

Drew University  
College of Liberal Arts

‘Who’s Sexy to Me?’:  
Exploring Asexuality and  
Recovering Asexual Meanings

A Thesis in English

by

Emma-Li Downer

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Bachelor in Arts  
With Specialized Honors in English

May 2023

## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to discuss asexuality, an undervalued concept that has the potential to complicate current conceptions of sexuality, identity, desire, and intimacy. Asexuality is defined by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) as referring to an individual who is not sexually attracted to others. Influenced by AVEN, contemporary texts like Julia Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation* and Alice Oseman's *Loveless* engage in important work of making asexuality more visible to the public and educating their readers about asexuality. However, their efforts also perpetuate an essentialist conception of sexuality that presents asexuality as an innate, natural essence or core. While essentialism can help advocate for asexuality, it portrays sexuality in a simplistic and potentially harmful light. Instead, this thesis argues that sexuality should be viewed as socio-historical construction, as Michel Foucault defends, where sexuality is part of and shaped by discourse. This conception of sexuality leads to a more nuanced understanding of asexuality and to acknowledging the existence of compulsory sexuality—or the assumption that everyone is and must be sexual. Resisting compulsory sexuality, which underlies compulsory heterosexuality, results in recovering asexual possibilities, traces, and meanings that have been erased, ignored, or forgotten. One way to achieve this is through a reparative, asexual reading practice and by identifying asexual resonances. Nick Adler does this in presenting an asexual analysis of Henry James's "Beast in the Jungle," which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reads through a homosexual lens but erases the possibility for asexuality. Importantly, Adler presents his analysis as an alternative that can co-exist with, and not necessarily replace, the reading provided in Sedgwick's "Beast in the Closet." To demonstrate the ways that an asexual reading practice can uncover alternative identities and meanings, this thesis analyzes three films and their leading female characters through a reparative lens. Specifically, Cynthia Darrington from *Christopher Strong* (1933), Sylvie Foster from *Housekeeping* (1987), and Polly Vandersma from *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) can be seen as exemplifying how characters can resist compulsory sexuality and lead meaningful lives that are not defined by or centered around sex. These female characters are not *lacking* in anything as they relate to others and find fulfillment in non-sexual ways. Asexuality has the potential to question assumptions like compulsory sexuality, complicate current notions of sexuality and identity, and act as a new lens through which literary works, films, and other media can be analyzed to recover asexual possibilities and meanings.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mom, who raised me with all the love she had.

Thank you for letting me spend those thirteen years with you, and thank you for teaching me that families can be built and love can come in all kinds of shapes.

I'm sure I learned everything I ever needed to know from you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have so many people to mention, but first and foremost is Dr. Sandra Jamieson. This thesis only exists because of your constant support, unwavering encouragement, and immeasurable help. Seriously, I would not have been able to complete my thesis without you reminding me why I wanted to write about asexuality in the first place and reassuring me that I was, indeed, capable of finishing it. Thank you for putting up with me during our weekly meetings, the impromptu meetings we would have in the lounge of Sitterly, and for accommodating my panicked, last-minute requests for meetings.

Similarly, I must thank the rest of my committee, Dr. Erik Anderson and Dr. Jens Lloyd, for all of their support. Anderson, you helped me think through so many of the theoretical aspects of my paper and challenged me to keep developing my ideas. Luckily, philosophy cannot be avoided, nor does it ever go away. Jens, your advice was immeasurable during the formative stage of my thesis, and I have applied all I can remember from your classes to this thesis. Thank you both for always believing in me and supporting me throughout every part of this process.

Dr. Wendy Kolmar, Dr. Shakti Jaising, and Dr. Hannah Wells—I cannot thank the three of you enough for all of the help and guidance you gave me while developing and writing this thesis. None of these chapters would be as they are now if it were not for the classes I took with you, all the help and the advice you gave me, or the sources you directed me to.

Also thank you to Eileen, Claire, Charlie, and the rest of my family for all of the unconditional love and support you have given me—and not just during my time at Drew. (I wish I could list everyone's names, but I would run out of room!) Your words of encouragement got me through this process and through the most challenging moments of my life. I could not have made it this far without all of you. It takes a village, so thank you for being my village.

Last but never least, thank you to all of my friends who have been there to support me during the process of writing and editing my thesis—and throughout my time in college. I have to especially thank Laila, my roommate and the other half of the Dynamic Duo. I would have gone crazy if it was not for you, and thank you for putting up with me for the past four years! Jane, Cam, and Anisa—I would not have made it to the end if it was not for all of your support. And look, we finally made it! Also, thank you so much, Mikayla, for all the support and energy you sent me from Boston and California.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter I</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Contemporary Conceptions of Asexuality in Julia Sondra Decker’s <i>The Invisible Orientation</i> and Alice Oseman’s <i>Loveless</i>	
<b>Chapter II</b> .....	<b>21</b>
A Discussion of the Foucauldian Basis of Sexuality, Complicating Asexuality, and Compulsory Sexuality	
<b>Chapter III</b> .....	<b>35</b>
Reparative Reading, Asexual Resonance, and Single Women’s Narratives in <i>Christopher Strong</i> (1933), <i>Housekeeping</i> (1987), and <i>I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing</i> (1987)	
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendix</b> .....	<b>63</b>
Beyond Visibility and Toward Future Directions	
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>72</b>

## INTRODUCTION

“Asexual” is not a term most people are familiar with outside of a scientific discussion about plant reproduction, much less in a conversation about sexuality or the LGBTQ+ community. In the early 2000s, David Jay established the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) where asexuality started to be widely discussed and recognized as a sexual orientation. AVEN’s overall goal is to “creat[e] public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community” (“About AVEN”), especially since asexuality has not been explicitly discussed until relatively recently. This goal informs how, throughout the website, AVEN defines asexuality as referring to a person “who does not experience sexual attraction,” further expanding on that to say asexual people “are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice to abstain from sexual activity, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are, just like other sexual orientations” (“Overview”). This idea of an “intrinsic part” that is “just like other sexual orientations,” as well as asexuality and celibacy, will be further explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

Due to rising awareness and discussion of asexuality since the early 2000s, Michael Waters writes that some people consider asexuality an “internet orientation.” However, Waters points out that this happens because asexuality’s “history is barely disseminated—not because it isn’t there.” There are brief moments throughout history when various forms of asexuality have been observed, named, and discussed. For instance, in 1869, Karl-Maria Kertbeny<sup>1</sup> classified three types of sexual phenomenon: “monosexuals” who were “masturbators, onanists who have

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Kertbeny was the “first person in any language to combine the Greek *homo* [same] with the Latin *sexus* [sex] in order to produce the word ‘homosexual’” (Breen and Peters 3).

sex only with themselves,” “normal sexuals” who we understand as heterosexuals today, “homosexuals,” and an “[allusion] to ‘amphisexuals’ or... who have sex with people from either sex” (Tobin 122). While not AVEN’s understanding of asexuality, Kertbeny’s “monosexual” can be understood as an early effort to understand asexuality and those who are not having sex or sexual relations with others.

Alfred Kinsey wrote the (in)famous Kinsey Reports where he and his team interviewed thousands of participants about their sexual activity and history. The results were published in the two books, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior of the Human Female* in 1953 (“The Kinsey Scale”). From his results, he created a scale that goes from ‘heterosexual’ to ‘homosexual’ with a third category called ‘X’ or group X that referred to people “who reported no socio-sexual contacts or reactions in their interviews.” Brad Mackay writes that “approximately 1.5 percent of his adult male subjects” were found to be part of the ‘X’ category in 1948 and in his 1953 report, between an “estimated... one and four percent of male interviewees, and from one to 19 percent of female interviewees.” Prominent asexuality scholar Ela Przybylo writes that Kinsey’s viewing sexuality as a spectrum “outlin[es] a model for thinking [of] sexual orientation[s] based on the degree to which one was attracted to one gender or another,” of which “Asexual communities draw on this spectrum concept to put forward additional forms of spectrum-based identification, including a ... sexual-asexual axis” (12).<sup>2</sup>

In 1972, Lisa Orlando formed the Asexual Caucus with Barbie Hunter Getz when “New York Radical Feminists formed caucuses based on similarity of sexual orientation” (1). They wrote *The Asexual Manifesto* where “‘Asexual,’ as [they] use it, does not mean ‘without sex but relating sexually to no one’... Asexuality is, simply, self-contained sexuality” (2). As I discuss

---

<sup>2</sup> I will expand more on the concept of sexuality and asexuality as spectrums in Chapter I.

asexuality throughout this thesis, I will be drawing on The Asexual Manifesto's broader definition or understanding of asexuality. Recall that AVEN's definition of asexuality refers to a person "who does not experience sexual attraction" where asexual people "are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way... [and that] is an intrinsic part of who we are, just like other sexual orientations" ("Overview"). The Asexual Manifesto's conception of asexuality makes an important distinction of asexuality not referring to a person "without sex" but rather a person "relating sexually to no one." While seeming small, the difference is in a wholly negative definition that draws on the lack of a thing (i.e. a lack of sexual attraction) versus a definition that describes how one could relate to others in various ways, one way of which does not include sexually. This concern about defining asexuality negatively is presented by Przybylo in *Asexual Erotics*, published in 2019: "Is asexuality really reducible to an absence of sexual attraction? What is lost when we hinge asexuality, as well as other sexual orientations, to the mechanism of 'attraction'?" (3). In other words, Przybylo is concerned that a definition like AVEN's, which centers solely around a *lack* of attraction, provides an "unnuanced rendition of asexual experiences and dispositions," ignoring the more complex "relationship at play between attracting and relating, attracting and desire, attracting and sex" (2–3). Also, by describing asexuality as a "self-contained sexuality," The Asexual Manifesto's conception of asexuality encompasses AVEN's desire to legitimize asexuality as another sexuality without basing the definition of asexuality on attraction, which is inherent in the idea of a sexual orientation ("What is sexuality and sexual orientation?"). In all, The Asexual Manifesto's conception of asexuality is broad enough to capture the idea of asexuality as relating to others and forming relationships in ways that are not solely based on or focused around sex.



In this thesis, my focus will not be to arrive at a comprehensible definition of asexuality or identify a cause of asexuality. Instead, I am interested in examining asexuality beyond the contemporary, popular conception of it being just another sexual orientation. Throughout my research, I have found that sexuality is not simply another kind of sexuality, such as heterosexuality or homosexuality. While asexuality can have the same function as other sexualities in that understanding it can help an individual who identifies with it to understand themselves, it can also prompt us to reconsider our current notions of sexuality in general. Specifically, by acknowledging asexuality and how it has been erased, left unknown, and devalued through a notion of ‘compulsory sexuality,’ we can resist this erasure and recover asexual meanings. Thus, asexuality should be considered more than just another species or type of sexuality. By critically examining literature and media through an asexual lens, we can gain new understandings and perspectives of characters and other ways of existing that have been ignored until only recently.

In doing this, I am following what many contemporary asexuality scholars are doing by exploring asexuality’s potential and identifying how asexuality intersects with feminist and queer studies. For instance, Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks wrote “New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice” in 2010 and asked, “How do we begin to analyze and contextualize a sexuality that by its very definition undermines perhaps the most fundamental assumption about human sexuality: that all people experience, or *should* experience, sexual desire?” (650). They answer that asexuality studies is an emergent field where we can “[consider] how asexuality intersects with feminist and queer theories of sexuality and with feminist and queer movements and politics. In this way we hope to begin an ongoing conversation about asexuality and the asexual movement within the discourses of feminist and

queer theory” (654). In *Asexual Erotics*, Przybylo adds that “queer and feminist approaches to asexuality tend to both broaden and pluralize what can ‘count’ as asexuality and how asexuality is defined” (14).

To begin broadening our understanding of asexuality, I will further explore in Chapter I how asexuality has been conveyed and talked about in contemporary spaces, specifically literature that aims to spread awareness about asexuality to general audiences. I will focus on the nonfiction book *The Invisible Orientation* by Julia Sondra Decker because its initial publication in 2014<sup>3</sup> makes it one of the first books explicitly written and published about asexuality. Then, I will examine how the young adult novel *Loveless* by Alice Oseman conveys information about asexuality through its main character, Georgia Warr, and how the novel’s characters act as a stand-in for the reader. In all, these contemporary texts have been sites in the production of a discourse on asexuality to understand this phenomenon as part of a larger discourse of sexuality. However, while these texts allow for asexuality to enter into popular consciousness, they also reinforce the notions that asexuality is simply another kind of orientation, which leads to perpetuating notions of sexuality that some scholars contest—specifically that sexuality is essential and sexual orientation lies at the heart of identity.<sup>4</sup>

To provide ways of complicating this, Chapter II will introduce Michel Foucault, a French writer and philosopher, who wrote three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Within the first volume, specifically, Foucault argues against an essentialist conception of sexuality that represents sexuality as a fixed, unchanging core or essence of one’s identity. Instead, he defends a socially and historically constructed conception of sexuality. By further exploring the Foucauldian tradition of sexuality—namely, through scholars like Judith Butler and her *Gender*

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Invisible Orientation* was republished in 2015, which is the version that I am using.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Professor Shakti Jaising for her help in working through this idea.

*Trouble and Bodies that Matter* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her *Epistemology of the Closet*—I want to consider how reconsidering sexuality invites a more nuanced understanding of asexuality. Turning to contemporary scholars, like Benjamin Kahan and Jonathan Ned Katz, I examine how asexuality can also advance the Foucauldian tradition of asexuality. Specifically, by placing Kahan and Katz in conversation with asexuality scholars Przybylo, Kristina Gupta, and Karli June Cerankowski, I explore the notion of compulsory sexuality, which underlies compulsory heterosexuality. From here, I build on what these asexuality scholars have written about viewing asexuality as a critical, reparative lens. In other words, we can examine literary works and recover asexual resonances, meanings, and traces that have yet to be fully considered. For instance, Nick Adler’s “The Beast Imperative” reads against Sedgwick’s “The Beast in the Closet,” defending an asexual reading of Henry James’s “Beast in the Jungle” that Sedgwick’s “Beast in the Closet” erases.

Building off of what I establish in the previous chapter, Chapter III will focus on how we can use the reparative reading practice that asexuality scholars promote as a way to recover asexual moments and meanings from media and literature. For that purpose, I have identified three twentieth-century films with female characters that resonate with asexuality: Cynthia Darrington from *Christopher Strong* (1933), Sylvie Fischer from *Housekeeping* (1987), and Polly Vandersma from *I’ve Heard Mermaids Singing* (1987). The film version of *Housekeeping* was released in 1987 and the book on which it was based was published in 1980; however, it is set in the 1950s, meaning that the three characters I examine are equally spaced apart throughout the 20th century. This temporal spread is important to illustrate how even if asexuality was not explicitly talked about throughout history, there are records of and resonances with asexuality that emerge during times of cultural change, such as following the World Wars and women’s

roles fluctuating throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, asexuality has been a conversation that keeps coming back—as I highlighted in the very brief historical timeline and examples at the beginning of this section—and especially now in the twenty-first century. Thus, this chapter’s aim is, in part, to establish how/why these films and their main characters are deserving of reparative asexual readings. Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly can all be understood as single women who resist the typical through the lens of asexuality, which has yet to be considered by scholars. The other aim of this chapter is more implicit and follows what I previously mentioned as exploring the intersection between asexuality, feminist, and queer studies.

