by Isabella Dally-Steele for the University of Minnesota First-Year Writing Program
under the Department of Writing Studies

LGBTQIA: The Scarlet Letter of the Queer Community

As historically marginalized groups in the USA have gained a voice in the 20th and 21st centuries, the nuances of these movements have become increasingly complex, as activists continue to identify and combat the macro and micro aggressions of the modern world. Perhaps the most controversial topic of today's LGBTQIA activism is the place of allies in the movement. Central to this controversy is how the glorification of cis-het[1] allies cripples the movement, depriving the LGBTQIA community of their hard-earned voice. To combat this harmful glorification, the University of Minnesota's GLBTA office should focus on serving its LGBTQIA community by ceasing to over-cater to allies; in doing so, they should change their title to include "Asexual" rather than "Ally."

The A in LGBTQIA has been a hot topic of contention ever since its debut. While the letter was originally intended to stand for "Ally", it was quickly changed to represent "Asexual" for a multitude of reasons. Foremost, "Ally" clearly did not fit the requirements of being a part of the LGBTQIA acronym. LGBTQIA is meant to represent marginalized gender and sexual identities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual), and as "Ally" is neither a gender nor a sexual identity (let alone a marginalized one), it simply does not fit. In addition to this, it was found that A could represent another, much more relevant community: asexual. Historically, the asexual community was estranged from both the straight and LGBTQIA communities, as neither the straight nor the queer population believed it possible to feel no sexual or romantic attraction. Because of this isolation, the asexual community desperately needed the support and recognition of the LGBTQIA community, which it received upon its inclusion into the acronym. This history, perhaps, is why members of the LGBTQIA

[1] Cis-het: a shortened term for cisgender heterosexuals, persons who identify with their assigned birth gender and are attracted to the opposite.

community, asexual or otherwise, feel that it is a slap in the face when Asexual is substituted with Ally in the modern day. Such a substitution not only estranges an already marginalized community, but also incorrectly implies that allies have the same experiences as the LGBTQIA community, which they do not. The results of such faulty implications have proven to be destructive, allowing the mainstream media to treat allies as experts on LGBTQIA issues, glorifying them while yet again marginalizing the LGBTQIA community. Unfortunately, by substituting Ally for Asexual in their title, the GLBTA office is guilty of just this type of toxic glorification.

The GLBTA office most likely decided to include Ally in their title in order to avoid estranging allies, a fair cause. However, this reasoning suffers from a foundational flaw: true allies would not be estranged simply because the office did not include Ally in their title. True allies understand that ally is not an identity, but rather an honorary title, and therefore does not merit a letter in the LGBTQIA acronym. As esteemed LGBTQIA activist and prolific journalist Sydney Lynn pointed out, "if you identify as a cisgender heterosexual you aren't a part of the community; you are a part of the movement" (Lynn, *The A Stands for Asexuality*). This clarifies the place of allies in the movement, emphasizing their importance without purporting their queerness. Allies that would be estranged by changing Ally to Asexual are not true allies, but rather fake ones, who do not aid the movement. If an "ally" demands to be recognized in the acronym, this reveals that they care more about their image as an altruist than supporting the community they pretend to care about. Kat Blaque, an LGBTQIA and black rights activist, holds views on allyship that closely parallel revolutionary author bell hooks's views on education for liberation. Just as hooks asserted that successful education for liberation is trademarked by uncomfortable feelings (hooks, 102-3), Kat states that "Allyship should feel uncomfortable to

you. If your allyship feels comfy, then it's most likely lazy and ineffective" (Blaque, *Alllyship*). As Kat put it in one of her video *How NOT to be an Ally*, "For some people, being an ally is akin to a fashion statement… You can wear a slayer T-Shirt without knowing a single Slayer song, but you'll get a lot of attention," and in the same way, you can call yourself an ally while not engaging in allyship (Blaque, *How NOT to be an Ally!*). Such fake allies do more harm than good, as since they care more about their image than the community itself, they do not involve themselves in LGBTQIA issues. Because they do not make it a priority to educate themselves, fake allies are not well-versed in the LGBTQIA community's values and goals. This ignorance, paired with their false portrayal of altruism, leads to fake allies misrepresenting the community. What is more, upon entering safe spaces reserved for the LGBTQIA community and allies, they often cause harm with the callous comments that come with this ignorance. By putting Ally in their title, the GLBTA office does nothing but enable fake allies, undermining their admirable efforts to support the LGBTQIA community. By replacing Ally with Asexual, the GLBTA office would better support the LGBTQIA community without estranging true allies, while simultaneously doing away with problematic fake allies who hurt the community.

Given A used to stand for Ally, it is understandable that the GLBTA office may consider changing their title unnecessary, reasoning that the LGBTQIA community at one time accepted Ally as a part of their acronym. However, such an argument has no foundation considering how different the cultural context is today. When A was introduced to LGBTQI as Ally, the LGBTQIA movement was less evolved than it is today, and thus the issue of ally glorification was not yet prevalent. Today, however, the controversy considering the ally-deity complex is a major point of contention in the community. Apart from simply not fitting into the acronym, A for Ally carries bitter connotations, including but not limited to the misconception that asexuals

have no place in the acronym but that allies do. By basing their acronym off an outdated mindset, the GLBTA office is unintentionally estranging and harming the community. By changing Ally to Asexual, the GLBTA office could easily remedy these wrongs.

