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# Producing and Translating Young Adult Books with Queer Protagonists in Times of Culture Wars

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## Abstract

Transgender identities have become a core issue in the cultural debates of Western societies, where two conflicting narratives have emerged. On the one hand, intersectional transfeminism seeks to deconstruct the heteronormative gender binary. On the other, homotransphobia has been normalized in far-right ideologies as a cornerstone of the global anti-gender discourse (Wodak 2021). While anti-genderism has turned gender identities into contested sites, education and literature remain places for resistance against prejudice. In particular, the production and international circulation of books for young adults (YAs) are key issues today. This contribution understands YA literature as an empowering tool for both queer and non-queer YAs to understand today's complex society. It aims to investigate trans narratives in American and Italian YA books, and their circulation as translated texts. This analysis brings together trans studies (Stryker and Whittle 2006), feminist and queer translation studies (Castro and Ergun 2017; Epstein and Gillett 2017), and their application to YA literature (Epstein 2015; Jenkins and Cart 2018). The paper first maps out the evolution of American trans-themed books and the reaction of Italian publishing. Second, it presents the first YA autobiographical comic by a trans Italian author, i.e., Alec Trenta's *Barba*, to highlight differences and similarities in trans narratives across cultures. Third, it focuses on the American graphic memoir *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, and analyzes some strategies used in its Italian translation. Ultimately, it discusses how YA literature can foster inclusion, thus 'doing' politics in today's culture wars on gender.

**Keywords:** YA literature, trans identities, gender-neutral language, queer books, gender ideology.

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## 1. Introduction

The present contribution focuses on trans-themed literature for young adults (YAs) and its positioning in contemporary culture wars on gender identity and young readers' education<sup>1</sup>. The paper focuses on books circulating in two different socio-cultural contexts: the United States and Italy. Two main interrelated reasons motivate this comparative choice. The first reason concerns the different diachronic evolution of queer YA literature in the U.S. and in Italy: as discussed below in this contribution, the US publishing started featuring representations of trans and queer protagonists long before the Italian one. The second reason pertains to the political and ideological clashes over gender inclusivity which have recently developed in both societies. Indeed, although these countries had gradually become more inclusive in past decades, in more recent years they have seen the rise of ultra-conservative forces that sustain a "project of queer epistemicide" aimed at "wiping out knowledges and representations of queer people [...] to reinforce the primacy of normative identities" (O'Loughlin et al. 2022, 1). Undoubtedly, recent events both in the U.S. and in Italy have shown that educating young people about gender issues, and more specifically on trans identities, is highly challenged. In this paper I aim at demonstrating that queer YA literature "does' politics"<sup>2</sup> in at least two interrelated ways: first, because it represents a place of resistance against prejudice, and second, because it challenges hegemonic discourses on issues like gender, identities, families, and society (see Pederzoli and Illuminati 2017). This is vital in a time dominated by an ongoing culture war over gender equality, in which conflicting narratives about the very concept of gender have emerged and spread. On the one hand, intersectional transfeminism seeks to deconstruct the heteronormative gender binary; in academia, this has been promoted through the dissemination of militant knowledge and "academic activism" (Lazar 2007, 146), i.e., an approach that raises critical awareness through research and teaching. This has merged with non-academic activism practices including marches, rallies, advocacy groups, and grassroots organizations that have defined feminist and LGBTQ+ movements for decades<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, homotransphobia has been normalized in far-right ideologies as a cornerstone of the global anti-gender discourse (Wodak 2021, 204-207).

Indeed, many Western countries have witnessed the birth and spread of anti-gender sentiments, sustained by ultra-conservative groups and far-right politicians. As demonstrated by a growing body of interdisciplinary and international research (Corredor 2019; Graff and Korolczuk

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<sup>1</sup> I use the adjective *trans(gender)* as a broad umbrella term to refer both to binary and nonbinary trans identities, that is, all those people "who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" (Stryker 2017, 1).

<sup>2</sup> Quote from Jacques Rancière (2004, 10).