## CHAPTER I

### Contemporary Conceptions of Asexuality in Julia Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation* and Alice Oseman's *Loveless*

In this chapter, I aim to explore how contemporary works have established the current discourse of asexuality. Specifically, I will examine the two contemporary works that are explicitly about this phenomenon to understand the discourse of asexuality. Published in 2014, *The Invisible Orientation* by Julia Sondra Decker is one of the first nonfiction books that explains and explores asexuality for a general audience. Published in 2020, *Loveless* by Alice Oseman is one of the first novels that narrates an asexual coming-of-age story for a young adult audience. In other words, these two texts are the initial steps in contemporary literature creating a discourse on or a conversation around asexuality. *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless* define and establish how many currently think about asexuality since these works exist in the public sphere and are easily accessible. There is a high chance that before one reads either or both *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless*, they would not know much about asexuality. Thus, Decker and Oseman are in critical positions as authors to not only introduce asexuality to a reader but to shape how they think a reader should understand and relate to asexuality—and ultimately how a reader understands themselves. Thus, it is worth analyzing exactly how they stage this conversation on asexuality and engage in the discourse around sexuality.

Before I begin analyzing Decker's *The Invisible Orientation* or Oseman's *Loveless*, I want to provide more context on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and its influence on the current understanding of asexuality. As mentioned earlier, AVEN was founded in 2001 by David Jay “with two distinct goals: creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community” (“About AVEN”). Through

these past two decades, AVEN has become one of the centers of the asexual community, providing individuals who identify as asexual, from across the world, the ability to connect through forums, in-person meet-ups, and even organized rallies and parades. Ela Przybylo, a prominent asexuality studies scholar, reported in her *Asexual Erotics* that at the start of 2017, AVEN has more than 250,000 members (4); almost 150,00 members on AVEN's English form, as of April 13, 2023; and six other forums in another language ("Forums"; "Other Resources"). With this kind of influence and reach, AVEN and its forum serve as the main place for asexual people to gather as a community online, connect, and discuss and build their understanding of asexuality and their relation to asexuality. Thus, it is important to acknowledge how influential AVEN has been on a contemporary conception of asexuality, especially given AVEN's simple and accessible definition of asexuality referring to a person "who does not experience sexual attraction."

If a person wants to learn about asexuality, browsing AVEN and its forum might be too daunting or time-consuming, which is where *The Invisible Orientation* comes in. Just as the founder of AVEN, Jay, had "decided people like us needed resources and access to community," Decker writes, "I want to help other asexual people embrace their orientation without an instilled core of self-doubt" (xiii). After all, she "started describing [her]self as 'asexual' instead of 'nonsexual' [as she had before AVEN was created] to connect [her]self with the awareness efforts... and took what opportunities [she] could to educate other people on the existence and experience of asexuality" (xiii). To do this, Decker has written *The Invisible Orientation* to perform definitional work and educate readers as to what asexuality is and what an asexual experience might look like. In the introduction, Decker describes her intentions of writing *The Invisible Orientation* as being "for the layperson, written in everyday language," not in academic

or scientific language or scattered across several forum threads (xiv). Also, it is meant to fill in the gap of literature and place asexuality “in the common consciousness so asexual people across the board know their feelings have a name—and can stop thinking they’re broken if they don’t conform” (xv). The book itself is divided into informational sections, further providing the reader a sense that *The Invisible Orientation* is meant to help with educating readers about asexuality. Specifically, these sections are directed toward those who identify as asexual, those who are questioning, and the friends and loved ones of asexual or asexual-questioning individuals. The book ends with “Part Six: Other Resources,” which easily transitions into a bibliography and index, replicating a nonfiction, scholarly text. After those elements are several more pages dedicated as “Notes” for the reader to use, further enforcing the idea that *The Invisible Orientation* is meant to educate, promote awareness of, and dispel myths about asexuality. In other words, the book’s format is less a traditional work of narrative nonfiction and more of an informational handbook with specific sections and a notes page at the end. This conveys an open, educational tone for all types of readers.

In *The Invisible Orientation*, Decker provides two definitions of asexuality that will drive the reader’s understanding throughout the book and, as is Decker’s hope, beyond the pages. Specifically, Decker describes asexuality as a sexual orientation “usually defined as the experience of not being sexually attracted to others. Less commonly, it is defined as not valuing sex or sexual attraction enough to pursue it” (3). Here, Decker echoes AVEN’s definition of asexuality, especially in the wording of the first, more common definition. For instance, she ensures the reader understands that asexuality is a “sexual orientation,” just like heterosexuality or homosexuality. Asexuality is not the absence of sexuality but a sexuality that does not involve sexual attraction. Interestingly, Decker provides a second definition of an asexual person “not

valuing sex or sexual attraction enough to pursue it.” This secondary way of understanding asexuality makes this a possible way to relate to asexuality, but it is not the primary way. Decker makes it clear that asexuality does encompass this lack of value or emphasis placed on sex, but by referring to this understanding as the less common way, she resists the conclusion that ‘pursuing’ sex or sexual attraction implies that asexuality is similar to a choice or something that one consciously does. To further her point, Decker writes that “sexual orientation is not determined by whether someone has sex or who they have it with. Orientation is not behavior—not for asexual people and not for anyone” (6). In other words, one’s sexual orientation depends on the *experience* of being attracted to a person of the same gender, the opposite gender, or no one at all—not whether a person engages in a specific sexual activity or not.

To better understand asexuality and how it fits into our current conception of sexuality, Decker compares a person’s sexuality to answering a multiple-choice test. If one’s sexual orientation is typically understood as “what kind of people are sexy to me” (5), it can be understood as answering the question “Who’s sexy?”. Heterosexuality could select A as the answer that says a person of the opposite gender is sexy, and homosexuality could answer B, a person of the same gender. Bisexuality could answer C, people of both genders “are sexy to me.” Thus, asexuality would be responding with D, a “none of the above” type of answer (5). Moreover, if an individual were to refuse to answer this multiple-choice question, then we can understand that as having an absence of sexuality. However, choosing the answer D, which allows an individual to say “no one is sexy to me,” means asexuality is a valid answer to the question of sexuality—not the absence of sexuality. By clearly laying out these different terms and their connections, Decker educates readers that asexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation—just another kind of sexuality, not too dissimilar to that of heterosexuality,



homosexuality, and bisexuality. However, she later clarifies that asexuality “does not describe any decision that person makes,” where “[m]uch like a heterosexual person does not ‘decide’ when to start being attracted to partners, an asexual person doesn’t ‘decide’ no one is sexually attractive or worth pursuing sexually. It just happens” (8). This is what separates asexuality from celibacy, as Decker and many asexuality advocates claim: celibacy is a choice or vow for various reasons, mostly for religious purposes; asexuality is not a choice and “just happens” like any other sexuality, such as heterosexuality or homosexuality. Throughout this example that Decker proposes, she assumes both a gender binary and the idea that sexuality is something that “just happens” or is essential. I will define what I mean by ‘essential’ and further explore and complicate these assumptions in the next chapter. For now, I simply want to point out the groundwork that Decker, who is in the AVEN tradition, has laid out for the reader. In this way, Decker is arguing that asexuality is just like any other sexuality but differs in how it hinges on the lack of sexual attraction while the others center around different versions of sexual attraction.

Furthermore, in the contemporary understanding of asexuality, sexuality can be seen as part of a spectrum. I alluded to this notion in the introduction section where Ela Przybylo credits Alfred Kinsey’s scale for the notion of sexuality as a spectrum. However, Kinsey’s scale was “based on the degree to which one was attracted to one gender or another (with gender understood on a binary model)” (6). In other words, on a scale of sexuality, heterosexuality is a fixed point on, say, the left side of a scale, homosexuality on the right, and bisexuality in between the two—indicating that a person can be attracted to a man, a woman, or both. Kinsey’s group ‘X,’ which reflects individuals who might identify as asexual if they were around today, was not on the spectrum. Decker points out that “[f]or *everyone*, sexual orientation is more like a range, not a simple series of separate categories” (5). Specifically, she outlines a spectrum on

page 36 that ranges from sexual to asexual with a gray area in between, but ‘sexual’ is not specified to either heterosexuality or homosexuality. To revise the Kinseyian spectrum, then, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are not necessarily fixed points as sexuality can be fluid between those categories—but asexuality also belongs on a spectrum of sexuality. This notion of sexuality as a spectrum could play into the academic discourse of an essential versus constructed nature of sexuality, which I explore in the next chapter. I introduce this concept here because it is important in outlining how sexuality and asexuality are currently understood in the popular sphere.

The young adult novel *Loveless* by Alice Oseman is another site of contemporary, popular discourse for asexuality. Similar to *The Invisible Orientation*, *Loveless* frames asexuality for readers; yet, as a piece of popular fiction, it contributes to this framing via a narrative and characters that a young reader can identify with. Also, as previously stated, *Loveless* is one of the first young adult novels that truly puts asexuality at the center of its plot and conflict. As Kenyon points out, there is a challenge in determining if a character is asexual or not in young adult stories because of “the indirect ways in which many YA texts might talk about sexual attraction and sex in order to maintain ‘suitability’ of sexual content for teenage readers” (10). In other words, a young adult story must walk a fine line between conveying important ideas about sexuality and maintaining suitable “sexual content for teenage readers.” One of these ways to discuss sexuality in literature is through what Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart identify as a “homosexual visibility” story in their *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*. This kind of story is where “a character who has not previously been considered gay/lesbian comes out either voluntarily or involuntarily. This revelation may occur at any point in the story, with dramatic tension arising from what *might* happen when the invisible is made visible” (xiv). A

“homosexual visibility” story is vital in allowing queer or questioning young readers to see themselves reflected in the novel’s character and the character’s struggles. In a similar regard, *Loveless* can be understood as an asexual visibility story. Patricia Kennon has done research on the presence and representation of asexuality in young adult literature. She writes that “Affirmation of the legitimacy and diversity of the asexual spectrum is vital for... [asexual] and questioning young readers to feel seen and welcomed, as well as for accomplishing validation and acceptance of these still misunderstood and marginalised orientations by allosexuals (people who are not asexual)” (3). Thus, just as young homosexual readers can identify and find comfort in knowing “one is not alone in a vast universe” by reading about a character who reflects their experiences (Jenkins and Cart 3), so can young *asexual* readers with *Loveless*.

Specifically, *Loveless* takes place in Britain and follows Georgia Warr to university with her two friends Felipa “Pip” Quintana, who is a lesbian, and Jason Farley-Shaw, who is presumably straight. When Georgia arrives at college, she meets her roommate Rooney Bach, who we later learn is bi- or pansexual. Through their (mis)adventures, this cast of characters tries to revive a Shakespeare club while Georgia searches for her sexuality. In the end, she realizes she is asexual and aromantic, successfully coming out to all her friends. There is a distinction between the ideas of asexuality and aromanticism, where the latter refers to someone who experiences little to no romantic attraction to another person (Decker 22). However, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on how *Loveless* lays out Georgia’s journey to discovering asexuality, and later, how this coming-of-age narrative provides other perspectives of an asexual visibility story. This can be seen especially through identification with the three prominent asexual characters introduced in the novel: Georgia; her college mentor, Sunil Jha; and her older cousin, Ellis. These characters act as mediums for the reader to understand asexuality. The

characters' questions, confusion, and discovered answers direct the reader as to how they should understand and accept asexuality. Therefore, I will look at how asexuality is framed in *Loveless* through these three characters' experiences of asexuality and what that means in terms of creating a discourse of asexuality.

The first character I will examine is Georgia and how her narrative introduces the reader to experiences of asexuality, especially with how they are exposed to asexuality without the novel naming it as such. This allows readers to learn about and embrace asexuality from the very beginning, even if they do not know the specific word for it, especially since *Loveless* is presenting the reader with an asexual visibility story. The novel begins at a party after Georgia's prom with her narrating, "There were literally three separate couples sitting around the fire making out, like some sort of organised kissing orgy, and half of me was like, *ew*, and the other half was like, *Wow, I sure do wish that was me*" (3). The disbelief she experiences when seeing "literally three separate couples making out" could stem from some naivety given her age; however, it also sets the reader up to better understand an asexual experience with her split reaction to intimacy—that is, her reaction of both disgust and yearning—which comes from her asexuality (and aromanticism). Georgia's split reaction of disgust or being uncomfortable and then also wanting to experience that attraction or desire is especially evident when Georgia imagines having her first kiss with Tommy, her long-time crush: "The thought of actually following through on the crush made [her] feel extremely nervous," and the idea of kissing, so she could say that she had kissed someone before high school ended, "filled [her] with dread" (5–6). Despite her friends' reassurance that she is just shy and nervous, the reader is aware that Georgia has a lack of actual attraction toward Tommy. Since the novel is written in the first-person perspective, the reader has access to Georgia's thoughts. Thus, while being nervous or

shy when approaching a crush can be normal, the reader knows that Georgia feeling “extremely nervous” and being full of “dread” are not signs of attraction or desire. Therefore, from the very beginning of the novel, Oseman slowly introduces the reader to asexuality without explicitly naming it, letting them undergo the discovery of asexuality alongside Georgia. Moreover, Georgia’s crush on Tommy is just one of many times where readers are invited to understand that while attraction and a desire for intimacy can be natural for some, it can also seem unnatural and distressing for others.

Additionally, as readers understand asexuality through Georgia’s experiences, the novel reinforces asexuality through the language that AVEN and Decker use, further shaping the current discourse of asexuality. After attempting to date her best friend, Jason; talking with Sunil, who is her college “parent,” about asexuality—which I will analyze in the next paragraph—and trying to figure out if she is truly asexual, Georgia forces herself into one last intimate situation. At her roommate’s insistence, Georgia experiments with kissing a girl in case the problem was that Georgia had only been trying to find attraction in the opposite gender. This triggers some hope for Georgia since her friend, Pip, realized that she was a lesbian after also struggling to be attracted to boys. Yet, immediately after the two girls kiss, Georgia realizes, “It wasn’t just a dislike of kissing. It wasn’t a fear or nervousness or ‘not meeting the right person yet.’ This was a part of me. I did not feel the feelings of attraction, of romance, of desire, that other people felt. And I wasn’t ever going to. I really hadn’t needed to kiss anyone to work that out” (276–277). This passage not only depicts Georgia’s acceptance of asexuality but also provides language that frames asexuality similar to the language that AVEN and Decker use. For instance, Georgia admits to herself, and the reader, that her lack of “feelings of attraction” is a part of her and that she “wasn’t ever going to” have those feelings. Crucially, she realizes that

she “hadn’t needed to kiss anyone” to know that. For one, this idea of sexuality centering around attraction—and other concepts in this passage, such as desire—reflects the language that is present in AVEN’s and Decker’s description of asexuality. Moreover, whenever she tried to kiss someone or force herself to engage in an intimate moment, she felt disgusted; she attempted to ignore that emotion or push past it, but the novel makes her discomfort clear to the reader. For Georgia, who she relies on her identification with asexuality, just as her friend Pip’s identification with homosexuality contributes to her sense of self and identity. In other words, similar to a homosexual visibility story, Georgia’s experience with asexuality implies that one’s sexuality is a part of who they are—and discovering one’s asexuality is akin to an individual discovering their homosexuality. Thus, we can understand *Loveless* as contributing to the discourse of asexuality that has been created with the help of AVEN and Decker’s *The Invisible Orientation* and aligning readers’ understanding of asexuality with the current conception of asexuality and sexuality.

