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# Queer Literary Ecologies and Young Adult Literature

## 1 Introduction

In history, queer literature has been notoriously hard to find for readers. This is in part a question of representation. In times when queer identities and actions could not be described openly, readers were obliged to develop a sense for the unsaid or excluded, as well as allusions and symbolism coded as queer. A considerable part of Western queer literary studies have been devoted to the recovery of a queer literary tradition, in fact, it was through literature and other cultural products that the queer theory developing from post-structuralist thinking made its arguments (eg. Sedgwick, 1990; Love, 2007). For queer scholars interested in intersections between queer identities, race and cultural inequalities (eg. Anzaldúa 2009; Muñoz 1999, Ahmed 2004), literature has continued to be an important place to theorise minoritarian and marginalised identities. At the same time, recovery has also been an important part of postcolonial literary studies focused on queer narratives: "'discovering' or 'exhuming' texts considered queer in our contemporary understanding of the term," as Palekar phrases it in her discussion of queer in an Indian literary context (2017, 8).

A classic like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was banned in England due to its explicit depiction on female same sex desire but avoided condemnation in Paris, like other banned books such as James Joyces's *Ulysses* (1922) (McCleery 2019). This example shows that the conditions for the reception of queer literature could differ locally, even within Europe. However, not even a famous (or infamous) novel like Hall's, has been subject to any extensive study of its circulation within queer communities, except within local, or Western national frameworks (eg. Emery 2001). The particular importance of travelling people, ideas, and genres for queer literature has been emphasized (Vanita 2011). But global contexts for queer literature remains still today conditioned upon the uneven access to human rights in different parts of the world. However, digital technologies have been used by queer activists in different ways globally, and it can be argued that circulation of fiction forms part of this digital activism (eg. Emenyonu 2018, Pain 2022).

Not so long ago, homosexuality was seen as a pathological condition in many Western countries, and this was reflected in how queer literature was labeled in libraries, as a "Sexual Perversion," and "shelved alongside books on


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sex crimes, incest, and pedophilia" (Adler 2015, 478). So, when eventually fiction could represent non-normative sexualities and gender identities more manifestly in some parts of the world, there was still no easy means of finding it for readers. Audiences seeking acknowledgement in literature relied to a large part on small, local communities. Organisations kept their own reading lists, and readers to a large extent depended on a locally shared knowledge of relevant literature. McKinney has described this development as taking place long before any digital infrastructures or social media: "Indexers armed with paper cards and a facility for sorting, filing, and describing lesbian materials stepped in to address these access problems by building community based subject guides" (McKinney 2020, 105).

Many scholars have underlined the significance of books and libraries for queer readerships, especially for "the coming-of-age experiences of LGBTQ people" (Adler 2015, 479). Literature is a particularly crucial source for understanding the prejudices, oppression, and violence that has affected gender and sexual minorities, and for the understanding of subjective queer experiences. Since literature as a medium gives "access to the interiority of characters, one might argue that it teaches us even more about the inner, psychological workings of sexual desire than other media, such as film," Jeffrey Angles points out in his contribution to the volume *Queer in Translation* (Angles 2017, 87). However, this potential access to acknowledgement and recognition in literature has not been unimpeded. "The books you *did* find were rarely, if ever, meant for you, at least if you were an adolescent struggling with coming out and finding love," literature scholar William Banks writes about his own experience as a reader searching for acknowledgement in books (2009, 33).

Although the experiences described by Banks are within an American context, the problem with access to queer literature is global, although the obstacles for readers in search of queer literature might be of different kinds in different parts of the world. The impact of feminist and queer studies in an American context has included a critical perspective on the male, heterocentric literary canon, however, this kind of critique is not equally possible in all global academic contexts. Thus, both academic and ordinary readers may experience that a focus on queer literature and queer reading practices is still controversial. Taking my cue from the longing for queer coming-of-age stories expressed by Banks, this chapter explores access to queer young adult literature by way of social media, and the kind of readership formed by it. As a case study, I have chosen TikTok, since it has established itself as a social media platform with a strong presence of young users (Boffone and Jerasa 2021).Through this focus, I also want to challenge the absence of queer literature, and young adult literature, in world literature as a research field. How has queer readership moved

from the small-scale and local (libraries) as described above to the large-scale and global (social media)? And what does the digital environments mean for the sense of community, moving from a local, and physical, community-based context to a global, digital context? Furthermore, the perspectives that queer historiography can bring to the study of world literature is discussed with a focus on temporalities.

