POWER AND LOVE IN THE MARGINS OF YA LITERATURE

Table of Contents

Introduction 5

Power at the Margins: Explorations of Queer YA Literature

"Time passes, and people forget. Don't let them": *Like A Love Story* and the Educational Strength of Historical Fiction," by Meghan Danyluk 7

Queering Utopian Space through TranSFormations in *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, by Humaira Daud 15

Fashion Do's and Don'ts: Clothing & Sexuality in *Like a Love Story*, by Helen Dinh 26

The Magical Portrayal of Queer Characters in YA and Children's Fantasy Literature, by Kaitlin Ho 36

The Violence of Femininity and Beauty Standards: Examining Miel's Identity Struggles in *When the Moon Was Ours*, by Melissa Iverson 44

Trans-Forming Unmapped Bodies: The Importance of Names in Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*, by Aubrey Malinis 52

Boy Exorcist: Ghosts of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun,* by Tiffany Tran 63

Reagan, Rhetoric, and Resistance: Analyzing the Social and Political Conflict of Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story*, by Sydney Wierenga 86

Like it Matters: Body and Identity in *Like a Love Story*, by Sung Bin Yim 95

Queering the Queer: Who We Are and How We Love in YA Romance Fiction

Drawing Lines: Henna, Identity, and Queerness in *The Henna Wars*, by Gurleen Buttar 104

Beyond the Framework: Identity Formation in *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* through Marcia's Lens, by Krusha Dave 115

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Strange Relations: Monstrosity, Intimacy, and Queer Possibility in *The Summer Hikaru Died*, by Mika Goli 140

Last Day on the Library Shelves, by Kayla Gourlay 148

Escaping the Patriarchy While Enjoying Its Pleasures: Women's Relocation of Erotic Gendered Violence into Queer Male Romance, by Delaney Kamstra 157

Queer Pride…and Prejudice: How *Most Ardently* Adapts *Pride and Prejudice*, by Josiah Loewen 171

She's the Man: Gender Performativity in Queer YA Fiction, by Ella McKnight and Emily Thornton 187

Lesbians in 1950s America: Legal Violence and Lesbian Spaces, by Danika Mein 205

Fire Emblem: Three Houses: Lacking in Representation, by Stephanie Pao 212

Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered: Performance and Male Impersonation in Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, by Victoria Perperidis 224

Ancient Retelling: Examining Appropriation in *The Song of Achilles*, by Amelia Usborne 231

Unwriting Love: Destabilizing Heteronormativity in Romance Narratives

"Maybe I'm Just Broken": An Analysis of Trauma and Queer Acceptance in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, by Malika Arora 244

Carry On: A Parody of the Harry Potter Series, by Adelina Baikenova 253

"Not Today, Colonizer": Reclaiming Voice through T-Shirts in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, by Lindsay Dober 265

Listen for the Sound of Love: The Queer Romance Missing in Audio Drama, by D.B. Eliot 276

Learning about Lou: Exploring Dual Identities in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, by Peter Hance 285

Exploitation for Empowerment: Resisting Heteronormativity and Sexism in Hollywood, by Mackenzie Katz 291

Sexual Boundary-Setting in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, by Mackenzie Morrow 300

Introduction: Unwriting & Queering

Nicky Didicher, Simon Fraser University

This anthology of twenty-seven undergraduate essays is the product of three sections of a senior-level English literature seminar course in gender and sexuality called "Beyond the Tragic Trope: Queer YA Romance" (Engl 417 at Simon Fraser University in Fall 2023, Summer 2024, and Fall 2024). Each student in the course developed their own research project, which had the option but not the requirement to be focused on one of the texts we studied in class. Each student had the option but not the requirement to publish the results of their work, with support from Simon Fraser University's Public Knowledge Project and Digital Publishing: special thanks go to Ioana Liuta and Jen Zirkee, who gave us information and advice, and Tony Lu, who worked on the cover design. We spent a significant amount of class time on peer reviews and peer editing, from a proposal to an annotated bibliography, to a pecha kucha presentation of research results, to drafts and revisions of the paper. And we are proud of the results!

The literary texts on which class discussions focused changed slightly over the three offerings of the course, but altogether they included Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016), C.B Lee's *Not Your Sidekick* (2016), Claire Kann's *Let's Talk about Love* (2018), Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* (2019), Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021), Adiba Jaigridar's *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* (2021), and Jen Ferguson's *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (2022). We explored what recent adult authors writing in English for teen readers are doing with love stories in which the protagonists exist beyond and challenge the binaries of male-female cis-het relationships. We looked at ways in which these texts both reproduce and challenge the conventions of YA (Young Adult) romance novels; we discussed ways culture can intersect with gender and sexuality; and we thought about how setting Queer romance in the future, the present, or the past has an impact on how readers may see themselves represented and/or gain insight into others' ways of being in the world. As the designer of the course, I wanted us to focus on positive and award-winning recent works, so different from the "problem novels" of past decades—here, thanks go to Rob Bittner for a guest talk on the background/history of Queer YA and insight into how books receive awards. I deliberately chose texts in which Queerness is not solely/primarily a source of shame and is not solely/primarily a source of social

challenge, texts which add the richness of cultural diversity, texts which leave their characters in good places. We want to celebrate growth in the production of such texts and the ways critics and readers recognize them as valuable.

The student authors in this anthology have wide-ranging interests and thoughtful responses to their chosen texts. In many cases, the literary texts they analyse are by Queer authors and have Queer characters. In some cases, the student authors' approach has been to do a Queer reading of YA texts by authors who do not so identify, but whose texts accommodate such a reading.

We acknowledge our own positionality as students and instructor at a Canadian settler university located on the sacred, traditional, and unceded lands of several Coast Salish Peoples, including the Səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations. We have tried to be respectful of and willing to listen to those authors and characters who are different from us and similar to us in complicated ways.

The student papers are divided into sections by the term in which the course took place, and within each section are organized in alphabetical order by the student's family name. An extra thank-you goes to Zandria Sarrazin, for assistance with proofreading the Fall 2023 group of papers. And, as the editor of the anthology, I encouraged students to capitalize "Queer" as a proud claim of identity for a diverse group of people. We hope that you will enjoy reading these papers, and we encourage you to read (or listen to) any of the literary works they focus on that may be currently unfamiliar to you!

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"Time passes, and people forget. Don't let them": *Like A Love Story* and the Educational Strength of Historical Fiction

Meghan Danyluk, Simon Fraser University

Set in 1989 in New York City, *Like A Love Story* by Abdi Nazemian (2019) follows three teenage protagonists – Reza, Art, and Judy – as their lives intersect with Queerness, pop culture, and the turbulent early years of the AIDS crisis. The characters in the novel are fictional, but the setting and events are heavily based in reality, supported by Nazemian's own life experiences and research. Consequently, *Like a Love Story* provides readers with an accessible opportunity to learn about Queer political movements such as ACT UP, 1980s pop culture icons such as Madonna, and the reality of living with AIDS before treatments were widely available. Nazemian processes and presents these concepts through the three protagonists, providing readers with an emotional history supported by a factual one. *Like a Love Story* exemplifies how placing sympathetic characters into historically accurate settings creates a valuable tool for teaching history through fiction.

Like a Love Story is categorized as *historical fiction* – an oxymoronic genre which causes confusion about what is fact and what is fiction within a story. In this case, Nazemian accurately represents the setting (i.e. New York in 1989) and events in 1989 (i.e. ACT UP protests, Madonna's "Blonde Ambition" tour) to the best of his ability, drawing on two different types of knowledge. One source he used was his own experiences. In an interview on a literary blog, he states that he "drew a lot from [his] own life for certain details, from fashion to music to language" (Tracy). For example, Nazemian drew on his own experiences to write about Madonna's music throughout the story. When Art introduces Reza to "Like a Prayer," Reza is amazed: he is "unable to find the right words to describe the transcendent experience" of hearing it (52–53). Nazemian himself is a lifelong Madonna fan, crediting her in his Author's Note to the novel with teaching him to see "queerness not as a death sentence, but as a community and an identity to be celebrated" (n.p.). It's likely that his lived experiences informed how her music affects Reza's journey of self-discovery throughout the book, providing readers with a glimpse into a real experience. The second type of source Nazemian used to shape the setting was research. He was not involved with ACT UP in 1989, but writes about real protests in the novel. For example, Art attends a protest at the

New York Stock exchange with Stephen. During the protest, Art experiences people chaining themselves to the balcony of the stock exchange, foghorns overpowering the opening bell, protesters being arrested, and a sign being revealed that says "SELL WELLCOME," referring to the company that increased the price of AZT (62–63). As preserved on the *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project* website, a real protest took place at the New York Stock Exchange on 19 September 1989. During the protest, each event experienced by Art took place (Davis). Evidence of the arrests can be seen in Figure 1: a photo reproduced in Greer. Drawing on his own personal experiences and research, Nazemian accurately recreates historical moments throughout the plot of *Like a Love Story*, so readers learn about real history.

AIDS, AZT & NYSE

AFTER THE ARREST: Seven AIDS activists were arrested yesterday after five of them chained themselves to a banister at the New York Stock Exchange to protest the high cost of the drug AZT. Three of the protesters were said to have AIDS or AIDS-related complex. The seven dressed as floor traders and wore fake IDs from the Bear Stearns brokerage firm. Five of them chained themselves to a banister of a balcony overlooking the exchange floor and unfurled a banner that read, "SELL WELLCOME" — a reference to Burroughs Wellcome, the sole manufacturer of AZT — and blasted horns. Burroughs Wellcome is traded over the counter, not on the NYSE. The NYSE vows to file charges. TOM MONASTER/DAILY NEWS

Fig. 1 Greer, photo by Tom Monaster for *New York Daily News*

Another way Nazemian presents history to readers is through providing access to the contents of Art's notecards. According to Art, the notecards are gifts

"Stephen made me when I asked him what OUR history was" (68). He treasures these gateways into Queer history and culture, and even writes new notecards so he can give them to his future child (412). As objects that exist within the world of *Like a Love Story*, the notecards help to illustrate how many barriers existed to accessing Queer history and culture in 1989, how mentor figures like Stephen worked to share what they learned, and the importance of Queer community to crafting one's own identity. As content written in a comforting epistolary style, the notecards function as a Queer-culture crash course for the reader. The topics of the cards we see in the novel include love (39), Judy Garland (89), Elizabeth Taylor (174), high school (216), and Madonna (330). In the cards covering pop culture icons, Stephen gives a brief biography of the icon and explains her tie to the Queer community. In the card about Judy Garland, for example, Stephen writes that "perhaps [Queer people] identified with her for generations because, like us, she was brutalized and victimized by the system and because, like us, she somehow created so much beauty out of it all" (89). Through this card, readers learn both about how Judy Garland was mistreated in Hollywood, and how Queer people were able to relate to her experiences. In the cards covering more general topics such as "love" and "high school," Stephen discusses how the Queer experience differs from mainstream experience. The notecard on high school starts "There may be no harder place to be queer than high school, a place of bullies and slurs, a place steeped in rituals of heterosexuality" (216). By pointing out the violent and heteronormative aspects of high school, Stephen reveals how it was (and still is) a difficult experience for many Queer people. Through the notecards, readers learn about Queer culture and the importance of having a Queer mentor.

Like a Love Story offers readers a realistic, researched representation of 1980s New York and facts about aspects of Queer culture. But, as Nazemian states in his author's note: "I am not a historian, and this is not a work of nonfiction" (n.p.) What differentiates *Like a Love Story* from nonfiction material is the inclusion of fictional characters. The story is told through the first-person narration of three teenage protagonists who experience the setting and filter it through their perspectives, allowing readers to understand this period of time emotionally as well as factually. Fear and anger are especially important throughout the novel, and the presence of each heightens the reader's understanding of the history.

Fear in *Like a Love Story* communicates the experience of being threatened by AIDS at a time when so little was known about the disease. When the public was

first beginning to reckon with AIDS in the 1980s, there was no clear guidance on how it was transmitted. In "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," a journal article published in 1987 that analyzes the AIDS crisis through a cultural lens, Paula Treichler points out that before more was known about the transmission of the virus, the risk of AIDS infection was associated with identities rather than acts. For example, The Center of Disease Control listed four high-risk groups (Haitians, hemophiliacs, heroin users, and homosexuals) until 1986, contributing to the idea that "the major risk factor in acquiring AIDS is being a particular kind of person rather than doing particular things" (Treichler 40). This lack of public information about AIDS caused fear in members of so-called "at risk" groups, as their health seemed to be constantly threatened. In *Like a Love Story*, Nazemian communicates this fear through Reza. At the beginning of the novel, Reza has minimal access to AIDS-related information. The first time he encounters it is through reading *Time* magazine as a child, a copy whose cover reads "The AIDS Hysteria" (7). Figure 2 depicts the magazine article in question, featuring a solemn doctor or researcher dropping red liquid in a series of test tubes. Reza narrates his reaction to the magazine: "inside I saw sickness, disease, lesions, young men dying. I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me, this was something I did not know until that moment. Until *Time* magazine informed me that I would die soon. I've been living in fear ever since" (8). Nazemian tells the same story as Treichler and the CDC reports, but through the eyes of an active participant. Reza connects his attraction to other boys with unavoidable death in this passage, echoing the idea that identity itself is a risk factor for contracting AIDS. His lack of information about the transmission of AIDS early on, as well as the fear he exhibits, embodies the chaos of living as a gay man who seemed to be at risk of a deadly virus without necessarily knowing how the risk could be prevented. It's an example of how *Like a Love Story* communicates both the context and the feelings of the AIDS crisis to readers, using empathy to put readers in the shoes of the protagonists.

Fig. 2 *Time Magazine*

Rage is another emotion present in the novel, and it communicates to readers the feeling of injustice. One of many injustices within the AIDS crisis was how the public perception of AIDS being a "gay plague" alienated gay people. A *New York Times* article published in 1986 reported that homophobic attacks in New York City roughly doubled between 1985 and 1986, and that perpetrators often taunted their victims about the disease (Greer). This sentiment existed at the top of politics, as well. A 2015 documentary called *When AIDS Was Funny* unearthed an exchange between a reporter (Lester Kinsolving) and Ronald Reagan's press secretary (Larry Speakes) in 1982, when there were nearly one thousand reported deaths in the United States. In it, Kinsolving asks Speakes to comment on AIDS – referring to it as the "gay plague" – and in return, Speakes taunts Kinsolving by asking if he has it, to press pool laughter (Lopez). These public displays of hostility towards Queer people, amid the explosion of a disease that was threatening their lives, undoubtedly caused reactions of anger. Art is one character who embodies that anger throughout the story. He holds anger for homophobic people in his life: "For Mrs. Starr who wouldn't let me create an ACT UP affinity group. For Darryl Lorde and all the assholes at school, who sneeze and cough words like 'faggot' and 'pansy' into their hands when Reza and I walk by" (296). His anger spills over to loved ones, as well: "'What does that even mean?' I burst out. 'JUST a gay movie?' [...] I can feel Reza tense a little. He can't handle this side

of me" (297–298). Art models how someone might react when constantly having to face injustice as part of an inescapable identity. For some readers, his constant anger frustrates more than it informs. One review from *Storygraph* states that "[Art] was either angry or mad and that was not fun to read at all" (Debchan). On the other hand, some readers have found a deeper meaning behind his rage. In "Melodrama and the Memory of AIDS in American Queer Young Adult Literature," Gabriel Duckels argues that Art's overly emotional expression "politically 're-gays' AIDS from the perspective of the present, and so the previously denied virtue of the queer adolescent during the first years of AIDS is belatedly recognized and aligned with today's adolescent" (318). In other words, Art's anger serves two purposes: introducing politically active Queer youth into the historical narrative about the beginnings of the AIDS crisis, and creating a figure of political resistance that modern youth can recognize and relate to. Art's anger also invites readers to feel angry. As one reviewer writes: "The entire time I was reading, I was angry. I wanted to go back in time and fight alongside the characters, to tell the government where to go, to stand up for the right for people to love who they love, period" (Bigdreamsandwildthings). Readers studying history through literature can learn about injustice by experiencing a character's reaction to it and carry that experience into how they shape the world moving forward. Art's anger is an important aspect of *Like a Love Story* because it teaches readers about the impact of political inaction by putting themselves in the shoes of someone forced to live with the result.

Though by Nazemian's own admission *Like a Love Story* is not a work of nonfiction, the realistic setting and events presented with emotional reactions of characters living through those events make the novel a valuable entry-point into learning about Queerness, 1980s pop culture, and the early AIDS crisis. Aspects of the book pulled directly from history – from the researched and remembered setting to the short history lessons in the notecard chapters – provide readers with realistic contexts to understand what living in New York in 1989 was like. This history is then interpreted through the lenses of the characters who help readers immerse themselves in the setting, providing an invaluable emotional perspective to the real history. I am not arguing that historical fiction should replace other forms of learning about history, rather that well researched stories provide an empathetic approach to learning history that other mediums may lack. Readers of *Like a Love Story* learn about history through relatable individuals, rather than broad, impersonal concepts. This micro approach to learning history encourages readers to think about past events with empathy. As humanity continues to face existential threats – increasingly polarized political ideologies, violent global

conflicts, increased exposure to AI and algorithms, and whatever else is in store – it is imperative that we learn from the past and practice empathy to navigate them. As Stephen tells his loved ones near the end of the novel, "'Time passes, and people forget. Don't let them'" (377).

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Queering Utopian Space through TranSFormations in *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*

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Introduction

Africanfuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor, reflecting on her paralysis from the waist down, states, "I wasn't diminished by my limitations. I've become more, greater" (*Broken* 83). Okorafor's body—that she refers to as her "cyborg self" (81)—had become hybrid against her own will. The main protagonist in Okorafor's *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (*B:TCT*[1]) also deals with her body being tranSFormed[2] into something entirely new and unfamiliar, as by the end of the trilogy her DNA becomes a mix of "Himba, Enyi Zinariya, and Meduse… and some, but not much, New Fish" (*B:NM* 347).

We can identify the trilogy with a number of genres, namely science fiction (SF), space opera, speculative fiction, and, as coined by Nnedi Okorafor herself, Africanfuturist ("Africanfuturism"). Okorafor's texts challenge tropes that are common to SF, and she coined "Africanfuturism" as a way to describe literature more directly rooted in aspects of "African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view" than Afrofuturism ("Africanfuturism"). Science fiction is distinct in its ability to represent worlds where sexual orientations and gender do not have to be confined to the binaries and social constructs of our world. However, SF worlds that have few or no connections to current real-world gender identities and challenges may be less successful in giving Queer readers relatable characters or experiences.

Current publications have not yet focused on the connection between identity, body, and utopianism in *B:TCT*. Bettina Burger, in "Math and Magic: Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* Trilogy and its Challenge to the Dominance of Western Science in Science Fiction," does use Donna Haraway's concept of a "multispecies

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[1] *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (*B:TCT*) contains three novellas and one short story, and quotations from works in this trilogy will be listed in-text as abbreviations: *B* for *Binti*, *B:H* for *Binti: Home*, *B:NM* for *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, along with "B:SF" for "Binti: Sacred Fire."

[2] See page 3.

muddle" as a way to describe the network of connections that Binti has by the end of the first novella (365). However, Burger focuses more on the technological aspects of these relationships rather than their potential as Queer relationships. Piu Chowdhury's MA thesis "Alternative Futurities in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*" does consider futurity in relation to Okorafor's depiction of Himba culture but focuses on Africanfuturism rather than the possibility for Queer futurity. I aim to extend these conversations on technology and the body to Queer utopianism and consider how Okorafor's personal writings on her own cyborg identity are reflected in *B:TCT*. Analogies for Queerness may be problematic for readers, as the author could have simply showcased actual representation for these social groups rather than depicting it in the form of an analogy. Nnedi Okorafor challenges such analogies by reclaiming Queer utopias in the science fiction genre in *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*. The connection she creates between technology and the body allows for Binti to develop an identity that challenges heteronormativity.

The SF Genre: Hard vs Soft SF and the Potential of SF Queer Utopias

SF is a genre that some may say bears a "burden of representation" (O'Brien qtd. in Šporčič 64) due to its reflection of real-world social, political, economic, and cultural issues. However, some SF can be quite conservative despite the genre's revolutionary allegorical potential. Anamarija Šporčič in "The Ir(Relevance) of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers" critiques the "outwardly conservative subgenre of science fiction" (61) when its attempt to create a utopia may only cater to a white, cis-het male audience. This has resulted in a majority of the SF genre depicting *male* utopias, which was a trend that was not broken until the "New Wave" in the 1960s. Then, SF media shifted from "hard" SF that had a heavy focus on science, space, and masculinized worlds, to "soft" SF that considered sciences such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, and Economics, exploring "the 'inner space' of both individual people and entire cultures" (Calvin 50–51). "Soft" SF can be a way of challenging masculine heteronormative conventions by recontextualizing certain elements to critique real-world politics and create something that is more aligned with a *Queer* utopia.

Since SF is not confined to the binaries of gender and sexuality of the real world, it has the potential for representation that can take the form of a Queer utopian society. Noteworthy in research of Queer utopias is José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, where he discusses the potentials and drawbacks of imagining Queer utopias. Muñoz begins by defining "Queer" as a humble state of being that

“does not yet exist” in order to prevent neoliberal ideologies and popular culture from diminishing Queerness (22). In other words, if this state of being does not yet exist, then it is impossible to marginalise or appropriate Queerness. There are many ways of thinking about Queer utopias, which Muñoz splits up into utopian idealism and utopian futurity, each having varying forms of either affirmative or ineffectual representation. Muñoz is cautious about utopian thinking, since it can be misinterpreted for “being naively romantic” (27). Futurity on the other hand can be claimed through SF, since imagining “alternative futures” (Campbell 131) can include Queer voices that would otherwise be left out. SF Queer futurity offers a way to challenge the notion that futurity must be heterosexual, given the general belief that Queer people are unable to bear children (Muñoz 49). Queer utopias, if done right, can enact change in ways that are not confined to a “blueprint” or “fixed scheme” (97). However, Muñoz cautions against utopian ideals that are disconnected from real-world politics and history (Campbell 131) and exhibit a “banal optimism” (Muñoz 3) that renders such interpretations meaningless. Instead, concrete utopias recognize the value in a Queer world that moves past a complete fantasy and is instead “relational to historically situated struggles” (Muñoz 3).

Nnedi Okorafor describes such historically situated stories in her own works as an “organic fantasy.” Organic fantasy requires a method, purpose, and realness (“Organic Fantasy” 277), and, most importantly, “emerges from the very nature of its story” (275). In this sense, we can see *B:TCT* as a combination of an organic fantasy and Queer utopia because it uses SF to represent the real world and “make something familiar strange” (278).

TranSFormations and Haraway

My coining of the term “tranSFormation” highlights how transformations can be unique in the science fiction genre, given its ability to create fictional identities that are rooted in the real world but not confined to human binaries. Binti’s tranSFormations are a sort of cyborg identity, as by the end of the third novella her human identity is mixed with bio machine and alien nanotechnology. In Donna Haraway’s essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway identifies various definitions of the cyborg, most relevant being “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality [...] [and] fiction” (5). A cyborg is utopian in the sense that it “does not dream of community on the model of the organic family” (9), aligning well with the potential of Queer utopian futurity.

The cyborg, while created as an "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (Haraway 9), inherently challenges heteronormative binaries of sexuality and gender. Haraway's is an influential take on cyberfeminism and the cyborg.[3] While hard SF media that embodies more conservative male-centred worlds may still confine cyborg identities to real-world gender binaries, Queer utopias have the potential to reimagine identities through the cyborg.

Technology serves as a point of pride for Binti on both sides of her family, with her mother's passing down the gift of mathematical sight allowing her to become a master harmonizer, and her father passing down the once shameful blood of the Enyi Zinariya that allows her to utilize the microtechnology of the Zinariya. Technology and the ability to utilize it are thus key aspects of her identity. However, technology is also a source of *intrusion,* beginning with the security protocols she must undergo upon boarding the ship in the first book. First, the security scans her astrolabe, which Binti describes as "a full deep scan" that allows "access to [her] entire life" (*Binti* 4). Technology is effectively tied to her very identity, along with her *edan* and "its stellated cube shape, [...] strange symbols [...] [and] intricate loops and swirls of blue and black and white" (7), that are so advanced that even she cannot decode such technology. The *edan,* another piece of technology that comes from her father's side of the family, later protects her when she "pray[s] to a metal even [her] father had been unable to identify" (11) during the Meduse's genocide of the Oomza University students. In this case, Okorafor paradoxically presents technology as a form of intrusion, as well as a source of protection, similarly to how she presents herself as cyborg. Okorafor identifies with Binti as someone who was forcefully "broken by, and changed by the unknown" (*Broken* 85). This identity, while not consensually endowed upon the both of them, has both intruded into what they were once familiar with and became a part of their new identity.

Okorafor views her own paralysis as both science and technology having failed her.[4] Science was once a passion for Okorafor, as she majored in pre-med before switching over to rhetoric (*Broken* 74–78). Although "science had failed [her]" (73)

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[3] I do not agree with all of her notions, especially her suggestion of viewing women of colour as a "cyborg identity" given their subjectivity formed "from fusions of 'outsider' identities" (Haraway 54), which dehumanises people of colour despite its explanation of internalising other's perceptions of the self, just as Judith Butler's theories of queer performativity "inhabit[s] rather abstract spaces" and is difficult to put into practice (Šporčič 64). Haraway's theories on the cyborg are rather abstract, but they make for intriguing perspectives when applied to fictional worlds.

[4] Okorafor received surgery for scoliosis but was left paralyzed from the waist down. Her unsuccessful surgery resulted in her "los[ing] her faith in science" (*Broken* 8) which she also refers to as a case of "technology and science gone awry" (72).

and was something she wanted to leave in the past, there were aspects of her old lifestyle that would still bring her comfort. Since she regularly played tennis before her surgery, she describes her "heightened state of being" on the tennis court as "treeing" (57). Treeing was her ability to "do no wrong" and sometimes involved "predict[ing] the future" (57). Treeing was her "superpower," and Okorafor expresses that she integrates similar abilities into her characters based on this experience. Binti often switches to a trance of mathematical sight that is also referred to as treeing. Despite the changes that she goes through both mentally and physically, she is able to rely on treeing during moments of distress. Both Okorafor and Binti have been physically altered in ways that fuse technology, which Okorafor identifies as her body being able to "move about the world with ease and agility […] [n]ot as [she] used to in the first part of [her] life, but as a cyborg" (*Broken* 6). The bodily changes Okorafor and Binti have gone through have left them to navigate the world in ways that are different than their past lives, but still enable them to continue or further enhance traditions from their past.

After her stabbing by the Meduse's stinger, Binti undergoes significant mental and physical tranSFormations. Due to such changes, like Okorafor, Binti has "ended one lifetime and begun another" (*Broken* 61). While she faces PTSD from the genocide of her fellow classmates, her *otjitze*-covered hair is now transformed to *okuoko*, tentacles that "glow […] a strong deep blue" (*Binti* 50), physically altering her into a "strange body" (50). Okorafor shows that Binti's physical changes are significant but, unlike her classmate Haifa's transition from male to female, Haifa herself says "maybe [they] *can't* really compare" (*B:SF* 65) themselves, since Binti underwent this transition against her will. Okorafor directly refutes the possibility of a Queer reading for the aspects of her tranSFormations that are rooted in trauma. Binti's bodily changes are not an analogy for being transgender, but instead, something entirely new and unique to her own identity.

Challenging Monogamy and Organic Fantasy

In SF, the cyborg may not only be imagined as a human-technological hybrid, but also as an alien body. Aliens, like cyborgs, are not limited to replicating the human body and thus have the "potential for transcending the gender binary all the greater" (Šporčič 61). Okwu is the one who will give birth to any children Binti has in the future, with her baby having *okuoko* due to the strong Meduse DNA, passing down Zinariya microbes, and possibly linking the child to New Fish as well (*B:NM* 347–348). While her nascent heteronormative relationship

with Heru in Book One resembles many of the relationship conventions of our world, it is cut short, and her connection to Okwu and New Fish are more representative of "queer visions of the future" (Kurowicka 72) that lack romantic and sexual desires. Heru was someone that Binti felt attracted to: she expresses how "looking at Heru made [her] heart beat too fast and [her] words escaped [her]" (*Binti* 10). Later, Binti's romantic, aesthetic, and/or sexual attraction for Mwinyi are expressed by her "kiss[ing] him on the neck and soon [finding] [her] way to his lips" (*B:NM* 353). The biological nanoids that are part of the Enyi Zinariya's DNA allows for an enriched Queer connection between Binti and Mwinyi, another tranSFormation. This technology allows for a connection that is only possible through the cyborg. Burger describes how the biological nanoids that are part of the Enyi Zinariya's DNA makes them part alien and part human (373). While Burger does not use the word "cyborg," the combination of technology with human and an alien species conforms to the new possibilities that the cyborg allows. In this way, even the seemingly heteronormative element of the final relationship group is queered.

Okorafor challenges the heterosexual futurities that Muñoz is cautious of and instead imagines a future that is reflective of a Queer utopia or ideal. The four-way relationship of Binti, Okwu, Mwinyi, and New Fish could be described as "polyamorous," which Krista Benson defines as a "claimed identity" and a "description of certain kinds of intimate relationships" that can vary from person to person (25). I would avoid coming to this conclusion since Okorafor herself does not overtly label them as polyamorous, and instead, view it as an enriched Queer connection.

What is most distinct about the alien species in *B:TCT* is their lack of physical attributes that resemble humans. When waiting to board the Third Fish for a second time, Binti explains how "just from standing in line and looking around, [she] saw people of many shapes, sizes, organisms, wavelengths, and tribes here" (*B:H* 117). While other alien species are only briefly described, the Meduse serve as a significant part of *B:TCT* and do not conform to human-like attributes that we are more familiar with. The Meduse are jellyfish-like beings with transparent domes that have "flesh thin as fine silk, [...] [and] long tentacles spilling down to the floor like a series of gigantic ghostly noodles" (*Binti* 12). Okwu is often referred to by the pronoun "it," and, while another Meduse's voice is described as "a solid oily low voice" (21), Okwu's voice is distinctly "high-pitched, almost female" (22). Other than this one instance, Okwu is rarely compared to certain sex categories by Binti herself, but others often apply heteronormative and sexual

conventions onto it, such as a Khoush man who accuses Binti's father of "having a daughter who'd even mated with a Meduse" (*B:NM* 250). Okwu is often falsely seen as Binti's companion in the sense of her being the "wife of a Meduse" (267), but when Binti temporarily dies, Okwu is not able to "bear to part with its partner" (313). Despite its lack of human-like physical attributes, Okwu is still placed within human gendered categories by other characters that place patriarchal views onto Binti's relationships. But Okwu offers a unique way for reproduction to take place with regard to the cyborg body. Like Muñoz suggests, futurity has the potential to empower Queer identities such as being able to bear children (Muñoz 49). In contrast, Haraway views the cyborg as separate from "organic reproduction" and instead taking part in "cyborg replication" (Haraway 6). Okorafor is able to incorporate both aspects of Queer futurity and the inability of the cyborg body to give birth. While Binti cannot give birth, it is Okwu, one part of her new familial partnership who allows her to reproduce. In this case, the world of *B:TCT* is not a Queer utopian society in the sense that it completely lacks sexual and gender binaries that resemble the real-world, but such binaries are still used to critique heteronormative conventions through the addition of other beings such as the Meduse.

In Binti's connection with Okwu through her *okuoko*, her tranSFormation not only creates bodily differences, but what Anne Balsamo describes as an alternative to the gendered history of technology through the "means of communication and connection with other bodies" ("Feminism" qtd. in Melzer 295). In this case, Binti's *okuoko* are not a form of technology, but her connection and resemblance to an alien body functions as an escape from a hetero-cis gender body ("Feminism" qtd. in Melzer 295). Due to Okwu and its kind being non-binary, Binti's *okuoko* enhances her body in ways that are more androgynous[5] than equated to gender binaries. Through her connection with Okwu, Binti has now formed a new relationship that is not rooted in romantic or sexual attraction but is still significant and enduring.

Digressing even further from the human body, the Third Fish and New Fish are living beings who represent entirely new conceptions of the physical self. A common trope in SF media is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and how some of the characters view AI as sentient beings, or even robots being given human characteristics. Elana Gomel in "Science (Fiction) and Posthuman Ethics: Redefining the Human," discusses how SF has the ability to address posthuman

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[5] A more recent definition defines androgyny as "the state or quality of being neither clearly male nor clearly female in appearance" ("Androgyny").

ethics through the integration of identities that are not confined to realities we are already familiar with. Gomel proposes that "truly alien" subjects are the most challenging to represent since they are so "qualitatively different" from us. Thus, they must share some similarities to our "shared reality" (351), and possibly even simulate other well-known elements in the SF genre. In addition to the bond that she forms with Okwu, Binti and the Third Fish have the shared trauma of the genocide of the Oomza Uni students, allowing her to see Binti's soul (*B:NM* 317). New Fish, like the Third Fish, is a Miri 12, which is a living technology that is closely related to a shrimp, with a natural exoskeleton that is genetically enhanced to grow three breathing chambers (*Binti* 8). However, the New Fish is much smaller in size with an "overly cheerful demeanor" (*B:NM* 313), and, unlike Okwu, is referred to by the pronouns "she" and "her" and described as "*Third Fish's daughter*" (316). New Fish is able to revive Binti within her breathing chamber in a process called "deep Miri" (321), in which her microbes blend with Binti's genes.

Given this bond or "union" (*B:NM* 317), Binti and New Fish must always stay in proximity to each other (346). Dustin Crowley, in "Binti's R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies," describes how very little distinction is made between species that are "'naturally' evolved or technologically engineered" (246) within *B:TCT*, effectively blurring the lines between each species. These blurred lines allow for the tranSFormation of her body to take place in a world that may not accept these differences, but still confirms the existence of unique connections with alien species like the Meduse or the Miri 12. The connections, relationships, and tranSFormation that take place in *B:TCT* do not take place simply for the sake of providing us as readers with something new and strange, but instead are a way to methodologically provide an alternative future that challenges typical ways of thinking about relationships. However, Mwinyi *does* conform to physical connections of desire and depicts a relationship that follows the romantic heteronormative conventions of the real-world. Binti frequently expresses her desire to kiss Mwinyi, showing that the shared identity of Binti, Okwu, and New Fish combines asexual and aromantic orientations with a relationship that contains romantic and possibly sexual desire. Thus, these Queer utopian relationships are made up of some real-world conservative conventions, while still challenging gender binaries and orientations. Okorafor does not present a banal optimism that would become meaningless due to its disconnect from the real world (Muñoz 3); she instead imagines a utopia that combines familiar elements of heteronormative relationships with Queer utopian ideals.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Identity

Like Okorafor's own body not being diminished by the limitations of paralysis, but allowing her to "become more, greater" (*Broken* 83), Binti is able to embrace her new identities while still strongly identifying with being Himba. Becoming "more" through her new identity, is "at one of the hearts of Afrofuturism" ("Nnedi Okorafor" 3:20-3:22). She is proud to say her full name, which before was "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib"' (*Binti* 16), but later becomes "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka Meduse Enyi Zinariya of Osemba, master harmonizer" (*B:NM* 272). She recognizes that she is still Himba despite the fact that her "hair has become okuoko because of [her] actions and even if [she] [has] Enyi Zinariya blood. Even if [her] DNA is alien" (*B:H* 184). She still questions her identity after this realisation, asking who she is, and insisting that she "[doesn't] want to change, to grow! [...] [she] just want[s] to be" (*B:NM* 348). Thus, identity and acceptance of such an identity is not a simple solution but is a continuous inner conflict. Especially in the case of Binti, she was not given the choice to conform to such identifications but is now forever linked with those of Okwu and New Fish. While *B:TCT* does not depict an overtly Queer relationship, it demonstrates how SF has the potential of portraying Queer analogies in ways that challenge real-world binaries of gender and sexuality. Okorafor embeds trauma and a lack of choice into the tranSFormations that take place in *B:TCT* to showcases how fictional worlds can provide Queer representation in ways that are not completely utopian. Instead, utopian elements can be embedded in ways that are more representative of our own, imperfect world, and the books show us that we can be more even when we have experienced trauma and loss.

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Fashion Do's and Don'ts: Clothing & Sexuality in *Like a Love Story*

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Introduction

Abdi Nazemian's 2019 novel *Like a Love Story* encapsulates the 1980s scene in New York City, touching on the social issues of the time and the personal ones of three teenagers: Judy, Art, and Reza. Against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis and the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the novel's protagonists navigate not only their own lives but also the broader cultural and fashion zeitgeist of the era. In the novel, we see that clothing shapes individual identities and that catering to conformity limits self-expression. When individuals do not fit into conventions, they receive greater negative repercussions for their self-presentation. As a result, *Like a Love Story* exhibits how fashion can serve as a versatile tool for self-expression, but only when individuals conform to societal expectations.

Fashion as a Tool and Self-Expression Agency

A significant and insightful study by Loureiro et al. draws on a number of sources to explore the impact of social influence and individual vanity on fashion product desires, presentation, and communication. They posit that "social influence is more important than vanity" (479) in how consumers choose what to buy and what to wear, accentuating the significant role of societal norms and close relationships in shaping opinions about fashion. The article discusses Leon Festinger's notion of Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals are inclined to assess themselves in comparison with others around them (qtd. in Loureiro et al. 469). However, as Buunk and Gibbons describe, "a dark side could emerge for those individuals who believe they are worse than their peers or others in their social network" (qtd. in Loureiro et. al 469). This may generate the need to dress similarly: reflecting those around them may create a greater sense of unity and belonging because it lessens a division between them. Dressing differently could subconsciously isolate them from their social circle if the way they present themselves clashes with others. Therefore, the desire to be accepted plays a role in how people select clothes and certain looks. Solomon et al. describe the notion of value, "a belief about some desirable end-state that transcends specific situations

and guides selection of behaviour" (qtd. in Loureiro et al. 471). There are a few values to consider in presenting fashion, particularly choosing certain looks and articles of clothing to "demonstrate their social status […] or to impress others" (Lawry et al. qtd. in Loureiro et al. 471). As a result, these "social values are related to what others say and reflect the participation of the community, the group of belonging and society" (Wiedmann et al. qtd. in Loureiro et al. 471). Fashion in this context is a means to eliminate the idea of being some sort of "Other," and individuals will avoid creating new looks and dressing accordingly in order to avoid the occurrence of it. However, this strips away originality and character authenticity, when individuals dress to fit in instead of dressing to illustrate their identities.

Handmade clothing and unique looks allow individuals to express themselves creatively and align how they present themselves to their true character. Handmade and self-created looks are a separate form of fashion unlikely to pertain to what is trending or worn by the masses. These styles often demonstrate originality, attempting to create looks that have never been seen before, never been worn in a certain manner, or other means of individuality. The nature of these "becomes integrated with consumers' sense of self and extends to their self-presentation during communication with others" (Westhuizen and Kuhn 768). The van der Westhuizen and Kuhn study underscores how individuals interact with handmade clothing and original looks as a means of self-expression. One aspect that furthers this notion is leveraging storytelling, which people can use as a tool to enhance self-presentation and identity. Encouraging individuals to share personal stories related to their clothing—such as why they purchase it and how it reflects their identity—enables a deeper connection between the person and their clothing choices (769).

Resisting conformity to social expectations in clothing choices holds importance because it allows for authenticity in self-expression and individuality. Choosing not to conform in fashion gives individuals the liberty to separate themselves from the constraints of what is acceptable in fashion styles or trends and express their personal preferences and distinct identities. As van der Westhuizen and Kuhn suggest, opting for handmade clothing or diverging from typical fashion norms enables individuals to assert their unique narratives and self-identity, contributing to a richer tapestry of individuality within society. Yet, it is important to recognize that not everyone can effectively defy societal norms to authentically express themselves. Factors such as societal judgments, particularly concerning one's sexuality, can restrict free self-expression.

Close the Closet: LGBTQ+ Community in a Heteronormative Society

When looking at clothes and sexuality, an individual can change the former. Sexuality is a more complex aspect of identity, not something one can consciously alter or choose at will. Despite this, the acceptance of the LBGTQ+ community in society is an ongoing process and not yet normalized in a hetero-dominant space. Conventional ideas of sexuality, in particular heterosexuality, are often associated with stereotypical gender roles. In this context, men are expected to be traditionally masculine and dominant and women are associated with femininity and submission. Stereotypes pertaining to male homosexuality specifically often minimize the relationship between men and masculinity, causing them to be seen and treated differently if they do present themselves as more feminine. According to Valsecchi et al.'s study, "straight men express more negative attitudes toward feminine, rather than masculine gay men, a phenomenon [they] label the gay-gender expression effect (GGEE). This effect stems partly from men's motivation to conform to the antifemininity norm of masculinity" (120). The nature of this suggests that when Queer men look and act in accordance with stereotypical flamboyance and femininity, it is likely that they will be judged and treated more negatively as opposed to if they were aligned with notions associated with the traditional idea of a man. Is the mistreatment of Queer individuals due to the fact that they oppose the conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity, and would the absence of this allow them to express themselves more freely sexually? The research implies that discrimination against Queer men may occur simply based on their sexual orientation, but is amplified in contexts where men's feminization is perceived (Valsecchi et al. 124). We can then understand the division between heterosexual males who separate themselves from homosexual males, in accordance with the findings of Valsecchi et al.'s study, to stem from personal sexual impulses, conformity to social norms, or beliefs in fundamental differences between heterosexual and homosexual males (124). The article concludes that "perceived men's feminization may increase men's affirmation of the dimension pertaining to heterosexuality—that is that 'real men' should not only conform to a straight sexual orientation, but overtly dislike gay people" (125). This suggests that Queer men are stripped of their male identities if they do not present themselves in a manner that correlates to what is approved in a heteronormative society. Overall, these studies show that Queer individuals are likely to be more socially accepted when their sexuality is concealed.

Like a Love Story's Queer Expression Matrix Diagram

Like a Love Story captures four broad representations of how people can express sexuality based on the social context of their time. Four characters within the novel exemplify how heteronormativity restricts self-expression: Judy, Art, Reza, and Reza's brother Saadi. Judy and Saadi are both heterosexuals, whereas Art and Reza are both Queer, with Saadi and Reza tending to lean more towards conforming to societal expectations to avoid repercussions. Figure 1 shows clothing choices and their consequences. Before delving into these examples, it is important to highlight that the consequences discussed are specifically tied to negative perceptions of sexuality and do not encompass other social factors that might influence how individuals are perceived when expressing themselves through fashion.

QUEER EXPRESSION
MATRIX DIAGRAM

CHARACTER NAMES: / CLOTHING CATEGORY:	JUDY	ART	REZA	SAADI
SUBCULTURE UNIFORMS/MERCHANDISE		×	×	
BRIGHT OR FLAMBOYANT ATTIRE		×	×	
CLOTHES THAT OPPOSE TRADITIONAL GENDERED STEREOTYPES		×	×	

*Being marked "X" in the chart indicates that dressing in accordance to these categories received negative judgement related to their sexuality

Fig. 1 how characters can or cannot express themselves due to their sexualities

The first category delves into subculture uniforms and merchandise, relating to how individuals dress based on their interests, a fundamental aspect of their identity. Yet, how they present themselves in this manner shapes others' perceptions. Saadi, Reza's step-brother, embodies the expected image of a conventional heterosexual man and leverages his privilege accordingly. Judy comments that she could "feel the condescension emanating from his lacrosse

body, from his beefy arms busting out of his polo shirt, and from his white baseball hat dangling from the back of his chair" (207). Art states how he calls "[Saadi] and his friends 'white hats' 'cause they're always wearing those dumb white baseball hats" (Nazemian 65). In contrast to his stepbrother's more basic attire, Reza opts for "a t-shirt with a decal of Madonna's face on it" (148), resulting in Saadi describing him as Judy's "gay boyfriend who loves Madonna so much" (217). The note to make here is to acknowledge how both characters can dress in relation to their interests, Saadi with sports and Reza with Madonna, and one is openly accepted by a heteronormative society while the other is ridiculed (Art ridicules Saadi, but this ridicule is unlikely to lead to Saadi being Othered). Examining the clothing articles themselves, one item, a plain white hat, inherently appears basic and aligns with the typical attire of conventionally masculine straight men. Its counterpart, however, showcases more personality and self-expression. Yet, this uniqueness is viewed through a heterosexual lens, prevailing in an era that is not entirely accepting of the Queer community. As highlighted in Valsecchi et al.'s study, where masculinity aligns with standard masculine interests and femininity with more unconventional ideas, adhering to such norms might affirm someone's heterosexuality. Consequently, Reza faces limitations in freely expressing his desired clothing style compared to his brother due to the constraints of heteronormativity.

The second category looks at certain pieces of clothing, in particular, bright or considerably flamboyant attire (fig. 1). When exploring this clothing category, the novel illustrates that it is generally less acceptable for homosexual men to wear this type of attire, as it often reminds others of their sexuality. Heterosexuals do not face the same dilemma. Upon meeting Art and taking note of his bright hair, Reza's parents discuss how they "wonder why [Art's father] allows his son to dress like that… [grateful that] none of [them] have children like that" (61–62). In contrast, in deciding what to wear, Judy considers how "Art says [she is] a summer, which means [she] look[s] good in this kind of hot color, but…Maybe [she's] a winter…. [She] think[s] about what [she] could do with the fabric. It could be a dress. It could be flowy. It could be asymmetrical. It could be simple and classic, even though [she doesn't] do simple and classic" (95). This passage highlights the contrast in how bright colors are perceived in self-presentation. Judy faces no comments like Art does, allowing her the freedom to express herself through self-created fashion without significant boundaries, as highlighted in Westhuizen and Kuhn's article. This emphasizes Judy's greater freedom of self-expression compared to Art, who faces judgment and criticism for wearing similar bright and vibrant colors.

One example that we could see as negating figure 1 in this category is a piece of clothing that Reza receives: "the sleeves are blue, and there is the illusion of an orange vest laid atop the shirt. On the back are two thick stripes, outlined in gold, and inside the gold stripes are tiny figures of plants and goats and flowers" (223). Despite Reza being a Queer character, he has not openly revealed his sexual orientation to those around him at this point in the novel. Consequently, how the garment he wears is judged differs from the criticism directed at Art for his bright clothing. As the shirt is a gift made by his girlfriend Judy, Reza is presumed to be heterosexual and therefore avoids ridicule for wearing it. This situation reinforces the observation that negative consequences and judgment arise specifically when an individual's Queer identity is recognized.

The third category examines clothing that challenges traditional gendered concepts (fig. 1). In relation to sexuality, Queer individuals might encounter increased pressure to adhere to these traditional norms to align with conventional ideas of sexuality and gender. For instance, being gay is often stereotyped as less masculine, leading some individuals to restrict their self-expression to appear heterosexual, especially in environments where others might not be open-minded. *Like a Love Story*'s Art can illustrate this notion. Art, when wearing a plain suit to disguise himself as a non-Queer individual, thinks to himself "about how easy it would be if this were who [he] was, a person who liked his red ties, and his boring haircuts, and his trades and deals and golf games. A person who didn't like boys, who didn't hate convention, who wasn't so angry. For a moment, [he] even wish[ed] for this, for an easy life" (77). This demonstrates how Queer people, in dressing how they desire, to illustrate their identities, sacrifice a life of safety and comfort if their self-presentation does not align with a heteronormative lifestyle.

However, as certain icons rise in Hollywood and elsewhere in popular culture, they have the potential to help normalize the expression of Queer identities through their appearances. One notable example mentioned in the book is Madonna.

Madonna's Influence

Nazemian's *Like a Love Story* makes multiple references to the pop icon, generating the question, why her? The book loosely touches on this notion, stating how some of the gay characters in particular, will "always be more into female divas, even when the world is enlightened enough for gay men to be pop

stars and movie stars. Because worshipping a gay male star would be too literal for [them]. [They] need layers and symbolism" (86).

Madonna challenges conventional female representations by contrasting stereotypical expectations. This notion aligns with Jose Blanco Fiske's view (1153–54) that Madonna creates meanings by recontextualizing ideological signifiers, giving them new connotations, and creating new styles that mock traditional ideas. Madonna's deliberate ambiguity in her personas invites diverse interpretations (1153–54). This intentional vagueness challenges assumed universal archetypes and emphasizes Madonna's control over her image and narratives. Fiske's article scrutinizes Madonna's manipulation of popular culture and fashion to challenge these conventional ideas of women. Fiske sees this practice as common in popular culture, "where ideological signifiers produced in capitalist societies are taken from their context and recycled into a new style that leaves behind, and even mocks, their signifieds" (1153). Madonna's exploration of diverse fashion choices, especially in her performances and publicity, aligns with Jungian analysis, particularly in relation to the "four stages of Anima development proposed by Jungian analysis: Eve, Helen, Mary, and Sophia" (Fiske 1154). In relation to the Anima figure, it "is useful to understand Madonna as a complex cultural system where emphasis is placed on the disconnect between signifier and signified" (1163). Through her "diverse personae" (1154), Madonna challenges societal constructs of gender and self-identity associated with unchangeable archetypes, pushing interpretations of feminine images beyond traditional boundaries. Her constant reinvention illustrates a post-modern world where archetypes are fluid and adaptable, enabling exploration and expression of individuality through various personas.

Arguably, some situations may involve stereotypes or biases against gay men affecting the decision to use a woman as a figurehead. These biases might stem from misunderstandings or preconceptions about gay men, resulting in a preference for a different spokesperson. Their messages could be undermined as a gay man is the one speaking it. Considering the societal setting of the novel in 1989, when being homosexual was more stigmatized due to the political atmosphere surrounding AIDS, a message conveyed by a gay spokesperson might be weakened. There was a heightened fear at that time that they were seen as spreading the disease, diminishing their societal impact. Women in influential positions could have a significant platform to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Their visibility and ability to reach wider audiences make them influential figures in promoting acceptance and equality.

However, it should be acknowledged that while Madonna's fashion looks and choices transcend the boundaries of conforming to heteronormative standards, people arguably perceived her as an outwardly feminine individual with little direct association with queerness herself. Without this Queer factor, her stardom and celebrity status were a bigger focus, which generated positive associations with her unique looks and style. Unlike characters such as Art, the icon didn't face the aforementioned restrictions in self-expression, thus having more agency and receiving better judgment from others. Madonna had and has the social power to express herself through fashion, and it is no coincidence that her song "Express Yourself" inspires the main characters of the novel.

Conclusion

In scrutinizing Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story*, this analysis centres the social context and conventions of this era, examining the relationship between adhering to these heteronormative notions and expressing individuality through clothing. There is an amplified impact on those who diverge from conventional standards, facing heightened repercussions for how they present themselves. As a result, fashion emerges as a versatile means for self-expression, yet within the confines of societal conformity. However, I would like to acknowledge that my analysis of agency for self-expression is limited to a gender lens, neglecting other factors that might impose restrictions on self-presentation, such as class, race, and other categories that do not conform to predominantly Western-approved standards. Overall, fashion in this novel demonstrates that while it serves as a powerful conduit for self-expression, its true versatility faces hindrances when individuals do not align with societal expectations, revealing the complex relationship between conformity and personal expression within the realm of style and clothing. Just as Madonna inspires the main characters of *Like a Love Story* to express themselves, whether they already have a sense of a style that does so (Judy, Art) or are beginning a journey toward self-expressive clothing (Reza), Nazemian's novel itself may inspire young readers today to flout social clothing norms, even when it may make them vulnerable to criticism or ridicule.

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The Magical Portrayal of Queer Characters in YA and Children's Fantasy Literature

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Portraying Queer characters in literature for youth can be a double-edged sword. Recently, the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in both Young Adult (YA) and children's literature has become an increasingly prominent aspect of contemporary storytelling, through diverse and inclusive narratives that represent the experiences of young Queer individuals. However, depending on how Queer characters are represented in YA and children's literature, there is the risk of undermining the authentic experiences and representation of Queer individuals. Robyn McCullough notes how often Queer texts for young readers use the genres of "science fiction, horror, magic realism, and pure fantasy" (9). The notion of incorporating magical realism, supernatural qualities, or magical elements into Queer characters can be a means of empowerment because highlighting a character's unique abilities can provide visibility for LGBTQ+ representation. However, some readers may feel misrepresented or can misinterpret the magical aspects of these Queer characters as being grouped with "otherness" or "difference" (McCullough 10). The fantasy component in these texts, the author's world-building, and their Queer characters present Queerness as something extraordinary or mythical. This is evident in Anna-Marie McLemore's YA novel *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016), C.B. Lee's lower-level YA novel *Not Your Sidekick,* (2016) and Kai Cheng Thom's picture book *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* (2017). Through Lee's and Thom's books, we see the authors employing magical qualities in their Queer characters as an empowering form of representation for the LGBTQ+ community; however, these narratives suggest that societal acceptance of Queer individuals hinges on possessing extraordinary abilities or residing in unrealistic worlds. McLemore's novel challenges this idea by using magical realism to depict Queer characters within the confines of a world that mirrors our own, therefore demonstrating that the acceptance and validation of LGBTQ+ individuals do not solely rely on fantastical elements to be embraced within the nuances of everyday life.

In blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, magical realism offers the opportunity to normalize extraordinary elements within the everyday world;

however, in the context of Queer themes, readers could still misconstrue this as depicting Queer individuals as outsiders in a non-normative world. When it comes to YA literature, employing a specific genre such as magical realism is an effective way to gain the attention of young readers because it offers an escape into an imaginative world where the possibilities are limitless. According to B. and Muthusamy, "young readers interact with deeper understandings of LGBTQ identities, and the text itself, as they deal with elements of magical realism, [which] brings fluidity and intangibility to their understanding" (581). Thomas Crisp states how some authors "rely on magical realism to suspend reality, […] by showing [Queer] characters building relationships in an environment relatively free of discrimination" (336). B. and Muthusamy add that authors use magical realism "as a tool to expand and gain identity in [a] society" (579), as the emphasis on the magical qualities of their worlds can illustrate "that they are no different from the others in this society" (579). However, in *When the Moon Was Ours*, the magical aspects in this world negatively affect certain people in the story when McLemore employs magical abilities in her characters. These individuals, such as Miel, Aracely, and the Bonner Sisters, are also discriminated against, characterizing them as "strange" (21) or "witches" (54). McLemore uses magical realism to also highlight gender discrimination as one of the main conflicts in their society. The discrimination that her Queer characters experience shows how discrimination against Queer people is still being represented in both the author's and the Queer character's societies. A crucial character in this story is Aracely, a Queer individual who is a transwoman and freely lives with her true identity but possesses magical abilities. Later we find out that she is Miel's supposedly dead brother, who was transformed by the river into her true gender identity. Alongside her initial mysterious appearance and her secret magical transformation into a biological woman, McLemore portrays Aracely as a fantastical character who possesses a powerful healing ability for which she is sought out and valued. Aracely's ability to cure love sickness is effective and helpful to others throughout the novel, and this is evident with Emma Owens being one of her regular customers who comes to her after getting her heart broken repeatedly (56). Despite how her abilities benefit the townspeople who seek her out to help them cure their love sickness at night, they still call her a witch by morning, often giving "her the same inconsistency they might give a lover, adoration at night, disavowal in the morning" (22). Because the rest of society identifies Aracely as a witch, the book shows how she is alienated due to her magical powers and therefore characterizes her as different. Their behaviour reflects conditional acceptance as they temporarily value her to take advantage of her ability and exploit her for their own benefit only to

disregard her as an outsider again. Ultimately, Aracely's character and her mistreatment by the rest of society are representative of the struggles that Queer individuals face. She is not only mistreated by being marginalized and labelled as a witch, but the townspeople also exploit her for her magic abilities. These aspects of Aracely's complex and unique character and her experiences of being alienated from the rest of her society are representative of Queer individuals' experiences, specifically transgender people. By allowing forms of discrimination to exist in this world, McLemore provides an authentic representation of the kinds of issues Queer individuals are faced with. However, this form of representation through magical realism and magical qualities still highlights how Queer individuals are marginalized and characterized as different from others.

Contrary to how McLemore presents Aracely with magical powers, she does not give Sam magical powers: he continues to grapple with his transgender identity throughout the novel. Towards the end of the novel, Aracely is revealed to be Miel's older brother Leandro, prior to her transformation by the water (97). Although it is not completely clear in the novel how Aracely became "a woman, finished and grown" (97) or how she developed the ability to cure lovesickness, we can speculate that the water had felt her sorrow and her broken heart because she had failed to save her sister. That sorrow had aged her heart, made her grown instead of a child. So, the water made the outside of her show the truth in all ways, not just by making her a woman, but by making her old enough to match her bitter heart (97).

Aracely's powers not only represent her ability to overcome her past traumas of losing her family and living as a male, but they can also symbolize her healing and self-acceptance because of her gender transformation. However, they also earn her the label of "a bruja, a witch" (23). Unlike with Aracely, McLemore portrays Sam with a lack of magical powers to represent his struggle against his true identity and self-acceptance. In a desperate attempt to become a man, similar to how Aracely became a woman by the water, Sam throws himself into a river, in hopes that "if he gave himself up to it, maybe it would do to him what it had done to Aracely, turning him into what he truly was. Maybe it would give him a body that matched this life he had built. Or maybe it would make him want to be a woman called Samira" (122). Sam's fears and doubts about his gender identity not only represent his lack of powers, but they also restrict him from becoming who he wants to be. McLemore portrays Sam as a Queer individual who cannot fully embrace who they are to represent the challenges of coming out and not being accepted for who they truly are by the rest of society. Even with his lack of

magical abilities, Sam is still discriminated against as a Queer individual. This is evident when Sam finds out that the Bonner sisters use his birth certificate as blackmail against him and Miel (226–227). Together with characters such as Miel and the Bonner Sisters, Sam and Aracely are discriminated against for their magical abilities and their reputations for being "abnormal" which illustrates that either way, whether you have magical powers or identify as Queer, individuals who are viewed as different are alienated. Ultimately, McLemore's novel shows how society marginalizes people who do not choose to fit society's standards or norms.

In C.B. Lee's *Not Your Sidekick,* many of the Queer characters such as Bells, Jess, and Abby have superpowers, which can reinforce the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals are only valuable or empowered if they possess extraordinary abilities. According to Pearson et al., science fiction explores what certain elements of the world contribute to the way individuals navigate their own existence (6). The novel is set in a future far from our current society, where the value of a person relies on whether they possess superpowers or not. The public recognition of villains and the high praise of superheroes illustrate that those with meta-abilities have a specific place in society and society deems these individuals "special" (Lee 11) based on their powers. The genre of science fiction fantasy "notoriously reflect[s] contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination, one associated with the future, with the potentials of technology, and with the important idea that life does not remain static" (Pearson et al. 3). In Lee's fictional world, she tackles the contemporary issue of racism in this story, which is evident when Orion insults Jess and her parents for not being "the ideal" superheroes because they are the only "refugees from the Southeast Asian Alliance in the League" (Lee 206). However, unrestricted gender identity is a relatively normalized aspect of this society, when identifying as Queer is widely accepted by this world. Crisp's statement that some authors use fantasy as a beneficial setting for Queer characters to escape reality (336) is apparent in other fantasy YA literature, too. Akwaeke Emezi's lower-level YA novel *Pet* (2019) is an example that demonstrates an author's advantageous world-building for Queer characters in fantasy YA literature. Emezi specifically uses speculative fiction to create a utopian society for the main character, Jam, to thrive in her true gender identity. With the concept of non-traditional gender and sexuality being completely normalized, her society's unified acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community allows emphasis on the science fiction/fantasy aspect instead. Similarly, Lee's novel has created a space for Queer characters to thrive and freely express their gender identities because this world's lack of Queer discrimination is

replaced with discrimination against supervillains. Although Jess, Abby, and Bells are defined as villains later in the novel, the discrimination committed against them is not for their sexuality or gender identity, but for their rebellion once they confront Orion. When we observe the relationship between Queer characters and the specific elements that allow them to navigate through this world, there seems to be a distinct connection between being meta-human and Queer simultaneously. An odd pattern forms as the few central protagonists who identify as Queer are the ones who develop or have superpower.[6] This is depicted through Jess, a bisexual character who originally does not seem to possess any super abilities despite her family's superhero legacy. However, after establishing a relationship with her girlfriend Abby, Jess discovers late into the book that she has had abilities after all. Abby also possesses meta-human abilities, as well as one of Jess's best friends Bells, a trans boy, who thrives as a masked hero under the alias Chameleon. With their superpowers, these characters all feel a sense of empowerment, which provides a sense of belonging for them. Their powers allow them to navigate in a society that values superhuman abilities without judgment of their gender or sexual identity. This leads to the perception that Queer individuals can only be accepted by society if they possess some unrealistic ability or live in a fantastical world. Ultimately, the portrayal of LGBTQ+ representation in this novel only highlights the Queer characters as interesting because of their powers, which not only overshadows their Queer individualities but also inadvertently marginalizes and alienates them as different from the general public.

In Kai Cheng Thom's children's picture book *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, non-binary individuals are inconsistently represented through the child protagonist's magical abilities. Although the book does not specify the child protagonist's gender identity, Miu Lan's inability to "decide what to be" (23–25), visually shows that the book is meant to represent non-binary individuals' struggle to fit into either gender. The magical elements of non-human abilities are an important factor for the non-binary protagonist to become who they want to be by the end of the story (Miller 155). Yet, it is notable how the book tends to describe the magically Queer character as different or "VERY strange" (2), which can have a negative connotation when used in the context of representing the LGBTQ+ community. Jennifer Miller mentions in chapter one of her book *The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children's Picture Books,* that picture books "can position readers to experience difference, not as otherness, but as a potential point of identification that enables radical empathy across difference" (15). However, by

[6] However, one of the main characters in this novel, Emma, is asexual. She is Queer, but has no powers.

incorporating magical aspects into the main character of this story, Thom's picture book actually illustrates this idea of difference through "otherness." It portrays Miu Lan in a negative light, as they are Queer for their magical ability, which can translate to being "strange" (5) for being Queer. As Miu Lan faces challenges for being different in an environment that insists on fixed binaries, there is also an inconsistency throughout the story. The first few times they go to school, they are made fun of and mistreated by the other children for their magical traits, but, after their mother tells them that being different is okay, Miu Lan's experience at school changes and the other children at school finally accept them as a classmate. There is an odd and sudden shift in attitude towards Miu Lan by end the of the story, as they continue to showcase their magical traits at school, despite being marginalized and alienated for these traits at first. The story's underlying moral suggests that one must be true to oneself to be truly accepted by others. However, primarily depicting Queer characters through their magical abilities in fantasy literature often places the character's gender or sexual identity as secondary to their supernatural traits. Thus, emphasizing Miu Lan's magical ability to turn into whatever they want as a way of representing non-binary individuals is impractical: it not only overshadows their gender identity for their more interesting magical traits, but also teaches children that being non-binary is being unrealistic. Ultimately, the magic within this story can create unrealistic standards for young readers by suggesting that they are only valuable when they possess extraordinary abilities. It sets a precedent that can be harmful to real-life Queer individuals who cannot conform to these magical expectations, possibly making them feel as though they do not measure up to society's Queer expectations.

Employing magical elements within Queer children's picture books has captivated young readers for their enchanting illustrations, narratives, and representation of the LGBTQ+ community. But it has also depicted Queer characters as strange and different. The fantasy genre allows "the suspension of reality" (McCullough 1) to "create an escape that leaves us yearning for something better, a world where we can be ourselves without the pressure that comes with living in the confines of the real world" (1). However, creating this magical outlet for Queer characters to thrive in and equipping them with supernatural qualities implies that Queer individuals could only feel safe reading this genre because of the "otherness" that the fantasy genre provides. Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*, C.B. Lee's *Not Your Sidekick,* and Kai Cheng Thom's children's book, *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* all use magical elements to represent their Queer characters. However, unlike Lee and Thom's books,

McLemore's novel utilizes magic realism to provide a more nuanced representation of Queer characters along with their struggles and experiences, intertwined with the magical elements of their world. It should be necessary for writers and storytellers to navigate fantasy literature for YA and children with caution and ensure that the mythical worlds they create can contribute positively to the broader narrative of acceptance and diversity for Queer individuals. By using a completely fantasy world, it is riskier for authors to try to include Queer protagonists. Whereas magic realism, in its blending of the real world and the fantasy world, allows an author to be more careful and nuanced as they portray the experiences of Queer protagonists without entirely detaching the fantasy narrative from the familiar realities that Queer readers can relate to.

