A-IDENTITY POLITICS: ASEXUAL EXCEPTIONALISM, PRECARITY, AND ACTIVISM

by

Ryan Sheehan
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts
English

Committee:

____ Director

____

____

____ Department Chairperson

____ Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: __________________________________ Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

A-Identity Politics: Asexual Exceptionalism, Precarity, and Activism

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

by

Ryan Sheehan
Bachelor of Arts
The University of New Hampshire, 2007

Director: Dr. Paul Rogers, Associate Director/Associate Professor
Department of English

Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

DEDICATION

To my mother and father, Clara and Michael, whose undying support has taught me the importance of dependability and human connection. And to Geoffrey, for introducing me to the asexual community, and without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many individuals, both personal and professional, were instrumental in the creation of this thesis. I would like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Paul Rogers, Dr. Samaine Lockwood, and Dr. Rachel Lewis, for their support for my project and their indispensable feedback. Each member of my committee also provided me with unique opportunities that fostered my growth throughout my career at George Mason University. Therefore, I wish to thank Dr. Rachel Lewis for allowing me many opportunities to present aspects of Chapter One to her classes and as her TA, which helped me reconsider and reframe my analysis; Dr. Samaine Lockwood, for taking me on as her research assistant, thus broadening my understanding of foundational texts in queer theory; and Dr. Paul Rogers, as well as the other faculty with whom I worked with in the Writing Across the Curriculum Program (Sarah Baker, Dr. Terry Zawacki, and Dr. Michelle LaFrance), for their guidance on the thesis writing process.

I also wish to acknowledge many of the faculty/staff members at GMU. This includes the Women and Gender Studies and the LGBTQ Resource Offices here at George Mason University—particularly Dr. Angela Hattery, Tashia Harris, Nancy Xiong, David Corwin, Andi Johnson, Marisa Allison, Ric Chollar, and Dr. Amena Johnson--whose guidance during my graduate education and/or feedback on my ideas helped shape many of the analytical directions of this thesis, and whose resource offices provided me with the space and opportunity to write in a safe, social, and productive atmosphere. In addition, I wish to thank the faculty and staff from the English department who aided me in the logistical aspects of this thesis and my degree or encouraged me to pursue a thesis, especially Jay Patel and Dr. Tamara Harvey.

My love goes out to many of my family, friends, and peers who aided me throughout the writing process. This includes the feminist and LGBTQ student organizations, as well as their executive committees, throughout my tenure as a graduate student (Pride Alliance, TQ Mason, Feminist Student Organization), whose activist and educational initiatives helped shape my discussions of the politics of transgression and subversion in this thesis' analytical framework. Additionally, Chapter One of this thesis began as a final paper for Dr. Rachel Lewis' Queer Theory course; thus, I would like to thank the students who took the time to read my paper in its early iterations and provide feedback (Andrew Jones, Kellie White, Emily Arnold, Em Eichelberger, and Sarah Metcalfe). I extend my love and gratitude to my family (Clara Sheehan, Michael Sheehan, Patrick Sheehan, Mikayla Sheehan, and Nana), my roommates throughout my time in graduate school (Allison Rich, Cass Mercer, Alex Gant, Nicole Leister, and Cheech Pan), and my boyfriend (Paul Wells), all of whom were incredibly supportive even in the most stressful portions of this writing process. Finally, this thesis would not have happened without the asexual community members and advocates at George Mason University, particularly Geoffrey Payne; as my identification within the community varies on context, it was important for me to have others in the asexual and aromantic communities to hear about my work and to provide feedback on its conceptualization. I thank them for their time and energy, and hope that this analysis does justice in helping to make this exciting new community more intelligible and recognized.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

A-IDENTITY POLITICS: ASEXUAL EXCEPTIONALISM, PRECARITY, AND ACTIVISM

Ryan Sheehan, M.A.

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Dr. Paul Rogers

This thesis explores the rhetoric of asexual awareness activists, specifically in regards to recent formulations within queer and post-structural feminist theory regarding precarity, vulnerability, and affect. An asexual is broadly defined as one who does not experience sexual attraction to others. While the term has existed throughout the history of sexology, the community and identity were formed in 2001 when David Jay created the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Queer and post-structural feminist analyses of have worked to elucidate asexuality's cultural and discursive contingencies. This thesis builds upon much of this scholarship, but considers recent trends in queer and feminist theory towards conceptualizations of precarity: institutional discourses that maximize one's sense of vulnerability. Precarity, I contend, creates a need for individuals to render their narrative recognizable by relying on discourses of cultural exceptionality along intersectional axes of identity. In considering the propensity for awareness activist to utilize exceptional narratives, I provide close readings of asexual awareness activist materials:

Angela Tucker's (2011) documentary *(A)sexual*, which features David Jay; along with *The Invisible Orientation* and "The Asexuality Top Ten" by Julie Sondra Decker. I conclude that while both of these texts offer important critiques of Western society's conceptualization of intimacy and recognition, they are also predicated upon normative discourses in order to exceptionalize their subjects. I conclude by considering future possibilities for asexuality studies that could reconceptualize the politics of recognition and consider new directions for discussions of the affective and discursive elements of asexuality.

INTRODUCTION

And sometimes, it's rough, like bone-to-bone, like your insides clean kind of love; sometimes it's candlewax on torsos, or moonbeams on eyelashes; sometimes there's no skin involved at all. It's just being to being. "Here, let me hold that soul for you. You've been drowning in labels for so long you've grown tired of survival. Here's a moment of bliss, a moment of aliveness…

Lauren Zuniga, "Submissive"

In her spoken word poem "Submissive," Lauren Zuniga (Speakeasynyc, 2012) deconstructs the stability of sexuality labels through recounting her first experience as a lesbian "sub:" a term in BDSM communities indicating a more receptive partner. Here, Zuniga contextualizes intimate connections as multifaceted and differential, ranging from physically visceral (i.e. "bone-to-bone") to psychic reprieves from constricting cultural labels (i.e. "sometimes there's no skin involved at all"). I deeply resonate with Zuniga's framing of intimacy, in that I too can experience it both in the moments of sexually physical contact with other men, and/or in situations where there is "no skin involved at all." I am a cisgender gay male who is relatively privileged (I am also white, middle-class, and physically able-bodied, to name a few); however, it has been difficult to explain to others how I occasionally desire nonsexual intimate connections while identifying as part of a community that is habitually valorized as hypersexual. From my perspective, it is not hard to see why such a perception of the gay male community exists: mobile applications such as Grindr have permitted my generation the privilege to ascertain a casual one night stand within minutes. And most media targeted toward gay men tout spectacularized sex scenes, or humor that revolves around one's sex positions (i.e. caricaturizing "tops" and "bottoms"). This is not to say there aren't gay men other than myself who feel constrained by these stereotypes; nor am I saying that one is incapable of experiencing intimacy through so-called "casual" sex. However, these cultural norms have made it difficult to voice my perspective of intimacy, considering that to identify as gay not only describes one's preferred sex partner(s), but indicates one who is perceived as a participant in gay culture and mores (Halperin, 2012).

I love sex; but for me, it is usually a way for deepening pre-existing bonds with another man, a physical manifestation of feeling. Thus, my ideal forms of sexual intimacy typically occurs after I have taken the time to get to know someone and form a bond. When I attempt to explain this to other gay men, I am met with surprise, and often directed to be "less selective" in choosing sexual partners. Such norms are also prevalent throughout queer culture more generally, which seems to pride itself on embracing sex as a form of health and liberation (Chu, 2014; Glick, 2000). The only community that has provided me with a space to discuss my ideals of intimacy is the growing asexual community, who boasts a spectrum of identities embodying the principal that sexual attraction is not an intrinsic human default or constitutive of intimacy. I ultimately choose to continue identifying as gay for a variety of reasons, though I have realized through my time with the asexual community that my intimate desires align with notions of demi- or gray-asexuality. Yet when I mention to others outside of asexual circles "I could identify somewhere on the asexual spectrum," I am met with a tired, though well-meaning, response: "I don't think you're asexual. Your feelings don't sound like the typical asexual experience." Such a reaction, I believe, is not entirely representative of a cultural misunderstanding of asexuality. Rather, I see it as evidence that asexuality is beginning to stabilize, perceived as a homogenous community within the mainstream public imagination.

The concept of asexuality has existed throughout the tenure of modern sexology, and possibly prior; indeed, the earliest use of the term to describe humans can be traced to 1833, and seminal sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing discussed it in his 1886 work, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Kim, 2014). However, the current asexual community and identity were popularized when then-college student David Jay formed the "Asexual Visibility and Education Network" (AVEN) website in 2001. While the term embodies an array of identities, AVEN—and much of the scholarship regarding asexuality—broadly defines it as describing one who does not experience sexual attraction to others. Asexuality has been introduced to mainstream audiences through various media outlets, both in nonfiction media (i.e. *The Montel Williams Show*, *The View*, *Tucker*, *The Huffington Post*) and popular narrative television (i.e. *Sirens*, *House M.D.*). While still largely under-discussed in scholarly literature, what work does exist regarding asexuality has assembled under the moniker of "asexuality studies." The earlier works in this field were focused on psychological analyses, but the past four years have shown a shift towards social constructionist critiques rooted in post-structural feminist and queer analyses of identity and identity politics. By post-structural feminism, I am referring to projects that seek to deconstruct essentialist discursive norms regarding sex and gender (Butler, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 2000); queer theory, though similarly deconstructionist, also incorporates more vigorous explications of sexuality (Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 2000). Importantly, both fields also consider their analyses alongside other institutional intersections, including race, gender, class, ability, socioeconomic status, citizenship, etc.

Queer and post-structural feminist interventions into asexuality generally aim to position its historical, cultural, and discursive contingencies, thus destabilizing the category of asexual. Such work is timely and vital, yet these analyses predominately utilize texts foundational to queer theory, like those of Michel Foucault (1978/1990) and Judith Butler (1990), to launch a largely discursive analysis of asexuality's cultural formation; much of this work, therefore, seldom engages with the recent trend with queer and feminist theories regarding the affective *and* discursive dimensions of identity, particularly regarding vulnerability and precarity. By precarity, I mean the social, cultural, and/or economic institutional discourses that maximize an individual's sense of vulnerability—a trait that is intrinsic, though differentially realized, to the human condition—thus rendering one precarious. Such a gap in the research of asexuality is, in some ways, understandable: while asexuals experience discrimination, there is a tacit understanding that most community members do not suffer from the egregious life or death circumstances mostly discussed in scholarship on precarity (Bishop, 2013/2014; Decker, 2014). Yet when theorized in regards to rights and politics, precarity not only gives way to personal distress, but also has discursive representational effects upon activism; certain members of populations become "exceptionalized" in public discourse as the most representative for human rights and social justice interventions, and thus are centralized in awareness projects (Ahmed, 2000; Hesford, 2011). Such a trend forces populations to adhere to normative notions of vulnerability, conforming to cultural narratives of oppression while potentially eliding their personal conceptualization of selfhood. Thus, while these analyses of asexuality and their awareness efforts provide important interventions into how visibility normalizes asexuality, they do not account for the ways individual advocates may or may not negotiate normative systems of oppression in order to make rhetorical claims for their identity—nor does it necessarily work to understand which discourses and strategies are responsible for such negotiations in the first place.

Rhetorical analysis offers an opportunity to discern both the affective and discursive mechanisms that shape asexual appeals to visibility and awareness. I will offer a more in-depth discussion of the modern definition of "rhetorical analysis" later in the methods section, but I ultimately invoke the term to characterize an analytical consideration for how cultural discourses contextualize arguments (Campbell, 2006). Rhetorical analysis, when taken this way, places an emphasis not only on textual and discursive mechanisms that permit appeals to recognition, but the context to which such appeals are possible, thus rendering clear the ways individual actors may or may not work to argue their perception of selfhood in relation to cultural norms. In other words, a rhetorical analysis allows us to understand what discourses asexual awareness activists perceive to be the source of their precarity. In this light, this thesis seeks to contribute to the field of asexuality studies by explicating contextual cultural discourses of asexual awareness activism in conjunction with queer and post-structuralist feminist formulations of vulnerability and precarity. As such, I am predominately interested in two questions: 1) how might theoretical understandings of precarity and vulnerability elucidate the framing of asexual awareness activists' discussions of discrimination? 2) Do these framings come at the expense of "exceptionalizing" the activists' identity?

This study considers observations made by several other asexuality studies scholars. Sociologists, like Kristen Schererr (2008, 2010), Mark Carrigan (2011, 2012) and Susie Scott & Matt Dawson (2015) have similarly worked to understand how asexuals navigate the "sexual world" utilizing qualitative data analysis and/or various sociological conceptualizations of agency. CJ. Deluzio Chasin (2011, 2013) and Megan Milks (2014) have also sought to provide the ways scholarly investigations of asexuality have crafted perceptions of the community as homogenous in their motivations for visibility. What distinguishes my study, through its focus on rhetoric and activist materials, is in its discernment of how certain discursive superstructures influence and permit appeals to asexual agency, precarity, and vulnerability. Indeed, my analyses rely heavily upon post-structuralist notions of discourse and sexuality, while at the same time tampering with the notion that the discursive notions of identity can wholly account for the lived experiences of asexuals, and those who represent them. Thus, my methodology is rooted in rhetorical analyses of mainstream asexual awareness texts and activists, rather than attempting to explicitly qualify individual asexual perceptions of selfhood and identity; nor am I working to situate asexuality as actively seeking to perpetuate sociocultural norms. I have opted, therefore, to examine texts that feature oft-cited asexual awareness activists: Angela

Tucker's (2011) documentary *(A)sexual*, which features David Jay*;* and Julie Sondra Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) YouTube series "The Asexuality Top Ten," and monograph *The Invisible Orientation.* I argue that both of these texts resonate with theoretical notions of vulnerability and precarity in relation to the politics of recognition. That is, asexuals iterate that they are maximally vulnerable in social, cultural, and psychological contexts (therefore rendering them what we might see as relatively precarious) when their identity is perceived as unintelligible by others. However, this comes at the expense of rhetorically positioning the activists' subjectivity as exceptional, aligning asexuality as intelligible only in relation to normative Western ideologies of identity. Here, I wish to emphasize that working to understand rhetorical framing, even with its focus on context, is not inherently indicative of the real thoughts and ideas of the asexual awareness activists in question; rather, the discursive inconsistencies of these asexual awareness activists, I argue, demonstrates a potential level of contextual flexibility in the light of their perceived precarity, making them complex figures who may tactically and critically deploy normative discourses for the sake of recognition.

Importantly, David Jay and Julie Sondra Decker (presumably) are white, cisgender, middle class, and able bodied (aka. relatively privileged); thus, this thesis does not seek to render conceptual connections to vulnerability and precarity in these texts as universally equivalent to the struggles of other communities. Rather, the very notion that these concepts can be connected within the context of privileged Western discourse, I argue, demonstrates that asexuality can exist as precarious in a variety of already tenuous circumstances. Therefore, if these relatively privileged activists demonstrate precarity and vulnerability in their narratives, then perhaps it exists in a variety of even more precarious contexts. But by turning to exceptionalization here, I am also working to understand how (and if) the privileged position of these activists allot them access to certain Western normative discourses of rights and awareness. By reading asexual awareness activist texts this way, we move closer to understanding how "asexuality," in a variety of contexts, may be rendered "intelligible' by the Western world. Indeed, as I will explore in the literature review, even the most innocuous norms bred throughout social justice endeavors can serve as the catalyst of policy in broader human rights claims, potentially exacerbating precarity in others contexts. Therefore, this intervention is timely and crucial we begin to see vies towards asexual inclusion in LGBTQ legal initiatives (Decker, 2014; Emens, 2014).

This thesis, therefore, avoids positioning certain asexual subjects as more "subversive" or "transgressive" than others. As some scholars have argued, queer and post-structural feminist theories occasionally glorify certain forms of resistance to norms as more effective than others, especially in regards to notions of "subversion" and "transgression" (Chu, 2014; Glick, 2000; Milks, 2014; Puar, 2007; Scott & Dawson, 2015). Indeed, the title of this thesis is representative of my intentions: the "A" in "A-Identity Politics" not only stands for asexuality, but also for the prefix "a-," meaning "without" (A-, 2008). Therefore, my analysis seeks to contextualize the activists in question not as mere reproducers of normative discourse. Rather, I believe these individuals, as a result of their perceived precarity, may have been placed in a position where their rhetorical appeals are only necessary under the established practices of recognition and visibility. I do not mean to challenge that recognition is unnecessary for subjectification; however, I am working to unravel the (ironically) normative ways queer and post-structural feminist theories may render only certain transgressive and subversive behaviors as pathways to recognition. Moreover, while I do not believe that we should excuse any harmful normative discourses recapitulated throughout asexual awareness activism, I do believe we owe it to those who identify as asexual to understand that their perception of selfhood is borne from a variety of institutional discourses, including those from some queer and feminist politics of sexual liberation and sexuality. I therefore focus upon determining any discursive dissonances that occur in one's bid for recognition, working to untangle the exceptional rhetoric of an individual political and/or social advocate from the circumstances that facilitate such exceptionality. Such a reading strategy, as I will further argue throughout the literature review and within the conclusion, can begin destabilizing asexual identity, while simultaneously establishing its conceptual importance in queer and feminist analyses of intimacy and affect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ASEXUALITY STUDIES

Psychologists and sociologists were to the first to explore asexuality and the culture of AVEN. While this thesis is focused on those viewpoints conducive to queer, post-structural feminist, and/or social constructionist perspectives of asexuality, a cursory understanding of the scholarship from psychology and mainstream works is necessary in order to explain the cultural and/or medical conceptualizations of asexuality, as they will be discussed throughout the course of this thesis.

As previously stated, an asexual is broadly defined as one that does not experience sexual attraction to others (Asexuality, n.d.; Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2012; Brotto et al 2010; Decker, 2014; Gazzola and Morrison, 2012; Horstman, Chapter 3, 2012; Prause and Graham 2007; Scherrer 2008, 2010)[1]. Many sites of asexual community building, therefore, explicitly differentiate asexuality from those practicing celibacy or abstinence, as asexuals see their disengagement with sex as inherent rather than chosen (Bogaert 2004, 2012; Horstman, Chapter 3, 2012; Scherer 2008)[2]. Moreover, many asexuals differentiate

---

[1] I will rely on this general definition throughout the thesis for the sake of clarity, as this is the one invoked throughout the activist texts I am exploring. However, I have also structured my analysis in ways that tamper with this broader conceptualization of asexuality. For an apt critique of the problematics of this definition, see Chasin (2013), whose analysis will be discussed in this section of the literature review.

[2] While this rhetoric is prevalent in many asexual communities, I acknowledge that it is not unproblematic. Representations of celibacy could very well be conducive to asexual discourse and identity. For an extended discussion of the relationship between celibacy and asexuality/aromanticism, see Benjamin Kahan's (2013) conclusion to his monograph *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life.*

themselves from those who with Hypoactive Sexual Dysfunction Disorder (HSDD), as—unlike those diagnosed—these asexuals do not see themselves as distressed by their lack of sexual attraction (Bogaert 2006, 2012; Brotto 2010; Prause and Graham 2007). The earliest scholarship of the contemporary manifestation on asexuality has been attributed to Anthony Bogaert's (2004) investigation of a British National Probability Survey, wherein one percent of respondents reported to having never felt sexually attracted to anyone. Since AVEN's inception and inclusion in the scholarly literature, the term "asexual" has come to encompass a wide variety of constituents.

Some asexuals identify themselves as "romantic"—those who are romantically attracted to others and may engage in physical acts such as kissing or cuddling--or "aromantic"—those who see their ideal relationships as similar to those of platonic friendships (Bogaert 2006, 2012; Brotto et al 2010; Decker, 2014; Scherrer 2008). Romantic asexuals may also affix prefixes such as "homo/hetero/bi/pan-"to their identity in order to qualify what gender(s) they find most romantically attractive (i.e. a "homoromantic asexual" lacks sexual attraction, but is romantically attracted to people of the same gender) (Decker, 2014). Furthermore, despite lacking sexual attraction, to call oneself "asexual" does not necessarily mean that one is "*not* sexual," as some individuals don't mind pleasuring their sexually inclined significant other(s) (Bogeart 2004, 2006, 2012; Brotto et al 2010; Decker, 2014; Prause and Graham 2007). There are those asexuals, for instance, who engage in masturbation, which they explain as a need to relax or as the act of having sex with oneself (Brotto et al 2010; Decker, 2014). Many in the asexual community also differentiate the concepts of "libido" and "sexual attraction;" it is entirely possible for one to be sexually aroused in the absence of external stimuli (Decker, 2014). Finally, there also exists a subset of the asexual community known as “demisexuals” and/or “gray-As;” the former eventually experiences sexual attraction after forming a deep emotional bond, the latter experiences sexual attraction seldomly (Decker, 2014; Gazzola and Morrison, 2012). The prefix “demi-” or “gray-” can also be used to describe romantic preferences; for example, a “demiromantic asexual” is not sexually attracted to anyone, but has the propensity for romantic attraction after they formed a deep emotional bond with their partners. The term “allosexual” has generally been used in opposition to asexuals--that is, an “allosexual” experiences sexual attraction at a rate that coincides with the norm (Sexual, n.d.)[3].

Many of these works are useful for understanding asexual culture, yet asexuality studies scholars who integrate a social constructionist view of identity have criticized aspects of the psychological and early sociological inquiries. For some, the methods of the psychologists do not account for both the lived and bodily experiences of asexuality, as well as the discursive mechanisms that construct asexuality along with other social categories. Andrew Hinderliter (2009) offers an analysis of the methodology across the then-contemporary studies on asexuality regarding its inattention to intersectionality: for example, he cites scholars such as Brotto et al’s (2010) use of survey instruments that

[3] It is important to note here that while the concept of romantic orientation was borne out of asexual discourse (and subsequently discussed by scholars in relation to asexuality), one needn’t identify as asexual in order to identify as aromantic. For instance, an “aromantic allosexual” would not experience romantic attraction, but would experience sexual attraction. See Siggy (2015), writing for the blog *The Asexual Agenda*, for an interview unpacking the differences/similarities between asexuality and aromanticism.

forced asexual participants from choosing a gender either than “male” or “female.” This, as Hinderliter (2009) contends, excluded gender non-conforming individuals from being represented in their data analysis. CJ. DeLuzio Chasin (2011) has commented on psychologists and sociologists’ reliance on drawing samples from AVEN, noting that the website does not encapsulate the entire scope of the asexual community. Chasin (2013) has further critiqued the definition of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction, especially in relation to psychologists such as Bogaert (2006) who define it as a life-long state of being. For Chasin (2013), this conceptualization of asexuality does not realize its gendered sexual implications, and fails to recognize asexuality’s radical aspects. In imagining a new paradigm, Chasin (2013) writes:

> This would be a world where being sexual is no longer mandated as a prerequisite of normalcy or intimacy and where nonsexual relationships are recognized and valued…where no level of sexual desire is pathological and where the social emphasis is on sexuality being self-affirming in whatever unique form it takes (p. 416)

Jacinthe Flore (2014) has further criticized psychological inquiry into asexuality for its reliance on medical tools and bodily response. As Flore (2014) concludes:

> The meanings and implications of asexuality are not found purely in biology, especially when biology is indubitably fraught with social, political, and moral maneuvering. Theories on/of asexuality are less about opposing sexuality completely than problematizing concepts further and delineating spaces of

intelligibility. Asexuality hence offers a location, both discursive and material, from which to refresh "known" realities about intimate life (p. 30).

