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DESEXUALIZING QUEER IDENTITIES: METHODS TO
VALIDATING NON-SEXUAL ROMANTIC ATTRACTION
AND RELATIONSHIPS

by

UNNATI PATEL

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's
and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Desexualizing Queer Identities: Methods to Validating Non-Sexual Romantic Attraction and Relationships

by

Unnati Patel

Advisor: Mario DiGangi

There is an increase in the negative views of queer and LGBT+ people in America, and I argue that it is, in part, due to the sexualized connotations of, and sexual association with, queer and LGBT+ identities. Innocuous acts by queer or LGBT+ people, such as being an out school teacher or holding hands in a public space, is enough for non-LGBT+ people to become uncomfortable to varying degrees and, sometimes, even cause verbal abuse or violence. When we look at queer or LGBT+ representation through the possibility of queerness, and by reading representations of queer and LGBT+ romantic attraction through non-sexual signs such as sacrifice, affection, desire, and trust, we begin to normalize non-sexualized identities of queer and LGBT+ people. Importantly, we validate non-sexual romantic expressions and relationships of all kinds, asexual included. We also work towards positive and non-sexualized representations of queer and LGBT+ people being reproduced by institutions of knowledge production, such as media and academia.

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Introduction

There are many ways to show attraction, love, and desire between two people. However, when it comes to identifying these signs for a heterosexual couple versus a homosexual couple, the same identifiers do not often apply to both couples. Oftentimes, signs of affection, such as hand holding and cuddling, between a man and women would be seen as romantic, whereas between two women, it would often be read as close friendship. It is very difficult to validate signs of romantic attraction between non-heterosexual or non-cisgender couples outside of sexual activity, which was seen as the only identification that was unable to be explained away as simply friendship. We argue for equality, yet we refuse to allow non-heterosexual couples and LGBT+ people the same respect regarding methods of identifying romantic attraction. To view heterosexuality as the default, and having to “prove” any identity other than heterosexuality, is inequality and homophobic. As such, this paper will be organized into two parts. Part one will consist of how signs of romantic attraction can be identified outside of sexual activity and should be applicable for non-heterosexual couples and people, and part two will focus on the effects of sexualizing queer and LGBT+ identities and how it can be detrimental for queer youth. By reading the sense of possibility, which Susan Lancer defines as “a sense of the *possibility* of movement into (and out of and between) such categories of sexual identity,” in this case specifically the possibility of queerness, we can make an effort to reduce the amount of homophobia present when denouncing romantic love and attraction between queer or LGBTQ+ couples on notions such as “gals being pals” (Lancer 234).

Sexuality has become largely associated with sexual activity, but asexuality studies and the asexual community identify “Other attractional modes that are explored by asexual communities on- and offline [which] include *aesthetic* attraction (‘attraction to someone’s

appearance’) and *sensual* attraction (‘desire to have physical non-sexual contact with someone else, like affectionate touching’)” (Przybylo 5, emphasis not mine). There is more to one’s identity than sexual attraction. There is romantic attraction separate from sexual attraction, which, for most people, align similarly. As an example, for many heterosexual people, their romantic orientation is heteromantic. “*Romantic* and *aromantic* are also relevant descriptors for people who are not asexual, as they help to grasp an aspect of the manner in which people are attracted to each other, rather than assuming that attraction relies only upon the desire to have sex” (Przybylo 5, emphasis not mine). By basing the value of a romantic relationship on sexual activity, it devalues all other aspects of the relationship and invalidates non-sexual romantic relationships. A relationship read through signs of trust, desire, affection, and sacrifice can thereby complicate how we read and identify relationships. Without valuing non-sexual aspects of a relationship or attraction, sexual identities “are formulaic labels that exist within the modern regime of sexuality and glaze over most *aspects of relating*, including the many possible manners of attraction and the practices they generate” (Przybylo 5). Within queer relationships, be it friendship, romantic, or sexual, there seems to be an increase in forms of physical contact. But this does not mean any one of these relationships are more important or less valid due to including or not including such forms of physical contact.

The lack of these varying identities in media is one of the factors for why there is a set identity and mode of representation of queer, LGBT+, and asexual people. When most of one’s social knowledge comes from the media, that also becomes the only knowledge they reproduce in their everyday lives. Michele Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, notes:

This much is undeniable: the learned discourse on sex that was pronounced in the nineteenth century was imbued with age-old delusions, but also with systematic

blindnesses: a refusal to see and to understand; but further—and this is the crucial point—a refusal concerning the very thing that was brought to light and whose formulation was urgently solicited. For there can be no misunderstanding that is not based on a fundamental relation to truth. Evading this truth, barring access to it, masking it: these were so many local tactics which, as if by superimposition and through a last-minute detour, gave a paradoxical form to a fundamental petition to know. Choosing not to recognize was yet another vagary of the will to truth. (Foucault 55)

This practice of evading the truth, barring access to it, and masking it is exactly what happens when queer and LGBT+ identities are associated with sex and sexual promiscuousness. To not show or present asexual or non-sexual relationships as being valid romantic relationships evades the truth of what a relationship entails, which is more than having sex with another person or people. It bars access to such relationships between queer individuals, through laws and social practices advocating against gay marriage. The media also masks queerness as a dangerous identity that should not be allowed around one's children, which only serves to further sexualize, demonize, and make queer identities seem almost evil and wrong, when it is simply having a romantic attraction to another in a non-heterosexual way. Working off of Ela Przybylo's argument of "compulsory sexuality, which suggests that sex is necessary, liberatory, and integral to happiness and well-being," I show how romantic attraction can be identified without the need for sexual activity, thereby broadening and pluralizing what can "count" as romantic desire or a romantic relationship for both heterosexual, asexual, and LGBT+ people and relationships (8).

In order to push for this pluralizing view of romantic desire, there needs to be the acceptance of the possibility of queerness when viewing texts and media. By this I mean we must practice reading relationships or attraction through the four identifiers of trust, desire,

affection, and sacrifice. Doing this, we not only become open to possibility of various identities, but we also expand what relationships can look like; desexualize relationships; and make queer identities “family friendly,” without needing some form of “proof” that a character or particular person is queer through sexual means. When an outsider says a character or person is gay or a lesbian, it limits the person to that label, and the same goes for when one says someone is straight. The possibility of queerness and heterosexuality being read for each character and person until said character or person states their identity would allow for queer sexualities and identities to become part of the default, along with heterosexuality, without either needing to be proven one way or another. At the end of the day, the only person who should be able to label anyone is themselves for themselves.

Along with labels used when coming out, what happens when one comes out is also significant. Simon, in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, explains how he does not want him coming out to be such a big thing and how it should be something everyone has to do, even coming out straight to one’s parents. While this may be an understandable feeling, keeping an open mind and taking things in stride as people discuss their lovers or romantic interests can benefit people from having to come out for many reasons, especially because others make them feel that they are keeping a secret. For example, a man can discuss his interest in a woman. However, this simply tells one that he likes women, not that he does not like men as well. Just because someone says they like apples does not mean they do not like any other fruit at all, they are simply expressing their enjoyment of apples. This is the difference between pleasure and identity: one does not negate nor define the other, and this is a key point to keep in mind when reading with the possibility of queerness.

The same should be said about people who write letters to loved ones. We need to take in stride that, for example, Katherine Philips writing about her love for a woman means she romantically loves women. However, we cannot ascribe onto Philips that she is a lesbian, any more than we can ascribe that she is bisexual. We simply do not know because Philips has not said it one way or another, however, we *do* know she loves women, and that should be enough. By putting sex and sexual experience at the forefront of identification, lesbian and women-loving-women existence and attraction are seen as friendship rather than romantic desire. “Kristina Gupta elaborates on the ways in which compulsory sexuality is a system that encourages some people to have sex, even while banning marginalized groups from sexual expression through the process of ‘desexualization.’ Desexualization... functions to render marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, lesbians and transgender people... as ‘asexual’ by default--misusing the term ‘asexuality’ in the process” (Przybylo 15). By putting the focus on different identification methods of romantic attraction, these non-sexual expressions of desire between women, and other queer and LGBTQ+ people, can become more legitimized and viewed as romantic desire rather than simply friendship, without the need for sexual activity and risk sexualizing or invalidating queer existence, experiences, and identity. There is a key difference between this practice of desexualizing some queer identities and my argument for desexualizing queer experiences. While the desexualization of lesbians causes women-loving-women experiences to be seen as simply friendship, I am pushing for non-sexual means of identifying romantic attraction. By using the identifiers of trust, desire, affection, and sacrifice, we validate queer and asexual existence and experiences without the *need* for sex or sexual activity, because one should not have to have sex in order for their identities or experiences to be viewed as valid or real. I will show how we can read these non-sexual identifiers through three

different means of cultural knowledge production: contemporary popular novels and films, academic scholarship, and pulp fiction.

