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LGBTQ Issues and Themes

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Gender and Sexuality: LGBTQ Issues and Themes

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 **FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY**

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Editor's Introduction

Exploring Subtleties within LGBTQ Issues and Texts

WENDY KEYSER

The idea for a topical issue of *The Falconer* on LGBTQ and gender themes arose out of a course I taught at Fitchburg State University in the fall of 2020, LGBTQ Issues and Literature. This discussion-based course underscored the overlap between community and academic insight: students brought an infectious level of enthusiasm for sharing and wrangling with their responses to literary texts and the texts of society. At times, people shared compelling narratives from their own experiences and observations as ways in to thinking about a text; at other times, readers delved into conflicting understandings of literary texts with respect and passion. Multiple students told me, privately, that they were inspired by their peers in the class to redouble their efforts in reading incisively and writing insightfully; they were also inspired by the opportunity to study a set of topics academically that they had thoughts and questions about “in the real world.” It was my absolute delight to work with this diverse group of invested students. While our discussions were fiery and engaging—people remaining after class to continue talking—students’ writing impressed me for its delving beneath initial ideas and observations and exploring subtleties within research writing and literary and cultural text analysis. After the English Studies department chair, Dr. Lisa Gim, visited our class and witnessed the quality of discussion, she broached the topic of creating a themed issue of *The Falconer*. Students from this course eagerly submitted their writing for consideration, and students from across the university’s undergraduate and graduate schools made submissions as well, leading to a richness and diversity of material included in this volume.

The purpose of this issue is to share academic work on issues of gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ identity. Some readers may have begun to wonder “what does it mean to be transgender?” and “how is gender or sexuality non-binary?”. For these readers, the pieces in this volume are approachable enough to clarify answers to such questions, without use of jargon and with attention to the experiences of real people. Other readers may be deeply familiar with LGBTQ topics and seek deeper explorations of these topics, with interest in how academic thought applies these ideas to popular culture, literature, and researched aspects of society. These readers, too, will be rewarded by the depth to which the pieces in this volume explore new territory.

The paragraphs which follow give a brief introduction to the pieces included in this volume. However, first I want to thank Ocean Vuong for granting permission for three of his poems from the collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Copper Canyon Press, 2016) to be reprinted in *The Falconer*. Ocean Vuong is an award-winning poet who is a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and thus shares a geographical and academic connection to Fitchburg State University. His poems pose snapshots with apt details, describing unique, human moments. It is indeed an honor to be able to reprint these poems, alongside three writers’ explications of them. Additionally, artwork by Bridie Wolejko is placed between each section (please note that the “Wendy” in these drawings is not this editor).

Part I, *An Examination of Society through Research and Narrative*, focuses on nuance within topics of great interest. The selected research pieces go well beyond an overview of LGBT topics, such as binary identities, discrimination towards and within the LGBTQ community, and gender-based expectations in society. Brett Rochford's "*Sorry, Bro, Masc 4 Masc Only*": *Discrimination within Male Homosexuals* explores gay men's discrimination imposed upon each other within the world of dating, privileging masculine-acting/appearing men. Lauren Walker, in her piece *The Bros and Cons of Bromanticism*, traces the evolution of social constructions of heterosexual male-male friendships as they reflect, respond to, and influence levels of acceptance of affection between men. Wylder Tallman provides an in-depth definition of binary gender and sexuality identities in his research, *Why Live on a Binary, When You Can Thrive on a Spectrum?* Jude Ngyuen describes the ways that intersectionality of race, social class, and transgender identities influence the ways that different groups within the LGBT community are impacted by violence and discrimination in *Disparities in Violence and Discrimination within the LGBTQ Community*. Lastly, Claire Collins shares a narrative, which goes against the traditional coming-out storyline, reflecting on her own coming out in an experience that explores the middle ground between triumphant and disheartening.

In Part II, *Critical Analysis of Contemporary Texts: TV Series, Film, YA Books, and Songs*, writers examine cultural messages within contemporary texts, evaluating selected texts for the presence and divergence from stereotypical representations of LGBTQ people and plot tropes. Additionally, writers explore both logical and emotional aspects of their personal responses, with the awareness that other readers, viewers, and listeners may have different responses. Both Ashley Grout and McKenna Leonard examine popular songs and their messages about lesbian relationships and gender, focusing on lyrics and, in "*Mixed Messages in Girls Like Girls*," the accompanying video as well. Alyssa MacKinnon and Sam Ramsden examine television series, MacKinnon delving into the Spanish drama *Elite*, and Ramsden discussing *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Brett Rochford analyzes *Angels in America*, a TV miniseries adaptation of a play by Tony Kushner, that goes well beyond discussing the AIDS epidemic to examining complicated emotional and ethical contradictions within characters and society. Melony Ellis discusses her personal reaction to *Loving Annabelle*, reflecting on her experience of rooting for a fictional romantic relationship between a student and teacher that she points out should come across as predatory, but is somehow touching and compelling. Lastly, John Plue discusses a collection of four young adult literature books with LGBTQ characters: *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Red, White & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, and *Carry On* and *Wayward Son* by Rainbow Rowell, with an emphasis on the importance of representation of diverse characters for young readers.

Part III, Critical Analysis of Literature: Poems and Novels, showcases writers' responses to selected literary works. In the first section of Part II, three explications of Ocean Vuong's poems are offered alongside the original poems from his book of poetry, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, a *New York Times* Top 10 Book of 2016, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award, the Thom Gunn Award, and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Ashley Grout discusses the secrecy behind a "Because It's Summer," a poem about a romantic tryst behind a baseball dugout in a local park. Travis Child examines the multiple meanings of devotion and the overlap between piety and sex in his analysis of "Devotion." Matthew Alberghini focuses on the implications of structure in his analysis of "Seventh Circle of Earth," a poem that appears in the form of footnotes to describe an imagined experience behind the factual headline of two gay men killed in their home by arson.

The second section of Part III includes interpretations of *Giovanni's Room*, by James Baldwin, a compact, vivid and suspenseful inner exploration of a young man's queer identity coming into contact with 1950s French and American cultures. Lauren Walker examines the metaphors of clutter and cleanliness in the physical spaces of the novel. Chemari Forde-DeBerry discusses the prerequisite of vulnerability for intimacy, and how the lack of one can imperil the other. Disa Parker's essay, "Sexual Orientation and Emotional Escapism," builds upon the premises of Forde-DeBerry's interpretation by elaborating on the motif of avoidance of self as it relates to sexual identity.

The final section of Part III includes Lauren Walker's discussion of *Girl Meets Boy*, a gender-bending and magical realism novel by Ali Smith, and Terrence O'Kane's analysis of gender in *Like Water for Chocolate*, another novel featuring magical realism, by Laura Esquivel. Walker explores the motif of protest across generations, genders, and personality types, from the suffragist movement to the resistance to a corrupt bottled-water company called Pure. O'Kane examines the secondary female characters in his novel and the varied embodiments of female power exhibited by these women.

Spanning research into selected LGBTQ issues, narrative prose, analyses of contemporary cultural texts, literary interpretation, and visual art, the contributions to this edition of *The Falconer* invite readers to engage in topics such as intimacy and trust, humanity and discrimination, and self-acceptance and self-avoidance. Readers will put down this volume with a new way of reading literary texts as well as the texts of popular culture and even casual conversations with friends.

PART I
An Examination of Society through
Research and Narrative

“Sorry, Bro, Masc4Masc Only”: Discrimination Amongst Male Homosexuals

BRETT ROCHFORD

In recent decades, members of the gay community have actively fought against discrimination, fighting against preconceived heteronormative ideas on homosexuality and gender identity. Despite these battles for equality, discrimination runs rampant within the gay community. This is seen frequently among gay men. The problem has been exacerbated by the emergence of social media in the past decade: men advertise on digital platforms for potential partners, typical for short term relationships, yet these platforms present blatant examples of discrimination towards other gay men. These profiles reveal men’s preferences on race, body type and gender role. Tag-lines include: “no fats,” “no fems,” no Asians,” “twinks only,” and most prevalent, “masc4masc.” Many men advertise that they are strictly seeking masculine men that match their masculine presentation. If there are any indicators of non-masculine traits displayed in photos or text, men be denied with the reply, “sorry bro, masc4masc only.” Specifically within online social settings, men respond with these tag-lines that exemplify body shaming, ageism and racism.

While body shaming and racism are not specific to the gay community, the discrimination that is most singular to the gay community is the idea of gay men advertising masculinity for other masculinity. Men are selective in having interest only in partners who present “masculine” attributes through physicality or gender role performance. What causes this phenomenon on selecting partners and disregarding other men within the gay community? Is it a result of psychological conditions or a result of the heteronormative society’s pressures of conformity? Closer examination shows that both societal and psychological issues cause this discrimination between gay men. A deep look into masculinity and identity can explain this phenomenon.

This is such a problem that it has caused men in the gay community to protest the “masc for masc” preferences. In turn this has caused the participants in this phenomenon to retaliate and advocate for masculine selectivity. Jay Clarkson remarks that this cry for tolerance of “masc for masc” selectivity “thinly veils a discourse that its highly homophobic and glorifies normative standards of masculinity” (2005). Clarkson instills this idea noting that “the struggle to define gay identity often pits those who should be allies against each other is a struggle for gender privilege” (2005, p.1).

To first understand what causes this discrimination among gay men, Wade and Donis (2007) define masculinity and how it is perceived by both homosexual and heterosexual men by “the masculinity ideology.” They suggest that masculinity is defined by “a culture’s definition of masculinity, and beliefs about adherence to culturally defined standards of male behavior” (Wade & Donis, 2007). These conventional standards center on physical prowess, dominance, toughness, and controlled emotions. Any traits in contrast these are considered feminine. Further, Wade and Donis explain that efforts to not conform to this hetero-centric ideology results in views of “homophobia, emotional restrictiveness, competitiveness, toughness and aggress-

siveness" (2007, p. 1). Any opposition to these standards could result in a man being labeled feminine, a label that is central to the negative stereotype of a "typical" gay man. This idea helps explain why gay men feel the need to conform to the heterosexual society's expectations of masculinity. It is not central to homosexuality but is enforced on gay men by heteronormative social standards. This idea can serve as the baseline for why men feel the need present as heterosexual.

A research study at North Western University found physical behaviors of masculine versus feminine supported stereotypes and ultimately led to narrow selectivity in partners (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997). Further research has shown that decisions when seeking partners within digital platforms show men look for not only behavior indicators of masculinity but also physical ones. This problem of conformity to masculinity is commonly referred to as "hegemonic masculinity" (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2007). This ideology can be used to explain why gay men feel the need to conform to heteronormative standards of masculinity, both behaviorally and physically. It has to do with same sex attraction and the desire for the ideal male physical presentation. Men seek partners who physically exemplify what they identify as in order to validate their own physical masculinity. North Western's research study confirmed this idea, discovering that gay men looked for physical characteristics similar to theirs in potential partners. They found that 27 percent of gay men who identified as "masculine" sought men with similar attributes, as opposed to 1 percent who sought "feminine" characteristics (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997).

Men's preference of partners is further supported by the overwhelming need to attain standards of physical perfection, regardless of their own identity of masculinity. Lanzieri and Hildebrandt note that gay men in general have a stronger preference for a lean, muscular physical appearance (2007, p. 2). They suggest that gay men as whole perpetuate the problem of hyper-masculine selectivity within the community through a standard of physical perfection and desirability. But, who sets this standard? Research shows men desire men who exemplify physical attributes that "social culture defines as masculine" (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011, p. 2), suggesting that discrimination between gay men stems from heteronormativity.

To further explore this idea, we can examine what are considered social norms for men. Society as whole places constraints on all members of society. Heteronormative ideals place a wide range of constraints of members of the LGBTQ community. The concept that perpetuates social constructs is referred to as "homographesis" (Clarkson, 2005). This concept defines how a culture's constructs isolate social groups and deem them unacceptable or distanced from society as a whole. This, of course, explains the problems of discrimination toward homosexuality in general. In particular, homographesis puts focus on an individual's sexuality as an indicator of their identity, creating a label through "visual inscription" (p. 1). This construct creates great pressure for gay men to present as heterosexual. Men struggle to recognize where they fall into society regarding their gender and sexual identity. Clarkson remarks that "recognition depends on some fundamental conformity to existing bodily conceptions and therefore their textual and visualizable form" (2005, p. 5). Clarkson notes that this

gender role issue has been studied and research has shown that gay men may have gender role conflict because of negative views from mainstream social constructs that do not support LGBTQ sexual orientations (Clarkson, 2005).

Gay men struggle with conceptions of masculinity. Their actions in partner selectivity are influenced by hetero norms. Men struggle with gender and identity issues, contributing to the phenomenon of masc4 masc. creating a form of discrimination among gay men. The research shows that this is a multifaceted issue that will be difficult to resolve. However, bringing attention to the issues that cause it may shed light on problems in society as a whole and the issues concerning ideals of masculinity. Until this issue can be addressed in society, it likely cannot be resolved among gay men. There needs to be more acceptance regarding gender roles and efforts to resist standards that keep them in place. Until then, we must be aware when this discrimination is taking place, and resist it.

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The Bros and Cons of Bromanticism

LAUREN WALKER

The author is an elementary education major with a minor in disability services from Framingham, Massachusetts. She writes: “Although I am a straight female, I took the LGBT Topics and Literature course to gather a better understanding of the LGBTQ community in order to become a better ally.”

Society is quaking with the emergence of bromance and the casual romance it elicits, which defy the societal standards of masculinity. The concept of bromance has started to break down the barriers that society has built over many years. It is described as “a term denoting an emotionally intense bond between straight men” (Robinson, Anderson & White, 2017, p. 94). In the previous few decades, males have had a difficult time forming intense bonds with other men because of many homophobic factors; however, generations ago homosociality was admired and supported. It is resurfacing today in support of the viewpoint from generations ago in the form of bromance.

In studies of bromance in the United States and the United Kingdom, researchers want to get concrete data on how much society has progressed towards the normalization of intimate, male friendship. Overall, many are noticing a changing atmosphere, and the positive outcomes of bromance are exceptional. However, there is always a negative with a positive, thus bromance carries some unlikeable attributes that force experts to question it (Chen, 2012). The emergence of the somewhat colloquial term, bromance, reintroduces the acceptance of masculine homosociality, while simultaneously supporting the gender hierarchy and normalization of homophobia.

The growth of bromance and same-sex kissing invite a more open outlook on homosociality by reintegrating its normalness back into society. In the Middle English era, it was common to see males take provocative photographs of each other, send letters of affection to one another, and sleep in the same bed (Moss, 2016). During this time, public displays of emotion between men were widely accepted. Men who pursued such emotions were seen as elite, and were admired for promoting hegemonic masculinity, which at that time was a “celebration of behaviors and qualities coded as masculine, an emphasis on male bonding, and the public celebration of those ties” (Moss, 2016, para. 5). Yet, beginning in the 1800s hegemonic masculinity negatively transformed into as a synonym for “dominant, strength, competitiveness, and emotional detachment” (Becker & Weiner, 2016, para. 5). Today, society has returned to the time of Middle English where males are able to have non-sexual relationships with other males, and strong connections between men are welcomed. Today, men admit that their bromances are “more emotionally intimate, physically demonstrative, and more based upon trust than any other friendship” (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 94). Similarly, some straight men feel comfortable giving each other a kiss on the cheek or lips in a bromantic friendship without any sexual desire (Anderson, Ripley, & McCormack, 2018). It is refreshing to see that society is moving towards “transgressive homosocial intimacies” through bromance and the normalization of same-sex kissing (Becker & Weiner, 2016, para. 10). Overall, by supporting bromance and same-sex kissing, society is promoting inclusive masculinity, which allows males,

who were “marginalized by hegemonic masculinity” to feel comfortable showcasing their emotional and intimate sides with members of their own sex once again (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 96). Although society is generally improving on the embracement of homosociality through bromance, it took decades full of hate to reach this sense of advancement.

The concepts of homophobia and homo-hysteria dominated the twentieth century, which caused a major decline in the acceptance of homosociality. As mentioned previously, there was a time where masculinity was categorized as being emotionless and hard-headed. If a male did not meet those standards, and presented themselves as more feminine, they were instantly labelled as gay. This problem reached a peak in the twentieth century during a time of homo-hysteria, described as “the fear of being socially perceived as gay” (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 95). Many males were frightened by the idea of being mislabeled as gay because of the homophobic atmosphere of this time, a period where homophobia became “the core dynamic of the social organization of masculinities in the late 20th century” (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 28), the time of the “gay plague” or the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which brought forth a lot of antigay violence and emotions (Anderson et al., 2018).

