

THE REPRESENTATION OF LGBT YOUTH OF COLOUR IN MEDIA

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Abstract

As Bryan Washington so effortlessly demonstrates in his masterful debut, *Lot*, the combined difficulty of being both a racial minority and an LGBT youth struggling with their queer identity provides much heartbreak, frustration, and crisis. However, *Lot* perhaps unknowingly identifies an issue with LGBT representation, especially the representation of LGBT people of colour in the media: the brutal focus on the negative. Although many within the community struggle during some point in their lives with discrimination or feelings of shame, modern queer identities can also bring an incredibly joyful and positive atmosphere into a person's life. *Lot* deals with a side to LGBT representation that the media greatly ignores; within the first three pages, our narrator is having his first sexual experience with another male, and despite it being repressed to keep his parents from hearing, it is honest and straightforward and fun.

In this article, I compare *Lot* to a study published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 'Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth: The Influence of Perceived Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation,' which discusses emotional struggles between queer youths, most of whom are people of colour. I will be considering the representation of young LGBT people of colour in media and how they are shown to belong in our modern society.

¹ J. Almeida, D. Azrael, H.L. Corliss, R.M. Johnson, B.E. Molnar, 'Emotional Distress

As modern society gradually progresses towards acceptance of all minority groups, who throughout history have been marginalised and discriminated against, the issue of representation in media has become increasingly significant. Not only are these groups underrepresented, many have been misrepresented, shown only through derogatory stereotypes or as solely negative characters. To name one such example, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, as well as people of other queer identities, have become notorious within recent media as characters known only by their emotional struggles, a vast majority of whom end the narrative at a considerably worse position than at the beginning. This occurrence is almost conventional, and a widely mocked representation in the community. However, questioning why media represents queer identities in this way, i.e. as people who 'wrestle' with their sexualities as a negative and difficult part of them, and where this misconception comes from, may be salient to continued social progress. In this article, I will be considering the representation of young LGBT people of colour in particular, using Bryan Washington's *Lot* as a focal point, and how these representations impact the perceived belonging of these people in our society.

One key study within this subject, published in a 2009 issue of the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, is 'Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth: The Influence of Perceived Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation.' This research study aimed to evaluate any potential links between queer identities and what they defined as "emotional distress"¹, essentially signifying "depressive symptomology [... e.g.]

Among LGBT Youth: The Influence of Perceived Discrimination Based on Sexual

suicidal ideation and self-harm.”² The research subjects were 13 to 19 year old students of diverse racial backgrounds, and their data was collected through a school-based survey in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The conclusion of this study was that LGBT youth did overall suffer from emotional distress more than heterosexual or cisgender youth, as “these youth must deal with stressors related to having a stigmatized identity.”³ If taken at face value, one can conclude after reading this study that queer identities and social difficulties are inevitably and irrevocably intertwined. Despite modern, more favourable views towards the LGBT community, those within it – especially youth – continue to face much negative perception. Evidently, some negative perceptions, particularly those stemming from religion, do remain within modern society; nevertheless, the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*’s study article lacks important evaluative points and is somewhat flawed. Generalising adjectives such as ‘likely’ in the quote “[p]erceived discrimination is a likely contributor to emotional distress among LGBT youth”⁴ demonstrate obstinacy on the researchers’ part to not explore other aspects of the participants’ emotional distress and give only the impact of their sexualities as a cause. For example, as approximately “45% [of the participants] were Black, 31% were Hispanic, and 14% were White,”⁵ race may play a role in the emotional

distress of the students, due to negative societal perceptions of minority groups. Therefore, this study demonstrates a persistent and stubborn societal focus on the negative impact of people’s sexualities, which plausibly could feed into the media’s portrayal of LGBT people.

Arguably the most important quote in the above study is: “These studies [i.e. this study and studies of alike topics] strongly suggest that the social context in which LGBT youth are embedded is a hostile one.”⁶ Bryan Washington’s *Lot*, a selection of short stories set in Houston surrounding queer identities and race, could be construed as supporting this statement: the LGBT characters in these stories all live in difficult environments, most living on the poverty line and some dealing with verbal or physical violence due to their identities. With further analysis, however, it is clear that many other factors lend themselves to these situations, and furthermore, the characters’ sexualities and racial identities are often the source of pleasure or an escape from an otherwise difficult world. One character, Nicolas, is accused by a friend of “screw[ing] out [his] problems”⁷: i.e., his sexuality serves as a release for him. *Lot* therefore explores LGBT youth – LGBT youth of colour in particular – in a much broader view than many other media outlets have even considered; it explores not only the discrimination and shame often surrounding queer identities, but the positive impact of them.