## 2 World Literature, Queer Literature, and Young Adult Literature

Even though the relation between globalisation and LGBTQ+ questions have long been a topic of scholarly interest (Hayes 2020), queer literature has largely been absent in the many world literature anthologies produced within the last ten or so years, and queer perspectives are rarely used as an analytical framework (e.g. D'Haen et al. 2013; Damrosch 2014; Helgesson et al. 2018). While a multitude of aspects on world literature are presented in companions to world literature and similar collected volumes, queer literature has not seemed to bear through as a relevant perspective within this research field, with a few exceptions. One such is the contribution by Debra A. Castillo's to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2012). Castillo takes on the "male heterosexist core" of both Western literary histories, and the history of world literature, the latter to a large extent depending on texts available in English (2012, 394), and begins to trace the emergence of communities sharing an interest in feminism, queer literature through online magazines and bookstores, and printed literature anthologies (2012, 299–401). The volume *Francophone Literature as World Literature* (Moraru et al. 2020) also contains one chapter on the intersections between world literature in French and same-sex desire. It discusses how different kinds of sexual and gender *difference* play out in different regional contexts, thus bringing to the fore the question of the mismatch between the Western concepts describing LGBTQ+ identities and actions, and the experiences expressed in literature from the Mahgreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Caribbean (Hayes 2020, 184–190). This is one of many research contributions emphasizing that local queer experiences need to be articulated in their own vernaculars. Another example is Domínguez-Ruvalcaba's (2019) exploration of the intersections between class, race, and languages in Latin-American culture, where queer identities are developed over national boundaries utilising digital technologies.

However, the few contributions on queer literature present in world literature volumes does not mean that global perspectives on queer literature are absent. The already mentioned anthology *Queer in Translation* focuses on intersections of translation studies and queer studies more broadly, in literature, but also in other media and political and activist contexts (Epstein and Gillet 2017). The contributions on literature focus on the role of affective identification in the context of the "gay boom" in Japan (Angles 2017), and on de-queering in the Swedish translation of English young adult novels with queer storylines (Epstein 2017); but the volume also contains contributions discussing how to translate non-normative sexualities that have no equivalent in Western languages and cultures, and the intersections of translation studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies (Palekar 2017). The interrogation of colonial assumptions in previous studies of LGBTQ+ cultures has been intensified the last ten or so years, as exploration of queer diasporas and homonationalism in what has been named a transnational turn within queer studies (Chiang and Wong 2016). However, issues concerning global aspects of queer literature is only a minor part of world literature as a research field.

The situation is very similar with young adult (YA) and children's literature: there are few contributions to edited volumes on world literature; none in the examples mentioned above. Nevertheless, global perspectives are by no means lacking in the field. As is the case with queer literature, research is mainly carried out in other contexts than world literature studies. *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (Hunt 2005) has a good global coverage with chapters on specific geographical regions, and contains reflections on comparativism, postcolonialism, and translation. Queer perspectives or even general discussions on LGBTQ+ literature is conspicuously absent, though. Global perspectives are developed in depth in *The Routledge Companion to International Children's Literature* (Stephens 2018), which engages thoroughly in global aspects, while many other works retain a mainly Western perspective while also discussing race and migration (eg. Cart 2010). Still, *The Routledge Companion to International Children's Literature* touches on issues of non-normative gender and sexuality very marginally. Typically, one minority issue is included in volumes about children's and YA literature: either global/ international perspectives, or non-normative gender and sexuality. This is for example visible in works explicitly devoted to queer YA such as *Over the Rainbow. Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Abate and Kidd 2011), and *Beyond Borders. Queer Eros and Ethos (Ethics) in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature* (Linville and Carlson 2016), where LGBTQ texts are discussed, sometimes exploring intersections with racial and ethnic aspects, but with primarily Western perspectives. The exception is *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Adults* (Epstein and Chapman

2021). It provides a broad overview over specific countries in Europe, Asia, South and North America, as well as chapters focusing on comparative perspectives on children's literature, with a LGBTQ+ aspects at the centre throughout.

It is not surprising that works on queer YA literature to a large extent has concentrated on accounting for one tradition and not global context. As mentioned in the introduction, the recovery of a queer literary tradition has been important within queer literary studies since queer authors and texts have been deprived of their contexts and interpreted in a heteronormative manner. To regain or reconstruct relevant contexts and modes of reading is an act of both discovery and recovery: the discovery of past queer lives documented in literature, and the recovery of authors included in the canon but stripped of their queer significance. One could describe this work as a creation of a queer 'counter-canon', to use Damrosch's concept describing literary works that may challenge the hyper-canon and present other ways of constructing literary history. Damrosch uses counter-canon specifically to capture subaltern voices and "writers in languages less commonly taught and minor literatures within great-power languages" (Damrosch 2006, 45). Considering that sexuality (and especially non-normative gender identities and sexualities) has been a controversial topic in YA literature, there remains much work to understand the development of queer textualities in different contexts, even within one language and cultural sphere. YA literature with explicit coming-out motifs is also a fairly recent phenomenon, and the genre was long characterised by stereotypical representations and tragic endings for characters that did not conform to gender and sexuality norms (Cart and Jenkins 2006), thereby reproducing the idea of LGBTQ+ identities and actions as something problematic and fateful. An emerging YA literature after heteronormativity is still in a process of formation, and this process is evidently different in different parts of the world. Banks and Alexander discern three waves of gay YA literature: "first-wave YA literature [. . .] suggest that non-heterosexual characters may exist in a shadow world of the text," "second-wave texts [where] the characters' sexualities are more central to the text, the protagonists 'come out' and come to understand themselves a s gay," and "[t]hird wave texts would embrace the 'orientation' of gay sexuality; characters in these books see their 'coming-out' and 'coming-into' as a natural and normal activity" (2016, 105). Banks and Alexander predict the fourth wave as one that "showcase a larger world of sexualities, gender identities, racial identities, class identities, etc" (2016, 105); a more intersectional and perhaps globally diversified YA literature.

