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“A Little Messed Up and Blue”: Coming of Age Queer, Twin, and Anxious in Tegan and Sara Quin’s (Junior) High School Books

Abstract: This essay argues that Tegan and Sara Quin’s *High School* memoir and *Junior High School* graphic novels function as a transmedia narrative of queer adolescent anxiety, blending nostalgia, emotion, and musical self-representation to challenge heteronormative coming-of-age frameworks and highlight a reparative queer literary mode. While the overall premise remains consistent, when told through different media, Tegan and Sara’s story emphasizes various aspects of the anxiety related to being twins, experiencing a queer coming-of-age, and the process of coming out. This essay treats the Quins’ autobiographical works as examples of transmedia storytelling rather than mere adaptations. Their memories of youth, along with the anxieties tied to being teenage twins striving to be recognized as individuals rather than reflections of each other, closeted lesbians at a new school, and musicians questioning their talent and prospects, have become the core themes of Tegan and Sara’s work across media. Each new element in their story adds layers to the experiences of growing up queer.

Keywords: YA literature, queer, twins, anxiety, Canadian literature, music, transmediality

LGBTQ2S+¹-themed books, films, and TV series, including those aimed at young people, continue to grow in number and genre diversity (Jenkins and Cart, 2018: xi). While the representation of LGBTQ2S+ youth in mainstream traditional media is greater than ever before, it is still not satisfactory, especially when it comes to the voices of young people who are not white, middle-class, or cisgender (Lo, 2019; Craig et al., 2015: 257; Marshall, 2019: 66). Some

¹ I use the term LGBTQ2S+ to refer to individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirit, and other non-heteronormative and cisgender identities.

young adult books published in the last decade offer hopeful and, at times, utopian and colorblind narratives featuring characters of various gender identities that significantly differ from those dominant in queer literature before. However, such inclusive depictions of queer adolescence – very different from those present in the “dark” books of the past – seem distant from the reality of many readers (Jenkins and Cart xii). They feature sugarcoated versions of the precarious circumstances faced by adolescents who identify as (or are believed to be) LGBTQ2S+ and are statistically even more likely to experience anxiety, bullying, cyberbullying, and victimization at school than heteronormative representatives of “the anxious generation” (Peter, Taylor, Chamberland, 2015: 187; see Haidt, 2024).

This essay argues that Tegan and Sara Quin’s *High School* memoir and *Junior High School* graphic novels function as a transmedia narrative of queer adolescent anxiety, blending nostalgia, affect, and musical self-representation to challenge heteronormative coming-of-age frameworks and highlight a reparative queer literary mode. Many popular books and series offer hopeful narratives, but the globally spreading anti-queer and anti-gender sentiments directed at queer youth and the media they consume trigger various types of anxieties among children and adults. As Judith Butler notes in *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* (2024), even in relatively progressive countries with marriage equality, LGBTQ2S+ children and adolescents are under threat due to the spread of right-wing extremism, which treats gender “as code for pedophilia or a form of indoctrination that teaches young children how to masturbate or become gay” (6). Politicians introducing anti-gay and anti-trans policies – recently in both the USA and Canada – are allegedly acting out of fear for the well-being of children. To quote Butler,

The fear of children being harmed, the fear that the family, or one’s own family, will be destroyed, that ‘man’ will be dismantled, including the men and man that some of us are, that a new totalitarianism is descending upon us, are all fears that are felt quite deeply by those who have committed themselves to the eradication of gender—the word, the concept, the academic field, and the various social movements it has come to signify. (15)

Some online adult reviews of Tegan and Sara Quin’s seemingly optimistic and hopeful books for adolescents reflect this fear of young people being harmed and indoctrinated. For example, in a review posted on Amazon.com on November 25, 2023, someone named S. chester writes that *Tegan and Sara: Junior High School* (2023) is “too sexualized and like everything else these days forces the alphabet agenda on children.” Despite featuring no explicit content, Tegan and Sara Quin’s books feature themes triggering some adult anxieties: young people questioning their sexuality, girls getting their first period, buying their first bras, and dealing with bullying online and offline.

While right-wing extremists talk about their alleged fear for the well-being of children, it is queer young people whose books are banned and rights denied who continue to grow up even more anxious than their already anxious peers. Anxiety, as Derritt Mason argues in his landmark *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture* (2021), is vital to "understanding the past, present, and future of queer YA," which he defines, quite broadly, "as a body of trans-media texts with blurry boundaries, one that coheres provisionally around affect more than content" (6). Such affective transmedia literature, as Mason believes, has "transformative potential for thinking relationality" (19). Mason emphasizes the need to embrace queer YA's ambiguity and its tendency toward redefinition and reinterpretation, advocating for the development of non-normative approaches to interpreting such texts (25; see Matos, 2024: 7). Thus, such texts, which often bend genres, should not be confined to established definitions and conventional readings. Instead, queer books should be read in ways that allow for fluidity and openness and challenge conventions.

