BEING AND DOING: INTERROGATING DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF ASEXUAL KINSHIP IN AN AMATONORMATIVE CULTURE

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Abstract

Taking a sociological approach grounded in intersectionality and queer theory, this thesis traces and investigates online asexual discourse and identity politics in order to critically investigate the way that asexual culture and Western culture more broadly understands the intersections of friendship, kinship, adulthood, and intimacy. Recognizing the ways that asexual discourse has uncritically taken up problematic nationalist, neoliberal, and racialized understandings of romantic kinship in its identity politics is necessary in order to shift asexual discourse from a respectability and visibility politics with the aim of neoliberal assimilation to a political consciousness that queerly reinterprets the role of sexuality in forming kinship.

I begin by tracing the history of online asexual discourse, situating the importance of this specific online culture to asexual worldmaking in a North American context. Here, I situate asexual theory in the context of amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality and find that asexual struggles for public recognition and legitimacy often rely on a problematic respectability politics based on notions of biologized, racialized, and gendered normalcy.

Next, I investigate the deep cultural entanglements of the sexual and the romantic, calling into question the ontological underpinnings of the Split Attraction Model by investigating the category of the 'romantic' as a culturally mediated, gendered, racialized, and classed historical construction. Here, I draw on philosophical work on the nature of romantic love and on the historical and political role of marriage, and on scholars of queerness from Black, Indigenous and Asian-American contexts to inform a decolonial and racially nuanced understanding of the SAM's political underpinnings, noting how social control in the form of sexual romantic norms is exerted differently on gendered, sexualized, and racialized bodies.

Finally, I ask what it means to practice nonsexual kinship, and how asexual/aromantic identity gets deployed in practice, drawing on the literature of polyamory to think through the difference between identity and practice. By tracing different examples of asexual/aromantic kinship practice that is not necessarily grounded in asexual or aromantic identity, I pose a new paradigm for thinking nonsexual kinship, opening asexual/aromantic kinship rather than identity as the grounds for thinking both asexuality and queerness.

Lay Summary

In the last two decades, asexuality has been increasingly recognized as a legitimate sexual identity, and a growing community of self-identified asexuals has formed in largely online forum spaces. Within these forums, several unique language formations have formed to help asexuals understand themselves and their desires, most notably the Split Attraction Model. This paper takes an intersectional social justice approach to investigate the roots and history of the asexual community and the Split Attraction Model. Critically, it investigates how asexual language structures are deeply entangled in colonial, racialized, gendered and classed understandings of both sexual identity and culturally mediated romantic and sexual norms. In particular, it asks what the stakes are for those who claim an asexual identity, how the possibilities of asexual kinship and practice might be expanded beyond their current confines, and how asexual theory might help us reimagine what it means to be queer.

Preface

This research program has been designed, performed and analyzed by Evelyn Elgie.

This thesis is an expansion of a paper given as part of a panel organized by the NWSA Asexuality Interest Group during the 2018 National Women's Studies Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

A version of Chapter 3 has been published. Elgie, E. (2020) "Kinship Beyond Biology: Polyqueer Asexualities and the Possibilities of Coparenting" in *Reproduction and Parenting Beyond the Binary*. Edited by Kori Doty and A.J. Lowik. (forthcoming).

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List of Abbreviations

AVEN: The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network.

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

DSM: The American Diagnostic Statistic Manual.

LGBTQ2S+: An abbreviation denoting the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, .and two-spirit community.

SAM: The Split Attraction Model

Glossary

> It is important to note that this glossary of terms is drawn from literatures and communities, digital and otherwise, about asexuality. The definitions I offer here are intended to contextualize the reader in the discourse of asexual communities; however, as my argument and exploration progresses through the paper, I will be unpacking and complicating many of these terms and their functions.

Ace: Colloquial abbreviation of *asexual*. Often used to refer to asexual people in a similar manner as "gay" or "straight" are used to refer to homosexual or heterosexual people.

Ace Spectrum or "ace-spec": The grouping of asexual, demisexual, and gray-asexual under a single umbrella of related sexual orientation. "Ace-spec" is a short form used to designate the entire collection into the "ace-spec community".

Aromantic: Someone who does not experience romantic attraction, based on the split-attraction model. Also theorized as a spectrum, parallel to the ace spectrum.

Amatonormativity: The cultural assumption of (usually heterosexual) romantic relationships being central to a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Allosexual: A term used for someone who does experience sexual attraction in any way. This term was coined by the asexual community to help prevent "asexual" from being a negative, othered quality held against a positive, normal "sexual". However, it is important to note that the prefix "allo-" has been criticized as being appropriated from autistic community and language formation, so I approach the term with caution even when it is being used by my interlocuters.

Asexuality: A sexual orientation characterized by a persistent lack of sexual attraction to any gender. (Bogaert)

Asexual: Someone who does not experience sexual attraction, according to the criteria put forward on the AVEN homepage.

A-spec: A catch-all term designating those who identify on either the *asexual* or *aromantic* spectrums.

Dyadic: Describes the interaction between a pair of individuals. In the context of Elizabeth Brake's work, refers to the focus on paired, usually sexual, relationships as superior to other forms of kinship relations.

Grey-Asexual: Experiencing sexual attraction only in specific or rare circumstances, or feeling that one falls on the asexual spectrum.

Heteronormativity: The cultural primacy and acceptability of heterosexual relationships as a default or norm, rather than same-sex or queer relationships.

Homosexual: Someone who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of the same gender or sex.

Libido or **Sex Drive:** Having a bodily desire for sex. Distinct from sexual attraction to specific people. A common metaphor used in the ace community is to think of libido as hunger and sexual attraction as cravings for specific food.

Microidentity: My own term for the phenomenon of more and more language being developed and used within queer subcultures to describe and socially validate or legitimize incredibly specific experiences under the umbrella of wider-reaching queer identities.

Pansexual: Someone who experiences (sexual) attraction to individuals regardless of gender.

Platonic: A non-sexual caring relation.

Queer Kinship: A contested terminology that draws on multiple histories. Refers to kinships that do not conform to the legal and social bounds of the Western nuclear family norm.

Queerplatonic: A non-sexual paired relationship, intended to take the place of a romantic relationship in terms of a social and legal life.

Romantic: A contested term in aromantic and asexual circles. Used to define a (usually sexual and monogamous) caring relationship which is socially and legally recognized as one's most important relationship.

Sex: Refers to male and female anatomy, and their respective processes (Bogaert). Distinct from *gender*.

The Split-Attraction Model (the SAM): The theory of sexual attraction that posits romantic and sexual attraction as being completely separate from one another. Some people who ascribe to this theory also differentiate between "sex drive" and "romantic drive".

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The AVEN logo appears here with the kind permission of the AVEN Project Team.

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For Tora.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

It's spring of 2018, and I'm sitting in a café in Halifax. Sitting across from me is my roommate of five years, Tora. We have just been bouldering; there is chalk on my hands, and my palms are stinging where they grip my too-hot cup of tea. We have just begun a conversation that we have been avoiding for months.

I am about to move to Vancouver in the fall, to start my Master's degree, where I will be writing a thesis on asexuality. I desperately want to ask Tora to move to Vancouver with me. Unbeknownst to me, Tora very much also wants to ask to move to Vancouver with me. In the course of our conversation, it becomes clear that both of us have spent the last several months thinking that we cannot and should not ask, because that is more than one is ever supposed to ask of a roommate.

Here is the problem that we are running up against: in our culture, the liberal, permissive, reasonably open-minded culture that we both grew up in, there is no social script to ask your friends to build a permanent life with you.

You're not *supposed* to ask your roommate to move across the country with you. You're not supposed to want to live with your roommate forever; you're *supposed* to room with them for a few years as a placeholder until you find your romantic partner, you fall in love, get married and leave your roommates and friends behind. For a boyfriend, or a girlfriend, you might move across the country for their work or school opportunity, even if you have no guaranteed work; that would be taken by everyone you know as a sign that the relationship is very serious. That you're very in

love. That it's very *real.* But it's not something that you're *supposed to do* for a roommate, even one you've lived with for five years.

What is that *supposed to*? Where does it come from?

In normative Western culture, there is no language to talk about the nonsexual intimacies we create with our friends. From popular music and romance novels, to dating apps and TV shows, and even from seeing the examples of the people and families around us every day, romantic love is assumed to be the default desired state for every person in the world. And as Carrie Jenkins notes: "For the contemporary Canadian...falling in love is a matter of developing an intimate attachment that normatively includes sexual desire. If sexual desire is absent, that is at best noticeably unusual; at worst it is interpreted as showing that the feelings involved are not romantic but platonic." (43) But what does it mean to fall in love when you self-identify as an asexual?

What is the difference between 'romantic' and 'platonic' when you remove the sexual from the equation? What is a romantic relationship at its heart? What kinds of intimacies are we speaking about when we talk about "romantic" love, if we're not talking about sex?

As someone who has had a complicated relationship with the idea of sexual attraction for most of my life, I have spent over a decade immersed in the communally negotiated vernacular of the asexual community. I have always had reservations about the way that those language formations treat the romantic and sexual; both with the way they are split from each other, their complex cultural entanglements ignored, and the way that they are both imagined as ahistorical, biologically determined forces at work in the body. So many of the asexual people I knew, including myself, struggled with the loneliness they felt at opting out of sexuality; a loneliness that opened many questions for me about the generally uninterrogated binary of platonic/romantic.

Once you remove the sexual from the romantic, what is left? I have asked this question of many, many people over the last five years, and received many different answers, none of which were quite satisfying. So the question that I arrived at was not "what does it mean to do romantic relationships as an asexual person?" but, in the end: If romantic relationships have no fixed meaning beyond their starting place in sexual intimacy, what does it mean that asexuals are still trying to do them? How flexible is the role of the 'romantic', and how is it being renegotiated? How does the production of the asexual community force us to reimagine what the categories look like that inscribe our intimate practices, and what new practices of intimacy are emerging from that reimagining?

In 2012, Elizabeth Brake coined the term *amatonormativity* to describe the disproportionate cultural focus and interest in marital and amorous relationships as special sites of value and the attendant devaluation of other types of caring relationships. This term, and its underlying discursive systems, are of particular significance when applied to the newly emerged demographic of asexual people, that subgroup of people who do not experience sexual attraction and therefore claim a queer identity as such. In the following section, I will unpack the intersections of asexuality, queer discourse, and amatonormativity, with particular attention to the implications the existence of an asexual population must have for an amatonormative culture. Ultimately, I am attempting to uncover the ways in which asexual discourse is still deeply steeped in amatonormative ways of thinking, and how the creation of the Split Attraction Model fails to account for the deep and internalized entanglements between the sexual and the romantic.

Kristina Gupta, Ela Przybylo, Danielle Cooper, and other queer theorists of asexuality argue that asexuality as an identitarian category places pressure on these broader amatonormative categories of being by existing in itself as a nonsexual form of sexuality, queering and complicating

what it means to think those categories. They recognize the influence of compulsory sexuality on the actions and practices of kinship and relationality formed by both asexual and sexual people, and the ways in which a sexual culture creates discourse in which "asexual" becomes a subaltern category or necessary refusal. In this context, it might be important to trace whether asexuality can even be thought outside of those discursive categories. Indeed, their work on asexuality uncritically treats aromanticism and asexuality as distinct identity categories based on a quasi-scientific model of attraction that understands "romantic" and "sexual" as specific biological drives that are inherent to a person and located in the body. This is known as the Split Attraction Model. This model (hereafter referred to as the SAM), is the term used in asexual communities to refer to the theoretical model of attraction that divides sexual and romantic attraction into different embodied drives, and more complexly opens the potential to complicate understanding of sensual, aesthetic, and other forms of attraction. While the SAM as a model is highly contentious in online asexual language- and meaning-making, there is little scholarly work being done on it. This model, in many ways, ignores the tight discursive and cultural ties binding the sexual and the "romantic" together in Western cultural discourse. I will be returning more critically to this model later in the thesis.

This thesis will critically engage with the discursive formations underlying the development of this model, calling into question the ontological categories of the *sexual* and the *romantic* which, though uninterrogated by the asexual community and asexual thinkers, underlie most, if not all, of asexual discourse. These foundational ontological categories are, in some ways, discursively necessary, as they allow their proponents to defend an emerging asexual identity from structural norms that would subsume that identity back under "straightness" or "gayness". The split-attraction model allows for a complexity of identity and attraction which is intended to give

people identifying under the asexual umbrella labels to fully identify and understand their own identities. However, I am troubled by the essentializing mode that this often takes. By locating "romantic" and "sexual" as fundamental, biological drives inherent to the body, asexual discourse creates an immutable category which enables the community to posit asexuality as an essential, inherent, defensible and legislatable category; but, as I will argue, this ignores the deep culturally and socially constructed ties between sex and romance, and the cultural illegibility of the word "romance" when removed from a sexual context. By interrogating these foundational categories and exposing their deep cultural entanglements with each other, I believe it will be possible to more clearly conceptualize the capacity of asexual intimacies to affect and shift queer theory and discourse, opening space to think of nonsexual kinship as a form of asexual doing rather than only asexual being. Most importantly, I want to attend to asexual kinship and intimacy as a mode of practice and community/household building that is already being and has long been widely practiced by both self-identified asexuals and other people who identify with other queer identities, focusing on these nonsexual intimacies as holding the radical potential for change instead of focusing on asexuality purely as a category of attraction-based identity. What would it mean for people who want to have asexual relationships if, instead of needing to be able to say "This is just who I am" as a form of defense and legitimacy, any person could openly and freely say, "This is what I choose"?

1.1.1 A Note on Positionality & the Ace Community

As I begin my critical engagement with the norms of gender, family and a/sexuality that constitute my sociohistorical world, I want to contextualize myself within it, acknowledging my own positionality as a white settler-descendant living on the unceded, ancestral, and occupied

traditional lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Səl̓ílwətaʔ (Tsleil-Watuth), Stó:lō, Shíshálh (Sechelt) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nations of the Coast Salish peoples. In the academy, and especially in the field of asexual studies, the voices of Indigenous, Black and other people of colour are routinely silenced and marginalized. As a white queer scholar, my own ability to have my ideas written, heard, and published should be read first and foremost as a space from which I can begin the work of supporting more marginalized voices than mine, actively working towards decolonization in truth and not simply as a gesture, and respectfully acknowledging how much work I personally still have to do in order to decolonize my own thinking.

Here, it is also worth acknowledging my positionality as an antimonogamous[1], genderqueer and asexually-identifying scholar. Following Sandra Harding's work on *strong reflexivity*, wherein "the producers of knowledge see themselves as broadly accountable and are committed to considering the blind spots imposed by their specific social locations" (as cited in Willey, 14) I find it critical to position my own investment in asexual world-making and queer kinships in order to engage honestly and respectfully with discourses of asexual meaning-making. Asexual and aromantic discourses of identity, kinship, and meaning-making are extremely heterogenous, and within queer discourse, even those who take up the same label may deploy and understand it very differently; it is therefore important to me that I write with a self-critical eye, attempting to acknowledge my own biases and positionality.

Asexual and aromantic communities have been a slowly emerging online subculture over the last decade; while asexuals existed and lived well before this, the visibility of these

[1] Angela Willey proposes the relational ethics of antimonogamy as "not an alternate sexual subjectivity but rather 'a way of life' oriented to undoing monogamy", whose goal is to "open space for thinking about power within and in relation to different structures and systems of belonging" (Willey, 96).

communities has increased exponentially in the last ten years. As a young queer person trying to find a way to express my needs and desires in regards to sexuality and intimacy, I found the language of asexuality useful for a variety of reasons; having asexuality as an option helped me to understand my own complicated relationship with sexual attraction as an adolescent, and, like many other asexuals, helped to validate those feelings as normal. However, the language of asexuality failed to help me frame and communicate my continuing desire for nonsexual and platonic intimacies beyond the bounds of romantic scripts. While I continue to identify as asexual and aromantic, and to form my significant relationships in nonromantic and nonsexual contexts, my concerns in this paper emerge from the totalizing and essentializing underpinnings of asexual language formation. While many asexual writers have dealt and continue to deal with the paradoxical nature of asexual discourse by naming and creating a multitude of smaller, hyperspecific microidentities[2] to more adequately express their needs, identities, and desires, I am most interested in unpacking the discursive framework underlying those identity formations in order to understand why and how they came to be structured as they are. Additionally, as a woman living in a nonsexual[3], non-romantic polyamorous relationship with a heterosexual queer woman, I often run up against cultural, social, and legal norms that make my relationship and large swaths of my personal life completely illegible and incomprehensible (in fact, I imagine that in reading this, you probably had trouble understanding what a nonsexual, non-romantic poly relationship might even be, because all those words simply do not fit together in that order). So while this is an

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[2] The asexual community has developed a plethora of terms for understanding one's own identity or sexuality, including lithromantic", "akoiromantic", "demisexual", "WTFromantic", and others; I have chosen to refer to these highly specific embodied terminologies as microidentities throughout this thesis.

[3] After Gupta, I "use the word nonsexualities to include asexuality, other forms of nonsexuality, and critiques of compulsory sexuality." (Gupta 16)

academic engagement with the norms of sexuality, identity, and romanticism, it is also a deeply personal project in which I am strongly implicated. Additionally, while asexuality is an emerging field, with a growing body of work in the last decade, there has been little work on the related field of *aromanticism*, and the ontological and linguistic consequences of the SAM; therefore my attention to the deep dialectic entanglements between the sexual and the romantic should be read through my commitment as a queer scholar to further unpack those discourses and recognize the amatonormative effects of romantic norms on asexual kinship making and family building.

This project is timely and necessary in this moment, as more diverse asexual relationship forms proliferate which are being named and framed; therefore interrogating the language that is used to express, define and imagine those relationships is a self-conscious and deeply critical action. By using a poststructural approach to engage with the mutability of these language norms, that is, thinking critically about where they came from, how and why they were socially constructed, and how they are deployed to create and define queer spaces, I hope to make space to ask why the language around a/sexuality developed in this way, and whether it might be deployed more effectively if linguistically and discursively reimagined.

Finally, it is important to note that as I begin to lay the groundwork for later chapters, I am not attempting to create a full history of asexual organizing, life, or community. That would be a project much longer, and necessarily much richer and more detailed, than I have space for here. Instead, I am attempting to contextualize modern asexual worldmaking by highlighting the spaces, people and ideas that have created the most common conceptions and understandings of asexuality, and to some degree aromanticism, as an orientation, as a community, and as an identity formation. The online asexual community is primarily English-speaking, and primarily based in North America (Renninger), although there are asexuals accessing the online spaces from far more

diverse locations. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be staying largely in the North American setting. While there are scholars doing fascinating work on the unique asexual resonances and kinships being created in both Poland (Kurowicka; Mizielińska and Stasińska) and China (Zhu), among others, I am contextualized in a Canadian setting (which has significant cultural crossover with the discourse at work in the United States). Given my own nationality, and the fact that my online and scholarly interlocutors are generally Canadian or American, I will be staying within this context. It is also worth noting the privilege and power inherent in a Canadian or American context given the online nature of asexual worldmaking; those with unrestricted internet access and more fluency in both English and American cultural cues might have an easier time in these communities, further shaping their bias towards a nationalist, North American perspective. I will return to this later in the paper, but this is certainly a direction for future research.