<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the development of LGBTQ+ and queer political movements, see Prearo (2015), Bernini (2017). For a focus on trans activism see Stryker (2017).

2022; Kováts and Pöim 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, Prearo 2024), ultra-conservative groups have mobilized against gender equality and sexual diversity, blocking, or limiting the implementation of anti-discrimination policies and inclusive education. They have succeeded in doing so thanks to a deceptive narrative based on terms like gender ideology, that is, a rhetorical device employed as a trope “to anathemize feminist and LGBTQIA+ activism/scholarship” (Borba 2022, 57). Recent studies have traced this trend both in Italy and in the U.S. The former has been described as the “lighthouse” of anti-genderism (Garbagnoli 2017, 151). This is exemplified by the strong presence of anti-gender sentiments among members of the current Italian government, including the incumbent Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and in the trend of banning queer books for children and YAs from libraries in several Italian cities (see Forni 2021).

Similarly, in the U.S., conservative actors have engaged in a war against gender equality with serious consequences on education. LGBTQ+ rights have been endangered in many American states, especially those led by Republican governors: probably the most notable case is that of Florida which passed the so-called ‘Don’t Say Gay’ law (i.e., Parental Rights in Education Act - HB 1557) and whose governor Ron DeSantis also signed the ‘Let Kids Be Kids’ package, i.e., a set of anti-LGBTQ+ bills aimed at banning medical treatments for trans kids and drag shows, as well as restricting pronoun use in classrooms (see Drenon 2023). At the same time, book banning has escalated rapidly across American schools and libraries: in early 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) reported a record number of demands to censor library books and materials. The association also documented that the vast majority of banned books “were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people of color.”

In such a socio-cultural context, the production and circulation of books for young adults (YAs) are key issues in education. This contribution understands YA literature as an empowering tool for both queer and non-queer YAs to understand today’s complex society, that is, a society where both gender inclusivity and homotransphobic sentiments are on the rise. It aims to investigate trans narratives in American and Italian YA books, and their circulation as translated texts. It seeks to show how literature, language, and translation can do politics and conflict. To do so, the following sections summarize the main elements in the diachronic evolution of trans literature for YAs in the U.S., its translation into Italian, and discusses two case studies.

## 2. American YA trans literature

As Larissa D’Angelo (2018, 19) writes, “[d]efining Young Adult Literature is not a simple task”, first because “we cannot determine what Young Adult Literature is without understanding who

the term Young Adult actually refers to.” Although unanimous consensus has not been reached yet, in my contribution I follow the definition provided by Christine Cart and Michael Jenkins (2006, 1) who consider as YA works those books “that are published for readers aged twelve to eighteen, have a young adult protagonist, are told from a young adult perspective, and feature coming-of-age or other issues or concerns of interest to YAs.”

In their thorough reconstruction of the development of LGBTQ+ YA literature, Jenkins and Cart (2018, 161) point out that, trans characters appeared much later than other queer identities: indeed, while lesbian and gay protagonists entered YA literature in late 1960s and 1970s respectively, trans books started to get published only in the early 2000s. Given the absence of trans protagonists in YA novels up until 1990s, Talya Sokoll (2013, 23) coined the expression “the forgotten T” to stress that queer literature concentrated only on the first three letters of the LGBT acronym. Only in the early 2010s the number of trans YA books started increasing dramatically in the US, reaching an overall number of more than 50 titles available today - without considering self-published texts (see Bittner et al. 2016).

Despite being milestones for trans visibility, many of the texts published in the early 2000s feature at least two main problematic elements. First, most of them still fall into the category of ‘problem books’. Also known as ‘issue books’, these are texts that “instead of just being viewed as works of fiction about people who happen to be queer, [...] tend to focus on queerness as a problem” (Epstein 2015, n.p.) and portray transness or homosexuality as the primary aspect of the protagonist’s identity (Flanagan 2010, 32). Second, their narratives rely on several heteronormative tropes: these may come in the form of family rejection, homotransphobic violence, disgust, being ‘trapped in the wrong body’ and sometimes end up reaffirm gender stereotype (see Pini et al. 2018).

