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Performing Asexuality through Narratives of Sexual Identity

Janet Sundrud
San Jose State University

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PERFORMING ASEXUALITY THROUGH NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Janet L. Sundrud

August 2011

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

PERFORMING ASEXUALITY THROUGH NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

by

Janet L. Sundrud

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2011

Dr. Matthew Spangler	Department of Communication Studies
Dr. David Terry	Department of Communication Studies
Dr. Shawn Spano	Department of Communication Studies

Abstract

PERFORMING ASEXUALITY THROUGH NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

by Janet L. Sundrud

This thesis explores the social construction of asexual identities through everyday narrative performances and critically examines the marginalizing effects of heteronormative discourses. This thesis posits narrative performance as a framework for understanding asexual identities within a heteronormative society. Drawing upon oral history and ethnographic methodologies, this thesis examines the narrative performances of three self-identified asexuals and explores four themes within each narrative: 1) the breach of heteronormative expectations, 2) the creation of commonality among individuals within the asexual community, 3) the negotiation of heteronormative discourses within the family, and 4) the construction of future-oriented liminoid narratives of asexuality. This thesis advances the claim that asexuality is a social identity by which asexuals narrate their past within a heteronormative society and envision a queer future.

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Chapter One: The Modern Asexual

Introduction

Heteronormative performances of social identity permeate nearly every aspect of our daily lives. William Leap (2007) defines heteronormativity as “the principles of order and control that position heterosexuality as the cornerstone of the American sex/gender system and obligate the personal construction of sexuality and gender in terms of heterosexual norms” (p. 98). As such, the heteronormative dream shapes our futures and guides our daily performances. For instance, many women attempt to embody “feminine” characteristics in the hope of attracting a male partner. Many dream of their wedding days and the rituals that celebrate femininity. They might also feel a strong desire to become pregnant and raise children. Some men, on the other hand, embody traditionally “masculine” characteristics and define their sexuality through their successful pursuit of women. They might be more adamant than women about initiating a sexual relationship and spend more time fantasizing about women as an object of sexual gratification. Despite the influence of these social scripts on our lives, most people do not acknowledge the impact of heteronormative thinking on their social performances.

In contrast, many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) community actively resist heteronormative discourses. They are more likely to disrupt sex/gender binaries and experiment with their daily performances of gender. For example, some lesbians embrace masculine performances of identity by cutting their hair and wearing masculine clothing. Drag queens, on the other hand, might attempt to embody partially or fully the ideal traits of femininity with dramatic makeup, luxurious

dresses, and long, stylized hair. The inversion of gendered performances on sexed bodies (e.g., male/feminine and female/masculine) inherently challenge heteronormativity and can disrupt gendered roles within same-sex relationships and families.

However, in some regards, the LGBT community has reappropriated the heteronormative expectations of dating, marriage, and childrearing to create, what I term, a sexual normativity. Instead of liberating the LGBT community from heteronormative expectations, many homosexual and bisexual individuals have recreated oppressive social expectations within same-sex relationships. Nowadays, instead of creating new models for partnered relationships, same sex partners are adhering to the benchmarks of heteronormativity through their desire to have a marriage ceremony and by raising children. If we want to liberate ourselves from this sexual normativity, we must resist and challenge the expectations inherent within sexual relationships.

With the emergence of the asexual community, individuals are finding still new ways to challenge societal assumptions about gender and sexuality. As defined by the Asexuality and Visibility Education Network (AVEN, 2008a), asexuals are individuals who “[do] not experience sexual attraction.” These individuals construct complicated performances of gender identity as they negotiate heteronormative expectations in their everyday lives. Since asexuals typically do not engage in sex, they might feel conflicted about forming partnered relationships and negotiating sex, and they might question their desire and ability to form a traditional family. The asexual community provides a refuge for many from the barrage of heterosexual messages that permeate nearly every aspect of our daily lives.

When I was a teenager, I often had to negotiate religious, familial, and societal values surrounding the issue of sex. My religious teaching told me to save sex for marriage, where it would become a sacred bond with my partner. I went through my teenage years as a “celibate” single woman, until, at the age of nineteen, I moved in with my boyfriend and spent five years in a committed relationship that I thought would end in marriage. When I was twenty-two, I began arranging my life into a collection of milestones: I would be married, give birth to children, and become a caretaker oriented around the home. I *wanted* this life. My family told me that these milestones would provide me with contentment. Yet, as I continued to balance school, work, and my relationship, I began to realize that sexual desire was not a feeling that I could naturally discover and awaken; rather, sexual desire is a social performance that I must constantly negotiate.

As a graduate student, I became increasingly interested in resisting and pushing back against heteronormative social discourses. I learned about an online community of people who claimed never to have experienced sexual attraction nor to have desired sex. I saw the potential to create new (a)sexual identities that did not rely upon sex with a man or a woman. Because this emerging group of asexuals defied everything I thought I knew about sexuality, I could draw upon the support of this community to resist heteronormative and homonormative scripts and explore love and intimacy within asexual relationships. This community empowered me to speak out against the prescribed gender roles within my family and envision a future that does not revolve around marriage. I subsequently ended the relationship with my boyfriend and moved in

with some friends (a married couple). I am now reevaluating the notion of family beyond the context of a traditionally defined partnered relationship.