I do not claim to speak for all asexuals, or to speak against the norms and structures of the important movement that is asexual community-building and worldmaking. Instead, following Dorothy Smith, I envision this exploration of asexual identity and kinship not as "focusing on sites of 'resistance' or of the avoidance of 'domination'" but as "a project aimed at opening up to us how our everyday lives participate in and are embedded in relations that aren't visible from within them" (Smith, 39). It is important to clarify that I am not making an argument against essentialized, biological asexuality or against those who take up the Split Attraction Model, but rather attempting to trace the cultural embeddedness of romantic norms, in particular the way that romantic and sexual norms influence the way we collectively understand and imagine the asexual self and the asexual community as a whole, opening space for the potential to reimagine asexuality as a powerful form of *doing*, not only as a way of *being*. Although I am interrogating the ontological underpinnings of essentialized, embodied and unchanging asexual identity and attempting to point

at a more flexible form of queer doing, I hold enormous respect for the important work being done by asexual activists to carve out spaces for queerplatonic and other forms of love in our overwhelmingly normative cultural landscape, and their resistance to (hetero)sexual kinship norms. While I am attempting to point out the contradictions inherent in asexual discourse, I do so considering myself to be a part of that discourse, and as a member of that community[4]. Like all theorists, my interest in tracing power through asexual discourse comes from my desire to understand my own socialization and the (sexual) culture I find myself in; however, rather than attempting to opt linguistically out of that socialized sexual role, I want to understand how nonsexual kinship and desire might have a larger effect on that culture and open spaces for the queer asexual *doing* that is already happening beyond explicitly asexual spaces.

1.1.2 A Note on Methodology and Online Asexual Discourse

In the last ten years, there has been a growing community of people identifying as asexual and/or aromantic, both online and in geographically situated communities. Because of the way that "asexuality" as such has only recently entered mainstream discourse as a discursive possibility for queer identity formation, the community has been greatly informed by online sharing of information and experiences (Renninger). Additionally, because asexuals and non-sexual potentialities still lack mainstream representation, asexuals form a very small percentage of the population, one that can be very far-flung geographically. This is immensely significant to the way

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[4] Vancouver, my home city, has a very active asexual community, and I have heard concerns from community members at conferences and in other academic spaces that queer theorists who write about asexuality are 'sexuals talking about asexuals'. I want to be very clear that this thesis, though academic, is very personal to me. As a nonbinary ace/aro, I am committed to engaging respectfully yet critically with asexual discourse and respecting the importance of the ace community, even as my relationship to my own identity is increasingly complicated by my studies.

asexual community has formed worldwide; asexual community-making tends to happen almost exclusively online, and online forums. As Elizabeth Emens notes:

> There are unique reasons an online community might be especially important for asexuals. An identity characterized by a lack of attraction means that spontaneous encounters and venues won't arise through sexual desire—by definition, sexual attraction won't bring those without sexual attraction together. So the stories of asexual meetings are more likely to be mediated through the articulation of the identity per se, rather than through common activities. (Emens 315).

Additionally, just as the nature of asexual community created a unique discursive space, the online nature of asexual worldmaking has had unique and important consequences for the way the asexual community as a whole uses and thinks about identity, language, kinship, and power structures. As I unpack each of these more through the course of this thesis, it will be critical to be attentive to the nature of their discursive origin in this online space, rather than in physical space.

The asexual community as it exists today has grown around these online communities and forums, and those online spaces are unique as a space for creating meaning and connection among community members. This is also the main reason why, in this thesis, I will be treating these online spaces – including AVEN and other online forums – as my main source to draw upon in order to understand the development of asexual communities and worldmaking.[5] My research for this thesis draws on a critical media studies and discourse analysis approach which treats both online asexual

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[5] It has been pointed out to me that in the course of my research, it might be beneficial to speak to people offline as well, especially given that Vancouver has an unusually strong asexual community. However, in attending the Vancouver Ace/Aro meetup group meetings, I was struck by how much the words and language everyone used drew on the same language formations and the exact same forums I had read online; therefore, I believe that in order to understand the geographically located communities that are just beginning to form, it is critical to do this tracing work of the older online communities that made them possible. I consider sociological interviews to be a possible direction for my future research, but one that must be grounded in this discursive work.

community forums and published work on asexuality as distinct parts of a larger archive. Given that so much of this archive exists in public forums online, it offers a rich and unique possibility for analysis.

1.1.3 The Online Discursive Construction of Asexuality as an Identity

The most well-known platform for asexual community-making is the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (hereafter referred to as AVEN), founded by David Jay in 2001. On the main page of AVEN, an asexual is defined as "a person who does not experience sexual attraction". This is a commonly accepted definition among asexual circles. AVEN continues this definition, specifying that

> [a]n asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is *an intrinsic part of who we are*. Asexuality does not make our lives any worse or any better, we just face a different set of challenges than most sexual people (Jay, 2001, emphasis mine).

This singular model of essentialized asexuality locates sexuality and desire as something that is inherent to a person. Some asexual scholars have noted as well that AVEN "tends toward asserting asexuality as an unchanging state of the body" (Przybylo and Cooper, 301). While this definition, and this embodied location of sexuality, is in some ways necessary in order to create discursive space, legibility, and community, it is also a definition that reproduces the dichotomy of need/choice as the foundation for legitimized desire.

AVEN defines asexuality as a sexual orientation like any other, based on desire and self-identification; rather than experiencing sexual attraction to people of the same gender, people who are differently gendered, or indiscriminately, an asexual person experiences specific sexual

attraction to no one. Given that AVEN is often the first point of contact with asexual discourse and the asexual community for people who are trying to name their own desires or lack thereof, it will be critical to bear this definition in mind as I trace the discourses and assumptions at work in asexual community and scholarship. There is also one other definition that I would like to keep in mind in the same way.

The World Health Organization's working definition of sexuality is as follows: "Sexuality is a central aspect of being human and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction" (World Health Organization). I am interested in unpacking, through the course of this paper, the assumptions about identity, sexuality, and being human that underpin these two definitions, and the ways in which they work with and against one another. One posits sexuality as literally a "central aspect of being human", while the other focuses on "the asexual" as a mode of being, a means of identification, and an essential part of identity. The complicated intersections of all these ideas, including identity, intimacy, language, choice, and desire, as well as the question of "being human", will continue to appear throughout this paper.

Additionally, it is important to flag here that David Jay (the founder and webmaster of AVEN) is an extremely influential figure for asexual world-making. As a white, cis, typically abled and conventionally attractive man, he is located along intersecting axes of privilege that allow him to speak as a representative of the community and be heard in spaces beyond the margin. Given the fact that asexuality as a community is still actively forming itself, his voice not only represents but creates asexual identity in an important way. It will be critical, later in this paper, to return to Jay and his role in asexual identity-making.

While I approach AVEN as a problematic space and a conversational community forum rich for analysis, it is also critical to distinguish Jay as a creator of that space and also an individual

person with views and identity separate from the patterns that AVEN reveals. While both Jay and his creation, AVEN, create public knowledge about asexuality, they do so in subtly different ways and in tensions that I want to unpack further later in this thesis.

The modern asexual community is unique in that it has been formed almost exclusively though these online forums (Renninger). In this sense, I regard these forums and online spaces as a valuable and rich archive through which to understand the growth and increasing legitimization of particular conceptualizations of asexuality. This collective approach to creating and naming asexual identity that has grown online is only one part of how asexual discourse has proliferated; therefore in the next section, I want to turn to how queer theorists, scientists, and psychologists respectively have taken up the discourse created online to reify and institutionalize these socially and collectively created knowledges. In this section, it will be important to note how theorists working in both psychology and social sciences have engaged or failed to critically engage with the socially constructed nature of asexual discourse, picking up the terminology created and used in those communities in a variety of ways (for instance, engaging with asexuality as a biological reality) without engaging in its socially constructed roots as a refusal of a sexual, amatonormative culture.

1.2 Public Discourses of Legitimacy

Emens notes that while "AVEN's information pages are quick to assure readers that 'there is no hierarchy of asexuality' … the need to broadcast this claim betrays the anxieties of authenticity that haunt this community." (317) As she notes, concerns of authenticity and legitimacy are critical to the initial formation of the asexual community. One of the earliest and

most important goals that brought together people who identified with these communities was the push to depathologize asexuality and have it removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, that is, to create medical legitimacy. This was the stated and explicit goal of AVEN's original forum system: to build enough of a presence and a community to push for legal recognition in the form of psychiatric depathologization. This is, of course, predicated on science being the most legitimate form of "truth" knowledge, and the DSM as a repository of truth and proof of legitimacy. The goal of AVEN is to "correct" the truth archive as held by the DSM, not to reject the DSM and the medical institution's capacity to define and control embodied experiences vis a vis identity: AVEN's community activists do not critically engage with the violence and power inherent in that capacity to define, asking for a change in the medical institution's standards to legitimize their experiences rather than critiquing the power that institution holds over what experiences and bodies are pathologized at all. In this sense, asexual agitating for visibility does not challenge the medical institution's power to define scientific "truth": indeed, the scientific "truth" of asexuality is being pursued by several psychologists and neurologists, as I will address later. However, it is worth noting that those activists did achieve their goal. The DSM has made several changes that reify the scientific legitimacy of asexuality as an identity, which caused some illuminating reactions from within the asexual community.

In 2013, the DSM-V was published with the changes included that had been agitated for by the AVEN community. Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder had previously been listed as "persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity'… 'that causes…interpersonal difficulty'" (Brotto). However, in the DSM-V, the criteria for "Diagnostic Features" now contains the addendum: "If lifelong lack of sexual desire is better

explained by one's self-identification as 'asexual', then a diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder would not be made." (DSM 434) In a similar vein, the criteria for Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder now adds: "If the man's low desire is explained by self-identification as an asexual, then a diagnosis of male hypoactive sexual disorder would not be made." (DSM 443) There are two interesting discursive moves that shed light on the way asexuality is understood through the DSM as a medical knowledge-making space. First, as Elizabeth Emens notes, the DSM-V "include[s] the intriguing decision to create separate low-desire diagnoses for men and women" (DSM 311). Here, already, the standard for sexual activity is established as a norm via binary gender, reifying two different standards for what *normal* desire ought to be and reinforcing medicalized binary gender standards. While for men, *low* desire is abnormal enough to diagnose a medical problem, for women the standard is *lifelong lack of sexual desire.* Additionally, "asexual" appears in scare quotes in the first entry (women), implying some level of invalidation, while in the entry for male hypoactive sexual disorder, the scare quotes are absent. This may simply be an editing error, but it does reify binary gender and reveal assumptions about the way medical professionals deal respectively with differently gendered desire or lack thereof.

Second, the DSM-V explicitly states that in order to avoid a medical diagnosis of pathological lack of desire, the patient must self-identify as asexual, therefore opting out of the standards of sexuality which are assumed to already be a part of their body and experience. Like the World Health Organization's definition of sexuality, which posits sexuality as an "essential part of being human", these definitions reify *being sexual* as the norm and nonsexual bodies—and indeed, nonbinary genders— as outside of the normal. This reifies *sexual* as the standard and

asexual as an Other. Moreover, the requirement for self-identification – the need to align with an identity as a way to *opt out* of an assumed normativity - constitutes a very queer move, and says more about how we collectively and socially understand sexuality than anything about asexuality. These pre-existing and medicalized expected standards of sexual activity already reveal the way that differently gendered people are expected to engage with and understand their own sexuality, both as gendered bodies, and as bodies that are automatically assumed to be sexual. These discursive conditions of heteronormative control on the standard of sexuality within the gendered body are critical to bear in mind moving forward.

In 2015, the blog *Asexual Archive* published the above excerpts of the DSM-5, claiming it as a huge win for the asexual community. They wrote:

> The DSM-5 explicitly and clearly recognizes asexuality, and says that if a person is asexual, that they should not be diagnosed with Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder or Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder. This book reaffirms that you are valid, your feelings are real, and that you do not have a disorder for feeling that way. *Anyone who claims otherwise is wrong. They do not know what they are talking about.* You can point them at this book as proof that they are wrong. (AsexualityArchive.com, emphasis theirs).

What is at stake here is legitimacy and the right to exist. Here legitimacy is first and foremost predicated on *identity*. Being "valid" in this empirical sense and not pathologized by the medical establishment requires self-identification; specifically, legible self-identification along linguistic lines already set by others, in order to establish oneself and one's body as nonnormative from a standard, "normal" baseline which is always assumed to be sexual. However, most interesting is the weaponization of this validation by the asexual community. This is not particularly surprising,

given the way that science as a form of knowledge carries distinct cultural capital and the trappings of legitimacy, but the deployment of a psychological diagnostic handbook as a tool to which asexuals can point their critics "as proof that they are wrong" (Asexuality Archive) is a useful snapshot for my purposes of the way that asexual discourse is an ongoing power struggle centered around who has the right to define the terms of what (a)sexuality is and with what consequences. For over a decade, the asexual community was organized in online spaces with the intent of normalizing and depathologizing people who do not feel sexual attraction; the framing of this attraction as a stable, empirically discoverable, and factual identity lent that community strength and staying power. However, these frames of knowledge that lend that legitimacy and legibility in public discourse also narrows the definition and possibilities of what asexuality is.

1.3 The Entanglement of Community and Scholarly Discourse

Most asexual worldmaking is happening online, in spaces that are not traditionally recognized as knowledge-making spaces in many disciplines. However, within queer media studies, there is a long history of online chat forums being recognized as important and rich spaces for discourse analysis, and arenas for complex tensions to arise in the definition of queer communities (Bryson, Wakeford). As Mary Bryson notes, "there is nothing straightforward about the relationship of subaltern sexual identifications and cyberculture" (Bryson et al., 792). Due to these growing spaces, and to the growing percentage of the population identifying as asexual and/or aromantic (Bogaert; Scherrer), there is a growing body of peer-reviewed literature surrounding asexual identity formations, including more research on, asexual identities (Scherrer) and asexual community-forming (Przybylo, "Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety").

This research falls into several disciplines, including psychology, neurology, sociology, queer feminist theory, and philosophy.

Much of the current empirical and sociological research around asexuality falls into a rather essentialist discursive formation, focusing on sexuality as something one *is* rather than something one *does* (Foucault) considering asexuality and aromanticism exclusively as identity formations shaped by the experience of attraction. I want to complicate this, and therefore complicate AVEN's claim that being homosexual, heterosexual or asexual is something that certain humans naturally *are,* rather than something that is strongly influenced by the sociocultural worlds in which one is socialized. In order to do this work, however, it is important to understand the thinking being done already around asexuality.

1.3.1 **Empirical Accounts of Asexuality and Public Legitimacy**

Anthony Bogaert, a social scientist based out of Brock University, was one of the first researchers to perform clinical, empirical research on people who identified as asexual. As Emens summarizes:

> Bogaert found that the 1% who had felt no sexual attraction—whom he called "asexuals"—had had fewer sexual partners, a later age of first sexual activity (if any), and less frequent sexual activity with others, the combination of which Bogaert found to offer "some validation of the concept of asexuality." (313)

Critically, here the scientific study of asexuality defines the orientation as deeply embedded in practice and is "proven" by studying the number of partners one has had, a move which has since been complicated by later theorists. Through Bogaert's psychological framing, the empirical quantification and definition of its presence in the population has the power to explicitly validate

it as a concept and therefore as an identity. Additional empirical studies (Brotto and Yule; Poston and Baumle) have reinforced the validity of identity claims through data-gathering such as "online questionnaires assessing sexual history, sexual inhibition and excitation, sexual desire, and an open-response questionnaire concerning asexual identity" (Prause and Graham), defining and crystallizing the quantifiable aspects of an asexual identity in order to lend it some scientific validity.

Most research around asexuality is taken up by the online asexual community and used to reaffirm the rights of asexual people to take up space, self-identify, and be ace and proud. However, although empirical data carries a powerful form of cultural capital, validating their experiences as a quantifiable percentage of the "nation" in a powerfully normalizing sense, these studies are still grounded in biases and assumptions about bodies, desire, and attraction that are grounded in understandings of the body as inherently sexual and traditional modes of calculating sexual attraction as comprehensible for asexual participants.[6] As sociologists Matt Dawson and Susie Scott note in their paper "Freedom and foreclosure: intimate consequences for asexual identities":

> A methodological problem with these studies is that they have tended to use measures that reflect dominant sexualised approaches (Hinderliter, 2009). For example, the use of Likert scales to rate levels of sexual desire are largely incomprehensible to those who have never felt such desire (cf. Brotto et al., 2010 and Prause and Graham, 2007). This reflects a wider lack of methodological plurality in research on asexuality. (Dawson and Scott, 6)

[6] There is some awareness and pushback in the asexual community against the sexual, normative biases of empirical surveys- please see the AAW's 2011 *Open Letter to Researchers* for more information.

These studies have also produced results which are of critical interest to my thesis. People who self-identify as asexual are more likely to be female (Bogaert, Prause and Graham) and to have a college degree (Prause and Graham), and to have "no significant difference in lifetime sexual partners or relationship status" (Prause and Graham) compared to non-asexual people; that is, although they self-identify as asexual, their kinship and relationship practices remain overwhelmingly normative, generally monogamous and romantic, and often heterosexual. [7]

Despite this data's tendency to be used to discredit the ace/aro community (that is, to delegitimize the orientation based on gender or as a trend) it strongly supports the argument that people who identify as ace and aro are potentially experiencing attraction or the lack of attraction beyond what Western discourse of bodily desire offers the language to understand, or potentially are simply not satisfied with the language and relationship choices available to them, and that when the language of non-sexuality becomes available to understand the self, they claim that identity, opting out of embodied desire and pushing against a specific set of culturally constituted norms. Two critical questions arise out of this literature for me, which I want to attend to later. Firstly, what does this data say about the way Western culture understands the female body and female desire, if we understand asexuality as an identity claim that arises strongly out of context more than it is internal to the body? As we will see later, asexual people (largely young, college-educated women) are using this language to opt out of certain social scripts. Thus, secondly, what forces of social control are at work on the way young women understand their bodies as inherently desiring

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[7] Given that most asexuals find it difficult to find other asexuals to date (and, indeed, given that the idea of dating beyond sex becomes something that has to be invented by both parties [Renninger]) many asexuals tend to date sexuals. (Dawson, McDonnell, et al.)

and desirable, and their identities as deeply tied to their sexualities and relationships? Gender and socialization are deeply at work here, as I will explore in the next section.

The study of asexuality as an empirical truth which can be captured in the body upholds the idea of asexuality as an orientation and a legitimate identity, however, the terms on which the Brotto studies and others operate reveal the rather Foucauldian workings of biopower in the way that Western culture discursively understands what it means to be human. As the WHO's definition of sexuality as a "central part of being human" reveals, it is almost impossible to quantify what it means to be a body that does not experience sexual desire when we culturally understand the body first and foremost as something inherently sexual. This has been referred to by several theorists as *compulsory sexuality.* I discuss this concept below.