Mark Carrigan's (2011, 2012) qualitative research analyses have similarly advocated against purely "scientific" explanations of asexuality. Instead, he advances methodological approaches that respect asexual agency, wherein "asexual individuals and the asexual community [are] agents, engaged in negotiating a path through social and cultural circumstances not of their choosing" (Carrigan, 2012, p. 4). Finally, Susie Scott and Matt Dawson (2015) argue for the integration of Symbolic Interactionism into sociological analyses of asexuality. In this regard, scholarship should look away from individual notions of asexual experience, but rather focus on "…the relational aspects of becoming asexual, which emerge out of social interaction and are negotiated in relationships" (Scott & Dawson, 2015). Thus, for these scholars, inquiries into an underlying psychological and sociological nature of asexuality must be considered with the ability to account for the discursive and material conditions that aid in the social construction of (a)sexuality and identity.

Ela Przybylo (2012) and Eunjung Kim (2014) have also both provided conceptual understandings of how asexuality has been constructed through the history of the medical literature. However, their work is distinct in that it focuses almost solely on the historically discursive aspects of asexual identity. Przybylo (2012) focuses her attention on texts that AVEN activists have used to qualify their asexuality as "healthy." In particular, she focuses on the work of Michal Storms and Paula Nurius, as well as the recent work of Anthony Bogaert and Lori Brotto. Przybylo (2012) thus argues that the latter two scholars

"…ultimately assigned the status of nonpathology to asexuality…at the same time…by simultaneously rehearsing harmful and myopic ideas of sexuality and sexual-gendered difference" (p. 16). Przybylo (2012) therefore hopes that asexual individuals and activists will not uncritically accept psychological inquiry as proof of their existence; rather, psychological interventions seeking to "discover" asexuality as a concept should be thoroughly scrutinized for their potentially normative assumptions, and thus the problematic discourse they may distill. Similarly, Kim's (2014) analysis spans from the early sexology texts and throughout the sexual revolution of the 1970s in order to elucidate the complex web between medical stigmatization (as felt through the disability community) and the conceptual assemblage of "healthy" sexual attitudes derived from normative beliefs that everyone has an intrinsic sex drive (as felt through asexual individuals, and exemplified throughout the literature in terms of asexuality as a concept).

ASEXUALITY AND QUEER POLITICS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Scholarly reactions to AVEN can be bifurcated into two strains of thought. On the one hand, asexuality as a concept and the community of AVEN are seen as sites of radical queer potential to challenge hegemonic sexuality norms. Scherrer's (2008) initial investigation concluded that AVEN offered people the language and space necessary to communicate their non-normative senses of attraction; in fact, many did not begin identifying as asexual until *after* they had found AVEN, making it a very important resource. Cerankowski & Milks (2010), in introducing the potential for an "asexuality studies," suggest that it could challenge queer and feminist politics that position sex as an inherently radical act. Ela Przybylo (2011) has written on asexuality's capacity to disrupt what she coins "sexusociety:" a performative social apparatus wherein certain sexual deeds become hierarchized as more desirable and privileged than others, with asexuality constituting a less privileged position. Furthermore, Erica Chu (2014) has further noted that while AVEN as a standalone organization is bound to have problems, it…

> …has succeeded in creating an environment of transparency and plurality that the dominant institutions involved in the theoretical development of other identity groups were not able to replicate when their concerns began to reach potential allies, coalitional partners, and he mainstream public (p. 88).

For Chu, then, AVEN represents a pluralistic space wherein individual understanding of identity can flourish, and its robust lexicon of terminology (i.e. sensual attraction, romantic attraction, sexual attraction, etc.) could supplement queer theory immensely.

On the other hand, many scholars criticize AVEN and its brand of visibility politics. Karli June Cerankowski (2014) has critiqued AVEN's focus on visibility, noting that it "…remains committed to a strain of identity and visibility politics invested in the expectation that visibility is always instructive and empowering" (p. 140). Cerankowski's analysis thus seeks to demonstrate how asexuality can be problematically spectacularized when exhibited in visual media, and works to broaden the scope of asexuality's rhetorical effects and affects. Przybylo (2011) is also highly critical of the asexual community's visibility rhetoric, noting its overreliance on a binary between "sexual" and "non-sexual." As Przybylo (2011) argues, asexuality in its current state lacks the transgressive potential possible to overturn sexusociety. Randi Gressgård (2013/2014) follows a similar critique to Przybylo (2011), wherein the current conceptualization of asexuality—both in psychology and awareness activism—works to reinforce a sexual/non-sexual binary that "…(re)configures asexuality in accord with liberal-humanist values…" (p. 74). For Gressgård, however, asexuality holds the radical potential to disrupt normative neoliberal ideologies. Important to understanding Gressgård's argument is a socio-cultural understanding of neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is predominately understood as an economic theory advocating for radically free market politics, scholars such as Wendy Brown (2005, Chapter 3) have explored its effects on society; namely, that the resulting values of exchange and return saturate every aspect of human interactions. This, for Brown, results in an ideal citizen that is seemingly autonomous, independent, invulnerable, and adept at managing themselves through self-care. In terms of identity (such as asexuality), the individual is able to recognize and conform to the cultural norms of asexual identity while continuing to be productive citizens in the economic market. In regards to Gressgård's argument, then, the concept of asexuality can undo neoliberal notions of intimacy, in that it forces individuals to confront their own conceptualizations of what counts as "sexual" versus "non-sexual," revealing the limits of self-regulation in relation to normative understandings of identity as intrinsic and immutable.

Some scholars—writing within a similar analytic vein--have focused on how both asexuality awareness rhetoric (not necessarily limited to AVEN) and scholarship can recapitulate normative discourses, often at the expense of other marginalized groups. Ianna Hawkins Owen (2014), for example, notes that scholars' characterizations of asexuality as a new concept ignores its long standing invocation in the discursive construction of race.

Owen (2014) also contends that asexuality serves to scaffold whiteness as a dominate and pure ideology: “whiteness desires to relocate in asexuality the success of its own historical endeavors to achieve self-mastery, claiming sexual superiority as an aid to racial superiority, vice versa” (p. 126). Due to the whiteness of asexuality, then, Owen (2014) opines that “…it is recognized by the popular discourse as not deviant, but as deserving of grief, care, support, and rehabilitation (p. 126). Additionally, Kim (2011, 2014) has worked in both of her pieces to demonstrate the exclusionary and/or conflationary rhetoric of disability and asexual activists. For Kim (2011), the asexual awareness activists’ attempts to destigmatize themselves from disability, in tandem with disability advocates’ attempts to divorce themselves from asexuality, forecloses disabled individuals in claiming asexuality, and vice versa. Kim (2014) later characterizes this discursive impasse as “mutual negation,” or “…the ways in which both disability and asexuality communities each negate the validity or presence of the other by denying any association or overlap with either group” (p. 273). Kim (2014) believes that this conflict could be assuaged by both groups “…emphasizing the entanglement of their stigmatization [by articulating] the various meanings of asexuality as well as its historical role in the construction of disability” (p. 274). Kristina Gupta (2014), moreover, reiterates the importance of coalition building for asexual and disability activists by utilizing Kim’s (2014) concept of “mutual negation” in exploring reactions to the “Adams v. Rice” verdict. Taken together, then, many scholars have worked within their analyses to demonstrate how AVEN and asexual awareness activists may, inadvertently, perpetuate dominate institutional norms through vies for visibility.

However, others have reminded scholars, in working to relate asexuality to normative discourses, to avoid using queerness to justify the current iteration of asexuality as unconducive for radical sexual politics. In this vein, Kristina Gupta (2013) has chronicled the reactions by lesbian critics regarding the film *The Kids are Alright*. In particular, Gupta (2013) advances these reactions as demonstrative of a lack of tolerance for lesbian relationships that may be perceived as asexual, and perpetuates certain sexual acts as more "legitimate" or "transgressive" than others. Megan Milks (2014) also contends that we must abstain from the longstanding tendency in queer and feminist theory to elevate certain sexual (or, in this case, asexual) practices as political. For Milks (2014), "constructed as inherently sex negative, repressive, or just not real, asexuality is understood within sex-positive discourse as a form of immature sexuality and an alarming remnant of sexual repression" (p. 109). Yet notably for Milks, this prospection is present within queer analyses of asexuality in some scholars' attempts to qualify the asexual movement as "immature," prescribing it as lacking transgressive properties. Following Jasbir Puar's (2007) examinations of queerness as a regulatory analytic (discussed further in this literature review), Milks implores scholars and advocates to avoid inscribing certain asexual acts as political while others regressive.

The observations from Gupta (2013) and Milks (2014) are perhaps all the more important when we consider the ways asexuals face discrimination, either/both on a personal or socio-cultural level. Indeed, the notion that asexuality might be perceived as lacking transgression does not account for the ways broader understandings of asexuality may already be seen as deviating from institutional norms. Elizabeth F. Emens (2014) has written an extensive survey of areas within Western legal discourse that asexual and/or aromantic individuals might seek to amend. While I do not have the space to recount all of Emens' (2014) analysis here, her discussion of marriage law provides a general sense of how she argues legal discourse as constructed on premises of compulsory sexuality:

> …in some states, nonconsummation of a marriage is a ground for voiding a marriage. And while fraud is not generally grounds for voiding the marriage, fraudulent intent 'not to consummate the marriage or not have intercourse likely to produce progeny' can be (p. 350).

Emens thus explains how asexual individuals—due to the non-normative and occasionally polyamorous nature of their relationships—might be implicated in debates about marriage as-an-institution. Emens also cites various nondiscrimination laws that could be amended to include asexual identified individuals, noting its inclusion in New York's Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, as well as how asexuality may change discussions surrounding sex work.

While Emens (2014) works to discern the legalistic effects upon asexuality, others have concluded that asexuals face egregious interpersonal discrimination that can affect their mental health and well-being, even if asexuality does not in-and-of-itself "cause" mental distress (Bishop, 2013/2014). Arguably the most telling investigation was by MacInnis & Hodson (2012): in their two studies—one of 148 Canadian undergraduate students, another of 101 online participants—asexuals were shown to receive more negative reactions than heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual individuals. In the first study, "asexuals were attributed significantly lower uniquely human traits than any other sexual orientation" (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012, p. 731), and "uniquely human emotions were perceived to be significantly least experienced by asexuals relative to all other targets" (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012, p. 733). Similar results were found in the second study, with asexuals disproportionally seen as lacking human characteristics. MacInnis & Hodson, therefore, ultimately concluded an intergroup bias towards asexual individuals. When considered together, then, while asexual awareness activism certainly has the propensity to perpetuate normative discourses, scholars that focus on asexuality's need for transgression could potentially be disregarding the ways asexuals may or may not face discrimination in a variety of contexts.

VULNERABILITY, PRECARITY, AND EXCEPTIONALISM

As of 1990, scholarly inquiries into sexuality and gender began to embrace post-structuralist ideology, questioning immutable and essentialist characterizations of identity such as "man," "woman," "gay," "straight," etc. Feminist scholars in the United States—notably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler (1990)—began to deploy French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1978/1990) theorizations of discourse to argue that sexuality and gender were culturally constructed categories requiring deconstruction and interrogation. Such a mode of inquiry was eventually coined "queer theory," characterized aptly by scholars such as Marc Epprecht (2013) as a critical stance towards claims of self-evident and essentialist identity, including the term "queerness" itself.

The past two decades have shown an additional shift in cultural and critical theory—and, as a result, feminist and queer theories—in addressing phenomena known as "affects." For Michael Hardt (2007), this shift was characterized by the increasing amount of scholarship focused on the body (predominately in feminism) and emotions (predominately in queer theory) by the analytical reconciliation between the two:

> …affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and…they involve both reason and the passions. Affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the casual relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between those two powers (p. ix).

A strain of queer and feminist theory has followed along the affective turn. Indeed, much of this affective turn has also been attributed to the later works of queer and feminist theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick & Adam Frank (2003). For Sedgwick & Frank, the fear of essentialism in relation to identity resulted in an overreliance on solely discursive analyses that overlooked the ways individuals conceptualize feeling on the basis of biology and emotional response. Sedgwick & Frank argue, through a reading of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, that the affective dimension of the body needn't be solely understood through discourse—rather, the body plays an important role in distinguishing emotions and their affective sources.

Following Sedgwick and Frank's (2003) analysis, some works in queer and post-structural feminist theories have worked to demonstrate the affective embodiments within larger institutions of power. Lauren Berlant (2011) is perhaps the most recognizable scholar in this regard, particularly in relation to her notion of "cruel optimism:" "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (p. 1). Similarly, Sarah Ahmed (2004) has importantly theorized a "political economy of affect," a system wherein certain affects are circulated through some populations, either at the expense or benefit of others.

Other queer and/or feminist projects engaged in affect have focused upon individualistic and community based conceptualizations of identity in relation to discursive mechanisms of power. Ahmed's (2006) later work in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientation, Objects, and Others* seeks to unpack the affective dimensions of sexual orientation, particularly in regards to positionality in relation to objects of desire. Judith Halberstam (2011), also, has used the personal dimensions of affect to queer the concept of failure, situating it as an escape from…

> …the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to order and predictable adulthoods…and while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life (p. 3).

Finally, Jose Esteban Munoz (2009), centers hope as a key component to his analysis by offering queerness as a rejection of the present and a reaching towards a utopic future.

These works are demonstrative of the ways that some queer and feminist scholars have centralized or deployed affect in their analyses; yet the affective turn is perhaps one of the key reasons for the recent considerations of precarity. The definition of precarity can vary slightly depending on the context in which it is discussed, but is generally characterized by its etymological root in *precarious*, or “dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable.” (Precarious, 2007). Similarly, precarity, in the theoretical sense, encapsulates the political, economic, and/or social conditions that exacerbate the intrinsic vulnerability of a person and/or population.

Precarity is mostly associated with economics, particularly in critiques of neoliberalism and globalization, and their resulting disparate inequalities. Guy Standing (2011) provides such an analysis in defining a new socio-economic bracket he calls “the precariat:” members of the lowest class who lack all forms of labor related security. Other theorists utilize precarity not necessarily to characterize human vulnerability, but the precarious nature of social structures (Turner, 2006). However, precarity as a concept has extended beyond economic analysis, mobilized in recent scholarship within queer and feminist theory.

As the definition implies, vulnerability plays a central role in scholarship pertaining to precarity. Vulnerability as a concept has been progressively more discussed in feminist theories, both in “normative” and post-structuralist contexts. Unlike the post-structuralist theories, which work to deconstruct dominate paradigms, “normative theories” consider institutions in relation to what they should do (Calhoun, 2002)[4]. As I am predominately approaching my analysis from queer and post-structural feminist perspectives of

[4] To be clear, my invocation of the term “normative theory” is not meant to be a critique, per se. Rather, I use the term in relation to scholars who have specifically identified their work as contributing to “normative theories” of moral institutions. I will address this discrepancy by distinguishing “normative theory” in quotation marks throughout this section.

vulnerability and precarity, I am only liminally engaged in the “normative” accounts of these topics. However, I will briefly explore the definitional commonalities of vulnerability between both schools of thought.

For both “normative” and post-structuralist theorists, vulnerability is seen as an intrinsic aspect of personhood. Mackenzi, Rogers, & Dodds (2014) have identified two patterns throughout the scholarship regarding vulnerability. In the first, vulnerability alludes to the inherently fragile condition of humanness, “…to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering; this susceptibility is an ontological condition of our humanity…" (p. 4). In the second, other theorists emphasize “…the fundamentally social or relational character of vulnerability, but rather than understanding vulnerability as ontological, it focuses on the contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others” (Mackenzi et al, 2014, p.6). While both themes play a role throughout the literature, the first has created a bevy of frameworks within “normative” moral theory that work to centralize universal vulnerability as a politics of action, as vulnerability elucidates our inherent sense of dependency upon others (Miller, 2012; Nussbaum, 2006; Turner, 2006).

While post-structuralist theorists also maintain vulnerability as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, “normative” theorists maintain that institutions must work to account for vulnerability’s notion of dependency in line with universalistic assumptions of individual agency. Nussbaum (2006) is perhaps the most recognizable philosopher in this regard, in advocating for a capabilities approach to social justice. This relies upon institutions’ realizations of a set of “central human capabilities.” These include “life…bodily health…bodily integrity…senses, imagination, and thought…emotions…practical reason…affiliation…other species…play…control over one’s environment…” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 76-77). What makes Nussbuam’s (2006) theorization demonstrative of “normative theory” is her characterization of each of these traits within a global framework: “the capabilities approach is fully universal: the capabilities in question are held to be important for each and every citizen, in each and every nation, and each person is to be treated as an end” (p. 78). Thus, while Nussbaum notes that each capability can be pluralistic, some iteration of them is assumed to exist in every culture, regardless of context. These individualistic notions of capability are considered the basis for seemingly essential notions of socially institutional justice on the basis of a “normative” understanding of vulnerability.

Yet post-structuralist inquiries, in line with queer and some feminist perspectives, consider the conditions that craft certain populations as more vulnerable and precarious than others. Judith Butler (2009) embodies this dichotomy when she writes:

> The difference between a structuralism (even a structuralist psychoanalysis) and a post-structuralism embedded in the dynamics of power is that the former would simply dismiss all claims of recognition as impossible (and make of that a timeless pathos or a perennial joke). The latter, however, would have to ask why some forms of sexual life are so much more possible than others, and why some seem to embody the unthinkable and even the unlivable (p. iii-iv).

It is within these power dynamics outlined by Butler (2009) that queer and post-structural feminist theories of vulnerability and precarity are situated: precarity is seen as a differential distribution that maximizes vulnerability for some individuals and populations.

Butler (2004, Chapter 1) first began to address the political implications of vulnerability and precarity in her essay "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy." Butler (2004, Chapter 1) posits the conditions that facilitate grief over the loss of another as demonstrative of the relationship between sexuality and human rights. For Butler (2004, Chapter 1), "grievability" is the affective mechanism constitutive of humanness, and grieving is the process wherein one realizes that they are dependent on others to live. Thus, according to Butler (2004, Chapter 1), grief reveals the inherent vulnerability of the human condition and our dependency upon others: in other words, we are not autonomous, but willed into living by our relations and desires for others.

However, Butler (2004, Chapter 1) notes that in social and political discourse, some sexualities and genders are seen as "unreal" and "ungrievable." Therefore, "…certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human…" (Butler, 2004, Chapter 1, p. 25), resulting in violence. In turn, a "silent and melancholic" discourse develops regarding the death of ungrievable populations, "…in which there have been no lives, and no losses, and there has been no common physical condition, no vulnerability that serves as the basis for an apprehension of our commonality, and there has been no sundering of that commonality" (Butler, 2004, Chapter 1, p. 25). Thus, for Butler (2004, Chapter 1), human rights initiatives should not exclusively aim for individual sexual autonomy, but understand that some cultural and social policies differentially render some populations more vulnerable than others. Thus, we must fold into humanness populations that have been perceived as “ungrievable” by providing the proper sanctions necessary for them to have livable lives.

Butler’s (2009) essay “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,” expands upon the notions of vulnerability to define precarity:

> …a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection (p. ii)

Importantly, Butler (2009) frames precarity not only in relation to violence, but as state of personal and cultural negotiation: precarity operates in the context of institutional discourses that may or not be in our own control—a power that “precedes the I” (iii). As such, Butler (2009) conceptually links her theory of gender performativity with precarity, for a precarious subject must work within the dominant framework of norms in order to be “recognizable,”—much in the same way that performativity outlines one’s inability to conceptualize their own gender outside of the discursive norms. In relation to subversion, therefore, Butler (2009) reminds us that even seemingly normative embodiments might come as a result of various discourses converging upon a subject, forcing them to act, on the one hand, within their conceptualization of themselves, and, on the other hand, what institutional norms expects of them to be seen as recognizable. As Butler (2009) iterates:

> When we act, and act politically, it is already within a set of norms that are acting upon us, and in ways that we cannot always know about. When and if subversion becomes possible, it does so not because I am a sovereign subject, but because a certain historical convergence of norms at the site of my embodied personhood opens up possibilities for action (p. xi-xii).

While Butler (2009) frames precarity in relation to social institutions and dominate discourses, Lauren Berlant (2011) unpacks the affective dimensions of precarity through her conceptualization of "cruel optimism." As previously mentioned, "cruel optimism" is a condition wherein the very source of one's attachments paradoxically signals one's optimistic desire, while simultaneously impeding the realization of said desire. While Berlant's monograph, *Cruel Optimism,* provides a variety of areas where precarity facilitates this affective state, it is her notion of "slow death" that is perhaps the most cited among feminists and queer theorists. Berlant (2011) defines "slow death" as "…the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (p. 95). For Berlant, this is manifested in the recent turn to the "obesity epidemic" in the U.S. Through an analysis of the systemic lack of accessible, healthy food—alongside discourses that one's weight and health is a "personal responsibility"—Berlant defines one's relationship to food and health as a cruel optimism: one needs food to survive, but one's precarious access to healthy food—as mediated through institutional policy—impedes them from being able to achieve a "healthy" state. This relationship, thus, allows for certain populations, whose access to healthy food is hindered and/or expedited through their institutional privilege, to live while others slowly die.

Jasbir Puar's (2007) seminal text *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, offers a chance to situate the nationalistic discourses that could be seen as exacerbating precarity and vulnerability in certain contexts within representations of sexuality. Puar (2007) traces the linkage of various normative mores surrounding sexuality in Western LGBTQ human rights discourse regarding the Middle East post-9/11. Central to Puar's (2007) argument is the recent conceptualization of "homonormativity," coined by Lisa Duggan (2003) as "…a politics that does not contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 50). Puar's (2007) titular term, homonationalism, reflects the conceptual conjoining of hetero-/homonormativity, and is maintained through three overlapping discourses: the upholding of institutional whiteness as reflective of queerness; the use of "queer" as a regulatory analytical device; and the upholding of the U.S. cultural and political doctrine (and the Western doctrine more generally) as exceptional modes of sexual liberation and identity. Thus, homonationalism discursively produces a queer constituency that upholds Western sexual orthodoxies predicated on secularism, "outness," and access to consumer capital, while situating the West as a sovereign power and bearer of these rights; as such, those who do not comply with such discursive norms could be seen as being institutionally precarious[5].