This essay aims to follow Mason's approach and focus on examining the literary elements of the transmedia storyworld of indie-pop duo Tegan and Sara Quin. The books, inspired by the band's adolescence in the 1990s, but set in both the 1990s and 2020s, reflect various types of anxieties experienced by queer young people.² In 2019, after years of referencing their experiences in song lyrics and music videos – which were initially misunderstood and dismissed by some male, heterosexual, and adult critics – the Quins published the bestselling and award-winning memoir *High School* and released an album featuring reworked versions of the songs they originally wrote in the mid-1990s. *High School* is not a novel and was not marketed as a YA book, but the Young Adult Library Services Association awarded it a 2020 Alex Award, given annually to ten mainstream books that appeal to teenagers. Considering the intergenerational and ambiguous character of *High School*, I argue that Tegan and Sara's memoir can be described as a noteworthy example of a queer young adult book that defines norms and conventions typically attributed to YA (Mason, 2021: 14; Matos, 2024: 17).

In his influential work on young adult literature, Kenneth B. Kidd distinguishes between two types of books about young people: "the novel of adolescence," which is one focused on coming-of-age but not necessarily written for young readers, and "the adolescent novel," which, as Mason suggests, is "more or less synonymous with YA" (11; cf. Kidd, 2011: 167). *High School* exceeds the category of "a book of adolescence" and has been enjoyed by readers of various ages, especially due to its central place in Tegan and Sara's storyworld. After all,

² While Tegan and Sara's works have generated adult anxieties connected to the fact that they do not depict adolescents as non-sexual, presumably heterosexual, and in constant need of adult protection, a study of the adult reception of the books – as well as a more detailed examination of the references to high school in the Quins' song lyrics and music videos – exceeds the scope of this essay.

young adult is not a genre “but a publishing category that encompasses multiple genres” and addresses themes, problems, and wants that resonate with both younger and older audiences (Fitzsimmons and Wilson, 2020: xiii; cf. Hintz and Tribunella, 2024).

In 2022, the memoir was adapted by Clea DuVall for a television show starring TikTokers Railey and Seazynn Gilliland – queer identical twins – in the roles of the Quins.³ Like *High School*, its critically acclaimed adaptation, which was named one of the best shows of 2022 by *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times*, is set in the 1990s. In addition to the main premise of the book, it also features the anxieties of the parents of queer adolescents. The memoir and TV show were followed by two fictionalized graphic novels directed at a younger audience, *Tegan and Sara: Junior High School* (2023) and *Tegan and Sara: Crush* (2024), illustrated by Tillie Walden – an American illustrator who also has a twin. Here, the Quins are transported to a present-day junior high school. The graphic novels are Tegan and Sara’s first book releases set in present-day Canada, where, on the one hand, queer people can get married, and according to the 2020 Pew Research Center survey, 85% of Canadians – 92% in the 18-29 age group – accept same-sex partnerships (Poushter and Kent), but on the other hand, anti-queer and anti-trans sentiments continue to increase, best represented by discriminatory laws introduced in New Brunswick and Saskatchewan. The protagonists of *Junior High School* and *Crush* grow up in the 2020s in an idealized and seemingly more inclusive world, reminiscent of the one portrayed in the 2012 music video of “Closer,” the band’s biggest crossover hit, which captures the frankness, awkwardness, and joy of adolescence.⁴ Unsur-

³ Similarly to the music mentioned in the memoir, the series may provoke nostalgia or “‘appropriated nostalgia’ in which younger audiences experience media texts of the past alongside their parents or other older viewers as these older viewers enact consumed nostalgia” (McCarthy, 2019: 674). Each episode of the show, which was produced but not written by Tegan and Sara, features two points of view reflecting the different experiences and voices of the protagonists. While the story follows Tegan and Sara’s early days of high school, it is fictionalized and minimalizes the use of drugs, probably to make the show appealing to even younger viewers and their parents. Instead, it focuses on the romantic plots. Notably, the series pays more attention to the anxieties of adults, not adolescents, especially the parents of queer adolescents, who in the memoir are only described from their children’s point of view. For example, Christina, one of the protagonists’ friends, mentions the anxiety of their fathers: “It’s like they’re afraid to parent us [...] Without our moms, they’re lost. They can’t deal with conflict. They have no clue what to do” (2019: 143). Still, *High School* does not explore the anxieties felt by the teens’ parents. Finally, *High School* features another main character usually not represented in the media – the city of Calgary with its queer community.

⁴ “Closer” and its high-budget music video directed by Issac Rentz, which features real-life couples, serve as a happy, nostalgic journey back in time for the Quins. At the time of its release, “Closer” was not only the band’s most successful release but also the most openly queer and diverse video in their repertoire. “Closer” is a narrative music video depicting a house/slumber party, and it extends the content of the lyrics, as it shows

prisingly, though, the problems of Tegan and Sara in the graphic novels differ from those experienced by closeted teen twins in the 1990s in *High School*. However, in addition to the apparent differences between the depiction of queer adolescence in the past and the present, the memoir and graphic novels point to the more universal aspects of anxieties experienced by queer youth, as well as those felt by identical twins and emerging musicians.

Although its general premise remains the same, when told across different types of media, Tegan and Sara's story seems to highlight various dimensions of the anxiety stemming from being twins, a queer coming-of-age experience, and the process of coming out. In my reading of the memoir and the graphic novels, I consider them as examples of transmedia works, rather than simple adaptations. As I demonstrate, the Quins' memories of adolescence, along with the anxieties related to being teenage twins fighting to be seen as individuals and not mere reflections of one another, closeted lesbians at a new school, and musicians questioning their talent and prospects for a future career, have become the central theme of Tegan and Sara's work across media, with each new addition to the story revealing additional layers of the experiences of those growing up queer.