1.3.2 **Compulsory Sexuality**

In her article, Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept, Kristina Gupta expands Elizabeth Emens' concept of compulsory sexuality, which the former uses to describe "the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexualities, such as a lack of sexual desire or behaviour, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity" (Gupta, 2015). She additionally is careful "to emphasize that compulsory sexuality is a system that regulates the behaviour of all people, not just those who identify as asexual" (Gupta, 2015). She posits the idea that *having a sexuality* is a socialized norm. If people are socialized to "experience themselves as desiring subjects" (Gupta), what does it mean to actively claim an identity that rejects this desiring? I read this to suggest that rather than being something that can be traced biologically, as Brotto and

Bogaert attempt to do, asexuality needs to be read within its social and cultural context, which queer scholars such as Przybylo and others have begun to do.

It is important to note that the term "compulsory sexuality" is drawn and extrapolated from the term "compulsory heterosexuality", as coined by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". In this text and within her other, later work, Rich identifies "compulsory heterosexuality" as a powerful social institution at work in the lives of (as she identifies it) women. Rich identifies this cultural norm in order to ask whether, "things being equal, women would *choose* heterosexual coupling and marriage" (Rich, 13), and to consider the "degree to which...heterosexual 'preference' has been imposed on women" (Rich 30). She identifies this compulsory sexuality specifically as a form of inequality under patriarchy that functions to ensure control over women's sexuality, labor, and political agency, identifying marriage norms and other widespread cultural sexual norms as a form of "female slavery…where women and girls cannot change the conditions of their existence… regardless of how they got into that existence" (Rich 23). She proposes, in this work, the notion of the "lesbian continuum" (29) and "woman identification"[8] (34) as part of the work of political organizing in order to "ask at every point how heterosexuality as an institution has been organized and maintained through the female wage scale…with its doubled workload for women and its sexual division of labour" (36). Rich is specifically taking a political stance grounded in feminist thought, one that moves away from 'lesbianism' as an identity and into identification with the lesbian continuum and female support networks as a powerful political tool for transforming hegemonic political systems.

[8] It is important to note that Rich's writing excludes nonbinary and trans women, grounded as it is in second-wave white feminist thought, and that I want to be attentive to that gap in order not to reproduce it.

Despite the explicit links that Gupta makes regarding the ways that her work draws on Rich's, there are some critical differences between the ways that Rich and Gupta respectively call for opting out of these "compulsory" norms, which I wish to expand on in later sections. Crucially, Rich calls for opting out of this compulsory sexuality by choosing to "coupl[e] or ally in independent groups with other women." (15); rather than resisting this compulsory sexuality by claiming asexual identity or *being*, she calls for a nonsexual intimate *doing*, the lesbian continuum. Meanwhile, identifying as asexual connotes a self-reflexive understanding of one's own experience of attraction, not necessarily sexual practice (Przybylo, 2011). While Rich's identification of compulsory heterosexuality, grounded in second-wave feminism, calls necessarily for action, Gupta and Emens' accounts of compulsory *sexuality* are located more in being and in identitarian communities striving for recognition, and in the right to opt out through self-reflexivity from sexual desire. Gupta traces the "privileging of sexuality and the marginalization of nonsexuality that makes sexuality compulsory" (147), locating an asexual population that is being relegated to the margins of sexual discourse (Gupta). Unlike Rich, her analysis is not woven through with a call to political action, but identifies hegemonic norms that are being enforced from the top down on a marginalized population. Similarly, Emens' analysis is centred entirely on the asexual community. Her essay does a brilliant job unpacking the discursive underpinnings of a sexualized society that makes discrimination specifically against asexuals nearly a given condition of its functioning. Unlike Rich, whose engagement with compulsory sexuality places the onus on the reader and on individual women to change their ways of thinking and politically engaging with other women, Emens engages with these cultural practices as a set of limitations and assumptions being imposed on the asexual population by a predominantly sexual culture. Her paper ends with a meditation asking for "asexuality [to] be incorporated into

antidiscrimination law" (Emens 374), which differs strongly from Rich's political call to unlearn internalized compulsory heterosexuality. In the next section, I will investigate the way that different genealogies of thought are at work in asexual theory in order to identify some of the complexities in Gupta's and Emens' assumptions about what it means to be asexual or do asexuality.

1.3.3 How Amatonormativity Complicates Accounts of Asexuality

The term "amatonormativity" was coined by the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Brake in 2012. In her book *Minimizing Marriage; Marriage, Morality and the Law*, she defines amatonormativity as "the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in the sense that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types" (Brake, 6). Her book argues that marriage should be "minimized" in such a way that its definition and benefits are expanded to include other types of caring relationships, rather than only monogamous sexual relationships. Brake notes that "the special priority accorded marriage and marriage-like relationships marginalizes other forms of caring relationships. To the extent that it sustains 'amatonormativity'—the focus on marital and amorous love as special sites of value—marriage undermines other forms of care" (Brake, 5). Brake's main argument is that as queer relationship structures become more common, it will be necessary to change the various privileges afforded to romantic, sexual, monogamous relationships—not only on a social level, but in our legal systems and judicial frameworks, so that "individuals can have legal marital relationships with more than one person, reciprocally or asymmetrically, themselves determining the sex and number of parties, the type of relationship involved, and which rights and responsibilities to exchange with each"

(Brake, 45). Brake's work is taken up most often by polyamory thinkers, but I believe her analysis resonates with asexual and aromantic thought, opening space to rethink the site of kinship relations as the norm rather than sexuality or selfhood. My eventual goal is to reframe kinship rather than identity as the site of asexuality and/or aromanticism, complicating those categories along the way. If we understand asexuality not as an essentialized identity formation, but as a way to express desires and to visualize what a queer life might look like, Brake's thought is critical to this reframing work.

This is critical to me, and something that I believe is overlooked in many asexual communities or asexuality studies; how is asexuality contextualized in an amatonormative world, and how the assumptions of that amatonormative world inform the desires and actual lived experiences of those who might otherwise wish to opt out of sex, marriage, or nuclear family structures? The question of what it means to split the "romantic" from the "sexual" must draw on Brake's work, and likewise must expand from the legal paradigm to address the deep sociopolitical roots and investments of historical amatonormativity in Western culture.

Amatonormativity as a concept is also worth critically engaging with in light of the discursive gap I have identified between Rich's compulsory heterosexuality and Gupta and Emen's compulsory sexuality. Brake's work focuses on sexuality not only as a site of being or an external norm being imposed on a minority population, but also as a social doing that incorporates romantic norms alongside sexuality and sexual norms and a cultural force that impacts everyone in our culture rather than simply those marginalized by it. In this sense, "amatonormativity" might be considered an extension of Rich's analysis of compulsory heterosexuality, although one that is more broadly drawn in order to consider its impact on more genders. Brake's idea of minimized marriage seems to me to echo the spirit of Rich's call for "woman-identification"- it is a call to

build mutual networks of support beyond one's spouse, choosing to invest one's care and time in different ways in order to practice intimacy differently. The major difference, to me, is that Brake does not confine her "minimized marriage" to only women. Her idea of "amatonormativity" does not align neatly with earlier, more identitarian ways of thinking critical nonsexualities, but does necessarily involve changing the shape of relationships and *doing* rather than claiming the right to *be.* This less rigidly identitarian way of theorizing the impact of amatonormativity opens the possibility of thinking nonsexual kinship as a valid choice. If one can determine "which rights and responsibilities" (Brake) to exchange with each member of this reimagined "marriage", it might be possible to get to a place where sex does not determine the level of time, commitment, or care one puts into one's relationships; that is, where one could have both a sexual and a nonsexual relationship and have neither be more important than the other. This would *not* require opting in as a "gold star asexual" (Bogaert), or even require one to identify as asexual at all; but it opens the door to what Przybylo and Cooper call "asexual resonances" beyond what might be considered explicitly asexual spaces.

1.3.4 **Asexual Resonances**

In their article Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive, Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper begin the work of opening discursive spaces for speaking about asexuality outside of explicit self-identification as ace. They discuss the "definitional maneuver that consistently appears in discussions of asexuality […] that it is sought for as a natural, consistent, and indisputable proclivity of the body" (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014). They discuss how the current ideological form of asexuality is a

> search for asexuality in perfectly embodied form, an asexuality that is ever present in the body, more or less unchanging throughout one's lifetime, and categorically not a "choice" closes down queerly asexual possibilities for archiving, emphasizing wholesale and rigid asexual identity over asexual moments, glimpses, resonances" (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014)

Przybylo and Cooper introduce the term "resonance" to create "a more flexible theorizing of asexuality" (303), one that can "envision it beyond the dominant, exacting definitions and manifestations it has acquired in the present as a sexual identity of 'no sexual attraction'" (303-304). They argue that rigid identitarian definitions of asexuality limit the possibilities for understanding the ways in which asexuality is at work in the everyday and the ways in which it might change our cultural notion of the "sexual". This move away from a rigid self-identification and essentialized, biological identity that it is possible to "find" is a crucial move in the field; it lays the groundwork for my research. However, they still use the term "asexuality" very broadly, using it to refer to any resonance they find of "asexual touch" (302) in their search to expand the asexual community's historical archive. I want to take a slightly different approach to create space for nonsexual touch and asexual resonance even for people who do not want to explicitly self-identify as asexual.

Gupta, Cooper and Przybylo are all interested in the project of tracing the historical archive for queer resonances, attempting to find expressions of asexual identity and desire and retroactively applying the label "asexual" in order to help create narrative and cultural spaces for present-day asexuals to build a history. I see this maneuver as having the potential not only to create an archive, but also to challenge the discursive labels that draw the limits of asexual selfhood and community. Following Pryzybylo and Cooper's work, I want to trace the queerly asexual resonances that could be at work outside the explicit label of "asexual" and the rigid structures of

identity-centric language; for instance, in the households and alternative kinship structures of those people who do not explicitly identify as asexual, but benefit from the growing mainstreaming of asexual discourse and the way it is affecting our cultural understanding of romantic love. This aspect of asexual discourse has a large amount of unexplored potential for more research, and is critical for how I want to move into thinking about asexuality not as a rigid, fixed identitarian category, but something that has been present in multiple historical narratives throughout history.

One important gap worth highlighting in Cooper and Przybylo's work is the way they deploy the word "asexuality". In the introduction to their paper, Cooper and Przybylo note that:

> …here, we are not bound to asexuality as a sexual identity category articulated in the West in the last decade or so, nor do we offer an alternative "measurable" standard for determining what constitutes asexuality. Rather, we shift our focus to a blurrier imagining of asexuality; we are attuned less to self- identified asexual figures than to asexual "resonances" — or traces, touches, instances — allowing us to search for asexuality in unexpected places. Such a queer broadening of what can "count" as asexuality, especially historically speaking, creates space for unorthodox and unpredictable understandings and manifestations of asexuality. (298)

Although overall, their discursive move is useful to me, I'm struck by the way that their articulation of "asexuality" becomes its own force; by "asexuality", they mean both "asexual people", or people who identify as *being* asexuals, and asexual *doing*, that is, as they say, "traces, touches, instances" (298). Their blurring of these two into one ontological category, "*asexuality*", is something that repeats itself over and over in other spaces of asexual discourse. The intervention I want to make here, and throughout the rest of this paper, is to ask *what* function this categorical blurring serve, and what impact (positive or negative) it has on political organizing when *doing* and *being* are blurred into the same action. When "asexuality" becomes this archive of queer touch

and *doing* as well as a category of *being*, what is at stake in asexual community-building? Do the categories of identity being claimed have a political goal, a new political practice that they create space for? Is there a political *doing* that asexuals wish to claim with this identity, or is the right to continue *being* the end goal? These are the questions I want to continue to answer.

1.3.5 **"No Asexual Kinship": A Symbolic-Interactionist Approach**

One criticism of Gupta, Przybylo and Cooper's work comes from the research team of Liz McDonnell, Susie Scott, and Matt Dawson, who take a symbolic interactionist approach as a means to contest the claim that asexuality is already inherently revolutionary. They used quantitative data from both interviews and research diaries to posit that "it is difficult to claim there are distinctly 'asexual practices of intimacy'" (Dawson, Mcdonnell, et al.), citing Przybylo and Gupta directly to push back against their claims that people who are asexual can create new relationship norms through simply being asexual. While Przybylo and Gupta argue that asexual identity is radical in itself in that it opens new spaces for radical intimacies, McDonnell et al argue that the intimacies that asexual people are forming are still deeply impacted and limited by romantic norms and scripts, even when they attempt to use this identity as a way to create new scripts:

> We would suggest that these arguments suggest the need to keep in mind the need for a 'relational' approach to understanding personal life (Smart 2007). This is especially the case for asexual people who, without dominant scripts of asexual intimacy, can only engage in negotiations to the extent that others are willing. (19)

Based on their participants' answers, they argue that most asexual people have desires that are not particularly revolutionary, and not even particularly queer. In their study, which focuses on "the interrelation between and intersection of asexual identities and intimacies" (1), these authors lay

the groundwork for my work by emphasizing that they "consider asexual identities as embedded and emergent from these social relationships, rather than being either privately individual or publicly political issues" (4). Essentially, they are attempting to account for amatonormative social forces in the context of how asexual identity works, "explor[ing] the dynamic, mobile interrelationship between [identity and intimacy], and its many potential consequences for asexual lives." (4)

Through the course of several papers based on their study data, Dawson et al argue that "…these comparisons always have to take place in light of dominant cultural scripts of what a 'romantic relationship' is seen to be." (Dawson, Scott, and McDonnell). This sociological data pushes back against the idea that asexuality is inherently revolutionary in and of itself, bringing the focus away from a nebulous idea of "asexuality" and back into the practice of what people who self-identify as asexual are actually *doing*.

One gap that I want to highlight in McDonnell, Scott and Dawson's work is that their research defines romantic desires as being part of sexual orientation, defining asexuality as "a sexual orientation defined by questions of sexual desire and romantic attraction" (19), which does not account for the complexities created in that definition by their participants' use of the split-attraction model. As I will discuss further below, McDonnell et al take up the language of the SAM when marking their participants' identities, but do not use that framework to create their definitions or in their analysis, a fairly significant gap that fails to take into account the fact that their participants are working from the framework of the SAM.

As sociologists, although they are approaching the question of asexual doing from a social sciences approach as well as a queer/feminist critical nonsexualities lens, their research is still deeply embedded in and informed by the notion of asexuality as an inherent, essentialized and

stable identity In this paper, sex and sexuality is still deeply entangled with cultural notions of romance, and the conflation and confusion of sexual and romantic desire throughout the literature and throughout community conversation shines as a major theme. Although the research question Dawson et al use is explicitly asking how asexually-identified people approach their sexual relationships, this question is nearly always answered by the participants in the context of what asexual people are doing with their romantic relationships and kinship structures, whether they stay within normative monogamous relationship structures or not. Although each of the respondents in Dawson et al's paper are self-identified as *being* asexual, their *doing* of asexuality is deeply tied up in the question of what kind of romantic scripts they are taking up; they are drawing on normative romantic scripts and attempting to fit their own self-identified asexuality into those inherently very sexual spaces. Although McDonnell et al identify their participants using the SAM, referring to their "asexual-heteromantic" (15), "grey-a lesbian" (14), and "hetero-romantic, pan-demi-romantic, flexible asexual" (10) they are not critically attentive to the origins of these language formations and what precise effect they are having. While they are attentive to the types of intimacies their participant are attempting to build, McDonnell et al do not critically engage with the identitarian labels their participants provide, presumably in order to respect their identities. However, this uncritical taking up of the language of the SAM, where romantic and sexual attraction are understood as completely separate, does not map well onto the theoretical framework that the team uses to speak about the intimacies being formed. In their paper, the team acknowledges more than once that the "cultural 'framing' of relationships (Morgan 2011) suggests that [...] what distinguishes a 'romantic' relationship from a friendship is partly the presence of sex." (10) Here, sex and romance are deeply tied together as norms, and their cultural framing is difficult to separate, although the participants, in their identity claims, have posited them as

separately understood. This is true in the content of the interviews as well. McDonnell et al note that in one of their interviews, their participant "attempted to maintain the romantic intimacy of the relationship by outsourcing the sexual element. However, his girlfriend rejected this […] due to the expectation that sexual intimacy is integrated within the romantic intimacy produced by the exclusive insularity of the relationship." (10) Although this participant identifies within the SAM, understanding himself as a "hetero-romantic, pan-demi-romantic, flexible asexual" (10), these terms become illegible when he attempts to deploy them within the social script of an intimate relationship. Despite the potential relief and validation of understanding his own identity and being able to accurately name his desires, those desires cannot be put into practice within his primary partnership.

This gap between *doing* and *being* is the major reason why, in another paper, Scott and Dawson criticize Przybylo's notion of "asexuality" as being something inherently revolutionary; they argue that "as opposed to the political perspective of seeing these discourses as conservative or repressive, and therefore contested by an innately critical, even anarchist, asexuality, our approach recognises that [dominant discourses] may instead be accepted and valued as meaningful to the relationship" (Scott and Dawson, 14). This data seems to me to be another reason why asexuality and desire must still be read within the lens of wider cultural forces; the norms of romance and sex are meaningfully and importantly entangled even for those trying to opt out of them. As we will see in the following section, these two forces are thought differently in the asexual community, and any research attempting to make sense of asexual worldbuilding ought to take that into account. As Przybylo and Cooper note, "the truth archive informs and is informed by asexuality's vernacular archive" (300); here, Scott and Dawson, in their attempt to add to the sociological truth archive, are not engaging critically with the way their participants' experiences

are deeply embedded in that vernacular archive. By not questioning where the SAM comes from, and how it informs the experiences and expectations of their participants, they are not able to engage meaningfully with the illegibility of their participants' identity markers to their partners, and the ways that those identities fail to produce meaningfully shifted practices. So where did the 'vernacular archive' come from, and how did these identity terms develop into the modern, hegemonic 'asexuality' we see researchers such as Przybylo and Cooper speaking about today?

1.4 Doing vs Being

The first appearance of what we might think of as modern asexuality appeared in 1972, when "the Co-ordinating Council of New York Radical Feminists formed caucuses based on similarity of sexual orientation." (Orlando, 1). During this radical feminist caucus, Barbie Hunter Getz and Lisa Orlando "realized that we would not feel comfortable in any of the proposed caucuses (heterosexual, Lesbian, bisexual) and formed our own." (Orlando, 1). This "asexual caucus" of two wrote *The Asexual Manifesto,* the first recorded example of asexual organizing in a Western feminist context[9]. In the *Asexual Manifesto,* which was eventually written and edited by Orlando on her own, she writes:

> Our experiences with sexuality have not been congruent with our feminist values. As our consciousness became raised on this issue we began to see how sex had permeated our lives and the lives of others. We categorized our relationships in terms

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[9] Radical feminist cells such as Cell 16 have also been cited by asexual scholars as early sites of asexuality, but I have chosen not to include them here as their rhetoric is often grounded problematically in concepts of celibacy as "wholeness" and sex as dirty, which is not a rhetoric I feel is useful to thinking asexual political organizing. However, it is interesting to note how online asexual historians engage with Cell 16. The blog The Asexual Agenda, notes that "What I'm seeing [in Cell 16] is that there were precursors to asexuality and asexual ideas, but the idea of asexuality itself wasn't quite articulated"; I read this as a self-conscious searching for history to support the asexual movement even though Cell 16 locates asexuality ontologically completely differently than the community does now.