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The Violence of Femininity and Beauty Standards: Examining Miel's Identity Struggles in *When the Moon Was Ours*

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Content Warning: Mentions of Self-Harm

When the Moon Was Ours by Anna-Marie McLemore (2016) explores femininity through Miel, a dynamic Latinx girl who protects the people she loves at any cost, even when it places her in dangerous situations. Miel needs that strength because she possesses a strange family trait: roses grow from her wrist. Her roses make her an outcast, but she is also a minority living in a white American society, resulting in white characters being callous towards her. Miel's roses represent different parts of her identity as female/feminine and the difficulties that come with living in a white American society as a Latinx woman. The roses demonstrate how society forces Miel to conform to traditional femininity, subjecting her to both internal and external violence that comes from unattainable social and beauty standards in American society.

Roses as Symbolism

In Europe and the Middle East, roses symbolize femininity because stereotypically they relate to women (Kandeler and Ullrich 3611). Stott states that "floral analogies have been employed to describe various attributes of femininity in art, literature, and thought at least since the Middle Ages" (61). Roses can also represent "virginity, spiritual love, and, above all, the Virgin Mary, who was a 'rose without thorns' because she was free of sin" (Graziano 69). This is significant to Catholic-influenced Latinx culture, impacting Miel's conceptualization of femininity through the Virgin Mary's purity and beauty. Roses are charming flowers and embody feminine qualities such as beauty and love (Kandeler and Ullrich 3611)…so why do Miel's roses cause her so much pain?

The roses that Miel grows out of her wrist cause her emotional and physical distress: she struggles with femininity because the roses shape her identity and dictate her place in society. These roses symbolize how beauty causes pain,

relating to the struggle of conforming to societal expectations (B. and Muthusamy 579). Miel experiences intense discomfort when the roses are touched, showing how femininity is an ever-present issue within her life. Since her roses react to even the smallest interaction, such as "pulling on the stem" or "knocking the flower head against a kitchen table" (McLemore 9), they indicate how issues surrounding femininity are essentially inescapable. At times, Miel even rejects these roses, for example trying to remove them from her wrist: "She poised the scissors low, close to her skin, and snapped the blades shut. Pain shivered along her veins. It found her heart and her stomach and everything in her that was alive" (26–27). In this explicit and vulnerable scene, Miel chooses to violently extract the roses out of her body rather than live with them. Miel's self-harm shows how she is unhappy with her identity being tied to the feminine roses because her body that does not align with the identity she wishes to project.

The beauty standard, which is nearly impossible to achieve, causes Miel to have self-confidence issues. We can tell that the roses represent beauty standards because Miel compares them to hair. Hair is a common way of expressing gender that can be heavily criticized, since certain styles and colours are deemed more beautiful than others. Miel states, "the petals themselves were like her hair, rooted in her, but not the same kind of alive as her skin" (9). Because the roses are "rooted" in her, they are part of her the same way that her hair is, but they are not necessarily providing a biological function like her skin does, thus connecting her femininity and gender expression with her physical appearance.

Miel associates her hair with negative qualities and believes it is less attractive because "Her hair was the dark, damp earth" (12), revealing her self-confidence struggles. We also see her insecurities when she refers to the Bonner Sisters' hair as "a forest of autumn trees" (4), "bright" (16), and "fire-haired" (19). The Bonner Sisters' hair is almost always associated with positive and bright words, the opposite of how Miel describes her own hair. Even though hair colour preference is subjective, Miel's physical appearance is placed below the Bonner Sisters since they fit the beauty standard.

Along with comparing her roses to hair, Miel connects their colour to lipstick, something that is historically and stereotypically used by women to enhance their appearance and to appeal to beauty standards. Miel frequently refers to her roses as "lipstick-colored" such as, "the one on her wrist was now as dark pink as her favorite lipstick" (8), and "the pink of her favorite lipstick was draining out of the petals, giving way to red, and then orange, until every petal had turned to copper or amber or rust" (23). The narrator most often describes Miel's roses as pink,

associating them with stereotypical femininity. Since makeup changes a person's physical appearance, by connecting her roses with lipstick, Miel is acknowledging that the roses impact her outward appearance. However, like makeup, Miel's roses fail to alleviate her insecurities, proving that stereotypical femininity is inescapable.

Her biological family also saw them as a feminine curse affecting women in her father's lineage. For women such as Miel who struggle with their identity, femininity can be a curse, due to society pressuring them to conform to an unattainable ideal. The roses impact Miel and her deceased mother because the children who grow roses out of their wrists are destined to "turn on their mothers" (43). Miel's mother even went as far as saying that the roses were a "petaled demon" (158). Because Miel's roses are referred to as a curse and a demon, they represent negative qualities despite being physically beautiful. Society has taught women they need to strive for a certain standard, when—in reality—femininity can be very damaging due to the pressures to conform to an impossible ideal. Femininity is beautiful and creates violent responses.

External Societal Factors that Impact Miel's Identity

Miel does not conform to traditional femininity, and society judges her due to her lack of feminine qualities, resulting in an internal battle between how she acts and how society wants her to act. McLemore emphasizes this by her being a Latinx woman living in a white American society, since she does not have fully European features. In her book titled *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture,* Myra Mendible states that "In the United States, the Latina body has signed in for somatic differences (body type, coloring, facial features) and differences in culture, class, language, religion, and sexuality. Consistently, its sign value has been linked to ideological currents, economic conditions, and political expediency" (7). Due to the somatic differences that Mendible mentions, Miel faces discrimination for being both a woman and a person of colour. Through an intersectional lens, she faces different societal challenges in comparison to white women, including the Bonner Sisters.

Many characters in the novel have negative preconceived notions about Miel and her caretaker Aracely. Despite Aracely helping people with her magic, they call her *bruja,* witch, an insulting term in this context. American society misinterprets and misuses Miel and Aracely's culture and language, causing Miel to have not only issues with femininity, but with her Latinx identity and heritage, too. Both her roses and her cultural heritage make her displaced and different.

McLemore's narrator describes Miel as a "little careless" and "unpolished," as well as not wearing makeup other than lipstick (148). These traits make her less feminine from society's perspective. Pickens and Braun state, "Even women who resisted and challenged these strict and limiting social norms of (hetero) femininity were still subject to them, negotiating their sense of gendered personhood" (446). Even though Miel resists certain societal expectations placed upon her, she still feels society's rejection of her identity, causing her to have an internal battle between how she wants to act and how society wants her to act.

The violence that society imposes on Miel and her roses is also something we can associate with violence caused by femininity. The Bonner Sisters stealing her roses shows them policing her femininity through external violence. The sisters claim ownership over Miel's body because she is less feminine and a minority in a white society. Even though the Bonner Sisters are women, the same as Miel, they have certain privileges that Miel does not, such as whiteness and fitting into the beauty standard. They take advantage of Miel without repercussions.

The Bonner Sisters are selfish manipulators, and, unfortunately, Miel is a traumatized victim of their abuse. Mendible states, "More often than not it is the bodies of Women of Color that are controlled, patrolled, and ideologically disciplined through legal and cultural discourses" (118). Since the Bonner Sisters try to steal Miel's roses and even try to cut them from her body, they are policing her identity and controlling her femininity. They also use their own femininity as a weapon and create a hierarchy based on societal beauty standards, with Miel at the bottom, making her powerless in violent situations.

Miel's Internal Self-Consciousness

Miel's femininity is very fragile when she compares herself to other women's appearances. For example, she thinks of Sam's mother as a "beautiful, kohl-eyed woman" (110), Aracely as "beauty and goodness" (26), and the Bonner sisters as "older, and beautiful, their eyes a fierce and fearless kind of open" (12). Miel is attentive to the appearances of others, describing their looks using feminizing words such as "beautiful." However, Miel is critical of her own body. Miel thinks she is not beautiful because she has stolen her mother's beauty but not used it for herself (195). Miel is judgmental of her physical traits because society has constantly told her that she is less feminine, making her believe that she is not beautiful.

Living in a white American society has impacted Miel's relationship with her female body. She compares herself to the Bonner Sisters, who fit into the white Eurocentric standard of beauty that Miel does not. They are pale, having red hair, blue eyes, and voluptuous curves, the opposite of Miel's body because she "did not stretch out a shirt like the Bonner sisters" (12). Even though breasts are related to biological sex and not gender expression, they are stereotypically associated with femininity. Miel does not have the ideal body that America advertises, which is thin but not too thin, while still having large breasts. Society's criticism of Miel's identity reinforces her bodily insecurities, resulting in internalized issues with her race and femininity.

When she experiences traumatic situations, self-harm acts as a way for her to regain control in her life and perhaps provides a sense of comfort. Self-harming is often a more feminine behaviour, as women are more likely to self-harm than men (Straiton et al. 30). It is also a way for people to communicate their distress (30), which is applicable to Miel as she struggles with expressing her emotions. Miel is part of a high-risk group because of her age: "women engage in self-harming more frequently than men in many Western countries, particularly in younger age groups" (29). Feminine gender roles and negative insecurities are also associated with the risk of self-harming (Straiton et al. 37, 40), meaning Miel is more vulnerable because of her self-consciousness and identity struggles. Because Miel cannot control how society perceives her, self-harm acts as a way for Miel to have agency in her life despite the dangerous outcomes of bodily mutilation.

Conclusion

The novel ends with Miel reaching an epiphany, leading her to see things objectively rather than subjectively. Her relationships with other women change, as she realizes her mother loved her, Aracely is her long-lost sister, and the Bonner Sisters are not perfect nor do they act as a unit. Acknowledging the Bonner Sisters' individuality shows that femininity takes on different forms. There is no proper femininity, because even women who fit the beauty standard have their own problems. The Bonner Sisters, like Miel, struggle in society, because Peyton Bonner likes girls and Chloe Bonner has issues with her baby and post-pregnancy. Even though the women in the novel have different conflicts, they share similar societal pressures, creating a (limited) sense of camaraderie and community.

After the climax of the novel, Miel's hair turns red, indicating an identity transformation both physically and mentally. She breaks society's control as she becomes more open-minded and less self-conscious. However, Miel's change in mindset may be caused by her change in body: "Miel's [hair] had turned so red that, when her skin was lighter in winter, at a distance, she could almost pass for one of the Bonner sisters" (261). Now that Miel fits the beauty standard more, society is less critical of her appearance. This can be problematic because Miel's identity acceptance depends on how society treats her. Miel's feminine experience illustrates the binary between how society wants women to be, and the struggles and hardships of women learning to accept themselves.

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Trans-Forming Unmapped Bodies: The Importance of Names in Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*

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In "The Question of Social Transformation," Judith Butler cites Gloria Anzaldúa, who identifies herself as a non-unitary subject (227). As Butler explains, Anzaldúa's "capacity to mediate between worlds" demands we "stay at the edge of what we know" because it is precisely "through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and living in the world [that we can] expand our capacity to imagine the human" (228). In other words, Anzaldúa claims a subjectivity invested in continuously questioning epistemological knowledge. For Anzaldúa, the point of undertaking multiple subjectivities is to "work in *coalitions* across differences" (228, emphasis mine), because trans-formation—forming a subjectivity that crosses differences—makes possible more bodies. Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) is invested in this trans-formation because it is vested in transgender subjectivity.

As Susan Stryker identifies, our normative knowledge is incomplete, and it is obvious through our use of normative language. Stryker is a transgender woman, and she likens her subjectivity to Frankenstein's monster: "The monster problematizes gender partly through its failure as a viable subject in the visual field; though referred to as 'he,' it thus offers a feminine, and potentially feminist, resistance to definition by a phallicized scopophilia" (241). Here, Stryker explains that her femme, transgender subjectivity cannot be captured by the masculine language attempting to name her embodied existence. To counter such reduction, Stryker *continues* to cite such normative language—however, "[t]his citation [only] becomes a subversive resistance when, through a *provisional* use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy" (241, emphasis mine). That is, Stryker employs the very same normative language delimiting her, because it is precisely through *her* appropriation—her non-normative embodiment—of the very word, that its signification changes. To combine Stryker's and Anzaldúa's arguments, a provisional use of language is made possible by coalitions across differences,

because it is through this mediation that we acquire new significations of normative language.

This matters because, returning to Butler, I want to problematize normative reality. When citing "real" or "reality," I mean what bodies exist, what bodies are allowed to exist, and what bodies are considered possible. According to Butler, norms govern what is real: the norm "allows for certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear in the domain of the social" ("Chapter 2" 42)—or the domain of the real. To connect this with Stryker, the norm depends on scopophilic discernment of the body, and language to rationalize this discernment. Oftentimes, language fails because its scope of meaning is narrow.

As I will complicate later through the character of Sam, unlike Butler, I distinguish *recognition* from *legibility* because recognition simply means bringing a body (by naming and identifying) into existence. Legibility, on the other hand, rationalizes that existence through normative meanings. However, because normative meaning is very narrow, the only way to question it is by maintaining the unintelligibility of non-normative bodies. The point, then, is not to be made legible by the parameters of normative meaning, but to be recognized—named, labeled, seen—by normative language in order to destabilize the very word that attempts to find cohesion in a body that does not, will not, and should not conform to "normal."

The problem with the norm, in addition to its narrow meaning, is, according to Butler who cites Jürgen Habermas, the belief that these norms are common, or universal ("Chapter 10" 220). This universality is expressed, Habermas argues, through "the everyday use of language" because it is through language that we "reach an understanding with one another about something in the world" (qtd. in "Chapter 10" 220). As Butler identifies, it is "the presumption of a *common* set of idealizations [that] gives our action order […], as well as what we take account of as we seek to order ourselves in relation to one another" (220, emphasis mine). We recognize and name each other through, seemingly, universal parameters to create meaning we can collectively understand. The problem is we do not, and we cannot create universal meaning.

So, to clarify, in my reading of Sam's subject formation, I am using Stryker's provisional use (appropriation) of normative language to problematize the very same names attempting to rationalize his body. The point is that this language cannot rationalize Sam—but, instead, through the collaborative recognition of

Miel, Sam's mother, and Aracely, their differing signification of normative language offers Sam a lexicon with more malleable meaning.

If there is no value in universal reality, the most important way to make real more bodies, then, is to accept multiple significations. To do so is to work collaboratively—across differences—in creating "a new legitimating *lexicon* for the gender [that is, bodily] complexity that we have always been living" (Butler "Chapter 10" 219, emphasis mine). Working collaboratively means challenging the certainty of our normative knowledge by engaging in *un*common realities. This means relying on the instability of language. So, to articulate non-normative bodies is to surrender to language's evolving signification. In Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*, I see that the co-construction of Sam's transgender subjectivity depends on Miel's, his mother's, and Aracely's recognition, which is languaged through coalitions of uncommon, re-signified language. McLemore uses the notion of "unmapped" and "unmappable" bodies to argue that bringing Sam's non-normative body into realness depends on such namelessness because it compels him to use his new, collating lexicon to recognize and language (i.e., name) his unmapped body.

As McLemore makes obvious, Sam is the moon. What follows in the novel, then, is the mapping of Sam's body, which parallels the historical mapping of the moon. There are two facts about the moon pertinent to Sam's own mapping and embodied experience of reality.

First, the moon's landscape was mistakenly mapped: early astronomers identified large, dark spots on the moon's surface; in 1645, Dutch astronomer Michael van Langren named these spots "'maria'—the Latin words for seas" ("Maria"). This name is responsible for "the widely-held view that the marks were oceans on the lunar surface" ("Maria"). However, in 1892, William Pickering contested this view, insisting that, because the moon essentially has no atmosphere, water would evaporate immediately, debunking the existence of lunar oceans ("Totally Dry Moon"). Despite this discovery, van Langren's "maria" persist to name these sea-less spots.

Second, the moon has two sides: the "near" side and the "far" side (Woods). Because "the moon is tidally locked to the earth" (Keller qtd. in Woods) and, therefore, "completes one full rotation on its axis in the time to orbit the Earth" (Woods), we can only see the near side of the moon. This means we can only map one side of the moon—our understanding of the moon is not complete, no matter how we name it.

Sam's mapping (i.e., naming), and thus subjectivity, begins when his town "christened" him Moon (McLemore 5)—already, there is instability here: they language him with a name containing a history of mistaken and mis-recognized landscapes and a perpetually unknowable underside. Compounded with the fact that he is transgender, Sam exists as an inherently trans-formative subject because he exists across the normative differences of the cisgender binary, and between being known and unknown. By christening him Moon, the town does not christen Sam with a name, but with un-mappability; Sam cannot be rationalized.

For this reason, Sam is named by many languages because he is constantly re-formed by the very flux he resides in. Here, I broadly define language as not necessarily a dialect, but any words used to convey meaning. But, beginning with a dialect, Sam recognizes himself as a *bacha posh*—a girl "[d]ressed as a boy" (McLemore 35) for families that do not have sons. Although it is Sam who recognizes himself as such, he was given this language by his grandmother. *Bacha posh* is a name offering to make intelligible his contradicting desire to be a boy, and his grandmother's desire for him to wear "[n]ot a boy's kurta, but the sunrise colours and scrolled patterns of a girl's salwar kameez. A dupatta draped over hair longer than he ever wanted to grow it" (198).

However, *bacha posh* is not wholly accurate, so Sam is continuously given names in an attempt to rationalize his non-normative body: "[e]ven with muscle filling him out, he didn't have the hard angles to his face or the wide spread to his hands to keep [townspeople] from calling him *feminine*" (McLemore 114, emphasis mine). Sam is "feminine" because, at the insistence of the Bonner Sisters, Sam is a "girl"— a naming consolidated by a birth certificate (114) and their consequential use of "she" and "her" pronouns. Here, like the moon, Sam's embodiment is composed of many dark spots read and named inaccurately by those who perceive him, not only because their knowledge of Sam is incomplete, but because Sam is constructed through normative, likewise incomplete, gendered meaning. To read this through Stryker, Sam problematizes this gendered language and normative conceptualizations of gender, because though referred to as "she," Sam cannot be contained—and he resists being contained—within definition by a feminized scopophilia.

Moon, *bacha posh*, and girl, affirming Butler, impose onto Sam's transgender body a narrow grid of legibility. The problem with these names, however, is precisely the narrowness of legibility. Though Sam is named, these names fail him because they insist upon reducing Sam into individual categories: Sam is unintelligible (Moon), or he is a girl dressed as a boy (*bacha posh*), or he is a girl. It is through this

giving of many names that the town attempts to reach an understanding with one another about who Sam is. However, because the presumption of a common set of idealizations is problematic, there is no such agreement to the construction of Sam's subjectivity. Sam's many names prove this, but it is through this languaging that the town seeks to give order to Sam's transgender embodiment, "[a]s though the truth of his body was any of their business, as though they had a right to consider how he lived an affront to them" (McLemore 117). As though the only possible way for Sam to exist is to be made legible through the rigidity of their incomplete, cisgender-normative language—to be made common because to be common is to be normative and universally understood.

But Sam's body is a coalition crossing the differences of "boy," "girl," "Moon" and "*bacha posh*." For Sam to truly be recognizable, he must remain unintelligible because the present lexicon attempting to define him fails. As Anzaldúa claims, to stay on the edge of what is known is to "expand our capacity to imagine the human" ("Chapter 10" 228)—it is to expand our capacity to *signify* the human. To be recognized, then is to interact and collate "Moon," "*bacha posh,*" and "girl." Sam does so. As a result, he renders himself recognizable.

Sam is not passive in all of this naming: Sam rejects some significations and accepts others. Using Stryker's words, "through a *provisional* use of language, [Sam] verbally declare[s] the unnaturalness of [his] claim to the subject positions [he] nevertheless occup[ies]" (241, emphasis mine). That is, Sam takes pieces from Moon, *bacha posh*, and girl, appropriating their signification to map himself—and this is necessarily Sam's responsibility because, like the real moon, only he has access to his perpetually hidden, perpetually unknowable "far side." He has the most complete knowledge of himself, and so, it is up to him to "figure out what kind of life [he] want[s]" (McLemore 107)—it is up to him to construct a lexicon that captures his existence. He is not alone in this construction: he collaborates with Miel, his mother, and Aracely. Though it is not they who name Sam, they do articulate new significations that compel Sam to use his new, collating lexicon to name himself.

Although I have condemned the Bonner Sisters and the townspeople for inaccurately naming Sam and appointing themselves with the authority to rationalize Sam's transgender body, I differentiate their intrusive languaging from "bonds of community where recognition becomes possible" ("Chapter 10" 216)—from the bonds of community Sam has built with Miel, Aracely, and his mother. They differ because where the former impose a rigid grid of legibility, Sam's community shows him "how contemporary notions of reality can be

questioned, and new modes of reality instituted" ("Chapter 10" 217)—how normative significations of his name can be questioned, and new signification of his names instituted.

To emphasize the importance of this collaborative effort to name Sam, I begin with Miel because her re-signification of Moon facilitates Sam's autonomous mapping. This is what I mean: "[w]ithout [Miel], [Sam] had been nameless. He had not been Samir or Sam. He had been no one" (McLemore 5). He was not named, and he could not name himself. Considering Moon, Miel echoes the same sentiment about Sam's body: "[Sam] was a moon […] He was a world *unmapped*, a planet of valleys and vapor seas" (182, emphasis mine)—however, instead of naming him as the townspeople do, Miel insists that "no one but he had a right to name" himself (182). Miel plays a vital role in Sam's own naming because, rather than finding a name to rationalize Sam's transgender embodiment, "[Miel had] learned him, but left room for the way he was still learning himself" and "[s]he knew the shape of him, every place that was shadow and every place that reflected light, without deciding he was hers to name" (266). In other words, though Miel recognizes that Sam has many dark, unintelligible spots, she does not attempt to name his spots maria nor attempt to elucidate his unknowable far side by gridding valleys and vapor seas that may or may not exist. Instead, "she saw him as something different than anyone else did" (13): "[n]o matter what their bodies had in common, she and Sam were not the same" (182) because "she understood that with his clothes off, he was the same as he was with them on" (13). Miel gives Sam the onus to name himself because she does not attempt to rationalize his transgender or "unknowable" body by naming him with the very same normative language that fails him. Instead, Miel recognizes that Sam's gender cannot be defined by a feminized scopophilia—there is no correlation between gendered body parts and sex categories (no correlation between Sam's body and girlhood). Miel, then, offers Sam autonomy in his body's unmappability: Sam can decide—can name—the body he inhabits because it has no prior gender, no prior signification, no prior name. Miel collapses any connections his body has with normative ideas of girlhood. Instead, as the unmappable Moon, he is nameless—and rather than "Moon" exposing him to the naming of others, Miel insists that "Moon" privileges him with the autonomy to name himself.

And Sam does attempt to name himself: as mentioned, Sam chose to be called a *bacha posh* because he insists on the specifically *boy* construction of this subjectivity. He chose *bacha posh* because there is some accuracy in this name: he "wanted to live as a boy" (McLemore 107)—but, "[h]e wanted to be a boy who grew into a

man, and for there to be space in the world for him" (208). Though "*bacha posh* were words that did not belong to him" (95) because they do not capture his desire to persist as a boy, they are words articulating a possibility in which he can trans-form his assigned-female body into a self-identified boy body. *Bacha posh* grants him the possibility to "stay this way" (207).

Sam's mother aids him in this conclusion: in his childhood, Sam claims that "there needed to be a man of the house and that [he was] going to be that man" (McLemore 205). Sam "declare[d he was] going to be a whole new person so there was a son taking care of his mother" (205). Sam used his mother to facilitate "a lie he told himself to pretend he was like the girls whose mothers and fathers dressed [them] as boys" (208). But his mother recognized, before Sam did, that it was more than that: "[w]hen [he] wanted to live as a boy, [his mother] knew how hard it was to stay in the same place" (107) where he was called Samira—she knew that *bacha posh* was a temporary, transitional naming that would lead to a more permanent self-identification. Sam's mother, when he chose to be a *bacha posh*, "wanted [him] to have the life [he] wanted" (107)—she wanted Sam to be a whole new person, in a whole new place, with a whole new name. So, when Sam later declares that he "wanted to stay this way" (207), his mother consolidates this decision with "a surer, quicker nod […] taking [his] hesitation and making it into something clean and finished" (207). Through a provisional use of *bacha posh*, Sam re-signifies this name by constructing it to mean a "girl" dressed as a boy who stays a boy. Sam appropriates its traditional signification by adding permanency to this otherwise temporary practice, and his mother validates this re-signification by giving him space in the world to continue living as a boy.

Using Miel's contribution, Sam destabilizes the name "girl": he simultaneously disconnects himself from it and re-signifies its meaning. This is a re-signifying made possible by Aracely's own confession because the possibility "that Aracely might understand what he could not say […] planted in him a want, new and raw, […] to live a life different from the one he was born into" (McLemore 105). Sam was never a girl—never Samira. Samira is a separate entity from Sam, merely a "girl his mother imagined when he was born" (250). Samira is Sam's far side: she is "his shadow" (250)—she "lived in places he could not map" (250) onto his own body. "Girl" is a name Sam could never know because Samira exists—as his mother's imagination, a shadow—in a transitory phase existing "out of the corner of Sam's eye" (250), or outside of Sam. Sam can never intimately know Samira because Sam cannot map her on the "part of him he bound down with [an] undershirt, or his hips, [which were] a little wider in a way that didn't show

through jeans" (60), or on "what he did or did not have pressing against the center seam of his jeans" (266). This body "was his body. It was his to name" (250), not Samira's. Though his body has breasts, wide hips, soft facial features, and lacks a penis, these body parts do not signify "girl," because Sam's gender cannot be defined by a feminized scopophilia.

Disconnected from Samira and "girl," Sam emerges with the certain declaration that "I'm a boy […] and I always have been" (McLemore 252). Much like Aracely "gave herself a name" (102) when she emerged from the water "a woman, finished and grown" (102), emerging as a boy, perhaps not finished, but with finality, Sam gives himself a name: "*he would be Samir*, the sum of the blood his mother had given him and the man he was becoming" (265, emphasis mine). Here, Sam re-signifies "girl" because he subsumes these gendered body parts into "boy"; he affirms Miel and rejects any correlation between his body and feminized body parts. Here, he declares that "there was no distance, no contradiction between the body he had and a boy called Samir" (183). Undertaking the collaborating names Moon, *bacha posh*, and girl means, then, to be a boy called Samir. Samir means permanently remaining unmappable by normative names and normative meaning. It means, instead, permanently claiming masculinity by re-signifying masculine embodiment—it is to claim boyhood, not in spite of, but through his non-normative embodiment.

Through the chapter titles, McLemore materially affirms Sam's quest to re-signify his imposed naming. As McLemore elucidates in the chapter "Lake of Autumn," each chapter title is the English translation of the lunar seas' Latin names—for example, *mare nubium* and *lacus autumni* mean Sea of Clouds and Lake of Autumn, respectively (McLemore 11). These are names given to the sealess spots identified on the moon—these names, then (like *bacha posh,* Moon, and girl) impose a grid of meaning that is likewise contested and reconsitituted by the chapters they name. Utilized as chapter titles, these names create a framework—a body—onto which Sam's narrative gives meaning. That is, these chapter titles do not make sense until *after* the chapter has been read—these names' signification depends on what Sam does and experiences in the narrative. In this case, naming importantly precedes meaning, giving Sam the chance to, likewise, signify the mapping of the book. The chapter "Sea of Nectar" best illustrates what I mean.

Without the content of the chapter, "Sea of Nectar" does not mean much. "Nectar" does allude to fruit, implying harvest or blossoming or fruitfulness—but, without context (without Sam's narrative to provide meaning), "Sea of

Nectar" offers an insubstantial suggestion of meaning. With, and because of Sam's narrative, "Sea of Nectar" obtains signification: this is the chapter in which Sam names himself Samir. This chapter is where "the rest of him was in what he chose" (McLemore 266, and it is only then that "Sea of Nectar" begins to make sense. Following the allusion to blossoming and fruitfulness, Sam substantiates such implications when he, in this very chapter, declares that "when he said his name" he is declaring "the sum of the blood his mother had given him and the man he was becoming" (265)—he is declaring the fruit blossoming from the labour he conducted to give meaning to his own name: the articulation of his own truth. In so doing, Sam likewise gives meaning to the name that titles this chapter. Through these chapter titles, McLemore offers the literal, physical copy of the book as a meta-body for Sam, whose chapter names only gain meaning after Sam offers his narrative—his truth—as signification.

The point of this analysis is to insist upon preserving unintelligibility—unmappability—because it is precisely through the "irrationality" of such radical embodiment that normative constructions of bodies are questioned. Trans-formation—trans subjectivity formed across the difference of the cisgender binary, and across the differences of recognition—is valuable and necessary in our capacity to imagine the human. I do not wish to objectify trans bodies and suggest that they are a means to improve our knowledge about the world, but I do suggest that, as Sam does, working collaboratively with subjects having realties *un*common to our own is a necessary risk and openness to another way of knowing and living in the world. I also suggest that, although recognition has the capacity to harm non-normative bodies, it also has the equal capacity to institute new modes of reality. This is evidenced by Sam, a transgender subject brought into and kept in existence by a community prioritizing recognition over legibility. This matters because, by prioritizing recognition over legibility, Sam's community renounces any authority to rationalize his body. Instead, they afford Sam the privilege to autonomously articulate the truth of his own body. Working collaboratively, then, means relying on *un*common realities to expose the instability and inadequacy of our normative knowledge—we neither experience nor perceive the world universally, so, necessarily, we do not create universal significations of language. Thus, instead of rationalizing the discrepancy between our meanings, and, more importantly, the discrepancies between bodies and normative names, it is more productive, non-violent, compassionate, and loving to surrender to such discrepancies. To surrender to language's evolving signification. To allow non-

normative bodies to be unmapped, because it means allowing non-normative bodies to be arbiters of their own body's mappings.

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Boy Exorcist: Ghosts of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun*

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"Hey, Did You Know?"[7]

Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun is a supernatural shōnen first published in 2014 by Japanese writer/artist duo, AidaIro. Set in the fictional Kamome School, against a backdrop of ghosts and monsters, the manga explores the mysteries and regrets that continue to haunt its halls.

One Kamome denizen is Kou Minamoto, a third-year junior high student and aspiring exorcist. Although he is *JSHK*'s tritagonist, he interestingly possesses several traits conventional to the action shōnen hero archetype. His status as the only *JSHK* character with so many shōnen-coded traits highlights his connection to these genre conventions and his subversions of them. His arc sees his masculinity going in an unorthodox direction, gaining power through empathy and fulfillment via homointimacy, while never losing his original shōnen attributes. With this, the series deconstructs masculinity. Through a post-structuralist lens, I will explore the manga's blurring of gender dichotomies, as well as how Kou's navigations and interrogations of masculinity challenge the traditional shōnen manga masculinity model.

At the time of writing, *JSHK* is an ongoing manga series. I will cover Kou's character and development up until Chapter 125. I will also look at AidaIro's canonical spin-off series, *Hōkago Shōnen Hanako-kun* (2019–current), and the official art books, *AidaIro Illustrations: Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun* (2019–current).

Masculinity in Shōnen

Anime and manga are usually marketed and sold in one of four editorial categories: shōnen (少年; boys'), shōjo (少女; girls'), seinen (青年; young men's), and josei (女性; ladies') manga. Each category has its own unique literary and visual conventions, and they may even be considered genres in their own right. While shōnen literally means "young person" in Japanese, speakers usually

[7] This is the first line in the series, as well as a recurring line.

understand and translate it as "boy." Publishers target shōnen manga at adolescent and teenage boys (approximately ages 12–17), although the readership extends beyond this target group to a wide range of ages and genders. The genre's thematic orientation concerns friendship, action, adventure, and/or overcoming the forces of evil, and its subgenres include romance, comedy, mystery, or sports (among other topics). Nevertheless, action narratives dominate this category to the extent that some publishers list certain manga as shōnen not because of their ostensible target demographic but because they prominently feature action and adventure (Levi 9, 163). Evidently, the action subgenre hugely influences shōnen, and we see traces of these influences in some shōnen conventions and archetypes.

In "Straddling the Line: How Female Authors Are Pushing the Boundaries of Gender Representation in Japanese Shōnen Manga," Daniel Flis presents what he calls the "shōnen framework": archetypal depictions of gender performance and expression in shōnen media. He defines the shōnen framework as containing simplistic heteronormative narratives, legitimizations of men's dominant social position, exploited/powerless representations of women, and male protagonists embodying hegemonic manliness (*passim*). Shōnen protagonists, who are majority male-identifying, prominently possess the traits of optimism, compassion, hot-bloodedness, heterosexuality, academic unintelligence, a strong sense of justice, and a predisposition toward physical combat. Heroes, especially within the battle and sports subgenres, have an ambition to "become the very best," whether it is *One Piece*'s Monkey D. Luffy aspiring to become the Pirate King or *Haikyū*'s Hinata Shōyō dreaming of winning volleyball nationals. We observe these traits in many shōnen heroes, especially in prolific series that have codified and/or propagated the shōnen hero archetype.[8] While these conventions have been challenged and subverted—especially in recent years, with shōnen heroes displaying more nuanced relationships to masculinity—they are still highly influential to and emblematic of the genre.

As a genre written for (and usually about) young boys, it is important to consider how shōnen constructs and exhibits masculinity and boyhood. Many of the aforementioned shōnen traits—particularly female characters' diminished importance, heroes' drive to "be the very best," and the action subgenre's valorization of boys who can physically overpower enemies or who push

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[8] Examples include Naruto Uzumaki from *Naruto*, Hikaru Shindō from *Hikaru no Go*, and Yūji Itadori from *Jujutsu Kaisen*.

themselves beyond their limits for self-improvement—overlap with the four themes I paraphrase from Robert Brannon's Male Sex Role theory:

1. "No Sissy Stuff," where stigma is attached to feminine characteristics;
2. "The Big Wheel," where men are driven by the need for success and/or status;
3. "The Sturdy Oak," where men are expected to possess toughness, confidence, and self-reliance, especially in crisis events; and
4. "Give 'em Hell," where violence, aggression, and daring are typically accepted—and even expected—in men. (Chapters 1–4)

These themes uphold hegemonic notions of masculinity — what modern Japanese and Western societies may consider natural or acceptable male traits. The quantity of such themes in shōnen highlights the genre's promotion/propagation of such masculinities. However, these masculinities are not always toxic; traditionally masculine traits (such as impulsivity or physical strength) often combine with or find outlets in motivations of self-betterment or friendship, or in a desire to protect the innocent, the weak, and heroes' loved ones.

I define the standardization of such gendered behaviors—their continued presence within an archetypal, hypermasculine genre—as a genre-specific construction that I call "shōnen masculinity." The specific masculinities and narrative conventions I will discuss are the ones primarily found in action/battle shōnen, the most popular and prolific shōnen subgenre.

JSHK is written by Japanese creators and primarily aimed at a Japanese audience, with characters who are all Japanese. As such, it is important to consider how culture informs gender roles, and how the manga's Japanese setting informs its characters' and readership's perceptions and constructions of masculinity. In *Masculinity and Japan's Foreign Relations*, Yumiko Mikanagi states that even "in the twenty-first century, Japanese men often liken themselves to bushi (samurai warriors) and the bushi ethos is closely wedded to all types of masculinity in Japan. Thus, images of bushi, for better or worse, have affected the construction of masculinity in modern Japan" (25). This historical gender ideology echoes in Kou's family line, which links him to a lineage of Japanese combat and masculinity. He is a scion of the Minamoto clan, one of Japan's foremost martial clans from which many famous samurai claim descent. Like the men that Mikanagi references, Kou indeed ties his identity to his bushi forefathers: "My ancestors [the Minamoto warriors] left countless powerful, anti-evil magical

artifacts for their descendants to use. I will master them all and use them to protect people from vicious supernaturals like you. That is the calling of every boy born into the Minamoto clan!" (ch. 3, p. 6). His proclamation reveals not only a desire to continue his ancestors' exorcizing business but also the perpetuation of masculine codes and traditions: he specifies that every Minamoto *boy* has a calling to become a bushi, even though female warriors also exist within his family. This revelation links the Minamotos to the bushi/masculinity connection that Mikanagi asserts.

The manga's Minamotos trace their bloodline to the historical figure Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu, a commander of the Imperial Guard and a secretary in the Ministry of War. Over time, his military exploits transformed into legends of him slaying oni (ogre-like demons, most famously Shuten Dōji, one of the three evilest yōkai, or supernaturals, in Japanese folklore). Both *JSHK* and Japan's historical myths celebrate this Heian-era yōkai slayer for his martial prowess, and indeed, his combat heritage lives on in *JSHK*'s contemporary setting. Like their ancestor, the Minamotos exorcize supernaturals through battle. Kou's older brother, Teru, even inherits Yorimitsu's legendary oni-slaying sword, Dōjigiri. While Kou's family are exorcists rather than samurai, and while Yorimitsu lived before the samurai class formally emerged, the manga's Minamotos are still combat-based, and they directly trace their lineage to later Minamoto samurai and shōgun. These continued practices and lineages situate Kou within a long tradition of Japanese combat and valor. Interestingly, despite his honorable service, Yorimitsu is not a major figure in Japanese history. A more prolific legendary occultist is Abe-no-Seimei, a Heian-era onmyōji who dispelled maleficent yōkai with charms and spells rather than swords or arrows. The fact that the story chooses the bushi Yorimitsu over the non-combative Seimei suggests its intention to draw a connection between Kou and warrior culture.

Although Kou is a tritagonist rather than a protagonist, he is still a hero figure in a shōnen series. The story codes him in a way that can be best understood as action shōnen heroism. In fact, he displays more shōnen attributes than the titular main male character or any other male character thus far, solidifying the connection between him and shōnen conventions. While never explicitly stated, the series suggests this link through his exorcist ambitions, heterosexual interests, sense of justice, and coming-of-age.

One of Kou's most notable traits is his alignment with action and fighting. He demonstrates this propensity as early as his formal debut in Chapter 3, setting the tone for his character. His first speech is a proclamation of his family's martial heritage and his intent to exorcize the ghost boy Hanako, thereby connecting him to the battle shōnen traditions of combat and physical engagement. The story revisits this notion, as Kou often suggests physical domination as the answer to conflicts, including when it is silly or unnecessary.[9] Even his debut stance—perched atop the school rooftop and brandishing Raiteijou, his spirit staff weapon—aligns him with action and motion.

This athletic inclination is in inverse relationship to his academic intelligence. Shōnen stories often feature physically adept but academically inept protagonists, and indeed, Kou struggles in school: his exam grades are 180th place at his school level and several chapters reveal that he is poor in or receives failing grades in art, science, and classical literature (*JSHK* chs. 12, 20, 59). Even outside of the classroom, he demonstrates a stereotypically shōnen simplemindedness. In Chapter 65, Kou claims that he is "never ever going to trust" Hyūga Natsuhiko before falling for his blatant lies a mere fifteen minutes later: "I had no idea you've [Natsuhiko] saved so many people… you're such a man of action! And so well-loved! You're amazing! You have all my respect! That story about the dogs at the South Pole really got me!" (28–29). The smash cut[10] in this scene highlights Kou's gullibility: he berates Natsuhiko (demonstrating his hot-headedness and combativeness) before the manga cuts him off mid-sentence and shows him crying into his hands and calling his previous adversary "master." The scene's absurdity—especially the mere fifteen minutes it takes to completely change Kou's feelings about Natsuhiko—emphasizes the silliness and simplemindedness characteristic of shōnen protagonists. Kou's battle inclinations paired with his moments of dimness reveal a very specific type of masculinity, one that centers action and physicality in the construction of boyhood.

Kou's strong sense of justice further aligns him with shōnen masculinity. He does not value strength for strength's sake; like others of the shōnen hero archetype, the desire to ensure his loved ones' safety and happiness is his primary motivation. Most notable is his resolve to extend his crush Nene Yashiro's short

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[9] Chapter 30 satirizes this tendency. Here, Kou's solution to dispelling the mysterious ghostly arms is challenging them to arm wrestling.
[10] A film edit that abruptly cuts from one scene to another, highlighting the disparity between the two scenarios. A staple in comedy.

lifespan. His heterosexual infatuation with the girl aligns with hegemonic masculinity and the shōnen genre's promotion of male/female romantic attachments. Motivated by altruism and love, Kou repeatedly declares himself as Nene's protector and dedicates himself to defending her from physical threats. This arrangement resembles the knight/princess relationship model emblematic of traditional heterosexual pairings, with the strong, mêlée-oriented Kou protecting the delicate, non-combative Nene.

However, Nene is not the only person whom Kou looks out for. Time and again, he proclaims his intent to protect his friends and family. Kou's battle with Hakubo in the Oni Arc features the classic battle shōnen formula of an underdog heroic figure facing off against a stronger adversary. When it appears as though the underdog will lose, he achieves an unprecedented win after declaring that he doesn't "care if no one expects [him] to! Or even wants [him] to! None of that matters! [He's] gonna make every last one of them happy" (ch. 90, pp. 23–25). With this proclamation, Kou attains his first major combat victory. His triumph is oppositional to Brannon's "The Big Wheel"; rather than be driven by his own success or status, his loved ones' prosperity motivates him.[11] In heroically shōnen ways, Kou couples his strength with the selfless and kindhearted intent to help others. The Minamoto exorcists indiscriminately exterminate all supernatural threats. However, Kou's compassionate nature has him struggle to accept that every supernatural creature is unfailingly evil. He defies Teru (his older brother and role model) by standing up for and saving Hanako twice, first in Chapter 10 and later in Chapter 85. His actions resemble how *Kimetsu no Yaiba*'s Tanjiro Kamado feels compassion for demons or how *Naruto*'s Naruto Uzumaki befriends the dreaded Gaara. Through his protectorship, Kou continues this tradition of shōnen heroes combating hate and advocating for friendship. Although he is not *JSHK*'s protagonist (as many shōnen heroes are in their own series), his actions nevertheless align him with shōnen herohood's attitudes and beliefs.

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[11] This selflessness does, however, align with Japanese masculinity; you fight not so much for your own benefit and interests but for your family, in-group, and society. Such behavior is culturally expected for Japanese men, and therefore, shōnen heroes. This is one example of hegemonic masculinity changing shape depending on the cultural context. Ambition and upwards mobility are masculine traits *in general*, especially within the Western contexts from which shōnen draws influence (the grandfather of the modern manga, Osamu Tezuka, was inspired by Walt Disney and Max Fleischer). While Kou's actions here subvert generalized/Western masculinity, they reinforce Japanese masculinity.

Kou fits into the shōnen hero formula not just because of his personality but also because of his circumstances. His relationship with his mother aligns closely with other shōnen heroes, and these son/mother relationships are central to shōnen narratives. In the aptly named article "What Boys Will Be: A Study of Shōnen Manga," Angela Drummond-Mathews asserts how shōnen stories, which follow the hero's journey framework, allegorize boyhood rites of passage (70). Shōnen heroes move from the comfort and routine of their regular lives to the struggle and adventure of their journey, where they then emerge as better people. This odyssey symbolizes the trials that boys must undergo to become young men. Shōnen coming-of-age stories have been imagined in a multitude of ways, but they generally share one common event: the death of the shōnen hero's mother. From *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* to *Attack on Titan*, the dead mother trope is ubiquitous in the genre. Even if they are still alive (as is the case with some series, such as *Hunter x Hunter*), shōnen mothers generally have very little characterization or narrative importance; they simply exist to be their sons' mothers. Gentle and loving, seldom seen outside of an apron or comfortable (yet still feminine) clothes for homemaking, shōnen heroes' mothers symbolize the safety of childhood and feminine domesticity. Their untimely deaths, then, represent the moment that a boy must leave the roost and navigate the strange, perilous adult world. Unlike shōnen fathers, shōnen mothers are rarely (if ever) aspirational figures whom their sons aspire to be like. Instead, shōnen mothers adopt a more passive role, with their untimely deaths propelling their sons' metaphoric journey to adulthood.

The Minamoto matriarch joins this long tradition of dead mothers. In Chapter 77, Kou reveals that she passed away when he was nine years old (31). Although his adventures (*JSHK*'s plot) occur years after this event, his mother's passing deeply affected him. It influenced him to step up and help more around the house, getting one step closer to maturity. The Red House, which shows interlopers their heart's desires, presents to Kou a vision of his mother if she were still alive: she greets him in the kitchen, frets over his health, and offers him snacks (*JSHK* ch. 77). This scene reveals how Kou's fondest memories of his mother are highly gendered: the entire vision never leaves the domestic sphere, paralleling the limited roles available for shōnen mothers. Indeed, like others of this archetype, Mrs. Minamoto's narrative presence is felt in its absence. Her death pushes Kou to take on more responsibilities and it contributes to the burdens on Teru's shoulders, but her own personhood means little to *JSHK*'s story at large.

Even her re-introduction in this chapter is more about advancing Kou's development and revealing the Red House's mysteries than it is about her.

Shōnen Under Erasure

Founded by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction theory is a philosophical and literary theory emerging from the 1960s school of post-structuralism. It aims to expose and subvert the hierarchical binary oppositions that frame our understanding of reality: good/evil, day/night, presence/absence, man/woman. According to Derrida, dualisms are never equal; one is always privileged over the other. Deconstruction seeks not to destroy but to destabilize these dichotomies and power struggles. It recognizes how these divisions may not always capture the full nuance of existence. The deconstructionist concept *sous rature* (translated as "putting something under erasure") involves crossing out a word or concept within a text but leaving it legible and present (Guillemette *et al.*). Doing so acknowledges a word or concept's necessity within a certain context, as well as its inadequacy to fully encapsulate reality.

This framework can help us understand Kou's relationship with his gender expression. Rather than position masculinity/femininity as a hierarchal binary opposition where one must overcome the other, *JSHK* reveals gender's nuances and complications. Throughout the series, Kou subverts gender stereotypes or adopts feminine characteristics, all the while maintaining the gendered markers that tie him to conventional boyhood. In these ways, his masculinity is subverted but not eliminated; it is put under erasure.

To fully understand Kou's gender destabilization, we must first understand the genre in which he exists. Despite being situated within a historically formulaic media category, *JSHK*'s iconography and narrative style blend shōnen and shōjo conventions. While *JSHK* indeed features shōnen's adventure, combat scenes, and predictable temporal sequences, its primary narrative focus is the characters' emotional entanglements and unraveling the mystery behind the titular Hanako-kun. The manga's distinctive art style (gratuitous symbolic flowers; enormous, sparkling eyes; and complicated, non-linear panel designs) invites readers to emotionally engage with the characters and their psychological development. This specialized visual language typifies the shōjo genre, shōnen's feminine counterpart and one of the formulators for Japan's so-called "girls' culture." As Mizuki Takahashi notes in *Japanese Visual Culture*, "only those with the ability to decipher [shōjo's aesthetic codes are] welcomed into that private realm" of girlhood (129). *JSHK*, then, explodes our sense of dialectical binary genres by adopting these

feminine codes into a masculine tradition, destabilizinging the lines between boyhood and girlhood.

In addition to incorporating visual and narrative elements from multiple genres, *JSHK* also pokes fun at shōnen and shōjo conventions, suggesting its desire to work outside these typified frameworks. Chapter 106 parodies the theatrical romantic plots common in early shōjo romance series,[12] with gratuitous flowers, dramatic speeches, elaborate dialogue bubbles, and the Yugi brothers drawn in a much more sophisticated and conventionally attractive style (10). The next page satirizes the gap between these shōjo visuals and the manga's reality: Tsukasa Yugi, drawn in a silly chibi style, makes the unromantic suggestion of feeding Nene a rat. Volume 1's ending comic also offers a subtle critique of shōnen conventions. When asked to describe their ideal selves, Nene imagines herself as an alluring, voluptuous woman; Kou dreams of being a rugged, muscular man; and Hanako wants to be a giant fire-breathing monster. The visual and narrative sketches here are standard to the shōnen action subgenre: sexualized women, power fantasy men, and city-levelling monsters. However, Hanako's comment that such alterations "would change the whole style of the series" (ch. 5, p. 26) reveals *JSHK*'s self-awareness in being an atypical shōnen manga. The series's genre-blending destabilizes the borders between boyhood/shōnen and girlhood/shōjo, and indeed, the notion of conventional boyhood itself. Like how *JSHK*'s style blends shōnen and shōjo conventions, Kou's ambivalent gender performances unsettle masculinity and femininity conventions.

While Kou's hot-headedness, daring, and propensity for fights align with Brannon's "Give 'em Hell" model, his combativeness is not as destructive. This subversion reveals the different ways that writers and readers may express or understand violence and its attendant masculine associations. As discussed above, Kou uses his strength to protect others. In contrast, Tsukasa Yugi is the character who exhibits the unrestrained violence and brutality common to "Give 'em Hell." Barring perhaps Teru Minamoto (whose profession necessitates his exorcizing supernaturals to protect humans), Tsukasa has killed the highest number of supernaturals in the series simply because he finds it fun. He does so in excessively violent ways: in his first proper appearance, he vivisects a supernatural just to examine its insides, and he later kills the former No. 3 by repeatedly bashing their head to the ground (ch. 17, 32). While Kou also fights adversaries, he never prolongs their suffering or uses methods that increase their pain. Both

[12] Like how action is the most popular and prolific shōnen subgenre, the romance subgenre is shōjo's equivalent.

boys meet opposition with force. However, Tsukasa differs from Kou in that he defaults to physical domination, such as when his instinctual response to Nene's non-compliance is to harm her (ch. 33, p. 26). In contrast, Kou does not immediately act on his violent impulses. While he threatens to beat up the Red House Boy, he never actually does so (ch. 76). His fight with Tsukasa in the Mitsuba Arc illustrates the gap in the two boys' violence: Kou attacks Tsukasa to avenge Mitsuba and Tsukasa attacks Kou to overpower him. Although shōnen heroes are or become the strongest in their fictional canons, *JSHK*'s most powerful and fight-ready character is arguably Tsukasa, whose overwhelming force is frightening and destructive. As he is the series' primary antagonist, we condemn his excessive violence more than Kou's. With this, *JSHK* demonstrates power as a way of putting shōnen violence and battle performance under erasure.

Despite his intimate connection to the famous Minamoto warriors and his position as an action-oriented character in a shōnen series, Kou is not a successful combatant like his predecessors. While he is also deeply invested in battle performance, he is a canonically poor fighter. *Hōkago Shōnen Hanako-kun* reveals that he has the lowest spiritual energy out of the three Minamoto siblings, including his five-year-old sister (*HSHK* ch. 13, p. 12). This low power level explains why he loses at least seven major battles in the series — nearly every single one he has engaged in, to date. Even in the Fictional World, where Mei Shijima restores his formerly-sealed Raiteijou to full strength, Kou still cannot win against a de-superpowered Hanako, a fact that the ghost boy takes note of: "I'm guessing you'll be too weak to move soon… even with No. 4's help, this is the best you can do" (ch. 57, p. 17). It is not uncommon for shōnen heroes to start their series weak before growing stronger; the underdog narrative is standard to the genre. However, *JSHK* implies that Kou never achieves a high level of exorcist power. When Mirai transforms him into the adult version of himself in Chapter 26, he admits that his lightning magic is still inferior to Teru's when he was the same age (33). Kou starts the story weak, and as this chapter reveals, *remains* weak. In contrast, because the genre allegorizes boys' coming-of-age, shōnen necessitates growth. Its heroes' training, determination, and hard work eventually yield fruit, and their strength through perseverance is evidence of their success and status as heroes. In this sense, Kou's slow combat growth without radical evolution is antithetical to the genre in which he is situated and from which he derives many character traits.

Another shōnen staple is the heroes' having rivals. The shōnen rival is often the hero's foil: where heroes are generally hot-headed, outgoing, compassionate, and academically unintelligent, rivals are generally cool-headed, aloof, cynical, and adept at strategizing. These characters not only provide narrative contrast with heroes, but they also push heroes to self-improve. Shōnen rivals often possess more status, respect, and/or technical skill than the heroes do, and as the archetype name suggests, are thus figures for them to compete with and surpass.

Interestingly, Kou lacks any rival figures. This can be explained in that *JSHK* is not an action manga and Kou is not the protagonist; focusing on his combat development would be tonally inconsistent with the series. However, he does have some people analogous to rival figures. Hanako is (initially) Kou's rival for Nene's romantic attention. The two share the key differences that mark shōnen heroes and rivals as foils: blond, hot-blooded, and naïve Kou versus dark-haired, calculating, and worldly Hanako. Kou's unreciprocated love for Nene further contrasts with her innate draw to Hanako, mirroring how shōnen rivals usually have some sort of initial advantage over heroes. The duo's occasional clashes (especially in the beginning, when Kou is adamant about exorcising the ghost boy) subscribe to shōnen's long tradition of hero and rival opposition, including their eventual reconciliation (ch. 9–10). Despite the boys' similarities in hero/rival conventions, Kou and Hanako do not perfectly fit this mold. Hanako is far too silly and childlike to be a traditional shōnen rival; Kou, who should be the immature and reckless hero figure, often reprimands him for his pranks and jokes, such as his being upset when Hanako spooks Nene in Chapter 58: "What are you doing!!? You could have made senpai's life even shorter!!" (p. 35). While shōnen heroes and rivals eventually become better matched throughout their series, the gap between Kou and Hanako's competition for Nene's love only widens. By Chapter 109, Nene is determined to confess her romantic feelings to Hanako while Kou remains her good friend. The boys' failure to fully fit the hero/rival formula reveals how Kou lacks this genre relationship staple.

Kou's older brother, Teru, is another figure analogous to a shōnen rival but is not quite one. The eldest Minamoto son is much more serious and dignified than Hanako is, aligning him more closely with the stock shōnen rival personality type. He is also more of an aspirational figure to Kou than the titular character. As one of the strongest humans in the series, Teru is someone Kou has always admired and wanted to emulate: "Nii-chan! I promise I'm gonna be just like you someday!! I'll be even stronger!" (ch. 9, p. 2). Teru's absolutism and hostility toward supernaturals clash with Kou's compassion for them, an ideological difference

that culminates in the brothers' brawl in Chapter 87. This conflict, as well as Teru's antagonistic role in many story arcs, mirrors shōnen rivals' frequent antagonism towards heroes in other shōnen works.[13] However, like with Hanako, Teru's similarities with shōnen rivals end after a certain point. While they indeed butt heads about supernaturals, the brothers have an otherwise affectionate and supportive bond that does not include the push-and-pull characteristic of shōnen heroes and rivals' relationships. In fact, Teru is hardly a rival even in the generic sense since Kou appears more intent on working alongside him rather than competing with him. The brothers' great skill gap also complicates the notion that Teru is Kou's rival or that Kou even has a rival at all, since he is not yet at a level where he can compete with many characters.

Despite Kou's similarities to other shōnen protagonists, the ambivalence surrounding his rival suggests his atypicality in this facet of shōnen herohood, as well as *JSHK*'s atypicality in genre conventions. Perhaps Kou's lack of a rival illustrates the series' intent to showcase a hero figure who is not meant to grow and engage in combat or competition (as shōnen heroes are wont to do), but who nurtures and expresses other, non-traditional kinds of strength.

For most of his life, Kou's role model has been Teru. Strong and brave, someone that everyone turns to when supernatural threats emerge, Teru is an aspirational paragon of exorcist masculinity. Kou strives and fails to match Teru in battle, but he surpasses him in domestic duties. The Minamoto matriarch's passing pushed Kou not into becoming a stronger exorcist (as would have been the case in a more standard action shōnen) but into feminized labor. As Kou puts it, "You've [Teru] been trusted to handle exorcisms since you were even younger than me. Tons of people relied on you. Meanwhile, I was stuck at home being a stand-in mom" (ch. 87, p. 13). Kou's identification with his mother is striking, as shōnen heroes hardly ever identify themselves with their mothers (or other female figures). This identification is not self-deprecating, though; the crux of Kou's unhappiness here is that he feels like others do not rely on him like they do his brother. His dissatisfaction does not stem from being a boy responsible for homemaking. In fact, Kou enjoys cooking and cleaning: "Not that I minded doing the housework. That's not what bothered me" (ch. 87, p. 12). This subversive pleasure challenges the Male Sex Role theory's "No Sissy Stuff" model. Hegemonic masculinity asserts that masculinity and femininity are oppositional; "real men" must renounce femininity or risk emasculation. Kou's identification

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[13] Examples include Sasuke Uchiha from *Naruto*, Yu Kanda from *D.Gray-Man*, and Sesshōmaru from *Inuyasha*.

and pleasure in domestic duties, while maintaining traditionally boyish traits and interests, disrupts the notion that men can only be one or the other: manly or sissy. Chapter 97 highlights the parallel between feminized and masculinized skills. Here, Kou draws a connection between his superior cooking abilities and Teru's superior combat abilities, and the brothers' inverse relationship with them: "He's [Teru] so good at everything else… but as usual, his cooking is a disaster. His 'help' just makes my job harder… from Teru-nii's point of view… maybe my attempts at being an exorcist are just as bad" (ch. 97, [p. 6]). Kou's thinking is suggestive of deconstruction. Here, he frames cooking and exorcizing as two opposites but does not position either skill as superior to the other; even the "perfect prince" Teru Minamoto is made an equal through his domestic failures. Out on the field, Kou is the weak and inexperienced younger brother, but even the prodigious fighter Teru recognizes his authority as master of the kitchen. Cooking and exorcizing mirror each other. The implicit similarities that Kou points out question the binaries that divide them.

Although fighting is not his strong suit, with several other characters overpowering or having better combat outcomes than he does, Kou's strongest proficiency is arguably his emotional intelligence. He shows signs of this aptitude as early as Chapter 15, deducing that Nene is lying about being fine around Hanako. In a show of great emotional maturity, Kou sets aside his pride and infatuation to help mend his friends' relationship. He pretends to be a bad baker to convince Nene to "help" him make Hanako's favored dessert, donuts. He then urges her to gift Hanako the treats. Kou's actions here help strengthen Hanako and Nene's relationship, and this bond is the building block upon which their deep love later forms. Kou's interpersonal astuteness occurs in at least five other major events: first when he can tell that Hanako is hiding something important from the group, second when he observes that Nene is the only person around whom Hanako puts down his guard, third when he realizes that the Red House Boy is Tsukasa instead of his descendent (as Nene believes), fourth when he deduces that Nene is in love with Hanako, and lastly when he recognizes that Mitsuba is not joking about his post-Severance suicidality (chs. 26, 56, 73, 76, 99). In all these instances, Kou deduces others' true feelings and interpersonal affairs without being told of or even witnessing them. Instead, he relies on minute emotional displays and interactions. This high degree of emotional subtlety is unusual for shōnen heroes, who, in very gendered ways, are generally clueless when it comes to emotional matters.

In another defiance of "No Sissy Stuff," Kou is very emotionally expressive. Not counting some minor background moments, he has cried eleven times in the series, making him one of the most—if not the most—emotional *JSHK* characters. These tears are often the result of pain or an inability to contain his happiness, defying the Male Sex Role theory's "The Sturdy Oak" model, an insistence that men must maintain toughness and confidence in any event. Hegemonic masculinity therefore codes frequent crying as feminine behavior, and Kou's easy tears are subversive in a long tradition of heroes who are indeed Sturdy Oaks in the face of danger or hardship. While he embraces more vulnerable and feminized emotions, Kou also exhibits supposedly acceptable masculine feelings such as the combativeness, aggression, and daring common to "Give 'em Hell." The presence of both feminized and masculinized emotions illustrates a more complex shōnen figure than in traditional shōnen manga.

Queering *JSHK*

Although Kou exhibits an unambiguous and immediate romantic interest in the heroine Nene Yashiro, his relationship with the ghost boy Sōsuke Mitsuba is more passionate and emotionally intimate. It is important to note that, at the time of writing, any romantic feelings between Kou and Mitsuba lie in the realm of subtext. However, the way that their relationship develops can lend itself to a Queer reading. Due to the non-canonical nature of the two boys' relationship, "Queer" in this sense refers not just to same-sex romantic love but also to any relationship model that breaks the confines of traditional male/female romantic social scripts. I define Kou and Mitsuba's deep, passionate, and emotionally intimate attachment, which blurs the lines between the platonic and the romantic, as "homointimacy."

While they have a strong and loving bond, *JSHK* suggests that Kou and Nene are better off as friends. This platonic relationship is unusual for traditional shōnen series, where hero figures often attain heterosexual romances. Kou's debut chapter starts with Nene reading a fairy tale about a prince who falls from the sky and saves a maiden from the evil spirit holding her captive. This dynamic parallels the three main characters' situations: Nene is contractually bound to serve as Hanako's assistant, and Kou descends from up high to attempt to vanquish him. The set-up, therefore, links Kou to the realm of fairy tales. True to romantic clichés, he immediately falls for Nene and later enters a love triangle with her and Hanako. Nene even comments on the similarities between real life and the story: "A boy from the sky… just like in the movie! It can't be! A young man's here for me…?" (ch. 3, p. 4). Life, however, is not a fairy tale. Nene does not return Kou's

infatuation, a romantic disinterest that never changes throughout the story. She finds that he does not live up to her expectations of what a prince should be, echoing her earlier admission that there is a difference between fantasy and reality. Although Kou conforms to many fairy-tale conventions (being introduced like the prince in Nene's story, falling in love at first sight, and mirroring the classic knight/princess dynamic through his protectorship over her), he ultimately fails to win the maiden's heart, suggesting that this romantic interest—and, perhaps, this heteronormative relationship model—is fairy-tale-like in its fantasy.

When shōnen series explore romance, their heroes usually attain their heterosexual conquests, from *Dragon Ball*'s Son Gokū marrying Chi-Chi to *Shokugeki no Sōma*'s Sōma Yukihira winning Erina Nakiri's affection. While Kou and Nene never enter a romantic relationship, we should not consider this Kou's masculine failing; their platonic love is built upon mutual respect and care, offering ways to imagine male/female bonds that do not necessitate romance. Daniel Flis asserts that shōnen narratives—and sometimes protagonists themselves—generally sexualize, objectify, and reduce the narrative importance of their female characters, especially love interests (3). Kou, however, is nothing but respectful to Nene, both as his senpai (an older mentor) and as a woman. He never joins in on Hanako's lecherous jokes and instead scolds him for them. Although he is physically attracted to Nene, he disapproves of Hanako's meta-suggestion for a more sexualized depiction of her in the manga (ch. 5, p. 27). His respect is not dependent on Nene's reciprocal love for him, nor does he do it to win her over romantically. There are several moments when he loses to his romantic rival, such as when he believes that Hanako and Nene have kissed in Chapter 29. Although he is distraught over his crush kissing another boy, his respect and chivalry towards her never change. In fact, over the course of the series, their bond follows a sibling-like trajectory and affection. In the Red House Arc, Kou initiates two forms of physical intimacy with Nene: first when he gives her a piggyback ride, and second when he lends her his clothes to wear (ch. 83, p. 4, 6). These actions are very intimate in a cultural setting where physicality between the sexes is uncommon, and they would signal a shōnen hero's budding romance with his love interest in any other series. *JSHK*, for its part, does not treat them with special consideration; they are just simple acts of care from one friend to another. At this point in the story, it is unclear if Kou's affections for Nene are still romantic, but his calmness when asking her if she loves Hanako at least demonstrates how he does not feel entitled to her love (ch. 73, p. 30). With this, Kou evades any male romantic entitlement common to "No Sissy Stuff."

However, we can also interpret his calm acceptance as him finding someone who is becoming more special to him. Kou and Mitsuba's bond is marked by passion and intensity not present in their other relationships, highlighting its significance to the boys. Their interactions reveal their strong feelings for each other, even when it is unclear whether those feelings are purely platonic. The story maintains this ambiguity by alluding to the possibility of the boys' same-sex infatuation without fully confirming anything. In the Volume 4 omake (bonus pages), Kou Minamoto asks Mitsuba if he crushed on any girls while he was still alive, while the Volume 10 omake has Yomogi Satō ask Mitsuba who he thinks is the cutest girl in their class (ch. 20, 50). In both scenes, instead of giving a straight answer, Mitsuba says that there are no girls who are cuter than him. His response maintains ambiguity as to his experiencing attraction to women; Mitsuba could like girls but simply has not found one that he thinks is cute enough for him, or he could be uninterested in dating them altogether and is giving a non-answer. Either way, he does not fully confirm his attraction, thus leaving room for a homoromantic interpretation.

