University of Alberta

Asexuality and the Feminist Politics of 'Not Doing It'

by

Elzbieta (Ela) Przybylo

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Abstract

This thesis makes a contribution to the burgeoning study of the sexual identity category and sexual orientation of asexuality by arguing for its political valence and feminist potentiality. Offering a feminist reading of scientific texts on asexuality, and revisiting feminist radical texts from the late sixties and early seventies, I make the claim that asexuality is possible and intelligible only in our very specific Western discursive context, a context saturated with the sexual, coital, and heterosexual imperatives. Assessing that asexuality is both limited and enabled by dominant sexual discourses and that asexuality as a sexual orientation has not been discursively available in the past, this thesis suggests that feminist iterations of asexuality contribute key insights to the gendered politics at work behind 'not doing it.'

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INTRODUCTION
Telling Stories, Making Maps

I would like to begin this thesis by introducing two sets of metaphors for understanding sexuality, and specifically the sexual identity category and sexual orientation of asexuality. One way in which to draw attention to the culturally created quality of sex and sexuality is through emphasizing that they are not facts but rather fictions, that they are *stories.* Ken Plummer in *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995) makes just this point, elaborating on the way in which sexualities in the late twentieth century are experienced as in need of telling. The enticement is to "[t]ell about your sexual behaviour, your sexual identity, your dreams, your desires, your pains and your fantasies" (4). Michel Foucault (1978) famously argues that the confessional, so integral to the function of the Church and later to Science, "became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth" that "[w]e have since become a singularly confessing society [… comprised of] confessing animal[s]" (59). Thus, "we live in a world of sexual stories" and it is the work of cultural investigators, such as say, graduate students, to consider not only what stories are being told but also how they are being told and who does the telling (5). Stories take on many forms and are told in different voices, "[t]here are scientific sex stories, […] historical sex stories, […] fictional sex stories" (Plummer 7). Annie Potts in *The Science/Fiction of Sex* (2002) describes "vocabularies of heterosex" such as those of sexology, which inform and naturalize aspects of sex and sexuality which are commonly taken for granted as truth, fact, and intrinsic elements of our biology. It is the project of this thesis to consider some of the stories currently being told about asexuality – by science, the media, and by those who identify as asexuals themselves. More than this, it is significant to deconstruct these stories by way of feminism, and explore what rules are set, what discourses reified, and what possibilities enabled. If, as Plummer asserts, "now the time has certainly come for personal sexual stories to be told – at least for some groups" and that "[s]tories can be told when they can be heard," then it is likely that now is the time for the telling of *asexual* stories. (6, 120).

Yet, the plotting of sexual or asexual stories is not a neutral enterprise. It is indeed a form of sexual colonization in that it partakes in discovering, delineating, organizing, boundary-drawing, and setting rules for normative sex and sexuality. In short, studies of sexuality partake in a form of cartography that, while perhaps not capable of controlling all sexual practices, does establish sexual norms and ideals. Jeffrey Weeks deploys the language of map-making describing the study of sexuality as a "virgin field" in 1981, a "continent of knowledge, with its own rules of exploration and its own expert geographers" (1, 12).[1] Or, more recently, he depicts sexologists as "would-be-colonizers" (2010, 13). Freud too, depicted women's sexuality as a "dark continent" (1926, 38). In writing of maps and cities, Michel de Certeau (1984) suggests that seen from above, as in the case of a map, a city appears "a representation, an optical artifact" and that to learn about those practices which constitute the everyday, we must see the city from "down below," take a walk within the city (92-93). The implication I wish to extract is that while maps are made (in part) from above, they do not resemble in any simple way the practices of the everyday. This thesis interrogates some of the maps that are produced for understanding *asexuality*, maintaining that they should be radically examined because they not so much reflect sexual identities and practices as they prescribe and constrain in advance what is possible. Yet as with cities, maps of sexuality and asexuality both limit and enable because there are always creative ways to navigate, make sense of, and interact with dominant frameworks. Such is the case also with asexuality: while science 'discovers' asexuality and maps are drawn by many to make sense of it, asexual practices and identities continue to be various and unpredictable.

This thesis makes four main contributions to the burgeoning field of asexuality studies. *First*, it traces asexuality's current articulations and permutations with the aim of denaturalizing that which seems to be both natural and unquestioned. Examining how asexuality is represented, by science most pronouncedly, but also to a smaller extent by the media, as well as by the asexual community itself, I critically consider what stories are being told of asexuality and what maps are being drafted. Thus, it is a main concern of this thesis to engage in a critical and radical feminist reading of contemporary representations and articulations of asexuality. *Second,* this thesis suggests that asexuality is both limited and enabled by discourses of sex and sexuality. In other words, I argue that asexuality must be considered as culturally contingent, rather than as a natural artifact of the biological body or psyche. *Third,* and related to this, is the claim that there is something inimitably particular about contemporary asexuality as a sexual identity. Indeed, asexuality has never before existed in the way it does today because never has it been possible to understand a set of sexual and nonsexual practices as a sexual identity category of *asexuality*. While this is true, it is not the case that discourses, ideals, and practices of asexuality have not circulated in the past, for indeed they have. *Finally,* this thesis suggests that feminism, and particularly feminist articulations of asexuality from the late sixties and seventies, have something substantial to contribute to contemporary asexuality. Particularly, they suggest that there is a *gendered politics* always at work behind 'not doing it' and 'doing it.'

The first chapter, "Considering Discourses," begins with an overview of the existing academic literature on asexuality. Next, I situate this project in the context of the dominant discourses of sexuality, which include the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital cluster.* I do this by way of drawing on the work of Foucauldian feminists including Wendy Hollway (1984), Annie Potts (2002), and Nicola Gavey (2005). Chapter Two, "Producing Facts," provides a critical reading of existing scientific studies on asexuality, arguing that while science proposes to convey the facts of asexuality, what is actually being assembled is a set of asexual fictions. In "Producing Histories," the third chapter, I turn to exploring historical discourses of women's asexuality and feminist articulations of a politics of asexuality. Finally, the fourth chapter, "Producing Stories," considers the ways in which contemporary asexuality is both exciting and disappointing from a feminist perspective, in that it breaks with many of the dominant discourses of sexuality while reifying others.

Notes

[1] "Virgin field" is in fact Vern Bullough's phrase from his article, "Sex in History: A Virgin Field" (1972), but Weeks avidly deploys it.

CHAPTER ONE
Considering Discourses: Asexuality and the Dominant Discourses of Sex

Sex is not a natural act.
–Leonore Tiefer, 1995

Sex is not simply a 'natural' fact.
–Carole Vance, *Pleasure and Danger,* 1984, p.7

This chapter has at its heart two goals: to introduce the reader to existing scholarship on asexuality and to situate asexuality in the context of the dominant discourses of sex, such as the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital discursive cluster.* I argue that while literature on asexuality is proliferating, there is a pressing need for considering asexuality as at once limited and enabled by these discourses of sex and sexuality. Asexuality is difficult for many to imagine, and is widely considered a joke, a disorder, a defect of physiology or psyche, a developmental stagnation, a form of repression, identity confusion, or a religiously inflected form of prudery. This difficulty of comprehending asexuality suggests that it breaks with dominant discourses and with notions of normality. At the same time asexuality has begun to become culturally intelligible, for instance there is an asexual community and academic research on asexuality is burgeoning, suggesting that discourses are somehow aligning to enable for asexuality to signify in ways it never has before.

This chapter will not answer the question of why asexuality is coming into existence in this present millennium, in this present decade. It will, on the other hand, set the table for this question to be raised in a way that takes stock of how our sexual identities and sexual practices are necessarily informed by compelling and at times competing sets of discourses. In particular, in "Academic Asexuality," I consider the burgeoning scientific and feminist academic work on asexuality. More than anything, this section demonstrates that asexuality is gaining momentum in the academic world and that it is increasingly becoming a topic of investigation. Next, in "Dominant Discourses of Sex," I situate this thesis project in the context of Foucauldian feminist work on discourses, including the work of feminist critical psychologists such as Wendy Hollway (1984), Annie Potts (2002), Nicola Gavey (2005), and others. This section provides an overview of some of the dominant discourses currently informing sexuality, including the *sexual imperative* which assigns sex and sexuality a space of prominence in our culture, and the *hetero-coital cluster,* which indicates which forms of sex are normal and natural.

I. Academic Asexuality: A Literature Review

In general, two voices are audible within current academic work on asexuality: scientific considerations of asexuality and sociological and feminist writings on asexuality. Scientific considerations of asexuality include early works from the seventies through to the nineties that briefly mention but do not explore asexuality, as well as research from the last decade, which roughly coincides with the development of *The Asexual Visibility and Education Network* (AVEN), the main internet hub of asexuality. Early scientific work on asexuality consists of that by Michael Storms (1979, 1980), Paula Nurius (1983), and Braden Berkey et al. (1990). While it mentions asexuality, it does so sparingly, focusing instead on other projects. Newer work on asexuality is a direct response to the visibility of AVEN and its members, and makes explicit efforts to classify, define, and study asexuality. This work includes the writings of Anthony Bogaert (2004, 2006, 2008), the Kinsey Institute study by Nicole Prause and Cynthia

Graham (2007), and the research of Lori Brotto et al. (2010) and Lori Brotto and Morag Yule (2010). Of these authors, both Prause and Graham and Brotto et al. employ qualitative tools to study asexuality. While this work lends legitimacy to asexuality – such as with Bogaert's suggestion in 2004 that one percent of the population is asexual – it is fixated on uncovering the underlying etiology or truth of asexuality. It does not engage in explorations of the contextual and cultural meanings of asexuality, but rather employs the presumed bias-free, truth-value of science to study the nature of asexuals and asexuality.[1] Within this scientific study of asexuality, however, there is surfacing a distinctly asexual voice such as Andrew Hinderliter's (2009) letter to the editor and CJ DeLuzio Chasin's "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality" (2011), both published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. These pieces are excellent examples of self-identities asexuals taking an academic interest in asexuality and critically considering the benefits and limits of existing research. Chasin's article, for instance, raises significant questions about asexual diversity and self-identification, suggesting that asexuals vary widely in degree and type.

On the other hand, a body of literature is beginning to grow that examines asexuality from more nuanced, critical, and oftentimes feminist perspectives. Mostly, this work has been produced in the last several years, responding to the increased visibility of the asexual community, however there are also a few earlier examples. Myra T. Johnson's 1977 "Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups," which has often gone unnoticed by contemporary researchers of asexuality, seems to be the first exploration of asexuality, predating Michael Storms' brief mentions of asexuality, and is at that a *feminist* consideration of asexuality. Johnson marvels, much as do today's writers on asexuality, that "[a] review of the Psychological and Sociological Abstracts for the past ten years, for instance, uncovers almost no articles directly concerning women who prefer not to have sex with others" (99). She acknowledges the pejorative connotations of asexuality within our culture and considers the political feminist potentials of asexuality for women. The *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians* (1993) anthology, edited by Esther Rothblum and Kathleen Brehony, is another early exploration of asexuality, and its focus is on historical and contemporary "romantic, but *asexual* relationships among lesbians" (5, emphasis added). While this anthology is not so much a meditation on asexuality as it is on lesbian relationships, it succeeds in conveying a sense of the difficulties that might exist for asexuals within relationships, such as secrecy, shame, skepticism, and definitional ambiguity. Similarly, Rothblum's chapter "'Boston Marriage' Among Lesbians" (2002) raises questions about the role sex plays in defining lesbian relationships, as about what *counts* as sex, suggesting that asexuality may be relevant to many lesbian relationships.

The first contemporary, non-scientific engagement with asexuality, following the development of AVEN and the publication of Bogaert's as well as Prause and Graham's scientific studies on asexuality, is Kristin Scherrer's "Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire" (2008). Scherrer, working from within the discipline of sociology, engages in qualitative research to explore asexual identity and community. The responses from her participants effectively demonstrate the challenges of identifying as asexual today, of navigating relationships with others when one is asexual, as well as the complexity of the lived experiences of asexuality. For instance, in understanding themselves as asexual, many asexuals *also* identify as bi, lesbian, gay, queer, hetero, and as *romantic* or *aromantic*. Scherrer continues her considerations of asexuality with another article, “What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion” (2010b), and a book chapter, “Asexual Relationships: What Does Asexuality Have to Do with Polyamory?” (2010a), both which draw on the same qualitative, internet survey research as her first article. These pieces emphasize asexuality’s capacities for challenging the centrality of sex in relationships, for restructuring relationships and offering options outside of monogamy, and for questioning the limitations of our language as it pertains to sexualities and relationships. In other words, Scherrer’s work explores the ways in which asexuals and asexuality complicate and undermine normative forms of sexual expression and relationships, such as how they undercut the premium placed on sex and on coupled heterosexuality.

Much like Scherrer’s work, Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks’ recent *Feminist Studies* article, “New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice” (2010), emphasizes the possibilities for rethinking intimacy, sexuality, and relationships that asexuality offers. In addition to this, it does so through explicitly considering the intersections that might be possible between feminism, queer theory, and asexuality. The authors argue that an “asexuality studies” is emerging and that asexuality has much to reap from feminist and queer perspectives (654). Much like Scherrer, and Cerankowski and Milks, Eunjung Kim, in her recent chapter “How Much Sex is Healthy?: The Pleasures of Asexuality” (2010), suggests that asexuality presents exciting possibilities for reconfiguring cultural understandings of pleasure as well as ‘health.’ Kim, working from the fields of disability and women’s studies, argues that asexuality rejects notions of the healthicization of sex (which render sex to be acontextually good and healthy), even while it promotes asexuality as healthy and normal. Also Kim briefly explores the relevancies between asexuality and disability, an intersection not yet adequately explored in literature on asexuality, but in need of consideration because "[m]any people are ordered into nonsexual and nonreproductive lives because of their age, disability, health, race, gender, class, or appearance […] present[ing] disagreements with the idea of asexuality when it is imposed as a stereotype or a mandate" (161). While the enforced and assumed asexuality of disabled people is probed by Maureen Milligan and Aldred Neufeldt in "The Myth of Asexuality: A Survey of Social and Empirical Evidence" (2001), their article identifies asexuality as inherently undesirable, and also predates asexual visibility (including the formation of AVEN and Bogaert's 2004 study) (also see O'Toole and Bregante).[2] Thus, Kim's is the first consideration of the complexities asexuality presents for disability, and disability for asexuality.

Breanne Fahs' "Radical Refusals: On the Anarchist Politics of Women Choosing Asexuality" (2010), like the other work I have been discussing, explicates the empowering moments of asexuality. In stark contrast to the other writers, however, Fahs emphasizes the political aspect of asexuality, arguing that "asexuality [is] a viable and politically significant choice" (458). Fahs examines tracts from the women's movement, such as those by Valerie Solanas and Cell 16 members that articulated asexuality as a form of resistance against patriarchy; she argues that "*asexuality may help to dismantle the entire institution of sex*," but that it needs to be explored as both a form of feminist resistance and as a political choice in order to do so (451, emphasis in original). While I am skeptical of our ability to ever freely 'choose' a sexuality or even sets of sexual practices, since although we live in a "culture saturated with the rhetoric of choice, it can be an uncomfortable realization that some choices are perhaps not *really* choices at all," I would like to situate my writing on asexuality as sharing in Fahs' belief that asexuality can be a "radical refusal" (Gavey 123, emphasis in original; Fahs). Clearly, this current thesis, with its investment in exploring asexuality by way of feminism has much in common not *only* with Fahs' project, but also with that of the other feminist work on asexuality I am here discussing – with the writings of Kim, Cerankowski and Milks, and Scherrer. But Fahs' project is especially compelling because it makes an explicit connection that the other authors make only implicitly at best – that asexuality might be *especially* meaningful for women because our sexual culture, despite ongoing feminist and lgbtq efforts, continues to be uniquely limiting and oppressive for women. Thus, my forthcoming publication, "Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety" (2011), stresses, like Fahs does, that asexuality has the capacity to substantially challenge both sexual norms and the structures that reify them, but that for this to occur, asexuality must become more about the *doing* than the *being*.

Although the body of literature focused specifically on asexuality is growing, the relevance and significance of asexuality is also made evident by its frequent mention in work on various other aspects of sexuality.[3] Thea Cacchioni, in "Heterosexuality and 'the Labour of Love'" (2007), suggests that asexuality, or a "prioritizing [of] non-sexual aspects of life and non-sexual relationships" might be a meaningful lifestyle change for many women who find sex unsatisfactory or unpleasureable (312). In addition to Cacchioni, other mentions of asexuality appear in Annemarie Jutel's critique of HSDD (2010), Natalie Hill's article on coming out and psychotherapy (2009), the *Sex Matters:*

The Sexuality and Society Reader textbook (Travis 2010), and asexuality is employed to examine Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* by Nathan Erro (2011). Also, Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst's *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (2010) briefly mentions asexuality in the context of New Zealand.[4]

II. Dominant Discourses of Sex

> [T]he imaginary element that is 'sex,' [...] the desire for sex – the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth […] the dark shimmer of sex.
>
> –Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 1978, p.157

> In Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously.
>
> –Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 1984, p.310

Despite the burgeoning of literature on and about asexuality and the prominence of feminist voices in academic considerations of asexuality, generally absent is a consideration of asexuality alongside the discourses of sex, or an embedding of asexuality in the cultural landscape that gives it shape. Yet, like anything else, asexuality is necessarily predicated and moulded by a particular set of intersecting discourses. Discourses, especially those of *sexuality* that I will be here discussing, create the cultural conditions that make asexuality at once both difficult to imagine and possible to formulate.

Following Foucault, discourses are multiple, at times complicit and at times competing, historically and culturally contingent webs of meaning and bodies of knowledge, which shape (restrict *and* enable) ways of being in the world (Foucault; Gavey; Potts 2002; Hollway). Nicola Gavey (2005) articulates the Foucauldian understanding of discourses as neither "absolute or universal; rather [discourses] take shape in specific ways in different times, places, and within different cultural contexts" (85). As Wendy Hollway (1984) outlines, "different discourses concerning sexuality are available to produce different knowledges or meanings through which practices are mediated" (241). Also, "[d]iscourses are multiple and they offer *competing,* potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world" on the basis of which varying subjectivities are formed (Gavey 85, emphasis added). Or as Foucault instructs, "we are dealing less with *a* discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms in different institutions" (Foucault 33, emphasis in original). Thus our subjectivities and practices take form based on the complex interactions of plural discourses. Yet many discourses, including those that shape our sexualities and sexual practices, have positions of cultural primacy. Their centrality renders them *natural*, and they become taken-for-granted as unquestioned and unquestionable features of our daily lives. These "[d]ominant discourses are those which are more powerful within a society; they have firm institutional bases, and are so ubiquitous that they appear to be natural, universal, inevitable: simply 'common sense'" (Potts 2002, 16; also see Gavey 85). In order to explore the meanings of asexuality – indeed, asexualities – we must ask questions about what conditions make it intelligible as a sexuality today, in a way it has never been intelligible before. As Nikki Sullivan (2003) posits,

> an analysis of the discourses surrounding and informing sexuality can provide clues as to why particular knowledges, practices, and subjectivities emerge when and where they do, and what purposes they might serve. Terms such as invert, queer, sodomite, sapphist, dyke, and so on, are cultural artefacts that are tied to ways of understanding and of being that are specific to a particular cultural milieu. (2)

Asexuality, as both a term and a concept, can become culturally meaningful and available as a sexual 'option' exactly because certain discourses are currently in place.

Annie Potts (2002) discusses discourses in terms of the *vocabularies* they produce, "the stock[s] of representation[s] and ideas, the terminologies, the modes of talking about, and the ways of understanding or making meaning of sex" (4). In today's western culture, many (though not all) vocabularies of sex derive from scientific and popular sexology, and "the cyclical interrelations between science [and] the media" (Nicolson 1993, 57-58). These vocabularies of sex, heterosex, and sexuality mingle in not always transparent ways to construct sets of possibilities, impossibilities, norms, and standards for how we experience pleasure, intimacy, and our bodies. Significantly, they inform sexual norms and practices in stringently *gendered* ways, prescribing forms of sex and sexual being that are limiting for all, but especially and uniquely disadvantageous for women (Hollway). In this section I am interested in reflecting on the cultural discourses and vocabularies surrounding sex and sexuality, gesturing towards the conclusion that asexuality might be best explored when situated at their intersections, since "[o]nce sex is understood in terms of social analysis and historical understanding, a more realistic politics of sex becomes possible" (Rubin 277).

While I will consider various sexual discourses and the ways feminists have articulated them, in particular I will focus on two interlacing sets of discourses. The first of these pertains to the *sexual imperative,* which assigns sex and sexuality a space of cultural supremacy through (1) privileging sex above other activities, (2) conflating sex and sexuality with the self, (3) coding sex as acontextually 'healthy' and 'good,' and (4) emphasizing sex as the 'glue' of a romantic relationship. The second series of discourses, which I will nominate the *hetero-coital cluster* for expediency's sake, prescribes what forms of sex and sexuality are 'appropriate,' 'healthy,' and 'good.' In particular, it consists of (1) compulsory heterosexuality, (2) the compulsion to couple, (3) the coital imperative, and (4) the orgasmic imperative.

The Biological Imperative. Significantly, the sexual discourses I will be elaborating on in this section, are also interlaced with and permeated by the *biological imperative* according to which sex is understood as a core natural impulse or drive, and akin to eating or drinking, configured as necessary to survival. In this way it becomes something human bodies do and have always done, incapacitating any analysis based on contextuality, relationality, or historicity. In this way, sexuality and sex become affixed to physiology, hormones, genetics, whatever, and separated from culture. Leonore Tiefer (1995) memorably argues that "sex is not a natural act," in the face of most discourses and vocabularies which imply, commonsensically and factually, that sex is nothing if not a natural act (Tiefer 1995; Potts 2002, 1). Gayle Rubin (1984) refers to the biological imperative as an ideology of *sexual essentialism*, or as "the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life," criticizing it as defective because it assumes a transhistorical, asocial, and never changing posture (275). Crucially, the field of critical sexuality studies, such as much of the work this thesis draws on, makes ongoing efforts to denaturalize the biological imperative, demonstrating instead, through both contemporary and historical research, that sexuality is culturally contingent.

The Sexual Imperative. Crucially for asexuality, sex and sexual identity have become a cultural imperative, and an integral part of understanding the self. As Foucault famously writes:

> In the space of a few centuries, a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are, to sex […] to bring us almost entirely – our bodies, our minds, our individuality, our history – under the sway of a logic of concupiscence and desire. Whenever it is a question of knowing who we are, it is this logic that henceforth serves as our master key […] the matrix not only of the living, but of life itself […] [s]ex, the explanation for everything. (78)

Thus to *be* we must *be sexual*. "[S]ex is *compulsory*, for without it one apparently remains deficient in some sense; in-complete; un-healthy" (Potts 1998, 156, emphasis in original). This sexual imperative has several dimensions: first, sexuality and sex become culturally prioritized over many other sets of activities, forms of relating, and types of identification. For Rubin, this is the "fallacy of misplaced scale" as a result of which "[s]exual acts are burdened with an excess of significance" (279). Second, sex becomes conflated with self, so that to know whom we are, we must know who we are sexually. As Foucault argues, sex, contemporarily, is affixed to the narrative and truth of the self, an emblem of identity, instead of as a series of acts (43). In this sense, however, self is hinged primarily to sexual *orientation*, which is based almost solely on object choice. We become defined by our sexualities and by our sexual preference on very limited terms. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) carefully delineates:

> It is a rather amazing fact, that of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensation, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation.' (8, emphasis in original)

Third, sex itself becomes understood as a manifestation of a 'healthy' self and is integral to 'healthy' relationships. "[E]very individual should exploit his or her sexual capacities to the full, taking care to keep them in good shape and not letting them lie fallow too long" for fear that if 'you do not use it, you will lose it' (Béjin 1985, 206; also see Potts 1998). Kristina Gupta (2011), scrutinizing this "sex for health" discourse, demonstrates that it increases the pressure to have sex, pathologizing those individuals who do not sufficiently enjoy sex or who engage in it infrequently. Employing the authority of science, sex for health, also renders healthy very specific forms of sex and sexuality, namely heterosexuality, 'safe sex,' and coitus. Arguing for the "quantifiable health benefits in areas not directly related to sexuality," scientific and popular studies recommend that the benefits of sex include: decreased risk of certain forms of cancer, increased lifespan, reduced risk of heart attack, pain relief, strengthened immune function, weight loss, improved oral health, 'wound healing,' etc. etc. (Gupta 3). One particularly popularized story, for instance, is that of semen functioning as an antidepressant or mood-booster for women, "when absorbed through the vaginal wall into the bloodstream" (qtd. in Gupta 13). This "healthicization" of sex, as Thea Cacchioni's study reveals (2007), forces women especially to engage in "sex work," which, akin to "emotional work," "refers to the unacknowledged effort and the continuing monitoring which women are expected to devote to managing their and their partners' sexual desires and activities" (301). Thus, women who do not sufficiently desire sex, experience it as unpleasurable, or engage in it infrequently enough to satiate their partners' and cultural expectations, are required to seek therapeutic help, better inform themselves, and engage in ongoing sex work through self-care and self-help.