Additionally, homophobic religious beliefs were increasing rapidly, which negatively impacted LGBT people (Anderson et al., 2018). Thus, the majority of males portrayed themselves as overly stereotypically heterosexual and masculine to avoid any mislabeling (Robinson et al., 2017). In consequence, any male that even remotely went against this exaggerated standard was given the title of gay and instantly hated by society.

Homophobia was so sensitive and extreme that even if a man hugged another man they were considered gay. This concept was known as the “one-time rule of homosexuality” (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 28). Unfortunately, homo-hysteria and homophobia destroyed any welcome of male affection during the twentieth century; however, researchers in the twenty-first century started conducting studies that proved bromantic viewpoints were becoming more positive.

Experts ran studies surrounding bromance and same-sex kissing to demonstrate the more forward-looking viewpoint males now have towards homosociality. There were two major studies done in the past five years to aid in providing progressive homosocial evidence. The first took place in the United Kingdom. The study consisted of thirty undergraduate males that attended the same university. The requirements for this study were as follows: the subjects must be male, they must participate in at least one of the four competitive sports offered at the university, and each subject will be provided a definition of bromance, as well as, a sense of how it operates (Robinson et al., 2017). The results were very supportive toward the positive effects of bromance. They explained that every male participant had at least one bromantic relationship, and unanimously said that their bromance was more important than any other friendship they acquired. Additionally, the men explained their bromances offered a “deep sense of unburdened disclosure and emotionality” that they enjoyed having in life (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 99). Furthermore, the participants agreed that prime characteristics of a bromance are shared interest, emotional intimacy, and physical closeness. Specifically, the physical portion could be expressed through hugging, cuddling, or being naked in the same room. Finally, the most significant point they all stressed is that bromance is love without the sexual attraction (Robinson et al., 2017).

The second study took place in the United States. This one consisted of 442 quantitative surveys and seventy-five in-depth interviews, which made it a mixed-methods study. The participants derived from eleven different universities in America and were each asked their opinion on same-sex kissing, as well as, their participation in it (Anderson et al., 2018). The results for this study showed favor in same-sex kissing. Out of the 442 surveys, about 38 percent of the participants had kissed another man on the cheek. Additionally, nine percent of the 442 men surveyed stated that they had kissed another man on the lips (Anderson et al., 2018).

In terms of the in-depth interview and surveys, many of the men that did partake in same-sex kissing said it occurred in specific environments. The data showed the act of same-sex kissing happened at fraternity parties, competitive athletic events, or gatherings where the consumption of alcohol occurred (Anderson et al., 2018). Furthermore, males admitted that the times they did kiss another male were purely examples of friendly affection. There was not any sexual attraction or intention involved. Finally, all participants mentioned that overall they feel same-sex kissing is simply a way to communicate social bonding and close friendships for them (Anderson et al., 2018).

Between the two studies, there was a great amount of research to prove that society is moving forward in seeing homosociality positively. Males are appreciating strong, intimate bromances and recognize that showing emotional and physical affection can be a sign of close friendships, rather than just sexual attraction. These studies showcase a welcoming, supportive perspective on homosociality.

From another perspective, there are some experts that argue although bromance is somewhat good, it spreads negative messages, as well. Bromance reinforces the subordination of gender and the normalization of homophobia, which proves it is not entirely positive. Over the span of generations, gender has been performed in relation to gender roles and stereotypes. Performativity is when “each person maintains control over how they act and consequently, how they are perceived” (Poost, 2018, pg. 2). Over time, roles that were socially constructed have been repeated so much so that they developed into the norm. This explains why males are seen as superior because they have been deemed “man of the house” and “breadwinner” for centuries.

This concept of male superiority relates to bromance and masculinity because of its exclusion of women. Bromance discusses a strong bond between a man and another without sexual intent. Although this is beneficial to society, women are not given that same right to have something similar to a bromance (Chen, 2012). Firstly, women who are friends with women are expected to be loving, emotional, and trustworthy because stereotypically women already have those characteristics. Secondly, women are not able to have a casual friendship with a male because they are consistently asked if there is a relationship forming. Thus, women are denied access to any type of bromance or synonymous relationship to a bromance because it does not exist for them. Men are the ones allowed to, which illustrates subordination and an enforcement of the gender hierarchy.

Additionally, the concept of bromance normalizes homophobia (Chen, 2012). Bromances are strictly for straight men meaning that “those who are not heterosexual are excluded from these relationships because of potential inferences of a sexual friendship,” which does not fit the bromance definition (Chen, 2012, p. 258). Addi-

tionally, the exclusion of homosexual males from a bromance supports compulsory heterosexuality. Bromance enforces the idea that society is heteronormative because only straight men can partake. Although the concept of bromance has its positive contributions to society, there are also negative outcomes to be evaluated.

The concepts of bromance and same-sex kissing are helping society return to the acceptance of homosociality between men; however, they are additionally enforcing the gender hierarchy and restricting improvement with homophobia. The journey that homosociality has travelled is a long one, starting in the Middle English era where public, male affection was respected, moving to the twentieth century where it was negatively connected to homosexuality, and finally to the twenty-first century, which has come full circle in terms of accepting homosociality through bromance. The concept of bromance allows straight males to feel comfortable expressing intimate love towards another male friend. It opens the minds of many to recognize that homosexually is not homosociality, and all males should feel free to be expressive and emotional with themselves and others. Also, bromance helps the decline of homophobia continue because it showcases that affectionate male connection is normal. Yet, there is still more discussion to be had in terms of evaluating the negatives of bromance. There needs to be equal opportunity for women to have a connection similar to a bromance, and there should be an inclusion of homosexual males to prevent any further homophobic feelings in society.

Overall, bromance aids in positively progressing this century, and is the first of many steps to get society to the place of acceptance it needs to reach. To conclude, love is love whether there is sexual attraction or not, and everyone should have the ability to express themselves through emotion.

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Why Live On A Binary, When You Can Thrive On A Spectrum?

WYLDER TALLMAN

American society is built around gender roles. Men have to act like men, and women have to act like women. Any time there is a crossover and a new TMZ article pops up about a celebrity saying they do not feel like their assigned sex, people clutch their pearls. But society has been shifting slowly, and thanks to pushes from the media and science, the idea of a spectrum is starting to outweigh that of the binary. What about those who don't feel like they're all male or female? What about those in the middle of the spectrum? Thankfully, those aren't rhetorical questions. Studies on transgender and non-binary individuals have been conducted for many decades, with a large uptick in the last decade and a half. I will look into what makes people feel they don't belong to a certain gender, how they go about expressing themselves, and the benefit of internet communities. Alfred Kinsey's Scale is being used by a modern audience to discover their sexual identities along a spectrum.

Within the umbrella of non-binary, people identify as different types of non-binary genders. People who identify as both genders refer to themselves as "androgynous" and "mixed-gender." These people typically have a fixed identity, but "incorporate aspects of both male and female" (Richards, et al., 95). On the other side of the spectrum, some individuals identify as "gender fluid," which means they incorporate aspects of male and female, but they don't have a fixed identity. Some identify as a gender, but not one on the binary. They identify themselves as "third gender." "Genderqueer" is the open-ended identity individuals use when they want to challenge the need for the binary. Then some identify with no gender. They can identify themselves as, "'agender', 'gender neutral', 'non-gendered', 'genderless', 'neuter', or 'neutrois'" (Richards, et al., 96).

When people are assigned a sex at birth, so too are they given three expectations: their gender itself, their gender role, and assumed sexuality. However, "these inferences are not invariably correct" (Richards, et al., 2016, p. 95). People are more than their external genitalia. Some people identify between the two genders, as both genders, as more than two genders, and as no gender (Richards, et al., 2016, p. 96). There are also intersex individuals, though they typically still view themselves along the binary (Richards, et al.). From a young age, children show signs of gender nonconformity. As Rahilly finds in her study on transgender and gender-variant children, "almost all parents described engaging in a kind of boundary work with their children's 'atypical' behavior" (Rahilly, 2014, p. 347). The children were around the age of seven when the study was conducted, with the stories their parents told referring to them being even younger.

Of course, when you are dealing with children, hesitations emerge. The parents in Rahilly's study "expressed fear about their child's risk of bullying and exclusion" (Rahilly, 2014, p. 348). And in some cases, the parents may be right. As Norton and Herek found in their 2013 study, heterosexuals were consistently as averse to transgender individuals as they were towards gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. They also found heterosexual men were more averse to transgender people than heterosexual women were. This is, unfortunately, "consistent with the notion that they are more invested

than women in adhering to gender norms, presumably as a means of affirming their own masculinity and heterosexuality” (Norton & Herek, 2012). Their study also found these attitudes applied to people who viewed themselves outside the binary.

But, there is a bright side. Norton and Herek found “heterosexuals’ attitudes toward transgender people varied according to the extent of their personal contact with sexual minorities” (2012). Heterosexuals who knew a gay or lesbian person were more likely to have a higher acceptance of these groups. In Lexington, Kentucky, researcher April Callis found despite the church’s efforts, the queer community was thriving. Religion is only a third of what Callis was researching, with the other two-thirds being media and science and how these affected the sexual binary in Lexington. Callis found discourse around these three topics can “be read as both supporting and refuting the sexual binary of heterosexual versus homosexual” (Callis, 2014). She also discussed that while religion was trying to eradicate acceptance of the LGBT population, the media and science were both influencing the city in a more LGBT positive light (Callis, 2014).

As Norton and Herrek (2012) pointed out, some heterosexual people tend to not like people who go against the binary. So, when there’s no social circle in person to turn to, where do non-binary people find allies and a community? Forums on the internet provide spaces for discourse around the topic of non-binary experiences. As Drucker states, “Individuals online could risk exploring how to categorize their sexuality with little fear of discovery” (2011, p. 242). With the anonymity of the internet, people are free to discover and explore themselves in many ways which wouldn’t otherwise be possible. Back in Lexington, Kentucky, Callis interviewed members of the community about bisexual representation in media. She reached the conclusion that bisexuals were being represented poorly, with females represented as over-sexual and constantly finding new partners and men not having any representation (2014). If the media isn’t reliable for learning more about oneself, and the community around a person is toxic, that leaves the internet and forums for people to turn to.

Alfred Kinsey’s Scales has been circulating the web for over ten years now in various forms, most notably popping up as quizzes in online forums. The quiz can vary between forums, with some getting the more intricate detail of Kinsey’s Studies incorrect, but they all come back to the same concept, which is to establish a spectrum with more than one stop between being straight and being gay. Drucker (2011) found 29 instances of the quiz appearing on various forums, with over 472,879 responses; another study conducted by Richards (2016) found over 17,000 respondents. Drucker’s research found that “selecting a place on the scale, even if only in the short-term, gives most quiz-takers and commenters some feeling of power and control over choosing a place in the sexual world” (2011, p. 259). The quiz is also designed with the intent that all places are ‘normal’, such, “no place on it had more or less cultural stigma than another” (Drucker, 2011, p. 259). Richards found the “model suggests that sexual orientation is best characterized by two values... rather than by a categorical label” This study compares the current way we identify sexually to “height [rather] than eye color” (2016). We should look at sexuality in terms of the individual along a spectrum, rather than as set identities. Set identities can make individuals feel more isolated in their identity, with no way of expressing how they feel (Richards, 2016).

The biggest downfall of the Kinsey Scale is that “the scale will probably not replace the dominant heterosexual-bisexual-homosexual identity triad in Western popular culture” (Drucker, 2011, p. 259). While it helps to self-identify, there’s no decimal system in place with the scale, only working off zero to six in terms of whole numbers. As such, there’s no way for the wider public to know what a two on the scale, for example, means (Drucker, 2011).

The same can be said toward non-binary genders. Much of society still operates on a two-gender understanding. Thankfully, strides are being made, such as the UN listing several different gender options and the EU explicitly stating “non-binary” on legislation, but that doesn’t change the fact that if you are not familiar with the community, you would not understand what being non-binary means (Richards et al., 2016, p. 97). As Norton and Herek write, “people who cross over from one gender to another (or who cannot be easily categorized as men or women) evoke negative reactions because they violate the widespread assumption that sex and gender are “naturally” dichotomous” (2012). Until better media, science, and religious strides are made, we will still have a situation like in Lexington, where “two of these three areas of discourse were read as producing only one ‘truth’” (Callis, 2014). Where only the science backs up with how people feel, and the media and religious affiliations people feel isolate them from their true selves.

At the end of the day, people identify with how they feel inside. Whether that’s feeling like the wrong gender from childhood experiences or realizing later in life that gender does not suit an individual correctly, people identify the way they choose to. And putting a limit on that, creating a binary that people have to choose from, is extremely detrimental to an individual. Instead, having a spectrum, both in terms of gender and sexuality, allows for better expression of oneself, without all the stereotypes of being labeled as something that someone is not. Once we are put on a binary, we struggle to make our voices heard. We thrive on a spectrum.

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Disparities in Violence and Discrimination within the LGBT Community

JUDE NGUYEN

The experiences of marginalized individuals within the LGBT community often get overlooked: there is a disparity at which the transgender community faces violence, harassment, prejudice, and discrimination. This is particularly concerning when discussing the prevalence of violence and harassment against the transgender community. Within the LGBT community it is essential to acknowledge and address how intersectionality plays a part in systemic obstacles and oppression within and outside of the community.

To start, intersectionality as defined by Barker and Scheele in *“Queer: A Graphic History,”* as “the complex interaction between identities and unequal power relations that structure our experience in diverse - often contradictory - ways” (2016, p. 47). Intersectionality is the concept that as a people we hold multiple identities that more often than not intersect with each other. A person can hold multiple identities that intersect and, depending on the context, may express themselves in nuanced forms (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 47). For instance, a person of color who identifies as LGBT may face more difficulties, due to these intersecting identities, as opposed to a white person who identifies as LGBT. Ignoring intersectionality within the LGBT community would mean ignoring obstacles, harassment, and violence members of the LGBT community face because of their intersecting identities. A survey from the U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) found that one in six trans people have been fired from a job because of their gender identity. The same study found that one in four black respondents experienced the same situation (Branstetter, 2019). These two survey results show how intersecting identities can affect the disparity of violence or discrimination individuals within the LGBT community may face.

Transgender individuals as defined in *Gender Violence: Transgender Experiences with Violence and Discrimination* are “...people who do not follow traditional gender norms” (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2001-2002). The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) collected data about violence against transgender people in 1995 (Lombardi et al., 2001-2002), and what they found was objectively devastating: even though only two percent of the sample size was transgender people, 16 percent of transgender people were victims of murder. (Lombardi et al., 2001-2002). These numbers speak volumes. According to a survey from the National Center for Transgender Equality in 2015, one in 10 transgender people were physically attacked in that past year. In addition, the survey found that half of transgender people were survivors of sexual violence (Branstetter, 2019). Gillian Branstetter, the author of *“Anti-transgender Violence is Real,”* mentions that data concerning violence experienced by the transgender community is most likely under-reported due to faultiness in reporting by the police and media (2019).

The statistics concerning violence and discrimination against transgender people show a pervasive pattern within the LGBT community that must be addressed. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), anti-transgender motivated hate

crimes went up nine percent from the years 2016 to 2017 (Branstetter, 2019). Within the year of 2019, 28 transgender people have been murdered; of these, seventeen were Black transgender women (Branstetter, 2019). This is an example of how violence affects people with intersecting identities at a disparity from their counterparts with more “privileged” identities. These numbers show a disturbing trend of violence towards transgender people and towards Black people; victims of violence and hate crimes within the LGBT community are often people of color who identify as transgender (Branstetter, 2019). These numbers are pervasive enough to show an ongoing trend of discrimination and violence against marginalized groups within the LGBT community.

The NVCAP study showed that over their lifetime, over half of the people within the sample experienced some form of harassment or violence; a quarter experienced a violent incident (Lombardi et al., 2001-2002). About 14 percent of the sample reported being raped or having experienced someone attempt to rape them, and 21 percent of transgender people have experienced rape or experienced someone attempt to rape them. “Over their lifetimes, 19.4 percent of the sample reported being physically assaulted without a weapon, and 17.4 percent reported having objects thrown at them. Overall, close to half this sample (47 percent) was assaulted in some way in the course of their lives.” (Lombardi et al., 2001-2002). Statistics often get overlooked. However, it is important to remember that there are lives and individuals being affected. The statistics are not solely just numerical data; they are stories, they are faces, they are individuals with names.