HIGH SCHOOL AND YA LITERATURE

Tegan and Sara consider their high school days spent in Calgary in the 1990s to be the "origin story" of the band and of them as individuals ("Tegan and Sara: The Agony," 2019). In the years following the release of their most commercially and critically successful records – including the synth-pop single "Boyfriend," in which the duo challenged heteronormativity, and the nostalgic pop hit "Closer," with a video foreshadowing the significantly more inclusive world of their graphic novels – Tegan and Sara decided to explore their high school memories in various transmedia forms.⁵ Considering the wide range of media across which they have been active, I suggest that their high school origin story can be read as an example of a transmedia story. "Transmedia storytelling," as Henry Jenkins argues, is not synonymous with adaptation because when a storyworld is told across multiple media platforms, each medium contributes uniquely to the narrative, constantly adding new elements to it (2007). This involves the

straight and LGBTQ2S+ couples representing various ethnicities. This is particularly important in the context of Tegan and Sara's memoir, which focuses on the experiences of white, cisgender, and middle-class teens. Therefore, it can be argued that "Closer," on the one hand, depicts a utopian – hopeful, idealized, and reparative – reinterpretation of Tegan and Sara's youth different from their experiences in the 1990s, one showing what the lives of queer young people of their generation *should* have been like. On the other hand, the video hints at some sense of progress of the rights of LGBTQ2S+ youth, which is also present in the Quin's two graphic novels set in present-day Canada.

⁵ When composing the song, Tegan Quin recalls delving into her nostalgic reflections, particularly reminiscing about her high school days (cf. Barret 391).

presence of “a static component that precedes the story and a dynamic component that captures the unfolding of the events” (Ryan, 2015: 364; cf. Kruger, 2023). Like other transmedia stories, Tegan and Sara’s has also been “created to be distributed and consumed via and across various media” (Mygind, 2024: 6). Although transmedia storytelling is usually associated with cultural texts set in fictional, often fantastic, worlds, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that “[t]here is [...] no reason why transmedia storytelling could not take as its subject matter realistic storyworlds, or even the real world” (2015: 14). This seems to be the case with Tegan and Sara, whose transmedia storytelling is based on their memories of growing up in the 1990s, which they have shared across song lyrics, music videos, memoirs, television, and comics in forms that contribute to the unfolding of the story and resonate with audiences representing different generations and tastes. As I demonstrate in this essay, various media formats and languages shape, enrich, and change Tegan and Sara’s transmedia high school universe, which continues to show various dimensions of anxiety associated with growing up queer, being a twin, and starting a music career (see Scolari, 2009: 587).

“The anxious sites of queer YA,” as Mason notes, “bleed beyond the scope of print literature and into cultural texts broadly conceived” (16). Tegan and Sara’s teenage anxieties connected to growing up queer in Calgary in the 1990s have bled into music, non-fiction, TV, and comics. The static component of their transmedia story is based on finding their stepfather’s old Fender acoustic guitar and participating in a battle of bands competition called *Garage Warz* in 1998. Tegan and Sara received one of the highest scores in the competition’s history, performing three songs, including “Collide,” which two decades later was used in the audiobook adaptation of the memoir they narrate. The band, at that time, called Sara and Tegan (and earlier Plunk – light punk), won studio time, which allowed them to professionally record a demo tape (“*Garage Warz*”).⁶

⁶ Because Tegan and Sara were uncertain about their post-high school plans, they decided not to go to university, took a gap year, and continued recording demos and performing at cafes and bars across Canada. Through this experience, they gained valuable insights and perfected their skills as songwriters and performers. After *Garage Warz*, the Quins started giving interviews, opened for indie-rock singer-songwriter Hayden, and were noticed by record labels. On the day of their eighteenth birthday, Tegan and Sara signed a demo contract with PolyGram. Since the release of *Under Feet Like Ours* (1999), their first independent record, self-written when they were teenagers, Tegan and Sara have had a successful music career, which won them the Governor General’s Award in 2018 and several Juno Awards. After years of making indie-pop music and existing on the margins of the mainstream, in 2012, Tegan and Sara released “Closer,” the first single of their seventh – but first pop crossover – record, *Heartthrob* (2013). With the catchy chorus, “All I want to get is, a little bit closer/ All I want to know is, can you come a little closer?” and the optimistic video, it became their most commercially successful song. “Closer” was featured in *Glee*, *BoJack Horseman*, and *Canada’s Drag Race* and helped the band receive global recognition among younger listeners, including those unfamiliar with their more alternative-sounding music.

Unlike most of their peers in show business at that time, from the beginning of their career in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Tegan and Sara have been open about their sexuality (Tegan qtd. in Schwartz, 2013). This openness has brought them, an indie band initially not signed to a major record label or promoted on pop radio, national and international publicity. Melody Lau observes in *Tegan and Sara: Modern Heartthrobs* (2022) that some male music journalists dismissed the Quin twins as a gimmick due to their being openly queer at a time when few female musicians were out (2022: 26-27, 91-92). The mixed critical reception of their early records – including sexist and homophobic reviews from *Pitchfork* and *NME* – particularly impacted Sara, who found them discouraging for queer musicians. However, with a growing online presence on platforms like Myspace, the band developed a cult following among young LGBTQ2S+ listeners and has inspired younger generations of performers (130-131). While Tegan and Sara's early songs rarely address sexual orientation explicitly, they have been, as Tegan said in 2018, "political from birth," and their music has resonated with young members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, particularly in Canada and the USA (41).