Orientation’, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38.7 (2009), pp.1001-1014 (p.1001)

² Almeida, Azrael, Corliss, Johnson, Molnar, ‘Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth’, p.1001

³ Almeida, Azrael, Corliss, Johnson, Molnar, ‘Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth’, p.1002

⁴ Almeida, Azrael, Corliss, Johnson, Molnar, ‘Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth’, p.1001

⁵ Almeida, Azrael, Corliss, Johnson, Molnar, ‘Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth’, p.1001

⁶ Almeida, Azrael, Corliss, Johnson, Molnar, ‘Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth’, p.1002

⁷ Bryan Washington, *Lot* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020), p.200

Lot uses a brutal and often pessimistic honesty to delve into multiple aspects, positive or negative, of queer youth's lives. Washington includes in this book explorations of HIV, homophobia, sex, and the interrelations of queer and racial identities, acknowledging the negative impact and perceptions of minority sexualities while simultaneously portraying the positive sides. The impact of this representation within this book as a whole is incredibly significant. In the interview *Rooted in Houston: PW Talks with Bryan Washington*, Washington is quoted as stating: "I'm always a little weirded out by narratives that portray victimized folks solely as victims, rather than people who are just trying to navigate their situation, whatever it looks like, just like anyone else."⁸ In every respect, *Lot* revolts against these stereotypical narratives, depicting every character as a human attempting to navigate a difficult situation, rather than a minority who becomes a victim of their own identity.

This depiction and representation of people, particularly those of minority groups, is important because of the political and social repercussions. As implied by the theme of this journal edition, representation in media is key to people's sense of belonging. Jenny Kidd's *Representation*, often used as an undergraduate psychology guide, states that "[w]hen people create representations of the world there are agendas at play, and particular sets of ideas, values, attitudes and identities assumed and normalized,"⁹ i.e. the inclusion of certain groups within media reflects both their attitudes towards the world, but further to that, established attitudes towards and ideas of them. This inclusion is therefore highly important, as it implies a hierarchy of who is most valued – and

thus most represented – in society. Kidd, for instance, "assert[s] that in Western contexts at least there has been a privileging of white, middle-class, hetero-normative, and often male, perspectives within the media and broader cultural output."¹⁰ Those who do not fit within the bounds of this group are impacted as a result of this, due to the implication that they are excluded in wider society and do not feel belonging. As a consequence, media outlets which do feature representation of minority groups such as LGBT youth of colour are significant in altering this narrative to allow every social group the feeling of belonging in society. However, as more representation is included, the risk of creating stereotypical or crude characters has become more apparent. Examples of these characters include the 'manic pixie dream girl,' i.e. a female character whose only purpose within the narrative is to affect the male protagonist, and also the LGBT couple who end the narrative negatively, whether in a break-up or a death. Kidd explains that following the correction of this imbalance in representation, we must as a society "argue for 'better' and more nuanced representation,"¹¹ to reach a point where "viewers/readers/players/visitors are offered not just positive images as opposed to negative, but 'a range of fuller ways of being imagined, both by others and within the group itself.'"¹² Bryan Washington demonstrates this nuanced representation in *Lot*, portraying all of his characters as fully formed characters experiencing natural and human emotions rather than victims of their own identities.

From the comparison of these two mediums – 'Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth' and *Lot* – it is evident that the representation of

⁸ Clare Mao, 'Rooted in Houston: PW Talks with Bryan Washington', *Publishers Weekly*, 21 January 2019, p.52

⁹ Jenny Kidd, *Representation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), p.3

¹⁰ Kidd, *Representation*, p.36

¹¹ Kidd, *Representation*, p.10

¹² Kidd, *Representation*, p.10

LGBT youth in media, particularly LGBT youth of colour, is overall deeply flawed. The stark contrast between *Lot* and other representations of LGBT narratives highlights the detrimental focus of media, and likewise society as a whole, on the negative impact of minority identities rather than an honest portrayal of them. The detriment of this, primarily, surrounds the impact on actual LGBT youth of colour, such as those who participated in the research study, who are reflected unfairly in media and thus do not feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, we can conclude from this collected data that media outlets, and society as a whole, have a moral necessity to improve these representations, and thus progress towards minority inclusion within our communities.

Bibliography

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