This story not only reflects my current perspectives on my own sexuality, but it also represents a performance of sexual identity. Many individuals understand sexuality as an inherent biological trait that remains fixed throughout their lives. However, as I will argue, sexuality is a performance made manifest through the act of narration and storytelling. Narrative performances allow individuals to communicate their sexual identity and elicit meaning from their performances of sexual desire. Within the asexual community, narrative performance creates a normative structure that unites a diverse group of people and distinguishes them from other sexual orientations.

From March 2010 to April 2010, I engaged in ethnographic oral histories with three self-identified asexuals to explore narrative performances that constitute the asexual identity. In treating narrative itself as an act of performance, I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How might asexuals narrate their identity within and beyond heteronormativity?

RQ2: In what ways do familial and communal relationships figure into the self-identity narratives of asexuals?

RQ3: How might asexuals resist and disrupt heteronormativity through the act of narrative performance?

The purpose of this thesis is to challenge narratives of sexual normativity and create a dialogic space for the creation of asexual narratives. This thesis will explore a broad range of asexual narratives, including social drama, misdiagnosis, displeasure, difference, communal belonging, coming out, activism, and hope. I will discuss how each asexual

woman, by evoking these narratives, displaced her heteronormative identity and situated herself within the asexual community.

Defining the Asexual Orientation

A range of sociological and psychological theorists has examined the concept of asexuality for three decades to define and categorize it within the social sciences.

Michael Storms (1980) created a bilateral model of sexual orientations by adapting Alfred Kinsey's (1948, 1953) continuum model of sexuality. Instead of positioning bisexuality as the middle ground between heterosexuality and homosexuality, Storms (1980) restructured the continuum into axes, with heteroeroticism and homoeroticism as two separate variables, and created a fourth sexual orientation: asexuality (see Figure 1).

He applied this new model to a former study by William Masters & Virginia Johnson (1979), which sought to understand better ambisexuals: "individuals who show no preference for the gender of their sexual partners" (p. 790). Although the term "ambisexual" could potentially encompass both bisexuality and asexuality, Storms'

results were more consistent with asexuality. Storms (1980) explained that "ambisexual subjects were able to respond adequately when stimulated by a sexual partner in the laboratory [but] they reported fewer erotic fantasies and daydreams than the heterosexual and homosexual subjects" (p. 790). This study suggests that asexuals, in general, are

capable of sexual stimulation and arousal, but do not initiate or pursue sex. Furthermore, doctors have categorized this behavior as a form of sexual dysfunction and have sought to

normalize through medicine and psychiatric services the sexual behavior of asexuals.

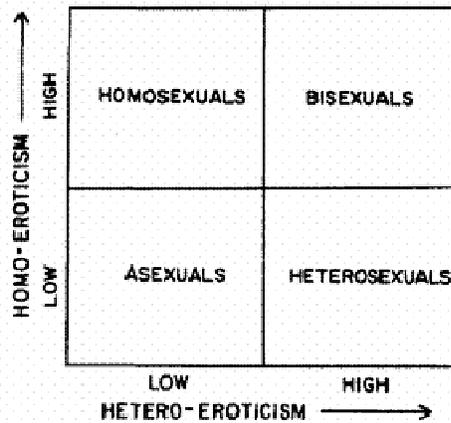


Figure 1. Storm's bilateral model of sexual orientations (Courtesy of the American Psychological Association)

When medical practitioners discuss asexuality, it is often in the context of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). The American Psychiatric Association (APA), in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, defines HSDD as “a deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity” (2000, p. 539). The APA further elaborates:

The individual usually does not initiate sexual activity or may only engage in it reluctantly when it is initiated by the partner. Although the frequency of sexual experiences is usually low, pressure from the partner or nonsexual needs (e.g., for physical comfort or intimacy) may increase the frequency of sexual encounters. (p. 539)

While this definition could easily describe members of the asexual community, psychologists base it on two faulty assumptions: first, that everyone *should* desire sexual activities and perceive them as enjoyable; and second, that a sexual identity is more desirable than an asexual one.

Another sexual disorder, Sexual Aversion Disorder (SAD), reiterates these assumptions and similarly marginalizes asexuality. SAD describes “the aversion to and active avoidance of genital sexual contact with a sexual partner” (p. 541). Individuals who identify with SAD experience different responses to sexual stimuli, ranging from “moderate anxiety and lack of pleasure to extreme psychological distress” (p. 541). Although many asexuals might identify with this definition, they may not perceive their asexuality as a psychological or medical “problem.” For some, asexuality provides a refuge from heteronormative expectations and allows for the creation of intimate, albeit nonsexual, relationships. Consequently, there is a growing need for the medical community to understand the ways in which asexuality constitutes a social and communal identity.