In addition to their online presence and direct contact with fans, Tegan and Sara's popularity in the early days can also be attributed to the fact that "music has been frequently associated with sexualities (...) that call into question the structures of patriarchal phallogocentric culture and compulsory heterosexuality" (Peraino, 2003: 461). Unlike other types of media, music also "has a different relationship with queer subtext" (Roach, 2018: 171; Zhao, 2021: 1033-1038; Bain et. Al, 2016). At a time when LGBTQ2S+ people lacked representation in film and TV, the work of musicians such as David Bowie, Prince, Kate Bush, and Madonna had "transformative queer potential, which continues to resonate with LGBT communities today" (Roach, 2018: 171). Moreover, representations of queerness in music "may function as important sources of support to facilitate the resilience of LGBTQ youth" – especially when it is the only source of support young people have (Craig et al., 2015: 255). This function of music seems especially important for people who do not see themselves represented in literature and other media forms, particularly individuals who are not white, not cisgender, not heterosexual, and not middle-class (Lo, 2019; Craig et al., 2015: 254-257; Świetlicki, 2021). The role of music as a support system is reflected in Tegan and Sara's memoir and graphic novels – as well as in many queer YA novels, for instance, James Brandon's *Ziggy, Stardust & Me* (2019) and Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021). Thus, it might be argued that openly gay musicians, or those who openly support the LGBTQ2S+ community, can help young queer people feel seen (Roach, 2018: 170). In an interview given at the time of the release of "Closer," which was inspired by memories of their youth, Sara Quin said: "In the early days, our experiences felt very authentic for people, and for kids, like us, who didn't necessarily have a ton of

gay⁷ role models, or people that they were looking up to” (Sara qtd. in “Music-NewsWeb,” 2013). Sara Quin recognizes the responsibility connected to the position of Tegan and Sara as musicians and “authentic” role models for “kids like them” in the late 1990s and early 2000s – that is, young Canadians who came of age when queer activism in Canada was taking off but LGBTQ2S+ individuals still had limited rights and representation in the media.

Tegan and Sara’s literary works focused on adolescence showcase the hopes, fears, and anxieties of emerging musicians who are queer teenagers growing up in Canada. As I argue in my reading of the Quins’ graphic novels, even in an idealized portrayal of queer adolescence, anxiety is unavoidable. Sara Ahmed argues that the distinction between fear and anxiety is typically described in relation to the presence of an object. Fear, as she notes, is often contrasted with anxiety because fear is tied to a specific object and is not anticipatory, meaning it is not related to a potential future threat (Ahmed 64). I agree with Ahmed that in anxiety, thoughts often shift rapidly between various objects, which heightens the feeling of unease. Young queer people in Tegan and Sara’s books – especially the protagonists – begin to worry about an increasing number of issues; the lack of attachment to any single object allows anxiety to build by accumulating more objects, eventually overshadowing other emotional connections to the world. For example, the *High School* and *Junior High School* duology points to the shift from struggles with self-acceptance to the anxiety stemming from starting a music career.

The Quins explored their teenage hopes, fears, and anxieties in *High School*, the best-selling memoir they crafted using old journals and cassettes filled with songs they composed during high school. I want to argue that it does not position the Quins as idealized role models. Instead, *High School* highlights Tegan and Sara’s entanglements in a heteronormative and patriarchal system and addresses anxieties that remain absent from their lyrics and videos. The impulse to engage with texts despite their ideological contradictions, as Angel Daniel Matos notes, is rooted in the principles of what he calls “reparative reading” (2024: 8). This approach encourages readers to recognize how texts can still provide value, meaning, and emotional support to specific communities, even amidst their shortcomings or omissions. It acknowledges that all texts are produced by individuals entangled in “hetero-and-homonormative, capitalist, and racist systems that all of us are complicit in” (8). Tegan and Sara’s memoir highlights the experiences of middle-class, cisgender lesbians who engage in destructive behaviors. While its chronotope is monoethnic and hetero-and-homonormative, *High School* reflects the Quins’ vulnerability and anxieties that may resonate with present-day readers. Reparative reading means exploring how the text resonates emotionally, prompts unconventional ways of thinking,

⁷ In interviews and their memoir Tegan and Sara refer to themselves as “gay” – not lesbian.

and guides us "towards queerer understandings of relationality and existence," in the case of Tegan and Sara, the experience of growing up queer and female in the 1990s with no representation in the media (8).

Three days after the memoir's publication, Tegan and Sara released their ninth studio album, *Hey, I'm Just Like You*, featuring new versions of twelve previously unreleased songs written initially when they were teenagers. Notably, like the journal entries from the 1990s, which the Quins used while working on the books, all the tracks on the tellingly titled album were reworked by adult Tegan and Sara, with six receiving co-writing credits. Sonically, *Hey, I'm Just Like You* is more similar to the band's first few releases than their two previous pop albums. Some lyrics on the record, like "Hey, I'm just like you/ A little messed up and blue," reflect the emotional turmoil and mixture of hope and anxiety discussed in the memoir and were heavily featured in its audiobook adaptation, read by the Quins. Moreover, the album's title suggests that the stories told in the song lyrics mirror the experiences of other "messed up and blue" queer adolescents. The inclusion of the demos instead of the studio versions in the *High School* audiobook, which also features an interview with the Quins, might be seen as an effort to further "authenticate" the narrative as one told by teenagers, not adults looking back. Additionally, to promote the memoir and the album, the band released several YouTube videos featuring archival footage of teenage Tegan and Sara.