PRECARITY AND REPRESENTATIONAL EFFECTS: UNPACKING EXCEPTIONALISM

So what are the effects of such discursively mediated structures of precarity? More specifically, this thesis is focused on understanding the complex ways the asexual community is represented. Thus, how do discourses that mediate precarity regarding gender and sexuality affect representation and interpretations of human rights/social justice violations? The works of Wendy Hesford (2011, 2014), Rachel Lewis (2014), and Carol Bohmer & Amy Shuman (2008), I contend, demonstrate that the effects are narratives of exceptionalism[6]. There are various ways we can define and interpret exceptionalism: as outlined by Puar (2007), "exceptionalism paradoxically signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress" (p. 3). It is this paradoxical tension that

[5] Puar (2007) does not explicitly formulate her analyses within the notions of precarity and vulnerability. Rather, I include her at this stage in the literature review (rather than the subsequent section) both to act as a conceptual bridge between these two sections, but also because of her engagement with a very much related mode of inquiry coined "queer necropolitics," which demonstrates how sovereign powers manage death over certain populations. Much of Puar (2007), Butler (2004, 2009), and Berlant's (2011) work are featured as seminal to queer necropolitics; therefore, *Terrorist Assemblages* is very much conceptually linked to their discussions. Moreover, it is clear that Puar (2007) is invested in the notion of precarity in her work, as evidenced by her moderation of a round table discussion on the subject, featuring Berlant and Butler (Puar, 2012).

[6] To be clear, the texts themselves do not necessarily use the terms "vulnerability," "precarity," and/or "exceptionalism" in their formulations, but the representational effects of the discourses they explore resonate with these concepts.

I conceptualize as “exceptionalism” in this scholarship, while paying distinct attention to the representational and narrative effects of precarity.

For Wendy Hesford (2011, 2014), human rights discourse in the West are positioned upon very specific narratives of liberation. As Hesford (2011) explores in *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms,* the visual representation of human rights violations on the basis of gender are predicated upon Westernized narratives of progress and modernity. Hesford (2011) demonstrates this through an investigation of visual representations on the basis of gender: “…the visual field of human rights internationalism often functions as a site of power for the normative expression of American nationalism, cosmopolitanisms, and neoliberal global projects” (p.3). Thus, the reliance on Westernized notions of liberation and identity, specifically in regards to gender, craft certain narratives of vulnerability and precarity as exceptional examples of injustice, thus resulting in a rhetorical appeal to the Western viewer to “care” about the subject on screen. For, as Hesford (2011) contends, viewers rely on contextually relevant cultural narratives to interpret texts—as such, documentary filmmaker’s and other visual artists situate their rhetorical appeals within these cultural norms. Hesford (2014) later offers Malala Yousafzai—recent Nobel Peace Prize winner and Pakistani education reformer—as an example of how to best navigate these exceptional rhetorics. As Hesford (2014) writes, “in the Western liberal imagination, Malala is perceived as exceptional because she is ‘different than’ fundamentalist Muslim women with whom she is compared because she is ‘more’ like us…” (p. 141). Yet for Hesford (2014), to merely concede that Malala is a Westernized actor ignores her as a precarious agent navigating the complex webs of human rights discourses; as such, Hesford (2014) offers a "responsive reading" (p. 143) of Malala that explores the impact of her rhetoric for advocacy in Pakistan and the West, revealing the ways in which she pivots and shifts her appeals in various contexts.

There are many other sites in which we can come to understand exceptionalism as it relates to advocacy; however, the works of Carol Bohmer & Amy Shuman (2008), and Rachel Lewis (2014) provide a case study in how exceptionalism functions in relation to queer claims of political asylum. All of these scholars could be seen situated within transnational sexuality studies, which have worked to identify the hegemonic effects of international human rights discourse upon non-Western communities in the rise of neoliberal globalization, development projects, and Western military initiatives. According to many scholars within this field, sexuality and gender expressions are constructed through culturally specific practices and norms (Akanji & Epprecht, 2013; Decena, 2008; Lewis, 2014; Najmabadi, 2014; Padilla, 2007). Yet Western-based international human rights advocates appear ambivalent to differential constructions of sexuality, reinforcing homonational discourse. Indeed, through the spread of global capitalism and development initiatives, cultures who do not comply with homonational discourses are often denied financial assistance or are subject to public scrutiny; this results in the need for LGBTQ subjects in non-Western contexts to adopt Western narratives of victimization to be rendered culturally intelligible (Lind, 2010).

For those applying for political asylum in the West on the basis of their sexuality or gender, precarity manifests in working to render their non-Western constructions of identity intelligible in a Western context. Bohmer & Shuman (2008)—a lawyer and folklorist, respectively—combine their disciplinary expertise in crafting a comprehensive guide to the inner workings of the asylum process. In their chapter on sexuality, political asylum seekers claiming sexuality and/or gender identity "exceptionalize" their case by aligning their culturally-relevant narratives with Westernized constructions of identity. This is seen in Bohmer & Shuman's (2008) following observation:

> To prove persecution based on sexual orientation, applicants must present a case that describes the vulnerability they face as members of a social group in a particular society. Further, they need to describe how they are recognized as gay and whether the persecution is based on being openly gay or because someone "looks" gay (p. 239).

This, in turn, thrusts the asylee into a precarious position where they must communicate their sexuality in terms that are intelligible in a Western context. Rachel Lewis (2014) has explored specific instances where asylum cases rely on Westernized, exceptional narratives. For Lewis (2014), the precarity of the asylum seeker also comes in their ability to adapt their culturally relative construction of sexuality in accordance to Western views. Oftentimes, this requires the asylee to rehearse reductive stereotypes of gender and sexuality derived from media representation and social norms (i.e. gay men are expected to act effeminately, frequent bars, etc). This often comes at the expense of providing "proof" of their sexuality; this has recently manifested in the suggestion from lawyers for asylum seekers to provide sex tapes to validate their sexual preferences.

This scholarship not only elucidates precarity's effects on populations in institutional discursive frameworks, but also on a personal level: for those in the political asylum system, precarity must be mediated through the subject's negotiation of their culturally disparate narratives of sexuality and/or gender identity. Thus, precarity forces subjects to adapt and shift their narratives in relationship to 1) what they desire and 2) what the institutions desire to render their case "exceptional." In Bohmer & Shuman (2008) and Lewis' (2014) investigations, this manifests in political asylum seekers needing to adjust their culturally relative narratives to fit a Western model of sexuality and gender. For Hesford (2014), this can result in large-scale actors, such as Malala, to reposition their narratives based on context. This renders the task of discerning narrative structures of individual actors radically complex, and can make seemingly normative rhetoric of an activist or actor subversive and multifaceted.

DISCUSSION: ASEXUAL EXCEPTIONALISM

Asexual individuals, generally speaking, are often characterized as less discriminated against than their LGBTQ counterparts, by both scholars and activists alike (Bishop, 2013/2014; Decker, 2014; Przybylo, 2011). Furthermore, asexuality awareness activists have made limited efforts to amend laws and/or policy, rendering them more easily characterized as a "social justice" initiative than one linked to "human rights[7]." Yet as I have hoped to demonstrate throughout this literature review, scholarship addressing human rights initiatives from a queer and/or feminist perspective have explored how social

[7] While I do not have the space here to theorize the distinct differences between "human rights" and "social justice," I invoke the former in instances that focus on legal sanctions as outlined by the United Declaration of Human Rights (Hertel and Libal, 2011), while the latter deals with creating social and cultural change for a particular issue.

norms derived from awareness and social justice programs in the West come to shape political landscapes of transnational human rights. Therefore, the characterization of groups on the basis of identity and liberation often shape the very normative discourses that induce precarity, forcing other groups to exceptionalize their narratives. Ergo, turning our attention to asexual awareness activism through a framework that honors the intertextual connection between so-called "social justice" and "human rights" initiatives, as they pertain to gender and sexuality, is not preemptive; on the contrary, it is necessary. Thus, our analysis can—and should—be focused on the ways affective conditions of asexual awareness activism relates to notions of vulnerability and precarity, with attention to the resulting exceptionalism that may follow.

From a legalistic and socio-cultural standpoint, asexual identified individuals are certainly subject to vulnerability and precarity based on their sexual orientation. Activists such as Julie Sondra Decker (2014) have recently begun to discuss the propensity for asexual individuals to be victims of "corrective rape," or rape intended to "cure" the asexual of their lack of sexual attraction; this has been similarly investigated in major media coverage of asexuality, notably in *The Huffington Post* (Mosbergen, 2013). Emens (2014), in her discussion of legal implications for asexual and aromantic individuals, tellingly characterizes the effects of the law upon asexual individuals as follows: "the provision for voiding the marriage for lack of consummation creates a *vulnerability* for asexuals (or rather, for those asexuals who don't have sex, which is not all asexuals)" (p. 351, emphasis mine). Additionally, MacInnis & Hodson's (2012) intergroup bias study is demonstrative of asexuality's dehumanization, and certainly demonstrates a capacity for the community to be precarious and vulnerable in their navigation of social situations. But perhaps the most striking reason to consider vulnerability and precarity in relation to asexuality lies in regards to the way community members publically identify. As Kristina Gupta—commenting in Bishop (2013/2014)-- explains, individuals who identify as romantic and on the asexual spectrum may truncate their often syntactically complex identities (i.e. heteroromantic asexual) into more recognizable terms like "gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual," etc. Such a maneuver extends the analysis of asexuality beyond explicitly asexual communities. Rather, it forces us to consider situations where asexuality might be considered in one's conceptualization of selfhood, but not explicitly stated.

This revelation could have radical implications for the way we discuss both domestic and transnational sexualities, shedding light on structural institutions that may exacerbate homophobia. Consider, for instance, Lewis' (2014) findings of lesbian, gay, and bisexual asylum seekers being required to submit sex tapes to "prove" their sexuality. Or, as Marc Epprecht (2013) has written on African homophobia and social justice: "heterosexuals may also fall victim to homophobic discrimination and violence if they do not conform to gender norms…heterosexuals who refuse to marry or who choose lifelong celibacy may be exposed to violence and shaming to enforce conformity with family expectations (p. 27-28). Here, Epprecht demonstrates an obvious conceptual link between "homophobia" and "sexual normativity" in African culture, in that those who opt not to have sex—either from a lack of sexual attraction or a personal/religious reason—may become implicated in homophobic systems of power. Therefore, conceptual connections between asexuality, sexuality, and transnational rights discourse are very much possible, and may in fact provide an important site of analysis for understanding how homophobia translates into both Western and non-Western contexts, elucidating additional sites where individuals may experience precarity and resulting maximal vulnerability as a result of oppressive institutions.

At this stage, I could very well work to continue expounding the distinct connections in human rights discourses (and their critiques) where asexuality-as-vulnerable and precarious may exist. However, such an analysis would feel pre-emptive. For one, “asexuality” is a social construct of the West, and thus working to find exactly how asexuality might “fit” intro transnational cultural systems—without first working to understand those systems—may simply impose Western norms upon non-Western contexts (Mohanty, 2003). Instead, I believe the most fruitful step at this juncture would be to turn our attention towards Western norms to discern, precisely, how asexual appeals to their perceived vulnerability and precarity may translate into exceptional narratives that, in turn, become implicated in normative discourses on both transnational and Western axes alike.

The discursive effects of these norms, in regards to sexuality and human rights in the U.S., has been termed by Jasbir Puar (2007) as “U.S. Sexual Exceptionalism:” a notion that the United States provides exceptional treatment to LGBTQ individuals. In using this concept to frame homonationalism, Puar (2007) notes that these attitudes are only realized upon one’s ability to adhere to cultural narratives of sexuality, whiteness, secularism, and neoliberalism:

> As the U.S. nation-state produces narratives of exception through the war on terror, it must temporarily suspend its heteronormative imagined community to consolidate national sentiment and consensus through the recognition of some, though not all or most, homosexual subjects. (p. 3)

Following Puar's (2007) formulation, I therefore posit the notion of "asexual exceptionalism" as a contrapuntal (though not mutually exclusive) discourse explicit to the Western conceptualization of asexuality: the cultural attitude that asexuality is uncontested in the Western world, but only if it is framed by an asexual in a way that is intelligible within implicit cultural norms of neoliberal citizenship, identity, and other intersections therein (i.e. ability, race, class, etc). Indeed, it is helpful here to consider Chasin's (2013) notions of how contemporary definitions of asexuality—either/both in scholarship or activism--craft a believable or "real" asexual, "in contrast to other asexuals who cannot be rightly articulated and who are therefore somehow less legitimate" (p. 418). Chasin (2013) lists traits of a "real" asexual as including one who is readily believed as asexual, has never been abused, is either aromantic or heteroromantic, mentally and physically healthy, socially adjusted, white, economically stable, and are cisgender. Chasin's (2013) notions of the "real" asexual help us to consider the implicit cultural norms that standardize the "exceptional" asexual subject—that is, one whose narratives align with these socially "recognizable" traits will be deemed intelligible by institutional discursive formations.

The formulation of "asexual exceptionalism," moreover, is not relevant only in regards to dominate discourses of power, but, I would argue, is also influenced by Puar's (2007) notion of queerness as a regulatory device—which, along with the ascendancy of whiteness, work together to form her term "homonationalism." In other words, queerness can operate as an extension of cultural and social apparatuses of power in working to determine who is "transgressive enough" to be considered vulnerable, precarious, and therefore worthy of greater queer scholarly and/or activist endeavors (Milks, 2014). This places asexual exceptionalism as opposed on a problematic conceptual binary; the asexual can be exceptional to dominate discourses, and therefore be unintelligible in queer contexts; or, one can enact transgressive behaviors to be seen as queer, but thus does not adhere to any (or all) dominate norms. Such a binary, I contend, must be tampered with in order to perceive the relationship between asexuality, precarity, and vulnerability.

We can see the attempt to regulate asexuality through queer theory in some of the scholarship within asexuality studies. Indeed those who do discuss—implicitly or explicitly—asexuality, vulnerability, and precarity appear dismissive of asexual discrimination or conceptualizations of identity, and work to situate them as "invulnerable," and therefore non-precarious, subjects. This is perhaps most overt in Przybylo's (2011, 2013/2014a, 2014b) corpus of work. As Milks (2014) also contends, Przybylo (2011) is problematically critical of the asexual community's politics, branding them as lacking transgressive potential to undo sexusociety's norms. Ultimately, for Przybylo (2011), the current asexual movement fails in this project, insomuch as asexuals work to maintain the binary between "sexual/non-sexual" in order to make bids for their personal safety. As she writes:

> Through avoiding intimate body-to-body contact an asexual subject is protecting her or his bodily margins, striving to recreate a zone of certainty and predictability

> in a sexusociety that is disorienting. Asexuals reassure sexusociety that they are not disgusted with sex, but merely *indifferent* to it…in doing so, they are demonstrating that they are not interested in dismantling sexusociety's project, but rather, that they hope to gain its acceptance, for they are after all 'still human'…(p. 454)

In response to this observation, Przybylo (2011) outlines her strategy for how asexuality might be more resistant by proactively working to challenge what acts count as "sexual" in the first place, citing the conceptualization of "romantic" and "aromantic" identities as examples of such a discursive, rhetorical moves. Reiterating notions of "strategy" and "resistance," Przybylo (2011) concludes that…

> Asexuality, in choosing to repeat differently, must also choose to abandon its reactive, binary-bound sense of itself, focusing on what it *does* instead of what it *does not do*. It must shift from declarations of absence, to an enacting of difference, both linguistically and actually. For resistance for be genuine, asexuality should repeat *itself* differently, plurally, and complexly. This is where its resistant energies lie: in alternative and plural enactments. This is what asexuality must do as a *strategy of being,* for absence can only be exciting and meaningful for short bursts of time, and even then it is not exactly an accurate description, since there is always some sort of presence .(p. 456-457)

Przybylo's (2011) work is no doubt provocative and interesting, and her theorization of "sexusociety" is a very useful analytic. However, her characterization of asexual awareness activism relies on a particular hierarchy of what asexuals count as "resistant, dangerous, and active" versus which ones are "complicit, vying for safety, and inactive." For Przybylo (2011), asexuals' vie for "safety"—a term she prominently displays in her title—demonstrates their inability to trouble the binary between sexual/non-sexual, rendering them non-transgressive. Yet those who deploy terminology such as "romantic" and "aromantic"—and, by extension, we could argue gray-A or demisexual—are the active undoers of systems of power. This binary opposition between who counts as "transgressive" and who does not creates a system of normalizing discourse within Przybylo's (2011) analysis. Przybylo (2011) thus recapitulates the notion that certain sexual acts "count" within a framework of "transgression," ultimately undoing her own argument. Furthermore, the use of the term "safety" to characterize those she sees as non-transgressive actors in sexusociety implies that unless one is visibly and actively working to subvert dominate systems of sexual normativity, they are somehow *invulnerable* in comparison to asexuals who are.

We see this narrative become more explicit in Przybylo's (2014b) essay "Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder." Here, Przybylo (2014b) examines the narratives of four asexual-identified men. On the whole, her qualitative data analysis yields interesting and important patterns for queer theory; namely, that the men interviewed demonstrated a cultural imperative to conflate sexuality with "health." In her penultimate section, "Indifference, Doubt, and Wonder," Przybylo (2014b) seems to double back on the claims of her earlier work by noting her own resistance to…

> …glorifying asexual men or asexual masculinities as some unilaterally transgressive or resistant way of "being a man." Indeed, I have attempted to explore

> the diversity of meanings that asexuality can acquire, without making hasty judgements as to its 'transgressive' qualities (p. 239).

Yet in responding to MacInnis and Hodson's (2012) work, Przybylo (2014b) reiterates that her interviewees exemplified a different conclusion, "…one of the main reactions that the participants reported was sheer *indifference*" (p. 240) from others regarding their sexual orientation. As a result of this, Przybylo (2014b) concludes:

> Significantly, while asexually identified men face discrimination in the forms of social exclusion and isolation, disbelief and invalidation of their (a)sexual identification, unwanted sex, bullying, teasing, and not fitting in, cultural prerogatives on sex as central to selfhood impact the lives of *all*. It is thus through studying asexuality, as well as through studying *sexuality* from an asexually attuned perspective, that we can begin to adequately explore the constraints of a culture that fuses sex with "health," joy, liberation, transcendence, and self-actualization (p. 424).

While Przybylo (2014b) worked earlier in this section to move her analysis away from the binary of "asexual-as-transgressive" versus "asexual-as-complicit," her ultimate finding recapitulates a narrative in which asexuality, by itself, does not constitute a position of vulnerability—rather, for Przybylo (2014b), the challenges unique to the asexual-identified men in her study are not discriminatory enough to qualify them as distinct from those who do not identify as such. Rather, it is the mere concept of asexuality—undoubtedly aligned with Przybylo's (2011) earlier conceptualizations of "asexuality-as-transgressive"—that positions it as a radical discursive position worthy of discussion. This is perhaps all the more apparent when we consider Przybylo's (2014b) use of the term "an asexually attuned perspective," (p. 424), an allusion to her methodology constructed in the afterward to *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity* (Przybylo, 2013/2014a)[8]. While the ultimate definition of the "asexual perspective" is important and useful, the word "perspective" presumes that a scholar—asexual or not—can occupy a place of complete empathy with their asexual subjects regardless of the cultural norms that have uniquely shaped an asexual's life. In other words, the elements that may or may not situate an individual asexual's possible precarity is not considered in this definition. It presumes, therefore, that those currently identifying as asexual are, until proven otherwise, merely working to reiterate the cultural norms of sexusociety and sexual normativity, and that there are no unique issues faced by asexuals that render them personally or socially vulnerable.

This expanded discussion of Przybylo (2011, 2013/2014a, 2014b) is not meant to discredit her work or presume that she is trying to minimize asexual experiences. However, her characterization of asexuality is overt in its espousal that it is a premature movement and "not-yet-queer" (Milks, 2014), and implicitly positions the asexual as a universally understood, seemingly invulnerable subject. While this pattern is most obvious in Przybylo's (2011, 2014a, 2014b) work, it can be seen elsewhere in the literature of

[8] According to Przybylo (2013/2014a) , an *asexual perspective* is defined as follows: "it is useful to assert that an asexual method, lens or perspective (1) questions dominant norms of relating, loving, kinship and intimacy, (2) diversifies sexual options, experiences and lifestyles, (3) challenges, in some capacity, schemes of the medicalisation and pathologisation of sexual lack, (4) exposes the constraining force of the sexual imperative and sex liberation rhetoric and crucially (5) insists on the legitimacy, viability, positivity, and possibility of absence or low levels of sexual attraction, desire, arousal, or pleasure." (p. 122).

asexuality studies. Randi Gressgård (2013/2014) similarly contends that asexuality is predicated on a reactionary binary rhetoric in line with neoliberal philosophies of citizenship. As Gressgård (2013/2014) writes, asexuality's politics of recognition:

> …is constitutive of subjects whose combination of freedom and self-realization (in accordance with notions of truth/authenticity) and self-determination (in accordance with notions of personal autonomy) makes them particularly suitable for self-regulation within the parameters of neoliberal citizenship (p. 74)

Combatting such politics of recognition, according to Gressgård, thus requires a disturbance of a different kind from asexual awareness projects, one that extends upon the revelation of a stable asexual identity and tampers with the arbitrary divisions between what is "sexual" and "non-sexual." Like Przybylo's (2011) sexusociety, this is a telling account of asexuality's discursive influence. However, Gressgård's analysis implicitly discredits the work of asexuality activists by presuming their construction of discreet categories, such as "romantic" and "aromantic," are merely reiterating neoliberalism and not a result of precarity. Such an analysis, therefore, forecloses the possibility of asexual awareness activists working within the frameworks of recognition out of necessity.

Ianna Hawkins Owen's (2014) analysis, moreover, also seems to position asexuality outside of the realm of vulnerability on the basis of race. In conceptualizing asexuality as representative of institutional whiteness, Owen (2014) asserts that popular representations and their "…attempt to recover the potential of sexual self-mastery (asexuality-as-ideal) reveals the continued misinterpretation of asexuality…as a status of *vulnerability* requiring intervention (asexuality-as-reparable)" (p. 126, emphasis mine). Of note is Owen's invocation of vulnerability in the context of grievability as theorized by Butler (2004, Chapter 1); in reading David Jay's interview on *The View,* Owen asserts that the talk show hosts are working to "save" Jay in order to render him human and grievable.