'Healthicization' (Conrad 1992), or 'healthism' (Crawford 1980), may be broadly understood as akin to medicalization.[5] It is a

> preoccupation with personal health as a primary – often *the* primary – focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of life styles […] [At the same time it is] seen to lie within the realm of individual choice. Hence, [it] require[s] above all else the assumption of individual responsibility […] the ideology of healthism fosters a continued depoliticization and therefore undermining of the social effort to improve health and well-being. (Crawford 368)

Significantly, health is often described as the "new morality" in that it becomes central to informing our sense of what is right or wrong (Zola 1975; Conrad 1992; Metzl and Kirkland 2010). The "healthicization of sex" (Cacchioni) or "health for sex" (Gupta) discourse thus situates sex as acontextually 'good' and 'healthy,' and "sex work" (Cacchioni) as the obligation and moral responsibility of each individual. If, "[i]n healthism, healthy behavior has become the paradigm for good living" and "[h]ealthy men and women become model men and women," then the healthicization of sex discourse suggests that *sex* is necessary for good living, and that *sex* (in sufficient quantities and adequate configurations) makes model men and women (Crawford 380).[6]

Corresponding to this, lack of sex or sexual desire, has increasingly become medicalized. *Medicalization* is the "process whereby more and more of everyday life has come under medical dominion, influence, and supervision," acquiring "medical meaning […] in terms of health and illness" and becoming "a vehicle for eliminating or controlling problematic experiences that are defined as deviant, for the purpose of securing adherence to social norms" (Zola 1983, 295; Kohler Riessman 47-48; see also Zola 1972, 1975; Conrad and Schneider 1980, 1992; Conrad 1992). In the last decade especially, medicalization has become augmented by pharmaceutical companies, which promote and invent both disorders and concomitant treatments (Conrad 2005; Tiefer 2006).

Significantly, preoccupations with erectile dysfunction for men and female sexual dysfunctions, especially disorders of desire, for women, have been culturally sifted through just such a processes of medicalization. First, in 1998, Viagra (sildenafil citrate) received the approval of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and appeared on the market as a medication to treat erectile difficulties in men. Medicalizing a common bodily lifespan change in men, Viagra also reified penetrative sex as the most authentic, 'healthy,' 'masculine,' and pleasurable form of sex (Gavey 126-131; Potts 2002; Potts 2005; Potts, Grace, Gavey, and Vares 2004). At the same time, Viagra affects women through increasing pressure on them to have sex when they may not want to, and emphasizing coital sex at the price of other, potentially more pleasurable sexual practices (Potts, Gavey, Grace, and Vares 2003; Potts 2005). Viagra propagates the idea that an erection is achievable on demand and should not be 'wasted' once it has arrived.

Similarly, the pharmaceutical hunt for at once defining and treating female desire disorders such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), demonstrates even more profoundly, pharmaceutical involvement in the process of medicalization (Moynihan 2003, 2005; Tiefer 2001, 2006; Tiefer et al. 2002; Irvine; Jutel; Cacchioni; Hartley; Wood et al.). On the one hand, attempts to define and treat HSDD and other female sexual dysfunctions speak to a relatively recent emphasis on women's entitlement to sexual pleasure; Virginia Braun (2005) writes, "[w]omen's sexual pleasure – or ability to orgasm – appears as a central concern for women, and indeed for society" (418). This engenders a shift away from the "missing discourse of female sexual desire" and an emphasis on women's sexual pleasure (Gavey 111). On the other hand, the cultural invention and mobilization of HSDD participates in a reaffirmation of the centrality of coital, penetrative sex as well as of the sexual imperative. Thus, both Viagra and the hunt for HSDD, demonstrate that "over the last two decades it has been the absence of sexual desire, activity and pleasure (often narrowly conflated with orgasm) that has been the problem" (Gavey 110). Both Viagra and the invention of HSDD participate in a pharmaceutically augmented medicalization that is informed and which informs discourses fixated on the 'health' value of very narrow conceptions of sex (namely hetero-coital-sex). Also, both crystallize the centrality of the *sexual imperative discourse,* which strongly urges us to engage in 'healthy' sex and to do so at any cost and by any means possible. In this context, where the absence of sex and sexual desire are medicalized, and sex is coded as acontextually healthy, it is difficult to *not* undertake often laborious, expensive, and sometimes risky sex work in order to pursue sexual fulfillment.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the sexual imperative advances the health of sex on very particular terms and in very particular contexts. Mostly, healthy sex is encouraged in healthy relationships (coupled, heterosexual relationships). It is within this context that a lack of sex or sexual desire is understood as alarming, in need of treatment, and perhaps most commonly medicalized. Sex is conceived of as the "normal and natural glue that holds together intimate relationships" (Gavey 142; see also Tiefer 1995, 11). The (heterosexual) relationship becomes the site in which healthy sex is expected and encouraged, and disordered or absent sex is redressed. So while, as Deborah Lupton (2003) writes, "discourses […] claim that sexual attraction and love are one, and that sexual fulfillment is essential to personal happiness," this is most emphatically the case in the hetero-coupled context (32).

The Hetero-Coital Discursive Cluster. Many feminist scholars, especially critical feminist psychologists, including Wendy Hollway (1984), Paula Nicolson (1993), Jane Ussher (1993), Annie Potts (2002), Nicola Gavey (2005), and Virginia Braun (2005) have elaborated on the sexual discourses integral to what I have here nominated the *hetero-coital discursive cluster.* Hollway identifies three central discourses, which have since become canonized within critical feminist psychology and analyses of heterosexuality (Terry 13). In particular, she identifies: the *male sexual drive discourse*, the *have/hold discourse*, and the *permissive (sex) discourse*. The *have/hold discourse*, perhaps least prominent or at least obvious in our contemporary culture, renders women as in pursuit of sex as a means to secure a family and 'trap' a man into a long-term, monogamous relationship (Gavey 105). It suggests that men are more sexual than women and that sex is the 'price' women pay for a committed relationship. The *male sexual drive discourse*, which Hollway suggests is the most ubiquitous and unquestioned of all three, holds as "[i]ts key tenet […] that men's sexuality is directly produced by a biological drive, the function of which is to ensure reproduction of the species" (Hollway 231). Thus, it holds that men have a biological and physiological drive to regularly engage in sexual 'release.' At the same time, this discourse renders it very difficult for women to refuse sex, and for men to stop sex once it is set in motion – so that the impression is that "it would not be right or fair for a woman to stop sex before male orgasm" (Gavey 121). Also, the *permissive sex discourse*, feeding off of the male sexual drive discourse, is relatively recent, and while it challenges the principle of monogamy, and assigns women a sexual drive akin to that of men, it is ultimately "a celebration of *masculine* sexuality" (Campbell qtd. in Hollway 235, emphasis in original). This is so because even while it holds, for instance, that the sexual response models and orgasmic capabilities of men and women are fundamentally similar (such as the famous sexologists, William Masters and Virginia Johnson, 'prove' them to be in the sixties), it fails to consistently analyze the material differences that make sexual equality between men and women impossible. As Gavey lucidly demonstrates, with the "permissive turn" of the 1960s, and "this shift toward a more libertarian ethic [of sex], women lost not only the right to expect traditional forms of exchange for sex (love, commitment, marriage), but also the 'morally based' grounds on which to refuse sex they did not want" (108). It is significant to underline, that discourses are not just formations floating in the clouds of theory. Instead, they collude, as Gavey's *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (2005) demonstrates by way of theoretically grounded qualitative research, to construct gendered ideas and practices pertaining to sex and sexual relationships, in day-to-day scenarios.

Acknowledging the enduring presence of these three discourses that Hollway names, I would like to discuss now the four tiers of the *hetero-coital discursive cluster,* which provide a teleological model of how sex should be lived that is at once compelling, seemingly natural, and difficult to dismantle and resist. This hetero-coital narrative model consists of: *compulsory heterosexuality*, the *compulsion to couple*, the *coital imperative*, and the *orgasmic imperative.* I would like to suggest that this cluster functions in a similar way to the "heterosexual matrix" of sex-gender-desire that Judith Butler (1990) expounds. The matrix of sex-gender-desire, as Butler depicts it, compels us to believe that the only way of being in the world involves an alignment of our biological sex, our gendered self-presentation, and our sexual desires. This alignment is experienced as the *only* option, as the natural option. And yet, as Butler well reminds us, it takes ongoing effort to maintain the integrity of this model in everyday life. In a similar way the hetero-coital discursive cluster of heterosexuality-coupledom-coitus-orgasm, naturalizes a specific story of love, intimacy, and sex. It prescribes how sex should be performed and with whom, infiltrating our cultural imagination of what counts as sex and pleasure, and what by default does not.

Compulsory Heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich (1980) has termed "compulsory heterosexuality" "[t]he ideology of heterosexual romance," which promotes heterosexuality as appropriate, healthy, and commonsensical (645). Monique Wittig (1980) writes in the very same year that it is almost impossible "to reject the obligation of coitus" because of the overwhelming dictum of heterosexuality, which suggests that "you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be" (210). Heterosexuality, as "a culturally constructed institution that most often functions to the detriment of women," is thus discursively reified as 'normal' and 'standard,' institutionally implemented, and variously lived and modified by individuals themselves (Sullivan 120). As many have argued, however, the *practice* of heterosexuality is dissimilar from the *institution* of heterosexuality, or as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) elucidate, "[h]eteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality" (548, n. 2; Sullivan; Overall; Segal; Richardson).[7]

The Compulsion to Couple. Allied to heterosexuality, is the cultural emphasis and privileging of the couple. Mimicking Rich, we might term this the *compulsion to couple*. The cultural operation of coupling functions at the expense of other relational configurations such as singlehood or polyamory. Polyamory, for one, is depicted as amoral, unnatural, and impossible to maintain. In a "mono-normative" culture, the assumption is that the couple is the ideal, indeed the only, 'healthy' relationship configuration (see Barker and Langdridge 2010). "Being part of a 'couple' connotes being part of a twosome, not more and not less" (Rothblum 2002, 84). On the other hand, those who lack a partner are depicted as incomplete, wanting, searching, or 'not yet there.' They might live their lives, under the impact of this discourse, feeling incomplete, wanting, and in relentless search of their soul mate. Coupledom is also codified institutionally and provided with ongoing social rewards:

> Heteronormative forms of intimacy are supported, as we have argued, not only by overt referential discourse such as love plots and sentimentality but materially, in marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of work and politics. (Berlant and Warner 562)

Also, other forms of intimate relating and support such as friendships, which are more fluid, permeable, and less rule governed, are deemphasized and rendered marginal to the couple.

The Coital Imperative. Sex is thus most encouraged within the context of coupled heterosexuality, and yet even within this very specific context, certain types of sex are prescribed and privileged over others. Gavey (2005) and Potts (2002), building on Paula Nicolson (1993), articulate the presence of a *coital imperative*, which "constructs the main point of heterosex as penetration of the vagina by the penis (typically with male ejaculation inside the vagina)" (Gavey 124). This very, very particular sex act thus becomes coded as *the* sex act, as the sine qua non of sex, as sex itself. Every other sex act including kissing, cuddling, oral sex, fondling, masturbation, etc., is configured as a 'building up' to this final apotheosis of sexual expression. Adopting Rubin's phraseology, this “hierarchical valuation of sex acts” deems certain sexual acts as more sexual, intimate, and meaningful than others (278-282).

The Orgasmic Imperative. Stephen Heath (1982), André Béjin (1985), Nicolson (1993), Gavey (2005), and Potts (2002, 2000), have also exposed the operations of an *orgasmic imperative* which functions in two interrelated ways. First, it codes sex as acontextually pleasurable, as a “domain of pleasure” as sociologist Steven Seidman (1991) has surmised – an “indulgence, treat, luxury and right” (Seidman 124; Attwood 87). Second, a plethora of pleasures and diversity of sexual sensations become reduced and flattened to the experience of the orgasm, “that acme of sexual enjoyment” (Béjin 201; see also Potts 2002; Nicolson). In this “new tyranny of orgasmic pleasure,” “the orgasm is held up as a measure of good health, and therefore an essential component of ‘happiness’” (Seidman 1992, 7; Béjin 202). Pleasure becomes reduced to orgasm, and both become framed as acontextually positive, empowering, and healthy (Braun 2005, 414). More than this, the orgasm becomes affixed to a particular plot of sex, “a delimited cycle, an order, a narrative, a little plot of sex: the Big O, a story in four episodes” (Heath 68).[8] Interestingly, under the influence of the permissive discourse, pleasure and orgasm become figured as something both men *and* women are entitled, even *obliged* to experience, in contrast to previous historical epochs (Braun 2005).[9] Braun (2005, 2009, 2010) demonstrates how women’s relatively newfound entitlement to sexual pleasure is channeled into female genital “cosmetic surgery” (FGCS). Women ‘choosing’ FGCS and surgeons performing these operations both rehearse discourses of female sexual empowerment and women’s entitlement to sexual pleasure to justify the “practice of designing bodies to fit certain sexual practices” (Braun 2005, 418). Vaginas that are anatomically ‘normal’ are thus figured as deviant and remodeled to be sources of greater hetero-coital female pleasure and orgasm (Braun 2009).

Sex Negativity. Although I have been emphasizing that sex is central to modern figurations of the self and that it is coded as healthy and understood as unambivalently pleasurable, many argue that there persists a contradictory set of discourses, which emphasize the dangers, as opposed to the pleasures of sex (Vance 1984; Lupton 33). Rubin identifies “sex negativity” as a remnant of Christian tradition that considers “sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force” (278). Indeed, because of a discursive history of sex negativity, it is possible for sexological science to proffer a cutting-edge, alternative, or liberatory quality to its investigations so that “the mere fact that one is speaking about [sex] has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (Foucault 6; also see Irvine). The persistence of sex negativity in a climate so intent on glorifying sex, exemplifies the ways in which opposing, contradictory discourses coexist, informing various aspects of varying ideas and practices. To quote Lupton –

> at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the sexual body must struggle with a tension between the discourses privileging self-expression and satisfaction through sexual encounters and those emphasizing the fearful and potentially fatal consequences of the mingling of bodily fluids during sexual abandonment. (33)

Contemporary cultural discourses collude to suggest the infallibility and value of sex. This fine weave of discourses, which includes the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital cluster,* emphasizes the primacy and healthiness of sex while articulating a very specific narrative of what counts as sex. Emphatically, these discourses create an environment that makes *asexuality* difficult to envisage, except as a form of ‘prudery,’ disorder, or implausibility. At the same time, it is exactly within this confounding mixture of discourses on sex that asexuality has come to fruition and become meaningful to a growing number of people. It is the intersecting points of these discourses I have been discussing, and perhaps many others I have not mentioned, that create both the possibilities and impossibilities for asexuality, that make it both 'dangerous' and 'pleasurable,' as the sexual binary goes.[10]

Notes

[1] It is the purview of the second chapter to explore in some detail these 'scientific' texts on asexuality.

[2] There are also no explorations of the sexual identity category of asexuality in relation to aging or childhood. While explorations of asexuality in relation to aging (for instance Deacon et al. 1995) or childhood (Angelides 2004) do exist, they predate or do not take stock of the sexual identity category of asexuality and instead take up asexuality as necessarily disadvantageous and undesirable.

[3] Forthcoming work on asexuality includes a special issue of *Psychology and Sexuality*, an edited volume by Cerankowski and Milks, which engages in a dialogue between asexuality and feminism, and another volume on asexuality edited by Mark Carrigan.

[4] On a side note I would like to add that the first appearance of an openly asexual character, Gerald Tippett, occurred on a popular New Zealand soap opera, *Shortland Street* in 2008. *Shortland Street's* portrayal of asexuality, while not without its problems, managed to both profile asexuality and many of the cultural and relational challenges facing asexuals, such as navigating love and relationships, coming out, deflecting claims of 'dysfunction' and 'repression,' and gaining in self-acceptance. Significantly, the presence of an asexual character on television has been meaningful and exciting for many asexuals; Johnston and Longhurst quote the following comment:

> New Zealand Wins Award For Most Asex-Friendly Country of 2008. Okay, there is no such award, but there should be! Probably the greatest news for the asexual community lately is the first ever explicitly asexual TV character. –The Gray Lady (39)

Another blog entry not included in the book, however, raises questions about why women's asexuality was not represented:

> I also find it interesting that the first representation of television asexuality is male. I just can't avoid thinking about how gender plays into representations of sexuality. […] Women are supposed to have

> a sexual "utility" that men don't need to have. […] I'm not saying that asexual men have it easier; we all have our own issues to contend with. I just think that bringing up ideas of inequality anywhere they exist is the first step to true equality. "New Zealand: Advanced Society"

Moreover, a famous New Zealand author, Keri Hulme, featured an asexual female character, Kerewin Holmes, in her prominent 1983 book *The Bone People* (though she did not employ the term 'asexual' to describe the character).

[5] Peter Conrad argues that medicalization and 'healthicization' are different, since "[m]edicalization proposes biomedical causes and interventions; healthicization proposes lifestyle and behavioral causes and interventions. One turns the moral into the medical, the other turns health into the moral" (1992, 223). Robert Crawford, on the other hand, described 'healthism' as a form of medicalization: "[a]s a pan-value, healthism is a form of medicalization" (1980, 381). Nonetheless, 'healthism' and 'healthicization' describe the same discourse of health promotion, one which frames health in terms of individual responsibility and emphasizes lifestyle changes, as opposed to social changes.

[6] For recent work on healthicization I recommend Cheek (2008) and Metzl and Kirkland (2010).

[7] Other feminist work on heterosexuality includes: Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993), Waldby (1995), Jackson (1995), Rowland (1996), Potts (2002), Gavey (2005), and Jackson and Scott (2010).

[8] Heath is referring here to Masters and Johnson's delineation of the sexual response cycle, which consists of four phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution.

[9] See Chapter 3, Section I: "Women and Asexuality."

[10] DuBois and Gordon (1984), argue that "[i]n general feminists inherit two conflicting traditions in their approach to sex" – *danger* and *pleasure* – and that these two positions are oscillated between in "pendulum-like motion" (31, 32). Similarly, Lupton argues that sex-as-danger and sex-as-pleasure are the two most dominant attitudes towards sex in our culture today (33).

CHAPTER TWO
Producing Facts: Empirical Asexuality and the Scientific Study of Sex

Nowhere, perhaps, do the interests of fiction and those of science meet and mingle more intimately than in the body of knowledge we have come to call 'sexuality.'
–Annie Potts, *The Science/Fiction of Sex,* 2002, p.15

The goal of this chapter is to question the existing scientific knowledge on asexuality. Such work is especially necessary at this moment when predictions are being made about asexuality's vibrant academic career, one which Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (2010), in a recent article, predict will blossom into an "asexuality studies" (654-655). Amidst the foretelling of this future for asexuality, I would like this chapter to serve as a critical reflection on the ways in which 'scientific' writings are edifying cultural understandings and definitions of an identity and sexual concept that is necessarily cultural. Two simple reminders are crucial for future considerations of asexuality to gain in adroitness and depth. First, asexuality, like all sexualities, is culturally and historically contingent. Asexuality has not existed at any other time in Western history, not as 'asexuality' per se. It has *not* always existed underneath all that sex. That it is here today is necessarily a crystallization of our specific here and now. Second, asexuality, like most sexualities, is in significant and intricate ways, carved into existence by science. This is not to say that science alone is inventing asexuality but that science, in collusion with other social forces, is defining what asexuality is and how it functions. In other words, scientific writing on asexuality is an important contributor to the formation and popularization of asexuality. I will note here, though, that science is not alone; both asexually identified individuals (most pronouncedly those organizing around the AVEN – Asexual Visibility and Education Network – banner), and various media are equal contributors to the asexuality of today. While in this chapter my central focus is on the *scientific* mapping of asexuality, this will be interlaced, to some extent, with media representations of asexuality and accounts from self-identified asexuals.

This chapter is divided into three sections, the first and second of which provide an overview of the existing research on asexuality, tracing asexuality's appearance (and disappearance) in scientific sex writing. The literature I am referring to as the scientific study of asexuality is comprised of a set of mostly articles, from the late seventies to the present decade, published in academic journals that self-describe as scientific in focus, such as *Archives of Sexual Behavior* and *The Journal of Sex Research.* They are 'scientific' not only in their self designation, but also in the way they strive to mimic the methods, processes, taxonomies, and language of the more hard sciences. They are invested in a particular type of knowledge-production which gains credibility, neutrality, and truth-value from its scientific label. Leonore Tiefer (2000) provides a list of ten tenets that run through the "sexological model of sexuality" *including* the notion that sex is a natural force, that desire is mostly a result of biology, the naturalization of differences between women and men, the normality of heterosexuality, and the belief that every person has a categorical sexual and gender identity (for the whole list see 82-83). Janice Irvine (1990) explains that one reason why "[t]he mystique of science [is …] invoked by sexologists [is …] in the hope that scientific methodology will render acceptable […] research into issues that mainstream society often considers unacceptable" (3). Nonetheless, an analysis of these texts is necessary because it interrupts readings of empirical texts as absolute and neutral truth, encouraging us to remember the story-telling aspect of scientific fact-production and that science too is a series of representations allied to specific cultural discourses. Also, such an analysis is urgent at this budding moment of asexuality studies because far too often, these empirical accounts of asexuality are taken up as sheer facts documenting the unveiling of a long-neglected sexual orientation.

But there is also a certain irony to the scientific study of sex. As Gayle Rubin notes (1984), "[e]mpirical sex research is the one field that does incorporate a positive concept of sexual variation" (284). Even as it is potentially damaging in its, say, naturalization of sexual difference or its binding of sex to the body, such research is also transformative in that it allows marginalized sexual identities to become articulated, to appear in the world in a recognizable way. So, my analysis of these texts, is not ultimately intended to erase them – they are meaningful documents that enable certain understandings of the (a)sexual self – but to disarm them of their neutrality.

The first section of this analysis, "Prehistory," explores the older, more outdated literature on asexuality, which spans the period between the late seventies and early nineties. This research, as I will demonstrate, is characterized by a lackadaisical inclusion of asexuality into sexual models. The authors of this early work, such as Michael Storms (1979, 1980) and Paula Nurius (1983), include asexuality in their models and writing not in order to interrogate it, but in order to advance their other sexual projects; thus they discuss asexuality in very limited terms. Next, in "Cartography," I will turn to the more contemporary and oft-cited research, which both opens up the academic study of asexuality and enables for asexuality to be popularized and thus rendered culturally visible, the advent of which is heralded by Anthony Bogaert in 2004. Significantly, this later work evinces a tangible claiming of asexual territory, and signals the modern 'discovery' of asexuality by science. In particular, I will argue that current scientific articulations of asexuality bind (a)sexuality indiscriminately to the biological body while reproducing and naturalizing harmful sexual differences. Finally, in "Asexuality, Science," I will complicate my own analysis that science reproduces and fashions sexualities, and asexuality in particular, through demonstrating the way in which asexually identified individuals organizing through AVEN effectively push back against scientific models. I will do this by way of exploring the debates around whether or not asexuality should be considered a 'pathology' of sexual lack. This final section will argue that while science is focal to shaping modern discourses of (a)sexuality, it is not, and has never been, the only shaper of sexual history or reality.

I. Asexuality's "Prehistory"[1]

Asexuality's prehistory, or its articulations before its more recent widespread dispersal, is rather humble. Indeed, before 2000 there have been only very random mentions of asexuality by scientific sources, and scarcely any interrogations of it in its own right. Unlike contemporary studies on asexuality by researchers such as Anthony Bogaert (2004, 2006, 2008) and Lori Brotto (2010, 2010), which demonstrate a tangible claiming of new, unexplored sexual territory, early scientific mentions of asexuality seem to accept it as an obvious and integral, if often neglected, component of the sexuality spectrum. The holistic models of sexual orientations, described by Michael Storms (1979, 1980) and Paula Nurius (1983) among others, from the late seventies through to the nineties, take for granted that a category such as 'asexuality' must exist, alongside other sexual orientations such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, and "ambisexuality" (Nurius). Indeed, in their scales, spectrums, models, diagrams, and typologies, asexuality is simply another hue of human sexuality. However, while asexuality has its place in some of these sexual models, early writing on asexuality is also characterized by a disinterest in exploring its definitions, parameters, and implications.

This prehistory, when understood as a counterpoint to contemporary asexual identity and community formation, evinces the contingency of cultural understandings of sexuality. That asexuality matters so very little previous to this last decade, and then suddenly rapidly acquires an abundance of signification, demonstrates, first, that it has become culturally relevant and intelligible and second, that this intelligibility is reliant on a cultural nexus. Early science's lackadaisical inclusion of asexuality into models of sexual orientation, in light of today's more avid scientific interest in asexuality, provides a living trace of sexuality's constructedness.

The first depictions of asexuality in a scientific source concerned with the study of human sex find their home in psychologist Michael Storms' writing.[2] Two pieces in particular, his 1979 chapter "Sexual Orientation and Self-Perception," and his 1980 article "Theories of Sexual Orientation," engage in a re-model-ing of Kinsey's sexuality scale, producing as a byproduct the sexual orientation of asexuality. Alfred Kinsey's breakthrough model of sexual orientation proposed in the 1950s, while highly innovative, is, Storms argues, "unidimensional" and insufficient for sexuality studies of the late seventies (Storms 1980, 784-785; Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953). Kinsey's infamous seven-point scale, while fluid in its insistence that "the heterosexuality or homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-none proposition" and that "reality is a continuum," is nevertheless hinged on one sole axis of sexuality – the heterosexual-homosexual continuum on which each person must fall (Kinsey et al. 1948, 638, 647). Because of this bisexuality is, as Storms observes, depicted by Kinsey as a compromise between heterosexual and homosexual erotic fantasies and sexual practices, and "bisexuals are seen as half heterosexual and half homosexual" instead of as "having high degrees of both homosexuality and heterosexuality" (Storms 1980, 785).[3] In other words, it is impossible on Kinsey's scale to have a great or low desire for both women and men simultaneously.