Mirroring in literature – self-reflection, ghostly doubles, doppelgängers, and shadow images – has long been associated with lesbian narratives, where it often functions as a tool for exploring identity and blurring the lines between self-recognition and attraction (Castle). In transmedia storytelling, mirroring can adopt new forms as stories told across media allow different audiences to access diverse identities and extend LGBTQ2S+ representation. While *Hey, I'm Just Like You* mirrors teen anxieties in song lyrics, *High School* was published with three different covers showing teenage Tegan and Sara standing opposite one another, present-day Tegan and Sara, and a mirror reflecting the readers' own images. The three covers point to the entanglements of the present and the past and suggest that the memoir can be read as a metaphorical mirror of the struggles and anxieties experienced by queer people growing up in the late 1990s, as well as many of those still faced by LGBTQ2S+ youth. *High School* focuses on identical twins who are very different but complement one another. They strive to find their voices as distinct individuals, even though many people confuse them and perceive them as doppelgängers, while being anxious teenage girls who grow apart, reconnect – initially because of drugs and later music – and ultimately realize on their own that they are not heterosexual. The cover photo depicting the Quins opposing one another also seems to reflect Tegan Quin's conviction that "she and Sara are mirror twins, a kind of identical twinning in which the features of one are asymmetrically reflected in the

features of the other” (Lau, 2022: 18). In the prologue, Tegan emphasizes the memoir’s theme related to mirrors and doubles – the Quins struggle to find their individual voices as twin sisters and navigate their entangled memories. As she notes, “I wonder frequently how many of the memories I carry of Sara are actually my own. How much of my early life have I confused with hers? Our tangled nature makes even me feel interchangeable with Sara – indistinguishable, bound, and suffocated” (2019: n.p.). Thus, like the voices in their songs, at times the voices of the Quins in their storyworld overlap.

The adolescent protagonists and interchangeable narrators of *High School*, closeted lesbians who do not know any other openly queer people, drink, take drugs, and explore their sexuality – that is, engage in activities considered taboo by adults, yet at the same time, actions many young people partake in. The memoir, which features such controversial aspects of adolescence as depression, suicide, and hard drugs, has resonated with both adult and young adult readers, including not only fans of the band. Notably, the presence of these themes has significantly increased in YA literature, appearing in popular – and frequently challenged – books like Malina Lo’s *A Scatter of Light* (2022), Mindy McGinnis’s *Heroine* (2019), and Nina LaCour’s *We Are Okay* (2017). The protagonists of *High School* are teenagers trying to come to terms with their sexuality during times when “[t]here could be nothing worse than being called a lesbian. Especially if you were one” (134). Thus, both Tegan and Sara emerge as anxious characters, afraid of being outed and, consequently, ostracized. “Do you believe as teenagers we’re old enough to know about and understand our sexuality?” asks Alex, Tegan’s best friend and first girlfriend, in the transcript of a school interview she conducted with Tegan and Sara in the 1990s (176). Although Sara replies, “No,” Tegan and Sara’s memoir, along with two graphic novels discussed in the following section, demonstrates that the answer is not simple. The protagonists and alternating narrators of *High School* feel lost and anxious about their present and future. To cope, they experiment with hard drugs, which initially “felt like an antidote” to all their problems, including the deterioration of their relationship caused by Sara’s close friendship with Naomi (49). In one of the first chapters of the memoir, Tegan states that before high school, she “was plagued with anxiety dreams all summer, in which [she] wandered the halls of [her] school searching for [Sara],” who had put daylight between herself and Tegan (24). She notes, “Acid provided a small square of neutral territory, relief from the war that had been raging between us since Sara and Naomi had bounced me from their union” (29). However, instead of bringing relief, drugs lead to further anxieties and “twist” the twins’ “self-esteem into self-loathing” (90). While both struggle with accepting their changing bodies and growing breasts, drugs intensify Sara’s struggles with body dysphoria and depression caused by “vulnerability and shame” (31). As she observes, “I tried not to look into mirrors when I was on acid. In those distorted reflections my armor sagged to reveal the body I hated

underneath [...] My body had become a stranger, and so had my mind" (30-32). The twins initially mistake drugs for the antidote for their growing anxieties, but gradually they begin to realize that such substances only intensify their negative emotions and contribute to the deterioration of their mental health.