*Loveless* provides a range of asexual experiences and behaviors, especially through Sunil Jha. He is introduced as Georgia’s “college parent,” non-binary, and “infinitely more mature” as a third-year than Georgia, who is a first-year (64). His guidance at university does not stop at academic advice and help around school. Georgia notices him wearing a pride pin that stands for asexuality. When she asks Sunil about it, he explains: “Asexuality means I’m not sexually *attracted* to any gender. So I don’t look at men, or women, or anyone and think, *wow, I want to do sexy stuff with them...* I still want to be in a relationship with guys and masculine folk. But I feel very indifferent about sex, because I have never looked at a man or any gender and felt sexual attraction to them. Men don’t turn me on. Nobody does” (196–197). Here, Sunil’s explanation that he has “never looked at a man” and “felt sexual attraction” reiterates the idea

from AVEN and Decker that his asexuality is based on sexual attraction and his sexuality has been an unchanging part of who he is—similar to what Georgia’s role is in *Loveless*. Yet, his inclusion and role in the novel also provide another asexual experience or perspective. For instance, given his familiarity with asexuality, he is confident and comfortable offering an explicit definition of asexuality to Georgia. If Georgia is uncertain about her identity and does not know about asexuality, then Sunil provides a model of how one is sure and at ease with their a/sexuality. Also, as he teaches Georgia about asexuality, the questions Georgia asks and the internal narration of her confusions or realizations speak directly to the reader, guiding the reader to how they should understand asexuality and what they should accept with this sexuality if they have not heard of or considered it before. Furthermore, after Georgia and Sunil talk, she finds his public Instagram account and reads one post that talks about how “[s]exuality in general [is] very taboo in Indian culture... and when he’d initially looked for support, he’d found the asexual community—even online—was incredibly white. But after finding a group of Indian asexuals online, he’d started to feel proud of his identity” (296). This is significant because Georgia’s experience with asexuality focuses mainly on sexuality itself. Sunil’s presence as both a non-binary character and a person of color indicates that asexuality spans across gender and across race. While his role in *Loveless* is less compared to Georgia, as Kennon observes, persons of color have not found much representation or visibility in fiction or popular texts (17). Thus, Sunil inclusion diversifies the discourse of and around asexuality and broadens the ways readers can respond to, and potentially identify with, asexual characters.

The third, explicitly asexual character is Ellis, Georgia’s older cousin, who embodies one of the reasons why *Loveless* is important. When Georgia returns home for the winter holidays, she recognizes a connection with Ellis that she had not seen before she knew about asexuality.

Ellis is thirty-four years old and a painter who, despite participating in the hook-up culture as a model before quitting, has not had any long-term relationships. After Ellis and her parents fight about her future as a single woman, Georgia and Ellis talk and the latter reveals, “Having a partner is what some people want. For others, it’s not. It took me a long, long time to figure out that’s not what I want. In fact... It took me a long time to realise that it’s not even something I can want. It’s not a choice for me. It’s a part of me that I can’t change” (314). Similar to Georgia and Sunil, Ellis has come to realize that her not wanting a partner was “not a choice” for her and is “a part of [her] that [she] can’t change.” While Ellis does not know of asexuality itself, her experience of not wanting a partner or enjoying engaging in sexual activities as a model resonates with Georgia’s unnamed experience at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, Oseman includes Ellis as a woman in her mid-thirties with experiences that reflect Georgia’s as the two talk. This parallel between Georgia and Ellis suggests that had Georgia not met Sunil and learned about asexuality, she could have grown up to be like her cousin. After all, when Georgia tells Ellis about asexuality, Ellis says, “You’re... very lucky to know all of this... I guess I’m a bit jealous... I just wasted a lot of time” (317–318). Ellis’s “wasted” time hooking up with people and trying to date when she never felt a connection. Her painful present could have been Georgia’s distressing future. Thanks to Sunil, Georgia now knows about asexuality and readers who recognize themselves in these three characters are similarly saved from enduring years of uncertainty like Ellis has. Thus, *Loveless* is spreading knowledge and awareness about asexuality to a wide variety of young readers who can identify with characters like Georgia and know that asexuality is enduring, showing itself in an older character like Ellis.

Throughout this chapter, I have been discussing how AVEN, Decker, and Oseman have framed, influenced, and shaped current discussions and understandings of asexuality.



Specifically, AVEN's direct influence on how Decker disseminates information about asexuality also impacts how Oseman writes characters like Georgia, Sunil, and Ellis. For instance, asexuality is described similarly in both books, relating asexuality as not experiencing sexual attraction. This repetition reinforces that connection, so readers of both *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless*, especially if they are unfamiliar with the idea or term of asexuality, are exposed to asexuality in the ways that Decker and Oseman understand and explain it. Moreover, both of these contemporary books establish a strong relationship between one's sexuality and one's identity. Decker's goal in *The Invisible Orientation* is to ensure more people can learn about asexuality so they can identify with asexuality and become more confident in who they are. This kind of journey is evident in *Loveless* where Georgia embarks on this path of discovery, bringing the reader along as she explores asexuality. Sunil has already made that journey and stands confident and comfortable on the other side. The last time the reader sees Ellis, she seems ready to take the first step in her journey to discovering her asexuality and how it relates to her identity. Overall, as people talk more about asexuality and the discourse surrounding it grows, the language and foundational concepts will continue, in some ways, to be established and shaped by the ideas presented by AVEN, *The Invisible Orientation*, and *Loveless*.

## CHAPTER II

### A Discussion of the Foucauldian Basis of Sexuality, Complicating Asexuality, and Compulsory Sexuality

As discussed in the previous chapter, Julia Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation* and Alice Oseman's *Loveless* frame asexuality in a way that is easily comprehensible for those unfamiliar with the concept of asexuality. Their work reflects and is in the tradition of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). However, such simplification and explanatory power comes with assumptions—and oftentimes, people are committed to certain notions about sexuality without being aware of the implications. There is a long history of scholars attempting to grasp and understand what sexuality is, and Michel Foucault is one of the most notable theorists who wrote three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. In the first volume, he writes that sexuality is often thought to have been repressed in the past and only in modern times has it been liberated—what he calls the repressive hypothesis (10–12). Implied in this understanding is the notion that there is some essence or core to sexuality that we have saved from the repressive Victorian era and we are now free to discover it. Such a conception of sexuality is essentialist where, as most people would consider today, sexuality can be reduced to a biological or psychological core. While this understanding of sexuality can be useful to advocate for rights and equality—as AVEN, Decker, and Oseman perpetuate—I argue that an essentialist conception represents an unnuanced view of sexuality and asexuality.

For instance, if we want to understand sexuality as a whole, this reductive, essentialist view does not give the full story. According to feminist scholar Judith Butler essentialism can support “the claim that sexuality has a natural and normative shape and movement” (*Bodies That Matter* 93). In other words, LGBTQ+ advocates and activists often rely on, consciously or not,

an essentialist conception of sexuality because they would argue that sexuality is inherent, cannot be changed, and plays an integral part in one's identity. Homosexuality, then, if it is essential to an individual, is natural and can be normal. However, essentialism can be a double-edged sword where Heterosexuality can also be argued to be essential, natural, and even the more normal sexuality, giving it as Butler describes "a normative shape and movement." In other words, if heterosexuality is seen as both essential and natural, as it has been in the past, then other sexualities are seen as unnatural and not normal. Moreover, despite the presence of an essentialist sexuality in popular discourse of sexuality and asexuality, we cannot grasp how the current conception of sexuality came to be. This rigid understanding of sexuality does not lead us to answer questions about how sexuality affects other aspects of society or even why certain sexualities became "deviances," other than simple brute fact and insistence. Thus, my goal in this chapter is to explore how Foucault's alternative to an essentialist conception of sexuality can lead to a more nuanced understanding of sexuality and asexuality. Later, I will also begin discussing ways asexuality can complicate the Foucauldian tradition through the notion of compulsory sexuality, which will be further expanded on in Chapter III.

While Foucault covers a lot of ground in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, I will begin by focusing on how he argues that sexuality is socially and historically constructed. Specifically, he writes that we must look at the discourses that have shaped sexuality and the hierarchies of power and knowledge that have produced its current conception. Sexuality, then, must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great

surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, [and] the incitement to discourse... are linked to one another. (105–106)

In other words, sexuality is not “a natural given” that everyone has when they are born or “an obscure domain” that we must discover. There is no essence or core that lies at the center of sexuality that must be kept “in check” or uncovered. Instead, “sexuality” is “a great surface network” that is produced by how we talk and think about sex. Foucault is not denying biological aspects of sex and sexuality, as Jonathan Culler points out. Rather, Foucault is calling attention to “an artificial unity, called ‘sex’, which came to be treated as fundamental to the identity of the individual. Then, by crucial reversal, this thing called ‘sex’ was seen as the *cause* of the variety of phenomena that had been grouped together to create the idea” of sexuality (Culler 6). In terms of asexuality, sex and sexuality are seen as fundamental to one’s identity, despite asexuality often being understood as the absence of those concepts—by how AVEN and Decker define asexuality and how Oseman portrays asexual characters in *Loveless*. Then, by Culler’s “crucial reversal,” one’s asexuality becomes a unified and unifying concept that one’s sense of identity both on the personal level and among a group of people, resulting in the asexual community.

Furthermore, by disrupting the idea that we must know our sexuality to know our identity, Foucault pushes back against the belief that heterosexuality is “normal” and that “homosexuals,” and other sexual minorities, are perverts or deviants. To start, Foucault argues we have an assumption that it “is through sex... that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own... identity” and that “our identity [comes] from what was perceived as an obscure and nameless urge [i.e. sexuality]. Hence the importance we ascribe to it, the reverential fear with which we surround it, the care we take to know it” (155–156). In other words, this “obscure and nameless urge” that we have assumed to be sexuality is not naturally a part of our

identity. Foucault points out that, instead, we have “ascribed” importance to sexuality and its role in our identity. Despite this constructed significance, we are compelled to revere sexuality, even if it has been through fear, and have taken so much care to know it. In fact, this is how the “nineteenth-century homosexual became... a type of life, a life form, and a morphology [and]... [n]othing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). In other words, homosexuality is not naturally a significant part of an individual’s identity. Given how sexuality has been constructed, homosexuality became something over and above homosexual acts—that is, an essence of homosexuality. “Then, by a crucial reversal,” Culler writes, “it became a question not of [homosexual] acts but of identity... Is he *a* homosexual?” (6). This mistaken assumption, in addition to how the hierarchies of power, knowledge, and religion have epitomized heterosexuality over homosexuality, has thus led us to think heterosexuality is “normal” and homosexuality is “unnatural.” Yet, if neither sexuality nor its role in our identity are natural givens, we can examine the discourse that has shaped it, instead of blindly accepting otherwise, and even find another way to shape our conception of sexuality in light of recent discussions of asexuality.

To briefly return to how AVEN, *The Invisible Orientation*, and *Loveless* shape the discourse of asexuality, I want to analyze how their language perpetuates an essentialist notion of sexuality. All three of these sources share information about asexuality and assume that asexuality is a natural condition for some people, thus fitting asexuality into the current conception of sexuality as just another orientation. As discussed previously, for many advocates and activists for the LGBTQ+ movement, it makes sense to push for understanding sexuality as something natural or innate in people. Because we cannot change this part of ourselves, such

people argue, then we should work on creating a society that accepts various but fixed sexualities. For the purposes of contemporary advocates and activists for asexuality, then, if they want asexuality to be accepted, they automatically fit asexuality into the mold of essentialism, similar to how many consider heterosexuality or homosexuality as natural and an intrinsic part of who we are. By reinforcing the idea that one's sexuality is a natural given, they also circulate the notion that sexuality lies at the heart of one's identity, another idea Foucault challenges. What is interesting with asexuality, though, is that sex itself is not given importance like it is with heterosexuality or homosexuality; instead, it is the absence of sexual acts and behavior that is ascribed meaning in an asexual individual's identity and provides them a sense of self or subjectivity. In *Loveless*, for instance, Georgia's journey to accepting her sexuality implies that her asexuality was just waiting to be discovered. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that sexuality is something obscure, hidden, and innate that has to be uncovered; then, once an individual understands their sexuality, they have access to their identity, just as we see in the relationship between asexuality and identity. Interestingly, considering asexuality also has the potential to complicate a Foucauldian conception of sexuality—a notion that I will explore more later in this next chapter. Overall, the current understanding of asexuality is influenced by how AVEN, Decker, and Oseman have shaped the discourse, which assumes an essential sexuality. By considering Foucault's challenge, we can gain a more nuanced conception of not only sexuality but asexuality.

Discussions of sexuality often invoke the topic of gender, and that interconnectedness is especially evident in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who has been credited as one of the scholars who first saw the need for and then developed queer theory. In the introduction of *Epistemology of the Closet*, she writes that a common, “unquestioned reading of the phrase

‘sexual orientation’ to mean ‘gender of object-choice’” (35).<sup>5</sup> If we consider this yoking of gender to sexuality, and vice versa, then heterosexuality can be understood as an individual with a directed object-choice of the opposite gender; homosexuality with a same gender object of choice. Then, where does asexuality lie in relation to this conception of sexuality? For this, I want to turn to Butler’s work on gender in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, which is in conversation with Foucault. If Foucault pushed for sexuality to be considered a socio-historical construction, then Butler goes a step further to argue gender is neither as fixed or stable as we assume it to be. Specifically, she analyzes our assumptions of gender and argues for a constructivist conception: “Consider gender, for instance... an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (“From *Gender Trouble*” 502). From the moment we assign a baby’s gender at birth to the ways we determine what kinds of toys, clothing, and even colors are masculine or feminine, we assume that this behavior is simply natural and normal because gender pre-exists our actions.

Yet, Butler encourages us to consider those instances as *acts* that are “intentional and performative.” Because we assume gender to be essential, we act or perform accordingly. We are generally not conscious of this performance since gender is “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis ... [and] ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (502). We must also be careful to understand the “performativity [of gender] not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies That Matter* 2). Neither gender or sexuality, then, are natural

---

<sup>5</sup> While she argues that “sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren’t well described in terms of the gender of the object-choice” (35), she frequently uses this language of “object-choice” in relation to sexuality throughout *Epistemology of the Closet*; I will employ a similar use of this term.)

givens that must be discovered. Instead, this performativity of both gender and sexuality have been imposed upon the individual by regulating norms and expectations. Gender and sexuality are produced by and produce a vicious cycle where we are assigned a gender and discover a sexuality, are expected to perform and act accordingly, and then assume that our identity naturally flows from our gender and sexuality. If a majority of people understand sexuality as one's gendered object of choice, then what happens when one or both of those notions are disrupted? Foucault destabilizes and challenges our assumptions that sexuality is a natural occurrence that inevitably becomes a part of our identity; Butler does the same with gender, denaturalizing the assumed binary between man and woman. Together, then, we are in the position to reconsider what we really mean when we refer to and discuss sexuality and gender. If we rethink the notion that sexuality and gender are fixed or rigid, then what was thought to be essential is in fact a construction, and those previously assumed fixed notions can be disrupted and undone. Of course, such work cannot be done overnight. Foucault, Butler, and Sedgwick were writing and theorizing at the end of the twentieth century, and the essential versus constructivist debate still remains.