Also, Kinsey's continuum model does not provide asexuality with any real territory; indeed, individuals who Kinsey identifies as having "no socio-sexual contacts or reactions," and who "do not respond erotically to either heterosexual or homosexual stimuli, and do not have overt physical contacts with individuals of either sex in which there is evidence of any response," are labeled simply as 'X' and are in want of a home on the erotic graph (1948, 656; 1953, 472). While Kinsey does provide textual, if not graphic space, for a group 'X,' indicating that after the age of 25 for men about two percent are characterized by a paucity of sexual response, and that "a goodly number of females belong in this category in every age group," he neither investigates this nor actually employs the term 'asexuality' (1948, 640; 1953, 472).[4] Indeed, because his project is so implicitly focused on disrupting conservative views of human sexuality, he probably is not compelled to investigate the absence of sexual response. As Irvine argues, "Kinsey conveys his belief, cloaked in the rationale that what is 'natural' is right, that sex is good and more is better" (20). For instance, Kinsey does not think to include priests or nuns, or otherwise celibate groups in his data sample, likely because this would affect his overall results (nor does he, for that matter, include many other groups for other reasons, including most problematically non-whites) (see Irvine 24).[5] As Vern Bullough (1998) indicates, Kinsey's 1953 book on the 'human female' was intent on challenging the assumed "asexuality of women" (130). Thus, women's high rate of 'X-ness' (or potentially, their asexuality), are explained by Kinsey as in need of further analysis, since "these individuals might show that they do sometimes respond to socio-sexual stimuli" (1953, 472). To recapitulate, then, Kinsey's gathered data, which ushered in the scientific study of sex, suggest the presence of some category, which might serve as a precedent for the contemporary designation of asexuality; however, this is neither accommodated in his seven-point scale, nor does Kinsey explore it in any great depth.

Turning to Storms, we see a slight possibility of a space of asexuality. Although not investigating asexuality in any great depth, Storms does create for it space on the scientific page, recording it as the fourth quadrant of his "map of erotic orientation" – of which the three other quadrants are homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality, or in his earlier chapter heteroerotic, homoerotic, ambierotic, and anerotic (Storms 1980, 784-785; 1979, 172).[6] Storms' subtle cartographic move, a re-model-ing of Kinsey's model into a two-dimensional map does allow for asexuality to make its mark, but Storms is not preoccupied with the asexual category at all.[7] While he does recognize that a two-dimensional model will have as one advantage the possibility of an asexual category, his writing focuses primarily on the second advantage of such a model, namely a "different view of bisexual[ity]," one that is not a compromise between heteroerotic and homoerotic fantasies but instead allows for "high degrees of both homosexuality and heterosexuality" (Storms 1979, 172; 1980, 785). In other words, although asexuality is scientifically named by Storms, he hardly acknowledges this act of naming. Despite Storms' lack of engagement with asexuality, he is often celebrated by asexuals for his introduction of the term into the modern discussion of sexuality. For instance, on the Apositive.org blog, Storms is commemorated by one asexually identified blogger as "creat[ing] the whole grid of orientation," and a respondent augments his model by erasing the boundaries that separate the quadrants and contributing some colourful graphic effects of her/his own ("The Storms Model").

Psychologist Paula S. Nurius' 1983 study, much like Storms' work, also incidentally gives a name to the category of asexuality. Intent on disproving traditional assumptions that heterosexuals are more psychologically and sexually 'healthy' than 'homosexuals,' Nurius employs a "four-group typology of sexual orientation," which includes asexuality as one of its categories (119). She develops this four-group typology of sexual orientations from the results of the Sexual Activity and Preference Scale (SAPS), which her 689 non-random (voluntary) college participants from around the United States completed as part of their questionnaire package. While Nurius does not discuss asexuality in any great depth, we do learn that out of her 689 participants, five percent of men and ten percent of women have a "predominately asexual orientation," based on their low scores on the SAPS test (127).[8] She therefore classifies asexuals as "those who largely prefer not to be involved in any sexual activities" (122).

Like Storms, Nurius takes up asexuality unselfconsciously, taking for granted its status as a sexual orientation. While her article exhibits a lack of interest towards asexuality, she does nonetheless suggest asexuality's proximity to *pathology*. Thus, while Nurius is challenging notions of homosexual pathology, her research manages to forge a link between *asexuality* and pathology. The results of the well-being scales Nurius implements as part of her questionnaire package for participants suggest that asexuals are at a greater risk for "clinical dysfunctions" such as depression, lower self-esteem, and lower sexual satisfaction, than are heterosexuals or homosexuals (128).[9] But while we should rightly be suspicious of this early alliance between asexuality and disorder, Nurius does ask rhetorically: "to what degree is the individual's problem rooted in their sexual preference per se and to what degree is he or she paying the price of norm-breaking via social sanctions?" (133).

In a similar way sexologists William Masters, Virginia Johnson, and Robert Kolodny engage in a pathologizing of asexuality in *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving* (1986). Like the other authors considered here, they employ asexuality as a component of a sexual typology, in their case a "typology of homosexuals" (364). Emphasizing that homosexuals, like heterosexuals, live their sexualities diversely, they identify "asexual homosexuals" as those "low in sexual interest and activity and […] not 'coupled'" (365). Reviewing a study by Bell and Weinberg (1978), they deduce that sixteen percent of male homosexuals and eleven percent of lesbians are 'asexual' (365). Much like Nurius, they link this asexual homosexuality with explicitly negative traits such as being "more secretive about their homosexuality," being the least happy of all homosexuals (along with "dysfunctional homosexuals"), as "worse off psychologically," having "considerable difficult coping with life," and being "generally loners" (365). Thus, Masters and Johnson pathologize asexuals, by assessing them as psychologically unfit and lonesome, adding also that male asexual homosexuals have the highest incidence of suicide among all the groups. But, much like with Kinsey, this is perhaps not all that surprising since their ongoing project was broadly focused on the 'liberation' of sex and the documentation of the physiological existence of sexual arousal and orgasm, and any real interrogation of asexuality might have been antithetical to such goals (Irvine 59).

Finally, another article which accommodates asexuality is "The Multidimensional Scale of Sexuality," published in 1990 (Berkey et al.). Concerned, like Storms, with the expansions and definition of bisexuality, Braden Berkey et al. introduce a Multidimensional Sexuality Scale (MSS) to employ in conjunction with both the Kinsey scale and participants' self-descriptions of their orientations, testing for the accuracy of self-assessment. Interestingly, their scale accommodates asexuality, with five statements designed specifically for its investigation (see Table 1 on 73-77).[10] While these statements are rather compelling and unprecedented in their multi-faceted approach to asexuality, none of the 148 participants actually describe themselves as 'asexual,' and thus regrettably the article does not ultimately investigate asexuality, or the results of the MSS in any further detail (77).[11] The authors speculate that "no subject categorized himself/herself as 'asexual' [and that this] is not surprising because of its reported low frequency" (83).

Thus asexuality, while suggested as a 'sexual orientation' already in the late seventies and early eighties by sexuality researchers Michael Storms and Paula Nurius, and later in 1990 by Braden Berkey et al., is used instrumentally but not explored in any great depth. Early findings on the rates of asexuality vary from a high of 14 to 19 percent as suggested of unmarried women by Kinsey, to the zero percent indicated by Berkey et al. (Kinsey 1953, 474; Berkey et al. 77). If anything, these varying rates, coupled with a paucity of any engaged explorations of asexuality, evince a disinterest in the asexual category. It seems instead that asexuality is plugged into models of sexuality for other purposes than its own categorical existence. That it is not taken up in any engaged way demonstrates also that it is not, at the time of these writings, a site of meaning-making, intellectual inquiry, or identity formation.

This is of particular interest for contemporary considerations of asexuality because it serves to flag the very contingency and constructedness of sexuality as of sexual ideals and practices. In other words, these studies' negligence towards asexuality reminds us that asexuality, like all sexualities, is not immutable and ever-present in a self-same form. Today's flourishing of asexual interest and meaning-formation, as I will explore in the following section, puts into sharp relief the absence of such conversations in the past. While asexuality had made its appearance in these early scientific texts, it is with a certain apathy, disinterest, incidentalness, and lack of engagement. But if asexuality is contingent, and if it relies for its meaning on other cultural discourses and dynamics, why is it that asexuality was *not* intelligible for the authors of these scientific studies I have discussed? And, then, why is it coming into intelligibility now? Perhaps it is as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick espouses that – "ignorances […] are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges" (8).

II. Asexual Cartography: The 'Discovery' of Asexuality

When, in the new millennium, asexuality is taken up as a subject of inquiry in its own right, by researchers such as Anthony Bogaert (2004, 2006, 2008), Nicole Prause and Cynthia Graham (2007), and Lori Brotto (2010, 2010) there is a shuffle for territory, for accurate mapping, for the production of science-knowledge. Here I am drawing on

Jeffrey Weeks' deployment of cartography in his discussions of the history of sexuality: sexuality as "virgin field," a "continent of knowledge, with its own rules of exploration and its own expert geographers," with sexologists as "would-be-colonizers" (1981, 1, 12; 2010, 13).[12] Weeks also describes the pluralization of today's sexual identities by way of similar language: "[i]n this new erotic economy […] we can now witness huge clusters of islands […] each with its own unique vegetation and geography" (2010, 88). Memorably, for Freud, women's sexuality was also a "dark continent," an enigmatic unknown, a silence worth 'penetrating' (qtd. in Weeks 2010, 29; Freud 1926, 38). For Bogaert too, his first "study [is] an attempt to open up the field and begin to explore factors associated with this relatively *uncharted* area of sexual variability" (2004, 279, emphasis added).

Emphasizing that this writing on asexuality is a form of map-making, I am suggesting that it is not neutral, value-free, and apolitical. In other words, the territory claiming and boundary drawing just beginning to take form around asexuality is a form of sexual colonization which purports to label, identify, and invent whole sexual realities for groups of certain people. Asexuality becomes discovered (more decisively than it was before); it is drawn out of obscurity and silence and transformed into a site worthy of scientific interrogation. As Tiefer (2000) attests, "[t]he scientific paradigm [leads] sexologists to assume that once general laws [are] established […] sexuality [will] be thoroughly *mapped*" (92, emphasis added).

Bogaert, followed by others, essentially asks, is asexuality *real*? i.e., Does it qualify as an 'orientation'? Does it (should it) have its own unique territory, with distinct borders, peculiar features, a subsystem of typologies? Or does asexuality overlap with those aspects of our sexuality that we already know to exist (i.e., for which we have scientific proof) – with certain other orientations, with particular pathologies? This is all, of course, in line with the great tradition of scientific discovery.

Several themes reoccur within this new scientific work on asexuality. First, and most pronouncedly, there is a veritable binding of (a)sexuality to the biological body and to the body of biology. This is hazardous because, as Rubin points out, “sexuality is impervious to political analysis as long as it is primarily conceived as a biological phenomenon or an aspect of individual psychology” (Rubin 277). Second, asexuality becomes a site of struggle over understandings of so-called orientation and pathology, legitimacy and disorder. Third, in many cases, asexuality becomes an occasion for shoring up naturalizations of sexual difference.

While I cluster my analysis around the work of psychologist Anthony Bogaert of Brock University (our first contemporary pioneer of asexuality) in particular, many of the themes that appear in his work are also evident in the work of the other contemporary researchers. I have chosen to build my analysis around Bogaert because his was the first voyage of discovery and what follows in many ways either expands on his work, clarifying details and uncovering those mystery-etiologies he failed to uncover, or is a direct response. Bogaert’s research is often taken up as the very proof of asexuality, the effects of which are to both legitimize and depathologize asexuality. Obviously, both of these aspects are very meaningful for many, and provide a good base for further explorations of asexuality, scientific and otherwise. But while I am not arguing that his work is of no value, I wish to provide a more complicated reading of his short texts on asexuality. Bogaert’s publications themselves, as well as other writing concerned with the scientific examination of sexuality, presents itself as value-free and neutral in its science.

And yet, as we will see, this scientific work often demonstrates limiting and limited perspectives on gender and sexuality.

Specifically, then, I begin by framing this discussion around the effects of Bogaert's research, namely the *legitimization* and *depathologization* of asexuality. Next I discuss the "biological and psychosocial" explanations of asexuality Bogaert, followed by others, provides (2004, 284). This search for asexuality's etiology is marred and limited by a reliance on *biological* explanations for asexuality and a psychosocial rehearsal of confining sexual *gender* roles, as well as *class*-based and *hetero-centric* assumptions (rooted in scientific evidence as these all are). In other words, it seems that the price paid for legitimization and depathologization is high – the rehearsal of limiting and normative standards of gender, class, and sexuality, as well as a veritable binding of asexuality to the biological body.

Legitimization. Bogaert's influential "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample" (2004), investigates the data from the U.K. National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, a national study of residents in Britain which was published in 1994 and which, fortuitously, had for one of its answer choices to a question designed to determine sexual orientation, "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all" (281; Johnson et al. 185). After Bogaert's article had been published, it was taken up by AVEN (the online asexual community) as well as surrounded with a swarm of media attention. One of its major attractions, for asexually identified persons and the media alike, was that it provided a sense of credibility to this new sexual orientation. Bogaert's review of the data from the British study suggested that 1.05 percent of the participants were indeed asexual, as predicated on their answer choice that they had "never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all" (Bogaert 2004, 281).[13] The national study itself was conducted in Britain in response to a perceived need to accumulate sexual information during the emergence of the AIDS epidemic (Johnson et al., for instance p. 5).

In "Asexuality: Classification and Characterization," (2007) which was sponsored in part by The Kinsey Institute and is the first study designed specifically for the purpose of exploring asexuality, Nicole Prause and Cynthia Graham insinuate that this percentage might not be accurate because of some limitations to Bogaert's research project, such as that it only uses one item to test for asexuality and that it lacks robustness because it draws on preexisting data not concerned specifically with the study of asexuality (342, 349, 353). Their study, a more deliberate and careful consideration of asexuality than Bogaert's, demonstrates that the sole item used by him to test for asexuality may fail to identify many individuals who might otherwise identify as asexual.[14] Likewise, asexually-identified CJ DeLuzio Chasin, in "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality" (2011) also aptly questions the validity of Bogaert's one percent, since the data was collected previous to the existence of the asexual community and asexual self-identification. Therefore, the percentage Bogaert identifies is not likely very accurate or representative.

Also, as Andrew Hinderliter (2009) points out in a perceptive letter to the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior,* the statement "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all," which Bogaert adopts to be the sine qua non of asexuality, assumes a permanence, absoluteness, and lack of flexibility around the category of asexuality which is unrealistic and which may deter many people from choosing this response (Hinderliter 620;

Przybylo). It does not, for instance, accommodate for those individuals who were at one moment in their lives sexually attracted to someone but who no longer experience sexual attraction. Also, Hinderliter argues that the definition is “functionally problematic” because “[p]eople who have never felt sexual attraction do not know what sexual attraction feels like, and knowing whether or not they have ever felt it can be difficult” (2009, 620). And it certainly does not account for the diversity of lived styles of asexuality, ranging from a preference for hugging and kissing to aromanticism, as well as additional identification as gay, straight, and bi (Scherrer 2008, 634; also see Chasin). As the AVEN website indicates, “There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently” (“Overview”).

But of most interest for this discussion is not the accuracy of the prevalence rates indicated by Bogaert, so much as the suggestion of validation that they provided. Because it provided an analysis of empirical data, and because it was published in the highly regarded *Journal of Sex Research,* which as I already mentioned prides itself on its “scientific study of sexuality,” Bogaert’s article became mobilized by various media sources, and by asexuals themselves, as ‘proof’ of asexuality (*The Journal of Sex Research;* see for instance “Research Relating to Asexuality” on *AVENwiki*). Likewise, it fueled the cultural imagination, suggesting that new uncharted sexual terrains lay in wake for sexuality researchers to uncover. Bogaert’s exploration of asexuality, as those of the other researchers, is very different from the casual deployment of asexuality that appeared in prior research. It seemed that at last, asexuality had come out of the shadows of indifference and entered the limelight of scientific and sexual concern.

Depathologization. Another reason why Bogaert's work is so often and so widely taken up in relation to asexuality is because it argues against the pathologization of asexuality. For instance, in his 2006 article, "Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality," the goal of which is "the clarification of some basic conceptual and definitional issues" of asexuality, Bogaert supports the identity category of asexuality and justifies its depathologization (241). He writes:

> a sizeable majority are choosing to identify with a term that is not part of the traditional academic and clinical discourse on sexuality and sexual identity […] Thus, the academic and clinical communities need to be sensitive to these issues […] it is reasonable and practical to use designations that individuals prefer (e.g., asexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual) when referring to sexual orientation. (246)

Also, Bogaert distinguishes asexuality from sexual desire disorders such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), by the very fact that asexuals are not necessarily characterized by "marked distress" and "interpersonal difficulty" – both of which are necessary for currently diagnosing HSDD (2006, 241). In his assertion that asexuality is not a pathology he is not alone; Prause and Graham's article likewise asserts the damaging potential of assigning pathology status to a newly forming sexual identity. They even exceed Bogaert's claims by complicating the very notion of distress through recognizing that it might result from social expectations rather than from an innate problem, and if this is the case, "then a psychiatric diagnosis implying abnormality may exacerbate concerns in an asexual individual" (353).[15]

Unlike in his earlier work, as will be discussed shortly, Bogaert argues not for the primacy of a biological proof of asexuality, but rather begins to trust more in the validity of asexuals' self-reporting, arguing against an approach where the "physiological attraction/arousal supersedes […] subjective sexual attraction in determining one's sexual orientation." (244). Bogaert demonstrates, then, that to consider asexuality a pathology would be inaccurate and harmful to those who identify as asexual. Thus, it is understandable, with moments such as these in his writing, why he is taken up as sympathetic proof for the existence of asexuality and the asexual identity category.

More recently, psychologist Lori Brotto of the University of British Columbia, who specializes in low desire problems among women, buttresses asexuality's depathologization through qualitative, quantitative, and physiological methods in two recent studies on asexuality: "Asexuality: A Mixed-Methods Approach" (2010) and "Physiological and Subjective Sexual Arousal in Self-Identified Asexual Women" (2010).[16] The first of these concludes that while "[t]he border between HSDD and asexuality is unclear," nonetheless "[s]imilar to the proposition by Bogaert (2006), […] asexuals are a mentally healthy group who continue to seek out and engage in rewarding, emotionally connected relationships" (Brotto et al. 614, 615). Like Bogaert, they ultimately undermine claims that asexuality is a pathology on the basis that asexuals are not distressed (607). Brotto's second study (2010), co-authored with Morag Yule, entrenches asexuality as a non-pathology by way of physiological testing which suggests that the sexual arousal response is intact in asexual women, even warning sex therapy clinicians from a "premature temptation […] to seek pharmaceutical and/or hormonal treatments" for asexuality (2). But despite this significant depathologizing work, Brotto, especially in the first of these studies (Brotto et al.), does so by way of testing for other disorders in asexual participants, such as depression, alexithymia (emotional deficiency), and social withdrawal (or Schizoid Personality Disorder). Brotto et al. thus forge potential links between asexuality and Schizoid Personality Disorder/social withdrawal – a link that might, problematically, become foundational to understandings of asexuality and perhaps even to asexuals' self-concept.

Similarly, Bogaert, despite all his arguments that asexuality is not a pathology, in a short 2008 chapter ponders whether those asexuals who masturbate may not have "sexual attraction to themselves, a paraphilia known as 'automonosexualism,'" or "directional/target disorders […] disruptions in mate recognition mechanisms" (12). Therefore, even while Bogaert and Brotto argue that asexuality is not a pathology, they do so in a way that is not strictly empowering for asexuals and asexuality.

Biology. In his discussion of the results of his research, Bogaert describes "physical development factors," such as adverse health, later menarche for women, shorter stature, and lower weight, arguing that these results suggest that sexual attraction "may be [not only] partly biologically based [but also] determined prior to birth" (2004, 284). In his later article, he underlines again his findings that asexuality might be determined prenatally, "that asexuality ha[s] certain biological correlates that suggest a prenatal origin (e.g., potential alteration of the hypothalamus)" (2006, 245-246).

Bogaert insistently speculates that asexuality resides both *in* and *on* the body. He argues that asexuality is made visible on the surface of the body by such characteristics as shorter stature and lower weight, exemplifying the detective work that goes into uncovering the truth of our sexualities. Of nineteenth century sexology Foucault writes, "since sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it—as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom—in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior" (Foucault 44). Rubin likewise criticizes this search for sex in hormones or psyche, in the physiological or psychological as a form of "sexual essentialism" (276). The scientific study of sex thus decrees the body a map of a person's sexuality, promoting at the same time the normalcy of certain body types and characteristics (such as, for Bogaert, those of normal height and average weight). Earlier in the 2004 article, Bogaert sets the stage for his consideration of asexuality by hypothesizing biological factors that might predicate asexuality, such as "illness, disease, disability […] *unusual* physical development characteristics – for example, short stature, obesity or extremely low weight, or late puberty onset" (280, emphasis added). Transferring asexuality onto the body, Bogaert effectively limits the mobility of its cultural understandings, encouraging us to make sense of it not in terms of interpersonal or social analyses, but rather in terms of the reading of the body in isolation. The body's appearance is here at once *diagnostic* of asexuality, and its raison d'être*,* since "these characteristics may be markers of poor health and development, which may alter sexual functioning and thus lead to the perception by others and themselves that they have little or no attraction for a partner of a particular sex" (280).

Bogaert continues on in his discussion arguing for the necessity of "psychophysical" research that would "evaluate the physiological arousal and attraction patterns of asexual people" with the intention of discriminating between those asexuals who only perceive or report their asexuality, versus those who are *true* asexuals (2004, 286). Presumably, true asexuals would demonstrate "a true lack of physiological attraction to a partner of either sex" and would "show no physiological response to stimuli," whereas perceived asexuals would "show typical attraction and arousal patterns and yet report, label, or perceive themselves as being asexual for various reasons (e.g., not aware of own arousal, deny arousal)" (286). Again, Bogaert seems unable to consider asexuality as anything other than the truth of the body. Yet in this instance, this truth is not readily perceived in the body's exteriority, but is concealed, embedded within the hidden mechanisms of the body, and in want of psychophysical research to be uncovered. Interestingly, however, Bogaert does somewhat soften his views of perceived versus true asexuality with his second article, recognizing that "physiological attraction/arousal" should not supersede "subjective sexual attraction in determining one's sexual orientation" (2006, 244).

Bogaert is not alone in his belief that asexuality might be discovered somewhere within the body. Brotto et al. (2010) comment on the possibility of a faulty maturation of adrenals during adrenarche, which would then affect the release or uptake of certain hormones and thus alter sexual development, leading perhaps to asexuality (616). Bogaert is also not the sole advocator of physiological research as a means to uncover the truth of (a)sexuality. Indeed after Masters and Kinsey, the evidence-value of physiological research seems to be compelling. Thus Prause and Graham also recommend that future research on asexuality should undertake physiological and psychophysiological testing, even listing off suggested items to test for, including responses to sexual stimuli, neurological testing, and hormone profiles (see 353). But interestingly, they follow this up with admitting that "physiological mechanisms appear unlikely to completely explain asexuality" (353). It is finally Brotto and Yule (2010) who undertake physiological research by striving to map *women's asexuality* by way of measuring 'vaginal pulse amplitude' (VPA). Participants view an erotic film while having their VPA tested through vaginal photoplethysmography which "involves [inserting] a tampon-shaped, usually acrylic, probe, which emits infrared light and provides an index of absorbed light corresponding to the degree of genital congestion" – a technology Irvine describes as a "represent[ation] [of] the continuing evolution of medicine's ability to explore and conquer the inner body in the quest for knowledge, scientific truth, and clinical intervention" (Brotto and Yule 3; Irvine 161).[17] Brotto and Yule also conclude that neurobiological research is needed, as well as an examination of "biological indicators pointing to asexuality […] (e.g., digit ratio measurement)" (12).

That the truth of asexuality is coded in or on the body is not a claim unique to the scientific study of sex, indeed it is a taken-for-granted dictum of our sexualities. One participant from Prause and Graham's study recycles just this logic: "I think people are probably biologically programmed to be interested, to have interest in sex, and it just comes naturally" (345). Other comments from their study similarly articulate asexuality as rooted in the body – as "something wrong genetically" or a "hormone problem" (353). Similarly, in Brotto et al. participants also rehearsed the notion that their asexuality is rooted irrevocably to their biology or their genes (610, 615). This of course allows for asexuality be both irrevocable, perhaps providing a certain legitimacy to their sexual identity status, but it also ambivalently solidifies this asexuality as beyond one's control, rendering asexuals victims to their own biology. And "[a]ssociated with this is, of course, the implication that if one could choose to be otherwise, to be straight [or to be 'sexual'], then one would" (Sullivan 30).