> of sex – either friends or lovers. We engaged in a "sizing up" process, however subtle or subconscious, with each new person, accepting or rejecting her/him as a possible sexual partner even if we never intended to become sexually involved. We arbitrarily rejected whole groups of people as unsuitable for intimate relationships because we assumed that such relationships, by definition, necessarily included sex. Often we chose to spend time with people simply on the basis of their sexual availability (the "bar scene"). As we became aware of this in ourselves, we became painfully aware of how we were being objectified by others. Asexuality is an outgrowth of this consciousness. It is a concept we have come to employ out of the wish to communicate – not merely through being but also through language – our struggle to rid ourselves of sexism in our personal lives. (2)

What is critical in Orlando's *Asexual Manifesto* is that asexuality is not defined as an embodied lack of desire, despite using the same word that AVEN would use thirty years later. Instead, asexuality is a philosophy shaped by a feminist consciousness, deliberately aimed at unlearning toxic socialized gender roles. For Orlando, being an "asexual woman" (4) involves the following:

> In examining our experiences relative to our values, we have come to asexuality as a stand and a state of being concurrently. Interpersonal sex is no longer important to us, no longer worth the distorted and often destructive role it has played in relationships. It no longer defines our relationships or in any way constitutes our identities. As asexual women, we do not (1) seek, initiate, or continue relationships in order to experience interpersonal sex, (2) use others for the satisfaction of our sexual needs or allow ourselves to be so used, (3) attempt to satisfy other needs (e.g. for affection, warmth, intimacy) through interpersonal sex, or (4) perceive others according to their potential, or lack of it, as sex partners. In essence then, our asexuality reflects a rejection of interpersonal sex as long as it cannot meet our conditions: that it be both congruent with our values and totally incidental and unimportant to our relationship. (Orlando, 4)

This vision of asexuality grounds it in a political consciousness, one that reinterprets relationships and romantic norms based on a reassessing of gender roles. Crucially, it never claims a biological lack of desire, and is attentive to the reasons one might seek out a romantic relationship; it is grounded in its (admittedly second-wave[10]) feminism in that it is a worldview one might choose to take up in order to relate more freely, not only to potential partners, but to everyone. Essentially, it constitutes making an active paradigm shift in one's relationality with the world. Additionally, it is interesting that Orlando specifies interpersonal sex as the arena for this paradigm shift, rather than an internalized sexual "drive" or desire. Quantitative research, as well as community meaning-making, has often noted that many self-identified asexuals still masturbate, (Bogaert; Przybylo; Brotto and Yule; Emens), making the distinction between desire for release through masturbation [usually framed as sexual 'drive' (Ritchie and Barker)] and desire for interpersonal sex (usually framed as sexual attraction). Orlando's specification of interpersonal sex as the site of power relations and political change is distinct from this move in that it does not attempt to internalize asexual desire. Asexual erotics and resonances are present here, but unlike modern asexual meaning-making, they are not categorically presented as "not a choice" (Jay). Instead, this asexuality is a choice specifically to do with how one approaches interpersonal sex.

Sexual desire is not politicized as an identity formation here. Unlike the discursively bounded edges of the asexual community, where the critical function of inclusion is mediated by whether one feels sexual attraction or not, desire has no bearing in Orlando's analysis. Instead, asexuality is deployed as a specific political consciousness around how a person can interact

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[10] Orlando, like Rich, deals with asexuality as a political stance that ought to be taken up by women in order to escape from the unique pressures faced by women under "male power" (Rich). Like much of the white second-wave feminism of her time, her analysis is not attentive to the varying workings of power on racialized, Indigenous, and trans* bodies, and my analysis and use of her ideas must account for that gap in her work.

ethically with one's community without reducing people to their potential as sexual partners, finding ways to seek out "affection, warmth and intimacy" without needing it to be *tied to sex*. This, however, does not preclude sexual partners, desire, attraction or practice. This is very different from how the modern asexual community's vernacular defines asexuality.

A second example of asexuality as political organizing was published around the same time. In 1973, Dana Densmore wrote *Independence from the Sexual Revolution*, a short article published by Quadrangle, in which she suggests that, particularly for women, sexuality is heavily socialized and mediated through gender roles, something very similar to what Rich argues. In seeking sex, she argues, "…the real thing we seek is closeness, merging, perhaps a kind of oblivion of self that dissolves the terrible isolation of individualism." (Densmore, 1) Like Orlando, Densmore is attempting to identify a broad cultural problem in which [a]ll desire for love, companionship, physical affection, communication, and human kindness […] translate to us into a desire for sex. This is pathetically narrow, impossibly limiting" (3), one that is especially fraught with modern gender roles. Densmore makes claims that could be read as precursors to much of what is now thought of as critical nonsexualities. Her manifesto, however, explores the possibility of choosing to opt out of sexuality and orgasm as the basis for creating love and affection, arguing that "we are limited when we believe that we must screw to express love" (Densmore, 3). Again, her approach is deeply rooted in a second-wave feminism that makes a call to action exclusively to (cis)women, which I do not want to pick up, but the importance of her argument lies in its grounding in asexuality as choice and action. She is arguing "not that sex is by its nature evil and destructive, but that it is not an absolute physical need" (3); not dislocating desire from the body in any biological way, but perhaps interrupting the binary model of sexual/asexual. By drawing on

Densmore, we might look for a radical asexual politics in which embodied desire or lack thereof is not the end goal, but an asexual doing is opened as a possibility.

In 1997, Zoe O'Reilly wrote the now-foundational blog post, "My Life As A Human Amoeba". In this blog post, she refers repeatedly to asexuals as "our kind", and claiming to speak for all asexuals, saying: "My people are a definite minority group who wish to be recognized like all the others. We want a colored ribbon, a national holiday, coupons for fast food. We want the world to know that we are out there." (O'Reilly) These goals are a particular form of organizing, which I think are worth noting. Coupons for fast food and national holidays are a specific kind of legitimacy, one which attempts to norm asexuals and asexuality into the fabric of existing roles, specifically in a fascinatingly state-mediated, nationalist and capitalistic way, grounded in the neoliberal recognition of individual identity. What is fascinating to me here is that O'Reilly's vision of asexual political organizing is about as far from Densmore and Orlando's radical politics as it is possible to get; rather than attempting to break down gender, sexuality, and normative heteropatriarchal kinship, O'Reilly's form of political organizing attempts to norm asexuality into capitalist heteropatriarchy.

O'Reilly's essay also rejects romantic (and, indeed, nonromantic) kinship in a way that once again blurs and ties together sexual and romantic norms. She goes on to say that:

> I find that being devoid of sexuality makes my life a lot easier. By not having a significant other I am following Thoreau's philosophy of "simplify, simplify, simplify." One less birthday to remember, less food to buy and no one forcing me to place someone besides myself first on my list. And a perfect reason for it all. Like the scorpion told the fox in the old fable, "It is my nature." (O'Reilly)

There are two things I want to note here. First is O'Reilly's claim that being "devoid of sexuality" means that she will have no significant other. She lays out no alternative claim for how she

imagines herself forming kinships in the article, so we are left to assume that all asexuals (as she claims to speak for her "people"), by rejecting sexual kinship, will choose automatically to live alone. It forecloses the possibility of any other form of kinship, reserving the kind of affection and the kind of life where one "places someone besides [them]self first on their list" (O'Reilly) for sexual partnership.

Second is O'Reilly's emphasis on the claim that it is in her "nature". This move is fascinating to me. The claim that there is a "perfect reason for it all" legitimizes her claim, making space in normative discourse for asexuality to be normed in. Additionally, her blurring of sexual and romantic norms reifies the "gold star asexual" (Bogaert) as the person who "wants no one" (Emens), choosing to live a life without birthdays to remember or companionship. She makes the troublingly moralizing claim that "In this time of teen mothers and raging hormones, my people should be praised for being what we are […]You'll never see us hanging out in the mall hitting on babes or buying smutty magazines from the local Circle K. Without sexual frustration, there's no cause to deface and pillage the town and its restroom walls" (O'Reilly). This claim is grounded in a troubling set of assumptions. O'Reilly connects certain forms of classic teen rebellion—the kinds of political agitation that intervene in white, suburban communities—as a "frustration" only arising out of sexuality rather than any sort of political consciousness. Her moral condemnation of teen mothers, graffiti, and cruising reflects a distinct standpoint grounded in racialized, sexist, and homophobic discourses. Rather than a self-conscious philosophy grounded in a feminist consciousness that aims to unlearn our objectification of other people, O'Reilly claims asexuality as a somewhat smug moral high ground, where asexuals will be abstinent, avoid teen pregnancy, and never be frustrated or angry with "no cause" the way their sexual peers are. This neoliberal, individualist organizing (and self-aggrandizement) is immensely different from the previous calls

for mutual, nonsexual support networks; and what makes it especially troubling is that this neoliberal grounding of asexuality is the one which, directly and indirectly, led to the creation the modern asexual community.

This text is still circulating, and is one of the key texts that to this day helps people claim an asexual identity for themselves. It is critical to me that it is *this* mode of asexuality that is uncritically taken up when people are beginning to understand their identities. The idea that there is a "kind", a "people", who ought to experience asexuality like this, means that this text carries immense cultural and discursive weight for the asexual community and the way that asexuals come to understand themselves. The first online asexual group, an email chatlist on Yahoo.com, was called "Haven for the Human Amoeba", after this article, and was the direct predecessor of AVEN, leading to the organization and political proliferation of the modern asexual community (Hinterliter). To this day, this is still one of the main articles to which questioning asexuals are referred as an important "Ace 101" text. O'Reilly's theoretical grounding, one that is rooted in homophobic, racialized, and moralizing discourses, has become the basis for modern asexual thought.

The difference between O'Reilly's work and the work of Orlando and Densmore is troubling. In the twenty-five years between these widely-recognized, germinal texts of asexuality, the assumed, implicit grounding of what it meant to be asexual shifted dramatically from something embedded in feminist social consciousness (an asexual manifesto) into something springing from an essentialized identity, fighting to be recognized as a "people" independent of socially constructed or political forces, fighting only for the right to exist and be celebrated within the heteropatriarchal, neoliberal framework rather than for the right to change it.

Why was it *this* approach to asexuality, centered on a “people” who are “out there” and have specific, attainable, capitalistic, and normative wants, that was able to grow? The articulation of an asexual *identity* that was based on a radical *being* rather than a doing was clearly more enticing, and was able to organize around that claim to legitimacy. As Chasin notes, “situated amid prominent identity politics, asexuality represents a useful political sexual orientation (identity) category—and the political action toward asexual visibility has proceeded accordingly" (169). The political weight and legitimacy of this particular form of identity politics grows from the success of earlier forms of identity politics in normalizing previously marginalized members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. In this form of organizing, identity becomes the primary means by which one makes political claims to the state, as seen in gay and lesbian organizing of the late 20th century (Brown). However, in the case of asexuality, identifying oneself as something one is not presents a particular form of paradox, as noted by Eunjung Kim, who refers to this paradox as "the politics of sexual disidentification that enable one to claim an identity by highlighting what one is not" (Kim, 480).

One pitfall of the extension of identity politics to the specific mode of politicization of asexual identity is that it inherits from the former a tendency to fail to offer a useful analysis of the power into which its proponents wish to be integrated. As Cathy Cohen notes: “Many of us continue to search for a new political direction and agenda, one that does not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently” (Cohen 437) The growth of “queer” politics as an alternative to identity politics emerged from those queer subjects who were dissatisfied with the stable and totalizing accounts of identity that gay and lesbian organizing offered. My theory draws heavily on this history of queer organizing, especially in the move I am

attempting to make from asexual identity into asexual kinship. As I will note later, the idea of asexual kinship relies and draws heavily on notions of queer kinship posed by earlier thinkers in order to move away from rigid identitarian politics.

How to trace the consequences of shifting understandings of what it means to opt out of sexuality? One is founded on *doing* politically transformational asexual kinship, while the other is founded on *being asexual.* What are the two different political investments of these respective definitional genealogies? Breanne Fahs and her second-wave anarchist politics remind us that "[w]hen women choose asexuality, rather than simply being asexual as consequence of their 'fixed' psychological makeup, it challenges ideas about identity and institutions"[11] (454). The discursive move in asexual politics to take up asexual identity, for all genders, should be understood as a move to opt out of fixed and gendered roles in relationality, legitimizing and crystallizing this opting-out as an immovable, unchosen identity in order to gain traction politically. However, now that the paradoxical and ever-narrowing micro-identities necessary to continue this legitimizing are having a negative impact on the political power of asexual *being*, rendering its political ends the right to only *exist* and not to *be,* it may be time for a reorientation of asexuality's political thrust.

At the micro-level of relational intimacies, *doing* asexuality is a relationship of power in a way that essentialized *being* is not. So, what other kinds of *being* are at work as political

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[11] I happened to attend a panel at which Fahs presented this work in 2019. The response from the local asexual community was not positive; many local community members attending the conference pushed back in the conference discussion, asking why a conference about asexuality was not focusing on "real" asexuals. I find this a compelling example of the way that O'Reilly's conception of asexuals as a fixed people has trickled into the modern vernacular.

organizing? I want to use the literature and theoretical frameworks arising around polyamory and polyamorous thought as a space to begin thinking nonmonogamous asexual *doing*.

1.4.1 **Where Next?**

Scholarly work on both asexual community-making and asexual identity is as diverse as the asexual community itself, drawing on online discourse, queer theory, and social sciences, respectively. However, throughout all the work I have highlighted here, the same gaps stand out to me; namely, the contestation of what "asexuality" itself actually is. The term has been used, in the literature I have read and referenced, to refer to: the asexual community (Jay), individual asexual experience (Chasin), a lack of interest in sex (Poston and Baumle; Bogaert), a lack of interest in both sex and romance (Dawson, Scott, and McDonnell), chosen celibacy (Fahs), lowered experiences of libido and embodied desire (Brotto and Yule), and moments of asexual touch (Przybylo and Cooper).

This may be that, like the term "queer", "asexuality" has come to stand symbolically for a variety of fields, signifying a wide number of experiences and people. The solution to this, within online asexual and aromantic community vernacular, has been to divide various experiences into various smaller communities and labels, and identify with smaller micro-identities in order to find other people with similar experiences whose experiences and choices might validate one's own. However, what are the consequences of this model, and what impact does it have on the way that this community organizes internally, and is received by the wider LGBTQ2S+community? In the next section, I will be investigating the discursive division of the "sexual" from the "romantic",

and therefore the “asexual” from the “aromantic”, tracing the political ramifications of this move as well as the problems inherent in this model.

Chapter 2: Aromanticism and the Paradox of the Split-Attraction Model

2.1 What is the Split Attraction Model, and where does it come from?

Emens titled her section on empirical studies of asexuality "The One Percent Who Wants No One", which reveals much about the way we culturally understand asexuality. Beyond stereotypes of asexuals as cold or frigid (Gupta, Przybylo,) it is a rather dated statement to claim that a lack of sexual desire is the same as "wanting no one". This is just one example of the way that the frameworks of thought underlying our understandings of the sexual and the romantic are deeply entangled, to the point where it seems obvious, even to a scholar of asexuality, that having no sexual desire means one wants "no one". What does it mean to want no one? Does it mean that all asexuals want to live alone, without companionship? Dawson and Scott prove otherwise, and note that most asexuals do end up in some form of romantic relationship. So what does it mean to want a romantic relationship, and yet claim an asexual identity? What about the opposite?

As I noted above, when AVEN was first founded, a large part of the discussion in the community forums revolved around the self-conscious reidentification and theorizing of how members' asexuality fit into existing models of sexuality. From this, Jay and others developed the AVEN logo (Figure 1), a symbol intended to represent their new model of sexuality:

> The top line represents the Kinsey scale, the left being homosexual, the right being heterosexual and the third dimension, leading to the bottom point of the triangle, represents sexual attraction. Asexuals lie in the bottom regions of the triangle, which is why you might see the two-toned triangle having only the bottom corner black. AVEN chooses to display the triangle as a gradient, which allows room for

demisexuals and grey-asexuals. It signifies that there really is no clear cut black-and-white; it is a continuum. (Jay)

Figure 1: AVEN's logo, featuring the inverted triangle representing their theoretical model of sexuality.

Likewise, as people within the asexual community began to realize that they still desired romantic relationships, or did not, the Split Attraction Model started to gain popularity: a model that posed yet another axis on the triangle where one could locate one's identity on another spectrum based on the amount or direction of romantic attraction one felt. Thus, someone could be heteroromantic, homoromantic, or aromantic, identifying their "romantic" orientation separately from how they understood their sexual orientation.

Despite the prevalence in online communities and physically located queer spaces of "asexual" and "aromantic" as separate and valid identities, there is little to no theoretical work being done within the academy[12] to understand how these identities became fixed as separate constructions and began to proliferate their own subcultures of meaning, associations, flags, and

[12] The idea of the "academy" is a different problem entirely, and the division between queer community and queer scholars is one that has come up as a point of contention between researchers and self-identified asexuals. For instance, I was a participant last year at Canada's first conference on asexuality, and there were several panels that became rather tense when local asexuals objected to some of the theorizing that queer scholars were doing about asexual resonances in feminist history. This division is especially visible in asexual spaces when identity formations are theorized and deconstructed and in more empirical studies (please refer to Asexual Awareness Week's 2011 "Open Letter to Researchers" for more on this). That said, the most complete work I've found discussing the split-attraction model is a blog called the Asexual Agenda, which has traced the history of the SAM in a very deep way. I'm interested in the ways that this blurs the boundaries of where theory happens.

associated microidentities. However, I am interested in how those identity formations are being formed, reformed, challenged, and debated in online asexual community spaces. One of the main functions of AVEN is as a forum space, and the resulting discourses happening within the forum conversations are often explicitly about what it means to be creating these queer identities and what language will most authentically express the experiences of those who wish to use the terms. Most interestingly, this is also often explicitly referred to as "discourse" by the asexual community and the online community at large. Asexual and aromantic discourse is self-conscious of itself as discourse in the Foucauldian sense; the people creating the language, spaces, and terminology are aware of the project as a form of world-making. Because of this self-conscious discourse and archive creation, the forums that developed the twin terminologies of "asexual" and "aromantic" language creation provide a rich and unique space for critical discourse analysis, one that has not been seriously engaged with as a space to trace the Split Attraction Model and the trajectory and development of the aromantic community.