However, in recent times, the landscape of YA literature has experienced a notable shift due to the increasing number of trans authors making their mark. These writers have provided empowering representations of intersectional identities, and celebrated protagonists who are genderqueer or nonbinary, as well as black or of different cultural heritage. YA literature has become more and more diverse not only in terms of themes but also of formats. Indeed, the increased presence of trans authors also translated into the production of several memoirs, which have provided queer teens with inspiring positive models and non-queer readership with a more accurate understanding of trans identities. These memoirs serve as crucial educational resources for society at large in navigating the ongoing cultural conflict surrounding gender identity, and in overcoming the “insidious path of epistemicide” of queer knowledges and visibility in contents for young readers (O’Loughlin et al. 2022, 1).

### 3. Trans YA books in translation

Trans-themed books have timidly approached the Italian publishing for YAs only very recently, mainly through the translation of few Anglophone texts. This delay is probably due to a prejudiced ideological attitude that has considered LGBTQ+ visibility dangerous for young readers (Salvi 2015). Therefore, the prolonged non-translation of trans books into Italian can be seen as a type of “censorship prior to publication” (Tarif 2018, 402). Indeed, I suggest interpreting this kind of censoring as being crucial to the epistemicide of queer visibility and empowerment, because it preemptively blocks both the publication of the text in the target language and the circulation of its message in a new cultural context. This is an additional element which shows that gender identity has been reduced to a contested site where conflicting ideologies clash. As a result, only seven out of more than 50 American trans titles have been translated into Italian. These are: *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters (2004), *If I Was Your Girl* and *Birthday* both by Meredith Russo (2016 and 2019, respectively), *I Wish You All the Best* by Mason Deaver (2019), *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas (2020), *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender (2020), and *Gender Queer: a Memoir* by Maia Kobabe (2019)<sup>4</sup>.

As mentioned, the number of YA trans books published originally in Italian is even smaller. This not only indicates a transphobic mindset but also highlights the delayed emergence of gender and sexuality-related topics in Italian mainstream culture, particularly in the field of education, lagging behind the United States by at least 20 years. To this day, one of the few original Italian texts with a trans protagonist is *Barba. Storia di come sono nato due volte*<sup>5</sup>.

#### 3.1 *Barba*

*Barba. Storia di come sono nato due volte* [literally Beard. The story of how I was born twice] is a graphic memoir written and illustrated by a young trans author named Alec Trenta. Published in February 2022 by Laterza, this is Trenta’s literary debut, and it can be considered a crossover book.

As several books written by American trans authors, *Barba* is a graphic memoir, therefore a non-fiction work. This does not come as a surprise; in one of the few academic studies conducted so far on this topic, John Brickford (2017) highlights that, since the early 2000s, there has been a conspicuous increase in non-fiction titles within YA queer literature. Brickford (2017, 196) also

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<sup>4</sup> This number is updated at the time of writing the present contribution, that is, September 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Another Italian book for YAs which deals with transness is *Non ci lasceremo mai*, a semi-autobiographical text written by Federica Tuzi. However, Tuzi’s protagonist identifies as trans only at a very young age and later rejects any type of labels to define herself.

shows that memoir has become the most common subgenre in YA non-fiction, largely outnumbering expository and historical texts.

Being a memoir, Barba recounts the author's personal experience of coming out and embracing his identity as a trans boy, documenting his story of transition. The book deals with transness in a delicate style, using a simple prose, direct language, and uncomplicated syntax, all elements which characterize YA non-fiction (see Brickford 2017, 186). Its effective metaphors - such as the hole the protagonist feels in his chest before embracing his true gender identity - guide the reader in understanding the author's struggles and achievements. The book also features several panels which explain terms and concepts related to gender identity and sexuality (for example, assigned sex at birth, sexual orientation, dysphoria)<sup>6</sup>. Although this makes some passages of the book more didactic than artistic, it is worth stressing that this material is very useful in a country where many people are still struggling to understand what 'gender' actually means.