Gender. In his discussion of the results, Bogaert also engages in a naturalization of gender difference based on female sexual submission and male sexual dominance. Struggling to justify why more women than men reported asexuality in the study (138 women and 57 men, from a sample of 18,876 participants, as based on his calculations), he grasps at several explanations, including that since current definitions of sexual arousal and response are “target-oriented,” they “may not adequately capture the nature of some women’s sexuality” (2004, 285). He goes on to explain that sexual desire may be categorized as *proceptive*, “the urge to seek out and initiate sexual activity” or *receptive*, “the capacity to become aroused upon encountering certain sexual circumstances,” and that, perhaps unsurprisingly, women more often demonstrate receptive desire (285, emphasis added). Bogaert evokes the active nature of men’s sexuality and the passive, coy, receptive nature of women’s sexuality in order to argue that women are often not at all aware of their own sexual impulses, and thus might perceive themselves to be asexual. In other words, he manages to correlate higher rates of asexuality in women with both their unawareness of their own sexual bodies – “they [(women)] may not be aware of their own sexual arousal as men are, even under conditions when genital responses are occurring” – and with their submissive, or receptive, sexual nature (284). He thus establishes men as at once more knowledgeable observers of their own bodies – “(s)experts” – as well as more trustworthy in their asexuality (and perhaps more likely to be ‘true’ asexuals) (Potts 2002, 60). Despite his great production in explaining the results, later studies conflict with his findings that more women than men are asexual (Prause and Graham 349, 352).[18] Instead of considering what cultural causes may enhance women’s rates of asexuality, Bogaert reverts to the certainty of the biological body, explaining differences in sexual expression with inherent differences in women and men’s sexual biopsychology.

Most alarming is perhaps the realization that notions of women as more receptive, more pliable, and less sexually coordinated than men are rehearsed, not only within Bogaert's writing but also in Brotto's work, as a scientifically proven and provable fact. Brotto et al. (2010) quote an impressive selection of authors when arguing that "women have been described as having greater sexual plasticity in sexual response and sexual orientation […] [they are] more likely to show desynchrony between mental and physiologic arousal than men" (615; also see Brotto and Yule 3). This is very much the point Bogaert makes when he asserts that "[(women)] may not be aware of their own sexual arousal," mentioning also "that women's sexuality (or at least their sex drive) is more 'plastic' than men's sexuality […] Thus, cultural influences may have a more profound effect on women's sexuality than on men's; as a result more women than men may become asexual if life circumstances are atypical" (Bogaert 2004, 284). [19] Brotto and Yule expand on this, quoting studies which suggest that women might be more incapable than men of coordinating their subjective (self-reported) and physiological (genital) arousal because they lack "interoceptive awareness" (11). Brotto and Yule deduce from their physiological study that asexual women might be unlike other women and more like men in that *they* might be capable of "interoceptive awareness" (defined by them as "awareness of sensations originating from within the body") (11). Thus two simultaneous stories are told about women's sexual response, in Brotto as in Bogaert. First, women cannot seem to correlate their physiological arousal with their subjective arousal (their minds do not know when their bodies are aroused). And second, women are more sexually "plastic," pliable, their sexualities more easily shaped by "cultural influences" and "life circumstances [that] are atypical" (Bogaert 2004, 284). These two elements, proven by science, are employed by both Bogaert and Brotto to explain speculations of women's higher rates of asexuality.[20]

Two series of questions arise: (1) Why are Bogaert and Brotto, as well as the research they draw on, preoccupied with establishing the *differences* between men's and women's sexual response? Is this the general trend of today's sexology (perhaps in opposition to Masters and Johnson who had as "one of their major ideological tenets: the similarity between women and men") (Irvine 60)? What might a focus on biological differences between women and men's sexual responses suggest about contemporary sexology and sexual politics more broadly? (2) *Also*, why is it that this difference is based on classifying women as less aware of their bodies, less capable of coordinating their bodies with their minds, and as more sexually receptive and pliable? Cloaked in science as these texts are, the impression is that such questions as I am raising are irrelevant. But these discoveries about women's sexualities, while embedded by Bogaert and Brotto within an exploration of asexuality, are nonetheless key to understanding current patterns within scientific sexological discourse. Meagan Tyler (2009) likewise recognizes this relatively recent emphasis within scientific studies of sex towards emphasizing women's receptivity. As she points out, while the recent *receptivity model* demonstrates an effort to more accurately represent women's experiences of desire and to challenge a model of women's desire that is based on *men's* desire (following Masters and Johnson), it ultimately "inhibits the possibility of women's sexual autonomy, […] reinforces the sexual demands of men in heterosexual relationships, undermines women's ability to refuse unwanted sexual contact, and may even promote harmful rape myths" (43).[21] It also positions women's 'receptivity' as binarically opposite to men's 'spontaneity,' and offers an ultimately disadvantageous and potentially harmful naturalization of sexual difference. Finally, there is nothing particularly new about emphasizing women's sexual receptivity, either in scientific tracts or in taken-for-granted cultural logic about the nature of women and men.[22]

Another worrying, and perhaps related, aspect that arises within Brotto and Yule's research concerns the suggestion that asexual women, while not experiencing a desire for sex, are nonetheless expected under certain conditions to undertake sex with a partner. Brotto, who is a sexual therapist, advises that "the (sexual/asexual) couple might be the focus of relationship therapy aimed at how to negotiate her lack of sexual attraction and what agreements can be reached about sexual activity that sufficiently appease both partners (e.g., agreeing that sexual activity may take place consensually but without interest for it on her part)" (12).[23] Brotto and Yule are suggesting that unwanted sex is acceptable within a certain scenario; the unwanted sex discussed in this statement is between an asexual woman and a sexual man, it is within the specific couple context in which sex is taken for granted as integral to the health of the relationship, and it is arrived at with the aid or under the guidance of a sexual therapist. Agreed upon, but unwanted sex, while perhaps consensual, is potentially harmful for asexual women, especially when emphasized within such a narrow scenario, because it pressures women into feeling that they are obliged to present their partners with sex. Nicola Gavey (2005), discussing unwanted sex, differentiates between "sex that is unwanted only in the sense that it takes place in the absence of desire" and sex in which "women [do not] feel like they [have] a choice; when the sense of obligation and pressure is too strong," focusing in her discussion on the latter (136). While Gavey's discussion makes effective use of this distinction, drawing attention to various limits women have on sexual choice in given contexts, I would argue that the unwanted sex Brotto and Yule suggest as acceptable also creates for women situations when they feel they have no choice. Thus, perhaps the distinction Gavey identifies between undesired yet agreed to sex, and sex where there is no choice, is not necessarily simple and obvious but rather more ambiguous and less certain. One participant from Brotto et al.'s study provides an example of how undesired but negotiated sex can be not only unwanted but also perhaps absent of choice:

> You know, the only reason I do it (intercourse) is to make the other person happy. And so, we were in a relationship and you know, he wanted to do it and we had been dating for a while and you know, I was in love or whatever and I thought we'll be together forever. So um…yeah, so we kind of planned it and that's…yeah…I mean it wasn't…I mean the way he was talking about it, oh it's so great and you're going to love it, blah, blah, blah, and then okay…you know, I believed him… (Participant 14). (Brotto et al. 612)[24]

This participant, while involved in planning or negotiating sex with her boyfriend, seems to have been avidly and aggressively convinced of its value though a powerful sex-is-great rhetoric.[25] Thus, the participant was in a certain sense pressured to have sex through the operations of the same androcentric discourses which Gavey suggests makes "women […] feel like they [do not have] a choice" (136). In other words, it is not altogether clear whether the unwanted sex that is negotiated within the context of sex therapy between a sexual man and an asexual woman is not in fact coercive, unpleasant, and perhaps harmful to asexual women's sense of their (a)sexual selves. That Brotto and Yule advise that this sort of sex might be "the focus of relationship therapy" and "sufficiently appease both partners" raises questions about sex therapy, consent, and the centrality of sex within romantic relationships (Brotto and Yule 12; Gavey 139).

Heterocentrism. In their study, Brotto and Yule (2010) also demonstrate a heterosexual bias. In their physiological testing, women, whether asexual, bisexual, homosexual, and heterosexual, were asked to view a heterosexual erotic film while their vaginal pulse amplitude (VPA) was measured. Only a heterosexual erotic film was used as stimulus because Brotto and Yule draw on evidence, which suggests that VPA is not affected by the sexual orientation of a participant – "there is the same (strong) magnitude of VPA among different sexual orientation groups to stimuli depicting male–male, female–female, and male–female actor pairings" (10).[26] In other words, this research implies that a heterosexual stimulus is equally effective at arousing not only straight women but also gay, bi, and as they intend to prove, asexual women as well (10).[27] If this is indeed the case, we might wonder why a homosexual erotic film or a bisexual erotic film might not have been used, for clearly a bisexual film might have appealed to the greatest number of participants. This research is problematic because it obviates the need to test arousal level with actor pairings that are relevant to a participant's sexual preferences and practices. It also implies that heterosexual sexual scenarios are the most arousing and standard of all scenarios. Most troublingly, it suggests that individuals of all sexual preferences have an underlying physiological propensity for heterosexual stimuli, even if it is just viewed and not participated in, and that arousal is imminent for anyone faced with heterosexual scenes.

Class. Finally, Bogaert (2004), though not Brotto, predicates asexuality through rehearsing damaging and simplistic class-based conclusions. Bogaert anchors asexuality to class, depicting the normalcy of the middle-class family. He proposes that "one pathway to asexuality may relate to an environment *different* from a *traditional* middle-class or upper-middle-class White home," basing this statement on his observed correlations between lower education levels, lower social class, and asexuality (2004, 284, emphasis added). Thus, "typical sexual development" is somehow, inexplicably correlated with a middle-class family home. He goes on:

> This suggests that the educational system and the home environment play fundamental roles in typical sexual development, and that alterations of these circumstances can have a profound effect on basic sexual attraction processes. (284)

It is difficult to understand why Bogaert is so intent on portraying lower economic status as concomitant with asexuality. Certainly one explanation is that it simply is. Yet Prause and Graham's study (2007) finds no correlation between lower education and asexuality, indeed they suggest that the opposite may be true and that a higher percentage of asexuals, as compared to non-asexuals, have completed a college degree (352). But even if this was not the case and Bogaert's results were reproducible, his framing of "typical sexual development" as taking place in the "middle-class" home is troublesome (2004, 284). For one, it gestures towards heterosexual, and perhaps even reproductive home-dwelling as the original form of sexuality, of which all other forms are imperfect imitations. But equally importantly, in his coupling of normalcy and middle-classness, Bogaert debases the sexual lives of so many people who do not fit that ideal – including, if his analysis of the results were correct – asexuals themselves.

As I have hoped to demonstrate in this section, while the scientific research on asexuality in instrumental in legitimizing asexuality it does so through the reproduction of normative, essentialist, and harmful notions about (a)sexuality, sexual difference, and heterosexuality. It thus evidences that "far from being value-free, science embodies a white, middle-class, heterosexual imperative" (Irvine 20). Likewise, while Brotto and Bogaert, as well as others, ultimately assign the status of nonpathology to asexuality, they do so only after great concatenations which establish asexuality as a region potentially bordering with personality disorders, class differences, or troublesome conclusions about the nature of sexual difference. While it may not be their intention, the authors of this work not only rehearse naturalized views of sexual difference, but also frame them in what may seem at first glance a progressive and generous analysis of asexuality. And although their work does, in general, legitimize and depathologize asexuality, it also reproduces harmful and myopic ideas of sexuality, sexual-gendered difference, and even class. While it may certainly be deployed strategically to aid in further explorations of asexuality, these texts are certainly not – as they may seem at first instance – single-mindedly empowering tracts.

III. Asexuality, Science: A Dialogue

Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (1998), discussing early sexology, advise that we should not make the mistake of conceptualizing sexology as a monolithic front that is invariably either progressive *or* harmful, but rather that it is "simultaneously empowering and disempowering, for it offer[s] not a homogenous ideology, but the potential to be all things to all people" (3). Likewise, Harry Oosterhuis (2002) advises that sexology has never been simply created from above, but rather that it is instead founded on a dialogue between patients and medical 'men.' In this final section, I argue that asexuality, too, is not merely created from above, but that it takes form through a series of uncoordinated conversations between those who produce the scientific study of sex, those who identify as asexual, and, in many cases, "the cyclical interrelations between science [and] the media" (Nicolson 1993, 57-58). I will explore in my discussion two instances of dialogue between the scientific study of sex and the asexual community. The first of these is a flurry of television specials, which briefly engaged with asexuality mostly around the year 2006. Shows such as CNN's *Showbiz Tonight*, Fox News's *Dayside*, MSNBC's *The Situation with Tucker Carlson*, ABC's *The View*, *20/20*, and *Primetime*, as well as the syndicated *Montel Williams Show* each made attempts to profile asexuality through inviting as guests members of The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN).[28] In addition to this, some of these specials explored asexuality through also inviting scientific and therapeutic "(s)experts," "satisfying the need for affective neutrality and scientific precision" (Potts 2002, 60; Béjin 207). Of interest is that on these specials, while science is foreground as the authority on asexuality, it does not figure at all in the accounts of the asexuals themselves. Second, I will also consider the way in which asexuals are placed in conversation with sex researchers while functioning as participants in research studies. In these cases, asexuals avidly and consistently push back against schemes of pathologization and effectively encourage the researchers towards concluding that asexuality is not in fact a disorder. With these two very different dialogues, I am arguing that sexual scientists and asexuals, or even more broadly, sexual science and the populations it seeks to define, understand, and classify, have plural and complex relationships with one another. Reliant in large part on context, sexual subjects navigate and use the science that is available to them in various ways. Scientific knowledge functions in an abundance of ways, and can become a space of intelligibility and source of frustration for those who come to occupy its subject positions. Following Foucault, power is in this way productive and "can produce desires, practices, and so on that are pleasurable as well as unpleasurable, and which may be liberating as well as oppressive" (Gavey 87; Foucault 92-95).

Around 2006, a stream of various television specials focused on asexuality, inviting both asexuals from AVEN and various (s)experts as guests. With little exception, the shows assumed a populist realist standpoint, often interweaving talking head shots of their guests with scenes of blurry heterosexual intimacy or shots of anonymous, mostly heterosexual couples holding hands in parks or on streets. Fundamentally, they each take up asexuality from positions of disbelief and antagonism, often rendering asexuality itself either a joke or as a mysterious occurrence. The shows also focus on profiling a certain type of heterosexual and couple-based asexuality, often featuring David Jay, the founder of AVEN, along with a hetero-asexual couple to function as asexuality's spokespeople. Other forms of asexuality which more substantially call into question the boundaries of romantic attachment, coupledom, dyadic pairing, or even heterosexuality are not given voice in the shows I am here discussing. The result is that asexuality is reduced to an equation of 'not doing it.'

In several of the shows, (s)experts are invited to speak as voices of authority, such as Anthony Bogaert and a sex therapist for *20/20*, a Fox News Analyst/Psychology Professor for *Dayside*, and the celebrity sex therapist Laura Berman for *Showbiz Tonight*. While the degree to which all of these figures are affiliated with 'science' is unclear, they each come to stand in as (s)experts because they are granted the power to either confirm or call into question the existence of asexuality. For instance, on *Dayside*, the (s)expert provides a very sympathetic confirmation of asexuality's existence, citing Bogaert's one percentile as ‘proof.’ On the other hand, the sex therapist on *20/20* violently negates the existence of asexuality:

> Sex is a fabulous, enormously pleasurable aspect of life and you’re saying you don’t miss it is like someone in a sense who’s colour blind saying I don’t miss colour. Of course you don’t miss what you’ve never had. […] You might as well label yourself not curious, unadventurous, narrow-minded, blind to possibilities […] sexually neutered.

But even when the (s)experts might confer legitimization or depathologize asexuality, what is clear is that asexuals’ testimonies are not entirely trusted, and interrogations often take place as to the exact parameters of what ‘counts’ and ‘does not count’ as asexuality proper (i.e., but if you do this or that can you still be an asexual?). This manner in which the media takes up asexuality not only speaks to our cultural anxieties towards asexuality, but also more relevantly for this discussion, effectively demonstrates the way in which science is called upon to offer credibility, proof, and comfort. Science functions to both comfort those who are ‘abnormal,’ in this case asexuals, as well as the hosts and audience, who might consider themselves ‘normal,’ providing simplistic biologically justified answers to complex culturally dependent phenomena.

While asexuals and (s)experts often appear in the same segments, they are not placed in conversation or direct contact with one another. Only in one instance (on *Dayside*) are (s)expert and an asexual couple placed within arm’s reach of each other, but even then no real conversational contact is made between them. In most cases, however, asexuals and (s)experts exist in different spaces, on different screens, and at different times. The voices of scientific authority and the voices of asexuality, while presented to us, the public, as being part of the same dialogue are not actually in conversation with one another at all. Instead, they occupy contiguous, yet completely disassociated planes, and an obvious division appears between who has the power to name and catalogue based on empiricism, and who can speak merely from personal experience. As Eunjung Kim, writing of asexuality attests, "[m]edical knowledge about the topics of asexuality and sexuality circulates into public awareness in a way that privileges the professional point of view over individual experiences and their creative interpretations" (167). The television specials are tailored to sediment the knowledge of science within the hands of the (s)experts, representing asexuals as unaware of science and uninformed about their own sexualities. Also, while discussing their asexuality, the members of AVEN do not rely on the "empirical methodologies, medical languages, and scientific taxonomies [to articulate their] […] bodies and pleasures" (Irvine 243). Instead, they seem to draw on their own metaphors, language, and classification schemes to make sense of themselves and their asexualities, disregarding science. For instance, instead of articulating themselves through using a language of dysfunction (as the (s)experts do), they instead emphasize their enjoyment of life's nonsexual pleasures and their acceptance of themselves.[29] As David Jay discusses on *Showbiz Tonight*:

> Sex is very central to how we're used to thinking about intimacy and thinking about relationships but if you think about it, sexual people have relationships that are close, that are intimate, that don't involve sex all the time. We're just used to putting limitations on where those relationships can go and what they can do and for me as an asexual person part of what's exciting is getting to take those limitations off, getting to sort of explore all the places you can go in relationships without necessarily having to focus around sex.

Both through the devices employed to segregate asexuals and (s)experts, and through asexuals' self-articulations, we get the sense from these television specials that whatever dialogue exists is top-down, that science charts the parameters to which asexuals must adhere.

In light of recent scientific research on asexuality, which I have been discussing throughout this chapter, a very different conversation appears between asexuals and sexual science. On the one hand, this conversation is characterized by a certain willingness on the part of asexuals to cooperate with scientific researchers, in the name of scientific knowledge and with the goal of uncovering the etiological truth of asexuality. As Brotto et al. (2010) observe in their study, "asexuals [are] very motivated to liaise with sex researchers to further the scientific study of asexuality" (599). Yet while this is true, asexuals' participation in research studies also enables them to shape scientific understandings and definitions of asexuality. One such example of this is seen in the efforts of the asexual community to not be scientifically labeled as disordered. For instance, as one blogger indicates: "I am painfully aware of how much the medical community wants to discredit asexuality and to portray it as nothing more than some sort of sexual disfunction [sic] or personality disorder" ("The Activism Bug"). Or as one participant from Brotto et al.'s study argues:

> Everyone in the asexual community wants to spread the message that [asexuality is] not a disorder and it's not something that's a problem and needs to be fixed and that's the big thing, the reason that we're trying to get the word out about it. (611)

The sexual desire disorder most often discussed by scientific studies as overlapping with asexuality is Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), which is defined by the current DSM-IV-TR (2000) as "[p]ersistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity […] caus[ing] *marked distress* or *interpersonal difficulty*" (539-541, emphasis added).[30] Because, at least as far as the current DSM is concerned, the classification and diagnosis of HSDD is hinged on "distress," asexuality does not qualify, as long as asexuals are not "distressed."[31] And although within both asexual and sexological communities, the notion of distress has been critiqued as imprecise and necessarily relational, asexuals persistently and consistently distance themselves from distress when participating in research in order to avoid making themselves – and asexuality –vulnerable to diagnoses of dysfunction.[32] For instance, Brotto et al. found that the majority of their participants (75% of women and 85% of men) were not distressed by their sexual orientation, from which they conclude "that asexuality and desire disorder[s] can be differentiated on the basis that the person with low desire experiences distress whereas the asexual does not" (603, 607). However, they continue with the following statement:

> Unsolicited feedback from some of the participants to the AVEN discussion board was forwarded by the founder of AVEN to the researchers. Some of these reports indicated that participants felt compelled to underrate their psychiatric symptoms in hopes of minimizing any relationship between asexuality and psychopathology that the researchers may have hypothesized. (608)

Thus, asexuals employ their roles as participants in research studies to push back against a medical system that might otherwise be inclined to pathologize them. While perhaps these attempts are neither centralized nor organized, they certainly demonstrate an active dialogue between asexuals and the scientific models and studies that seek to define and classify them. They provide evidence of the false neutrality of science, as well as the complex and ongoing conversations that, while forming the ongoing creation of sexual science, are completely effaced from the face of science. Such subversive participation in the process of truth-making or knowledge-production evinces that "[s]exual science

[does] not simply impose language, ideologies, and interpretive strategies on a passive public" but rather that marginal sexualities, like asexuality, "confront and sometimes appropriate sexual science for their own purposes" (Irvine 8).

To complement this indirect method of manipulating research tools I just described, a group of asexuals formed a DSM taskforce so as to influence the DSM-V classification system for HSDD (which is undergoing major revisions), evincing attempts to alter the shape of the science of sex in a way that will better accommodate asexuality. Through such organized efforts, asexuality is taking significant steps towards asserting its place in the sexual landscape and creating a dialogue with sexology. However, as Andrew Hinderliter, an asexual blogger and graduate student observes:

> A political question that those challenging the pathologization of asexuality must ask is whether to challenge the pathologization of asexuality only or whether to the challenge the pathologization of sexual disinterest more generally. (2010)

Although sexual science is playing a central role in the formation of contemporary asexuality, this is certainly not a simple role. Instead, the scientific study of sex provides opportunities for asexual formation, identification, and action, but also functions to limit and restrict the shape that contemporary asexuality will acquire. In this chapter I have ultimately argued that the discourses that are woven, in part by sexology, need to be carefully considered and relentlessly scrutinized. I have called into question the discovery of continents of sexual knowledge, and finally also briefly intimated that sexual science is never top-down, but rather consists of complex and often imperceptible struggles between different groups of people. Although researchers and sexologists, such as those I have discussed throughout this chapter, are eager to engage in asexual cartography, it is clear that they are not the only group intent on charting, renegotiating, and contesting the making of an asexual continent.

Notes

[1] As described by one asexuality blogger on Apositive.org ("The Storms Model").

[2] Feminists such as Myra T. Johnson (1977) and Valerie Solanas (1967) had however written about asexuality before Storms, though not as a sexual orientation.

[3] Storms' is not the only re-model-ing of Kinsey, but it is perhaps the one of most relevance for asexuality. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) discusses a dynamic model by Fritz Klein, for instance, which has a grid of seven variables as well as a time scale (9-10).

[4] Kinsey suggests that "[a]fter early adolescence there are very few males in this classification [that is the classification of 'X' or 'asexual' – though he does not use the latter term] (see our 1948: 658), but a goodly number of females belong in this category in every age group (Table 142, Figure 95)" (1953, 472). He further suggests that "[m]ales with no socio-sexual response (rating X) rapidly disappear between the ages of 5 and 20," although his chart indicates that there is always a percentage of males who do remain lacking sexual response (1948, 658; see chart on p. 640). For instance, he lists 2.3% as fitting into group X at age 26, 1.9% at age 30, and 2.0% at age 39 (640). Of women Kinsey suggests, "[b]etween 14 and 19 per cent of the unmarried females in the sample, and 1 to 3 per cent of the married females, had not made any socio-sexual responses (either heterosexual or homosexual)—*i.e.,* rated X—in each of the years between twenty and thirty-five years of age. Among the previously married females, 5 to 8 per cent were in that category (Table 142)" (1953, 474). Janice Irvine suggests that Kinsey believed that women had a lower "capacity to respond to *psychological* stimulation" than men, which then manifested in a lesser variety and a lower frequency of sexual practices (35, emphasis added).

[5] Irvine (1990) discusses Kinsey's failure to include race in his studies as just one manifestation of his white bias. While Kinsey took great effort to argue for the objectivity of his work, it is nonetheless, as Irvine makes obvious, saturated with his beliefs about the world, including biases about race and gender. Kinsey did not include data from non-whites because, he later explained, he had not amassed enough sex histories from black women and men to justify their inclusion (Irvine 24). Thus the data he presents is based solely on white people.

[6] In his 1979 chapter, he suggests that 0% of men and 10% of women are "anerotic," although this does not seem to correlate with the numbers he provides, which indicate that 1/86 men and 5/99 women are "anerotic" (see Figure 1 on p. 175 and Table 1 on p. 176).

[7] Storms' main concern in the two pieces I am here considering is to disprove the assumption that sexual orientation is indicated by sex role identity, or that a 'normal' sex role identity (feminine for women and masculine for men) will correlate with heterosexuality and that sexual inversion will correspond with homosexuality.

[8] Nurius classifies asexuals as those who scored less than 10.0 on the Sexual Activity and Preference Scale (SAPS) (126).

[9] Specifically, Nurius distributes six scales in total to her participants. Two of these pertain to sexual preferences: the Sexual Attitude Scale (STD) and the Sexual Activity and Preference Scale (SAPS); and four are short clinical scales: the Generalized Contentment Scale (GCS), the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE), the Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS), and the Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS).

[10] The statements pertaining to asexuality, to which participants answer true or false, are: 'I have never been aroused by erotic material which features members of either my same or opposite sex;' 'I have never felt in love with members of either my same or opposite sex;' 'I have never sexually fantasized or dreamed about members of either my same or opposite sex;' 'I am not sexually attracted to members of either my same or opposite sex;' 'I have never engaged in sexual activity with members of my same or opposite sex' (pp. 73-77).