Last year, at the conference *Unthinking Sex: Imagining Asexuality* (Canada's first-ever conference on asexuality) I had a conversation with Dr. Przybylo in which she remarked that there is very little scholarly literature being written about aromanticism as a separate orientation from asexuality. This led me to go looking for that literature. When I searched "aromanticism" in the UBC library database, the only results that came back were on Moses Sumney's 2017 album of that name[13]. Likewise, searching "aromantic" turns up one result, a short article about agender, aromantic, and asexual people, and a citation leading back to Anthony Bogaert's psychological

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[13] Sumney does identify as aromantic and his album is a potentially rich source for engaging in the discourse of aromanticism; this paper is not the place to do that, unfortunately.

work on asexuality[14]. So while the term is at work in queer communities, its definition and discursive deployment as a biologically inherent drive separate from asexuality is untheorized and unchallenged in most literature. Indeed, even those scholars who self-identify as asexual or grey-asexual, who are approaching asexuality through the lens of queer theory, have tended to disavow "aromanticism" as a different identity entirely and refused to engage with it on the grounds that it needs to be theorized completely separately by different scholars who can approach it from an aromantic lens[15]. This emerges from a norm that is consistent and prolific within the asexual and aromantic community's discourse, and one that I disagree with strongly. The idea that "aromantic" and "asexual" are two different fixed identities emerging from two different sets of biological drives is a quasi-scientific model referred to within the asexual community as the Split Attraction Model (hereafter referred to as the SAM). The validity and importance of the SAM is widely cemented, to the point where I am almost hesitant to engage in critical reflection on the merits of the model. However, it has been criticized from other queer standpoints, most notably from lesbian and gay advocates online who argue that the SAM reduces queer desire to simply *sexual* desire erasing the other forms of kinship and queer doing that arise of out what we think of as "sexuality". Therefore, the contention around this model is worth attending to when thinking about what queer kinship, and especially when thinking about what it means to claim any queer identity for oneself.

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[14] Bogaert's work is based from a psychological paradigm, and is deeply essentializing. I have opted not to unpack his work more fully as a main source because although his work is possibly the most well-known work on asexuality, the arguments he makes are outdated and his work thinks about asexuality in an essentialist way that I find frustrating.

[15] At two different conferences, asexually-identifying scholars told me that aromanticism was an issue that they are not well-positioned to think about because they are asexual rather than aromantic, and as aromanticism is a completely different identity and drive, it needs its own theorizing and sub-field. I have my doubts about this, given the deeply intertwined nature of aromantic identity formation with asexual communities, and their immensely entangled histories, but even that disavowal speaks volumes to the deeply cemented acceptance of the SAM in ace scholarship and spaces.

I will return to this question in more detail, but first, I want to briefly trace and contextualize the discursive roots of the SAM and its rise and normalization in online asexual discourse, and the potential meanings of what a biological, inherent "aromanticism" might mean as an orientation within a broader cultural context.

2.2 History of the Split Attraction Model

The Split Attraction Model has been traced to a variety of origins by the users of the AVEN forum. Most attribute the earliest uses of the term "aromanticism" to a post in 2005 from user ForbiddenFury that read:

> I believe I said something about there being two possible orientations, sexual and asexual. And that then there were sub-orientations, bi, gay, straight, pan. This can be sexual or romantic I'd guess, though more people would consider it both or sexual. But I do question why it would be "sexual or asexual." Why not "romantic or aromantic"? Why is the sexual stuff first? Why not have totally different categories of asexual, sexual, and romantic, aromantic, and then heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, pansexual or homoromantic, heteroromantic, etc? In that case I'd be homoasexual romantic. Gets complicated, yes, but it does clarify things. (AVEN user ForbiddenFury, quoted by AVEN user Orbit in the forum discussion "Relationship Definitions" and cited as being from a lost thread circa 2002.[16])

This user, an early member of AVEN, identifies several gaps in the existing model of "sexuality". In the AVEN triangle model, as noted above, the straight line of the Kinsey scale is opened into a triangle, indicating two different axes or spectrums of desire; heterosexuality to homosexuality on

[16] I have been unable to find the original post, but the community's self-reflexive need to identify this origin in its own forums is fascinating in its own right.

the X axis, narrowing down through the Y axis through various levels of grey-asexuality and finally to a complete lack of sexual desire at the point. However, the model that ForbiddenFury proposed, and which has been taken up across ace/aro discourse, posits this extra axis of romanticism. But what makes this model necessary?

One aromantic user on an AVEN forum explained their reasons for still seeking romantic relationships in the forum discussion “Aromantics in Romantic Relationships”:

> [W]hen you're aromantic and you know you can't get the kind of intimacy you want with others because the large majority are romantic, and then you realize that the only kind of intimacy you could have with these people is romantic, then circumstances may make you able to compromise. (AVEN user RisingSun on AVEN.com, posted in forum “Aromantics in romantic relationships” on February 20th, 2015).

Consider this example from the same forum, in which a different AVEN member offers potential models for thinking about romantic attraction:

> I separate romantic attraction and romance drive. Romance drive is a desire to get into a romantic relationship and do romantic stuff even when you have no romantic interest towards anyone. Romantic attraction is feeling romantically attracted to someone. (AVEN user Fire&Rain on AVEN.com, posted in forum “Aromantics in romantic relationships” on February 20th, 2015)

This user proposes a further division of the SAM, arguing that “drive” and “attraction” are distinct, internalized forces. Note their language; the idea of a “romance drive” is posited as something that “is”, not as an idea; and this factual positing of “romance drives” as a biologically internal process is something that has been uncritically picked up across asexual discourse, as was evident in the identity claims made in the McDonnell study.

A single user proposing, with no research or data, that they believe they have an internal and biological "drive" which compels them to desire romance, is not particularly scientific or powerfully embedded in what we might consider asexuality's "truth archive" (Przybylo); however, as this conception of identity spreads through online forums and gains traction, it can quickly become a normative and accepted quasi-scientific model of identity being used and cited across many platforms as fact, using the language of "drives" to biologize the idea, claiming validity by deploying the cultural capital of scientific language. This is what has begun to happen throughout asexual community discourse as more activists and self-advocates use the language of aromanticism in the way it has been proposed on AVEN, without challenging either its roots in the split-attraction model or the SAM's assumption that "romantic" is a stable and unchanging, physically embodied category. As Przybylo and Cooper note, "the truth archive informs and is informed by asexuality's vernacular archive, that body of examples that is more fluid and changing, but that still capitulates, too often, to certain exclusionary mechanisms and parameters of exception." (Przybylo and Cooper, 300). This model, which has quickly gained traction and legitimacy, is not being challenged or researched in any space, only used, normed and reproduced to the point where it can hardly be challenged anymore; and yet it reproduces existing parameters of normal and abnormal by failing to challenge constructed romantic norms as socially constructed and therefore mutable. In all this, there has been very little attention to the socially constructed nature of "romance" as a category.

In the seventeen years since AVEN user ForbiddenFury's original post, "aromantic" has become a commonly used identity marker, and the SAM, though still contentious in many spaces, has become a commonly accepted model for understanding asexual and aromantic as completely disconnected terminologies within asexual and aromantic (a-spec) communities and forums online

despite the complete lack of research around the validity of the romance "drive". The marker "aromantic" as a distinct identity is commonly used without a critical eye to this moment of origin, and without critical attention to the inherent paradox of claiming that a "romantic" orientation is a biological drive when the notion of the "romantic" is deeply sociocultural.

I want to return to this AVEN user's definition of the "romance drive": "a desire to get into a romantic relationship and do romantic stuff even when you have no romantic interest towards anyone." By fixing this desire linguistically as a *drive*, this definition reveals the cultural tendency we have to locate orientation in the body, as a fixed, biological aspect of the self that we have no control over. However, as Butler writes, "the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our 'singular' stories are told" (21). This "romance drive" is necessarily culturally situated, by its very existence, a speculative biological claim made specifically in order to support the making of an identity that pushes back against a specific cultural norm.

In order to meaningfully identify "aromantic" as a category separate from "asexual", it seems critical to locate what exactly "romantic" attraction is, separate from sexuality; whether that is a biological or a social drive, and whether romantic love as a concept is biologically or socially separable from sexuality. However, despite the powerful cultural currency of the term "romantic", a precise definition of the word is near-impossible to pin down. In order to fully understand the cultural context of aromanticism as an orientation, I want to briefly investigate the social and cultural trappings of romantic love.

2.3 Romantic Love: An Economic and Colonial Proposition

In her book *Undoing Monogamy,* polyamorous scholar Angela Willey engages with the discursive frames surrounding monogamy norms and their deep biological implications, saying:

> The naturalness of monogamy is persistently posed as a "true" or "false" question: are we or are we not wired for monogamy? I reframe the question, asking instead, what is the relationship between how we imagine social belonging and how we understand human nature? (3)

In the same way, I want to reframe the question which is being asked and answered about asexuality. The asexual community's struggles to achieve "valid" legitimacy are asking this same question: are we or are we not wired as sexual beings? Are asexuals real or are asexuals not real? Do we not have the right, based on our essential, biologically hardwired asexual identity, to claim this asexuality as an identity and therefore have our desires respected? Willey reminds us that "knowledge and power are not only enmeshed with one another but also always implicated in possibilities for new becomings. That is to say, *living elsewhere* and *becoming otherwise* are entangled processes." (Willey, 3) The way that asexual discourse has been deployed makes the claim on *becoming otherwise*, but often fails to create ways in which those people *becoming otherwise* have the opportunity to meaningfully change the way that they will live; in this case, their primary kinship relationships.

By reframing our investments in asexual worldmaking and legitimacy to ask, after Willey, "what is the relationship between how we imagine social belonging and how we understand human nature?" we might end up with a question that could potentially look more like: "What is the relationship between how we imagine romantic kinship and how we understand biological sexuality?" Or it might be "What is the relationship between the social function of sexual and

romantic norms?" We might even go so far as to say: "To what extent does the need for the validation of asexuality and aromanticism as rigid and essentialized structures of natural human identity emerge from a culture whose kinship structures are deeply invested in sexual and romantic kinship?"

In order to answer any of these questions, it will be critical to investigate what romantic kinship is, and how it became a prevalent cultural norm. The way that I will enter into these questions, rather than attempting to trace a nebulous cultural idea of *romance* as such, will follow the same path as Elizabeth Brake in her investigation of amatonormativity. In order to understand how kinship norms are resolutely sexual and shaped by colonial capital, and not simply a biological, embodied principle, it is necessary to trace the sociohistorical roots of marriage and family, recognizing the legal and cultural dimensions of "romantic love", which in Western culture tends to be reified as an unknowable, ahistorical force that exists beyond historically and politically invested power structures. In this sense, it is critical to ask: How do marriage norms function as a tool of white supremacy and settler colonialism, dictating who is allowed to be sexual, whose bodies are inscribed as asexual, who is allowed to reproduce, and who is allowed to be a parent? These questions are intersectional and reach beyond the realm of this paper's scope, but to begin to address nonsexual kinship as a form of asexual doing, it will be critical to locate the original of sexual, nuclear family norms as a Western imposition, a form of racialized and gendered biopower, and a historical economic proposition deeply shaped by industrial capitalism.

The question of marriage as an industrial and capitalist norm in the North American context must be approached first through a decolonial lens. The nuclear family as it has functioned since the late nineteenth century is a tool of white heteropatriarchy, one that exerts state biopower on the reproduction of individuals through the division of lives and families into those who are

deemed worthy or not worthy (Butler, *Undoing Gender*) of marriage, reproduction, and parenthood, dividing parents from children if their relationships are not considered "correct" under colonial (hetero)sexual standards (Owen; Rifkin) . Just as reproductive health, marriage rights, and childcare are available only to a certain subset of people, white heteropatriarchy forecloses certain types of relationships by prescribing "a mutually faithful, monogamous [heterosexual] relationship in the context of marriage" as "the *expected standard of sexual activity*" (American Social Security Act, quoted by Brake, 13, emphasis in Brake). Discourse, as Foucault lays it out, is not simply *law*, but also includes "all your thoughts, every word you speak, and all your actions" (Foucault 20), the language, assumptions, and internalized culture working within all of us. In this sense, internalized, learned culture influences law just as law influences culture, so in order to think marriage's cultural role as noted in the law, it is necessary to engage with legal structures as arising from discourse. One key example of the way that romantic norms are reified and normalized through the law is this moment from the *Obergefell v Hodges* ruling, the Supreme Court decision to approve gay marriage in 2014.

> No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. […] Their hope is not to be *condemned to live in loneliness*, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. (Supreme Court of the United States, 28, emphasis mine)

This ruling is interwoven throughout with cultural assumptions about marriage as the "highest ideal of love"; the most important and only ethical way to live. I am especially struck by the unchallenged (and indeed foundational) assumption here that the only alternative to marriage is

loneliness. This echoes some of what O'Reilly's *Life as Human Amoeba* claims: the uninterrogated cultural norm for both those who embrace and who reject (hetero)sexual marriage forms is that the alternative is to live alone. The history of marriage as it has been normalized as the foregone conclusion and capstone of the "good" life is deeply intertwined with our social standard of compulsory sexuality, and with the monogamous, reproductive, and Western heterosexual family as the only site of kinship-building.

2.4 Romantic Norms as a Tool of Colonial Power

The nuclear home as the only legitimized space of kinship-building dates back to the late nineteenth century, where gender roles and the project of a national identity became stratified through the idealized model of the nuclear couple (Carter). Over the last two centuries, the normalization of monogamous nuclear families and their subsequent framing as "traditional", rigid, and unchangeable in the Western setting ignores the extent to which this set of kinship structures arose out of the industrial context of single-income homes and the aspirational idea of the bourgeois home (Smart; Shanley). Additionally, the normalization of marriage is deeply implicated in the project of white colonial nation-building. As Bonita Lawrence notes, a key aspect of the Canadian settler-state's practice of settler colonial dispossession was the weaponization of kinship by creating divisions in various Indigenous nations along the lines of gender and forcing Indigenous women to give up their status and nationhood if they wanted to marry non-status Indian men. This both disrupted the previously matrilineal kinships existing in many Indigenous cultures, as well as directly removing the power that women traditionally held in those nations (Lawrence). Additionally, the heteronormative gendered rulings around Indian status and Bill C-31 ignored queer contexts in Indigenous nations through its assumptions about Christian marriage and

heterosexuality being the only meaningful form of kinship or care (Rifkin). Moreover, Canada also enforced normative heterosexual kinship as the only viable form of a "good" life by teaching binary gender roles, domesticity and gendered forms of socialization and labour in residential schools, which constitute a gendered colonial curriculum that sought to disrupt "lesser" Indigenous gender, family and domestic practices and patterns (Lomawaima; Cannon; Lawrence).

Critically, the framing of the heterosexual nuclear family as traditional and "natural" (Sikkema) also erases queer Indigenous forms of kinship, which as Leanne Simpson notes, often included grandparents, extended family, and other adults in the community as part of the family that raised the child (Simpson, 2017). Within the hegemonic systems at work in colonialism, the Christian moral institution of the nuclear family was used to erase the critical care work done by extended family and community members. It also allowed the colonial state to define what the proper care of a child looked like, and how families "ought to" live, giving them the excuse to remove Indigenous children from their homes in order to place them in residential schools and systemically strip their culture, languages, and faiths from them (Lomawaima, Simpson).

I particularly want to attend here to Leanne Simpson's account, drawn from Nishnaabeg oral history, as a counterexample to understand how nonsexual kinship has existed in non-Western societies. Simpson recounts gender variance beyond the Western binary as well as nonmonogamous, nonsexual kinship, saying: "my sense is that my Ancestors lived in a society where what I know as "queer," particularly in terms of social organization, was so normal it didn't have a name" (129). Like Simpson, this allows us to "consider what straightness looks like in societies where queerness is normalized, where difference isn't difference but normal." (129)
I am most struck by her articulation of the Nishnaabeg words used to describe cohabitation:

> Wiijidaamaagan means s/he co-habits with a person; wiipemaagan means s/he sleeps with a person and wiijiiwaagan means a friend or companion. . . a gay person is described as wiijininiimaagan—a man whose partner is another man; wiijikwemaagan is a woman with a female partner—the word has no judgment in it. (130)

In this case, Simpson articulates a set of norms that not only articulate what we would understand as platonic cohabitation, but set it at the same level of normalcy as sexual cohabitation; the word *wiijidaamaagan* does not distinguish between the two. Far from Butler's account of the *never will be, never was*, Simpson articulates that within Nishnaabeg theory, asexual kinship not only *was*, but still is. This colonial dimension of the illegibility of asexuality to our dominant discourse is hugely important to my project; in many ways, it reinforces the constructed nature of asexual cohabitation as a nonpossibility, reminding us that other norms are possible and indeed, that they exist.

> Indian agents prevented the use of Nishnaabemowin and therefore the gender variance encoded in our language, and they policed the intimacy of Indigenous peoples, as described in the previous chapter, to promote heterosexual, monogamous relationships between cisgendered men and women to the exclusion of all other intimate partnerships. (127)

The intervention of the colonial state in Indigenous kinship-building happened both through the policing of intimacy and through the restriction of their language; the norms that were made possible through the gender encoding of the language, as Simpson notes, broke down with the loss of language to fit colonial gender and kinship norms. Additionally, heterosexuality was imposed by settler-colonial states throughout North America not only with cultural genocide, but through the systemic murder of Indigenous people who embodied and practiced gender outside of

normative Euro-Christian norms (Miranda). What is critical here is that in the colonial state's intervention, gender and intimacy are deeply tied together, and intimacy is policed to be *only* hetero and only sexual under the settler state to preserve the cultural fiction that gendered, monogamous Western marriage norms exist beyond cultural and historical context and are, in fact, a universal norm.

I want to finish this section with Simpson's powerful meditation on queer Indigineity:

> Queer Indigeneity cannot be reduced to just sexual orientation. It is about a web of supportive, reciprocal, generative relationships that we often do not have names for in English and that exist outside of the hierarchy and the imagination of heteropatriarchy—a hierarchy that places the relationship of cisgendered, married, monogamous men and women at the top, and de-emphasizes or erases all other relationships. Ceremonies, ritual, social organization, and mobilization that replicate this invisibility and hold up the hierarchy also center heteropatriarchy. (134)

Asexual scholars, such as Ianna Hawkins Owen, have already identified the overwhelming whiteness of most asexual spaces and scholarly interventions. As a white settler scholar myself who is attempting to broadly trace asexual discourses and the workings of biopower within them, it is crucial that I make space to centre Indigenous contexts; not only as a decolonizing gesture or afterthought, but because, as in this example, Indigenous thought brings an entirely different set of frameworks to think asexuality and sexual identity, one that is absolutely critical to my project and must be considered to meaningfully understand how sexual identity is deployed in our present Western colonial culture. While it would be appropriative for me to uncritically pick up Queer Indigeneity as a concept to use as a white scholar, Simpson's understanding of what it means to be queer—that is, thinking queerness as a "a web of supportive, reciprocal, generative relationships" (134) rather than as an internalized, individual identity, speaks deeply to this project.

