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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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks to those in ENGL417W with me this fall semester, Professor Nicky Didicher and all my classmates. Without their amazing support, this essay would not have been as successfully completed.