Landon Callahan is a transgender student at Fitchburg State University. Landon Callahan has a multitude of experiences that involved discrimination. In high school, Landon began transitioning. His high school did not want him to use a gendered bathroom. Additionally, the high school would not change his name until it was legally changed, even though guidelines required them to change his name even prior to legally changing it. In his place of work, Landon has experienced being outed as transgender by a coworker, who then proceeded to threaten violence against him. Although this coworker quit, re-applied, and was denied re-hiring, there was not much done to protect Landon from discrimination at work. (L. Callahan, personal communication, October 2, 2019). The article *Gender Violence: Transgender Experiences with Violence and Discrimination* describes a correlation between transgender people who experience economic discrimination and increased rates of experiencing violence. “Working adults who disclose their transgendered experience, or request reasonable accommodation to it, are fired, harassed, intimidated or assaulted by supervisors and coworkers, have their privacy violated, have their property defaced and destroyed, or are murdered. Workplace discrimination is so rampant that it is the norm among transgendered people” (Lombardi et al., 2001-2002). Discrimination against transgender people within the work force or school settings is pervasive. Employment discrimination keeps many transgender people in a perpetual cycle of poverty and discrimination (Branstetter, 2019).

This opens a discussion about laws and policies created to support transgender students and individuals within the work force and out of the work force. Most recently, in June 2019, Tennessee and Indiana were considering discriminatory laws that would force transgender people to use the bathrooms based on the gender they were as-

signed at birth (Gale Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection, Gale, 2019). On the positive side, seventeen states have laws that ban employment discrimination based on gender identity (Taylor & Lewis, 2014). It is important to identify and acknowledge systemic obstacles and discriminatory policies in place that affect the transgender community and people of color within the transgender and LGBT community. Policies on the federal level do not document attacks based on gender identity or presentation, and there are currently very few cities that have actual policies that protect people from anti-transgender motivated hate crimes and discrimination (Lombardi et al., 2001-2002).

Transgender women, particularly transgender women of color, tend to get erased within the community when LGBT issues are discussed. If I were to ask the reader to name at least one of the victims of the seventeen Black transgender women who were murdered, I assume the reader would only be able to name one at most. From personal observation of the media, I do not hear the names of victims of anti-transgender and anti-person of color motivated crimes often. The first step in protecting marginalized groups within the LGBT community is to acknowledge that there is violence and discrimination that occur at a disparity.

It is important to recognize intersecting identities within the LGBT community while discussing LGBT topics. Transgender people and transgender people of color experience violence and discrimination at a disparity within the LGBT community (Branstetter, 2019). In order to put a stop to anti-transgender motivated and racist motivated violence and harassment, as a community we must first acknowledge the prevalence of such violence and harassment. The voices of marginalized groups within the LGBT community often get erased when discussing issues pertaining to the LGBT community; while addressing the obstacles the LGBT community faces, we must acknowledge the obstacles and high prevalence of discrimination that intersectional members of the LGBT face.

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A Sticky Note Worth More

CLAIRE COLLINS

I looked around, not knowing what to do or how to do it. My hands were trembling. Sticky notes: I saw them across the room on my desk in the corner. I thought I could write it down on a sticky note instead of saying it. The pen shook in my hand as I started writing on the paper, leaving little marks like chicken scratch before I could get the first letter down. The relief of even just writing it down felt good.

My plan was to put it under my parents' bedroom's door. My hand slipped on the knob of my bedroom door as I tried to turn it; they were still sweating. The door creaked open, and I hesitantly took a step out, knowing I still had to walk all the way downstairs. The staircase looked longer than usual. I heard something, so I ran back into my room and tried to calm down, giving myself a pep talk. "People do this all the time. It's nothing to worry about. Mom and Dad aren't going to be mad; they probably won't even care."

I took a step out of my room for the second time, this time feeling a little more confident. As I grabbed the railing, I started debating with myself. "Maybe I'll just do it at a different time. They don't have to know. What's the point in telling them?" My hand slid down the railing as I walked farther down. On the next step, I curled my toes on the stairs and took a deep breath. My heart was pounding. I felt like I just ran a marathon, but never crossed the finish line. I didn't want to reach it, but I knew I couldn't give up, so I didn't. Halfway down the stairs, I stopped.

Her arms rested on the dark oak table in front of me. The lights were dim around the four of us. My hands were in my lap and I picked at my hangnails nervously. The soft carpet that was beneath my feet made me feel a little more comfortable, but tension still filled the room we were sitting in. Family therapy was the subject. I hesitated but told my mom, "No." My sister nodded her head and agreed with me. We sat at that table for two hours. We argued for the majority of the time, which wasn't surprising.

The two hours at the table were long. I wanted to leave, wanting to not be there and just have everything work out. That night at the table dragged on. The longer and longer I was there, the more I realized I should've just told them in the moment. My mom explained how she wanted the family to get along and be able to talk to each other and thought family therapy would be the most helpful. I disagreed with her but understood that she wished that I would talk to her more. "Just talk to me," my mom had told me. My dad sat there silently, but by the look on his face, I could tell he had felt the same way. He had wanted my sister and me to build stronger relationships with them.

I couldn't walk back up the stairs. Being half way there would mean I would have to run the last few miles of that marathon; giving up halfway would be embarrassing. The yellow sticky note crumpled in my hand, I could feel the sweat from my hand

soaking into the paper, yet I continued to walk further down. At the last step, I turned to walk towards my parents' room but was caught off guard. "Hey," my dad said, coming out of the room.

"No way," I thought to myself. This couldn't be happening. There was absolutely no way I could turn around now. My plans were ruined. I saw him look at the yellow paper in my hand. He could tell it was something important. I wiped tears off my face but couldn't control it. I looked up at my dad, tears forming in his eyes.

Being emotional around my parents was uncomfortable for me. I always felt that crying was a sign of weakness and vulnerability, but I never really learned that it wasn't always a bad thing. Even when I was younger and scraped my knee on the sidewalk, I would hold in the tears. To me, crying was something I never wanted to do unless I was alone. I wanted to be strong and tough around my friends and family so they didn't see me as someone who couldn't control her emotions. My dad never cried in front of me, nor did my mom. Seeing the tears in my dad's eyes suddenly made me relieved. I felt comfortable. It's something about seeing a parent cry that makes me realize crying is inevitable, and vulnerability is impossible to hide.

He put his arms around me. It was one of the first times my dad and I had a real hug. Being in his arms felt like a dream. Everything faded; I couldn't remember where I was or what the yellow paper said. I felt safe. Maybe the hug was all we needed. A few minutes later, I pulled away. He wiped his face and I wiped mine. His eyes were puffy and red, but mine looked like I was stung by ten bees. I handed him the crumpled piece of paper from my sweaty hand.

As he opened it, my heart started beating again. With every unfold, more and more tears grew in my eyes. I didn't want him to open it, but at the same time I did. He had to. Finally, the last fold, one more until he would read it. My heart has never raced faster. I was so close to the finish line, two steps away. Two steps away from being relieved. When his thumb pulled back the last fold, automatically a smile spread across his face. He laughed. It was the finish line, that last step, my heart slowed down. I cried, but the crying turned into laughter. "Claire," he said while laughing and crying.

"I know, Dad," I responded, while laughing and wiping my face. He hugged me again, and everything felt right. We stood there hugging; nothing was on my mind; I just knew that that was the happiest I've ever been.

"When do we celebrate? Do you want a beer?" he said enthusiastically as he let go and smiled. I don't think I've ever seen him so happy. I started cracking up, as did he.

"What's going on?" my mom asked, surprised to see my dad crying. He handed her the note, and she smiled. Her reaction was delayed, but maybe she already knew. She was the one on the sidelines cheering me on, but maybe she wanted someone else to win the race. When she gave me a hug, it didn't feel the same as with my dad. It was more forced, maybe because my dad and I have always gotten along more than my mom and I have. As we stood in the hallway for ten minutes, my mom kept looking at me and smiling. Nothing could stop me from feeling like she was forcing it. I knew coming out to my parents would be a huge relief, but the only question I kept asking myself was: is she genuinely happy?

DRAWING: Glenda and Wendy, Study I

Materials: charcoal and graphite on paper

Artist: Bridie Wolejko

The artist recently graduated summa cum laude from Fitchburg State University with a B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies. She is now enrolled in FSU's Arts Education M.Ed. program with the goal of becoming a high school art teacher.



Part II
Critical Analysis of Contemporary Texts:
TV Series, Film, YA Books, and Songs

“Girls”: A Misguided Attempt at a Bisexual Anthem

ASHLEY GROUT

The author is a nursing major at Fitchburg State University who identifies as bisexual.

Rita Ora and the contributors to the song “Girls” claim that it is a bisexual anthem meant to make LGBTQ people feel included in the music community. However, this song was met with a lot of criticism from LGBT members within the music industry as well as from the general population who heard the lyrics, because it could be considered queer-baiting or fetishizing two women having a relationship.

The main issue with this song is the lyric: “Sometimes I just want to kiss girls, girls, girls/red wine, I just want to kiss girls.” Many prominent members of the LGBT community such as Hayley Kiyoko and Kehlani have called the song “harmful” because it uses the stereotypes that for women to enjoy kissing girls they have to be drunk and that women kiss other women to turn men on. Hearing the song for the first time over the summer of 2019, I was a little shocked; this was an anticipated single for the artist and when the lyrics were sung, it immediately put me off. I saw them as a harmful representation of a bisexual woman. Kiyoko (an openly out lesbian) tweeted:

Every so often there come certain songs with messaging that is just downright tone-deaf. A song like this just fuels the male gaze while marginalizing the idea of women loving women. I know this wasn’t the intention of the artists on the song, but it’s the lack of consideration behind these lyrics that really get me. I don’t need to drink wine to kiss girls; I’ve loved women my entire life.

The red wine is not the only stereotypical or controversial reference in the song. In another verse, the lyric “I could be your lipstick just for one night/ girls just want to have fun” insinuates that this is a one-time thing and they’re just doing it for fun. They also reference “lipstick,” which is a common stereotype in the lesbian community where women who dress more feminine are called “lipstick lesbians.” The use of these stereotypes only adds evidence to the argument that Ora’s song is most commonly appreciated by either experimenting straight women or to the straight men who fetishize the relationship between two women.

This song may also increase the stereotype that bisexual women are sluts because they prefer two genders, which is the opposite of the representation the community needs. It also portrays women as something that can be “tamed” in the following lyrics: “You know I tamed it, and then I named it... I put the lion in the cage... I’m the hunter and she’s the prey.” Women already struggle with being seen as inferior to men, which leads to the belief that they can be “conquered;” the vocabulary used in this song only supports that idea.

In terms of Ora's character, she has refuted claims that she was queer baiting with this song and has come as far to say that this song was her "coming out song." As someone that is in the LGBT community, I wouldn't want to send the message she sends in this song to the people I was trying to come out to. Ora portrays relationships between two women as experiments that happen only one time when they are drunk. When trying to see Ora's song in a more complex light, I see how she may consider this a coming out song because of the first couple of lines, "I ain't one-sided, I'm open-minded/ I'm fifty-fifty and I'm never going to hide it." In these lines Ora comes out to her audience as a bisexual female in the music industry.

It's important to understand that the intention of the song was to make bisexual men and women feel like they have more representation in the music industry, as most songs that come out focus on relationships between men and women. In that regard, this piece of music can be seen as progressive, but with the use of stereotypes it really takes that part away for more listeners and shows that many people in the industry have no idea what the average member of the LGBTQ community has to do to overcome the very stereotypes she references in her songs. When people try to come out they are often told that this is "just a phase," and it is harmful to the person coming out; they are trying to figure themselves out just as much as the person they are telling, and this lyric only helps to belittle the sexual identities of bisexual women.

Overall, this song is harmful to the LGBTQ community. For someone listening who knows little to nothing about the community, this song does not portray it in a way that I personally would like to be seen. The idea of being tamed by someone bothers several listeners, and the idea that two women having a relationship must be the result of a drunken night doesn't sit well with many bisexual and lesbian listeners.

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Mixed Messages in “Girls Like Girls”

MCKENNA LEONARD

The song *Girls like Girls*, by Hailey Kiyoko, is a disturbing music video that shows the dangers of coming out and entering into a same sex relationship, specifically as females. The songwriter herself was aware that she liked girls as early as six years old and was constantly placed in situations where she felt she had to hide her sexuality. Hailey explained that before she was a solo artist, she was in a singing girl group and was supposed to sell an image of sex. This was uncomfortable for her and until her solo career she felt she had to do it. This is just one example of pressuring people to conform to heteronormativity.

In the beginning of the video, we see the character Coley riding a bike, looking traumatized with cuts and bruises across the entire left side of her face. The song and music video depict Coley’s character as a young girl who is attracted to another girl, Sonya. Sonya has a boyfriend named Trenton, and as the video continues, the girls slowly pursue one another in a relationship. However, when both girls kiss by the pool, Trenton pulls Coley away from Sonya and throws Coley into a rock, which cuts up her face. Trenton then proceeds to scream in Sonya’s face saying, “Look at me, not her. How dare you do this to me?!” Coley’s character then physically assaults Trenton, and the two girls embrace each other. The final scene of the music video cuts back to the beginning where Coley is biking, and she smiles, despite the cuts and bruises to her face.

Sonya’s character changes the course of the storyline in the music video when she decides to pursue the relationship with Coley. Sonya undergoes a significant life change when she decides to kiss Coley by the pool. The outcome is unfortunately predictable when Trenton throws Coley into a rock and yells at Sonya for embarrassing him. For people in the LGBT community, it is not uncommon to be victims of ridicule and violence. This is unfortunately a reoccurring theme for people inside the community and a piece of it was displayed in this music video *Girls like Girls*.

Stereotypes abound in this video. When Sonya kisses Coley, it brings up a stereotype that it is extremely embarrassing for a man to lose his girlfriend to another woman. Women are perceived as weak, and the relationship between both girls delivers a hard hit to Trenton’s pride and masculinity. Trenton’s character maintains a static personality throughout the video. His character shows possessive qualities over Sonya, and the moment the two girls kiss, he becomes extremely violent. People in the LGBT community are disproportionately targets of violence, and it is a strong reason why so many people are afraid to come out. Members of the community face ridicule and witness violence all too often, and the violent scene in the music video shows a small part of reality.

A second stereotype in the video is portrayed through the girls’ clothing. Sonya’s character is dressed in a plain T-shirt and a flannel wrapped around her waist. The clothing style could bring up the stereotype that “lesbians dress like boys.” The clothing is not particularly masculine; however, there is not a strong message of femininity through the clothing choices of either girl. A third stereotype portrayed in the music

video is that “all lesbians hate men.” In this video when Coley’s character is hurt by Trenton and ultimately beats him up, it shows support to this stereotype. Coley disregards Trenton from the beginning of the video, and even though it is because she wants to date Sonya, it reinforces this stereotype.

Through the course of the song there are a few lyrical references normalizing same sex relationships. There’s one line in particular that appears eight times throughout the song and it is: “Girls like girls like boys do, nothing new.” This recurring lyric removes the confusion about same sex relationships; girls like girls the same way girls like boys. This is not a new concept. Individuals in heterosexual relationships may not understand the attraction of two men or two women to one another. However, this lyric explains that a same sex relationship has the same level of attraction as that of a heterosexual relationship.

Another lyric in the song removes the stereotype of same sex relationships as being a phase. There are a lot of stereotypes that everyone has a gay phase, an experimental time in their life just to try it out. This is especially true for girls, and it is almost expected now. The lyric is: “Don’t tell me, tell me what I feel, I’m real and I don’t feel like boys.” This lyric is confirmation that the attraction between both girls in this music video is not a phase, and it is a genuine attraction. There is a stigma that girls being in a relationship is attractive to men and that all girls experiment at some point in their lives. Men are not a part of this stereotype; if men are in a same sex relationship, they are just in a relationship. The stigma has more of a connection to women potentially, because the relationship between two women appeals to the heterosexual, masculine man. The songwriter, Hailey Kiyoko, even revealed that her parents believed when she was growing up that her attraction to girls was just a phase. She knew she was attracted to girls from the age of six and began to embrace her sexuality when she released this song, *Girls like Girls* in 2015; she was 24 years old.

The music video brings up awareness about people in the LGBT community and shines a light on the potential for violence. The video also addresses the fear of coming out as a lesbian and shows the risk in doing so. In this video, both girls show hesitancy about coming out, and I believe that people who watch the video will see the hesitation throughout most of the video. The end of the music video is refreshing, because it ends on a positive light. I hope that people who watch the music video and listen to the song will realize that same sex couples are as typical as relationships between a man and a woman.

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The Spanish Drama “Elite” and its Mixed Representations of Homosexual Love on Screen

ALYSSA MACKINNON

A fairly recent Netflix show has become highly inclusive of its LGBTQ viewers, although there are still some valid points as to why people could be left scratching their heads. After premiering in October 2018, the two seasons of the television hit *Elite* has gained immense traction. It was originally produced in Spanish, but has been voiced over in English for Netflix. The show has rumored to be in the making of a third season as it follows a group of Spanish teenagers who are classmates at a top-notch private school in Spain, but also find themselves caught up in the intense murder investigation of a dear friend who had plenty of secrets herself.