This ambiguity returns in Chapter 47. Here, Kou tries to leave the Fictional World with Mitsuba, who wants to stay. Mitsuba attempts to distract him by pointing out the shooting stars, and Kou asserts that he is here for Mitsuba, not the stars. Mitsuba then asks, "For me…? Is this a confession? Sorry, but I'm not interested in guys with lame earrings" (7). Again, the manga teases romance between the two boys even when it does not have to, introducing homointimate potential into their dynamic. Mitsuba's comment also lends ambiguity; he rejects Kou because he does not like "guys with lame earrings," but this does not eliminate the possibility of Mitsuba liking boys in general. Similarly, in one of the artbook's bonus comics, Kou says his ideal type is someone with a cute smile, a romantic preference with no gender specifications (*AI: JSHK* vol. 1). Although what constitutes a cute smile is subjective, Mitsuba has one of the series' most unique ones, being the only main character with a catlike smile (which often indicates cuteness in mange/anime's visual language). In this sense, he can satisfy this romantic prerequisite, especially after Kou makes it his mission to ensure Mitsuba's happiness (and thus protect his smile).

In Chapter 77, the Red House Boy asks Kou if he loves Mitsuba and if he is two-timing on Nene with him. Instead of definitively answering, Kou just expresses exasperation: "Get bent, kid… seriously, what are you even talking about…?" (14). The Red House Boy's question comes out of the blue. While his silly belief that Kou is cheating on Nene with Mitsuba is probably meant to

illustrate his innocence, this homoromantic teasing still entertains the possibility that some Queer subtext is present, especially since the chapter establishes that Mitsuba is someone very important to Kou.

Later, in Chapter 98, Mitsuba convinces Kou to take him somewhere nice in exchange for information. Kou asks his group chat for fun places to go on a night out, and again, others interpret his actions as romantic: “Does this mean you’re on a date!? If you’re on a date, you should go to a theme park!” ([13–14]). Kou does not answer their questions, but he does say in an aside that “it’s not a date, though” ([14]). He is not incorrect; Mitsuba asks him for a night out for information exchange, not romantic bonding. However, the fact that the manga continues to tease these moments only brings attention to the duo’s romantic subtext instead of denying its existence. Rather than avoid any potential romance between Kou and Mitsuba, it persistently hints at such possibilities, a sort of knowingness that can support a Queer reading or be a subtle acknowledgement that such interpretations are popular in the readership. The “fun place” that Kou and Mitsuba end up visiting is an aquarium. This is a common date spot in romance manga and anime, so much so that it has become almost a cliché. Despite Kou’s claim that they are not on a date, this night out still marks a huge turning point in their relationship and is a site of great emotional bonding, much like first dates are for many couples: Kou gifts Mitsuba a gachapon (vending machine) toy, the pair opens up emotionally, and Kou eventually convinces Mitsuba to find a reason to live (mirroring Mitsuba’s efforts to stop Kou’s suicide attempt in the Picture Perfect Arc) (ch. 98–100). He also piggybacks Mitsuba home, mirroring him piggybacking Nene home in a previous major arc. These two are the only characters to whom Kou extends this service; they are also the only characters that he has ever been hinted to like romantically. Perhaps the parallels in this scene represent the metaphorical movement of Kou’s strong feelings for Nene over to Mitsuba, whatever one interprets those strong feelings to be.

Kou dedicates himself to saving Mitsuba from his ghostliness, but unbeknownst to him, he has arguably already saved Mitsuba by befriending him. In his debut appearance, Mitsuba states that his spirit will move on if he can take a picture of something important to him — something so significant that it tethers his soul to the Near Shore.[14] Much of Chapters 18 and 19 involves his and Kou’s wild search for this elusive photography subject, as it is Mitsuba’s policy “to only take pictures of things [he likes]… or things [he thinks] are important to [him]” (ch. 18, p. 19).

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[14] In many supernatural anime/manga, the “Near Shore” is the human/living world and the “Far Shore” is the non-human/non-living world.

When Kou later expresses his desire to befriend Mitsuba even though they are an exorcist and a ghost, Mitsuba photographs a rare human subject, someone he thinks is important to him: Kou. As Tsukasa reveals in Chapter 19, Mitsuba's true desire—the reason his spirit has not yet moved on—is because he wishes to stay in everyone's memories. However, he forgets this desire and becomes satisfied with just Kou's attention and affection, highlighting the significance the boy exorcist holds in his heart (ch. 19, p. 16). Whether we read this moment as platonic or romantic, it becomes clear by the end of the Mitsuba Arc that the pair have forged a strong and lasting bond, one that has deeply affected them both. Regardless of our interpretation, their bond still indicates homointimacy — a deep emotional attachment that unsettles heteronormative social scripts because another boy has become the most important person in Mitsuba's life.

Similarly, Mitsuba becomes one of the most important people in Kou's life. After he (seemingly) disappears in Chapter 20, Kou cannot stop thinking about him. In his own words, it feels "like time had stopped" whenever Mitsuba is involved (ch. 42, p. 5). Indeed, their bond disrupts spatial and temporal boundaries, and the distinction between the Near and the Far Shores. In the Picture Perfect Arc, Mitsuba claims that, as a human, Kou can never understand Mitsuba's uniquely supernatural issues and feelings. Kou's response to this outburst stuns Mitsuba to silence: "Want me to die? Then I can be with you forever" (ch. 48, p. 21). Kou risks his life for many people, but Mitsuba is the only one to whom he offers it. Although Mitsuba admits that he feels homicidal jealousy towards humans, he saves Kou when he jumps out of the school window following this statement, demonstrating how Kou's life bears more weight to him than his existential loneliness. This care is reciprocal. In the Red House Arc, Kou deduces that the titular house shows him the things that he most desires. Immediately after this revelation, an illusion of Mitsuba appears. The apparition claims that he cannot go on without Kou, that Kou is all that he has, and that he wants Kou to become a supernatural and stay with him forever (ch. 77, pp. 15–17). Although Kou does not fall for the Red House's trap, the fact that these are the things that he most wants to hear from Mitsuba emphasizes the enormity of his desire for him.

The importance of the boys' bond embeds itself in the story's visual language. Kou's most recognizable physical trait, the one that others often comment on, is his omamori earring, a talisman for traffic safety. Before the story's events, Mitsuba died in a traffic incident. The boys' narrative entanglement and Mitsuba's countless references to Kou's earring further connect the two story elements.

Kou, with his traffic safety amulet, dedicates himself to saving Mitsuba from dying once more. The only other person to whom he dedicates this much energy into defending is his (possibly former) crush Nene. This is another link suggesting Mitsuba and Kou's potential love. Nene's dream in *HSHK*'s Chapter 27 features a world where all the characters—dead and alive, supernatural and human—are classmates. In this dream, Mitsuba appears to be a regular, living human boy, just like the other dead and supernatural characters are. Interestingly, Kou's earring is missing in this world where Mitsuba is safe. Perhaps this is the manga's subtle way of affirming the connection between the boys: Mitsuba is alive and well, so Kou's omamori (symbolizing his protectorship) is unneeded. All these details suggest the ropes of fate that bind Kou and Mitsuba.

Intimate Cannibalism

Cannibalism and consumption are acts rich with symbolic meaning; their appearances in *JSHK* signify sex, love, and bridging the gaps of otherness. As one of humanity's deepest taboos, cannibalism in many social contexts "others" or "queers" its participants. *JSHK*, however, frames consumption as an act that destabilizes the lines between the other and the self. This reading mirrors how sex similarly dissolves these distinctions, uniting its participants as "one." Chapter 94 illustrates consumption as the purest, most literal form of uniting bodies with a lover. Here, the human/supernatural couple, Sumire Akane and Hakubo, consummate their pseudo-marriage through consensual cannibalism. For several pages, readers are led to believe that the oni Hakubo is, in Sumire's words, "carrying out [his] husbandly duty" (ch. 89, p. 21). This misleading is made possible because the scene borrows from the cinematic conventions of sex, particularly the disparate shots of the couple's bodies, the visual blocking obscuring their full actions, and the fade-to-black ellipses (Krzywinska, *passim*). It is not until we see a panel of Sumire's bloody arm do we realize that Hakubo is eating her alive. With this, *JSHK* draws a connection between love and cannibalism, and alternative ways of portraying unity. While not an intimacy scene, Kou and Mitsuba's Chapter 99 fight mirrors Sumire and Hakubo's cannibalism scene through the similarly dimmed lighting and disparate, close-up panels of their bodies. In fact, these two major story arcs follow each other, further emphasizing their narrative connection. Like how Hakubo eats Sumire's arm, Mitsuba bites Kou's finger, drawing blood and stirring his appetite: "I am really trying to control myself. But you're making it so hard to resist" (ch. 99, [p. 29]). The cinematic parallels call attention to the couples' and scenes' similarities, particularly their intimacy through consumption. As Amy Heneveld says, "the act

of cannibalism gives voice to the wordless acts of physical love and intimate exchange that are difficult if not impossible to describe, and thus articulates the possibility of unity between two desiring subjects" (412). Indeed, Mitsuba, who usually feigns disgust with Kou, admits that he must restrain his want to consume him, which is one form of desire. Similarly, Kou is unable to eloquently articulate his feelings for Mitsuba when asked, but he clearly expresses his desire to keep him alive when he encourages his cannibalistic urges: "Eat it" (ch. 99, [p. 22]). The pair grows to greater understanding after this chapter: Kou now knows about the ailment that afflicts Mitsuba and Mitsuba witnesses firsthand Kou's genuine care for him. As the ultimate taboo, cannibalism can draw out people's true feelings when these desiring subjects cross the line of social acceptability.

The notion that cannibalism unsettles interpersonal divisions is particularly useful in the context of Queer and queered love, especially the taboo relationship between an exorcist boy and a ghost boy. In Chapter 84, Teru Minamoto shares a legend about how humans who eat supernaturals are bound to become supernaturals themselves.[15] Indeed, the manga's events kickstart when protagonist Nene Yashiro eats a mermaid scale, putting her under the mermaid's curse, giving her mermaid characteristics, and binding her fate to the supernatural. When Hanako, her love interest, eats the other half of the mermaid scale, their fates intertwine and their love story begins (ch. 1). Here, consumption unsettles the boundaries between humans and supernaturals: both their physical being and the restraints on their love. In the Nightlife Arc, Mitsuba reveals that, although supernaturals do not need to eat, he must consume humans or other supernaturals to maintain his physical form, and he considers himself a monster among monsters because of this (ch. 99, [pp. 11-13]). Mitsuba is already a queered character: as a ghost, he cannot befriend living humans, and as an artificially created supernatural, he is othered from regular supernaturals. His cannibalistic nature further alienates him from both groups, whom he must kill and eat to survive. He feels he is "nothing but a monster" and this fuels his suicidal ideation (ch. 99, [p. 13]). After Kou hears this story, he responds with uncharacteristic seriousness: he immediately kills a weak supernatural and offers its bloody heart to Mitsuba (an act already rich with romantic symbolism). He says that even if Mitsuba is "the absolute worst piece of dirt alive, even if [he's] a monster… if [he] wasn't around anymore," Kou would not know what to do (ch. 99, [p. 35]). After

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[15] Kou physically reacts to this news. At several points in the series, he expresses interest in becoming a supernatural so that he can be with Mitsuba and better understand supernaturals. This scene therefore hints at future connections between Kou, Mitsuba, and cannibalism.

this cannibalism scene, Kou forgives Mitsuba for biting his finger and has a candid conversation with him about his liminal existence, demonstrating how intimate cannibalism helps collapse the walls between individuals. Although social and moral transgressions should other their participants, Kou's wholehearted acceptance reveals not only his deep love for Mitsuba, but also a way to dismantle the lines between queered individuals ("monsters") and others. As his older brother suggests, humans with great resolve can certainly overcome the boundaries that separate them from the Far Shore.

Conclusion

Kou's character arc illustrates the different sides of shōnen masculinity, their conventions and complications. While he still conforms to many hegemonic traits at this point in the story, he also introduces a softer and Queerer form of masculinity. This gender-blendedness challenges the traditional binarist ways we view characters' gender expressions, putting masculinity under erasure. Rather than looking at gender as a hierarchical binary opposition—masculinity versus femininity—Kou's gender journey can serve as a model for understanding the nuances and complexities of gender expression in fiction. His story is part of a growing trend in recent shōnen, where male protagonists display more complex relationships to masculinity, femininity, and the traditional roles that dictate our still largely heteronormative global society. Shōnen's hypermasculine norms have remained largely unchanged since the post-war period where the genre formally developed. As we witness this highly gendered manga form break down its own traditions and display increasing gender ambivalence, we witness the advent of a new generation of stories, heroes, and readers who exist outside of and challenge gender traditions.

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Reagan, Rhetoric, and Resistance: Analyzing the Social and Political Conflict of Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story*

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Historical Overview and Analysis

Ronald Reagan took office on 20 January 1981. Not six months later, the initial outbreak of AIDS occurred. Reagan would not utter the term "AIDS" even once during his first term as president. Silence for four years. After the death of five thousand victims, Reagan acknowledged, but did not sufficiently address, the AIDS epidemic on 18 September 1985, during a routine press conference (Crowe 432). Silence for two years. On 1 April 1987, Reagan declared AIDS "public health enemy number one" (Gerstenzang). Finally, on 31 May 1987, he called for urgency when tackling the virus, demanding that the American public treat victims with compassion, understanding, dignity, and kindness (Reagan). In 1987, Reagan was suddenly compelled to recognize the ongoing and imminent threat of AIDS, but his efforts to rewrite history were in vain. Reagan's deafening silence led to the death of thousands of Americans, a fact that history remembers.

One of the most sinister aspects of Reagan's silence was that it allowed for incorrect, destructive, and outright bigoted narratives about AIDS to run rampant. By the mid-'80s, many believed that AIDS could be spread through surfaces like doorknobs and toilet seats; others thought they could contract the disease through physical proximity, with a 1987 Gallup poll finding that 38% of participants would refuse to work alongside someone with AIDS (Singer and Rogers 13). Paradoxically, the media framed AIDS as a distinctly gay disease, indicating "that the gay community was at risk, and almost everyone else was not" (Crowe 430). These conflicting narratives highlight the extent to which the public was misled, accepting two notions that could not *possibly* be true at once.

Reagan's absence also meant that staff members could weigh in and symbolically represent the consensus of the administration. Perhaps the most egregious example of this phenomenon was in 1984 when senior advisor Pat Buchanan, arguing that contracting AIDS was a moral punishment, wrote: "the poor

homosexuals [had] declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution" ("Khachigian"). During an infamous 1983 White House briefing, Press Secretary Larry Speakes chuckled at the mere mention of a "gay plague" victimizing gay men, conveying that staff thought AIDS simultaneously sacrilegious and jocular (Dreyfuss).

It is impossible to sever Reagan's AIDS response from his legacy as president. The length of his incumbency overlaps with the discovery and development of the AIDS crisis. Despite attempts to rewrite or undo history, it remains true that his response led to the death of thousands of victims and contributed to the toxic spreading of misinformation, homophobia, and religious moral panic. For activists, however, Reagan's calculated silence was a rallying cry. In her book *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, biographer Jennifer Brief discusses how AIDS inaction would mobilize progressives and "bec[ome] a central pillar in the political opposition to Reagan" (31). After thousands of needless deaths were swept under the rug, activists came together out of necessity. The options were to organize or die.

The most prominent group to form was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power or ACT UP. In March 1987, ACT UP was founded to bring attention to AIDS, push for a cure, and correct misinformation. The group used disruptive but nonviolent protests and evocative materials such as chants, slogans, posters, and signs to garner media attention (Sember and Gere 968). In the early days, ACT UP released the SILENCE=DEATH poster, now a symbol synonymous with AIDS activism. The poster interrogates apathy toward victims and targets Reagan's deafening silence, suggesting that his hands are stained red. As the epidemic became increasingly dire, "the politics of the gay rights movement and the conservative counterculture led by Reagan were directly pitted against one another" (Pimm 12). And by the late '80s, a harrowing political division was sewn into the fabric of America.

Like a Love Story

Abdi Nazemian's Young Adult novel *Like a Love* Story (2019) intimately portrays and interacts with this political conflict. Set in 1989, the novel centers on Reza, an Iranian-born teenager who moves to New York City at the peak of the AIDS epidemic. While adjusting to his new life, Reza grapples with his sexuality and the decision to conceal his true self. His apprehension to come out as gay stems from two core fears: devastating his mother and dying from AIDS. The latter paralyzes

Reza. He internalizes AIDS myths and misinformation, directly associating homosexuality with the disease, and constantly conjures images of suffering AIDS victims in his mind.

Reza's misinformed fears are shaken through his bonds with Judy, Art, and Uncle Stephen, three characters driven by AIDS activism and disgusted by the silent indifference of Reagan and public health officials. Through these bonds, Reza begins attending ACT UP demonstrations, discovers his love for Madonna, and eventually develops a romantic relationship with Art. Although he initially struggles with self-loathing, his exposure to progressive activism and the personal experiences of Uncle Stephen propel his character development. In the end, Reza hardly resembles who he was on the first page. He ultimately sheds the misinformation and ignorance and embraces his true self. Reza's internal conflict echoes the political conflict: shifting from repression to acceptance.

Before Reza immerses himself in the world of art and Uncle Stephen, his knowledge of Queer identity is intensely colored by his upbringing and family life. In the first half of the novel, conversations about AIDS are absent from Reza's household. Despite living in New York City, the epicenter of the epidemic, the home becomes a haven from the devastating realities of the outside world. However, Reza has already been traumatized at age eleven in the Toronto airport when he saw a copy of *Time* with the headline "The AIDS Hysteria." He describes the impact this discovery has on his internal psyche, stating: "I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me […]. I've been living in fear ever since" (7–8). In contrast, his mother and sister did not notice the headline and are instead distracted by magazines encapsulating Isabella Rossellini's beauty. Regardless of Reza's emotional turmoil and scars, he initially complies with his family's unspoken policy of silence.

This unspoken agreement echoes and is perhaps shaped by the government's response to the AIDS epidemic. While Nazemian never explicitly outlines the political ideology of Reza's family, the impact that Reagan's rhetoric had on the attitudes of the American public is unquestionable. Dubbed "the great communicator" in the early years of his administration, Reagan had a reputation for directly swaying public opinion with his authenticity and honesty. Ken Khachigian, his chief speechwriter, writes that the former president had the "ability to educate his audience, [and] make his arguments vivid to the mind's eye" ("Khachigian"). He captured the attention of America, persuading them of the importance and urgency of whatever issue he was discussing. Despite his nickname, Reagan's silence on AIDS was deafening. By refusing to address the

AIDS epidemic, Reagan gave the public permission to ignore the crisis and "reinforced apathy towards people with AIDS" (Ortiz 9). However, Reza's knowledge of his queerness prevents him from feeling apathetic. Instead, Reza constantly disturbs himself with "images of dying men with lesions" (13). He does not have the privilege of simply not thinking about AIDS.

Early on, Reza's inner thoughts reveal his belief in damaging myths about the contraction of AIDS. However, Reza's ignorance does not stem from religion or bigotry but from paralyzing anxiety. Art identifies Reza's unease before they go to meet Stephen, Judy's uncle who is dying from AIDS, and attempts to alleviate his concern by reminding him: "you know you can only get AIDS from sex and needles, right?" (97). Instead of calming down, Reza spirals:

> And what about the hangnail on my finger, which is red from all the times I've picked it and is now touching the dirty seat? What if someone else was sitting here before me, and they had a bleeding hangnail on the exact same spot? What about toilet seats – people could bleed on them, or worse, masturbate on them? What about cuts on fingers when we shake people's hands? (98)

With the benefit of historical hindsight, Reza's fears may come across as neurotic; however, they were highly resonant in the American public's understanding of AIDS. One Columbia study even reported that by 1989 approximately 20% of participants still thought the disease could be spread through sharing a glass, a toilet seat, or shaking hands (Singer and Rogers 13). While these numbers were lower than in years previous, they underline how misinformation campaigns can dominate the public's consciousness.

Perhaps the only member of the Reagan administration whose goal was to properly educate Americans was Surgeon General Everett Koop. In 1988, Koop released an information pamphlet, *Understanding AIDS*, helping to dispel harmful myths, including the myth that AIDS could be transmitted through surfaces. Despite twenty million copies being distributed across the country, some misinformation would continue as conventional wisdom ("National Library of Medicine"). Koop's inability to reset public attitudes demonstrates how entrenched our initial notions and ideas can become. For the better part of the 1980s, the government did not strive to combat misinformation, allowing fiction to run rampant and dominate the narrative. How can anyone suddenly start believing the right thing after years of misinformation?

We see the theme of challenging misinformation during Reza's initial visit with Uncle Stephen. For Reza, meeting Uncle Stephen means confronting head-on his fears and anxieties about coming out and living as a gay man. This is unease that, again, Art immediately detects: "He shakes Stephen's hand, and Stephen wipes more sweat from his face. Reza smiles politely, but I can tell he's afraid. He doesn't cross into the apartment" (113). Leading up to this moment, Reza's only interactions with AIDS victims were through a magazine page or television screen, allowing for a degree of separation. Before he never had to interrogate his preconception of what being an AIDS patient would be like, instead assigning horror to the idea and committing to repression. Through his new friendship, Reza begins to question these ideas. He learns to understand that just because Stephen is dying does not mean that he is tragic.

Gabriel Duckels describes Uncle Stephen as the "moral center of the novel" who takes on a "teacher-mentor-fairy-godmother role" ("Melodrama" 318). Stephen welcomes Art, and eventually Reza, into the Queer community, teaching them about canonical cultural history and the importance of icons such as Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, and Marilyn Munroe. Stephen's "Queer 101" note cards "demonstrate the very real need to pass down queer history from generation to generation…particularly true of the 'plague years'" (Duckels, "Popular Music" 14). By sharing his interests, including the artists and films that shaped him, Stephen imparts a wealth of knowledge that would have otherwise been lost. The note cards exemplify the place where the personal becomes the political.

Through Uncle Stephen, Art and Reza further explore the world of AIDS activism, taking the initiative to get involved. Nazemian pulls from real history to depict the New York Stock Exchange protest, which fought against price gouging on pharmaceutical drugs such as AZT. Art throws himself into the project, compelled by his overflowing love for victims and more existential reasons: "I don't want to die before my time […]. I don't know how I'll ever begin to live while this disease is raging. Who will love me when all they'll see when they look at me is a possibility that I may kill them?" (24). Art's existential anxiety mirrors Reza's, as they both fear the implications of living as a Queer man during the AIDS crisis.

Fittingly, the novel's core romance begins developing after Reza attends the Stock Exchange protest, and Art encounters him in the crowd. Leading up to this moment, Reza demonstrates little interest in politics or activism, opting to conform to the status quo and remain silent: two things Art refuses to do. Reza later reflects on his decision to attend, stating "I was drawn to it because I had

heard him discuss it. I had to be there…. I want to know more, but I am still too scared" (95–96). Art influences him to go and expose himself to the outside world, conveying the immediate impact and the importance of exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences. By attending the protest, Reza confronts his fears head-on and rejects the societal and family expectations that control and repress him. The Stock Exchange protest symbolizes the place where the political and personal overlap.

As the novel progresses, Reza tackles and conquers the fears and anxieties that previously controlled him. He involves himself politically, severs his relationship with Judy by admitting his affection for Art, and promptly comes out to his conservative family. Nazemian foreshadows this transformative shift early on when Reza violently rips out his braces, labeling them as: "mouth invaders, maybe, or teeth terrorists" (1). Through this act, Reza breaks through the constraints that contort his body into an inflexible mold, just like he breaks through the misinformation and societal norms that previously dominated his worldview. The action symbolizes the futility of these constraints, conveying how each person has the agency and power to overcome them.

Reza's character progression leads to his decision to have sex with Art, an idea that causes him anguish, anxiety, and dread at the beginning of the novel. This is Reza's biggest hurdle, primarily because of his exposure to and internalization of misinformation and myths about AIDS. Interestingly, Uncle Stephen's death accelerates Reza's decision-making, as he promptly declares in the next chapter: "I need supplies" (379), meaning condoms. While Uncle Stephen welcomes Art and Reza into the Queer community, he also underscores the impermanence of life. When attempting to alleviate Reza's anxiety around sex, Art expresses this idea: "What if AIDS is our warning that life is short?' What if it's telling us that we should love when we have the chance?" (307). So, while Reza and Art experience immense grief, Uncle Stephen's death also brings about the reminder that they must live in the moment.

Nazemian's novel engages with the politicization of the AIDS epidemic by re-visiting and showcasing perspectives that were deemed insignificant and intentionally buried by the Reagan administration and public health officials. While Uncle Stephen, Art, and Reza are fictional characters, they represent diverse experiences now given a voice and immortalized on the page. Further, Nazemian highlights the possibility of self-acceptance through Reza, who goes from fearing coming out and living openly to doing exactly that. Through his relationships and exposure to activism, Reza breaks away from the rigid expectations that constrain

and repress him and begins questioning the misinformation and myths about AIDS that have been spoon-fed to the public. He moves away from repression and towards true acceptance. Queer teen readers today may not suffer from the same kinds of misinformation and silencing that Reza does, but Nazemian offers them a valuable role model of self-examination and self-liberation with regard to their own situations of oppression, fear, and silencing.

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Like it Matters: Body and Identity in *Like a Love Story*

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Discourse analysis claims individuals construct their identities individually and cooperatively, with the influence of others within the discourse activity or community they are participating in, thus implying that identity creation is a two-way process. Individuals construct their identities through various elements, including behavioral, contextual, and verbal within their discourse. For example, an individual can construct their identity as female by choosing to wear skirts and dresses, and others can choose to accept the individual's identity or challenge it if their views conflict with the individual's presented identity. A common challenge others assert is claiming an individual cannot be female due to their biological sex being male. Judith Butler contributes to this argument with their theory of gender performativity, in which individuals construct their gender identities through the "repeated stylization of the body" (*Gender Trouble* 33). Butler's idea originates from their criticism of feminist theory, and their theory of gender performativity is essential to understand how Young Adult (YA) fiction portrays gay male characters. Specifically, Abdi Nazemian in *Like a Love Story* (2019) purposefully uses the historical context of the AIDS crisis to demonstrate how society's perception of AIDS and homosexuality dictates and determines an individual's worthiness to live. Society's decisions on who is worthy influence how individuals outside societal norms perform their identities; importantly, many of these individuals perform in a state of vulnerability, which adds another layer of complexity. Nazemian illustrates this with Reza's and Art's respective identity performances that contrast due to their differing views on their lives' worthiness: Reza believing his own and gay men's lives are worthless, and Art believing the opposite.

The history of Queer YA literature and early representations of fictional gay male characters help us understand Nazemian's text and context. In "Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel: Repression and Power in Gay Male Adolescent Literature," Roberta Seelinger Trites critiques how Queer discourse and gay male characters in YA literature convey a contradictory message to the readers, one of superficial freedom from their repressions, but also one that continued to

undermine such freedom due to the dependency of gay YA literature on its gay characters' repression. Her critique is dependent on Michel Foucault's idea of knowledge being contingent on power. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that power produces knowledge, and therefore, "power and knowledge directly imply one another" (27). Trites also explains how Western ideals define pleasure, and hence heteronormative values. She then establishes the relationship between knowledge, pleasure, and power as the discourse of gay male characters in YA literature to illustrate the paradoxical message of Queer YA literature.

Trites pulls evidence from early works of Queer YA literature such as John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (first published in 1969) to demonstrate her argument that gay characters are disempowered due to lacking physical pleasure. Trites discusses the omission of physical intimacy involving gay characters, and how, when intimate, they are described as uncomfortable. The gay protagonist in Donovan's novel, Davy, identifies such physical intimacies as "unusual" (Donovan, qtd in Trites 145). Early works of gay YA often envelop physical intimacy of, and with, gay characters in a negative rhetoric that illustrates homosexuality as an activity an individual will engage in because of unfortunate circumstances or terrible events. Trites supports this argument with the inference that Davy's mother had "driven him to engage in homosexuality" because his troubled home life allowed him to be more susceptible to this deviant behavior (144). Such negative discourses emboldened the larger idea of homosexuality being "unnatural" in early Queer YA literature, ultimately strengthening homophobic discourses despite their superficial portrayals of Queer freedom.

Trites's critique is mainly of Queer discourses and the verbal aspect of the depiction of fictional gay male characters. However, it is important to realize that these depictions may have emerged partly because of the environment that the characters are living in. One of many factors of identity portrayal in discourse analysis is an individual's environment, which includes what is materially and socially present. Social aspects, such as ideologies, norms, and stereotypes, play a significant role in influencing an individual's behaviors and ultimately their identity performance. Therefore, it would not be strange at all to question why the gay characters such as Davy from Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* perform their identities in a certain way in response to the societal norms imposed on them. Like Donovan, Nazemian explores this same question in *Like a Love Story.* He uses the historical context of the AIDS crisis to show how Queer characters, in a state of vulnerability, perform their identities through repeated

behaviors that act as responses to the knowledge that society finds them unworthy.

Nazemian's choice to situate his work within the AIDS crisis puts *Like a Love Story* in the past, and specifically within this intense social issue targeting gay men. Nazemian does this to present two ideas: one, how the relationship between power and knowledge, in Foucault's terms (28), controls society's perceptions of AIDS and homosexuality; and two, how those perceptions frame gay men as vulnerable. In the novel, it is heavily implied that those with a wide exposure to the public use their power to spread negative rhetoric that homosexuality causes AIDS (as Trites similarly contends). For instance, a member of the ACT UP committee complains about the news report placing news concerning the victims of AIDS at the end of the paper. He describes the report as "hidden in the back of the newspaper" (Nazemian 17), which highlights how the news outlet rids their report about AIDS and homosexuality of salience. This deliberate action by a group with power implies the AIDS crisis is unworthy of sharing.

The lives of gay men who are experiencing AIDS are similarly unworthy, whether relegated to the back pages or not. Reza's introduction to AIDS is from *Time,* where a (real-life) cover article about AIDS is titled the "AIDS Hysteria" (8). He then connects AIDS to "sickness, disease, lesions" (8), and eventually death, which depicts homosexuality through negative rhetoric. These descriptions frame gay men associated with AIDS to be in a state of unnecessary attention ("hysteria") but also vulnerability. Butler describes it as a state with the "possibility of injury" (171), lacking proper infrastructural support, and deprived of power ("Bodies That Still Matter" 177 & 180–181). This was obviously true for gay men, given the fact that they were targeted by society for being deviants and overall lacked support for ending the epidemic.

This ability to stress specific information and assert certain claims demonstrates the power media has over society's knowledge. The media's spread of information on AIDS and homosexuality has heavily influenced mainstream beliefs because what is widely shared is assumed to be more credible. There are several instances in the novel when characters believe the incorrect narratives that media propagate about AIDS and homosexuality, such as with both Judy's and Reza's mothers. Believing homosexuality is a danger to society, and that AIDS is a result of being gay, the two emphasize these claims by the way they describe homosexuality. Judy's mother describes AIDS as "a disease you get because of a behavior" (84) when talking to Judy about Uncle Stephen. Her use of the word "behavior" conveys how she views homosexuality as an action an individual willingly decides

to perform. However, homosexuality is not something an individual chooses to be; most definitely, it is not something that is chosen knowing the individual will face discrimination from society, as Butler explains with their claim that agency is paradoxical. During an interview, Butler asserts individuals are affected by how they are addressed based on societal norms that start upon their birth and, most importantly, "against [their] will" (Butler, qtd. in Ahmed 485). Therefore, despite individuals being able to perform who they wish to be, they are thrown into a world with established norms against their will at the same time. Yet, Judy's mother believes the media's claim, and naturally society's narrative, about homosexuality, exemplifying the influence of knowledge shared by those in power.

Akin to Judy's mother, Reza's mother also follows the knowledge shared by the media concerning homosexuality. Her belief aligning with the media is evident by the fact she never uses the terms "homosexual" or "gay" throughout the novel. She firmly denies Reza's homosexuality by asserting he is "not like these other men" (264), refusing to address her son by a proper term. Her decision to not use the term erases the existence of gay men in her language; if one does not exist within the language that society uses, then it is impossible to be considered important, much less recognizable. This relates to Butler's claim, based on Hegel's claim, that if someone's identity does not adhere to the established societal norms, then they are void of recognition, and therefore unintelligible (Hegel, qtd in Butler, *Undoing Gender* 31). This is the phenomenon that results from the narratives media circulated during the AIDS crisis; these two fictional mothers' belief in this negative narrative exemplifies the influence those in power have in spreading and constructing society's knowledge. But they also further propagate the overall narrative of gay men being dangerous and deviant. As a result, the relationship between power and knowledge that perpetuates this narrative undermines the value of gay men's lives, which is most evident in social issues such as the AIDS crisis. For this reason, Nazemian setting his novel in the past and specifically within the AIDS crisis makes his choice purposeful and important.

I suggest that these popularized perceptions of AIDS and homosexuality dictate an individual's value in society. The perceptions the AIDS crisis creates arise from the crisis devaluing and erasing the existence of gay men. In response, this is exactly what Nazemian displays in how Reza and Art perform their identities. Despite both identifying as gay, they contrast in their identity performances due to differing views on the worth of their own lives. It is evident throughout the novel

that Reza fears the threats of being gay during the AIDS crisis and believes his life is worth less than others'. Due to this fear and fixed belief in his life's low value, Reza performs his identity by concealing his homosexuality to avoid receiving attention from others. On the other hand, Art does not believe in the media's narratives about AIDS and homosexuality, firmly believing in his life's value, which is evident in that he knows and wants gay men "to mean something" (303). The messages the AIDS crisis spreads about gay men cause Art and Reza to perceive the value of their lives in a different light.

At the start of the novel, Reza attracts the attention of others such as Judy and Art. Other characters also see Reza as a literal stranger, being a new student from Toronto. But Reza further feels himself being a stranger due to his sexual orientation, which is something others are not aware of yet and that he continues to hide. He is constantly living within the "atmosphere of potential harm" (Butler, "Bodies That Still Matter" 179) constructed by his family members and his school environment that reinforces his looming death. In response to this vulnerability, he is determined to conceal his homosexuality to gain recognition based on societal norms, and for the benefit of other people's comfort. Hence, he performs the identity of a stereotypical mother's boy, acting prim and proper to avoid creating trouble. We see this in how Reza is sparse with his words, choosing to be quiet. The well-established image of gay men being a "plague," as the news report states in the novel (17), controls Reza's thoughts about his sexuality and imposes the idea that the lives of gay men are unworthy to live in society. Being aware of and believing in these ideas, Reza actively attempts to stay quiet and be careful with his words to avoid revealing his forbidden sexuality. Reza's performance of this behavior is clear in the perspective of the other protagonists as they describe him "[choosing] his words carefully" and being soft spoken (30). He also uses more formal language, asking Art to "release" his hand, and telling Art he will "purchase" the Madonna CD (50, 65). Reza's choice to be more formal in discourse instead of using colloquial common words or phrasal verbs indicates how his proper behavior to hide his sexuality floods over to his verbal habits. His attempt to conceal his homosexuality demonstrates that he behaves in a way that is less likely to be perceived as a source of trouble for people around him.

Although his proper behaviors depict his performance as a mother's boy, they only hint at his general avoidance of trouble for others based on his attempt to hide his homosexuality. However, his performance of heteronormativity in the first half of the novel speaks volumes about how he views homosexuality and AIDS. He fears the death that is associated with being gay and attempts to

perform a heterosexual identity by dating Judy. Reza performs all the actions people assume a stereotypical boyfriend would: he gifts Judy her favorite flowers as he invites her on a date, he pays for their dinner and is called "a real gentleman," and he even buys them matching pins as a solidification of their heteronormative relationship (Nazemian 127). Reza's heteronormative performance exemplifies how he attempts to erase his vulnerability, as it indicates his fear of being gay. It also shows that Reza subscribes to the narrative portraying gay men as unnatural beings. He then acts upon that narrative with his heteronormative performance to ensure he does not create trouble, aligning with his performance of a proper boy.

Like Reza, the novel's second gay male protagonist, Art, is also in a state of vulnerability by identifying as gay. Under Butler's definition of vulnerability, he too faces the potential of being injured due to his sexual orientation. This is especially evident in the scenes where Darryl bullies and directs disgust at Art and the scenes including the police threatening arrests during the protests for gay men's lives. Nevertheless, in comparison to Reza, Art does not hide his gay identity out of fear, and he understands he can behave however he wants. He essentially performs agency, allowing himself to recognize the value of all bodies and lives in what Adriana Zaharijević claims is the result of agency (28). Art's performance of agency is an act of resistance, as he fights against these incorrect narratives that society presents about AIDS and homosexuality throughout the novel. What underlies his acts of resistance is his belief that gay men's lives are worthy and valuable like other lives, and he reasserts the worthiness of gay men's lives by being openly expressive of his sexual identity both through his fashion choices and his activism.

Art's gay identity performance exhibits his attempts to break free from the confines of societal norms promoting heteronormativity, in tangible and active ways. For example, he constantly presents his gay identity through his fashion choices: wearing eyeliner, tank tops, and combat boots, as well as dyeing his hair. Some of these choices, being more closely associated with women, are seen with disgust by others. For example, Darryl, who frequently provokes Art at school, remarks he "didn't think [Art] could get any gayer" (35) with his newly lavender-dyed hair. These instances of deviance convey Art's defiance of the bland school uniform that urges students to "conform to heterosexual norms" when he is amid other, mainly straight, students (16). Despite the disgust that Art receives, he continues to express his gay identity to essentially disrupt the societal norms of what a man should look like. Art's disruption clearly shows he, as a gay character,

is not recognized nor valued as much as those who adhere to societal norms, but he attempts to overthrow such perceptions.

Art does not conform to societal norms through fashion, and he also participates in activism for the AIDS victims and gay men that asserts the existence and worthiness of his own life and other gay men's lives. Art's involvement with the political group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) reveals his goal of asserting the importance of gay men's lives during the AIDS crisis by photographing the ACT UP protests. The most powerful example is when Art uses his camera with the broken lens to photograph the ACT UP members. His photos assert the existence of gay men and demand that their lives be considered worthy – worthy enough to receive recognition – while the broken lens placing a crack in each photo effectively paints the vulnerability of the ACT UP members, as well as all gay men's lives. Their photographs demand that society "remembers that [gay men are] under assault" (201) as they physically manifest the ACT UP committee's resistance and defiance.

Art's identity performance consequently demands a renegotiation of the value and worthiness of gay men's lives. We can see his performance as the abjection Butler once defined in an interview as an "enabling disruption" that offers the opportunity for the "radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all" (Blumenfeld & Breen 18). Given that the media-spread narratives about AIDS and homosexuality place no significance on the lives of gay men, the men are stripped of the recognition Art believes that they deserve. He wants himself and all other gay men to "mean something… know that we existed. That we lived," expressing his overall reason for photographing the ACT UP members (303). The reality during the AIDS crisis was that gay men lacked the recognition required "to be conceived as persons" in their society (Butler 32). So, Art's printing of the images he takes of the ACT UP members physically bring the lives of gay men into existence within a society where they are unintelligible, and it demands a renegotiation of their worth.

Following the reestablished existence of gay men, the novel ends with Reza and Art's happy ending when Reza shifts his perceptions on AIDS, homosexuality, and physical intimacy. Reza begins the novel as a gay male character who resembles gay male characters of earlier Queer YA novels, like Davy from Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, showing discomfort with intimacy. He rejects Art's intimate advances and avoids topics such as sex in several instances because he fears AIDS. For example, Art attempts to engage in intimacy with Reza in the darkroom, but is frustrated at Reza's resistance. Despite

Art's desire, Reza's persisting fear of AIDS leads him to believe that "AIDS is [their] warning" of worse events in the near future (307) and, for this reason, Reza finds intimacy with Art uncomfortable. However, after Uncle Stephen's death, Reza's perspective on homosexuality and AIDS changes. Though the narration does not say so, we see this change through Reza's actions. He buys supplies for sex in the following chapter and initiates sexual intimacy with Art, in contrast to the darkroom scene. In this moment, Reza experiences intimacy with Art without any hint of discomfort, and he says that "there is no more death or grief or distance" (388) during this experience. We see Reza finally separating homosexuality and AIDS from fears of death and disease. This allows him to engage in intimate acts with Art because he no longer sees being gay as something to fear, but as "the person [he's] been waiting to be" (387). This revelation leads Reza and Art to a positive sexual experience, unlike early Queer YA novels, conveying that Reza has overcome his fear of homosexuality and AIDS, and that he too recognizes his existence as a gay man now.

Even through all the harsh obstacles thrown at the protagonists in *Like a Love Story*, the two gay protagonists receive a happy ending,[16] as in many recently published Queer YA texts. The novel argues for the value of gay men's lives like all other lives, claiming Queer people are deserving of recognition. But what separates *Like a Love Story* from other recent Queer YA novels is how Nazemian purposefully sets his novel in the context of the AIDS crisis. His decision to set the novel in the past allows for the novel to be more realistic in comparison to the idealistic nature of much Queer YA literature today. For a realistic portrayal of Queer lives, the past setting emphasizes and intensifies the difficulties of being Queer. The two gay protagonists illustrate how these difficulties continue today, even as medication for AIDS is available, with their identity performances. By employing a past setting in the novel, Nazemian ultimately attempts to ensure the struggles Queer people have undergone and continue to undergo are not erased in literature because Queer people matter, both their bodies and identities.

[16] In the epilogue to the novel, set near our present, Art and Reza are no longer together, and Art has AIDS that is controlled by medication, but neither of these facts changes the happiness of the novel's ending.

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Drawing Lines: Henna, Identity, and Queerness in *The Henna Wars*

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Introduction

Nishat, a Queer Muslim Bangladeshi girl, challenges the stereotype of Queer Young Adult (YA) romance stories by representing an invisible community. Written by Adiba Jaigirdar, the character Nishat in *The Henna Wars* carves parallels between the traditional and sacred practices of Muslim Bengali culture and the endeavours of young Queer people. Layers of discrimination challenge Nishat's identity: from homophobia within her ethnic Bengali culture to the homophobia and racism she experiences within the Western Irish culture at her all-girls Catholic school. Cultural surveillance and isolation push Nishat to use henna as a way to connect herself to her South Asian roots and her femininity. The use of henna throughout the novel also acts as a catalyst for the sapphic enemies-to-lovers plot between her and Flavia, a closeted bisexual Brazilian girl at her school, associating the acceptance of Queer sexuality with cultural celebration and traditionalism. Henna, or *mehndi*, is a botanical plant that can be ground into a paste to stain the hands or feet with intricate designs. Women commonly adorn it during celebratory events such as weddings or Eid across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This paper aims to understand how Jaigirdar represents the complex identity of Queer South Asian Muslim girls through cultural and religious practices and norms by answering how henna indexes identity.

Being Queer Within Her Cultural and Religious Upbringing

Bengali society, like many South Asian cultures, passes down traditionalist ideology regarding sexuality, gender roles, marriage, and family structures. These communities function as collective societies, promoting assimilation into groups that are characterized by protection, loyalty, and obedience from birth to death (Dutta 220). Family association helps dictate social status and consequently privilege, esteem, protection, community, and support systems. To be ostracized by a community or family within a collective society forces individuals to rely on themselves, making them extremely vulnerable. Long-term survival outside of someone's family can be unstable and risky because it puts the individual at a

significantly lower social status and limits their chances of securing a marriage. Marriage joins families together, allowing communities to gain higher social status or wealth and esteem. Therefore, the growth of family and community also gives people strength and power. The importance of marriage is marked early in *The Henna Wars* when Sonny Appu's wedding serves as a trigger for Nishat to come out to her parents. She is hoping to be received with acceptance and a vision of a future marriage that would make her parents joyful and proud, despite her romantic interest going against the traditional norms of Bengali customs (11).

Hierarchical attitudes regarding social status and gendered power dynamics are normal within Bangladeshi society, emphasizing masculine and feminine norms. These conservative values dictate heteronormative family structures, roles, and responsibilities–especially regarding child-rearing–with a masculine power hierarchy. Marriage acts as the ultimate form of social networking, allowing marginalized and elite groups to build networks with people of similar status that strengthen an unequal structure (Dutta 221). Nishat braves going against the norm because her parents have previously defied it by choosing to have a love marriage. Choosing a spouse is an individualistic action uncommon for traditional Bangladeshi unions, where parents arrange a marriage with the most socially suitable or economically beneficial partner. The shame and dishonour that follow this decision continue to haunt Nishat's Ammu and Appu, for they were criticized and humiliated for going against their parents' wishes (117). They became ignominious for their selfish choices, a stigmatization that continued when they moved and integrated into a Western country, forcing them to be critical of how their family's choices are reflected in their community. However, when Nishat comes out to her parents, they respond in refusal, fear, and shame, emphasizing that Nishat has the choice of being gay and humiliating her parents further, or protecting her family's dignity by pretending to be straight and rejecting her queerness (118). Marrying a girl would put her family at risk of alienation and ostracism for supporting homosexuality and supporting the production of a family dynamic that would not pass down the attitudes of a traditional family dynamic. They would fall to the bottom of the social class hierarchy and be subjected to public humiliation at cultural and religious gatherings, a detrimental event within their culture.

Parallels between culture and religion blend for many Bengali people within the diaspora. The movement of people throughout history has also resulted in the merging and acquisition of cultural and religious practices. While both influence behaviours, beliefs, and collective identity, each can mutually dictate the formation

of laws and social norms. Ostracism, harassment, bullying, assault, and institutional neglect make Bangladesh's conservative society dangerous and hostile for people to be Queer (Macdonald 8). Same-sex intercourse is outlawed in Bangladesh with the punishment of life in prison (Macdonald 1), a sentiment commonly registered within Islam. Under Shariah law in the Quran, "homosexuality is criminalized under Hadd punishment" (Hendricks 44), a categorization of fixed punishments based on "limits (prescribed by) God" (Rahman 237). While the Quran is the edifice of Islam, the Hadith serves as a testament to the prophet Mohammad. The Hadith is the ideology, teachings, and actions of the prophet Muhammad, which influences the "mindset of early Muslims and the kind of early leadership that shaped the face of Islam" (Hendricks 33). Justifications for hate crimes against homosexuals and sexual minorities commonly stem from the Hadith (Hendricks 33).

Sonny Apu preaches a similar sentiment to Nishat, claiming "Muslims aren't gay" (100). She claims queerness is a "sickness" (101), demonstrating a belief that queerness can be cured and reversed with the right remedy. Attributing mental illness to Nishat's sexuality identifies her personhood as a hazard, pushing her self-perception into disorder. In Bangladesh, Queer people are commonly prescribed anti-psychotics for the abnormality of their sexuality when seeking medical advice and assistance (Macdonald 11). Failing to understand that queerness is not a Western ideology that can be picked up and practiced creates the misconception that queerness is a choice of morals that can be denied and unlearned. Her family believes Nishat has subconsciously picked up lesbianism from TV, films, and books (100). Her Ammu displays similar anxieties regarding Nishat's influence on her sister Priti when they engage in conversation about Instagram, distracting Priti from her studies (93). Pushed by the belief that queerness comes as a result of being unfocused and succumbing to media propaganda, Nishat gets affection and acceptance from her parents when they see that she is focused on her academics. They throw her a celebratory *dawat* (158) because they believe she is doing the right thing by re-focusing on a future suitable for a Bengali girl and getting over her lesbianism.

The *dawat* (a Bengali feast and social gathering) also showcases how important it is to show face in Bengali customs: proudly presenting achievements and blessings to the community or family to maintain a positive face. She understands that there is rejoicing in the community when she makes her people proud. The underlying threat of consequences if she chooses to bring shame to her family is highlighted by reminding her what she is risking. Nishat is tormented by the belief that her

family will do something drastic when she has brought too much shame and dishonour to them by conflicting with her community's religion and risking the collective cultural structure. Nishat realizes that she is a problem case, "a family matter" that needs to be discussed and solved outside of her earshot but still within a small circle of confidants (100). Her apprehension is present every time she feels alienated from her parents' warmth and affection. Interestingly, Nishat's sexual identity is unwavering throughout the novel despite moments like these causing her internal conflict and pain, because she is aware of the discriminatory restrictions in between the rare acknowledgment and connection she gets.

Henna as a Connection to Community

Over centuries of migration and assimilation practices, religious ideologies and cultural practices in South Asia get blended and muddled, including the traditional practice of henna. Jaigirdar introduces henna as a part of a Muslim-Bengali wedding tradition for the bride and female relatives to adorn on their hands in celebration. Diasporic communities in the Western world have been observed to maintain some aspects of traditional Muslim weddings, like some forms of the *Mehndi* (Rozario and Samuel 360), but are mixed with their ethnic cultural traditions, making distinctions between race and religion in weddings quite difficult. The adornment of henna for a South Asian bride can signify marriage, fertility, and femininity. The Hindu origin story of henna similarly attributes henna to traditional femininity within a heteronormative society. Parvati, the mother goddess and symbol of fertility is depicted in the *divya kath* or divine story wearing henna to please her husband Shiva (Miczak 204). Parvati's archetype links henna to fertility and marriage, while implying its application is to fulfill the expectant role of a woman: as amiable and someone who prioritizes beautifying herself for her husband.

Documentations of henna practices can be found trailing the spread of Islam, with origin stories dating back to Fatima, the prophet Mohammas's daughter (Miczak 203). Though she may be considered to be the first influential woman to adorn it, Miczak points out that henna stains must have been used and adorned by women in Mecca before Fatima for Mohammad (c. 600 AD) to fall in love with it (Miczak 203). The adornment of henna during the festivities of Eid–a Muslim celebration of the end of Ramadan–is also common. Therefore, we can assume that the exclusivity that Nishat expresses as a henna artist is tied to both her religious and cultural background. She claims to do henna because it is "a part of [her] culture" making it inappropriate for others to practice the craft if it is not

engraved within their culture, as with Flavia's situation (111). There is also a marked difference between the two girls' styles of art: Flavia creates sharp, edged patterns (96), and Nishat pulls from Bangladeshi styles such as the Peacock (235), mandalas, flowers, and leaves (96).

Nishat's henna connects her to her grandmother who had practiced the craft in Bangladesh since she was Nisha's age. When Nishat and her sister would visit her in Bangladesh, her Nanu would "spend hours applying intricate beautiful patterns to [their] palms" (20). The time and experience of application suggest bonding with family and other female relatives or community members. Despite the distance, the lineal connection of henna being passed down in her family signifies a stronger connection to a collective culture, where the teachings of ancestors and elders are passed down. Nishat considers how the craft could have been a family tradition because her Ammu had also dabbled in the craft, but long left it when moving to Ireland and had no one to practice on (79). Now, Nishat practices similar styles, aiming to perfect the craft to her Nanu's calibre. Henna takes place within a collective community, where business and opportunity rely on the support of fellow community members. Despite the homophobia within her community, Nishat relies on her community's appraisal of her work. While showcasing her work online, she feels comforted and hopeful for the future of her business when Desi people appreciate her designs (77). Again, during her celebratory *dawat* she hopes the aunties there will admire her work enough to pay her to do it during Eid (158). She is also able to outsource her business to the public by setting up shop within her Abbu's restaurant. Financial prospects, clientele, business growth, and protection are all dependent on her reputation and a public image that is acceptable to the community–which could be harmed by coming out as a lesbian. This proves true when trying to outsource business to her white classmates at school, and she is met with disparagement of her henna stall after being outed (188).

Indexing Femininity and Sexuality

Nishat's ability to do henna helps index her feminine qualities making her more accepted within her community. There are strict gender roles apparent within traditional Bangladeshi culture and Islam. Connections to bridal tradition and historical religious beings depicting henna strictly adorned by female bodies, suggests the practice is strictly for females. Despite there being male characters that acknowledge the henna within the novel, no adult male body adorns it, emphasizing the strict binary norms surrounding the practice. By practicing the beautifying ritual, and keeping the craft to other female community members, she

is upholding the traditional gender binary norm and her traditional religious and cultural values. Upholding henna as a strictly feminine practice helps display an image of heteronormality to her community, saving her and her family from possible rejection and ostracization.

Disregarding the possibility of doing henna on men may be a reflection of her Muslim background. Online discussion threads about contemporary Muslim ideology suggest that henna on boys is considered inappropriate because it has been customary for women to adorn it, and by wearing henna men and boys are imitating women (see, for example, Azka *r/muslim*). Within the Western diaspora, modern views around gender encourage men, including Queer men and gender-diverse people to adorn henna. While it is not as popularized, it is not completely unheard of. Uddin from *Them* shares stories from Queer South Asian people, predominantly men and non-binary people, who adorn henna as a way to explore a natural pull to femininity, goddess-like energy, or their "divine femininity" (Uddin). Many Queer men and non-binary people are marginalized from their South Asian community, so embodying a "motherly figure" with the help of henna encourages support and the formation of a new–more welcoming–community (Uddin).

This notion of imitating the opposite gender is largely considered haram in Muslim customs and goes against teachings within the Hadith. It was narrated by Abu Hurairah, a close companion to the prophet Mohhamad and narrator of many Hadith verses, "that the Messenger of Allah cursed women who imitate men and men who imitate women" [English translation] (Sunan Ibn Majah Hadith 59). The Quran and Hadith are primarily addressed to heteronormative demographics, and of course contemporary terms such as homosexual, transgender, or non-binary are not used. The description of mukhanathans replaces some of these concepts in the Hadith, referencing their appearance and role in society through stories of them interacting with the prophet. They were publicly effeminate, "languid men (in body and voice/both involuntary and voluntary)" (Rowson 673), who "adapted feminine adornment" like henna on their hands and feet (675) and were not attracted to women (675). Blatant displays of cross-dressing were uncommon during the early period of Islam, aside from the muhanathans, but once brought to the prophet's notice they were banished (Rowson 673). The public display of henna helps identify the mukhanathan's femininity as well as homosexuality. The teaching vilifies practicing actions outside of the binary norm, also implying that by practicing henna as a Muslim man, one is going against God's blessings and ordinance.

Practicing henna may be a technique Nishat uses to keep hold of her identity as a South Asian Muslim, balancing it with being a Queer person struggling to gain acceptance within her community. Practicing a traditional feminine craft may have made it easier for her parents to accept her sexuality because she is presenting a traditionally feminine image, one that has been connected to conservative, heteronormative relationship dynamics. Nishat's Ammu asks Nishat not to cut off her hair, assuming it is a physical identifier of lesbianism. She uses Ellen DeGeneres's short hair as an example. Claiming she "looks like a lesbian" because "her hair is so short," Ammu is baffled when she learns that Ellen's long-haired wife is not bisexual (266). The prospect of appearing to be straight to her community makes the small Queer community invisible. Although this may be the reality for many Queer South Asian Muslims, it limits Jaigirdar's intentions of providing a story for identities that are not often depicted in mainstream media (Rajurkar). Ultimately, readers relating to Nishat's identity get the message that people should still abide by cultural norms.

Conflict in the Irish Community

In the case of Nishat, her identity has been shaped by her Western upbringing along with the social and religious expectations within the Bangladeshi-Bengali diaspora. Nishat's personhood is "living, breathing proof" that being gay and a Muslim are not mutually exclusive (100). Nor is being gay a criminal offence in Ireland, compared to Bangladeshi culture. Within her Irish-Catholic school, her identity as a Muslim faces constant criticism because she is different from the majority White-Catholic population. She gets pestered with questions about the modesty of her religion, regardless that she is not properly practicing it (113). Being subjected to racist rumours and insensitive questions about her religion erodes her level-headedness.

The resulting conflict of being condemned for her sexuality within her religion and ethnic culture and for her religion and ethnic culture in Irish society causes Nishat to feel a constant stream of stress, anxiety, and sadness. Her support systems are limited to her sister, best friends, and Flavia (her school crush), which progressively destabilizes as Nishat struggles to fare against homophobia and racism. Her sexuality goes against the school's Catholic ethos, according to her anonymous classmate (167). Nishat's autonomy and identity get swept from under her when her choice is taken away, feeling as if she's "become a passive in [her] own life" (167). Being outed to the entire school and receiving more stigmatization and discrimination further destabilizes her rationality.

This only pushes her to go to extreme lengths to ensure she beats Flavia's henna business in the competition, assuming she has outed her. Nishat is angry and frustrated that Flavia is claiming her cultural tradition (henna) by practicing it as an artist, rather than adorning it as a supportive gesture of celebration in an appropriate context. This fervour for progressing her business over Flavia's may be due to henna and the class business competition being a tangible, physical practice that keeps her pushing through the disparities she faces because of her identity (125). She has control over her work and her business, giving her a sense of security when she has little control over the effects of her identity. Surveillance of a collective society, isolation of being Queer and unaccepted within her culture, and discrimination within her school community push Nishat to use henna as a means of coping with the hardships that come her way. It quiets her mind because it requires focus and purposeful intent while doing it, and henna gives her happiness when she receives admiration and support for her completed work (22).

The act of applying henna on Flavia progresses intimacy and trust between the two girls, showing an acceptance of self-identity for both. Henna progresses Nishat's romance with Flavia by bringing them both physically close. This gives Nishat a chance to explore her romantic feelings and desires for Flavia, marvelling over small touches, close proximity, and the trust Flavia has for Nishat's skillset to do her henna. This also provides for moments of vulnerability and romance as they share kisses, finally acknowledging each other's feelings for one another (239). Although Flavia struggles to understand the problem of cultural appropriation with her practicing the craft, she uses henna as a way to try to connect with Nishat, after bonding over it at the wedding they initially met at (237). The progression of the sapphic enemies-to-lovers trope through henna ties the practice into their romance, imbuing the craft with their sexuality.

Acceptance Through Henna

Henna provides Nishat opportunities to gain acceptance with her classmates and her own self-identity. It is also used as a vessel for reconciling her relationship with her mother since coming out.

Despite the past tensions between Nishat and her mother, Ammu shows her support by coming to her business display during her school's business competition gallery. She still wants Nishat to do her henna despite her stall being vandalized by her classmates for being gay, just prior. The application process provides a bonding experience for the two, when her Ammu and Appu can see the violent behaviours that occur due to Nishat being a minority (257). This

triggers her mother to relate her own experiences of needing to fit in and be accepted in a community and family (267). By the end of the application, her mother praises her work, showing that she is proud of her daughter, a sentiment of love and acknowledgment to Nishat (257). In this sense, henna is again depicted as a practice of bonding.

Similarly, girls in her class come to get their henna done as a sign of support and respect when Nishat sets up a henna booth in her father's restaurant, admiring the work enough to pay Nishat. She notes this experience is the "first time anything resembling respect has been aimed at [her] from [her] fellow classmates" (231). This is a significant moment of acknowledgment and acceptance, given that her classmates outed her to the entire school and often subjected Nishat to forms of homophobia and racism. Here the practice of henna is a signifier of cultural pride. After she is outed, girls will still come to her to get henna done, further signifying henna as a craft of pride and acceptance.

Conclusion

Through the character of Nishat, the novel explores how traditional cultural practices can both reinforce and challenge societal norms. Henna serves as a powerful tool for Nishat to assert her identity and navigate the intersections of her queerness, her Muslim faith, and her South Asian heritage. It allows her to claim a space within her community while also challenging the boundaries of what is considered acceptable within that space, providing Nishat with a sense of grounding and belonging. The shared experiences with henna between Nishat and Flavia highlight the potential for cultural practices to foster understanding and acceptance of identity. As Nishat uses henna to bond with her family, classmates, and community, henna becomes a symbol of resilience and empowerment. Her ability to maintain her queerness in the face of societal pressures and cultural expectations speaks to the strength and courage required to live authentically. The unique intersectionality between race, religion, and sexuality in Jaigirdar's narrative resonates with readers who feel invisible or misrepresented by mainstream media, providing a sense of validation and belonging. This paper hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of how cultural symbols like henna can be reimagined and reclaimed by those seeking acceptance and self-affirmation. By doing so, it aims to offer solace and solidarity to those who, like Nishat, are navigating the challenges of living authentically in a world that often demands conformity.

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Beyond the Framework: Identity Formation in *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* through Marcia's Lens

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Introduction

Identity formation is a cornerstone of human development, shaping individuals' self-perception and engagement with the world. This developmental process is especially critical during adolescence, a period characterized by the quest to establish one's roles, values, and beliefs within a broader social context. A coherent sense of identity not only fosters self-esteem and psychological well-being but also facilitates effective social integration. James Marcia's Identity Status Theory, initially introduced in 1966 and refined over subsequent decades, categorizes identity development into four distinct statuses: Identity Diffusion, Identity Foreclosure, Identity Moratorium, and Identity Achievement. Each status is defined by different levels of exploration and commitment to roles, values, and beliefs, which in turn profoundly impact adolescents' self-esteem, autonomy, and psychological well-being. In Adiba Jaigirdar's novel *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* (2021), Marcia's Identity Status Theory can serve as a foundational framework for examining identity formation. However, its limitations are revealed when applied to the nuanced experiences depicted in the novel. Set against the backdrop of contemporary Ireland, the narrative explores the complex interplay of cultural expectations, family dynamics, and internal influences on identity development. While we can categorize both Hani and Ishu within the Identity Achievement status, their experiences illustrate the multifaceted nature of identity formation. These experiences underscore that a well-defined sense of self can coexist with behaviors that do not conform to traditional expectations of identity achievement, highlighting the necessity for a more flexible and inclusive understanding of this status.

James Marcia's Identity Status Theory

James Marcia's Identity Status Theory provides a sophisticated framework for understanding the processes of identity formation, particularly during adolescence. Building upon Erik Erikson's stages of psycho-social development, Marcia's theory delves deeply into the concepts of exploration and commitment in identity development. Erik Erikson, a seminal figure in Developmental Psychology, posited that adolescence is a pivotal period for the formation of identity. According to Erik Erikson's theory developed in 1968, the process of identity formation during adolescence involves a gradual evolution of the ego (Kroger 683). During this developmental stage, the various identifications from childhood are not merely discarded but are transformed into a more complex and integrated self-concept (Kroger 684). This transformation indicates that the simplistic identifications formed during childhood become inadequate as the individual matures (Kroger 684). Consequently, these early identifications are re-evaluated and restructured into a coherent and stable identity (Kroger 684). James Marcia, a highly respected psychologist, expanded on Erikson's ideas by developing an ego identity status model, which has become a widely accepted means of assessing the exploration and commitment dimensions of Erikson's identity formation concept. (Kroger 683). In this context, exploration refers to the process of questioning and experimenting with different roles, beliefs, and goals, while commitment refers to the degree to which an individual has settled on specific roles, beliefs, and goals after a period of exploration ("Identity in Adolescence" 160).

Marcia identified four distinct identity statuses: Identity Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Identity Diffusion ("Identity in Adolescence" 161). These statuses are not sequential stages but rather different patterns or processes that individuals might experience as they develop their identity (*Ego Identity*). Identity Achievement is characterized by a high level of both exploration and commitment ((*Ego Identity*). Individuals in this status have actively explored different options and have made strong commitments to particular goals, values, and beliefs (*Ego Identity*). They tend to be confident and possess a well-defined sense of self ("Identity in Adolescence" 163). Individuals in the Moratorium status are in the midst of exploration but have not yet made firm commitments (*Ego Identity*). They are actively questioning and considering various identity options (*Ego Identity*). This status is often associated with high levels of anxiety and uncertainty but also with a dynamic and flexible approach to identity formation ("Identity in Adolescence" 161). Foreclosure describes individuals who have made

commitments without a period of exploration (*Ego Identity*. These commitments are often based on parental or societal expectations rather than personal choice (*Ego Identity*). Individuals in this status may exhibit rigidity and a lack of openness to new experiences ("Identity in Adolescence" 164). Identity Diffusion is marked by a lack of both exploration and commitment (*Ego Identity*). Individuals in this status may appear apathetic or indifferent towards the process of identity formation. (*Ego Identity*). They often struggle with making decisions and may feel disconnected from a coherent sense of self ("Identity in Adolescence" 164). Marcia's Identity Status Theory not only categorizes identity statuses but also explores the various characteristics associated with each status. These characteristics include measures of external pressures, self-esteem, resistance to authoritarianism, internal locus of control and autonomy, and cognitive sophistication and ethical behavior. By examining these dimensions, Marcia's theory offers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in the development of personal identity during adolescence.