[11] In other words, no participants indicate that they are asexual because they do not select "I do not consider myself to be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. I have never had any attraction to, desire for, or sexual contact with members of either my same or opposite sex" (see Table 2 on p. 78). Because no one participant selects this sexual orientation option, the results from the MSS are not investigated based on asexuality.

[12] The first of these – "virgin field" – is Vern Bullough's phrase from his article, "Sex in History: A Virgin Field" (1972), but Weeks avidly deploys it.

[13] The 1994 national survey involved 8 years of work, and included a total of 18,876 participants aged between 16-59 (Johnson et al. ix-x). Interestingly, the funding promised by the federal government was later cut off by Margaret Thatcher, then the Prime Minister, "on the grounds of its intrusiveness and its unacceptability to the British people" (16). Apparently, according to Bogaert's calculations, from all the participants a total of 195 (57 men and 138 women) indicated that they had "never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all" as opposed to choosing one of the other selections such as "I have felt sexually attracted to only females, never to males" etc., which would have been an indicator of their sexual orientation being mostly homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual (Bogaert 2004, 281-282).

[14] Prause and Graham, in their Kinsey Institute sponsored study, engage in a qualitative and quantitative survey of asexuality so as "to better characterize individuals who self-identify as asexual and to provide exploratory data for future hypothesis-driven research" (342). Their study consists of two portions, the first is interview sessions with four self-identified asexuals, and the second is an online questionnaire completed by 1,146 individuals, 41 of which self-describe as 'asexual.' I say that their work is more careful and deliberate for several reasons. First, their study is specifically designed to study asexuality and asexuals, whereas Bogaert's, drawing on existing research as it does, is not. Also, their work is less myopic in focus and cites a greater variety of sources, some of which are not scientific per se.

[15] Arguably, Brotto et al. (2010) similarly complicate distress through their statement that asexual "distress, if any, might stem from the interpersonal consequences/aspects of asexuality, rather than being related to personal consequences" (607).

[16] The first of these, "Asexuality: A Mixed-Methods Approach" (2010), consists of two studies. The first being quantitative, is based on an online questionnaire completed by 187 participants, with the intent to "further characterize asexual individuals" based on the "sexual, personality, psychopathology, and interpersonal functioning" (600, 601). The second study, qualitative, takes a sample of 15 of these respondents and follows up with a phone interview in the hopes of exploring findings found in the first study (608). "Physiological and Subjective Sexual Arousal in Self-Identified Asexual Women" (2010), coauthored with Morag Yule and containing a more diversified selection of references, uses physiological testing to uncover whether or not asexual women's 'sexual arousal response' is intact. It does so by way of

testing for vaginal pulse amplitude (VPA) along with "subjective sexual arousal," using among other measures vaginal photoplethysmography (3).

[17] Participants' "subjective sexual arousal" is also tested and this is done through a measure called the "Film Scale" which inquires into an individual's experience of their arousal after and before watching an erotic film (5).

[18] Prause and Graham (2007) identify no significant gender differences in their study on asexuality (26 out of 41 asexual participants identify as women) (348, 349, 352). In general, it is unclear whether more women than men identify as asexual or experience their sexualities as asexual. But Brotto et al. (2010) also have a significantly greater proportion of women in their study, 133 of their 187 asexual participants in study 1 are women, perhaps confirming Bogaert's musings that more women than men identify as asexual and relate to asexuality. Of interest is that when Brotto et al. make efforts to classify their participants into two genders, 27 of 214 participants who complete the online questionnaires refuse to provide this information and are subsequently not included in the study (601; also see Hinderliter 2009 and Chasin).

[19] Brotto, in both of her studies, as well as Bogaert cite the work of Meredith L. Chivers.

[20] I would like to add, however, that Bogaert is more tentative than Brotto about the suggestion that women's sexuality is more 'plastic' and indeed spends less time and cites fewer sources towards proving this point.

[21] A key sexologist active in the ongoing efforts to develop and secure this receptivity model is Rosemary Basson (2000, 2001). The model is seen as an improvement on Masters and Johnson's model, which assumes that men and women experience sexual desire in the same way and have the same sexual response cycle. Interestingly, feminists have likewise critiqued the Masters and Johnson model on the grounds that it provides "[a] false notion of sexual equivalency between men and women" and that it overstates the "genital and physiological similarities between men and women" ("New View Manifesto"). Significantly, however, the new model of 'receptivity' or 'responsive desire' that Basson and others subsequently develop is also potentially disadvantageous to women.

[22] The work of Nicola Gavey and Annie Potts is especially effective at demonstrating that sexual differences which are culturally and scientifically presented and experienced as natural are in fact *naturalized*.

[23] Brotto's considerations of unwanted sex are not limited to this one statement. Brotto et al., (2010) for instance, dedicate one section of their article to the theme of "Negotiating Boundaries in Relationships" and provide many statements from asexuals who self-describe as capitulating to sex as a way to compromise within a relationship (612-613). Nonetheless, while unwanted sex is clearly a part of the lives of many asexuals, both women and men, (Brotto et al. indicate that 25 percent of their asexually-identified participants have engaged in sex) this does not mean that it should be encouraged within a therapeutic context, as Brotto and Yule do (Brotto et al. 607; Brotto and Yule 12).

[24] Similarly, in Prause and Graham's study one participant comments: "I didn't really enjoy having sex. He surely seemed to be enjoy[ing] it, so whenever he wanted it I didn't really refuse" and another, "I think if the person is asexual, he or she might engage in the act, probably if he or she has a partner, they may feel obliged to engage in the act" (344, 345). Prause and Graham (2007) comment that, based on their findings, while one reason an asexual person might experiment with sex is curiosity, "[t]he second factor […] for engaging in a sexual activity [is] being in a romantic relationship and feeling that the partner deserve[s] or expect[s] sex" (345).

[25] It is not in fact specified whether this participant is a woman or man.

[26] They use the work of Meredith L. Chivers to buttress these claims.

[27] This claim, that a heterosexual stimulus is effective at genitally arousing women of all sexual preferences relates to Brotto and Yule's discussion of women as incapable of coordinating their subjective and physiological arousal (which I discussed above). Since women are not aware of their genital arousal when it occurs, "there is the same (strong) magnitude of VPA among different sexual orientation groups to stimuli depicting male–male, female–female, and male–female actor pairings, despite the fact that self-reported arousal levels corresponded with the stimuli of their stated preference" (Brotto and Yule 10).

[28] Each of these is available for viewing online (see Works Cited).

[29] Another reason for why the asexuals in these television specials might not be interacting with the language of science is that scientific research on asexuality was scarce in 2006 (it appears that only Bogaert's first piece had then been published).

[30] Basically all contemporary studies of asexuality consider asexuality alongside or in relation to HSDD, though they mostly conclude that because asexuals are not 'distressed,' they are not diagnosable with HSDD (Brotto et al.; Brotto and Yule; Prause and Graham; Bogaert 2004, 2006).

[31] Suggestions for changes to the DSM-V (to be released in 2013) deemphasize the role of 'distress' in the diagnosis of HSDD and other sexual desire disorders. On a side note, the DSM-V, as far as can be predicted, will present a dynamic restructuring and renaming of HSDD: it will fracture it into separate disorders for men and women, into "Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder in Men" *and* "Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder in Women." Since the role of distress in diagnosis is decentralized and minimized it is unclear whether asexuality will stand to gain or lose with the new DSM, but it seems likely that a distancing form distress will no longer suffice to depathologize asexuality (see APA's *DSM-V Development*).

[32] Critiques of 'distress' exist both within the asexual community and within sexological writing. For instance, asexual blogger, Andrew Hinderliter (2010), in an online article recognizes that distress can be relational or caused by things other than one's asexuality and even Prause and Graham (2007), in their scientific study on asexuality, acknowledge that distress may be due to social expectations (353). Distress as a component of diagnosis has also been criticized widely within sexology, such as by Walter Everaerd and Stephanie Both (2001), Richard Balon (2008), and by Lori Brotto (2009), which has led to recommendations that it be much less central in the DSM-V (see APA's *DSM-V Development*).

CHAPTER THREE
Producing Histories: Feminist Asexuality and the Politics of 'Not Doing It'

We feel that we need sex, but the issue is very confused. What is it we really need? Is it orgasms? Intercourse? Intimacy with another human being? Stroking? Companionship? Human kindness? And do we 'need' it physically or psychologically?
–Dana Densmore, "Independence from the Sexual Revolution," 1971, p.59

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, contemporary asexuality, is an entirely new and unique sexual entity, one that is informed by an interchange, a dialogue between science, the media's popularization of science, and the efforts of asexual activists. Yet while asexuality has not existed before as it does today, as a burgeoning sexual identity, it has appeared in varying forms historically. Passionlessness, frigidity, celibacy – while not asexuality per se, are nonetheless each relevant to a historical consideration of 'not doing it.' In tracking the historical forms of asexuality a couple of things become clear. First, meanings of asexuality shift over time, along with the discourses that give them their shape. Thus it is possible that at one historical moment asexuality is understood as some sort of norm for women's sexualities, while at another time it is not. Related to this, because women's asexuality is not a dominant discourse today (though it is not by any means a dead discourse either) it is possible for women to identify as asexual in a way it has never been possible in the past. Second, as the title of this chapter indicates, there is always a politics at work behind 'not doing it,' as there is behind 'doing it.' Thus, standards and norms that are circulated into existence are caught up in a politics of gender, as of race and class.

I begin this chapter by first considering, in "Women and Asexuality," the ways in which discourses regarding women's asexuality shift, so that at one time women are commonly understood to be without sexual desire, while at another their lack of sexual desire is understood on pathological terms – as frigidity. In other words, while in the nineteenth century women were generally configured as asexual or passionless, by the twentieth this discourse began to fade away and women became increasingly conceived of as sexually desiring beings. In turn, however, an absence of sexual desire became conceived of pejoratively as frigidity, and understood as in need of medical attention. Tracing such changes in the understandings of women's sexualities it becomes evident that women's 'not doing it' is both culturally contingent and politically charged. Next, in "Feminist Asexualities" I consider how feminists of the women's liberation movement responded to these escalating discourses of women's sexualization and theorized asexuality and celibacy for their own purposes, as strategies to gain independence from men and end women's oppression. In the context of the permissive turn of the sixties, feminists such as Dana Densmore and Valerie Solanas imagined 'not doing it' as a radical and political response to discourses that implied women's sexual availability and circumscribed women's bodily autonomy. I read these feminist articulations of asexuality with the intent of observing how they disrupt the dominant sexual discourses I discussed in the first chapter, namely the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital cluster,* as well as with an eye for how feminist asexualities, while certainly different from contemporary asexuality, are relevant for feminists examining asexuality in the new millennium.

I. Women and Asexuality: Historical Perspectives

Asexuality, as I will explore in this section, has a discursive history that aligns it with femininity. Although this section is far from a comprehensive review of the discourses that have aligned women with asexuality historically, it is intended to demonstrate that (1) configurations of 'not doing it' shift over time, (2) discourses aligning women with asexuality are more prominent at certain times than at others, and that (3) 'asexuality' – while beholden of a certain peculiarity today – carries with it a discursive history. This discursive history is one, crucially, that has located 'not doing it' as something of unique meaning and relevancy for women.

In particular, then, I will consider two historical articulations of 'not doing it:' *passionlessness* and *frigidity*. Passionlessness describes a belief in women's asexuality that functioned as a dominant discourse for understanding women's sexualities in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (Cott 1978). Frigidity, on the other hand, operated especially in the interwar years while discourses of women's capacity to experience sexual pleasure were escalating. Indubitably, such discourses of asexuality have referred to a certain type of woman historically, laden as they are with class and race based assumptions. Passionlessness, for instance informed notions of white, well-to-do women's sexualities, while working class, immigrant, or racialized women were understood as licentious and sexually available (D'Emilio and Freedman 46). Also, both passionlessness and frigidity were deployed at times of great cultural change, when much hinged on sexual difference and on women's sexualities; in other words they were saturated with a *politics* of 'not doing it.' And, such historical discourses of women's asexuality proved to be both constraining and enabling, in that they circumscribed women's experiences of sexuality even while making this circumscription ground for other possibilities.

Nancy F. Cott (1978), in a feminist consideration of the history of sexuality, discusses the way in which nineteenth century European women were considered "passionless" or sexually "anesthetic" prior to the "modern science" of sexology.[1] Markedly, passionlessness referred mostly to well-to-do ladies, and not the lower classes or prostitutes who were perceived of as "low and immoral," as gynecologist William Acton described them in 1857 (212). Thomas Laqueur (1990) holds that passionlessness was allied with a cultural shift in understandings of sexuality from a "one-sex model" where women and men's biologies and sexualities were viewed as fundamentally similar, though hierarchical, to a "two-sex model" where women and men were understood as fundamentally *dissimilar* in biology and sexuality. Whereas a one-sex model was accompanied by a "two-seed" model of reproduction, which assumed that women's sexual pleasure and arousal was necessary for procreation, a two-sex model was not. Laqueur also correlates the increasing primacy of the two-sex model with larger cultural shifts such as the rise of Evangelism, post-revolutionary ideals, the ideology of separate spheres, the factory system, the free market economy, etc., all of which enabled the transformation of understandings of the body:

> The new biology, with its search for fundamental differences between the sexes, of which the tortured questioning of the very existence of women's sexual pleasure was a part, emerged at precisely the time when the foundations of the old social order were shaken once and for all. (11)

Carl Degler (1974), however, argues that while medical men may have been convinced of women's sexual anesthesia, this was not in fact a dominantly held view in the Western world at all. So while British physician William Acton (1857) was widely cited in the English-speaking world for his belief that women were not sexual – that "the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind" and have a "natural repugnance for cohabitation" – there was actually no real consensus on the matter either in medicine or in society in general (Acton 212, 214). This demonstrates that at any one time competing and misaligned discourses of sexuality are operating, so that, "in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and indeed today, at any given point of scientific knowledge a wide variety of contradictory cultural claims about sexual difference are possible" (Laqueur 175).

Passionlessness, while "exaggerating sexual propriety so far as to immobilize women," also provided opportunities for women to understand themselves beyond the sex of their bodies (Cott 236). It allowed women "to assert control in the sexual arena" and it "served women's larger interests by downplaying altogether their sexual characterization, which was the cause of their exclusion from significant 'human' (i.e., male) pursuits" (233). This deemphasizing of sexuality thus elevated women to a sort of moral equality with men (Cott 228; also D'Emilio and Freedman 71). Significantly, a conviction that women were passionless may have actually allowed for certain women to refuse unwanted sex, limit family size, and build strong bonds with other women in a cultural context where marriage and reproduction were idealized as the appropriate life routes for women (Cott 234, 233; D'Emilio and Freedman 71).

By the turn of the century, however, the discourses of women's asexuality or passionlessness were somewhat fading. While Acton had suggested that women were not inherently sexual, by the cusp of the following century Havelock Ellis (1903) was convinced of "how natural the sexual impulse is in women" (Ellis 284). Ellis was adamant about women's capacity to enjoy the sexual impulse, and about the "abnormality" of those women who exhibited sexual disinterest or anesthesia (Ellis 284). Sexual pleasure became understood as something natural for women. This shift in discourses of women's sexuality was not, however, a clear substitution of one discourse by another. In the late nineteenth century sex did become more central to understandings of the self than ever before – with the modern birth of 'homosexuality,' and 'heterosexuality' for that matter – as Foucault explicates (1978). However, this did not signify that women were suddenly unambiguously conceived of *as* sexual (that is, as capable of sexual desire and pleasure), and that discourses of women's asexuality abruptly died out.

For instance, Joanna Bourke (2008) mentions that "the general agreement that wives were more reluctant to have sex than their husbands" persisted well into the twentieth century and lingered on until the sixties (435). Even marriage advice manuals of the fifties continue to demonstrate an engagement with discourses of women's sexual passivity or relative asexuality, and this at a time when Kinsey's work, which stressed women's capacity for sexual pleasure, was well known (Gavey 116-117). Discourses of women's sexual passivity may indeed be seen in operation today with the ongoing presence of the have/hold discourse I discussed in the first chapter (where sex is for women a means to an end, that end being a husband, family, and children) or with the recent turn in sexology towards the receptivity model of women's sexuality, which I mentioned in the second chapter (Hollway; Gavey; Potts 2002; Basson 2000, 2001; Tyler). As Annie Potts spells out: "the permissive discourse retains notions of active male sexuality and compliant female sexuality, with women 'striving' to meet men's sexual 'needs,' and risking any reluctance on their part as being labelled 'uptight' or frigid'"

(2002, 44). So, while there is some general shift in dominant discourses over time, and specifically at the fin de siècle, from women's passionlessness to women's sexualization, discourses of women's sexual passivity continue to run parallel to discourses of women's sexual desire, even into the present day. Discourses thus overlap, shift, form new constellations, but do *not* simply disappear from one period to another. In their introduction to *Intimate Matters* (1988), John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman describe this as a process of layering, whereby certain motifs persist from one era to the next and are gradually substituted by new ideas, concerns, and discourses (xix).

Nonetheless, there was a general sexualization of women at the end of the Victorian era, and sexologists, as I earlier demonstrated by way of Ellis, did emphasize women's capacity for sexual pleasure, enjoyment, and orgasm. "The shift […] from the nineteenth-century pattern of separate spheres for the sexes and female passionlessness to the modern pattern of companionate marriage with a modicum of female sexual pleasure" marked a discursive sea change in understandings of women's sexuality (Vance 14). Again, some form of passionlessness persisted in the cultural mind, but the dominant discourses of women's sexuality emphasized women's sexual potentialities, sexual desire, and sexual pleasure.

Notably, this new emphasis on the naturalness of women's sexual pleasure functioned, in part, *prescriptively*, encouraging specific forms of sex (coital heterosexuality) and medicalizing, to a certain extent, those women who were not interested in sex, or the sort of sex on offer. Ellis, for instance, emphasized the "abnormality" of those women who exhibited sexual disinterest or "anesthesia" (Ellis 284).[2] Thus, according to these cultural logics, "[t]o be 'normal,' women had to do sexual intercourse willingly," meaning that not only hetero-coital sex was an imperative, but that increasingly, sexual pleasure was becoming an imperative (Jeffreys 185). Feminist Margaret Jackson (1994) argues that,

> Although women were now permitted to have sexual feelings and to experience sexual pleasure, it was strictly on male terms. […] A woman's sexual instinct could only be awakened by, and satisfied by, a man, thus rendering women sexually dependent on men at precisely that point in history when they were achieving a significant degree of political, economic, and sexual independence. (179)

In this context of a relative prescribing of sex and medicalizing of sexual lack, the concept of *frigidity* became a derisive term culturally available to be deployed against those women who were not into 'doing it,' for one reason or another. Through "abstinence and frigidity, the sexual [was] made ever-present, undeniable, obligatory: a fact, a thing, an imperative" (Moore 189).

This trend towards a problematizing of the nonsexual female body is rendered even more acutely after the First World War. Feminists Margaret Jackson (1994) and Sheila Jeffreys (1985) each talk about the rise of the "frigid woman" in sexological literature as generally damaging to women because it reiterated the heterosexual, coital imperative. Frigidity, of course, applied strictly to women and was defined in heterosexual terms as a sort of indifference to heterosexual sex and a general attitude of coldness – it "was quite simply woman's failure to respond with enthusiasm to one particular sexual practice, sexual intercourse" (Jeffreys 171-172). As feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes:

> Frigidity, it should be noted, is not a refusal of sexual pleasure per se. It is the refusal of a specifically *genital* and orgasmic sexual pleasure. The so-called 'frigid woman' is precisely the

> woman whose pleasures do not fit neatly into the male-defined structure of sexual pleasure, a teleological structure directed towards an orgasmic goal. (1989, 133, emphasis in original)

And at the same time, it was white women of a middle class who were understood within the logic of frigidity, since racialized women, women of lower classes, and Eastern women were imagined as lascivious, sensual, and ‘primitive’ (Jeffreys 178-179).

In a recent article, Alison Moore and Peter Cryle (2010) argue that the history of frigidity is often simplified and rendered less messy to serve contemporary political goals.[3] They demonstrate that the term was not simply formed from above by medical men as a tool against women, but that its history is much more ambiguous and complicated. For instance, they discuss how Jean Fauconney, a *docteur* with no medical training, wrote quite prolifically on frigidity in fin de siècle France, bridging high brow and low brow, as well as medical and popular notions of frigidity taking shape at the time. Also, Moore and Cryle argue that frigidity came into existence through a negotiation of many discourses, and did not mark in a simple way the transition from an insistence on women’s asexuality to the emphasis on women’s sexual pleasure. While in the interwar years, as I will shortly argue, women’s frigidity became tied to sex that was not coital, at the fin de siècle when the term was just percolating into commonplace usage, frigidity was a more complicated notion, and “it was more often defined as a failure to become aroused at all” (251). Also, while at the turn of the century frigidity was not especially medicalized, by the interwar years it began to be increasingly presented as aberrant or neurotic (243).

Interestingly, by the interwar years, frigidity was depicted in highly politicized language, reflective of the anxieties over shifts in women’s social roles. For instance, Weith Knudsen (1928), writing about the 'woman's question' described women's frigidity as a "threat to civilisation," while sexologist and eugenicist, Walter Gallichan (1927, 1929), linked the "cold," "prude," or sexually apathetic woman directly to feminism (Knudsen, qtd. in Jeffreys 176; Jackson 1994, 177-179). Gallichan warned that "[t]hese degenerate women are a menace to civilisation," that "they wreck conjugal happiness," and that they are in fact diseased and in need of medical treatment (qtd. in Jackson 1994, 177). Similarly, Wilhelm Stekel (1929), a psychologist and follower of Sigmund Freud, writing of frigidity in 1926, was also convinced that it required medical attention. While Stekel assessed that rates of frigidity in women were high and while he depicted many case studies of women who achieved sexual pleasure through passionate embraces, masturbation, or genital "titillation" (but *not* through coitus), he understood this not as a feature of women's sexuality, so much as a dysfunction in need of redress (see Stekel, chapter 5). Again, frigidity is defined not as a complete inability to experience sexual pleasure, so much as an inability to derive pleasure from the *coital* moment (Moore and Cryle 261).

Likewise, for Freud, writing his treatises on women's sexuality in the twenties and thirties, frigidity signified woman's failure and psychological neurosis; vaginal frigidity marked a woman's incapacity to transition from the immature clitoral orgasm to the more mature and feminine vaginal orgasm (Gerhard 2001, 39-43).[4] While, according to Freud, sexual desire originated for the little girl with a homosexual desire for her mother, maturation or entrance into womanhood required a transference of this desire onto men. Women, in this account, were in search of the penis they realized they did not possess upon that fateful moment of seeing, desiring instead children as a means to gain proximity to a little penis of their own (through producing a boy-child) (see, for instance, Freud's "Female Sexuality," 1931). Crucially, coital heterosexuality was emphasized by Freud as the normal, mature, and appropriate form of pleasure for women, and motherhood as the appropriate life route. In this way Freud's work naturalized heterosexuality, reproduction, and a gendered division of sexual and social functions (Gerhard 2000, 450). Frigidity, or vaginal frigidity, on the other hand performed the purpose of marking not only the unhealthy, psychologically unwell, or neurotic woman, but also the woman who refused to accept her feminine lot in life. More than anything, the appearance of the frigid woman as a body-site in need of medical intervention indicated the unease with women who were *not* 'doing it' properly, heterosexually, or frequently enough.

At the same time as notions of women's frigidity circulated, the famous marriage manual by Dutch physician Theodore Van De Velde (1928, in English) emphasized companionate marriage, simultaneous orgasm, and mutuality of sexual pleasure for both partners. The manual demonstrates that women's sexual pleasure and orgasm were more and more often seen as natural and as the goal of sexual cohabitation, or that sexual pleasure began to become an imperative for women. However, feminist Jane Gerhard, in *Desiring Revolution: Second Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (2001), argues that this emphasis on women's orgasm did not much affect traditional marital arrangements or the social role of the wife as subservient to male authority (26). Women were granted the experience of sexual pleasure, but because the husband was deemed the author of this sexual pleasure and retained his role of authority within the household and beyond, this "narrative of romantic heterosexuality operated to *both* enhance and circumscribe women's sexual status" (Gerhard 2001, 26, emphasis added).[5]

Such post World War One articulations of frigidity, and what Jeffreys emphatically argues is "a massive campaign by sexologists and sex advice writers to conscript women into marriage and ensure that once within it they would engage cheerfully and frequently in sexual intercourse," might be in part explained by Susan Kingsley Kent's (1988) discussion of the demise of feminism (Jeffreys 166). The problematizing and pathologizing of women's frigidity in the 1920s might thus be connected to the decade's renewed acceptance of marriage and women's maternal role, which resulted from national desires to regain a sense of stability after the chaos of the war. Notably, this chaos was also perceived *off* the battle lines, namely in women's increased infiltration of 'men's work.' Moore and Cryle (2010) for instance write that "frigid women were assumed by many to be a danger to the reproductive health of the nation" (Moore and Cryle 2010, 261). Thus the circulation of the concept of frigidity was indicative of cultural anxieties in regards to the presence of single women in paid labour positions, their increased visibility in the public realm, and the threats this presented to the gender order and women's traditional place in the world (Jackson 1994, 179).