While many of Tegan and Sara's behaviors in *High School* are destructive and stem from their insecurities, anxieties, and lack of positive representation in the media, they eventually find refuge in music, first in records by The Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana, Green Day, and Hole who "were the new sound of youthful rebellion," and then in their own songwriting (Lau, 2022: 15). As Sara says upon listening to The Smashing Pumpkins' poignantly titled *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* (1995) for the first time, "Nothing had ever sounded more important to me. Billy [Corgan]'s words spoke directly to the places inside of me that were hurt. His suffering reflected my own, and briefly, I felt less alone" (2019: 39). None of the original members of The Smashing Pumpkins identify as LGBTQ2S+, but teenagers like Tegan and Sara, that is, young people coming to terms with their sexuality at a time when access to openly queer role models was limited, identified with the gender-bending videos and rebellious lyrics like "intoxicated with the madness. I'm in love with my sadness" ("Gay-4Grunge"; Lau, 2022: 15-17).⁸ After starting to write songs, Tegan and Sara once again grow closer, exchange their fondness for illegal substances for music, and realize that their "voice[s] matter" (167). Although the twins experiment with drugs and alcohol throughout the memoir, it is music that helps them to learn to handle their anxiety and face their own queerness. In the epilogue, Tegan notes that because of their mutual love for music, the sisters reconnected and realized that they could build a future: "Until Garage Warz, my 'future' had been a giant black hole that kept me up at night, dragged me down as I studied, and created tension when anyone pressed me about it. All of a sudden, I'd gone from invisible to notable. Sara and I had a future" (300-301). This future involved becoming an inspiration for younger generations of queer women.⁹

The memoir, which focuses on the messy and emotional teenage years of the Quins, highlights the role of songwriting as an antidote to the twins' drug

⁸ Moreover, although most popular bands at that time, except for Hole, consisted of all-male lineups, The Smashing Pumpkins' original bassist was a female musician named D'arcy Wretzky; this might further explain why the band was important for Tegan and Sara. *High School's* musical references to artists young readers might not be familiar with were replaced with mentions of Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish in *Junior High School* and *Crush*. The graphic novels' adults, however, mention bands like Nirvana and The Smashing Pumpkins. Thus, the rebellious artists teen Tegan and Sara identified and at times were not allowed to listen to – as was the case with Nirvana's "Rape Me" in *High School* – are now oldies listened to by the teens because of their parents influence, in a way David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, and U2 were in *High School*.

⁹ Interestingly, while no openly queer musicians are mentioned in *High School*, Tegan and Sara are among the female musicians listened to by the bisexual protagonist of Lo's *A Scatter of Light*.

and alcohol use and as a promise of a future. However, it also depicts the anxieties stemming from Tegan and Sara's deteriorating relationship, their conflicting feelings towards female friends, and the parental pressure to attend college. Moreover, *High School* addresses Sara's suicidal thoughts provoked by homophobia and bullying (78). Notably, in the 1990s in Canada, there was "little concerted action or confront[ation of] bullying and harassment based on sexual diversity or gender deviation, and even less acknowledgment of such difference in the curriculum" (Rayside 5). This is reflected in *High School*, which points to instances of casual homophobia, with adults and Tegan and Sara's peers using terms like "fag" or "dyke." Bruce, the protagonists' sympathetic and kind stepfather, calls Kurt Cobain – the gender-bending leader of Nirvana – a "fag" for wearing makeup (74); Dr. Morgan, a closeted gay teacher, refuses to react when a student says, "[c]an't get AIDS unless you're a fag" (260); and the Quin twins' uncle accuses his wife of not protecting their twelve-year-old daughter from the sight of two women kissing (170). These scenes illustrate Ahmed's observation that "queer subjects may also be 'asked' not to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable by avoiding the display of signs of queer intimacy, which is itself an uncomfortable feeling, a restriction on what one can do with one's body, and another's body, in social space" (Ahmed 148). While even kind adults seem passive, teen Tegan or Sara react in all such situations. For example, Tegan, who at this point is still in the closet, calls Bruce homophobic and says, "When we were little, people called us boys and made fun of us for having short hair. Would you like it if someone were calling us dykes? Because they already call us freaks and fuckups because of how we look" (76). In the last instance, she also confronts her uncle, saying: "Protecting her from what? Gay people? [...] Why is everyone acting so messed up about this? We've been watching violent movies for ten days. Marty, you take your kids to Hooters. How is Sloane seeing two girls kissing such a big deal?" (170-171). Despite their individual and shared anxieties and struggles, the memoir positions Tegan and Sara as the ones calling out homophobia, which fits the core of their story and is further explored in the two graphic novels.

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AND CRUSH: BETWEEN HOPE AND FEAR

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz argues that "Hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory" (Muñoz 3). *Tegan and Sara: Junior High School* (2023) and *Tegan and Sara: Crush* (2024), the two graphic novels co-created with American illustrator Tillie Walden, transpose young Tegan and Sara from high school in the 1990s to junior high school in present-day Calgary and seem to represent this duality. Unlike traditional memoirs, comics "offer a way of taking control of representation in a direct and politically loaded engagement with the visual self" (Køhlert, 2019: 3).

As Frederik B. Köhlert argues, “multimodal hybridity of the comics form [...] creates a distinctly unstable and decentered reading experience that enables the drawn performance of the autobiographical self as a site of ideological struggle” (4). Moreover, as Hillary Chute observes in her landmark study of women’s graphic memoirs, such multimodal narratives allow their creators to “stage dialogues among different versions of the self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration” (2010: 5). Thus, Tegan and Sara’s choice of the multimodal comic format gave them the opportunity to enhance their transmedia storyworld and visually explore the theme of mirroring and self-representation.