Part One: Identifying Romantic Attraction Through Non-Sexual Means

Beauty and the Beast

One of the best examples to show how these signs can be used to identify romantic attraction is *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Disney uses these four signs of attraction to show a growing love between Belle and Beast throughout the film without signs of sexual intimacy, except for two kisses shared between the two at the end of the movie. However, the focus of this film will be identifying these four signifiers of romantic attraction between Belle and Beast. While my focus of this essay is to show how queer existence can be viewed and identified through non-sexual means, I use *Beauty and the Beast* to show that these identifiers can be applied to any form of romantic attraction, be it between a heterosexual couple, queer couple, or even someone having feelings for another person (requited or unrequited). This is important because while queer people have often been sexualized throughout history, desire of women by men has also been sexualized, and this form of identification of romantic attraction can be used to add more depth into the perception of romance between people in different ways outside of sexual experiences depicted in movies and TV shows.

Beauty and the Beast (1991) is an animated film produced by Disney, marketed towards young children. I chose this film to represent the ways that studios have the ability to show love in different ways, especially since Belle is human and Beast is, well, not human. Disney produces a film that, as marketed towards children (and their parents who watch the film with them), is still able to depict growing fondness, attraction, and love between Belle and Beast, not only in a way that children can easily interpret but without the traditional and physical means of

showing attraction, such as kisses (until Beast turns human at the end of the film). While many of Disney's animated films do not show a lot of physically sexual means of attraction, such as kisses, *Beauty and the Beast* plays an interesting role because these means of showing growing attraction have to be done in a particular way considering Beast is a non-human character, which shows that these means of showing romantic attraction can take place without kissing or other physical forms of sexual attraction.

Beauty and the Beast tells the tale of a young woman who, to save her father from eternal imprisonment by the Beast, offers herself up in his place. As time passes, Belle and Beast grow fond of each other and fall in love. Sacrifice is often a form of showing love for another person. The person who sacrifices is the person who puts themselves through pain because they do not want a loved one to be hurt or in pain. Belle puts herself into the position of prisoner in order to have her father be free and warm in his own house in the village. In return, she promises to live in Beast's castle as his prisoner forever. This is also the beginning of Beast having a chance to develop a relationship with another being, as he had been living alone in the castle, outside of his servants who had been turned into animate inanimate objects (such as a talking clock or candle holder). One important thing in a relationship, in any relationship, is trust. Beast had none of Belle's trust, and vice versa, especially when she was crying in her room and he yells at her to eat with him or she "doesn't eat at all" (*Beauty and the Beast*). Beast wants to have dinner with Belle because he desires companionship. This desire for companionship expands throughout the movie, as we see the two becoming more and more close, and Belle treating Beast as a person, not as a monster. And it is exactly this that makes Beast see her as someone he loves. Belle shows him compassion, and shows him affection as she teaches him to read, and when she throws a snowball at him. It is these defining moments that Belle and Beast not only view each

other as equals but find they quite enjoy each other's company and desire it, as it makes them happy, unlike they were before.

Belle especially grows to trust Beast and views him as having humanity when he comes to save her when she attempts to run away from the castle. Her horse was frightened, and Belle was almost attacked by wolves until Beast came to save her. While he put up an indifferent or uncaring front, Belle saw that he was hurt trying to protect her. After Beast collapses, instead of taking her chance and running away, Belle not only helps him back to the castle, but she helps clean and wrap his wounds. Beast, even after his growling at her, saw that she really cared that he was hurt, so he let her take care of him. And Belle, knowing Beast risked his life to save her, learned that he was not entirely a bad person or being, that he deserved care just like anyone else. There are also signs of growing trust between the two as Beast does not take Belle throwing a snowball at him as a negative sign and, instead, sees it as a means of her wanting to do something fun with him, and that is something he's never experienced before. As such, it can be read as a sign of the trust he has for Belle: he does not view that as an act of insubordination or as a means of hurting him but rather as a means of enjoying each other's company and having a good time.

As the relationship between Belle and Beast grew, and while the sacrifice on Belle's part for her father's freedom can be seen as a form of familial love, the sacrifice Beast makes to set Belle free and save her father is one of romantic love. Beast does not want to be the reason for Belle being unable to help her father in his time of need, and no matter how much he loves her and wants to be with her, he chooses to let her go because, to him, her happiness is worth more than his own. He sacrifices his only chance at being human again, his only chance at love, true love, in order to let Belle save her father who means more to her than her own life. Beast letting

Belle going is also a sign of sacrifice in that Beast wanted to protect Belle from the hurt of being unable to do anything while her father is taken away to a psychiatric hospital and she is prisoner in the castle.

The affection shown through body language used in the film also speaks volumes in showing comfort, affection, and the desire to be with one another. When Belle becomes a common guest at Beast's dinner table, he tries to impress her and get her to like him by eating more properly and cleanly, as though he were physically human. Viewers see the return, when Belle, wanting Beast to be comfortable and not change for someone else, decides that instead of Beast trying to eat soup with a spoon and having a hard time, she would pick up her plate and drink from it instead. Seeing this, Beast copies, and both of them having found a nice middle ground. This is a sign of wanting to impress someone and being shown that there is no need to change who one is in order to be desired by another person because there is nothing wrong with the way they are doing things. There are also more smiles shared between the two throughout the movie, as they learn more about each other and spend more time together. They are able to share laughs, trust each other, and even dance together, which can be seen as a very emotionally intimate practice, as they are both very close. Dancing can also be seen as something that can make one feel very vulnerable, such as Beast feeling awkward and not wanting to make Belle uncomfortable about where he puts his paws until she puts them on her hip for him.

Another way Disney shows the change between the two from strangers and enemies to friends and lovers is through the songs they use throughout the film, specifically "Something There." Using lines such as "There may be something there that wasn't there before," and Belle singing in response with:

There's something sweet and almost kind

But he was mean and he was coarse and unrefined

And now he's dear and so I'm sure

I wonder why I didn't see it there before. ("Something There")

Even with Beast, the audience can see his trust and desire grow in the same song, as well as Beast noticing that Belle is seeing him as a person rather than a beast when he sings:

She glanced this way, I thought I saw

And when we touched she didn't shudder at my paw

No, it can't be, I'll just ignore

But then she's never looked at me that way before. ("Something There")

Both of them are learning and growing closer and more fonder of each other, shown through various means, such as song, body language, and their relationship growth over the course of the film. These signs of romantic attraction are there in many depictions of romantic relationships, but as Western society has associated sexuality with sex and a large part of a person's overall identity, especially when associated with queer people and queer identities, this method of reading romantic relationships often gets lost due to preconceived notions of queer identity and the lack of viewing media with a possibility of queerness instead of heteronormative and homophobic means of reading everything as heterosexual until told otherwise through labels or sexual activity between LGBT+ individuals.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda

Just as the signs of romantic attraction can be seen between the heterosexual couple of Belle and Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, the same signs, though in different situations, can be seen in the novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli. The novel follows a teenager named Simon whose email exchanges with an anonymous homosexual teenage boy

(who goes by the name “Blue” in his emails) at his high school were seen by Martin Addison, who then uses the photos he took of the emails to blackmail Simon, implying if Simon does not try to help Martin get together with Abby Suso, then he would tell the whole school that Simon is gay. While that is one of the main plot points of the book, the plot point this essay will focus primarily on is the one in which Simon’s growing love for (the out but anonymously, and therefore, closeted), Blue and his struggle to learn more about Blue, both in his relationship with him and Blue’s real life identity. I chose this novel because not only is it marketed towards young adults, as a YA novel, but it is one of the few novels with a gay male lead character that gets turned into the movie, *Love, Simon*.