While the GLBTA office may understand the issue presented by including "Ally" in their title, removing it may prove to be a problem. As the office wishes to provide resources to guide allies, it is understandable that the GLBTA office would wish to advertise these amenities in order to help the community. However, while putting Ally in their title may achieve this goal, there are many other less harmful ways that the office could make their resources known. On their website, the office would do well to create an "Ally Resources" tab nested under "Resources." This approach would be even more helpful to potential allies, as creating a specialized section focused on tips, tricks, and opportunities to be a good ally would better engage the ally community. Therefore, by replacing Ally with Asexual and creating an "Ally Resources" tab on their website, the GLBTA office could not only better support their community, but also foster ally corroboration.

While it is clear that Ally has no place in the LGBTQIA acronym, many argue that failing to include Ally enforces separatism between cisgender heterosexuals and the diverse queer community, undermining the LGBTQIA community's underlying goal of acceptance, a risk that they cannot afford to take (A. Volpe, *Argument Thesis and Outline*). However, taking Ally out of the GLBTA office's title in no way encourages separatism. Since Ally connotes neither cisgender nor heterosexual (but rather "helper"), removing Ally from the GLTBA's title does not imply a stigma against students who identify as such. What is more, as the GLBTA office was created to supply support to the queer community, it searches to create diverse social networks for its participants - networks that undoubtedly include cis-het students. By changing their title to better

reflect the marginalized community that the office seeks to serve, the GLBTA office does not encourage separatism, as this change in title merely reflects the office's dedication to fairly representing their community. The GLBTA office would continue to encourage ally activity and involvement, and therefore cisgender heterosexual students would in no way be estranged from the movement. As we can see, by dropping Ally in favor of Asexual, the GLBTA office would support its own community to a greater extent, all without creating a barrier between the queer students it serves and the cis-het community.

Finally, the most concerning argument against replacing Ally with Asexual is the fact that many students who are unready or unable to come out as queer attend the GLBTA office and its functions under the pretense of being an ally, and therefore by removing Ally from the acronym, these students would be cut off from support. This issue, while touchy, is yet again solved by the simple fact that, even without Ally in its title, the GLBTA office would undoubtedly continue to serve and aid allies, and therefore still provide solace for currently closeted students. Yet again, we can refer to the "Ally Resources" tab on the website; while the GLBTA's support of allies will not be as conspicuous as it once was, it will still maintain its strong allegiance to helping allies. In this way, closeted students may still find support at the office without jeopardizing their well-being. By replacing Ally with Asexual, the office can continue to better its support of its out community, without jeopardizing its closeted students.

After reviewing the cases for and against changing the GLBTA office's title to include Asexual rather than Ally, it is clear that the best course of action is to do so, as it furthers the office's mission to support the University of Minnesota's LGBTQIA community, while still encouraging allyship. Kat Blaque put it well in her video *How NOT to be an Ally!* when she compared good and bad allies, likening them to different types of stage mates and asserting that

good allies should use their privilege to amplify the voices of the LGBTQIA community, rather than steal the mike (Blaque, *How NOT to be an Ally!*). By including Ally in their title, the GLBTA office inadvertently steals the mike from the very community it is searching for support. By claiming that allies know the LGBTQIA experience, they hand the mike to allies, whose only wish is to amplify the voices of their queer peers. By taking the initiative to replace Ally with Asexual, the University of Minnesota could prove its solidarity with the LGBTQIA community and encourage a positive ally support network, acting as a trailblazer by combatting the ally-deity complex. Such a progressive action would help abolish ally glorification, producing generations of well adjusted LGBTQIA grads and helpful allies.

[1803 words]

Works Cited

Blaque, Kat. "VEDS 4: How to NOT Be an Ally!" Online viedo clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 4 Sept. 2014. Web. 06 Dec. 2015.

Volpe, A. "Argument Thesis and Outline." Message to the author. 3 Dec. 2015. E-mail.

Lynn, Sydney. "The A Stands For Asexuality: Putting The A In The LGBTQA+ Community." *Thought Catalog*. Thought Catalogue, 03 Apr. 2015. Web. 06 Dec. 2015.

Regents of the University of Minnesota. "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Ally Programs Office." *Welcome!* Office for Equity and Diversity, n.d. Web. 06 Dec. 2015.

Hooks, Bell. "Pedagogy and Political Commitment: A Comment." Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black. Boston: South End, 1989. 98-104. Print.

Blaque, Kat (kat_blaque). “Allyship should feel uncomfortable to you. If your allyship feels comfy, then it’s most likely lazy and ineffective” 27 May 2015, 7:17 PM. Tweet.

Works Consulted

Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.