This notion of asexuality as representative of institutional whiteness is important, especially considering the underrepresentation of asexuals who identify as people of color (I will explore this more in Chapter One). But I contend that Owen's (2014) deployment of asexuality as lacking vulnerability, especially considering her allusion to Butler (2004, Chapter 1), presumes that it is not an intrinsic aspect of constructing humanness. Owen, therefore, dehumanizes those who identify as asexual, while also insinuating that asexuals cannot be victim to precarity. This is not to say that asexuality indicates a level of vulnerability akin to other populations; rather, it would be more appropriate to consider it as differentially distributed, affected by other intersections on the basis of race, gender, class, etc (Butler, 2009). Furthermore, much like Gressgård (2013/2014), Owen's lack of attention to theorizations of precarity within the context of her analysis presumes that asexual awareness activists and actors are not working within and around institutional discourses while at the same time being aware of them. Owen seems to overtly express this opinion in the conclusion of the essay: "while the potentials of exploring asexuality are exciting…we must remain vigilant about assigning fictive agencies to asexuality" (p. 131). Przybylo (2011, 2013/2014a, 2014b), Gressgård, and Owen, I thus contend, are implicated in the kind of identity politics maintained by regulatory queer critiques working within a rigid framework of "who is queer" versus "who is not" (Puar, 2007; Milks, 2014). Such a maneuver, I contend, does little to assuage asexual exceptionalism—rather, it is an equally normative adjudication of the asexual community.

Scholars writing within this queer/post-structuralist frame have received a similar critique from Scott and Dawson (2015). In promoting the inclusion of Symbolic Interactionism into asexuality studies, Scott and Dawson (2015) are especially critical of post-structural ideologies:

> While individual identity is recognised, it is theorised primarily as a site of ideological inscription or a basis for political action, such as resistance to oppressive discourses. Marginalised in this analysis is the recognition of the lived experiences of asexual people as people; what it means to self-identify as such, how this definition emerges through social encounters, relationships and interaction, and how these experiences affect actor's everyday lives (p. 8).

I agree that the analyses by these scholars seemingly overlook the ways asexuals may negotiate and relate to others in and around their asexual communities. However, Scott and Dawson's (2015) seem to conflate any mode of post-structural influenced inquiry as anarchist: "poststructuralist anarchism…depicts asexual identity as merely a discursive construct or social position, divorcing it from the personal, and yet ironically imbuing it with agential power" (p. 8). While such a view of post-structuralism is very common (and one, I would contend, is fraught with misconceptions), I think that understanding the discursive construction of identity is not moot; indeed, any bid for recognition could be said to be steeped in discourse (as evidenced through the notion of exceptionalism), and observing the ways these discursive superstructures operate allow us to understand how asexuals are able to rhetorically iterate their identity in the first place. Therefore, I rely heavily on the theoretical conceptualizations of scholars such as Przybylo (2011), Gressgård (2013/2014), and Owen (2014) in their understanding of the discursive aspects of the asexual here-and-now. Where I differ comes in the implications from my analysis; rather than advocate for asexuality to be "done differently," I am advocating that we, as scholars, *read* asexuality differently, and in ways that account for those potentially lived experiences of asexuals while at the same acknowledging the cultural discourses with which asexual-identified individuals may (unknowingly *or* tactically) deploy. Indeed, my view is more in-line with Milks' (2014) observation that there is no …

> …one catchall way to do sexual politics. As we know from decades of gender and sexuality studies and theory, politics does not inhere in sexual praxis….asexuality does no entail liberation, nor does it *not* entail liberation. That is not to say that the emergence of asexuality as an identity category and community does not warrant politicization; only that, while these kinds of politicizations have merit, we must be skeptical of any attempt to make asexuality—or sexuality—*do* this or that. As the asexual person may refuse the expectation to 'mature' into an assigned sexual futurity, so too may the asexual movement refuse the expectation to mature into a particular queer/feminist political futurity (p. 115)

Following Milks, then, I turn towards my analysis to discern asexual exceptionalism not as a way to label some asexual members as more "queer" than others; rather, my hope is to discern how certain narratives become possible under particular cultural discourses, and what these narratives can tell us about the way we represent asexuality in the West.

METHODS

I began this study by first determining which texts would be the most effective in aiding me to answer my research questions. My choices for these texts were not terribly difficult. Up until now, much of the work regarding asexuality, representation, and rhetoric has analyzed AVEN or David Jay's television interviews, likely because these were, for some time, the most accessible texts available to scholars. In order to maintain a feasible archive, I decided to focus on texts that were written for a mainstream audience and that were accessible outside of AVEN. This led me to only a handful of materials, none of which have been closely read by scholars. I determined first to focus on Angela Tucker's (2011) documentary *(A)sexual*. I then opted to study Julie Sondra Decker's (2014) very recent monograph *The Invisible Orientation.* Both of these texts feature (and, in the case of Decker, were written by) well-known and visible asexual awareness activists. *(A)sexual* focuses predominately on David Jay, while Julie Sondra Decker is a YouTube personality (her videos are featured under the moniker swankivy). In reading *The Invisible Orientation*, I also chose to comparatively examine some of Decker's (2008a-l) YouTube activism, specifically her first set of videos "The Asexuality Top 10," wherein Decker debunks the top ten myths she has heard about her asexuality. I did this in order to discern more about Decker's (2008a-l) use of personal narrative to establish her *ethos*.

These texts were also chosen due to their similar rhetorical aims: to educate the reader/viewer about the asexual community, and what one can do to be allies to asexual-identified individuals. All of these texts invoke narratives and personal examples in an attempt present their arguments, allowing me to examine the dissonances between the author's personal conception of themselves and what they perceive as expected of them. Such a state of negotiation, I conceptualized, would help determine areas within asexual awareness activism where the framing identity was indicative of precarity.

One could argue that these two texts might seem strange to choose in the context of vulnerability and precarity. After all, both activists maintain relatively privileged positions in regards to their intersectional identities (Jay is presumably cisgender, white, able-bodied, middle-class, conventionally attractive male; Decker is presumably cisgender, white, able-bodied, middle-class, conventionally attractive female). However, in choosing these texts in relation to my research questions, I wanted to find instances that were indicative of potentially exceptional discourses. If the rhetorical framing of these activists resonated with conceptualizations of vulnerability and precarity, then I wondered if these affective states were communicated through an exceptionalization of/by these activists as asexuals in order to bolster their *ethos*. Furthermore, it is of my belief that if exceptionalism was not deployed within these activists' narratives, then an understanding of vulnerability and precarity would still be important. Indeed, my focus on privileged asexual activists works alongside Butler's (2012) assertion of precarity as an ethical mode of political mobilization. For Butler (2012), since we are unable to choose with whom we cohabitate the Earth, then we ae obligated to "honor those obligations to preserve the lives of those we may not love, those we may never love, do not know, and did not choose" (p. 150). Ergo, the ability to assuage precarity for larger populations starts by rearranging our most proximal infrastructures to minimize it for all people; however, I would also add that this requires we not assume that precarity has the same effects for everyone. Therefore, if these activists who maintain relatively privileged positions assert narratives that align with conceptualizations of vulnerability and precarity—and if these texts elucidated the structures that facilitated such perceived precarity—then discussing these texts will likely aid in understanding how other, less privileged identities may experience differential and/or exacerbated precarity.

In reading these texts, I opted to view my analysis as rhetorical. While "rhetorical" has a bevy of modern meanings, I am most interested in the ways in which various discourses allot for an individual's ability to make a particular point. This tradition is encapsulated by Karlyn K. Campbell's (2006) observation, in discussing the work of Richard Burke, of rhetorical analysis as examining what discourse does:

> The critic's job was to explicate the ways that a rhetori construed the world in and through language, to interpret what kind of symbolic work that construal performed, and the ways it might invite others to see the world in similar terms. (n.p)

This perception of rhetoric is also encapsulated by Hesford's (2011) definition of the act of looking in relation to visual texts as a self-reflexive, "rhetorically mediated practice" (p. 57) practice. As she writes: "all modes of looking involve some level of interpretation or narration. Audiences draw on a host of historical associations, cultural narratives, structures of feeling, and rhetorical expectations in their engagements with images as texts and their contexts" (Hesford, 2011, p. 57). By bringing together queer conceptualizations of the discursive formations of identity alongside rhetoric, therefore, I am equally intrigued not only by the persuasive appeals that each text is attempting to convey, but—in line with scholars such as Cerankowski (2014)--the discursive mechanisms that frame the ability for such arguments to be made effectively and affectively. In the case of *(A)sexual*, I am concerned with how Tucker (2011), as a filmmaker, works to construct a narrative from her non-fiction material to *rhetorically frame* her argument (and at what expense to other narratives/communities); for *The Invisible Orientation* and "The Asexuality Top Ten," I focused on the discursive elements that may inform Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work, as well as the ways she establishes her *ethos* as an activist. A rhetorical approach seems most appropriate here because it allows us to conjecture upon what discourses create, exacerbate, or preclude precarity for the subjects within these texts. This is especially the case considering how precarity is framed as the discursive and actual conditions that maximizes one's social, cultural, and/or psychological vulnerability.

In addition to general rhetorical inquiry, I attended to each text using two reading strategies. Perhaps the most obvious within this work is my attempt to deploy how Wendy Hesford (2014) classifies *responsivity*. According to Hesford (2014), responsive reading works to situate the figure in question as an agent working within various discourses and contexts, taking into account strategic and tactical flexibility in the way they may advocate for their cause. While Hesford (2014) performs this kind of reading in relation to Malala, I find it is important to consider with these Western-based activists as well. In all of these texts, Tucker (2011) and Decker (2008a-l, 2014) are working to speak to a large, mainstream audience, many of whom likely do not understand the asexual community. As such, the presentation of their narratives or opinions may have simplified for the sake of accessibility, with the more dynamic aspects of their activism reserved for explicitly asexual spaces. Therefore, I situate both Tucker's (2011) depiction of David Jay and Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work within the larger body of their writings and advocacy to discern what each of these major texts might *not* be able to tell us about the activists in question. In participating in this reading strategy, it should be made clear that I am not trying to determine what each of these activists *actually* believes. Rather, I am working to present them as complex and multifaceted social actors whose own discourse may complicate or reinforce the narratives they present in the works under consideration. Additionally, I was particularly attuned to the intertextual aspects of these texts. By intertextual, I am referring to a view of texts as always implicated within each other (as opposed to singular, autonomous events), a notion derived from the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and coined by Julia Kristeva (Alfaro, 1996). I use this strategy predominately to demonstrate the broader implications for Tucker (2011) and Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work—how their representations of the community may translate in larger perceptions of asexuality as a concept and identity.

CHAPTER 1: "NO ONE FORMS INTIMACY TOTALLY ON THEIR OWN TERMS:" PRECARITY AS FAILURE IN *(A)SEXUAL* (2011)

It is near impossible to encounter a text about asexuality and not find David Jay's name; indeed, since founding AVEN in 2001, Jay has become associated with the coining of the term "asexual" as it applies to human sexual attraction. This has made him the subject of mainstream discussions of asexuality, including a bevy of television interviews, many of which have served as a focal point for analysis by queer and feminist scholars (Cerankowski, 2014; Kim, 2011; Owen, 2014; Przybylo, 2011). Ultimately, Jay has become the poster-boy for the asexual movement; but AVEN, social justice advocates have opined, may recapitulate many of the dominate discourses its users are trying to assuage. As one AVEN admin, Andrew, summarizes:

> …there have been growing accusations of 'rape culture' on AVEN, claims that AVEN is hostile to anyone who isn't white, cisgender, romantic, neurotypical, etc. on account of AVEN failing to censor certain opinions. Other people criticize AVEN for having too much censorship. (Siggy, 2012)

Andrew's comments reveal fascinating antithetical observations amongst the asexual community: for instance, AVEN censors too much for some, while AVEN censors too little for others. This sort of tension runs rampant throughout the asexuality studies scholarship: as explored in the literature review, AVEN (and the activists associated with it) is either characterized as a pluralistic space exemplary of queer politics (Chasin, 2013; Chu, 2014; Hinderliter, 2014; Milks, 2014), or it is seen as a reactive perpetuator of normative discourse (Cerankowski, 2014; Gressgård, 2013/2014; Owen, 2014; Przybylo, 2011). Considering the centrality of David Jay and AVEN in discourses around asexuality, then, alongside the polarizing opinions shared by both asexuality studies scholars and activists, an exploration of how AVEN and Jay are positioned within mainstream and scholarly discoursed—particularly as they relate to representation and queer politics—is critical and timely.

Since Jay's television interviews have been the subject of much scholarly inquiry, I wish to turn my attention here to an under discussed representation of Jay and AVEN in Angela Tucker's (2011) documentary *(A)sexual*. The documentary chronicles several asexual-identified individuals, but centrally David Jay, as they work to negotiate their identities. Scholars have explored the documentary in some detail: Cerankowski (2014) has analyzed the film's advertising materials and how they rhetorically spectacularize asexual individuals; others have invoked Tucker's (2011) interview with popular gay sex columnist, Dan Savage, to explore antagonistic opinions of asexuals from the LGBTQ community (Emens, 2014; Milks, 2014).

No published scholarship to date, however, has offered a close reading of the documentary. Such a gap is troubling for two reasons. First, a documentary is not a non-neutral depiction of the truth; rather, as filmmakers and scholars have expounded, the genre uses non-fiction footage and filmic techniques to artistically craft a rhetorical point (Hesford, 2011; Nichols, 2010; Small, 2012; Tascon, 2012; Winston, 2000, 2008). Thus, second, the use of interviews and materials from *(A)sexual* as evidentiary ignores its limits in telling "the truth." We must approach a documentary-as-text, therefore, not for its ability to confer facts; rather, we must examine it by how certain narratives become *rhetorically* *framed* by the filmmakers, often at the expense of redacting the complex realities of its subjects. Furthermore, we must ask in relation to this documentary: what are Tucker's (2011) rhetorical goals regarding the asexual community? How does she accomplish her intentions? And how might this documentary—which aims to educate and garner support for the community—allude to narratives of vulnerability and precarity to support its thesis?

In this chapter, I argue that Tucker (2011) positions Jay in ways we could see as precarious, and therefore vulnerable, by presenting him as one whose own vies for visibility and awareness paradoxically allow him to express his conceptions of intimacy, while at the same time foreclosing them. Jay's narrative initially works to demonstrate intimacy as performative, one that requires sex to be intelligible (Butler, 1990; Przybylo, 2011). Yet the film's conclusion—wherein Jay concedes that he may only be able to ascertain the kind of relationship he desires by having sex—positions Jay as demonstrative of the queerness of failure (Halberstam, 2011): Jay's own awareness discourses have ironically rendered him precarious, in that he is unable to succeed in "proving" that asexuality is a productive possibility. The film's conclusion, therefore, works to demonstrate the discursive limits of visibility politics akin to LGBTQ mainstream activism, and renders asexuality as incapable of being fully expressed under such a political rubric. I contend that while this rhetorical strategy is effective and rich, it can only be realized by framing Jay as exceptional, valorizing his position within the documentary as cisgender, white, middle-class, and able-bodied. Such a rhetorical maneuver, I contend, simplifies the complex history of Jay, asexuality, and AVEN, all the while reiterating asexual exceptionalism along the intersectional axes of race, gender, class, and ability.

I begin by outlining the narrative structure of *(A)sexual*. I then provide a close reading of Jay's narrative in the film, focusing on the areas that situate asexuality as performative. I then examine the documentary's climax through readings of Lauren Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism and Judith Halberstam's (2011) queer reading of the affective dimensions of failure. I subsequently examine how Tucker's (2011) resulting affective "appeal to failure" works by positioning Jay within the parameters of asexual exceptionalism, focusing on the narrative strains in the documentary that reveal racist, classist, ableist, and cissexist rhetoric. Throughout the latter portions of this chapter, I provide several points of context that work to position Jay as a more complex activist that have been minimized or omitted by Tucker's (2011) narrative framing of Jay's character. I conclude by considering the documentary as a pedagogical tool in exploring the nature of neoliberal narratives of progress, as well as genric conventions of the documentary film.

"WHAT'S THERE TO TALK ABOUT?" ASEXUAL PRECARITY AND PERFORMATIVITY

(A)sexual investigates the lives of several asexual-identified individuals to explore the intricacies of the community. The first two-thirds of the film introduce the viewer to key concepts regarding asexuality, and follow a group of asexual individuals as they march in a San Francisco Pride parade. The latter part of the film follows the rise and fall of Jay's intimate relationships, culminating in his admission that he may need to engage in sexual activities in order to find his desired level of intimacy. Jay sits at the center of the narrative, though Tucker (2011) incorporates other asexual individuals, presumably to explore the

community's heterogeneity. These include Julie Sondra Decker, here referred by her YouTube name "swankivy;" Barb, an older woman who has claimed asexuality after three decades of abstaining from sex; Elizabeth, an asexual on the Asperger's spectrum who is in a relationship with a man named Brian; Cole, an advocate for AVEN; and Antonia, an asexual based in New York City. Tucker (2011) also features several psychologists—Anthony Bogaert, Lori Brotto, and Cynthia Graham--who serve to legitimate asexuality as a healthy, functional sexual orientation. Interpolated throughout the film are the viewpoints of several asexual naysayers, demonstrating the discrimination the community faces. Most of this source material is garnered from Jay's pre-existing television interviews, but is also present in Jay's interactions at the pride parade, and an original interview with Dan Savage, who remains critical and skeptical of the asexual community when compared to the plight of LGBTQ populations.

Tucker's (2011) intended argument is not hard to discern when we consider the film's production history. As Cerankowski (2014) has noted, *(A)sexual* was produced by Arts Engine Inc., an independent media outlet that utilizes filmic and visual media to evoke discussions around social issues. Cerankowski also explains that the documentary was meant to serve as an educational tool, evidenced by its touring at film festivals, LGBTQ centers, and universities. This is also evident in Tucker's (n.d.) "Director's Statement" (as cited in Cerankowski, 2014): "*(A)sexual* is a window into a subculture that people know very little about, a subculture that is growing. Our film will use humor and popular culture to make this serious subject interesting and accessible" (p. 149-50)[9]. Thus, Tucker's (2011) documentary seeks to educate viewers in hopes of validating the community; the incorporation of various instances of asexual discrimination, therefore, attempt to serve this point. While the documentary is meant to be accessible to mainstream viewers, the manner in which Tucker (2011) exhibits discrimination towards the community is demonstrative of the early theories of Michel Foucault (1978) and Judith Butler (1990)—both of which have been taken up by Ela Przybylo (2011) in theorizing "sexusociety." Upon briefly exploring these scholars' claims, we can begin to understand the rhetorical maneuvers that frame Tucker's main argument.

In his first volume to *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1978/1990) speaks of the "repressive hypothesis:" a historical model wherein attempts by institutions to render sexual acts and desires as pathological and/or sinful inadvertently created discourse surrounding sexuality by advocating for confession. Foucault (1978/1990) characterizes these confessions as "…the nearly infinite task of telling—telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures…" (p. 20). Thus, normative institutions' attempts to denounce and silence those who did not conform to their ideologies led to discursive resistance. Specifically, non-normative individuals were required to find alternative methods to refute the institutions that devalued their existence, resulting in a reverse discourse; for instance, in the case of

[9] At the time of my thesis writing, Arts Engine Inc's mission statement and Tucker's director's statement, both cited by Cerankowski (2014), appear have become defunct or difficult to access. I am therefore relying upon Cerankowski's account of these materials here.

homosexuality, it "…began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 101).

Though Foucault's (1978/1990) theories explicate discursive formations of identity, Judith Butler's (1990) landmark work *Gender Trouble* attempts to explore the function of gender and identity labels within society. This is especially the case in Butler's (1990) initial formulation of gender as performative—distinct from "gender as performance"—wherein reiterated cultural acts on the basis of compulsorily assumed heterosexual desire have congealed over time into a fictitious reality; as a result, one's perception of their gender is never pre-discursive, nor can it ever be situated outside of the pre-established norms (i.e. if one does not identify as either male or female, they must first know the definition of male or female). Any variation of gender that does not coincide with dominate paradigms, however, is rendered culturally unintelligible, thus opening up a space to explain the oppressive mechanisms of culturally performative apparatuses, while simultaneously revealing (or subverting) their own instability.

Both Foucault (1978) and Butler's (1990) theorizations of the discursive constructions of gender and sexuality serve as the basis for Przybylo's (2011) construction of sexusociety. For Przybylo (2011), sexusociety is an inescapable performative social apparatus, in that "individual actors must mimic each others' actions, not *en masse* but more as a telephone game enacted in a web, so that there is always slight variations of repetition, amounting to the *impression* of a coherent body politic" (p. 447). As a result of this repetition from various actors, certain sexual deeds become hierarchized as more desirable and privileged in sexusociety, with asexuality constituting a less privileged position. Przybylo (2011) proceeds to conceptualize the effectiveness of asexual rhetoric in relation to David Jay's interview on *The View.* This particular interview has been a common site of analysis for queer and feminist scholars, as Jay is subjects to an array of personal questions that work to debunk his asexuality. For Przybylo (2011), the interview follows Foucault's (1978) logic of sexuality as being borne of confessions; Jay is forced to "confess" his orientation while the interviewers simultaneously attempt to discredit him. As Przybylo (2011) writes, "like in Foucault's articulations of the confession, Behar (along with the other hosts) entreats Jay to *tell everything,* and functions as the interpreter and decipherer of Jay's 'inner' (a)sexual truths" (p. 450).

While Tucker (2011) may not explicitly draw upon these theorizations of gender and sexuality, it is telling that her selection of interviews articulate this web of theories posited by these scholars[10]. This is perhaps most evident in the selections from *The View* present in the film. The first instance it is referenced comes after Jay explains the definition of asexuality, in which the hosts reply:

Behar: And is it a problem?

Jay: No

[10] Cerankowski (2014) additionally comments on Jay's appearance on the *The View* as indicative of Foucault's (1978/1990) confessional aspect of the repressive hypothesis. Her work is meant to demonstrate how Jay becomes spectacularized, insofar as "…asexuals are made sexually visible because they have heretofore been unimaginable" (Cerankowski, 2014, p. 144). Thus, while Cerankowski explicitly alludes to Przybylo (2011), it is more so to support her larger argument, while I am here focusing on the interview's inclusion in the documentary. As such, I have deferred from often a larger discussion of Cerankowski's argument here, but do consider her formulations of asexual spectacularization in relation to performativity an important complement to my reading of Tucker's (2011) documentary.