Applying James Marcia's Identity Status Theory to the characters Hani and Ishu from *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* reveals that both characters exemplify the Identity Achievement status, albeit in different ways. Hani, a Bengali Muslim teenager, demonstrates a high level of exploration and commitment by presenting her authentic self. Her commitment to her identity is underscored by her honesty and openness about her bisexuality, which is supported by her family. However, Hani struggles with the desire to be accepted by her friends, who do not fully understand or accept her sexual orientation. This external pressure adds complexity to her journey but does not diminish her strong sense of self. The supportive family environment enables her to navigate these challenges with confidence and clarity, characteristics that Marcia attributes to individuals in the Identity Achievement status. In contrast, Ishu, a Hindu teenager, exemplifies a strong sense of self and commitment to her values despite being uncertain about her sexual orientation. She demonstrates traits of Identity Achievement through her autonomy and confidence, particularly evident in her academic ambitions and her relationship with Hani. Ishu's aspiration to become Head Girl, though driven by a desire to meet her parents' expectations, showcases her unwavering dedication to her goals and values. While she has not explicitly labeled her sexual orientation, her actions and decisions reveal a deep level of self-awareness and commitment to her identity. Despite the rigid expectations set by her parents, Ishu remains steadfast in her commitments, embodying the confidence and well-defined sense of self that Marcia associates with Identity Achievement. Hani's and

Ishu's respective journeys underscore the critical role of exploration and commitment to diverse values in cultivating a coherent and stable identity. Their experiences also illuminate the limitations of Marcia's theory, suggesting that, while it provides a valuable framework, it may not fully encompass the diverse and dynamic nature of identity development in contemporary contexts.

Critique Of James Marcia's Identity Status Theory

Marcia's Identity Status Theory has been pivotal in advancing our comprehension of identity formation. However, it has encountered significant critiques, particularly for its Western Euro-centric viewpoint that posits Identity Achievement as the zenith of maturity (Côté & Levine 180). This perspective may not resonate with non-Western cultures, where communal needs frequently take precedence over individual identity. Côté offers a pointed critique of this theory, asserting that identity formation is shaped by a multitude of cultural and contextual factors. He observes that "Erikson's integration of sociological, historical, and psychological factors within one social psychological perspective has not been considered. Moreover, in focusing on the psychological states of individuals, certain processes seem to have been misidentified as outcomes" (Côté & Levine 148). This critique underscores the theory's oversight of how broader factors interplay in identity formation, and its propensity to misidentify ongoing developmental processes as definitive outcomes. Thus, while Marcia's framework provides invaluable insights, it necessitates adaptation to accommodate cultural variations and the nuanced complexities of identity formation. As Côté and Levine highlight, "the identity status paradigm is decidedly psychological and has ignored historical, sociological, and social psychological evidence that would make it more compatible with Erikson's interdisciplinary perspective" (Côté & Levine 173). This suggests that Marcia's theory could be significantly enhanced by integrating a wider array of influences to more accurately reflect Erikson's holistic approach.

The experiences of Hani and Ishu exemplify that deviations from Marcia's categories are not merely attributable to their Bengali backgrounds. Rather, these variations reflect the intricate interplay of personal crises, cultural expectations, and mutual support. Such complexities elude Marcia's rigid categorization of identity statuses. Kroger et al. Suggest that Marcia's presumption of a linear progression towards Identity Achievement oversimplifies the inherently non-linear nature of identity development (684). For instance, an individual might

achieve identity in one aspect of their life while grappling with anxiety in another, or exhibit confidence in some areas while remaining in exploration in others. Kroger et al. assert that identity formation involves fluctuations and regressions, with individuals cycling through different statuses multiple times (690). This underscores the necessity for a more nuanced framework that better accounts for the dynamic and culturally diverse nature of identity formation. Marcia's identity status categories fail to encapsulate the fluid and multifaceted nature of individual experiences, highlighting the need for a more flexible and inclusive understanding of this process.

Hani's and Ishu's developmental trajectories illustrate the intricate balance between personal aspirations and cultural and familial expectations, emphasizing the interplay between individual and collective identity formation. Hani's established bisexual identity juxtaposed with Ishu's ambiguous stance creates a dynamic interplay, underscoring the complexities and fluidity inherent in adolescent identity development. Their interactions and mutual support challenge Marcia's rigid categorization, highlighting that identity formation is not a linear process but a multifaceted experience shaped by cultural, familial, and societal factors. This nuanced perspective is reflected in the varying degrees of self-esteem, resistance to peer pressure, authoritarianism, autonomy, cognitive sophistication, ethical behavior, and anxiety observed in Hani and Ishu. Examining these dimensions will underscore the necessity for a more comprehensive and inclusive framework for understanding identity development beyond Marcia's traditional paradigm.

Characteristics Associated with Identity Achievement Status

Family Dynamics

Marcia posits that supportive and balanced familial relationships cultivate an environment conducive to identity exploration and achievement, whereas rigid and authoritarian family structures tend to result in foreclosure, and neglectful or inconsistent parenting often leads to diffusion ("Identity in Adolescence" 171). Applying this theoretical framework to the characters in *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* provides a nuanced understanding of how their respective family dynamics profoundly influence their identity formation processes.

Hani benefits from a supportive familial environment, significantly aiding her in achieving Identity Achievement. Her family's acceptance and open communication provide a foundation for her to explore and affirm her bisexual identity. Hani's assertion, "I trust Amma with my life" (22), underscores the profound trust and emotional security she feels towards her mother. This statement illustrates the depth of her reliance and the strength of the familial bond, with the phrase "with my life" signifying the extent of her trust. Her mother's unwavering support is integral to her emotional stability, reflecting a safe and nurturing environment crucial for identity exploration. Such an environment mitigates the anxiety typically associated with identity formation, enabling Hani to express her bisexuality without fear of rejection or judgment. The profound trust and secure relationship with her mother serve as a foundation for honest self-exploration, fostering a space essential for healthy identity development. This supportive environment is further emphasized by Hani's reflection "Abba and Amma have made things easy for me. How easily I can be myself with them. How easily they'll accept everything about me and their willingness to talk things out" (41). Her parents' readiness to engage in open dialogue and their unconditional acceptance provide Hani with a stable platform for self-exploration. The repeated emphasis on the word "easily" underscores a profound sense of comfort and security within her family dynamics, conveying that Hani's acceptance by her parents is seamless and natural, devoid of struggle or resistance. This distinction between mere tolerance and genuine acceptance is critical for her confidence and sense of security. The phrase "willingness to talk things out" implies a proactive and open-minded approach from her parents, indicating their active engagement in understanding and supporting her identity. This aspect of open communication is crucial in Marcia's theory, as it fosters an environment conducive to identity achievement. Their deliberate effort signifies that their support is both intentional and meaningful. This combination of ease of acceptance and open dialogue creates a nurturing and supportive familial environment, providing Hani with a foundation of unconditional love and support. In Marcia's framework, such an environment is pivotal for healthy identity formation, allowing individuals to explore their identity without fear of rejection or disapproval. Hani's reflection on her parents' acceptance bolsters her self-esteem and empowers her to explore her identity authentically. The absence of barriers or resistance in her familial relationships means she can navigate her identity with minimal anxiety, underscoring the importance of familial support in the complex process of identity formation. Therefore, Hani's experience illustrates how an environment

of open communication and unconditional support can empower individuals to embrace their true selves with confidence and security.

Ishu's identity formation is profoundly shaped by the stringent and demanding dynamics within her family, creating a striking juxtaposition to the nurturing environment that Hani experiences. Her parents' elevated expectations cultivate a pressurized environment that shapes her character and challenges her resolve. Ishu's introspection about her sister, "Like Ammu and Abbu haven't been doting on her, their perfect, favorite child, for our entire lives" (13), illuminates the constant comparison and heightened expectations she endures, particularly regarding her sister. This comparison fosters her resilience and motivates her to meet her parents' exacting standards. The phrase "perfect, favorite child" accentuates her sister's elevated status in their parents' perception, exacerbating Ishu's internal conflict and her struggle for parental approval. This struggle profoundly impacts her self-esteem and identity development, compelling her to assert herself in an environment lacking the unconditional support that Hani enjoys. Consequently, Ishu's experience epitomizes the complexities of identity formation under stringent familial expectations, illustrating how such pressures can impede the process of achieving a stable identity. Nevertheless, Ishu's determination and resilience ultimately guide her toward her own identity achievement, underscoring the intricate interplay between familial pressures and personal development.

Despite the pervasive lack of trust and emotional openness within her family, as exemplified by Ishu's poignant confession, "My sister is definitely not someone I can trust. She's not someone I can go to. Not even if she pretends that she is" (105), her parents' unwavering belief in her capabilities imposes an onerous burden on her to perpetually meet their lofty expectations. This is poignantly encapsulated in their avowal, "We don't have to worry about our Ishu" (27). This duality is of paramount significance as it elucidates the intricate familial dynamics at play. The scarcity of emotional vulnerability and open communication within her family engenders a milieu where Ishu's internal struggles are magnified by her emotional isolation. Her inability to rely on her sister for support intensifies her sense of loneliness, thereby exacerbating the challenges inherent in her quest for self-acceptance and identity formation. Conversely, her parents' confidence in her abilities, while ostensibly positive, introduces a complex layer of expectations. Their ostensibly reassuring statement, "We don't have to worry about our Ishu," serves to place an implicit yet formidable expectation on Ishu to maintain an

unerring facade of competence and success. This reflects an authoritarian familial structure where elevated expectations coexist with minimal emotional support, compelling Ishu to continuously strive for excellence without the requisite emotional scaffolding. The resultant of empowerment and pressure is crucial, as it illuminates the profound influence of external expectations on our identity formation. For Ishu, her parents' belief in her abilities could ostensibly act as a catalyst for motivation and achievement. However, the dearth of emotional openness and support transforms this potential source of empowerment into a significant wellspring of stress and anxiety. Consequently, the relentless pressure to meet these heightened expectations without a supportive emotional foundation profoundly complicates Ishu's trajectory towards identity formation. She is thus compelled to navigate the conflicting imperatives of familial duty and personal authenticity. These intertwined familial dynamics reveal the broader existential challenges that Ishu confronts in her identity formation journey. They illustrate how familial relationships, imbued with both empowerment and constraint, play a pivotal role in shaping the multifaceted and often arduous path of personal growth and self-realization.

Ishu's determination to make her parents proud, despite the emotional strain, is exemplified in her resolute declaration, "I have to show them that I'm willing to do whatever it takes" (18). This statement vividly illustrates her profound commitment to fulfilling her parents' expectations, even at the considerable cost of her own well-being. The significance of this quotation lies in its illumination of the considerable sacrifices Ishu is prepared to make, thereby reflecting the profound impact of familial pressure on her identity development. Her goal-oriented mindset, encapsulated in her fervent desire to distinguish herself from her sister, is further emphasized by her assertion, "I want my parents to see that I'm not my sister" (33). This desire to carve out a distinct identity, while simultaneously seeking parental approval, adds a layer of complexity to her identity formation process. It underscores the intricate interplay between her personal aspirations and the expectations imposed upon her, thereby revealing the multifaceted nature of her internal conflict. The psychological toll of this endeavor is considerable, as it highlights the internal conflict between her intrinsic desires and the extrinsic demands placed upon her by her family. Ishu's relentless pursuit of validation from her parents, evidenced by her willingness to do "whatever it takes," epitomizes the extent to which familial expectations shape her sense of self. This intense drive to prove herself distinct from her sister is indicative of the broader cultural and familial dynamics that compel her to

continuously strive for recognition and approval. Ishu's declarations serve as a testament to the profound influence of familial pressure on her identity development. They not only underscore the sacrifices she is willing to make but also illuminate the deep-seated internal struggles she faces in her quest for parental validation. The intricate dynamics within her family environment compel her to navigate a complex path toward self-realization, marked by the constant tension between her desire for individuality and the overarching need for familial approval.

The dynamics between familial influences and individual resilience present a more intricate picture of identity formation than Marcia's theory alone can capture. Hani and Ishu's experiences underscore the multifaceted interplay between family dynamics and personal development. Hani's supportive family environment facilitates her journey toward identity exploration and acceptance, closely aligning with Marcia's theoretical framework. In contrast, Ishu's rigid family structure fosters resilience while simultaneously imposing significant emotional barriers that complicate her identity formation. This dichotomy suggests that identity development is not merely a product of familial support or rigidity but is profoundly shaped by individual resilience and the unique pressures exerted by environment. Recognizing this complexity reveals that identity achievement involves navigating a spectrum of influences and challenges and highlights how commitment to our goals can coexist with the necessity for ongoing adaptation. This understanding calls for a more nuanced approach to identity formation, one that appreciates the dynamic and evolving nature of personal development within the broader context of societal and familial interactions.

Self Esteem

Self-esteem is a critical determinant in the process of identity formation, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and navigate their social environments. Within James Marcia's Identity Status Theory, high self-esteem is intricately linked with identity achievement, indicative of a stable and positive self-concept (*Ego Identity*). As Schwartz et al. elucidate, "participants in the Identity Achieved status scored highest on personal expressiveness" (515). This positive correlation between Identity Achievement and personal expressiveness highlights the pivotal role of self-esteem. Marcia's own research further substantiates this relationship, revealing that individuals with high identity achievement consistently rate

themselves more positively in social contexts and exhibit stable self-esteem ("Identity in Adolescence" 163). The characters Hani and Ishu serve as exemplars of this theory, demonstrating that high self-esteem is a crucial factor in attaining a stable and positive self-identity.

The interplay between spirituality and self-identity is crucial for achieving a balanced and resilient sense of self. Hani's practice of centering herself through prayer, as she avers, "I sit down with my Qur'an. The one thing that actually helps me center myself" (73) underscores the profound interconnection between spiritual practice and psychological resilience. This illustrates the stability of her self-esteem and her ability to sustain personal equilibrium through her religious convictions. The phrase "center myself" suggests a deliberate and conscious effort to achieve inner peace and balance, highlighting the significant impact of her spiritual practices on her mental well-being. By specifying "my Qur'an" Hani emphasizes a personal and intimate relationship with her faith, indicating that her religious identity is a deeply integrated aspect of her self-concept. This intersection of religious practice and self-esteem reveals a holistic approach to identity wherein spiritual beliefs fortify her self-concept, corroborating Marcia's assertion that individuals in the Identity Achievement status appraise themselves positively across various domains. Hani's recourse to her religious practices for solace and strength demonstrates that her self-esteem is not solely anchored in her sexual identity but is also intricately entwined with her spiritual beliefs, thereby providing a multifaceted foundation for her overall identity. The act of sitting down with her Qur'an as a centering ritual underscores a regular, sustained engagement with her faith, which supports her mental and emotional stability. This exploration reveals that Hani's spiritual grounding is a crucial component of her identity, enabling her to navigate societal challenges with a fortified sense of self and inner peace.

Hani's confidence in her bisexuality and social interactions serves as a compelling illustration of her elevated self-esteem. For instance, her assertion, "Because… I am bisexual" (20) epitomizes her steadfast confidence in her identity, notwithstanding societal pressures. This declaration transcends mere self-acceptance; it encapsulates her ability to articulate her identity with clarity and conviction, a hallmark of high self-esteem. According to James Marcia's Identity Status Theory, such unequivocal articulation of someone's identity signifies Identity Achievement, wherein an individual has traversed the exploration phase and made a definitive commitment to their identity. Hani's assertive proclamation thus indicates her successful navigation through the complexities of identity

exploration to arrive at a resolute self-understanding. Hani's emphatic statement, "I do know how I feel about girls" (21) underscores her unwavering certainty and self-assurance in comprehending her sexuality. This level of personal expressiveness aligns with Schwartz et al.'s findings on the correlation between identity achievement and personal expressiveness. Schwartz et al. contend that individuals who attain identity clarity are more adept at articulating their feelings and beliefs with confidence (516). Hani's declaration is a manifestation of her internal clarity and her capacity to communicate it effectively, exemplifying a secure and integrated sense of self.

Despite possessing a robust sense of self and confidence in her bisexual identity, Hani is beset by significant anxiety concerning her relationships and social acceptance. This anxiety is particularly acute in her interactions with her friends, who incessantly demand validation of her sexuality. For instance, Hani reflects on how her friend Aisling "seems to notice all of the little things that make us different. And she hates them all" (10). This reflection illuminates the profound sense of alienation Hani experiences as her friends fail to accept her authentic self. The shift in Aisling's perception from acceptance to intolerance, underscored by the intensity of "hates," reveals the quotidian realities that fuel Hani's anxiety. Her friends' refusal to embrace her differences thrusts her into a perpetual state of self-justification and stress. This emotional impact is significant, transforming friendships, which should ideally provide support, into arenas for validation. Hani's anxiety is further compounded by the pressure to conform to societal expectations, despite her commitment to her true self and her religious practices. She poignantly articulates this internal conflict, stating that it is "better that I just keep that part of my life wrapped up and hidden away in my own home" (10). While she exhibits confidence in her bisexuality, societal pressures necessitate the concealment of this aspect of her identity, leading to internalized stress and anxiety. The metaphor of being "wrapped up and hidden away" vividly conveys the act of concealing her authentic self, suggesting both physical and emotional containment. This concealment highlights the external pressures she endures and the psychological toll of living a bifurcated life, where her true self is suppressed to secure social acceptance. The interplay between these external pressures and resultant anxiety profoundly impacts Hani's self-esteem. The incessant need to justify her identity and conceal facets of herself progressively erodes her sense of self-worth. Despite her inherent confidence, the tension between her internal sense of identity and the external demand for validation engenders persistent

anxiety. The psychological burden of this concealment reveals the substantial impact of societal and relational pressures on our mental health and self-esteem.

Ishu manifests high self-esteem through her assertiveness and leadership qualities, consistently illustrated in her interactions with peers and her proactive approach to challenges. For instance, Ishu's decisive action in grasping Hani's hand and leading her into the rain, accompanied by the directive "We should go" (49), epitomizes her confidence and decisiveness. This act of leadership and initiative not only signifies her robust self-esteem but also underscores her capacity to assume control and make decisions with assurance. The imagery of guiding Hani into the rain metaphorically represents Ishu's readiness to embrace uncertainty and confront challenges directly, embodying her resilience and self-assured nature. Ishu's candidness about her lack of dating experience is evident as she states, "You know, I've never dated anyone before" (35), and her forthright declaration, "I'm not even a lesbian" (38), further accentuate her self-assuredness and comfort with her identity. These admissions demonstrate her ability to be transparent and sincere regarding her experiences and feelings, characteristics commonly associated with high self-esteem. Her willingness to acknowledge her inexperience in dating without apprehension of judgment indicates a secure sense of self. By openly addressing her sexuality and relationship experiences, Ishu exemplifies an internalized sense of worth and confidence. Her confidence in discussing her sexuality and relationship experience aligns with Marcia et al.'s findings that individuals in the Identity Achievement status exhibit elevated self-esteem, enabling them to approach personal topics with confidence and clarity (*Ego Identity*). According to Marcia's identity status theory, individuals who have explored various facets of their identity and made firm commitments to certain values and beliefs are likely to possess high self-esteem and a coherent sense of self ("Identity in Adolescence" 163). Ishu's candidness regarding her sexuality and her leadership behaviors reflect the attributes of someone who has achieved a stable identity, thus reinforcing the notion that high self-esteem is integral to this status.

Hani's and Ishu's experiences elucidate the transformative role of self-esteem in shaping both individual identity and societal norms. Their robust self-esteem facilitates a confident engagement with and challenge to prevailing societal expectations, influencing their interactions and societal perceptions. By authentically embodying their identities, they offer alternative paradigms that question and potentially shift rigid societal expectations. Yet, their stories also

reveal that high self-esteem does not eliminate anxiety or the desire to hide aspects of oneself. This complexity suggests that even those with a strong sense of identity must continually navigate the pressures and challenges of societal expectations. Their journeys highlight that fostering high self-esteem can inspire individual and societal transformation, but it also involves an ongoing negotiation with internal and external conflicts. This dynamic interplay underscores Marcia's theory of identity achievement as a catalyst for social change, demonstrating how personal self-acceptance and resilience can effect broader cultural shifts.

Resistance to Peer Pressure and Authoritarianism

Marcia contends that individuals who have attained Identity Achievement status exhibit notable resilience to external pressures and display diminished levels of authoritarianism, indicative of their broader open-mindedness ("Identity in Adolescence" 163). He argues that "Foreclosures, both male and female, are the most endorsing of authoritarian values among the identity statuses" ("Identity in Adolescence" 163). This assertion implies that individuals in the Identity Achievement status are less susceptible to conforming to authoritarian values, thereby underscoring their capacity to resist peer pressure and societal expectations. In a complementary vein, Marcia et al. underscore that such individuals are predominantly guided by their intrinsic values rather than external influences (*Ego Identity*), further corroborating their reduced authoritarian tendencies.

In the novel, Hani exemplifies resistance to peer pressure and an absence of authoritarianism through her inclusive stance and advocacy for LGBTQ+ issues. Despite societal pressures, her behavior reveals significant autonomy and a rejection of authoritarian norms. Hani's proactive engagement with challenges, firm belief in her agency, and capacity for self-directed decision-making are central to her character development. The pressure from Aisling, who doubts the authenticity of Hani and Ishu's relationship, further tests Hani's resolve. When Aisling asserts, "You guys aren't really together" (42), and adds, "I mean ... you can't be" (42), underscores the social scrutiny and disbelief Hani must navigate. This phrasing suggests a rigid mindset and a refusal to accept the possibility of Hani and Ishu's relationship, implying a societal expectation that such relationships are implausible or unacceptable. Aisling's definitive tone and choice of words indicate not just doubt but a challenge to Hani's autonomy and the validity of her actions.

Hani's decision to enter a faux relationship with Ishu, despite the potential for social backlash, underscores her internal locus of control and autonomy. However, this decision also complicates her resistance to peer pressure, as it stems from a desire to prove herself against Aisling's authoritarian norms. Her strategic approach to making their relationship convincing such as staging photographs and organizing fabricated dates, demonstrates a calculated effort to exercise control over her circumstances. This is exemplified when Hani says "Nobody's going to believe we're dating if you sit like that" and suggests sitting next to each other instead of having a gaping space between them (44). Hani's acute awareness of societal scrutiny and the importance of appearances in their plan is evident here. Her suggestion to sit closer highlights her proactive and solution-oriented mindset, with the words "for starters" indicating a methodical approach. The term "gaping space" vividly conveys the obviousness of their physical distance, emphasizing the necessity of closeness to convince others of their relationship. By orchestrating this scenario, Hani not only manages her immediate social environment but also reinforces her sense of identity. This calculated effort reflects a sophisticated interplay of autonomy and self-determination amid external pressures. However, it also reveals a nuanced aspect of her character: her actions are, in part, a reaction to Aisling's authoritarianism, indicating that her resistance to peer pressure is complex and multi-faceted. Hani's commitment to maintaining the facade of their relationship underscores her ability to balance external perceptions with her internal values, demonstrating her adeptness at handling complex social dynamics. Her confidence and strategic planning showcase her resilience and determination to assert control over her identity and circumstances, even as she engages in actions influenced by the very pressures she seeks to resist.

Hani's internal conflict is further compounded by the dichotomy of her identity, which intricately complicates her navigation between societal expectations and personal authenticity. The duality is poignantly articulated in her reflection: "Coming home to my mother's voice saying Hani after a whole day of being called Maira always feels strange. Like stepping out of a skin that belongs to me but doesn't quite fit" (22). This metaphor poignantly encapsulates Hani's profound internal dissonance and sense of alienation. The imagery of "stepping out of a skin that belongs to me but doesn't quite fit" powerfully conveys the profound discomfort Hani endures as she oscillates between her public and private selves. Here, the word "skin" represents her public persona, which, while

necessary for conforming to social norms, feels intrinsically foreign and misaligned with her authentic self. This discomfort underscores the significant emotional and psychological toll associated with maintaining a facade that diverges from her true identity. It reveals the nuanced struggle inherent in balancing societal expectations with personal authenticity, illustrating how Hani's dual identity engenders a persistent sense of estrangement and internal conflict. This thematic tension underscores the broader discourse on identity formation, where external pressures compel individuals to navigate the delicate balance between societal conformity and the preservation of their genuine selves. Hani's experience, thus, serves as a microcosm of the larger conflict between societal acceptance and personal integrity. Through this duality, Hani's narrative highlights the complex dynamics of resisting peer pressure while striving to maintain self-authenticity. Her challenge to reconcile these disparate facets of her identity vividly exemplifies the intricate interplay between societal expectations and individual selfhood.

Ishu's character reveals a nuanced engagement with peer pressure and authoritarianism, reflecting her internal struggles and moral dilemmas. Initially, Ishu's proactive stance against Hani's toxic friends, Aisling and Dee, is evident when she insists on going to a halal restaurant during their first meeting. This decision not only underscores Ishu's awareness of negative influences but also demonstrates her commitment to maintaining her values despite prevailing social pressures. Ishu's critical observation, "Why is she friends with people who don't let her be who she is? Who make her feel uncomfortable and embarrassed of who she is?" (72), highlights her profound frustration with the superficiality of peer relationships. The phrase "don't let her be who she is" implies a sense of repression and denial, suggesting that Hani's friends are actively obstructing her authentic self-expression. The descriptors "uncomfortable and embarrassed" further accentuate the emotional impact of such relationships, revealing Ishu's sensitivity to the discord between external validation and personal integrity. This observation illustrates Ishu's growing disillusionment with her social circle's lack of authenticity and her struggle to balance the need for acceptance with a commitment to self-respect and genuine connections.

Ishu's personal experiences with peer pressure underscore a profound internal struggle, highlighting the tension between her ethical principles and her desire for social acceptance. Her decision to permit Aisling to cheat off her test exemplifies the tension between her ethical principles and her desire for acceptance. Ishu's

introspective question, "If I let her take a look at my test, if I let her cheat, does that mean I'm good in her books?" (90), encapsulates her anxiety about conforming while compromising her integrity. The repetitive construction "if I let her" underscores her indecision and the gravity of the choice before her. The expression "good in her books" suggests a transactional interpretation of friendship, where acceptance is contingent upon actions aligning with peers' expectations rather than authentic mutual respect. This moment of vulnerability reveals the complexity of Ishu's resistance to peer pressure, highlighting how the quest for social approval can sometimes lead her to contravene her values. Ishu's narrative thus illuminates a complex interplay between her resistance to authoritarian norms and her susceptibility to peer pressure. Her actions reflect a continuous negotiation with her moral compass and the external expectations imposed upon her, underscoring the intricate challenges of preserving personal integrity amid social pressures.

Hani's and Ishu's narratives illuminate the evolving nature of identity as they navigate the complex interplay between authenticity and societal expectations. Their simultaneous resistance to and conformity with peer pressure exemplify the non-static quality of identity formation. This ongoing negotiation underscores the continual adaptation required to reconcile personal integrity with external demands, reflecting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of self-representation.

Internal Locus Control and Autonomy

Individuals who attain Identity Achievement status are characterized by a pronounced internal locus of control and a high degree of autonomy. Schwartz et al. contend that these individuals perceive themselves as the principal architects of their lives, demonstrating a significant capacity for self-direction and independence (507). This is exemplified by the Informational style of identity formation, which underscores a deliberate and strategic approach to identity development through active exploration and self-directed decision-making (507). Complementarily, Marcia et al. emphasize that those in Identity Achievement status exhibit a strong internal locus of control, often relying less on external validation (*Ego Identity*). This internal orientation facilitates decision-making that is firmly rooted in personal values and beliefs, rather than contingent upon external approval (*Ego Identity*). Marcia clarifies that individuals in Identity Achievement demonstrate a more pronounced internal orientation compared to those in the other Identity Statuses ("Identity in Adolescence" 164). Collectively, these insights

substantiate that internal locus of control and autonomy are quintessential attributes of Identity Achievement, reflecting a sophisticated self-direction and a confident capacity to shape our own outcomes.

In *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*, Hani exemplifies Marcia's concept of Identity Achievement through her steadfast adherence to personal values and her strong internal locus of control. Her commitment to religious practices underscores her autonomy and self-direction. Hani's statement, "Yeah… It's just something that's important for me. Like going to the mosque for jummah during school holidays and reading the Qur'an every weekend (33), reveals the depth of her personal conviction. Her remark, "It's just something that's important for me," highlights that her commitment is driven by internal values rather than external influences. By specifying the frequency of her practices, Hani emphasizes the deliberate and consistent nature of her adherence to her beliefs. This routine reflects her prioritization of personal values over any external factors. Hani's dedication to her religious practices, driven solely by internal motivation, underscores her strong internal locus of control. Her ability to consistently uphold these practices demonstrates her self-directed approach and commitment to her core values, aligning with Marcia's assertion that individuals in Identity Achievement status exhibit a pronounced internal orientation.

The evolution of Hani's internal locus of control and the intricate nature of her self-direction are epitomized in a pivotal moment in her journey. Hani's realization about the burden of deceit makes a critical turning point, shifting the focus from mere self-awareness to a deeper understanding of her own priorities. As she reflects on the repercussions of her decision to fake date Ishu, she states, "I got so caught up in my lies I forgot all the important things" (146). This quotation highlights a pivotal moment where Hani acknowledges the psychological toll of maintaining falsehoods. The words "caught up" suggests losing control through deceit, while "forgot all the important things" reveals her profound recognition of her true priorities. This introspection emphasizes the complexity of aligning personal desires with core values. Hani's journey illustrates that true self-awareness involves not just managing autonomy but also prioritizing what truly matters to her, showing that self-direction must be guided by an understanding of our genuine values.

Ishu's internal locus of control is clearly illustrated through her self-directed actions and decision-making. When her sister Nik abandoned medical school to

marry, their parents were profoundly discontented and chose not to attend Nik's engagement party despite being invited. Acknowledging the necessity of supporting her sister regardless of their parents' disapproval, Ishu confronts her parents and insists they attend the wedding to show solidarity with Nik. This act exemplifies Ishu's steadfast commitment to her principles and her capacity to make autonomous decisions based on her convictions, rather than capitulating to her parents' rigid expectations. Ishu's decision to prioritize her sister's emotional well-being over familial disapproval underscores her strong sense of self-direction and internal locus of control. Ishu's declaration, "I'm not going to miss my only sister's wedding, Ammu. You shouldn't ask me to" (165), explicitly challenges her parents' authority and accentuates the significance of personal happiness and individual choice. The phrase "I'm not going to miss" underscores her resolve and determination, indicating that her decision is final and unwavering. By directly addressing her mother with "Ammu," Ishu personalizes the confrontation, signaling that this is a deeply important and personal stance for her. The directive "You shouldn't ask me to" further reinforces her autonomy, as she establishes a clear boundary and refuses to be swayed by her parents' expectations. Her parents' apprehension that supporting Nik would dissuade her from returning to university is countered by Ishu's reasoning: "She's not going to go back because you decide to punish her for following her own path. She's just … doing what makes her happy" (165). The phrase "following her own path" highlights the importance of autonomy and individual choice in Ishu's values. Ishu's use of "you decide to punish" underscores the authoritarian nature of her parents' approach, while her defense of Nik's actions as "doing what makes her happy" emphasizes the value she places on personal happiness and self-determination. This dialogue illuminates Ishu's understanding that genuine support and love arise from respecting individual choices and fostering an environment where personal autonomy is esteemed. In a household where parental approval is paramount, Ishu's defiance against her parents' expectations reveals a significant aspect of her identity: her unwavering commitment to personal values over familial or societal pressures. Ishu's actions and words in these moments are unequivocal indicators of her internal locus of control. She does not merely react to her parents' expectations but rather assesses the situation based on her values and the well-being of her sister. Her ability to articulate her beliefs and maintain her stance against familial pressure exemplifies a profound autonomy. Ishu's approach underscores her prioritization of personal integrity and the emotional needs of her loved ones over conforming to external demands, thereby fortifying her identity and sense of self.

Hani's and Ishu's experiences accentuate the essential role of internal locus of control and autonomy in defining their identities. Hani's journey highlights the significance of self-direction and unwavering confidence in her beliefs, enabling her to navigate her path with assurance. Ishu's narrative exemplifies the power of self-direction in transcending rigid familial expectations. These narratives collectively emphasize the critical importance of internal locus of control and autonomy in identity formation, demonstrating that true self-identity is forged through self-directed exploration and the courage to make independent decisions grounded in personal values and beliefs.

Cognitive Sophistication and Ethical Behavior

The intersection of identity formation and ethical behavior underscores the profound influence of cognitive and cultural sophistication on personal development. Marcia et al. argued that individuals who attain Identity Achievement demonstrate superior academic performance and exhibit enhanced cultural sophistication and ethical behavior (*Ego Identity*). This assertion is corroborated by Schwartz et al., who found that individuals with higher cognitive functioning and advanced ethical reasoning tend to adopt an Informational identity style, which is closely associated with Identity Achievement (517). Schwartz et al. highlight that "the findings from this study provide support for the hypothesized links among ego identity status, identity style, and personal expressiveness. The Informational style and the personal expressiveness are linked with Identity Achievement" (517). This Informational style, marked by cognitive capabilities and ethical discernment, highlights the crucial role of advanced thinking in achieving and maintaining a well-defined identity.

In *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*, Hani's character exemplifies advanced cognitive sophistication and ethical behavior. Her ethical considerations in various actions underscore her moral development. The conflict between Hani's genuine desire for acceptance and her father's political ambitions, marked by a façade of increased religiosity to secure votes, presents a profound exploration of authenticity versus societal expectations. Hani's confrontation with her father, "You said that if Salim Uncle finds out that I've lied it'll look bad but… what about you? You've spent all this time lying to him and pretending that you're someone you're not" (139), demonstrates her cognitive sophistication in recognizing and addressing hypocrisy. The deliberate choice of words such as

"lying" and "pretending" directly confronts the moral incongruity in her father's actions, emphasizing Hani's unwavering commitment to honesty. By framing the situation with, "what about you?" she not only challenges her father's authority but also prompts him to reflect on his own ethical shortcomings, showcasing her ability to engage in complex moral reasoning. This pivotal moment underscores Hani's ethical reasoning: she understands the paramount importance of honesty and integrity, even when it conflicts with her father's pragmatic political strategies. Hani's use of the phrase "you've spent all this time" highlights the prolonged nature of her father's deception, starkly contrasting it with her own values of truthfulness. This scenario vividly illustrates how Hani navigates intricate social dynamics, balancing personal authenticity with external pressures, indicative of her advanced identity status. Her capacity to articulate this ethical conflict, despite potential familial and social repercussions, exemplifies her mature cognitive processing and steadfast commitment to personal integrity.

Hani's internal conflict is acutely illustrated by her reflections on her parents' long-term settlement in Ireland, "Amma and Abba have been living here for more than three decades now. They know Ireland like the back of their hands—it's their home. But neither Amma nor Abba have spent a lot of time talking about the past—except to rave about all the ways things have gotten better" (147). This quotation encapsulates Hani's struggle to reconcile her parents' optimistic perspective on their immigrant experience with the contemporary challenges she faces. The phrase "they know Ireland like the back of their hands" signifies her parents' profound familiarity and comfort with their adopted homeland, indicating a deep sense of belonging and mastery over their environment. The term "home" is particularly significant, conveying an emotional and psychological attachment that suggests Ireland has become an integral part of their identity. This stands in stark contrast to Hani's perception of Ireland as a place where she continually grapples with identity and acceptance, highlighting her internal conflict. Hani's observation that her parents "rave about all the ways things have gotten better" implies an enthusiastic and possibly idealized view of their immigrant journey, characterized by an intense positivity that may overlook ongoing struggles and challenges. This enthusiastic recounting creates a dichotomy between her parents' narrative and Hani's lived experience. Hani's recognition of this discrepancy demonstrates her cognitive sophistication, as she critically evaluates the reality of their situation versus the narrative they choose to present. Her critical assessment of her parents' perspective underscores her ethical reasoning. By noting that her parents "have spent a lot of time talking about the past" only to emphasize

improvements, she identifies a selective memory that focuses on positive outcomes while potentially ignoring or downplaying hardships. This selective positivity reflects a coping mechanism her parents might use to reconcile their past difficulties with their present stability. Hani's ability to comprehend this complexity indicates her advanced cognitive functioning. Hani's reflections on her family's immigration experience further enhance her cognitive and ethical understanding. Her father explains the struggles and sacrifices the family faced, stating, "When we first moved here, it was difficult. There were barely any Bangladeshi people here" (147), adding depth to Hani's understanding of her parents' motivations and the pressures they endured. The phrase "it was difficult" succinctly captures the initial hardships her family encountered, setting the stage for Hani's empathetic understanding. The term "difficult" immediately conveys a sense of struggle and adversity, which Hani recognizes and appreciates. The specific mention of "barely any Bangladeshi people" highlights the cultural and religious isolation they experienced, emphasizing the loneliness and disconnection from their cultural community. Hani's internal conflict is revealed as a nuanced negotiation between her parents' idealized immigrant narrative and her own lived reality, showcasing her profound cognitive and ethical development.

Ishu's academic success is a testament to her cognitive abilities, firmly situating her within the framework of Identity Achievement. Her consistent performance is evidenced by her confident assertion, "I'm pretty sure I aced it. Like I've aced every single test since I started at this school" (7) which underscores her intellectual prowess and unwavering dedication to academic excellence. The phrase "aced every single test" not only indicates a pattern of success but also reflects her exceptional intellectual capability and mastery of her subjects. Moreover, the expression "since I started at this school" suggests a long-term commitment to maintaining high standards. This sustained academic achievement aligns with the characteristics of Identity Achievement, demonstrating her ability to navigate complex educational demands with competence and resilience.

Ishu's character development illustrates the maturation of her ethical awareness. Initially, her decision to run for Head Girl is primarily motivated by a desire to garner parental approval, as evidenced by her confession, "No … I'm pretending to date you because I want to be Head Girl because of my sister. My sister is like … perfect. She has been perfect in my parents' eyes" (50). The fragmented nature of this confession, punctuated by ellipses and repetition, underscores Ishu's hesitation and internal conflict. The term "pretending" accentuates a sense of dis-

ingenuousness, indicating actions misaligned with her authentic desires. Ishu's view of her sister as "perfect" underscores her perception of her sister as an unattainable ideal, intensifying her struggle with familial expectations. This quotation poignantly encapsulates Ishu's internal conflict and her tension with familial expectations. As the narrative progresses, Ishu's ethical reasoning undergoes significant evolution, prompting her to reassess her motivations. Her internal monologue, "Why do I want to be Head Girl? Everyone else was talking about class hoodies and debs, and how they have all of this leadership experience. I don't want to be a bloody leader of these girls; I barely even like talking to them half the time. I definitely don't want to spend half of the final year in school planning a dance where I'll probably have a miserable time" (157), exemplifies her cognitive sophistication. The rhetorical question "Why do I want to be Head Girl?" marks the commencement of her introspection. Her dismissal of typical student leadership concerns, such as "class hoodies and debs," sharply contrasts with her disinterest, highlighting the disparity between her genuine interests and external expectations. The repeated assertions of "I don't want" and "I definitely don't want" express a strong personal aversion, signifying an advanced level of self-awareness and ethical deliberation. Ishu's pursuit of the Head Girl position ultimately reveals a misalignment with her authentic self. Her realization becomes apparent when she hesitantly admits to Hani, "To … show Ammu and Abbu that I'm … not you" (157). The fragmented nature of her confession, punctuated by ellipses, underscores her profound internal conflict and struggle to articulate her true feelings. This admission emphasizes her deep-seated need to assert her individuality and distinguish herself from her sister's idealized image. The verb "mumbles" suggests her lack of confidence and the emotional difficulty of this significant revelation. This moment signifies a crucial turning point in Ishu's journey toward Identity Achievement, demonstrating her evolving self-awareness and ethical reasoning. By confronting the pressures to conform to her sister's example, Ishu begins to navigate her path, reflecting significant personal growth and maturity.

Hani's and Ishu's experiences reveal that Identity Achievement is a dynamic process involving cognitive sophistication and ethical reasoning. Their journeys underscore the complexity of navigating personal values amid external challenges. The nuanced decisions they make demonstrate that one can be deeply aware of ethical dilemmas while simultaneously employing cognitive reasoning to justify actions. This ongoing negotiation between cognition and ethics highlights the

fluid nature of identity formation, where self-awareness and the prioritization of personal values are pivotal.

Conclusion

James Marcia's Identity Status Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding identity development, emphasizing the importance of exploration and commitment. However, the experiences of Hani and Ishu in the novel reveal that identity formation is a multifaceted and non-linear process, influenced by personal crises, cultural expectations, and mutual support. While Marcia's theory presupposes a well-defined, individually determined identity, Hani's and Ishu's narratives illustrate that a robust sense of self can coexist with traits that do not align with traditional expectations of identity achievement.

The stories of Hani and Ishu exemplify the intricate interplay of factors in identity formation, including family dynamics, self-esteem, resistance to peer pressure, internal locus of control, autonomy, cognitive sophistication, and ethical behavior. Their experiences underscore that authentic self-identity emerges through self-directed exploration and independent decisions rooted in personal values. Despite the anxiety and external pressures, both characters exhibit resilience and self-awareness, underscoring the fluid and dynamic nature of identity formation shaped by both internal and external influences. Their evolving journeys advocate for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of diverse identities, highlighting the necessity for a flexible approach that accommodates the dynamic nature of personal development within societal and familial contexts. Hani's and Ishu's narratives emphasize the significance of nurturing environments that support individual growth and the prioritization of personal values, contributing to the broader evolution of societal attitudes toward identity.

The intricate relationship between coming out and self-confidence is exemplified by the experiences of Hani and Ishu. Rosati et al. underscore that the act of coming out is pivotal for enhancing self-esteem, life satisfaction, and the quality of interpersonal relationships (2). Correspondingly, Legate et al. demonstrate that individuals who disclose their sexual orientation experience greater well-being, particularly when supported by their environment (145). James Marcia's theory of identity development, which emphasizes the importance of commitment to beliefs and goals, prompts an inquiry into whether this framework can be extended to encompass our commitment to our sexuality. In *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake*

Dating, Hani's open identification as bisexual and her commitment to her sexuality ostensibly suggest an increased level of self-assurance. However, the narrative presents a complex reality: despite Hani's commitment and the act of coming out, she continues to grapple with self-assurance. Conversely, Ishu, who remains reticent about her sexuality and has not come out, exhibits a pronounced sense of confidence and self-assurance. This juxtaposition challenges the simplistic correlation between coming out and self-confidence, indicating that while coming out and committing to our sexuality can substantially enhance well-being, they are not the sole determinants of self-identity. The characters' experiences suggest that personal resilience and inherent personality traits are equally pivotal in shaping self-identity.

The examination of the nuanced interplay between coming out and self-confidence becomes particularly pertinent when considering the intended readership of *Hani & Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*. The novel provides profound insights into the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity formation, particularly for adolescents. The journeys of Hani and Ishu illustrate that it is entirely possible to experience simultaneous confidence and doubt, thereby reassuring readers that struggles and uncertainties are inherent components of the journey toward self-acceptance. The narrative underscores that being secure in our identity does not preclude the experience of challenges, emphasizing the significance of resilience and support in personal development.

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Strange Relations: Monstrosity, Intimacy, and Queer Possibility in *The Summer Hikaru Died*

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The international debut of Japanese horror manga series *The Summer Hikaru Died*, penned by writer and illustrator Mokumokuren, quickly drew attention and acclaim, appearing on the New York Public Library's "Best Books for Teens 2023" in the first year of its release. Its English translation found many new fans overseas, with praise for its "balance between childhood first love nostalgia and horror" (D). But the sometimes sweet, sometimes fraught, yet undeniably Queer relationship between the protagonist, Yoshiki, and the monster ("Hikaru") that assumes both the body and identity of his childhood friend (Hikaru) escapes any simple definition. We experience "Hikaru"'s monstrosity through its effect on Yoshiki, how it horrifies, enthrals, and transforms him. The series uses the inhuman "Hikaru" and his relationship with Yoshiki to explore what possibilities for intimacy and relation exist within the Queer realities that remain unintelligible, inarticulate, and therefore monstrous.

Queerness and monstrosity intertwine within *The Summer Hikaru Died*, making this manga a part of the robust tradition in which monstrosity serves as a cipher for Queerness. Through Queer monster theory, we can understand how "in a cis-heteronormative culture, queers are figured as cultural excesses, and so cohabit the same margins from which monsters emerge" (Brassington). It relates the relegation of Queer identities to the position of outsiders, and the associated reactions of mingled "rage, shunning, and fear" in response to Queer people's lifestyles (Jones and Harris 519) to the experiences of fictional monsters. The horror genre, to which *The Summer Hikaru Died* undoubtedly belongs, facilitates such explorations. As Boyle writes, "few media in mainstream culture appear willing to challenge the normalisation of sexuality. Yet [...] horror has an indisputable history of confuting norms, whether those norms are addressing human or sexual status" (169). *The Summer Hikaru Died* addresses both.

The beginning of the series establishes "Hikaru" as almost but not quite able to pass as fully human. In the first chapter, Yoshiki confronts it as not being "the

real Hikaru" (Mokumokuren 1: ch. 1), an imperfect imitation. Many other characters also detect in "Hikaru" a qualitative difference from the original, whose life and identity it has assumed. To them, the new "Hikaru" does not entirely belong – an experience that maps easily onto queer lived realities. Outwardly, it appears adequately human, but its insides are what count. The barrier of "Hikaru"'s skin, skin being "the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers" (Halberstam 163), contains all the horrors of its true nature, which constantly threaten to spill out. "Hikaru"'s monstrosity compromises this boundary every time it makes itself known. Its grotesque insides spill out to remind us, and other characters, that it is not like them: a visible, bodily difference that defines the separation between what is a monster and what is not.

Though Queer monster theory cites a connection between the outsider experiences of both monsters and Queer individuals, within queerness lie its own margins, a range of what is accepted and articulated, and what is not. Jones and Harris draw attention to the real-life issues of marginalization that exist even within what is Queer:

> Sometimes, queer bodies and desires and relationships are performed in a socially acceptable and thus intelligible manner […]. But queers also perform bodies, desires, and relationships that are less than intelligible, less than acceptable, unspeakable: butch, femme, androgynous, polyamorous, trans*, and gender creative. (519)

Eklund points out a similar conclusion, describing how, despite formations of Queer community, particularly online, the policing of identities contributes to a "pressure to conform to one of a few marginally accepted Queer identities" (80). *The Summer Hikaru Died* chooses to explore the more marginalized ways of existing, presenting characters that, while Queer, do not perform queerness in any acceptable manner. It addresses these issues through "Hikaru"'s many ambiguities, the very nature of which are wholly unintelligible. Studies of more recent works highlight monsters whose highly mutable characteristics align with how "Hikaru" is presented. Eklund discusses contemporary depictions of monstrosity in the emerging genre of "genderpunk" games, defining the "genderpunk monster" as that which "makes a virtue of change [...], without end, without perfection but not necessarily without purpose" (87). This mutability is key to "Hikaru"'s monstrosity.

Within the narrative, there is never a definite name for what "Hikaru" is. Others refer to it interchangeably, even within the same conversation, as "nounuki-sama" (the great brain snatcher) a title infrequently used by the villagers, or, perhaps

most suitably, "the thing" (Mokumokuren 3: ch. 14), unable to pin down its existence to any single defining attribute. Whenever we see "Hikaru"'s monstrosity emerging, its patterns and borders shift from panel to panel – similar enough that we understand it to be the same entity, but so inconstant that no depiction is ever identical. It imitates organic forms, with the many swirls and folds recalling, by turns, microorganisms or intestines, all the while remaining ultimately inconclusive.

This is not the only embodiment of "Hikaru"'s fluidity. Beyond the borders of human and monster, inside and outside, "Hikaru"'s liminality even compromises the borders of life and death. Though ostensibly animate, the entity known as "Hikaru" occupies its namesake's reanimated corpse, rendering it an indeterminate blend of alive and not. "Hikaru" itself later states that, for it, "There ain't much difference between bein' dead or alive [...] it's just changin' forms, y'know?" (3: ch. 15). It comprehends life and death on the same terms as its own mutability – just as accessible and, ultimately, inconsequential, to the point where killing others is an easy decision for it to make. Though the borders it blurs are unfathomably alien, through Queer monster theory, we can relate its practices of doing so back to the similarly "deformed, destructive, disavowed" practices of gender and sexuality performed by Queer individuals on the furthermost borders of identity (Jones and Harris 518). "Hikaru"'s fundamental noncompliance with human life reflects Queer noncompliance with normative life. Beyond "Hikaru"'s human shell, nothing about it completely fits into the range of human recognition, embodying Eklund's definition, and recalling other meanings of "queer" – "queer" as in "strange," that which escapes understanding.

"Hikaru" is not the only aspect of the series that is strange and unknowable. The ambiguous relationship between Yoshiki and "Hikaru" is equally Queer in both senses of the word, with the text wholly unconcerned with making either character's sexual identity or feelings towards the other easily legible. Hints throughout the text make it clear how the text wants us to see them. Throwaway statements from various characters such as Rie, an older acquaintance, who previously assumed "Hikaru" was Yoshiki's "girlfriend or somethin'" (1: ch. 6) frame the two as definitively involved. Despite this, neither "Hikaru" nor Yoshiki ever devote any thought to their own orientations or defining their relationship outright. One brief exchange between the two not too long before the original Hikaru's death illustrates the text's disinterest in labels. In this scene, Yoshiki and Hikaru discuss the troubles of another family in the village, concerning their heir's status. The boy is not "sick," as Hikaru believes, but a "homosexual," as Yoshiki

clarifies – to which Hikaru replies with complete, even comical confusion, "Home-o-sex-you-all?" (2: ch. 9), and a vague, dismissive "I dunno…" from Yoshiki redirects the conversation. So far, this is the text's only straightforward articulation of queerness: one of confusion and discomfort. Though Yoshiki and Hikaru's relationship changes later, as Hikaru is replaced, transforming from a definitive and innocent friendship to something decidedly less so, they never revisit the subject.

But the scene does not end there. Yoshiki goes on to express his frustration with the village's limitations, how it is "too small and cramped. [He] can barely breathe with how cramped it is" and longs to move to the city (2: ch. 9). He expresses these limitations both in terms of geography, as the village itself is deeply rural and contained, and in terms of worldview, a frustration that easily extends beyond the boundaries of the narrative. Yoshiki, and the text, speaking through him, resents reduction, containment. From the way the conversation develops, it becomes clear that Yoshiki's desire not to continue discussing the topic of homosexuality with Hikaru does not necessarily stem from a discomfort with his own identity, but rather a discomfort with the label itself. The label, like the village, is too cramped for who he is, and what his relationship with Hikaru will become, albeit after "Hikaru" replaces the original. At the same time, the turbulent, but powerful bond that Yoshiki and "Hikaru" later develop stands in stark contrast to the fractured, faltering "normal" relationships that populate the rest of the narrative – full of widows, widowers, and feuding broken families. Though ambiguous and occasionally uncomfortable, something about Yoshiki and "Hikaru"'s relationship simply works in a way that all others do not. *The Summer Hikaru Died* is solely interested in exploring possibilities that are more mutable, more expansive, and less palatable – just like "Hikaru" himself.

Out of "Hikaru"'s highly mutable form come new kinds of relation, expressing its feelings to Yoshiki physically in ways that, at least at first, seem completely unfamiliar. For Queer monster characters, "their queerness is intimately tied to their monstrousness" (Brassington), and the same is true for "Hikaru." The scenes that showcase its monstrosity most clearly are also the ones in which it participates in ambiguously erotic exchanges with Yoshiki that function similarly to, without ever being, sex. Just as "Hikaru" does not comprehend life in the way humans do – as Yoshiki muses, "the world ["Hikaru"] sees is… just so different" (Mokumokuren 3: ch. 16) – its affections and means of expressing them do not work as humans' do. Jones and Harris express a similar idea, in that "how [unintelligible queer individuals] make love, show love, understand love and speak

[their] love [...], when seen, is often misunderstood, feared, or shunned" (519). "Hikaru"'s kind of love functions in the same way, with even Yoshiki's reactions to it stemming from a place of confusion and terror, before beginning to accept the intimate possibilities that "Hikaru"'s monstrosity presents.

A scene in the second volume, just one emotionally charged, intimate exchange among many, illustrates this notion exactly. The text is explicit in telling us how to read these abject encounters, with the framing, attitude, and terminology of each scene reminiscent of those used to describe sex. This scene in particular sees "Hikaru" and Yoshiki sneaking off into an empty classroom, where Yoshiki proceeds to extend a tentative hand to touch "Hikaru." The gesture morphs into Yoshiki slipping two fingers into a dark, slit-like cavity in Hikaru's chest in an action that overtly resembles sexual penetration. Upon encountering "Hikaru"'s amorphous insides, he reacts with mingled disgust, fear, and eventually reluctant pleasure as he slowly realises that the merging of his body with "Hikaru"'s "[feels] so good" (Mokumokuren 2: ch. 10). The accompanying sound effects littering the page – gasps and moans, a throb in Yoshiki's brain – make the eroticism even more overt.

These acts are undeniably monstrous – unfamiliar, for all that the series depicts them through a lens we are much more familiar with. At the same time, these monstrous acts do not only imitate sex, in many ways, they surpass it entirely. Within Mokumokuren's work, "Hikaru"'s monstrosity allows for forms of connection that accomplish a more profound intimacy than any human act. The end of the third volume sees "Hikaru" achieving perhaps the height of romantic love by rendering into reality the impossible act of giving Yoshiki its "heart" for him to keep. Though "Hikaru" seems to lack a literal heart, the suggestion is clear as it reaches into its own chest, vaguely to the left, rips out a portion of his own insides, and offers it to Yoshiki, as proof of its commitment (3: ch. 16). What would be unthinkable, and certainly fatal for a human is only a brief ordeal for "Hikaru," whose monstrosity becomes the means for an unparalleled form of closeness.

Their strange relations, however, obscure one more significant border – the border between "Hikaru" and Yoshiki. The more they mingle not just their bodies, but their very existences, the more Yoshiki undergoes changes that transform him both externally, affecting how others perceive him; and internally, affecting the way he perceives the world. Yoshiki's "sex" with "Hikaru" leaves behind traces that fundamentally alter what he is. Rie, a woman with minor extrasensory abilities, warns Yoshiki about "[mixing]" with "Hikaru," where

"[Yoshiki] won't be human anymore if [he gets] too mixed in with [Hikaru]" (1: ch. 5). We see this play out when other monsters begin to manifest in Yoshiki's house, as he becomes somehow more attractive to them; as "Hikaru" claims, something about Yoshiki is "nice" to them (2: ch. 11). Though undetectable to us, and never fully explained in the manga, an intangible quality of Yoshiki's has shifted to cause this attraction, and seems as though it will continue to shift, bringing him further away from what is normal.

Yoshiki's dealings with "Hikaru" also alter the way he sees the world, coaxing out darker impulses that culminate with him stabbing "Hikaru" to kill it and keep it from potentially hurting others. While we may initially read Yoshiki's urge to protect others by killing "Hikaru" as a human instinct, the method he chooses indicates otherwise. When he stabs "Hikaru," piercing it just below its chest, the visual recalls previous, similar penetrations where "Hikaru" took Yoshiki's hand into itself as a means of sharing pleasure and closeness. The scene's deliberate setting in Yoshiki's bedroom, on his bed, with the stabbing initially resembling an embrace only further transforms the attempted murder into an act that links horror and intimacy, not unlike their previous exchanges. But this particular exchange goes a step further. The act of killing demonstrates Yoshiki's desire to change "Hikaru" as he himself has been changed, forcing "Hikaru" to switch from a state of life to one of death, again. At last, Yoshiki demonstrates an interest in the kind of change that "Hikaru" has been directing him towards, a desire to compromise borders – here between life and death – of his own volition. And as Mokumokuren's work has already outlined, mutability is the domain of the monstrous. Their reconciliation afterwards, which ends with "Hikaru" giving Yoshiki his "heart," seals for us how the murder attempt has progressed their relationship, even positively.

Gradually, Yoshiki changes into something less human, less intelligible, and more like "Hikaru" – and within the parameters of Queer monster theory, the more monstrous he becomes, the more Queer. Though other characters claim that "things won't go well for [Yoshiki]" if he continues to be and "mix" with "Hikaru" (1: ch. 6), the later developments between the two cast doubt as to whether this is entirely the case. The repulsive yet irresistible exchanges shared by "Hikaru," a sometimes human-like monster, and Yoshiki, a human becoming monstrous, achieve an intimacy so complete, it is difficult not to view parts of it as appealing. Though not necessarily healthy, or possibly even sustainable, as the series remains ongoing, the strange, border-obscuring nature of Yoshiki and "Hikaru"'s relationship fulfils both their desires. Despite the obvious dangers, the

series prompts us to consider the favourable aspects to a love as grotesque as theirs could be, one that indulges, accepts, and survives even the worst impulses. It steers us towards the possibilities that lie within the unconventional and the unfamiliar, the very margins of Queer experiences. *The Summer Hikaru Died* challenges our preconceptions of what Queer intimacy is and looks like, forcing us to question whether to be human, to exist solely within the range of intelligible identities, is what we truly want to be.

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Last Day on the Library Shelves

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Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) is one of the many Queer stories that has been pulled from the shelves across the United States by parents and officials who do not want their children exposed to LGBTQ+ narratives, or what they refer to as "sexually explicit" content ("Banned Books by Malinda Lo - 2021 to 2024"). *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is set in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1950s and it follows teens Lily and Kath as they fall in love. Beyond the fact that several of her own books are being banned and challenged, Lo has close ties with the book banning movement as she is a co-plaintiff in a lawsuit against the state of Iowa's book banning law ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). In *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, Lo subtly uses metafiction and explores themes of secrecy through Lily, who must hide her sexual identity, in order to show how books can both uplift identities and give people the means to tear them down.

While book banning is on the rise now more than ever, it is not a new concept. What is more recent is the shift of book bans to focus predominantly on children's literature (Pickering 33), which came about after children's literature was no longer "designed solely to morally prime children into being 'good children'" (33). In the early twentieth century, authors of children's literature had to be wary of what they said or discussed in their books, or else risk not getting published (33). While there is now more room for a variety of books to be published with LGBTQ+ themes and characters, not everyone is able to access these books with the rise in book challenges and bans that target them.

As mentioned, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* has itself been a victim of the book banning movement, and also is the most banned of Lo's works. In the early months of 2024, it already received 50 cases of bans, challenges, or restrictions for the year, which is 16 cases higher than it was in October of 2023 ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). These statistics only reflect publicly accessible cases, so the number is likely much higher ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). The total cases as of March 2024 for Lo's books was 64 ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"), which is an extreme increase from 26 in 2023, 15 in 2022, and 3 in 2021 ("My Books Have Been Banned"). However, it was *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* that was targeted by the well-known book banning group Moms for Liberty

in May of 2022 ("My Books Have Been Banned"), which likely contributed to the steady rise in bans for the book.

The community of book banners is widely made up of organized groups of parents. According to Laats, a professor of education and history at SUNY Binghamton, "the language of book banners has been the same for a century: 'We have parents' rights and we demand to exert those rights to dictate what goes on in schools'" (213). One large-scale book banning group that plays into this is Moms for Liberty, a group founded in Florida that largely appeals to the Republicans of America (Stanford 12). They are known for "contest[ing] schools' COVID-19 precautions, advocat[ing] for schools to remove books—often those featuring LGBTQ+ characters, people of color, and others from marginalized groups—from their libraries, and flipp[ing] school boards to conservative control" (12). They are also assertive in their belief that parents—not schools—should control the kinds of sexual education their children receive (12), which becomes especially problematic as Moms for Liberty and other book banning groups often take sexuality out of context. This happens most often with books about LGBTQ+ characters which are often described as "pornographic," perpetuating the harmful stereotype that LGBTQ+ equals oversexual and deviant (Pickering 35).

In an interview between Education Week and Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice, Justice condemns the role that schools play in giving agency to children over the way they identify at school. Justice is asked about cases in which children might not be comfortable with their parents knowing about their gender identity, and she compares the situation to teen pregnancy, saying that while it would be upsetting, it should not be something that the school should keep from the parent (Stanford 12). This statement suggests that teen pregnancy and exploring gender identity are comparable topics, again perpetuating the idea that queerness is equivalent to issues regarding children and sex. Justice finishes this thought by saying, "So this idea that schools are saying home might not be safe—unacceptable. Do not tell my child that home is not safe. My child does not need a sexual spirit guide at school" (12).

Contrary to Justice's statement, the idea that a Queer child's home might not be safe for them is a very possible reality, and for some children a school that encourages them to explore their identity might be vastly different than the situation they face at home. *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* depicts this when Lily is forced to confirm that she is a lesbian to her mother. Lily's mother tells her, "There are no homosexuals in this family. […] Are you my daughter?" (329). This

causes Lily to face homelessness out of the very real fear that returning home is no longer a safe option for her, and she must instead stay with Lana, who is essentially still a stranger to her. Although "sexual spirit guide" is not the right term, Lily being able to speak with Lana about her experiences is something she needs, because she is not able to do that with her own mother.

Lily's situation is not an extreme, but something that is experienced by many LGBTQ+ youth. According to Walters, the Branch Manager of the West Indianapolis branch of the Indianapolis Public Library, "many factors can account for homelessness of LGBTQIA+ youth, but family conflict is the primary cause, which is disproportionately due to a lack of acceptance by family members of a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity" (20). This knowledge that she will not be accepted is what puts Lily off from telling her family for so long. She is afraid that they "will never look at [her] like this again" (*Last Night at the Telegraph Club* 325), and instead will come to only look at her in "disgust" (329).

When Lily first finds *Strange Season*, a book about two women in love, she is forced to read it in secrecy. Lily "itched to return to *Strange Season*, but she didn't dare read it while the clerk was so nearby – and she could never, ever buy it" (41). Similarly, Walters shares that there are young patrons at the library who cannot borrow LGBTQ+ books because they are afraid of the reaction at home: "these are young people who have to hide who they are from their family" (20). When groups such as Moms for Liberty attempt to shield their children from LGBTQ+ themes, they are effective on wide-scale removals of books they deem sexual, but Lily is proof that children will still find a way to access the reading material they want. Having access to these materials in a safer space such as at school or home with room for conversations around sexuality and gender is a far better option for children. Reading *Strange Season* alone and without someone to discuss it with, Lily is subject to seeing the love between two women being referred to as "unnatural" (40) and "shameful" (41), becoming the default narrative of Queer people in her mind and confirming the way she thinks her parents will react to her coming out as lesbian.

Lo incorporates other scenes to allude to situations between parents and their LGBTQ+ children, speaking to what Justice says. After Lily runs away from home she is told, "[Your Mother is] having a hard time right now because you're not what she expected. But we're never what our parents expected. They have to learn that lesson" (339). Pushing children to be a certain way does not accomplish what parents hope it will. If Lily presents herself as straight as her mother wants, she will never be able to be her true self or experience happiness as she deserves.

Oftentimes, when parents do not accept the identity of their children, it leaves the children in a place where they have to decide between being unhappy for the rest of their lives or severing their relationship with their parents. Lo includes this scene in *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* as a way of reassuring teens who are feeling rejected by their parents that there is likely someone outside of their family that will understand what they are going through, and that with time it is still possible for parents to grow to understand them.

A concern that these book banning groups may have is that reading LGBTQ+ can supposedly "make" their children queer, and that might be a point of contention they have with *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. For example, one group of challengers called BRACE (Botetourt Residents Against Child Exploitation) are pushing back against libraries that they believe "confuse [children] about gender" ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). After reading *Strange Season*, Lily thinks about Kath, "*Are you like the girls in the book too? Because I think I am*" (100, italics in original), which makes it seem as though it is the book that makes Lily think she might be lesbian as well. However, a book does not have the capability of making someone Queer, though it can help people put words to what they are feeling, which is what happens to Lily. With *Strange Season*, Lily "felt as if she had finally cracked the last part of a code she had been puzzling over for so long that she couldn't remember when she had started deciphering it" (42). Through this scene, Lo is telling her readers and also her challengers that this book will not change who someone is, but it can help them understand themselves or other Queer children better. This sentiment is also echoed in Pickering's article: "Reading a book about being gay does not make the reader gay, any more than reading a book about menstruation will not make the reader menstruate if that is not what their body does. What advocates argue is that these books might teach the reader about what a person experiences, which may lead to more empathy" (37).