Also, the thirties similarly proved to be a decade of chaos, characterized by a great economic crisis, with continued efforts to reify women's traditional social and sexual roles as a means of establishing some degree of social stability. Psychoanalysts after Freud continued to 'fixate' on frigidity and the problematic, or not sufficiently mature and feminine, clitoral orgasm. Most pronouncedly, psychoanalysts Eduard Hitschmann and Edmund Bergler, penned *Frigidity in Women: Its Characteristics and*

Treatments in 1936, explaining frigidity as "the incapacity of woman to have a *vaginal orgasm*" (20, emphasis in original). Gerhard argues that like in the past, this frigidity was about much more than reinforcing coital sex, but also about demarcating deviance and normalcy, paucity and excess (2001, 40). Like previous psychoanalytic articulations of frigidity, it functioned to reinscribe healthy femininity as passive, and

> represented the chaos of women behaving like men, of women overpowering men, and of women rejecting their passive and maternal destinies. Women who desired clitoral stimulation represented gender and sexual anarchy and, in doing so, threatened social demise. (41)

Thus, as I have been emphasizing, frigidity operated not only in terms of the sexual, but also in terms of the social, politically that is, to reinforce traditional ideals of sexual difference within the family and beyond at a time of instability – exemplifying Laqueur's assertion that "[s]ex […] is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power" (11).

I have been discussing at some length discourses of women's asexuality or passionlessness, the shift to women's sexualization, and the availability of the concept of frigidity for several reasons. First, this trajectory I have been sketching, reminds us of the historical coupling of asexuality and women. This is significant because it attunes us to the very specialness or specificity of a moment like today, when because women are *not* conceived of primarily in terms of asexuality, they might claim asexuality as a counter-discursive position. In other words, while notions of women's asexuality are still afloat discursively, they are perhaps not as dominant as they were in the past. Thus, I have also been arguing that the ways in which asexuality and women have been discursively coupled historically suggests that discourses of women's asexuality shift, while never entirely disappearing. While widespread understandings of women's passionlessness might have faded, discourses of women's sexual passivity and receptivity continue to circulate, even to the present day. Likewise, the discourses that make understandings of women's frigidity possible continue to flourish, allowing for the term to remain culturally available, if not in exactly the same way as it was historically. Finally, this trajectory I have been relating feeds into the subsequent section of this chapter, since, as Gerhard argues, notions of women's sexuality and their frigidity galvanized feminist responses of the late sixties and seventies (2001, 44). In the following section, then, I will consider how feminists appropriated notions of women's asexuality for their own purposes, articulating it as a method for resisting patriarchy and male demands on their time and bodies.

II. Feminist Asexualities

In the fifties, the work of Alfred Kinsey and the decline of the hegemony of psychoanalysis led to new theorizations of women's sexuality. Kinsey, for one, refrained from employing both psychoanalysis and notions of frigidity in his work, writing of his distaste for the term because of its misrepresentation of women as less responsive to sexual stimuli than men, a notion he generally disagreed with (1953, 373).[6] Even more pronouncedly, sexologists William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1966) emphasized the similarity between women and men's sexualities through arguing for the sameness of their sexual response cycle and the functional similarity between the clitoris and penis.[7] Masters and Johnson argued that the clitoris is the epicenter of women's orgasm and sexual pleasure (even while they contradictorily encouraged penetrative sex), and that women are capable of multiple or sequential orgasms (see Irvine, chp. 2 and Gerhard 2000). Women were thus more and more often understood to be *as* sexually desiring, arousable, and orgasmic *as men*.

Before I undertake an exploration of *feminist asexualities*, I wish to consider further the discursive and historical landscape of the sixties. As already mentioned, the work of Masters and Johnson especially, and Kinsey before them, contributed in no small part to the "permissive turn" that ate away at the cultural puritanism around sex and sexuality (Gavey 106). Gerhard argues that "[t]here was a period in the late 1960s and early 1970s when sex mattered in a whole new way," and this was true both for feminism as for the culture of the West more broadly (2001, 2). D'Emilio and Freedman (1998) attest that, in America at least, there were many revolutions in the sixties, including youth protests, gay liberation, and women's liberation. Steven Seidman (1991), on the other hand, rejects the notion that there was a sexual revolution in the sixties altogether, arguing that it "was more rhetoric than reality" as well as that it was decades in the making (122). Also, the sexual revolution, if there was one, took place in urban centers and among the children of the middle classes (D'Emilio and Freedman 306). It is significant also to note, that the gluing of sex to pleasure was influenced widely by consumer capitalism, and the marketing of sex and sexual lifestyles. Hugh Hefner's *Playboy,* first published in 1953, Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), and the appearance of the contraceptive pill in the sixties each bolstered the liberal sexual culture (see, for instance, D'Emilio and Freedman). It is within this context of sexual liberalization that discourses promoting sexual permissiveness could become culturally intelligible on a widespread scale, especially among the new generation. Wendy Hollway

(1984) comments on the *permissive discourse,* which, while challenging monogamy, also asserted the naturalness of heterosex (234-236). Establishing women as equal in their sexual needs, drives, and pleasures to men, it nonetheless primarily promoted and celebrated a *male* sexuality (Hollway 235; Gavey 108). Thus women lost the grounds for saying no to unwanted sex, sex that they might have had earlier avoided under the guise of morality (Gavey 108).

In this context, then, many feminists in the late sixties and seventies began to question this so-called sexual revolution, noting how it failed to take stock of material differences, gendered power relations, and indeed the politics behind 'doing it.' Issues of sex and sexuality were found to be at the core of women's oppression and the institution of heterosexuality was found to be, through consciousness-raising and feminist organizing and theorizing, instrumental in the maintenance of inequality and women's oppression. While many feminists *celebrated* sex and sexuality, it was never uncritically, but rather with an eye to how power and inequality structure the 'liberated' relationships between men and women.

For instance, feminists of the women's liberation movement such as Anne Koedt (1968) and Ti-Grace Atkinson (1968, 1970) explored notions of women's sexual freedom by way of appropriating the *clitoris* as a symbol of women's autonomy and liberation (Gerhard 2000, 449). Rejecting psychoanalysis and embracing the work of Masters and Johnson, they responded to the permissive turn in culture through theorizing forms of pleasure that did not include men.[8] Anne Koedt in her feminist classic "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1968) famously politicized what she saw as the myth of women's frigidity, drawing on Masters and Johnson to embrace the clitoris as a site of women's sexual pleasure and orgasm.[9] Frigidity, in turn, she saw as a patriarchal tool employed by sexologists to keep women in their sexual and social place. She writes:

> Men have generally defined frigidity as the failure of women to have vaginal orgasms. […] Rather than tracing female frigidity to the false assumptions about female anatomy, our 'experts' have declared frigidity a psychological problem of women. (38)

Also, the *vaginal* orgasm was suggested by Koedt and Atkinson to be a politically expedient lie, a myth, which serves the interests of the status quo; Atkinson, in "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse" (1970), writes that the "[v]aginal orgasm is an excellent illustration of the way men oppress and exploit women" (6).[10] The clitoris became for Koedt, Atkinson, and many other feminists including those reading their work, a symbol of sexual and corporeal resistance against the sexual experts and against patriarchy more generally, and an opportunity to know the body outside of phallocentric norms and to create a new sexual language and landscape. Feminists thus *clung* to the clitoris and appropriated it as a symbol for women's liberation, sexual autonomy, and feminist revolution.[11]

While some feminists celebrated clitoral sexuality as a tool for establishing women's autonomy, others argued for *asexuality* or *celibacy* as a strategy to assert women's independence and end women's oppression. Feminist Breanne Fahs, in "Radical Refusals: On the Anarchist Politics of Women Choosing Asexuality" (2010), has recently commented that strategies of asexuality are often lost in feminist debates, with the focus instead placed on the polarized impasse of the pro-sex versus anti-sex debate of the eighties (446).[12] She argues that asexuality, while ignored as a sexual politics, is a "radical refusal," a compelling and effective feminist strategy. Fahs raises the poignant questions – "What if women *stopped* having sex permanently?" arguing that it would be a radical feminist and anarchist strategy for undoing patriarchal and state institutions such as the family, reproduction of the nation, and gendered dynamics of power (446-447, emphasis in original).

Following Fahs, I will focus on the asexual politics of Dana Densmore, a radical feminist and member of the Boston feminist collective Cell 16, and Valerie Solanas, the great outsider feminist. While asexuality and celibacy perhaps do not figure as dominantly in feminist texts of women's liberation as does say, the clitoris, that they were explored by two very different feminists – Densmore and Solanas – suggests that asexuality and celibacy were imagined, by at least some feminists, as compelling and viable feminist political strategies. I will read Densmore and Solanas for how their texts disrupt the dominant discourses of sexuality, namely the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital cluster,* as well as for how they imagine strategies of celibacy or asexuality.

Celibacy and asexuality are commonly articulated as categorically different from one another, especially in the context of contemporary asexuality, on the basis that celibacy is a choice and asexuality is not (because it is a natural artifact of the biological body or psyche). While Fahs also distinguishes between celibacy and asexuality (imagining the former *as a temporary tactic* and the latter *a permanent one*), she does so in a way that fundamentally denaturalizes asexuality because it ascribes to asexuality an element of choice in order to make it a ground for a political and feminist action. I explore these boundaries that are drawn between celibacy and asexuality in the subsequent chapter, but for now I would like to suggest that blurring the distinction between asexuality and celibacy is productive. This is especially so in the context of this discussion since feminists of the late sixties and seventies do not seem to be particularly concerned with differentiating between celibacy and asexuality, imagining *both* as politically motivated choices or strategies for ending women's oppression.

Before I continue, I would like to assert the value of second wave feminist formulations on sex, sexuality, and women's oppression, if this is perhaps not already obvious. As Jo-Ann Wallace and Tessa Jordan (2011) note, second wave feminist texts are commonly read today as both passé and simplistic. The common charge is that they occlude concerns around race and class; in consequence the stories told of the second wave tend to create a distance between then and now, them and us, and perhaps even suggest a (feminist) march of progress. Even while "[a]ll political movements, feminism included, espouse social and ethical ideals as they articulate their vision of the good life or more just society," it is my assertion that many feminist insights are key to enacting personal and social transformation, and that feminist insights on asexuality, especially, may help generate politically engaged philosophies and practices that are never mute on asymmetries of gender (Vance 21). In discussing these texts, then, I hope to suggest that a feminist politics of celibacy and asexuality is politically meaningful today.

Dana Densmore is one such feminist who engaged in exploring a politics of asexuality or celibacy as a strategy for ending gendered inequality and women's oppression. Densmore was member of the Boston feminist group Cell 16, formed in 1968, which produced the feminist journal *No More Fun and Games,* and which partook in separatism and radical sexual abstinence (Fahs 2010, 448). In "Independence from the Sexual Revolution" (1971) and "On Celibacy" (1968) Densmore contributes several key insights, which remain culturally relevant to this day, and which predate, in a sense, future work on sexuality.[13]

First, Densmore undermines the *sexual imperative,* implying that sex is not entirely a natural, bodily need, but that it has been rendered central to the self by a patriarchal culture. For instance, in "On Celibacy" (1968) she writes, "[s]ex is not essential to life, as eating is. Some people go through their whole lives without engaging in it at all, including fine, warm, happy people. It is a myth that this makes one bitter, shriveled up, twisted" (264). This directly addresses a discourse that is influential to this day, namely, that sex is healthy (psychologically and physiologically) and that an absence of sex is somehow deleterious.[14] In "Independence from the Sexual Revolution" (1971), she questions the efficacy of equating fucking with freedom, to put it crudely, sardonically asserting that "[s]ex becomes a religion," and that "[i]t's forced down our throats" (58). "[P]eople seem to believe that sexual freedom […] is freedom" she complains, a "[s]exual freedom that includes no freedom to decline sex" (58). Like other feminists of her time, Densmore is skeptical of the permissive turn in culture, "not [because] sex is by its *nature* evil and destructive," but on the grounds that it does not account for women's social oppression and the violent elements of sex such as rape and unwanted sex (59, emphasis in original).[15] Likewise, she questions whether sex is really that much more exciting and pleasurable than other activities: "A lot of things are pleasurable without our getting the idea that we can't live without them […] I can think of certain foods, certain music, certain drugs, whose physical pleasurableness compares favorably even to good sex" (59). Here, Densmore is drawing our attention to the artificialness of privileging sex above other activities, when, as she writes in "On Celibacy," "sex is actually a minor need, blown out of proportion, misunderstood" (265).

Second, Densmore questions the *hetero-coital discursive cluster*, unsettling the coital and penis-centered teleological narrative of sex. She writes,

> [w]e *feel* that we need sex, but the issue is very confused. What is it we really need? Is it orgasms? Intercourse? Intimacy with another human being? Stroking? Companionship? Human kindness? And do we 'need' it physically or psychologically? (1971, 59, emphasis in original)

In this way she unravels the question of what counts as sex in our culture, exploring women's motivations for engaging in sex, which according to her include love, affection, and closeness. She is not alone in such questioning, either. Feminist Kate Millett, for instance, also interrogates the value of coitus in *Sexual Politics* (1969), describing it a "charged microcosm," which "[a]mong other things […] may serve as a model of sexual politics," denaturalizing it as "a long series of learned responses" (23, 32). Also, Densmore calls into question, what Seidman (1991) has more recently referred to as the shift towards a "sexualization of love," or the discursive merging over the twentieth century of love with sex. "We think that love is sex love, genital sex love," Densmore laments, undoing the naturalization of love *as* sex and calling into question the naturalness of genital sex (1971, 60).

Third, Densmore suggests that *celibacy* is a possible strategy for disrupting women's emotional, sexual, and social dependence on men, and encouraging autonomy, independence, and bonds with other women instead. In "On Celibacy" Densmore rallies:

> This is a call not for celibacy but for an acceptance of celibacy as an honorable alternative, one preferable to the degradation of most male-female sexual relationships. But it is only when we accept the idea of celibacy completely that we will ever be able to liberate ourselves. (266)

Densmore holds that increasing orgasms or acknowledging women's capacity for sexual pleasure is insufficient for substantial social change because women's right to pleasure is only one minor element of "the general oppression and degradation [women] suffer in the world," and because oppression exists on many levels, "the issue isn't just orgasm" (1971, 57). Sex is troubling for Densmore not in and of itself but because it is presented as the route to liberation, when it is instead part and parcel of women's oppression since it absorbs women's time and energy, increases their chance of experiencing violence and objectification, and maintains their dependence on men. Densmore advances that sex is time absorbing for women because of all the grooming, flirting, and preparations that lead up to it, diverting time away from women's liberation (for instance 1971, 56). Thus "many girls who would be most free to fight in the female liberation struggle are squandering valuable energy" (56).[16] Also, sex is "the great sop that keeps us in our place" because it is instrumental in keeping women dependent on men for pleasure and survival (1971, 58).

In this context, celibacy is imagined as a reasonable option, an efficacious strategy for gaining independence from men and funneling time and energy towards women. In this sense it smacks very much of political lesbianism, which is also often explored as a political feminist practice. For instance, Radicalesbians' well-known "The Woman Identified Woman" (1971) recommends lesbianism for feminists on the grounds that it allows for "[o]ur energies [to] flow toward our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors" (83).[17] Fahs argues, though, that Densmore and Cell 16's explorations of asexuality as feminist praxis *predate* lesbian separatism, helping to establish its foundations (2010, 455). Also, Densmore's call to celibacy becomes, most relevantly for asexuality, a method for expanding possibilities of relating, such that she argues in "Independence from the Sexual Revolution" that "we need to develop new nonsexual ways of relating to people, to men as well as women. The obsession with genital sexuality, and screwing in particular, cheats us out of a world of rich possibilities" (1971, 60). It is not so much that Densmore advocates a desexualization of life, as much as a channeling of the sexual and erotic energies to activities other than sex (1968). Finally, celibacy for Densmore entails more than 'not doing it,' it also signals a move towards a greater independence from men's approbation, and a rejection, perhaps, of the tools and methods currently employed to win men's attention and flattery: "[y]ou have to be prepared, then, to be not just unattractive but actually sexually repulsive to most men, perhaps including all the men you currently admire" (1968, 267). Densmore's strategy of celibacy thus encourages women to think critically about the permissive cultural turn, empowering women to turn their backs on men and male approval, and build a new society that refuses to settle for anything less than women's complete liberation.

Valerie Solanas' infamous "SCUM (The Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto" (1967) also, if very differently, takes up questions of asexuality as a radical practice that mounts a challenge against both the state and patriarchy.[18] Solanas, a radical anti-establishment figure who intentionally disidentified from various identity positions including *feminism,* nonetheless deserves feminist consideration because of her inimitable analyses of patriarchy and women's marginality (Fahs 2008). Immortalized most frequently for shooting Andy Warhol in 1968, an event James Harding (2001) has argued was a compelling anti-art avantgarde performance, Solanas has also often been taken up and her work reprinted in the context of feminism, enabling a broader readership (Fahs 2008).[19] For instance, Atkinson identified her as "the first outstanding champion of women's rights" and Florence Kennedy, "one of the most important spokeswomen of the feminist movement" (qtd. in Fahs 2008, 596). More recently, Fahs asserts that Solanas encourages us to the take the question of feminist radicality more seriously, to ask whether “the project of ‘man-hating’ (something that is constantly—and publicly—rejected by most modern feminists) [may] be useful, even on a theoretical level?” (2008, 593). In response to this she speculates: “She [Solanas] laughs in the face of apologetic, we-don't-really-hate-men, we're-not-lesbians, we-shave-our armpits, we're-not-offensive feminism. She arouses the central anxieties of the feminist movement” (613).

Compelled by Fahs’ poignant question, I too am reading Solanas for the insights she contributes to a feminist politics of asexuality. Her manifesto, a particularly inventive disruption of hegemonic discourses of sexuality (as of practices of consumption, social control, and as Harding argues, of art culture), effectively redeploys against men many of the cultural myths that have been told throughout history – including today – about women. A manuscript not without contradictions, “SCUM” enacts an “antagonistic dissonance,” and is “consciously disharmonious and disruptively nonassimilable,” even while it is politically radical and meaningful for feminism (Harding 148). I will consider “SCUM” first by exploring how it divides society into three groups of people – men, groovy SCUM women, and Daddy’s Girls. Next, as I did with Densmore, I will read Solanas for how she undoes dominant sexual discourses, including the *sexual imperative,* the *permissive turn,* and *the hetero-coital cluster.* Finally, I will turn to Solanas’ radical feminist solution of asexuality which enacts the end not only of women's oppression, but also the end of women's oppressors – men – through situating it in the context of her larger SCUM project.

Mobilizing language that is at once acerbic and humorous, Solanas divides society into three groups of people: men, Daddy's Girls, and groovy women. Solanas pronounces that males are among other things "entirely visceral," "half dead, unresponsive lump[s]," "utter bore[s]" (201), "walking dildo[s]," "psychically passive," and "incomplete female[s]" characterized by "pussy envy" (202). Also, according to the manifesto, they are responsible for a wide selection of cultural evils, institutions, and discourses, ranging from war, violence and hate, to niceness, politeness and dignity, and to the money-work system, culture and great art. Indeed, men have a "negative Midas touch," in that everything [they] [touch] turns to shit" (205). Man's one superiority is in "public relations" – he "has made of the world a shitpile" and convinced women of their inferiority (202). On the other hand, it is not as simple as women being unambivalently characterized by the opposite of these traits – well they are, but then they are sculpted by masculine culture into other forms, particularly into being 'Daddy's Girls.' The Daddy's Girl – "passive, adaptable, respectful of and in awe of the male" – adapts to her subservient role in society graciously, without putting up much of a fuss, and becomes incapable of seeing it for what it is – meaningless, insipid (210). In turn, only some women retain their "grooviness" and can classify as SCUM, as "self-confident, swinging, thrill-seeking females" (211). While I will elaborate further on Solanas' universe of SCUM, for now I will consider the ways in which her manifesto assembles a challenge to dominant sexual discourses.

First, Solanas, like Densmore, though in a strikingly different way, calls into question the *sexual imperative.* Early on in SCUM, we are introduced to men as truly loathsome creatures, and Solanas makes an effort to depict their obsession with sex, denaturalizing through hyperbole what Hollway has described as the male sexual drive discourse – or that men need sex, and that therefore their sex drive is beyond their control. Solanas writes that "the male is, nonetheless, obsessed with screwing; he'll swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there'll be a friendly pussy awaiting him" (202). This hyperbolic humor, while perhaps difficult on the ears (of some), effectively renders ludicrous the male sexual drive discourse. Also Solanas reconfigures the cultural logic that sex marks women as passive and men as active by claiming that "[s]crewing, then, is a desperate, compulsive attempt to prove he's not passive, not a woman," and transforming Freudian penis envy into male "pussy envy" (202). These tactics are a deconstruction or an overturning of the active/passive binary, as well as a statement on the cultural invention of discursive knowledges that reduce women to being less-than men, absent.[20] But Solanas' major analysis of sex lies in her rejection of it as unnecessary and time consuming. Her rejection of sex is grounded in a broader rejection of society, culture, men, and anything created by men – which seems to be just about everything. While I will touch on this again further on, for now I want to emphasize that in the manifesto sex is rendered, as in Densmore's pieces, a waste of time: "sex […] is a solitary experience, noncreative, a gross waste of time" (Solanas 213).[21] But unlike Densmore who is careful not to voice an anti-sex rhetoric (indicating, for instance that sex is *not* by "*nature* evil or destructive"), Solanas does not refrain from describing sex as destructive – she depicts sex as "animalistic" and "the refuge of the mindless” (Densmore 1971, 59, emphasis in original; Solanas 213). Unfortunately, Solanas does not describe in depth why sex is so base, the implication being that it binds women to men, and that it is a misuse of women’s time, time that could otherwise be spent “grooving.” Also, like Densmore, Solanas generally understands sex as heterosex and neither celebrates nor criticizes lesbian sex, and thus it is unclear whether she imagines lesbian sex as equally unworthy of one’s time.

Next, Solanas’ strategy for criticizing the *permissive turn* in culture is through invoking the figure of the hippie, the symbol, par excellence, of sixties alternative culture and the sexual revolution. For Solanas, “[t]he ‘hippie’ is enticed to the commune mainly by the prospect of all the free pussy” (208). The hippie is thus no different to other men in that he is navigated by his cock. Fahs (2008, 2010) and Harding (2001) both argue that Solanas is staunchly anti-establishment, anti-movement, and anti-capitalism and this too is perceptible in her hostility towards the quintessential figure of sixties alternative living. Furthermore, Solanas asserts that males are incapable of a true social revolution because “the male on top wants the status quo, and all the male on the bottom wants is to be the male on top” (210).

Third, the “SCUM Manifesto” also unsettles aspects of the *hetero-coital discursive cluster* by briefly challenging couple culture and what Seidman (1991) has referred to as the “sexualization of love,” or the binding of sex to love. Solanas presses that “[a] true community consists of individuals – not mere species members, not *couples*,” later in the manifesto advocating for SCUM “couple-bust[ing]” (207, emphasis added, 218). In this way, she briefly undermines the social organization of love as based on the primacy of the couple. She also nullifies the sexualization of love through stating that "[l]ove is not dependency or sex, but friendship" (211). And since this friendship is only possible between two women – that is between "two secure, free-wheeling, independent, groovy female females" (evoking again political lesbianism) – the society she envisions is based on polyamorous, potentially asexual, women-to-women friendships (211).

It is *asexuality*, as one component of a larger SCUM revolution that is envisioned by Solanas as an effective strategy for completely dismantling patriarchy. Yet, unlike Densmore who takes seriously the task of the feminist revolution, Solanas does not (seem to). *Densmore's* critique of sex and strategy of celibacy is firmly based in what I read as a sort of feminist optimism, the sense that the world not only needs to change but also that it actually will with sufficient organized feminist effort. Solanas, on the other hand, speaks from a position of nihilism, disbelieving in the possibility of change, even as she advocates for a most radical type of system overthrow.

Her proposed solution for overthrowing male society and culture is as follows. In the manifesto, SCUM – the "self-confident, swinging, thrill-seeking females" – are after creating "a female society [… of] funky females grooving on each other" (211). In order to do this the true *scum* of the earth, or men, must be eliminated in whatever way possible, and their male culture must likewise be exterminated. Part of this strategy for eliminating men is *asexuality*, an end to the reproduction of men. In addition to aiding in the elimination of men, asexuality also redirects SCUM women's attention to other pursuits, namely the remaking of society. SCUM women,

> those females least embedded in the male 'Culture,' the least nice, those crass and simple souls who reduce fucking to fucking, who are […] too selfish to raise kids and husbands […] these females are cool and relatively cerebral and skirting *asexuality*. (213, emphasis added)

Since SCUM is “impatient” it will begin to act immediately through public disobedience, withdrawal from the labour force, and a refusal to partake in the money system. The “fuck-up force” will begin its “unwork” through various means of civil disobedience including “fucking up their work,” destroying useless objects (most anything created by men including “Great Art”), taking over the airwaves, “couple-busting,” and finally, killing all men (218).

Solanas writes: “If all women simply left men, refused to have anything to do with them—ever, all men, the government, and the national economy would collapse completely,” and this is the ambitious and fictitious goal of the SCUM manifesto, a complete remaking of society through a complete annihilation of male society and culture (217). Crucially, asexuality is central to this, because it fractures women’s intimate ties with men, their oppressors, and thus frees women up to engage in the making of a new world and new world (dis)order. This is a revolutionary not reformist proposition since “SCUM is against the entire system, the very idea of law and government. SCUM is out to destroy the system, not attain certain rights within it” (220). Males will be annihilated and also cease to be reproduced, sure, but the final note of nihilism and hint that Solanas is perhaps not too hopeful of the prospects of substantial social change is in the manifesto’s assertion that females too will eventually cease to be reproduced. “Why produce even females? Why should there be future generations? What is their purpose?” (217). This nihilism, I would argue, serves to undercut the notion of revolution, questioning the possibility for social change. Also, it makes the strategy of asexuality particularly appropriate: “an asexual political agenda advances women’s liberation in the direction of *nihilism*” (Fahs 2010, 455, emphasis added).