Behar: So then why do you need to organize?

Jay: I mean, there's a lot of things that aren't a problem that you need to organize around. We need to organize, well, partially, because it isn't being talked about. Because…

Other host: I mean, you're not having sex. What's there to talk about?[11]

(Tucker, 2011)

Behar continues with this line of questioning. In a segment that Przybylo (2011) also discusses, Behar expounds:

Behar: But maybe it's repressed sexuality rather than, you know, that you're just like a normal guy walking around. Maybe it's repressed because you don't want to face what (the) sexuality might look like. Could that be it? Lie down. Just lie down. (Tucker, 2011)

The final clips come after the hosts ask Jay if he personally masturbates:

Behar: But you didn't answer the question, do *you* like to have sex with yourself?

Jay: Oh, me personally? I tried it. I mean, it was alright.

Behar: It's not all that? (Tucker, 2011)

All of these clips resonate with Przybylo's (2011) overall analysis of *The View* interview as a set of confessions: "it is obvious throughout that Behar, as the excavator of truth, is skeptical towards Jay's claims of asexuality, that she is intent of exposing him as a fraud, an 'asexual imposter' through whatever means are within her reach…" (p. 450).

[11] Due to the way this interview was shot, it is hard to discern here which of the hosts says this line.

Many of the other interview segments included throughout Tucker's (2011) documentary follow the same Foucaultian (1978) confessional theme and their resulting links to Butler's (1990) performativity and, thus, Przybylo's (2011) sexusociety. In Tucker's selection from *Tucker*, host Tucker Carlson also asks questions to seemingly provoke a "confession" from Jay:

> Carlson: Why don't you just try it once, and then you'll know, for certain, whether you'll like it or not?
>
> Jay: How many times do I have to try it before I actually say that…
>
> Carlson: (interrupting) Oh, c'mon, it's like goat cheese! You know, when you're little, you think "I'd never eat goat cheese, it comes from a goat. I didn't even know they had milk!" And then you try it, and it's sort of intriguing, and after three or four goat cheese experiences, you know, you like goat cheese.
>
> Jay: I mean, honestly, did you have to try sex in order to realize that it something you wanted to do? I mean, do most fifteen year old boys…
>
> Carlson: I mean, it wasn't a hard sell in my case, but on the principal that everything is worth trying at least once… (Tucker, 2011)

Here, not only does Carlson work to enact a confession from Jay, but also to debunk Jay's *ethos*. Throughout the clip, Carlson does not let Jay get a word in edgewise, and also infantilizes him through an analogy comparing Jay to a child with an underdeveloped palate for goat cheese. This minimizes Jay's credibility by rendering him too inexperienced to claim that he is, truly, asexual.

Finally, in a clip from *The Montel Williams* show, the titular host asks Jay and his cohorts whether or not their asexuality is a result of an undiagnosed disability:

> Williams: What if you are a child born with Asperger's syndrome, and don't know that: you live you're entire life—now you're 60 years old—and think "the place that I belong is with you guys? (Tucker, 2011)

Again, Tucker (2011) includes a clip of media where Jay's asexuality is challenged as unreal or unintelligible, positioning Williams as an authoritative voice seeking a confession from Jay and his peers, while all the while working to discredit.

While Tucker's (2011) goal may not have been to present Jay's experience as coinciding with scholarly conceptualizations of identity, the fact that the interview segments appear like confessional interrogations resonate with Foucault (1978), Butler (1990) and Przybylo's (2011) notions of asexuality as discursively mediated and controlled. Tucker's (2011) documentary therefore represents asexuality as "unintelligible" in the performative web of sexusociety. In this sense, Tucker presents asexuality as discriminated in the sense that it is seen as abnormal, insofar as it is expected that one should be enticed by sexual acts.

This is articulated most clearly in Dan Savage's interview, where he classifies asexuality as "hysterical" when considering the sex positive liberation movement. Savage articulates that one should not feel obligated to have sex, but finds the formation of a community surrounding the issue unnecessary. Furthermore, Savage sets an impressive precedent for who "counts" as asexual when he says "I set the bar pretty high for asexuality: I think if you're beating off, you're probably not asexual." Savage is also adamant in the documentary that it is unethical and morally irresponsible, in his opinion, for an asexual person to date an allosexual: "people who are asexual and want an intimate, perhaps quasi-romantic relationships, that doesn't involve sex should date *each other*." In both instances, Savage is depicted as trying to establish which relationships are appropriate within the current discourse of sexuality and gender, which resonates with Butler's (1990) notion of gender and sexuality as performative: within the dominate framework, certain forms of desire and sexuality—in this case, following Przybylo (2011), asexuality—become seen as "unintelligible."

Tucker's (2011) documentary, therefore, can be seen as situating asexuality as precarious through aligning it within the theoretical frameworks of performativity. The connection to precarity becomes clear when we consider the following quote from Butler (2009) extending gender performativity within the context of precarity:

> The desire for recognition can never be fulfilled—yes, that is true. But to be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition—that make a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one's life, the ontological conditions of one's persistence. We think of subjects as the kind of beings who ask for recognition in the law or in political life; but perhaps the more important issue is how the terms of recognition—and here we can include a number of gender and sexual norms—condition in advance who will count as a subject, and who will not (p. iv).

Here, Butler (2009) proceeds to utilize her final allusion to the advanced condition that allow certain subjects to "count" as the catalyst between precarity to performativity.

Tucker's (2011) framing of the community within this context of performativity thus implicitly advocates for the view of asexuality as socially precarious; only by enacting this identity within the pre-established norms and producing a reverse discourse can Jay become "recognizable" to the interviewers. The constant reiteration of these performative instances throughout the documentary, moreover, signal to the viewer that Jay's plight is predominately situated on oppressive discourses within dominate paradigms. Thus, for the majority of the film, Tucker (2011) invites the viewer to initiate a change in the discourse that makes Jay and other asexuals lives intelligible.

DAVID JAY, INTIMACY, AND VULNERABILITY

While the earlier scenes in the documentary allude to asexuality as precarious vis-à-vis performativity, it is the documentary's conclusion that demonstrate the effects upon Jay—namely, an increased sense of vulnerability in regards to intimacy. In the latter portions of the film, we are introduced to Jay's web of intimate partners. Jay characterizes the nature of his relationship within a polyamorous framework: he treats each of his friends in the same way he would treat a romantic partner, and thus has come to love each of them for the various roles they fulfill in his life. Some of the members of Jay's web of intimate partnerships also express a deep sense of love and community for him, with some indicating they want him to help raise their children. Others semi-humorously implore that they wish for Jay to marry them. Ultimately, Jay's friends provide the same level of intimate connection that others perceive as solely attainable in a monogamous sexual relationship. As Jay says in the conclusion of his presentation at Drew University, titled "Can asexual people fall in love?:"

> Jay: This many people can do a lot more than [two people]. In lots of different ways, we're beginning to question a lot of these ideas about--not just around people needing sex to be happy--but about people needing all kinds of things to be happy. We are inventing a bunch of languages that are useful, hopefully not just for asexual people. (Tucker, 2011)

As Jay says these lines, the slide behind him crosses out the original title and replaces it with "How can asexual people be happy on their own terms?" These visual and verbal cues solidify asexuality as a radical possibility that changes the landscape of how everyone, not just asexuals, perceives intimacy. Jay's comments also demonstrate the potential for his relationship to alter what he perceives as a sexualized dominate paradigm for intimate relationships.

Shortly after this scene, we are presented with Jay two years later. Here, Jay discloses that his web of intimate relationships has dissolved: some friends had gone to focus on monogamous sexual relationships, others had lost touch with Jay as a result of starting graduate school. Jay reflects that this transition was "the closest thing to a breakup I have ever had." As a result, Jay reveals to the viewer that he now seeks a monogamous relationship, one that could provide him with more security and stability. But Jay also makes discloses a surprising revelation:

> Jay: …even, like, that person could be a sexual person, and I could even be in a relationship that involved sex—I know that that's something a lot of asexual people

> do, and that's not something that I'm opposed to—but I know that I would need kind of that community building or something else to really be the core source of intimacy in our relationship. (Tucker, 2011)

While Jay at first appears to have come to terms with this, the camera eventually cuts to him sitting, silent and hesitant, before proceeding to comment:

> Jay: So, I wanna clarify a little bit why sex is something that I would want to have in a relationship with someone. The reason that sex is something that I'm now kind of willing to have in my relationships with people really gets to the fact that sex is how we take relationships seriously, and that I feel like I'm gonna have a much easier time having a relationship that gets taken seriously, and a relationship works—envelope more options--if that's something I'm willing to put on the table. (Tucker, 2011)

Here, David's narrative is strongly linked to performativity: his notion that sexual relationships are the only ones taken seriously resonates with Butler's (1990, 2009) conceptualization of intelligibility. Jay's diction in the documentary thus suggests that intimacy is performative insomuch as sexual intimacy is required in order for it to be registered as intelligible. And, as I've demonstrated in the previous section, Tucker's (2011) framing of Jay's plight as performative renders his narrative a precarious one. But unlike the previous scenes in the documentary that worked to advance this argument within the context of dominate discourses, this moment is unique in that the very liberatory discourses that Jay sought to establish—that asexuality is a legitimate identity that requires visibility and recognition—exacerbate his precarity and sense of psychological and intimate vulnerability. This is evidenced by Jay's subsequent comments:

> Jay: I've spent so much time in this community fighting for the idea that people don't need sex to be happy, that it is really kind of disheartening for me to feel like I might need to have sex just because that's the only way to, like, access the kind of intimacy I want to access. (Tucker, 2011)

As Jay states this, we cut away to him walking in slow-motion through a crowd of people. Such a visual implies that Jay's sense of self and intimacy has been folded back into the public discourse, rendering him unable to escape society's own expectations of his identity. This point is further solidified in the final portion of this monologue when Jay concedes "no one forms intimacy totally on their own terms" (Tucker, 2011).

We could characterize Jay's precarious position in the documentary as a manifestation of Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism: that Jay's object of attachment—in this case, his desire for recognition as an asexual--is at once optimistic and simultaneously detrimental to his own well-being and progress. Indeed, for the majority of the film, Jay's vies for recognition as an asexual and his subsequent community building endeavors are framed as opening up possibilities for himself and others. Yet in this moment, the rhetoric that Jay has relied upon for recognition and community—both in regards to his close friends and AVEN—have complicated his ability to be happy. Thus, Jay's remarks that he is "disheartened" that the discourses he has sought to disseminate have personally failed him works to establish his endeavors as cruelly optimistic. Furthermore, within this web of cruel optimistic precarity, Jay has, according to Tucker's (2011) narrative, failed in his quest for recognition.

Yet failure is not without its subversive potential. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam (2011) troubles the binary opposition between "success" and "failure." For Halberstam, "success" within a heteronormative neoliberal paradigm is equated with both "reproductive maturity" and "wealth accumulation" (p. 2). Implicit to Halberstam's discussion of neoliberalism are its social implications: as outlined in the literature review, while predominately known as an economic model favoring completely unregulated markets, neoliberalism affects individuals by crafting subjects adept in self-care, resiliency, independence, and renders every social exchange within an economic model of investment and return (Brown, 2005, Chapter 3). Halberstam thus argues failure's capabilities to undo dominant neoliberal paradigms of positivity, the valorization of individual resiliency, and independence in the U.S, which "…emerges out of a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions…" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3).

While Halberstam (2011) frames these aspects of failure and success through an analysis of popular culture (namely animated films), I believe this notion of failure serves us well in understanding the subversive potential of Jay's narrative in Tucker's (2011) documentary. On the whole, Tucker's (2011) narrative frames asexual awareness projects along liberatory frameworks of the mainstream LGBTQ movements. In this regard, then, "success" would involve Jay achieving happiness, depoliticization, and personal mobility—something akin to Duggan's (2003) homonormativity, but related to asexuality. But here, Jay's own use of these liberatory politics predicated on visibility have forced him into a precarious position as a result of his failure. This renders Jay incapable of fully realizing his ideal intimate relationships, and forces him to acknowledge the performative nature of intimacy. Such a "failure" implies that Jay's narrative--in line with Cerankowski's (2014) observations of asexual awareness movement's reliance on visibility--could elucidate the discursive limitations of a politics of visibility. Furthermore, this documentary's narrative framing erodes neoliberal conceptualizations of resilience—Jay has, instead, according to Tucker's (2011) narrative, provided a platform to understanding the ways asexuality tampers normative LGBTQ discourse, moving the viewer towards a radical new paradigm.

While this rhetorical appeal situated on failure is powerful, I would contend that it must be inferred that Tucker's (2011) film has presented Jay as holding the potential to succeed. Take, for instance, the *OED* definition of "failure:" "a failure to occur, be performed, or be produced; an omitting to perform something due or required; default" (Def. 1a, n.d.) and "the fact of becoming exhausted or running short, giving way under trial, breaking down in health, declining in strength or activity" (Def. 2, n.d.). In both definitions, failure is measured in one's possible success, either in "omitting to perform something *due* or *required*," or that one is "running short" of their intended goal. These definitions of failure, I contend, both tacitly work to presume that subject under question is bound to succeed. So what are the mechanisms that Tucker (2011) uses to position David as a potential success? It is, as I argue in the next section, the exceptionalization of Jay as privileged asexual subject that allows his failure to act so subversively.

JAY AS AN EXCEPTIONAL SUBJECT

Tucker's (2011) documentary positions the asexual individuals being interviewed as relatively non-threatening in their sexual orientation. This results in a decontextualized narrative of AVEN's origins that relies on normative representational discourse on the basis of gender, race, class, and ability. These discourses situate Jay and his asexual cohort as "exceptional" examples within the asexual community who work to defeat previous stereotypes against asexuality. This, I contend, primes Jay as a potential success, thus making his failure in the conclusion readable to the viewer. This section works to contextualize Jay and the origins of AVEN, and proceeds to explore of these intersections individually.

According to Tucker's (2011) documentary, Jay coined the term "asexual" because he was unable to find any resources that addressed his perceptions of intimacy. Notably, Jay qualifies his asexuality prior to forming AVEN as a "big, icky mystery," and proceeds to explain the following:

> Jay: There were no resources, there was no community, there was no one I could talk to, and that was really scary and really isolating for me. And so I said, 'alright, if no one else is talking about this stuff, I'm gonna talk about it, and I'm gonna just put something up there on the internet and see who gets in touch with me (Tucker, 2011).

This narrative of AVEN's origins implies that Jay is exceptional insomuch as he was the sole creator of the asexual identity and community.

Yet the actual history of asexuality and AVEN is significantly more complicated. Indeed, as explained in the literature review, the term has existed throughout the tenure of sexology (Kim, 2014; Przybylo, 2012). Furthermore, Andrew Hinderliter (2013/2014) offers background on AVEN and David Jay as an activist. Jay started AVEN as a static-content site; it did not become a forum-based website until Jay became an active member of a pre-existing site regarding asexuality, the Yahoo group "Haven for the Human Amoeba" (HHA). When HHA reached critical mass, it fused with AVEN, therefore prompting Jay to open up forums. Hinderliter (2013/2014) also chronicles the ways that Jay worked to avoid a sense of elitism on AVEN. This is probably most apparent when Jay reached out to another prominent activist, Geraline Levi Jones (Miss Geri). Miss Geri and Jay, at one time, wished to collaborate, but abandoned the idea "…because of a disagreement over whether people with a sex drive/people who masturbate can be asexual. Miss Geri took the position that they cannot" (Hinderliter, 2013/2014, p. 60). Jay, on the other hand, wished for AVEN to be more pluralistic, and felt that masturbation should not foreclose one's ability to participate in the community. Miss Geri went on to form the "Nonlibidoist Society," a now defunct website. But unlike AVEN, which anyone could join, the Nonlibodoist Society required permission to access, including "…a survey people could fill out, which would be sent to Miss Geri who would tell people if they were asexual or not" (Hinderliter, 2013/2014, p. 60). Hinderliter (2013/2014) does offer multiple other viewpoints recounting asexuality and AVEN's origin (i.e. he tells of Nat, a genderqueer sex-positive individual who collaborated with AVEN, and traces many of the early splits in the community over David Jay's rhetoric). However, even if Hinderliter's (2013/2014) historical overview of AVEN is inconsistent with reality, what is clear is that the site did not form in a vacuum. Moreover, AVEN—and Jay's brand of activism--appears, comparatively speaking, to be a more fluid approach to discussing one's lack of sexual attraction. Tucker's (2011) documentary, however, portrays Jay and AVEN's origins as more in line with mainstream LGBTQ activism; namely, that asexuality is immutable and is most conducive to those representative of institutional whiteness, binary gender roles, middle to upper-class upbringing, and able-bodiedness.

Tucker's (2011) documentary also implicitly positions Jay as the most exceptional asexual in the film through his identity as a cisgender man. Indeed, while Tucker (Tucker) claims in her director's statement that the film was meant to talk about the growing asexual community, she spends an unbalanced amount of time examining Jay over her other asexual subjects—all of whom identify as female. Such a tactic seems to take advantage of the fact that while asexuality has been discussed conceptually throughout Western history, it has been highly gendered as feminine (Gupta, 2013; Kim, 2014). Emens (2014) has also remarked that it is Jay's position as a cisgender male that has accounted for his success as a visibility advocate. For instance, in responding to the trend throughout the research demonstrating that more women than men identify as asexual, Emens (2014) writes, "perhaps no one took note of asexuality until men did—that is, until men claimed it as an identity (p. 336). Emens (2014) proceeds in a footnote to clarify this point: "this may help explain David Jay's relative fame and role in bringing asexuality into the limelight…" (p.

336). By relying on Jay's narrative more than those of the female asexuals in the documentary, Tucker (2011) seems to be taking advantage of these implicit gendered and cultural discourses around asexuality in order to position Jay as the most exceptional subject in the film.

Yet Tucker's (2011) film does not only situate Jay as an exceptional subject through his maleness; it is implicitly reiterated that it is Jay's position as cisgender that aids him in making the asexual community prominent. Indeed, the psychological experts Tucker (2011) includes—namely Anthony Bogaert and Lori Brotto--implies a reassertion of binary gender normativity within the asexual community. This is best understood through an investigation of the ways these scholars discuss gender in their work in relation to how it is presented in the film. In his interview in the film, Anthony Bogaert summarizes the answers to the British National Probably Sample he investigated as follows:

Q: I have felt sexually attracted to…

A. Only to males
B. More to males, at least once to a female
C. Only females
D. More to Females, at least once to a male
E. Equally to males and females (Tucker, 2011)

Each answer is portrayed on the screen as Bogaert states them. When he reaches the final option, answers A through E fade away to reveal "F. neither males nor females" (Tucker, 2011). A check mark appears next to this final option. This scene is problematic for two reasons. First, the British National Probability Survey did not actually read this way; according to Bogaert's (2004) report, the survey was presented as follows:

> "I have felt sexually attracted to…" Six options followed: (a) "only females, never to males"…" (b) "more often to females, and at least once to a male"… (c) "about equally often to males and females"…(d) "more often to males, at least once to a female"… (e) "only to males, never to females"…and (f) "*I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all"* (p. 281, emphasis mine)

Thus, the original iteration of the question that spurred Bogaert's (2004) research was not gendered, but he recounts it in the documentary within the confines of the gender binary. As presented in the context of this documentary, Bogaert possibly conflates asexual attraction to genderqueer/gender non-conforming individuals. This leads to the second issue with this scene: Bogaert's statement in the documentary is not corrected through Tucker's (2011) visual aid. The inclusion of a "check mark' next to "neither males nor females," then, acts as visual affirmation of Bogaert's report.

Moreover, scholars such as Lori Brotto--who is also interviewed in the documentary—have previously rendered trans individuals invisible in their analysis of the asexual community. As outlined by Hinderliter (2009), Brotto et al (2010) rely on binary oppositions of gender in crafting their sampling data. For instance, in one report, Brotto et al (2010) eliminated all 27 responses from their first study who did not indicate their gender when confronted with only the answers "male" and "female." However, what if these 27 individuals subscribed to non-normative gender identities? To eliminate their responses from the study thus further implies that gender non-conforming individuals cannot be asexual. By including Brotto alongside Bogaert, Tucker's (2011) documentary implicitly perpetuates this problematic discourse between those in the asexual community and gender non-conforming communities within psychological analysis. Furthermore, the reliance on this binary conceptualization of gender identity and expression within the documentary aid in positioning Jay as an exceptional subject. Not only is Jay exceptional in the film because he is featured more than his female cohorts, but because he is (normatively) cisgender.

Beyond featuring Jay as a cisgender male, Tucker's (2011) film demonstrates Jay's asexuality movement as predominately white. Indeed, the pool of asexual identified interviewees within the documentary are all white, with the exception of Antonia, who appears for only a few minutes at the film's conclusion. Even in crowd scenes, very few people of color are to be seen amongst the asexuals. This includes the "barbeque" scene, where asexual individuals gather from across the country to David Jay's backyard prior to marching in the San Francisco pride parade. The few people of color integral to the narrative are briefly featured in Jay's intimate web of friends, both of whom are named Poonam. Otherwise, many of the other non-white individuals who are included in the documentary are reserved for the "confessional scenes," wherein someone asks seemingly random participants to define asexuality. The results are comedic, with the participants demonstrating little-to-no knowledge of the term or the community in its current manifestation (i.e. asexuals are linked to amoebas and moss, a conflation of asexual reproduction with the asexual identity). Though these scenes are clearly meant to demonstrate the misconceptions of asexuality, it is problematic that the few non-white individuals in the documentary are featured in the context of these "comically ignorant" scenes. Moreover, it is two black men who are interviewed that are shown to be both offensive and incoherent. As one of them remarks: “[asexuality] is about preparing yourself to do something because you needed to fall back enough ‘cause things went crazy for a minute. There’s no such thing as asexual human beings” (Tucker, 2011). His partner laughs at the final remark. By predominately featuring white asexuals—notably David Jay—and offering problematic representations of people of color, Tucker’s (2011) documentary reiterates Owen’s (2014) analysis of asexuality as indicative of whiteness, and lessens the possibility of asexuality as a category to be claimed by people of color.

Jay and the asexuals within AVEN are also portrayed as having a presumed socioeconomic status of middle-to-upper class mobility. Scenes where Jay discloses his coming out story are accompanied with images reminiscent of nuclear suburban living and the interior of college dorm rooms. Barb, an older asexual woman, tells of her decision to end sexual relations; as she utters “I haven’t missed [sex] at all” (Tucker, 2011), we are shown a tail-shot of her four-seat personal plane taking off into the sky. The documentary, therefore, implies that one must have access to some form of capital in order to “not miss sex” as an asexual.

