Final Essay
Troye Sivan’s Blue Neighbourhood Trilogy

Australian singer and songwriter, Troye Sivan is an influential voice for the LGBTQ community and one of the very few openly gay artists who has entered the limelight to become a prominent figure in the music industry (Wikipedia). Sivan made his debut as a YouTube vlogger and singer, where he eventually landed a record deal that would set the scene for his mainstream music career (Wikipedia). One of Sivan’s more recent pieces is a three-part video series called Blue Neighbourhood, which includes the songs “Wild”, “Fools”, and “Talk Me Down” (Sivan 2016). In total, all three songs have reaped a whopping 60 million hits on YouTube and a fan base that would anchor his entry in the mainstream. The trilogy tells a story of a “forbidden love” between two queer youth, Troye and Mathew, who develop feelings for one another as young boys playing in the neighbourhood. Throughout the trilogy, there is footage of the unsurmountable struggle that these queer youth face simply for having intimate feelings for one another. Sivan’s reason for creating the trilogy was to promote visibility of queer groups so they do not have to grow up in the same world that Sivan did with little to no representation of themselves in the media (Friend 2016, para. 7).

Locating the Blue Neighbourhood trilogy in the greater history of LGBTQ activism and visibility reveals that it is only fairly recently (late 1980s) that queer characters began to make an appearance in popular culture; an appearance that would otherwise last a moment and amount to a very limited social script (Hilton-Morrow 2015, 70). The limitations of such a
script are in keeping with the assimilationist model of the gay rights movement, which typically casts queer characters as white, middle-class, and cis-gender (Hilton-Morrow 2015, 9; Peters 2011, 206). The gay rights movement sought to repeal anti-sodomy laws, embrace legal marital rights, and ratify anti-discrimination laws, which were all established in the interest of securing normative frameworks, as opposed to challenging them (Becker 2009, 124). At the time, essentialist and assimilationist arguments seemed to be the most viable way for LGBTQ communities to reap the “same visibility and rights as their straight counterparts” (Hilton-Morrow 2015, 8). This discourse of normalization eased the presumable risk that queer identities might “pose to a dominant social order by de-emphasizing or erasing difference, while asserting sameness to an idealized white, middle class, heterosexual norm” (Cavalcante 2015, 455). While it is true that the Blue Neighbourhood series remains embedded in discourses of normalization, it also introduces a wide range of viewers to a relationship that has historically been dubbed deviant, comical and/or forbidden (Cavalcante 2015, 455).

In this essay, I will argue that part of what makes Sivan’s three-part series, Blue Neighbourhood so successful is its tendency to speak to dominant discourses about sexuality, heteronormativity, and homophobia, all the while creating space for queer youth to be represented and visible in a way like never before.

A closer look at the trilogy suggests that an essentialist approach to sexuality is at work, which renders sexual orientation to be intrinsic to one’s biology and driven by hormones and bodily desires (Hilton-Morrow 2015, 7). This is nicely conveyed in the “WILD” segment when the young boys are playing together. Throughout the video, the
relationship between these two young boys is shown alongside snapshots of their future together as lovers. By structuring the series in this way, it becomes clear to the viewer that this queer relationship is founded on an inherent longing for same-sex desire that would be likely uncovered in the early years of childhood (Hilton-Morrow 2015, 7). In some sense, even the title “Wild” is linking the love of two males with the irrefutable concept of nature, which might be a reason why it was chosen to introduce the series and further, prime the audience. The “Wild” segment also makes use of the expected role of young boys and their connection to the wild. The boys in the video are repeatedly shown playing outside in the trees, or gallivanting through the woods, which is another marker of their ‘predestined’ role as boys. In this way, I think the series pairs the seemingly intrinsic nature of both boyhood and sexuality in order to cater to a more mainstream understanding of sexuality that is assumed to be biological.

In another light, the trilogy is profuse with homonormative cues, all of which are appealing to the interests of a mainstream audience. For example, the same-sex relationship in the series presents all of the “usual” qualities that a straight relationship might have. For one, it is a monogamous relationship that is prone to fights and break-ups, just like straight relationships. Sivan also voices in the lyrics of “FOOLS” that this same-sex relationship really just wants all the same things that define a nuclear family, such as “swimming pools”, “living rooms”, “aeroplanes”, “a little house on the hill”, and “children’s names”. In fact, without the videos, the lyrics could just be about another heterosexual romance. The lyrics are not directed to a gender-specific audience, making it a story that is less about queer relationships and more about relationships in general. To this end, I think that part of what
makes the *Blue Neighbourhood* Trilogy so popular is its ability to cater to a wide audience. However, in this process, some of the key struggles that set homosexual relationships apart from heterosexual relationships continue to go unquestioned.