While more LGBT+ novels are being written and becoming more accessible, with both positive events and a positive ending, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is one of the few, if not the only, novel with a movie adaptation that focuses on a gay lead character, portrays the gay characters as non-sexual beings, and shows the other sides of them. Both the novel and the movie show: the interactions between queer characters and their friends, family, and peers; the fears a queer person can have in terms of coming out; and the ways queer people can be harassed and bullied for being queer, often through sexually derogatory means. I also include the movie adaptation because movies have a much more prominent voice when it comes to the different literary mediums, and when the movie was released, there were so many responses and reactions regarding the representation of Simon and his relationship, both with Blue and his family. I will go more in depth regarding the movie and the reactions it caused in the public in part two of this essay, where I discuss how representation has a very prominent role in how different groups are viewed and why proper representation is impactful and important.

When beginning the novel, the first sign of romantic attraction the reader immediately notices is the sacrifice Simon makes by accepting being blackmailed in order to still be able to continue emailing with Blue, as Simon fears if the emails were leaked, Blue would stop emailing him. While most closeted people would worry about being outted to the school as reason to let themselves be blackmailed, Simon is also worried about losing Blue. One may believe that Simon may not care about being outted, or may not care as much about being outted when compared to the chance of losing Blue. However, later on in the novel, the readers see that Simon is putting up with this fear of being outted along with not wanting to lose Blue. Interestingly, it is not the fear of people knowing that Simon is gay that he is worried about. Instead, the readers see Simon's fear is being seen as a different person *because* people learn that he is gay. Juxtaposing this with how Simon still worried about losing Blue the whole time shows just how important Blue is to him, and it shows just how much Simon was willing to put up with in order to maintain his relationship with Blue, even without knowing who Blue was in person.

The whole time this goes on through the novel, Blue is blissfully unaware of anything that Simon is going through, because Simon chose not to tell him. While this can be a sign of Simon's fear of Blue no longer wanting to continue their relationship through emails if Blue finds out, they have a growing trust built between the two throughout the novel. The first interaction read between Blue and Simon is Blue having shared his story of how he realized he was gay. While these moments can come to fruition due to a sexual awakening regarding someone of the same gender (as it was with Blue), they are not always. Simon shares that he found out through a weird dream about Daniel Radcliffe and his obsession with Passion Pit until he realized it was not really about the music (Albertalli 13). To be able to share with someone one's "gay awakening" story is something very personal, possibly a few tiers below sharing

coming out stories and coming out to someone. The topics of Blue and Simon's conversations go from how they learned they were gay and Halloween costumes they wore growing up to discussing how they were planning to come out to their parents or friends and finding solace and comfort in each other as they go through the process of stressing over telling their parents or friends, what their reactions might be, and how things ended up turning out. They became each other's support, even noting that "just talking it over with you makes everything better" (Albertalli 147).

Another sign of trust between Simon and Blue is seen when they share their feelings regarding coming out to people in their lives, such as Blue with his parents and Simon with his friend and eventually his family. The fact that they find it easier to talk to each other about these things shows how comfortable, and therefore trusting, they are with each other. On top of that, as the novel progresses, Simon and Blue slowly share things that could help the other figure out who each other are if they really tried. While the fear of everything changing if they knew who each other were (either they are not attracted to each other, or something does not click like it does when they email each other), the desire to know who the other person is can still be read and felt by the reader. Their trust is also shown through the fact that they understand the importance of sharing those little clues: Blue states in an email, "I also have to confess that I've been looking extra carefully at people's T-Shirts at school to see if someone might be wearing an Elliott Smith shirt. I know it's a long shot. I also know it's really unfair, because I shouldn't be trying to figure out your identity when I don't give you any good clues about my own" (Albertalli 103). Simon suggests they exchange phone numbers, but when Blue apologizes and explains his hesitation, Simon immediately follows up with: "Not until you're ready, though. And I could never hate you. You're not going to lose me. Just think about it. Okay?" (Albertalli

185). They understand the importance of trust in their anonymous emailing situation and for their friendship and growing love and attraction for each other. They both want to keep this relationship they have developed with each other, and both are not willing to risk purposefully finding out who the other is in fear of losing what they have with each other.

Along with trust and sacrifice, Simon and Blue's relationship also shows signs of romantic love through affection and desire that is shared between them throughout the novel. Blue, knowing Simon's "Simon-logic" regarding how Simon should not be wearing a band shirt if he did not go see the band in person, states: "I would order you all kinds of band T-Shirts... Or we could just go to a live show. I mean, I don't actually know anything about music, but I'm guessing it would be fun if it was with you. Maybe one day" (Albertalli 107). Readers can see the desire to know who the other is, to be able to spend time together, to be together in a relationship in person. At one point, Blue and Simon begin to sign their emails as "Love, Simon" and "Love, Blue" (Albertalli 144). Eventually, Blue notes that he may know who Simon is, and Simon follows along and tries to guess who Blue is by asking if Blue fits in with some of the things Simon and (the person he believes Blue to be) Cal Price have done, which causes Blue to state that he is sorry, but that he is not who Simon thinks he is. It is at this point that Blue stops signing his emails with "Love" at the end. Their affection and desire is shown through the inclusion of "Love" at the end signing of their emails to each other. While they do stop signing their emails with "Love," it is not a sign that their shared affection and desire is gone, but that there is miscommunication and a bit of hurt. Blue stops in order to not get more attached to Simon than he already is, having read how Simon seemed to enjoy himself with another person who was not Blue. The fact that Blue got hurt due to his desire and love for Simon shows that he

loved Simon in the first place, whether he knew Simon in person or not, or if his guess at who Simon is was correct or not.

Once both Blue and Simon get through the hurt, they find their way back to each other, Simon through his email to Blue to meet him at the fair, and Blue through giving Simon an Elliott Smith shirt with his phone number hidden on a card inside the shirt (which Simon does not find until he is about to leave for the fair), a sign that Blue was ready for Simon to know who Blue was, and it was a sign that Blue was ready to take the risk. Simon's desire for Blue is also strong enough for him to project his feelings onto others that he believes to be Blue. With Cal Price, he kept looking for signs of Blue in Cal, taking his drawings of superheroes as being a sign of him being Blue (who really likes superheroes). However, this projection of desire just goes to show how much he wants to get to know Blue in person; it shows his desire for his relationship with Blue to be more than an email exchange.

While Simon and Blue's relationship does not play out like that of Belle and Beast, these signs of romantic attraction can be read in the same way. One has to put aside what they believe makes a romantic relationship when interpreting the relationship between people and remember that relationships are more than the physical, typical signs of a romantic relationship: the kissing, the sex, the sexual tension. By reading relationships through these different experiences, through shows of sacrifice, affection, desire, and trust, one desexualizes queer and LGBT+ relationships and identities and puts them on par with how heterosexual relationships are seen. When a heterosexual couple holds hands while walking down the street, they are often believed to be in a relationship, but when two women hold hands, they are seen as simply friends. Even worse is when two men are seen holding hands, that they can often be at the receiving end of insults, slurs, or physical violence, often due to the association of male queerness with the feeling of the

homosexual agenda being pushed onto the person (often a heterosexual and homophobic person), when all they are doing is holding hands. It is, unfortunately, quite often that people are sharing through various online forums that the homosexual agenda is being “shoved down” their throats at the mere image of women sharing a chaste kiss at their wedding or two men holding hands while walking down the street. This only goes to show how simple, non-sexual signs of queer desire or affection are seen as aggressive forms of distributing and enforcing a political and social agenda.

The Merchant of Venice

Along with pop culture, the academy is simply another field of social knowledge production, and the methods academics use to identify romantic attraction and validate romantic relationships can impact how people, often students and other academics, view and identify them as well. Both the social means of knowledge production, such as media and literature, and the academic, play a role in how young adults and adolescents develop views and beliefs regarding different topics of discussion, in this case, their views and beliefs on LGBT+ identities and relationships and how they are viewed. But many aspects of knowledge production comes from adults, and therefore it is important to look into how these productions of knowledge relay information and what information is being relayed.

In gay and lesbian studies, and sexuality studies, there had been the need to prove queer existence in history, and often times it was done through noting non-heterosexual sexual acts between two people. This was seen as a way to prove, without a doubt, that queer and non-heterosexual people, as we define them today, did exist throughout history. In this way, the sexual acts could not be easily brushed off as being homosocial friendship or female platonic friendship. In regards to *The Merchant of Venice*, I use this play as a sample to show how sexual

queer identity can be reproduced and also how romantic attraction can be viewed in non-sexual ways in the institution of the academy. While there has been progress in using more “subjective” methods of identifying queer romantic attraction, such as interpreting language used, comparing different relationships, or viewing two peoples’ experiences together as a sign of partnership, the “objective” method was through identifying sexual connotations in various texts. For example, Antonio states the following when Bassanio requests his help:

I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it,
And if it stand, as you yourself still do,
Within the eye of honour, be assured
My purse, my person, my extremest means,
Lie all unlocked to your occasions. (1.1.135-1.1.139).