# 3 Queer Literary Ecologies

In *An Ecology of World Literature* Alexander Beecroft reconceptualises world literature studies through an "ecological" approach, underlining "the interaction of literature with its environment" (2015, 3). Beecroft argues that an ecological framework instead of an economic, which has been more often used within studies of world literature, can better account for complexities and interactions between literature and human environments (economical, political, technological etc.). He describes literary ecologies which are not limited to certain geographical spaces but can appear anywhere if the conditions support it. These "cut across traditional cultural borders and juxtapose unrelated cultures" and thereby challenge centre–periphery models of world literature (Beecroft 2015, 28). Could queer literature and its reception contexts be described as such an ecosystem? From a Western and contemporary point of view, one could imagine that the common soil, as it were, of the queer literature ecology is that of marginalized and censored readership and authoring. After all, as Ahmed as stated, "heterosexuality becomes a script that bind the familial with the global," and that script functions as a foundation of what we see as civilised (Ahmed 2013, 423). However, the openness to same-sex relations and fluid gender expressions have differed over time and cultural contexts. The example most often referred to in the West being the place of male homosexuality in Greek Antiquity (eg. Percy 2005), but there are many others, like the Northern Indian "male homoerotic subcultures that [had] flourished in pre-colonial cities and been celebrated by major poets" (Vanita 2011, 106). Literary ecologies in Beecroft's sense are systems of reception and consumption rather than production. I propose that queer readerships connect works in an ecology of queer literature. This queer literature ecology may exist in different times and cultural contexts and cut through and form part of the six ecosystems Beecroft discusses: the epiphoric, the panchoric, the cosmopolitan, the national, the vernacular, the global (2015, 33–36). Queer, of course is a modern and Western concept. However, we can be sure that non-normative sexualities and gender identities are neither a modern, nor a culture specific phenomenon, although the norms and language to describe this may shift. It is in this way I for the sake of simplicity use the concept queer, as an umbrella term for those gender identities and sexual desires that have been stigmatised and marginalised in different ways in various times and cultural contexts. One drawback is that this use of the concept queer risks functioning as a "false unifying umbrella" (Anzaldúa 2009, 164), and homogenise diverse experience and identities into one group (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2019). It is therefore important to remember that there may be inequalities within queer communities, and that within one queer literary ecology, different kinds of minority literary

traditions may coexist and develop, separately or in different intersections. This is especially important to keep in mind when discussing LGBTQ+ literature, where male same-sex experiences have been significantly more portrayed than for example lesbian, bi, and transgender experiences.

The six ecological types described by Beecroft have a chronology, but it is not a progressive development: "multiple ecologies can coexist at any time" (2015, 195). Rather than associating one of the ecologies discussed by Beecroft to queer readership, I argue that it may be traced as an ecosystem enclosed in all the Beecroft's different large-scale ecologies, but with certain temporal dislocations. The national literary ecology emerging during the nineteenth century uses literary history to privilege vernacular literary forms. However, although LGBTQ+ writers to some extent have been included in such histories, this was not acknowledged, nor was their texts read as queer. Still in late twentieth century there were few attempts to recover an LGBTQ+ literary history, and only in a few major languages (Heede 2015), although national literary history as a genre still perseveres in academia, despite the advances of world literature and global frames of interpretation. As Mahmutović has argued, if a specific literature (in Mahmutović's case American Muslim writing) is "made mainly through the way readers make connections between works – as well as authorial intentions in cases where writers aim at producing a particular kind of literature, it is possible to speak of American Muslim writing as *a* literature that belongs to different literary ecologies, for example different national literatures" (2018, 140). Queer literature can in parallel be viewed as a literature constructed by the connections readers make between works that may belong to different literary ecologies, different national literatures, and different times. There is a tradition of community-based reception, where literature changed hands quite literally between queer readers in specific contexts, as described by Wallace (2016). However, these local reception patterns did not mean that reading was confined to national literature. As mentioned above, travel and circulation of queer literature was important since books might be banned in one national context, and not in another (Vanita 2011). Like all literature LGBTQ+ themed literature has increasingly been subjected to global publishing logic, there is a risk that a kind of mainstreamed queer world literature does not address the needs of readerships in countries where queer rights are absent.

In the final section of his book, Beecroft discusses global literary ecology in connection to the possibilities for different literary languages to survive in a global sphere of translation. His outlook on the future of linguistic diversity in literature is not very hopeful, considering the mechanisms of homogenisation of national literatures to a global marketplace. Literary ecologies are large-scale in scope, but also observable in individual texts. He points out a narrative strategy,

"the plot of globalisation" as a common narrative structure in novels within the global literary ecology, using multi-strand narration to express global interconnectedness and decentring (2015, 36). The still developing global literary ecology with its narrative devices is interesting to consider in relation to developments in queer YA literature and in YA literature in general. YA literature *per se* is about identity formation, and this theme has increasingly been plotted as young people's need to navigate between different identities having to do with class, race, religion, sexuality, gender norms, and disabilities. Maybe an addition to the "plot of globalisation" put forward by Beecroft could be that this plot is also intersectional. One such example, *Money Boy* by Paul Gee (2011), is discussed by Durand (2016) who underlines the YA literature can capture the often-paradoxical effects of living in between cultures and languages and represent intersectional identities, for instance, avoid descriptions of LGBTQ+ people of colour as a homogenous group (2016, 83). Durand's particular example is a novel about a Chinese boy in Canada whose coming-out is complicated by the homophobia in the Chinese community, and the fact that he is marginalised as an immigrant.