Finally, the last page of the book includes practical information that may be much needed to trans people, namely: the Gay Help Line number and the URL of the website [infotrans.it](http://infotrans.it), which brings together trans-affirming services across Italy in an interactive map. This innovative element fills a gap found in previous texts for young readers (see Spallaccia 2022).

Nevertheless, Barba exemplifies a typical element of trans representations in Italian publishing: in fact, unlike many books recently published in the U.S., this is the story of a white trans boy. This somehow reaffirms the tendency of early American queer YA literature of the U.S. to depict transness in binary terms and to underrepresent nonbinary and BIPOC characters (see Cart and Jenkins 2006, 14).

In addition, on a more general note, binary representations of transness allow authors to elude a linguistic issue that is frequently associated with gender nonconformity: namely, the use of gender-neutral language. Unlike Trenta's book, the difficulty of respecting gender-neutral language in Italian becomes evident in the translation of an American book, that is, *Gender Queer: a Memoir* by Maia Kobabe.

### **3.2 *Gender Queer: A memoir***

#### **3.2.1. *The book***

Like Barba, *Gender Queer* is a graphic memoir and can be considered a crossover book for its capacity to attract a multigenerational audience of teens and adults. Published in 2019 by Oni Press, it recounts the journey of self-discovery and coming out of its author Maia Kobabe. Kobabe

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the table in (Trenta 2022, 47), which closely reminds the Genderbread person, developed by Sam Killermann [n.d.] to illustrate key issues on gender and sexuality.

is an American cartoonist and illustrator, who identifies as nonbinary and asexual, and uses gender neutral Spivak pronouns e/em/eir<sup>7</sup>. The book's popularity among teen readers has drawn criticism from a variety of quarters; as the most frequently challenged book in 2021 and 2022, it has become the emblem of the culture war on gender in American school libraries.

*Gender Queer* is a key text to understand the struggles experienced by nonbinary and asexual individuals today, also in terms of language: indeed, the readers of Kobabe's book can experience a journey through gender-neutral language and identities, as the author experiments with different sets of pronouns. This, however, posed several challenges to its Italian translation, which was published by BeccoGiallo in September 2022.

One of the main reasons of this linguistic challenge lies in the different grammatical gender systems of the source language (SL), i.e., English, and the target language (TL), i.e., Italian. The former is a natural gender language which distinguishes gender through pronouns while most nouns have no grammatical marking of gender. The latter is a grammatical gender language, which lacks gender-neutral pronouns, and always assigns a feminine or masculine gender to nouns and determiners (see Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012, 169). As summed up by Heiko Motschenbacher (2014, 258), "grammatical gender languages [...] pose a far greater challenge to a non-heteronormative language policy because gender binarism is much more firmly entrenched in language structure."

The different ways in which English and Italian express gender play a crucial role in translating queer books and, therefore, in the way these books challenge normative discourses on gender identity. In the case of nonbinary or genderqueer protagonists, the Italian translator must keep the characters' fluid identity in the TL, i.e., a language that is not as fluid as the SL in terms of gender. This is particularly challenging in the case of Kobabe's book, given its strong use of gender-neutral pronouns and terms. In this linguistic and discursive challenge to heteronormativity, "language becomes a vehicle for constructing and negotiating identities within a gender spectrum much wider than that bounded by the man / woman (masculine /feminine) binary" (Formato and Somma 2023, 23).

In recent years, several strategies have been used in Italian to try to find a solution to gender-neutral language. So far, the strategies mostly used have been the ellipsis of pronouns, different forms of paraphrasing, and the use of epicene nouns and adjectives<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, members of the LGBTQ+ community have attempted to queer Italian through several linguistic experiments to

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<sup>7</sup> These are a set of pronouns used by some nonbinary people in English-speaking countries, especially in the U.S. As noted by linguist Dennis Baron (2020, 128), Spivak pronouns "were promoted as gender-neutral alternatives by the mathematician Michael Spivak in the 1980s and thereafter on LambdaMoo and other online discussion groups." More recently, these pronouns have been used by some genderqueer and nonbinary people to question the gender binary and "to abjure the gendering of the body, to refuse to be cast as male, female, or transsexual" (S. Thomas 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Epicene words are common terms that are valid for both women and men, such as the nouns 'persona' (i.e., person) and 'individuo' (i.e., individual).

refer to nonbinary people, such as replacing gendered nouns with recently created gender-neutral suffixes and inclusive morphological inflections (-\*, -@, -x, -u).