Tegan and Sara’s acclaimed graphic novels aimed at pre-teens and teens are not merely adaptations of *High School* but extensions of their storyworld co-created with Walden and set in present-day Canada. They depict the Quins’ teenage anxieties alongside experiences of contemporary queer youth growing up in very different circumstances. At first glance, the books are more hopeful, optimistic, and inclusive than *High School*. Many of the memoir’s white, middle-class characters, depicted in the numerous photographs used in the illustrated edition and featured in promotional videos, have been transformed into characters representing various ethnicities. The changes are evident in the characters’ names (Roshini, Faiza, Ms. Nguyen, Ms. Patel) and their visual representations. However, Tegan and Sara emerge as colorblind characters who do not contemplate or question their friends’ ethnicities. On the one hand, the books’ diversity fills the gap in Tegan and Sara’s *High School* and aligns their chronotope more closely with their music videos – especially “Closer,” the aforementioned track about the first intimate contact between two infatuated individuals, which offers an idealized and diversified version of Tegan and Sara’s high school experience. On the other hand, the choice not to address racism and inequality can be seen as problematic because it appears to overlook the complexity of systemic oppression. Moreover, unlike in *High School*, numerous adolescent and adult characters in *Junior High School* and *Crush* are openly LGBTQ2S+ or are positioned as allies. However, despite these optimistic and seemingly utopian changes, along with familiar fears and anxieties from the memoir, the books introduce new struggles faced by representatives of “the anxious generation,” that is, young people who grow up physically protected but with virtually unlimited access to the internet and social media.

Fears and anxieties have become defining features of our times, characterized by rapid changes and innovations (Ahmed, 2004: 72). These shifts have undermined traditional structures and values while fostering a sense of loss of control and uncertainty about the future (72). Tegan and Sara’s graphic novels navigate between the positive representation of LGBTQ2S+ youth and their focus on sadness, specifically “the binary and hierarchical thinking that queer theories attempt to resist and challenge” (Matos, 2024: 19). Centered on 12-to

13-year-old Tegan and Sara, who have just moved and changed schools, the books contain no explicit vocabulary and make no mention of drugs, alcohol, or house parties. Thus, at first glance, the junior high school experiences of the graphic novels' Tegan and Sara diverge from the predominantly negative ones remembered by the twins in the memoir. However, at the end of *Junior High School*, the girls give it "2 stars. Product was not as described" (277), and they feel that it was "the longest year of [their] lives" (294). The protagonists of the novels question their sexuality, experience their first periods, which Sara refers to as "the WORST moment of [her] entire life" (120), buy their first bras – a theme also mentioned in *High School* – deal with bullying both online and offline, and, at times, exhibit symptoms of depression.

Junior High School and *Crush* showcase the hope associated with growing up queer surrounded by supportive peers and adults, but both visually and textually, they also highlight the fears and anxieties experienced by queer teens. Most of the panels featuring both twins are violet, a color frequently associated with lesbians, but Walden employs two colors to visually represent the different voices of the protagonists and their emotions: blue for Tegan and maroon for Sara. This choice appears intentional. Blue is conventionally associated with sadness, a feeling often expressed by Tegan. Moreover, while maroon symbolizes longing and thoughtfulness, Sara also feels marooned by her sister (McCausland, 2024: 172-175). At times, the twins agree, and their voices complement each other. For example, after attending school for the first time, Sara wonders: "WHY do people ask us the WEIRDEST questions and say the WEIRDEST stuff?" to which Tegan adds: "Omg are you twins? Can you read each other's minds? Can I Touch You? Are you real?" (20). The graphic novels also visually highlight the role of mirrors and reflections in lesbian literature and stories of self-narration. Walden's illustrations emphasize not only the differences between the sisters but also the similarities between their emotions, as seen in the panels showing them looking into the mirror separately yet with similar sadness. Additionally, she captures the anxiety connected to starting a new school and making new friends in the scene showing Tegan and Sara after they hear Avery making fun of them. After Tegan says, "I'm going to be a puddle now. Bye," Walden transforms her into a literal blue puddle of tears (52). While Sara first tries to comfort her sister, she sees herself in the puddle and gradually becomes more distraught, changing into a maroon puddle.

Both graphic novels address the issue of openly queer role models. Tegan and Sara listen to Billie Eilish, who is bisexual, and watch LGBTQ2S+ characters on TV. When Sara is sick, she feels abandoned and ignored: "Tegan and all the kids at school are doing things without me... what if I miss something? What if no one even notices I'm gone?" (95). Home alone, she watches the new episode of the third season of *Atypical* (2017-2021), in which two girl characters, Casey and Izzie, kiss. The scene highlights the differences between the

1990s, when the Quins lacked representation in the media, and the present-day circumstances of teen adolescents who can encounter teen lesbians in mainstream TV shows. Interestingly, the sight of two girls kissing makes Sara anxious, afraid of something she anticipates – that she might also be a lesbian. She starts sweating, and her eyes become larger. First, she hides under the blanket but then decides to rewind the show. “I feel so warm... is this my fever?” she wonders and decides not to tell Tegan about her experience (102). The TV kiss makes Sara think of Roshini, the female classmate with whom she is infatuated. While they are initially close friends, the proximity to Roshini changes Sara’s behavior from their first encounter. Like her crush, she becomes vegan and continues to think about her. Notably, the Quins fail to address the cultural reasons behind Roshini’s veganism.