Elite proved to be a very engaging and enticing show, as depicted from its trailer; however, the beginning of the series illustrates a stereotypical view of LGBTQ romance. The character of Ander Munoz, played by Aron Piper, is the focal point of the show in this regard. For example, there is a moment between him and his love interest Omar that especially feels too predictable in its depiction of homosexuality. The couple meets in secret, outside at the entrance of some glamorous event. There's also the representation of the two initially meeting and conversing online over a dating app, which also plays into the idea of secrecy. This minor detail adds danger to the mood as well, which can be seen as a tool to further the stereotypical notion that non-heterosexual relationships are something you shouldn't partake in. Rather than embracing each other in the open, Ander and Omar sneak back inside, only to run to a secluded and darkly lit corner of the house. As this scene continues, the element of privacy becomes a huge and apparent motive for the show's scriptwriting process. Privacy for gay characters is widely seen within films and television shows, and in this way, *Elite* becomes another example. Furthermore, the underlying aspect affection is not shown, almost as if the writers want to avoid the idea altogether, but are showing it just for the thrill factor. For example, the scene in which they run away from cameras, darting in and out of room not to be seen, conveys an overwhelming sense that their love cannot be public and therefore, must stay consistently hidden— whether behind a bathroom door, a wall or in the rare corner of a mansion. The series holds other examples of similar stereotyping, one of which I'll explain further.

With our attention still drawn to Ander, the audience witnesses a sadder moment of his in connection to another character named Guzman, played by Miguel Bernardeau. In the locker room of their school, Guzman finds Ander aggressively banging on the walls and slamming lockers and decides to intervene. He grabs his waist and sits him down on the bench to talk it through, but Ander breaks down and sobs on his shoulder, and Guzman hugs him. The reason for this second piece of stereotypical evidence is how in most television shows or movies, we see a gay character break down emotionally when confronted, as if they're unable to hold back their emotions. He or she may be viewed as vulnerable or weak because of this reaction, and although the writers of *Elite* remain respectful, there is a slight discomfort in how most characters

are involved in such a scene. In this way, the gesture between Ander and Guzman is unsettling, but nonetheless a touching moment.

The creators of *Elite* do incorporate elements that are not stereotypical and therefore appreciated. Throughout its first season, *Elite* is very open with the idea of non-heterosexual love when it comes to explicitly affectionate or sexual scenes. In most television and film, audiences can feel the writers tiptoeing around the idea of gay love and therefore coaxing the actors in a certain direction, which can be seen as either subtle or incomplete, especially when compared to depictions of heterosexual sexuality. In contrast, Netflix's *Elite* shows gay relationships as they would any other relationship – sexual experiences included. There is a moment between three different characters that immediately held my attention for one reason: a division of power. Within the show, we're offered a few scenes that directly involve the parents of certain characters, and in this example we meet the parents of Carla Caleruega, her boyfriend Polo, and Christian Exposito. Their kids, unbeknownst to them, have been participating in a polygamous relationship with one another. In one particular scene, however, the teens instinctively draw a line between who has the overall power. It is a frame in the storyline that instantly shifts the tone. They run off, abruptly leaving the party their parents are hosting. Before totally disappearing from view, Carla turns around and gives the finger, followed by the two male characters sharing a passionate kiss. At that moment, they gain all the power and exude an attitude of not caring – a sort of rebellious teen romance. This dynamic between parent and child embodies the weight of Carla's, Polo's and Christian's decision to openly remain lovers.

Apart from the issue of power itself, this scene brings up more questions about each member of the trio's individual sexuality. Carla and Polo began a heterosexual relationship before ever meeting Christian. When Carla eventually meets Christian, it is Polo who initiates their sexual affair. We later learn that having a third party within the relationship is Polo's guilty pleasure, and the more Christian is involved, the more Polo agrees to continue his role in the relationship with Carla. At this point in the storyline, in which we're given the previous scene, Christian's decision appears to be permanent. The relationship is no longer strictly heterosexual, and therefore we can develop questions about each person as what this means going further into the season. Is Polo bisexual, considering he's the one who urges Carla in the first place? Is Carla bisexual, or does she agree only for the excitement of having another partner? Is Christian bisexual, or is his part in the relationship for fun and games as well? Lastly, has this polygamous relationship become their new stand on life, and how will the idea of multiple lovers unfold?

This series shows many layers to LGBTQ relationships. Not knowing what the second season holds, and potentially the third either, I can only make initial observations. However, from what I've regarded as important throughout the series, it is clear that Netflix's new phenomenon *Elite* has elements that are both positive and negative, provoking and needing more perspective.

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Looking through Queer Eyes

SAMANTHA RAMSDEN

At first glance *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* may seem like another flashy makeover show run by five gay men. At the beginning of the show the cast, also known as the Fab Five, swoop in and start to help often times a “helpless straight man.” They make jokes about his closet, his personal grooming and hygiene, house, etc., and address where he needs to start making changes in his life. By the end of the episode, the once helpless straight man is now a transformed individual, and everyone leaves happy. Although this material makes for a very entertaining and enjoyable experience, *Queer Eye* takes the show another step forward and focuses around a main theme that what brings people together is far greater than what drives us apart. Each episode explores into deep controversial social topics including religious, cultural, racial, and other social barriers seen in the United States today. The Fab Five are all about focusing on self-love, self-care, and being in touch with their emotions. Throughout the episodes they work through conflicts with jokes and even talking about their feelings. Both the Fab Five and the men they are helping more often than not start with a stereotype or bias and leave with new thoughts and ideas by the end of the week or the end of the episode.

In season two episode one titled “God bless Gay,” the Fab Five set off to Gay, Georgia, a small town with a population of 89 people, to help a woman named Miss Tammye and her son Myles. Tammye is a giving, caring woman who is very involved with her church and community. At the beginning of the episode, the Fab Five get a tour of the church community center; however, Bobby, the home design guru, refuses to go into the building. Bobby grew up in a tight religious community and feels very conflicted with facing his past. “I don’t like being involved with the church, because there is so much hate with the gays and fights against our, just, basic rights that I have a hard time making peace with it.” Teary-eyed Bobby explains the pain he has endured in his life with the church, and the Fab Five are there to comfort him.

Later in the episode, Miss Tammye tells the Fab Five about her son Myles, who has just moved back home. Myles also shared his story of being gay and growing up in the church. At 14 years old, he came out to his mother, who refused to accept him because of her faith. He moved away to a big city but felt like he lost himself. He missed his family, going to church and singing in the choir, so he moved back with his mom. He stopped taking care of himself, his room, and had no social life, because the closest gay guy he could find was at least 20 miles away.

The Fab Five band together to help Myles find himself again. They cut his hair, redesign his room, and he even gets a nice suit for the homecoming event led by the church. Karamo then takes Myles to a lesbian and gay choir, where Myles auditions and makes it into the choir. Karamo and Myles have a really meaningful talk about being yourself “Part of, like, when you’re not feeling the best is also reflected in other areas...”

At the end of the episode Miss Tammye gives a speech in the new community center made by the Fab Five. “This week, we worked for the Fab Five. They put their whole hearts into the community center. These are five gifted men who are gay. And

through the course of a week we were able to build some relationships. They shared with me how they have been torn down and rejected, and the church has turned their back on them. This has been a life changing week for me. He (God) knew you guys would end up together, you continue to let God use you..."

The Fab Five take time to reflect on their week and what they learned. Bobby even feels a sense of healing from his past traumas with the church and is ready to start to move on. By the end of the episode, it is almost impossible not to be teary eyed, especially when Miss Tammye talks about her son. "You can't antagonize and evangelize at the same time." That is what *Queer Eye* is truly about, the spiritual and physical transitions everyone goes through. Who would've thought that one of the most meaningful episodes would be found in a small town called Gay?

As mentioned previously, *Queer Eye* reveals personal biases and stereotypes each person carries with them. They then test these preconceived ideas by placing a diverse set of people in situations we rarely would place ourselves in. The Fab Five use their platform to educate mass audiences who would be unexposed otherwise. They take their own ignorance and use it as a fuel to educate, not only themselves, but others as well. Even the cast of the Fab Five act as a way to defeat stereotypes about gay men. They have a diverse cast, ranging from a flamboyant hair stylist, to a coy Muslim fashion stylist, to a strong outspoken black man, and even a southern white man. They talk about their different backgrounds and their current lives. Although there was an original *Queer Eye* released in the early 2000s, this *Queer Eye* provides viewers a chance to listen to many different voices. For example, in the episode in the town of Gay where there is only a population of 89, when Miss Tammye's best friend Gene is asked if there are any Muslims in the town, says, "I'm pretty sure we are thin on gays and Muslims."

Not only does *Queer Eye* inspire people to talk and think about their social views, it also encourages viewers to look into themselves and make change through self-care. Some lessons that can be taken away are: you are never too old to make a change, you can love yourself as fuel to help make change, it takes time to make these changes, and lastly working on yourself also helps the people around you. *Queer Eye* has helped me through the roughest times in my life, and I can only imagine the amount of viewers (gay or straight) who also feel the same way. *Queer Eye* the reboot came to us in a time where political and social divide is so fierce, a time where having conversations with people who have different views seemed almost pointless. However, *Queer Eye* shows the importance of not only having these conversations, but listening and understanding as well. Whether it's a Trump-voting straight man, a closeted college Muslim student, or a church-going southern Black woman, *Queer Eye* teaches us to connect with the most important identity: we are all human beings.

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Angels in America by Tony Kushner: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes

BRETT ROCHFORD

During the height of the AIDS epidemic, many works of literature and film emerged to bring attention to the crisis. These works, centered on finding a cure, fighting discrimination, and political neglect, granted audiences an inside look at the devastating effects of the virus and its impact on the gay community. Here, the epidemic was central to the plot and acted a driving force. These works failed to humanize queer people beyond their illness. They lacked characters with complexity and texture. Identities were defined by their illness and physical suffering. This is not the case in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, a brilliant expression of the complex and humanizing qualities of queer people and their place in America.

The early 1990s saw the birth of Kushner's epic two-part play, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. Unlike other works, Kushner uses the AIDS epidemic to shed light on problems America faces as a whole. His use of fantasy shows how the epidemic is a mere symptom of the problems plaguing America. Social insecurities, immorality, racism, and homophobia. Like those infected with the virus, America is sick and dying. His play was the first to look beyond the immediate panic of the epidemic, and into the lives of queer people living in a politically immoral country. Rather than play an antagonizing role, the virus serves as a catalyst, a foundation for the development of his rich and complex characters. Kushner forces audiences to see what is wrong with America and the political barriers keeping queer people in the minority.

Kushner's characters are unconventional, flawed, and human. Their identities are sourced from their values and morality. Adherence to their moral or immoral identities is what damages their relationships and causes personal conflict. These characters have strict ideas of their place in the world and are committed to maintaining or achieving their position. Most are unaware of the effect this has on themselves and others. In many cases their actions contradict their beliefs and reveal their flaws. Through the immoral actions of others, many characters are left to question their beliefs and see their own flaws. These characters acknowledge their mistakes and seek forgiveness. In doing so, they still maintain an independent identity. They forgive but do not forget. Those who forgive repair their relationships, and those who do not are left broken and alone.

When diagnosed with AIDS, Prior expects support from his longtime partner Louis.

Despite his love, Louis fears Prior's declining health and inevitable death. Incapable of dealing with this apprehension, he leaves. Seemingly heartless and cruel, Louis is trying to maintain his own values and identity. When talking to Rabi Isidor, Louis explains that philosophically, Prior's illness threatens his "Neo- Hegelian" views. His philosophy is that being true to his values and place in world is the key to "happiness, perfection, and moving up hill" (Kushner, 2013). He later confesses to Prior, "I have to save myself" (Kushner, 2013). This staunch value system is a direct reflection of the troubled political system threatening America and a marginalized the queer

community. Kushner presents a Reagan-istic view that “selfishness is a righteous quality” (Kushner, 2013). In Louis’s view, his own self-preservation is of greater importance than is support for his lover. Louis’s values system based on political ideology is what keeps him from committing to Prior. He is so concerned with maintaining his own identity that he fails to address the hurt he is causing others. Belize brings this to his attention, stating, “up in the air, too far off the ground to pick out the details. Louis and his big ideas. Big ideas are all you love” (Kushner, 2013). Louis fails to see how his ideological rationale is the source of his guilt for leaving Prior.

Belize suggests that Louis misunderstands the nature of love. Louis claims that “love is never ambivalent” (Kushner, 2013). Belize explains, “democracy is simple, justice is simple, those are un-ambivalent.... love is hard” (Kushner, 2013). Love is not as cut and dried as the ideologies Lewis lives by. Until he can relinquish part of his values, he will continue to feel guilty for leaving Prior. He understands what he must do but does not act on it. Louis compares himself to biblical characters “who in betraying what they love betray what’s truest in themselves” (Kushner, 2013). This biblical comparison shows how Prior’s abandonment contradicts his supposed value, devotion. He must accept the challenges love presents. It takes this realization and the actions of others for Louis to see his flaws.

These flaws become apparent to Lewis in his relationship with Joe, the lover he takes after leaving Prior. Like Louis, Joe is committed to maintaining his values and identity. Unlike Louis, Joe’s identity is nearly an artifice concealing a mix of contradicting values. On the surface, Joe is the embodiment of morality. He is a devout Mormon, married, and committed to his work as a law clerk. But, he is secretly gay. Kushner paints a sympathetic portrait of Joe: a man trapped by the pressures of a homophobic society, obligated to uphold his morality. Despite this, Joe’s character becomes callous, as he ascribes to a system that exacerbates his insecurities. He values his constricting faith and supports the Republican administration, an administration that inflicts injustice and suppresses the progress of the gay community.

Despite accepting his sexuality, Joe still maintains negative values. His inability to see his own contradictory values leads to his own unhappiness. Joe acknowledges his sexuality but will not let it define him. He is unwilling to release the identity he has established, no matter how much it makes him suffer. He says to Harper, “no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have to kill it...there is nothing left, I’m a shell. There is nothing left to kill” (Kushner, 2013).

Joe defends his morality, saying, “As long as my behavior is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. In the eyes of God” (Kushner, 2013). Joe’s commitment to his values is contradicted by his actions. He begins a gay relationship with Louis and is involved in immoral and corrupt court dealings. Kushner’s sympathetic portrayal of Joe changes when Louis becomes aware of his immoral anti-gay court dealings and association with Roy Cohn, a highly corrupt lawyer. Joe’s actions defy Louis’s beliefs. Seeing Joe’s flaws pushes him to see the harm he himself caused by abandoning Prior. His values are changed by Joe’s actions and Belize’s insight. He comes to realize he must seek forgiveness from Prior.

Forgiveness is possible in the most unexpected people. Kushner makes this clear by forgiving Roy Cohn. Roy was never able to see the flaws in his values. He was

corrupt and committed horrendous acts toward others. Despite this, Roy is granted forgiveness. He doesn't deserve it, nor does he seek it. His forgiveness is granted out of sympathy for his inability to change and his suppressed sexuality. Upon Roy's death, Belize calls Louis to perform the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. Here again we see Belize calling out Louis's troubled ideals. Belize says:

He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe... a queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing.
Forgiveness. Which is maybe where and love and justice finally meet. Peace at last. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?
(Kushner, 2013).

Here, Belize calls Louis to question his ideals of justice and love, two ideologies that burden him. Louis is forced to take pity on Roy and forgive the horrendous values that shaped his character. In doing so, Louis can see his own flawed values and selfishness in abandoning Prior. More importantly, Kushner uses this event to show how even the worst human beings are capable of being forgiven. Louis's delivery of the Kaddish is spiritually assisted by the presence of Ethel Rosenberg, a woman who was sentenced to death because of Roy. She magically appears throughout the play to bring Roy's morals into question. Shortly before Roy's death, she says: "I came to forgive, but all I can do is take pleasure in your misery" (Kushner, 2013). She is resentful and full of hate. However, her assistance in Louis's delivery of the Kaddish says otherwise.

Though she doesn't say it, her actions suggest she does take pity on Roy and grants him forgiveness, despite his monstrous ideology and character. As said by Belize, forgiveness is the hardest thing, but can grant us peace. This hints at Kushner's suggestion of a more progressive, inclusive America.

Louis admits his selfish ego-centric mistake in abandoning Prior in his hour of need.

Louis professes: "Prior. I want to come back to you" (Kushner, 2013). Prior does forgive him, but on his own terms. They will not be partners. Louis has left Prior emotionally devastated and Prior will not forget that. Yet, he appreciates Louis's love and the relationship they once had. He will not disregard that. Prior says "I love you Louis, I really do...but you can't come back, not ever" (Kushner, 2013). The resolution between Prior and Louis shows the unconventionalality of Kushner's characters. They still maintain a sense of self while accepting or granting forgiveness. They maintain part of their identity and do not go back to where they once were. Those who don't, like Roy and Joe, are destined for unhappiness and personal demise. Despite the deplorable acts people commit, they are still capable of being granted forgiveness.