The non-acceptance and censorship of children's reading materials is not exclusive to parents. Censorship is now happening at a larger scale and oftentimes lawmakers are even involved (Pickering 32). With the involvement of lawmakers and politicians in book banning, it becomes increasingly difficult for librarians and teachers to push back against the book banning movement without facing repercussions. There are several cases of librarians refusing to remove books from their shelves or pushing back against policies and as a result their public libraries are defunded (Pickering 36). Library staff are being mistreated and threatened, or forced to remove books in order to not face punishment (36).

Rises in book banning often correlate with larger political events, such as "divides over the Trump presidency, the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, and increased support for LGBTQ+ communities" (33–34). Book banning was also prevalent during the time that *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* itself takes place, which Lo says was "a period when the U.S. government persecuted people it believed were communist sympathizers, including Chinese American immigrants and gay people" ("My Books Have Been Banned"). Lo speaks directly to this issue with Lily's understanding of the ways in which she is not treated the same as others: "America had given her so much in the four years since she arrived, but it also regularly reminded her of how it saw people like her" (305). On Lo's blog, she points out this metafictional (in the sense of books commenting on books and publishing) aspect of her writing, saying she is "alarmed that people who call themselves Americans are taking a page from China's authoritarian handbook" ("My Books Have Been Banned"), meaning that the book banning movement seeks to erase the truth in stories like Lily's, essentially ignoring "America's complex history of racism and inequality" ("My Books Have Been Banned").

Despite it being seven decades after the time that *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* takes place, many LGBTQ+ students are still in a similar situation as Lily, where they do not see themselves represented at school and in literature (Altobelli & Lambert 25). Pickering's findings indicate that the "greatest numbers of challenges aim at books concerning gender queerness, Queer sexuality, and those that reflect the Black experience" (Pickering 37), which presents a greater problem when most children's and young adult literature is already lacking in representation (37). However, there are more varieties of Queer stories now that can provide children with a lens in which they can see themselves represented positively, and such a story can really make an impact on a Queer child who has not experienced that. This is especially critical when Queer narratives of the past—and present—feature characters who are "assaulted, contemplating or completing suicide, being murdered, dying alone" (Walters 19). Furthermore, beyond LGBTQ+ children seeing themselves represented, straight/cis-het children reading Queer stories can help them to build empathy and understanding as well as knowledge that they are not the default identity (Pickering 38).

Lo's biggest qualm with challengers of LGBTQ+ books is that they are most often seeking to shame the readers and writers of these books. Lo says that in most cases her work is taken out of context by people who have not read her books in full, but found scenes that they took issue with ("My Books Have Been

Banned"). She highlights a particular case where the challenger said "I don't need this kind of garbage in my mind. And neither does any child. Pornography!" (@wcvafreedom2read). The "Request for Consideration Form" that the library patron fills out in order to create a case against a book asks the challenger to make specific references to issues they have with the book, but in this case the patron cites "Everything!" as the problem with the book, and makes no other specifications other than referring to "the selection [they] saw," (@wcvafreedom2read) indicating that they have not read the full material. Lo also responds to this on her blog:

> There is a heavy element of shaming involved in these book bans. When intimate scenes from my books are pulled out of context and put in a table format alongside the accusation that they are pornographic, it's clear that the book banners are declaring my work shameful—and by extension, they're trying to shame me. ("My Books Have Been Banned")

This again plays into the stereotype that Queer equates to sexually deviant or explicit, and there are several cases in which children's books with LGBTQ+ characters or themes are taken out of context or are described as being about sex, even when there are no sexual elements involved in the novels at any point (Altobelli & Lambert 25).

When Lily is forced to come out to her parents, she is also no longer able to see Kath or spend time at The Telegraph Club, the place where she finally gets a glimpse of the Queer community in San Francisco. Lily's mother taking this away from her does not change the fact that Lily is lesbian, but instead forces her into a space of deep loneliness and hurt. As put by Saundra Mitchell, author of several challenged Queer books, "Removing us from books, movies, websites, textbooks, documentaries—removing us from schools and libraries—will not erase us. It will only mean that your children, the children of your community, your families, your flesh, who have been so fearsomely, wonderfully made—will suffer the way we did in decades past" (1). Book banning of LGBTQ+ narratives is increasing, and so is the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ children in schools. Walters reports "four in five LGBTQIA+ students…feeling unsafe in school because of at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics compared to six in ten from two years previous" (20). These two issues are not separate, but go hand in hand.

When Lily's family sends her away in an attempt to rid her of her desires for Kath, the distance does not do what her parents hope it will. Rather, Lo's text says very little about what happens to Lily while she is away, instead moving straight

into the epilogue in which Lily is back in San Francisco. It is as though Lo is saying that this time away does not change Lily's story; removing her from San Francisco does not change who she is or what her feelings for Kath are, especially as the book concludes with the two girls back in each other's company.

While the challenges mentioned in this paper are in libraries and schools in the United States, Canadian librarians are also witnessing this happen more frequently in their libraries (Wong). These challenges also "primarily involve opposition to books that deal with sexuality, 2SLGBTQ+ themes or gender diversity" (Wong). Consuming media wherein various identities are represented can help to create psychological safety for youth, especially if they are discovering or struggling with their identity, and this should be the priority of caregivers and lawmakers when deciding what books to include in a school or library. With this goal in mind, libraries can strive to reach the point at which there is no way to exclude media that represents LGBTQ+ identities because they will be as acceptable as heterosexual identities.

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Escaping the Patriarchy While Enjoying Its Pleasures: Women's Relocation of Erotic Gendered Violence into Queer Male Romance

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Content warning: this paper contains references to sexual assault and intimate partner violence.

Introduction

The enemies-to-lovers trope is pervasive in romance narratives, occupying a significant portion of both the romance genre and online fanfiction spaces. These stories of erotic obsession, forbidden love, and sexual tension are primarily written by and for women, often raising concerns from feminist readers about the perpetuation of romanticized abuse, gender essentialism, and unhealthy models for love. While the enemies-to-lovers dynamic has enamoured and aroused audiences throughout the history of romance novels, its traditional heterosexual context has become increasingly criticized, while a simultaneous rise of gay enemies-to-lovers narratives occurs. A century's worth of romance novels featuring passionate loves blossoming from social tensions proves women's continued attraction towards this trope, and research within the Fan Studies field shows that the majority of slash (male/male romance or erotica fanfiction) is written and read by women (Busse and Hellekson 76). So, women's fascination with writing and reading Queer male enemies-to-lovers stories is a natural progression within the trends of these mediums and genres. However, we must also consider the rapid mainstream adoption of feminist ideology by young women and the consequent rise of disapproving feminist analysis of romance media when regarding the phenomenon of women's enemies-to-lovers narratives being relocated into male bodies and Queer contexts. I argue that women write Queer male enemies-to-lovers romance narratives because it allows them to explore and enjoy the common fantasy of erotic aggression, romantic toxicity, and hegemonic masculinity without the threat of gendered violence against women. By

using two male characters for this trope, the hetero-patriarchal dynamic of male aggression and domination does not threaten (fictional) women's safety, nor reinforce women's submission and passivity. Eliminating the misogyny from the enemies-to-lovers dynamic allows writers and readers to indulge in fantasies that are not pleasurable in the contexts of their own lives and identities. One example is the differing romantic realities and fantasies of slash writer Cath from Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013). The coexisting critiques and defenses of the popular dark romance and fantasy genres, as well as the role of gender in Rowell's Queer novel *Carry On* (2015), demonstrate both the female fantasy of hegemonic masculinity and the feminist consciousness and patriarchal realities that interfere with these erotic idealizations.

Dark Romance and Its Discourses

To establish the gendered and sexual nuances of this phenomenon, we must first understand the enemies-to-lovers trope and the popularity of the dark romance genre. The "enemies-to-lovers" trope is especially malleable due to the broadness of its premise, and it is often paired with other genre tropes, such as forbidden love, fake dating, and forced proximity. Despite this broadness and vastness for possibility, a common feature of the trope is a significant power imbalance between the pair, typically signified through class disparity and incongruous social statuses. In heterosexual romances, the majority of these dynamics place the man in the position of power, oftentimes directly placing him in an authoritative position above the female love interest, therefore giving him the advantages of wealth and masculinity in a capitalist, patriarchal setting. An iconic example of this dynamic is the romance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's beloved novel *Pride and Prejudice*. While Mr. Darcy possesses excessive wealth and benefits from his upper-class male privilege, Elizabeth's family must actively seek social connections to avoid future poverty, placing Elizabeth at a social and financial disadvantage compared to her love interest. The sensual taboo of imbalanced power extends beyond social status, often manifesting in the actions of male love interests who are frequently displayed as violent, angry, aggressive, and sometimes criminal or supernatural. Thus, the enemies-to-lovers trope can often be found in the "dark romance" genre, which is an adult sub-genre of romance that pushes boundaries and blurs the line of consent, placing characters in situations where "Morality is optional, but pleasure is not" (Donaldson). Acts of physical domination often appear in dark romances and, much like the assault-adjacent fantasies in bodice-rippers of the past, women

readers are usually intended to interpret this male brutality as a manifestation of love rather than contempt (Kaler 95). When the collision of dark romance and fantasy occurs, we typically see an intertwining of masculinity and monstrosity, creating erotic and dangerous situations for so-called "pure" female leads, whose pursuers' interests are both predatory and romantic. Bloodlust becomes symbolic for sexual desire, and supernatural ravaging becomes synonymous with sex. Male characters being "vampires or werewolves positions them 'naturally' as predators and their female lovers as prey," but their non-humanness allows these gender roles to exist, as it excuses them from expectations of socially constructed human behaviours (Jowett 3).

While there is a large readership of dark romance, and an even larger readership of the entire romance genre, there is also a large and loud population of critics. For example, feminist critiques of *Twilight* emphasize Bella's lack of autonomy, as her supernatural romantic interests frequently use their superior strength to physically control and stalk her, and the key to Bella and Edward's relationship is the constant knowledge that he has the capacity to kill her (Durham 288). These criticisms claim that the blending of maleness and monstrosity highlights and excuses the characters' brutality, therefore showing violence as "essential and inexorable" to their being and inherent to boyhood (Durham 289). By framing violence and rage as fundamentally intertwined with masculinity, their presence in a man's love for a woman is therefore excused, allowing essentialist ideology to be normalized, accepted, and romanticized. Pairing this image of hegemonic masculinity with weak, docile, indecisive, and innocent portrayals of female characters (such as Bella Swan) further emphasizes the power imbalance between the two members of the romantic pair. A 2016 study measuring heterosexual women's romantic beliefs, such as "endorsing the ideology of romanticism, placing high importance on romantic relationships, and believing jealousy is positive," found that women possessing these beliefs also find controlling, mate-retention behaviours romantic (Papp et al. 104). This relationship between romantic beliefs and the risk of intimate partner violence is explained partially through Script Theory. This theory argues that human behaviours are predictable and follow observable patterns, therefore suggesting that women internalize the representation of heterosexual love in the context of jealousy, violence, and control (Papp et al. 99). This study states that media's conflation of romance with control leads to internalized messages that consequently increase the risk of violence, highlighting the need for mainstream media to eliminate the romanticization of unhealthy relationships in order to amend these toxic heterosexual scripts (Papp et al. 107). According to a 2020 poll by Pew Research

Center, feminism and liberalism are steadily increasing among women, with 61% of American women identifying as feminists, especially those aged 18–29 (Barroso). This poll also found that differing social expectations for men and women are seen as one of the largest obstacles American culture still needs to tackle regarding gender equality (Horowitz and Igielnik). As liberal ideologies and awareness of gender inequality increase among women, this population naturally becomes more critical of misogyny in mainstream media, and therefore increasingly disapproving of and disturbed by it.

So, if a large population of women are feminists, how does a genre that often relies upon the suffering and domination of women manage to thrive in the market of women's literature? The key factor in addressing this question is the element of fantasy. The enjoyment of this genre relies upon the reader's awareness that the text is fiction and the author's ability to incorporate the non-consensual, dangerous elements into a "potent but non-explosive mix" that titillates the audience without causing distress (Kaler 95). While some argue that the eroticism of threats of danger in romance fiction is simply a sexual fantasy and form of escapism, others interpret it as a subversive reclamation of power. Lee argues that these novels can be read as fantasies of female empowerment by "reposition[ing] the conflict […] from the quest of a love that conquers all to a struggle for power through knowledge of the other" (62). Cohn argues that the romantic or sexual relationship with the powerful male figure allows the woman to obtain his social and economic power, creating "a new equilibrium of male-female power" that is "wrenched free of the historical situations in which they were created" (4). Whether reading these romantic texts of female subordination as sexual liberation through the indulgence of fantasy or as a subversive form of claiming power, the presence of hegemonic masculinity and misogyny is undeniably present from a literal reading of the gender dynamics. Arguments in favour of and against this genre can both be true at once, as the "threat of sexual danger both heightens the eroticism" and evokes concerns "with the larger cultural messages transmitted by the romance novel and what these indicate about women's fantasies" (Lee 61). The contexts that make these fictional scenarios concerning are often also what make them erotic.

Romance, Fantasy, & Gender in *Fangirl*

The coexisting awareness of male violence and romantic fantasies of men's toxic love are visible in Rainbow Rowell's novel *Fangirl.* The novel follows Cath, an anxious college freshman and popular slash fanfiction writer online. Cath

exclusively writes love stories about characters Simon and Baz, two enemies from the fictional *Simon Snow* series who greatly resemble Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy from the *Harry Potter* franchise. Cath is enthralled with the idea of a slow-burn, enemies-to-lovers romance blossoming from Baz's constant bullying, manipulation, and endangerment of Simon; however, her perception of similar actions by men in her personal life is completely different. Rowell provides frequent examples of men threatening female characters, such as strangers in a bar sexually harassing Cath and her twin sister Wren (116). Rowell also describes Cath "press[ing] 911 on her phone, then [running] back to the dorm with her finger over the Call button" whenever she is alone at night (84). Later, Cath's writing partner and semi-crush Nick takes advantage of her conflict avoidance and desire to be liked in order to steal her work (210). He manipulates her by saying, "You're freaking me out here. Are you actually mad about this? Do you really think I'm stealing from you?" (210). When Cath notices a bruise on Wren's cheek, she worriedly asks if it was caused by Wren's boyfriend (343, 348). By including these instances of misogyny and fears of gendered violence, Rowell shows that Cath is easily victimized by men due to her passive and socially anxious nature, aware of this threat, and actively against the harmful behaviours of men, thus contrasting the toxic love stories she fantasizes and writes about.

By demonstrating Cath's awareness of misogynistic threats and her experiences as a victim of them, Rowell establishes that Cath's reality with men vastly differs to her fantasies about men. This is further exemplified through Cath's romance with Levi versus her depictions of her fictional crush Baz, who she jokes about being in a "secure" relationship with (16). Cath's crush on Baz is central to her storytelling, as her fanfictions are written in a third person limited point-of-view, giving readers insight into the mind of Simon and framing Baz as the object of romantic and sexual desire. While Cath describes Baz as "a long, dark shadow" (139) and as having eyes that are "sunken and shot with blood" (136) in her fanfiction, she describes Levi as constantly smiling, having a friendly face, and being "hundred-watt Levi" due to his bright, cheery nature (271). Levi's friendliness and enthusiasm are unconventionally plentiful, and Cath describes him as "[going] so far out of [his] way to be nice to people" (70). This is consistently proven through his actions, such as driving Cath home rather than letting her walk home alone at night, or carrying Cath's laundry because he wants to "make [women's] lives easier" (309). Meanwhile, Cath's fanfiction includes multiple scenes where Baz verbally abuses Simon, such as calling him "the most self-centered, insufferable prat ever to carry a wand" (136), publicly bullies him, and admits to trying to kill Simon by luring him towards a chimera (138). By

writing Cath's real-life boyfriend and her fanfiction's object of desire as opposites, Rowell affirms the claim that women's enjoyment of dark romance and toxic fictional relationships are an exercise in fantasy and escapism. However, Cath explicitly dislikes the cliché heroines of romances, which she expresses while writing a love story with Nick. She describes his protagonist as a "Mary Sue to the tenth power" and proclaims, "I have something against twenty-two-year-old women […] stopping the car to wish on dandelions," and "It's a cliche. I swear to God, every surviving Volvo produced between 1970 and 1985 is being driven by quirky fictional girls" (198). Cath's acute awareness of the gendered politics in love stories is evident in her criticisms of Nick's cliché female character, yet she adores the romance between Baz and Simon, two characters who embody tropes and clichés: Baz is a brooding, predatory vampire while Simon is a loveable, misfortunate Chosen One. As a reader, it is difficult to imagine Cath writing this story in a heterosexual context that places a girl at the mercy of Baz's sadism-disguised crush. Cath's awareness of gendered violence, preference for kind-hearted men, and disliking of poorly written female leads proves that her love of the enemies-to-lovers slow-burn embodied by Simon and Baz is able to exist because of its male Queerness. By creating a romance between two male characters, Cath can explore and experience the anticipation and sensuality of aggression, obsession, and violence without consuming a narrative that misrepresents women and places them in danger at the hands of men.

Carry On's Erotic Aggression

Following the mass success of *Fangirl*, Rowell went on to write *Carry On*, which follows the enemies-to-lovers romance of Simon and Baz in the universe of the *Simon Snow* series from *Fangirl*. In the author's note of *Carry On*, Rowell explains, "When I finished [*Fangirl*], I was able to let go of Cath and her boyfriend, Levi, and their world. I felt like I was finished with their story… But I couldn't let go of Simon" (521). She states that the story is her (not Cath's) take on the character she "couldn't get out of [her] head", and that this novel (turned trilogy) was a way to give Simon and Baz "the story [she] felt [she] owed them" after only half-imagining them in *Fangirl* (522). Rowell's own interest in her toxic romantic Queer leads is further demonstration of gender politics in romance. Her heterosexual YA romance novels (e.g. *Eleanor and Park*) depict quirky outcasts finding safe spaces in their first loves— this male/female tenderness and safety juxtaposes *Carry On*'s male/male erotic violence. *Carry On* follows Simon, the "Chosen One" in the World of Mages, and his roommate (and declared nemesis) Baz, a vampire/mage,

in their final year at Watford School of Magicks and at the end of a magical war. Smith and Moruzi state that the forbidden romances of Gothic young adult novels emphasize the protagonist's occupation of "the liminal space between childhood and adulthood demarcated by sexual experience" and place the heroine in conflict with the politics of their universe, "conservatively linking their sexual maturation with danger to themselves and others" (14), which is also true of Simon and Baz in *Carry On*. When looking specifically at the context of paranormal romance, in which the male half of the heterosexual pairing is usually the paranormal figure, the monster-figure's bloodlust is read as a sexual metaphor (Durham 284). As previously mentioned, intertwining bloodlust with erotic desire and the capacity to kill with forbidden love intrinsically links the concepts of romance and sexuality to violence. Alongside this blending of bloodlust and romance, a paranormal man's enhanced strength and untamed violence become manifestations of masculinity. This combination places fictional young women at the mercy of their predators for the sake of love. While the structure of these conventions remains applicable, their gendered implications are changed when in the context of male Queerness, as are the aforementioned conventions of dark romance. The eroticism of bloodlust is expressed by Baz, describing wanting to "Kiss him or bite him […] Those were my fifth-year fantasies: kisses and blood and Snow ridding the world of me" (201). Although Baz possesses the traditional paranormal, masculine urge to physically attack and drink the blood of his romantic conquest, he is also aware that Simon "would put [him] out of [his] misery if [he] tried" to either bite or kiss him, showing an equality between the pair's power and strength, which is unusual for the tropes it mimics (201). Searching *Carry On* for the criticized features of the (heterosexual) romance genre and the fantasy/paranormal romance sub-genre shows a disruption of these genres' gendered conventions. The duo-masculine dynamic and Queer context of the novel negate feminist critiques regarding the presence of hetero-patriarchal abuse in romance, as the boys are equally capable of harm and retaliation.

The unaligned social power between romantic leads is still present within this pair, as Simon is an orphan from the non-magical world whereas Baz is a member of the Pitch family, "the nearest thing [the magical world] [has] to a royal family" (82). Although Baz has significantly more skill in wielding magic, Simon is the declared "Chosen One" and has the most power of any Mage in history. In the context of a magical universe that assesses one's power through the amount of magic they possess, the measure of this fantastical power is therefore comparable to the enhanced physical strength of other paranormal male leads. So, while men in dark romances are seen restraining women, carrying them without their

consent, and protecting them beyond their ability to do so for themselves, Simon and Baz are portrayed as equals in their power and the ability to harm one another. Although Simon frequently recounts the memories of Baz's attempts to kill him, Simon also states, "But I'm probably gonna have to kill [Baz] someday, and we both know it" while talking to his friend Penny (165). While the typical enemies-to-lovers dark romance plot or forbidden love in a paranormal romance usually place one character in an inferior position to their romantic counterpart, leading to empowerment through their eventual union, Simon and Baz are immediately presented as equals. The power struggle does not imply domination or submission, but rather an erotic mutual destruction between emotionally repressed teenagers. For example, Edward's intrusions into Bella's home to watch her sleep is often read as creepy and predatory stalking, despite the narrative's insistence that it is an act of romance (Meyer 293). Baz often watches Simon sleep and Simon frequently recalls secretly following Baz through the Catacombs every night (176). Both of these acts resemble those of Edward in *Twilight,* but they are not portrayed nor read as "creepy." Because Baz and Simon are both boys, they have access to one another's social and physical spaces without a sense of intrusion, whereas identical actions in a heterosexual romance would resemble women's fears of being followed and attacked by men in the dark, which Cath worries about throughout *Fangirl* when walking alone at night. The constant hateful and erotic obsession expressed by the boys is read as less threatening than it would be for a heterosexual pairing. During random, non-sexual moments, Baz will fantasize about acting upon his unrequited urges, saying, "I imagine myself spitting in his face. And then I imagine licking it off his cheek and kissing him", a statement that many women would consider objectifying and dehumanizing if it were targeted towards themselves or a female character (205). Although Rowell's Queer enemies-to-lovers story contains more pronounced unhealthy obsession and physical aggression than the typical paranormal romances that are criticized for their misogyny, Rowell simultaneously acknowledges the genre's misogynistic conventions. Agatha, Simon's girlfriend-turned-ex-girlfriend, struggles with her role as the Chosen One's girlfriend because she feels as though supporting the Greatest Mage is "the only place [she] can make any difference" (75). However, she wants to sidestep her "golden destiny" as a passive side character in her powerful boyfriend's prophesied greatness (199). Rowell writes a beautiful and passive love interest for the Chosen One and subverts her traditional role by depicting Agatha's discontent with the constant interference of her boyfriend's excessive power and his propensity for danger, as well as her desire to escape the magical world. This representation dismantles the misogyny that teenage girls in

paranormal romance, such as Bella Swan, often fall victim to. This further proves an awareness of gender roles within the genre and emphasizes the necessity of male Queerness for anti-misogynist readers and writers who crave the sensual hostility that often contradicts their advocacy for women. Women can relish the paranormal romance and strong, brooding men of their fantasies without the distraction of wondering the same questions Agatha asks (e.g., *what is this character's identity beyond her relationship with a man?*) or feeling disturbed by the sexualization of women's abuse in romance narratives.

Interpreting Violence and Queerness

Although this male/male reinterpretation of traditionally misogynistic tropes absolves writers and their readers of the (debated) reinforcement of women's submission to men, it does not entirely undo the harm of the genre's gender essentialism. While this practice removes women's suffering from the equation of hetero-patriarchal romance, the upholding of traditional masculinity can remain. Because the readership of fanfiction and YA romance (regardless of the characters' gender, sexual orientation, and identity) is girls and women, the romantic ideals portrayed in these women-less relationships must be considered through the lens of a female reader. It is worth noting that, although the discussed perspective frames men as romantic objects of women's desire, it does not exclude women readers who are not attracted to men. These messages can still be internalized and therefore influence one's manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality and romantic ideals. So, the Queer male romance narrative eliminates the Mary Sue archetype and the passivity of women, but, ultimately, the "female emotional longing for some old-fashioned strong-armed protection by powerful males" remains in women's portrayals of men in romance (Weisser 98). Whether or not women vicariously project their attraction into the Queer romance story or experience desire for the character(s), they are consuming narratives that promote the aforementioned gender essentialist ideology which links masculinity with violence. This ultimately justifies and romanticizes men's aggression, obsession, and dominance in romantic and sexual contexts. This is only a half-solution to the critiques of dark romance: fictional women are freed from toxic masculinity while real-life readers receive a double dose. This is not a criticism specific to Rowell's *Carry On*, nor an invalidation of its romance and readers. Instead, it is an exploration of the gendered behaviours present across genres, both in published novels and in fan works within internet communities similar to Cath's.

Women writers' representation of Queerness and male/male romance is a point of contention for many readers. It is argued that the practice of women writing male/male romance and erotica allows for the prioritization of women's sexual pleasure in a community by and for women, particularly in fandom spaces (Busse and Hellekson 77). This is illustrated in *Fangirl* when Cath meets a reader of her fanfiction who expresses love for Cath's story and complains that there are not enough Simon/Baz love scenes (202). The two then bond over their shared enjoyment of the gay couple despite outsiders' judgments of this interest (202). However, this centering of women's desires is often critiqued by gay men themselves, such as author Jamie Fessenden's statement that "MM Romance may be about gay men, but it isn't really ours." *Reddit* user @markthepage writes, "I am really bothered by how little published or marketed gay romance is actually #OwnVoices, and how much of it plays up yaoi fetishes," describing the frequent inauthenticity of mainstream Queer romance, the domination of women in the male/male romance market, and the fetishization of male Queerness. With the aforementioned increase in feminist ideology and liberal politics among women, feminist concerns are broadening into intersectional perspectives, no longer making (typically white, heterosexual) women's representation in media the only demographic worth considering. If readers reject characters such as *Twilight*'s Bella Swan for their inauthentic and male-centric representations of womanhood, further consideration must also be given to all romance characters who exist in a hetero-patriarchal society and marketplace. While these concerns and criticisms hold value and raise important questions, an absolutist approach that invalidates all male/male romance media by women is not an appropriate response. Rather, much like the discourse of dark romance, understanding both sides of the argument and applying them on a case-by-case basis is essential for promoting critical thinking and media literacy. For example, the domination of women in the male/male YA romance market reveals a comparative lack of Queer stories by men being published or promoted. Meanwhile, debates about this discrepancy expose the public's tendency to dismiss women's literature with broad generalizations, such as assuming that women's stories about Queer men are inherently fetishistic or inaccurate. It is necessary to establish that literature, like all artistic mediums, is a deeply personal experience which is individual to the readers' and writers' politics, identity, and circumstance.

Queer paranormal and horror stories are another popular genre with a history of gender and sexual politics. The Queer coding of monstrosity and antagonism is clear throughout the twentieth Century, such as the portrayal of Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* and the comparisons between gay men and vampires during

the 1980s AIDS crisis, which described them both as contagions who transformed victims into the living dead through the mingling of blood (Benshoff 117). However, this subtextual representation of Queerness through monstrous otherness, which often coded violent acts as sexual perversion, has been transformed into its own genre of Queer Horror. This genre uses monstrosity as a metaphor for Queer experience (such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*) or explicitly displays the Queerness that has been culturally coded into monstrosity (such as the *Interview with the Vampire* television series). The past's discourse on Queerness in horror demonstrates how criticized genre conventions shift with the culture that consumes it. If we can now read monstrosity positively as a site for Queer identity exploration, then we should view the various discourses surrounding the romance genre (and its sub-genres) as both evidence of social progress and as a fluid space for transforming the genre and its readers' identities.

Conclusion

Queerness in fiction manifests in multiplicities. It can be monstrosity and otherness, an escape from patriarchal violence, an exploration of gender and sexuality, and/or simply a depiction of romance for audiences to enjoy. The ongoing tradition of literary criticism that questions the representation and authenticity of texts reflects a desire for diverse and compassionate stories. Meanwhile, the coexisting popularity of criticized sub-genres shows a simultaneous need to express our identities and desires in ways that do not always fit neatly into the categories created by these discourses. Romance novels are ultimately an artistic medium, and art is defined by the diverse lenses of politics and personal experiences through which it is created and consumed. Aiming for perfect acceptability, authenticity, and expression is an impossible feat: the definition is an ever-moving target that changes with our culture. A singular, universally accepted representation of love (regardless of orientation) or Queerness may never be found for the audiences of romance media. However, the continuing attempts to express love and Queerness, and the continuing critiques of these attempts, are themselves evidence of diversity. The conflict between creations and reactions leads to transformative adaptations of the genre (such as women using male Queerness to explore eroticism without the threat of misogyny, or authors expressing Queer experiences through monster allegories), and is therefore invaluable to a culture of readership, social acceptance, and self-expression. The only way to transform the romance genre is to continue writing

and reading in alignment with what we authentically feel and what we value in the world we inhabit. A genre cannot progress without a desire to continue improving the stories we write, read, and internalize. The changing trends in the romance genre are ultimately reactions to our social and political contexts, reflected in how we articulate the desire to love and be loved.

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Queer Pride…and Prejudice: How *Most Ardently* Adapts *Pride and Prejudice*

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Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any book in possession of great popularity must be in want of an adaptation. *Pride and Prejudice* has had its fair share of adaptations, from films to plays to more books. This is in part because of its pervasive popularity, but also its long-standing themes that still resonate with readers over two hundred years later. Though the story has had hundreds of adaptations, which modify it to suit whatever whimsy an author possesses, it tends to maintain its position as a heterosexual and cisgender romance. However, there are notable deviations from this theme. *Most Ardently* by Gave Cole Novoa, released in 2024, is one such exception. The story follows *Pride and Prejudice's* footsteps and introduces us to the same familiar characters, plot and setting. It sets itself apart by centering the narrative on transgender Oliver (formally Elizabeth), who struggles to live, pursue love, and be a good child, all while staying true to himself. Though the book starts with an interesting interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* that seeks to introduce Queer people into the narrative, it may falter in its execution. This potential failure has implications both for the message of the book and how it may affect its audience and genre.

Pride and Prejudice Overview

Since its publication in 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* has continued to enrapture readers. Though its twenty million copies sold may seem small in relation to other books that can sell into the hundreds of millions, the impact of *Pride and Prejudice* is undeniable (Walsh). The academic community returns time and time again to this work, writing thousands of papers, reviews, and critiques. Combining this with the general population's pull to the novel emphasizes the importance of *Pride and Prejudice* in the current cultural climate. Numerous critics delve into the implications of *Pride and Prejudice*, but for this paper, we will only focus on the fundamentals of the book. Namely, we will provide answers to questions like what maintains *Pride and Prejudice's* relevance as well as exploring its central plot and messages.

To answer the first question, Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri's paper "Revisiting Classics: Relevance of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" uses relevance theoretic analysis to assess *Pride and Prejudice*'s undiminishing popularity. Relevance Theory has two main principles: that relevance is what most compels the human brain, and that inferential communication contains relevance (62). In engaging with this theory and the text, Khushu-Lahiri supposes that *Pride and Prejudice* communicates and maintains its relevance through discussion of still relevant topics. The first concept she discusses is gender. She observes that in the book the expectation that men of high social standing "must be in want of a wife" (Austen 9), implies that women must also want to be a wife (Khushu-Lahiri 66). Elizabeth's character is in conflict with this expectation, as her values prevent her from accepting proposals that she should accept according to societal norms. Khushu-Lahiri states that this decision creates a "dichotomy between femininity and being true to oneself" (66). She states that this dichotomy is one that women still struggle with in the current patriarchal world, maintaining the relevance of the text.

Khushu-Lahiri then focuses on the relevance of human traits and social class in *Pride and Prejudice*. She points to three main human traits, each of which she connects to a character: prejudice, which Elizabeth allows to cloud her perception of Darcy; pride, which inhibits Darcy from admitting his feelings due to Elizabeth's social standing; and cynicism, which causes Mr. Bennet to reject the social expectations around being a father, husband, and neighbor (67). Khushu-Lahiri argues that the experience and overcoming of these emotions are universal to human experience, and so causes the text to maintain relevance. Additionally, she addresses how the book links social class to the quality of someone's character. Austen portrays Elizabeth and Jane as being held in higher regard than their sisters and mother because they act in a much more respectable manner, despite being in the same family (Khushu-Lahiri 68). This separation of class based on not only wealth but conformity to social standards is something that Khushu-Lahiri states is still being done today, with traits and characteristics often being seen as differing between the elite and middle class (69).

Though Khushu-Lahiri's paper helps to explain some of the central themes that lead to *Pride and Prejudice's* relevance, it does not explore the importance of these themes to the book's message. The paper "Of Life and Happiness: Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" by Samina Ashfaqa and Nasir Jamal Khattak ventures an answer. They suggest that the characters who receive a happy ending may be significant in understanding the message of the book. To them, it appears as though Austen is only willing to hand out happy endings to those that manage to undergo the

lengthy process of overcoming their negative qualities. Austen punishes Lydia with an unhappy marriage for her shallow self-interest and disregard for her family's concerns (Ashfaq & Khattak 10). Meanwhile, Elizabeth, who manages to see past her injured pride and realize Darcy's true nature, achieves true happiness with him (15). Thus, taking shortcuts and not addressing negative qualities only leads characters to perpetuate their own misery (17). Though moral messages like this can seem rather simplistic, they provide a moral backbone to the work that makes it more than just a romantic story. It teaches about the value of taking the time to look past how things seem and get to how they are, even if the process is long and unenjoyable.

Despite this rather straightforward moral message, there are some who find issues with the book. Joseph Carroll offers an opinion that unites the two previous arguments, saying that "the fulfilment of their happiness thus strongly suggests an ideal concord between their specific cultural order and the elemental aspects of human experience" (Carroll 14). What Carroll means by this is that the characters' happiness is contingent on their values being compatible with their social protocol. However, he notes that this concord is not one every reader will agree with. It requires both an acceptance of Austen's cultural values and the idea of a normative heterosexual romance (Carroll 14). He states that readers who do not agree with Austen's values must "find some way of interpreting her perspective that makes it seem more alienated than it actually is" (Carroll 14). Carroll suggests that these varying interpretations often only differ in small amounts, changing what themes the readers focus on or where they place their tonal emphasis.

This is a rather significant criticism since, if the reader does not buy into a heterosexual marriage as a happy ending, then it disrupts the moral messaging of the book. If readers interpret Elizabeth's character as contradictory to her "happy ending," then the book would no longer reward her character development. In fact, all the characters in the book would appear to receive the same punishment, but with varying levels of severity. To solve this, readers would have to re-imagine the work to be reflective of their own personal values while maintaining the positive ending. Though Carroll suggests that this interpretation would be of little consequence, it shakes the foundation of the text. Attentive readers would have to find a way to re-imagine *Pride and Prejudice* that still allows for the themes that make it relevant to remain intact. Otherwise, these interpretations threaten the moral backbone that elevates the book past a simple romance.

Queer Readings of *Pride and Prejudice*

Though this kind of interpretation may seem like a tall order, there is a longstanding history of queering *Pride and Prejudice* in a way that maintains its themes. Not only does this history suggest that these interpretations can be done, but also that there may be a foundation within *Pride and Prejudice* to support them. However, these interpretations do change various aspects of the story, specifically in how the audience is meant to view the character Darcy.

Devoney Looser's *Atlantic* article "Queering the Work of Jane Austen Is Nothing New" states that the first ever Mr. Darcy to take the stage was a woman. University productions of *Pride and Prejudice* featuring all-woman casts were somewhat frequent in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This casting decision follows a trend of the time, calling back to the 1500s all-male productions of Shakespeare (Looser). However, the other plays following this trend were not romantic comedies and the display of two women playing each other's romantic interest was highly unusual. Though it was likely not the intention of the plays, this did serve to emphasize Queer readings of *Pride and Prejudice* (Looser). More intentionally, however, it's possible that the portrayal of Darcy by a woman might have served to satirize certain aspects of Darcy's masculinity; instances of a woman cracking Darcy's whip might be seen as more funny than swoon-worthy (Looser). This portrayal disrupts both the gender and sexual certainty of the original. If two women can successfully reproduce the story, despite an inability to provide an accurate representation of masculinity, it calls into question the necessity of masculinity in the story. This challenges the heterosexual basis of *Pride and Prejudice* while maintaining the original book themes through an identical plot.

Though these stage productions fell out of popularity by the mid-twentieth century, discourse about Queer readings of *Pride and Prejudice* continues to this day. An excellent Master Thesis by Jennifer Leeds, "Jane Austen's Open Secret: Same-sex love in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Persuasion,*" explores the Queer implications of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley's friendship. She argues that the book does not begin with compulsory heterosexuality but instead arrives at it slowly, allowing space for queerness in the process (13). Her main evidence for Darcy's queerness is his rejection of social decorum. Leeds claims that when Darcy makes statements like "there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with" (Austen 17) he is communicating to Bingley that he refuses to participate in heterosexual courting (Leeds 18). This refusal to participate in classic mating rituals such as dancing can definitely be read as

Queer. Even if he himself isn't, it aligns him with a rejection of straight culture, which Queer viewers would resonate with.

Leeds goes on to argue that not only is a homosocial bond present between Mr. Bingley and Darcy, but that Darcy's eventual heterosexual coupling would not have been possible without it. She claims that Darcy only initially insults Elizabeth due to the jealousy he feels towards Elizabeth's sister when Mr. Bingley shows her attention (Leeds 23). Without his initial insult, calling Elizabeth "tolerable" and "slighted by other men" (Austen 17), Elizabeth would not have had her attention so keenly on him. Her inability to ignore Darcy or to pander to his ego is what first piques his romantic interest in her (Leeds 28). Elizabeth's disinterest in marrying Darcy, or his fortune, is distinctly against the feminine goals of the time which paints Elizabeth in a masculine light. Leeds argues that this masculine representation of Elizabeth is what cements Darcy's interest in her (29). Through this view, Leeds portrays homoerotic jealousy as the basis of the heterosexual pairing and an attraction to the masculine as the element that maintains it.

Though the persuasiveness of this argument is up to interpretation, Leeds's reading is made possible by a comprehensive understanding of the novel. It demonstrates the capacity that *Pride and Prejudice* holds for Queer readings. It is exactly interpretations like this that lead to retellings such as *Most Ardently*. As Hutcheon says in her book *Theory of Adaptation*, "the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation," (8). Though *Pride and Prejudice* itself may sell a story of compulsory heterosexuality, there is nothing stopping readers, and then writers, from telling a different one.

Theory of Adaptation

Before we can explore further how *Most Ardently* retells the story of *Pride and Prejudice* in a Queer light, we must first understand more about adaptations. This section will explore the concept of adaptations and set expectations for how this paper will assess *Most Ardently* as a retelling. One of the questions surrounding this paper is how heavily to judge *Most Ardently* in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*. Certainly, its inspiration cannot be ignored, as Hutcheon puts it, "If we know [the] prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly" (6). Seeing as it would be difficult to find someone who is oblivious to the story of *Pride and Prejudice*, recognizing this shadow is necessary when viewing its success. However, Hutcheon suggests that an adaptation's fidelity is not what determines its success. Instead, she stipulates three components that are crucial to a successful adaptation: product, process of creation, and process of reception (7).

For the first component of the product, Hutcheon focuses primarily on the transposition done with the original work. Transposition can be a change in medium, genre, frame or ontology (8). In the case of *Most Ardently,* it is a shift in frame, changing the framework of the story from a heterosexual romance to a Queer one, which a creates "a manifestly different interpretation" (8). Transposition, even when operating within the same medium, means change, so adapters will always have to make compromises and progressions (16). Moving away from the idea of fidelity, a persistent element within critiques of adaptations, means judging an adaptation by its choice of transposition.

The second, process of creation, is the idea of (re-)interpretation leading to (re-)creation. Hutcheon suggests that adapters are first interpreters and then creators. She describes this as a "double process" of first forming a new understanding of a work, and then creating something to be representative of it (20). In accordance with this idea, Hutcheon claims that an unsuccessful adaptation is not made from a lack of fidelity, but a lack of creativity and skill (20).

The third, process of reception, surrounds the idea of the audience's awareness and acceptance of the adaptations' intertextuality. Hutcheon's claims that "both the pleasure and the frustration of experiencing an adaptation is the familiarity bred through repetition and memory" (21). She goes on to note that sometimes adaptations are transgressive against their original work. In my example, *Most Ardently's* queering of *Pride and Prejudice* transgresses against the heterosexual values that the original maintained. Hutcheon states that not all audience members will appreciate such transgressions; however, they do serve to point out audience expectations around the work (22). The audience's expectations and experience of an adaptation is going to have an impact on its success. If the work transgresses against audience beliefs, though this may be done in valuable ways, it may negatively affect its reception.

Most Ardently

These three components, though not encompassing the entirety of adaptation theory, set up a lens which we can view *Most Ardently* through. How did Gabe Cole Novoa interpret, transpose, and create *Most Ardently*? What's transgressive about it, if anything? How was it received?

Interpretation & Transposition

In an interview with Yu-Hung Tien and Mariam Wassif, Novoa, when asked about his reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, stated "I knew Elizabeth's struggle intimately because it was mine." As a transmasculine person, Novoa resonated

with the strict expectations around gender performance that Elizabeth has to adhere to in *Pride and Prejudice*. Similarly, he resonated with the theme of "finding unlikely love" due to his own experiences: he found love even when "cis heteronormative society made it feel impossible" (Tien & Wassif). Given this, it's clear that his interpretation and inspiration in adapting *Pride and Prejudice* stems from a deeply personal resonance to the original text. Hutcheon states in her book that "adapters' deeply personal as well as culturally and historically conditioned reasons for selecting a certain work to adapt and the particular way to do so should be considered" (95). In this case, it is clear that Novoa's personal experience as a transmasculine person in the western world significantly impacted his reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, which then impacted his recreation of it.

Novoa begins his interview by stating that *Pride and Prejudice* is about "rigid gender norms, societal expectations, and finding unlikely love" (Tien & Wassif). This, along with the way he reinterprets Darcy's "morose attitude at the balls and aloof nature" as being Queer, fits well with interpretations like Leeds's, which sees Darcy as Queer and Elizabeth as masculine. Novoa then moves past interpretation and into creation when he does not simply claim that Elizabeth is masculine, but instead creates a version of her that is instead a he.

The creation of Oliver as the main character in *Most Ardently* is the most notable deviation from the original *Pride and Prejudice*. Changing the original Elizabeth's gender has huge implications for the plot, character relations, and implicit values of *Pride and Prejudice*. It takes a book that begins with characters struggling to adhere to the socially prescribed rules of their world and who learn to conform to them, and turns it into a book that begins the same, but instead must teach the world to change. This transposition of the gender experience in *Pride and Prejudice* has all the creativity and ingenuity to create an exceptional adaptation. The idea takes root in the spirit of *Pride and Prejudice* and yet transgresses against it in a way that creates the perfect opportunity for new meanings and understandings around the work.

It addresses Carroll's concern around *Pride and Prejudice's* maintenance of heteronormative romance as the default and it creates the opportunity for Queer people to become visible in history and this classic (Tien & Wassif). Despite the positive impact of this change, it does threaten the foundation of the text. If the execution is found lacking, the moral backbone of *Pride and Prejudice* that maintains it as an important book could be threatened. Novoa must ensure that if he removes the element of heterosexual marriage, he must replace it in equal part with an aspect of the text which restores meaning to the work.

Creation & Execution

Novoa starts his novel with Oliver already aware of his masculine identity and having come out to a few close friends and his sister. Though he maintains a feminine appearance for much of his day Oliver can live part of his life as male when he dresses appropriately and secretly goes out into the world. This clarity of identity that Oliver starts the book with means that his main conflict is not a matter of discovering himself, but instead whether to reveal himself.

His positionality on coming out stays rather consistent throughout the book. At the end of the first chapter, he states that "One day, the rest of the world would know the truth, too" (4) indicating that he does not plan on staying in the closet forever. He also signals disdain for the idea of anyone conforming to societal values who does not want to. During a conversation with Charlotte, who in this adaptation is a lesbian, Charlotte mentions how she would marry Mr. Collins if he proposed because she is not in a privileged enough position to deny the offer. Oliver seems aghast at the suggestion and says, "I just don't believe any of us should have to accept circumstances that will stand in the way of our happiness" (160). Charlotte points out that many people don't have that option and need to "choose a middle ground if [they] hope to survive" (161). To this Oliver agrees, but thinks that to live his life as someone's wife would not "feel like survival at all" (161). This conversation is a very telling one, both in setting up the expectations of their world, and also digging into Oliver's positionality.

Oliver clearly exists with a lot of privilege, given he's in a position where if he does not wish to marry, he does not have to. However, he does not seem to recognize his privilege and, in fact, looks down on Charlotte for doing what she needs to do in order to survive. When Charlotte eventually accepts Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage, Oliver states that he "cannot accept that" because he "refuses to settle for a future that will deny [him] the happiness [he] deserve[s]- the happiness [they] *both* deserve" (184). Though this sentiment is coming from a place of wanting to live a happy and authentic life, it makes it clear that Oliver's beliefs are unable to change regardless of circumstance (where Austen's character's are). Charlotte has no other option, and Oliver is unable to see that. Oliver seems to be given one set of values and does not deviate from them. He thinks that he should not compromise happiness for survival, and he judges other people accordingly. These values do not shift or expand to allow the other people in his life to be recognized.

However, despite this strong opinion, he is rather passive when it comes to his own journey. Every time Oliver comes out to another character, it is only due to

advantageous timing or force. When he comes out to his father, it is because he was caught sneaking out. He only comes out to Darcy because he runs into him accidentally, not because he sought him out. He comes out to his family because, if he did not, he would be blackmailed into marriage. For a character so enraptured with the unity of happiness and authenticity, he takes no initiative in enacting it. This passivity, in addition to a surface level understanding of his and other Queer people's circumstances, leads to his character being rather two dimensional.

This two-dimensionality is never challenged by the other characters, as they all accept Oliver almost instantaneously after he comes out. He is never forced into a position where he needs to confront that living authentically comes with consequences, because, for him, it doesn't. Even the antagonists, Mr. Collins and Mr. Wickham, serve only to enable Oliver's passivity. By putting him into a position where he has to choose between coming out or living as Mr. Wickham's wife, Oliver is set up to make a decision that only cements his existing values. Not only does it deprive him of *choosing* to come out, but it does also not challenge him to develop a more robust understanding of himself. By Novoa's ending the book this way, readers are left feeling as though Oliver has not changed. The book began with a character determined that the world would change for him, and it ends with the world doing just that. He does not have to change, make compromises, or deal with hard realities. Though this lack of internal conflict allows the book to ignore difficult problems, it limits Oliver's character from developing in a way that would compel audiences to resonate with him.

Unfortunately, Oliver is not the only character in *Most Ardently* who lacks depth. Many of the characters are only given one or two defining characteristics. However, where Oliver's character is unchanging, these characters may be too quick to change. Mrs. Bennet starts the book wanting Oliver to conform to societal values including wearing dresses, enjoying balls, and marrying. Like in the original, she pressures Oliver to accept Mr. Collins's proposal saying that if he does not, she will "never speak to [him] again" (Novoa 155). These beliefs and actions make it clear that Mrs. Bennet thinks that Oliver should maintain a heteronormative appearance at all costs. Oliver himself states that he cannot "imagine a world in which his mother would embrace him with a smile and a word of encouragement" (229) upon his coming out. However, counter to this, when Oliver comes out to her at the end of the books she is instantaneously accepting saying "I suppose your vehement distaste for dresses makes all the sense in the world now" (280).

Instead of this change reflecting growth or development, it instead reads as a flagrant disregard for her established character. Mrs. Bennet's instantaneous acceptance means that she had no time to grow or develop new opinions. This instant change insinuates that Oliver's conception of her was reflective of his anxiety instead of her true character. However, her actions in the book make her old-fashioned position seem undeniable. Though Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is also quick to change her opinion when the engagement between Elizabeth and Darcy is announced, the change is in accordance to her values. In the original, Mrs. Bennet pressures her daughters to marry for money and status. The only reason she doesn't like Darcy is because she thinks his callous manner is depriving her daughters from an opportunity to marry him. If marriage is then offered, her dislike for his temperament is not longer relevant. However, in *Most Ardently* her values of heteronormativity are being challenged by Oliver's coming out, making her acceptance contradictory to her values. This contradiction results in the book feeling empty, unable to even support even simple character concepts. Characters, including Mrs. Bennet, end up being puppets providing conflict or acceptance depending on what is advantageous to the story.

Though the majority of *Most Ardently*'s characters fall into this category, there are those whose depth hints at untapped potential. When Darcy is first introduced, he appears tactless and cold. However, as Oliver gets to know him better, we see that Darcy's previously callous behaviour was because "he was in a space where he had to pretend to be someone he wasn't" (117). This representation of Darcy incorporates his character from *Pride and Prejudice,* while also adjusting it to suit a Queer perspective. When in the company of men, and where Darcy is not expected to "flirt with a future that would never –could never–make him happy" (117), he is kind and lighthearted. It explains Darcy's foul temper in the original as not just a dislike for social decorum, but as something that expands on and deepens his character, similar to what Leeds suggests.

One of the valuable gains from this representation on Darcy is that it shows the realistic implications of being a closeted Queer man in a time when he could not come out without serious penalty. One thing that Novoa talks about in his interview is how important it is to him that the public realise that Queer people have existed throughout history. Queer people's inability to come out, or to be recognized as Queer, has limited our exposure to historical cases of those identities. Showing Darcy's struggle with his sexuality creates a realistic portrayal of why so many Queer people have remained undiscovered in European history. After Darcy and Oliver kiss for the first time, with Darcy being unaware that

Oliver is also Elizabeth, he panics. He runs off and, a few days later, proposes to "Elizabeth." This panic and attempt to conform to heteronormative standards is something that creates realism in his journey. It would also likely resonate with many Queer readers whose character has been influenced negatively by being forced to stay in the closet. Finally, it creates a realm of growth for Darcy, forcing him to outgrow his internalised homophobia and accept his queerness in order to be happy.

However, Darcy's development seems to halt completely after Oliver comes out to him. To set the scene, Oliver and Darcy are talking for the first time since Darcy ran off and proposed to "Elizabeth" when Oliver comes out to him. Even though realising his queerness is obviously a difficult process for Darcy, he accepts Oliver almost immediately. He empathises and even laughs when he realises that in his "panic about kissing a boy, [he] ran off to ask a *boy* to marry [him]" (255). This acceptance, though a bit surprising, is not itself an issue. Darcy has been exposed to gender queerness before in the form of molly houses and has generally proven to be accepting of other people's queerness. However, it is a bit startling when Darcy is suddenly open to being in a queer relationship with Oliver. They both admit that they "enjoyed kissing" (256) and soon Darcy accompanies Oliver to tell his family he is trans, after threats from Mr. Wickham arrive. Though this sequence of events makes for an easy happy ending for Oliver, Darcy's development seems to be forgotten in the mix. The complexity of his character is quickly overshadowed once the spotlight resettles on Oliver. This is disappointing, as outside of Darcy's character there is little depth to be found. Darcy shows the potential that the book has to execute an interesting interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* and yet his character alone is not sufficient to enrich the entire book.

The two-dimensionality present in almost every character[17] means that any message *Most Ardently* tries to achieve will likely not resonate with readers. We get the sense that *Most Ardently* is trying to tell readers that if they stay true to themselves they will achieve happiness. However, this lesson is ineffective if it is demonstrated in a world that lacks realism and depth. This disconnect between reader realities and Oliver's realities results in a book that is encouraging in concept but falls flat in execution.

Reception

[17] Though there are also many two-dimensional characters in *Pride and Prejudice,* the main characters are not.

Despite these criticisms, *Most Ardently* is still a somewhat successful adaptation. *Most Ardently's* Goodreads page, a website dedicated to the rating and commenting of books, has over six thousand ratings for a total score of 4.05 stars out of 5 ("Most Ardently"). The majority of the ratings fall either in the four- or five-star category with only 23% percent of ratings falling below that ("Most Ardently"). Scrolling through the comments, we find many of them praise the book both as an adaptation and as a piece of priceless representation. Particularly, lots of the comments note the positivity and acceptance in the book as a positive feature ("Most Ardently"). However, investigating the comments further reveals a distinct lack of positive comments that address the plot, characters, or message. Some reviews note that they enjoyed the romance element of the book, but very few mention any other aspect of the plot ("Most Ardently"). The lack of depth in these comments seems to resonate with the lack of depth in the book. This suggests that readers that enjoyed *Most Ardently* most likely engaged in it from a more aesthetic perspective, appreciating it as a simple story with the type of representation that many Queer readers have been seeking.

Comments that delve deeper are typically reviews with three stars or fewer. These reviews explore and criticize the book's characters, themes, plot changes, and values. To provide a brief overview, the most common complaints are as follows: historical inaccuracy, Darcy's misogyny, a general lack of focus on women, unnecessarily evil villains, Oliver's shallowness, and a dislike of some of Novoa's plot changes ("Most Ardently"). It's important to note that many of the negative reviews start with how excited the reviewer had been for the book ("Most Ardently"). This excitement, however, only ended up amplifying their disappointment when the book did not meet their expectations. Based on these reviews, it seems as though readers who wanted *Most Ardently* to capture "what it would be like to be trans in the Regency era" (Chad Chrysanthemum) were left disappointed by a book uninterested in exploring the nuance involved with that concept. In this way, *Most Ardently* fails to meet readers' expectations of addressing the complicated and interesting challenges around being Queer in a historical context. Hutcheon states that, when a book goes against its audience, it serves to reveal something about reader expectations (22). In this case, it may reveal that some reader expectations were too high.

Since *Most Ardently* was first published in January of 2024, there are many professional reviews of the book at the time of writing. However, one review by Aaren Tucker, a Canadian scholar, gives an overall positive verdict but states that "the overall flattening of Austen's complex characters also unfortunately invites

unfavorable comparisons to her most enduring work" (148). Despite this, Tucker praises the book's representation of historical happy Queer people. However, the criticism handed to the book is very telling when viewing *Most Ardently* as an adaptation. An adaptation should reimagine its predecessor and, with its new interpretation, create a story that resonates with the original and amplifies a different aspect of it. If an adaptation results in good Queer representation but a "flattening" of the original story, then it has simply taken the original and used it for parts. *Most Ardently* takes the plots and characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and flattens them, removing the nuance and complexity that made the original a classic.

Personally, as a trans reader who was excited to read this book, I found it lacking. Trans representation is important to me, for that reason I often find myself seeking it out. It makes me, and many other trans people, feel seen and validated. Adaptations such as this write us back into the narrative. They take classics and stories that were never made for us and rewrites them so they can be. However, the reason *Pride and Prejudice* is a classic is not solely because it features a heterosexual romance: it is because of the comments it makes on society and decorum, its wit, its exploration of personal failings and how overcoming them is rewarded. *Most Ardently*'s disregard of almost every one of these aspects results in a book that may be representative and entertaining enough, but empty. For readers who are simply desperate to see positive and happy trans representation, *Most Ardently* may do enough. However, for readers who want trans people to be featured in interesting and meaningful stories, this book does not deliver.

Likewise, a happy ending is not the same as a perfect one. Oliver gets his perfect ending, and though it is refreshing to see a trans character who is loved and supported, it feels unrealistic. Many Queer people will have experience with someone like Mrs. Bennet, who perhaps loves them, but struggles to see them for who they are. The Mrs. Bennets of the world do not simply flip on a dime: Queer people living in relation with them must give them the time to see if love is enough to turn the tide of their opinion. Regardless, taking the time to grow and learn to be comfortable in yourself is the true happy ending. Oliver is never given the opportunity to discover this, or anything else. To me, true representation is more than just showcasing a trans person, it's about showing a person. A person who is just as rife with flaws as the rest of us. A person whose happiness requires real work and growth. A person who struggles with their body and mind in a way that is unique, but also unquestionably human.

Conclusion

With adaptations becoming more and more prevalent and an outcry for more Queer representation, the writing and publication of a book such as *Most Ardently* is no surprise. However, there are still very few like it. *Most Ardently* is one of the first of its kind and that means its success as an adaptation matters. It sets an expectation for the demand of these books and sets genre conventions for how they are written. *Most Ardently* doesn't just retell a class in a Queer light, it proves that queering a classic can be done and that there is an eager audience invested in its success. This makes its lack of depth and nuance disappointing; however, this disappointment does not condemn it. *Most Ardently* still provides positive representation for those that need it, and it sets an example for works that follow. Future works can take inspiration from *Most Ardently* but seek to do more. Though there should be many more books that seek to tell happy trans stories, this does not mean that those books should shy away from showing queer characters who are real and complex.

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She's the Man: Gender Performativity in Queer YA Fiction

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Introduction

Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating is a 2021 YA romance novel by Bengali-Irish author Adiba Jaigirdar. The novel follows two Queer teenage girls, Hani and Ishu, as they navigate their personal and familial relationships in a secondary school in Dublin, Ireland. When Hani's white friends doubt her bisexuality, Hani asks for help from Ishu, another Bengali student. Hani proposes a fake dating scheme so she can convince her friends of her bisexuality and in return Ishu can become popular enough to make Head Girl. Aware of how they are perceived by their peers, Hani and Ishu do their best to make their fake dating believable to their heterosexual peers; they go on dinner dates and triple dates, to parties, and to cultural gatherings together. During these dates, Hani takes on a feminine role by people-pleasing and caring more about appearances. Ishu is portrayed as more masculine because of her assertive and confident attitude. Judith Butler, a critical gender theorist, might suggest that society's compulsory heterosexuality influences the characters. Hani performs her gender to fit into society and Ishu performs the masculine roles seen in heterosexual relationships to make their relationship appear as real to their heterosexual peers. In this essay, we will analyze how the Queer characters in *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* are influenced by heteronormative gender and dating stereotypes. Our analysis will be interpersed with our creative writing, which will demonstrate our understanding of the characters and speculate as to where the story could go if we bring Butler's gender theory into it.

Judith Butler is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. In the early 1990s, the post-structural theorist wrote a book called *Gender Trouble*. This work questions the heterosexual assumptions in feminist literary theory and movements (vii). *Gender Trouble* proposes that "nothing is natural, including sexual identity and desire" (Williams 2372), which means that anatomical features have been prescribed with set expectations regarding sexual desire by society; people live or "perform" in the ways that society and culture expect them to. Butler does not

argue that sex does not exist, but that gender is a constructed and reproduced part of identity. This means that actions in our normal daily routine can differ depending on our gender and are only normal to us because our thoughts have been shaped by society. In an interview with Big Think, Butler calls these actions performative, not because they are fake, but because we are enacting our lives as a specific gender (07:16). Modern society, according to Butler, is "ill-equipped" to recognize people whose bodies do not fit into the heteronormative institution and there are consequences of being a "deviant" such as homophobia (Williams 2373). Butler says many in society refuse to allow trans people to define themselves because they would then feel that "their own self-definition is destabilized" (Big Think 10:55). People often feel insecure when what they have known to be true about gender and sexuality gets more complicated. However, Butler writes in Chapter 3 of *Gender Trouble* that, whether a person is Queer or straight, the perceived notions of gender are impossible to uphold because they were created a very long time ago. They write, "The loss of the sense of the 'the normal,' however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal,' 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody" ("Subversive" 189). This means that it is absurd that deviating from society norms makes society uncomfortable, because norms are not original: they are reproduced versions of older ideal behaviour. It is impossible to behave in an idealistic way because we have culturally and socially changed.

Butler's theory of gender performativity allows us to challenge what we consider normal and break free of the unattainable pressures put on us to act in a certain way by society. Analyzing Hani and Ishu's story through the lens of Butler's concept of gender performativity adds nuance to their struggles; not only are they dealing with the pressure of coming out as Queer in a difficult stage of life, but they are also learning how deeply heteronormativity is rooted in society. In the following paragraphs, we will demonstrate how Hani and Ishu are subjected to performing gender roles.

Hani's Performance

The perpetuation of gender norms has had, and continues to have, an influence over societal perceptions of gender. Many individuals believe that a "real woman" is determined by biology (Butler, "Subversive" 191). However, academics such as Clark and Paechter, and Gardiner have explained that the societal interpretation of what defines a "real woman" goes beyond the sex assigned at birth. Those who identify as a woman are often expected, by society and peers, to act womanly. Butler states that "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right"

("Subversive" 190), meaning that societal treatment of an individual may change if they do not act according to how the norm indicates they ought to act. Clark and Paechter point out that young girls are punished by peers when their actions and physical appearance do not reflect characteristics associated with femininity. According to Gardiner's descriptions of feminine characteristics, Hani's physical appearance reinforces the idea of Hani as feminine. Hani plans what she wears thoughtfully and strategically for fake dates with Ishu (Jaigirdar 81), and wears makeup, dresses, and perfume (143). Wearing a scent is not necessarily gendered, but our society has made a distinction between men and women wearing scents.[18] Magdalena Petersson McIntyre claims that consumer goods mould ideas and images of femininity and masculinity through their marketing and lead consumers to believe that products are to be used by specific genders. Petersson McIntyre explains that "designed goods are necessary props in an ongoing iteration of an unstable gender norm" (341). If designer goods are used as props, then wearing perfume is one tool that individuals, such as Hani, use in their performance of femininity. Women are the target consumers for most cosmetic products. Hani admits that her "dressing table has so many bottles and vials and brushes that [she] could probably start [her] own beauty line" (56). Hani's excess amount of makeup may indicate that she wears makeup frequently and therefore is constantly performing her gender.

Hani also outwardly performs her femininity through her clothing choices. Hani and Ishu are required to wear uniforms at school (79). Hani describes her school uniform as "puke green" (79), demonstrating her dislike of its appearance and showing that she cares about what she wears. The uniform makes her free-time clothing choices more important, as she is not frequently able to decide what she wears. Gardiner discusses the association between dresses and being "womanly." She argues that not wearing dresses or tearing a dress while wearing it can indicate that the character in literature is less feminine than individuals who wear dresses (Gardiner 2, 14). Hani specifically chooses to wear a green dress with a white floral pattern on her first fake date with Ishu (81). Later, she wears a purple dress with lace to Dierdre's party (116). Flowers and lace are largely associated with femininity, therefore Hani is enhancing this image of herself as feminine through the designs of the dresses. Hani appears to care about her public appearance. She plays with her hair and Ishu frequently takes note of Hani's long hair and how it is styled. Hani's hair is described as long, black, and falling to her waist (43, 117).

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[18] Marketing typically targets women as consumers of "perfume" and targets men as consumers of fragrance by labeling it as a "fragrance for men" or a "cologne."

Ishu draws attention to its noticeable length and the large effort it would take for Hani to maintain. Ishu states, "you have such long, thick hair. It must take a lot of work to keep it that way" (117). Hani supports Ishu's guess when she details how she cleans her hair with special products and uses oils, conditioners, and Mehndi in her hair care routine (117). Despite the extra effort it takes for Hani to care for her hair, she chooses to keep her hair very long. Gardiner cites Justine Larbelestier's novel, *Liar,* in which a character says, "You have to stop suppressing the girl parts of yourself. Is this why you keep your hair so short? Why you never wear skirts or dresses?" (quoted in Gardiner 17). She claims that female literary characters are made more boyish-looking by cutting their hair short, therefore rejecting femininity. If short hair on women is viewed as a masculine hairstyle, then this would imply that long hair is viewed as feminine. Maintaining her long hair style may be another way that Hani performs her femininity.