Queer and intersectional characters are also represented in many other YA novels from the last ten or so years, sometimes with migration and linguistic barriers at the centre, like in *Money Boy*. Goodreads Choice Awards, an award based on the voting of readers, exemplifies this. The nominated YA novels 2021 (Goodreads 2021) describe intersectional and often globalised or bi-cultural and bilingual identities, and some of them also include queer characters and storylines. Benjamin Alire Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante Dive into the Waters of the World* is one of the nominated novels 2021. It is the sequel to *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), awarded with multiple literary prizes, among them the Lambda Literary Award and the Stonewall Book Award. Both the first and second part are about two teenage Mexican American boys in Texas, combining a love story that must confront homophobia with borderland identities and class boundaries. Another nominated novel to Goodreads Choice Awards 2021 is Adiba Jaidirgar's *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* (2021). It is a coming out love-story centred around a second generation Bangladeshi-Irish girl, and a Indian/Bengali-Irish girl. When the popular Hani Khan comes out as bisexual, she is questioned by her friends because she previously dated boys. She begins fake-dating the studious Ishu, and they end up falling in love, at the same time grappling with both racism and bi-phobia. Jaidigar's previous YA novel, *The Henna Wars* (2020) narrates the complexities of coming out as a lesbian in a Muslim family and in an Irish Catholic school. Both Jaidigar's and Alire Sáenz' books exemplify that globalised and bi-cultural identities is an important theme in contemporary YA literature, and in this sense Beecroft's "plot of globalisation" is visible in them.

In his discussion about global literary ecologies, Beecroft writes that ["w]riters who write in particular ways will find it easier to get published and to gain recognition than others do" (Beecroft 2015, 247) He further explains this as a mechanism or 'evolution' transferred across time, so that writers who have once gained influence retains it (Beecroft 2015, 247). However, Beecroft also argues that this kind of literature may be disrupted by "ecological shocks" and gives the examples "technological developments, changes in the economics of book publishing, changes (liberalising or otherwise) in censorship regimes or in literary tastes, and changing competitions with larger literatures, such as English" (Beecroft 2015, 247). I interpret this statement as a description of how long-lasting literary power structures (for example manifested in canonisation) may be overturned. Although we have seen no disruption of English as the most important language in the global literary market, technology has certainly played a part in shifting the processes of readership formation. One could argue that technology has been the driving force in the emergence of queer readerships that are not necessarily connected to local communities, but instead can share book recommendations and reader experiences through digital media, such as for example Goodreads or TikTok. Research has shown that apart from the access problems to queer literature discussed in the introduction, there are additional are barriers to the access of queer literature for young readers in schools and school libraries (Booth and Buhva 2018), and in some regions, such as the Arab world (*Anonymous 2021).[1] In a situation where access is limited in certain cultural and institutional contexts, digital media become an even more important space for sharing book recommendations and reader experiences. In an article about Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood,* a lesbian and modernist classic, Laura K. Wallace describes the formation of queer reading publics across time. She cross-reads reception events in different time periods and in different contexts, and among other things, academic reading and readers on Goodreads, and concludes that "to many (perhaps most) readers, a book's greatness inheres in its applicability to their own lives, in the aesthetic and affective pleasures and intensities it provides, which have everything to do with identity politics and historical context" (Wallace 2016, 90). Her reading of the reception of *Nightwood* strongly suggests that queer literature can be seen as an ecology, evolving over time, but with the shared experience of readers seeking and finding acknowledgment and recognition in certain works. Although Wallace does not reflect on Goodreads as a digital social medium per se, her discussion of "feeling public," a concept that underlines the formation

1 The name of the author withheld by the editors.

of readerships as an affective process, is useful for the understanding of public readership on TikTok. It also aligns with Ahmeds discussion of the "the role of pleasure of queer lifestyles or counter-cultures" (Ahmed 2013, 424). The pleasure in reading, and affective response in general, are aspects strongly present in the reader-responses of queer literature on TikTok.

## 4 BookTok, YA Literature, and Queer Readership

Even though Beecroft points out technology as one of the factors that define the conditions for literary ecologies, and may disrupt ecological systems, he does not develop in depth how digital technologies and social media affect global literary ecologies. But since Beecroft also underlines that readers are instrumental in the creation of literary ecosystems, digital platforms where communities of readers interact are relevant to explore. BookTok is a community of mostly young adult readers on TikTok that has quickly expanded as an important strand of this social media platform, enabling users to share reading experiences, recommendations and interact with other readers. TikTok, developed from the Chinese platform Douyin in 2017, allows users to post videos, and provides sound and visual effects and possibilities of editing the videos (Boffone and Jerasa 2021). It was initially targeted to the teenagers of generation Z but is now a social media platform more broadly used by different audiences and for different topics and interests. On TikTok, interaction is directed towards content, not individual profiles, and as Zulli and Zulli has pointed out, "[c]reative interaction is also prioritised over discursive interaction," meaning, things are not discussed, as for example on Facebook or Twitter, content is created and shared using hashtags. Further, they describe the networks on TikTok as "imitation publics," capturing a style of interaction through imitation and replication rather than connections between individuals (Zulli and Zulli 2020). Through the hashtag #BookTok used together with more specific tags such as the names of individual works, one such "imitation public" is created.