Like Densmore, then, Solanas, envisions radical asexual strategies to end systemic problems. Both Densmore's practical solution of celibacy and Solanas' nihilistic world takeover, of which asexuality is an integral part, are embedded in a feminist dissatisfaction with gendered inequality, women's sexual and social oppression, and a world that appears to be run by men and for men. 'Not doing it' becomes a feminist weapon employed by two different feminists towards a similar set of goals: fracturing women's intimate ties with men, establishing women's sexual and social autonomy, redirecting women's time and energy towards feminist projects and woman-centered friendships, and working towards a world in which women's liberation is manifest. In outlining these two different and yet similar asexual strategies, I have hoped to demonstrate how meaningful to feminist politics 'not doing it' can be.

Finally, before concluding this chapter, I wish to briefly discuss three other articulations of feminist asexuality and celibacy. Short pieces by Jessie Bernard (1972), Myra Johnson (1977), and Candace Watson (1987), while not all comfortably fitting into the decades of women's liberation, demonstrate nonetheless that strategies of celibacy and asexuality, while marginal in feminist thought, are not only unique to Densmore and Solanas. While perhaps never a core component of the mainstream women's movement, asexuality is relevant and meaningful to feminism, as Fahs best demonstrates in her recent work (2010).

First, feminist sociologist Jessie Bernard's "Women, Marriage and the Family" published as a chapter in *Intimate Lifestyles* (1972), taps into some of the possibilities of celibacy as a feminist political tool.[22] She describes radical feminists as "fomenting […] a brand new sexual revolution [… which] is not the now stale revolution with which the women's magazines are still preoccupied—the work-harder-to-achieve-orgasm revolution—but one that transcends it" (383).[23] Like Densmore and Solanas, she is skeptical of the promises and opportunities that the sexual revolution presents for women. Also, like Densmore (whom she cites), she is hopeful of the changes that feminism will enact in the world, such as enabling a decline of housekeeping roles, marriage, and reproduction. While Bernard's "is not a call for celibacy per se" it is a sympathetic defense of celibacy as "an honorable alternative" preferable to many heterosexual relationships (384). Bernard recognizes the challenge this presents to the sexual imperative, to marriage, and to reproduction, commending "radical women" on "doing what [she] think[s] needs to be done" (384, 385). Bernard ends her short chapter with the following statement: "Fifty years from now we will look back and wonder what did we ever think was so avant garde about these women. By that time, it will just seem so matter of fact" (385). That forty years have passed, and that the texts I have been discussing continue to be read as *radical*, might therefore suggest that the project of feminist celibacy or asexuality is not at all an outdated one.

Another text of the seventies which takes up asexuality from a feminist perspective is Myra T. Johnson's "Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups," published as a chapter in *The Sexually Oppressed* (1977). Citing Bernard's chapter, as well as the texts of Densmore, Koedt, Atkinson, Jill Johnston, and other feminists (though not Solanas), Johnson perhaps provides the most extensive early consideration of asexuality. Predating the work of the scientific study of asexuality by several years, she both employs the language of women's liberation *and* raises issues that are commonly explored in asexual communities today. First she recognizes that asexuals, and asexual women in particular, are sexually oppressed (as goes the title of the volume) because they are rendered invisible by culture; asexual women are "[o]ppressed by a consensus that they are nonexistent," she writes (97). Johnson also explores the possibility of asexuality being "politically conscious" and engages in work similar to the other authors I have been discussing, disrupting the notion of the sexual revolution as liberating and questioning the sexual imperative (103). Exploring women's magazines she demonstrates that many women feel pressured to have sex as a result of the permissive turn. For instance, a letter from a reader of *Glamour* in 1974 indicates: "Please, would someone mention the fact that life can be beautiful, meaningful, rich and satisfactory with or *without* sex?" (qtd. in Johnson 101).[24] At the same time, like in contemporary work on asexuality, such as that by Scherrer (2008, 2010a, 2010b), Johnson also identifies the absence of language to describe asexuality – "[t]here appear to be few really appropriate words in the English language to describe the individual who […] seems to *prefer* not to engage in sexual activity" (97, emphasis in original).[25] Johnson's chapter, while not articulating asexuality as a radical strategy in the same way Densmore or Solanas do, effectively situates asexuality in the context of the permissive turn and raises questions about why asexual women are rendered culturally invisible.

A final piece I would like to consider could scarcely be considered an example of second wave feminism. Candace Watson's "Celibacy and It's Implications for Autonomy" (1987) published in an early issue of *Hypatia's* "Forum," is nonetheless a radical feminist text that sits well in the context of this discussion. Watson reforms the notion of celibacy to also include autoeroticism, or masturbation. She argues that for women a celibacy that includes masturbation severely challenges heterosexuality, reproduction "in service to the species," and enables bodily autonomy (158). This autonomy is "anything but a personal choice" because it is largely predetermined by "circumstance and culture [which] intervene to shape our economic, emotional, and sexual destinies" (157). Celibacy, coupled with masturbation, is a feminist strategy that Watson considers to be accessible and possible for many women and also "potentially radical [in its] invisibility" (158). Thus, unlike Johnson, she imagines the invisibility of celibacy to be one of its radical possibilities. Watson celebrates a celibacy complemented by masturbation, as a reasonable, accessible, and effective feminist tactic, one that asserts women's sexual autonomy in a social context where this is not often possible.

I have been arguing in this section that asexuality and celibacy have the capacity to be politically meaningful feminist tactics and that this is indeed the way in which they were taken up by feminists in the late sixties and seventies (and in the case of Watson (1987) and Fahs (2010), more recently as well). Not only do feminists such as Densmore and Solanas deploy asexuality and celibacy in a way that disrupts and dismantles dominant discourses of sexuality, but also they do so *intentionally*, that is with political feminist goals in mind. While these goals are various they include ending women's oppression and gendered inequality, subverting systems of power and privilege, asserting bodily autonomy, and challenging current patterns of production and reproduction.

In taking very seriously the writings of Densmore, Solanas, and others I am suggesting that we can learn from past explorations of asexuality, employing them to expand current notions, understandings, and practices of contemporary asexuality. While it is not the case that the feminist asexualities I have been here discussing are directly linked to the contemporary sexual identity category of asexuality, it is the case that contemporary asexuality would benefit from close considerations of texts such as the ones I have been discussing (and perhaps many more which have not yet been 'discovered') because they remind us of the radical, political, and feminist implications of 'not doing it.'

Notes

[1] Many argue, that notions of women's passionlessness of the nineteenth century in turn replaced earlier notions of women's sexuality as carnal, insatiable, and dangerous (Cott 220-221; Gerhard 203 n. 57).

[2] D'Emilio and Freedman note however, that while Ellis perhaps did not believe in the passionlessness of women, he did write of them as passive, modest, and in need of a male to be aroused (224-225).

[3] In particular, Moore and Cryle criticize feminist generalizations of frigidity:

> Given this historical context, it would be naive to imagine texts about 'frigidity' as automatically part of a dominant, hegemonic, or even necessarily institutionalized discourse of sexuality. It would be a further error to assume that the notion of frigidity was always a form of patriarchal power-knowledge that considered coital penetration to be the only legitimate sexual act. Yet supposing that to be so has become something of a habit in *feminist* discussions from Betty Friedan to Luce Irigaray, who have tended to see any use of the notion of feminine sexual frigidity as simplistically repressive and patriarchal. In this view talk of frigidity is based on the general phallocentrism of male doctors who failed to understand the importance for women of clitoral pleasure and of nonorgasmic forms of sexual enjoyment, a claim that clearly has greater relevance to mid- and late twentieth-century usages. (250)

[4] For instance, Freud says of the clitoris and clitoral pleasure that it is like "a pine shaving […] to set a log of harder wood on fire" (qtd. in Gerhard 2001, 30).

[5] Gerhard also notes that the discourse of women as sexually insatiable and licentious continued to creep up throughout Van de Velde's marriage manual, reflecting the persistent and stubborn presence of contradictory yet mutually enhancing discourses. Thus the discourse of women as asexual or passionless, as well as the idea of women as closeted nymphomaniacs, both continued to persist (and indeed persist until this day) (2001, 26).

[6] In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), Kinsey et al. write:

> The failure of a female to be aroused or to reach orgasm during coitus is commonly identified in the popular and technical literature as 'sexual frigidity.' We dislike the term, for it has come to connote either an unwillingness or an incapacity to function sexually. In most circumstances neither of these

> implications is correct. It is doubtful whether there is ever a complete lack of capacity, although individuals do appear to differ in their levels of response. In general females appear to be equally responsive to the whole range of physical stimuli which may initiate erotic reactions. (373)

According to Irvine, Kinsey understood women and men as similar anatomically and physiologically, but possessing different capacities to respond to *psychological* stimulation (35). See the second chapter of this thesis or Irvine's chp. 1 for a feminist analysis of Kinsey.

[7] The four phases of their sexual response cycle are excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution.

The similarity they constructed between men and women is, significantly, based on selective use of their research. This similarity was not only a "major ideological [tenet]" of their work, but also has been employed as a main model and theme of sexology ever since (see Irvine, esp. 60-66).

Also, Irvine argues that many of the claims presented by Masters and Johnson were in fact firmly grounded and based on Kinsey's work (i.e., such as the similarity of women and men's sexualities and the importance of the clitoris). For instance, she writes: "Despite their reputation as pioneers, most of William Maters and Virginia Johnson's research was not innovative" and "Masters and Johnson were later credited with revolutionizing female sexuality when they presented findings that Kinsey had published over a decade before" (53, 41).

[8] In making the clitoris an emblem for women's liberation, Koedt, especially, puts to work Masters and Johnson's findings, neither questioning their validity nor the paradigm of science from within which they are working (and which they are indeed creating). Even while Koedt questions the motives of earlier scientific work, she ardently believes in the progressiveness of Masters and Johnson, despite, as Irvine comments at length, their perhaps not being as revolutionary as history makes them out to be. They were, for instance, avid supporters of heterosex and marriage despite their findings suggesting the expendability, from the point of view of women's anatomy and sexuality, of at least the first of these (see Irvine, chp. 2).

[9] Koedt's essay first appeared as a mimeograph, was later printed in *Notes from the First Year* (1968), a radical feminist journal, and then again in *Notes from the Second Year,* which is the version I cite from (1970) (Gerhard 104, 209 n. 6).

[10] Atkinson's "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse" first appeared in *Notes from the Second Year* (1970) and this is the version from which I cite.

[11] Also see Ti-Grace Atkinson's "Vaginal Orgasm as a Mass Hysterical Survival Response" (1968) and Susan Lydon's "The Politics of Orgasm" (1970).

[12] This debate is remembered most often by way of the conference at Barnard College, "The Scholar and the Feminist," which took place in 1982 and the resulting publication, *Pleasure and Danger,* edited by Carole Vance (1984) (Gerhard 2000, 476 n.60).

[13] Densmore's "Independence from the Sexual Revolution" was first published in *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* in 1971, but I cite from its appearance in *Notes from the Third Year* (1972). "On Celibacy" appeared in the first issue of *No More Fun and Games* in 1968, but I cite from its reprinting in the Canadian anthology *Voices from Women's Liberation* (1971).

[14] Kristina Gupta, for instance, examines how scientific research and its popularizations argue for the health value of sex. Also, see the first chapter of this thesis.

[15] Another feminist critique of the permissive turn is offered by Roxanne Dunbar in "'Sexual Liberation:' More of the Same Thing" (Gerhard 109).

[16] Interestingly, Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) makes a similar argument.

[17] I am citing here from the version of "Woman Identified Woman" in *Notes from the Third Year* (1971), though it had been distributed previously in mimeographed format. Radicalesbians were initially named "The Lavender Menace" (Gerhard 112).

[18] The manifesto was mimeograph printed by Solanas in 1968 and distributed on the streets at a cost of two dollars for men and one dollar for women (Harding; Fahs 2008). James Harding (2001), exploring the anti-art avantgarde radicality of her texts, describes Solanas' method for selling her manifesto as engaging in a "provocative guerilla theatre tactics" (152). Also, the version she distributed had playful misspellings and random marginalia (such as "Tiny Tim is just another pretty face," "Wallace Fer Presadint [sic]"), which have since been intentionally edited out of future reprintings (Fahs 2008, 606-607). I am citing from the version of the manifesto reprinted in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader* (2000).

[19] Harding describes the shooting as "the most deeply provocative and profoundly subversive moment of American Avantgarde performance in the 1960s" even while it is more often rendered as an attempt by Solanas to gain fame or as evidence of her mental instability (Harding 146; Fahs 2008).

[20] Jacques Derrida (1982) suggests that deconstruction involves "an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system," – reversal/displacement, or inversion/displacement (329). Elizabeth Grosz (2005) reminds us, though, that at best "[a] breach in this oppositional structure is only temporary, and can only sustain itself for a short time" (7).

[21] In a similar way she says of herself in a 1967 interview, "I'm no lesbian. I haven't got time for sex of any kind. That's a hang-up" (qtd. in Fahs 2008, 598).

[22] Jessie Bernard's "Women, Marriage and the Family" was first published as a chapter in *Intimate Lifestyles* in 1972, but I cite from the version in the 1975 edition.

[23] Here I am reminded of Thea Cacchioni's (2007) discussion of women's "sex work," or the "unacknowledged effort and the continuing monitoring which women are expected to devote to managing theirs and their partners' sexual desires and activities" (301). Also see the first chapter of this thesis.

[24] Also, a reader of *Mademoiselle* in 1972 recognizes that the sexual liberation was created by and for a certain group of individuals, namely the children of the urban middle class: "In many ways, sexual freedom is the philosophical toy of the college student. Individuals 'discuss' sexual freedom all too often in terms that will serve only to reinforce the choices *they* have made" (qtd. in Johnson 102). Or a 1971 article in *Glamour* voices concern over choice and medicalization: "Now it seems a new rigidity is developing. A woman is no longer free *not* to have a sex life […] Because a girl chooses not to have sexual relations does not make her a case for the analyst" (qtd. in Johnson 102).

[25] This lack of language is also frequently discussed on asexual blogs and academically by Scherrer (2008, 2010a, 2010b).

CHAPTER FOUR
Producing Stories: Imagining Asexual Futures

Nothing bad happens to you if you don't like sex.
–David Jay on CNN's *Showbiz Tonight,* 2006

Paradoxical as it may seem, is it possible that not desiring sex
can be part of that radical sexual culture?
–Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, "New Orientations," 2010, p.662

This final chapter begins where the first chapter left off – knee deep in the complex web of sexual discourses that both constrain and enable sexual and asexual practices, identities, and meanings. Yet while in the first chapter I delineated the ways in which sexual discourses limit our mobility in this sexual world, this current chapter considers instead how discourses provide the raw materials for making sense of our sexualities and ourselves. The goals of this chapter are thus as follows: to assert that asexuality is a meaningful set of practices that effectively disrupts dominant discourses of sex and sexuality *and* to complicate this celebration of asexuality through suggesting that contemporary asexuality is indiscriminately bound to the body in a way that obfuscates political and gendered analysis.

In "Frictions, Tensions, Misalignments" I revisit Foucauldian notions of discourses as necessarily contradictory and complex, and thus as enabling and full of possibilities. Next, in "AVEN" I consider closely what stories the Asexual Visibility and Education Network is telling about asexuality, and which stories it is leaving out. Finally, in "Asexual Futures" I celebrate the many ways in which asexuality disrupts the dominant discourses of sexuality, such as the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital* *cluster,* while ultimately arguing that contemporary asexuality might glean insights from feminist political practices and theorizations of asexuality.

I. Frictions, Tensions, Misalignments: On Discourses and Possibilities

In the introduction to this thesis, I explored the webs of discourses within which asexuality must be made sense. These include the *sexual imperative*, which suggests that sex and sexuality are central to 'healthy' lives and relationships, and the *hetero-coital discursive cluster*, which encourages a very particular narrative enactment of sex and sexuality. I argued that these (and other) discourses mould our sexual and non-sexual lives, constraining in advance the possibilities and subject positions available. The set of questions I left unasked and unanswered, revolve around how asexuality, as a sexual identity, can arise in a discursive setting that seems to make it impossible for it to arise. In other words, how is it that asexuality has become a sexual possibility in a context that emphasizes its impossibility? I thus begin this chapter, with exploring how discourses not only limit but also *enable*.

Notably, Foucault writes of "[d]iscourse [that it] transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it," acknowledging both its limiting and enabling possibilities (101). At any one time, various contradictory discourses exist concomitantly, interweaving to enable *various* subject positions: "[d]ifferent discourses […] offer competing possibilities for forming personal identity" (Potts 2002, 17). Because "[d]iscourses are multiple and they offer *competing,* potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world," they provide opportunities for various subjectivities and subject positions (Gavey 85, emphasis added). Gareth Terry (2006), in his thesis on non-religious celibacy among heterosexual men, demonstrates how the 'strangeness' of male celibacy exemplifies a collision between sexual discourses such as the sexual imperative and discourses of masculinity, which render men rational, agential, self-choosing subjects. Celibate men thus at once undermine the sexual imperative while perhaps reifying neo-liberal discourses of 'choice' and masculine control. As Terry demonstrates, the present is a moment of many contradictory discourses; the sexual imperative has become a dominant discourse, for men *and* women, without dismantling discourses of sex negativity and women's sexual passivity and asexuality. In peculiar ways notions of women's sexual passivity actually comingle with the sexual and permissive imperatives, as Annie Potts makes evident with her feminist deconstruction of John Gray's *Mars and Venus* self-help books (Potts 1998; also Potts 2002). For instance, Potts (1998) demonstrates that men and women are considered fundamentally dissimilar in Gray's books, indeed from different planets, with men as active, whole, and in need of 'quickies' and women as passive, lacking, and in need of romance. At the same time, because sex is understood as a necessary, healthy part of a relationship and an integral part of the self, especially the *masculine* self, sex is compulsive, whether or not women desire it as much as men. Thus, Gray advocates that women put up with 'quickies' regardless of whether they enjoy them because "sexual rejection wounds a man's soul" (Potts 1998, 160). In this way, women, who are understood as perhaps less desiring than men, must assume their passive role and heed the male sexual drive discourse, the sexual imperative, and the permissive discourse, engaging in unwanted sex which is fundamentally vacated of consent (see Potts 1998).

Critically, however, it is the occasional friction, tension, and misalignment of such contradictory discourses that allows for sexuality to be experienced diversely, and to substantially change from one historical period to another. Wendy Hollway (1984) explains that "[t]he advantage of the [Foucauldian] idea that current at any one time are competing, potentially contradictory discourses […] rather than a single patriarchal ideology, is that we can pose the question, how is it that people take up positions in one discourse rather than another?" (237). In terms of heterosexual relationships, Hollway argues that gender difference is reproduced and maintained in day-to-day interactions, including through sex, but that "[w]hen there remain contradictions in each person's wants of the other, there is ground for an interruption of its reproduction" (259-260, 252). Moreover, "[e]very relation and every practice to some extent articulates such contradictions and therefore is a site of potential change as much as it is a site of reproduction" (260). In this way discourses not only shift, but they can be shifted through social efforts and political action. In brief – "[w]here there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95).

Feminists writing on heterosexuality have emphasized the disjuncture between institutionalized discourses and quotidian practices, a disjuncture which enables heterosexual women to be more than dupes of dominant discourses or ideologies.[1] While recognizing the constricting effects of discourses, many have also argued for varying degrees of mobility within discourses (for instance Segal; Overall; Rowland). So while heterosexuality is certainly "implicated in the subordination of women," "conflating heterosexuality as an institution with heterosexual practice, experience, and identity" is understood to be an inadequate simplification permeated with a monolithic conception of heterosexuality as unaltered and unalterable (Jackson 1995, 11). For instance, Hollway admits that heterosexual practices both reproduce gender difference while acting as the ground for their interruption. Similarly, Lynne Segal (1994) asserts that "the codes linking sexuality to hierarchical polarities of gender, though always present, are never fixed and immutable. On the contrary, they are chronically unstable and actually very easy to subvert and parody" (242). This 'chronic instability' of occupying discourses accurately and predictably allows for a disjuncture or misalignment between discourse and practice. So even while discourses inform and shape our subject positions, it is inevitable that they will be reproduced in various and contradictory ways in day-to-day life. Thus, 'heteronormativity' – "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged" – and heterosexual practices are not necessarily self-same (Berlant and Warner 548, n. 2).

This propensity for the misalignment of institutionalized discourses and practices, is perhaps most innovatively asserted by Judith Butler (1990) when she argues that gender is created through the repetition of acts, which then congeal to form the gendered subject, providing only an "*appearance of substance*" (192, emphasis in original). Since exact repetition is de facto impossible, and there will always be an "occasional *dis*continuity," or the "possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition," the naturalness or continuity of gender, or of whatever else, is revealed a farce (192, emphasis in original). Thus discourses, taken for granted as part of the daily fabric of life, are in fact lived variously, inconsistently, contradictorily. And although it is crucial not to overstate agency, it is useful to remember that there are many ways to inhabit discourses and be inhabited by discourses. This hopeful realization that discourses of sexuality are both lived variously as well as likely to change (though often in unpredictable and accidental ways), enables asexuality to be understood as a form of sexual contestation even while it is not celebrated uncritically.

II. AVEN: The Public Face of Asexuality

In order to perform the rather celebratory work of considering how asexuality disfigures dominant sexual discourses, it is useful to first analyze the definitional maneuvers that The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (that is, AVEN) undertakes. This is integral because AVEN has become the *public face* of asexuality, informing asexual identification and practice, appearing in the popular media and in academic journals, and generally functioning to stand in *for* and *as* asexuality. While this makes sense since the birth of AVEN has actually allowed for asexuality to become culturally intelligible and to be taken up to the extent it has been by the popular press and by academic literature, it is nonetheless necessary to read AVEN critically, inquiring into how it tells the story of asexuality and what it leaves out of this story. In particular, I will briefly consider three aspects of the story AVEN consistently tells about asexuality: (1) the notion that asexuality is not a culturally inflected phenomenon but an intrinsic and unchangeable part of the psyche or biology, (2) the absence of a substantial critique of the medicalization of sexual lack, and (3) the untold story of gender. Before undertaking this consideration, I will first provide a discussion of AVEN's goals and functions.

The Asexual Education and Visibility Network (AVEN), which was formed by David Jay in 2001, has been a central force not only in the formation of an asexual community, but also in the very creation of the concept of 'asexuality' and its coverage by both the media and by academic, including scientific, research. As Lori Brotto et al. (2010) comment in their study on asexuality: "members of the AVEN community see it as part of the 'visibility and education' efforts of AVEN to liaise with researchers who conduct scientific trials on asexuality, in particular if those studies have the result of reducing stigma" (613). AVEN is a multi-language platform "with two distinct goals: creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community" ("About AVEN"). Members of AVEN participate in online forums and blogs, organize local meetings, distribute information about asexuality at gay pride parades, and liaise with both the media and academic researchers. As a website and community, AVEN aids in the public recognition of asexuality as a sexual orientation, and provides support, enabling individuals to *identify* as asexual. For instance, in her qualitative study, Kristin Scherrer (2008) describes how people who experience a disinterest in sex often identify as asexual only after they encounter the AVEN website; as one research participant indicates:

> I've been able to call myself asexual since I first read the AVEN FAQs at age 20. I didn't call myself asexual for several months because I needed to have a good long think about the whole matter. I concluded that I'd always been asexual, even if I didn't have a handy label to stick on. (630)

AVEN thus plays a central role in fostering an asexual community and making the category of asexuality meaningful and intelligible to a broader segment of the population.

Also, AVEN plays a formational role in *defining* asexuality. The website indicates that an asexual is "a person who does not experience sexual attraction" and this definition becomes central to how asexuals come to understand their sexualities, such that in Scherrer's study 44 percent of asexual participants provided this very definition of asexuality (*AVEN;* Scherrer 2008, 626; also see Brotto et al. 2010). I am suggesting, therefore, that asexuality, while presenting many opportunities for various identifications, is nonetheless to some extent, caught up in an identity politics that might come to operate on grounds of exclusion, since identities "work to limit and constrain in advance" (Butler 1990, 187; Przybylo 2011). As Linda Nicholson (1990), in her introduction to the reader on feminism and postmodernism warns, "the very categories we use to liberate us may also have their controlling moment" (16).