What Foucault and Butler have been doing, challenging and disrupting what has been assumed natural, is based on identifying discourse and silences. Foucault's focus in *The History of Sexuality*, specifically, is on how society seems to permit discussion of heterosexuality and imposes silence about homosexuality. From here, an assumption was that since people did not talk about homosexuality, such a way of existence must be "unnatural" or absent from reality. Instead, Foucault argues that "[s]ilence itself—the things one declines to say... is less the absolute limit of discourse... than an element that functions alongside the things said... There is not one but many silences, and they are integral parts of the strategies that underlie and permeate



discourse” (27). Here, silence is not the same as an absence, and what is not said about sexuality “functions alongside the things said.” In other words, silence is not the absence of discourse but a part of discourse that produces notions of sexuality and sexual identity. For Foucault, this meant heterosexuality as what is spoken about and homosexuality as another part of discourse that was not spoken about, but which still shapes our conception of sexuality. Foucault was talking in reference to what he called the repressive hypothesis. However, I argue that Foucault’s approach can be used to not just look at the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality but to take a broader look at sexuality itself and the things not said about it. That is, asexuality—both in relation to sexuality and in regards to the discourse surrounding it.

In *Celibacies*, Benjamin Kahan addresses Foucault’s repressive hypothesis and provides a possible basis for an academic discussion of asexuality that is worth examining. Kahan points out that the many silences that Foucault emphasizes is often what “queer studies reads [as] silence in only one way: reading the “absence” of sex as itself a sign of homosexuality.... as “evidence” of same-sex eroticism, covering over our ability to read actual absences of sex” (Kahan 3). Yet, for Kahan, these silences, these actual absences of sex point to “a sexuality rather than as an internalized homophobia or as a fig leaf for homosexuality.” Thus, his aim is to “[reconfigure] the epistemology of the closet, understanding celibacy not as an absence or as a stigmatized identity but in positive terms as an attractive identity with its own desires and pleasures” (3). My goal in this chapter and throughout this thesis is also to argue against a negative understanding of asexuality, in both meanings of that word. Asexuality should not be seen as a stigma, unnatural, or not normal; nor should it be understood as an absence of sexuality or identity. Instead, asexuality—like the notion of celibacy described by Kahan—can be described positively and with unique desires and pleasures.

Yet, despite Kahan's similar aim in *Celibacies*, I cannot fully support his work in establishing his version of celibacy, especially in connection to asexuality. While Kahan wants to reconceive celibacy "as a sexuality in its own right," he wants to maintain celibacy's identity "as a choice, performative, vow" (2). He also distinguishes between asexuality and celibacy, writing that the former is typically defined as "being an orientation or describing a set of desires rather than being a choice, practice, or behavior. [His] theorization of celibate desire and understanding of celibacy as a sexuality sharpen[s] the differences between celibacy and asexuality" (31). Kahan is correct that popular discourse differentiates asexuality from celibacy, and emphasizes that a sexual orientation is not a "choice, practice, or behavior." Part of the reason behind this popular discursive move is to establish that one cannot choose to be asexual, or not. Asexuality "as a sexuality in its own right" is not a choice. In either conception of sexuality, as either essential or constructed, it is not a *choice*. One cannot wake up one day and choose to be a different sexuality than one was the day before. A constructed sexuality might appear as if the individual themselves is constructing their identity, and thus their sexuality; however, recall how Foucault discussed sexuality as a socio-historical construction: "a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, [and] the incitement to discourse... are linked to one another" (105–106). In other words, sexuality is something far greater than one individual's choice for themselves. There is the discourse that shapes and influences sexuality, as I have been discussing so far. I sympathize with Kahan's intent behind differentiating the contemporary conception of asexuality and his celibacy, and some of his establishing work in *Celibacies* definitely applies/connects with my work in this thesis. Yet, I am not taking the step to yoke Kahan's celibacy together with the asexuality I am discussing.

Furthermore, the work I aim to do in this thesis does not stop at simply positing that asexuality can be and is a sexuality in its own right. Such a claim would be to argue for asexuality's right to sit beside heterosexuality and homosexuality as types of sexual orientation—and stop at that. Instead, I want to also consider how asexuality is a force that can compel us to reconsider sexuality itself. Part of this rethinking involves what Kahan writes as celibacy “as a resistance to compulsory sexuality” (2). Compulsory sexuality<sup>6</sup> originates from the term “compulsory heterosexuality,” a phrase popularized by Adrienne Rich in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience.” Specifically, Rich describes compulsory heterosexuality as “a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination... which draws women toward men” (637), “enforcing heterosexuality on women” so they are “convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” (640). Then, from this idea of compulsory heterosexuality, asexuality scholars like Elizabeth Hanson have taken a step back and considered how “compulsory *sexuality* is embedded in compulsory heterosexuality” (345), where “[b]eneath the heterosexual compulsion lies a more foundational sexual compulsion” (358). In other words, compulsory sexuality is a broader, more foundational compulsion than compulsory heterosexuality. To provide a better sense of compulsory sexuality, Kristina Gupta and Karli June Cerankowski, write in “Asexualities and Media” that compulsory sexuality is the “assumption that all people are sexual” and a “system that regulates the norms around sexual desire and practice” and “compel[s] people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity” (19–20).

---

<sup>6</sup> Another term that the asexual community on social media uses is amatonormativity, which is coined by Elizabeth Brake. This notion draws on and converses with marriage and aromanticism, a connected but separate topic of asexuality, which is too broad for this thesis but is briefly talked about in the Appendix. There is also the term allosexual that is used to mean a similar notion to compulsory sexuality.

This “system that regulates” and compels individuals to be sexual, from desiring sexual activity to taking up sexual identities, might sound familiar when considered through the Foucauldian tradition. That is because compulsory sexuality can be understood as part of discourse that surrounds, shapes, and is shaped by sexuality—a notion that Foucault touches but does not develop. Recall how he defends the position that sexuality is not a natural given that must be uncovered nor is it an inherent aspect of one’s identity. He was only thinking in terms of heterosexuality and homosexuality, arguing that neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality is normal, natural, or should be compelled upon any individual. Yet, the underlying cause of compulsory heterosexuality is this compulsion to be sexual by taking up sexual identities and partaking in sexual acts. Asexuality, then, appears as a prime example of how sex and sexual practices do not have to lie at the heart of one’s identity—compulsory sexuality does not have to define who an individual is. Therefore, by critically studying asexuality, we can find ways this recent attention on a known but previously unnamed phenomenon informs and develops the Foucauldian conception of sexuality that many scholars have not fully considered yet.

Another scholar in conversation with the Foucauldian tradition is Jonathan Ned Katz who, in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, also perpetuates the notion of compulsory sexuality. Taking the argument that sexuality is a socio-historical construct, Katz argues that we should not understand heterosexuality as “essential, unchanging: ahistorical,” but “an idea distributed widely only in the last three-quarters of the twentieth century” (13–14). As he explores the history of heterosexuality and how the term “heterosexuality” has changed meanings, he concludes that the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is not as stark as we might assume. Without the stigmatization or structure of heterosexuality viewed as normal and natural while homosexuality is deviant, Katz claims that the “homogenization of heterosexual and

homosexual heralds a paradoxical emerging trend: the declining significance of ‘sexual orientation’ ... [and] the old homo/hetero distinction” (187). To employ the terminology that I have been using thus far, both heterosexuality and homosexuality are directed, gendered object-choices differentiated only by the question of which gender an individual desires. With the unstable binary of gender (as I have briefly exemplified through Butler), heterosexuality and homosexuality are simply directed desires of another individual. Therefore, in the conclusion of his book, Katz argues that we should move toward “the making of a new pleasure system” (190) that no longer emphasizes the power imbalance that has long persisted between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Yet, while Katz “decline[s] the role of pleasure prophet” of what kind of “sex world” will follow with the slippage between heterosexuality and homosexuality, he writes that “[w]e can struggle together to make relationships and a social world more welcoming to erotic diversity and carnal joy” (190). I am not trying to argue that Katz is wrong in promoting a new way to conceive of sexuality, specifically homosexuality and heterosexuality. After all, my project rests on the idea that no sexuality ought to be considered (more) natural or normal over another. I *am* claiming that Katz’s encouragement of a new pleasure system that focuses on “erotic diversity and carnal joy” fundamentally promotes compulsory sexuality. It erases and ignores asexual relationships, desires, and pleasures.

In a similar vein, Nick Adler argues that while Sedgwick analyzed Henry James’s “Beast in the Jungle,” she read for homosexuality and erased the possibility for an asexual interpretation. Interestingly, Sedgwick seems to acknowledge that sex and sexual acts and practices are not at the center of one’s identity or desire. In a list presenting aspects of sexuality and how people can differ, she writes “To some people, the nimbus of ‘the sexual’ seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them

loosely or floats virtually free of them” (25). Sedgwick lists several more items that appear to resist compulsory sexuality and resonate with asexuality.<sup>7</sup> However, Adler points out that Sedgwick refuses to consider a sexuality that does not have desire directed at a gender of object-choice: “Asexuality entered the popular queer lexicon in the early 2000s, [with the creation of AVEN] so it may have been an unfamiliar term to Sedgwick while she was writing ‘The Beast in the Closet,’ but it certainly would not have been an unfamiliar concept” (98).<sup>8</sup> Thus, Adler spends his time in “The Beast Imperative” recovering asexual instances and meanings in James’s “Beast in the Jungle.” He further claims that Sedgwick “[performs] asexual alienation” and “make[s] asexual acknowledgement nearly impossible” due to “the sexual imperative,” which is a term Ela Przybylo uses in her writing about asexuality to refer to a similar idea as compulsory sexuality.<sup>9</sup> In all, Adler’s goal is not “for an asexual reading of ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ that will *supersede* Sedgwick’s reading but rather for an asexual reading that stands in conversation with Sedgwick’s—analyzing the text through an alternative, but no less valid, queer lens” (98, emphasis mine).

Thus far, my work in this chapter has been examining how Foucault examined not only the discourses that shaped sexuality as a social and historical construct but the silences that have contributed to compulsory sexuality. While contemporary asexuality activists push against the assumption that everyone is and must be sexual, they perpetuate notions that Foucault

---

<sup>7</sup> Another notable line is: “For some people, it is important that sex be embedded in contexts resonate with meaning, narrative, and connectedness with other aspects of their life; for other people, it is important that they not be; to others it doesn’t occur that they might be” (25).

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this critique of asexuality entering “the popular queer lexicon in the early 2000s” can be leveled against Katz as well. His *The Invention of Heterosexuality* was published in 2003 and re-released in 2006 with a new preface. His scholarship was happening around the same time asexuality began to enter discussions of queer sexualities.

<sup>9</sup> Adler draws from Przybylo and her “Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually Identified Men Talk About Their (A)sexualities” from *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. See also Przybylo’s *Asexual Erotics* and “Afterword: Some Thoughts on Asexuality as an InterDisciplinary Method” in *Psychology & Sexuality*.

challenges; namely, that sexuality is essential and sex lies at the heart of our identity.

Acknowledging how the Foucauldian tradition can complicate the current conception of asexuality, we can also see how asexuality can advance Foucault's claim about sexuality and identity. Asexuality is unique in that as a sexuality, it actually resists the idea that sex must be at the heart of one's identity, how they understand themselves, and how they relate to others.

Interestingly, Sedgwick comes close to resisting compulsory sexuality in *Epistemology of the Closet*, but she does not articulate it or asexuality itself. Adler points out that in her efforts to read James's "Beast in the Jungle" through a homosexual lens, she erases any asexual meaning—and so he reparatively reads "Beast in the Jungle" to recover that possibility of asexual meanings. More recent scholars like Katz have perpetuated this notion of compulsory sexuality. In addition, Kahan points out that not mentioning an individual's or a character's sexuality is assumed to be repressing homosexuality—another prime example of compulsory sexuality. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will analyze three twentieth-century films for alternative, asexual meanings. I am not looking for my analyses to shut out other readings of these films. I simply argue that, like Adler's call for his work to stand on par with Sedgwick, my asexual reading can join the discourse around the three films with equal weight, and so stand in conversation with it as a way to challenge both essentialist readings and compulsory sexuality.

### CHAPTER III

Reparative Reading, Asexual Resonances, and the Single Woman's Narratives in *Christopher Strong* (1933), *Housekeeping* (1987), and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987)

Although asexuality has not been explicitly considered until recently, such as in the texts that I discuss in Chapter I, the seeds of asexuality can be found in earlier works from Karl-Maria Kertbeny and Alfred Kinsey's reports to *The Asexual Manifesto*. The acts and practices of real and literary spinsters, bachelors, and individuals who never remarried after divorce or widowhood may be read through the lens of asexuality that, as Nick Adler proposes to do, uncover potential asexuality without replacing other readings. In the process, this will reverse the practice of ignoring these figures, a phenomenon that Kristina Gupta and Karli June Cerankowski attribute to compulsory sexuality.

Gupta and Cerankowski have explored the silencing effect of compulsory sexuality in "Asexualities and Media." To resist and counteract compulsory sexuality, they argue for "adopt[ing] what [they] call an asexual reading practice, which shares some similarities with a reparative reading practice" (20). This is especially important because, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Benjamin Kahan writes that "queer studies reads silence in only one way: reading the 'absence' of sex as itself a sign of homosexuality.... as 'evidence' of same-sex eroticism, covering over our ability to read actual absences of sex" (3). This problem is countered by an asexual reading. Broadly, the aim and purpose of asexuality studies and this chapter is "[t]o read so-called absences... [and] develop a mode of asexual reading that is attentive to the meanings that may be derived when sex is not at the centre of a relationship narrative, and when such absences are not meant to perform as a cover for 'unnarratable desires'" (21). Ela Przybylo adds that this "practice involves remaining critical of how sex and



sexuality are mobilized and ward what ends with the goal of interrogating compulsory sexuality” (*Asexual Erotics* 26). In other words, when texts and their characters are analyzed with an assumption that everyone is and must be sexual—and that relating to others sexually is necessary for identity or a part of what makes one human—asexual meanings and moments are lost. Yet, how individuals, both real and literary, relate to and form deep, intimate connections with others does not have to be centered around sex. A reparative, asexual reading practice, then, “rather than seeking out a biologically identifiable asexuality or one that is coded in the desires and actions of the body, ... [allows for us to] read for moments in which non-sexual expression is meaningful” (20). These moments could be read through a non-heterosexual lens, which is the focus of queer studies. However, as Adler reparatively reads Henry James’s “Beast in the Jungle,” this chapter will explore asexuality as an alternate lens to homosexuality that encourages “understanding sexuality, desire[,] and intimacy in a more complex way” (21). This can be seen especially in some of the questions that an asexual reading practice and acknowledging “compulsory sexuality [encourage] us to ask... [such as]: Does this portrayal of sexuality suggest that all people are motivated by sexual desire? Does this portrayal of sexuality suggest that sexual desire is necessary to human flourishing or an essential part of what makes us human?” (20).

In applying this conception, my focus will not be to “define the characters’... sexualities or attempt to otherwise identify them as asexual,” as Gupta and Cerankowski write, since “doing so would be an impossible and futile project” (21). Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper further comment that such an attempt risks “projecting current understandings of asexuality onto past specters” (304). Instead, I will rely on what Przybylo and Cooper call “asexual ‘resonances’ ... [or] a certain texture, sensibility, or implication of asexuality that shifts the focus from asexual

identities to asexual traces, touches, instances,” which invites a new analysis of older works. In other words, my analysis in this chapter is not to declare that any character is necessarily an asexual individual. The characters I focus on do relate to others in ways that are not sexual—as is the understanding of asexuality used in this thesis—and their development and identities do not rely on nor is centered around sex. However, I am not claiming that the characters are asexual in the same way we understand characters in *Loveless* by Alice Oseman as being asexual.