Jonathan Haidt in *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Caused an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (2024) argues that the leading cause of young people’s growing anxiety is access to smartphones and social media. *Junior High School* and *Crush* feature modern technology that, indeed, leads to problems previously absent from Tegan and Sara’s storyworld, most importantly, online bullying (cf. McInroy and Craig, 2018: 180). The twins are always accompanied by their smartphones, which help them bond with their new friends and stay in touch with their old friend, Faiza. However, smartphones can also create additional anxieties. Sara feels rejected when Tegan does not respond to her messages, becomes suspicious when Roshini leaves for summer camp, and does not text her back. In *Crush*, she also receives a social media message from a girl warning her about Roshini, who befriended her at the camp and then stopped answering her texts. Moreover, the novels highlight the influence social media might have on young queer musicians’ careers and the dangers such exposure carries. Tegan and Sara’s first song, which Sara wrote about Roshini, is uploaded onto YouTube and goes viral. It receives many positive comments but also some negative ones, including an anonymous one calling the song “gay” (238). The comment bothers Sara, who seems to anticipate that openness about her sexuality and the use of she/her pronouns in her songs might turn the listeners’ focus from the quality of the band’s music to the twins’ personal lives. Thus, while the graphic novel is set in present-day Canada, it points to an event that occurred to the Quins in the early 2000s. However, here, criticism comes not from male journalists trying to pigeonhole the duo as a gimmick, but from an anonymous online hater who cannot be confronted.

Anxiety emerges as a way of attaching and clinging to objects. Unlike fear, where the approach of an object triggers emotion, anxiety serves as a means to approach (or generate the lost) objects (Ahmed, 2004: 66). In addition to the themes of queer self-discovery and struggles with feeling seen and heard present in the other books, *Crush* focuses on the fears and hopes connected to Tegan and Sara’s emerging music career and their future in show business.

While in *Junior High School* the twins find refuge for their anxieties in music, the second book begins with a nightmare that both Sara and Tegan experience – performing at an arena in front of countless unfamiliar faces. In the dream, which foreshadows the twins’ anxieties depicted in the graphic novel and present in their entire storyworld, Tegan loses her voice, and Sara breaks a string in her guitar. Throughout *Crush*, the twins question the quality of their songs, deal with rejection, and sign a contract with Ramona Keys, the manager of a famous musician called Nite Fever, who records a verse on “Crush,” the eponymous track. Notably, the sisters react to their new circumstances differently, with Tegan being hopeful and Sara fearful. However, they both feel the pressure connected to show business and the responsibilities of becoming public figures and potential role models for other young people. It makes Tegan wonder: “Being excited sometimes feels a little like being afraid. What if I’m not as good as” (88). Because the twins start fighting again, eventually, their mother decides to replace Ramona as their manager and encourages them to slow down, spend time with their friends, and make music on their terms.

CONCLUSION

The uplifting message of self-confidence and pride found in Tegan and Sara’s transmedia storyworld has resonated with a significant portion of their audience, particularly young lesbian fans. However, what makes their work likely to connect with listeners, readers, and viewers of all ages is the anxiety, imperfections, and vulnerability that are more universal than the glamorous version of high school offered in most TV dramas or the sugar-coated representations of adolescence found in many young adult books. As their achievements have expanded and their impact since the late 1990s has reached a broader international audience, Tegan and Sara have become increasingly mindful of their role as role models for queer people and younger members of their fan base, promoting the importance of embracing and celebrating one’s identity. With their rising success, Tegan and Sara have used their platform for LGBTQ2S+ activism in Canada and the USA. Most notably, they started The Tegan and Sara Foundation, a charity whose “mission is to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ women and girls” and “is founded on a commitment to feminism and racial, social and gender justice” (About). In 2024, in response to the anti-trans legislation in Canada, the foundation issued an open letter signed by over 400 artists.

Angel Daniel Matos rightfully argues that “some of the most delightfully complex and politically viable queer YA cultural productions are those that use narrative, aesthetic, and temporal innovations to channel a painful (and at times forgotten) past for readers and viewers, while nonetheless being optimistic, future-oriented, and emotionally sustaining” (Matos, 2024: 12). While

Junior High School and *Crush* can be considered more optimistic and future-oriented fictionalized prequels to *High School*, the graphic novels, targeted at younger readers, contribute something new to the story of Tegan and Sara and highlight the new types of anxieties and fears faced by young people. Moreover, with their multimodal form and numerous narrative differences, they stand as Tegan and Sara's most intergenerational book releases, resonating with long-time fans of the band and casual readers who were not born in the 1990s or even when "Closer" was released.

With university courses and numerous scholarly books and articles about the lyrics and music videos produced by global icons such as Taylor Swift, David Bowie, Kate Bush, and Beyoncé¹⁰, the entanglements and intersections between literature and popular music have never been more obvious and have never been studied more extensively. A detailed study of Tegan and Sara's influence on younger generations of queer musicians, the place of the duo's music in their transmedia storyworld, as well as a close reading of the television series, exceed the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, as this essay has argued, their high school origin story depicted in *High School*, *Junior High School*, and *Crush* demonstrates that each high school-themed cultural text (co-)created by the sisters reflects different layers of adolescent anxieties experienced not only by the Quins but also by queer teens in the 1990s and the 2020s.

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¹⁰ For studies examining the intersections of literature, art, and popular culture in the work of these artists see Bickford, Cawood, Mendes and Wacker, and Naiman.

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