Jay and the community’s presumed socioeconomic means and perspective is perhaps even more concerning when we consider Tucker’s (2011) framing of AVEN as the *de facto* site of refuge for asexuals. Indeed, within the film’s narrative, one interviewee positively expounds upon the internet’s role in establishing the asexual community; since “shrinks” have been the harbingers of sexual terminology, she sees the internet as a perfect tool for a community to form on its own terms. Yet the emphasis on AVEN as the community hub presumes that all asexuals have some level of consistent access to the internet. Moreover, Tucker's (2011) documentary portrays AVEN's culture as one that relies on a level of tacit socioeconomic privilege. This is seen in the discussion of the connection between "cake" and the asexual community through interviews with Cole and David Jay:

> Cole: Somebody posed the question "what's better than sex?" And *everybody seems to universally agree* that cake is just fantastic. Jokingly, cake would be like "asexual sex."
>
> Jay: And cake became this sort of symbol of welcoming and acceptance and ushering people into the community. That experience of finding other asexual people and of finding a way to talk about this stuff has really been something that has united the community and has brought us together, and is *something all of us can relate to.* (Tucker, 2011, emphasis mine)

Interpolated throughout this scene are images of handcrafted, professionally photographed cakes. The universalist rhetoric employed by Cole and Jay is troubling; after all, does *everyone* worldwide enjoy cake? More specifically, can everyone afford designer cake on a regular basis? The representations of "cake" as a casual commodity, one that everyone can enjoy, along with Jay's reassertion of cake as "something all of us can relate to" positions him and those who are welcomed into the asexual community as those with the means to consistently afford extraneous items such as gourmet artisan cakes, personal four-seat planes, and computers.

Yet perhaps one of the most complex set of discourses are present in Tucker's (2011) attention to asexuality as it relates to disability. As noted in the literature review, many preliminary studies in asexuality studies have attempted to discern the relationship between HSDD and asexuality (Bogaert 2006, 2012; Brotto, 2009; Prause and Graham, 2007). Moreover, disability studies scholar Eunjung Kim (2011, 2014) has demonstrated the "mutual negation" present in the rhetoric of both disability and asexual activists: disabled individuals contest the notion that they are inherently asexual, while asexual individuals dismiss that they are disabled. The connection between asexuality and the disability community, therefore, is a tenuous one.

Tucker (2011), in the narrative framing of her documentary, does little to alleviate these problematic connections. We are first introduced to the relationship between the disability and asexual community in an interview with Lori Brotto, who indicates that her 2008 study explored the connection between psychiatric issues and asexuality. As she outlines her work, a word bubble of psychiatric disorders appears on the screen; the list includes "post traumatic stress, anger control, suicidal thinking, alienation, sexual distress, psychotic features, depression, health problems, anxiety, alexithymia" (Tucker, 2011). When Brotto proudly proclaims that her team found "no connections," the words individually fade away. This scene was probably included to divorce the stigma that all asexuals are disabled. Yet much in the same way we are presented with a blank screen ultimately void of diagnoses, Tucker's (2011) film insinuates here that one must have a "clean bill of health" in order to qualify as legitimately asexual.

The exceptionalization of Jay as an able-bodied member of the asexual community is apparent in the documentary's portrayal of Elizabeth. Elizabeth identifies as an asexual with Asperger's syndrome, a disability commonly associated with asexuality (indeed, this sentiment is demonstrated in Jay's interview with Montel Williams). Elizabeth personally believes that her disability and asexuality are linked. As she notes in a personal interview:

> Elizabeth: I have Asperger's, and I absolutely think that Asperger's and asexuality are linked. The number of people who have autism spectrum disorders on the asexuality message boards, not anywhere near a proportional representation of the general population. I don't know enough about the biology of either one to speculate on why that is (Tucker, 2011).

In one sense, Elizabeth's narrative reiterates problematic notions of asexuality as an immutable, biologically rooted condition, as evidenced by her notion that she does not have enough biological evidence to conceive of how Asperger's and asexuality are linked (Flore, 2014; Przybylo, 2012; Kim, 2014). But her narrative also demonstrates one who has embraced asexuality and disability as identities that can be simultaneously experienced by one person. Yet immediately following this interview, Tucker (2011) intervenes with a shot of psychologist Cynthia Graham emphasizing that "there *may* be some association between Asperger's and asexuality. One study had been done looking at that…" (Tucker, 2011, emphasis mine). This is then closely followed by Jay remarking:

> Jay: It's something that our community *has really had to figure out how to come to terms with*, and it changes how we provide support to people. I don't think that Asperger's is the one description for asexuality; I don't think there's any one thing

> that can be used as a root cause for asexuality, but there may be factors that are associated. (Tucker, 2011, emphasis mine)

Graham and Jay's comments, when considered to their close proximity after Elizabeth's narrative, appear to be working to undo the notion one can identify with Asperger's and asexuality. Graham's comments suggest that due to the limited amount of information available on the connection to Asperger's and asexuality, Elizabeth's claims are not well founded. Jay further insinuates that narratives like Elizabeth's are a burden to the community. Jay's invocation that Asperger's is something the community has had to "figure out how to come to terms with" thus renders disability as something he had not considered in his conceptualization of asexuality as it relates to AVEN. This is further evidenced by Jay's notion that disability requires him "to change how we provide support to people" on AVEN, which compulsorily assumes a standard form of support that disability fundamentally disrupts. The implication in this narrative framing, therefore, is that someone like Elizabeth—who claims asexuality and disability simultaneously—is an abnormal case in the asexual community. This not only reiterates the notion of mutual negation, but also positions Jay's conceptualization of the community as rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that Angela Tucker's (2011) documentary *(A)sexual* frames asexuality along notions of precarity by presenting intimacy as performative. Furthermore, Jay can be seen as precarious as a result of his own visibility efforts: the asexual awareness movement renders his intimacy unintelligible, and AVEN becomes a site of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). This moment can be seen as subversive; Jay's "failure" as an awareness activist disrupts teleologies of progress by showing the discursive limits of social movements predicated on visibility (Halberstam, 2011). Yet Tucker (2011) renders Jay recognizably perched for success to the viewer by framing him within the parameters of asexual exceptionalism, emphasizing his character within culturally normative discourses of gender, race, class, and ability. While examining these normative discourses within the film, I have made efforts to contextualize aspects of AVEN's founding that elucidate Jay as a more complex figure as the documentary might lead us to believe.

I have presented variations of this chapter at classes offered through George Mason University's Women and Gender Studies program. In every instance, at least one student has commented on the documentary's conclusion, in which Jay concedes that he would be willing to integrate sex into his intimate relationships. These students have opined that this seems counterproductive to the documentary's aims. After all, why would a film working to justify and discuss the asexual community end with its protagonist failing in his quest? Not only have these discussions helped form the basis of my analysis, but they are also indicative of the ways in which dominant neoliberal discourses of personal progress rely on narratives of resistance and perseverance. My analysis of the documentary's narrative framing, therefore, is not meant to serve as a critique on Tucker's (2011) abilities as a filmmaker, or to presume she was parroting problematic discourse intentionally or uncritically; indeed, many of these normative aspects of the film's narrative could have resulted from extraneous reasons, such as availability of footage or participants for the film. This is perhaps most evident when one views *(A)sexual's* Kickstarter page: in Tucker's (2010) rationale for fundraising, she advertises the asexual individuals who, alongside Jay's narrative, were meant to "flesh out the movement as a whole" (n.p.). This includes—alongside Elizabeth and Brian—Antonia, who is described here as "…an attractive, African American woman, a life coach who has finally figured out that she is asexual and is eager to organize a group in NYC" (Tucker, 2010, n.p.). Thus, Tucker (2010) may have had to limit Antonia—a woman of color whose narrative could have addressed the relationship between asexuality, gender, and race—within the film for the sake of narrative feasibility, time, artistic vision, or (as evidenced by the Kickstarter) money. Therefore, it is my hope that while this reading serves to demonstrate the consequences of the film's reliance upon normative discourses in vies for recognition, it also addresses how Jay's "failure" may tamper with the ways Western norms of identity rely upon notions of "progress" and "success."

CHAPTER 2: "I KNOW WHAT I FEEL:" PRECARITY AND FEELING IN THE WORK OF JULIE SONDRA DECKER

While David Jay is arguably the most prominent asexual awareness activist, he is certainly not the only. I first came across Julie Sondra Decker in *(A)sexual*, there referred to by her YouTube user name "swankivy." Under this moniker, Decker (2008a-l) became known for a series of videos she titled "The Asexuality Top Ten," where she debunks what she perceives the ten most popular myths regarding her claim to asexuality. Charismatic, funny, and delightfully awkward, Decker has worked throughout her activism to disseminate information in an accessible manner; she is also a writer, an artist, and has been featured in several focus-pieces of asexuality in mainstream media[12]. Decker (2014) has recently released a mainstream work on asexuality, provocatively titled *The Invisible Orientation*. Like "The Asexuality Top Ten," Decker (2014) writes to a mainstream audience, specifically individuals who wish to know more about asexuality, broad community terminology, definitions, all the while working to divide myth from fact. However, despite Decker's large corpus of activism, she has been seldom discussed in asexuality studies; moreover, the relative newness of *The Invisible Orientation* has rendered it absent in the scholarship.

I find the general limited use of Decker's work from the scholarship strange, if only because, from a rhetorical standpoint, it is a delight to read. Decker (2008a-l, 2014) clearly

[12] Decker, for instance, was featured in a series from *The Huffington Post* regarding asexuality. Of particular interest to this thesis is her appearance in the article on discrimination, "Battling Asexual Discrimination, Sexual Violence, and 'Corrective' Rape" (Mosbergen, 2013).

works to justify, broaden, and situate her appeals in ways that are inclusive and reflexive. Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work also frequently resonates with notions of vulnerability and precarity in relation to asexuality—words she never uses, but nonetheless exist within the cruxes of her discourse. Her activism is not without its problematic aspects, however; like framing of Jay in Tucker's (2011) documentary, Decker (2008a-l, 2011) seems to rely on asexual exceptionalism in her prominent works, notably when she is ambiguous in her discussions. Yet the moments where this asexual exceptionalism does occur creates a productive tension that simultaneously opens up discussions regarding the affective dimensions of identity.

In this chapter, I argue that Julie Sondra Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) *The Invisible Orientation* and "The Asexuality Top Ten" reveal notions of asexual precarity and vulnerability in situations where asexual identity is rendered unintelligible or unbelievable. This rhetorical framing opens up a space to discuss the often unpredictable ways affects function in relation to identity, especially in Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) frequent allusions to the ways anti-asexual sentiments do not honor individual feelings. Yet these appeals, like with Jay in *(A)sexual*, come in the context of exceptional discourses. For Decker (2008a-l, 2014), this is evident in areas where her framing of asexual identity is ambiguous; as a result, it appears that only the explicitly self-identified asexual individuals are subject to these notions precarity and vulnerability. This manifests in *The Invisible Orientation* through an assertion of a strict asexual/allosexual binary, and in "The Asexuality Top Ten" through a reliance on appeals to Decker's (2008a-l) own (privileged) *ethos* as an asexual individual.

I will comparatively examine each text. I begin by providing a discussion of the areas where Decker (2014) describes asexuality in ways to resonate with precarity, particularly in her exploration of the tensions between LGBTQ community spaces and asexual individuals, in *The Invisible Orientation*. I then turn to "The Asexuality Top Ten" with a focus on the ways Decker (2008a-l) rhetorically positions herself in relation to her (and others') identity[13]. In regards to each text, I identify discursive strains in Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) writing demonstrative of asexuality as an orientation of desire and feeling. I then turn to how asexual exceptionalism manifests throughout Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work through her reliance on a strict asexual/allosexual binary positioning of identity. I conclude by considering how Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) textual ambiguity can also open up a space of radical (re)conceptualizations of queerness as it relates to affect.

PERFORMATIVTY AND PRECARITY IN *THE INVISIBLE ORIENTATION* AND "THE ASEUXALITY TOP TEN"

In *The Invisible Orientation,* Decker (2014) seeks to provide an accessible introductory text defining the ins-and-outs of the asexual community. The audience, according to Decker (2014), is relatively broad: anyone who might think they are on the asexual spectrum, allies of the asexual community, those teaching in sexuality studies, and—as she bluntly puts it—"…for people who think asexuality doesn't exist" (p. xiv).

[13] I am opting to review each text in reverse chronological order for the sake of readability. *The Invisible Orientation* is a larger work that is meant to appeal to a broader audience; as such, it often provides information about the community and culture that helps to inform Decker's (2008a-l) observations in "The Asexuality Top Ten."

While the monograph acts as an educational tool, a consistent theme throughout it (as indicated by the title) is asexuality's lack of visibility and recognition as a legitimate identity category. It is this theme that provides the catalyst for our discussion of how Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) rhetoric resonates with notions of vulnerability and precarity.

The Invisible Orientation also reads as uncharacteristically fluid in its conceptualization of sexual orientation: "for *everyone,* sexual orientation is more like a range, not a simple series of separate categories" (Decker, 2014, p. 5). This results in rhetoric that seems to avoid asexual exceptionalism. As Decker (2014) continues:

> If someone who has never been sexually attracted to anyone does develop sexual attraction, that person may decide to start using a different label. Labels are chosen to describe people…When circumstances change, labels can too. There's no danger in asexual people describing themselves as asexual because it is not a decision they're now sworn to adhere to…the change in description does not mean they weren't an authentic example of what the previous label described when it fit them (p. 8).

Beyond her framing of identity as mutable, Decker (2014) also represents the asexual community as intersectional. As noted in the literature review, asexual awareness activism has been criticized by scholars for its visibility discourse that may exclude other communities (Gupta, 2013, 2014; Kim, 2011, 2014; Owen, 2014). Indeed, as explored in Chapter One, Tucker's (2011) documentary relies upon some of this rhetoric in its framing of David Jay's narrative. Yet here, Decker (2014) makes every effort to challenge the paradigm of the "gold star asexual," or "…an asexual who lacks all the traits often blamed or asexuality, [which] therefore supposedly makes a good spokesperson since they are, for all intents and proposes, unassailable" (p. 12). In the list that follows, Decker (2014) cites a slew of intersections that are often attributed to "the gold star asexual," including that they are able-bodied, white, cisgender, pro-sex, healthy, young, aromantic, and nonlibidoist[14]. Decker (2014) explores each intersection throughout the monograph, but adds that identifying within a complimentary opposite category should not diminish one's claim to asexuality. For instance, in describing disability in the asexual community, Decker (2014) writes: "asexuality isn't an orientation that can only be claimed by those with able bodies and optimum health" (p. 79). Such a statement helps to alleviate Kim's (2014) notion of mutual negation in relation to asexual and disabled communities. And regarding non-white asexual identified individuals, Decker (2014) describes how various racially contingent cultural mores might exacerbate discrimination as an asexual:

> Some will join online asexual communities and not bring up their race as they perceive it may cost them a sense of belonging or because white participants may suggest their perspectives or discussions of race-related intersectionality are irrelevant. They may also feel pressured to consider class issues, race issues, and religious issues that affect their communities and culture disproportionately as "more important" and may feel shamed for thinking attention to asexuality awareness is actually worthwhile (p. 73)[15]

[14] Notably, this list is not dissimilar from Chasin's (2013) remarks on the "real" asexual that help frame the notion of "asexual exceptionalism." For more on this subject, see the discussion of Chasin's (2013) work in the Literature Review.

[15] We could speculate that Decker's (2014) inclusion of these passages in her monograph comes as a reaction to associated scholarship. In her bibliography, Decker (2014) cites

Decker (2014) continues this trend with a variety of other commonly conflated "conditions" used to debunk asexuality, including if one was sexually abused, transgender or gender non-conforming, etc. In all cases, Decker (2014) acknowledges that such a status does no discredit one's claim to asexuality. Thus, unlike the documentary in the previous chapter, Decker (2014) seems to advocate for the asexual community's heterogeneity (Carrigan, 2011, 2012; Chasin, 2011, 2013; Hinderliter 2009, 2013/2014) to instances where asexuality extends beyond "gold-star" status. Such a rhetorical positioning, at first, appears to debunk the notion that there should be a truly exceptional asexual.

Decker (2014) does explore how asexuals experience institutional oppression (and, we could say as a result, situational vulnerability), some of which mirror those of LGBTQ individuals. The "non-exhaustive list" she supplies—and further expands upon—reads:

> 1) consummation laws. 2) adoption denial. 3) employment discrimination and housing discrimination. 4) discrimination by mental health professionals. 5) lack of marriage equivalent for non-romantic relationships. 6) religious pressure/discrimination. 7) "corrective" rape. 8) lack of representation in media and sex education. 9) internalized oppression/self-hate. (Decker, 2014, p. 57)

Kim's (2011) earlier work on asexuality and disability narratives. She also includes Cerankowski and Milks' (2014) edited collection, which includes Owen's (2014) work and Kim's (2014) second piece, in her list of suggested scholarly articles. While this infers that Decker may have engaged in this scholarship while writing her monograph, she does not discuss these works directly in her discussions about the intersections of asexuality and other identities. Ergo, I am inclined not to draw explicit connections about Decker's rhetorical motives here—however, it is worth noting that such an intertextual possibility exists.

These instances of what we may consider socio-political precarity, however, take up a relatively small amount of her monograph; rather, notions of precarity—and, therefore, vulnerability—are manifested the most in Decker's (2014) text within interpersonal interactions.

Decker's (2014) text relate to notions vulnerability and precarity, like the documentary, in regards to performative apparatuses of identity (Foucault, 1978/1990; Butler, 1990, 2009; Przybylo, 2011). These relationships are constructed throughout the monograph, but are most apparent in the section regarding asexuality's relationship to the LGBTQ community: "Society, Discrimination, and Queer Communities." In general, Decker (2014) does not define asexuality as inherently queer or not; rather, asexuality's assimilation into LGBTQ spaces comes as a result of its rarity and lack of focus in the media. Thus, according to Decker (2014), asexuals may go to queer spaces because the members hypothetically understand the experience of being discriminated against for their non-normative sexual orientations or practices. However, Decker (2014) explains that LGBTQ individuals often exclude asexuality on the basis that it is an illegitimate identity. As Decker (2014) writes, "…for asexual folks it's not an experience of outward oppression so much as it's an experience of omission—of being left out and unable to participate in something that's supposedly central to life" (p. 47). Here, the asexual is rendered vulnerable as a result of a lack of recognition. As Decker (2014) continues:

> Some will say that enduring invisibility isn't the same as "oppression"—and they're right, though what *happens* as a result of systemic erasure, verbal abuse, and misunderstanding can be oppressive…asexual people aren't saying they have

> an identical or worse experience when compared to LGBTQ people. Asexual people are saying they often feel omitted, erased, and excluded and that they move through life facing consistent challenges to their sexual orientation (p. 48).

Decker (2014), thus, seems to acknowledge a kind of social and psychic vulnerability through the erasure of those who claim asexuality; such a move harkens to notions of vulnerability and its differential distribution as a result of what we could consider social precarity. Decker (2014) proceeds later to qualify an explicit examples of discrimination resulting in vulnerability. As she states:

> Any asexual person who identifies openly as asexual learns to defend the existence of the orientation against comments like "No, see a head doctor" and "I'm sorry, but that's not a real thing" and "if you love someone, you have to want to have sex with them" and "sex with me will fix you." Asexual people are told, through these messages, that they are expected to be quiet unless they *want* people to interrogate them about everything from sexual experiences to genital functionality (Decker, 2014, p. 66)

Here, Decker (2014) describe how asexual individuals are often told that their harassment is spurned from the disclosure of their orientation, to which she writes, "[this] attitude is more or less advocating asexual people staying in the closet. That it's coming out itself that causes the problem, not any kind of issue with mainstream attitude" (p. 66). Taken together, these passages insinuate that asexuals find themselves in precarious positions through vies for acceptance and legitimacy. The resulting interrogation from non-asexual individuals relates to the Foucaultian (1978/1990) notion of confessions, in that the asexual must justify their existence, while all the while being discredited by others. Decker's (2014) discussion of coming out thus renders visible the hegemony of social norms requiring one to be sexual in order for their intimacy to be intelligible, here represented in her appeal to the fact these normative notions derive from overarching "mainstream attitudes."

The resulting performative-as-precarity framework opens up, for Decker (2014), as social vulnerability in the asexual individual:

> *Invisibility* means not being able to connect with others like you. It means being very likely to come to the conclusion that you are broken. It means seeing no boxes to check and being filled with fear and shame or frustration. It means being isolated in the way that is unimaginable to most people who take their visibility for granted. And it means that as soon as you try to be seen—regardless of whether you're just asking the initial questions or deliberately spreading asexual-specific awareness—the vile attitudes and unreasonable requests for justification you will be subjected to will probably make you wonder if the invisibility was really so bad (p. 66).

Decker (2014) thus constructs a paradigm that resonates with notions of precarity for the out-asexual in regards to current mainstream attitudes: asexuals experience negative affects as a result of invisibility, and their inability to connect with asexual naysayers flattens the multidimensional aspects of their vulnerability—in its political, social, and psychic forms—and how it creates a need for dependency (Butler, 2004, Chapter 1; Mackenzi, Rogers, & Dodds, 2015). The resulting social precarity for the asexual subject, according to Decker (2014), spurns from a lack of recognition from others, with the solution being to recognize asexuality as legitimate.

Decker (2008a-l) constructs her arguments around asexual visibility in a similar way within her earlier work in "The Asexuality Top Ten." The video series was uploaded between June 2, 2008, and June 13, 2008. In her introductory video, Decker (2008a) outlines that the web-series is meant to justify asexuality by debunking the most popular myths against its existence. The series is thus comprised of twelve videos: an introduction, the "asexuality top ten" proper, and a list of honorable mentions. The top-ten reasons are listed as follows, from "least popular," to "most popular:" 10) You hate men; 9) You can't get a man; 8) You have a hormone problem; 7) You're overly involved in your own busy life; 6) You've just never had me in your bed; 5) You're just afraid of getting into a relationship; 4) You were sexually abused; 3) You're a lesbian; 2) You just haven't met the right guy, and 1) You just got out of a bad relationship. In the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to the videos that pertain to a specific myth as "Video 10-1" (in order of their corresponding position on the list) and the introductory video as "The Introduction."

