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

Peter Hance, Simon Fraser University

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,

[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.

Works Cited

Auger, Monique*, et al.* "'It's in My Blood. It's in My Spirit. It's in My Ancestry': Identity and its Impact on Wellness for Métis Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender Diverse People in Victoria, British Columbia." *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1, Dec. 2022, pp. 20–38.

Bidwell, Kristina F. "Métis Identity and Literature." *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, edited by James H. Cox and Daniel H. Justice, Oxford University Press, pp. 118–136.

Brandley, Ben, and Angela Labador. "Towards an Asexual-Affirming Communication Pedagogy." *Communication Education*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2023, pp. 331–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2022.2151638.

Ferguson, Jen. *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*. Heartdrum, 2022.

Hanson, Aubrey Jean. "Holding Home Together: Katherena Vermette's *The Break*." *Canadian Literature*, no. 237, 2019, pp. 27–45,183.

Hille, Jessica J., *et al.* "'Sex' and the Ace Spectrum: Definitions of Sex, Behavioral Histories, and Future Interest for Individuals Who Identify as Asexual, Graysexual, or Demisexual." *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 57, no. 7, 2020, pp. 813–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1689378.

Pitcher, Katelyn J., *et al.* "Outness and Social-Emotional Adjustment among Asexual and Demisexual Adolescents." *Journal of LGBT Youth*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2024, pp. 507–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2023.2200385.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give special thanks to my partner, Keianna, for always supporting and standing by my side.

I would also like to acknowledge my Indigenous friends for sharing their knowledge and their histories with me.