Throughout the novel's fake dating trope, Hani is portrayed as polite, passive and non-confrontational in her striving to please people. Clark and Paechter cite *Hey* (1997) in their explanation that the pressure from other school-girl peers "to be 'nice,' that is, kind, polite and unassertive, prevents girls from fully expressing or asserting themselves" (271). This indicates that being passive in our expression of ourselves is associated with being considered nice. Clark and Paechter point out that characteristics of niceness and politeness are heavily valued in young girls and have a large impact on their ability to make and maintain friendships. When Hani becomes frustrated with her friends, she explains that "[she's] not supposed to get angry" (215). Hani's confession supports Clark and Paechter's claim because it implies that her passive attitude is important in maintaining her relationship with Aisling and Dierdre. Similarly, Elizabeth Sharp's article differentiates between valued femininity and excessive femininity. She states that "the emotional restraint to be "calm" and nice despite things not going [their] way, fit[s] the niceness prescription of valued femininity" ("Modern Bridal"). Sharp indicates that being "calm" and "nice" are heavily valued characteristics in their association with being feminine. Hani's kind and polite attitude is an example of perfect femininity. While Hani's avoidance of using curse words may be a result of her cultural customs, it also supports the image of Hani as polite. Hani is hesitant to show anything other than kindness because she knows it could mean the end of her friendship with Aisling and Dierdre. Hani appears to be aware of Butler's claim that not performing your gender "correctly" can have social consequences. At the end of the novel, Butler's statement is supported when Hani's boldness and assertiveness on behalf of Ishu coincides with the end of her

friendship with Aisling and Dierdre. While readers know that they were already not good friends to Hani, it is ultimately Aisling and Dierdre who walk away from the friendship.

Hani is an interesting character to analyse through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity because she subconsciously performs her gender to fit in with her friends. She feels "expected" to act in certain ways and believes she's not supposed to get angry. Based on this analysis, Hani hurts herself when she performs her gender because she cannot express her true feelings. To demonstrate how Hani maintains her femininity to please others, we have added a scene to further highlight the compressive nature of gender. Below is an original scene written by Ella McKnight that shows how Hani is influenced by heteronormative pressure. The scene is based on Hani and Ishu's conversation about the difficulties of caring for Bengali hair types at the end of Chapter 16.

"Doesn't it all just get in the way? In physical education class, I mean." asks Ishu, as she thinks of Hani's beautiful hair.

Hani sits behind her on the bed, brushing Ishu's hair.

"Not really." Hani lowers her brush from Ishu's waves. "I played football and rugby and I had no trouble with my hair."

Ishu's eyes widen and she turns to face Hani. "You played rugby?" She can't imagine Hani playing a sport like rugby. It's so… hard-core.

"Yeah, my brothers taught me and I played on a team for a while." Hani smiles fondly, recalling her favourite sport. She used to love running on the field with her team and the competitive nature of the game.

"Why don't you play anymore?" Ishu asks.

Hani's smile falls. "I don't know," she replies. "My fupi didn't like me playing it. She thought it was too tom-boyish."

"But isn't there a national women's team now?" Ishu asks.

"You're right, there is a national women's rugby team in Ireland, but that doesn't really matter to my fupi. She didn't want me to be wasting my time with sports. Last year, Aisling asked Deirdre and me to join the cheerleading team, so I did. It was fun, too."

Although Hani's expression is pleasant, Ishu hears the disappointment in her voice.

"But it's not the same as rugby, is it?" Ishu asks.

"Well… not really," says Hani. She plays with her bracelet. "It really hurt when I had to tell my parents I wanted to quit rugby, but I felt like I was expected to."

"You can do whatever sport you want, Hani. It doesn't matter what people think," says Ishu. She smiles.

This re-imagining and addition to their conversation in Chapter 16 highlights how Hani complies with heterosexual gender norms. When Hani says that her fupi (aunt on her mother's side) doesn't like her playing rugby, Hani is showing how ideals perpetuated by her female family members have contributed to how she lives her life. To be "tomboyish" is to go against what heteronormative society believes a woman should be (Gardiner). Hani quits rugby because she feels expected to, showing that she is very influenced by societal constructions of gender and femininity. The scene exemplifies how performing gender hurts young women because she feels that she cannot play the sport she loves.

Ishu's Performance

We can view Ishu as more masculine. Many of her traits are the opposite of Hani's feminine traits. Hani's long hair is seen as feminine and therefore Ishu's short hair may be masculine. Hani and Ishu also contrast in whether they wear makeup (56, 205) and their attitudes towards wearing dresses (115). Hani's physical representation of femininity is more clearly described than Ishu's physical presentation as masculine. However, we can see Ishu performing masculinity through her actions and attitudes. David Vogel's article parallels information found on the *Men's Minds Matter* website and in Clark and Paechter's article: the dominant masculine norm in our society is being competitive, courageous, emotionally strong, and independent. We see these traits associated with masculinity in Ishu's character. Ishu is the opposite of Hani in her courage and ability to say what she is thinking. While Hani's restraint from speaking her feelings and standing up for herself are performing as feminine, Ishu's qualities of courage to speak up for Hani is a masculine-associated trait. During a conversation with Ishu, Hani says,

> "You're like…super smart. The smartest person in our entire year. Not just in results. You also just know…so much. About so many things. And you always speak your mind and you can stand up to anybody. You're basically like…invincible." "So…everybody at schools thinks I'm superman?" Hani turns back to me with another smile that lights up her whole face. "No." she chuckles. "They think you're a lot of things they're afraid to be…so it's easier to just not interact with you." (170)

Hani notes that Ishu is "a lot of things they're afraid to be" (170), which shows Ishu's boldness is apparent to many of the people in their school. Hani's statement implies that all the students in their all-girls school do not have Ishu's courage to be outspoken. The inability to see Vogel's masculine-deemed trait in such a large pool of girls supports courage and boldness' association with

masculinity. Ishu's response about being Superman compares her personality to a male heroic figure rather than a female figure. The choice to say Superman rather than Superwoman, or another female hero, may indicate that Ishu identifies her characteristics as masculine as well. Hani also describes Ishu as the smartest person among all their peers. Ishu competes with Nikhita in academics (209) indicating that Ishu is competitive, another trait Vogel associates with masculinity. Hani hints at Ishu's competitive nature when she calls her the smartest in their year (170). To be the best or smartest indicates a competitiveness to be in and maintain the top spot. This suggestion that Ishu is competitive is further supported by Ishu's drive to compete and win the Head Girl position (116). Ishu also displays the emotional strength Vogel describes as a dominant masculine norm. Vogel explains that boys are teased for crying, as it is seen as being emotionally weak. Ishu points out her performance as emotionally strong when she states,

> "I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips, or the tears prickling behind my eyes. I feel like I've picked this up from Hani–too many emotions. I'm not really a crier, but ever since becoming friends with Hani…." (334)

This statement describes Ishu's previous ability to act emotionless. She claims that she was not previously an individual who cried. Ishu's school peers see her as "invincible" (170), and being seen as emotionally weak would not coincide with this image. Ishu's characteristics grouped together may be associated with masculinity, especially because they are characteristics that she is not noted to share with the other girls at her school. Hani points out in her statement that the other students think that "it's easier to just not interact with" Ishu (170) because she is different from them. This demonstrates what Butler describes as a consequence for not "properly" performing her femininity. Ishu's intellect and lack of friendships makes her the target of Aisling's bullying. Butler argues that not performing one's femininity should not be cause to view someone differently. Gender is a social concept. An individual's anatomy is separate from their gender, and both of these can be separate from their performance (Butler, "Subversive" 187). Ishu's gender is separate from her masculine characteristics. However, her deviation from societal ideals is not a result of her consciously addressing heteronormativity, but rather her conforming to heteronormative ideas. Her masculine-associated characteristics push her into taking on the heterosexual masculine roles in her Queer fake relationship with Hani, and is therefore still influenced by heteronormative attitudes.

A Fake Relationship

Often in heterosexual relationships, there are actions defined by gender. We have unconscious biases or expectations regarding how people should act in a relationship based on their gender. Through the reproduction of these expectations, dating roles have become normalized and people who date often feel pressured to conform to them. This is called compulsory heterosexuality. Butler explains that "compulsory heterosexuality [holds] claims to naturalness and originality" ("Subversive" 169). With this being a common assumption among society, it makes sense that Hani and Ishu would base their fake relationship on heterosexuality and the roles associated with it. When Hani begins to take on roles associated with women in heterosexual relationships, Ishu fills the male role. They each naturally have characteristics associated with one gender, so they fall into those roles unconsciously. This is shown on their first fake date when Ishu pays for Hani (91–92). Ishu's reason for paying for Hani's meal is that Hani is managing an aspect of their fake relationship that Ishu doesn't want to—posting on social media. In the scene, she thinks to herself,

> "I know that I already told Hani that we would be paying for our own meals, but all things considered it seems a little unfair to make her pay when she's the one handling all the Instagram stuff. I mean, it's not like I could considering I have three followers, and one of them is Hani. When we get the bill, I'm quick to hand over my debit card. Hani settles me with a glare, though I can tell that it's harmless. It has more humour in it than anything else" (91–92).

In Hani and Ishu's relationship, Hani takes on the emotional labour of appealing to social media so that they can prove that their relationship is real. It is a common assumption that feminine-identifying people value emotional and social relationships more than masculine-identifying people do, but it is a fact that female adolescents use social media to facilitate friendships more than males:

> The more female adolescents perceive the possibility to easily and constantly access to their friends online, the more they tend to experience validation within the relations (e.g., frequent online interactions with friends, together with public demonstration of affect, may be synonymous with validation among friends); conversely, males reported to perceive less validation within friendship relations when they experience higher accessibility to friends online. (Angelini 26028)

Hani cares more about her friendships and social persona, and this relates to her putting effort into maintaining a social media presence. Ishu's lack of social media

presence reflects that she does not find validation through social media and friendships, as most teenage females do.

Due to Hani's more feminine qualities and the fact that she does social media work in their fake relationship, Ishu takes on a more stereotypical, masculine role when she pays for the date. The action of masculine-identifying people paying for dates is very normalized and supported by the heterosexual-dominated society. Men are praised as gentlemanly, or chivalrous for paying for their significant others. It is not uncommon for Queer people who are more masculine appearing, to experience feeling pressure to take on the role of a straight man in a relationship. This phenomenon is explained by Michal Jones, in *Everyday Feminism*:

> As a non-binary, masculine or center person, I find myself pulling out my credit card by default while on dates, opening doors, and feeling pressures to dress and behave in certain ways. Because that is what is expected of me. And while there is nothing wrong with, for example, the conscious and consenting decision for me to pay for dinner, so much of that unconscious behaviour is rooted in greater systems of heterosexism and misogyny. ("How Queer Relationships")

Jones recognizes that their behaviour is influenced by society's compulsory heterosexism, and, when they date, they replicate heterosexual dating roles. Ishu, like Jones, has masculine traits that influence how she acts while fake dating Hani. However, like the male interviewees in "Queering Courtship," Ishu does not express that she feels expected to pay. "For the most part I pay … I don't feel like it's expected of me. It's something I like to do," says one of Lamont's interviewees (116). The only respondents who justified paying for dates were cis-men: "While they were often very critical of gender norms in other aspects of their lives, this norm went unquestioned and was portrayed as a non-gendered practice" (116), Lamont explains. This means that despite their sexuality, people with masculine traits unconsciously reproduce their gender through the act of paying for meals on dates, which further supports that Ishu subconsciously takes on the masculine role.

Another example of Ishu compulsively filling a masculine role in their fake relationship is when she mentions wanting to give her jacket to Hani. When Hani admits that she is feeling chilly, Ishu says "I would give you my jacket if I hadn't left it in my locker [...]. That would be like…the right thing to do, right?" (185). Ishu prescribes to the idea that giving your jacket to your date is socially agreed upon. However, this action is associated with men acting gentlemanly in

heterosexual dating, as supported by *The Gentleman's Journal*. In its discussion of gentlemanly etiquette, *The Gentleman's Journal* states that "If it mists into the air, you should ask if she's cold, and offer your jacket." They explain that this action often has romantic implications and in using the term "she" they imply that this etiquette guide is intended for heterosexual relationships. It is well known that this action was common in the olden days, but blogs such as the *Gentleman's Journal* and *Distractify* by Sarah Kester indicate that these actions/assumptions continue to this day. Kester notes the common use of men giving hoodies to women. This modern translation of the jacket-giving tradition has altered due to changes in style; however, the reason behind the action remains the same: making their female significant other feel protected. Ishu is constantly trying to protect Hani by standing up to Aisling and Dierdre. Ishu's desire to give Hani her jacket is another attempt to protect and comfort Hani.

In "Queering Courtship," Lamont writes that the members of the LQBTQ community she interviewed felt the dating practices in heteronormative relationships were too rigid. Most interviewees felt that for non-gendered dating practices, "there were no rules over who should ask for dates, who should contact the other person first after a date, or who should pay for a date" (114). One responder suggested trying activity-based dates rather than money-based dates, such as free concerts and hiking. If we were to speculate as to where the story would go if the author wanted to address compulsory heterosexuality in the novel, Ishu and Hani's date would not have been a traditional dinner date. Ideally, the girls would decide to find a space to date that isn't associated with conventional heterosexual dating practices because they would be more conscious of heteronormative pressures influencing them. Below is a scene written by Ella, that demonstrates how Hani and Ishu could have navigated dating as a Queer couple. The scene is inspired by Chapter 11 in the novel.

> "So…? We could go to a fancy restaurant or something?"
> "And you're going to pay for me?"
> "I said it's a fake date, Hum—Hani."
> "Then let's do something else. How 'bout a movie?" Hani suggests.
> Having never dated before, Ishu's confusion shows on her face. Ishu's parents always celebrate their anniversary by going to one of the fancy restaurants in town.
> "Are movie dates romantic enough?" Ishu asks.
> "I think going to the movies is a pretty typical date. Aisling and her boyfriend go all the time." Hani chuckles. "Plus this way we can easily pay separately."

> "I guess you're right, but I don't really like movies… you can't talk during them. Can we do something else?"
> Their conversation dies while they think of other possible dates. Ishu can hear her watch tick. The only person Ishu knows who could help them is her sister, but she would never ask Nik for something silly like dating advice.
> Hani's face suddenly lights up. "Oh! What about baking?"
> "Baking? What do you mean?"
> "We can bake some cookies together. Think about it, it's cozy and cute. We don't have to dress up or spend money, we can just show people that we're spending time with each other, privately. Like a real couple would do."
> Ishu doesn't mind the idea of their first date taking place somewhere comfortable and getting to know Hani more. At least she wouldn't have to dress up.
> "Okay," Ishu replies, "But I'm not a good baker."
> "That's okay, I'm not either." Hani smiles. "Let's do it at my place after school. My parents will be out of the house working on the campaign for a few hours."
> "So… we'll have the house to ourselves?"
> Hani snickers. "Yes. To burn as many cookies as we need to get an Instagram-worthy batch."

In this scenario, Hani and Ishu discuss where they want their first fake date to take place. With their status as high school students in mind, they understand going for a traditional restaurant date puts unnecessary financial pressure on them. Hani then suggests going to a movie but Ishu disagrees. She asks Hani, "Are movie dates romantic enough?" which implies that she has a fixed idea of what romantic dates look like. Ishu believes restaurant dates are romantic because her heterosexual parents go out for dinner dates. Finally, Hani suggests that they bake cookies. Baking is an activity that most people enjoy, or can find joy in doing with another person. Lamont writes that "Many LGBQ people emphasized how freeing it was to be queer and not feel the need to worry about normative heterosexual expectations. Instead, they concentrated on figuring out what would make them happy as individuals" (110). Ella's goal with the scene is to capture a moment where the couple choose a date that makes them both happy as Queer teenagers, with limited money and resources. By choosing a type of date that can make them both happy, they resist compulsory heterosexuality and do not perpetuate heterosexual dating practices.

A Real Relationship

Some readers may argue that Ishu does not perform her gender because she acts in masculine ways that contradict her gender. This would make Ishu a gender non-conforming character. However, Ishu's traits align with those associated with the masculine norm and result from her performing a masculine role in her fake relationship with Hani. At the beginning of their fake relationship, Hani and Ishu are the only two openly Queer students at their catholic school and their immediate influences are heteronormative, mono-ethnic couples—parents and friends. Hani and Ishu have no Queer role models or examples to show them how Queer couples can date without following heteronormative dating roles. Therefore, their fake relationship is likely modeled after a heterosexual relationship. Butler claims that gender is "an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" ("Subversive" 186). They explain that heterosexual relationships have previously been demanded for reproductive purposes and created a norm that continues to be upheld through heteronormative ideals of what dating and relationships look like (185). Therefore, Hani and Ishu are not just taking on heterosexual roles in their Queer fake relationship because of a lack of Queer role models, but also because their relationship is intended to look real to their heterosexual peers. Heterosexual individuals may not believe that a relationship is real if it does not resemble their norm.

The assertion that Hani and Ishu's fake relationship is based on heterosexual norms is supported at the end of the novel. It isn't until the lines of whether their relationship is fake or real begin to blur that their performative heteronormative roles blur as well. When Hani and Ishu begin to realize that their fake dating is not entirely fake, we see both individuals change. Hani ignores the polite and kind attitude that is expected of her when she stands up for Ishu. Kindness and politeness are seen in Hani excessively while they are fake dating, and therefore it is very noticeable when she strays from her previously built image. Ishu appears to give in to some of the characteristics associated with femininity, such as smiling more (328) and overcoming her competitiveness to befriend rather than compete with her sister. However, Ishu remains bold and assertive along with her new characteristics, which make her less conformative to her gender. When Hani and Ishu begin dating for real, they find their own way of dating, rather than imitating heterosexual relationships. Ishu claims that "before all of this started, [she] didn't even know what being in a relationship was, but now [she's] pretty sure [she] can write a guide to real dating" (336). Ishu's claim that she knows what it's like to really date someone demonstrates that following heteronormative dating rules was not authentic to them.

A Hypothetical Sequel Scene for *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*

Given Ishu's balance of feminine and masculine traits, Ishu's character could be used as a representation of a non-gendered character. Butler writes, "When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force" ("Subversive" 185), which means that when our heteronormative ideals of gender are challenged or disrupted, they lose their influence over us because they are revealed as fake. Ishu can disrupt gender norms by using non-gendered pronouns to describe herself. To speculate where the story might go using Butler's theory of gender performativity as a lens, Ella has written a scene that would take place in the future of Hani and Ishu's relationship. In this hypothetical sequel of the novel, Hani and Ishu attend a college together and their immediate, heteronormative influences are challenged. The scene is written from Hani's point of view like many chapters in *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating.* The reason for this is that Ella is heterosexual and cis-gendered and cannot assume the emotions Ishu would be feeling during the scene. However, Ishu's perspective is inspired by Butler's feelings regarding gender as shown in the Big Think interview.

HANI

"Hello, first years!" a woman with dark curls calls out. From wall to wall, the classroom is full of first-year college students, including myself and Ishu. "Let's go around the room and tell everyone your name and pronouns! I'll start. My name is Saoirse, and I go by she/they pronouns."

I listen to students' names, look at their faces, and try to remember their faces. Gods, there are just so many people joining the Feminism club. I didn't want to join it originally, but Ishu tells me that it will look good on my CV. I feel a little nervous as the name game makes its way to me.

"My name is Abeba. I prefer she/her pronouns," says the girl beside me. With a smile, she turns to me. I'm next. I cough to relax my throat.

"Hi, I'm Humaira. I go by she/her pronouns. It's nice to meet you all."

My heart thumps against my chest. I never felt so nervous about introducing myself to other people before but I'm a University College Dublin student now. And so is my girlfriend.

"My name is Ishita," she says loudly and confidently. So confident, as usual. But then, she's silent. Everyone's silent, waiting for her to answer the other part of the question. I tap her hand gently to remind her. "Oh, um… I go by she/her pronouns."

The next person in line introduces themselves, but I look at Ishu.

"Everything okay?" I whisper.

Her cheeks look a little rosy but she nods.

After introductions are complete, our club leader hands out name tags. I write my name and pronouns on a tag, then stick it to my shirt. Then Saoirse, our leader, explains the type of things we will be doing, discussing, and reading over the year in the club meetings. They tell us how excited they are to share and discuss new topics in feminism with a group of fresh faces, and want to ensure that everyone feels comfortable. At the end of the meeting, Saoirse and their fellow upper-year students bring in boxes of pastries from the coffee shop across campus. Ishu and I move in and out of conversations, snacking on pastries, and getting to know some of our peers. The range of personalities takes me by surprise at first. I'm so used to being different from other people but it's not the same here. Lots of students are queer and a handful are Bengali, too. It's nice.

Ishu and I have coffee in the courtyard a couple of hours after the club orientation meeting. Our class schedules are very different this term, but we can share a couple hours each day without a conflict. Plus, we live in neighbouring dorms now—no need for buses.

"So… are you nervous for tomorrow?" Ishu asks. "It's our first day of classes. No more introductions and name-games."

"A bit. I'm more excited than nervous. You?"

"I'm tired of orientation. Let's get on with classes now." Ishu chuckles.

"That's so like you to think that way," I say with a smile. "How did you find the feminism club? Do you think it's worth attending?"

"Sure. It sounds interesting." Ishu replies.

"You seemed a little uncomfortable during introductions."

"I wasn't nervous. I was just distracted."

"By what?"

Ishu shrugs. "I was thinking about the whole pronouns thing. It's interesting. No one in high school went by they/them pronouns."

"You're right. I mean we were the only queer students at the time too."

"I don't like being defined by my sexuality, I already feel like I'm treated differently for being Bengali."

"I feel the same way," I say. "When we started dating, or rather fake dating, I felt like I had to prove my bisexuality to Aisling and Dierdre, but I never wanted to be treated differently because of it." I take a sip of my chai latte. So far, everyone Ishu and I meet feels the same way about starting college and changing lifestyles. It feels good to know I'm not all that different from anyone else.

Ishu suddenly says my name, "Hani?"

"Yeah?"

"My parents and sister don't know this, but I think I prefer they/them pronouns. I'm used to she/her, but I just… it feels more comfortable to me."

"Oh." Ishu's moment of hesitation in the club orientation makes sense to me now. "So that's what you meant by being *defined*."

"Yeah. Sort of. You know, I never really fit in with everyone at school. I always felt like there were expectations for me to act in certain ways and care

about certain things. My gender doesn't really matter. I want to be seen as more than my gender. I want to be Ishu, who reads and spends time with their girlfriend. It's hard to explain but I believe that the parts of my identity that I've created and nurtured matter more than how people define being a woman. What I'm wearing or what gender I'm dating shouldn't matter."

"How long have you felt this way?" I ask Ishu. I've never thought about my gender this way.

"I've never felt connected to the labels given to me in high school but being here, in college, has made me think about my sexuality and gender more. I didn't know that I didn't have to conform to a gender category. And now I've met people, like me, who don't believe we have to pick between the binaries because some people can't imagine anything outside of them."

I open my mouth to speak, but Ishu quickly adds, "I don't expect you to share my feelings…it's just something I've been thinking about for a while now."

My heart warms for Ishu. They're learning more about themself and trust me to accept them. I really-really like them. I cover Ishu's hand with my own and smile, "I understand. Thank you for letting me know how you're feeling, Ishu. I'll call you by whatever name and pronouns you want me to."

Ishu blushes. "You still want to be my girlfriend… right?"

I chuckle and smile even more brightly. "Of course, silly."

Ishu looks relieved and I can tell they've been thinking about how to confess their thoughts about this for a while.

"Would you prefer that I call you my partner?" I ask.

"No, I like it when you call me your girlfriend."

I feel warm inside. "Good."

In this hypothetical sequel, Hani and Ishu are placed in a new environment. They are not in high school, but now in college. This change in setting is important because Hani and Ishu are not the only Queer students at the school and will meet more people through the feminism club who can show them how Queer individuals can break away from heteronormative influences. The feminism club is a diverse group of students who accept identities as "deviants" (Williams 2373) within a heteronormative society, making it a space where Ishu can comfortably question her own identity. In the scene, Ishu explains that she does not feel comfortable when she is made to confine herself to a category in her identity, such as her sexuality. She says, "...I believe that the parts of my identity that I've created and nurtured matter more than how people define being a woman. What I'm wearing or what gender I'm dating shouldn't matter," which is inspired by Butler's personal thoughts about gender in the Big Think interview. They state, "the gender that you are taught to be, should not determine how you live your life" (4:45-4:51). Ishu asks Hani to use they/them pronouns when referring to her, thus choosing an important part of her identity for herself. Hani

also challenges heteronormativity when she asks Ishu, "Would you prefer that I call you my partner?" We often assume a person's gender or pronouns, especially when we have known them for a significant period; however, asking a person for their preferred pronouns is a way to combat compulsory heterosexuality.

Conclusion

In their interview with Big Think, Butler proposes that society's expectations and desire to categorize people is an issue of freedom (4:45-4:51). Gender is a concept enforced by society through the idealization of heteronormative values. Heteronormative values have become unquestioned norms and influence the way we view gender, sex, and masculinity/femininity. Anyone who does not fit into the heteronormative "box" is pushed out by society. Butler argues that society's expectations of people hinder individuals' ability to be themselves without facing aggressive attitudes and therefore affect gender rights and gender equality. While we believe that our modern society is progressing to allow individuals the freedom to be who they want, Boyer and Galupo point out that even self-exploration is influenced by constricted ideas of gender and sexuality and the roles individuals are pushed to perform. *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* spotlights the social pressure to conform to the heterosexual norm while dating and shows how easily people are influenced by heteronormative gender and dating stereotypes. Inserting creative writing into our analysis has allowed us to actually use Butler's theory, and to understand Hani and Ishu from a different perspective. Our creative element also shows how important it is for young readers, Queer and straight, to read characters who do not perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality. Hopefully, *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* and other Queer YA novels will encourage readers to notice when they are being forced to, or are expecting others to fit into the heterosexual norms that society has created.

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Lesbians in 1950s America: Legal Violence and Lesbian Spaces

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Growing up in a Catholic family, my grandmother was never able to live as her authentic self. A looming fear of rejection and neglect pushed her away from coming out to her loved ones, and instead she lived as a falsified version of herself for decades. After the passing of her husband and years of living a life that did not align with who she truly is as a person, she came out to her family and friends as lesbian. Lesbianism during the 1950s in North America was called unacceptable and unnatural. It was shameful to be anything except for straight, forcing women to hide their identities in fear of rejection from their families, friends, and society. The notion of a "proper lady" was to be an obedient wife (to a man), and their only requirements beyond submissiveness were to bear and raise children. As decades have passed and views on sexual identity have shifted, lesbians have become free to express themselves and live authentically. My grandmother, since the passing of her husband, has finally felt comfortable enough within society and within her family to live the life she has always yearned for. She is now happily dating a woman and has been very free in sharing who she is with those around her. Her story is what inspired me to research and share experiences like hers, as it is important to talk about the discrimination and hatred lesbian women faced in the 1950s.

This paper will explore the lesbian individual and her community in 1950s America with a focus on the legal violence that she faced during this period. I will begin by looking at *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Malinda Lo (2021) to show a fictional depiction of the lesbian experience in 1950s America. While this book is an imagined scenario, it is a well-researched example that displays the authentic and real experience that many lesbian women would have had. Topics that I draw on from this book include lesbian spaces and legal violence faced by lesbians. I will then move my focus to my secondary research sources regarding legal violence. In this section of my paper, I will discuss the historical violent actions taken by law enforcement officers and lawmakers against lesbian individuals and this community and how these actions negatively impacted them socially, emotionally, and sometimes physically. I will then highlight lesbian spaces and how legal violence impacted these safe havens for this community. Using this

evidence, I argue that the legal violence taken against lesbian women in 1950s America, despite its clear intent to abolish these individuals, brought together a community that would flourish in the years to come.

Last Night at the Telegraph Club is the story of Lily Hu, as she navigates the uncovering of her sexuality in a time where lesbianism was thought to be unacceptable. Despite the opinions of her family and society, Lily explores a world that is unknown to her, finding interest in a friend from school, Kathleen Miller. The two girls share a romance before they are separated by both the law and their families. Before they are torn apart, Lily and Kath frequent the Telegraph Club, a hotspot for lesbian women, to find like individuals and to freely express themselves. It is here that the two girls learn to identify and accept their sexuality and begin to build a community of people who understand and support them despite what the societal outlook on lesbianism is. The Telegraph Club showcases the importance of spaces for lesbian women, as these spaces offer a safe environment for these individuals to express their true identities and to find comfort in community. In the case of Lily, the Telegraph Club is a driving force in her finding her footing within her sexuality. It is because of the exposure to an otherwise hidden lifestyle and the unwavering support of other women that Lily can confidently identify as lesbian.

Eventually the Telegraph Club is raided by police, while Lily and Kathleen are there. The two girls get separated in the chaos and we later find out that Kath is arrested and unable to contact Lily. In an attempt to figure out where Kath is, Lily and some other women whom she met at the Telegraph Club contact a lawyer of whom they say "he's one of us" to track down her whereabouts (343). Although it is not directly said, it is understood in this comment that to navigate the legal system lesbian women must sneak around to ensure that their true identities stay hidden. It would not have been a viable solution to simply contact the police themselves to inquire about the location of Kathleen as it would be implicating themselves with the "crime" of lesbianism. This interaction with the law showcases how the legal system actively worked against lesbian individuals and this community. Firstly, the abrupt raid on the Telegraph Club gives an example of the ways in which the legal system imposes violence against lesbian spaces. The club is raided based on alleged homosexual activity, and its attendees are targeted simply for being lesbian. Secondly, the calculated and hidden movements in working around the legal system that lesbian women must take in fear of repercussions shows the violent suppression that is imposed on them. They are not able to navigate the world around them in a manner that is afforded to non-

lesbian individuals, as they know they will not be treated with the same kindness that a supposedly "normal" person would.

In the novel's historical context, 1950s America, Queer women experienced discrimination within the workforce because society viewed these individuals as unnatural and something to fear. Lesbian women were disallowed from working as civil servants or joining the army because their sexuality made them untrustworthy individuals who should not be placed in any position of power. In the case of women working within the military specifically, "lesbianism – or simply the suspicion of lesbianism – became an easy justification for dismissal" (Boyd, "Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s" 119). Eskridge notes that "this anti-homosexual fervor motivated federal agencies to adopt more explicitly anti-LGBT policies" (377). Societal views on lesbian women seeped into laws regarding the restrictions placed on the LGBT community in terms of how they were able to interact with the workforce. This blatant legal violence and discriminatory outlook from society forced many lesbian women into hiding, as they could not risk their social standing or jobs. Similar to the restrictions on civil servant and military positions, the state of Florida launched a campaign during the 1950s that moved to fire any gay or lesbian teachers on the basis of them exposing children to a homosexual lifestyle (Boyd, "Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s"). Sexuality was not separate from the workplace in the eyes of the law, and lesbian women were disallowed from working in a position with any authority or power. Legal violence against lesbian women impacted them economically in that their jobs were threatened, it impacted them socially in that society viewed them as deviants, and it shaped them emotionally as the weight of discrimination forced them to reject or deny their true identities.

Legal violence did not just impact lesbians' working lives, but also the spaces they occupied. Lesbian spaces acted as environments in which these women could freely be themselves. They were able to find both friendly and romantic relationships in these spaces and build communities that would support them in their sexuality. Boyd comments that "public visibility in bars, taverns, and nightclubs engaged lesbians in a relationship with the state as a collective, as a social group" ("Lesbian Space, Lesbian Territory" 71). This collective, in the eyes of the law and society, was a danger to the public as these spaces encouraged homosexuality, which was deemed unnatural and illegal. Thus, lawmakers and enforcers targeted these spaces and those who existed within them. Legal violence regarding lesbian spaces was often physical, as they would bring in police dogs to both intimidate and injure women (Faderman 165). Sexual harassment was also

common during the raids of lesbian spaces. For example, a raid of a Los Angeles lesbian bar included a strip search of all patrons and employees that were present at the time of the raid (Faderman 165). This violent treatment goes beyond the necessary force that would be required of a raid and is due to the outlook on lesbian women from law enforcers. Lesbian women were seen as threats to society and to the family unit and were thus treated with cruel and violent punishments.

Faderman, in speaking about legal violence and the LGBT community, says that "the worst police harassment took place inside the gay bars" (164). Undercover female police would be sent into these establishments to entrap women into what they believe to be a normal lesbian encounter. Once these women implicated themselves with the crime of lesbianism, they would be arrested. This had detrimental effects on their lives outside of these lesbian spaces, as often their families and workplaces would find out about their sexually deviant behavior. These "undercover agents threatened the safety of bars and taverns – no one knew who was watching whom" (Boyd, "Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s" 109). The looming threat of being found out by an undercover police officer took away the feelings of safety, comfort, and community within many of these lesbian spaces. This uncertainty drove many lesbian women away from these spaces in fear of their sexuality being uncovered to their families, friends, and workplaces. Legal violence first worked to remove the lesbian individual from these spaces, but this was not entirely successful, as many women still congregated in bars despite the possibility of persecution. Instead of focusing on the individual, then, legal violence seemed to switch its focus to the establishment instead.

In 1949, the liquor license of a lesbian bar called the Black Cat was revoked based on alleged homosexual activity. This action was appealed by the owners of the bar with no success, so they hired a lawyer and took their fight to the courtroom. It was here that judge Robert L. McWilliams shut down their case, denying the right for the LGBT community to gather. This decision highlights the laws view on lesbian women in that "[…] the public assembly of homosexuals on a regular basis was clearly a frightening prospect to law-makers" (Boyd, "Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s" 122). Disallowing a group of people to come together based on their sexuality is an example of clear discrimination against lesbian women taken by lawmakers and enforcers. It was not until 1951 that the Supreme Court overruled McWilliam's decision and returned the liquor license to the Black Cat and "affirmed that homosexuals were, indeed, human beings, and the public assembly of homosexuals was not in itself illegal" (Boyd, "Policing Queers in the 1940s and 1950s" 122). This ruling from the US Supreme Court

began paving the way for lesbian women to claim a position within Amrican society as respected individuals, but there was still much work to be done, as legal violence against lesbian women would not end here.

The Black Cat was certainly not the only lesbian bar to face legal violence during the 1950s. Tommy's Place was also shut down following a police raid of the establishment in 1954. All three owners of the bar were arrested and "were charged with contributing to the delinquency of minors by serving them alcohol" (Lo, "The True Story"). The raid took place due to police suspicions of underage girls visiting the bar and being sold alcohol, marijuana, and narcotics by the bar owners, bartenders, and patrons of the bar (Lo, "The True Story"). Many young girls who visited the bar were forced to testify against the three owners, and one girl recounts being told she could either testify against the bar or face trial as an adult herself (Lo, "The True Story"). Months after the raid and the finishing of the trial two of the three owners were sentenced to prison on the count of selling narcotics or alcohol to minors. Following the trial and sentencing of these women, those who knew them said it was unlikely that any narcotics were being sold or used within Tommy's Place, and that the drugs that were found during the raid were likely planted by the police (Lo, "The True Story"). The raid on Tommy's Place and the events that followed clearly show the disadvantage lesbian women faced while dealing with the legal system. These women were discriminated against not due to fears of exposing minors to alcohol or drugs, but to "the threat of homosexuality and gender nonconformity" (Lo, "The True Story").

In the decades following the 1950s, lesbian women continually worked to carve out a space for themselves within society. Many homophile movements came to fruition during this period, with the Daughters of Bilitis being the first lesbian group that appeared during the 1950s (Faderman and Timmons 128). This organization, like other homophile groups, offered lesbian women a community that would validate and support them as their authentic selves. Unlike lesbian bars, the Daughters of Bilitis began as an underground support group, meaning they were not subject to violent raids or scrutiny from the law. As membership grew and the organization became more well established, they became more visible to the public and worked to offer a supportive community to lesbian women across America. Homophile organizations such as Daughters of Bilitis functioned to pave the way for national recognition and acceptance of the lesbian individual and community. It is because of the initial work of groups like this that freedom was granted to lesbian women in America.

This paper has highlighted the legal violence faced by lesbian women in America in the 1950s. Not only were individual women impacted by this violence, but the lesbian spaces that many of these women found communities within were also targeted. Lawmakers and enforcers actively worked to strip lesbian women of their identities and any spaces that validated them. The raids on lesbian spaces were violent acts and were taken with the intent to abolish the lesbian individual and community. Despite all of this, the lesbian community flourished throughout the following decades and established a place within society. They are now viewed by American law as humans deserving of rights and respect and are no longer treated as social and sexual deviants.[19] This did not come without the efforts of the lesbian individual and community in the 1950s, though, as they set the precedent for modern day lesbians to move throughout the world without fear of violent legal repercussions. The title of Last Night at the Telegraph Club is a reference to Chapter 40, in which Lily admits to her mother where she was when the raid happened and is kicked out of her family home, but the novel makes the Telegraph Club an important setting not only for Lily's journey of self-discovery, but also for the positive community it creates. For teenage readers, the historical reality gives a sense of continuity and perspective on the challenges of being lesbian now, and for me as a reader that context supports my empathy for my grandmother.

[19]The rise of right-wing power in American politics under Trump is endangering this.

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Fire Emblem: Three Houses, Lacking in Representation

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Content Warning: This paper will have a section discussing the narrative of my primary source, which contains descriptions of child abuse, assault, and PTSD.

Introduction

The year is 2021 and Christmas is around the corner. My brother and I load up *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (*FE3H*) as his early present, and, once we are into the gameplay tutorial and meet our first few characters, we are immediately enthralled. This is our first tactical strategy Japanese roleplaying video game (JRPG) and the combat is an experience well worth its time. But what of the characters? We are required to pick between the houses of the Black Eagles, Blue Lions, and Yellow Deer because the main character is a professor assigned to teach the students within one of them. We both know that this choice would likely set us on a certain path within the game. We agree on Blue Lions for our first playthrough. Knowing that the story is amazing and that a different path would be interesting to play, I ask my brother if he is willing to make another save file when we are done, but he is not. So instead, I put away the idea of a replay and explore more about *FE3H* through a fan-based wiki. What I am most fascinated by is the same-sex options for romance.

At the end of the game, the main character, Byleth, has a choice between all the people they have achieved maximum likeability with. When my brother and I are prompted to make a choice, we are surprised to see not only male characters but female characters in our list of choices. Looking up the choices later, however, I am disappointed to discover that these choices are gender locked: if a player wants to have a same-sex romance option, there are only so many options to choose from after deciding to play as the female or male Byleth. Choosing either option opens to some relationships but closes off others. In other words, if a player desires to marry a female character playing as a female Byleth, they will find that there is only a limited selection. Even more depressing is the fact that same-sex romance representation between characters with no involvement from Byleth is also rare, let alone any unusual gender representation. I aim to argue that the

current *FE3H* Queer representation leaves a lot to be desired, and with that as a prime example, the video game industry still has room to improve the quality of Queer representation for future games. To do this, I will examine the romance mechanic, dialogue, characters, visuals, and narrative within *FE3H*. In terms of the second and third components I have listed, my playthrough will be used to explore them. In addition to that, I will be using sources that highlight these main components and how there are both significant signs of positive to neutral Queer representation, the latter being more prominent and frustrating.

An Explanation of JRPGs and the Relationship Mechanic

To understand the romance for *FE3H*, I will explain what the genre of JRPGs are briefly before delving into the relationship mechanic, what it does, and a comparison of this feature to a couple of other prominent JRPGs. The most common difference found between JRPGs and non-Japanese RPGs is that while many RPGs are usually more focused on gameplay, JRPGs focus more-so on the plot, as well as long hours of gameplay due to the level-up training that the player must put time and effort into for the characters they play.

FE3H holds a relationship system called support conversations and this advances the player's bond with and understanding of the characters they interact with, possibly leading to romance should they choose them at the end for marriage. These conversations lead into short dialogue events where the player encounters the character and discusses a particular topic with them: from arranged marriages, their past full of strife, to a favourite pastime. These dialogue options are not exclusive to the interaction between only the main character and other characters. Students and faculty characters within the world of *FE3H* may have support conversations as well, but, unlike Byleth, only a select few have options to view and listen to. The support conversations hold no impact on the narrative, but, depending on the character, references can be made regarding the plot. The support conversations that the player has with the characters are listed from C to S, depending on the gender the player chooses for Byleth, and those without them range from C-to A+ or even C to B only. If the player achieves the highest-level support conversation, they can have the character's name on the list of choices for romance options at the end of the game. As I have said, however, these are gender locked. Not all characters both the male and female Byleth befriend can become romantic interests to each other and some are even completely locked from being a romance option in the first place.

I will be delving into the intricacies of gender-locked relationships later in this essay. In this specific section, I want to compare the relationship mechanics between *FE3H* and two other JRPGs I have had prior experience with. In *Octopath II*, another medieval fantasy JRPG, there is no one character that the player must play, but rather there are eight different storylines that culminate together, every one being connected in some way. The relationship mechanic known as travel banter can allow the player to trigger bonus dialogue between characters that do not have any bearing on the game's narrative but will reference it depending on scripted timing to see it. There is, honestly, no romance within travel banter, with the dialogue all focusing on camaraderie between the characters. There is also no ranking of conversations like *FE3H*. So in terms of a romance for both Queer and straight audiences, it has none. As for *Persona 5*, a prominent supernatural JRPG set in modern-day Tokyo, the main character is a high school student referred to as Joker by his teammates during combat. This game holds a relationship mechanic known as "confidants" through which he can learn more about his friends and the people around him in his life, such as strangers becoming friends around the city or a peer from a different high school. This system has levelling for the relationship progress, from one to ten stars. Although there is a romantic relationship that can form between Joker and his confidants, it is strictly only the female confidants he can date. Overall, both systems are much more limited in terms of LGBTQ+ representation, but I find *Octopath Traveler II* more forgiving since there are not any canonical instances of explicit romantic relationships between the characters.

Research Playthrough

During my playthrough of *FE3H*, I choose the female version of Byleth. My intent within this playthrough is to progress the relationships of the female characters within the Black Eagles house, particularly aiming to marry Edelgard, the house representative and the future emperor of an entire country. Although she is a student and Byleth is a professor, to contextualize, the main character is canonically the age of a young adult at the beginning and the rest of the students are around the same age. After a time skip within the narrative, the students find them to have seemingly not aged while they, in contrast, visibly have over the past few years, all young adults like Byleth. I have found that while the story's justification is not realistically viable, it makes sense from a fantasy-based perspective considering that non-aging beings exist and the protagonist partially possesses that bloodline, hence a possible reason that they do not at least appear

to age. Trying to brush past the logic of the game, I play as I usually would, aside from the fact I am writing down many observations in terms of the interactions with Byleth, the bisexual characters, as well as the heteronormative ones. I can confirm that none of the Queer characters whom the main character teaches in their respective chosen house are treated differently because of their sexuality. In fact, their sexuality is never brought up as a topic between any of the characters during any support conversations. What I am left with is simply raw interaction without any preconceived anti-LGBTQ+ judgements. I think that in and of itself is a positive representation because it shows the characters are not treated any differently compared to any heteronormative interactions on the surface level, so I appreciated that. The progression of understanding the characters more throughout their support conversations gives me a sense of a closer bond developing between Byleth and them. Reaching the end of the story, where I choose to propose to Edelgard, she visibly blushes and clearly states that "she looks forward to starting their [her and Byleth's] life together" and that "she may truly call her [Byleth] her partner and equal now" (Proposal scene) Though I am already aware that the dialogue is the same for both the male and female Byleth, it nevertheless feels special and sweet in the moment. Perhaps it is because I have worked countless hours toward this point that the satisfaction of having the two paired together puts a smile on my face.

Of course, I cannot ignore flaws within the dialogue, specifically that of the interactions between characters. A perfect example is one that Aimee Hart of *Gayming Magazine* writes on, one to do specifically with a pairing of Dorothea (one of the canonically bisexual female characters) and Petra, two characters from the Black Eagles house, where they look past each other's differences and respect one another, forming a close bond. To them, "in a game which could do a lot better…Dorothea and Petra feel much like a mug of hot chocolate – warm and cozy" ("That's Underrated"), and I do agree to a certain extent. Some lines during their support conversations do have romantic or at the very least, affectionate undertones such as Petra saying that "Dorothea is filling her heart full" or that "it is impossible to be imagining life without her" (Support Conversation C). As much as this example is quite sweet, it does not change the fact that their concluded written epilogue leaves much to be desired when the only remotely romantic implication the players can take from it is that "…she [Dorothea] becomes the person who Petra loves the most" (Epilogue) and that can easily be read as them being friends. To me, it feels quite disappointing that, while Byleth is written to have an explicit same-sex relationship with any of the bisexual characters, the other characters on their own are not given similar treatment.

Another example of this writing is through the male characters Hubert and Ferdinand. Both are at odds with each other at first, competing to be the most dedicated to Edelgard. Arriving at their final support conversation, the two hold more respect for one another, even awkwardly exchanging gifts with flustered expressions (Support Conversation A+). Their ending describes that they "are opposites…melancholy and merciless…bright and compassionate" and that "the two become known as the nation's 'Two Jewels'…some say their fame makes even Emperor Edelgard jealous" (Epilogue). Aside from the easily read opposites-attract trope, the player could also feasibly find that jealousy is a testament to how the romantic chemistry of Ferdinand and Hubert works so succinctly by the end. At the same time, considering the dominant heteronormativity within same-sex interactions, it is very easy to deny or deflect even the idea that these two characters could be romantically involved since that explicit wording for them is never provided. Overall, I find that, though I can appreciate the bonds that characters on their own have, it does not change the fact that it is easy for a heterosexual fan to see the canonical context and simply write them off as only friends and nothing more.

Explored Progressive Narrative

On the one hand, I am surprised in the first place that a JRPG has positive depictions of same-sex romances in a medieval setting, considering that Japan is a relatively conservative country and, though depictions of romantic and sexual relationships are traditionally heteronormative, *FE3H*'s storytelling has clear progressive themes. In *FE3H*, a large topic of contention, especially for the Black Eagles route, are Crests, which are essentially birthmarks passed down by the nobility that provide an abnormal amount of power to the holder, such as strength or magic. Heirs to these families must have a Crest, as it is a symbol of pride and authority in the public domain. The central church within *FE3H*, the Church of Seiros, upholds the power of Crests within the narrative but is considered to be a neutral party between nobles and commoners alike unless otherwise attacked because their religion and faith are questioned or rebelled against. Edelgard explicitly states how much she is against the Crest system that the nobles have rigidly built and what the church technically contributes to maintaining. What she fundamentally works to create is a new system where nobles must accept that anyone with merit and effort alone should hold recognition and power rather than that role being determined by the children they bear. The narrative for Edelgard, at its core, depicts a young, strong, and capable

woman who has a goal that essentially dismantles a system set so rigidly into society that breaking it will have a major impact on everyone.

Another aspect to note is that Edelgard is the only bisexual house representative. This is important since she is also the only house representative who rebels against the church in the narrative. Her disdain for the nobility and the church is what fuels her resolve, and her sexuality is never brought into question or even used as a source of conflict. She suffers from a traumatic past of childhood abuse. Her grudge with the church comes from what she is forced to undergo when an essentially antagonistic cult experiments on her to place a second Crest in her, while her father is stripped of imperial authority. The church upholds the Crests and so, by association, Edelgard is understandably antagonistic with the cult and the church. I would that say that the motivation to dismantle the church and the Crest system overall still has many intricate complications due to the narrative, especially since she forces herself to collude with the cult in order to ultimately do away with the church. Nevertheless, we can easily read the fundamental points of her vendetta as befitting the one Queer house representative who is against those who desire to suppress and erase her because she does not agree with what deep-seated totalitarian authority dictates. Loïc Mineau-Murray writes on a different JRPG, one belonging to the *Tales of* series, where they observe one of the characters "rebelling against a society governed by the Abbey" and that her "resistance against a religious entity trying to erase her existence by pretexting the common good is reminiscent of battles LGBTQ+ individuals have and still have to lead against some conservative religious communities" (145). This situation in *Tales of* mirrors what is happening between Edelgard and the church. Whether or not the writing is intentional here, it is clear at the very least that *FE3H*'s writers are not afraid of exploring progressive themes within the narrative.

Visual Quality for Same-Sex Relationships

While the female Byleth has a few choices for same-sex romance, the male Byleth is provided fewer, and it does feel like an unintentional mistake, if not a deliberate choice to queerbait. In another article, Hart states that "when the game first came out, there was only one male same-sex romance…the player could also get an S support with elder male characters…but these endings turned out to be platonic" and that "throughout 2019, additional love interests were added…two for a gay male Byleth" ("Can You"). The choices for the male Byleth feel understandably shoved aside. It is also painful for the players when one of those same-sex

romance options is locked behind paid DLC (downloadable content), additional content added in the game if purchased. Whoever decided on the same-sex relationship options clearly favoured the female side much more. I consider it to be a somewhat fetishistic choice, since *FE3H* caters to a masculine heteronormative audience. Lesbian and bisexual women have historically been fetishized in Japan, and it is no surprise that this is still the case in recent games. Amina Hassan, a student at the University of Guelph, wrote a research paper documenting the history of this. She states, "records of same-sex relationships between women throughout Japanese history […] are often heavily fetishized or have been created for the male gaze" (par. 1) and that "even among activists [in the women's rights movement] women who experienced same-sex attraction were often not met with acceptance" (par. 17). It is no wonder then, that the ending illustrations for all the bisexual female characters to be subtly targeting the heterosexual male demographic.

Unlike the depiction of both Byleths visibly affectionate with their heterosexual fiancé(e) illustrations, the female bisexual characters are seen alone from the first-person perspective, only gazing affectionately at them, and in turn, the player. Even less subtle is Dorothea, who not only gazes towards Byleth and the player, but is also intentionally seen with her cleavage visible as she bends forward in her ending illustration. This cannot simply be read as a genuinely heartfelt moment between each Byleth and the player. As for the same-sex male romances, there is also barely any affection except within dialogue. Given the conservatism in Japan, there is also the possibility the team at Intelligent Systems may have been limited in what they could do to even write same-sex romance options. Unfortunately, I have no information as to whether or not that is true (please see the Acknowledgements section below). I will, however, criticize the choices for the options, as I find, with personal morals and ethics in place, two of the options for both Byleths feel quite perplexing as they are technically related to the main character by blood.[20] As a contextual note, the non-aging beings I mention previously in during my research playthrough are these exact two bisexual marriage options and they are a part of the Church of Seiros.

[20]As a contextual note, the non-aging beings I mention previously in my research playthrough are these exact two bisexual marriage options, and they are a part of the Church of Seiros.

Fan and Critics: Desiring More

The fundamental problem with the romance of *FE3H* is that there is just not enough Queer representation overall for me to say the game is fully positive. It feels more like they blur the lines between positive and neutral since there is a lack of choice on the player's same-sex romance options and a lack of explicit canonical LGBTQ+ pairings for other characters' support conversations. In terms of the first point, I find that I don't agree with the idea that all characters should be made bisexual for Byleth to have plenty of choices for the romance in *FE3H*. As RnbwSheep, a user on *Reddit*, succinctly put it, their "problem with the 'make everyone bi' route is when the player is the only time the NPC expresses same-sex attraction," with ShamelesslyLenette, another user, adding that "it makes the cast feel diverse and real" (RnbwSheep). Overall, both users wish for more LGBTQ+ representation within the characters themselves and wish they did not have to or need to be attracted only to the main character. I agree with this sentiment, as it would help the characters feel more fleshed out as real people and not simply choices for the player to make and forget later. The writers already do an excellent job of giving more humanization to the characters, as Brendan Graeber at IGN states, since there are characters who don't necessarily get along outside of combat and evidently show that through support conversation (*FE3H* review). Supplementing this with realistic LGBTQ+ representation would only elevate the characters further. And I am left disappointed knowing that the writers did not, or perhaps could not, do that for *FE3H's* characters.

When it comes down to Queer representation, the fans are the ones most affected by the overall game. While I have highlighted Hart as well as a couple of users on Reddit who are mainly dissatisfied by the way the game handles the LGBTQ+ representation, that does not stop anyone from creating their own fan art or fanfiction of the characters. Far from it, to be honest. PS Berge and Rebecca K. Britt write in the *Game Studies* journal that "immediately following the release of *FE3H*, fans online begin creating Queer content as a way of establishing legitimacy for the gay ships they supported – especially those denied paired endings in the original game" (par. 14). Their observation not only indicates to me that many fans could see the interpreted pairs as completely non-canon, but also that dissatisfaction fuels the fans' creative outlets for more Queer representation in the characters, so they decide to write or draw for themselves and others. I think that this motivation from the fans not to accept the endings of the official game is both admirable and saddening to me. It is admirable since they

firmly believe it is disheartening to see LGBTQ+ representation missed and make creations of their own to share with others, and saddening that they are the ones who take up that work, when it should have been on the game developer's part to try to be bolder in that representation.

It is already a challenge in the West for Queer representation to thrive in the lives of the LGBTQ+ community, let alone in video games for them. I recognize that for video games to have representation for Queer fans, the environment for the Queer community needs to change first. And by that, I specifically mean the very dominant heterosexual society surrounding them. Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda Phillips make very valid points when bringing up forms of resistance both against and for the LGBTQ+ community within politics. They bring up the prominent Gamergate controversy, a movement that maliciously harmed and harassed plenty of the Queer community and individuals just because they either created a piece of work that was explicitly tying video games to the Queer community or because they identified as LGBTQ+. At the same time, this brought about resistance from the LGBTQ+ community to rise against the Gamergate movement and create more work representing them involving video games (par. 15). It is this resistance that makes me consider how the parallels between Gamergate and the official *FE3H*, though not the same, do feel similar in restricting the more open-minded ideas of having more Queer representation in any facet of ways. Once again, it is disappointing to see that in both situations, LGBTQ+ fans and scholars alike are left to do the work to represent themselves because others either do not care to or rather hold hostile intent towards them. Comparing *FE3H* and the two JRPGs I have mentioned previously regarding their relationship mechanics, while my primary source is objectively more flexible in terms of portraying Queer relationships, it is evident that the developers of these games deliberately hesitate to add them in or completely leave all explicit romantic relationships out. For Queer players, I find that between *FE3H* and *Persona 5*, there is more that they can feel rewarded for in the relationship mechanic here, despite the latter being very heteronormative. In both, the relationships between the main characters and others feel more like a progression, unlike *Octopath II*, which at least can provide a better-simulated sense of feeling closer to the characters.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this research paper, I find myself a bit dissatisfied. There is certainly a lot more work to be done for the LGBTQ+ community to have a

diverse amount of representation within video games. The emphasis should be placed especially on the quality of this representation if developers both locally and internationally plan to include Queer plot, characters, visuals, etc. *FE3H* proves it has many flaws in that regard. I think that with more education provided to the youth of today, Queer representation can improve so much more in daily life, and, by having that become integrated into society, the video games industry can evolve and improve in the quality of it in this slowly progressive society.

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Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered: Performance and Male Impersonation in Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

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In Malinda Lo's novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021), Lily Hu's journey of self-discovery and exploration of her sexuality is intricately woven into the fabric of various performances she both witnesses and participates in. The novel begins with Lily at San Francisco's Miss Chinatown Contest, where she feels a stark contrast between her own discomfort and the enjoyment of those around her. This discomfort signals Lily's internal struggle with the gender and sexual norms imposed on her. Through Lo's narrative, performances serve as pivotal moments for Lily, acting as catalysts that push her to question and understand her identity. The portrayal of male impersonator Tommy Andrews is particularly significant, as it not only highlights the historical context of gender performance but also prompts Lily's awakening to her own desires. Through interactions with Tommy and experiences at the Telegraph Club, Lily begins to embrace her true self, challenging societal expectations. Lo uses performances as a means to reveal Lily's inner conflict and ultimate acceptance of her sexuality, drawing connections to historical instances of gender nonconformity and the broader implications of these performances in shaping individual and collective identities.

When we are first introduced to Lily at age thirteen, she is watching the 1950 Miss Chinatown Contest with her family and peers. While observing these idealized Chinese American women perform for their audience, one contestant glances "back over her shoulder coquettishly" (6), much to the delight of the male viewers. Lily finds herself unable to watch the proceedings with the same delight as those surrounding her. She doesn't understand what it is about this performance of femininity that makes her avert her eyes like "she shouldn't be caught looking at those girls" (6), when men sitting nearby have no issues studying the contestants lewdly and Lily's best friend Shirley is easily able to choose a favorite contestant of her own. Others feel comfortable with these women flaunting their femininity for the world to see, since Chinese American women of this time and place were expected to present themselves in a certain way.

However, for Lily, something about this celebration of gender norms makes her uncomfortable, alerting the reader to Lily's own internal struggle with her gender and sexuality.

In her work *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage*, Gillian Rodger discusses how attitudes towards gender shifted in the late nineteenth century, and suddenly both women and men were encouraged to stay within their own separate spheres. American men encouraged the idea of separate spheres because it allowed them to not have to compete for jobs with women, since there was already anxiety surrounding competing with recent immigrants to America for jobs that paid well enough to allow men to provide for their families. Meanwhile, middle-class women were encouraged to—and did—want a husband with a job that allowed them to stay at home to care for the family, as this also was a sign of wealth (Rodger 169–172). While *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is set a bit later than Rodger's work covers, this information still helps explain why performances emphasizing and celebrating femininity, such as the Miss Chinatown Contest, were a fun community pastime. But, unlike the other residents of Chinatown, this performance isn't to Lily's taste, as the pageant makes her question "what a Chinese girl should look like" (9). This pageant is the first indication the reader gets that Lily doesn't quite feel comfortable in the sphere she's been assigned to due to her sex at birth. That she makes this discovery at a performance is also very important, since the reader will soon learn the importance of performances in Lily coming to understand not only her sexuality but also how she can still be a feminine woman without having to conform to the gender norms society expects her to.

As Lily ages, she continues to follow the path that is expected of her. However, one day Lily sees an advertisement that sparks feelings within her reminiscent of how she felt watching the Miss Chinatown Contest many years ago, but more sexually charged. When Lily's friend Shirley urges Lily to look at her family restaurant's advertisement in the local paper, it isn't the simple restaurant ad that catches Lily's eye. Instead, it is "a relatively large ad that included a photo of a person who looked like a handsome man with his hair slicked back, dressed in a tuxedo" (16). This is the first time Lily becomes aware of Tommy Andrews, a male impersonator, and just the sight of the performer's photo causes "[s]omething [to go] still inside Lily, as if her heart had taken a breath before it continued beating" (16). Lily is completely captured by this male impersonator, and the reader soon learns that this isn't the first time Lily has found herself drawn to pictures of women not conforming to the gender norms of the time.

Lily also ripped out a picture of Katherine Hepburn from a magazine because Lily was drawn to the "confidence in [Katherine's] expression, a hint of masculine attitude in her shoulders" (22). These unabashedly masculine women, Tommy Andrews and Katherine Hepburn, exude a confidence that Lily can't take her eyes from, while the easy femininity of the contestants of the Miss Chinatown Contest had caused Lily to turn away. And though Lily "couldn't put into words why she had gathered these photos" (23), she couldn't help herself from looking "and, by looking, to know" (23). If Lily keeps looking, maybe she can finally learn what she finds so compelling about these photos and, in turn, learn more about herself and her own feelings.

Lily is not the first, nor will she be the last, woman to long for the freedom and confidence that came with being male. In his work *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, Peter Boag discusses Sammy Williams, who died in Manhattan in 1908 at the age of 80. Williams was a respected man in the community, so when the coroner came back to tell the town that Williams was actually a woman, the locals were shocked (31). Williams had never married and never had female companionship as far as the community knew, begging the question of why Williams chose to disguise herself as a man. It could be that she was what was then called a "sexual invert," or she could have chosen to portray herself as a man for the freedoms being a man offered her (Boag 29-39). Being a woman living alone and single during Williams's time would have been considered odd, but men could live as bachelors with no one blinking an eye. Considering those circumstances, it's no surprise that Williams chose to cross-dress in order to live a life without scrutiny.

When Lily finally has the chance to go to the Telegraph Club herself to see Tommy Andrews perform live, she is introduced to a whole new world. When Lily first arrives at the Telegraph Club, the bouncer at the door looks like a man to Lily at first until she quickly realizes that it's a woman. While Lily had noticed women like this before as "they had drawn her eye magnetically" (143), she is taken with how, in the context of the Telegraph Club, it is "natural, and even expected" (143) for women to dress closer to men than women. In her work *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, Nan Alamilla Boyd talks about the rise of gay and lesbian bars in San Francisco after Prohibition and how police officers who would routinely check on these bars couldn't tell which of the performers "were the men and which were the women" (68). These clubs and bars were places where both lesbians and gays felt free to be themselves, and now Lily is witnessing this freedom for herself. While it might seem unnatural to Lily's

Chinatown peers, for Lily, seeing these people in their element starts to help her understand her own feelings and sexuality.

When Lily finally sees Tommy Andrews perform, everything changes for her. When Tommy Andrews takes the stage to perform a popular song of the time, "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," Lily is faced with Tommy's "physicality. The way [Tommy] stood, the way she moved – her swagger – so like a man and yet . . . [i]t was that yet that made Lily's skin flush warm" (146). Tommy didn't change any of the lyrics to the song she was performing, so she was singing "to an unnamed 'him' while dressed as a man" (146). This engaged the audience. They loved Tommy, and Tommy seemed to love them back. Seeing all of this made Lily feel "as if all of [her] most secret desires had been laid bare onstage" (146). Lily is realizing her secret desires aren't so secret for some. Seeing Tommy now is sparking something inside of Lily that she hadn't yet given the chance to grow. Lily "didn't want Tommy ever to stop" (146), because this performance has given her the chance to unashamedly acknowledge that this is why she doesn't feel comfortable in the sphere she was born into. She belongs in a different sphere; she belongs here at the Telegraph Club with all the women living their truths, who look at Tommy without fear of showing their enjoyment or admiration. This moment, watching Tommy Andrews perform, is a catalyst for Lily, and moving forward she will find it harder and harder to hide the truth of her sexuality from her family and friends. Most importantly, this is when Lily can start to explore her budding feelings for Kath.

Tommy's first performance is also a beautiful nod from author Malinda Lo to the history of male impersonation itself. As explained by Rodger in *Just One of the Boys*, "by the early twentieth century, male impersonation had become a novelty" (169). This would explain the general appeal of Tommy's act. Men with their wives seem to enjoy seeking out the excitement of a male impersonator, especially if they are tourists visiting San Francisco. Boyd explains in her work how San Francisco had always been considered more open and free than other cities in America. This allowed gay and lesbian clubs to flourish in part due to the tourism they attracted. The first lesbian nightclub opened in San Francisco, Mona's, was listed in magazines that advertised to tourists who were looking for something a little more scandalous to do on their travels (Boyd 68–73). While male impersonation itself is dwindling in popularity by the time Tommy takes the stage in 1954, San Francisco is still a place where she can perform, thanks to the tourism that gay nightclubs in the city attracted. Tommy's performance itself is based on real male

impersonators such as Annie Hindle, who was the first male impersonator to take the American stage in the nineteenth century (Rodger, "Annie Hindle"). The reader can also catch glimpses of Gladys Bentley in Tommy's dress and swagger, who did perform at Mona's in the 1940s after she had moved to San Francisco. After WWII, San Francisco's gay nightclub scene exploded in popularity, allowing Bentley's popularity to rise in San Francisco (*Drag King History*). Like Tommy, Bentley was incredibly popular and relevant in San Francisco because the unique gay scene in the city allowed their acts to flourish. Tommy also highlights the importance of seeing yourself represented on stage. Seeing Tommy helps Lily find her truth, and historical male impersonators such as Hindle and Bentley pushing gender stereotypes onstage helped countless others find themselves. While performances have an important role in Lo's novel, we must remember that they also play an important role historically.

When Lily next sees a performance, it isn't at the Telegraph Club, but witnessing this performance once again causes Lily to question her sexuality. This time, Lily is watching ballet dancers perform in her school's Christmas pageant. After seeing Tommy Andrews at the Telegraph Club, Lily finds herself "newly aware of what she was watching" (217). When teenage boys sitting near Lily whistle and call out lewdly to the ballerinas, Lily finds herself questioning the "difference between those boys' whistles and what she had been thinking" when watching the dancers herself (217). She knows in her heart that she isn't being disrespectful like those boys, but she also knows that what she is feeling when watching the ballerinas is closer to the feelings of those boys than it is to Shirley's, who is watching the dance performance beside her. Lily can't help but think of the Telegraph Club and Kath in this moment, since, if she were sitting in the audience there, she wouldn't have to feel ashamed of admiring the ballet dancers or hide her blushes in the dark auditorium. The Telegraph Club gives Lily the freedom to explore her sexuality within its bounds, but Lily doesn't yet feel comfortable doing that exploration outside the Telegraph Club.