While some scholars focus on this scene, and others, as a show of Antonio’s commitment through offering all he is (and all he has) to Bassanio in order to help Bassanio with his needs and desires, even if it is to marry Portia, other scholars focus on the sexual connotations behind the language used: For example: when Antonio says Bassanio can have his purse, scholars have argued “The purse is Elizabethan slang for genitals” (Hammond 91).

Beyond this connotation, there is also the push for using these sexual meanings to further validate one’s argument for the existence of queer desire. Hammond notes:

When Salerio describes Antonio’s emotion as ‘affection’, he is using a word which was much stronger in Elizabethan English than it is today. As well as ‘kind feeling, fondness’ it also meant ‘passion’, especially sexual passion, and the disturbance of the mind’s equanimity by violent feelings which it cannot control... Though the first line is coolly courteous, ‘Say how I lov’d you’ grows more intimate, and leads up to the poignant

“Whether *Bassanio* had not once a love’... All the characters recognize Antonio’s special love for Bassanio, but what exactly it amounts to, no one says. (Hammond 92-94, emphasis not mine)

Notice how these lines could hold the same meaning when the reference to sexual passion is taken out if non-sexual means of identifying desire and romantic love were normalized. Various scenes in *The Merchant of Venice* can be viewed as having the *possibility* of queerness, and if one was to interpret what that possibility could mean for the relationship between Bassanio, Portia, and Antonio, there may spring up more variance in terms of how one can view relationships as a whole. For example, Antonio making the following promise to Portia:

I once did lend my body for his wealth
Which, but for him that had your husband’s ring,
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly (Shakespeare 5.1.249-5.1.253).

Antonio can be read as establishing what he is willing to give up for his dear Bassanio, and he willingly promises his own soul as a promise that Bassanio will never intentionally break Portia’s faith in Bassanio’s relationship with her. Read with the possibility of queerness, this moment can be viewed as Antonio forever tying himself and his life to that of Bassanio’s, someone he loves enough to do so without hesitation. Without the possibility of queerness, it can be read as Antonio giving up his place next to Bassanio’s, as his dear friend, as that place is now for Portia.

To view different scenes and moments in literature and history with the possibility of queerness, we begin to view situations in dramatically different lights. Antonio can be viewed as

being simply someone who deeply cares for his friend Bassanio or as someone who loves Bassanio dearly enough to stay with him and give him everything Antonio had built up, has, and is, knowing he will never be loved the same way because Bassanio loves Portia. However, there can also be a reading in which Bassanio loves Antonio in return, as much as (if not more than) Bassanio loves Portia, as a simple nudge from Antonio to hand over the ring as payment was quickly complied with, whereas he had clear reservations the whole time leading up to that moment. To view things with the possibility of queerness is to allow for all these different possibilities to take place, co-exist, and view how it can cause so many different, and all valid, interpretations.

Even outside of *The Merchant of Venice*, there is the question scholars have about the separation between friendship and sexual relationships: Ruth Vanita argues that “Like many lesbian and gay studies scholars today, Vicinus invokes the ‘erotic’ to bridge the gap between sexual relations and romantic friendship” and that this method leaves unanswered the question:

...when persons of the same sex in the nineteenth century shared a bed, either intermittently or in the long term, embraced, kissed, and wrote letters or poetry to each other sprinkled with romantic endearments, declarations of loving commitment, and expressions of yearning to be together, may these be read as evidence of sexual or even erotic engagement with one another? Or was this just the way romantic friends or even good friends were expected to conduct themselves in that era? (Vanita 133).

Vanita writes this regarding Martha Vicinus’s book, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women*, and I argue that there is a really simple answer to that question: they may just be romantic partners, even with or without sex because neither a relationship nor romantic interest is or needs to be dependent on whether one’s relationship with their partner(s) includes erotic or

sexual activities. Even more important is Vanita's use of the word "friends" when regarding two women who are declaring their loving commitment and expressions of yearning for each other. In a heterosexual scenario of the same, the two would immediately be thought of as lovers, so why is the same courtesy not given to women when they are in the same position?

Vanita also states, regarding love and friendship being viewed simultaneously, that:

"she [Vicinus] is much closer to the spirit of those who have written about same-sex love in the West, from Sappho, Plato, and Cicero, through Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Katherine Phillips, to Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. None of these writers made an absolute distinction between friendship and love. In their writings, the erotic and the friendly compose a seamless continuum, with spontaneous and ultimately inexplicable attraction forming the glue. It was no accident that Jane Austen titled an early work, 'Love and Friendship,' not 'Love or Friendship'" (Vanita 134).

It is this that I am trying to make my point; love and friendship do not have to be separate, and oftentimes are *not* separate. They are merely viewed as such due to social knowledge production calling for the inclusion of sexual engagement between people in a romantic relationship.

Hammond notes: "Once again, the public language of male friendship contains within it the possibility of a more private and sexual relation" (Hammond 94). By emphasizing sexual acts between queer men, it devalues all other aspects of their relationship, putting care, nurture, and affection second to their sexual experiences. And by questioning the validity of a possible lesbian relationship due to the lack of sexual or erotically charged actions devalues any and all non-sexual relationships. People often hope to marry their best friend, and oftentimes they do, but if one was to look into the life of a married couple, sex and sexual intimacy may not always be present or it may be reduced compared to the beginning of one's relationship. However, signs

of love, desire, and affection remain if one looks deeply. These signs are read when one partner show by making breakfast for the other or wishes their partner a safe trip to work; letting one's partner sleep in on a weekday to take care of their child who is crying; and it can even be sacrificing one's sleep to stay up with their partner to talk about something, nothing, and everything all at once, at one a.m. on a weekday. An expression of romantic love is much more than kissing, touching, or having sex. It is about the trust between partners, the sacrifices they make for each other, how they show affection and desire to be with one another, even when affection and love is shown using phrases such as "be safe," "welcome home," or "have a nice day."

Part Two: Why It is Important to Desexualize Queer Identities

For decades, academics have had to fight to prove queer existence in history through pointing out homoerotic subtext, the sodomy that took place in early modern England, or the implied sex between two characters of the same gender or sex. However, proving queer existence through sexual practices, and peoples' notions of queer people, have, in part, led to the sexualization, and sexual association, of queer people. There needs to be a distance created and enforced between queer people and the sexualization of them. This includes the need for having to prove queer existence through people and characters having homoerotic subtext, or looking at word play that could have implied sexual context. For example, as mentioned before, "purse" being slang for genitals. This can be very harmful for growing youths who are figuring out their sexuality and having no community to go to, outside of gay bars, to find people who they might be able to relate to.

Current Views and Knowledge Production Practices

Using sexual relationships as proof that queer people existed in the past through in this way, runs risk of these queer identities only being sought and seen through a sexual lens. Many queer people today would benefit drastically from their identities separated from the sexually promiscuous and “unnatural” identity many people place on them. When it comes to other forms of social knowledge production, pulp fiction was a genre from the 1950s and 60s that was not as regulated as regular literature, mostly because it was cheap to make mass-market and cheap to sell. Because of this, and because the literature was not as respected, the pulp fiction novels were able to be less censored, though some laws still applied.

This included maintaining the lack of obscene material, such as positive endings for queer stories because it would promote that type of sexuality. As such, through to policing of the depicted queer identities, the endings had to come back full circle and portray the content of the novels as punishable and unnatural, and therefore ending in a way that is “fitting” for those who act upon their sinful desires. The pulp fiction novels’ policed intention to reinforce society’s beliefs in the immorality and perversion of queer sexualities is shown especially when Forrest writes:

An inverse law seems to be at work on pulp fiction novels: the better and more honest the book, the more its jacket copy must moralize against it. For lesbians readers, mixed messages indeed... The viciousness of the jacket copy is designed not only to hold off censors but to short circuit any insights by lesbian readers who might add up the truths in this book [*Twilight Girl*] and begin to question the inimical judgments made of them.

