

# The Lessons of “Montero”

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Billowing fuchsia clouds grace the screen as mystical chords begin to play. Descending through the mist, viewers are met with a fantastical world of lush greenery, violet mountains, and remnants of Greek-inspired architecture. A booming voice echoes as we dive further into this whimsical setting: “In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don’t want the world to see. We lock them away. We tell them no. We banish them. But here, we don’t. Welcome to Montero” (“Lil Nas X – MONTERO” 0:00-0:18). In the “Montero” music video, twenty-three-year-old pop singer Lil Nas X becomes entranced by a snake in the Garden of Eden, performs a pole dance to Hell, and gives Satan a lap dance, all in an effort to artistically express his sexuality and advance queer representation in pop culture. While many viewers identified with the single’s unapologetic message, others were outraged by Nas’s video, arguing that its unabashedly gay imagery is inherently blasphemous.

The release of Nas’s music video was accompanied by a chorus of criticism from conservative Christians who were concerned “Montero” may corrupt children’s understandings of their own sexualities and lead them to reject the teachings of the Christian religion. Because the single is widely accessible across American mainstream media, critics were outraged that young minds could be exposed to queerness, especially in a context that presents scandalous depictions of Christian iconography, before parents or members of their faith communities could educate children on the subject. To promote the single, Lil Nas X released limited edition sneakers adorned with a pentagram pendant on the tongue and a pocket of human blood in the sole. Kristi Noem, Republican governor of South Dakota, tweeted her disgust: “This [product] is outrageous, disgusting and perverted and on #PalmSunday no less” (@KristiNoem). The same day, Fox News anchors Laura Ingraham and Raymond Arroyo conducted a segment with the headline “Rapper Embraces Satan Just In Time For Holy Week,” to which Nas replied “LETS FUCKIN GOOOO! WE MADE FOX NEWS!” (@LilNasX).

Supporters appreciate the artist’s commitment to boldly illustrating his sexuality, especially by comically defying negative commentary like the aforementioned threads. Twitter user @thatcutiearly shares: “The one truth we can all agree on is Lil Nas X didn’t have to do this, but he did, and we should be thankful and proud” (@thatcutiearly). Another fan quote tweets Nas, adding: “Deadass tho this man is the definition of an artist” (@iamgeorgimusic). By acknowledging and making light of the

hate his work receives, he highlights the critics' hypocrisy, thus normalizing queer expression in music. Although Nas's video serves as an opportunity for listeners to explore and take ownership over their own identities, the stark polarization between the fans' and the critics' feedback demands that we ask: Who should be responsible for teaching children about gender and sexuality? Since adults who hold the same conservative outlooks as Noem, Ingraham, and Arroyo may not discuss sexuality in ways that provide young people with accurate information to develop their own opinions and identities, can schools and digital media fill the gaps in these conversations?

Sex, sexuality, and gender are complex topics that should be addressed and defined for children with their nuances and spectrums in mind. According to *The Sociology Project 2.5*, a textbook authored by NYU's sociology department, a person's sex refers to their "anatomy, chromosomes, and average levels of certain hormones" that biologically categorize them as male, female, or intersex, whereas a person's sexuality encompasses their "sexual activity and sexual interests" (Manza 12.1). On the other hand, researchers at the Yale School of Medicine note that gender is a term that should be used "when referring to self-representation influenced by social, cultural, and personal experience" – it's not biological, it's social (Mazure). The article goes on to point out that while these definitions are good starting points, they evolve. An older, cisnormative perspective of gender presents male or female as the only acceptable categories of gender, whereas modern definitions recognize a gender spectrum, creating space for anyone who identifies outside this traditional binary. The persistence of these older definitions contributes to the divisive nature of debates about education around gender, sex, and sexuality.