2.4.1 **Blackness and POC Otherness vis-à-vis Asexual Thought**

The sociohistorical construction of the nuclear family [that is, the end *product* of (hetero)sexual kinship] is also racially charged to maintain white moral and cultural hegemony, not only over Indigenous bodies, forms of thought and intimacy, but over other racialized, nonwhite socialities and knowledges. The turn in the twentieth century to "normal" heterosexual couples as the basis for legitimacy, citizenship and national belonging is rooted in the reproductive standards of middle-class whiteness, assimilating, controlling and erasing preexisting lifestyles and family structures (Carter, 2013; Smart, 2013), especially those that are perceived as threats to the white nation-state. In order to fully comprehend the impact of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage norms, it is critical to historically contextualize compulsory (hetero)sexuality "in order to acknowledge how racialized groups experience both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory sexual deviance" (Wu 59). Wu's concept of racialized sexual deviance recognizes the ways in which historically, marriage and the nuclear family have come to carry extra cultural import in Asian-American communities because of the way that those communities must reckon with the specific history of the head tax and "bachelor" cultures, where women and families were not allowed to immigrate with their husbands (Wu) Additionally, racialized minorities had specific forms of sexual control exerted on them in the form of laws against miscegenation (Kojima et al.).Through racialized control of which bodies and families are allowed to create kinships and normative sexual/nuclear families, the realm of sexuality comes to be foreclosed in a specific way to those communities historically and, to a degree, at present. Because of these histories, racialized communities and bodies are already understood by mainstream Western culture as sexual or nonsexual in specific ways that are different from white bodies (Kojima et al.; Owen; Zhu). This

difference and its accompanying histories of violence must be taken into account when attempting to theorize asexuality and nonsexual kinship, in particular the unique history of violence on Black bodies and families.

When the morally 'correct' nuclear family is framed as the heterosexual pair reproducing within the strict bounds of white Christianity and monogamy, it allows the state to draw moral lines and exert biopower over those bodies who "deserve" to reproduce and those who do not, (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*). In relation to Blackness, such a calculus produces the black body as "a signifier of sexual excess and also the negation of sexuality as an intersubjective relation [...] simultaneously sexual and asexual in its earliest iterations" (Owen). It also forecloses the ways in which black family and reproduction are fraught with the reverberations of the Middle Passage and the deliberate interruption and destruction of Black kinship through slavery and the prison-industrial complex. As Ianna Hawkins Owen notes, Black kinship and heterosexuality are already fraught with the imperative "to preserve in flesh evidence of racial, sexual and gendered violence that was intentionally destroyed in the formal archive"; an imperative that frames the black body as already a/sexual and black kinship as already subaltern to idealized white kinship (Owen).

In Canada's settler history, racialized minorities have historically had to deal with the controlling domination of the white colonial gaze. I want to be careful in my analysis to be leaving space for the unique forms that asexual kinship can and must take in racialized communities given that history of domination. As a white asexual scholar and a person who moves through the world passing as cis, I can opt out of sexual kinship without the extra historical complexities and pressures that are exerted on Black and POC queer people trying to create the same forms of nonsexual kinship. While Black and POC bodies in Western colonial discourse are already foreclosed, in specific ways, as sexual and asexual, the voices of BIPOC asexuals themselves are

often erased or marginalized in asexual community spaces (Owen; Przybylo), and their complex intersectional experiences are absorbed into a more normative narrative where white asexuality is more readily accepted Staying cognizant of the intersectional impact of my project by intentionally marking the colonial and racial dimensions of white, heterosexual, and nuclear normativity will be critical to understanding the radical potential of asexual kinship and the existing racial dimensions of the asexual community. As I move forward to interrogate asexual identity structures' deep investment in existing romantic and marriage norms, it is critical that I be attentive to the continuing reproduction and centralization of whiteness in the narratives with which I am engaging, and not to reproduce those narrative norms myself.

2.5 Modern Discourses of Romantic Love

In Carrie Jenkins' book *What Love Is And What It Could Be,* she posits a different kind of model for understanding romantic love, devoting an entire book to unpacking the various cultural movements that have influenced the way we understand romantic love.

Jenkins defines romantic love as a form of social control whose role is "to take as input the attraction and affection that arises between adults and produce as output something resembling the nucleus of a nuclear family" (101). She argues that "[s]ocial construction...comes into play in separating out certain kinds of love as 'romantic'. Romantic love's distinctive social function sets it apart from other kinds of love. [...] Its distinctive social role is what makes it romantic, not what makes it love." (52-53) This argument posits romantic love as deeply social and functional as a learned norm that serves to reify and reproduce the nuclear (white) family in Western society. She goes on to clarify that:

> Other kinds of love- such as the kind of love involved in a close friendship- do not have the same function: it is normally accepted that one may have as many friends as one cares to have, and there is no expectation that one will live with one's friends or have their children. If we do start experiencing very powerful feelings of care or desire for a friend, we are pressured to interpret this as falling in romantic love. (53)

This account of romantic love is deeply socially constructed. Although Jenkins also proposes a sort of split model of how love functions, which accounts for a biological component to how love and attraction function, the key here is that the category of *romantic* is a functional one, not a biological drive. But if romantic love is a form of social control that has a controlled output, what happens to those who remain outside of its bounds? What makes this force so powerful?

In their essay *Romantic Love is Killing Us,* Caleb Luna notes:

> When I think about the benefits of romantic partnerships as exhibited both in popular culture and my own observations via my friends' romances, I recognize that these benefits are not purely financial or physical. They are about daily and mundane interpersonal interactions of reciprocity. In short: investment, and care. The practice of investing in and caring enough for someone to incorporate them into your life in such significant ways that their presence begins to feel necessary, if not compulsive. (Luna)

In this account, Luna hones in on the powerful social function of romantic love not only to categorize what forms of love create family, but *who* is eligible to be organized into the nuclear family and reproduce. They detail the way in which romantic love as a discursive ideal functions to exclude "unlovable" bodies, whether fat, disabled, queer, or nonwhite. As above, the norm of the nuclear family is offered on such terms as to exclude "culturally devalued bodies" (Luna) and reinvest time, energy and care into bodies which are perceived as lovable. The bodies that give and receive care- what Elizabeth Freeman would refer to as "kinship"—is deeply political. Luna

says: “I don’t want to be loved. I want to be cared for and prioritized, and I want to build a world where romantic love is not a prerequisite for these investments—especially not under a current regime with such a limited potential for which bodies are lovable. We can commit to keeping each other alive despite our sexual capital.” (Luna). The idea of “sexual capital” being something that a body has and can trade on is not grounded in any essential drive of the body. We are socialized to understand beauty and desire in very specific, ableist, and racialized ways, and to deliver care and intimacy accordingly. Like Rich, Orlando, and Densmore, Luna does not want to fit an asexual body into a sexual, heteropatriarchal world, or claim an aromantic identity to opt personally out of romantic norms; rather, they are attempting to redefine the boundaries of what kind of care can count as romantic and shift broader norms of care, desirability, and kinship.

2.6 Where Next?

To me, what seems to emerge most clearly out of these genealogies of thought is that sexuality and romance are necessarily a *doing* grounded in social norms*;* in the case of nonromantic or nonsexual relationships, a radical doing or refusal to *do* that arises from a cultural context where a certain form of doing is expected. As CJ Chasin notes in their article, *Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential*: “We live in a world that is often hostile to asexual people and that devalues and often refuses to recognize asexual peoples' primary relations” (Chasin, 8). The linguistic turn that changes this radical *doing* into an essentialized *being* arises out of a need for legitimacy; nonsexual relationships that fail to meet the social and legal standards of a (hetero)sexual nuclear relationship have historically been treated as illegitimate and therefore ineligible for the same social and legal benefits. Asexuals organize around the *idea* of being asexual and having the right to be recognized as such in the same way that proponents of gay

marriage organized around questions of legitimacy. However, due to the nature of asexual identity as a radical, paradoxical opting-out of a near-universal norm, rather than a push for a new norm, the challenges remain distinctly different.

In the case of the SAM, and aromantic identity, the challenges also coalesce around a question of *doing*. If we accept that 'romance' is culturally and historically constructed, then the idea of being essentially, biologically 'aromantic' becomes extremely problematic, in the sense that it is fraught with cultural meaning and the historical, racial, and gendered investments of systemic romantic norms. Thus, through the rest of the thesis, I will mostly stay away from explicitly theorizing 'aromanticism' as separate from 'asexuality', treating them instead as a set of intertwined experiences that arise from individual and collective resistance to the linked norms of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity, and which are complicated by intersectional experiences of race and class. I will generally use 'asexual' to refer to both of these experiences, given that when many of my interlocutors say 'asexual', they are referring to that same set of linked nonsexual/nonromantic experiences of resistance in which they are having to resist romantic as well as sexual norms.

At the beginning of this section, I attempted to reframe my own investment in romantic norms with the question: "To what extent does the need for the validation of asexuality and aromanticism as rigid and essentialized structures of natural human identity emerge from a culture whose kinship structures are deeply invested in sexual and romantic kinship?" This is the question that I am continuing to ask and answer as I move forward, being careful to bear in mind the complexity of aromantic/asexual experiences.

In the next section, I will investigate the different forms of radical nonsexual/nonromantic kinships that are emerging both within and outside of explicitly or identitarian asexual spaces. By comparing the different discourse at work in explicitly asexual spaces with the genealogies and discourses at play in nonidentitarian yet nonsexual kinship structures, I want to open the potentiality of (poly)asexual kinship as a more functional space for grounding the politics of radical asexuality.

Chapter 3: Genealogies of Asexual Kinship

Through the last ten years of asexual organizing, one of the discursive moves that has become increasingly common is the creation of new terms to speak about identity. On AVEN and in other online spaces such as Tumblr, new terminologies and vernaculars have developed to identify and validate the unique experiences of extremely small subsets of people (Renninger), language which has become so hyperspecific that it is next to illegible to anyone not extremely familiar with those online spaces. Given the problems of identity claims, as outlined above, and the paradoxes and exclusions baked into the ontological grounding of the ace community's form of identitarian organizing, that is, "the politics of sexual disidentification that enable one to claim an identity by highlighting what one is not" (Kim), my goal is not to invent new identity terms with this thesis.[17] Instead, I will explore, in this chapter, different ways that queer people (both explicitly asexual and not) are creating and defining their relationships by queering existing language and making it work for their unique forms of nonsexual kinship. In the cases that I will explore, the people using the terms are deploying them in ways that they are not normally used. These are words like "partner", "parent" and "roommate". The reworked deployment of these words pushes the boundaries of what it means to be each of those things and challenges assumptions about the forms of care that each role is supposed to perform, therebyredefining the bounds of kinship and family in ways that are not centred around sex or sexual reproduction. These examples draw heavily on previous iterations of queer kinship (Kinsman; Lampard; Rich), but also push beyond them in ways that are unique to the nonsexual nature of those relationships. Through exploring these examples of culturally legible asexual *kinship* rather than (or in addition to) asexual

[17] I have been asked multiple times if I am trying to coin new polyasexual terminology with this thesis. I am not.

being, I hope to both complicate and clarify the question of what *asexuality* could mean, and open new forms of asexual doing as a possibility for thinking what it means to be queer.

One language form that I will flag is the term “queerplatonic”. This is not a new term, but one that derives from the asexual community to denote a relationship that is neither romantic or platonic in nature but instead something entirely new (Jay). I am interested in this language formation because it is a piece of asexual naming that functions outside the purview of identity. Because of this, it is picked up in a unique way beyond the bounds of the asexual community, and has been used and queered in a variety of surprising ways, not only by people who understand themselves as not experiencing sexual attraction. I will return to this later in this chapter.

The current discourses around asexuality, both in “the “truth” archive (consisting of scientific writing) and the “vernacular” archive (consisting of online community spaces and popular publications) (Przybylo and Cooper, 299) tend to treat asexuality as an inherent and essentialized function of the self. However, if we view asexual or aromantic identities as a way of opting out of a socially, discursively constructed notion of sexual kinship, of choosing different values than romantic love as a basis for forming family and of charting new discursive possibilities for asexual kinship, we can open up further asexual potentialities for queer folks with multiple important sexual and/or nonsexual relationships. If we opt out of sexual kinship as defined by the romantic norm of the nuclear family or identitarian modes of attraction-as-self, we open up polyasexual and/or polyaromantic possibilities for ourselves, recognizing that romantic norms as set out by our present hegemonic culture are constructed as part of a particular set of sociohistorical forces of control. This set of terms are so far beyond the normative-sexual understanding of kinship that they are next to incomprehensible; the language available in Western culture to understand desire, kinship-building, and love is so entangled in the sexual and the monogamous that even

asking what it might to be *polyqueer-asexual* is already an absurd question. How can someone be polyqueer and asexual? What intimacies are these language formations trying to make space for?

Christine Overall, a scholar who tracks nonmonogamy, traces the same discursive issue I raise above—the norm of sexuality being thought as internal, fixed identity— as she attempts to unpack the modern "construction of the self almost exclusively in terms of sexual relationships with other people" (Overall, 19). She traces the discursive forms of monogamy and nonmonogamy in her book *Monogamy, Nonmonogamy and Identity,* thinking about the way that the *self,* or being, is implicated in one's doing, in this case, doing polyamory. In her meditation on polyamory, Overall opens the question of kinship and non/monogamies to the idea that "coupling" (a terminology that might also be read as kinship-making) does not necessarily need to be sexual. This opens wider possibilities in our understanding of love, family, and kinship for asexual nonmonogamies; that is, polyamorous families that do not give sexual relationships, as she says, "a moral and emotional primacy over other relationships" (Overall, 1998). If self-identified asexuals are able to claim this form of doing, what might that look like within our cultural discourse of the "good" life? How would these relationships become legible?

To draw on Judith Butler's essay *Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,* we might consider these desires for committed, nonmonogamous, and asexual relationships an example of "the *never will be, the never was*." (106), a group whose desires "will never be eligible for a translation into legitimacy" (106) as those structures are so far beyond our cultural understanding of a good life as to be completely incomprehensible within our language. For asexuals and others who would like to prioritize polyamorous or nonsexual bonds, marriage is not an authentic way for them to express their emotional needs and their important kinship relations (Chasin). Butler identifies nonbinary gender as "a field outside the disjunction of illegitimate and legitimate; it is

not yet thought as a domain, a sphere, a field; it is not yet either legitimate or illegitimate, has not yet been thought through in the explicit discourse of legitimacy" (Butler, 2004). I want to expand this idea to include asexual kinship; as it functions outside of our structures of legitimacy, and claims a paradoxical opting out from sexuality, asexual kinships are seen as less desirable than sexual/romantic bonds while not being completely illegitimate. Marriage functions in Western social discourse as a legal and social purchase on legitimacy, marginalizing those who choose other forms of intimacy or family. The idea persists that romantic relationships and paired, sexual relationships are inherently more desirable than platonic ones. However, in a framework of polyasexuality, "polyamorous" means something beyond the sexual or the romantic; and the "amorous" part of kinship can refer to any sort of care. This opens up possibilities for care and kinship beyond the vertical hierarchy created by the categories of friend/partner/spouse, and the different types and levels of care assigned in our cultural imaginary to each category. These redefined forms of kinship might allow us to open relationality into a space that is "no longer measured [...]in terms of sexuality-as-identity, but in terms of bodily sensations and affective intensities" (Kean), challenging the socially constructed notion of the "partner" and leaving space for individual negotiation of the types and intensity of care to be offered and received in individual kinship structures, determined not by sexual availability or exclusivity but by genuine care, need, and ability.

3.1 Queer Kinships

In order to theorize these nonsexual, nonmonogamous kinships, I am drawing heavily on the rich history of queer kinship. Existing scholarship on queer kinship already identifies its potential to subvert the nuclear family, sexual coupling, and biological reproduction as the site of

kinship, noting the subversions at work in places such as voguing houses (Weston) and subcultures such as punk (Halberstam). The importance of queer kinship in the "families we choose" (Weston) is often subsumed in the simplified, more normative narratives that center more culturally legible queer families: for instance, two gay dads and their children, a now-common trope in mass media (Walters). Additionally, as the proponents of gay marriage grow more normatively accepted, in what David Eng refers to as "queer liberalism" (Eng), the state reifies whiteness and amatonormative, nuclear family structures while continuing to marginalize queers of colour. In order to speak about the potential of nonsexual kinships to redefine family structures, it is necessary to acknowledge my debt to these scholars, who identify the "complex relationship [of queer kinship] to reproduction, cultural production, and assimilation" (Halberstam) as well as "the potential of chosen kin to expand the notion of family well beyond couples and kids" (Weston). I am interested in pushing the bounds of this work further to understand how queer kinship is being created in the context of queerplatonic relationships as well as the context of self-identified asexuals.

For those who do create polyamorous queerplatonic partnerships, or who choose to prioritize platonic partnerships alongside or over their sexual or romantic attachments, family structures and kinship are necessarily redefined. Households or parental units might be formed of two or more friends, multiple sexual partnerships, or some combination of sexual and asexual partnerships. As outlined above, the mother/father binary of "traditional" Western parenthood is discursively complicated by polyamorous asexual relationships and polyqueer (a)sexualities (Schippers). The concept of "monogamy" is so sex-centric that it becomes increasingly hard to define once it is considered through the lens of asexual desire and asexual relationship formation (Willey). Thus, for a growing number of asexuals, polyamory has become an acceptable alternative

to traditional monogamous (hetero)sexual relationships. However, in these kinship structures that depart from the historically constructed and reified Western "tradition", how does a non-biological, nonsexual partner, or an asexual parent fit in? This particular formation of parenthood might also require a queer re-imagining of kinship; one that has already begun to be thought through in theorizing queer kinships. As queer kinship and parenthood become more common in Western contexts, the queer family is becoming more common as a social and domestic unit that must be considered. As many queer youth are disowned or alienated from their biological family, "family" as a concept takes on a nonbiological aspect, and has done in the mainstream eye for decades in queer families of choice (Mizielińska and Stasińska). However, as Freeman notes, "queer 'extended family' tends to collapse into amorphous and generic 'community,' while queer 'descent groups' seem for the most part linguistically inconceivable." (297) A re-imagining of kinship for polyasexual families might require a variety of new terms, new understandings of family, or even a change in the sociolegal structures that govern who is included in our state-recognized iteration of "family". This tendency can be seen at work in online asexual communities, where the terminology for understanding asexual identity is multiplying at a remarkable rate (Renninger).

However, it may be possible—and more useful, in the everyday context—to reimagine the way we understand kinship based not on new and obscure linguistic forms, but on a reformation of the way we understand and structure families. Freeman says that "… kinship consists of 'doing' rather than 'being.' The crux of the issue for queer theory might be this: what would it mean to 'do kinship'?" (Freeman, 2008). Based on this question of "doing", I want to ask whether or not asexual kinship might be best served by the reworking or utilizing of existing kinship laws to help asexual partners move into socially and legally legible roles. Although a third asexual partner

living with a married couple may not be a partner in their marriage in the eyes of the law or in terms of partnership as a recognized relationship given the strong cultural precedence given to romantic/sexual partners. However, “parent” may be a more legible term for recognizing their contribution and kinship within their polyasexual household; rather than attempting to redefine the term “partner”, or attempt to define their own relationship and intimacies as equal when there is so much cultural weight and privilege given to sexual partners, redefining “parent” by taking up equal shares of that form of care and love is an arguably simple way to have a culturally legible role within that family unit which is otherwise tricky to define as an asexual partner. Essentially, I would like to ask: rather than coining new terms for asexual kinship and being, how are asexual parents queering the words and structures already in use to speak about family to define their kinships in a meaningful way?