The specific traces and moments of asexuality that I will be discussing are from twentieth-century films that resist compulsory sexuality. I focus on the medium of films in this chapter because of their wide reach and appeal to broad audiences. An analysis of literature written for a young adult audience allows us to see how representations of asexuality are being formed and how the discourse is shaped. In a similar vein, looking at films allow us to see how asexual people are represented and how the discourse is shaped in a broader context. For instance, films have the ability to perpetuate messages about societal norms or refute them by generating alternative representations of sexuality and ways of existence. Therefore, by considering how Cynthia Darrington from *Christopher Strong* (1933), Sylvie Fischer from *Housekeeping* (1987), and Polly Vandersma from *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) resonate with asexuality, we can achieve a counter-reading of not just compulsory heterosexuality but compulsory sexuality.

In my analysis, I will be in touch with both feminist and queer studies, as many other asexuality scholars have done. Specifically, as I look at how the leading female characters in *Christopher Strong*, *Housekeeping*, and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* can be viewed through the lens of asexuality, I draw on Laura Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which was written in 1975. Mulvey argues that much of twentieth-

century film has been created through the male gaze where “[t]raditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (256). Women, then, were on screen, possibly among other reasons, to be an “erotic object” for both the characters within the film and the audience—to be looked at, objectified, and sexualized. I argue that compulsory sexuality is implicit in the male gaze as the assumption and compulsion that women on screen can and are sexualized and that the audience must be sexually desiring subjects who objectify women. Therefore, asexuality provides a new way to challenge the male gaze and resist sexualizing and objectifying women on screen. In fact, such a reading would resist sexualizing characters at all, so this lens would present no erotic object for characters on the screen or the audience. This form of asexual reading practice can be considered an asexual gaze where what the characters and audience watch is important and significant, not for its sexualization or objectification, but for other non-sexual values. Viewing these films through an asexual gaze allows us to understand their leading female characters successfully resisting compulsory sexuality and achieving meaningful and non-sexual endings.

Before I set out to analyze the three films, I also want to provide some historical and cultural context for these films. The first film that I examine, *Christopher Strong*, was released in the 1930s, but I must start my discussion a decade before. In *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman outline how the 1920s was one of the first times women gained a sense of independence and sexual autonomy. This decade was when women “were engaged in the public world, not vicariously through... husbands and sons, but as workers, consumers, and, finally, as voters” (233–234). However, the 1930s began with the Great Depression. Much of the progress women made socially or politically in the previous

decade started to backslide. As Lillian Faderman highlights in *Woman: The American History of an Idea*, a shortage of jobs led to a culture and discourse that pushed women out of the workforce and back into homes so men could work (249). Hidden within this backslide is society's swing towards compulsory sexuality where women were expected to be sexual and end up married, having children, and taking care of a house. This pattern of women's roles opening up only to be restricted with a swing toward tradition and compulsory sexuality also occurred in the 1950s—the decade when *Housekeeping* takes place. Similar to the 1930s, women were called out of the domestic sphere to help with the war efforts of World War II, only to be ushered back into the house once the fighting was done. Moreover, women were expected to give up their jobs and social, economic, and political freedoms again. As Faderman writes, “the shift to early marriage, prolific motherhood, and domesticity was billed as a return to normalcy... [And] in all manner of public discourse[,] women were squeezed to fit the mold” (280). This return to “normalcy” is, again, a result of adhering to compulsory sexuality, especially in how women were expected to marry and have children even earlier than in the previous decade. Finally, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* takes place in the 1980s, which is a time of radical change for women, feminism, and homosexuality. This resistance to compulsory heterosexuality started with “gay activists assault[ing] the structures that relegated homosexuals to an underground, hidden existence” in the previous two decades (D'Emilio and Freedman 318). Then, the 1980s saw radical feminists welcoming and supporting homosexuality in their politics where “love between woman [was] the manifestation of mental health [as opposed to being deviant], and female heterosexuality was tantamount to masochism” (Faderman 339). Overall, these three of these films take place during time periods when there was a desire to challenge the expectation that women must be wives, mothers, and keepers of the house— notions which result from

perpetuating and adhering to compulsory sexuality. By analyzing Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly through the lens of asexuality, we gain a better understanding of how these characters resist the compulsion to be sexual and can have meaningful relationships and desires that are not centered around sex.

Cynthia Darrington from *Christopher Strong* is the first character I analyze who resonates with asexuality, especially when considered through the asexual gaze that resists both the male gaze and compulsory sexuality. The film depicts the titular character as a loyal husband until he has an affair with Cynthia, a famous pilot. Cynthia ultimately discovers she is pregnant with Christopher's child and kills herself in the end. While the film's conclusion could be interpreted as punishing or dismissing Cynthia for not adhering to the compulsion to be sexual, Cynthia is established as a single, successful career woman outside of her relationship with Christopher. For instance, within the first two minutes of the film, the camera lingers on a newspaper article that declares Cynthia "again victor" of a race with an image of her in her aviator outfit. The audience then sees Cynthia as she drives alone, speeding down a highway and dressed in masculine clothes. In fact, she ends up racing a man, who is riding a motorcycle, and she wins. When the two stop to talk, she says her primary concern is getting to the airfield so "the papers [don't] find out too much about the plane [she is] flying at the Paris air meeting" (7:55–8:00). This not only continues to establish Cynthia as a famous pilot but is an excellent example of an asexual gaze. Cynthia is dressed for her flight; she is not wearing clothes that invite the viewer to sexualize or objectify her. Nor is the camera focusing on her from a sexualizing angle, instead restricting the audience's view to only her shoulders and head as her hair flies in the wind. Also, this scene conveys a sense of independence and agency as she drives her car, alone, to the airport at high speeds.

Moreover, this repeated characterization that Cynthia is a pilot also establishes her as a single woman with a long, successful career and content with her life not defined by sex. This is reinforced when Cynthia eventually crosses paths with Christopher. What intrigues her about him is that they are both “exhibits” or novelties for a treasure hunt: Christopher for being a man faithfully married for five years—and “a great deal more,” he adds—and Cynthia for being a woman older than twenty-one years-old who has never had a love affair—nor been married, she adds. However, Christopher introduces himself to the party and declares, “the devotion to one’s country, one’s home, and the one woman is the very root of man’s happiness in life” (00:08:26–34). Most notable here is the connection between a heterosexual relationship with “one woman” and “the devotion to one’s country.” Christopher’s claim that one’s devotion to “one woman” should be treated as equally important to one’s “devotion to one’s country” illuminates the idea of (hetero)sexual fidelity as synonymous with patriotism. In contrast, Cynthia announces to the party, “I’ve always wanted to fly, and moreover as my flights were usually alone, that may be the reason I never met the man I might be in love with. It certainly is the reason I’ve got to keep fit” (00:08:56–00:09:05). In other words, Cynthia places the utmost importance on her career as a pilot; her desire to fly has taken the stead of marriage to a man or domesticity, both products of compulsory sexuality. Unlike her fellow “exhibit” and outsider who claims (hetero)sexuality as foundational to his identity, Cynthia at the film’s beginning rings with asexuality. She derives her identity from being a single, independent woman and her career, not relating to others sexually.

Cynthia’s resistance to compulsory sexuality is especially evident in *Christopher Strong* at the conclusion of the film. Throughout the film, Cynthia and Christopher grow closer and more intimate, and their relationship develops from friendship to an affair. When Christopher’s

daughter, Monica, discovers the two's love affair, she acts cold to Cynthia. Elaine, Christopher's wife, speaks to Cynthia afterward. Elaine apologizes for her daughter, saying with a smile that Monica has become "old-fashioned" after marrying Harry and becoming pregnant, and she is "glad. Marriage and children make almost any woman old-fashioned and intolerant..." (01:06:02–01:06:08). Elaine is the kind of woman who adheres to the compulsion to be sexual. From this stems her embracing her role as both Christopher's wife and Monica's mother, as an "old-fashioned" woman. Elaine's conversation with Cynthia, then, implicitly perpetuates that assumption that everyone should be sexual and that a proper woman's future should result in marriage and motherhood. Moreover, similar to Monica, Cynthia herself is pregnant and has the possibility of being a mother. Later on, Christopher will admit to Cynthia that if she were pregnant with his child, it would be his duty to marry her. Altogether, then, if Cynthia goes through with having the child, she would have to become Christopher's wife and a mother to his child—a future she has never expressed interest in, especially since she has fallen in love with Christopher but does not want to ruin his family. In fact, she does not express much sexual interest in Christopher throughout the film, and their attraction to one another is not necessarily physical.

Furthermore, Cynthia has not always had an identity that centered around her relationship with Christopher, so it is her identity as a successful pilot and as a single woman, who has never had a love affair, that Cynthia ultimately returns to at the end of the film. Cynthia embarks on her final flight to break the altitude record she had been aiming for since the film started, and she has dressed once again in her aviator outfit—the masculine clothes she wears at the beginning. Once she reaches the required height, she removes her oxygen mask and lets the plane crash. Her death might seem like the film is simply removing Cynthia as a single woman who rejects being sexual

or shaping her identity around her relationship with Christopher. Yet, if looked at through an asexual lens, Cynthia is resisting compulsory sexuality on her own accord. Rather than being compelled to accept the options presented to her in the film—domestication, motherhood, and marriage—Cynthia turns away from the kind of life Elaine enforces and Monica perpetuates. She reclaims the identity she had as “exhibit B” before Christopher. Thus, Cynthia ends up back where she started: opting out of compulsory sexuality in the only way possible to her and as an independent, single, and content woman who is not defined by sex.

The next film I analyze is *Housekeeping*, which is based on Marilyn Robison’s novel of the same name. Both follow Sylvie Fisher as she is called back to her hometown, Fingerbone, Idaho, to care for her two teenage nieces, Ruth and Lucille. Similar to *Christopher Strong*, *Housekeeping* presents Sylvie as a character who resists compulsory sexuality; yet, unlike the previous film, Sylvie finds another way to find non-sexual meaning in her life.

Before I discuss Sylvie, though, I want to highlight Helen, Sylvie’s sister who kills herself seven years before the main events of the film. The opening sequence follows Helen as she drives back to Fingerbone and leaves Ruth and Lucille on her own mother’s porch. She ensures that her daughters are settled before she leaves. Then, the camera reveals her atop the car eating fruit until she asks a group of young boys to help push her car out of the mud. Once the tires are free, Helen drives her car off a cliff and into the lake (00:07:38–00:09:22). Bert Cardullo writes that with this scene, the audience must “accept Helen’s suicide as the act of someone who no longer wishes to live in the world rather than soberly ask what events have led up to this woman’s decision to kill herself” (“Three Ways to Play House” 351). I would partially agree with Cardullo here. With the viewer only knowing Helen for a short amount of time before her death, one has neither the information nor the chance to truly wonder what fueled Helen’s



decision. The audience cannot determine the ‘why’ behind her committing suicide. We can, however, focus on the impact of her death at the start of the film<sup>10</sup> and the purpose of omitting the novel’s backstory of Helen being married, ultimately separating from her husband, and never remarrying. When Helen leaves her two daughters on the porch of her own mother, she is giving up her role and identity as a mother, but unlike the book, where her suicide can be understood as a resistance to marriage (and even compulsory sexuality), the film leaves us without this narrative. In doing this, the film mystifies her decision and leaves us with the unexplained actions of a woman at the very beginning. Interestingly, while her fate resembles Cynthia’s choice in *Christopher Strong*, the book makes the connection more strongly than the film, presenting both women as rejecting the assumptions of womanhood, marriage, and motherhood. I am not claiming that Helen in the book or film necessarily resonates with asexuality. Yet, her rejection of continuing to live as a mother and a woman, and the underlying principles of compulsory sexuality, sets the tone of *Housekeeping*—thus, preparing the viewer for Sylvie.

Sylvie is the second single woman I focus on in *Housekeeping* who resists compulsory sexuality, which is implicit in her rejecting the expectations of being a conventional woman. One of the first pieces of information the audience learns about Sylvie is that she is “an itinerant.” Also known as a ‘hobo,’ Sylvie wandered across the country and rode in railway freight cars before returning to Fingerbone. As Faderman points out, back in the 1930s, a significant portion of women became hobos. These women found such a lifestyle “a fresh way to snub conventions about how a woman ought to live” and an “ultimate challenge to the restrictions placed on woman” (261, 263). Sometimes these female hobos had partners, but many of them were single.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cardullo focuses on the comical yet distant tone established in this scene, which recurs throughout the film itself. For more on this, see “Three Ways to Play House” in *The Hudson Review*, that I previously quoted from, and the chapter “Theatre and Fiction in Film” from his *In Search of Cinema: Writings on International Film Art*

Given this historical background, it is understandable why Sylvie would want to live as an itinerant and “snub conventions about how a woman ought to live.” She chooses to live on the outskirts of society as an itinerant and to exist separate from the assumption that a woman’s sexuality must lead them to domesticity and traditional marriage. However, similar to the audience’s limited ability to truly know Helen and the reasons behind her suicide, Cardullo writes that Sylvie cannot be “explain[ed]... away as an odd ball who has good reasons in her past for being odd... Sylvie is not a freak or a mental case, but rather a warm and intelligent woman who has chosen her way to live and is unyielding in her commitment to that choice” (“Theatre and Fiction in Film” 301–302). In other words, Sylvie is presented as an unapologetic “oddball” who has decided how she wants to live life and “is unyielding in her commitment.” And this commitment resonates with asexuality and her unconventional lifestyle.

Moreover, Sylvie’s resonance with asexuality becomes clear throughout *Housekeeping* in how she is content with life as a single woman not identified by sex, thus refusing to drive the film toward a narrative infused with compulsory sexuality. This can best be seen when Fingerbone is flooded after four days of rain and Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille are trapped in their house. Sylvie and Ruth are not bothered by this, but Lucille finally says she has had enough. Sylvie simply nods and replies, “Oh. It’s the loneliness. Yeah, it bothers a lot of people.” Then, Sylvie talks about a woman she knew who was “so lonely” that she “married an old man with a limp” and had several children within five years. Yet, Sylvie narrates while chuckling, “none of it helped at all. She was still lonely” (00:35:50–00:37:02). Here, then, Sylvie pushes back against the importance placed on engaging in sex, having children, and motherhood—all notions resulting not only from the assumption such as life is proper for a woman but from the compulsion that everyone must be sexual to achieve a meaningful life. Sylvie does not find

happiness through marriage or being a traditional mother. Instead, she finds contentment as an itinerant, not bothered by the loneliness that Lucille felt, and never staying in one place. Then, when she returns to Fingerbone, she finds fulfillment in wandering around the forest and lakeshore, talking with other people and learning their life stories, and even napping on park benches, much to Lucille's horror. None of this relies on the assumed inevitability that a woman's sexuality will result in meaningful domesticity or that a woman's identity must be defined by conventional marriage or traditional motherhood. Thus, Sylvie and her finding meaning through non-sexual ways allow us to view *Housekeeping* with an asexual lens and understand how the film is not perpetuating the male gaze.