Like her later work, Decker (2008a-l) seems to balance her personal conceptualization of asexuality alongside holistic alternatives, making it clear that asexuality is a broad category. Decker (2008a-1) is quick to specify when her own personal understanding of asexuality conflicts with broader community espousals. These moments often come when Decker (2008a-l) retroactively modifies her statements with text bubbles within her videos. In "The Introduction," for example, Decker (2008a) defines an asexual as "a person who isn't interested in having sex," with a textual bubble noting "er, well, more accurately, they're not interested in having sex due to lack of attraction to other people, though some asexuals do have sex for other reasons…" Additionally, in "Video 8"

Decker (2008d) concedes that she personally feels as though her asexuality is a result of a hormone problem, but should not be seen as the case for everyone. As Decker (2008d) states, “I wouldn’t say it’s a problem. So, maybe, low sex drive plus a certain mindset equals asexuality—*for me*, maybe that’s it” (emphasis mine). After Decker (2008d) speaks this, a text bubble appears over her head modifying this statement: “though I should note that some people with normal to high sex drives still ID as asexual because it’s about ATTRACTION, not horniness.”

Furthermore, in “Video 3,” Decker (2008i) unpacks the role of masturbation in the asexual community. Here, Decker (2008i) initially iterates “I guess it’s up to argument whether that person is still an asexual, because [masturbation] is a sexual behavior.” Yet Decker (2008i) clarifies in a text-bubble: “Note—not an argument I’d make, because not all masturbation is “a sexual behavior.” I wasn’t clear here. Many asexual people masturbate.” Such instances throughout Decker’s (2008a-l) videos demonstrate a sense of self-reflexivity and pluralistic notions of identity; Decker makes clear that her own conceptualizations of asexuality may change, be modified, or against the grain of her peers through these textual modifications. These moments, like those within *The Invisible Orientation*, seem to resist an exceptional model of asexuality; rather, asexuality is presented as fluid and individualistic in its construction.

Notions of precarity and vulnerability in “The Asexuality Top Ten” are consistent with Decker’s (2008a-l) later work in *The Invisible Orientation*, in that they arise from a lack of recognition and intelligibility. In “The Introduction,” for instance, Decker (2008a) notes the reason for her video series is to spread awareness for asexuality: “I would like some recognition--I don't need a parade or anything, but you know, I would just like there to be some awareness out there." Decker's (2008a-l) rhetoric also demonstrates ways asexual individuals may experience vulnerability when their identity is not recognized. This is perhaps most explicit in "Video 4," when Decker (2008h) recounts an incident that occurred while meeting a potential new male friend. According to Decker (2008h), the man appeared to understand her explanation of her asexuality; yet at the end of the night, he asked her for a good-night kiss. Decker (2008h) ultimately conceded to a friendly kiss on the cheek, but reminded the man of her aromantic asexual identity; in response to this, the man licked her on the face "like a dog." While Decker (2008h) writes off this narrative as a funny mishap, it is nonetheless demonstrative of how the invalidation of asexuality can manifest into degrading and dehumanizing moments of social precarity.

Decker's (2008a-l) rhetoric within the video series also resonates with notions of vulnerability and precarity as differentially constructed based on context. Decker's (2008a-l) early work is thus equally demonstrative of anti-asexual exceptionalism, challenging the stability of the asexual identity. For instance, in "Video 3" (You're a lesbian), Decker (2008i) opines:

> To tell you the truth, it would be a lot easier if I was gay. It would be so much easier to explain, because the lesbian lifestyle and the whole concept of being gay is so much more readily accepted than the concept of asexuality right now—people don't even believe it exists.

Yet as Decker (2008i) says this, a word-bubble appears with an addendum that reads: "But don't worry, I'm not saying "being gay is easier than being asexual." I'm saying homosexuality is acknowledged as existing while asexuality often isn't." Like the documentary in the previous chapter, therefore, both *The Invisible Orientation* and "The Asexuality Top Ten" could be seen to contain rhetoric that consistently constructs notions of vulnerability and precarity as related to performative aspects of identity.

"YOU CAN'T DEFINE WHAT CAN AND CAN'T HAPPEN WITH MY FEELINGS:" ASEXUALITY, AFFECTS, AND BINARIES

In many instances where we could see her discussing precarity and vulnerability, Decker (2008 a-l, 2014) rhetorically frames asexuals as a subject of feeling; the politics of recognition position the asexual as precarious and vulnerable when steeped in the negative affective dimensions of being unrecognized. Decker (2008a-l, 2014), therefore, frequently reiterates in both *The Invisible Orientation* and "The Asexuality Top Ten" the importance of respecting individual feelings. Let us take, for instance, Decker's (2014) notion in *The Invisible Orientation* that "this book was written because everyone will benefit from knowing that asexuality exists, that it isn't a disorder, and that *asexual people can be trusted to describe their own feelings…*" (p. xv, emphasis mine). Decker (2014) also draws upon affects in her exploration of invisibility (cited earlier in this chapter), as rendering one filled "…with fear or shame or frustration…" isolation, and being forced to put up with "…the vile attitudes and unreasonable requests for justification you will be subjected to will probably make you wonder if that invisibility was really so bad" (p. 66). Such instances reveal the affective dimensions of erasure, and how they lead to an individual—who, in

Decker's (2014) case, has identified as asexual—to feel negative perceptions towards themselves.

These notions are also seen within "The Asexuality Top Ten." For instance, consider these statements from two different videos:

> I know what I feel, and I've decided to look on the bright side about it, and be happy that I'm well-adjusted, and that I don't need to be like everybody else in order to be happy. (Decker, 2008f)
>
> So, you stick a penis in a vagina and then that means it's love. So, there's no such thing as any other kinds. C'mon now...you can't define what can and can't happen with my feelings, can you? (Decker, 2008g)

These comments elucidate an additional factor in Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) rhetoric that move us towards a potential framework of asexual precarity, in that it manifests not only from a lack of recognition for identity, but for feeling—a lack of understanding for how an asexual may perceive themselves in relation to how they feel and what others expect of them, and the attempt to moderate precisely how one *should* feel about others. I am not making a claim here that Decker (2008a-l, 2014) is advocating for empathy; I do, however, feel that such instances in Decker's rhetoric force us to consider the relationship between discursive understandings of identity in relationship to affects.

The relationship between discourse and affect are perhaps best explored in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick & Adam Frank (2003), who are cited as instrumental in the affective turn. According to Sedgwick & Frank (2003), theories' shift into examining the discursive mechanisms of power were so radically antiessentialist that they effectively excluded one's personal conceptualizations of feeling on the basis of emotional response. Their following critique of the then-contemporary scholarship is perhaps the most applicable to queer and post-structural feminist theory: "human language is assumed to offer the most productive, if not the only possible, model for understanding representation" (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003, p. 93). Yet as both scholars aptly argue through their reading of the under-read psychologist Silvan Tompkins:

> How long does it take you after being awakened in the night by (a) a sudden loud noise or (b) gradual sexual arousal to cognitively "analyze" and "appraise" "the current state of affairs" well enough to assign the appropriate quale to your emotion? That is, what is the temporal lag from the moment of sleep interruption to the ("subsequent") moment when you can judge whether what you're experiencing is luxuriation or terror? No, it doesn't take either of us very long, either (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003, p. 113).

Considering Sedgwick & Frank's (2003) comments, Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) allusions towards the importance of respecting feelings becomes a fascinating point of analytical departure. Taken alongside her clear attempts throughout her writing to be as inclusive and intersectional as possible, in addition to the fact that many of Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) comments most conducive to notions precarity are explicit in her discussions of asexuality in queer spaces, Decker's work begs the question: to what degree is the source of asexual precarity the result of antiessentialist regulatory queer analytics? By bringing the affective dimensions of identifying as asexual into her activism, Decker (2008a-l, 2014) prompts us to consider the limits of discursive analysis as they relate to queer identity.

Such a consideration would be tempting to take at this stage; however, I believe we must first consider some of the potentially exceptional discursive elements of Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) framing of identity. Indeed, while Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) conceptualization of asexuality is fluid, it is still considered within her work as a distinct category that is thrust into a binary opposition between asexual/allosexual identities. Such a binary opposition, as Przybylo (2011) argues, can actually aid in the perpetuation of oppressive discourses such as sexusociety, for if asexuality "…remains faithful to reactive, binary-bound repetitions, it may only serve as a surface resistance to sexusociety, while at the same time aiding in sexusociety's production…even the micro safe space of the asexual body is in fact *embedded* within sexusociety" (p. 456). To be clear, I do not wish to advocate for Przybylo's (2011) prescriptive notions of queer transgression in relation to asexuality within the context of Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) activism. However, I do contend that Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work can be seen as ultimately participating in asexual exceptionalism through positioning only those asexuals who outwardly identify as asexual as most implicated in notions of vulnerability and. This privileges visibility as a mode of liberation, and does not challenge the ways that claiming identity (i.e. "coming out") can reinforce stable constructions of identity in relation to politics and precarity (Butler, 1993, 2009).

While Decker (2008a-l, 2014) frames asexuality as a fluid category, it is nonetheless characterized as a distinct category within a particular, discursively liminal space. Take for instance, Decker's (2014) personal narrative at the opening of *The Invisible Orientation*. In the early portions, Decker (2014) personally defines her lack of sexual attraction as “nonsexual.” After writing an online essay describing her identity and feelings, Decker (2014) discovered that there were more people like her. Yet according to Decker (2014), it wasn’t until the coining of the term “asexual” that these individuals began to have a voice:

> Many of the people I’d previously talked to found AVEN and developed a supportive network, shared their pride in their identity, and spearheaded the beginnings of outreach to educate the world about their orientation. When media outlets picked up on the concept, I started describing myself as “asexual” instead of “nonsexual” to connect myself with the awareness efforts, and I participated in some of the interview requests and took what opportunities I could to educate other people on the existence and experience of asexuality. (p. xiii)

On the one hand, this aspect of Decker’s (2014) narrative embraces the socially constructed aspect of asexual identity, in that it is represented as a discursively constructed state that encapsulates the feelings of Decker and her peers. For instance, much like in Decker’s (2014) narrative, early scholarship in asexuality studies noted that individuals had not begun identifying as asexual until encountering the term on AVEN (Brotto et al, 2010; Scherrer, 2008). Decker’s (2014) narrative construction, furthermore, at first acknowledges Przybylo’s (2012) sentiments of asexuality as scientifically construction. As she reminds the reader: “…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…That it is here today is necessarily a crystallization of our specific here and now” (Przybylo, 2012, p. 2).

This moment in Decker's (2014) narrative, while at first resisting asexuality as a stable category, also paradoxically represents it as a moment of "discovery." After this paragraph in *The Invisible Orientation*, "asexuality" replaces Decker's (2014) previous identity of "nonsexual" and the then-nameless identities of those around her. Such a narrative move implies that these individuals were awaiting their "true" identity to discursively emerge within the sea of isolated confusion, having been *discovered*: "having a network through which asexual people could find each other—*along with widespread acknowledgement that the orientation exists*—was a great step forward. But it remains a terribly under-discussed topic…" (Decker, 2014, p. xiii, emphasis mine). In this italicized segment, Decker (2014) no longer seems to acknowledge asexuality as a discursively constructed category; rather, it is within the formation of AVEN that the enigmatic folds of the then-unnamed "asexuality" came into fruition as a contained identity.

Such a rhetorical framing of asexuality has several effects upon the reading of Decker's (2014) monograph. On one hand, Decker's (2014) text insinuates that claims of precarity and vulnerability in relation to asexuality become feasible only when one openly identifies as such. Take, for instance, Decker's (2014) discussion of asexual and allosexual relationships. We again find Decker (2014) engaging in a pluralistic, self-deterministic rhetorical framing of asexual/allosexual partnerships: "…it's [the asexual individual's] right to specify what the boundaries and dealbreakers of your relationship are and what expressions of intimacy you're looking for" (p. 43). Decker (2014) then proceeds to list several possibilities for an asexual partnering with someone who may wish to have sex: the allosexual partner might give up sex, the asexual may agree to have occasional sex, the couple may opt to be polyamorous, etc. Yet Decker's (2014) framing of the relationship relies on a strict binary division: "If an asexual person wants a relationship with someone who *does* want to make sex a part of the relationship, then compromise is in order" (p. 43). It is clear here that there is an asexual in the partnership—but what of the one with "sexual needs?" At first it appears obvious that this person is allosexual, but Decker's (2014) language is ambiguous. Could, for instance, the "sexual" partner be a gray-A? A romantic asexual who suddenly experiences sexual attraction to another (after all, this is stated as a possibility in the monograph)? Only the person with the asexual modifier is recognized in this case as experiencing non-traditional, non-sexual understandings of intimacy; the partner who doesn't, according to Decker's (2014) ambiguous rhetoric, could either be allosexual or a "deviation" from asexuality. Such a rhetorical framing, therefore, presumes a distinct space where asexuality "begins" and "ends," reinforcing a binary between "asexual" and "allosexual.[16] And binaries, while useful for navigating the world, can only remain in opposition through a stabilization of culturally contingent categories; in this case, "allosexuality" must reassert itself through an othering and stabilization of "asexuality," and vice versa (Butler, 1993).

This binary construction thus raises an important theoretical question: what are the boundaries of asexual (and aromantic) interactions? Where does a hug go from platonic to romantic to sexual? Randi Gressgård's (2013/2014) analysis of asexuality's relationship to

[16] One could argue that Decker avoids this binary through her inclusion of "demi" and "gray-" asexual/aromantic categories. While these labels technically fall between "asexual" and "allosexual" and/or "aromantic" or "alloromantic," she nonetheless implies that one must identify as a label in the asexual spectrum. This, ultimately, does not tamper with the binary, so much as reinforce it.

neoliberalism and identity is most applicable here. Gressgård's (2013/2014) invocation of neoliberalism is, like Halberstam (2011) in the previous chapter, meant to discuss both its social and economic effects. That is, neoliberalism relies on individualism, self-realization of one's identity (and, subsequently, the ability to use this understanding to care for oneself), and renders all exchanges and notions of progress (including political and social) in terms of economic investment and return (Brown, 2005, Chapter 3). Therefore, in a neoliberal paradigm, one is often unengaged in determining how social institutions mediate identity; rather, the end goal of neoliberal project to combat inequality strives in a desire for de-politicization, self-sufficiency, and assimilation into dominant paradigms of economic production and advancement (Duggan, 2003).

For Gressgård (2013/2014), such logic exists within the current formations of asexual awareness in attempts to be elevated from a place of pathology to identity (patterns we have seen in Decker's (2014) framing of asexuality as an identity waiting to be "discovered"). Asexuality's project of recognition, according to Gressgård (2013/2014), is subsequently steeped in an attempt to be seen as conducive neoliberal subjectivity:

> …the politics of recognition is constitutive of subjects whose combination of freedom to self-realisation (in accordance with notions of truth/authenticity) and self-determination (in accordance with notions of personal autonomy) makes them particularly suitable for self-regulation within the parameters of (neo)liberal citizenship (p. 74)

Combatting such politics of recognition, according to Gressgård (2013/2014), thus requires not an extension upon the revelation of a stable asexual identity, but one that tampers with the fabrics of how we conceptualize the realm of the sexual versus the realm of the non-sexual--to pose the question: "how to firmly draw the line between physical affection and sexual interaction; sexual and non-sexual intimacy; sexual and non-sexual desires; friends and lovers/beloved; primary and secondary relationships, etc.?" (p. 77). By framing asexual precarity and vulnerability solely in terms of those who explicitly identifies on the asexual/aromantic spectrums, then, Decker's (2014) ambiguous rhetorical appeals imply that the boundaries between "the sexual" and "the romantic" are self-explanatory. The ability to recognize these boundaries, therefore, falls within neoliberal notions of self-realization: one would need to identify as asexual or aromantic in order to articulate a non-normative sense intimacy. This, we could argue, aids in the construction of an exceptional asexual as one who falls within this neoliberal paradigm of identity.

Similar rhetoric can be found in "The Asexuality Top Ten," in that while Decker (2008a-l) frames asexuality as fluid and multifaceted, it is nonetheless distinct from other allosexual counterparts. In "The Introduction," for instance, Decker (2008a) states that asexuality is known by other names: "also known as nonsexual; some people say antisexual or celibate, but those two things aren't quite what it is." While Decker (2008a) is likely relying on the rhetoric of broader awareness efforts (i.e. AVEN's distinction that asexuality, the orientation, is distinct from celibacy, a choice), such a framing demonstrates a discursive denomination to distinguish asexuality from any and all counterparts. For instance, as Decker (2008a) continues in "The Introduction," "This video today is going to be about what asexuality is, and my personal experiences with it, because there are an awful lot of things asexuality is not..." This implies a binary opposition between asexuality and allosexuality, in that asexuality must be defined by what it *is* versus what it *is not*. And, for instance, in "Video 7," Decker (2008e) explores the possibility for her to maybe one day feel sexual attraction:

> …I have not made some kind of choice against this for the future, I'm just saying asexuality, for me, means that I have never felt interested in someone in the past, and I don't feel interested in anyone now, and being that of this recording I am thirty years old, it's hard to imagine that it will suddenly start.

Such a statement at once ambivalently tampers with the stability of the category of "asexuality" and the notion of sexual orientation, while at the same time implying a discursive "limit" to asexuality: for Decker (2008e), the implication that sexual attraction that may occur represents an "end" to her asexuality—that the potential future presence of sexual attraction would temporally remove her from the identity category "asexual." Such rhetoric, therefore, relies on the notion that asexuality is a distinct category with stringent limits, even if it is broadly construed.

Decker's (2008a-l) videos not only utilize neoliberal notions of self-evident identity, but also deploys rhetoric of self-exceptionalization in order to render her asexuality intelligible to the viewer. Unlike her later work with *The Invisible Orientation*, Decker (2008a-l) is able to insert more personal narratives into her YouTube videos; as such, many of the logics for debunking each of the myths rely on rhetorical appeals her *ethos*. Specifically, Decker often situates her views as distinct from other cultural mores of asexuality. In "Video 9" ("You can't get a man"), Decker (2008c) states:

> Now if we digress into the realm of the ego for a second…I'm reasonably attractive, I think, and from the responses I've gotten from guys who make it all too clear that I'd be on their list if I would allow it. I think I'm a decent looking person. And just as an added note, people who suggest that the reason that I don't wanna have sex is to cover up the fact that I just can't get man: a lot times they haven't seen me, they're responding to something that's on my site. So, they're probably thinking that I'm really hideous or something; who knows what they're thinking…?

Within this example, Decker (2008c) seems to be relying on an implicit cultural stereotype that asexuality is a result of one's unattractiveness. In positioning herself as conventionally attractive, therefore, Decker (2008c) paradoxically situates herself outside of one myth in order to debunk another. Such logic continues in "Video 4" ("you were sexually abused") when Decker (2008h) states:

> But me, I'm pretty sex positive *for an asexual*; I'm open to the ideas, and I think it's great when people can find a sexual relationship that makes them very happy, but as long as they leave me out of it… (emphasis mine).

Decker (2008h) again invokes a normative assumption of asexuality is a state of sexual disgust. While Decker (2014) later unpacks this myth in *The Invisible Orientation,* here she nonetheless uses it to exceptionalize herself as an asexual: she is somehow different *as an asexual* because she is sex-positive.

More telling, however, are the moments when Decker (2008a-l) positions herself as self-sufficient, both economically and personally. Throughout the video series, Decker (2008a-l) relies on a parallel of her domesticity to her *ethos* as an asexual. In "The

Introduction," Decker (2008a) draws an explicit connection in the definition of her own identity as an "aromantic asexual:"

> …I happen to be an aromantic asexual. That's what they call it when you're not interested in a domestic partnership, either. I'm not looking for any kind of partner. I don't like to cuddle. I don't want to find another asexual to be roommates with or cuddle up with them. But there are some people who do want to, some people who do want that sort of relationship. So, there's all kinds.

At first, this notion appears to embrace an anti-neoliberal view of asexuality—one needn't have a domestic partnership, according to Decker (2008a), to be happy. But as the series progresses, Decker (2008a-l) implicitly constructs herself as happy outside of a domestic partnership because she has the means to be self-sufficient and independent. For instance, in all of the videos, Decker (2008a-l) films from various areas of her apartment. In "Video 4," Decker (2008h) explicitly draws attention to this when she states:

> I'm in a corner because…well, I'm running out of interesting places to broadcast from. I'm trying to be all cool and have different interesting looking backgrounds of some kind in all of my different videos, but there's only so many locations of interest in my little apartment, so you're gonna have to deal. I'm broadcasting from a corner. But I have interesting stuff behind me: this is my Flower Fairies stuff collection. I collect Cicely Mary Barker's artwork.

While this statement at once humanizes Decker (2008h) as endearing and quirky, it also works to situate her authority as an asexual advocate in relation to her domestic stability. Decker (2008h) therefore frames herself in regards to neoliberal notions of identity through an appeal to her economic stability; that is, her identity does not impede her from being an active, independent producer and consumer. Decker (2008a-l) frequently calls upon her grounded personality and understanding of herself as a means to justify her asexuality. As Decker (2008a) states in "The Introduction:"

> …I had not heard of anybody going through life just never developing an interest, but I wasn't gonna say to myself 'well, I've never heard of anybody else that feels this way, so I must not feel that way." That's not how I am. I'm in touch with myself and I knew I that I wasn't feeling these things and I wasn't gonna pretend to.

This vein of thought continues in "Video 7:"

> If someone struck me "that way" I would respond, and I would find time to respond. *But being true to myself is very important*—as much as that sounds like an after-school special or something—*I really do listen to myself*… (Decker, 2008g, emphasis mine)

Like her later work, then, Decker (2008a-l) positions herself as an individual whose understanding of asexuality comes from narratives of neoliberal self-regulation. This, in turn, perpetuates notions of asexual exceptionalism within neoliberal notions of selfhood.

CONCLUSON: AFFECTIVE ASEXUAL FUTURITIES

In this chapter, I have provide a comparative reading of Julie Sondra Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) "The Asexuality Top Ten" and *The Invisible Orientation.* On the whole, Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) discussions of asexuality in both texts are seemingly conducive to queer frameworks of identity, in that asexuality is presented as multifaceted and fluid.

Furthermore, Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) examinations of asexual discrimination resonate with notions of social precarity in line with performativity, in that asexuals are seen as most vulnerable when they are rendered unintelligible. While this opens up a fascinating analytical space for discussing the role of individual feeling in relation to recognition, it nonetheless relies on a binary opposition between "allosexual" and "asexual" that reinforces neoliberal notions of self-evident identity (Gressgård, 2013/2014). This follows alongside the conceptualization of asexual exceptionalism as one who is in line with the social and economic constructions of neoliberalism, evidenced by Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) self-exceptionalization within her texts to bolster her *ethos*.