Kushner's play is multifaceted. It is not a piece of propaganda for the AIDS crisis, but an intimate look at the relationships of people living within it. The virus serves as the physical manifestation of a broken America that is in need of change. Like those suffering from the virus, America needs care and attention, or death is inevitable. Characters' internal struggles exemplify the problems America faces and the margin-

alization of queer people. Like the characters in this story, America must see its flaws and learn from its immoral past. Progress is possible, but it takes awareness, change, and action. Prior says it well:

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. *More life*. The great work begins (Kushner, 2013).

Despite the emotional pain and suffering presented in his play, Kushner leaves us with hope for the future. Harper reflects on this idea saying, "nothing is lost forever. In this world there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we left behind, and dreaming ahead" (Kushner, 2013). Problems can be resolved, people can change, and forgiveness can be granted. Progress is a difficult battle, and suffering is inevitable. Learning from the past can guide our future. This is a positive message not only for queer people, but for humanity as a whole. Everyone is special, everyone deserves love, and sometimes it takes a pain and suffering to become aware of that.

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“Loving Annabelle”: A Captivating, Forbidden Love Story in Film

MELONY ELLIS

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Loving Annabelle is a captivating, forbidden love story that pulls your heart in a separate direction than your morals. A controversial love between a student and a teacher is unfolded throughout the emotional story of a senator’s daughter, Anabelle Tillman (in her senior year of high school), forced to go to Catholic boarding school where she falls in love with her poetry professor, Simone Bradley. Kathrine Brooks, the writer and director of *Loving Annabelle*, illustrates an endless connection formed between Anabelle and Simone in such an exquisite way, it makes you sit and question to yourself: why? Why am I so drawn to the relationship I would normally be so against? When reading the storyline, I immediately assumed the relationship must be immoral and predatory. Yet, seeing the relationship unravel throughout the movie, I realized it was anything but that. It’s executed beautifully and kindly. It brings the viewer into the story to sympathize with the characters and makes them realize their feelings are from a place of true blamelessness.

Nevertheless, *Loving Annabelle* is not an original storyline, but a product of inspiration. Kathrine Brooks came across the movie *Maedchen in Uniform*, a 1931 German film, when wandering about a movie store featuring foreign films. *Maedchen in Uniform* is about a teenage girl, Manuela, who was sent to boarding school after the passing of her mother. As Manuela grieves and closes herself off from her classmates, she is drawn out of her shell by her stunning teacher, Elizabeth von Bernburg. Quickly, her liking for Elizabeth turned into a romantic attachment, becoming a school scandal. The movie is said to be the first lesbian movie ever made.

In 1958, the remake of *Maedchen in Uniform* came out. The movie was very close to the original plot, yet was far more expressive. Despite the movie being about lesbianism, it was less about sexuality and more about an internal need for a woman to be connected to another woman, in a nurturing sense. When Kathrine Brooks stumbled upon the movie, she was merely 18 years old. She fell in love with the story. Immediately, Brooks knew she wanted to produce her own contemporary version of the story. The difference was that Brooks wanted to dive deeper into the sexual identity aspect and capture the sexualized part of the story; thus, *Loving Annabelle* was written over the next seven years.

Some characters are stereotypical characters and others are very well rounded and complex. The most stereotypical characters in the film are in the high school peer group. Cat, a mean girl, takes her anger out on others; Colin, the quiet girl, is super sweet but keeps to herself, and is the victim of Cat’s bullying; and Kristin, the bubbly, somewhat ditzzy girl, is just happy-go-lucky and could care less. Lastly, the headmaster, Mother Immaculata, is a die hard, uptight, single-minded Catholic in charge of all the girls at the school and is somewhat power hungry.

These character dynamics make an appearance in almost every movie or television show placed in a high school setting. I've seen it in the shows "Gilmore Girls," "Glee," and the movie "Mean Girls." But despite the characters in *Loving Annabelle* being stereotypical, the life problems they had gave them so much more depth and complexity. Cat comes from a broken home, where her father is in jail, and she has a drug problem that her father enables. Colin struggles with self-harm. While it wasn't kept in the movie, Kristen's character was written to have a daughter that her parents refuse to let her see, and raised her daughter to think Kristen was her older sister. And Mother Immaculata had a drinking problem. They're very real-world problems, which make the characters feel more real than not.

Annabelle and Simone's characters are very round and complex, as they are the most important characters of the story. Despite Annabelle being the problem student that refused to conform to the school and Simone being the teacher, their characters are very authentic and raw. Annabelle may be rebellious, but she is years far more mature than her peers, and Simone is very sweet and soft spoken, presenting two very different personalities than you would expect to see in these roles.

Normally, you would think a teacher being involved with a student would make the teacher manipulative and the student naive, but that couldn't be further from the truth in this story. While I don't view the story as predatory, Annabelle (the student) is definitely the aggressor, while Simone (the teacher) is constantly trying to distance herself from Annabelle, and even asking to have Annabelle be moved to a different dormitory. However, she is not successful, and obligations of her job push her to become closer to Annabelle as Mother Immaculata delegates the responsibility of getting Annabelle under control to Simone, despite her wishes not to take it on. Annabelle takes this as an opportunity to pursue Simone even further, and it is not before long that Simone feels herself pulling towards Annabelle. Nevertheless, the relationship is not solely sexualized: the two form a strong connection and friendship throughout the entire story.

One of the things that connect Annabelle to Simone is Annabelle's Buddhist prayer beads worn around her neck when she arrives at the school, which is against school policy. Simone constantly persuades Annabelle to take the beads off in order to protect Annabelle from the wrath of Mother Immaculata, as Simone knows it all too well. It is uncovered that Mother Immaculata is Simone's aunt, and Simone has attended the same Catholic boarding school since she was 13 years old. During Simone's time at the school as a student, she fell in love with her classmate Amanda, who became the love of her life. She and Amanda left the school for many years before Simone returns to teach after Amanda dies. When Annabelle reveals that the beads belong to the first woman (person) with whom she ever fell in love, it is a significant moment that connects Annabelle to Simone, as Simone always wears a cross around her neck that belonged to Amanda.

Since the beads represent a different religion, Mother Immaculata demands Annabelle take the beads off. When she does not comply, Mother Immaculata forces Annabelle to wear a giant beaded cross necklace around her neck and for every day Annabelle refuses to take the beads off, an additional cross was added. Mother Immaculata states: "I think it will let you realize how heavy a burden denying Christ can be." This line speaks volumes, as there is a very strong sense throughout the movie

that one must conform to Catholicism, despite not wanting to. Sadly, throughout the story you see the dreadful impact that burden leaves.

The two things that hang around their necks are symbolic of religion but also love. At the end of the movie, when Annabelle and Simone are ripped away from one another, Annabelle races to give Simone her Buddhist prayer beads as Simone is escorted off the school grounds. This scene in the movie exhibits multiple possible symbolic messages. Annabelle is sending a message to Simone that she loves her, as those beads had been given to Annabelle by the first woman she loved, and she then passes them along to Simone. Also, the necklace represents Simone breaking away from Catholicism as she breaks away from the Catholic school, latching onto the Buddhist beads themselves.

The story does indulge in some of the common tropes, such as the lesbian being sent away to a Catholic school for reform and the student becoming involved with her teacher. And while the story is influenced by certain tropes and storylines, that can be seen in similar pieces, the movie's specific combination makes for a unique and individualized LGBTQ+ viewing experience. It challenges the viewer's morals and preconceived thoughts.

As I watched the movie, I wondered, if the relationship was between a man and a woman, would I feel differently? The answer is 100 percent, yes. And I don't know what makes it different. I don't know why it sits easier with me that the characters are two women instead of a man and a woman, because they are still a student and a teacher. Yet, I think it is easier with most viewers, because if the relationship was between a man and woman, it would be far less acceptable and I don't believe the movie plot would have flown with the viewers.

The movie *Loving Annabelle* is a very complex movie, and I highly recommend people to watch this movie and really think about the issues that arise, such as the impact that being forced to conform to a religion can have on one's mental health, and the fear it can create on being true to one's self. I would like to leave you with a line quoted within the film. While it may not make sense just by what I have written, I ask you to watch "Loving Annabelle", bring yourself into the story, as it will.

"The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes" – Marcel Proust

-Loving Annabelle

WORK CITED

Divine Light Pictures (Producer), & K. Brooks (Director). (2006). *Loving Annabelle* [Motion picture]. New Almaden, CA: Wolfe Video.

DRAWING: Glenda and Wendy, Study II

Materials: charcoal and graphite on paper

Artist: Bridie Wolejko

The artist recently graduated summa cum laude from Fitchburg State University with a B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies. She is now enrolled in FSU's Arts Education M.Ed. program with the goal of becoming a high school art teacher.



Part III
Critical Analysis of Literature:
Poems and Novels

Because It's Summer

you ride your bike to the park bruised
with 9pm the maples draped with plastic bags
shredded from days the cornfield
freshly razed & you've lied
about where you're going your supposed
to be out with a woman you can't find
a name for but he's waiting
in the baseball field behind the dugout
flecked with newports torn condoms
he's waiting with sticky palms & mint
on his breath a cheap haircut
& his sister's levis
stench of piss rising from wet grass
it's june after all & you're young
until september he looks different
from his picture but it doesn't matter
because you kissed your mother
on the cheek before coming
this far because the fly's dark slit is enough
to speak through the zipper a thin scream
where you plant your mouth
to hear the sound of birds
hitting water snap of elastic
waistbands four hands quickening
into dozens: a swarm of want you wear
like a bridal veil but you don't
deserve it: the boy
& his loneliness the boy who finds you
Beautiful only because you're not
a mirror because you don't have
enough faces to abandon you've come
this far to be no one & it's june
until morning you're young until a pop song
plays in a dead kid's room water spilling in
from every corner of summer & you want
to tell him *it's okay* that the night is also a grave
we climb out of but he's already fixing
his collar the cornfield a cruelty steaming
with manure you smear your neck with
lipstick you dress with shaky hands
you say *thank you thank you thank you*
because you haven't learned the purpose
of *forgive me* because that's what you say
when a stranger steps out of summer
& offers you another hour to live.

Ocean Vuong, "Because It's Summer"
from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.
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Secrets in “Because It’s Summer”

ASHLEY GROUT

The author is a nursing major at Fitchburg State University who identifies as bisexual.

In “Because It’s Summer” by Ocean Vuong, the speaker hides his sexuality from the world outside of himself, the boys he sleeps with, and in a way, from himself. “You’ve lied / about where you’re going you’re supposed / to be out with a woman” clarifies that this is not sneaking off for an affair, it is sneaking off to avoid people knowing the character is attracted to men. The speaker does not really care who this boy is, what he looks like or what he is like; it is clear that this is just two guys getting together secretly: “behind the dugout / flecked with newports torn condoms/ he’s waiting with sticky palms & mint/ on his breath a cheap haircut / and his sister’s levis.” The fact that they had to meet behind a dugout shows that what they are doing is not accepted by the speaker’s family. The line “he looks different / from his picture but it doesn’t matter / because you kissed your mother on the cheek before coming / this far” implies that maybe the speaker is worrying about disappointing his mother the most, or maybe that he is just afraid of being caught in his lies.

The fact that the speaker does not mind that the boy/man he is meeting with secretly looks different than what was advertised shows that he could be desperate for touch, even if it is from someone who does not care for him. The line, “a swarm of want / you wear like a bridal veil but you don’t / deserve it” leads the reader to think that the speaker does not find himself to be worthy of love or worthy of feeling wanted.

The speaker seems very depressed throughout the whole poem, speaking of death and how this encounter with a random man “offers [him] another hour to live.” The poem ending leads the reader to believe that sexuality is a difficult thing for not just his family to accept, but also that he himself is not able to come to terms with it. He may not hate that he likes men, but he does not want to embrace it either.

He continuously references that this relationship is only okay because it is summer, and he is too young to be held accountable for these encounters. The end of summer is the end of his childhood and the end of this excuse he has been using to justify his actions.

WORK CITED

Vuong, O. (2016). *Night sky with exit wounds*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.

Devotion

Instead, the year begins
with my knees
scraping hardwood,
another man leaving
into my throat. Fresh snow
crackling on the window,
each flake a letter
from an alphabet
I've shut out for good.
Because the difference
between prayer & mercy
is how you move
the tongue. I press mine
to the navel's familiar
whorl, molasses threads
descending toward
devotion. & there's nothing
more holy than holding
a man's heartbeat between
your teeth, sharpened
with too much
air. This mouth the last
entry into January, silenced
with fresh snow crackling
on the window.
& so what—if my feathers
are burning. I
never asked for flight.
Only to feel
this fully, this
entire, the way snow
touches bare skin--& is,
suddenly, snow
no longer.

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Devotion to the Flesh

TRAVIS CHILD

The author is a psychological science major from Fitchburg, Massachusetts who uses he/they pronouns.

In his poem *Devotion*, Ocean Vuong compares falling to one's knees in prayer to a higher power to falling to one's knees in order to administer fellatio. Written in the voice of a man thinking about the act of intimacy he is currently engaging in (Vuong, 2016, pp. 84-85), it is a poem about passion and love for another man, while also managing to maintain an air of sadness that is familiar in Vuong's writings.

The main comparison is introduced with the title of the poem, "Devotion," evoking ideas of religion, but the poem itself beginning with "my knees/ scraping hardwood, / another man leaving / into my throat," quite clearly evoking imagery of sexual intimacy. This theme does not end there, and in fact becomes less subtle as the poem goes on to say "the difference/ between prayer & mercy/ is how you move/ the tongue," not only comparing sexual intimacy and acts of prayer to a higher power, but conflating the act of sexual intimacy to mercy. The lines "there's nothing / more holy than holding/ a man's heartbeat between / your teeth" state that the act of lovemaking is holy in and of itself, a joining of lovers as one flesh in itself being an act of God (Vuong, 2016, pp. 84-85).

There are subtle hints of sadness within the lines of the poem as well. The first is pointed out by a particular word choice, where the speaker refers to his partner's orgasm as him "leaving" when typically, the language used is "coming" when describing an orgasm. This choice creates an air of aloneness: even as the poem describes the wonder of a sexual encounter such as this, there is the ever-present knowledge that this man may leave him after things are concluded. The second bit of sad imagery is when the speaker compares himself to Icarus: "so what—if my feathers/ are burning. I / never asked for flight." Invoking this image of Icarus gives rise to thoughts of the speaker figuratively plummeting to his death for flying too close to the sun in pursuit of this sexual encounter. Perhaps this particular example of flying too close to the sun has to do with him wanting something more after this sexual encounter, harkening back to his use of language when describing the orgasm (Vuong, 2016, pp. 84-85).

This poem paints a picture of being devoted to one's partner in a way that is a facsimile of something holy, while at the same time juggling ideas of longing and loneliness for the partner who may end up leaving in the end. In doing so, the poem creates a complex and beautiful idea of what it means to be intimate with a partner, where there can be loneliness in the love that is shared between two individuals.

WORK CITED

Vuong, O. (2016). *Night sky with exit wounds*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.

Seventh Circle of Earth

On April 27, 2011, a gay couple, Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw, was murdered by immolation in their home in Dallas, Texas.

Dallas Voice

1

2

3

1. As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone/ behind closed doors, / was enough / to erase myself.
To forget / we built this house knowing/ it won't last. How/ does anyone stop/ regret/ without
cutting/ off his hands? / Another torch

2. streams through / the kitchen window, / another errant dove. / It's funny. I always knew/ I'd
be warmest beside / my man. / But don't laugh. Understand me/ when I say I burn best / when
crowned/ with your scent: that earth-sweat / & Old Spice I seek our each night/ the days

3. refuse me. / Our faces blackening/ in the photographs along the wall. / Don't laugh, Just tell me
the story/ again, / of the sparrows who flew from falling Rome, / their blazed wings. / How ruin
nested inside each thimble throat / & made it sing

4

5

6

7

4. until the notes threaded to this / smoke rising/ from your nostrils. Speak— / until your voice
is nothing / but the crackle / of charred

5. bones. But don't laugh / when these walls collapse / & only sparks / not sparrows fly out. /
When they come / to sift through these cinders—& pluck my tongue, / this fistful rose, / char-
coaled & choked / from your gone

6. mouth. / Each black petal / blasted / with what's left / of our laughter. / Laughter ashed / to air/
to honey to baby/ darling, / look. Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still

7. American.

Ocean Vuong, "Seventh Circle of Earth" from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Copyright © 2016 by Ocean Vuong. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Copper Canyon Press, coppercanyonpress.org.