According to Zulli and Zulli (2020), imitation can be of two kinds: it can be formed through imitation of specific videos, or a more general replication of different types of videos (as for example the book haul). In the case of BookTok, the latter is more common. On BookTok a typical content is a video recommending book titles, sometimes more in general such as "Popular books that I never finished" (@bookobsessed) or "Books I've bought because of BookTok" (@isabellagerli). Although publishers and librarians have a growing presence on BookTok, most posts are by readers themselves, who publish videos about their reading re-

using effects, music, and type of video (a book haul, displaying a large number of books; recommendations and ratings; emotional reactions to books etc). Like "AltTikTok" and "LesbianTikTok," examples mentioned by Zulli and Zulli, BookTok can be described as a particular community "developing videos that aligned with and were imitable by that community" (Zulli and Zulli 2020, 12). As Papacharissi has shown using Twitter as an example, hashtags may be used to create "tropes of belonging" (2014, 117) that are characterised by shared feelings. While the shared feelings in the Twitter contexts Papacharissi explored were mainly negative (discontent, disagreement), BookTok usually bind readers together by a strong emotional engagement in fictional characters and staging strong emotional responses; constructing "affective publics" in a similar way as Wallace describes (2016), but with other feelings and content foregrounded (Papacharissi 2014). Ahmed argues that queer pleasure is not only about sexual intimacy, but also the access to social belongings in different spaces, such as "clubs, bars, parks, and homes" (Ahmed 2013, 437). While Ahmed is primarily discussion spaces where bodies come into contact, it may be worth considering the role of digital spaces in the creation of queer pleasure and queer politics.

Publishers have testified to the significance of the shared content on BookTok: one example is backlisted titles suddenly in-demand after trending on BookTok (Jensen 2022). Many BookTok users are fans of the same genres, such as fantasy romance, manga, or LGBTQ+ literature. Currently #booktoklgbtq has 48.4 million views and #booktoklgbt 377.9 million views.[2] Two of the unexplained upticks of paper backs during 2020 were Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (Miller 2012), originally published in 2012 and Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End*, originally published in 2017 (Silvera 2017). Both were tied to viral content on BookTok (Jensen 2022), and both (although set in very different contexts and narrated within different genres) are male same-sex love stories and depict homosexual and bi-sexual identities.

*The Song of Achilles* recasts the *Iliad*'s story of war and heroism as a love story between Achilles and his companion Patroclus. At the same time, the story is also transposed from the heroic and mythical to territories recognisable from contemporary YA literature: coming of age with its grappling with friendship and identity, and sexuality. Miller gained praise for portraying an openly gay relationship, but the depiction of male same-sex love has also been criticized by queer readers for narrating homosexuality from a heterosexual perspective (eg. Reading

**2** Statistics from TikTok app, accessed 28 February 2022. There are also other hashtags to find lgbtq+ literature such as #lgbtqbooktok, #lgbtqbooks etc.

While Queer 2015, Strange Queer Things 2018). Readers using the hashtag #thesongofachilles (or any variety of this hashtag) on TikTok engage explicitly and emotionally in the love story. Users draw Achilles and Patroclus in intimate scenes (eg. @casilda_draws), search for fan art after finishing it (@.dianasbookshelf), they choose music to enhance the emotional impact of certain scenes, such Achilles weeping over Patroclus dead body (eg. @promisesbooks) and they stage their own emotional reactions to the tragedy of the lovers (eg. @eleonorastellax). The reader responses to the novel are usually put in very few words: "Adele + Patrochillies = me sobbing my a$$ of" as the user @jeanne.reads writes in a post from 27 October 2021, staging affective response to the novel by using Adele's song "When We Were Young". It is clear that #BookTok offers a space to share the emotional responses to the text and has been known for supporting precisely affective responses to fiction (Jensen 2020). Judging from the posts using the hashtag #thesongofachilles, emotional responses to the novels tragic love story are highly valued. Wallace's concept of "feeling public," describing the "paradoxical sense that reading is simultaneously public and private, social and individual" (Wallace 2016, 73) is pertinent to this context. Interestingly though, that the book narrates a same-sex love story does not seem particularly significant in its reception on BookTok. Although many use the hashtag #lgbtq, *The Song of Achilles* does not seem to connect queer readers. Ahmed remarks that "[g]lobal capitalism involves the relentless search for new markets, and queer consumers provide such a market (2013, 436). Also, it is clear that queer content directed to audiences that are not queer form part of this capitalist logic.

