects of the intersectional phenomenon, we can ascertain that despite largely passing for a cisgender girl for most of the narrative, Amanda instead needs to grapple much more with the fear of being caught out having passed. Her invisibility shelters her from physical harm, at least from any violence arising from the fact she's trans, but that passing also erases part of her. This is a particularly difficult space to operate in, as many trans people might well prefer their dead names and past selves to pass into obscurity in preference of living their truth free of the shackles the past may present as. Yet, it is also the case that such

erasure unfailingly ignores part of one's life and journey, to the point where the transness itself may be erased. Self-erasure of this kind can be tricky, though few if any would contemplate it without much reflection. Because of this however, despite its complexity, Amanda's position allows for fertile discourse and can serve as a linchpin for discussing the issues surrounding trans lives in society. A boon for any educator.

## 4 In Conclusion

These two novels both get at the very essence of what it means to be challenging gender and sexual norms. The experiences had by the characters within the novels are unique, yet highly applicable for learning. By reading them together one is allowed to glimpse the specificities inherent to observing transgender life from both the inside and the outside. This process in particular highlights the plethora of challenges ingrained in the trans experience, both with regards to transgender people themselves as well as the people around them. The struggles faced by trans characters in the novels proffers ways to overcome struggles faced by other minorities too, and highlights the advantages of a flexible stance on consciousness of resistance when one's marginalized position is intersectional, even while rejecting the binary framework of such thinking.

In the framework of the Norwegian curriculum in particular, these novels offer perspectives and opportunities for reflection otherwise inaccessible to many students. These perspectives enable critical discourse regarding gender and sexuality in general as well as transgender issues in particular. As part of LK20's incorporation of interdisciplinary topics and themes, this entry from literature into the topic of sexuality is itself a worthwhile goal, while the enhanced visibility of transgender characters and different kinds of gender expression is conducive to creating a more inclusive and diverse environment, both for learning and for society. It may also allow students perspectives on how to recognize subversive tactics and denial of freedom of expression in their own lives and those of others they know. By priming our students for encountering differences in their lives we are effectively training them to meet others with kindness and understanding, no matter their social group, sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity, religion or any other tribes or affiliations.

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