Additionally, since Sylvie is an independent and single woman caring for her nieces, she encourages a rethinking of what motherhood looks like. In the 1950s, when *Housekeeping* takes place, "spinsters" and single women were assumed to be "'emotionally incompetent' and must not serve as role models," according to Faderman, and "only married women should be permitted to teach," "to be the bearer and rearer of children[,] and keeper of the home" (284). Sylvie counters all of these ideas with her unusual ways of caring for her nieces, which I tentatively refer to as asexual motherhood. While Sylvie is technically married, as she admits to Lucille during dinner once that neither she nor her husband knows where the other is. Lucille, growing frustrated with how unconventional Sylvie is, presses her aunt for why she does not live together with her husband. Sylvie replies lightly, "Well, you can't be good at everything" (00:49:06–00:49:22). Not only does this scene enforce Sylvie once again opting out of marriage and domesticity, the cornerstones of compulsory sexuality for a woman, but it also shows a rift forming between Sylvie and Lucille. Unlike Sylvie or Ruth, Lucille desires to become a 'proper' woman who follows the expectations to marry, have children, and derive her identity from a

traditional way of life. To this end, Lucille starts living with her home economics teacher, who ultimately adopts Lucille, and starts hanging out with girls at school who care about societal norms and expectations. Sylvie is then left to care for just Ruth in her own unique way, which includes adventures of the two rowing across Fingerbone's lake, spending a day in the mountains, and riding in a railway freight car. Another way to think of Sylvie's unconventional way of raising Ruth is as motherhood with asexual resonance. While Sylvie is not taking Ruth to church or teaching Ruth how to take care of a house, from cooking to cleaning, the two are enjoying and content with each other's company. Ultimately, what develops between them and bonds them together is a relationship defined by non-sexual meanings and interactions.

As *Housekeeping* concludes, Sylvie's counter-narrative to compulsory sexuality cannot stay within Fingerbone. The townspeople seek tradition and order, especially in terms of how they expect women to behave and act. So, when three older women hear of how Sylvie is taking care of Ruth, they intervene. These women visit Sylvie at home, and their color-coordinated outfits, tidy hair-dos, and clutched purses easily contrast Sylvie's curly hair and simpler clothes. As they start to talk, one of the women, Mrs. Walker, asks Sylvie if she has heard from "Mr. Fischer," to which Sylvie replies, "Who?" This immediately concerns Mrs. Walker and the other two women, and they have to clarify that they are referring to her husband. Then, Mrs. Walker gets to the point of their visit: "Some of us feel that Ruthie, that a young girl needs an orderly life" (1:34:00–1:36:11). Drawing again on the 1950s notion that a single woman cannot properly raise a child, the three women have deemed Sylvie unfit to continue to have custody of Ruth. How Sylvie has been raising Ruth will not result in the latter leading "an orderly life." It is also important to note that all three of these women who are passing judgment on Sylvie are married, attend church, and adhere to the societal norms and expectations that are produced by

compulsory sexuality. After the women's visit, a date is set up to remove Sylvie's custody of Ruth, so the two run away from Fingerbone, crossing the railroad tracks that lead out of town. As I have analyzed thus far, Sylvie demonstrates how a single woman can push against the compulsive narrative that calls for her to be sexual. *Housekeeping* would be an entirely different film if it had a similar ending to *Christopher Strong* where Sylvie and/or Ruth escaped the custody trial by committing suicide, or if the film ultimately reunited Sylvie with her husband. Instead, the film keeps the unconventional family together. While Sylvie and Ruth are no longer welcome in Fingerbone, their counter-narrative can continue off-screen and beyond the town. Their story, then, exemplifies how individuals can achieve intimacy and meaningfully relate to others in ways that are not sexual or implicitly encourage compulsory sexuality. Instead, Sylvie and Ruth demonstrate that single women can exist and remain that way, even at the conclusion of a film.

Moreover, we can also consider *Housekeeping*'s final shot through the lens of asexuality, especially given the previous discussion of the final scene of *Christopher Strong*. Both Cynthia and Sylvie are single women who not only seem to be pushed out of their world, and thus the movie, but also choose to leave. By Cynthia committing suicide, she has agency in her decision. She chooses to crash her plane, thus exiting the film and its society that uphold the (hetero)sexual structures and an insistence that a woman's fate should be one of marriage and motherhood. Similarly, throughout *Housekeeping*, Fingerbone and the film's larger society had been attempting to fit Sylvie into a mold forged by compulsory sexuality: that is, of traditional, heterosexual marriage and nuclear familial structure. Once Sylvie makes it clear that she will not be conforming, and neither will Ruth, both the town and the film push them out. At the same time, Sylvie and Ruth choose to leave Fingerbone, resulting in the final shot of *Housekeeping*

capturing the two leaving town via the train tracks. This wide, long shot has the camera lingering on the railroad tracks that stretch out into the darkness as the backs of Sylvie and Ruth grow smaller, the two making their escape. As the scene fades to black and the credits roll, the viewer is given the impression that Sylvie and Ruth, because of their non-conformity, are exiting not only the watchful eyes of the town but the gaze of the viewer and the film. In other words, Sylvie leaves behind the societal conventions and expectations that the film and its society tried to impose on her. Thus, Sylvie presents another way one could resist the male gaze. Her leaving the film's gaze and the viewer's gaze—both of which struggle to objectify and sexualize her because that is the default, the assumption—she forces us to consider how she can be happy in a life that resists the expectations and norms of a sexual society. This also results in Sylvie's asexual motherhood. Her unconventional ways of caring for Ruth, infused with singleness and non-sexual meaning, disrupts the traditional, nuclear familial structure born of compulsory sexuality—through which she also retains and exercises her agency.

This chapter has focused on the female characters who embody new, alternate ways of existence that are not inevitably tied to compulsory sexuality and its products of marriage, domesticity, and family—and Polly Vandersma from *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* is the most explicit in both her singleness and asexual resonance. The film follows Polly as she recounts to the audience her most recent job as a “person Friday” at an art gallery. One of the first pieces of information she tells the audience is, “I live by myself. I always have since my parents died when I was 21. And in the 10 years since then—I'm 31 now—I've had a couple of, you know, boyfriends, but I could never really talk to them about all kinds of things I think about sometimes and all the things I've seen. So I guess that makes me a spinster or something and an unsuccessful career woman (00:07:00–7:42). It is clear that Polly is another single woman in a

twentieth-century film with asexual resonance. She lives on her own and has not kept any long-lasting relationships because she cannot talk with the “boyfriends” she has had. She even declares herself a “spinster or something” as an unmarried woman in her early thirties. Yet, she is not quite like Cynthia, who defines her independent identity through her career as a pilot. As “an unsuccessful career woman,” Polly frequently struggles with a typewriter and has previously been called “organizationally impaired.” Nor is Polly like Sylvie. While Sylvie wanders as an itinerant, she does this consciously, making her direction in life the absence of really having one. In contrast, Polly has little direction for her future and is not as confident as Sylvie in that decision, as evident in the conversations she has with Gabrielle, the curator of the art gallery. Yet, similar to Cynthia and Sylvie, Polly is just as content with her life as it is. “I’ve always had this hobby,” she admits to the audience, “and that keeps me pretty busy. I, um... I kind of get a kick out of taking pictures of things that I like, you know (00:07:50–00:08:04). Thus, Polly presents an alternative to the alternative. To be happy, a woman does not need to focus on sex, marriage, or a family. Nor she does not need a career or an unconventional family to compensate for the absence of those things. When we view the film through an asexual lens, we do not see the fact that Polly, Sylvie, and Cynthia have no desire for a sexual relationship or resulting family as a *lack* of anything, nor do we see it necessarily as a feminist victory. It just is. For Polly, fulfillment comes from her curiosity about life, which in turn fuels her passion for photography. Thus, she presents another type of counter-narrative of how women can be content with a life centered around non-sexual desires, relations, and existence.

Polly’s singleness and resonance with asexuality not only counters a plot driven by enforcing compulsory sexuality but allows for an explicit disruption of the male gaze through an asexual gaze. From the outset of the film, it is established that Polly has set up the camera that is

filming her. She deliberately speaks to the camera, making the audience no longer “the invisible guest” who can objectify women—which Mulvey mentions as a way to challenge the male gaze (259). Also, when Polly addresses the audience, the shot is cold and grainy, depicting a homemade style of filming. The ‘creator’ of the film, then, is an unprofessional film-maker in Polly, a single woman in control of the camera—thus, in control of the film and narrative themselves. There are more conventional, high-quality shots that are what one would expect a film to look like, but those shots are part of the story that Polly tells the audience. In other words, they are not flashbacks but told from Polly’s perspective where her subjectivity infuses the film and drives the narrative forward. Thus, the camera does not capture an objective narrative, nor is the audience allowed to be a passive observer. Polly’s gaze becomes the asexual gaze that frames *Mermaids*. Whether Polly is holding the camera to take photos or she is in control of the film, she is not defined or driven by sex or sexual pleasure. Instead, she establishes her agency and subjectivity as a woman outside the heterosexual marriage and beyond compulsory sexuality. Her control of the film invites the audience to see life like she does: pleasurable and worth looking at in and of itself, not because of erotic pleasure or sexual satisfaction.

Unlike the previous films I have analyzed, scholars have noted ways we can read *Mermaids* through a homosexual lens, especially given the lesbian relationship in the film—and the possible hint toward Polly being a lesbian as well. In conversation with this, I want to do similar work as Adler did and provide an asexual reading of the film that can exist alongside the homosexual reading that scholars have already established.

The best way to do this is to focus on a scene that Marilyn Fabe, one such scholar, holds as charged with homosexual energy—in which I also argue that we can recover asexual meaning. The center couple of the film is Gabrielle (or “The Curator,” as Polly calls her) and her young



lover, Mary. After spending time with Gabrielle, Polly admits, “I think I kind of fell in love with the Curator. I know that love is a pretty strong word when you’re talking about another woman and she’s not your mother but there you go. I... I don’t think I wanted kissing and all that stuff. I just, just loved her” (00:30:05–00:30:25). During Polly’s narration, the camera focuses on Polly’s face as she stares at Gabrielle, then shifts to capture Gabrielle’s legs and moves upward. That shot ends with Gabrielle looking at the camera, immediately cutting to Polly looking away. Polly’s gaze is directing the camera’s movements, and it is this camera work, specifically, that Fabe refers to when she argues that this scene has a “frankly sexual gaze from the point of view of a woman [that] is rarely seen in mainstream films” (225). Here, it is important to understand how Polly can be analyzed through a homosexual lens. Recall how D’Emilio and Freedman wrote that the 1980s was a time for radical change, especially in terms of supporting homosexuality and “assault[ing] the structures that relegated homosexuals to an underground, hidden existence” (318). In addition to Fabe’s analysis of this scene, resisting compulsory *heterosexuality* can be seen in Gabrielle and Mary’s relationship in the film itself. However, such analysis also perpetuates compulsory *sexuality*.

To resist this erasure of asexual possibility, I want to present an asexual reading of Polly and her relationship with Gabrielle (and Mary) that can stand in conversation with Fabe’s homosexual reading. During this scene, while the camera provides a tight shot of Gabrielle standing beside a window, Polly says she does not want to kiss Gabrielle, nor does she mention wanting to engage in any sexual acts at all in the film. Instead, all that Polly says is that she “just loved” Gabrielle. Throughout the film, Polly observes others, and she finds pleasure in the simple act of looking. Her curiosity, fascination, and overall desire to look at Gabrielle do not have to be defined by sexual pleasure, just as other moments of Polly’s looking are not sexual in

nature. Fabe challenges such an asexual reading: “But here a picture is worth a thousand words—Polly’s inhibited desire is expressed by how she sees, not by what she says” (225). While I am not arguing that Fabe’s reading is wrong, we must notice how her analysis perpetuates compulsory sexuality and erases an asexual lens. Her analysis does not leave room for a meaningful, non-sexual relationship between Polly and Gabrielle. As previously established, Polly enjoys her hobby of taking pictures. She finds fulfillment in observation, but that does not have to be conflated with or understood as voyeurism infused with sexual meaning. We can perfectly consider Polly as a single woman fascinated by Gabrielle, possibly for her beauty and for all the ways Gabrielle is unlike Polly herself, but that is not inherently sexual or require an explicitly sexual reading. Thus, endeavors like Fabe’s analysis erase asexuality, but if we consider how Polly resonates with asexuality, then we can find new ways to analyze *Mermaids* to recover non-sexual moments, traces, and meanings.

Moreover, the unconventional ending of *Mermaids* not only subverts the traditional structure of a film, but it rings with asexual resonance. After learning about Gabrielle’s deception of passing her lover’s artwork as her own, Polly flees to her house, and it is revealed that *Mermaids* has been her recounting her experience at the art gallery, telling the story of how she came to be sitting in her apartment filming herself. If one were to stop the film as the credits start, they would understand the film much differently, with Polly’s fate left uncertain. The proper ending of *Mermaids* comes when the credits start to roll. The interspersed clips interrupt the text, shot in that grainy quality from the handheld camera Polly took from the art gallery. The audience watches as Gabrielle and Mary arrive at Polly’s home. Gabrielle apologizes for the previous deception and realizes how passionate Polly is about photography. Polly offers to show the two women more of her work, leading them into a doorway that is supposed to open to her

photo-developing room but reveals a vibrant forest. This after-credit ending disrupts the structure of a traditional film and a narrative where a single woman's ending follows the compulsion to be sexual—that is, through marriage or, at the very least, coupling. From the start of the film, Polly has been on her own, and over the course of the film, the audience can understand Polly as a single woman content with her asexual existence, refusing to change to fit society's or the film's standards and expectations. When she offers to bring Gabrielle and Mary through the doorway, she has agency. She is a single woman allowed to exist as she is, and she leads a lesbian couple out of the viewer's gaze, the film's gaze, and the film itself. *Mermaid's* final scene, then, echoes not just *Housekeeping's* ending but also the conclusion of *Christopher Strong*.

Overall, the single women I have analyzed in this chapter exemplify counter-narratives to compulsory sexuality. Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly all opt out of and refuse the expectations of a woman in the twentieth century and the assumptions that they must be sexual to have meaning in their lives. For instance, Cynthia could have raised the child she conceived with Christopher on her own, remaining a single woman and becoming a mother. Yet, she rejects motherhood and chooses to kill herself and escape that pressure to center her identity as a woman around motherhood and domesticity—consequences of compulsory sexuality. In other words, Cynthia's narrative exists beyond her relationship with Christopher. The asexual energy that drives *Christopher Strong* connects back to her career as a pilot, not as a woman in an affair. Helen and Sylvie represent two alternatives to marriage and motherhood. As single women, they had to find ways to resist compulsory sexuality and relate to others in non-sexual ways. Helen saw only one way out, killing herself—her fate ending similar to Cynthia's. Sylvie finds another path to reject the pressure to be sexual through her itinerancy. Her relationship with Ruth, an unconventional motherhood ringing with asexual resonance, directs the narrative of *Housekeeping*. In the end,

she exercises her agency to leave Fingerbone and the viewer's gaze. She does not perpetuate the assumption that her life would only be meaningful through being sexual, being bound in marriage, or having biological children. Polly is another single woman who establishes her subjectivity and agency through her use of the camera in filming *Mermaids* and her hobby of photography. Meaning, then comes from non-sexual sources—not the assumption or pressure that she must relate to others sexually. Even her relationship with Gabrielle does not have to be defined by sex or understood as resulting in sexual desire or erotic satisfaction.

Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly are all characters who we understand as single characters with meaningful endings through an asexual lens. They exercise their agency throughout their films and retain it up until the very end. By them exiting the films, which impose notions of compulsory sexuality, they exemplify how individuals can live complete and happy lives outside the expectations of compulsory sexuality. Thus, we become aware of the assumptions that sex is necessary for meaningful relationships, and we understand how individuals can define themselves, their relationships, and their identity beyond and independent of sex.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have been arguing that asexuality is a relatively new and unacknowledged phenomenon that should be discussed, both in public and academic spheres. Asexuality compels us to reconsider current notions of sexuality and recover asexual meanings that have been silenced, ignored, or forgotten. As I mentioned in the Introduction, asexuality has been discussed in various but mostly implicit ways, from Karl-Maria Kertbeny to Alfred Kinsey and *The Asexual Manifesto*. Yet, asexuality has not been widely talked about or acknowledged until recently.

Part of the recent rise in explicit discussion has been due to the contemporary books *The Invisible Orientation* by Julia Sondra Decker and *Loveless* by Alice Oseman, which I analyzed to consider how these books have shaped the current discourse and understanding of asexuality. These authors are in unique and important positions to spark conversations of and around asexuality, especially among readers who have not considered asexuality before. *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless*, specifically, contribute to how the discourse of asexuality is shaped in how they use and perpetuate the language and ideas that originated in the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). With these works using similar, familiar language to describe asexuality and resist misconceptions, they make it easier for people unfamiliar with asexuality to understand and accept it. For instance, both Decker and Oseman frame asexuality as just another kind of sexuality that is akin to heterosexuality and homosexuality. If people can grasp heterosexuality as a type of sexuality—not just the only normal or natural one—and accept alternative sexualities like homosexuality, then people can accept asexuality. *Loveless*, specifically, makes strides toward this goal of acceptance through the novel being an asexual visibility story. The novel presents Georgia, Sunil, and Ellis in different parts of the journey in

learning about and accepting asexuality and their identity. These three experiences provide readers with diverse models or examples of how to understand asexuality and view asexuality spanning across gender, race, ethnicity, and age.

While the work of these contemporary texts is vital, it can have unintended consequences. Specifically, *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless* (and *AVEN*) perpetuate an essentialist conception of sexuality where an individual's sexuality is understood to be determined by some biological or psychological core or essence. Understanding asexuality through this essentialist conception *can* help with activist efforts. By arguing that we cannot change who we are and that our sexuality is natural and normal, LGBTQ+ activists can argue that people need to be more accepting of and sympathetic toward sexualities other than heterosexuality. Yet, an essentialist conception can be too limiting in understanding sexuality because it is so restrictive that it places people into rigid categories and boxes—classifying them through biology and, in some ways, removing agency. When seen through this lens, asexual characters in literature and film remain static. Their only journey is to discover what their sexuality is. There is no space for development beyond that because the conclusion is already determined. We see this in particular with Oseman's writing where asexual characters are simply learning how to fit into the mold of just another sexual orientation. *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless* both place readers in a position where they can only read and understand asexuality through an essentialist lens, so readers—like characters—are presented with the concept that understanding one's a/sexuality is a necessary step in grasping one's identity. Presenting rigid and restrictive notions of asexuality does harm by preventing individuals from seeing themselves represented on the page or on the screen.

There is another problem with the essentialist understanding of asexuality as a form of sexuality. I argue that asexuality is more than just another type of sexuality, such as heterosexuality or homosexuality. In fact, when understood as a sociological and historical concept, it might not be a kind of sexuality at all. By viewing asexuality through this perspective, we can complicate our understanding of sexuality and reconsider the relationship between sexuality and identity. To understand this, it is important to consider Michel Foucault's defense of the claim that sexuality is a socio-historical construction (in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*). By understanding that sexuality is not a natural or normal given, Foucault argues that sexuality is constructed by discourse—e.g. what people say and think about sexuality—and is a part of a great surface network. Also, Foucault points out that we have assumed people must grapple with and discover their sexuality so they can come to terms with their identity. This assumption is especially evident in young adult novels, like *Loveless*, where the story's conflict centers around the main character discovering their sexuality so they can step into their identity. However, Foucault argues, if sexuality is a construction, then we have also constructed the importance we ascribe to sexuality's role in identity. Thus, sexuality itself is not natural or inevitable, and neither is the connection between sexuality and identity. This provides us with a new lens through which to see and understand identity and to read literature.

While works like *The Invisible Orientation* and *Loveless* are important and useful in sparking the conversation about asexuality and creating discourse around the asexual visibility story, literature and media should not stop there. *Loveless* exemplifies an asexual visibility story, drawing on what Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart refer to as a 'homosexual visibility story.' Yet, Jenkins and Cart identify two other kinds of young adult stories in LGBTQ+ literature: the "gay assimilation" and the "queer consciousness/community stories" (xiv). The

former “assumes the existence—at least in the world of the story—of a melting pot of sexual and gender identity. These stories include people who ‘just happen to be gay,’” and the latter “show[s] LGBTQ+ characters in the context of a community... [where] the audience for these books is not limited to readers from within the culture [or community]” (xv). In other words, a gay assimilation and a queer consciousness/community story move beyond the visibility story and push for acknowledgment and integration. Asexuality should follow the same trajectory with asexual assimilation and asexual consciousness/community stories. Decker’s and Oseman’s work open the conversation to allow stories of and about asexuality to go further and present other conceptions of asexuality. When we study literature through a lens of asexual identity that is not rigidly essentialist, or simply another form of sexuality, we also provide alternatives for others, and in particular, the media. It is important that media representing asexuality does not reinforce notions of essential sexuality or gender.

So, I propose that we adopt a more nuanced understanding of asexuality overall. When we do, we see representations of asexuality in literature and film that viewers and critics may not have noticed previously, partly because they had no name for it. Yet, Kristina Gupta and Karli June Cerankowski do have a name for it. They describe an asexual reading practice that gives us the tools to resist compulsory sexuality and recover asexual meanings that have been lost. This is a form of a close reading that takes what they call a reparative lens to works that have asexual resonances or traces. Nick Adler is a prime example of this in how he reads against Sedgwick’s analysis of “Beast in the Jungle.” Notably, Adler proposes an asexual reading of James’s work not to counter Sedgwick but to provide an alternative analysis that can co-exist, and possibly enhance, her homosexual reading. Not only does this kind of reading recover asexual meanings that have been buried by compulsory sexuality, but it introduces another way



to think about asexuality as not a fixed sexuality at all—as non-sexual, or a culturally constructed sexual identity that has nothing to do with biology.

Reading through an asexual lens—an asexual reading—differs from the project of simply trying to identify characters as asexual, which is the kind of visibility work we see in standard readings of *Loveless*. As Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper note, this kind of asexual reading focuses on identifying non-sexual moments, traces, and hints that are significant but not sexual—and thus, moves away from perpetuating the assumption that all people are and must be sexual beings. Another way to understand the difference is that searching for asexual resonances as a critical or close reading practice of literary works, films, and other media allows us to see what has been missed in cultural representations asexuality, or lack thereof, and therefore, compels us to see it in the world around us. It also allows for a broader understanding of identity that moves beyond visibility and sexuality. Moving beyond the simple agenda of making asexuality visible to those who have not heard of it, an asexual lens pushes our understanding of asexual representation to be more nuanced.

As I discuss in the third chapter, we see the impact of reading through a reparative lens in the case of Cynthia Darrington from *Christopher Strong* (1933), Sylvie Foster from *Housekeeping* (1987), and Polly Vandersma from *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. There are moments in these films where the camera and other characters observe, who I identify as, characters with asexual implications using what might be called an asexual gaze, drawing on Laura Mulvey's writing on the male gaze and visual pleasure and her discussion of the sexual gaze in general. These moments challenge viewers to also re-envision asexuality as not just another sexuality. By searching for moments in the film that resist the compulsion to sexualize and objectify others, we can find new understandings and analyses that otherwise would have

been missed. Analyzing these films through an asexual lens, thus, challenges the notion of compulsory sexuality and illustrates how individuals can achieve meaningful lives without relating sexually to others.

It also is important to note that, by considering asexuality as a construction instead of an essential, natural given, we are reminded that there is not one set model or portrayal of asexuality. This is especially exemplified in these films and with Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly demonstrate how varied asexual resonance can be. For instance, Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly have different connections with asexuality. Cynthia engages in a relationship with Christopher Strong, but it is clear throughout the film that what draws the two together is not simply, or even primarily, a physical or sexual attraction. In contrast, Sylvie lives an itinerant life and is confident in her single lifestyle. Nowhere in *Housekeeping* does Sylvie display any adherence to compulsory sexuality or its products (traditional marriage, motherhood, and domesticity). While she tries to care for Ruth like a mother would, she does not teach her how to adopt a sexual identity. She accepts Lucile's traditional sexuality but seems rather mystified by it. We as viewers see very clearly that Lucile's actions are, at least in part, socially constructed as a way to fit in. Sylvie shows Ruth another way to present herself by modeling what it looks like to not sacrifice her identity and be bound in traditional motherhood. Similarly, while some critics view Polly as a lesbian who is sexually attracted to Gabrielle, that is not the only reading. Gabrielle embodies much of what Polly does not have, like a set direction in life and a desire for success, and Polly admires that. Moreover, Polly is content with her life as a single woman working odd jobs and taking photos of what interests her. Like Sylvie and Cynthia, she is a fully-fleshed out character with a meaningful life in which she can relate to others in ways that are not sexual. The

differing ways these three women exist may be limited by the time period in which the films are set, but in each case, they are presented as not *lacking* anything with the absence of sex.

While I look at these female characters through an asexual lens, an asexual reading practice can be applied to all characters—not just women. Since I examine how a woman’s role and societal expectations compel her to enter into marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, we can apply this asexual lens to male characters and analyze how society’s norms and expectations for men function similarly. For instance, compulsory sexuality also underlies masculinity and toxic masculinity, which perpetuates the notion that men must be sexual in order to be ‘a proper man.’

To conclude this thesis, let us briefly return to Jonathan Ned Katz. In the final chapter of *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Katz says that he wants to achieve “a new pleasure system” (190). While we have made great strides in achieving an inclusive pleasure system by disrupting the assumption that heterosexuality is both normal and a natural given and erasing the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, we must also consider how the divide and hierarchy between sexual and asexual can be overcome. In doing so, we reconceptualize what we mean by ‘pleasure’ to include non-sexual desires and ways of existing that do not assume or force individuals to be sexual, relate to others sexually, or take up sexual identities. While there are examples of this in Cynthia, Sylvie, and Polly, there are many others—male and female—that can be explored (see Appendix). Thus, the pathway toward a new, fully inclusive system is being paved through the scholarship, literary works, and media I have discussed on asexuality—and by the current and future works that I have not.

## APPENDIX

### Beyond Visibility and Toward Future Directions

Common in discussions about asexuality is the Split Attraction Model where one's sexual and romantic attractions, desires, and drives are not necessarily the same. This split allows for asexuality to be separate from aromanticism. Like asexuality, aromanticism has not been discussed much in recent scholarship. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) discusses aromanticism on its own webpage titled "Romantic Orientations": "Some asexual people may still feel romantically towards others, or may wish to find a romantic relationship, despite not feeling sexual attraction." Importantly, AVEN clarifies that the Split Attraction Model is "by no means exclusive to asexual people... since for the general population[,] both sexual and romantic orientation are usually implied in the same word" ("Romantic Orientations"). Ela Przybylo expands on this, writing that "[r]omantic and *aromantic* are also relevant descriptors for people who are not asexual, as they help to grasp an aspect of the manner in which people are attracted to each other, rather than assuming that attraction relies only upon the desire to have sex" (*Asexual Erotic* 5). If one were to build off the work I have done in this thesis, or go about a similar process, then aromanticism could be understood akin to how asexuality is conceived by The Asexual Manifesto. Instead of relating to others in ways that are not sexual, aromanticism could be indicating ways an individual can relate to others in ways that are not centered around romance. Julia Sondra Decker also discusses aromanticism in *The Invisible Orientation* in a section called "Romantic Orientation." Georgia in *Loveless* is not only asexual but aromantic, so her struggles with aromanticism could also be analyzed in how I analyzed asexuality in Chapter 1. Similar to how I explored the concept of compulsory sexuality throughout this thesis, one could also look into the notion of amatonormativity, a term that

Elizabeth Brake coined and on her website “describe[s] [as] the widespread assumption that everyone is better off in an exclusive, romantic, long-term coupled relationship, and that everyone is seeking such a relationship.”

To continue discussing and examining asexual representation in literary works, films, and other media, it could be useful to refer to the work Gwendolyn Osterwald and Patricia Kennon have done with looking at asexuality in media and young adult novels, respectively, and identify problematic themes. Osterwald points out that media has often portrayed asexual characters as geniuses or quirky to make up for the fact that they do not relate to others sexually. There is an assumption that a character’s lack of sexual desire would make them too boring. Unfortunately, this leads to the misconception that asexual individuals are emotionless and/or need to overcome their lack of sexual activity or interest in order to be fully human or normal (41). She provides some characters who are often brought up and considered prime examples of asexual characters in contemporary media; for instance, Sherlock Holmes, specifically the iteration from the BBC television show, and the Eleventh Doctor from *Doctor Who*. Kennon also points out that there are common themes or tropes that asexual characters and representations of asexuality fall into by researching and analyzing several young adult novels. Namely, there is often a non-asexual mentor or savior that provides knowledge or insight (whether that be the main character and/or the audience themselves) about asexuality. The issue arises especially when an “allosexual saviour,” or someone who is not asexual, saves “the asexual character from their isolation, ignorance, and feelings of brokenness (15). Interestingly, *Loveless* could partially fall into this description by Sunil educating Georgia about asexuality, Georgia informing Ellis, and all of these characters and their experiences teaching the reader knowledge of asexuality. However, by asexual characters connecting, mentoring, and educating each other, *Loveless* avoids

perpetuating this idea of a non-asexual savior. Also, Kennon points out the lack of diversity in asexual representations—in the sense that there is little racial diversity in young adult books that include asexuality, that the type of narrative or sub-plot asexual characters experience does not vary, and that out of the various identities considered under the asexual spectrum, only one or two are portrayed and represented (17–18). In other words, given the rising awareness of asexuality, texts and media should explore asexuality in all of its nuances—from various asexual experiences to the intersection between a character’s sexuality and their gender, race, class, etc.—resist perpetuating harmful tropes, assumptions, and conceptions of asexuality.

In a similar vein, Smangaliso Simelane talks about the specific potential young adult fantasy novels have for asexuality and asexual representation in “Positive Representations of Asexuality in Contemporary Young Adult.” Specifically, she writes that “the fantasy genre’s ability to serve as a particularly potent means of identification [is] capable of inspiring changes in the attitudes and real-world beliefs of readers” (80). To achieve this, Simelane talks about how fantasy novels can “defamiliarize topics that society and readers have assumed are normal, namely with “worlds [that] are made strange through the author’s reimagining of time, space, physical laws and other dimensions. However, [these fantastical worlds] often retain enough of an analogous relationship to ours for meaningful parallels to be drawn” (80). Part of this analogous relationship relies on evoking sympathy, which “is a necessary step in the process of identification” (81), where identification is how readers connect with and, especially with young adult readers, build their sense of self and identity. In other words, there are “fantasy elements that [can] create a comfortable emotional remove and make these ideas more readily digestible” (83).