The next time Tommy helps Lily explore her sexuality isn't when performing, but instead when the two have a brief moment alone at Tommy's home. Lily and Kath are invited together to Tommy's home for a party after a night at the Telegraph Club. It's at Tommy's home that Lily first comes face to face with the idea of two women living together as a couple. When Lily snoops in Tommy and her partner Lana's room, she is suddenly caught by Tommy. When Tommy

confronts Lily, she feels "as if Tommy [was] onstage again" (258). Tommy is once again performing for her audience, Lily, "a performance that [Tommy] had slipped into effortlessly, like water" (258). Even alone, Lily sees her interaction with Tommy as a performance on Tommy's part, and this performance makes Lily come face to face with her feelings for Kath. Tommy referring to Kath as Lily's girlfriend allows Lily to confront her feelings because when she tries to tell Tommy Kath isn't her girlfriend, it makes Lily feel like "she had betrayed Kath" (259). It is right after this confrontation with Tommy that Lily and Kath finally share their first kiss, a tender moment that allows the reader to cheer with delight. Watching Tommy's performances allows Lily to open her heart not only to the truth of herself but also to Kath.

In *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* Malinda Lo masterfully uses the theme of performance to navigate Lily Hu's journey of self-discovery and acceptance of her sexuality. From the discomfort Lily feels at the Miss Chinatown Contest to the profound impact of witnessing Tommy Andrews's male impersonation act, performances are pivotal in Lily's realization of her true self. These moments not only highlight her internal struggle but also provide a space where she can safely explore her identity away from societal expectations. The historical context provided by figures like Annie Hindle and Gladys Bentley enriches the narrative, connecting Lily's personal journey to a broader history of gender nonconformity. Through the lens of these performances, Lo emphasizes the importance of representation and visibility in the process of self-acceptance. Ultimately, Lily's experiences at the Telegraph Club and her interactions with Tommy Andrews illustrate how performances can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth and the embracing of one's identity. In a way, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is Malinda Lo performing for her readers, especially her lesbian and bisexual adolescent readers, providing for us opportunities to determine how we as readers feel about gender expectations, about femininity and masculinity, about confident identity, and about finding a community.

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Ancient Retelling: Examining Appropriation in *The Song of Achilles*

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Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is a retelling of the story of Achilles and Patroclus, re-imagined and retold with a focus on their relationship as the duo develops from friends to romantic partners. The retelling is a tragic love story set in Ancient Greece, and follows the duo from childhood to their deaths during the Trojan War. Miller explores the depth of their emotional and physical connection with tenderness and complexity. This interpretation of the nature of their relationship aligns with some ancient sources and scholarly debates about the relationship dynamics of Achilles and Patroclus in Greek mythology. In Homer's *Iliad*, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is described as extremely close; although not explicitly stated to be a romantic relationship, a reader may infer such dynamics. Some readers may perceive Miller's retelling of their story, because she is an apparently heterosexual, female, and white-presenting author, as the appropriation of a Queer Greek story; however, this is not the case. Miller does not appropriate the Greek LGBTQ+ community in *The Song of Achilles*; instead, she re-imagines and retells their story with a focus on their relationship in a respectful, well researched, and sensitive manner that arguably does offer some Queer representation to a country that, in modern times, does not appear to have fully embraced and included LGBTQ+ persons within it.

When discussing the notion of appropriation, it is worth first defining what is meant by the term "to appropriate." Appropriation in a cultural context is when elements of one culture, particularly that of a marginalized or minority culture, are taken and used by members of the more dominant culture ("Appropriation"). Appropriation involves a power dynamic where the appropriator benefits at the expense of the originator and it is exploitative, unethical, or disrespectful to do so. Therefore, we must first examine Miller through a variety of scholarly arguments, and conclude why, or why not, it is appropriate for her to write such a story.

Secondly, we will examine what homophobia in *The Song of Achilles* looks like in the context of ancient Greece. We must also understand that the modern concept of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ in Greece has many differences when compared to what was considered normal and generally accepted in ancient Greece. We will

then analyze these writings contrasted against the environment that LGBTQ+ persons currently experience in Greece and discuss why Miller's interpretation could be viewed as inspirational in how it connects the story of a Greek hero, who happens to be involved in a Queer relationship, with modern-day Greece and the difficulties of having LGBTQ+ representation in a country where it is not entirely safe to do so.

Miller as a Writer

Is it appropriation to write a novel about a Greek Queer couple if you are not a Queer Greek? As we have discussed, the notion of appropriation is the taking and the use of elements of one culture, for use by the dominant culture. In terms of literature, there is no single definition or method of determining how to categorize appropriation. Scholars are constantly debating what qualifies as "appropriation" in literature. Laura Otis discusses the multitude of arguments surrounding this debate. Otis outlines Junot Díaz's, a Pulitzer Prize winner, argument against authors writing about a community they themselves are not a part of. Claiming that it is ethically wrong to take from other minorities' experiences and turn a profit from them (219). However, Otis refutes this definition on the grounds that "restricting authors from writing about things beyond their experience censors artists and discourages them from exercising their imaginations" (222) Otis further argues that readers learn through reading and points out that only a small portion of the population writes and publishes fiction novels (222). Similarly, Paul Haynes, in "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Intertextual Writing," discusses the different approaches to categorizing cultural appropriation and how it is difficult to apply them to literature. Haynes defines cultural appropriation as "an unauthorized use or imitation of characteristics, symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals or technologies derived from these networks, but removed from their cultural setting and original purpose" (292). Despite this inability to universally define "appropriation," all these scholars do share a middle ground of sorts when defining appropriation in literature, stating that it is inappropriate and immoral for these authors to portray any minority character in a way that contributes to harmful and demeaning stereotypes. Haynes's paper has a heavy focus on "minor literature," which is explained as literature that "does not attempt to meet the standard but instead attempts to subvert or revise the standard," with the standard being "white, male, elitist, values" in literature (294–95). He continues to explain how "storytelling as minor literature gives a voice, a collective value, and it recognizes the political and social conditions shaping its characters

that, in turn, serves to rouse its readers" (301), which matches the description of Miller's work. Miller's work is interpreting their relationship, taking the work of Homer and focusing on the story of Patroclus and Achilles; she is providing their relationship its own voice.

Miller is a white(-presenting) American female writing about an ancient Greek couple that by today's standards would be identified or labeled as "Queer." As of the date of writing this paper, Miller is reportedly engaged in a heterosexual relationship with her husband, Nathaniel Drake (Cochrane and Duffy), so an appropriation of an ancient homosexual relationship, the telling of Achilles and Patroclus's story, may seem to be appropriation on the surface. However, this premise falls apart when we examine Miller's work through Otis's or Haynes's definition of appropriation. If one of the key steps of ensuring that an author is not appropriating is their research and how they present these minority characters, Miller is cautious of how she portrays Achilles and Patroclus, and extremely well researched within the context of their relationship and the history around them. Achilles and Patroclus's relationship does not stir up any distress within what is considered normative in the setting of the novel. In Ancient Greece, male same-sex relationships were considered somewhat normal if they obeyed certain conditions. These relationships were known as pederasty. At the beginning of "Law, Society and Homosexuality in Classical Athens," David Cohen defines these conditions as "a prohibition against males of any age adopting a submissive role" (1), which does not apply to any translations or retelling of Achilles and Patroclus's relationship because neither individual is submissive–neither in Miller's retelling nor in translations of Homer. William Percy discusses how "institutionalized pederasty existed alongside other forms of homosexuality" (16), and he uses Achilles and Patroclus as an example of a same-sex couple that does not fit into the pederasty mold. Percy goes on to describe their relationship as "that form of male love […] not identical with classical Greek pederasty" (19) because they are the same age or too close in age, nor do they meet other criteria for this label.

Miller is historically correct in the sense that not a single character in *The Song of Achilles* labels Achilles and Patroclus's relationship. They were simply Achilles and Patroclus; they were simply in love. This hardly seems to be appropriation, but rather a proper representation of what it means to be in love without placing gender limits or labels on a relationship. Miller's own words refute the idea of her using the story to appropriate: "I did not deliberately set out to tell a deliberately 'gay' love story; rather I was deeply moved by the love between these two

characters–whose respect and affection for each other, despite the horrors around them, model the kind of relationship we can all aspire to" ("Q & A").

In one of the articles Miller wrote for the *Guardian* about her experience since the release of *The Song of Achilles* and the fears she had while writing it, she explains that her education and love for Greek mythology began as a child after her mother began to read Homer's *Iliad* to her ("it helped"). Miller would later receive a Bachelor's and Master's in Classics, aiding her in the research for *The Song of Achilles* ("The Author"). Her education reveals that Miller is, in theory, very well qualified to take characters from Greek mythology and adapt their story and relationship using the well-known theory that they were lovers. In a Q&A posted on Miller's website, she admits that the idea of Achilles and Patroclus being in a homosexual, or at the very least homo-romantic, relationship is not a new theory ("Q & A"). Miller states that she first saw it mentioned by Plato, presumably in Plato's *Symposium*. Here, Plato discusses the possibility that Patroclus and Achilles were lovers. This reinforces the argument that Miller is not appropriating the Greek LGBTQ+ community, as she is not giving these characters a new identity/sexuality but rather taking them and telling their story while applying an old theory. This retelling provides the reader with more context and explanation as to why Achilles fought so hard to avenge Patroclus and cried with his dead body every night. This demonstration of their love and bond is what drew Miller to the story and characters in the first place ("Reader's Guide").

Homophobia in *The Song of Achilles*

Another factor that contributes to the argument that Miller is not appropriating the Greek LGBTQ+ community is the fact that there is little homophobia in *The Song of Achilles*. As an assumed heterosexual female, Miller would have no personal experience dealing with the challenges of homophobia. Instead, Miller avoids using homophobia in the two major characters who prevent or attempt to prevent Achilles and Patroclus from being together. The first and most predominant character who challenges the pair, both as friends and romantic partners, is Achilles's mother, Thetis. Thetis, a sea-nymph, is constantly trying to separate Achilles and Patroclus and, while at first glance a reader may attribute this to homophobia, that perspective neglects to take into account Thetis's character as a whole. Thetis's actions and words reflect a mother desperate to protect and immortalize her only child, and to separate him from any partner, male or female, and have Achilles celebrated as an individual, without anyone else by his side.

This is evident when she is confronted by Deidameia's pregnancy with Achilles's child. Immediately, Thetis exclaims "you are a foolish girl" (133) because she had hoped that Deidameia would not truly believe herself worthy of Achilles. This is confirmed moments later when Thetis continues to belittle Deidameia, claiming that she is "poor and ordinary, an expedient only. You do not deserve my son" (133), because no mortal deserves her son. Neither Patroclus nor Deidameia is worthy enough to be with Achilles because Thetis believes Achilles will be a God. She even states this directly in an interaction with Patroclus when she declares that "he will be a God" (53). She warns Patroclus that he should stand aside while her son ascends to his destiny.

Classifying Thetis as a homophobe is reductive because it also neglects her natural hatred for mortals, not just those who are homosexual. Further supporting this is an interaction between Chiron, Achilles's trusted Centaur teacher, and Patroclus. After Patroclus ignores Thetis's warning about following Achilles while he trains, Chiron has a private conversation with Thetis. Later in the novel, Chiron claims that "[Thetis] is also young and has prejudices of her kind" (80) referring to her prejudice for mortals. This supports the idea that Thetis does not hate Patroclus because he is homosexual, but rather because he is a mortal.

Her actions are not motivated by homophobia but by the desire to protect her child from death and to establish his legacy. In an act of desperation to prevent him from fighting in the Trojan War, Thetis hides Achilles with King Lycomedes. After Achilles, Thetis, and Patroclus are discovered by Odysseus, he states that "she knows why I am here; she blesses and guards my purpose" (166), and Thetis responds with "Athena has no child to lose" (166).

Miller seems to confirm that Thetis is not homophobic at the end of the novel. Patroclus has been stuck between worlds, unable to join Achilles in the underworld. During this time, Patroclus and Thetis engage in a conversation about Achilles. Thetis admits that "[she] could not make him a god" (368). This confirms that Achilles has been waiting for Patroclus since his death. After their conversation, Thetis is able to free Patroclus from the living world, allowing him to enter the underworld at last, an act that she would not have done if she were homophobic. During Achilles's life, Thetis did not want him to be attached to any mortals out of fear they would be the cause for Achilles' inability to become a God. However, now that she has failed, she has no prejudice to Achilles and Patroclus being together and is able to reunite the partners in the underworld.

An argument that Thetis forced Achilles to marry Deidameia as an act of homophobia is ridiculous and ignores all previously mentioned motivation for her actions. Miller has cleverly taken the stereotypical trope of "mother-in-law from hell" and applied it to a Queer relationship, without needing to rely on homophobia to do the heavy lifting. Had Miller written Thetis to be exclusively against Achilles and Patroclus being together because they were in a homosexual relationship, then yes, Miller would have been appropriating the Greek LGBTQ+ community. This is because a heterosexual person cannot truly experience homophobia and therefore cannot encapsulate how difficult it is to manage.

Another character who challenges the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, without resorting to homophobia, is Achilles's son, Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus is an interesting character as he never had any direct contact with Achilles or Patroclus. Challenges arise when Pyrrhus refuses to honour his father's last wish to have his burial be with Patroclus, in particular to have their ashes mixed and share a monument. The first half of this final wish was granted before Pyrrhus arrived at the front lines of the Trojan war. One of his first acts is preventing Patroclus from sharing or even having a tombstone. His reasoning for this denial is not because of Achilles and Patroclus's romantic relationship, which it is possible he did not know of (see below), but rather he did not view Patroclus as an equal. Any success Patroclus had was because he was "in my father's armor. With my father's fame. He has none of his own" (Miller 363), and therefore he does not deserve to be treated in a manner that honours him. In his eyes, Achilles was a famed hero among the mortals and to bury him with an exiled prince, who was not even a part of any official army, would be inappropriate. In Miller's version of Pyrrhus's words, "A slave has no place in his master's tomb. If the ashes are together, it cannot be undone, but I will not allow my father's fame to be diminished. The Monument is for him, alone" (357) because to him Patroclus was nothing more than his father's slave. Pyrrhus is not motivated by homophobia, but rather classism. For it to be homophobic as well, Pyrrhus would have had to know that his father was in a homosexual relationship with Patroclus. In one interaction between Briseis (a sex slave Achilles rescued) and Pyrrhus, she asks him if he knew who Patroclus was. Pyrrhus responds "of course I have not heard of him. He is no one" (359). Not that it would matter if he did know of their relationship: Miller does not present Pyrrhus as a homophobic character but rather as someone who views himself and his father as superior beings. Similar to his grandmother, sexuality has no effect on his treatment of those around him.

I am not stating that Miller's version of Pyrrhus and Thetis are not homophobic at all, but rather that their actions are largely motivated by a shared need to protect Achilles and their classism. They both commit horrible acts that prevent Achilles and Patroclus from being united. However, Miller has not written characters who are solely, even primarily, homophobic. Returning to Haynes's definition of appropriation and comparing it to how Miller presents Thetis and Pyrrhus, it becomes clear that Miller does not change the characteristics of either one of them nor has she contributed to any harmful stereotypes against the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, Miller presents two characters, two antagonists, in a manner that allows for her protagonists and readers to grow and learn from these challenges.

Current Environment in Greece for the LGBTQ+ Community

Is it safe to be Queer or a homosexual in modern day Greece? While discussing Miller's work in terms of appropriation, it is important to consider what current conditions are in Greece for the Greek LGBTQ+ community. As Otis states in her paper, "Only the slimmest fraction of people in any culture publish fiction, and these have not tended to be poor, female, or racially or ethnically marginalized individuals" (222), and, although Otis does not directly mention the LGBTQ+ community, it is common knowledge that the community has a long history of discrimination on the basis of homophobia.

In February 2024, Greece made history by becoming the first Orthodox Christian country to legalize same-sex marriage and parental rights (Gregory). Previously, in late 2015, Greece passed a law allowing same-sex couples to enter civil unions as well as protect their rights to health care. In terms of human rights, nine years is not a long period of time for such progressive changes. However, not everyone in the country was happy or supportive about this new equal marriage bill. Around the time the 2024 bill passed, *NPR* reported polling statistics that 49 percent of the population at the time was against the bill (Lavelle). Considering this is the Orthodox church's stance and an estimated 80–90 percent of the country identifies as Greek Orthodox, it is not surprising, though devastating, that hate crimes against LGBTQ+ community continued following the passing of the bill (US State Department). This legislation granted many of the rights of marriage, such as inheritance rights, but did not equate to full marriage equality. This inequity and unwillingness to allow the same rights to apply to homosexual persons as do heterosexual persons in a relationship exemplify the barriers the

LGBTQ+ community experienced in Greece. Much of this might be imputed to the control the Orthodox catholic church has over the country and its laws. Prior to the most recent legislation ratifying the right of same sex couples, the church had publicly declared that they were against same-sex relationships, especially same-sex parents. *The New York Times* reported that "The Holy Synod, the Greek Orthodox Church's highest authority, argued in a letter to lawmakers this month that the bill 'abolishes fatherhood and motherhood, neutralizes the sexes' and creates an environment of confusion for children" (Kitsantonis). This statement illustrates a shared belief among some of their followers. The response from those opposing the bill was immediate, with demonstrations taking place in Athens (Kitsantonis). These demonstrations send a clear message of hate and unwelcomeness to those directly affected by the bill. However, this did not stop the LGBTQ+ community and human rights advocates from celebrating this victory (Kitsantonis).

A time that should have been filled with celebration of equal human rights was tainted by a series of hate crimes. In March 2024, a large group of people harassed a transgender couple in Thessaloniki (Vourlias). During this attack, Thessaloniki was hosting their annual Documentary Festival, which is a LGBTQ+ friendly film festival (Vourlias). The group reportedly "cursed, spat, and threw bottles as they pursued the young couple" for no other reason other than that the couple was transgender (Vourlias). Despite the legalization of same-sex relationships, these hate crimes demonstrate an unwillingness to accept the direction the country is headed in for equality. This attack led the United Kingdom to release, in April 2024, a travel warning for Queer couples touring in Greece (O'Donoghue).

These hate crimes are not new in Greece. In fact, the country has a history of attacking and murdering Queer folks. In September 2018, a LGBTQ+ and HIV activist, Zacharias (Zak) Kostopoulus was murdered by two men in a public store while a crowd of bystanders watched on (Smith). It was later revealed that the two men lied to police, stating that Zak had attempted to rob the store at knife point, prompting police to put a dying Zak in handcuffs (Smith). Why these police officers decided to place Zak in handcuffs is still not public; however, we can assume it was because Zak was Queer. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Zak's brother Nikos said, "Zacharias was a victim of prejudice. He was very open, very expressive. He'd walk down the street and often people would hurl abuse at him" (Smith) which indicates that Zak encountered abuse on a regular basis. Zak's murder demonstrates how easily these verbal attacks on Queer persons can turn

deadly. Especially if these attackers feel validated in believing they are protecting the beliefs of their church.

In an article Miller wrote for the *Guardian* titled "It helped people come out to their parents," Miller shares her experience of writing *The Song of Achilles* and the fears she had, and she makes an interesting statement. Miller writes, "I've heard from people who said it helped them come out to their parents, and others who said it inspired them to get their PhDs, or to start their own novels" ("It helped"). Literature is one of the most influential forms of media, and *The Song of Achilles* was translated into over twenty-five languages, including Greek (Amazon). In a praising review for *The Song of Achilles*, McLendon explains what the novel means to them:

> I can only speak from my experience, but something I remember in particular is substituting myself in place of a girl character so I could imagine myself with the boy characters I liked. Imagine having to spend your life substituting yourself with someone who isn't even your identifying gender, because there was no representation for you to see yourself in. And I'm sure other people who aren't represented have had to do something similar. Even if this book weren't as great as it is, I'd still be grateful for it, because it means I'm being seen. (McLendon)

The Song of Achilles is a piece of literature that allows for a Queer person to picture themselves as the masculine hero, in mythological Greece. McLendon's review provides us with some insight as to how impactful the representation of a same-sex couple is in *The Song of Achilles*. It is even more impactful when we consider how important this story might be to a Queer person in Greece.

Conclusion

Miller, although an outsider, is providing hope and the chance to read literature in Greek (and other languages) with proper Queer representation. To have a novel that represents a positive Queer relationship in a country where it is not entirely safe or welcoming to be Queer is critical. By taking Achilles and Patroclus and developing and highlighting their relationship based on Homer's *Iliad*, Miller has provided the LGBTQ+ community with more representation in literature. As a result, Miller was able to publish a novel that is inspirational, especially considering the current environment Greek LGBTQ+ community have to withstand, and perhaps there is a lesson in her work that everyone can learn from, that ancient Greece was more tolerant of a variety of sexuality and gender identity

than modern Greece and than many nations around the world today. Miller's education in Greek mythology allows her to properly place these characters in Ancient Greece while still having a positive effect on the modern world. We can hope that perhaps one day human rights will prevail, and Greece will be a safe environment for all to freely express themselves. Until then, it is good for writers like Miller to continue supplying proper representation.

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"Maybe I'm Just Broken": An Analysis of Trauma and Queer Acceptance in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*

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Jen Ferguson's novel *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, published in 2022, acknowledges multiple forms of systemic oppression in the protagonist Lou's life. Lou is a demisexual Métis woman from Alberta, Canada, and, over the course of one summer, the novel navigates intersections between her sexuality, gender, and race while Lou works at her family's creamery. *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* takes care to recognize how Lou's identities interact with one another, and, as a Queer person of colour, I take interest in how the novel represents Lou's journey with her asexuality in relationship to her other oppressed identities. Embracing my sexuality as a BIPOC was turbulent given the desperate urge to appear normal in a Eurocentric world, and that is a sentiment I hear my Queer BIPOC peers echo. After analyzing the novel, I argue that the delay in Lou's demisexual awakening demonstrates that systemic oppression, and the resulting trauma, can inhibit Queer BIPOC from recognizing and acting upon non-heteronormative sexual preferences, and affirms the crucial role labels can play in destigmatizing 2SLGBTQIA+ identities.

Trauma is a complex and wide-reaching term, and it is a subject requiring a sensitive approach out of respect for victims. For the sake of this paper, I will be referencing psychologist Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score* as my primary research source and using its definition of trauma to guide my analysis. Van der Kolk explains trauma as the "imprint" left by severely adverse experiences that "fundamentally reorganize" how traumatized individuals navigate the world (21). Some of the adverse experiences he includes as examples are sexual violence, absent and negligent parents, and warfare. This imprint left by traumatizing experience is a recurring pattern of behavior with effects that cross between bodily systems that otherwise function as separate entities. Trauma is a simultaneously psychological, physiological, and emotional experience in which the "alarm signals don't stop" after the hardship is over, and "stress hormones keep sending signals […] to tense for action or immobilize in collapse" (van der

Kolk 46). I will use this framework of trauma as a recurring, whole-body pattern of reactions against adverse experiences throughout this paper.

There are a number of factors that led to my choice of expert and definition of trauma. Firstly, the intended audience of van der Kolk's work makes it a more accessible research source for a Psychology novice. In writing this paper, I acknowledge that I come from a literary background with an amateur understanding of the body's neurological processes. Written by an established psychologist, *The Body Keeps the Score* is a *New York Times* bestseller. Reaching a wide audience of readers requires material that is accessible and lacks excessively academic language or prerequisite knowledge. As a result, his writing is incredibly approachable for individuals who are poorly versed in brain anatomy, like myself. Van der Kolk's writing style enables me to break down his descriptions of trauma qualitatively and apply them to Lou in a way that is not stepping into anatomical evaluation.

Another major factor influencing my research methodology, and my choice of van der Kolk as an expert, is my positionality as a Queer woman of colour. As a bisexual South Asian woman, I embody many identities that are systemically oppressed, and, as a result, I am a victim to forms of violence that are similar to those Lou battles in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*. While trauma is an inherently delicate subject, because it relates to the most insidious and troubling experiences of our lives, my identity leads me to believe BIPOC and Queer people sustain trauma in a unique way. Neocolonialism benefits from keeping all non-White BIPOC traumatized, just as the ensuing bodily and emotional dysfunction inhibits us from organizing against imperial forms of violence. In my opinion, this imperial legacy also reduces motivation to treat and research trauma, as minimal knowledge on the subject maintains the existing status quo. Van der Kolk's research is credible to me because his descriptions of trauma in the body parallel my experiences, demonstrating applicability to BIPOC survivors. While the extent of his accuracy will vary from survivor to survivor, using my life experiences across this paper to ground van der Kolk and other researchers' findings helps ensure that they are applicable to Lou's story.

Lastly, despite the influence my marginalized identity has on this paper, I recognize that my privilege in being a settler in North America shapes my research, too. Given that I am a cultural outsider, I will be using the research and expertise of Métis scholar Elizabeth Fast when evaluating the forces that result in Lou's trauma, and how her unique situation is informed by these forces. Fast's article "Historical Trauma, Race-Based Trauma, and Resilience of Indigenous

Peoples: A Literature Review," written with Delphine Collin-Vezina, analyzes the colonial history of Canada and highlights the legacy of anti-Indigenous atrocities. Fast and Collin-Vezina's work provides a guideline for how trauma manifests in Indigenous communities as a historical byproduct of forced assimilation through government policy such as the Sixties Scoop and mandatory Residential School enrollment. My hope is that in combination with van der Kolk's research and my positional expertise, I will be able to accurately analyze how these conflicts relate to Lou's identity as a Métis woman, how these conflicts continue to impact her coping skills and thought processes, and how her ensuing patterns of behaviour delay Lou's awareness of her demisexuality.

Lou undergoes adverse encounters due to her Indigenous identity akin to those that Fast and Collin-Vezina describe in their article, resulting in the trauma-informed behavior that later inhibits her ownership over her sexual orientation. Peter England's incessant attempts at controlling her life is one example of an adverse colonial force that eventually influences Lou's patterns of behavior in the novel. Peter England, Lou's biological father, has been incarcerated at the start of the novel for sexually assaulting her mother. This assault is how Lou was conceived. When his prison sentence ends, Peter England attempts to reconnect with Lou and develop a paternal relationship with her, despite her extreme discomfort and resistance. England expresses his desire to "mould [her] into a woman" in his first letter to her (62). This need to change Lou to better meet cisnormativity and patriarchal guidelines of femininity suggests that Peter England believes that he has a duty to enforce Western norms on Lou, erasing her individuality and identity outside of him. Loss of identity is a focal point of Indigenous trauma, as "assimilation" was a critical attribute of disembodying Indigenous people from the North American landscape (Fast and Collin-Vezina 168). England's intent to abuse his paternal power and strip Lou's agency parallels colonial violence in Canada, making his violating attempts at reconnection doubly disturbing for an Indigenous person.

Peter England's name and settler status enhance his impact as a traumatic colonial force in Lou's life, too. Peter England's name is an immediate reference to his Whiteness, with his last name being an allusion to the British Empire. He is also "as white as they come" and "old, old settler stock" (Feguson 64). Peter England's character is the epitome of Whiteness, and this emphasizes the distressing nature of his desire to control Lou's body. By insisting he has a "God-given right" to exert his will over her life, he embodies manifest destiny and the pervasive control of the settler (62). He is a colonial force in the novel, and his

presence in Lou's life prompts her development of damaging survival mechanisms, leaving an imprint on her psyche that inhibits her demisexual awakening.

Lou's primary survival mechanism following Peter England's release is privately fixating on the threat of him violating her boundaries. In the following chapter of the novel, Lou describes herself as being stuck in a "hard loop" over the situation (74). Lou's mother is prone to leaving town whenever a threat emerges, forcing Lou to operate under the assumption that "everything will change" if she informs her family about his release (76). Lou has to internalize her feelings and isolates herself from her family and friends to avoid uprooting her life. Considering the circumstances, her reaction accounts for all negative outcomes that result in voicing her anxiety, but, critically, does not alleviate her anxiety about Peter England, keeping her stuck in the loop. Lou's thoughts return to the phrase "he's out. Out. Out" repeatedly in conversations and this pattern intrudes upon her life (75). This dilemma suggests to Lou that there is safety in isolation even when it inhibits her peace of mind, imprinting her with a pattern of dismissing her need for comfort in favour of security. This belief is a direct byproduct of her circumstances as a Métis person, and it will reoccur in a way that mimics van der Kolk's model of trauma when Lou explores her demisexuality.

Another way *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* illustrates the pervasive impact of anti-Indigenous oppression on Lou's Queer awakening is by demonstrating how Child Protective Services and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police pose a threat to her safety, eventually resulting in Lou learning to prioritize security over her bodily needs, even in unrelated situations. After a bush party, Lou and her friends urgently take Cami, an Indigenous minor, to the hospital after a White character, Doyle, physically assaults her. Along the way, they are stopped by the RCMP. Fast and Collin-Vezina highlight in their article that the Sixties Scoop, a "continuation of the residential school system" in which Indigenous children were rehomed from their families disproportionally often, is one of the primary factors of Indigenous trauma in North America (169). Both the RCMP and hospitals have the power to separate families from their children by reporting cases of violence or negligence to CPS. For this group of marginalized teenagers, they "can't stop hospital staff from calling CPS" (95). CPS and the RCMP – while often viewed as beneficial public services – both serve as enactors of colonial violence in this narrative, creating an unsafe reality for the Indigenous and Black characters. The lack of safety in the novel as a result of CPS and the RCMP contributes to Lou

developing patterns of behaviour that will eventually limit her ability to come to terms with her Queerness.

These colonial forces subliminally influence Lou's behavior, as she identifies the threat of CPS rehoming Cami immediately, and prioritizes her friend's needs to her own disadvantage, reaffirming that Lou's adverse experiences encourage the suppression of her needs in favor of security. As a member of the RCMP approaches King's vehicle, interrupting the group's drive to the hospital, Lou offers herself up as the scapegoat regarding alcohol consumption. She confesses to the officer that she is "a little" drunk so Tyler and her sister Cami can stay silent and avoid the backlash to Cami's intoxication (91). Stereotypes associating Indigenous people and high alcohol consumption result in violent interactions in the novel: Doyle originally attacks Cami under the assumption that all Indigenous women are "drunks" (85). Lou offering herself as the drunk ruins her credibility with the officers, damages her character, and leaves her vulnerable to further questioning. Lou sacrifices her wellbeing to protect Cami and the rest of her friends as a result of anti-Indigenous oppression, and she chooses to put the security of the group above her reputation. This situation reaffirms that internalizing problems is Lou's sole method of protection, just like hiding the news about Peter England's release from prison.

Internalization and minimizing her needs are coping mechanisms that Lou returns to even when situations are non-threatening, including during her romantic interactions with King. The reoccurrence of this behavior demonstrates that these adverse experiences impact on the rest of Lou's life, by shaping her character and inhibiting her true self. When King asks Lou out on a date, Lou tries to summon sexual attraction towards him through masturbation. She fails to feel pleasure in the moment and accuses herself of getting "too in [her] own head" – unable to "unfold" (128). Focalizing inwards instead of outwards and blaming her mind instead of her immovable sexual orientation suggests she assumes that sexual attraction is mutable and subject to her will. She internalizes the problem, just like she does with the RCMP and with Peter England. Lou repeats her behavior when trying to buy King's father a gift. By considering buying a "*I'm sorry I can't date you, I'm a mess, I swear* card" for King, she trivializes her sexuality and treats her romantic preferences as a personal failure (130). Despite the lack of a violent threat, Lou repeats the same patterns of internalizing, indicating that those oppressive forces continue to influence her behavior, going as far as preventing her from acknowledging safe emotions. Lou's patterns are the consequences of adverse experiences, just as van der Kolk describes in his

research, and demonstrate how Queer BIPOC are isolated from themselves due to trauma.

This imprint of suffering is even more insidious when we consider how it defamiliarizes victims from their body and leads to suspicion about the source of the emotions, creating a greater barrier to recognition of 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. Patients of van der Kolk frequently report feeling "extreme disconnection" (91) and "chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies" (98) as a result of having their fight-or-flight systems activated over long periods. As individuals accustom themselves to "ignoring or distorting the body's messages" they become "unable to detect what is truly dangerous or harmful […] and what is safe or nourishing" (99). If every bodily sensation feels unsafe and wrong, it leaves survivors suspicious of emotions to the point of invalidation. In my personal experience, this is especially true if someone already suspects trauma is skewing their relationships and sense of self, as unfamiliar bodily sensations no longer feel authentic. Instead, victims can misinterpret their genuine feelings as trauma responses.

Lou is especially victim to the trap of assuming her feelings are trauma responses and misinterprets the signals in her body as a result. She chalks her sexual disinterest up to the violence of her conception. After failing to sexually arouse herself at the thought of King, Lou thinks of her mother's assault. She traces her issue back to the "first two cells" in her body and expands outward from there (128). Peter England violated her mother, and it creates the opportunity to believe that "violence" is "woven" into her (128). She even uses herself as validation for the "science" of epigenetics (128). This belief – that trauma is in every fiber of her being – enables her to stop thinking critically about her sexuality, and she "stop[s]" evaluating other possibilities for her persistent lack of sexual desire (128). This belief is another consequence of the pressure to minimize her needs and find ways to suppress herself. Trauma drives her to control herself, loathe her body, and isolate herself from her romantic connection to King.

Queer trauma survivors are often victims of this type of internal suspicion, invalidating their sexual desires by treating them as a manifestation of their trauma. Lou's experience resembles the findings of research about childhood trauma and sexuality. In a study published in *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*, women identifying as lesbians and bisexuals with a history of childhood abuse report believing that their sexuality was invalid. One participant said that she felt "uncertain if she was just afraid of men because of bad experiences" before coming out (Robohm *et al.* 42). Another study published in the *Archives of Sexual*

Behaviour found that there was a negative correlation between alexithymia – the inability to "identify what […] physical sensations mean" (van der Kolk 100) – and the frequency of penile-vaginal intercourse in women (Brody 75). Women who struggle to identify their feelings have less sex. This trend does not translate into "masturbation or other sexual behavior frequency" (Brody 75), suggesting that while trauma does not erase sexuality, it can inhibit people from expressing their sexual needs outside of themselves. My experiences as a teenager validate this research, too. I found it difficult to embrace my bisexuality because I believed it was a method of self-sabotage. As I age, and resolve my self-sabotaging tendencies, my bisexuality persists. Existing outside of cis, hetero, and allonormativity requires a level of internal cognition that trauma prevents.

The Summer of Bitter and Sweet gives readers a solution to the problem of trauma in the form of labels, ultimately affirming the immense power they possess in embodying 2SLGBTQIA+ orientations. Lou revisits sexual pleasure when she finds a way to externalize her sexual disinterest in the label *demisexual*, reducing her compulsion to fix herself. King introduces Lou to the term after she confesses that sexual attraction is not in her "DNA" (311). He throws her off guard with it, and in her narration of the story, she says she never considered "it could be something…regular" (311). In contrast to the threat of Peter England's return and the RCMP, Lou gets to be a passive observant of her sexual orientation, as there are no longer any stakes in her ability to change herself. She is normal, and she cannot suppress herself to be something safer. Framing her sexual disinterest as a need rather than a failure breaks Lou's patterns. Lou gets "braver" after this moment (311). The conversation shifts towards her embracing that she "'didn't want any'" of the sexual attention she received from Wyatt – embracing disinterest in a starkly contrasting manner to earlier in the novel (314). King and Lou continue this trend as they explore what "kind of ace" she is, slowly exploring and checking in regularly on how Lou feels (317). The pair do not stigmatize her boundaries, and when Lou questions herself, King "hover[s]" and "wait[s]" (317). Normalizing having slow, intentional sexual exploration allows Lou to "smile" and feel "light" throughout the whole process (318).

Labels let 2SLGBTQIA+ people move beyond shame and encourage self-governance in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, and van der Kolk's research supports this representation. One of the first practices van der Kolk uses to help trauma victims is by encouraging them to "notice and then describe the feelings in their bodies" (103). Embracing sensations allows victims to "befriend the body" and see themselves without shame (van der Kolk 102). Self-awareness is necessary for

boundary setting and asking for what you need, with "communicating fully being the opposite of being traumatized" (van der Kolk 237). Labels do this by giving Queer people the tools to define themselves and authentically conceptualize themselves. In Lou's case, she describes the experience of embodying a label as the way "you speak truth with a capital *T*" – fully and boldly (314).

In *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet,* trauma does not change the protagonist's identity, it simply makes it harder for her to embrace it wholly. For Queer people of colonized, diasporic, and intersectional identities, creating safety in an identity that exists on the fringe of normalcy can make suppression an appealing tactic. It feels safer to hide your Queerness when it can elicit backlash and push you further into the margins of society. In demonstrating this issue, Ferguson emphasizes the force of oppression that inhibits Queer people from coming out, and challenges heterosexual people to recognize the pivotal role of destigmatization in Queer and Indigenous liberation. Carrying trauma does not make any appearance of sexuality invalid, but until traumatizing forces of oppression come to an end, BIPOC Queer people will continue to hide.

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Carry On: A Parody of the *Harry Potter* Series

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Introduction

Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* (2015) plays on popular fantasy genre conventions to parody J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and comments on the "chosen one" trope, the plot, characters, and relationships. The story follows Simon Snow, the "worst Chosen One who's ever been chosen" (Rowell, *passim*), as he enters his final year at the Watford School of Magicks. As the Chosen One, he faces pressure to save the World of Mages from the Insidious Humdrum, a mysterious force that has been stealing magic from the world. At the same time, he must navigate a difficult relationship with his roommate, Baz. Alongside his friends and Baz, Simon embarks on a quest to solve a murder, which ultimately uncovers decades-old treason and the novel ends with Simon sacrificing his magic to defeat the Insidious Humdrum.[21]

While many reviewers from platforms such as *Goodreads* recognize *Carry On*'s similarities to the *Harry Potter* series, not everyone perceives them to be intentional, as some simply believe the "book definitely [had] elements that were similar to other stories" (*Goodreads,* JesseTheReader). Despite this, Rowell has stated in an interview with *The Guardian* that the similarities are intentional: "When I'm referencing *Harry Potter* and other Chosen Ones in *Carry On*, I'm doing it very intentionally. I'm talking to the reader directly in those moments: 'You've read the same books that I've read. You love the same stories. Let's talk about them. Let's think about them. Let's take them apart and see what's inside'" (quoted in Sproull). As such, Rowell not only confirms that the similarities are meant to be there, but also indirectly claims that *Carry On* is a parody meant to say something about the *Harry Potter* series. Since not all readers perceive the novel as a parody, it is important firstly to determine whether *Carry On* truly is one, and secondly how that impacts our understanding of the story.

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[21] The characters of Simon and Baz first made an appearance in Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013) as characters in the protagonist's fanfiction of the fictitious "Simon Snow" series. From there, Rowell developed these characters into a separate novel. Although an argument that *Fangirl* is a parody of slash fanfiction can be made, it is outside the scope of the present essay.

Theoretical Framework

Linda Hutcheon's seminal work *A Theory of Parody* (1985) remains one of the most influential in the field. Hutcheon rejects the notion that parodies exist simply to mock their background texts, and claims that they are instead "a form of inter-art discourse" (2). She states that parodies are analytical and interpretive in nature, serving to comment on culture and ideology. They are distinct from other modes such as pastiche and burlesque, with which they are often confounded. Hutcheon asserts that ironic trans-contextualization is what defines and gives a unique power to parody (12). Trans-contextualization is a process through which parodies shift the settings of their target works. This shift demonstrates how a work's meaning can be altered when put into new cultural or historical contexts, allowing dynamic interactions between works that enables us not only to "come to terms with the weight of the past" (29), but also to look forward with "transformative power" (20) that creates new cultural meaning. Hutcheon claims that parody is "repetition with difference," where "critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony" (32). The reader plays a key role in the interpretation of the text. If the reader is unable to recognize the incorporating work as a parody, they take the message at face value and simply integrate it into their understanding of the work. Using a Goodreads review as an example, although "Khahn, first of her name, mother of bunnies" did notice similarities between certain aspects of *Carry On* and other stories, she ultimately perceived the novel to be its own piece of literature. Hutcheon states that parodies operate on two levels, one surface and one that is implied, and because of this "the final meaning of irony of parody rests on the recognition of the superimposition of these levels" (34). The reader must therefore be able to understand the interplay of these levels to recognize and understand a parodic work. Overall, for a work to be considered a parody, it must 1) contain similarities to the background text, 2) contain differences from it, and 3) be perceived as a parody by its audience. According to Hutcheon's theory, *Carry On* is indeed a parody because it contains ironic subversions of tropes, plot, and characters present in the *Harry Potter* series to create a more nuanced understanding of the story.

Similarities

Not unlike Hutcheon's claims about the importance of similarities, Jonathan Gray argues that for the reader to understand which background text is being parodied, "ghost" textuality must be created (Gray 45). By that he means that the

parody must establish similarities with the background text "invisibly, yet hopefully still sensed by its audience" (45). This does not mean that these links must be subtle, only that they have to be there. The use of fantasy setting and elements in Rowell's work creates a powerful sense of familiarity. *Carry On* takes place at Watford Wizarding School of Magicks, a British boarding school where students come to learn magic. Additionally, each student is assigned a roommate by the Crucible, an old magical relic that casts people together (Rowell 168). Once matched with your roommate, all eight years of school are spent sharing a room. There is a stark similarity to Hogwarts, also a magical British boarding school, the only difference being that its students are sorted into one of four "houses" by a sentient hat.[22] *Carry On* also includes magical creatures and artifacts, including merwolves (wolf mermaids) and items (such as wands and rings) used to channel magic when casting spells, reminiscent of the *Harry Potter* series. These similarities create a superficial sense of familiarity for the reader and are likely to be the similarities noticed.

The second main similarity is both authors' use of the "Chosen One" trope; however, as will be discussed later, one of the major differences that establish *Carry On* as a parody is Rowell's subversion of the trope. The Chosen One is a character chosen, oftentimes by a prophecy, destiny, or some sort of divine power, to be the hero who saves the world from an evil villain (Gobert Tilahun). The character usually leads a mundane life before discovering they have secret powers, at which point they begin the hero's journey. At the age of eleven, after living a relatively normal life as an orphan in a care home, Simon finds out he has magic and slays a dragon supposedly sent by the Humdrum to kill him (Rowell 5). He then finds out that he is the most powerful mage in the world and that he was foretold in a prophecy as the "greatest power of all powers" that would come when the World of Mages was in danger to defeat a great threat (Rowell 34). Rowell establishes that, before the events that take place in *Carry On*, Simon and his friends have had several battles with creatures sent by the Humdrum to destroy him. Likewise, as early as Chapter 1 of *The Sorcerer's Stone,* Professor McGonagall states that Harry will one day be a "legend" and that "there will be books written about Harry – every child in our world will know his name" (Rowling *SS* 13). Upon being introduced to the magical world, Harry learns that

[22] It is worth mentioning that Rowling uses many conventional fantasy genre tropes in her series. Battles between good and evil, Chosen Ones, magical boarding schools, mythical creatures, and magical tools are common tropes and themes used in many other stories (Brewer). However, the Harry Potter series is not a parody of any other fantasy work since Rowling does not commit any ironic inversions.

Voldemort allegedly died the night he tried to murder Harry (55–57). As the story progresses, Voldemort and his followers once again rise to power and threaten the magical world. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry finds out that a prophecy marked him as "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord" (Rowling *OP* 841). Harry and his friends also have several run-ins with the powers of evil, as every book in the series culminates with a showdown between Harry and Voldemort or one of his followers.

Rowell's use of similar fantasy genre elements and the "Chosen One" trope have a dual purpose. Firstly, as Hutcheon states, parody is "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (6). Upon setting up these similarities, Rowell begins subverting them to bring the reader's attention to particular areas of *Harry Potter* she finds outdated, as I discuss below. Secondly, according to Gray, "each genre has its own 'common sense' rules," that we "internalize and use to make sense of future texts," (28). Thus, while reading *Carry On*, readers can now use their knowledge of other "Chosen One" stories, including the *Harry Potter* series, to make predictions of where the story will go. Based on this, readers would expect Simon eventually to defeat the Humdrum, become the hero he was prophesied to be, find his one true love, and get a happy ending. However, through ironic inversion, the story does not progress in the expected way.

Beyond Simon/Harry, Rowell also creates other intentionally similar characters. Simon's friend Penny is a smart and strong witch, much like Hermione. There are several instances in the book where her magical skills prove essential in battle against the Humdrum. During the battle at the end of the novel, she is the one who casts the spell that defeats the Mage (Rowell 486). In the *Harry Potter* series, Hermione is known as the smart one in the trio and is often the one to figure things out during conflicts, such as when she recognizes the plant trapping the trio at the end of *The Sorcerer's Stone* as the Devil's Snare, and subsequently saves them by lighting a fire to fight it (Rowling *SS* 278). Baz's character bears a resemblance to Draco. Each is a bully, rival, and general antagonist. The relationships between Simon and Baz and Harry and Draco are initially complicated by the divide among their families, as both Baz and Draco come from old and powerful families with more conservative and elitist opinions on how the magical world should operate. *Carry On* establishes a history of antagonism between Simon and Baz: Baz setting a chimera on Simon to get him killed (169), the two of them getting into physical altercations several times a year (167), and Baz's attempt to steal Simon's voice, thereby stealing his ability to

practice magic (180). Setting up such a deep-rooted dislike between Simon and Baz allows Rowell to create tension like the one between Harry and Draco.

Differences

As Rowell says in the interview with *The Guardian*, the similarities between *Carry On* and the *Harry Potter* series are deliberate and meant to create conversation with the reader. At the heart of the similarities, there are also differences with Hutcheon's critical distance. Rowell first breaks down the "Chosen One" trope to modernize it, as well as to point out how much the *Harry Potter* series leans on it to get the story in motion. Hutcheon claims that parody can be a "conservative force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms; but it is also capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses" (20). We can see this in Rowell's manipulation of the "Chosen One" trope, in particular through the subversion of Simon's character in relation to Harry's. Rowell criticizes Rowling's use of a teenager still learning to control his powers being the one who defeats Voldemort as a plot device that advances the story. Unlike Harry, who is always a talented magician, Simon is unskilled. From the first few chapters, the reader learns that Simon would rather use a sword than magic on his enemies: first, from his memory of fighting a chimera, then when a goblin attacks him while he is on his way to Watford, and he uses the sword to kill him. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that although Simon is the most powerful magician who has ever existed, he is bad at wielding his magic. After the goblin attack, he tries to clear away any evidence, and at first his wand only sparks, then "the taxi disappears. And the head disappears. And the fence disappears. And the road…" (Rowell 24-5). The same pattern of Simon's spells not working as intended, often having disastrous effects, continues until the end of the book. His magic is consistently unstable and uncontrollable. It is ironic that the character who is expected to save the world can hardly control his powers. Although Rowell employs "conservative force," as Hutcheon calls it, mocking the idea of a perfectly talented young magician destined for greatness by using a character with the opposite qualities, she also creates "new syntheses" by modifying the traditional hero's journey Simon goes through. Instead of focusing on battling evil, Simon often struggles with insecurity about his skills, causing him to doubt his ability to defeat the Humdrum. He develops alternative skills, such as his swordsmanship and his ability to "go off" (7), which puts a new spin on traditional "Chosen One" stories such as the *Harry Potter* series. All in all, Rowell offers new ways to incorporate the "Chosen One" trope, or even to bypass it altogether.

She takes the irony one step further by mocking the power given to prophecies in both stories. Although both are arbitrary, in that neither of them mention Simon or Harry by name, in both stories circumstances push the boys towards the roles described in them. The prophecy in *Carry On* is also extremely vague, not specifying what the threat to magic will be: "And one will come to end us all," or who would be the savior, "And one will bring his fall" (34). It then becomes clear how absurd assigning the role of the Chosen One to Simon is, given his lack of control.

By committing these ironic inversions, Rowell is affecting the commonsense rules as Gray describes them. Throughout the novel, Rowell subverts the "Chosen One" trope, which according to Gray would come as a surprise to the reader since they would expect the story to develop more like it does in the Harry Potter series. Gray says that, while reading, the audience makes guesses as to what will happen. These guesses are eventually proven right or wrong. He calls this process "reading through" (33) because while reading, we are not only reading the text itself, but also reading it through other texts. In this case, while reading *Carry On*, the reader would also read it through the *Harry Potter* series (and/or through other novels featuring the "Chosen One" trope). This process is important, as Gray goes on to say that the interactions between the texts are multidirectional, and *Carry On* as a parody, "threatens to destabilize… [the *Harry Potter* series'] power," (45). In other words, while reading *Carry On*, the audience's understanding of the *Harry Potter* series also changes.

Although several characters, such as Simon and Penny, are parodies of their *Harry Potter* counterparts, Baz, in relation to Draco, is by far the most developed and subverted. Although prior to the events of *Carry On* and at the start of the novel, Baz is bad, soon after his arrival at school, the reader finds out through that he is "hopelessly in love with [Simon]" (Rowell 176). Even before this confession, he shows signs of not being as evil as he outwardly presents himself to be. For instance, during class when he notices Simon getting so upset by his presence that he begins losing control of his magic, Baz imagines helping him calm down (161). The reader also learns that although he does harbour hate towards Simon, he has long since stopped trying to inflict long-lasting damage following an incident during which an innocent bystander got severely hurt (181). As the story progresses, Baz joins forces with Simon and his friends to solve the murder of his mother, and eventually participates in the uncovering of the Mage's betrayal and subsequent defeat of the Insidious Humdrum. A significant portion of *Carry On* is written from his point of view, and as a result his character is very complex and

developed. Overall, by making him one of the main characters and giving insight into his thoughts, Rowell humanizes him and gives him a redemption arc. His character was such a success that he prompted Rowell to write a sequel to *Carry On* continuing Baz's story. She shared in an interview with *Vox* that, after finishing *Carry On,* "the back of my mind just never leaves Baz Pitch… He just is there all the time." Rowell is not the only one who loves Baz this much, as many reviewers pick Baz as their favourite character. For example, Hannah Azerang on *Goodreads* says, "Don't even get me started on my love for Baz because I'll never stop." This is in contrast to Draco, who remains a secondary villain throughout the *Harry Potter* series, and no sort of positive relationship ever develops between him and Harry in Rowling's novels. This glaring difference between the roles of Baz and Draco in their respective novels begs the question of why Rowell decided to parody the character of Draco by turning him into Baz, a fan favourite character secretly in love with his nemesis. Based on Rowell's statement that the similarities between *Carry On* and the *Harry Potter* series are attempts at communication with the readers, one potential reason is Draco's popularity among fans. A quick google search reveals endless blogs, discussion threads, fan art and even an entire subreddit dedicated to him. Comments under a *Reddit* post asking why fans love Draco despite his bad portrayal in the books reveal that "a lot of people wanted to see him have some sort of redemption arc" and "He is an extremely popular character in fanon, not canon. There is basically the canon version of him that exists in the books/movies and there is the fanon version of him that exists in fandom/fanfic/head-canons/etc. You basically got to treat them like two different characters" ("Mountain_Pathfinder" & "HauntedReader"). Based on the fanfiction written about Draco on *Archive of Our Own*, these commenters are right, as many stories depict him as quite similar to Baz. For instance, a fanfiction titled "Storm in a Teacup" depicts Draco's secret obsession with Harry's hair, and unexpected friendship between the two, and the eventual formation of a romantic relationship (Wood). While the story alludes to the fact that Draco is still considered mean, he is also given several good qualities like a sense of humour, supportiveness, and a general "fluffy" outlook on the world. Baz aligns more with the fandom-created version of Draco than the version that Rowling describes in the *Harry Potter* series. Rowell may not so much have been parodying Rowling's depiction of Draco, but reader perceptions of him by trans-contextualizing him from the fandom space to her novel, where she creates an alternative version of the *Harry Potter* series in which Draco becomes good and gets the much-desired redemption arc. The irony in this difference is

that it creates more interesting and nuanced interactions between Simon and Baz and elevates the story.

Rowell also further plays on popular reader conceptions of Draco in the fandom by queering both Baz and Simon and developing a romantic relationship between the two. A search of fanfics under the "Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter" tag on *Archive of Our Own* gives nearly 70,000 results, demonstrating the popularity and desire of the Harry Potter fans to see a relationship between the two characters. This desire is not lost on Rowell, as we could argue that Simon and Baz's relationship reads like a parody aimed at critiquing the lack of sexual orientation diversity in the *Harry Potter* series. By adding this relationship, Rowell critiques several of Rowling's choices. Firstly, she brings the reader's attention to the lack of Queer representation in the *Harry Potter* series, as no outwardly Queer characters are included. Secondly, Rowell criticizes the notion that Harry, as the Chosen One and a typical fantasy hero, has to end up in a heterosexual relationship. Instead, she creates an alternative narrative in which Simon does not "magically" develop feelings for a convenient female-presenting character, such as Ginny in the Harry Potter series, but instead enters a complicated relationship with a man. By doing this, she improves the story and communicates to the reader that, much like them, she also found the lack of Queer representation and of well-developed romance plots problematic. As such, she subverts the idea that Agatha, whom Simon dated for several years prior to the events of *Carry On*, should have been his main love interest by introducing a Queer relationship with Baz. In *Carry On,* Rowell notices Draco's missed potential and brings to life the "what-if" scenarios that many fans of the Harry Potter series want. I feel that Rowell's portrayal of Baz is more a respectful homage of the Draco/Harry fanfiction than a parody.

Reader Perceptions

Not all readers see *Carry On* as a parody, and the reviews of those who do demonstrate mixed opinions on whether *Carry On* as a parody of the *Harry Potter* series elevates or ruins the narrative, with one reviewer from *Goodreads* saying, "it is all sorts of ludicrous to read a book about a character who is a parody of another character" (Goodreads, Khanh first of her name mother of bunnies). Another reviewer said that the *Harry Potter* series' heavy prominence was "not really satisfying," meaning the novel would have been better off as a stand-alone rather than a parody (Goodreads, Chantal) On the other hand, many reviewers also appreciated *Carry On* for how it subverted the *Harry Potter* series. For

example, a reviewer by the username of "chan" says "I think I like this better than *Harry Potter*… this book does SUCH a good job at pointing out issues in the source material." Another reviewer stated that "[*Carry On*] is everything that never would have happened in *Harry Potter*" (*Goodreads,* Kristina Horner). Although these (and other reviewers) do not elaborate on why specifically they think that *Carry On* is a parody, based on what they do say, it seems as though Rowell makes unexpected but welcome changes that readers wanted (but did not get) from the *Harry Potter* series. "emma" says that this book is for readers who "always wanted Harry and Draco to date but in a world in which Draco isn't a total sh*tbag and doesn't require so much over explanation." Another user points out that Rowell's subversion of the "Chosen One" trope was "brilliant," "clever," and "witty" (*Goodreads*).

Besides either loving or hating *Carry On* as a parody, many readers are also divided on whether the novel exists simply within the frame of the *Harry Potter* series or if it can also be read as a "standalone." One *Goodreads* reviewer with the username "Jesse (JesseTheReader)" says "While the book definitely had elements that were similar to other stories, it had its own refreshing style." Another says that *Carry On* did not feel like a copy of the *Harry Potter* series, as Rowell created "[her] own world" (Goodreads, Natalie). To put it differently, even those who recognize the intentional similarities and differences between *Carry On* and the *Harry Potter* series ultimately think that Rowell's parody ultimately creates a unique piece of literature, improving on the shortcomings of the *Harry Potter* series, but also of other similar fantasy stories. As novelist Charles De Lint says in his review of *Carry On*, "A third of the way into the book the reader entirely forgets the influences. Instead, they're drawn into a world as absorbing and magical as *Harry Potter*'s (and to be honest, with better writing), and are engaged with these characters and this story" (81). All in all, it seems as though Rowell's purpose while writing *Carry On* is not only to point out and critique certain aspects of Rowlng's novels that readers and she found problematic, she also ends up writing an original story that subverts common fantasy tropes, and the result is somewhere between a parody and an original story. This makes sense when we take the sequels *Wayward Son* (2019) and *Any Way the Wind Blows* (2021) into consideration, as Rowell diverges from the *Harry Potter* narrative and takes the story and its characters into a completely new direction.

Conclusion

To the question of whether *Carry On* is a parody at all, using Hutcheon's definition, the answer would be "yes." Rowell successfully establishes similarities

and differences with the *Harry Potter* series, and, more importantly, the differences are done at a critical distance that allows her to comment on the plot, trope usage, and characters. Ultimately, having the knowledge that *Carry On* is a parody of the *Harry Potter* series should prompt readers to re-evaluate their conceptions of the popular series, and perhaps consider Rowell's work to be a more nuanced and better-written piece of literature.

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"Not Today, Colonizer": Reclaiming Voice through T-Shirts in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*

Lindsay Dober, Simon Fraser University

Content warning: this paper includes reference to sexual assault, murder, and r*.**

"Not Today, Colonizer" [23]–the bold letters on Lou's T-shirt proclaim a gravity of defiance as she comes face-to-face with a colonizer. This is a defining moment of Lou's resistance in Jen Ferguson's *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (2022), where her fashion statement speaks volumes against the rural and conservative backdrop of Lloydminster, Alberta. Lou aligns her values with what she wears, opting for T-shirts to do the talking in a world that has historically suppressed Indigenous women's voices. Lou's T-shirts are a signifier of a way to confront heteropatriarchy and colonialism, and at the same time act as an avenue to reclaim her bodily autonomy. T-shirts are ways to communicate personal and communal messages, asserting ourselves and our beliefs in society. Lou's T-shirts help her move from silence to voice, and they propel her on a journey to confront colonial power.

Historically, T-shirts originated as male underwear for modesty purposes until the early twentieth century (Cole 153). The T-shirt eventually transformed from boxy men's tees to everyday attire worn by all, often adorned with graphic art or text as a form of self-expression (Critchell). Barthes explores the history of the coding of clothes as a "function of meaning" that goes beyond modesty and ornamentation (90). Lou wears her protest T-shirts as what Barthes would call "an act of signification and therefore a profoundly social act right at the very heart of the dialectic of society" (91). While her T-shirts, including "Black Lives Matter" and "Not Today, Colonizer," are memorable and "capture the pulse of [the]

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[23] This phrase riffs on RuPaul contestant Bianca Del Rio's popular line, "Not Today, Satan," referring to expressing resistance to an action or person. The phrase now exists in many variations. In this case, Lou's T-shirt protests against colonialism and the evangelical churches' historical ties to colonial power.

time," the historical colonial ties to these issues continue to be prevalent to this day and Lou aims to confront them (Critchell).

There is a deafening power that lies within the ability to convey a message without speaking. Ferguson depicts Lou's T-shirts as "being loud in Alberta in a way she wouldn't be being loud in say, Toronto, or Vancouver. And she knows this" (Personal Interview). This comparison emphasizes that context matters; her silent protest is impactful in rural Alberta where right-wing politics dominate. Therefore, her "Not Today, Colonizer" T-shirt speaks volumes as Lou chooses to wear this specific tee to assert her body into spaces held predominately by white men and settlers. When Lou wears the tee, she is "flooded with adrenaline. The urge to run. To fight" (45). She feels this impulse in the beginning of the novel when she experiences pushback from a delivery driver while working at her family-owned ice cream shack. He notices her T-shirt and hostilely claims "it's called the right of conquest, girl. Done and done and done" (45); his statement illustrates settlers' unapologetic ways of continuing to illegitimately occupy stolen land or dishonour treaties that were meant to protect Indigenous land: Lloydminster is on Treaty 6 land, first stolen from the Cree, the Nakoda Sioux, the Dene, the Saulteaux, and the Métis Nation; it is presently Metis land (The Law Society of Alberta). His immediate observation of Lou's T-shirt and malicious comment contrasts to possible reactions in more progressive urban spaces such as Vancouver or Toronto; Lou's tees may not be as provocative there and there would be an increased likelihood of support shown towards Indigenous Peoples. Even when she is confronted by colonizers, her fear of "turning [her] back on [her] family–again," referring to her past denial of Indigeneity, prevents her from taking it off (46). Thus, Lou's T-shirt is not only speaking for her but also empowers her to embrace her Indigeneity and confront conflict through this non-verbal form of expression. The meaningful impact that silent protests create are more powerful in spaces where significant political and social tensions exist; consequently, here Lou can balance her sense of safety with her acts of protest.

Although Lou does not reveal concerns for her safety, subtle hints of fear emerge when she avoids provoking others. She attempts to distract the delivery driver from the meaning behind her shirt by exclaiming it is an "inside joke" (45). This fear is rooted in the awareness of historical racist attitudes towards Indigenous Peoples and being treated as inferior. According to Ferguson (Personal Interview), Lou's silent protest is "being loud in a way that feels safer?" Echoing this compromise is Lou's confusion about her sexuality and her decision to keep it private; she can feel safe without revealing her sexuality to others. Lou

allows both safety and the urge to protest or reveal her sexuality to simultaneously exist throughout her journey. Finding this balance motivates Lou not just to wear these protest messages one time, but to continuously wear them to illustrate that a cause is deserving of relentless disruption against unjust systems of power.

Halfway through the novel, Lou wears a "Love Is Love Is Love" T-shirt spelled in glitter and describes how she gets all her T-shirts from Goodwill, "where once-activists donate their uniforms when they give up the fight. Or, where they dump their gear when the fight isn't cool anymore" (131). This spotlights the current activism climate where self-proclaimed activists enthusiastically fight for a cause but no longer show support once its novelty fades. The decline in support parallels the way celebrities and brands advocate for certain causes in the short-term, limiting their efforts to symbolic activism which does not address the structural roots of the issue (see Brodmerkel). Lou chooses to wear and share other people's concerns to demonstrate that the fight is never over as long as these oppressive systemic issues continue to exist. Her deep respect for the land is embedded in giving thrift store T-shirts a second life, which is a direct response to the exploitation of natural resources and labour in clothing production. Lou's act of reducing harmful pollutants into the environment while supporting social causes close to her may inspire young readers to shop secondhand and discourage them to participate in fast fashion.

While Lou wears these T-shirts proudly and repeatedly, she has not yet discovered how to embrace her own identity in the same way. Lou's "Love is Love is Love" activist T-shirt communicates her belief in celebrating all forms of love, including those that extend beyond heterosexuality. However, she struggles with discovering her own sexual identity and her relationship with King makes it more complicated. She feels a growing attraction to him, yet she does not want to be sexually intimate with him. Lou wrestles with her inner turmoil as she reflects on feeling no sparks with her ex-boyfriend Wyatt and can count the exact number of times that they kissed, while losing track of the instances between King and herself. Therefore, this is about "King versus Wyatt" in the beginning (Personal Interview). Throughout the novel, there are occasions when Lou notices King in a T-shirt, especially when his tee "darkens under a circle of sweat" (186). Similarly, she cannot help but stare at him shirtless, while noticing for the first time that he is "not only aesthetically beautiful" (186). Lou staring at the sweat forming on King's T-shirt evokes an imagery of perceived masculinity, one that is conventionally sexual and exhibits physical strength. While she may not consciously connect King's wearing T-shirts to stimulating a sexual attraction for

him, she continuously wears or sleeps in King's T-shirts and finds a sense of comfort and safety in smelling them or curling her fingers in the cotton (251). Her interactions with his T-shirts reveal both sexual and romantic attraction, an interest distinct from what she experiences with Wyatt. She trusts King and "want[s] to want this," the sexual desire King feels for her, but she believes that "all that matters is I don't work" when she realizes that she does not want to go beyond kissing (293). She considers that this could be a trauma response to the sexual violence Peter England inflicted on her mother. It is only when King asks if she is asexual that Lou considers her sexual identity struggle as being "regular" (311). Therefore, her "Love is Love is Love" tee reflects Lou "willing to give others credit that she won't extend to herself. So she believes in a thing and wears a t-shirt but hasn't always internalized that she is also allowed to live that truth" (Ferguson, Personal Interview). The revelation of her sexuality as an inherent aspect of her identity instills greater confidence in Lou, to live her truth, and emboldens her to stand up for her beliefs.