While there certainly exists allusions to asexual exceptionalism within Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) work, I believe it is important to note that these are produced from moments of textual ambiguity. Ambiguity, however, is as capable of at once reiterating problematic norms as it is in subverting them. This is especially considering the fact that most of Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) appeals to asexual recognition are built upon affect. Thus, we must consider affects' undefinable and unpredictable aspects that cannot be explained through discourse alone. Indeed, affects may be analytically unreliable, but they are nevertheless an apparatus of humanity. For Sedgwick & Frank (2003) and Butler (2004, Chapter 1), affective mechanisms work to situate humanness. For Butler (2004, Chapter 1), this is seen in one's right to grieve and be grieved; for Sedgwick & Frank, one has the right to claim you understand your feelings as a subject, even when the words to describe those feelings are socially constructed. The affective dimensions of misrecognition in Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) activism, therefore, opens up a conceptual slippage: is it asexuality, as an identity and sexual orientation, that has crafted this precarity? Or is it the *intimate dimensions* of Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) perception of relationality—both in the context of and outside of her claim to asexuality—that have crafted the precarious situation? While this chapter has predominately focused upon the former line of inquiry, I have hoped throughout my analysis to open up a space for later works (either mine or others') to consider the complexities of this second analytic, and allows us to consider broader implications for analyses of asexuality.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined two closely related research questions: how might theoretical understandings of precarity and vulnerability elucidate the framing of asexual awareness activists' discussions of discrimination? And do these framings come at the expense of "exceptionalizing" certain aspects of their identities? I have explored these questions through examinations of Angela Tucker's (2011) representation of David Jay in her documentary *(A)sexual*, and Julie Sondra Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) *The Invisible Orientation,* alongside her earlier YouTube videos "The Asexuality Top Ten." In both cases, notions of vulnerability and precarity are prominent when the activists in question assert their asexuality as intelligible and legitimate. In *(A)sexual*, Jay's narrative culminates into social precarity and failure through his inability to achieve an ideal level of intimacy that is conducive to his visibility movement. However, this rhetorical framing comes at the expense of positioning Jay throughout as an exceptional asexual: his cisgender maleness, whiteness, perceived middle-class position, and able-bodiedness are exemplified throughout the piece. This runs counter to many of the accounts of Jay's creation of AVEN, which position him as more complex, and aware of the pluralistic and socially contingent aspects of identity.

Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) "The Asexual Top 10" and *The Invisible Orientation,* at initial glance, provide a fluid approach to asexuality, one complementary to a queer conceptualizations of mutable identity. Like *(A)sexual*, vulnerability and precarity reverberate throughout Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) activism in situations where asexuality's legitimacy is questioned. Decker (2008a-l, 2014) rhetorically frames this argument through an implicit binary opposition between asexual and allosexual; as such, only the self-identified asexual is seen as vulnerable and precarious, drawing a stringent line between where asexuality "begins" and ends." "The Asexuality Top Ten" further reveals that Decker (2008a-l) also must exceptionalize herself as a sex-positive, conventionally attractive, middle-class asexual in order to bolster her *ethos.* However, we also find that her language is conducive to a potentially radical reconsideration of the affective dimensions of misrecognition.

My reading of these two texts holds implications for future directions in asexuality studies. First, *(A)sexual's* depiction of David Jay and Julie Sondra Decker's (2008a-l, 2014) activism link precarity in regards to the politics of recognition, both in heteronormative and queer spaces. This raises questions about the current Western paradigms regarding recognition, identity, and visibility. Such an implication is not entirely new; in her work *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* Kelly Oliver (2001) has worked to move the prevalent Hegelian politics of recognition from one rooted in subjectification vis-à-vis struggle, to one of love and compassion. Moreover, Wendy Hesford (2011), within her monograph, has called for an interrogation into notions of suffering and recognition, which "…ignores the cultural and material differences that shape the politics of identification, recognition, and belonging and, in so doing, removes suffering as a universal" (p. 190). I concur with both scholars that in order for asexuality to be accounted for in a queer context, our notion of "suffering" as it relates to recognition must be reworked; indeed, it would appear that the current dominate narrative of suffering—as exemplified by my discussion of Przybylo

(2011, 2013/2014a, 2014b), Gressgård (2013/2014) and Owen (2014) at the conclusion of the literature review—has potentially made the possibility of asexuality as a precarious position unintelligible within the Western cultural imagination.

Accounting for asexual exceptionalism alongside precarity and vulnerability, however, would not necessarily mean turning our attention away from asexuality as an identity. Indeed, throughout queer theory, identity—however socially constructed it may be—has been seen as vital for the assertion of rights and social change (Butler, 1993, 2004). Therefore, I've attempted to demonstrate through my readings of these texts, even problematically situated rhetorical appeals to recognition can come with implications for reimagining cultural norms. Tucker's (2011) documentary demonstrate Jay's vulnerability by elucidating the limits of his own visibility projects; for Decker (2008a-l, 2014), feelings serve as a tool to demonstrate the affective dimensions of identity. Thus, like Gayle Rubin (1975/1997) argued in her seminal piece "The Traffic in Women," we may benefit from turning our attention away from solely how asexuals should perform along queer understandings of identity, but to the mechanisms of power that make exceptionalism necessary, and continue to delegitimize non-sexual intimacies as states of happiness within the public imagination.

I am not, however, necessarily advocating for a greater inclusion of narratives that demonstrate the "dangers" of being asexual. While I have no doubt such narratives exist, and should be shared by those who wish to tell them, solely relying on such narratives for analyses will only aid in the project of asexual exceptionalism; in other words, only the most spectacular instances of injustice will become intelligible within the public imagination. Rather, I believe we must reimagine what "asexuality," conceptually speaking, does to craft precarity across identities and throughout a variety of contexts (including, as this thesis has demonstrated, potentially among those we perceive as privileged).

Indeed, we could conceptualize "intimate orientation" as a new kind of institutional intersection that works alongside race, gender, class, and ability to regulate behavioral and sexual norms. Take, for instance, Eunjung Kim's (2014) genealogy of asexuality's evolution as a diagnostic tool throughout sexology. While Kim (2014) primarily focuses on the evolution of the term, implicit throughout her analysis is allusions to how gendered sexual norms have been shaped through sexology's pathologization of asexuality. Notably, Kim (2014) demonstrates that asexuality-as-pathology was very much responsible for the characterization of women as "frigid." For instance, in citing Frank Capiro, Kim (2014) writes that "he dedicated himself to the study of sexual disorder and frigidity in the hopes that frigidity "*can* be cured" and that "many marriages can be *saved,*" because "the sexually adequate woman is a better and happier wife and mother" (p. 265). The rhetoric such as this sounds strikingly like current discourses surrounding rape culture and its reliance upon compulsory heterosexuality; both of these related concepts have been the project of feminism for some time. Incorporating notions of sexual normativity that police asexual and/or aromantic identities along the axis of intimate orientation could supplement the already robust ways feminists--both domestically and transnationally—are combatting cultures of sexual violence. This consideration is similar to Chasin's (2013) sentiment that…

> …we need to interrogate the expectations and pressure that coerce people, especially women, to want more sexual desire, just as feminists before us, such as the early twentieth-century sexuality and birth control activists, challenged the idea that women should overcome sexual desire in order to be truly womanly. If it can be okay for asexual people to not want sex, maybe we can make it okay for anyone to not want sex. (p. 416)

Following this example, we could add an additional layer of analysis to queer and feminist theory that are demonstrative of greater cultural discourses sexual normativity has helped shaped through time.

But this project needn't surround only the instances where asexuality, in a conceptual sense, renders negative affects/effects. Rather, we could also use this to breakdown intimate hierarchies that draw arbitrary lines around "romance" and "sex," as discussed in Gressgård's (2013/2014) analysis. This could include deeper interrogations into the cultural construction of discreet terms such as "platonic" and "friendship," and to demonstrate how the affective dimensions of non-sexual intimacies can differentially craft spaces of compassion. I would add that such a turn might help to reshape how we perceive coalitions, breaking down the current neoliberal narratives of identity and liberation as steeped in independence and autonomy, into one that demonstrates moments of radical dependency and vulnerability.

Such an analytical maneuver, I believe, also allows us to open up the possibility of asexuality's inclusion into discourses of transnational sexualities and human rights. By focusing on the regulatory institutional aspects of intimacy, we can work to understand how culturally relative notions of “asexuality” and sexual normativity shape cultural practices and/or norms that places individuals into precarious situations. This allows us to consider asexuality as an unstable category of analysis, and could help alleviate potential issues in policy.

This thesis has come with some limitations in its analysis. As previously mentioned, my archive has consisted of works by privileged asexual awareness activists. While I believe my rationale for approaching these texts has been adequately addressed in this thesis, it nonetheless is an aspect of my work that should be considered. It is my hope that future asexuality scholarship and activism includes more varied narratives, if for no other reason to move away from a paradigm of the asexual exceptionalism predicated upon dominate institutions. But I also hope that this thesis--with its methodological attention to queerness, affect, and rhetoric—can provide pathways that integrate more varied dimensions of the discursive influence over identity. While my study’s reliance on rhetoric and analyzing the politics of recognition can only go so far in examining the lived realities of asexuals, continued use of qualitative data analyses can help us shed light on these conditions. I have aimed for my analysis to compliment these scholars to help in understanding how cultural norms might influence disparities between lived aspects of identities and their relationship to representation.

REFERENCES

A- [Prefix1]. (2008). In *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/14?rskey=PZuAfL&result=8&isAdvanced=false

Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Akanji, O., and Epprecht, M. (2013). Human Rights Challenges in Africa: Sexual Minority Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. In *Sexual Diversity in Africa: Politics, Theory, and Citizenship* (pp. 19-36). Montreal & Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Alfaro, M.J.M. (1996). Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept. *Atlantis, 18*(1/2), 268-285. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054827

Asexuality. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2015 from AVENwiki: http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Asexuality

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism* [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Bishop, C.J. (2014). A mystery wrapped in an enigma—asexuality: a virtual discussion. In M. Carrigan, K. Gupta, and T.G. Morrison (Eds.), *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology* (pp. 123-134). New York, NY: Routledge. (Reprinted from *Psychology and Sexuality*, *4*(2), pp. 195-206, May 2013).

Bohmer, C. & Shuman, A. (2008). *Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bogaert, A.F. (2004). Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample. *Taylor and Frances, Ltd*, *41*(3), 279–287. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/4423785

Bogaert, A.F. (2006). Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality. *Review of General Psychology, 10*(3), 241-250. Doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.10.3.241

Bogaert, A.F. (2012). *Understanding Asexuality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Brotto, L.A (2010). The DSM Diagnostic Criteria for Hypoactive Sexual Disorder in Women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*(2), 221-239. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-009-9543-1

Brotto, L.A, Knudson, G., Inskip, J., Rhodes, K., and Erksine, Y. (2010). Asexuality: A Mixed Methods Approach. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*(3), 599-618. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-008-9434-x

Brown, W (2005). Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy. In *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). Imitation and Gender Insubordination. In H. Abelove, M.A. Barale, & D.M. Halperin (Eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (pp. 307-320). New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy. In *Undoing Gender* (pp. 17-39). New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2009). Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics. *AIBR Journal of Iberoamerican Anthropology, 4*(3), i-xii. Doi: 10.11156/aibr.040303e

Butler, J. (2012). Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation. *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *26*(2), 134-151. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134

Calhoun, C. (Ed). (2002). Normative Theory. In *Dictionary of Social Sciences.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from http://www.oxfordreference.com.mutex.gmu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.001.0001/acref-9780195123715-e-1180?rskey=TRG2JD&result=3

Campbell, K.K. (2006). Modern Rhetoric. In T.O. Sloane (Ed), *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric.* Retrieved from http://www.oxfordreference.com.mutex.gmu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125955.001.0001/acref-9780195125955-e-161?rskey=nICbXZ&result=1

Carrigan, M. (2011). There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community. *Sexualities, 14*(4), 462-478. Doi: 10.1177/1363460711406462.

Carrigan, M. (2012). "How do You Know You Don't Like it if You Haven't Tried it?" Asexual agency and the Sexual Assumption. In T.G. Morrison, M.A. Morrison, M.A. Carrigan, & D.T. McDermott (Eds), *Sexual Minority research in the New*

Millennium: Social Justice, Equality, and Empowerment (pp. 3-20). New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Cerankowski, K.J., & Milks, M. (2010). New Orientation: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice. *Feminist Studies, 36*(3), 650-664. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/27919126

Chasin, CJ.D. (2011). Theoretical issues in the Study of Asexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 40*(4), p. 713-723. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-011-9757-x

Chasin, CJ.D. (2013). Reconsidering Asexuality and its Radical Potential. *Feminist Studies, 39*(2), p. 405-426. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719054

Chu, E. (2014). Radical Identity Politics: Asexuality and Contemporary Articulations of Identity. In K.J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 79-99). New York, NY: Routledge.

Decena, C.U. (2008). Tacit Subjects. *GLQ, 14*(2-3), 339-360. Doi: 10.1215/10642684-2007-036

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008a, June 2). Asexuality: An Introduction [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBzGJIjAy4Y

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008b, June 2). Asexuality Top 10: Number 10 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-eZTa1No6s

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008c, June 3). Asexuality Top 10: Number 9 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z52sylotgNA

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008d, June 4). Asexuality Top 10: Number 8 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agj0mDJqMX8

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008e, June 5). Asexuality Top 10: Number 7 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWOOIvuThTo

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008f, June 6). Asexuality Top 10: Number 6 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxmhNSiMGVY

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008g, June 7). Asexuality Top 10: Number 5 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gP-o9Zs15qw

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008h, June 8). Asexuality Top 10: Number 4 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQe55IEYMNg

Decker, J.S. [swankivy]. (2008i, June 10). Asexuality Top 10: Number 3 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uV1b3pmTxw

Decker, J.S [swankivy]. (2008j, June 10). Asexuality Top 10: Number 2 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R--JBy18lmo

Decker, J.S [swankivy]. (2008k, June 12). Asexuality Top 10: Number 1 [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcBhYBxXx7A

Decker, J.S [swankivy]. (2008l, June 13). Asexuality Top 10: Honorable Mentions [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQmu0j84gsY

Decker, J.S. (2014). *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality.* New York, NY: Carrel Books.

Duggan, L. (2003). *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Emens, E.F. (2014). Compulsory Sexuality. *Stanford Law Review, 66*, pp 303-386. Retrieved from http://ssrn.com/abstract=2218783

Epprecht, M. (2013). Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Failure [Def. 1a]. (n.d.). In *The Oxford English Dictionary Online.* Retrieved from http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67663?redirectedFrom=Failure

Failure [Def. 2]. (n.d.). *The Oxford English Dictionary Online.* Retrieved from http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67663?redirectedFrom=Failure

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. Jackson, TN: Basic Books.

Flore, J. (2014). Mismeasures of Asexual Desires. In K.J. Cerankowski & M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 17-34). New York, NY: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published in 1978).

Gazzola, S.B., and Morrison, M.A. (2012). Asexuality: An Emergent Sexual Orientation. In T.G Morrison, M.A. Morrison, M.A. Carrigan, & D.T. McDermott (Eds.), *Sexual Minority Research in the New Millennium* (pp. 21-44). New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Glick, E. (2000). Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression. *Feminist Review, 64,* 19-45. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395699

Gressgård, R. (2013). Asexuality: from pathology to identity and beyond. In M. Carrigan, K. Gupta, and T.G. Morrison (Eds.), *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology* (pp. 68-81). New York, NY: Routledge. (Reprinted from *Psychology and Sexuality, 4*(2), pp. 179-192, May 2013).

Gupta, K. (2013). Picturing space for lesbian nonsexualities: Rethinking Sex-Normative Commitments through The Kids Are All Right (2010). *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 17*(1), pp. 103-118. Doi: 10.1080/10894160.2012.683381

Gupta, K. (2014). Asexuality and Disability: Mutual Negation in *Adams v. Rice* and New Directions for Coalition Building. In K.J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 283-301). New York, NY: Routledge.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Halperin, D.M. (2012). *How to Be Gay.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Hardt, M. (2007). Foreword: What Affects are Good For. In P.T. Clough & J. Halley (Eds.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (pp. ix-xiii). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hertel, S., & Libal, K. (2011). *Human Rights in the United States: Beyond Exceptionalism.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Hesford, W.S. (2011). *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms.* Durham, NC: Duke University press.

Hesford, W.S. (2014). The Malala Effect. *JAC, 34*(1-2), 139-164. Retrieved from http://www.jaconlinejournal.com/archives/vol34.1.html

Hinderliter, A. (2009). Methodological issues for studying asexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 38*(5), p. 619-621. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-009-9502-x.

Hinderliter, A. (2013). How is asexuality different from hypoactive sexual desire disorder? In M. Carrigan, K. Gupta, & T.G. Morrison (Eds), *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology* (pp. 56-67). New York, NY: Routledge. (Reprinted from *Psychology & Sexuality*, *4*(2), pp. 167-178, May 2013).

Horstman, J. (2012). *The Scientific American Book of Love, Sex, and the Brain* (pp. 81-85). San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass

Kahan, B. (2013). *Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kim, E. (2011). Asexuality in Disability Narratives. *Sexualities, 14*(4), p. 479-493. Doi: 10.1177/1363460711406463

Kim, E. (2014). Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructed Sexual Normalcy. In K.J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 249-282). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lewis, R. (2014). “Gay? Prove it”: The politics of queer anti-deportation activism. *Sexualities, 17*(8), 958-975. Doi: 10.1177/1363460714552253

Lind, A. (2010). Introduction: development, global governance, and sexual subjectivities. In A. Lind (Ed), *Development, Sexual Rights and Global Governance* (pp. 1-19). New York, NY: Routledge.

MacInnis, C.C., & Hodson, G. (2012). Intergroup bias toward “Group X”: Evidence of prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance, and discrimination against asexuals. *Group Processes Intergroup Relations, 15*(6), 725-743. Doi: 10.1177/1368430212442419

Mackenzi, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (2014). Introduction: What is Vulnerability and Why Does it Matter for Moral Theory? In C. Mackenzi, W. Rogers, & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Philosophy* (pp. 1-29). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Milks, M. (2014). Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation. In K.J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 100-118). New York, NY: Routledge.

Miller, S.C. (2012). *The Ethics of Need: Agency, Dignity, and Obligation.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Mohanty, C. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mosbergen, D. (2013, June 20). Battling Asexual Discrimination, Sexual Violence, And ‘Corrective’ Rape. *The Huffington Post.* Retrieved from www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/20/asexual-discrimination_n_3380551.html

Munoz, J.E. (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York, NY: New York University Press.

Najmabadi, A. (2014). *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Nichols, B. (2010). *Introduction to Documentary* (2nd ed.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2006). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Owen, I.H. (2014). On the Racialization of Asexuality. In K.J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 119-135). New York, NY: Routledge.

Padilla, M. (2007). *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Prause, N. and Graham, C.A. (2007). Asexuality: Classification and Characterization. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 36,* 341-356. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-006-9142-3

Precarious [Def. 2b]. (2007). In *The Oxford English Dictionary Online.* Retrieved from http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/149548?redirectedFrom=precarious

Przybylo, E. (2011). Crisis and Safety: The asexual in sexusociety. *Sexualities, 14*(4), 444-461. Doi: 10.1177/1363460711406461

Przybylo, E. (2012). Producing facts: Empirical asexuality and the scientific study of sex. *Feminism and Psychology,* online, 1-19. Doi: 10.1177/0959353512443668

Przybylo, E. (2014a). Afterward: some thoughts on asexuality as an interdisciplinary method. In M. Carrigan, K. Gupta, & T.G. Morrison (Eds), *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology* (pp. 121-122). New York, NY: Routledge. (Reprinted from *Psychology and Sexuality, 4*(2), pp. 193-194, May 2013)

Przybylo, E. (2014b). Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk About Their (A)sexualities. In K.J. Cerankowski and M. Milks (Eds.), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (pp. 225-246). New York, NY: Routledge.

Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Puar, J. (2012). Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović. *TDR: The Drama Review, 56*(4), 163-177. Retrieved from http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/the_drama_review/v056/56.4.puar.html

Rubin, G. (1997). The Traffic in Women. In L. Nicholson (Ed.), *The Second Wave Reader: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (pp. 27-62). New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published in 1975).

Scherrer, K.S. (2008). Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire. *Sexualities, 11*(5), 621-642. Doi: 10.1177/1363460708094269

Scherrer, K.S. (2010). What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, *22*(1-2), 56-73. Doi: 10.1080/10538720903332255

Scott, S., & Dawson, M. (2015). Rethinking asexuality: A Symbolic Interactionist account. *Sexualities, 18*(1/2), 3-19. Doi: 10.1177/1363460714531273

Sedgwick, E.K. (1990): *Epistemology of the Closet.* Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Sedgwick, E.K., & Frank, A. (2003). Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins. In E.K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Sexual. (n.d.). Retrieved April 27, 2015 from the AVENwiki: http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Allosexual

Siggy. (2012). How can we respond to problems with AVEN?. Retrieved from https://asexualagenda.wordpress.com/2012/10/31/how-can-we-respond-to-problems-with-aven/

Siggy. (2015). An interview about allosexual aromantics. Retrieved from https://asexualagenda.wordpress.com/2015/02/02/an-interview-about-allosexual-aromantics/

Small, J.L. (2012). Trafficking the Truth: Media, Sexuality, and Human Rights Evidence. *Feminist Studies, 38*(2), 415-443. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0499697.0038.206

Speakeasynyc. (2012, Jul 15). *Lauren Zuniga's "Submissive."* Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_gEtpmpYqY

Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class.* Huntingdon, GBR: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved from http://www.ebrary.com.

Tascon, S. (2012). Considering Human Rights Films, Representations, and Ethics: Whose Face? *Human Rights Quarterly, 34*(3), 864-883. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23254649

Tucker, A. (2010). About this project. Retrieved from https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1600445431/help-us-edit-our-asexuality-documentary/description

Tucker, A. (Director). (2011). *(A)sexual* [Documentary]. USA: Arts Engine, Inc.

Tucker, A. (n.d.). Director's Statement. Retrieved from http://www.artsengine.net/asexual

Turner, B.S. (2006). *Vulnerability and Human Rights.* University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Warner, M. (2000). *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Winston, B. (2000). *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries.* London, England: BFI Publishing.

Winston, B. (2008). *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond* (2^{nd} ed.). London, England: Palgrave and MacMillan.

BIOGRAPHY

Ryan Sheehan is a candidate for an M.A. in English with a concentration in the teaching of writing and literature, alongside a certificate in Women and Gender Studies, at George Mason University. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Music Performance in 2011 from the University of New Hampshire. Ryan will be beginning a PhD program in English at The Ohio State University in the Fall of 2015, focusing on Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy, as well as Sexuality Studies. He grew up in Shrewsbury, MA.