(Forrest xvi)

These lesbian pulp fiction novels all were written in an attempt to write “about lesbian lives as honestly as they could,” but as a means to get the content out there, the jacket covers of these novels were all written for the censors, as were the endings: death of the lesbian character(s), being forced to live life alone, or madness (Forrest xvi).

Katherine V. Forrest, who put together and wrote the introduction for *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels 1950-1965*, talks about the connection between the writers of lesbian pulp fiction and the cover copiers, saying: “For lesbian books, cover copy proclaimed our evil in order to meet morality requirements while the come-hither illustrations beckoned the reader into their pages and promised lascivious details” (Forrest x). Unfortunately, “we [lesbians] were in every way susceptible to accepting and even agreeing with the larger culture’s condemnation of us” (Forrest xiv). This practice, the act of containing all that was freed within the novels and stories, only serves to continue the push for a heteronormative society where queer sexualities need to be seen and condemned to maintain societal norms and expectations. This same practice still applies in media today with “queerbaiting” (the practice of suggesting the sexual orientation or queer feelings for another character without any intention of making it canon) and the “bury your gays” trope (killing off queer characters in shows or movies).

Practices such as these in mainstream media and other forms of social knowledge production has caused a distinct identity to queer sexualities due to how they are represented in media. As a result of this, and as a result of the current political climate, GLAAD has noted in its 2018 executive summary that 31% of people in 2017 were “somewhat” or “very” uncomfortable with seeing same-sex couples *holding hands* (“Accelerating Acceptance 2018”). On top of that, they note in the report “This year, the acceptance pendulum abruptly stopped and swung in the

opposite direction. More non-LGBTQ adults responded that they were “very” or “somewhat” uncomfortable around LGBTQ people in select scenarios. The decline is paired with a significant increase in LGBTQ people reporting discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity. The decline in acceptance and rise in discrimination found in the survey corresponded to an increase in hateful rhetoric in our culture” (“Accelerating Acceptance 2018”). By showing more positive and non-sexual representations of queer sexualities in the media, and causing more positive exposure to the general public who may or may not know a queer person in their lives, it could serve to be a representation of just how human, normal, and “family friendly” these identities are, and how they do not have to be associated with sex to represent them or explain what a lesbian is to their children.

The mentality against homosexual and queer identities is something that needs to be addressed, and Gregory Herek’s research shows:

Interactions have consequences for both beliefs and affects associated with lesbians and gay men. Because they provide information, face-to face interactions tend to refute stereotypes and reduce ignorance, which Marmor (1980) identified as the most important sources of hostility toward homosexual persons. At the same time, interpersonal encounters have an emotional impact that individuals can generalize to all lesbians and gay men. Thus, heterosexuals who know lesbians and gay men are better able than others to recognize stereotypes as inaccurate, and are more likely to express tolerant attitudes as well” (“The Roots Of Homophobia”).

While we cannot give everyone a “gay best friend,” how LGBT+ people are represented and reproduced in media can have an effect on the attitudes and beliefs people have regarding

LGBT+ people. At the same time, separating the sexual connotations and associations with LGBT+ identities can also have a positive effect in helping to change these negative views.

These identities being associated with overt sexuality cause minor same-sex shows of affection to be deemed inappropriate: for example, the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) scene with two men dancing the waltz together at the end caused a significant uproar. A movie theater in Alabama refused to play the movie because it had a gay character, LeFou, Gaston's right-hand man. LeFou's "gay" moment is him dancing with another man at the end of the film, a scene which only gets one second of screen time. At the same time, many fans were underwhelmed with the scene. *USA Today* reports: "in an interview with *Attitude* magazine... Condon said the character LeFou (Josh Gad) would be portrayed as gay. This caused the film to get shelved in Kuwait and Malaysia, to be given a stricter rating in Russian theaters and to be boycotted by one Alabama drive-in" (Lawler). This is not a criticism to whether the character LeFou was gay *enough* or if the scene could or should qualify as a gay scene. Instead, this is to highlight the reactions people have to the word "gay," and how it is interpreted by people. What do people imagine or envision when they hear the word "gay?" Is it sexual activity between people of the same gender? Is it two people kissing? Is it flamboyant outfits, nail polish, and makeup worn by men or women being portrayed as masculine or in pantsuits? Focusing on the non-sexual aspect of queer relationships and desire help make these identities and feelings more normalized and viewed in a different light, outside of the personal and sexually intimate behind-closed-door activities. Identifying oneself as queer or gay does not mean they have to now fit into the aesthetic expression of that identity.

While there has been a push for more diverse LGBT+ representation in media, there is still a lot of pushback. In one instance, the website entitled One Million Moms has a campaign

regarding Hallmark no longer supposedly being a “family friendly” channel due to the channel having aired a Zola commercial which showed two brides kissing. One Million Moms stated:

Until recently, Hallmark had a good record for keeping their movies and commercials family friendly. Now, parents can no longer trust Hallmark because Hallmark is no longer allowing parents to be the primary educators when it comes to sex and sexual morality. (“Hallmark is Now Airing LGBT Commercials”)

At this point, women-loving women are being associated with education regarding sex and sexual morality. Instead of comparative connections (such as explaining two men or two women can love each other the same way a man and woman do), they are associating queer identity with that of sexual morality, as if to say that two women kissing on their wedding day is morally unjust, and sex, which is not at all taking place at the wedding.

The campaign announcement continues, bringing up specifically how homosexuality is being forced and cannot be considered family friendly, stating:

Parents need to know that they could now come face-to-face with the LGBT agenda when they sit down to watch the Hallmark Channel.

Family entertainment is not the outlet in which to be politically correct by forcing tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality - a sinful lifestyle that Scripture clearly deems as wrong. You can read so in Romans 1:18-32” (“Hallmark is Now Airing LGBT Commercials”).

They wanted people to take action, and asked Hallmark to “stay true to its family friendly roots that so many families have grown to love, and to keep sex and sexual content – including the promotion of homosexuality – out of its programming” and over 35,000 (and over 58,000 in their campaign after Hallmark reinstated the Zola ad) people took action in support of the petition

(“Hallmark is Now Airing LGBT Commercials”). So many people taking action and speaking up regarding the commercial of two women sharing a kiss during their wedding ceremony caused Hallmark to take down the that commercial, along with three other ones from Zola, which also feature same-sex couples in the ad. The spokesperson stated: ““The decision not to air overt public displays of affection in our sponsored advertisement, regardless of the participants, is in line with our current policy, which includes not featuring political advertisements, offensive language, R-rated movie content and many other categories”” (Murphy). Hallmark has since apologize for taking down the commercial, with Mike Perry, the president and chief executive of Hallmark Cards, stating: “the team at Hallmark Channel’s parent company, Crown Media Family Networks, had ‘been agonizing over this decision as we’ve seen the hurt it has unintentionally caused’ and that ‘they believe this was the wrong decision’” (Ortiz).

This is not to show how much power or influence One Million Moms has but more a method to point out the backing and opposition there is towards acceptance and the language used by people against homosexual representation, whether it is positive or negative. What part of two women sharing a chaste kiss can be described as “overt public displays of affection?” Clearly, there is something going on when people argue that a gay character or a kiss between brides during their wedding for a commercial is not family friendly, especially when those same aspects, when portrayed by a heterosexual couple, is not a problem. This begs the question: what part is not family friendly? Is it simply queer people existing? Or having to explain that two men or two women can love each other the way a man and a woman can? Or is it that it goes against religious beliefs or practices? Maybe it is something children should not be “forced” to watch, even when violence and sexual content is displayed in the media as well? There is clearly a tie between the queer identity and sex(uality), and that tie is causing small displays of affection

between same-sex or LGBT+ people to be automatically blacklisted from being “family friendly.”

The lack of LGBT representation in media for younger youth can be due to, in part, films with LGBT characters often being rated above PG, oftentimes PG-13 or R. The Motion Picture Association of America (M.P.A.A.) historian, Jon Lewis, notes that “the M.P.A.A. is harder on films featuring gay sex or characters than it is on movies featuring straight sex... [Love, Simon] also follows a gay protagonist, and is rated PG-13 for ‘thematic elements, sexual references, language, and teen partying’” which begs the question: “is homosexuality the theme in question?” (Abrams). The Vanity Fair article, “The Persistent Trouble with Movie Ratings,” continues to say “According to Lewis, the M.P.A.A.’s logic is simple: “They are the average Americans--that’s their argument. ‘Most parents think that.’ They are not saying that gay sex is good or bad--they’re saying that parents would have an issue with their kids seeing that” (Abrams). Now the question is why? I argue that it is because parents may be worried their children will be or become gay, or they believe that gay or LGBT people “[expose] their peers to harmful influences” (Russel et al. 641).