In contrast to *The Song of Achilles*, *They Both Die at the End* is set in a familiar space, New York, in a recognisable near future. The novel depicts an everyday world, with the exception that people who are due to die in the next 24 hours are given notice of this in advance and given the possibility to find somebody who shares this destiny via the app Last Friend. This is how the two teenage protagonists, Puerto Rican Mateo and Cuban American Rufus, meet. The premise of only having a few precious hours left in life, creates a narrative space for engaging in existential questions about identity and the meaning of life, including the experience of being gay/bisexual teenage boy. The novel was nominated to Goodreads Choice Awards 2017, and like *The Song of Achilles* it has engaged readers in emotional responses on BookTok, and in very similar ways: from readers staging their own emotional reactions (eg. @saracarstens), to reviews (eg. @hungrycaterpillar), and reactions to the end (@abbysbooks). Like Miller's novel, the reception to *They Both Die at the End* does not focus on sexuality; it is read as a love story, and not specifically as a same-sex love story. While an important different between *The Song of Achilles* and *They Both Die at the End* is that the latter is written by an openly gay author, they both

seem to exemplify a mainstreaming of queer culture. This reflects an increased visibility and acceptance, at least in some parts of the world. However, as Daniel Elam has phrased it: "the 'gay community' today is a banally knowable object rather than the product of a passionately forged experience of self-making" (Elam 2017). His remark suggests that when LGBTQ+ culture (or gay culture, as he primarily focuses on) become mainstream, there is a loss of community. When hetero cis teens read and engage in queer love stories it may indicate an embracing of those identities, but also mean that literature representing same-sex relations doesn't per se create queer readership on BookTok. In fact, it is an interesting question if the transformation from the previous limited access to queer literature, depending on the reader being part of a local community, to commercial production and global digital access to queer literature via for example BookTok and Goodreads, means a loss of community for queer people or more opportunities to "feeling public," even as a private reader, as Wallace describes (Wallace 2016).

As shown above, the queer literature ecology on BookTok is not visible through the lens of the bestselling examples discussed above. However, if you follow the hashtags "lgbtq"/"lgbtg+"/"lgbtqia" booktok or "queerbooktok," you'll find posts from queer people who share their reading and give book recommendations. That all kinds of readers have found bestselling titles including queer love stories, like *The Song of Achilles*, doesn't automatically increase knowledge about queer literature: "I swear that's the only lgbtq+ book straight booktok knows," one user comments (@readbyfin). The comments to this post reveal both an underrepresentation of lesbian/sapphic books and a slight frustration about the one-sided interest in certain bestsellers: "if you ask booktok for queer books people will literally only reccomends [sic], the song of achilles, they both die in [sic] the end, and red white and royal blue" (the latter is another bestselling same-sex love story). On queer BookTok there is certainly a community, and a critique against the shallow knowledge about queer literature on "straight BookTok," especially the lack of sapphic literature. Many librarians have accounts with LGBTQ+ book recommendations, and ordinary readers share reading experiences. These experiences can include how to handle parents who don't allow you to read queer books (@thecalvinbooks) and giving each other tips about queer books with "discreet covers" (@literarylesbian). "THANK YOU FOR THIS AND PLS DO MORE IF U CAN! I have a very homophobic and christian family so this helps," one user comments. As Buffone and Jerasa states, BookTok "enables queer teens and allies to engage with queer YA literature" and allow queer teens to "experiment with their identities in ways that are not viable or safe off-line" (2021, 10, 11).

While queer YA literature (mostly male gay) have been increasingly marketed, and accessibility for readers is improved through social media, it is very clear that queer reading (that is LGBTQ+ readers reading LGBTQ+ books) still is controversial and met with obstacles, and of course even more so in global contexts. Since TikTok does not focus on user profiles it is not always possible to identify the nationalities and first languages of those who create content. Although there are videos in different languages, English is the dominating language on BookTok, and the books displayed, commented, and recommended are usually written in English or is translated to English. They seem to be texts that speak to us "as citizens of the world" rather than "residents as a specific place" (Beecroft 2015, 299), although many of them describe queer marginalization and homophobia in specific cultural contexts. If digital social media is considered, the possible future of a global literary ecology where English functions as a lingua franca described by Beecroft (2015, 295–296), seems already here. There is one major exception from the tendency that most literature discussed and recommended on BookTok is written in English, and that is Japanese Manga, and Korean Manhwa, but that is a research field in itself. When it comes to the representation of LGBTQ+ people, bestselling YA literature in English may benefit the visibility of this group in different national contexts where LGBTQ+ rights are limited. In South Korea, where same-sex relationships are not legally recognized, *The Song of Achilles* gained "massive domestic popularity" and is part of a larger trend where the novel is used forward non-normative experiences (Younsei Annales 2021). Angles describes a similar effects of the "gay boom" in Japan in the 1990ies, when Western literature representing male same-sex desire was translated to Japanese, and he explores the subtle adaptation of queer identities and practices that takes place in translation (Angles 2017, 92).