Even more recently, a gender-neutral morpheme was developed employing the so-called schwa, i.e., a sign from the International Phonetic Alphabet that typically denotes a neutral vowel sound. The use of schwa has thus become an experiment that is significant both at linguistic and political level, because it challenges grammatical and social binarism, showing the limitations of these systems. In fact, schwa has given political visibility to those who do not socially identify within a fixed gender binary model. At the same time, it has polarized both academic debates and the public opinion, as well as politicians, journalists, and writers. As a result, schwa has become the symbol of a cultural war between two opposing sides which have been either advocating for or rejecting this strategy for inclusive language. While some sociolinguists have praised it as a language experiment to promote inclusivity (see Gheno 2022; Manera 2021), other scholars have sharply criticized its use for issues related to morphology, syntax, and pronunciation, as well as accessibility for those with intellectual or sensory disabilities (see De Santis 2022; Giusti 2022)<sup>9</sup>. Although many of these criticisms can be interpreted as attempts to maintain both the linguistic status quo and the social norm more or less overtly, schwa has become popular in the queer community and progressive publishers have used it as a neutral morpheme.

Antonia Mattiello, the Italian translator of *Gender Queer*, decided to use schwa in some sections of the book, along with different translation strategies. For constraints of space, below I focus on the linguistic challenges brought on by the translation of pronouns in two different passages of the book, where the author employs two different sets of pronouns, i.e., the singular they/them and the Spivak pronouns.

### *3.2.2. Analysis of translation strategies*

The first example refers to a panel which depicts four pins with the different sets of pronouns that Kobabe and other authors could choose to wear during a queer comic exposition: traditional female and male pronouns (she/her and he/him), they/them, and the Spivak pronouns (Kobabe 2019, 204). In this passage, as well as throughout the book, Mattiello decided to keep all four sets of pronouns in English in the TT. This strategy of non-translation may be interpreted as an example of what B.J. Epstein (2017, 121) calls ‘acqueering’, that is, those translation strategies designed to emphasize or even increase the queer elements of the text. This may be the result of the translator’s choice to find a way not to diminish the queerness of the text.

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<sup>9</sup> For a more extensive coverage of the Italian debate on the use of schwa, see Formato and Somma (2023, 24-26).



In fact, like many gendered languages, Italian does not have gender-neutral pronouns. A tentative solution to this lack of pronouns has come from some Italian authors who have tried to use schwa to create a new experimental pronoun, that is, *læi* (Cavallo et al. 2021, 32)<sup>10</sup>. So far, the use of this neologism has not spread much among Italian speakers, and it has been used only in some online forums. Moreover, in this case, the use of *læi* would have solved the linguistic issue only partially, as it would have translated just one set of pronouns.

Indeed, Mattiello attempted to use *læi* in another passage of the book, namely in a panel depicting the moment Kobabe is introduced to the Spivak pronouns by a peer cartoonist named Jaina Bee (see Kobabe 2019, 189). The dialogue between Maia and Jaina, both in the ST and TT, is available in Tab. 1 below:

| ST   | TT   |
|--|--|
| (Maia) I've been thinking about switching to they/them pronouns but for some reason that doesn't feel quite right. What pronouns do you use? | (Maia) Ho pensato a lungo se usare i pronomi they/them ma per qualche motivo non li sento adatti a me. Tu che pronomi usi? |
| (Jaina) I use the Spivak pronouns e, em, eir, as in "Ask em what e wants in eir tea"   | (Jaina) Uso i pronomi Spivak E/EM/EIR come in "Ask em what e wants in eir tea"*  |
|  | *chiedi a <i>læi</i> cosa vuole nel suo tè   |
| (Kobabe 2019, 189)   | (Kobabe 2022, 189)   |