After looking at these methods of containing queer identities and reasons for why “family friendly” does not seem to include queer and LGBT+ representation, there is one more aspect of today’s views and social practices that needs to be noted: the viewing of one’s queer identity being seen as a secret if it is not disclosed. Queer people cannot outright be who they are and love who they love without backlash, but they also cannot be in the closet or choose not to disclose their orientation or identity without issue either. In *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Simon comes out as gay to his friend Abby (who he has only known for six months) before he comes out to Leah and Nick (who he has known for six years). He explains to Leah, who had

been upset at not feeling trusted (though she claims she has no right to such feelings as coming out is Simon's thing) as Simon came out to Abby first, that "I guess there hasn't been time for her [Abby] to have any set ideas about me yet" (Albertalli 133). Simon has spent his entire life being presumed as a straight male, and this notion or identity that people have of him causes him difficulty when he wants to come out to his friends and family. Throughout the novel, Simon is constantly explaining how coming out is always seen as such a big thing, and that he feels he cannot come out, not because he would not be accepted by his family, but because everyone would make it a big deal, as if he is no longer the same person.

When Simon eventually comes out to his longest-known best friends, Nick and Leah, Leah is upset that Simon did not tell her sooner. She says, "Then why did you come out to her first?" (283). Leah had an issue with Simon not coming out to her first, and while she does note, often, that she does not "have the right to give a shit" because it is his thing (Albertalli 283). She tells Simon, "But when you told her first, it was like, I didn't even see that coming. I thought you trusted me" (Albertalli 284). She continues to say "...apparently you trust her more... which is awesome, because how long have you known her? Six months? You've known me for six years" (Albertalli 284). Leah is a good example of the mentality people can have regarding a queer person's coming out.

While Leah notes that she has no right to care or be upset that she was not one of the first people Simon came out to, I want to focus on why it is exactly that she feels upset. She felt that she was not trusted, and this brings me to my point regarding one's identity: when it is not straight or cis-gendered, it is treated as a secret, something one is hiding, something one should bring up because it is deemed, by some people, as important information that they should know about someone. And this is not just the case in fiction novels. Eve Sedgwick notes in

Epistemology of the Closet, a court case in 1973, where an eight-grade science teacher was demoted to a non-teaching position by the Board of Education of Montgomery County, Maryland, because they found out he was gay. Sedgwick explains:

When Acanfora spoke to news media, such as “60 Minutes” and the Public Broadcasting System, about his situation, he was refused a new contract entirely... The federal district court that first heard his case [held] that Acanfora’s recourse to the media had brought undue attention to himself and his sexuality, to a degree that would be deleterious to the educational process. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed. They considered Acanfora’s public disclosures to be protected speech under the First Amendment... [However], the appellate court affirmed its decision not to allow Acanfora to return to teaching. Indeed, they denied his standing to bring the suit in the first place, on the grounds that he had failed to note on his original employment application that he had been, in college, an officer of a student homophile organization--a notation that would, as school officials admitted in court, have prevented his ever being hired. The rationale for keeping Acanfora out of his classroom was thus no longer that he had disclosed too much about his homosexuality, but quite the opposite, that he did not disclose enough” (Sedgwick 69).

One cannot be out and fully accepted, nor can they choose to not disclose information and are viewed as keeping a secret. The ignorance people have to one’s non-heterosexual or non-cis-gendered identity is put on the person to disclose and tell, because they are otherwise assumed to be heterosexual or cis-gendered and therefore given the same treatment, respect, and access as heterosexual and cis-gender people. Researchers identify homosexuality as “a stigma that falls into the category of blemishes of individual character... this [is] a ‘discreditable’ stigma, that is,

one that may be concealed but has the potential to discredit the character of its holder... the stigma of homosexuality can be deeply discrediting” (Russel et al. 635). To have simply an identity being a sole reason for someone to be discreditable is something that needs to change, as a person’s color, race, ethnicity, and/or sexual or gender identity should not be the basis upon which credibility relies on. The default being the heterosexual identity causes surprise and accusation when someone finds out one is not heterosexual, and the openness to the possibility of queerness helps eliminate these surprises and accusations of withholding “necessary” information, which is, in turn, used to discredit queer and LGBT+ people.

Our political climate, social practices, and methods of knowledge production all play a role in how queer and LGBT+ people and relationships are read and seen. Because of the sexual connotation ascribed onto queer identities, there are many methods that exist and were created to police how society as a whole is granted information and knowledge is produced: there is the policing of how stories are advertised and end in the lesbian pulp fiction novels of the 50s and contemporary shows and movies through the “bury your gays” trope; how movies and shows are rated by the M.P.A.A. when LGBT+ characters are involved; and how non-sexual displays of affection by a queer couple is viewed through different standards than the same being displayed by a heterosexual couple. Parents are also a significant source of policing knowledge. On top of this, the queer identity is views as a discreditable stigma, which ties this all together to show just how sexualized even innocuous acts such as holding hands generates pushback and views of inappropriateness due to the sexual connections a queer identity has. Because of these preconceived notions, queer people are made to feel as though coming out is such a big deal because *other people* make it a big deal. And they make it a big deal because their views about this now-out person change, which can change how they interact with them. Now that we see

how our current means of social knowledge production works to maintain a heteronormative world, we can begin to see why change is very much needed and beneficial.

How the Possibility of Queerness Can Be Beneficial

One of the biggest concerns in the LGBT+ community is the safety of LGBT+ youth and adolescents. In the case of children and young adults needing to stay in the closet to be safe, research has also been done regarding the effects of adolescents coming out regarding their LGBT identity during school. A study titled "Being Out at School: The Implications for School Victimization and Young Adult Adjustment" describes how "coming out is associated with greater risk for peer victimization" and "studies of LGB adults indicate that disclosure of LGB status is associated with positive social and emotional adjustment" (Russell et al. 635). Coming out is beneficial in some means, as it helps with adjustment in life, however, it is also tied in with the victimization these children and young adults face due to coming out. Russel et al. also identify that "LGBT victimization is the key factor that suppresses the positive effect of coming out on adjustment" and that "Multiple studies document that younger youth are less accepting of LGBT peers" (640-641; 637). As such, it is increasingly important to think about how productions of knowledge affect not only adults but young adults as well.

As I explained earlier on in the essay that being able to label oneself is important because how one comes out impacts how people react to it, especially in the case of young adults. It is also important for the person to come out for themselves, and not have others come out for them (unless, of course, they were asked to by the one wanting to come out). This is clearly represented by both Blue and Simon in *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Blue tells Simon that his parents (who are divorced and his father remarried) were in Blue's and his mother's house without any prior warning (which his father had been doing since the divorce), and his

parents were laughing and talking about something. Blue says: “I was positive my mom had told my dad I was gay, which would just be—I don’t know,” before he changes topic back to explaining why his parents were in the same room laughing and smiling (Albertalli 144). The sense the reader gets from this moment is that Blue does not know exactly how to feel if someone else, even if it was his mother, came out for him. And while it may not be exactly clear as to whether Blue was feeling neutral or negative regarding this possibility, there is a feeling of hesitation. This can be due to Blue feeling as though he did not have the choice nor control in coming out for himself and having someone else do so for him.

Simon, however, did not get to choose how he came out to the world, due to Martin advertising on their high school’s anonymous rumors Tumblr page, Creekwood Secrets:

SIMON SPIER’S OPEN INVITATION TO ALL DUDES

Dear all dudes of Creekwood,

With this missive, I hereby declare that I am supremely gay and open for business.

Interested parties may contact me directly to discuss arrangements for anal buttsex. Or blue-jobs. But don’t give me blue balls. Ladies need not apply. That is all. (Albertalli 158-159).

The way Martin outs Simon in this blatant, sexual way, causes students at their school to play on that sexual deviancy in order to make fun of Simon. There are students who change Simon and Martin’s character’s names for the play they are in from “Faggin” and “Faggin’s Boy” to inappropriate, homophobic slurs, as well as some boys going into the school auditorium, where Simon and his fellow theater students were rehearsing for their play, in dresses over their pants and pretending to grind on one another.