Although the series very carefully displays the impacts that homophobia has on queer identities and relationships, it nevertheless locates this phenomenon in the single, isolated place, which is characterized as a “rural” region where Mathew’s homophobic, drunk father resides. The lyrics of the entire trilogy are premised on the heartache and yearning for a love that was broken by the homophobic threats of Mathew’s father. However, it is not known to Troye that Mathew has broken up with him for this reason, which is where the trilogy falls back on the normative lyrics of heterosexual breakup songs in order to characterize this queer relationship. By responding to homophobic violence in this way, the *Blue Neighbourhood* trilogy overemphasizes the breakup, while downplaying the homophobic violence that led to that breakup. This is demonstrated whenever Troye voices his own setbacks for the failure of the relationship, frequently referring to himself as a “fool” who made a “mistake” for choosing Mathew. To this extent, homophobia is addressed, yet skirted by homonormative discourses that cease to see break-ups as nothing more than a matter of “foolish” choices and wrong turns.

In the video “Wild”, viewers are acquainted with the natural environment that Mathew and Troye are exposed to through child play, which takes place in the rugged and industrial landscape that surrounds Mathew’s house, or in the urban suburbia that surrounds Troyes’ house. The socioeconomic markers that come to define the separate lives of Mathew and Troye might very well be distinguished in order to reduce the systemic intricacies of
homophobia to a single identifiable source, that is, “rural” and “conservative” regions (Krawszewski 2009). In the same way that Kraszewski argued that The Real World imagines racism to be stemming from the regions of rural, conservative communities, I think that the Blue Neighbourhood trilogy frames homophobia as if it were stemming from the rural and conservative communities that are thought to house the most homophobic people, such as Mathew’s father (Kraszewski 2009, 208). In the video “Fools”, there is a lot of imagery to make the distinction between the contrasting lifestyles of Mathew and Troye. Mathew and his father embody all the codes of a lower class. They reside in a weathered house on the industrial side of town and work as handymen who paint and repair old boats.

In contrast, Troye resides in a “modern” house on the suburban end of town, and we are not given much information about his family. Perhaps the absence of Troye’s family is symbolic of their absence in deciding the sort of life they might want him to live, according to their views. The fact that Troye resides in an “urban” setting supports Kraszewski’s claim about The Real World, which is that social oppression is thought to reside in the townships of rural and conservative areas, rather than “liberal urban environments” (2009, 208). As a result, the “urban feel” that is associated with Troye’s area of occupancy supports the notion that urban areas are far removed from producing homophobia, in part because urban areas are assumed to be more liberal. While viewers are likely made to feel sympathy for both Troye and Mathew, the lyrics and videos are framed so that the viewers identify with the Troye, which also places them in the position of a liberal, non-homophobic viewer (Peters 2011, 195). Ultimately, this move depoliticizes and individualizes the systemic forces that
continue to cultivate attitudes of homophobia in the minds of many people, not just those who reside in rural townships.

Like Kraszewski, I would argue that *Blue Neighbourhood* frames homophobia as individualized and easy to overcome, rather than part of a much broader set of forces that make it not so much an individual problem, but a cultural one (Kraszewkski 2009). According to the lyrics of the trilogy, all that needs to be done is “leave this blue neighbourhood” and “hope [that] people change”. In an interview, Sivan even explains that the *Blue Neighbourhood* trilogy is meant to symbolize a “really small community” with a “small town-ish vibe” [read rural and conservative], which he hoped to leave behind one day and see what “was out there in the big world” [read urban and liberal] (Young Hollywood, 0:51-1:22). Representing homophobia in this way can be problematic because it locates homophobia in individual people and places, while suggesting that the best way to overcome homophobia is to move elsewhere (of “urban feel”). Unfortunately, this is not an option for many queer youth who do not have the socioeconomic means to do so. Additionally, this conceptualization of homophobia does not address the broader structural forces that produce social inequalities. By succumbing to the script of homonormativity, the series depoliticizes and individualizes the breakup as something that amounted to a matter of wrong decisions, rather than a separation that was premised on homophobic violence.

While the series unfortunately falls short of addressing homophobia without individualizing its persistence, it effectively provides queer youth with better and safer access to content that may be more representative of their experiences than in previous generations. The concept of “generativity” can be applied to the *Blue Neighbourhood* series in the way that
the series creates a space where queer youth can find a meaningful representation of
themselves at a safe distance if needed (Goltz 2013). In this way, Blue Neighbourhood is
offering a representation that will generate a point of identification for queer individuals,
opening up the space for a future, hope, and solidarity. For example, notions of future and
hope are articulated through the visual and verbal messages of the trilogy. Sivan voices his
“hopes” for the relationship, envisioning a future together with a house and children. The
series at large invites queer viewers to reflect on and relate to some of the themes that are
highlighted, such as same-sex love, break-ups, homophobia, and family disapproval. I
thought it was especially meaningful for the “WILD” segment to show the love between two
young boys, which I would argue is a very rare occasion in popular culture. This sort of
coverage opens up the space for younger generations of queer youth to see themselves in the
media and know that they are not alone. By the end of the trilogy, there is uncertainty about
what the future might entail for Mathew and Troye, in part because it is framed so that, as
viewers, we are left with the hope that Mathew did not commit suicide, even though there is
the possibility. This ultimately leaves viewers with the curiosity to imagine what the future
for Mathew and Troye might look like if there were no threats to Mathew’s future as a queer
person. To this extent, the Blue Neighbourhood series is an exception to mainstream discourse
in the way that it offers “stories, meanings, and futures” for queer youth (Goltz 2013, 141).

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