3.2 David Jay: Third-Parenthood and Self-conscious Archive Creation

In the last ten years, several states and provinces across North America have legalized third-parent adoption, “the result of decades of fights by queer couples whose sperm and egg donors wanted to contribute more than genetics.” (Jay) The third-parent bill known as SB-274 in California passed in 2012. California was the first US state to pass such a bill. Here in Canada, Ontario passed Bill 28, the All Families Are Equal Act, in 2016. The Ontario bill amends the Children’s Law Reform Act so that “[u]p to four unrelated and unmarried adults can sign a contract entitling them to be legal parents to a child without being biological parents, applying to court for

declarations of parentage, or adopting."[18] (Sikkema). This development is a landmark for polyasexual Canadian families, opening legal possibilities for queer poly families that did not exist before. Previously, lesbian and gay parents who wanted to have their sperm donor legally recognized as a parent had to use loopholes in legislation that allowed "the state to exercise its "parens patriae" – the legal term for the state to act as the guardian for a minor – in declaring the partner a mother." (Lai) This loophole was first used in Ontario in a ruling in 2007 in which a lesbian couple wanted the nonbiological mother to gain guardianship without the child's biological father having to lose his parental rights. This case is "thought to be the first in Canada in which a child [had] more than two legal parents" (Lai). More recently, in Vancouver, a family with three parents, who had their second baby in 2015, were "among the first Canadians to achieve [legal third-parenthood] without using litigation." (Subdhan). In this case, as well, the three parents were two lesbian mothers and the biological father of their children, a close friend who they "knew from the start" would be "a dad, not just a donor." (Subdhan). These parents, and others before them, are the reason that legal structures around parenthood are changing in Canada to include more diverse forms of parenthood.

However, to my knowledge, there is only one publicly polyasexual family that has taken advantage of third-parenthood laws: the experiences of David Jay, the founder and webmaster of AVEN (the Asexuality and Visibility Education Network). What I find crucial about this case as

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[18] It is worth noting that the article from which I pulled this information was vehemently opposed to Bill 28, deriding its proponents as "backwards" and claiming that the bill "erases the basic, core rule of our law that a person is the child of her natural parents" and that it is an attempt by the Ontario Liberals to "throw out the traditional categories of natural and adoptive parents." Sikkema also takes offense at the wording of the Liberal proposal, suggesting that the phrase "In the year 2016, there's no one way to start and raise a family" is insulting to those who feel threatened by this "looming revolution in family law". This, to me, suggests that academic work on polyasexual families is more needed than ever.

differentiated from the Canadian examples is the way that the parents understand themselves as biologically situated in relation to their children. In the case of the 2007 Ontario ruling, and in the Vancouver case, the three parents comprise two sexually involved women and their sperm donor; so all three of the parents are linked either through a sexual partnership or through a biological parenthood. In these cases, the intimate sexual partnership is opening space within their parenting to honour biological parenthood as well. But Jay's situation is different. He is not a biological father, and is not sexually intimate with either of his two coparents. In this sense, his story offers a rich case study for understanding how asexual third-parenthood might queer the boundaries of what parenthood is, and what it could be.

David Jay is the founder of AVEN.com[19], one of the main online platforms where asexuals can find resources and talk over forums, building community and connections. He is also vocally asexual, and to many people, he is the face of the asexual community[20]. He describes himself and his co-parents as "the first set of parents to take advantage of this [third-parent] law which includes a straight couple, and definitely the first to include an asexual" (Jay, 2017). Jay's account of his first few weeks as a new father is deeply moving. Jay also offers a new take on what intimacy looks like, what kinship means, and how parenthood can be navigated beyond biology, saying: "As an asexual I obviously wasn't sleeping with either of them, but there are many other forms of intimacy to navigate." (Jay)

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[19] The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network

[20] Jay is a white male, which is worth noting, since there is a consistent whitewashing problem in the ace community. As the public face of asexuality, he does continue to perpetrate, even if unknowingly, the idea that asexuality is white, thin, male and able-bodied. It is important to consider why a white male is the first person to be able to build family in this way, and consider how that privilege can be expanded to more diverse asexuals.

In the course of the article, Jay writes about the various nonsexual and life-changing intimacies he is able to experience as the third (and only nonbiological) parent to baby Octavia. He describes being present for a birth, planning finances and obligations, and building furniture. Without hesitation, he describes passing the baby "from mother to father to father in her first hours of life, learning the scent of our skin and the tone of our voices" (Jay), alongside near-casual mentions of three sets of grandparents. Nowhere in the account does he make an attempt to justify any of these linguistic turns or to speak of them as unusual; he doesn't attempt to invent any new names or relationships. Instead, he simply accepts the label of "father" for himself, a label which is legally and culturally legible, and yet revolutionary for all that.

Jay also traces the ways in which this triad coparenting opens up new and exciting intimacies, unique to their situation. For instance, describing the birth of his daughter, he says: "That first night in the hospital we take shifts […]The next day we both get to experience something that few new fathers do: our child's first day of life with the presence and awareness of a night of rest." (Jay) And yet, he is careful to trace the ways in which he is separate from his coparents' biological intimacies. For instance, he describes a mantra the two sexual partners say to one another and to their biological baby, in which he does not participate. The biological parents tell the baby and one another "You've got this." Jay says: "My instinct tells me that it's not a phrase I should use, that there should remain a small handful of things that are sacred between the three of them, and that this is one of them. I am not short on sacred things." (Jay) This account of kinship certainly speaks to Kean's sense of intimacy as being measured not "in terms of sexuality-as-identity, but in terms of bodily sensations and affective intensities" (Kean). This new formation of kinship opens the way for new forms of intimacy, caring, and affect.

Jay's experience as an asexual father in a triad of parents opens new discursive possibilities for what asexual parenthood might look like for more families. His account resonates strongly with Freeman's claim of what kinship could become, and what it might already be:

> ...my point is not that we need a new set of terms, but rather, a different sense of what kinship might be. For as a practice, kinship is resolutely corporeal. Its meanings and functions draw from a repertoire of understandings about the body, from a set of strategies oriented around the body's limitations and possibilities. Kinship 'matters' in the way that bodies 'matter': it may be produced or con- structed, but is no less urgent or tangible for that. (Freeman 298)

This sense of the corporeal is extremely present in Jay's account. Every part of the experience that makes him a parent to Octavia is deeply physical and to do with her immediate survival, from building furniture or making financial and time contributions, to being present in the delivery room, bracing his pregnant coparent's foot on his shoulder as she pushes, and holding baby Octavia at the moment of her birth. His experience of parenthood, although lacking a "natural" (Sikkema, 2016) or biological aspect, is deeply embodied and materialized in a significant way, realized in the physicality of commitment, touch and bodily encounter. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Sara Ahmed argues that "norms surface as the surfaces of bodies; norms are a matter of […] how bodies work and are worked upon" (157). In this example, Jay's asexual relationship with his coparents is defined by the intimacies and joys he shares with them, not as a couple, but as a parent who shares and builds the bond that all three are creating with their daughter; their intimacy is navigated by the work they are doing to re-norm their relationship with and care for Octavia. Jay's parenthood is all about "creating intimacies that are not based on biological ties, or on established

gender relations" (Ahmed 164), finding new kinds of kinship to build with his coparents around their shared parenthood.

Freeman describes true kinship, beyond legality or sexuality, as "a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being's body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilizing all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another." (Freeman 298) I find it critical that Jay does not refer to the other two as his partners; that term is reserved for a different person. Instead, he refers to them as coparents, a fascinating discursive move that relocates the site of kinship from the sexual kinship relations between the parents to a mode where kinship is centred on the child as a site of care. It is clear from the way he writes about his daughter that Jay and his coparents are sharing "all the possible resources" that three bodies have for taking care of a child; and the self-conscious way that they are documenting that journey is opening new forms of normative kinship in public discourse.

Here, I think it is critical to locate Jay's account within an intersectional understanding of asexuality. Ahmed further argues that "[t]he everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality is also its affectiveness, wrapped up as it is with moments of ceremony (birth, marriage, death), which bind families together, and with the ongoing investment in the sentimentality of friendship and romance." (Ahmed 554). Is there something in the everydayness of Jay's account that can effectively resist that everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality? And what modes of normativity does Jay still fall into that allows him to open those "everyday" queer spaces? As noted, Jay is cisgender, straight-passing, white, male, and middle class. These intersecting privileges give him a mobility and variety of choices when thinking about the types of family he

wants to create; he is less limited by harmful stereotypes and foreclosures on his family and his financial situation. Additionally, his coparents carry a certain amount of privilege and respectability as a straight couple— the extent to which that straightness is queered by a third parent is perhaps the topic of an entirely new paper. That said, Jay is using that privilege to create a space of visibility which opens up these possibilities and sets precedents in law and practice for more queer and polyasexual parents to create families not based in biology, but in a kinship that more closely resembles Freeman's representational and practical strategies for careful parenthood. As Ahmed notes, "the closer that queer subjects get to the spaces defined by heteronormativity the more potential there is for a reworking of the heteronormative" (Ahmed 161). In this case, Jay's whiteness and cisness opens a space for him to rework and queer the heteronormative, potentially opening the space for future, more diverse bodies.

However, what does nonsexual kinship look like for those with fewer choices and less mobility? What does it look like for women, for mothers, for racialized bodies, whose positionality and role in kinship is already defined to be a different place? In particular, what might this asexual kinship or *doing* look like for people who do not explicitly claim asexual identity as a mode of being? If, as Freeman claims, kinship matters in the same way that bodies matter, it might be possible to rethink asexuality—and possibly even queerness itself— from a *doing* to a *being* by thinking it as a form of queer kinship.

Presently, we use the terminology of identity to invest bodies as the significant site of desire or queerness. We name our embodied selves and our internal, essential desires as the site of queerness, in order to build stable legitimacy and form communities with others who experience the same embodied desires However, if we recognize legible sexuality as simply one way of

expressing our desires to build certain forms of kinship, we might just as equally invest kinship itself as the site of queerness; rather than understanding ourselves as "being" essentially queer because of how we experience sexual desire, we might understand ourselves as doing queerness through kinship. If kinship matters in the same way that bodies matter, we can name kinship as queer doing without needing to name the self as a queer body in order to do so; or, perhaps, understand a body as queer through its doing rather than through its desire; for instance, Lisa Orlando, claiming the label of asexual for herself not because she does not experience sexual desire or practice interpersonal sex, but because of the relational approach she takes to her sexuality and the queer way she constructs kinship[21]. In this way, the study of asexual kinship opens up new possibilities for what it means to be queer, and how polyqueer practice might be informed by nonsexual intimacies as well as sexual ones.

3.3 Boston marriages, QPPs and the Lesbian Continuum

Many self-identified asexuals, as McDonnell et al note, choose to engage in "traditional" forms of sexual intimacy and monogamy for a variety of reasons. Additionally, many self-identified asexuals, such as David Jay, are finding ways to shift mononormative, amatonormative and heteronormative scripts to create recognizable forms of (potentially radical) asexual kinship. However, I think it is also worth looking at a third category of doing here distinct from either of

[21] Here, I am also thinking of my own partner, who is straight in her sexual practices, but has begun to consider herself queer because of our immensely queer nonsexual partnership. Her queerness is not at all centred on her embodied desires, and are very much centred in the *doing* that is our household and relationship.

these: the growing number of people who do not identify as *being* asexual but who are engaged in shifting amatonormative scripts anyway and are *doing* asexual kinship.

There is a long tradition of platonic support networks; as Adrienne Rich puts it, the "lesbian continuum" of female support and love that forms the history for these sorts of relationships, in addition to Orlando's asexual manifesto and its grounding in feminist values of non-sexualization. Writing in the 1980s, however, Orlando's and Rich's analysis often falls into trans-exclusive, heavily biologized language. Therefore, as I explore how gender is at work in the move to doing queerplatonic intimacy, I want to be careful not to reproduce trans-exclusive biological "womanhood" in my analysis, being attentive to the ways that gender is socially mediated and constructed in relationality.

If we understand aromanticism as an identity formation that is not necessarily inherent or biological, but is instead pushing back against an amatonormative culture, it becomes necessary to trace how gender is affecting the push. Why, in both these examples, is it women forming these queerplatonic spaces within a poly framework? Gender norms are strongly at work here, and I argue that it is because of the unbalanced (and disproportionately negative) effects of (hetero)normative romantic love on women. Rich notes "the constraints and sanctions which historically have enforced or ensured the coupling of women with men and obstructed or penalized women's coupling or allying in independent groups with other women" (15). This is fundamentally a gendered norm; the same social constraints are not enforced as heavily on men, and men's bodies are not legislated and controlled in the same way that women's bodies have historically been. Rich theorizes "male identification" as the mode by which women are taught to treat male sexuality as the locus of power, identifying "the importance placed on the male sex drive in the socialization of girls as well as boys" (34). Rich, like Butler, theorizes sexuality as something learned rather

than innate or biological, which is inherently gendered in the process of socialization. If girls are taught to perform and understand their desire differently from boys, then of course female opting-out from learned sexuality is going to look immensely different from male opting-out; therefore, asexuality must necessarily be understood in a socialized, gendered manner "within institutions that reproduce our lives through gender norms[…] always "constructed" in ways that we do not choose" (Butler, 18). Given that gender and sexuality are deeply tied together, the forms of sexuality and romantic doing that are available to women and gender-non-conforming people will always be circumscribed by their gender in traditional social scripts; therefore, in a heteropatriarchal Western society, where our romantic norms overwhelmingly benefit masculine and male people, it should come as no surprise that it is overwhelmingly women and femmes who are choosing to break those scripts and form, as Rich might put it, "lesbian alliances".

While *queerplatonic* is a term that was developed in the online asexual community, I find it critical to note the ways that these relationships have spread and proliferated for people who do not explicitly identify as asexual. These partnerships often reference the "Boston marriage", a term historically used to describe two women, usually spinsters, living together without a man. In their 1993 book *Boston Marriages: Romantic But Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians*, Kathleen Brehony and Esther Rothblum explain:

> The term "Boston marriage" referred to unmarried women who lived together in past decades. These women were presumed to be asexual…In the past century and beginning of the 20th century, women were not expected to want genital sex, and thus the women in Boston marriages were free to express their emotional intimacy and passionate love for each other openly. The women lived conventional, respected lives as "spinsters" or they married men while continuing to express their love through letters and shared activities. (Brehony & Rothblum, 4)

While it is entirely possible that historical “Boston marriages” were cover for then-closeted lesbian relationships, they have begun to be taken up by both asexual and heterosexual women who find the traditional life trajectory of a romantic relationship and cohabitation with a spouse to be unsatisfying. Brehony and Rothblum note that their book was intended to “reclaim the term "Boston marriage" (7) to describe the concept of romantic but asexual relationships between lesbians today” (Brehony & Rothblum, 4). Proponents of the Boston marriage live in supportive, caring relationships with platonic companions: not exclusive nor even necessarily asexual, as some women also choose to date outside of these loving cohabitations. In interviewing various (lesbian) women about their non-sexual, intimate relationships, they conclude: “Most agreed that the word "lover" was not appropriate given the lack of sex, but there were few alternatives in our current language” (Brehony & Rothblum, 10).

In the last two decades or so, this term has been taken up by contemporary lesbians to describe their nonsexual and/or nonmonogamous relationships, as there is still a lack of adequately socially legible language to describe such kinship formations. For instance, in 1995, Zoe Zalbrod wrote an article called “Boston Marriages” in her zine *Maxine* about a strong platonic relationship that she had with another woman, writing:

> Around that time I was breaking up with a man, and he accused me of using my lady as a surrogate, apparently for a committed heterosexual relationship. I snorted at this and wrote a rampage about how a connection so deep and free was a substitute for nothing, how it was not only a real thing but was better than coupled love, which seemed so often to impose a loss of self, hard compromises, and fucked gender roles. (Zalbrod)

After reading this article, Kennedy, a blogger, was inspired to do more research about Boston Marriages and begin an alternative lifestyle. She now lives with her “roommate”, Liz, in a house

they bought together, although they continue to date other people. In her 2001 article for *Ms Magazine,* she reflects that there is no adequate word for this alternative lifestyle that is still not accepted or understood by everyone she meets. She says that "[roommate] is an inadequate word, but it's all we have. What else do you call two friends who are shacked up together in a decaying Victorian… go to parties as a couple, and spend holidays with each other's families?" (Kennedy). These partnerships, by their very existence, challenge the dominant definition of family and necessitate a revisiting of the definition of partners, opening the word to nonmonogamous and nonsexual meanings very different from its grounding in (hetero)sexual nuclear marriage norms. Later in the article, she expands, saying: "Words offer shelter. They help love stay. I wish for a word that two friends could live inside, like a shingled house with faded Persian rugs." (Pagan Kennedy). Brehony and Rothblum concur, saying:

> We are infinitely restricted by a language system that has precious few resources to describe the multilayered, complex, unique relationships among people. This restriction points to the limited importance placed upon human relationships in our culture. People who study such things often note how cultures devise language precisely to describe things that are important to them…It is not surprising that in a culture that has far more words for describing warfare than relationships among people, there is a failure of language to define the central realities of those relationships. (Brehony & Rothblum, 20)

Although, as noted, in the last decade these relationships have slowly begun to become more common., this "failure of language", as evident in the asexual community, has morphed into a proliferation of language, with various terminologies at work to identify and legitimize these kinship structures. While none of them are common enough to be able to be considered normative, I want to trace the different genealogies underlying these different language forms in order to better

understand the impact, assumptions and theoretical frameworks that underlie the language choices different people are making. In more recent examples that have been covered in mainstream online news articles, for instance, Sarah Burke's article "Queer, Poly, and Platonic: Two Partners Discuss Their Unconventional Love", the language of queerplatonic partnership has been explicitly taken up by people who do not identify as asexual. She speaks to a woman and a nonbinary person who have structured their kinship relation around the idea of queerplatonic commitment, despite the fact that both of them have other sexual partners.

In Burke's article, "Carolyn" says:

> So, it never has been sexual. At first, I would describe it as "friends," and then I remember a moment when we were swimming together at the pool, where we realized that both of us were interested in polyamory. And then I remember a long, long conversation ensuing, and us discussing what it meant to be in relationship in general…what it means to be in an intentional relationship with someone, and what that means for sexuality, and how the sexual aspect of a relationship can transform how you think about it and the hierarchies and priorities in your life. (quoted in Burke)

In the same article, her queerplatonic partner Sara says:

> Regardless of the fact that I don't identify as cis, my life is very woman-centric and I still use that lesbian language. The lesbian continuum, I think, really affected the both of us and how we wanted to talk about relationships and, in general, *how we were both really committed to deconstructing hierarchies in our relationships—especially not privileging sexual relationships over non-sexual relationships*. And even before I had read this, we realized and verbally acknowledged and communicated that we were in an intentional relationship, and that we were very committed to each other, and that it was a lesbian relationship regardless of whether or not it was sexual or ever would be. (quoted in Burke, emphasis mine)

Sara and Carolyn both explicitly point to Adrienne Rich and her theory of the lesbian continuum as the origin point for how they understand their relationship and its importance, despite its non-sexual nature. It's worth noting that this idea comes from the same manifesto in which Rich coined the term *compulsory heterosexuality*, and is thus the same origin point for Emens' later thinking on compulsory sexuality specifically as a force which might affect asexuals. However, Sara and Carolyn pick up Rich's original meaning of compulsory heterosexuality, and apply it to their relationship without identifying as asexual at any point; both of them acknowledge within the article that they do, in fact, feel sexual attraction, but have chosen to privilege their nonsexual relationships over their sexual ones. They self-consciously deconstruct hierarchies of sexuality without claiming to be asexual. This is something we might consider asexual *doing*, categorically a choice rather than a biological reality. Przybylo and Cooper might even go far as to call this an *asexual resonance*; but does that make it an example of *asexuality*? Is it an example of *aromanticism?* Is it neither? Does it need a label to exist? Does it need to align with asexual language and politics to be what it is, to have a potential radical impact? This example highlights the gaps in the linguistic frameworks of asexual discourse, and points to the ways in which it might be more useful to think of asexuality as the potential for *doing* rather than only as a type of *being*.