Martin decided to out Simon in such a way that would be perceived as shameful, humiliating, and sexual. Instead of outing Simon by simply telling the school that Simon is gay, he goes above and beyond, making Simon out to be a sexually promiscuous character who is looking for sex with other guys, which is the same energy coming from the boys who sexualize Simon being gay by associating gayness with overt sexuality. Simon's experience emphasizes how important one's identity is, because when they come out for themselves, if they so choose, they are holding the power. But once someone else labels them, or comes out for them, the person who is labeled loses the power to make their own decisions about their own life. They no longer have control over how they come out, which affects people's reactions and actions towards the person.

Martin's association of Simon with sexual promiscuity caused others to do the same. The person's life is decided for them by someone else, which is not uncommon as dominant groups, in various aspects of identity such as race, gender, religion, and ethnicity, do so to the minority groups in order to control them or control how people view them. If one cannot control the person or specific group they have issues with, as Martin lost control over Simon when Simon stopped letting Martin blackmail him, they target how that person or group is viewed by everyone else, seen when Martin dramatizes Simon's gay identity as being an open call to all men for sex. By no longer putting emphasis on the *need* to come out of the closet or disclose one's identity, and by accepting things in stride when one shares such information, we break down the very means that cause people to respond in such a way in an effort to humiliate and discredit queer and LGBT+ people.

To follow up, when Simon is stopped by Martin to apologize about how he did not know posting about Simon being “open for business” for “anal buttsex,” would cause such a reaction from their peers, Simon replies:

‘I think you’re a huge fucking asshole. I mean, don’t even fucking pretend you didn’t know this would happen. You blackmailed me. This was—I mean, wasn’t that the whole goddamn point? Humiliating me?’

...

‘And you know what? You don’t get to say it’s not a big thing. This is a big fucking thing, okay? This was supposed to be—this is mine. I’m supposed to decide when and where and who knows and how I want to say it.’ Suddenly, my throat gets thick. ‘So, yeah, you took that from me. And then you brought Blue into it? Seriously?’

You fucking suck, Martin. I mean, I don’t even want to look at you.’ (Albertalli 196-197)

From Simon’s outburst, one can solidify that coming out is a very personal and emotional thing.

This can even be seen through the multiple exchanges Blue and Simon have on the topic.

However, the key is when Simon says, “I’m supposed to decide when and where and who knows and how I want to say it” (Albertalli 196). One’s identity is not for others to share; how one shares is important to how it comes across and is received by the other party. Not only does labeling or outing someone cause the person to be put into a box, but the way it is done by another person can cause people to view that person a specific way. When we stop ourselves from labeling others as heterosexual until proven or disclosed otherwise, we give the control back to the minority. It lets them pick when, where, and how they choose to come out, if they so choose, and this is important in how others respond to it as well. While we cannot change everyone’s mind regarding how they view LGBT+ people and identities, we can control our

individual impulses to label people based on our perception of them and give them back control over how, to who, and if they choose to come out or disclose their identity. And this can impact how our children and adolescents around us also view and act around and regarding queer and LGBT+ people.

Labels and coming out are very impactful in terms of how the person is then viewed, though it should not change a thing. However, that is not the only aspect that benefits from being read with the possibility of queerness. Referring back to Foucault, the media masks queer relationships and chooses to participate in queerbaiting viewers for higher ratings from queer viewers. It bars access to the variations of queer identity outside of the sexual deviant, which causes many people who do not know an out, queer person, to associate queerness with that of a sexually promiscuous and dangerous identity. In this case, one can positively participate in knowledge production and open the minds of viewers by showing examples and narratives in film and media about the various identities queer people have, not just one that is flamboyant and effeminate, but also ones that look “normal;” that are effeminate women and masculine men; ones who go against traditional roles of masculinity/male and femininity/female while still being “normal” and participating in society just as the majority does.

In the *Time* article, “*Love, Simon* Is a Groundbreaking Gay Movie. But Do Today's Teens Actually Need It?” Daniel D’Addario notes Simon as being “a gay teen who is very carefully built to seem as straight as possible.” Being gay, queer, or a lesbian does not mean there is only one look to those labels, and that is specifically what both *Love, Simon* and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* are showing: anyone can be gay, not just the guys who are effeminate or flamboyant, but the ones who look just like regular, heteronormative people, because LGBT+ people are regular people. D’Addario is associating a “straight man” as looking like a typical

American, typically masculine, wearing not-really-flashy clothes. Basically, looking heteronormative and not “gay.”

What *Love, Simon* shows is that *anyone* can be gay, because being gay is not a catchall term that changes how one presents their identity. To have Simon look like any other teenager who may be coded as heterosexual, while he actually identifies as gay, is important *because* it shows that queer identity is not able to be put into a box with similar expressions of identity. It shows that identities have so many facets created by each individual person who makes their queer identity their own: some do it by wearing bright clothing; by not worrying about gendered clothing; by men wearing skirts and crop tops; and some by still following traditional expectations of dress for men and women and simply viewing their identity as who they are attracted to, such as a effeminate women identifying as a lesbian.

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D’Addario goes on to note that *Love, Simon* “with every narrative twist moves further into a fantasyland idyll, could have used some of [*Riverdale* and *13 Reasons Why*’s] probing curiosity about what really makes teenagers ache or yearn or want to grow up,” but he fails to

consider that queer people, both youths and adults, ached and yearned for exactly the fantasyland idyll that every straight person got in a movie advertised as a romantic comedy. Many fans on Twitter stated:

“For the closeted high schoolers we were. For the closeted high schoolers there still are. And for our younger selves that supported every goddamn str8 teen rom com. *It’s time we got our own*”

“Dear @GBerlanti Thank you for making @lovesimonmovie that shows the world just a flicker of how hard coming out can be for LGBTQ youth *even in the most accepting of families and the best of circumstances.*”

“I’ve never been comfortable kissing or putting my arm around my gf in a movie theatre or public in general. Tonight I laid my head on her shoulder while we watched Love, Simon and *felt completely comfortable for the first time*. So yeah, I’d say this movie is pretty important” (@Samgreis; @CodyMatzFox9; @whorefrost, emphasis mine).

As idyllic as *Love, Simon* may be, with Simon having parents, family, and friends accept him for being gay, for the support of the teachers, especially Ms. Albright the theater teacher (who made sure that the teens being offensive regarding Simon being gay got in trouble and learned their lesson), it does not in any way mean that that is not a future to be strived for.

Though there has been a massive change regarding how LGBT+ people are viewed by society, GLAAD notes that the decline in non-LGBT+ people’s comfort with queer people in different scenarios is “paired with a significant increase in LGBTQ respondents reporting discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity. The decline in acceptance and

rise in discrimination found in the survey corresponded to an increase in hateful rhetoric in our culture,” (“Accelerating Acceptance 2019”). This is an obvious sign of the severe need for change, especially regarding how LGBT+ people are viewed. I emphasize again that 31% of people stated they were somewhat or very uncomfortable with LGBT+ people *holding hands*.

At the same time, these negative and hypersexualized portrayals have also affected the younger generation. GLAAD also notes there is:

Surprisingly, however, an evident downward shift in comfort levels happened within participants ages 18-34. While young people are identifying as LGBTQ in higher rates than ever before, there has also been an uptick in non-LGBTQ young people pushing back against acceptance. The younger generation has traditionally been thought of as a beacon of progressive values. We have taken that idea for granted and this year’s results show that the sharp and quick rise in divisive rhetoric in politics and culture is having a negative influence on younger Americans. (“Accelerating Acceptance 2019”)

Movies like *Love, Simon* are important, because it highlights still ongoing homophobic practices in young adolescent life, though it does not look like it once did. And to have more people being able to speak up, even teachers like Ms. Albright, helps queer and LGBT+ know that there are allies to help them and stand up for them. When it came out on March 16, 2018 by 20th Century Fox Studios, there had been so much feedback from people who went to go watch it. Social media, especially Twitter, blew up with teens, young adults, and adults discussing how they felt having watched the movie. However, people, like D’Addario, note numerous reasons for why *Love, Simon* is not needed. D’Addario states:

Young queer people in bad situations, for whom it could represent a meaningful piece of affirmation, might well find its stabs at relatability fairly ludicrous...But those kids who

were met with support when they came out are probably too sophisticated for *Love, Simon*—so much so that its vision of how good it feels for a masculine, traditionally attractive bro to receive encouragement might not resonate at all. (D’Addario)

There is an understood practice that Hollywood tends to portray who they believe would be the most attractive for the audience to view, or what would be more relatable. However, simply because Simon, played by actor Nick Robinson, is a “masculine, traditionally attractive bro” receiving encouragement and support from people for being out as gay is not typically what people typically resonated with. They resonated with the fact that Simon is a *gay* main character.