Seventh Circle of Earth: Footnotes in History

MATTHEW ALBERGHINI

“Seventh Circle of Earth” is incredibly interesting, because while it is still an excellent poem when spoken, much of its impact is created through the written form. The poem itself relates back to the brief news account from *Dallas Voice*: “a gay couple... was murdered by immolation in their home,” which starts the poem, telling the story behind the two men who were burned alive in their house and revealing just how they were killed. This poem presents the story of these two men, Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw, both with imagery and with the structural presentation of the poem.

The title evokes the idea of the seventh circle of hell, one of the nine circles of hell from “Inferno,” first part of Dante Alighieri’s “The Divine Comedy.” In *The Inferno*, circle seven of hell is where those who commit sins of violence go. This includes those who commit violence against their neighbors (the people who burned down Michael and Clayton’s house with them inside). The poem continues this theme of (hell) fire throughout the poem with imagery. The reader can really get into the head of one of these men as he speaks to his partner, their world literally burning down around them in the following two excerpts: “I always knew / I’d be warmest beside / my man” and “Speak - / until your voice is nothing / but the crackle / of charred bones.”

What is also interesting is how the seventh stanza of the poem is just one word: “American.” On its own, having this word be the final word of the poem presents a scathing criticism of America as a whole, that one word on its own saying “This is how America really is, that even in 2011 we still burn people in their homes for being different from us.” But also, taking the lines before that into account, forming the full sentence, “Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still... American,” it seems the speaker is almost proud at his situation, saying how they are happy to be together up until the end, and despite all that is happening to them, they are still happy to be American, and to have been able to have this life, no matter how it ends.

Much of the impact of this poem, however powerful its imagery is, would be lost if it were presented in any way other than on a page. The way it is presented on the page is with the news bulletin at the top, introducing the poem, and then two pages completely blank except for the numbers 1 through 7 every few lines, followed the actual poem written as footnotes at the bottom of the page. This structure is what makes the poem so powerful. The headline that introduces to poem is the only story told of these two men, from a media standpoint; the rest of the story is blank or non-existent. The newflash of the couple’s life and death will ultimately be a footnote to almost everyone else, and almost no one will know their full story, but that does not make it any less important or real to those who lived it.

WORK CITED

Vuong, O. (2016). *Night sky with exit wounds*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.

Cluttered with Confusion

LAUREN WALKER

The author is an elementary education major with a minor in disability services from Framingham, Massachusetts. She writes: "Although I am a straight female, I took the LGBT Issues and Literature course to gather a better understanding of the LGBTQ community in order to become a better ally."

The mind of David is cluttered with confusion, and it can only be cleaned with the assistance of Giovanni's room. In general, the symbolism that hides within the novel, *Giovanni's Room*, is impressive. The consistent motifs that scatter themselves throughout the story make for an extremely interesting read. Additionally, the motifs give the reader an opportunity to think deeply and analyze the complexity of each character. An examination of "dirty" allows for a deeper analysis in connection with the great house and Giovanni's room to reveal hidden meanings behind the cleanliness and clutter, effectively connecting the different relationships within the story, the significant settings of the story, and the genuineness of David's internal struggle. Additionally, it forces the reader to inspect the symbolism behind each living space and how it reveals David's mindset when struggling with his sexuality.

The neatness and purity of the "great" house symbolize the heteronormative lifestyle that David is trying to lead because he wants to cooperate with societal standards, in addition to concealing his unconventional feelings towards Giovanni. David and Hella decide to purchase a house together once Hella returns to Paris, and David refers to this house as "great" the moment they find it. The house is large in size, but that is the only aspect David thinks is great. He feels unwelcome and believes he "[has] no right to come here[...] but by this time[...] there [is] nothing else [he] [wants] to do" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 157). At this moment, David is very conflicted with his sexuality. He strongly believes that he does not have the right to enter happily into this "great" house because it symbolizes a strictly heterosexual community. He cannot contentedly walk into this large community of straight people and stay, knowing he does not belong. His internal conflict is revealed because he fiercely yearns to be a part of that "normal" group, but his strong feelings towards men outcast him from feeling welcome.

Additionally, David emphasizes the cleanliness of the house. He says, "the big bedroom, the master bedroom, which Hella and I had used, [...] is very clean and orderly" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 68). The word "clean" here refers to the purity of the room. Although sexual desires have been fulfilled, they have been done so in an acceptable, heterosexual manner. The house itself is clean because it appeals to societal standards. When a house or a room is viewed as clean, it is admired and complimented. Thus, the "great" house remaining clean symbolizes the approval from society, because the relationship in the house meets societal expectations. In general, the cleanliness fits within the order of society's structure, which in societal terms is pure.

On the other hand, David dislikes the tidiness of the house because it reminds him of a prison. He admits, "I walk up and down this house- up and down this house.

I think of prison" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 112). In jail, the cells must remain orderly and pristine, which correlate with the environment of the great house. Although a prison cell is small, a personal feeling of being imprisoned does not have to be. David feels trapped by heterosexual norms and confined with the thoughts of what a man is. For the entirety of David's life, he has desired to be sexually "normal." His dream has been to have "a woman be for [him] a steady ground, like the earth itself, where [he] could always be renewed" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 104). David has yearned for a wife and a house full of children, but after experimenting with Giovanni he is full of confusion. The house of his dreams is now a nightmare, and the vastness of the house makes him feel miniscule.

In prison, one's picturesque life and ideals dreams are stopped short. People are supposed to be miserable because it is an unpleasant place to be and their life aspirations are paused. David's original vision of his life with Hella is destroyed and he loses his intimate feelings about her in the house because he has internal misery. He questions, "How soon could I be free?" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 100). David desires to be free from Hella, free from the constant pressure of being a stereotypical man, free from the greatness of the house that consumes him, and free from his unhappiness. In prison, all an innate ever wants to be is unconfined. David is a prisoner of society, and his sentence, unfortunately, will last for a long time. Even when he escapes the house, David will forever be chained by societal standards.

Although the great house is not freeing for David, Giovanni's small room provides David with lessons that he will never forget. Giovanni's intimate, small room symbolizes queerness in society and the freedom of David's sexuality. Giovanni's room is anything but grand. It is a tiny, cluttered room that is full of cardboard boxes and knick-knacks from Giovanni's past. The room itself is "not large enough for two," so when David moves in, he is quite cramped (Baldwin, 1956, p. 85). Although this room is small, the hidden message is colossal. Queerness in society at this time is of the minority. Those that are queer make up a small portion of society, because the norm is heterosexuality. The idea of homosexuality is closed off and placed in a secluded space because it is not accepted or visited often. Giovanni's room is a dark space that is impure because of the clutter. It represents the idea of queerness and how it has a negative connotation attached because impurity is disliked.

Additionally, the impurity of the room connects to the "shameful" sexual acts occurring in the room. Society would not compliment those actions, thus the room itself is a sinful space. Basically, it does not pose queerness in a positive light. For David, the room symbolizes multiple things. First, it represents the dark thoughts and messiness of David's mind. It makes sense for David to enter an untidy place because it is a physical representation of his mindset. David throughout the story has, for the most part, thought negatively about his queerness and it has caused a great deal of disorderly thoughts. However, David tries to fix the room, which can be interpreted as him trying to fix his mindset. David says, "I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing housewife[...] I threw out the paper, the bottles, [and] the fantastic accumulation of trash" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 88). The idea that he is cleaning implies that he is trying to improve, and rid his mind of the "accumulation of trash" he has developed around his queerness.

There always has to be a motivation for renovation, and Giovanni, in David's case, is that motive. Giovanni is a light in the dark world, because he introduces David to love as a gay man. Their relationship is far from perfect, but there are positives within it. Giovanni introduces David to queerness in that small room. Although David does not fully accept it, there are moments where the reader sees him trying. David admits, "sometimes I thought, but this is your life. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting," when referring to his enjoyable relationship with Giovanni (Baldwin, 1956, p. 88). He starts describing Giovanni with beautiful language. David says, "here my baby came indeed, through all that sunlight, his face flushed and his hair flying, his eyes, unbelievably, like morning stars" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 58). Overall, the symbolism of a small room making a great impact is powerful. Every room he enters, meaning every new relationship he begins, will be influenced by the lessons David has learned in Giovanni's room.

The constant use of the term "dirty" throughout the story symbolizes different messages about queerness. In some cases, "dirty" is simply and literally used to describe an object; however, there are other instances where the term promotes a different meaning. The first example is when Jacques is having an intense, but genuine conversation with David about men. Jacques explains, "If you think of them as dirty, then they will be dirty- they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 57). When something is considered dirty, it is usually unwanted and unappealing. In this context, "dirty" refers to the fact gay men are undesirable because they do not fit society's standards. However, Jacques is clarifying that if David thinks of other gay men as undesirable to society, then David is promoting himself as undesirable too. Gay men, to David, are only dirty because he is "giving nothing" or doing nothing to change that perspective. A second important example of the term "dirty" is seen when Giovanni is angrily telling David about how he got fired from work. Giovanni explains, "I really did not want to be dirty with him" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 107). In this case, the immediate thought goes to dirty in terms of sexual acts. Although that is one option, another interpretation is that Giovanni does not desire to lessen his mortality to match Guillaume's immature level; he wants to maintain a professional demeanor. There are multiple cases throughout the story that David hears about the lack of respect from other men. It is a solid lesson for David to keep in mind, especially when trying to become secure in himself.

The difference in cleanliness and messiness of the great house and Giovanni's room uncover hidden meanings about sexuality and society, in addition to pushing the reader to further expand upon "dirtiness" and connect to David on an emotional level. The great house unmasks the truth beyond David's feelings of personal imprisonment, and emphasize the squeaky clean normalcy that society forces on relationships. The great house symbolizes that not all prison cells are small; they just make one feel that way. On another note, Giovanni's room may be filthy, but it represents the mind of David. Furthermore, usually when something is unclean, it should be picked up, and that is what Giovanni's room helps David complete. It serves as the foundation for renovating his life.

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Room: The Love Line between Vulnerability and Intimacy

CHEMARI FORDE DEBERRY

The word “love” thrown around more often than it should be. Everyone wants to share love with someone, to receive love and even feel loved. But, in order to love someone, you need to open up and become vulnerable to that person. In the novel, *Giovanni's Room*, the character David is enabled to be intimate with others because he's fully ashamed and disappointed in himself for feeling different from what he expects to be normal sexual desire. He finds himself attracted to men, and this sickens him. But the focus in the novel is room, both metaphorical and physical. Throughout the novel, David identifies shared spaces as being vulnerable within a state of intimacy, and David fails every time to open up to people based on one thing, fear: fear of rejection and humiliation from society. Therefore, he keeps his feelings to himself. David doesn't make friends easily, because he does not trust them, but he truly does not trust himself. When David leaves his lovers, he leaves them grasping for his affection, and he does not seem to care how he treats them. Room in the novel symbolizes David's inability to be vulnerable or share intimacy with anyone. David experiences this in each of the following meaningful relationships: with his father, Joey, Hella and Giovanni.

The first intimate room David shares is with his father. As a child, David and his father experience a tough love relationship, which could have been the start of David's difficulty to be vulnerable and intimate with others. At a young age, David loses his mother but states that her presence hasn't left the house he grew up in. “I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares...as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive. But when my father or my aunt came rushing into my room to find out what had frightened me, I did not dare describe this dream, which seemed disloyal to my mother” (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 10-11). David is not able to see his parents in an intimate setting, because his mother dies when he is five years old. Also, his father is never fond of showing emotion. He watches as his father and his aunt get into fights over him or about his father coming home drunk after spending a night out with all different types of females.

I could tell by the sound and the rhythm that he was a little drunk and I remember that at that moment a certain disappointment, an unprecedented sorrow entered into me. “I thought,” said Ellen, coldly, “that someone ought to tell you what you're doing to your son.”

“What I'm doing to my son...what are you talking about, Ellen?”

“Do you really think that you're the kind of man he ought to be when he grows up?”

“He is growing up, you know...which is more than I can say for you.” (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 13-14)

Watching his father stumble into the house constantly explains why David is not happy growing up. As David continues to grow up, he and father get into many fights; David cries, but since his father shows no emotion, David figures that is how a man must face things, emotionless.

Things change with David's friend Joey; their sexual encounter is the second intimate room. We meet Joey on page six in the novel, when David explains how he has not thought about him in many years, but their special moment floods his mind vibrantly. Joey is David's childhood friend that he went to school and hung out with. They are very close, until David lets a night of confused pleasure affect how he sees Joey and how he treats him as well. One day, [David] "laughed and grabbed his head as I had done God knows how many times before, when I was playing with him or when he had annoyed me. But this time when I touched him something happened in him and in me which made this touch different from any touch either of us had ever known" (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 7-8). This is the first know time that David feels a certain way toward a person of the same sex. "Joey raised his head as I lowered mine and we kissed, as it were, by accident. Then, for the first time in my life, I was really aware off another person's body, of another person's smell...I feel in myself now a faint, great thirsty heat, and trembling, and tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst. But out of this astounding intolerable pain came joy; we gave each other joy that night. It seemed then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with jockey the act of love" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 8). The kiss, and David and Joey trying to figure out each other in more experienced and personal way, affects David. That very night, David enjoys himself with Joey and actually pictures what it would be like to love Joey so. But all that changes the next morning. David feels complete shame and regrets everything to the point he makes up an excuse to get out of Joey's place. These two friends soon become former friends. David believes the only way to dispose of his disappointment and shame is to treat Joey in awful way, without care for how it makes Joey feel. He pushes away a true friendship because the fear of being different from everyone else. This is the astounding start of David digging the hole of self-deception.

Hella is David's third intimate room. David and Hella meet in a bar at St. Germain de Pres, and eventually David unexpectedly proposes. Unsure of her future with David, Hella decides to go away to Spain to ponder on his proposal. During Hella's absence, David continues to think and love her, but he also begins a relationship with Giovanni. When he receives a letter conveying that Hella wants to marry him and live a life together; when she returns, "I took her in my arms and something happened then. I was terribly glad to see her. It really seemed, with Hella in the circle of my arms, that my arms were home and I was welcoming her back there. She fitted in my arms, she always had and the shock of holding her caused me to feel that my arms had been empty since she had been away" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 120). With Hella being away for so long, David does not know how much he truly missed her. In his head he believes this should feel right and maybe in his heart, he feels the same way. They continue to thrive even though David repeatedly will not tell her anything. Hella figures she is losing her grip on David and does not know why or how, until she finally catches David interacting with his gay friends and sees him for who he is. He tells her..."yes, I'm gay." This is who he is and he's not ashamed.

Giovanni's Room is David's final intimate room and this one affects him more than all the others. David and Giovanni's love story has its ups and downs, but they cannot deny how much they mean to each other. Yet David feels that their relationship isn't a "normal" relationship, and that is what he wants. So, David seeks every possible way to get away from Giovanni or push him away, including just not returning

home after secretly reuniting with Hella. Three days later, he runs into David in public. "Where have you been?" he cried. "I thought you were dead! I thought you had been knocked down by a car or thrown into the river...what have you been doing all these days?" I was able, oddly enough to smile. And I was astonished at my calm.

"Giovanni," I said, "I want you to meet my fiancée. Mlle Hella. Monsieur Giovanni" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 129). Giovanni abruptly finds out the reason why David has disappeared. You can tell this affects Giovanni in a certain way, because he knows that his and David's relationship is the easiest or the simplest relationship. In this moment, David can tell that sharing the news of Hella being his fiancée to Giovanni cuts deep into his heart. He knows Giovanni is hurting because he loves him so much and that he had to find out in this way.

David decides that he owes Giovanni an explanation for his actions, so he visits Giovanni's room one last time, revealing yet again his inability to acknowledge his own feelings or vulnerability with the person he loves the most.

Giovanni stared at me and turned on his side, facing the wall, and began to cry. "Baby, stop crying. Please stop crying...what is the matter?"

"Why have you gone away from me? I have never reached you," said Giovanni. "You have never really been here. I do not think you have ever lied to me, but I know that you have never told me the truth...why? Sometime you were here all day long and you read or opened the window or cooked something...and I watched you...and you never said anything...and you looked at me with such eyes, as though you did not see me." (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 136-137).

This is the final altercation between Giovanni and David. Giovanni calls out David's flaws and how he needs to be honest with him to make their relationship work, and how he will be nothing if David leaves him. David continues to knock Giovanni down by largely explaining to him that their relationship will never happen because the world won't accept it and he can't accept it. So, they say their final goodbyes because as time goes on it would be too late to fix anything.

David is self-deceptive; he only looks out for what best for him. He shares spaces with certain individuals who have affected him and how he will continue his life. But if he were able to open up and be honest with these important people, his life could have ended differently. He feels that he will never be able to find love, because he doesn't know how to love someone. I believe David needs to focus on his problems that he has within himself to open up and become vulnerable and figure out how to love people. He has many opportunities to make this happen, but he fails to take the hint and chooses to let fear lead his life, and now he's alone.