Though sex, sexuality, and gender are by definition distinct entities, they are notably intertwined. Stellenbosch University professor Anita Cloete argues that parents and religious figures should be involved in helping young people decipher them. Cloete investigates how children today have access to sexual content in a variety of forms, which can shape their understandings of sexuality. In an article in *HTS Theological Studies*, she suggests that "if the various media are the only or primary educators on sex and sexuality and there are no other voices, such as those of parents and faith communities who can put the conversation . . . into a moral context, this conversation is heading down a destructive path" (4). In other words, Cloete argues that children need 'other voices' besides media to discover what sex and sexuality actually are. While her belief that children should learn "how to live out their sexuality with dignity and respect for themselves and others" is undoubtedly genuine, 'parents and faith communities' are often not the best place for queer kids to learn to understand and love who they are. Especially conservative parents and faith communities can seek to model sexuality according to traditional, hetero-normative expectations, making young people who may identify as LGBTQIA+ feel as if they are 'heading down a destructive path' when they embark on a search for identity. In creating "Montero" and crafting an

unapologetically queer landscape, Lil Nas X seems to parody the fears about exploring one's sexuality that can pervade the conservative moral systems of traditional institutions like the nuclear family and some denominations of the Christian Church, causing self-doubt and internalized queerphobia in children.

Religion professor Ashon Crawley finds Nas's discography especially empowering after his own healing from religious trauma. In "I Grew Up Afraid. Lil Nas X's 'Montero' Is The Lesson I Needed," Crawley, a gay man, shares how he faced rejection from his church as a child because of his sexuality. For Crawley, Cloete's "faith communities who can put the conversation on sex and sexuality into a moral context" were not helpful, but rather condemning. He recalls how a preacher at his former church informed his followers that "'fornication and the spirit of homosexuality was beginning to take over' his church" and assured them that, through collective prayer, his "'young folks' had been delivered from the demonic, from spiritual warfare" (Crawley). Crawley asks himself: "Had God told [the preacher] who and what I was, what I was contending with, what I was trying to pray away?" This preacher's 'moral context' is clearly homophobic, instilling fear and anxiety in Crawley and leading him to suppress and invalidate his own sexuality.

As Crawley continues to learn and heal from his traumatic upbringing, he finds comfort in artistic sexual expressions of queerness, like Lil Nas X's "Montero." He explains: "I am grateful for the audiovisual troubling of fear 'Montero' provides. It compels me to remain aware when fear creeps in, when it causes me to slip into self-doubt or undue self-criticism." When bold creators like Nas parody – or claim ownership over – homophobic stereotypes, and depict unapologetically gay narratives that have historically been deemed too taboo for mainstream media, queer youth might better connect with and find pride in their identities. However, children should not have to exclusively rely on the Internet to navigate their sexualities; if gender, sex, sexuality, and related topics are taught in inclusive moral communities, children can accept these phenomena as innate parts of the human experience, as opposed to unusual or unacceptable deviations.

Professor of practical theology and member of the United Methodist Church Boyung Lee argues that religious educators should use "trauma-informed" pedagogy, which recognizes five core values of "promoting safety, building trustworthiness, making choices available, collaborating to build trauma-sensitive communities, and empowering of trauma survivors," in their work. Lee recognizes how religion can influence gender and sexuality, arguing that faith can be employed as a vessel for recovering one's self-worth. On a general level, she thinks young Christians can "make full sense of their lives in relation to God" by having open conversations about gender and sexuality as integral parts of creation and religion education, helping shape the church into a safer, more accepting place. Committing to a trauma-informed curriculum

that incorporates meaningful discussion around sex, gender, and sexuality, can put compassionate Christian values into practice and serve many queer members of the community who could benefit from their church's empathy.

Acknowledging the benefits of sex education in the church, Lee shares that "the cognitive, emotional, physical, gendered, sexual, and spiritual dimensions of human nature and experience are inseparable and intricate parts of every education anchored in religion." For many who are religious, faith is an all-encompassing component of who they are, so their spirituality is inextricably interwoven with their other identities, including their genders and sexualities. When religious leaders encourage open dialogue on trauma, especially trauma inflicted by a church, victims may be able to find solace in and support from their community. If members of a church community continue to foster a culture of acceptance, queer members will not have to fear exile, like Crawley once did, and the traumatized can begin a process of recovery.