In the case of AVEN, several stories become rehearsed as the truth of asexuality. The first of these is the belief that asexuality is something one acquires biologically, *not* culturally. This is evident, for instance in AVEN's decisive assertions that asexuality is *unlike* celibacy. While celibacy is understood as a 'repression' of one's natural inclination towards sex, asexuality is conceived as a natural disinclination towards sex. Also whereas celibacy is understood as a 'choice,' asexuality is understood as *not* a choice, but rather "an intrinsic part of who we are," something internal to the psyche or biology, and something one is simply born with ("Overview;" also see Scherrer 2008, 631). Useful for purposes of legitimacy and identity demarcation, this distinction between celibacy and asexuality effectively suggests that since asexuality is *not chosen*, it is therefore 'real,' natural, and resistant to social or cultural pressures. This demarcation of celibacy-as-choice, and asexuality-as-nonchoice is specious because it fails to account for the ways in which *every* sexual expression, identity, or practice is both culturally constructed and culturally enabled. In other words, choice/nonchoice is not a particularly useful schema for thinking about our sexualities, since it is rare that sexuality is something one chooses, or fails to choose, but sexualities are instead comprised of complex imbrications that both enable and constrict moments of agency.[2]

Another way in which the naturalness of asexuality is upheld is through AVEN's less frequent argument that asexuality is a fundamentally unchanging state of the body.[3] As the website indicates:

> Most people on AVEN have been asexual for our entire lives. Just as people will rarely and unexpectedly go from being straight to gay, asexual people will rarely and unexpectedly become sexual or vice versa. Another small minority will think of themselves as asexual for a brief period of time while exploring and questioning their own sexuality. ("Overview")

In this way, asexuality and sexuality become fixed as unchanging and fundamentally coherent components of human psyche and biology. This places high value on a form of asexuality that remains unaltered and unmodified throughout one's life, an asexuality that may be difficult if not impossible for individuals to inhabit. As with distinguishing asexuality from celibacy, arguing for asexuality's permanence functions to legitimize and confirm asexuality's existence to those who are skeptical or might wish to undermine its plausibility. However, the notion that asexuality is a permanent and unchanging aspect of the self also functions restrictively and prescriptively, binding sexuality to the body in a way that obviates consideration of the relational and cultural factors that influence the development of sexual practices and identities.

The second story that AVEN frequently tells about asexuality, is that it is not a dysfunction, but a 'healthy,' happy, distress-free state. While this may seem fairly benign, it is problematic in at least two ways. First, it fails to question more broadly the paradigm that medicalizes sexual lack or lack of sexual desire in the first place. Second, as Eunjung Kim (2010) has recently mentioned, "[c]laiming positive identity based on good health status and normalcy has the potential to ignore those people with various health issues, sexually related or not" (160). As the website indicates:

> *People do not need sexual arousal to be healthy, but in a minority of cases a lack of arousal can be the symptom of a more serious medical condition. If you do not experience sexual arousal or if you suddenly lose interest in sex you should probably check with a doctor just to be safe.* ("Overview," emphasis in original)

As evidenced in the above quotation, asexuality becomes legitimized through its opposition to dysfunction or disorder, while the existence of dysfunction itself, as well as the authority of the medical institution in defining this dysfunction, is left intact and unchallenged.[4]

Specifically, in order to demonstrate that asexuality is not a disorder, asexuals actively distance themselves from states of "distress" and from "interpersonal difficulty," both of which are required to currently diagnose Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), which is regularly explored in scientific research in relation to asexuality.[5] Though this is less visible on the AVEN website, asexuals emphasize that they are not distressed in media interviews by way of discussing the joyful, social, and healthy aspects of asexuality. As David Jay passionately argues on a special of ABC's *20/20* in 2006: "What I mind is when the idea gets enforced that people need sex, that without sex you're somehow broken. And of course we can be happy without sex." In subtle ways, then, AVEN asexuals position themselves in opposition to sexual disorders, suggesting that while sexual lack disorders might exist, they are fundamentally dissimilar from asexuality.

Indeed, even Cerankowski and Milks' recent *Feminist Studies* (2010) article on asexuality maintains the discreteness of categories of 'health' and 'disease' based on 'distress' – arguing that asexuals are healthy because *not* distressed. They write, "there is a marked difference between those who experience a decrease in sex drive or lack of sexual desire and are *distressed* by this and those who do not experience sexual desire and are *not distressed* by this" (653, emphasis added). What they fail to consider is that distress is a highly flawed concept since any form of sexual distress if both relationally and culturally influenced.[6] To be terse, depathologizing asexuality *solely* on the basis that asexuals are not distressed, still leaves asexuality vulnerable to being understood as 'abnormal,' 'unhealthy,' or even 'dysfunctional,' failing to substantively challenge the medicalization of sexual lack as well as the concomitant healthicization of sex.

Finally, one story that repeatedly fails to be told by AVEN is that of *gender*. Such silence around gender is difficult to trace, but it is significant because as Sedgwick (1990) writes, silence is "as pointed and performative as speech" (4).[7] AVEN-based asexuality generally fails to explore questions such as: How is asexuality different for women and men? How do dominant discourses of sexuality – including the sexual imperative, the male sexual drive discourse, the permissive discourse, etc. – variously impact the meanings of asexuality for women and men? In what ways are ideals of masculinity and femininity challenged and/or upheld by asexuality? *If* more women are asexual, how can this be explained in a way that does not rely on essentialist notions of biological difference?[8]

I have been exploring these various facets of AVEN's articulations of asexuality because AVEN plays a focal and formative role in how asexuality is imagined and how asexuals understand their sexualities. In other words, it serves as a springboard for all further explorations of the topic. But while I have been somewhat overstating AVEN's rigidity in order to emphasize its circumscribing moments, I would like to end this section on a more hopeful note, asserting, as Scherrer (2008) does, that asexuality shares an *ambivalent* relationship with essentialist notions of sexuality, such that it both challenges and reifies simplistic notions that hinge sexuality to the biological body or psyche (629). Or as the AVEN website muses, in an apt depiction of (a)sexuality as shifting and shiftable, as plural and variously experienced:

> There is no litmus test to determine if someone is asexual. Asexuality is like any other identity- at its core, it's just a word that people use to help figure themselves out. If at any point someone finds the word asexual useful to describe themselves, we encourage them to use it for as long as it makes sense to do so. ("Overview")

III. Asexuality, Feminism, Futures

On this note, then, I would like to finally consider how contemporary asexuality provides opportunities for complicating dominant sexual discourses such as the *sexual imperative* and the *hetero-coital discursive cluster*. But even as I do so, I want to consider critically what other discourses are being reified or emphasized. Earlier I discussed Terry's work on non-religious celibacy among men in which he ultimately argues that while celibacy challenges the sexual imperative it also reifies other discourses such as notions of masculinity as based on control and rationality. Similarly, in a recent volume on polyamory, *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (2010), a central theme that emerges is that even while various forms of polyamory undermine the cultural imperative to couple, they often recycle other dominant discourses such as the sexual imperative or normative notions of love and intimacy. I am thus suggesting that while it is useful to examine asexuality for how it breaks with those discourses of sexuality that are experienced as natural, common sense, and taken for granted as truth, it is also crucial that asexuality not be celebrated uncritically. Here I take seriously Elisa Glick's (2000) warning against assuming "that some sexualities are more liberatory than others, and the most liberatory ones of all should serve as the foundation for a politics of resistance" (24). This chapter will thus end on a note that is at once celebratory and critical, reflecting on what feminist articulations of asexuality might offer to future debates on asexuality.

As I discussed earlier in this thesis, one dominant discourse of sexuality today is the *sexual imperative* which, fueled in part by the permissive turn, emphasizes sex and sexuality as healthy, integral, and necessary components of the self. Contemporary asexuality undermines and denaturalizes the sexual imperative, demonstrating that since sex and sexuality are not experienced as natural by everyone, they must not be the only options culturally available. Asexuality blatantly refutes the sexual imperative, suggesting that sex need not be integral to a person's life or be the gold nugget of romantic relationships. Asexuals regularly question the 'specialness' of sex, preferring other activities as more meaningful, fun, and rewarding. Even while sexuality becomes integral to their sense of self and identity in that asexuality is a "'sexual orientation of no' […] not 'no sexual orientation,'" Scherrer (2008) argues that asexuality decentralizes the focus on defining one's sexual self *only* in terms of the gender of object choice (Melby 5). Instead, asexuality envisions sexuality as comprised of many axes – including the sexual axis (whether one is sexual or asexual), the romantic axis (whether one is romantic or aromantic), and the axis of object choice (whether one is hetero, bi, or gay). In other words, sexual identity becomes a more robust and layered aspect of the self.

Also, asexuality suggests that sex is not inherently and acontextually fun, healthy, natural, and good. David Jay, the founder of AVEN, while being interviewed for CNN's *Showbiz Tonight*, comments that "nothing bad happens to you if you don't like sex" – a *crucial* insight considering the current medicalization of a lack of sexual desire, and the concomitant healthicization of sex (see for instance Cacchioni or Gupta; "Asexuality on CNN Showbiz Tonight"). In another interview, this time for ABC's *20/20,* Jay comments that "for [him] sex was never anything it made sense to do" (see "Asexuality on 20/20"). This statement suggests that if an intrinsic desire to have sex is not exhibited by *everyone*, then perhaps sex is not as 'natural' as is commonly presumed, or to appropriate Tiefer's phrase, that "sex is not a natural act" (1995). Asexuality also substantially and openly dismantles the notion that sex needs to serve as the glue of a romantic relationship and that anytime a relationship is romantic, sex must necessarily be at its core. This draws attention to what Seidman (1991) has described as the "sexualization of love" or the implication that sex is a manifestation and expression of one's love for another person. Instead, on *Showbiz Tonight* Jay insists that "sex and love are different things." Also, because *men* identify and understand themselves as asexual, they effectively challenge the *male sexual drive discourse* which suggests, as Hollway (1984) and Gavey (2005) explore, that men are always in need of sex, and "that men's sexuality is directly produced by a biological drive, the function of which is to ensure reproduction of the species" (Hollway 231). In relation to this, asexuality also questions the *permissive discourse,* which implies that women have sexual appetites and drives akin to those of men. As I discussed in the context of texts from the women's liberation movement, asexuality might provide women an identity through which they can resist the permissive discourse and reject, in an ongoing manner, unwanted sex. Thus if a women does not desire sex, asexuality provides her with grounds on which to *not* have sex, whereas otherwise she might feel obliged to. In all these ways asexuality might be a "radical refusal" for women and men, a refusal that enables a questioning of *the natural* and a subsequent reworking of dominant discourses of sexuality (Fahs 2010).

All the while, however, asexuality is perhaps not that *radical* after all in the sense that it often distances itself from a political stance and relies on the *biological imperative* for legitimization. Asexuals regularly take up the position that asexuality *is* natural or innate and that it derives from the workings of the pre-cultural body. Scherrer (2008) finds that many participants describe themselves as naturally asexual, in that they feel they were always asexual, even before they had the language to describe this aspect of themselves. One example of how the biological imperative is rehearsed by those who identify as asexual is in terms of *masturbation*, which is depicted by some as a physiological need, a way to "clean out the plumbing" or to relieve stress (Brotto et al. 611; Scherrer 2008, 628). Also, as I explored earlier, asexuals disidentify from sexual desire disorders such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) and maintain that they are healthy and undistressed, failing to question the broader medicalization of sexual lack.[9] As Kim writes, "the way that asexual activists use the claim of 'being healthy' and seek legitimacy and normality in the name of health to counter the pathological charge significantly limits our understandings of diverse asexual lives" (158). Nonetheless, "asexuality has a complicated relationship with essentialist notions of sexuality" and even as it relies on the biological imperative to make sense of itself, “asexuality simultaneously challenges essentialist understandings of sexuality as naturally being part of a human experience” (Scherrer 2008, 632).

In similar ways, asexuality both upholds and challenges aspects of the *hetero-coital discursive cluster*, which argues for the cohesiveness of the teleological narrative of heterosexuality, the couple, coitus, and orgasm. First, it appears that queer, gay, lesbian, and especially bi identities are common among asexuals and in the asexual community, disturbing the primacy of heterosexuality (Scherrer 2008). Indeed, queernesss is incorporated into the project of asexuality, and asexuality is built around the premise that people may be gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. This is also demonstrated by asexual eagerness to participate in pride parades (including in San Francisco, Toronto, and London).

Likewise, asexuality raises significant questions about the centrality of the couple and the compulsion to couple in our culture (see Scherrer 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Often questioning what ‘counts’ as a relationship and exploring other forms of intimacy, asexuality encourages polyamory, singlehood, and intimate friendships. This is especially the case, Scherrer (2008) argues, for those who identify as *aromantic* asexuals. In her study she found that while many who identify as romantic continue to search for monogamous partnerships, those who understand themselves to be *aromantic* instead prefer networks of friendship (633). Asked to describe their ideal relationships, participants depicted a variety of relationship models, some resembling cultural ideals, others not. For instance, one man depicts the romantic imperative when describing his ideal partner as “[a] soulmate and best friend who I/we [sic] can hold each other and be close. Someone I can depend on and grow old together and experience and learn life together" (Scherrer 2010b, 63). Other participants preferred polyamorous relationships; one participant described her ideal as "[a] group relationship with two men and maybe another woman, and a separate relationship with a woman" (Scherrer 2010b, 65). Or, alternatively, yet another participant confronts the male sexual drive discourse by submitting that if she had a sexual partner, she would encourage him to have sex outside of the relationship: "I desire a socially monogamous, intimate relationship. I don't care about the sex […] but if he wants to go elsewhere and forgo sex with me altogether that is fine, too. Better, actually. I would be open to a polyamorous relationship" (Scherrer 2010a, 158). These examples suggest that asexuality opens the door for forms of intimacy and relating other than those that are discursively situated as standard and natural, namely coupled heterosexuality. Also, asexuality troubles *both* monogamy and polyamory in that it calls into question the centrality of sex integral to both, inciting reflections on the role of sex in all forms of relationships and exploring styles of relating that are aromantic or friendship based (Scherrer 2010b, 65-66). Thus, asexuality also dismantles the notion that romantic relationships are superior to other relational configurations such as friendship and family. In addition to this, asexuality advances that autoeroticism and solitary sex or masturbation are suitable strategies for expressing one's asexuality, again disheveling the ideal of coupled sex.

Asexual practices, other than *not* consisting of sex, also consist of a proliferation of expressions of intimacy such as kissing, cuddling, and fondling, reformulating in this sense which practices are most valuable and "problematiz[ing] the boundaries between the sexual and the non-sexual" (Scherrer 2008, 629). In such a way, asexuals disrupt the narrative of heterosexuality through exploring and preferring acts other than coitus, which is commonly understood in our culture as the most intimate and pleasurable sexual act. Asexuals thus explore both noncoital and nonorgasmic forms of pleasure, including kissing, cuddling, holding hands, or relating to others in nonphysical ways. And, as in the case of aromantic asexuals who might not derive pleasure from kissing or cuddling, intimacy is suggested as *exceeding* the physical.

On the other hand, however, sex is maintained by asexuals to be *intercourse.* One participant in Brotto et al.'s (2010) study indicates that "[e]veryone's definition of sexual activity is somewhat different but I mean asexual people just aren't interested in *intercourse* and there are all different levels of how far they'll go" demonstrating rigid and limiting notions of what counts as sex (610, emphasis added). As Scherrer evinces,

> the boundaries between sexual and not sexual are largely based on an *androcentric* understanding of sex, where behaviors other than penile-vaginal intercourse are generally delineated as not sexual. (2008, 627, emphasis added)

While this might enable asexuals to retain a coherent sense of themselves and their sexual identity, it does little in the way of reconsidering what 'counts' as sex and how this definition of sex is culturally invented. At the same time, though, Scherrer points out that redefining behaviours that are commonly understood to be sexual as *non-sexual*, actually does draw our attention to how acts such as masturbation or kissing are not *inherently* sexual but rather culturally constructed and understood in this way (2008, 629).

I wish to suggest that the ways in which asexuality unsettles the cohesiveness of the hetero-coital cluster and engages in a form of 'queering' is not unlike that of Butler's (1990) *subversive repetition.* The *heterosexual matrix*, comprised of sex-gender-desire (where sex is innate, gender stems from sex, and sexuality stems from gender) assumes, like the hetero-coital cluster, that a certain alignment of acts and desires is natural and normal. While Butler argues that acts of subversive repetition such as drag reveal the artificiality and constructedness of the heterosexual matrix, *asexuality* might likewise reveal the constructedness of the hetero-coital cluster of heterosexuality-coupledom-coitus-orgasm. Thus, revealing the constructedness of the hetero-coital narrative, asexuality also exhibits that other sexual and nonsexual stories are possible. While, again, I do not want to overstate the effects of such subversive repetition, it is easy to see how expressions of sexuality and forms of sex that do not readily adhere to a dominant normative ideal may function to denaturalize what otherwise might remain unquestioned and unquestionable. This is not of course to say that *only* asexuality – asexual identities and practices – allow for this sort of disruption, since discursive disruptions occur regularly in our day-to-day lives, as Hollway attests, "[e]very relation and every practice to some extent articulates such contradictions and therefore is a site of potential change as much as it is a site of reproduction" (260). Cerankowski and Milks also make the argument that asexuality has the capacity to queer or to be queer, asking, "[p]aradoxical as it may seem, is it possible that not desiring sex can be part of that radical sexual culture?" (662).

The utility, for *feminist politics* of exploring the possibilities for such a rupture of dominant modes of sexual and relational organization through *asexuality* is that it might offer sexual schemas that are perhaps *less* disadvantageous for women than those currently in place. But while this may be the case, contemporary asexuality generally fails to draw political meanings and make connections between asexual practice, identity *and* broader socio-cultural frameworks. While the texts of the women's liberation movement, which I discussed in the previous chapter, enunciated asexuality as a feminist political strategy or tool for dismantling women's oppression, contemporary asexuality is commonly understood as an aspect of the self disconnected from issues of gender. It is naïve to argue that asexuality *should* be theorized and practiced today in the same way it was by feminists of the late sixties and seventies, since these are two very different forms of asexuality born of different historical moments. Nonetheless, reading feminist texts on asexuality provides us with several key insights for future analyses of asexuality.

First, while feminist texts explicitly elaborated on the specificity of what asexuality signified for women in the context of systemic and gendered inequality, contemporary asexuality is rather mute on the matter of *gender*. In failing to consider how asexuality for women and asexuality for men might be very different experientially, asexuality ultimately renders gender invisible. Thus the cultural and relational motivations that might incite or inspire asexuality in women are completely eschewed when asexuality is understood as a sexual orientation or an artifact of the body. We should instead ask: How might asexuality aid in the demedicalization of sexual desire disorders for women? In what ways might asexuality open up new relational and practical possibilities for women? How might the contemporary cultural availability of asexuality influence a woman's sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual possibilities? In other words, asymmetries, not least those of gender, permeate how sexuality and consequently sex are understood and experienced in everyday life. It is a mistake to assert that gendered patterns of sex and sexuality in our world have nothing whatsoever to do with asexuality. And of course, it is never only gender that influences how discourses are navigated and lived, but also many other aspects of the self, including ability, age, race, and class. It is appropriate in this context to raise Kim's concerns:

> Can one be asexual and claim asexuality as a positive identity within a society that understands asexuality not only as a sign of contempt but also as a naturalized trait for some people? What is it like to be asexual when one is not considered sexual at all or is somehow prohibited from being sexual? Many people are ordered into nonsexual and nonreproductive lives because of their age, disability, health, race, gender, class, or appearance. (161)

Second, feminist articulations of asexuality remind us that there is a *politics* informing 'not doing it.' Asexuality, like sexuality, is both limited and enabled by cultural and relational factors, which are in turn informed by discourses. Asexuality made sense for some feminists of the last sixties and seventies because it obstructed women's sexual accessibility and enabled for a transference of time and energy away from men and towards other women. Theorizations of feminist asexuality were thus spurred by a context in which *androcentric* permissiveness and *gendered* inequality were incredibly ubiquitous. What is it that drives the asexuality of today, what is its particularity, and what are its politics? Contemporary asexuality might be feminist in the sense that it disconfigures dominant discourses of sexuality. But it is also *not* feminist because it is not understood as a "radical refusal" in the way Fahs argues feminist asexuality was, primarily because it is *not considered to be a refusal at all*, but rather a natural state of the body. It is necessary to imagine how asexuality, whether or not it is experienced as choice, is in fact political.

I have been arguing that asexuality disrupts dominant discourses and demonstrates that those aspects of our sexualities that we take for granted as facts are actually *culturally expedient fictions*. Asexuality, in the contemporary moment, offers possibilities for rethinking the centrality of sex and the naturalization of sexual norms. Yet, as long as we fail to acknowledge the cultural relevancy and embeddedness of asexuality, its necessarily political valence, and its meanings in a fundamentally gendered society, it is likely that we will also fail to acknowledge all that asexuality has to offer – both theoretically and in practice.

Notes

[1] My thanks to Michelle Meagher who in a conversation drafted the term "institutionalized discourses."

Feminist work on heterosexuality includes: Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993), Segal (1994), Waldby (1995), Jackson (1995), Richardson (1996), Rowland (1996), Overall (1999), Potts (2002), Sullivan, chp. 7 (2003), Gavey (2005), and Jackson and Scott (2010).

[2] This distinction between *celibacy* and *asexuality,* I will add, is not unique to AVEN, but is also sometimes emphasized in literature on celibacy. For instance Sandra Bell and Elisa Sobo (2001) writing on celibacy argue that:

> Celibacy must, at least first, and at least conceptually, entail a *denial* of sexual desire. That is, simple *asexuality* – simply having no sexual drive – does not count (unless it has been instilled by celibate practices). One cannot abstain from what one has no appetite for doing. (12, emphasis added)

Likewise, Terry writing on non-religious celibacy among heterosexual men in New Zealand, comes across participants who also emphasize the choice aspect of their celibacy, such as Aragorn who states that "celibacy is an active thing and that there's a proactive choice" (97).

[3] But, unlike with AVEN's categorical separation of asexuality from celibacy, the question of permanence seems to be a much less stringent requirement of asexuality. For instance, the "General FAQ" on AVEN recognizes that

> sexuality can be fluid, and it can change over a period of time for some people. If you find that you have little or no sexual attraction to other people now, then you can choose to identify as asexual. Many asexual people were more sexually active during puberty or another period of their lives. However, at this moment they do not experience sexual attraction to others and identify as asexual. ("General FAQ")

This apt depiction of (a)sexuality as shifting and shiftable, as plural and variously experienced, speaks to the variety of subject positions that asexuality might enable.

[4] Also, see Chapter 2, Section III: “Asexuality, Science,” for a discussion of how asexuals challenge notions of “distress” in the context of scientific research.

[5] HSDD is currently defined by the DSM-IV-TR (2000) as “[p]ersistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity […] caus[ing] marked distress or interpersonal difficulty” (DSM-IV-TR 541). Crucially, at least as far as the *current* DSM is concerned, the diagnosis of HSDD is hinged to ‘distress,’ and thus asexuality does *not* qualify, as long as asexuals are not ‘distressed.’

Also, see Chapter 2, Section III: “Asexuality, Science.”

[6] Critiques of ‘distress’ exist both within the asexual community and within sexological writing. For instance, asexual blogger, Andrew Hinderliter (2010), in an online article recognizes that distress can be relational or caused by things other than one’s asexuality and even Prause and Graham (2007), in their scientific study on asexuality, acknowledge that distress may be due to social expectations (353). Distress, as a component of diagnosis, has also been criticized widely within sexology, such as by Walter Everaerd and Stephanie Both (2001), Richard Balon (2008), and by Lori Brotto (2009), which has led to recommendations that it be much less central in the DSM-V (see APA’s *DSM-V Development*).

[7] It is possible that AVEN's neutralization of gender speaks to a broader cultural politics of what feminist Susan Bordo described already in 1993 as “gender-skepticism” – “a new skepticism about the use of gender as an analytical category” (216). This would interestingly make sense of many asexuals’ rejection of the two-gender system and their adoption of more fluid gender positions (Hinderliter 2009; Chasin). For instance, in Brotto et al.’s (2010) study, 27 out of the 214 participants simply abandoned the question relating to gender, refusing to categorize themselves as strictly male or female.

Prause and Graham (2007) identify no significant gender differences in their study on asexuality (26 out of 41 asexual participants identify as women) (348, 349, 352). In general, it is unclear whether more women than men identify as asexual or experience their sexualities as asexual. But Brotto et al. (2010) also have a significantly greater proportion of women in their study, 133 of their 187 asexual participants (in study 1) are women, perhaps confirming Bogaert’s musings that more women than men identify as asexual and relate to asexuality.

[8] Fahs (2010) raises a series of questions similar to ones I here raise:

> Perhaps we should more pointedly ask: How does asexuality differ between men and women, between those with different political orientations, and between those with power and those without power? When people of color, women, the working class, and other disempowered groups choose asexuality, does it carry different meaning than when hegemonically powerful groups (e.g. white people, men, high SES groups and so on) choose asexuality? If sexual identity fluctuates throughout the lifespan (Diamond, 2003), might people also choose asexuality to assert independence, autonomy, and changing sexual priorities? Further, might asexuality represent a logical, even *empowering*, response to oppression? (456, emphasis in original)

[9] This has prompted Andrew Hinderliter, an asexual blogger and graduate student to observe that:

> A political question that those challenging the pathologization of asexuality must ask is whether to challenge the pathologization of asexuality *only* or whether to challenge the pathologization of sexual disinterest *more generally.* (2010, emphasis added)

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have been arguing for the necessity to take asexuality seriously as a political and culturally embedded response to constraining aspects of dominant sexual discourses. I have radically questioned the stories and maps currently being drawn in relation to contemporary asexuality, asking that we instead explore asexuality as a politically motivated, culturally contingent set of sexual practices. Also, I have claimed that asexuality is entirely specific to our present cultural moment, even while we might glean insights from considering past circulations and articulations of asexuality. And while it is never the case that feminism has all the answers, this thesis ultimately argues that feminist writings on asexuality can propel asexuality towards more poignant, politically radical, and gender aware theorizations and explorations of 'not doing it.'

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