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Sexual Orientation and Emotional Escapism

DISA PARKER

Throughout *Giovanni's Room*, there is an underlying tone that David is constantly running from something. He runs to Paris to escape his past and to find himself, but it ultimately ends up with David becoming more lost in the process. He runs from his feelings to emotionally escape the truth about his feelings for a young Italian boy named Giovanni, but his marathon ends abruptly when his denial leads to him being alone. Ultimately, *Giovanni's Room* is about David coming to terms with this sexual orientation and how he represses those feelings. He'll do anything to avoid processing his feelings, and when anybody tries to promote David's self-reflection, he resorts to emotional escapism and runs away from his true identity.

The beginning of the novel begins in the south of France while David reminisces about his past. He is in France because he has physically run away from his feelings to find himself. As an American, David feels he has a certain set of morals and standards to uphold--this mostly being a heterosexual and masculine lifestyle. Figuring that he could be somewhat free, he travels to Paris to escape judgement, discover more about himself, and outrun his problems in a physical sense. In the opening scene, David reflects on his previous romance with a boy named Joey. Joey ignited David's inner turmoil in his teen years, and instead of facing his feelings and talking to Joey, he actively avoided and bullied him. David remarks that "...the sadder this made him, the nastier I became" (p. 20), again reinforcing that he will run away from his feelings instead of confronting how he truly feels. He grows to resent Joey, forming an idea in his head that Joey was to blame for the way David internally felt about his sexual identity. This budding aggression and denial carries with him as he travels to Paris and falls in love with Giovanni.

While in Paris, David meets a man named Giovanni who he moves in with and ultimately falls in love with as well. This, however, poses a problem because David currently has a girlfriend in Spain whom he is determined to marry. While David's girlfriend--Hella--is away, he constantly remarks that he is glad she's so distant; he states, "I could not even pretend to myself that I was sorry she was in Spain. I was glad. I was utterly, hopelessly, horribly glad" (42). This is most likely because he does not have to worry about what she will think about his relationship with Giovanni. He hopes that she will forget about him while in Spain and David will have an easy departure from his heterosexual relationship with her. However, the latter thoughts are David's true emotions that he desperately tries to avoid. While he wants a happy life with Giovanni, he internally escapes those feelings by burying his thoughts of homosexuality with the presence of women. In part two of the novel, David receives a letter from Hella, stating that she intends to come back to France soon to marry David. He is thrilled by this news, instantly going out into town to find a woman to sleep with--to find someone that can persuade David into believing that he does love women. He finds a girl named Sue and they have sex, but the whole time David is internally wishing everything could end. He tries to escape his true feelings with physical excuses, but in the end he just hurts another person as a result of his denial.

David not only hurts Sue and Joey by running away from his true feelings about

sexual identity, but he hurts--and is partially responsible for killing--Giovanni as well. As seen with Joey, David turns his true feelings into resentment towards the person he loves. As he falls in love with Giovanni, he begins to hate him more and more, blaming Giovanni for why he feels the way he does. David states that "With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots" (p. 56). The more David falls in love with Giovanni, the more David will grow to hate him. David constantly deceives himself about his true feelings towards Giovanni, and this is shown around the time Hella returns to France. While he wishes for a hetero-normative lifestyle with Hella, he merely wishes for that happy relationship dynamic with another man. He sticks around with Hella because it is the "right thing to do," but he ultimately is emotionally escaping his true feelings for Giovanni more and more.

Over time, David secludes himself from Hella, hoping his withdrawal will cause her to cut things off; this decision will allow David to enter a relationship with Giovanni without having to sever the ties with Hella himself. He is running away from the decision he has to make--either to choose Hella or Giovanni. If he commits to Giovanni by breaking up with Hella, David would internally prove that he is a gay man--a fact that he does not want to come to terms with and that he is constantly denying throughout the novel. When Hella does not pick up on the cues David gives her, he is ultimately forced to cut ties with Giovanni. While he does not want to do this, he has to because he does not have the courage to stay with him or commit to a long-term homosexual relationship in general. The two fight and Giovanni argues, "You are not leaving me for her. You are leaving me for some other reason. You lie so much, you have come to believe all your own lies" (p. 69). Giovanni verbally acknowledges that David continuously runs from his true feelings instead of facing them, hinting that David has tricked himself into loving Hella. David leaves Giovanni's room, hoping to finally have run away from his feelings towards him and live a happy life with Hella.

That happy ending does not come to fruition; because David has run from all of his feelings and lied to himself and everyone he cared about, he ultimately hurts Joey, Hella, and Giovanni. After hearing about Giovanni's death, David secludes himself more and more from Hella, burying his true feelings for him deeper and deeper. With all the previous thoughts and emotions packed tightly inside, David runs away from Hella into the south of France, having an affair with a sailor when Hella finds him. David finally came to terms with the fact that he is gay and drives away Hella. Now alone, David realizes that he cannot outrun his inner feelings no matter where he goes or how hard he tries. The last scene of the novel shows David leaving the house in southern France, physically running from his past yet again. He tears apart the letter of Giovanni's execution date in an attempt to escape those feelings he once had for him, but the wind blows the shreds back at David, proving that no matter what he does, he cannot run from the truth about whom he loves. In the end, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* demonstrates that denying one's own feelings with ultimately lead to a life of dishonestly, loneliness, and pain.

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Pure Protest

LAUREN WALKER

The author is an elementary education major with a minor in disability services from Framingham, Massachusetts. She writes: "Although I am a straight female, I took the LGBT Topics and Literature course to gather a better understanding of the LGBTQ community in order to become a better ally."

The message girl is beautifully masculine, and the power of his protests echo like a lioness's roar. Her message travels to reach all those who need to listen, because the importance of his content is urgent. *Girl Meets Boy*, by Ali Smith, highlights unorthodox topics such as homosexuality, lesbianism, and gender fluidity. However, the story emphasizes the power of protest and the depth of love in different ways, as well. The novel brings to the surface multiple unconventional concepts to start a conversation about equality and fighting for what is just. The story develops a prioritization for protest, which is supported by smaller motifs such as purity and gender fluidity.

Bold statement pieces on architecture, secretive eating disorders, and feminine empowerment all exemplify a form of protest in their own distinct manner. Throughout the book, dramatic and boisterous methods of protest are used. In the first chapter, the grandfather is telling Anthea and Imogen about his involvement in protest. He explains how several teenagers, himself included, wrote "NO VOTES NO GOLF" to defend women's right to vote, which put them in jail (Smith, 2009, p. 13). Additionally, the grandfather tells stories of a woman called Burning Lily who "started setting fires to buildings- buildings that didn't have any people in them" as a form of protest (Smith, 2009, p. 16). She knew it would grab powerful officials' attention, which is what she desired. Similarly, Burning Lily refused to eat unless change started happening. It was another drastic way to fight the women's inequality. Both Anthea and Imogen listen carefully, and their grandfather's stories bridge a connection between protest of the past and the choices Imogen and Anthea make in adulthood.

Imogen is not very outgoing or boisterous; however, she has her own way of using her voice that connects to Burning Lily's hunger strike. In the story of Burning Lily, the grandfather briefly brushes over Burning Lily's hunger strike. However, Imogen's attention increases when her grandfather says that "there wasn't anything else for her to do...they all did it, to protest" (Smith, 2009, p. 17). There was very little people could do back then to protest, but refusing to eat was something they could control. Even though Imogen mocks Burning Lily's choice to starve herself, the grandfather openly says "you'd do it too, if it was the only thing you could do" (Smith, 2009, p. 17). In Imogen's adulthood, there are hints she is suffering from an eating disorder. Anthea makes scattered comments on her sister's thinness. Anthea admits, "I saw it in the turn of her head and the movement of her too-thin wrist. How had I not seen it? She was far too thin. She was really thin" (Smith, 2009, p. 40). Based on Imogen's attentiveness to her grandfather's inclusion of Burning Lily's story and Imogen's passive personality, there is a possibility that Imogen could be starving herself as a form of protest. To support this theory, Imogen works in a place of employment where

women are ignored, but she cannot verbally refute the inequality because she values her position too greatly. So, similarly to women back in the era of Burning Lily, going on a hunger strike is a form of protest she can undertake.

The connection between Burning Lily and Imogen is not the only similarity. Anthea finds interest in her grandfather's form of protest, which is much more public. Anthea is creatively bold and ambitious. In partnership with Robin, Anthea addresses inequality on billboards and important buildings to aggressively state her message. For example, Anthea and Robin write "ALL ACROSS THE WORLD, WHERE WOMEN ARE DOING EXACTLY THE SAME WORK AS MEN, THEY'RE BEING PAID BETWEEN THIRTY TO FORTY PERCENT LESS. THAT'S NOT FAIR" (Smith, 2009, p. 113). This form of protest echoes her grandfather's acidic statement found on a golf green, which was a message for equality, as well. The connection between Imogen and Burning Lily, as well as, the similarity in protest between the grandfather and Anthea, leads the reader to believe that there is a parallel linking the two times. Furthermore, it may be an indirect message that equality has not been reached, even after all this time, which "MUST CHANGE" (Smith, 2009, p. 113).

A protest is powerful whether it is boisterous and public or individualized. Although the importance of protest is highlighted in the novel, another symbol that should not be overlooked is the usage of "pure." The word "pure" and the name Pure of the water company represent underlying hyper-masculinity, which sparks a current of feminism from Imogen as a form of protestation. The definition of pure is "free of any contamination," and it is regularly used positively (Google Dictionary). However, the contamination inferred in this book is unjustly feminine. The atmosphere in the Pure water company is very masculine, because the majority of its employees are male. Anthea admits, "[t]hey all looked the same, the bosses with their slightly Anglified accents and their trendily close-shaved heads[...] they all looked like they were maybe called Keith" (Smith, 2009, p. 23).

The leader, Keith, pitches the company with an advertising creation of the "Pure man" (Smith, 2009, p. 100). To begin, the reasoning why the representative has to be a man is questionable. Why is it not a woman? He further explains to Imogen, while he is trying to "promote her" that "at Pure we will reward more than anything your ability to look good, look right, say the right thing, on camera if necessary, under all pressures, and to take the flak like a man if anything goes pear-shaped" (Smith, 2009, p. 102). There are multiple, sexist issues with this message. Firstly, the insinuation that a woman's primary purpose should be to "look good" for a camera, because a beautiful appearance from a woman will increase sales, is derogatory. Secondly, the statement that Imogen would have to solve problems like a man would infer that a woman cannot properly handle an issue herself. On top of that, Keith hinting that Imogen needs to fix something if it goes "pear-shaped" is highly offensive because it implies that Keith needs something fixed if it goes in a feminine direction, considering many women's body types are "pear-shaped." Thus, clearly the focus of this company is utilizing males for the intelligence and the few women for appearance.

Overall, Keith and his company are demeaning towards women, which angers Imogen because she has personally been affected. Once Keith speaks to her about the promotion, readers witness a side to Imogen that is unfamiliar. Immediately she

says “It’s bullshit, Keith” when referring to his promotion proposal (Smith, 2009, p. 106). She is completely distraught and humiliated, hence she quits and takes the power back. Imogen has never been an assertive character, but this is an opportunity to reveal her feministic authority. It is her time to protest in response to the true identity of Pure’s foundation. Pure is a correct term for the small-minded attitude of the company and its employees, who pride themselves on their arrogance and hyper-masculinity.

Although Imogen shows protest against Pure through feminism, there are other types of protest that are performed using gender fluidity. The use of intertwining, opposite pronouns display the power of protest regardless of gender. The author uses a fluid approach to gendered language and pronouns. Throughout the novel, the author casually incorporates pronouns for each gender, specifically when there is protest. For instance, the grandfather refers to himself as a girl throughout the majority of his story. He says, “did I ever tell you about the time they put me in jail for a week when I was a girl?” (Smith, 2009, p. 13), inferring that he classifies himself as a female during the time when he chose to fight for women’s rights. Additionally, during Anthea and Robin’s declaration of inequality, they signed their graffiti both “message girls” and “message boys.” Under one message reads, “Iphis and Ianthe, the message boys, 2007” (Smith, 2009, p. 113). The utilization of interchanging gender pronouns symbolizes that both genders have the right to speak. It is a message that highlights there is not one particular gender whom should be granted more power or control. Gender should not be separated, but united because both can offer a voice to the world. Overall, the idea that gender is a permanent delineation of what a person can do is ludicrous. The roles assigned to each gender showcase a problem in society and a lack of support for each member of society. The power of protest resides in anyone who has a voice, which is everyone.

Protest, purity, and gender fluidity are all interconnected to generate a story that expresses an important message about protest. The Pure water company floods its foundation with hyper-masculinity, which forces feministic and secretive protest from Imogen, while Anthea and her grandfather use bold, gender fluid graffiti to aggressively state their position on inequality. Overall, protest is used for different causes in dissimilar eras, but there is always a universal parallel between them. EVERYONE HAS A VOICE TO PROMOTE CHANGE, SO LET’S LISTEN!

This essay is signed by the message girl: Iphis 19

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Gender in Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

TERRENCE O'KANE

Laura Esquivel captivates her audience in her novel *Like Water for Chocolate* through the romantic plot and magical realism. Readers are mystified as the primary female protagonist Tita prepares magical recipes that aid her in her journey toward winning the man she loves, Pedro. The text and much criticism focus on Tita and the torments that she endures, but much can be gained by analyzing the female characters that make up Tita's life. Esquivel creates a world of strong Mexican female warriors. Each of these characters involved in Tita's life are examples of strong female characters that resonate in a patriarchal society. I would like to focus my paper on the examination of Nacha, Mama Elena, and Gertrudis, so that readers can be aware of the different strengths that each of these female characters contributes. These three female characters each have different backgrounds and undergo different trials in the text. For the purpose of this essay I would like to look at both Esquivel's versions of them in the text as well as their portrayal in Alfonso Arau's film of the same name. By analyzing their strengths in both text and film, I hope to further the conversation on how each of these female characters exert strength in a society that pushes them down.

Priscilla Pankhurst Ferguson's "Culinary Nationalism" references the ambitions of a French chef by the alias of "Pampille," who aimed to define France through the recipes in her cookbook (1913). Ferguson states, "That culinary country is not to be found in the extravagant creations of celebrated (male) chefs in fancy modern restaurants.... The building blocks of this culinary country... are the dishes from the provinces, none of them creations of any individual, all of them products of the land itself" (Ferguson 102). In relation to *Like Water for Chocolate*, Mexican culture can be found in the dishes prepared by Tita and these women. The different ingredients and the methods that these women use connect them to their ancestors and their country. At the same time, Tita is a product from the relationships she shares with these women. Mama Elena shows her the value of strength through power, while Nacha shows her the value of strength through knowledge. Just as each dish contains a certain ingredient to make the dish more complete, each of these female characters contributes to the woman that Tita becomes.

Nacha, Tita's elderly mentor and head cook who is hard of hearing, definitely shows a sense of strength through her knowledge and as the source of family heritage. She applies her knowledge to culinary and natural healing methods that she passes down to Tita. Mate Zubiaurre explains in her article, "Culinary Eros in Contemporary Hispanic Female Fiction: From Kitchen Tales to Table Narratives," how the kitchen plays a large role in the female character's pursuit for knowledge and power. Zubiaurre writes, "The kitchen turns into a laboratory meant to foster intellectual inquiry and to pursue knowledge as a means of power. Moreover, Tita exerts her power gained through culinary wisdom not only over men, but also over women" (Zubiaurre 35). Tita learns how to use this power and definitely utilizes it to her advantage throughout the text. Nacho may seem like just the elderly deaf cook, but she holds the power in her knowledge, which she in turn passes to Tita. The kitchen is Nacha's

sanctuary where she, like Tita, can escape the torments of the outside world and surround herself with a craft that she has over the years mastered.

Kristine Ibsen also touches upon this idea of “control” in her article, “On Recipes, Reading and Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como Agua Para Chocolate*.” Ibsen writes:

Esquivel reinforces the idea of a community of women. Just as the rituals associated with cooking provide Tita with a sense of security (15), the fact that these popular genres often rely on formulae provides women with an order and a control that may not exist in their everyday worlds. Furthermore, as with her appropriation of magic realism, Esquivel has chosen to use conventions from popular discourse that will be easily recognized by the reader. (Ibsen 3) Ibsen goes on to analyze how this idea can be applied to Tita’s character, but I believe that it can apply to Nacha just as effectively because Nacha too has suffered and found solace in the kitchen. One must remember that both these women, no matter how great the age gap is, live under Mama Elena’s roof and have been scorned by love. Nacha is mentioned to have lost her fiancé at a young age (Esquivel 36). The kitchen is someplace they both have their own “control” as head cook. Ibsen is talking about this idea of “control,” and how the “rituals of cooking” as well as the setup of the text in the form of a “cookbook” provide a foundation that readers can find peace with. The cookbook can be a personal reference as one adds their own spin on recipes. Their tests are recorded with successes and twists that they may not want to attempt again. The foundation of Nacha’s strength comes from the confidence that she has established through her training in the kitchen. She takes this “order and control” that Ibsen references and uses it to find her strength. Nacha does not have the advantage of status, but she does have knowledge that she can always fall back on.