People on Twitter, after *Love, Simon*’s release, raved about how heartwarming and inspiring the movie had been. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and its movie adaptation, has queer characters, has queer characters of color, has characters of color, has so much diversity, that as a romantic-comedy it can get away with being a feel-good movie with a happy ending for gay characters. This is because it is the first of its kind. Throughout all of history, queer characters were demonized, killed off, barely had two lines, and were the butt of every joke. And more positive movies about queer people and queer history all portray its disturbing and dark history. While the latter are important to have, it is also important to have feel-good, heartwarming, positive, happy-ending movies featuring queer main characters that, and this is important, do not die at the end. To D’Addario, who states “There’s no reason that the first gay romantic comedy for young viewers necessarily needed to look so much like the pat, flat rom-coms with which today’s teens are barely familiar,” I say there is *every* reason for the movie to be a basic rom-com that straight people have been able to enjoy since movies and shows existed. As *Cosmopolitan* says in their article: “For those whose stories have never been represented in mainstream film, this one’s for you.” This movie is not for anyone but those who were never

given their happy endings, their cheesy romances, their issues viewed as important, no matter how accepting their families and situations may be, because coming out is never easy, because it still deems one as an “other” when straight people never have to come out. It is for the people who were surprised and overjoyed by the applause and cheering: “The emotional impact of seeing Love, Simon in a teen packed Leeds cinema with a spontaneous round of applause at *that* moment on the ferris wheel was pretty overwhelming;” for the person who “Cried when the theater (mostly teens) erupted in cheers when two boys kissed. Cried thinking about all the LGBTQ+ kids who never got to see this movie;” and the one who “suddenly thought of all the queer youth who never got to see Love, Simon bc they're not here with us anymore” (@strawhousefilms; @samueljdonovan; @vexedcer). James, in his tweet, sums it up in the best way:

Reasons we need Love, Simon

It normalises being gay, or any orientation other than straight

It shows us that gay doesn't look a certain way

It shows us that not every coming out experience is the same

It sends a message of acceptance

It paves the way for more films like it (@jamesxingleton).

Often times, queer couples and people are asked “So who’s the guy/girl in the relationship?” or “How do two women have sex?” or “when does lesbian sex end?” or even “If you’re a guy, what do you have in your pants?” often without the couple or individual prompting the question. So often are conversations and discussions regarding queer or LGBTQ+ people veered towards the sexual, either regarding a person’s genitals or their sexual experiences or sexualizing queer people (even if they are underage), or needing to prove a character (be it in a

movie, show, or novel) is queer through their sexual intimacy with a person of the same gender. In order to take the step towards the desexualization of queer identities, and the reason why it is so important to desexualize queer and LGBT+ identities is because it impacts LGBT+ youth; it impacts how knowledge is produced, reproduced, and spread; and it pushes for a more normalized and universalized view of LGBT+ and queer people as being human and like everyone else. By reading with the possibility of queerness, we work to destabilize the current associations of sex(uality) and queer identity and broaden what it means to show romantic desire and attraction without sex having to be involved, thereby changing people's views of queerness bringing up only ideas of sex(uality), such as that of one Twitter post stating: "tonight I saw love simon with my mom, after a 4 year journey of teaching her to love me for who I am, she grabbed my hand in the theatre while simon came out to his family, & mouthed "im sorry" to me with tears in her eyes because when I came out I never got acceptance" (@brockhmtons). By working against stereotypes and hyper-sexualization of queer identities, and working to have them viewed and portrayed as having valid, positive identities and nonsexual associations with the world, maybe it can help promote that being gay or queer is not something to view as sexual, because it is not always sexual.

Conclusion: Being Open to the Possibility of Queerness

Queer existence is proven in a way that the majority can no longer deny, yet not everyone has sex, and no one should have to have sex in order to feel that their attraction to the same gender is real. Using sex and sexual acts as the only identifying method queerness also runs the risk of causing a form of hypersexual identity to be inscribed onto queer identities and people. Why should lesbians be asked, "how do you know you're a lesbian if you never had sex with a girl?" when a heterosexual person is never asked "how do you know if you're heterosexual when

you never had sex with the opposite sex?” Why has debate “focused on whether a relationship could be considered lesbian if no genital contact occurred, and if neither woman identified herself as such (Ruehl, 1983)” (Griffin 231). By using the non-sexual signifiers of trust, desire, affection, and sacrifice, we push towards a new way of reading relationships without the devaluation of non-sexual relationships.

We also push away from labeling these relationships as what is important is not necessarily the label itself, but what these relationships mean: in this case, that these two women loved each other even without genital contact. Whether the relationship was labeled lesbian or queer matters not as much as the fact that this relationship exists at all. Labels tend to be very restrictive when applied onto those who have no say for themselves, and as such, may not accurately depict what is being read. What can be read is the romantic attraction between the two women, even if it is without sex or genital contact. The reading of queerness can also cause these newfound, possible relationships as being more significant and valuable than first viewed. When we take into consideration the social hierarchy of relational importance, where romantic or marital relationships are viewed as more important and of value than platonic friendship, the reading of possible queerness between two women can bring to light the significance of their relationship when read as romantic rather than platonic. Reading with a lens of the possibility of queerness can further identify the existence of queer identities and relationships and increase the significance of these relationships without needing to further sexualize these identities or experiences.

By reading queer identities and experiences through non-sexual means also brings to the forefront just how these identities are portrayed. Parents fear that these identities or even the knowledge of these identities for their children will “turn their children gay” or argue that it is

not “family-friendly” content for children to be exposed to. However, by expanding *how* we read and depict queer and LGBT+ people and characters through our various means of social production, we increase the knowledge people absorb regarding queer and LGBT+ people. Foucault states he would like to “search instead for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate)” (Foucault 12). The propagation of knowledge, in relation to the representation of queer identities, is absorbed by the general public through media: the views and beliefs it depicts, the reaction and response to difference, and the ideology that is pushed onto the viewers.

Media, including books, news, and movies, can twist the perception of the audience in relation to how they understand queer identities and queer relationships. To identify queer people in media as being flamboyant, colorful, and turned into an aesthetic “other,” that becomes the identifying model of queer people as a whole: when D’Addario identified Simon as being a very straight-looking character and otherwise masculine, he is showing how he associates queerness, or in this case gay identity, with difference, especially difference from the normal, typically masculine man. Instead of showing gay men as being always flamboyant, predatory, sexual, or objectifying other men (straight or otherwise), the depiction of other sides of queer identities and humanizing them, such as Simon fitting in to social norms of teenagers, can have a powerful effect in not only normalizing queer identity to the masses but also expanding what being queer or LGBT+ can look or act like.

This practice of desexualizing the queer or LGBT+ identity to disassociate sexual promiscuity with queer identities would not only make queer identities and experiences more

“family friendly” through non-sexual associations, but it would also help with lowering peoples’ lack of comfort regarding queer people. The increase in the discomfort of non-queer people due to viewing these non-sexual acts by queer people; the teaching of queer history to their children in schools; or even simply knowing their child’s teacher is LGBT+, may be due to the association with sexual promiscuity or the association of LGBT+ identities with sexual practices. When we detach the association of sexual promiscuity with that of the queer or LGBT+ identity, we can begin to lower these slowly increasing rates within the last few years. When we put labels or identify others based on our perception of them, we are taking away their identity and their control to define themselves. By deciding who they are and how they are allowed to act, simply through the practice of presuming their identity, we limit people from being able to be open about their romantic love for more than one gender. However, through the practice of reading the possibility of queerness, we become open to the various possibilities of desire and attraction, while at the same time becoming more fluid regarding changing identities and how we perceive certain identities. We also become more accepting and understanding when people self-identify, regardless of our interpretation of their identity expression because of this openness to the possibility of queerness looking and presenting in many different ways. This is why I argue the importance in desexualizing queer existence in order to work on staving off sex as being the primary association to queer identity.

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