For instance, the Skybound Saga by Alex London is a contemporary fantasy, young adult series that could be analyzed to further build on the work I have done in this thesis and address Simelanes's ideas. This series consists of *Black Wings Beating*, *Red Skies Falling*, and *Gold Wings Rising*, which are set in a world where falconry and the Hollow Tongue, a magical ability to use the language of birds and control them, dictate power structures and one's safety. In a section at the end of the second book, *Red Skies Falling*, London answers questions about the trilogy thus far. He specifically addresses a question about Kylee, which asks him about "includ[ing] [her as] a female character who could be coded as asexual and/or aromantic." He replies, "I did not import any of our labels around sexuality into the fantasy novel on purpose, as it is not set in a world where cis-gendered heterosexuality is assumed or even the norm... [trans, gay, and ace characters] all exist and live [those] experiences in their own context" (n. page). In other words, since London's fantasy novel does not have to include the notion that "cis-gendered heterosexuality is assumed or even the norm," he was free to also resist compulsory sexuality. Throughout all three of the Skybound saga, there is no compulsion or pressure for Kylee to be sexual—or romantic, if one were to explore aromanticism in this series as well. London further answers that question, describing the Skybound Saga as "a world that did not judge her for it or see her as somehow incomplete for it." No character shames her or asks her for an explanation as to why she does not engage in sexual activities or pursue a relationship—not even one of her childhood friends, a "boy who loves her [and] understands and accepts their relationship" (n. page). While this is not exactly the defamiliarization that Simelane discusses, the Skybound Saga presents a way for both asexuality to exist in a world without compulsory sexuality and for both asexual and non-sexual individuals to see how a society could function without this assumption. Moreover, with this implicit resistance to compulsory sexuality, the Skybound Saga can

encourage readers “to, perhaps for the first time, analyse elements of compulsory heterosexuality that might have otherwise gone unnoticed when hidden behind the mundaneness of everyday life” (Simelane 82). Thus, fantasy young adult novels have the potential to not only provide space for asexuality and asexual characters to exist without any further justification, but the potential to imagine what a world could look like without compulsory sexuality and the priority placed on (hetero)sexual relationships.

Finally, to elaborate on Simelane’s argument for fantasy’s potential for asexuality and connect it with the critical, asexual reading from Gupta and Cerankowski, I want to highlight *The Deeds of Paksenarrion* by Elizabeth Moon as a possible resource to analysis through an asexual lens and for asexual resonance. Moon’s work is an epic fantasy story that was broken up into three books for practical publishing purposes. The first is titled *Sheepfarmer’s Daughter* and was published in 1988, then *Divided Allegiance* was also released in 1988, and finally, *Oath of Gold* in 1989. Paksenarrion (often called Paks) has a destiny to fulfill, a calling she does not realize as until she becomes a soldier. Her journey finally reaches its climax and conclusion when she takes on the mantle of paladin and is tasked to combat evil. I believe that Paks resonates with asexuality, especially in the first third of the story—or in the first book, *Sheepfarmer’s Daughter*. For instance, what causes her to become a soldier is her father trying to force her into an arranged marriage, and throughout *Sheepfarmer’s Daughter* and the rest of the story, Paks shows no interest in marriage or sexual relations. A senior officer asks if she’s a “sisli,” or a “woman who beds women,” to which she declines (38). In both of these instances, Paks shows little interest in relating to others sexually.



Moreover, Paks befriends Saben, a fellow recruit in *Sheepfarmer's Daughter*. As they train together, Saben makes it clear, though subtly, that he fancies Paks. When the two are discussing their future, Paks relating to Saben non-sexually is clear:

“The thing is, I got what I wanted. A life I like, good friends, enough pay for extras I want. The only thing would be—” he slid a glance at Paks. when she met his eyes, she reddened and looked down.

“Saben, you know I—”

“You don't want it. I know. Not from me or anyone.” (178–179)

Also, Paks tells Saben that her gently refusing his pursuits is not because of an incident of sexual assault she experienced before: “[E]ven before [that incident,] I just don't feel that way.” Similar to my analysis of *Loveless*, one could explore whether the language in Moon's writing perpetuates an essentialist understanding of sexuality or allows for a more nuanced understanding of a/sexuality. Another moment in *Sheepfarmer's Daughter* that I want to highlight is after Saben's death. Paks wonders if she should have “bed him. It was something he had always wanted... Better not. She had never wanted to” and “her grief might've been heavier if she did” (310). Again, this moment hints toward the notion that Paks's resonance with asexuality is akin to an unchanging, ahistorical conception—i.e. an essentialist conception of sexuality. Yet, while Paks admits that “her grief might've been heavier” if she sexually engaged with Saben, the force of grief for a friend still holds importance in the story. Paks does not easily overcome her grief or pull herself out of her mourning simply because her and Saben were not lovers. She is allowed to grieve, and her grappling with the loss of a friend extends throughout *Sheepfarmer's Daughter*—and a bit into the rest of Pak's story.

In all, there could be a literature analysis done not only on whether Moon's writing perpetuates an essentialist conception of sexuality. There might also be a concern that can be further explored in the connection between Paks relating to others in non-sexual ways but her destiny as a paladin since Kennon points out that asexuality is often associated with religious messages. In this instance, asexuality might not be deemed evil, but there can be a connotation that to be pure and properly religious, as one is as a paladin, one must not engage in sexual activities or give into sexual desires.

Another future direction could be further examining the intersection between asexuality and feminist and queer studies, especially with the notions of radical politics and queering erotics. For instance, recall *The Asexual Manifesto* that I draw on for a broad understanding of asexuality. During 2022, it became fifty years since Lisa Orlando and Barbie Hunter Getz wrote the initial *Asexual Manifesto*, and Aley O'Mara licensed the "*Asexual Manifesto 2022: Radical Asexual Politics, 50 Years On*"—which is housed on [asexualmanifesto.org](http://asexualmanifesto.org). The *Asexual Manifesto 2022* calls for "radical asexual politics" where there is emphasis on community and "act[ing] from a place of collectivism." Erica Chu also wrote an essay called "Radical Identity Politics: Asexuality and Contemporary Articulations of Identity" in *Asexualities*, the "first book-length collection of critical essays" on asexuality—according to Routledge's website. Chu's work "focus[es] on asexuality in this chapter [and] challenges queer hegemonies that would mark asexuality as invisible and as less worthy of critical attention because it is supposedly not 'radical enough' in its transgression of the cultural limits placed on eroticism" (80). Moreover, the *Asexual Manifesto* "reject[s] bioessentialism and reclaim[s] [asexuals'] power of self-determination," "reject[s] mere visibility and reclaim[s] the power of direct action," and "reclaim[s] erotic excellence," which draws on Audre Lorde's work with erotics. Interestingly, I

have been referencing Przybylo and some of the introductory work she does on asexuality in *Asexual Erotics*. This book, in particular, goes beyond asexual visibility and aims “to deepen our understanding of intimacy and relating and offer a meaningful language for thinking about the coordinates of asexuality” by also building off of Lorde’s work (3). Specifically, Przybylo resists the connection Freud’s legacy made with conflating erotics with sex drive, desire, and sexuality (20). More scholarship, then, can be done on how asexuality has the potential to further radical politics and to resist the assumed associations we have made between erotics and sexual relations and desire.

One final potential avenue of exploration one could undertake is how asexuality can impact the craft and creation of literature itself. In *Asexualities*, Elizabeth Hanna Hanson analyzes novels’ narratives themselves. In “Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure,” she explores “the implications of the *logic* of asexuality for narrative structure, taking Henry James’ ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ (1903) and *The Sacred Font* (1901) as [her] examples” (345). Significantly, both Nick Adler and Hanson are focusing on “The Beast in the Jungle” and resisting asexual erasure done by Sedgwick and other scholars. Taken together, they are recovering asexual meanings and possibilities from James’s work, with a focus on the narrative structure and how an “[a]sexually structured narrative opposes forward movement, closure, and intellectual mastery and embodies stasis, the suspension of desire, the non-event, and indifference to the meaningful narrative end” (367). In a similar vein, “Beyond the Narrative Arc” by Jane Alison in *The Paris Review* explores how the narrative shape of fiction—a story’s arc—has an “irksome sexual aspect” where “critic Robert Scholes [writes]: ‘The archetype of all fiction is a sexual act... the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation.’”

Interestingly, Alison exclaims, “This is not how *I* experience sex,” and asks, “why should sex—this kind of sex!—be the archetype of fiction? Why should an art form as innovative as fiction have a single archetype at all?” Ultimately, Alison concludes that a “radial narrative could spring from a central hole—an incident, absence, horror—around which it keeps circling or from which it keeps veering, but it scarcely moves forward in time,” which echoes the conclusion that Hanson draws. Thus, asexuality’s influence and potential to radically alter narratives and the shapes of stories is another interesting direction that can be explored.

## WORKS CITED

- “About AVEN.” *Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*.  
<https://asexuality.org/?q=about.html>. Accessed 25 April 2023.
- Adler, Nick. “The Beast Imperative.” *The Henry James Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, Spring 2022, pp. 97–108.
- Alison, Jane. “Beyond the Narrative Arc,” *The Paris Review*,  
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/03/27/beyond-the-narrative-arc/>. Accessed 25 April 2023.
- “Asexual Manifesto 2022: Radical Asexual Politics, 50 Years On.”  
<https://www.asexualmanifesto.org/>. Accessed 25 April 2023.
- “Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives.” *Routledge*, 2014.  
<https://www.routledge.com/Asexualities-Feminist-and-Queer-Perspectives/Cerankowski-Milks/p/book/9781138284791>. Accessed 25 April 2023.
- Brake, Elizabeth. “Amatonormativity.” Personal website, [elizabethbrake.com/amatonormativity/](http://elizabethbrake.com/amatonormativity/).  
 Accessed 25 April 2023.
- Breen, Margaret Sönser and Fiona Peters. *Genealogies of Identity: Interdisciplinary Readings on Sex and Sexuality*. Editions Rodopi BV, 2005.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* Routledge, 1993.
- - -. “From Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” in Kolmar and Bartkowski, pp. 496–504.
- Cardullo, Bert. “Theatre and Fiction in Film: Notes on Two Paradigmatic Scenes, One Metaphoric Fiction, and An Omnibus Adaptation.” *In Search of Cinema: Writings on International Film Art*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004, pp. 292–314.

-- -. "Three Ways to Play House." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 41, no. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 348–356, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3850883>.

Cerankowski, Karli June, and Megan Milks. "New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 650–64. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/27919126](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27919126). Accessed 9 Mar. 2023.

-- -. *Asexualities: Feminists and Queer Perspectives*. Routledge, 2014.

*Christopher Strong*. Directed by Dorothy Arzner, RKO Radio Pictures, 1933.

Chu, Erica. "Radical Identity Politics" in *Asexualities*, pp. 79–99.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Decker, Julie Sondra. *The Invisible Orientation*. Carrel Books, 2015.

D'Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Harper and Row, 1988.

Fabe, Marilyn. "Feminism and Film Form: Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*." *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*. University of California Press, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520959019-015>.

Faderman, Lillian. *Woman: The American History of an Idea*. Yale University Press, 2022.

"Forums." *Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*, [www.asexuality.org/en/](http://www.asexuality.org/en/). Accessed 25 April 2023.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1978.

- Gupta, Kristina and Karli June Cerankowski. "Asexualities and Media." *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex, and Sexuality*, edited by Feona Attwood et al., Routledge, 2022, pp. 19–26.
- Hanson, Elizabeth Hanna. "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure." *Asexualities*, pp. 344–374.
- Housekeeping*. Directed by Bill Forsyth. Columbia Pictures, 1987.
- I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. Directed by Patricia Rozema, Kino Lorber, 1987.
- Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central, [ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.drew.edu/lib/drew-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5313644](http://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.drew.edu/lib/drew-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5313644).
- Kahan, Benjamin. *Celibacies*. Duke University Press, 2013.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. The University of Chicago Press. 2007.
- Kennon, Patricia. "Asexuality and the Potential of Young Adult Literature for Disrupting Allonormativity." *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2021, pp.1–24. doi: [doi.org/10.24877/IJYAL.41](https://doi.org/10.24877/IJYAL.41).
- Kolmar, Wendy K. and Frances Bartkowski. *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. McGraw-Hill, 2013.
- London, Alex. *Red Skies Falling*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019.
- Mackay, Brad. "Asexuals, the group that Kinsey forgot," *University Affairs*, 9 Jan. 2013, [www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/asexuals-the-group-that-kinsey-forgot/](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/asexuals-the-group-that-kinsey-forgot/). Accessed 25 April 2023.
- Moon, Elizabeth. *The Sheepfarmer's Daughter*. Baen, 1998.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in Kolmar and Bartkowski, pp. 253–259.

- Orlando, Lisa and Barbie Hunter Getz. "The Asexual Manifesto," *Ace Archive*,  
[acearchive.lgbt/artifacts/orlando-the-asexual-manifesto/](http://acearchive.lgbt/artifacts/orlando-the-asexual-manifesto/). Accessed 25 April 2023.
- Oseman, Alice. *Loveless*. HarperCollins, 2020.
- Osterwald, Gwendolyn. "Contradictions in the Representation of Asexuality: Fiction and Reality." *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 4, Apr. 2017.  
<https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-arts-and-humanities/volume-4-issue-1/article-4/>
- "Other Resources." *Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*,  
[asexuality.org/?q=links.html](http://asexuality.org/?q=links.html). Accessed 25 April 2023.
- "Overview." *Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*,  
[asexuality.org/?q=overview.html](http://asexuality.org/?q=overview.html). Accessed 25 April 2023.
- Przybylo, Ela. *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. The Ohio State University Press, 2019.
- - - and Danielle Cooper. "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive," *GLQ*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2014, pp. 297-318.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, Summer 1980, pp. 631–660, [www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3173834.pdf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3173834.pdf).
- "Romantic Orientations." *Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.
- Simelane, Smangaliso. "Positive Representations of Asexuality in Contemporary Young Adult." *WritingThreeSixty*, vol. 4, no. 1, 15 Nov. 2022,  
<https://doi.org/10.14426/writing360.v1.327>.
- Spohrer, Erika. "Translating from Language to Image in Bill Forsyth's 'Housekeeping,'" *Mosaic*, vol. 34, no. 3, September 2001, pp. 55-71, [www.jstor.org/stable/44029612](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029612).



“The Kinsey Scale.” *The Kinsey Institute*, [kinseyinstitute.org/research/publications/kinsey-scale.php](https://www.kinseyinstitute.org/research/publications/kinsey-scale.php). Accessed 25 April 2023.

Tobin, Robert Deam. *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

Waters, Michael. “Finding Asexuality in the Archives,” *Slate*, 6 Mar. 2020, [slate.com/human-interest/2020/03/asexuality-history-internet-identity-queer-archive.html](https://www.slate.com/human-interest/2020/03/asexuality-history-internet-identity-queer-archive.html). Accessed 25 April 2023.

“What is sexuality and sexual orientation?” *Center for Young Women’s Health*, 26 Oct. 2018, [youngwomenshealth.org/askus/what-is-sexuality-and-sexual-orientation/](https://www.youngwomenshealth.org/askus/what-is-sexuality-and-sexual-orientation/). Accessed 25 April 2023.