Initially, Nacha is a background character to the text, her deafness used to get the point across that Tita cried a lot while in Mama Elena’s womb (Esquivel 5). Even on the next page, Esquivel writes, “Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor” (Esquivel 6). From this quotation the author is showing the reader that Nacha is always there to clean the mess up. No matter how tough the situation is, Nacha has the strength to do the job that no one really wants to do. In Arau’s film adaptation, the scene is quite comical where Nacha is left with a quite a large mountain of salt. The poor woman, portrayed by Ada Carrasco, stands with an expression of astonishment on her face, but slowly gets to work because she knows that it has to get done. Nacha does not even miss a beat before she starts sweeping away.

Nacha supports Tita throughout the span of Tita’s life. Although Nacha dies early on in the story, she is with Tita whenever Tita cooks or needs advice. She turns out to be a fairy godmother character, which fits in well with this magical realism genre. One of the more touching scenes in the text is when Nacha is helping Tita bake the wed-

ding cake. Esquivel writes, "Nacha was on Tita's side, and she was doing everything she could to spare her pain. With her apron she dried the tears that were rolling down Tita's cheeks..." (Esquivel 30). It is amazing that Tita is able to bring herself to make this cake, but she may not have been able to complete it without the aid of her maternal figure. The scene shows how much Tita relies on Nacha's support, and it takes a strong person to be there for someone who needs to bake the wedding cake for her enemy. Nacha does this so elegantly too, where she cleans Tita's tears with her apron as the two stir the cake batter. I enjoy the section in which Esquivel describes Nacha's dislike for Rosaura because she was a picky eater (Esquivel 30). This tension must have made this task extra difficult for Nacha, but like with the mountain of salt that covered the floor, she shrugs and performs her duty to the household.

Critics have definitely observed the bond that Nacha and Tita share. In "Mother-Daughter Relationship in Laura Esquivel's *Como Agua Para Chocolate*," Jeanine Lino Perez looks into the nurturing that Nacha provides for Tita and how common it was for the maids to raise the children. Perez writes:

In Latin American countries it is not unusual that maids take charge of bringing up the children of their employers. This happens frequently in middle-class families who can afford having maids and leave their children with maids while they work or do other things, freeing them from parental duties. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable that Tita's care is Nacha's responsibility and that they develop a strong bond. (Perez 193) Often times Mama Elena is penalized for not taking care of Tita as a child in the way that a mother should; this criticism may come from having a Westernized mindset in which a mother is expected to take care of her children. Perez describes how in Latin American countries, maids often take care of the children, and this is what Nacha does. Nacha basically raises Tita in the kitchen. It is interesting how Perez uses the word "free" to describe leaving the children with maids as a sense of liberation. The bond that Tita and Nacha share should not be considered unnatural. Instead, this type of bond should be expected because Tita has been in Nacha's care as if Nacha were her biological mother. Perez closes her section on Nacha by writing, "Soon after Rosaura and Pedro weds Nacha passes away, but her nurturing spirit is not gone for good. She would be forever supporting Tita, whispering advice and nice words in her ears. Nacha continues to be Tita's good sweet mother" (Perez 194). In this respect, Nacha appears as Tita's fairy godmother. It is interesting how both she and Mama Elena are able to return after their deaths. Their ability to return from the afterlife signifies the strength that they had when they were alive. This strength carries over and allows their influence to pass back and forth through the realms. Unlike Mama Elena, who is basically haunting Tita, Nacha appears in times of need. The part at the end of the film where Nacha is seen lighting the candles is quite beautiful and really pulls at the reader's emotions, which further signals her strength to go beyond the text and into the audience's feelings.

When Tita finds Nacha dead, Esquivel writes, "She found Nacha lying dead, her eyes wide open, medicinal leaves upon her temples, a picture of her fiancé clutched in her hands" (Esquivel 41). This scene shows Nacha's strength, because even in the end of her life she is able to perform the rituals needed in order to comfort her. Nacha is able to find solace in the picture of her fiancé as well as prepare herself with natural remedies. Her influence is able to push Tita forward, the impression left showing her strength.

Mama Elena and Gertrudis, unlike Nacha, demonstrate power more overtly than Nacha does, rejecting the roles of nurturer or helper. Mama Elena, the tyrant of the text, is an intriguing character when it comes to strong women in *Like Water for Chocolate*. I remember sitting in class and participating on discussion boards where this character was ripped to shreds on the account of her malicious behavior. Not many wanted to focus on the traits of strength that she exhibited in the text because they could only see how horribly she was treating Tita. However, one cannot argue that a story is more interesting with a strong villain. Instantly, I think of the witch from Stephen Sondheim's musical, *Into the Woods*. The primary antagonist of the musical is malicious in her acts, such as trapping Rapunzel in a tower so that she can "stay with her" because the world is "dark" and cruel (Sondheim, "Stay with Me"). Comparable to Tita, Rapunzel is driven insane in the end, but the audience still adores the witch. This is because she is such a villainess that demands respect and receives it because of her power. Mama Elena is quite admirable in the way that she too demands respect from everyone as she maintains her ranch with an iron fist.

The introduction to Mama Elena shows that her character is quite strong. The following passage occurs just after Tita is born and Mama Elena finds that she cannot nurse her child. When Nacha offers to care for Tita in her kitchen, Mama Elena accepted her offer gratefully; she had enough to do between her mourning and the enormous responsibility of running the ranch—and it was the ranch that would provide her children the food and education they deserved- without having to worry about feeding a newborn baby on top of everything else. (Esquivel 6-7)

Mama Elena is forced to take over the family ranch and become the head of household with the sudden passing of her husband. She realizes the responsibility has suddenly fallen to her and takes on the role that is considered masculine. Interestingly enough, no child of hers ever gets an education that she works so hard to provide. Mama Elena stresses the importance of education in this passage. Perhaps her ideals change over the years as she spends more time as the owner of the ranch. Perhaps it was for Gertrudis that she intended the education, but she is disowned shortly into the story. Also, it is a bit strange that she does not see nurturing Tita as a top priority as she is a newborn child. She is able to pass off her maternal instinct (if she has any), and set her new priority on the ranch itself so that she can provide for the greater picture rather than just Tita.

Mama Elena's taking over as head of household and in turn acquiring a masculine role in the household is comparable to the famous Lady Macbeth's transformation. Both female characters acknowledge their gender and the limits that come with it by living in a patriarchal society. They reject their sex to gain power. For example, Lady Macbeth states, "Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between/Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts/And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers, / Wherever in your sightless substances/You wait on nature's mischief" (l.v. 53-57). Lady Macbeth demands that all nurturing qualities be taken away from her so that she can "unsex" herself. She wants to cause "mischief" against what is natural and absolve herself of any maternal qualities. The greatest comparison occurs where she demands that her breast milk be taken away, much like how Mama Elena's dries up (Esquivel 6). Both are on a quest for power, and both find their power through taking on a masculine role.

One particular scene that stands out regarding strength in Mama Elena is when the soldiers visit her ranch in the chapter titled "May." This scene generates such admiration for Mama Elena and causes me to forget about the way that she abuses Tita.

Mama Elena immediately picked up her shotgun; as she cleaned it she plotted how to hide her valuables from the greed and gluttony of these men. No one had ever had anything good to say about these revolutionaries- and obviously what she had heard could scarcely be unreliable, since she'd gotten it from Father Ignacio and the mayor of Piers Negras. They had told her how the rebels entered houses, destroyed everything, and raped all the women in their path. She ordered Tita, Chenchá, and the pig to stay hidden in the cellar. (Esquivel 88)

The way that Mama Elena takes charge in this scene shows how much honor she has. This ranch is hers, and she will not surrender it to anyone. The way that she hides her valuables and forces the younger girls to hide in the cellar shows a sense of duty. Just as a captain would go down with his ship, Mama Elena will fight for the ranch or die trying. The way in which she shelters Tita and Chenchá because of the stories she heard from Father Ignacio and the mayor of Piers Negras wins me over the most. If Mama Elena were a true villain, she would have Tita and Chenchá standing with weapons at the edge of the ranch or just in front of her. In gaming terms, the two would be considered "meat shields." Because Mama Elena takes their lives and their dignity into account and demands that they hide, she is not all bad. If Mama Elena did not care about these two girls, the revolutionaries may have made off with them. Instead, Mama Elena shows honor, strength, and courage to stand between the revolutionaries and her ranch.

Similar to earlier where Mama Elena takes on a masculine role by becoming head of the ranch, this interaction with the captain of the revolutionaries puts her transformation to the test. Her strength is admirable as she stands in the doorway with the shotgun in her hand. The effect she has on the Captain demonstrates her power. "Her gaze met that of the captain in charge, and he knew immediately from the steeliness of her eyes that they were in the presence of a woman to be reckoned with" (Esquivel 89). Esquivel describes her eyes as "steeliness," showing her cold and threatening demeanor. The same look that she has given to Tita for years has now come in handy to use upon a group of male revolutionaries. Once she is provoked, Mama Elena blows up one of the chickens with her shotgun as it dangles from the sergeant's hand (Esquivel 90). She states, "I have a very good aim and a very bad temper, Captain. The next shot is for you, and I assure you that I can shoot you before they can kill me, so it would be best for us to respect each other. If we die, no one will miss me very much, but won't the nation mourn your loss?" (Esquivel 90). Mama Elena is successful in her mission as she demands something that is very unlikely in this patriarchal society: respect. The way that she stands her ground and wields the shotgun shows that she knows what she is doing. Mama Elena is not afraid to die: she would rather lose her life than lose her power. Mama Elena craves power to the point that she returns to Tita after her death. In both text version and film version, Mama Elena's ghost haunts Tita when she fears that she is pregnant with Pedro's child. The woman has risen to the point in which she can not only ignore the restrictions of her gender, but also ignore the restrictions of life and death.

This particular scene is absent from the film and its absence truly takes away from Mama Elena's character. Up until this point, Mama Elena is only ruthless to those that live on her ranch, particularly Tita. It is nice to see her putting this power to better use, but because of this scene's absence, Mama Elena is just a villainess through and through. In Arau's film version, Mama Elena is portrayed by Regina Torne who gives the character a more evil-stepmother sort of feel.

The distance between her and Tita is obvious, in which there is no motherly affection as in the text. Torne is able to master Mama Elena's cold stare, but she is not able to use it for the scene with the captain. There is one scene in which the bandits attack the ranch, but rather than Mama Elena confronting the bandits head on, she sneaks up from behind and is quickly dispatched. The way she attempts to assault the bandits from behind shows a different interpretation of her character. This version contradicts the text version of Mama Elena, who would shoot the bandits head on, but this Mama Elena shows no skill in combat and tries to hide in the shadows. Her power struggle is incomplete in the film version, because the bandits undercut that subplot as she is knocked to her death rather than choosing it for herself.

I would now like to analyze Gertrudis, one of Tita's blood sisters, and how she portrays strength. Gertrudis, the middle daughter that Mama Elena had through romantic relations with an African American man, portrays her strength when she abandons her home to pursue her own freedom. Gertrudis' strength comes from this sense of liberation. Writers Marta Sierra and Clara Roman-Odio describe the pursuit several female characters have for freedom by leaving home in their article, "Global and Local Geographies: The (Dis)locations of Contemporary Feminisms." On page 21 they state, "The journey away from the metropolis—prompted by the leitmotiv of orphanhood—offers the protagonists the chance to reach new forms of freedom and self-determination" (Roman-Odio 21). Although the authors do not apply this analysis to *Like Water for Chocolate*, that idea gives a sense to what Gertrudis is feeling when she is liberated. In this case the "metropolis" would be Mama Elena's ranch, and in a way the young girl is orphaned as Mama Elena disowns her. In the text it is stated, "Mama Elena burned Gertrudis' birth certificate and all of her pictures and said she didn't want to hear her name mentioned ever again" (Esquivel 59). Gertrudis might as well be considered an orphan at this point as Mama Elena, her only living parental figure, wants nothing to do with her. Gertrudis, through her liberation, is able to experience a life that would not have been available to her if she were to stay on Mama Elena's ranch.

The scene in which Gertrudis is liberated is unexpected. As Tita's spell washes over Gertrudis, she is overcome with passion as a series of magical events occur such as the shower stall bursting into flames from the heat given off from the woman within. Esquivel writes, "Gertrudis stopped running when she saw him riding toward her. Naked as she was, with her loosened hair falling to her waist, luminous, glowing with energy, she might have been an angel and devil in one woman" (Esquivel 55). The fact that Gertrudis is naked already shows a sense of liberation, as she is not constricted by clothing. Esquivel goes on to describe how her hair is free and the amount of energy that is being emitted from her body is pretty wild itself. Interestingly, at the end, Gertrudis can neither be determined as resting on the side of God or the devil. In this sense, her liberation is taken to a new level where even on

a spiritual plane, Gertrudis has broken free. Tita provides Gertrudis the momentum that she needs for her pursuit to freedom, but Gertrudis' real strength comes from adapting and taking charge of her life thereafter. Gertrudis becomes her own person and creates her own rules.

Finnegan provides an interesting analysis of Gertrudis in "At Boiling Point: Like Water for Chocolate and the Boundaries of Mexican Identity." Finnegan focuses on Gertrudis' ethnic background and her portrayal in Arau's film by actress Claudette Maillé. Finnegan writes:

Nowhere is this racial 'register' more apparent, however, than in the figure of Gertrudis. Linked to both a Hollywood tradition of Mexican representation, and filmic discourse within Mexico, Gertrudis emerges as the most complex and contradictory character in the film. She is a mulatta, a revolutionary general, a confused prostitute in possession of an exhaustive libido, and a devoted sister, wife and mother. (Finnegan, 318)

I find it interesting that Finnegan refers to Gertrudis as "contradictory" where she has all of these opportunities that are available to her as soon as she rejects her restrictions. I would not refer to her as a "contradictory character," but in fact as an opportunistic character. Gertrudis is able to adapt and find the best road for herself personally. Finnegan lists all of these labels that are given to Gertrudis, but she does not attach to just one of them. Gertrudis does not let the labels define her just as she does not let Mama Elena rule her life upon her liberation. Characters, such as Father Ignacio, refer to Gertrudis working in a brothel as a condemnation of her person. Gertrudis does not see this as a condemnation, but instead as a way of taking control of her body. Father Ignacio and Mama Elena can condemn Gertrudis all they want, but in the end she is surviving and living a life that is on her terms.

The scene in the chapter titled, "September" reveals the free soul that Gertrudis has once she is reunited with Tita for the first time since her departure. This following passage shows how content Gertrudis is with her life once she was able to find the strength from her independence.

Smoking a cigarette, Gertrudis, perfectly at her ease, was regaling them with fantastic stories of the battles she'd been in. She had them openmouthed, as she told them about the first firing squad she had ordered, but she couldn't contain herself. She interrupted her story and flung herself into the center of the salon where she began to dance gracefully to the polka "Jesusita in Chihuahua," which Juan was playing brilliantly on the norteno accordion. She lightly hitched her skirt up to her knee, quite uninhibited. (Esquivel 179-180)

This passage shows the transformation of Gertrudis' character by describing her "perfectly at ease." This shows that she is comfortable with who she is in life where before she was the middle child who was good at dancing. The image of Gertrudis smoking a cigarette in her laid back manner shows how unconcerned she is with how other people perceive her. She has ascended above the expectations of society. Gertrudis cannot even be bothered to finish a story about her adventures, because as soon as she hears the music playing, her body tells her to dance instead. The word

“uninhibited” is the perfect word to use to define Gertrudis. Her character becomes “uninhibited” the day that her passion burns down the shower stall. That is the day that Gertrudis finds her strength and challenges society through her liberation.

Tita is able to be strong in *Like Water for Chocolate* because she is surrounded and influenced by strong women all of her life. Mama Elena is malicious, but she knows the value of power, and she would sooner die than relinquish any of it, quite like Lady Macbeth or the Witch in *Into the Woods*. Nacha shows Tita the importance of knowledge and to find her balance in life through their shared craft of cooking. Cooking brought peace, as well as power to both of these women in several different ways. Not just in ways that created magic, but in ways that swayed crowds of people to be connected to their culture. Gertrudis shows Tita strength through her liberation, showing her that it is okay to breakaway and be free. *Like Water for Chocolate* shows the reader an incredible cast of female characters that refuse to be defined as the weaker sex in a patriarchal society.

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