"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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