Table 1

The quote on the right shows that the translator decided to keep not only the Spivak pronouns but also the English sentence which exemplifies the use of Spivak. An Italian literal translation of the sentence at issue is included in a footnote on the same page, and it employs *læi* to render the gender-neutral pronoun. This translation strategy, however, appears to be only partially successful. On the one hand, it succeeds in keeping the queerness of the text and the nuanced linguistic choices included in the panel. On the other, it does not provide a solution that can be used consistently in the text and in the Italian language to overcome the difficulty of naming multiple trans nonbinary identities. Moreover, although the Italian queer community has historically borrowed several English terms (for instance, 'coming out', 'transgender', 'gay'), some sets of pronouns may

<sup>10</sup> Italian linguist Giuliana Giusti (2022, 13-14) criticizes this neologism and suggests using 'loro' as a gender-neutral pronoun. Although it literally translates the English use of the singular they/them, this option does not seem popular among Italian nonbinary people, to date.

be unfamiliar to some readers, such as the Spivak, which are kept in the TT. In order to help a more diverse audience fully understand the text, the translator could have used the paratext to provide more information about the linguistic challenges and the identities presented in the book, for example by inserting a translator's note at the beginning of the book or an afterword.

Thus, the strategies analyzed here do not fully address the linguistic issues raised by the translation of queer texts that challenge gender binary, like Kobabe's memoir. Rather, these attempts show that a more extensive discussion is needed not to lose genderqueer identities in translation and also to raise awareness and educate readers on such debated and contested issues.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This contribution has shown that YA literature has a crucial role in contemporary societies: by promoting inclusion in education, it complicates notions of gender and power and gives voice to marginalized communities. More specifically, when reading queer and trans books young readers can encounter "trans possibility models", that is, "examples of liveable trans lives in all their complexity and myriad forms" (Pearce et al. 2020, 1).

As analyzed above, the production and international circulation of queer books have increased in countries like the U.S. and Italy. In the former, a more diverse and inclusive literature for YAs has developed in conjunction with successful online campaigns like We Need Diverse Books and Own Voice, aimed at fostering diversity in children's and YA literature (Corbett 2020, 5). In the latter, several publishers are trying to produce and translate more and more books that help both queer and non-queer young readers to understand the complex society they live in: this trend is exemplified by the growing number of gender-positive and LGBTQ+ books presented each year at the Children and YAs' Book Fair held in the city of Bologna. Furthermore, on a more specific linguistic and literary note, it demonstrates the "potential of translation as a tool for political action" (Castro 2013, 38).

As mentioned in the Introduction, this revolution has come in a time of strong social tensions over gender identities, in which homotransphobic stances have already produced aggressive forms of queer epistemicide, especially in relation to childhood. In recent years, many queer young people have seen their rights and existence threatened by anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments and

legislation in the US (Corredor 2019), with serious impacts of their psychophysical wellbeing<sup>11</sup>. Simultaneously, at the time of writing the current Italian government, that is the most far-right government since Mussolini's fascist dictatorship, is waging a war on LGBTQ+ rights and attacking rainbow families: the most recent episode is an Italian prosecutor's demand to cancel birth certificates for lesbian couples (see Balmer and Piscioneri 2023). Moreover, according to the 2023 Rainbow Europe Map and Index by ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), Italy ranks 34<sup>th</sup> out of 49 European countries in terms of equality and protection of LGBTQ+ people's rights. This result places Italy in a lower position than states like Hungary, which have promoted overt homotransphobic legislations for years. In these socio-cultural contexts, it is therefore important to remember that YA literature must provide the knowledge and education tool to shape a more equal society, also by raising awareness in societies that are still characterized by rooted gender discrimination that produces devastating effects on the lives of LGBTQ+ people of all ages.

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<sup>11</sup> According to recent surveys, nearly one in five trans and nonbinary youth attempted suicide in 2021 (Trevor Project 2022, 4). In 2022, approximately one out of every three queer young people reported consistently experiencing poor mental health as a result of anti-LGBTQ policies and legislation (Trevor Project 2023, 13).

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