In another, less explicitly polyamorous example of queerplatonic love, Carolyn Yates of *Autostraddle* interviewed Eva, a "28-year-old Chicana pansexual cis woman" who is "in a long term queer platonic relationship and works in the sex industry and as a research assistant". Her relationship takes a different approach to forming nonsexual kinship structures:

> My best friend and I […] have a very strong intimacy and connection that we both describe as being in love. But we are not interested in each other sexually. Recently,

> I came across the term "queer platonic" and it describes us perfectly. We are planning on getting engaged soon and want to buy a house together and foster children together one day. We take vacations together and make important decisions together. We basically function as a couple, just without the sex. We see other people for that purpose. We're planning our lives together but we casually date others. We have talked about what it would look like if either one of us wanted a more serious partner [than the people they casually date] and for us that would look like adding someone to our existing relationship. (Eva, quoted in Yates)[22]

What is most interesting to me about this example is that the two friends understand themselves as being "in love" and plan on getting engaged; this maps more closely onto normative romantic understandings of love. Unlike people who self-identify as asexual, these friends began their relationship before finding the language to validate and legitimize their desires.

While the asexual community draws most heavily on a neoliberal and individualized understanding of sexuality, deploying the SAM as a workaround to legitimize romantic desires while still claiming asexuality as an identitarian space, these examples explicitly and implicitly draw on Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum:

> As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, this limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body

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[22] Adrienne Rich notes that "women in every culture and throughout history have undertaken the task of independent, nonheterosexual, woman-connected existence, to the extent made possible by their context, often in the belief that they were the "only ones" ever to have done so" (15). This rings especially true for me personally in reading this article. Neither my QPP or myself identify as asexual, and throughout our relationship, both of us have worried that we might be "appropriating" asexual language by taking up "queerplatonic" as our moniker. It was with a huge sense of relief and validation that I read these two articles, especially Eva's words, and realized that I was not, in fact, the "only one" to be creating and deploying the language of QPPs outside of explicitly asexual spaces.

> or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic," and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which "makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial." (Rich, 28)

What would it mean, particularly for women and gender-non-conforming people, if it were possible to simply identify a *relationship* as asexual instead of the *self*? What political possibilities might be opened up in the vein of Orlando's original Asexual Manifesto in the name of disavowing "exploitation" and opening "a more humane style of relating" (Orlando, 3)? In order to be able to do this, it would be necessary to break down amatonormativity and its lasting social and psychological effects. Due to the normative effect of the (hetero)romantic narrative, the culture of the nuclear family, and the deep entanglement of the romantic with the sexual, it is extremely difficult at the moment for platonic relationships to be legible as legitimate primary support relationships.

This, I believe, is at the heart of the split-attraction model and its appeal: the cultural and quasi-scientific discourse at work in our everyday lives reduces platonic kinship to a secondary happiness. Mainstream discourse reduces platonic kinships to something lesser than romantic kinship: someone who is not married must be living a "lonely" life, an assumption plainly stated in the US Supreme Court's gay marriage ruling (above). The retreat back *into* discourse in order to legitimize an aromantic lifestyle makes complete sense in this context. Someone who simply lives a life without romantic connection is culturally perceived as lonely. Someone who has self-identified as aromantic is carving out a space to discursively legitimize the life that will make them happy, the *doing* that will be best for them; however, in an amatonormative culture, this *must* be

translated into a *being* for it to mean anything or to be legitimized. By pointing to a scientifically legitimized, biologically inherent identity, aromantics and asexuals are able to defend the life that makes them happy as legitimate. Instead of saying "I want to live with a non-sexual partner and I should be allowed to make that choice without stigma", asexuals are able to say "I *am* asexual, I deserve a happy, non-sexual relationship, and it would be unethical to attempt to change me because I am biologically wired this way". However, the discursive backflipping and inherent paradoxes of the Split Attraction Model are actually chipping away at the desired legitimacy of these models. The backlash against asexuals in online spaces over the last five years has been immense, driving self-identified asexuals back into the closet. (Renninger) Instead, a more productive way forward might be for the discursive work of asexuality to be grounded in the less identitarian and more relational theory of polyamory.

3.4 Queering Asexuality, Queering Polyamory

In her breakdown of the social forces that underly the powerful norm of romantic love, Jenkins says that

> [i]n a society that values romantic love as its primary model for a "normal" life, powerful feelings of care and desire that one experiences for another person will tend to be focused toward the creation of a marriage-based, monogamous, lifelong, reproductive family unit with another person. Once formed, that nuclear unit can be locked in by providing social and legal benefits (such as tax breaks, social approbation, and hospital visiting rights) that incentivize staying together, while making the alternatives (separation and divorce) costly and complicated. (51-52)

So what are the alternatives to this "normal" life which is offered as the primary model to most of us? As Brake suggests in *Minimizing Marriage,* it may only be possible to break down these social

norms by shifting the legal structures available to us by “allow[ing] individuals to select from the rights and responsibilities exchanged within marriage and exchange them with whomever they want, rather than exchanging a predefined bundle of rights and responsibilities with only one amatory partner” (Brake, 68). However, as McDonnell et al noted in their study, even self-identified asexuals struggle to meaningfully do asexual intimacy in a world where sexual intimacy is a given, and developing new scripts is a challenge. They note that “[u]nlike other nonnormative sexualities in which both the presence of sex and the prominence of the categories allow individuals to engage in ‘experiments in living’ to develop new scripts (Weeks et al. 2001), this is not seen as available to asexual people” (8). Ahmed also notes the power of socialization even in queer resistance, reminding us that "to refuse to be compelled by the narratives of ideal heterosexuality in one’s orientation to others is still to be affected by those narratives; they work to script one’s orientation as a form of disobedience” (165). Asexual orientation has been framed for decades as a form of disobedience and resistance, while asexual practices have been foreclosed by normative narratives that still frame romantic ideals as desirable even within that disobedient orientation. If asexual people are fighting for legitimacy and the right to *be*, this has not been enough to create meaningful discursive space in which to create scripts for asexual intimacy.

On the other hand, women and femmes who are opting out of sexuality and creating queerplatonic relationships without explicitly identifying as asexual are creating spaces for themselves where they negotiate and navigate new forms of intimacy by taking up the language of polyamory. However, polyamory is not without its own issues and challenges. Angela Willey notes that “stories about polyamory offer us some models, but as they gain popularity in our [queer] communities, recipes for poly living are increasingly prescriptive and often couple-centric.” (96) However, monogamy, like amatonormativity and romantic love, is predicated on the continuing

existence of the (hetero)sexual nuclear family. As Becky Rosa notes: "For monogamy to exist there needs to be a division between sexual/romantic and non-sexual love, with the former prioritized over the latter." (quoted in Willey, 8). Picking up the structures and theoretical groundings of polyamory that are increasingly normative might be a useful way for asexual theory to return to its roots, that is, radical feminism that is philosophically focused on treating people as more than their sexual capital. The radical potential of nonmonogamy to interrupt romantic scripts opens up one direction for asexual doing and organizing; however, polyamory, though growing more common in mainstream narratives, is still deeply tied in our cultural imagination to *sexual* nonmonogamy, as evidenced by texts such as *The Ethical Slut*¸ which is still considered required reading for anyone considering a nonmonogamous lifestyle. As Overall notes:

> The idea of nonmonogamy holds out the deceptive promise that the way to love others, to be close to others, is through a sexual relationship with them. It creates the illusion that sexual freedom is the path to sexual liberation, or that it provides the route to social transformation. It endorses the masculinist idea that sexual feelings are overwhelming and uncontrollable, and that one must act upon them. (Overall 75)

How can polyamory be a useful tool for asexual thought when it is still overwhelmingly sexual in most cases? What does it mean to be a “partner” to someone if they don’t sleep in your bed, if they are sexually active with someone else, if attraction is not what defines your life? What kinds of new intimacies can asexual polyamory mean? What *is* asexual polyamory, and why would anyone want to practice it?

Although, at first glance, hypersexualized polyamory and asexuality appear to be opposite ends of a spectrum, I see critical nonmonogamies and critical nonsexualities as inhabiting overlapping spaces of resistance to the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. In outlining critical

nonmonogamies, Overall identifies "certain views about sexual relations, love, and intimacy, that underlie human connections under patriarchy: […] that sexual coupling defines and is the hallmark of closeness between human beings; that being sexual is being intimate; and that sex is almost the only route to warm physical contact between adults" (14). Although, in her text, she never explicitly invokes asexuality, the very same questions are at work here as in Orlando's early Asexual Manifesto; a form of political consciousness that is interested in redefining the gendered and sexualized terms on which humans fulfil their need for comfort, care and intimacy. The move into critical nonmonogamies challenges compulsory sexuality without having to take up fraught identity markers or opt in to one's understanding of self and desire as biologically determined.

The fingerprints of polyamory are also at work throughout the examples above. Again, though none of the people in queer, asexual, polyamorous relationships define themselves as polyamorous in the way that has become common, they are nevertheless *doing* polyamory by choosing to commit to both sexual and nonsexual partners without privileging one over the other. Asexual thought and polyamory are deeply entwined, and have much to contribute to one another; I see this as a gap in critical nonsexualities scholarship and a definite direction for future research.

Asexual polyamory is a near-meaningless term because the cultural meanings that we ascribe to each of those terms renders them practically paradoxical when placed next to each other. Perhaps this is why none of the polyamorous aces I reference above describe themselves in that way; it simply doesn't make any sense, and it's possible that uncomfortable and abnormal language, in this case, makes the doing feel even more uncomfortable. However, I want to turn again to Sara Ahmed, who says:

> We can posit the effects of 'not fitting' as a form of queer discomfort, but a discomfort which is generative, rather than simply constraining or negative. To feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives. […]Queer feelings are 'affected' by the repetition of the scripts that they fail to reproduce, and this 'affect' is also a sign of what queer can do, of how it can work by working on the (hetero)normative. The failure to be non-normative is then not the failure of queer to be queer, but a sign of attachments that are the condition of possibility for queer. Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us. (Ahmed, 165)

Asexual polyamory lacks scripts for living, and for loving, and for what kinds of intimacies they ought to be creating. However, that lack of a script opens the possibility for new forms of intimacies that do not rely on the sexualization of partners or on the assumption of identity.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

It's March 30th, the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, the virus to which Tora and I have been affectionately referring as "covie", or sometimes, "the 'rona". I sit in a tiny folding chair in our shower. Tora hums and frowns over my temples, shedding tiny clippings of hair all over my back. Downstairs I can hear the low voices of her partner and mine, murmuring back and forth as they make us dinner and volley verbal barbs back and forth.

This moment is so intimate, and so hard to put into words. Tora's hands warm against my forehead or shoulder, holding me still while she works. My awareness of her leaning over me. The sound the clipper makes when she curves it up my scalp, her fingers brushing hair away from the stubble to see it more clearly. The soothing vibration ringing down my skull from the electric buzzer. I feel loved, and seen, and safe.

Afterwards, Tora takes a video of me so that I can see her first try at a fade, see how it looks on the back of my head. In the video, I am dancing towards her in my underwear, covered in tiny, itchy clippings. I make a face, and the video shakes. "You're cute," she says. You can hear her laughing in the video.

These are intimacies that we build for ourselves. They aren't erotic, they aren't sexual, they feel as easy and as natural as breathing. They are the spaces that built themselves. We didn't make them because we felt that's what we should do to reach some boxed, straight-to-TV, unattainable vision of "true love": we started doing them because it made us happy, and we continue doing them because we want to keep them.

We aren't trying to resist our learned social scripts, in this moment. We aren't trying to be a political statement, we aren't deploying complex queer thought. We're just

happy to be together, in this weird time, in this weird old world. And that's worth a lot. (Elgie, “Quarantine, Home Haircuts, and Social Scripts”, 2020)

Making new intimacies and new scripts isn’t always easy. There is discomfort, and jealousy, and frustration. There is the oddness of growing the boundaries of the self, and the discomfort of making yourself legible over and over again in a world that continues to expect you to be other than who you are. There is self-conscious archive creation, because you have tried and failed to find yourself in media over and over again, and you hope that the next person doing what you’re doing does not. In some ways, it would be easier to simply *be* asexual, claim that identity as a point of pride, and carry on dating like my friends do, fitting my asexual self into amatonormative scripts even when they chafe. But I’m not sure that *being* would mean anything to me if I wasn’t *doing* something differently as well.

In this thesis, I lay the groundwork for future work on asexual doing, and point to forms of asexual kinship that are being practiced both inside and outside of explicitly asexual spaces. By investigating queer asexual *doing*, I have attempted to expand the categories of the asexual away from an essentialized, biologically determined identity into an asexual practice that is grounded in political consciousness and self-conscious non-normative action. I have also attempted to understand the link between sexual and romantic norms, and therefore romantic practice, by deconstructing the Split Attraction Model and the history of marriage norms in a way that recognizes the racialized, gendered, and colonial investments of that model.

Recognizing the ways that asexual discourse has uncritically taken up problematic nationalist, neoliberal, and racialized understandings of romantic kinship in its identity politics is necessary in the present moment, where asexuals are fighting to be publicly recognized and just beginning to be legitimized in public discourse. It seems critical to me that asexual discourse shift

from its present incarnation—a respectability and visibility politics with the aim of neoliberal assimilation— to a political consciousness that can begin to queerly reinterpret the role of sexuality in forming kinship in a broader sense. Instead of asking for a parade, coupons, and recognition as a quantifiable population, asexual consciousness demands that we recognize the challenge of *doing* asexuality in an amatonormative society, especially for BIPOC people, given the constraints around sexuality and kinship that have been historically placed on nonwhite bodies and choice. Given that opting out of sexual and romantic norms is next to impossible even when one identifies as asexual, what is at stake here is an asexual *doing*, the right to form nonsexual kinships without having to justify one's choice through an essentialized, biological identity. The queerness of asexual *doing* opens one way of doing queer kinship that has been underrepresented in our pop culture *and* undertheorized in asexual discourse.

The scholarship on asexualities has a lot more room to grow, particularly in terms of more fully documenting and examining asexualities' everyday lives. Future directions for research could thus include more sociological work on exactly how asexual kinships are being deployed, and what new forms of queer being and doing arise out of nonsexual poly kinships. Ultimately, in future work, it would be useful to trace and share the polyqueer and asexual language being used across various households via qualitative research analysis. Attention to the strong online presence of many people who identify as asexual can be extended further to examine the logics and tactics through which self-identified asexuals navigate online worlds through anonymity. In addition, to add empirical and ethnographic texture to studies of asexuality, it would also be important to empirically trace how ace/aro people, kinships and communities produce and occupy material spaces that exceed online spaces. A context like Vancouver, with a small but vibrant ace/aro community, can be an especially fruitful site for ethnographically examining the sociopolitical and

linguistic formations and material practices that comprise how asexuals and the people around them are doing relationships and kinship. Additionally, it would also be useful to expand this research beyond the Vancouver community, particularly to examine translocal practices of connection that bring localized communities in relation to each other. Attention to translocal differentiation is also crucial. While there is a lot of asexual discourse that happens in online forums, especially since asexuals are a small population and therefore quite spread out (Renninger, 2015), online and physical spaces can be very different for building social understandings of the world. Each of these future research directions is guided by the same political and theoretical impulse of this thesis, which is to think through the everyday *doings of asexuality*. It is thus crucial that future research examine how people doing asexual kinship are navigating their physical and immediate social worlds, and the ways the language, structures and frameworks they use play out in the day-to-day of their lives. Finally, the impacts of asexualities' vernaculars, politics and practices *beyond* ace/aro communities would enable scholars of sexualities to more fully document the *broader* worldmaking capacities of asexual thinking and doing. Tracing such asexual resonances outside of explicitly asexual communities could have ramifications for the way that we as a culture understand friendship, reproduction, adulthood, intimacy, and romantic love in a much broader context, expanding what it means to be queer by first expanding what it means to *be* asexual.

4.1 Coda

I am still trying to figure out what it means for me personally to do polyasexual kinship. What does it mean to choose and build a family outside the sexual, outside the romantic, outside the nuclear, with no clear script for how to do it? What does it mean to choose a family? How do

you build a home where everyone feels safe, where everyone feels loved, and it's okay that some of that love is expressed sexually and some is not? How do you resist social scripts that place a romantic partner over a platonic one? How do you even figure out what it means to be a platonic partner, when the words platonic and romantic are so steeped in amatonormative understandings of how commitment ought to be parceled out?

Tora and I have now lived together for seven years. The first five years of that was with other friends. The last two years have been the two of us alone. Now, for the first time since we embarked on our queerplatonic journey, we are moving again: not changing cities this time, but moving to a larger house to accommodate three more partners who want to join us on this very queer quest. It feels right that we are moving in the same week that I finish writing this thesis: we embark on our next step of *doing*, pulling more people into our polycule, at the same time that I let go of these ideas in my thesis, putting them into the world and hopefully pulling more people into this conversation. The scripts that I have available to me about asexuality— the Zoe O'Reillys of the world— have always made me think that the alternative to heterosexuality, or indeed, normative sexuality at all, is to live alone. So much of our public discourse treats "asexual" and "aromantic" as synonymous with "lonely", and romantic scripts as overwhelmingly the only way to find love and companionship. But what's become clear to me, the more that I read and the more that I learn, is that this thing we're doing is not new. I am building a home made of people who love me, and it doesn't matter, in that home, whether that love is sexual or not, or whether I understand the exact dimensions of my own sexuality to be able to name them precisely. There is nothing new about that. As I have seen throughout this COVID-19 crisis, the world is full of families, biological and not, who are all pulling together in the face of fear and uncertainty to

support one another; and that unscripted love and care is much more real than the social norms breaking down all around us.

In this moment, I am so glad not to be alone. I am so glad to have created a network of caring relations that are not defined by my sexual worth. I am so glad that I no longer believe I have to be completely independent as the only alternative to normative romance. I am so lucky in the privileges I have, to be in a country with socialized medicine, to have safe housing and to see families reconnecting, neighbours taking care of one another. The kinds of care happening in the midst of this crisis are so queer. They are a kind of *doing:* a queer kinship that is breaking the boundaries of what normal life looks like to make us all stronger and help us all survive this strange new world. We are going to build a new life that we shape from our needs, not from the scripts and bounds that have been offered to us, and it won't be easy, but it will be worth it. We are still figuring out what that looks like, and how this new life will shape us in return.

Evelyn Elgie, April 8, 2020

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