On BookTok there are users specialising in diversifying book recommendations, both in terms geographical and representational diversity. The account @the_asian_librarian, focuses on books from underrepresented geographical regions, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, and books with LGBTQ+ representation (eg. @the_asian_librarian February 2020, 22 December 2021). Many accounts focused on queer literature also actively promote diversity, mostly in terms of representation of characters. @justgreggy is one example, a reader from Curacao living is the Netherlands, providing ample examples of books in many different genres over the whole LGBTQ+ spectrum, calling out problematic representations, and offering critiques of the male same-sex love stories that are embraced on straight BookTok.

# 5 Global Literature and Queer Temporal Dislocations

Compared to the experience of being a young reader with limited possibilities to see one's identity acknowledged in literature that Banks described, cited in the beginning of this article, BookTok and other digital social media offers infinitely more access to queer literature for young readers, although there is some unevenness in representation over the LGBTQ+ spectrum, and male same-sex love stories are clearly favored. It is almost impossible to get an overview over the YA literature content on BookTok globally. One can access BookTok in other languages, but for example, on Swedish BookTook, to name one small language, the posts are often in English anyway. In this way, literature content on TikTok can be seen as representing the same global and mainstreamed commercial logic as the other literary circuits, like literary criticism and publishing, for example. However, when it comes to queer young adults, both Goodreads and BookTok make possible to ask others for recommendations on precisely your literary preferences (eg. Sapphic fantasy, or trans-themed sci-fi), and it offers anonymous access for persons that haven't come out to their families. This is a kind of community, but arguably not the same as the one Wallace describes. She discusses how the reading of certain texts, coded as lesbian, was a means of becoming part of a lesbian community. "GLBTQ [. . .] reading practices seek and build social relations precisely because GLBTQ people in heteronormative culture often feel isolated and singular" (Wallace 2016, 74). Readers could rally around texts to understand "queerness as a social identity with historical roots, rather than an individual diagnosis" (Wallace 2016, 74). Queerness as a social identity is present in the examples from BookTok I have discussed, and can be understood as an emotional connection between readers that promotes digital and global circulation. However, how historical is this social identity and emotional community? Social media is often very focused on the present. On BookTok, it is primarily new books that are displayed and discussed. Literary history is mostly absent, but as we have seen the digital technologies may disrupt the temporality of the market, making backlisted books resurface again.

To return to the question of queer YA literature and temporality, some efforts have been made to trace an evolution of this literature. The four waves of gay YA literature described by Banks and Alexander (2016, 15) may to some extent be transferrable to other the whole LGBTQ+ spectrum, but not entirely. A genealogy of trans YA literature may have a very different development, focusing more on gender norms than on sexuality. Cart and Jenkins (2006) offers a comprehensive history of LGBTQ novels for young adults, covering almost 200 titles over the

years 1969 to 2004. It is a broad and inclusive history of queer YA literature, including a focus on intersectional identities and cultural differences within an English language and primarily North American context. Cart and Jenkins describe a development from characters that come out in isolation in heteronormative environments in late 1960ies and early 1970ies, to characters happy with their queer identities, and with access to queer friends and family members around 2000. In addition to this chronological approach, they also develop three categories for the classification of LGBTQ YA literature: "Homosexual visibility" books that present coming-out stories, "Gay assimilation" books that present sexual and gender diversity as a given reality, and "Queer consciousness/community" books, that emphasize queer belongings in a broader context (Cart and Jenkins 2006, 169–172). These categories are not identical but similar to those discerned by Banks and Alexander, even if they more explicitly aim to describe a temporal development. Despite showing a move towards more diversity in representation and access for readers to queer literature, Cart and Jenkins also point out the need for more books with queer characters of color, as well as books centering on lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities. Interestingly, this is among the most common criticism towards mainstream LGBTQ+ YA literature by readers on BookTok as well, indicating that there may not have been a continuous development towards diversifying queer representation in YA literature.

Furthermore, looking at the development of queer YA literature from a global perspective, these stages, or waves, are problematic to apply, since they would show that Anglo-American literature is somehow more mature or developed than other literatures. Also, there is clearly a need to think beyond national borders to account for queer migrant and bi-cultural experiences (Anzaldúa 2009). In their discussion about transnationalism in relation to queer culture, Chiang and Wong underline that "gender, racial, and queer cultural formations do not merely follow the vertical logics of colonial modernity" (2016, 1645), and one might add, does develops its own temporal patterns when it comes to cultural production. One interesting example put forward by Chiang and Wong, is Johann S. Lee's novel *Peculiar Chris* (1992), a coming-of-age story described by them as "Singapore's very own debut of queer writing" (Chiang and Wong 2016, 1647). The author himself draws attention to temporal dislocations in his foreword: "He laments that in the Western gay canon, queer authors can develop beyond a conventional 'coming out' narrative," Chiang and Wong writes (2016, 1647), which is not the case in all literary traditions. Chiang and Wong also cite the author's own foreword: "For this reason, what you are about to read is in one sense, extremely new and yet, in another, very passé" (Lee cited by Chiang and Wong 2016, 1647). This quote highlights that queer literary ecologies may exist in different temporalities, connected to local conditions and nationally coded ideals of gender identities and

sexualities. To acknowledge this can also provide a way to avoid "evaluat[ing] the novel by how closely it aligns with Western queer liberalism" (Chiang and Wong 2016, 1648).