Secular education around sex, gender, and sexuality in schools can be equally impactful, as the classroom can act as a safe space where students can learn about sexuality and gender without judgment. Author and Loughborough University professor Tracey Skelton, who has studied sexual education from a geopolitical lens, discusses how school can serve as an unbiased middle ground where sexuality is addressed as a universal concept. Skelton suggests that when building a framework for lessons on sex, the teachers' language is critical. She clarifies that educators must decenter heterosexuality as the norm, highlight that every person has a sexuality, and emphasize that sexuality takes "all kinds of expression" (3). When educators provide an expansive definition of sexuality and address this aspect of identity in a safe and factual way, students can then develop their own understanding of their identity. Religion is a choice and queerness is not. If students want to consider the LGBTQIA+ community from a Christian perspective, receiving a secular, fact-based education from school could help prevent them from taking on queerphobic assumptions and judgments that some churches still encourage.

Because many schools need better resources, and many teachers need better training about how to cultivate accepting classroom communities and teach inclusively about gender, sex, and sexuality, investing in inclusive K-12 education about sexuality and gender in school should be a potential solution to this problem. However, many US students today are actually losing access to these resources and lessons. On March 28, 2022, Florida Republican governor Ron DeSantis signed into law the "Parental Rights in Education" bill that opponents have deemed the "Don't Say Gay" bill (Diaz). For context, the bill reads: "Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards" (qtd. in Diaz). Essentially, the law prohibits any

discussion about sexuality and gender in Florida's primary schools and provides parents with the grounds to sue school districts for doing so. DeSantis told reporters that it was "'entirely inappropriate'" that teachers were discussing gender identity with students since they were "'hiding'" the classroom lessons from the parents (DeSantis qtd. in Lavietes). While it might seem like a 'moral' perspective on education, DeSantis's view counters faith-based practices like Boyung Lee's which see sexuality as an integral part of teaching children to understand themselves and others.

Critics of the "Don't Say Gay" bill argue that it erases opportunities and support for LGBTQIA+ students to learn about and be affirmed in their identities, and perpetuates stigmatized perspectives on sexualities that are not heterosexuality. If teachers are not given better resources, training, and opportunities to discuss gender and sexuality within a fact-based, inclusive framework in schools, many LGBTQIA+ children will continue to believe there is something wrong with them and will lack the knowledge they need to find an accepting community. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Will Larkins, a junior at Winter Park High School in Winter Park, Florida, shares how his childhood as a queer person was marked by discomfort. Once he became educated about the LGBTQIA+ community, he could begin to understand, validate, and express his sexuality. Larkins notes: "I have come to realize that those who have been so openly hateful toward me often knew little about the queer community – they thought being L.G.B.T.Q. was a conscious choice." For this reason, he argues that students need education around sex, gender, and sexuality from a young age in order to recognize that these identities exist in a spectrum and that no identity is invalid; this can help all kids, regardless of their identity, become more accepting of themselves and others.

Larkins, who is president of Winter Park High School's Queer Student Union and a leader of the Say Gay Anyway walkout, writes: "Education didn't just give me a sense of self-worth but also the knowledge of a community and lifeline there for countless young people." The fight for LGBTQIA+ rights and visibility has greatly changed since Ashon Crawley's generation were children; it is empowering to see queer youth like Will Larkins openly and proudly advocate for their community when Crawley could not. However, they both endured hate, self-doubt, and confusion that no child should have to experience.

While creators like Lil Nas X will continue to publicly celebrate queerness, bills like "Don't Say Gay" and the people who uphold them will continue to try to influence society's views as well. Schools have a duty to help children understand their identities in relation to their communities, and religious institutions must evolve as well, so they can teach about gender and sexuality in ways that enhance the humane values of their faiths. Introducing these topics to people at a young age can also help them withstand and combat the queerphobic assumptions their peers or mentors may still project toward them.

As Nas exemplifies in the fictional world of “Montero,” the LGBTQIA+ community will continue to carve out inclusive spaces for queer kids to find acceptance and receive the support and love they deserve. However, systemic changes must be achieved to foster equity more broadly. Today, many members of the queer community continue to face discrimination, unequal access to healthcare, and difficulty finding employment, among other circumstances. Gender and sexuality are defining traits of one’s identity that do not warrant hate or violence in any way. In order to craft a world of free self-expression and love that goes beyond even what Nas accomplishes, those in power across various US institutions must amplify queer voices and fight to protect and advance their rights.

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