Towards the end of the novel, she becomes braver and confronts Peter England, healing something inside of her that was afraid to embody her values beyond wearing protest T-shirts. This allows her to become more comfortable with King, leading her to share her identity struggle with him, realizing she is not alone. In the final scene, she recognizes "I'm not broken" and that her deep connection with King, while kissing him back, may not be forever but that "right now, this is exactly enough" (360). In this moment, Lou affirms her identity beyond conventional heterosexual ideas of romance and attraction and chooses to embrace her demisexual identity. Her connection with King not only contributes to her identity journey, but it could be the reason she feels a close tie to the Black Lives Matter movement. This is a cause that not only affects her close friend but mirrors the demand for racialized bodies, such as Indigenous Peoples, to exist in spaces without harm.

Readers are first introduced to Lou's T-shirts when she slips on her Black Lives Matter (BLM) tee a few days after her breakup with Wyatt. It is then revealed that her uncle, Dom, hired both King and Wyatt to work at the family's ice cream shack with her that summer. In this moment, she reflects on previously lying to King about her Indigeneity even when he revealed that folks in town commented on his darker Black skin compared to his father's. Their casual prejudice is based on the notion that "there's acceptable Black and too Black," with King being perceived as fitting into the latter (28). This is one of the readers' first glimpses of everyday racism and shows how it has affected someone close to Lou. During

their first day working at the ice cream shack, Wyatt fixates on King's Blackness by calling him a "Black man of mystery" and that he would "pay good money to have hair like yours" (33); this reduces King to singular racialized traits, objectifying him. Their interaction magnifies the way Wyatt diminishes King's identity by expecting him to perform like television Black stereotypes.

Despite Lou's complicated feelings towards King, her close connection to him activates her support as an ally to the BLM movement, understanding the violent parallels between his struggles and hers. Therefore, wearing a BLM T-shirt conveys meaning, whether during protest events or everyday life, that Black lives are inherently valuable. Richardson & Ragland analyze the language of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and argue that protest messages on shirts disturb the commonly unquestioned complicity of racism and "put the issue of state violence against Black bodies in the faces of all passersby" (35). Famous athletes such as Lebron James and Kyrie Irving used their platform in 2014 and wore "I CAN'T BREATHE" T-shirts in honour of Eric Garner, a Black man unjustly choked to death by the police (Richardson & Ragland 35). Their presence and message were asserted in a controlled space with a predominantly white audience who had no choice but to be confronted by the devastating effects of state violence. Although Lou's reach is not the same as that of NBA athletes, she wears her BLM tee for the same reason–to disrupt white spaces and the silence of the conservative and privileged lives of Lloydminster.

King experiences racism on a spectrum, from casual remarks about his hair to fearing for his safety from the RCMP. We see disproportionate police surveillance when King is targeted by getting pulled over after escaping Doyle, Wyatt's friend, who attacks Lou and her friend Cami. The police officer asks, "been drinking, boy?" with a "mean spit of the word" on boy (91). The malicious tone and language are a way to belittle King's autonomy and degrade him by not saying his name, reflective of historic racist practice. This reinforces white men's perceived power and is a tactic of dehumanization to justify violence. King's reflexive polite and measured performance when interacting with the police officer indicates he has learned this routine before, so as not to provoke suspicion or violence. His cautious actions are in response to systems of power that regard him as inferior. King's encounters highlight how institutions and societal practices are complicit in racism and point to the need of collective resistance against these oppressive systems. Lou's BLM T-shirt signifies her allyship and a counter-narrative to normalized violence against Black lives, which is similarly reflected in her tees that challenge the destructive narratives of Indigenous Peoples.

The purpose of Lou wearing protest T-shirts is not just to stand against colonialism, but to offer a counter-narrative that works towards changing harmful discourses. Lou wears a T-shirt from the Students Against Drinking and Driving fundraiser with a "Students Do It Sober!" message (70). This T-shirt alludes to challenging the "drunk Indian" stereotype, as it resists harmful racist generalizations. The message builds towards a critical conflict in the novel where Doyle taunts Cami and Lou for not drinking by remarking "but you're like, Indians," which links their race to the stigma of substance use (86). A brutal attack follows, in which Doyle and his friends repeatedly kick Cami and yank Lou's hair until it bleeds (effectively scalping her). Halfway through the novel, Lou confronts Wyatt about the attack, and he maliciously spits out the statement "Indians drink. There's a pack of them right now on the sidewalk outside that trash hotel downtown and you know it" (177). This is one of the rare times readers see Lou's fear vanish and she verbally fights back while embodying her T-shirt's opposing narrative. Wyatt's overt racism perpetuates the damaging assumptions about Indigenous Peoples, fueling her escalating anger.

Lou constantly negotiates between her protest goals and her well-being, and over time she becomes driven by something deeper–anger–that emboldens her to be fearless through her words and actions. This ties to Brown's argument that "without anger there is no impetus to act against any injustice done to [girls]. If we take away girls' anger, then, we take away the foundation for women's political resistance" (13). Lou inserts her presence and values, through her T-shirt messages, into white spaces and disrupts what society expects of a woman–specifically, an Indigenous woman who is silent and complies with the status quo. In a world that has historically marginalized Indigenous' voices, Lou's T-shirts, although silent in sound, come across as loud and clear in opposition to colonialism.

When Lou comes to understand that her father, Peter England, is attempting to gain complete control over the land where her family business resides, this anger reaches its peak. Peter England's sense of entitlement towards Lou is evident in his first letter by stating "we have the right to meet each other. I have the right to mold you into a woman —like any father does" (62). This statement is rooted in the patriarchy through England's objective to control Lou, which he disguises as a father's conventional protective role. His aim to control her, like property, is revealed when he attempts to manipulate her by suggesting she add his name to her birth certificate, so that he can secure complete ownership over the land Lou is set to inherit. His possessive and threatening actions towards Lou symbolize the

colonizer's belief in the right to land–to conquest–no matter who was there first. This perceived superiority is heightened in his third letter, which states "I can prove you belong to me," implying his sense of ownership over her and her Indigenous body (163). He attempts to distort the truth by telling her that Lou's mother tried to abort her or "legally murder you when you were beyond defenseless. I saved you" (163). His framing of Lou's mother as a murderer and himself as her savior reveals the irony of the white men who are killing Indigenous women and girls. His alleged truth is an attack on her mother and a deception to persuade Lou to meet him. Lou's silent protest of "Not Today, Colonizer" shifts from a message on a T-shirt to building towards the novel's pivotal moment where she confronts Peter England: "I don't belong to you" and "you have nothing I want or need. What you're doing, threatening me, my family, my friends, it stops now" (340). This moment is the first time she challenges him and denounces any sense of ownership over her, telling him to stop his pursuit. She realizes that "the land is as much mine as it is Peter England's" and that "this land knows me," affirming her own autonomy and her right and connection to the land (275). I argue that this is Lou's defining moment of resistance. Her values expand beyond her T-shirts as she asserts her independence against Peter, who symbolizes the pinnacle of colonialism. While Lou stands up for herself and her family against this colonial figure, the novel spotlights a broader conversation of the systems in place that make it difficult to address the ongoing violence against Indigenous women and girls.

In the beginning of the novel, Lou is faced with an ultimatum: she is coerced into either jumping out of Wyatt's moving vehicle or sexually pleasuring him in the movie theater. At this moment, her decision is clear, and she jumps from his moving car onto the highway pavement (18). This harrowing scene is evocative of the highway of tears, which highlights the ongoing failure of society and structural systems in providing justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW). The novel centers around the traumas faced by Indigenous women and girls: her mother's rape, Doyle's violence towards Cami and Lou, and news of missing Indigenous women. The continuing violence against Indigenous Peoples is explicit when Lou educates Elise, Wyatt's new girlfriend, by stating that she does not celebrate Canada day: "I'm Métis. It's not a holiday most Indigenous people are really excited about. Colonialism and genocide, the mass graves of children at residential schools and all that" (132). The disparity of the murder of Indigenous women in Canada is evident, as they make up 4% of the Canadian population yet consist of 25% of national female homicide victims (Saramo 207). Saramo magnifies the government's inaction by highlighting previous Prime

Minister Stephen Harper's federal leadership (spanning February 2006 to November 2015) as a pivotal example of framing the problem as individual violent acts rather than an ongoing systemic problem. Harper's focus on the acts of violence did not do anything to redress the systems that allow violence towards Indigenous women to become normalized, resulting in reduced efforts to rectify the issue. This erases their voices to the point where Indigenous bodies are perceived as inherently disposable, such as Lou's body when she jumps out of Wyatt's vehicle. His assumption that it is Lou's responsibility to sexually please him is pronounced when he continuously calls her his "Native girlfriend… emphasis on Native," fixating on the stereotype of Indigenous women as promiscuous (33).

While it is important to challenge whether gender-based violence, including MMIW and ongoing harmful stereotypes, is that adequately addressed through Lou's T-shirts, or do these issues need to be redressed? Ferguson (2024, Interview) claims that "the silent T-shirt game is never enough. It's a step, and it's an important one." While Lou's "Not Today, Colonizer" T-shirt is in direct opposition to the disproportionate violence of Indigenous bodies, Ferguson stresses that

> wearing a T-shirt won't stop hate or colonialism or laws from getting passed that criminalize and are abusive towards trans kids. T-shirts might be a great fundraiser. They might be a great message that has lower stakes in terms of say... action or safety. But we always need more. We always need to open our hearts through storytelling and then to go out into the world and build one action on to another action. First a t-shirt, later a protest or volunteering at a community org doing good, etc., etc. (Personal Interview)

Through her novel, Ferguson tells us that moving from silence to voice and building upon our actions is necessary to drive impact towards both meaningful narrative and structural changes.

Redressing this protest issue requires a multi-faceted approach. It can include assembling community support and engaging in movements such as The REDress Project (Saramo). The project originates from Métis artist Jamie Black, and makes invisible missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls visible by hanging red dresses up to transform and disrupt physical spaces. The colour red evokes imagery of "blood, power, womanhood and Indigeneity" which draws attention to the violent crimes against MMIW and demands society to confront its complicity in perpetuating the systems that dismiss it (Saramo 214). This project is parallel to

the power of fashion activism, where Lou wears her T-shirts in predominantly white spaces to oppose settlers' belief of their right to land and Indigenous women's bodies. Parsloe & Campbell's analysis of #MMIW tweets spotlights a modern form of Indigenous protest. Increased awareness and online support are one way to continue Lou's mission of resistance in a digital space. Her individual act of protest joined with thousands of others can contribute to widespread systemic solutions, which is reminiscent of how a multitude of individual acts of violence affect an ongoing systemic problem. Redressing this issue needs to expand beyond community awareness. Taking an intersectional and anti-oppressive approach to policy reform, legal protections, education improvement, and public acknowledgement of injustices is necessary to redress systemic inequalities that have historically discriminated against Indigenous Peoples.

Lou uses T-shirts as a form of silent protest where they speak for her when she is not ready to speak. She is eventually faced with the choice of being silent or standing up for herself against Peter England, a figure symbolizing the white male colonizer. In her complex sexuality journey, she works through her trauma with King by her side and comes to the realization that her trauma does not define her; instead, the affirmation of her ace-spectrum identity enables her to be her authentic self and speak her truth. Lou's progressive resistance against colonial and heteropatriarchal forces throughout the novel reveals the loud transformative impact her voice can have beyond a T-shirt.

Lou's story models how expressing protest through a medium, such as T-shirts, can be a way to assert our beliefs and challenge historic systemic inequalities. Lou's journey from silently protesting systemic pressures designed to suppress Indigenous women's voices to confronting Peter England demonstrates how everyday activist choices and actions can build momentum in reclaiming personal autonomy. Her protest progression illustrates a way for young readers to find their own version of her T-shirts that feels authentic to themselves, and to reflect on how they use that to express their values and contribute to social change. Lou's story compels readers to move from silence to voice, and advocate fiercely for a cause that matters deeply to them.

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Listen for the Sound of Love: The Queer Romance Missing in Audio Drama

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It has been a long time since I began to love audio drama. It was just "podcasts" when I started in 2016—though if you were to put a row of podcasts together and ask someone to pick out what I'm talking about, you're more likely to hit than miss. We have all matured more since then, and we can now distinguish ourselves amongst other "podcasts." It is even my job now, writing, producing, and just general contributing to this medium I call home. So when I was asked to write this paper on Young Adult romance pieces, I went straight to audio drama to write about it. After all, I can name almost half of my favourite romantic relationships just from audio drama alone.

I looked up "romance audio dramas," trying to get an understanding of what is popular, understand what has really hit its stride in the genre. The first result I got was a Reddit post titled "Romance-ish Audio Dramas?" It has sixteen upvotes (JanuaryDaphne). The rest of the results were click-bait, top-however-many, blog articles that were banal and written so dryly that it would make the most stalwart romance fan drop, stone dead—not to mention the ones that did not even have any romance in their lists. I could find the shows I was looking for—sure, I knew a few off the top of my head and could research to find more. But in a medium where productions like *Welcome to Night Vale*, *White Vault*, and *Limetown* can skyrocket in popularity and break into pop culture all on their own and have some of the most memorable relationships in pop fiction, where did all the good romance go? Why is it that romance as a genre has not broken out as much in audio drama?

And how did we get here? Since about the 1940s, radio drama had been in a bit of a lull. Ever since major broadcasting companies started to shift funding into television, radio had been left to die in North America. In this dry well of funding in the broadcasting arts, Richard Imison writes that there was a belief that the

effective death of radio drama was a "a serious loss to American[24] cultural life" (Imison 289). Then two major developments happened in the twenty-first century: a powerful, mobile, cellular device was put into the hands of almost every adult on the planet with a built-in application that downloads podcasts, and the show *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-) began broadcasting. *Welcome to Night Vale* is not only a turning point in radio drama—now audio drama—but also in the lives of its audience. While we can describe the show itself as a surreal gothic take on local radio news, what it represents is far larger. In her piece on Queer audio drama, Ella Watts characterizes *Night Vale* as "the first flush of social radicalism enter[ing] the podcast fiction DNA" (Watts 438). The clearest example being how the "protagonist of *Night Vale*, Cecil Palmer, is an openly gay Jewish man who declares his love for another man in the first episode" (Watts 438). There are so many more examples of diversity in its cast, but the point that Watts makes, which I will return to later, is "*Night Vale*'s primarily teenage and young-adult fans were not interested in" the story, but rather in Cecil and Carlos, the main Queer couple of the show. The show itself puts Cecil and Carlos at the forefront of its identity, from having Cecil's love declared in episode one, to having their relationship expanded or celebrated on the show's anniversaries. Watts puts their relationship at the centre of the show, saying their being "at the heart of the podcast is fundamental to its charm." However, while the love of Cecil and Carlos leads the ship[25] on *Night Vale*, it is still defined as a horror audio drama, not romance. Danielle Hancock writes that *Night Vale* is incredibly important as a piece of horror, saying in her paper that "*Night Vale* arguably brought horror podcasting from the niche corners of the Internet to global prominence" (Hancock 220). Regardless of its classification, *Night Vale* was a trailblazer of a show that charted a new trajectory for audio drama in the years to come. But what is important about *Night Vale* is it reshaped audio drama to become a safe haven of a medium for the Queer and open minded, especially in terms of love.

That brings us to today, where the medium as a whole is very horror-oriented popular fiction: for the past decade, horror audio dramas have been the ones breaking past the core audience of the medium and reaching out into the popular culture. *Night Vale* is the most obvious, but there is also *The White Vault*, bringing its production company into such fame that it can get Jeff Goldblum to do

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[24] I ended up choosing to focus on North American radio and audio drama, while still using sources from the United Kingdom, because to go into British radio drama history and interpretations and audience would be beyond the scope of this paper.

[25] Pun intended

celebrity appearances on their roleplaying podcast (Grebey). Or *Limetown*, which garnered so much attention that an entire television adaptation was made of it (Andreeva). Horror has the market cornered right now in audio drama, and some believe that it is the natural environment for horror, anyway. Richard J. Hand, writing for the *Companion to American Gothic*, says that in the language of sounds—the use of spoken words, music, soundscape, etc.—is a "form with limitless potential to tap into the imagination of the listener" (Hand 655). Because of audio horror's ability to allow the audience's imagination to come up with the horror on their own, "the fertile imagination of the audio listener has meant that the Gothic has always been an immensely important genre" (Hand 655). Thus, horror makes its nest in the audio drama sphere, but of course there is more than just horror here. I interviewed a producer in the industry, Karma Light of Lanterns Aura productions, on the current state of the industry. They say that while *Night Vale* "is a horror," some would argue that the romantic subplot is just as important "because Cecil is the main part of Welcome to Night Vale, and Carlos is a big part of his world" (Light). In other words, the horror of *Night Vale* is not what is important to its audience, but instead the romance of its protagonist. This perspective stretches out to other dramas such as *Alice Isn't Dead*, produced by many of the same people as *Night Vale*. While some would argue that *Alice* is primarily a gothic horror drama, Karma argues that "*Alice Isn't Dead* would not have happened if there wasn't a love plot in there." So, what we are left with is a medium that is in love with horror, but also one primed for romance.

If the ground for romance is so fertile, then why is there no good romance growing? Karma themself was enamoured seeing a Queer romance depicted in an audio drama. When they started to listen to audio drama, it was "the first time that I was exposed to just unashamed Queer romance, like in *Welcome to Night Vale* was the first time that a main character was gay." This is a medium that can best deliver the kinds of Queer romance that young Queers have yet to experience. In addition, audio drama is believed to deliver a kind of intimacy with the story that other mediums cannot. In her piece on radio drama staging, Elissa Guralnick says that people personalize an audio drama more than other mediums. She says that what an "audience is seeking and is at a loss to find in any other medium, including movies and the stage, is an intimacy, a personal dimension, that makes every encounter with radio drama an encounter with one's own imagination" (Guralnick 79). To bring this to our contemporary context, a Queer audience seeks intimacy with a Queer story that is personally relatable to their own experiences. This brings us back to the original question, though: why are there no

romances that have not only been produced—because they are out there—but have also reached beyond the Queer audience, into the wider world?

One reason may be that the medium is too young. When I asked Karma why there is so little romance-dedicated audio dramas, they suggested that audio drama in its modern form is too new:

> If I take a guess, I'd probably say it's because fiction podcasts as a medium, as we know it, because obviously radio dramas have been around for a while, is relatively new. And because the first one that I can think of that was really popular was *Welcome to Night Vale*, people have been kind of unconsciously copying that throughout and *Welcome to Night Vale* is a horror. (Light)

What that means is that break-out romance stories may be yet to come for the audio drama sphere, and their absence is just due to how new the revitalized medium is, relative to its peers such as audio books or radio drama.

However, a more subversive problem—and a reason it could take a while for any break-out romance audio dramas to be produced—is that the tools writers use for audio drama make it hard to create them. In writing theory, there is a process called visualization, which applies very much to radio. Visualization, as James O. Connelly puts it, is "the process of forming mental images depicting the content of the product" (746). Basically, visualization is the process of creating images based on the writer's prose. All listeners of audio dramas have to visualize, so one of the consequences of this is that each listener has a personal image of what they see based on what they hear. This goes back to how listeners of horror personalize the horror and imagines things that would be far scarier for them personally than anything the writer could make. To quote Imison again, audio drama "alone can produce pictures which are tailor-made to the taste and experience of each individual listener" (Imison 290). Here is where I think this becomes a problem for romance writers in audio drama especially, because the romance genre audience can be very territorial with interpretation. In a genre loaded with shippers and die-hard romantics, interpretations on how specific relationships are forming or how they should form abound within the romance genre community. How does a listener fill in the intimate silences between two characters? How does the writer tell their audience this silence is a platonic one and not a romantic one? Karma has this issue in their work, saying "it's an audio medium, which means that like when I make my podcast, like I have a rule that if it doesn't make a sound, it doesn't exist, so it would be difficult to make a romance into a podcast." This is not to say that writers exclude romance as a whole from audio drama: there are still romance subplots. But rather, it is much

easier to fill a small subplot with a romance when the overarching plot is the main focus and bulk of the writing. Speaking personally, it is tricky to get people to believe that a relationship is one thing or another without explicitly stating what their relationship is. I submitted an audio drama script to an editor for feedback, and he asked a question about two of my characters, who are platonic. He asked "so what is the relationship between these two? Is it romantic? Platonic? I can't tell." I had not even written any dialogue between the two that was not expository, or how one felt of the other, so it was not a failure of my writing. He had come up with that from just the script alone. I ultimately realized that, as an audio drama writer, even for platonic relationships, there is a certain amount of steering you have to do to keep the audience on the same page of a character's love life. Connelly would agree with me, saying that "the writer is responsible for creating the stimuli that trigger the visualization response in the audience" (746). In other words, I am somewhat responsible for telling the audience what is and is not romance. This is not to say that romance audiences are mindless drones who see a love plot even between their kitchen appliances, but that interpretation and visualization are a subconscious part of the viewer and will happen with or without writer input.

Audio drama writers may be swimming upstream to work against the strengths of the medium to create romance, but also it may be that the romances that **do** work just do not fit within the current definition of romance. Guralnick says that audio drama production and engagement ask different things of its creators and audience respectively. She says that it "makes totally different demands" when compared to something like theatre (81). In our case, though, when compared to a medium like television or movies, audio drama is its own beast. Television and movies do not require much, if any, visualization for example. So having a genre audience—such as that of romance—swap to a medium that requires almost entirely visualization is a hard jump to make. But it is not just in visualization, it is fundamentally a problem with genre conventions within the medium. Karma has a point on this, saying that the romance genre may not be built for audio drama unlike horror is,

> because a lot of horror is what you can't see. And if the whole medium is you can't see the thing. And also, it's never going to describe it to you, because it's not a book or a movie. Then it lends itself really well. Whereas romance, I think lends itself way more to being in books and movies. (Light)

But does that mean that romance stories are strictly impossible for audio drama? That is a stretch, but stretching is exactly the point I am trying to make. The issue

is not with audio drama, but with the way we collectively define the romance genre. We need to stretch the boundaries of genre conventions to include these new ways of conveying love. Let me give an example of how a romance audio drama escaped the romance genre. I was listening to an anthology audio drama called *Within the Wires*, specifically its second season, where the plot revolves around a relationship between an artist and her critic. What makes this plot so unique and ineffable for the romance genre, though is the narrative is told through an audio tour of the artist's work by the critic. The plot and romance is told between the lines of the audio tour as the critic slowly reveals her feelings and plot in her narration. This is the kind of romance that is present in audio drama, and ultimately why audio romance might escape the boundaries of genre romance: it is so hard to define. Karma puts it far better than I do when it comes to another show they define as "romance," *Alice Isn't Dead*:

> I guess if you're looking for them actually falling in love and then them going on dates and then that type of thing, then I guess *Alice Isn't Dead* wouldn't be that. Off the top of my head, I don't believe I could think of one where that is the case, where it's two people falling in love and going on dates afterwards and exploring that. (Light)

In terms of a traditional romance, audio drama is mostly bare of pure romance dramas. But for non-traditional or experimental romance, the field abounds with them.

But I hear you cry, "so what? It's romance, who cares? We can get our fill of Queer romance elsewhere, audio drama is fine." Sure, audio drama does not need romance, and the audience seems content with the subplots that we have today. Karma themself says that a romance audio drama "would be so different from everything else that everyone is listening to, that it would either go into absolute obscurity, or it would literally be the only thing of its kind." So, there is possibly no audience for the genre-only dramas, and any audio drama requires a "committed audience" (Guralnick 80). However, audio drama stretches to an extremely diverse audience, and a very young audience at that. Having people see different forms of love being depicted, that it even can be depicted, influences Queer people and especially Queer youth. Karma's first experience seeing Queer romance being depicted was audio drama:

> That was the first time I've ever seen that in anything. I never saw them on TV shows and cartoons, obviously. And since then, basically every single audio drama I listened to has some sort of queer romance in it, which is pretty cool as someone who is queer. And when I was in high school, that was just not a

> thing you talked about. And then after graduating from high school, was like, oh, there's this whole world of audio drama that has relationships that I relate to more than the ones that are on TV or in most books that were published at the time. (Light)

So, to say that romance is inconsequential is misleading. Especially now, when audiences see audio drama as a haven for Queer and diversity narratives, it is vitally important that we in the medium work to show more representation of Queer and open-minded romance stories.

What is next? Obviously, there should be more Queer romance written, main or sub plots. This may sound odd, but the best answer may just be to wait. Not until someone smarter figures it out, but rather until a larger audience grows up and can bring more support into the genre and can change what the romance genre means. Karma—who for the record is much older than I—says they "think it will definitely get there where people are going to want to listen to romance, especially with the rise of romance in YA in general." They continue by saying that with the growing rise in Young Adult romance books, "it's not going to be a far leap for someone to think, 'hmm, maybe we should write a romance as a podcast.'" So it is only a matter of time until the audience is at a critical mass for the genre to explode, and a writer to strike the match. What is great about audio drama though, compared to television or movies, is that not only can you create truly experimental stories, but that the turnaround time and production costs are small. There are two obvious consequences for this: a lot of audio dramas can be made and the barrier to entry is low. Karma agrees, saying this means

> people could really, really be very creative with whatever romance that they want to do, and they didn't have to be approved or have people say like, oh, no one's going to listen to this because of these reasons, like they could really do whatever they wanted, which lends itself to having like tons of different types of romance. (Light)

Personally, I think the potential to create something wonderful is something to aspire to. While I do not write romance stories, I do believe they are the most raw form for character passion and interaction. I look for well written love when I can, because it is what I think is at the core of a story: two characters in conflict and love. Besides, it would be hypocritical to lampoon the lack of romance stories in audio drama and then not commit to write a few of my own. After all, I may not write romance, but all connection is a love. So, what can I do then? Well, now I do the only thing I can do, write a whole bunch.

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Learning about Lou: Exploring Dual Identities in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*

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Young adults, while developing their sense of self, often search for communities to accept them. In Jen Ferguson's *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (2022), the protagonist Lou struggles with the development of her romantic relationships. She experiences alienation, in part because she considers herself broken for not having sexual attraction to her partners. Her journey of learning about being demisexual mirrors her experience of accepting her Métis ancestry. In the present setting of the novel, the reader follows Lou, understanding what it means to be demisexual and how it impacts her life. Concurrently, the reader sees glimpses of Lou's past, where she discusses how she decided to finally accept her Indigenous ancestry and no longer feel shame in her Métis background and family. The significance of Lou's journeys is that they share many issues regarding the acceptance of demisexual and Métis people within their own groups. Rejections cause these people to receive no protection from the harm of the settler state. It is understandable why Lou would have trouble accepting herself, and it is essential to see why Métis people have difficulty finding community under the Indigenous label. What are the causes for demisexuals and ace-spec people to feel alienation from the Queer community? In addressing these questions, I propose that these identifiers connect through their rejection from their overall communities. While social justice advances the rights of equity-seeking groups, preventing lateral violence within these communities is vital. While the spotlight widens, we must be tolerant and understanding of groups that the settler state conceals.

Métis people face unique challenges to their Indigeneity compared to other Indigenous peoples: their Indigeneity is disputed compared to other Indigenous groups in Canada. The confusion surrounding Métis identity is a problem created by the settler state, as "the... racialized and legislated forms of Indigenous identity have been painful and destructive for Indigenous people, especially those of mixed ancestry" (Bidwell 118). To pursue their colonial efforts, the settler state made discriminatory policies surrounding Indigenous peoples. The distinctness surrounding Métis and the legal limbo surrounding their existence resulted from Canada's decision to legislate them separately from other First Nation peoples.

These decisions would result in Canada identifying Métis through their mixed identities. The disputes and policing of Métis people's identities originate from the distinctions established by the settler state, leading to conflict within the Indigenous community. These harms have led to discrimination against the Métis as not being "Indigenous enough." Although other First Nations people are mixed, with people having white ancestry, it is the distinctions established in the Indian Act that led to the rejections and issues that continue today. The violence would lead white-passing Métis people to make decisions on their identities. Some people discover that their families would hide their identities: "I interpreted my grandfather's telling me never to discuss it outside of the family as internalized racism and shame. And I'm rewriting that story as my grandfather loved me and my grandfather was protecting me" (Auger *et al.* 28). It is essential for people not always to consider that hiding their Indigeneity is a shameful act: it comes from the need to protect oneself from systems that cause harm. The complicated history of Métis people means they have their identities rejected due to the laws imposed by the settler state, or they decide to hide their identity, as Lou has, to defend themselves from the lack of protections provided by the state.

Lou's rejection of her Métis ancestry comes from the confusion surrounding her identity. She shares with the reader the existence of the "big lie," an ongoing façade by which she decided to hide her Indigeneity. Lou would claim to be white, taking extra precautions to hide her family and connections to other Indigenous peoples (*passim*). While sharing, one of the excuses she used to provide is that "I don't have a culture" (28). Before the novel begins, she used it as a deflection from people questioning her ethnicity, but it comes to the reader as a statement of her inability to connect with her Métis ancestry. By choosing to pass as white, Lou decides to have no cultural identity. The creation of the "big lie" is shown by the shared past with her mother. Their constant need to move is the result of racist structural systems that discriminated against Indigenous parents. The journey from town to town is an important part of their history. Hanson, in an article on Vermette, shares, "the mobility of the Metis is the notion of kinship: while on the move, Metis people have been tied together through bonds of relationship" (Hanson). In Ferguson's novel, their journey led to a strong bond between Lou and her mother based on their shared experiences. By deciding to return and stay in her mother's hometown, Lou creates the "big lie" to remove herself from the trauma that they shared. All she notes is that her family received harm from the settler state, and her rejection of herself was to protect any further cases of harm to herself or her family. However, as we see her reveal parts of the "big lie," we see her journey of self-acceptance through the fallout from her actions. She has

become involved with the Indigenous community and volunteers at the Friendship Centre. There, she makes friends with other Indigenous youth, such as Tyler. While Lou rejected her Indigeneity due to historical oppressions and generational trauma, the affirmation of her Métis ancestry allowed her to form connections that would surpass the conflicts between Indigenous communities that the state legislated upon them. As Tyler says, "There's not one way to be Native, eh? … It's who you are. It's being yourself and honoring your family, your people, the land—all living things" (188).

Likewise, the Queer community often ignores demisexual people due to structural systems set by and for allosexual people. Just as the lack of understanding towards Métis issues leads to harm within their community, so does the lack of awareness surrounding demisexuals and other ace-spec people. The settler state does not solely discriminate based on race, as allonormative narratives lead to the discrimination of ace-spec peoples. Determining and enforcing the allosexual viewpoints as the correct and only basis for relationship causes discrimination and the inability for ace-spec people to discover and define themselves. With the focus within the Queer community on allosexual relationships, the resulting lateral violence within the community results in the alienation of ace-spec peoples, and choosing to focus on allosexual identities within the Queer community perpetuates the objectives of the settler state. It is vital to increase awareness of this, as a lack of representation leads to negative effects on mental health. Demisexual youth have lower self-esteem and higher risks for depression and anxiety compared to people with other sexual identities (Pitcher *et al.* 518–519). The data is echoed in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, as Lou faces mental health and serious emotional trauma from her inability to express her sexuality. The rise of demisexual representation stands against the allonormative system, because it confronts the public's biases on sexuality. Providing spaces for ace-spec people to represent themselves allows demisexuals, and other ace-spec sexualities, to challenge allonormativity by accepting themselves within Queer communities.

The lack of ace-spec representation leads Lou to misinterpret her relationship concerns. While her past is concerned with her acceptance of her Métis ancestry, her current journey is for her to understand and accept her demisexuality. Initially, she cannot comprehend why she feels no sexual attraction to Wyatt and does not conform to the allonormative ideas of relationships. Although Lou has not yet identified as demisexual at the beginning of the novel, readers can see this possibility in her ideas surrounding sex: "The idea of sex is fine. Sex on TV is fine.

Sometimes, you know, at night, in the dark, this is nice enough. But seriously with Wyatt, nothing. Nothing at all" (128). She understands the concept, but finds it impossible to comprehend when she engages with Wyatt. Without proper ace-spec representation within her communities, Lou is unable to express or understand her emotions. Just as her "big lie" hurt her platonic relationships due to race, her frustrations with her sexuality hurt her romantic relationship with King, when her perceived importance of sex within a relationship leads her to strain it: "'I can't have sex with you,' I blurt out. It's inelegant. It's only half truth. But it's what matters" (299). She knows that it is only a part of the truth, but she decides that she is unfit for a relationship and disregards her feelings for King that are, due to her demisexuality. However, even if a demisexual person has an emotional connection to someone, it does not mean that it will lead to an engagement in sex (Hille *et al.* 821). Through the patience and understanding of King, and his knowledge of demisexuality, Lou is finally able to accept and express her sexuality. With knowledge of ace-spec concepts, Lou can determine what she wants in a relationship, regardless of what allonormative narratives dictate.

We see the intersectional harm that occurs from the rejection of both identities from their communities through the trauma Lou experiences in the novel. *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* shows both of Lou's self-acceptance journeys and how these identities intersect. Her experiences show why people feel unsafe pursuing a better understanding of themselves. With a lack of support within their communities, there is no protection from the harm enacted by the settler state. Without an effort to understand the effects of intersectionality in the Queer and Indigenous communities, lateral violence can occur within these spaces.[26] Like other normative structures, allonormativity harms ace-spec people of colour since it affects their relationships with themselves and others (Brandley and Labador 334). Lateral violence does not only cause harm within its community but extends and harms people in other equity-seeking groups. We see this occur when Lou speaks about her demisexuality as "an inheritance, something that's come from the violence of what Peter England did to my mom when she was sixteen. But *why* doesn't matter. All that matters is I don't work" (293). Due to the allonormative biases in her life, she determines that her demisexuality is a result of her mother's Indigeneity. It leads her to once again struggle and blame her Métis ancestry,

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[26] Note: Lou's main Queer community in the novel is her bi friend, whose mistreatment of Lou stems more from not taking meds for bipolar disorder than from discrimination based on Lou's sexuality, so we don't literally see that violence in this novel.

attributing her frustration to generational trauma. Without being able to understand and express herself, Lou is once again alienating her Indigeneity.

Lou's journey shows why intersectional approaches are vital when discussing identity. Challenging biases within sexuality and Indigeneity allows us to resist colonial narratives. While these communities fight for the rights and recognition of their members, these smaller conflicts of who gets to be considered a member cause lateral violence. These conflicts shift from resistance against a colonial system to influential members enacting their strength over others. *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* shows that members can experience harm due to these internal arguments and how, without an intersectional understanding, these conflicts can lead to self-doubt in other aspects of a person's identity. As Jen Ferguson says, "I've yet to read a book with a character who is both demi and Michif. But I did write one" (363). Without narratives to share these journeys of self-acceptance, it causes others to experience the same feelings of rejection that Lou felt, without the possibility of a positive resolution: the novel shows the possibilities of lateral violence, but gives us the positive benefits of finding community instead. By writing a book that intersects Ferguson's identities, she shows us how to prevent lateral violence. Through these narratives, "we can craft ace-affirming communication and relationalities that can chip at and undo intersecting and destructive forms of colonial, allonormative, and cisheteronormative power" (Brandley and Labador 342). A book such as this not only helps readers by providing them with representation, it allows them to express themselves and refocus the conversation from infighting to focusing on challenging the oppression imposed on the communities as a whole by the settler state.

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Exploitation for Empowerment: Resisting Heteronormativity and Sexism in Hollywood

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Preceding both the progressive milestones of the gay rights and women's liberation movements of the '60s and '70s, American film's golden age of Hollywood operated under a heteronormative and patriarchal social regime. Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) explores the titular character's life as a rising Hollywood starlet in the 1950s and early '60s as she navigates being a Queer woman in an industry controlled by male-dominated studios. The status quo allowed only a subordinate, domestic position for women and supplied dangers to health and well-being for Queer folk; however, Reid's Evelyn Hugo successfully maintains control of both her career as well as her public image while protecting her authentic self through the utilization of both her body and domestic image, the commodification of her celebrity, and her lavender marriage to a gay film producer.

Women and Queer members of the film industry were forced to conform, in both their personal and professional lives, to socially defined boundaries of sexuality and gender founded on heteronormative patriarchal values. Facing legal barriers to equality, cultural hostility, and political apathy, Queer people across the country were vilified by news outlets, the police, sodomy laws, and popular culture (Rosenfeld 27–29). Queer Americans who were outed as gay or lesbian were subject to arrest or dismissal from their job, often losing the favor of their local community as well. These consequences were acknowledged across the country, but within Hollywood they were written into employees' contracts, known as the Hays Code, or the Motion Picture Production Code (Brown; Rosenfeld 28). Worries that inappropriate depictions of murder, drug use, and sexual assault began to cloud the glamour of the film industry, so the Hays code limited and controlled exactly what was allowed to be shown on screen and what narratives were allowed to be presented to audiences in films from 1934–1968 (Lewis). Further, in an effort to preserve social etiquette and public comfort, the Hays code dictated that Queer characters could only have sinister intent and an unhappy ending, and female portrayals were largely limited to either the contented housewife or the alluring seductress. Because the censorship of positive Queer

representation and female independence went along with the censorship of violence and substance abuse, the Hays Code deemed them transgressions of equal harm to viewers – reinforcing the immorality of Queer folks and women's rights as similar to that of murder. The Hays Code was weaponized to support the patriarchal, heterosexual, white supremacist hierarchy within the cinematic machine to disappear the concept of female liberation from cultural norms or of homosexuality as comparable to heterosexuality.

Actresses in Hollywood were owned by the studio they worked for, or likewise controlled by male colleagues who held immense social and/or financial capital. Ever present for women in the industry was overt sexualization, assault, objectification, and the offer of trading sex for a promotion. The reality of the 1950s and '60s held the absence of protection for victims of such industrial norms, as well as lack of repercussions for perpetrators. In the face of this widely normalized misogyny, Reid's Evelyn Hugo engages sex as a tool and her beauty as an asset to manipulate those around her, understanding that these aspects will be asked of her anyway. Speaking to utilizing her beauty to land film roles, Evelyn says, "it was my chest that kept men's interest. And women admired my face" (51). She sexualizes her own body and, in that, takes back the power in how she is perceived and treated. Evelyn remains in control throughout the novel, despite navigating female oppression and sexualization based upon patriarchal ideologies. Growing up in Hell's Kitchen, she finds[27] social power as a girl who developed early for her age, inciting looks and innuendos from the men around her. Understanding that she was not in a position to refuse a man's advances, she used her body as a valuable commodity to trade and found comfort in using sex for profit if it was on her own terms. Looking back on her teenage years, Evelyn speaks to a relationship she had with a man who owned a local corner store:

> I knew he was going to get what he wanted from me whether I let him or not […]. I took anything I wanted […] in exchange, I saw him every Saturday night and let him take my shirt off. […] He'd convinced himself that his wanting me was my fault. And I believed him. *Look what I make these poor boys do,* I thought. And yet also, *Here is my value, my power.* (43, italics in original)

In the beginning of her career, Evelyn uses sex appeal as a steppingstone to introduce herself to Hollywood, while advertising her ability to keep an audience

[27] Although the novel is mostly set in its fictional past, I will largely use present tense to describe the memories she shares, in order to distinguish Evelyn's fictional experiences from their historical real-world contexts.

entertained. Her character is a gifted actress, but her beauty and free use of her sexuality opens doors in the industry that otherwise wouldn't have been by talent alone. In parallel, Marilyn Monroe, real-life sex-symbol and iconic actress from the late golden age of Hollywood, spoke in an interview about trading sex for acting jobs throughout the beginning of her career, stating "'When I started modeling, it was like part of the job,' she explained. 'All the girls did […] and if you didn't go along, there were twenty-five girls who would. […] I've slept with producers. I'd be a liar if I said I didn't'" (McElroy, "The Studio"). Evelyn, like Marilyn, understands the necessity of conforming to the actions expected of her within a male-led industry founded on misogynistic and patriarchal values to achieve her desired career.

Roles and jobs available for women in Hollywood sharply dropped in the 1920s. Options slowly rose again in the '50s, but decades of limited female-held positions fostered a landscape that encouraged women to compete while discouraging female bonds to form within the industry (Morris). Actresses of the post-war era were exploited and oppressed but were simultaneously taught to conduct themselves as if they weren't, thus perpetrating an outward image of complicity (McElroy, "There Were No Laws"). This image of complicity works to alienate rebellions versus the patriarchal ideal and eliminates a platform to make a change by removing community connections between women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* unpacks the sociocultural phenomenon of the time that encouraged women to "desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity," to live for nothing other than domestic and motherly duties, and to revel in it (Freidan 15). Oppression within the domestic sphere, Hollywood arena, and local political structures worked in tandem to discourage women from seeking independence, while convincing them it was in their own self-interest. Despite her seven marriages, Evelyn refuses to adhere to the "feminine normality [and] fulfillment" that is a woman's natural journey to wife and mother expected at the time (Freidan 31). Managing to control the narrative around her body and actions, Evelyn enters the domestic realm on her own terms, while refusing to give up her career and independence. Like her sexuality, Evelyn employs the ideal of domestic female subordination in her first marriage to Ernie. As Ernie offers her a new start in L.A., playing the role of housewife allows her financial stability and access to Hollywood that she wouldn't have had otherwise. When approaching him about taking acting lessons, Evelyn makes him dinner, noting, "I specifically didn't take my apron off when I brought it up. I wanted him to see me as harmless and domestic" (47). This ultimately brings her success and sets her on course to become a big Hollywood name.

In order to conform to something the public would respond to positively, Evelyn knows she has to disconnect her public persona from her Cuban heritage and past life. She bleaches her dark hair, loses the ideal amount of weight, perfects a trans-Atlantic accent, and formulates a false backstory and suburban parents. Evelyn notes, "it was an easy act to put on … a star feels comfortable being the very thing the world wants her to be" (51). The 1950s was the start of a sociocultural shift from buying patterns and personal interests being entirely reliant on tradition and institution, to an exploration of self and impulse within consumer trends (Davis). Being an actress right in the middle of this shift allows Evelyn's personal branding and film marketing strategies to integrate both a portrayal of an ideal 1950s woman – alluring but innocent – and the glamour of scandal to attract attention. Actively producing an image for the consumer, Evelyn and her team contrive her celebrity identity to appeal to as large an audience as possible. This is engaging in a "new language of self-empowerment," because Evelyn is in charge of her own commodification and objectification, "turning the power of branding around to personal advantage" (Davis). Sitting for publicity photos curated by her agent Harry Cameron, decorated by a team of makeup and fashion professionals, Evelyn notes: "I was being designed to be two opposing things, a complicated image that was hard to dissect but easy to grab on to. I was supposed to be both naïve *and* erotic" (51). Evelyn is well aware and an active participant in this formulation of narrative of how she is conceived by the public and understands that she can capitalize on it.

A highly mediatized celebrity identity possesses power, generating both monetary and attention-based capital (Marshall 164–166). Evelyn finds her fanbase and role opportunities growing simultaneously as she builds a relationship and engagement with the public. As she is idolized by her audience for both her scandals and her talent, Evelyn gains social capital and affective power, which she commodifies as monetary value. Engaging in the objectification of herself once again, Evelyn elevates a one-dimensional, sexualized icon as her public persona, retaining control of her self-presentation to a public audience. Comparing Evelyn to real-life Hollywood actress Elizabeth Taylor, Evelyn's popularity is in part due to her beauty and on-screen talent, but just as exciting to her audience are her many marital scandals and mentions in the press. Similarly, Elizabeth Taylor's infamy included divorces, affairs, and husband-stealing scandals throughout her career – a prospect that she and her studios commodified, because they understood her notable reputation would transfer to ticket sales (McElroy, "There Were No Laws").

Like Taylor, Rita Hayworth is another real-life inspiration for Evelyn's character (Reid, Author comment). Hayworth adopted Jean Harlow's "Blonde Bombshell" nickname and gave it new meaning as an erotically charged femme fatale in the 1940s, which catapulted her to fame in Hollywood (Gilda). In Reid's novel, Evelyn Hugo similarly has a "Blonde Bombshell" persona through public marketing and self-promotion, with a reliance on the concept of spectacle, through fabrication or exaggeration of stories and personal anecdotes. Evelyn's third marriage to Mick Riva is a performance for the press, to cover the rumors of her lesbian relationship with her true love, Celia St. James. Evelyn understands the damage being outed as Queer would do to her career, not to mention the threat to her and Celia's safety, and manipulates Mick into a quick wedding and annulment, both of which she convinces him are his idea. Her fourth marriage to Rex North is "a relationship built entirely on box office" to promote the movie they costar in and advance both their careers (Reid 196). Her staged affair and subsequent marriage to her fifth husband, Harry Cameron, is a mutually agreed upon lavender marriage, fabricated from their deep friendship and for the conservation of their heterosexual reputations. Harry and Evelyn decide together to concoct a narrative of convenience: as Harry says to Evelyn, "We could get married… after all I love you. Maybe not the way a husband is supposed to love a wife but enough" (220). Evelyn's marriages and tawdry set-up affairs work to promote her sexual allure and allow her to engage with the public gossip to maintain relevance and popularity. The marriages also work as steppingstones for her career or the preservation of her secret Queer relationship from the spotlight; each relationship leaves Evelyn with something learned, or something earned, reiterating the idea that these seven men exist to promote *her* as opposed to the social norm at the time which dictates the wife exists to serve her husband. Years later, when asked by a reporter if she is embarrassed about having been married so many times, Evelyn replies: "No … Because they are just husbands. *I* am Evelyn Hugo" (385). She refuses to participate in the devaluation of women, of herself, and discards the societal ideal that a husband dictates his wife's worth in any way.

Lavender marriages were marriages of convenience, involving a man and a woman, in which one or both of whom are Queer and wished to hide their sexuality for the sake of their careers or safety. Originally a term from the 1800s, "lavender marriages" arose during the golden age of Hollywood due to public scrutiny of those in the film industry, and the strict heteronormative guidelines enforced by the Hays Code (Brown). In the face of socially, legally, and religiously enforced heteronormativity, lavender marriage arrangements allowed high profile members of society or celebrity personalities to pursue their public ambitions

while concealing their true sexual orientations. Highly stigmatized and the subject of political fearmongering campaigns all over the world – e.g. homosexuality being conflated with communism during the Red Scare in America – being openly gay was to accept public hostility and to put your career and relationships in jeopardy (Brown). Lavender marriages offered Queer people, especially celebrities, the appearance of a traditional heterosexual marriage that was acceptable at the time, while allowing them to lead separate private lives without persecution. One of the most famous purported lavender marriages of the time was Rock Hudson's three-year marriage to Phyllis Gates, supposedly set up by Hudson's agent to invalidate a magazine exposé that would potentially out him as bisexual (Garber 18-19). Another is Judy Garland's marriage to Vincente Minelli, who was purported to be gay throughout gossip circles and salacious Hollywood press (Garber 19; Nesti). Lavender marriages were a necessity to any Queer person in Hollywood intending to further their career and protect their public image, and Evelyn is no stranger to this concept. After life drives them apart and Evelyn decides to get back in touch with her true love, Evelyn and Celia exchange letters that Evelyn signs as Edward to posture a heterosexual relationship, in case anyone should read them. However, in an act of devotion to Celia, and an act of defiance for herself, she signs her last letters as Evelyn, crossing out the Edward initially written. Here, she maintains her autonomy, embracing her authentic identity and sexuality in permanent ink, despite potential consequences.

Evelyn acknowledges the high price of fame as akin to that of simply existing as a bisexual woman in the social climate of 1950's America, in that it required hiding aspects of yourself and fabricating others. Meeting a young man with dreams of being an actor, she reflects inwardly on the price she paid, noting, "you have to be willing to deny your heritage, to commodify your body, to lie to good people, to sacrifice who you love in the name of what people will think, and to choose the false version of yourself time and time again" (326). Though at points in the novel Evelyn feels as if she has discarded the intersectionality of her identity, she claims power by employing her body, celebrity influence, and marriages of convenience to maintain her reputation and Hollywood career. Years later, within the secondary storyline, Evelyn is diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer and is working to have her life's story published in the modern day, complete with illicit relationships, business deals disguised as marriages, and an account of her healthy domestic life with Celia St. James, as her happiest and most legitimate marriage is ironically with another woman. In a last act of authority and self-empowerment, Evelyn takes her own life instead of succumbing to cancer. By publicly revealing the hidden details of her time in Hollywood, and subsequently

committing suicide, Evelyn ends her life just as she lived it at the beginning of her career, in full control and on her own terms.

Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* is a work of crossover fiction, enjoyed by both adults and younger readers. It does not fall under the label of young adult (YA) fiction like the much of the rest of the focus texts of this anthology, although it is a Queer romance novel that is written in an accessible style with relatable content for a range of readers. The strong YA publishing sphere of today offers options to teen and youth readers who have outgrown juvenile-targeted works, and crossover fiction allows these audiences an even wider range of content. Novels like Reid's are valuable because they not only foster an emotional connection with young readers, but they introduce more complex concepts surrounding history, culture, social progression, and sexual exploration in language that doesn't completely alienate them. Novels like this one offer younger readers access to themes that are a little beyond their years or their scope of personal identification and introduce complex issues that they might encounter later in their lives. Further, the overt sexualization and subordination of women, as well as a lack of political and cultural acceptance for Queer people are concepts that persist today. Around the world, young people encounter sexualized commodification and construction of narrative within media, as well as homophobia and sexism. As such, this novel is not only a window into the past, but also a distinctive comment on the present. *Seven Husbands* is informed by real-life experiences so that Queer teen, youth, or adult readers can know that despite their story being rewritten, despite their struggle, Queer people have always been here and have fought very hard for their right to openly love who they want.

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Sexual Boundary-Setting in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*

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CONTENT WARNING: mention of non-consensual sexual interactions and r***

Sexual boundary-setting is under-studied in the field of Psychology. This lack of research is even starker when considering the experiences of people on the asexual spectrum. Given this gap, Ferguson's *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (2022) provides a compelling opportunity to combine my research interests as a Psychology and Gender studies student taking an English literature course. Though I am allosexual, the conversations that Lou has regarding her asexuality are interesting to compare to my own experiences with boundary-setting. This paper is thus an amalgamation of existing research on first sexual encounters, the boundary-setting conversations that occur in our heteronormative society, and an analysis of Lou's demisexual experience in relation to these normative experiences. Demisexual literature examples like Ferguson's, which thoroughly examine healthy sexual boundary-setting conversations, will only benefit young asexual readers who search for representation.

In a psychological study conducted by Morgan and Zurbriggen, most women reported that their first expressions of disinterest in sex were met with a range of negative reactions. Many women felt manipulated or pressured to engage in sexual acts based on their partner's interests. According to the study participants, men should be the ones initiating sexual interactions, and men may have to pressure their female partners to get what they want. Most participants "believe the male sex drive is constant, active, and strong, that it is difficult for young men to constrain their sex drive" (517). Sometimes, the pressure that women received went as far as constituting rape, but, almost universally, women expected a certain level of pressure. They often "held a low standard concerning what kind of pressure was unacceptable" in sexual situations (526). Some women even accepted men's threats that they would leave the relationship if a specific "sexual activity did not occur" (526).

This kind of pressure is present in Lou's sexual scenes with Wyatt. Though he never rapes her, he does not respect her boundaries and consistently pressures her to do more than she wants. Wyatt tells her that she does not "have to like giving BJs for you to, you know, go to town" (Ferguson 18), but her disinterest in sexual activities extends beyond disliking oral sex. At the very beginning of *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, she laments about kissing Wyatt forty-six times and not feeling a spark once (16). In an internal monologue, she specifies that she does not "want to have [his] dick in [her] hand at all" (18), though she does not have the words to tell Wyatt this. She is not interested in anything remotely sexual with Wyatt and is even surprised when his next girlfriend appears to enjoy his sexual advances. Long after they break up, Wyatt confesses that he knew Lou was never enjoying herself when they engaged in sexual activity. He "knew there was something wrong with [Lou]" because she was always "frigid" (136). Wyatt pressured her, despite knowing that Lou did not want to be sexual with him, prioritizing his own desire over her comfort. In viewing Lou's sexuality as a problem, or something "wrong" with her (136), he diminishes his own responsibility to explore it with her, ask her questions about it, and respect her boundaries. He tries to remove himself from the equation, and he claims no responsibility for his own harmful behaviour.

There are consistencies between Lou's later experience with King and some of the Morgan and Zurbriggen study's participants: "several women discussed partners" who "were careful to make sexual experiences consensual and comfortable, suggesting that these women were given greater spaces for sexual agency" (534). Some women's first sexual encounters involved accepting and accommodating male partners who were happy to abstain from sex in accordance with their wishes. Some women had partners like King.

When Lou tells King that "[she] like[s] kissing [him] a lot" but is not sure that she wants anything more from him sexually, King accepts that (238). Though Lou does not yet have the language to describe her sexuality, once she is honest about her position, things begin to fall into place. King offers demisexuality as an option—a word he is familiar with through his friend Yana. This identity resonates with Lou and allows her to begin discussing her sexual boundaries with King more explicitly. Together, they "try other things" as if doing "an experiment" to determine what Lou is comfortable with (238). Sometimes Lou verbalizes her boundaries, but other times King recognizes them without her needing to say them aloud. When she asks King how he knows whether he likes a sexual activity, for example, he takes that as a sign to stop. If she is not sure that she is enjoying an activity, King takes it off the sexual menu. This same practice is

recommended in real life for a variety of sexual challenges. For example, people with provoked vestibulodynia (a medical condition that can make penetrative sex painful for people who have vulvas) are encouraged to communicate what feels good, what does not, and what they are unsure about (Basson et al. 77). As they begin therapy (either cognitive behavioural therapy or mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy), therapists will instruct patients to refrain from anything that does not feel good or that they are not sure about (80). Instinctively, King follows this protocol. He practices good consent by treating anything besides an enthusiastic "yes" as a "no." He checks in with Lou frequently, allows her to change her mind, and tries not to take things personally. In the afterword to the novel, Ferguson writes that King is her "favorite character" because of his "goodness, his kindness," and "his heart" (270). Some of Ferguson's early readers however, critiqued King for being "too good for a teenage boy," which is probably because he is (Ferguson 270). King's approach to respecting Lou's boundaries is unfortunately, non-normative. Often, as demonstrated by the psychological literature, male partners react like Wyatt when their female partners decline sexual advances.

Lou views Wyatt's actions and behaviours as sexual advances even when he requests oral sex. It is worth noting that the definition of "sex" is not as clear as many might believe. It is contestable, and the term "sexual activity" has even more debated boundaries. Though oral sex and anal sex both have the word "sex" within their names, it is very common for people to think of sex strictly as vaginal penetration. For many, a person with a penis and a person with a vagina are the only two who can engage in "sex." Among younger people, such as Lou, however, sometimes sex is defined more broadly. Michels et al. asked adolescents about their first sexual decisions and conversations, and how they felt about choices they had made in the past—whether to accept or decline sexual advances. One girl who had the opportunity but had declined sexual contact, considered oral sex to fall within the larger category of sex, "because you're still more intimate" (Michels et al. 590). Though none of the teenagers in the study considered either kissing or intimate touch to be sex, Lou's discomfort with sexual activity is not limited to activities and definitions that other teens agree upon, as is clear in her hesitancy surrounding kissing. Her interactions with Wyatt appear to be mostly of a sexual, rather than romantic nature, whereas her experiences with King are primarily romantic and platonic, with a slow introduction to sexuality. The definitions that we use for sexual activity are varied and fluid, but Lou's discomfort also does not need to be boxed nor defined to be valid.

Despite their differing definitions, many participants in psychological studies report similar hesitation to Lou when it comes to engaging in sexual activity. It is difficult to tease apart demisexuality from normative beliefs in this case, though. Sexuality incurs a great deal of shame in Western culture. While Lou is afraid of backlash for not participating in sexual activities, others are concerned about the consequences of being sexual. Fears surrounding pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and social judgment are rampant. These fears can be at least partially explained by the education that students receive. As Kokkola explains, "the nuts and bolts of what might go where and what might happen as a result are easy to explain, but describing how to produce sexual pleasure and/or intimacy is embarrassing, in part, because it reveals so much about one's own preferences" (16). There is shame surrounding sexuality. Even Lou's mother, Louise, tries to shame Lou for having sex. She insists that Lou use condoms but does not take time to ask Lou what is going on between her and King, nor explain why condoms are important (Ferguson 240). She automatically assumes that they must be having penetrative sex but avoids furthering the conversation to explore Lou's experience. Louise's own experience with her sexuality is complicated and warrants its own in-depth analysis, but for the purpose of this paper it is only important to know that the kind of sexual education she provides Lou in this scene is reminiscent of the one that many American adolescents experience. Young people are terrified of STIs (Michels et al.), but they are rarely taught about transmission, detection, or prevention methods besides abstinence and sometimes condoms (Torres; Bittner 359). Teens can turn to other sources, such as pornography, but these depictions are not necessarily accurate and are intentionally dramatic (Bittner 364). Porn also rarely focuses on concerns such as STI transmission. Perhaps to combat their unanswered fears, many people turn to exclusive relationships for exploring their sexuality, at least initially.

Though monogamy does not guarantee protection against sexually transmitted infections, many students in one psychological study admitted that they preferred to wait before engaging in sexual activity. They felt safer to engage sexually once a sense of trust and closeness had been established with the other person. They wanted to be in dedicated monogamous partnerships. One boy explained that before having sex, "you have to be in a relationship with the person [for] a long time, and you have to really trust them" (Michels et al. 591). Another girl insisted that "you should love the person" you have sex with, and that she did not yet love anyone, so she had refrained from having sex (591). Still, another stated that she was "comfortable with [the person whom she had the opportunity to have sex with], but not to that extent" where she would have been willing to do anything

sexual with him (591). Another study posited that women especially "are more likely to indicate that sexual intercourse is only appropriate in relationships in which there is some degree of commitment, affection, and/or love" (Cohen and Shotland 291; citing a variety of sources). It is unclear whether these kinds of views come from the social scripts we have been indoctrinated with, or whether the participants were personally uninterested in sex without first establishing a relationship. Truthfully, demisexuality may be impossible to tease apart from cultural narratives with this specific reported data. The data seem to insinuate that many people who are first approached with the opportunity for sexuality outside of the confines of a romantic relationship respond negatively. Whether due to demisexuality or cultural narratives, many people expect that their first sexual encounter with a person will be after establishing a connection of at least five dates (often more like eight to ten), and that it will occur weeks after initially meeting the person (Cohen and Shotland 297).

With this discussion, I do not intend to imply that demisexual individuals will eventually mature out of their need for romantic connection, nor do I wish to conflate demisexuality with immaturity. These experiences are undoubtedly distinct, but the comparison is useful for several reasons. Unfortunately for my analysis, there is far more existing research on first sexual experiences than there is on demisexuality. External factors such as shame and fear may influence first sexual interactions more, whereas demisexuality may be more internally influenced. Without research to back this claim, however, I can only use the data available. While it is unlikely that more than a small minority of Michels et al.'s study participants were demisexual, that data was not reported. However, as Lou is both demisexual *and* sexually inexperienced, her story is relevant and intrinsically connected with the psychological study participants. Her experience of demisexuality is not universal, but it is not unique, either. I cannot make such claims until further research has been conducted. Lou's fictional life cannot be used to represent every person's asexual experience. Lou only feels comfortable navigating her sexuality with King, following a platonic and blossoming romantic connection. Other people on the asexual spectrum may find themselves more, or less, interested in sexual activity than Lou, following the development of more, or less, of a connection than the one between King and Lou. The experiences of asexuality and demisexuality are varied, and different for every person. Lou's sexual inexperience is also entirely unrelated to her demisexuality, and I do not wish to confuse the two. Many demisexual people have a sexual history. Many others do not. Lou's specific experience is captivating for readers, though, and I think her sexual boundary-setting conversations are particularly compelling when

we consider their educational potential for young readers who turn to literature to learn how to conduct themselves in similar situations.

Like many others, Lou is initially hesitant to share her sexual boundaries with King. King asks her about them explicitly before she is finally honest with him. He prompts her many times, claiming that her "excuses" for not going on a date with him "are exhausting" and that he wants a "real answer" (Ferguson 209). He knows there is something going on deeper within her, and he is open to discussing it, but Lou still hides from him because she does not want to admit that she "can't have sex with him" (209). She tells readers that "it's always a good idea not to talk about sex with someone you literally ran away from when he asked you on a date" (109). When she finally tells him that she does not want to have sex with him, it is less of a set boundary, and more a means to halt his interest in her. It is not until she finally sits down with King and uncomfortably squirms through a conversation about sexuality, that they make any progress. When she admits that she does not think she wants, or "can want sex," the characters make headway (234). She finally lets King know what has been bothering her, gives him an idea of how he can support her, and sets a boundary. She requests that they move "real slow," and she admits that she does not "know if [she] want[s] to have sex ever" but that she does want to "try other things" with him (238). It is this boundary conversation that finally opens the door for King and which allows their relationship to progress. Though boundary discussions can be uncomfortable, they are effective in ensuring that all parties are comfortable with whatever actions follow.

One possible route for navigating uncomfortable boundary discussions is a tool known as the Relationship Anarchy Smorgasbord. Though Relationship Anarchy at its core focuses on dismantling the traditional relationship structure and its associated norms, the smorgasbord itself could be useful in Lou and King's relationship. According to the Multiamory podcast, the Relationship Anarchy Smorgasbord is a "chart" laid out in a specific way to facilitate boundary discussions (00:07:45–00:08:10). People in any kind of relationship can discuss sexual, financial, and familial boundaries, along with many other types that are on the board, in addition to topics the individuals raise themselves (00:14:00–00:14:30). The smorgasbord is intended to be personalized, and it allows boundary conversations to come up early in relationships, with the intention of defining the role that people will play in their relationship partnering life. The smorgasbord also does not require any degree of finality (00:13:00–00:13:30). People are encouraged to return to the smorgasbord to re-assess their relationships and their

comfort with the boundaries they have previously set. Though Lou and King are far from bringing such a tool into their relationship, it could have helped Lou bring up the topic of sexuality with King, in a less stressful way. Upcoming Young Adult novels might consider applying the smorgasbord or other boundary-setting tools to help introduce the concept of healthy boundary discussions to young readers.

Regardless of how she does it, Lou's navigation of her demisexuality serves as representation for young readers. Ferguson's depiction of sexual boundary-setting discussions is important and "validating" for young folks on the asexual spectrum who are finally beginning to see "representations of [themselves] in literature" (Bittner 368–369). Young Adult literature is just one possible avenue for sexual education, but novels may be particularly comforting within a greater education system primarily focused on "abstinence, condom use, and HIV prevention" (Bittner 359). Young Adult literature can complement the especially sparse Queer sexual education that adolescents receive. Ferguson's description of Lou's (dis)comfort with sexual acts may be a particularly important example for asexual teens who are unsure of how to communicate their experiences with partners, and who have turned to Young Adult fiction for answers. The approachability and accessibility of Young Adult literature is exciting in its potential to educate a growing group of asexual adolescents who do not see or find themselves in traditional sex education classes. Young Adult literature provides "a space in which explorations of danger and desire outside of heterosexist expectations occur" (Bittner 361), and where adolescents can look for inspiration about how to navigate their own discussions regarding sexuality. As Lou explores her own sexuality, readers can be encouraged to consider their own relationships with their bodies, and others, and how to openly communicate their boundaries.

The Summer of Bitter and Sweet provides a compelling entry to the sexual boundary-setting conversations that people have every day. Ferguson's novel is a strong representation of healthy, albeit uncomfortable, boundary-setting conversations, and could be interesting to sexually inexperienced folks, demisexual people, anyone questioning their level of sexual interest, desire, and/or arousal, and others who are interested in learning more about one demisexual person's experience. Though the novel should not be considered the be-all-end-all for demisexual literature, it does add to a growing body of Queer Young Adult fiction that people will ultimately use to educate themselves. It is important that more works such as these are published, so that adolescents know their experiences are normal and perfectly acceptable. If someone finds comfort or familiarity in Lou's story, I

think it is a testament to the writer, who has contributed to the representation of demisexual teens' experiences. Ferguson has excelled at introducing a likeable, relatable character, whom asexual readers might be able to see themselves in. Given their reduced or fluctuating interest in sexuality, many asexual people are bound to have sexual boundary-setting conversations, and they should have a plethora of representations to turn to, to help determine how they might behave in their own situations.

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