It could be argued that there are two build-in temporalities within queer YA literature in a global context. Firstly, there is a narrative temporality that adheres to YA literature as a genre about identity formation, where protagonists are supposed to develop and mature. This is closely connected to the idea of "chrononormativity" in Freeman's sense, signifying an idea of a natural course of life from childhood to productive and reproductive adult maturity (Freeman 2010). Secondly, there is an idea that queer YA literature has developed in certain ways over time, from the individual (typically gay male protagonist) struggling to come out in a hostile environment to including a more diverse and intersectional representation, and queer collectives. These ideas of development over time, in the narration of the protagonist's life, and in the development of the genre, are clearly not transferrable over different cultural contexts. While critics in the Global North might argue that we need no move beyond "calls for visibility and forward-oriented teleological growth" (Mason 2021, 6), exactly that type of representation may be very important in other cultural contexts. Requests and comments on BookTook also show that positive visibility is still much in demand by readers, as is also the need to hide reading of queer texts, visible in the requests for "discreet covers". Here, there is also a great divide within Western cultural contexts. Readers in the US may experience an urgent need of hiding queer reading considering the growth of a value-conservative opinion for example expressed in the "Don't Say Gay" legislation bills (Barbeauld 2014, Mazzei 2022); a clear example that there is not an unambiguous progressive development towards increasing inclusivity, diversity, and visibility.

In her text about how queer texts and queer reading practices make LGBTQ readers "feel public," Wallace describes "a transhistorical lesbian experience" through readings of *Nightwood* in different time periods and contexts (2016, 84). The question is, can a Western canonised texts speak to readers globally over time, and make readers globally "feel public"? To avoid that queer literature, for example from the Asias as discussed above, is measured against a Western idea of development, the problematizations of linearity and teleology within queer theory is helpful. Wallace discusses Love's critique of a "linear, triumphalist view of history," (Love 2007, 3); one could extend this critical position to include a resistance to the idea that LGBTQ+ representation should develop in certain ways over time and move from coming-out themes in heteronormative contexts to more inclusive queer representations. In a global context, there is clearly a need to be wary of normative Western chronologies.

# 6 Conclusion

Despite the importance of travel and transnational reception of texts for queer communities, it is striking that gender and sexuality to such a large extent has been excluded in foundational work within world literature. Moreover, this field of research also has shown a lack of interest in children's and YA literature. When global aspects are explored, it is in research by scholars in these fields (queer studies and young adult literature respectively), not by those engaged in world literature. While universality has been seen as a central criterion for world literature from Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* to recent theories (Mufti 2016, 1–5), both queer literature and YA literature is perceived as a concern for certain readers, and scholars in field specialized in these areas. As Mufti points out "[c]oncepts and categories of European origin are at the core of literature as a worldwide 'space' of reality, including long-established ways of thinking about the alien, the exotic, or the other" (Mufti 2016, xi). Although this may not have been Mufti's intention, "the other" can also in this context be understood as subject not conforming to compulsory heterosexuality or normative gender identities. Queer readers have struggled to find texts representing queer experiences, both due to a marginalisation of those such themes and characters in literature, and to obstacles in finding this literature, and despite increased access this question is still acute in many cultural contexts. Building on Beecroft's idea of literary ecologies constituted by the reception of texts by readers, this chapter has explored a queer literature ecology formed by queer readership.

Following Beecroft's statement that technology has the potential to disrupt literary ecologies, queer readership on BookTok was traced, and showed to provide a space for the sharing of affective reading experiences and knowledge of queer literature, but also to solidify the position of English as a global language. Furthermore, a mainstreaming of literature with queer loves stories is visible in the general reception of book successes on BookTok such as *The Song of Achilles* and *They Both Die at the End*, but this kind of reception is also criticized by queer readers on BookTok. In this critique it becomes visible that queer BookTok can create a space of belonging, even though it is a digital space, far removed from the local contexts where queer readership thrived in the past. BookTok also serves readers specifically looking for a different kind of representation, including queer literature by authors from specific nations or regions. While access to queer literature in the past has been closely connected to local small-scale communities and social environments, digital media, such as TikTok, provide spaces for queer readers to connect on a larger scale. This digital belonging means easier access to relevant literature for young queer readers, but it can't replace more local communities, only provide an alternative kind of belonging.

Queer YA literature and young queer readership is still controversial in many contexts. The continued demand for queer themed coming-of-age stories testifies that the longing for acknowledgement in texts, or the possibility to "feel public" through texts is as strong now as in the past. However, that queer literature is more mainstream today changes the way queer belongings are constructed. Palekar points out that in translation of queer texts, the translator is faced with the "temptation to try and make explicit a certain kind of globally legible and homogenizing queerness" (2017, 15). For all the benefits of TikTok to empower and connect queer readers, there is a risk that the kind of queerness you may encounter in such spaces is precisely that "globally legible and homogenizing queerness". This is something to also be wary of when exploring the temporalities of queer YA literature. The historical development of Anglo-American YA literature featuring queer characters and motifs becomes cannot be taken as a norm, and an assessment of literature globally against a Western idea of development within the genre needs to be avoided. The literary ecology of queer YA literature functions both in different social spaces (large-scale digital, and small-scale around physical communities), and in different temporal frames.

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