Recently, some scholars have begun to examine the prevalence of asexuality as a marker of identity. Anthony Bogaert (2004) conducted a national probability sample survey to gauge the number of people who associate with asexuality. In his research, he defined asexuality as “the *absence* of a traditional sexual orientation, in which an individual would exhibit little or no sexual attraction to males or females” (p. 279; italics in original). After conducting telephone interviews with 18,426 people, he discovered that one out of every 100 people identified with the statement: “I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all” (p. 281). By comparing the responses of the asexual participants with the responses of the sexual participants, he concluded, “Relative to sexual people, asexual people had fewer sexual partners, had a later onset of sexual activity (if it occurred), and had less frequent sexual activity with a partner currently”

(Bogaert, 2004, p. 282). His findings suggest that psychologists and doctors could correlate asexuality with certain sexual behaviors and create predictors and indicators of asexuality.

Researchers have also sought to explore the relationship between asexuality and psychological distress. Nicole Prause & Cynthia Graham (2007) conducted a multi-method study to assess the *amount* of sexual attraction and desire experienced by asexuals, whether asexuals might prefer masturbation to copulation, and the level of excitability and/or inhibition experienced by asexuals. After surveying 41 self-identified asexuals and 1,105 non-asexuals, they found that asexuals scored lower on the Dyadic Sexual Desire subscale, Solitary Sexual Desire subscale, and Sexual Arousability Inventory, indicating that asexuals are less likely to engage in dyadic and/or solitary sexual activities. They also found that asexuals scored low on the Sexual Inhibition scale, which suggests asexuals are not particularly sexually fearful, but rather have a lower excitatory drive.

Yet, as more individuals identify with asexuality and congregate through online and local communities, some researchers have begun to explore the social significance of asexuality. Kristin Scherrer (2008) challenges her colleagues to consider how asexuality “is given meaning by the broader cultural understandings of that identity” (p. 622). Her article identifies three narrative themes within the asexual community, including: (a) defining asexual versus sexual; (b) narrating one’s identity as essentially asexual; and (c) describing one’s romantic orientation. After conducting a survey with 102 self-identified asexuals, she found each individual constructed deeply personal narratives and

interpretations of her asexual identity. For example, although thirty-nine participants endorsed the definition provided by AVEN (2008a), fifty participants provided alternative definitions that did not emphasize sexual attraction. My own research will apply several communication theories to explore the ways in which participation in the asexual community and the act of narrative performance serve to constitute asexuality.

The Emergence of an Asexual Community

Over the past decade, asexuality has become more than a sexual orientation; it has evolved into a social community. Many individuals learn about and develop their asexuality through online community sites, personal sites, and blogs that collectively create a communal space for asexuals to connect with other asexuals and narrate their asexual identity (see Table 1). These websites offer relief from heteronormative discourses and provide an environment where asexuals can celebrate their asexual identities. Among these websites, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) hosts the largest community of asexuals on the Internet and offers many resources for the modern asexual. Founded by David Jay in 2001, AVEN serves two goals: “[to create] public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and [to facilitate] the growth of an asexual community” (AVEN, 2008b). The AVEN website features editorials, newsletters, and general information about asexuality. However, the primary feature of the website is the online forums, wherein new members share stories about how they came to identify as asexual and long-term members offer encouragement and support. The forums are especially important to the asexual community because they

allow individuals to begin a process of constructing an asexual narrative of their own identity and negotiating its performance through online conversations with other members.

Table 1. Online websites that constitute the asexual community, March 2011

<i>Community Sites</i>	<i>Blogs</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Apositive ▪ Aromantic Asexuals ▪ Asexual Lesbians ▪ Asexual Visibility and Education Network ▪ Asexuality LiveJournal Community ▪ Haven for the Human Amoeba ▪ HotPiecesofAce YouTube Channel ▪ The A-sylum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A Life Podcast ▪ A Proud Geeky Asexual Mind ▪ Ace of Butterflies ▪ Ace of Hearts ▪ Another Asexual Radical ▪ Asexual Explorations ▪ Asexual Curiosities ▪ Asexual Love ▪ Asexy Beast ▪ Edge of Everywhere ▪ Glad to be A ▪ Love from the Asexual Underground ▪ Musings from Outside Normal Boundaries ▪ The Protean Avenger: Asexual Politics ▪ A Proud Geeky Asexual Mind ▪ Rainbow Amoeba's Petri Dish ▪ Shades of Gray ▪ The Asexualist ▪ The Venus of Willendork ▪ Writing from Factor X
<i>Dating Sites</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acebook ▪ Affectionate Friends ▪ Asexual Pals ▪ Asexualitic ▪ Platonic Partners 	

The discussions within the asexual community reveal asexuality to be a complex identity that encompasses a wide range of social performances. Self-identified asexuals might: (1) have sex with men and/or women, but think of themselves as asexual due to low arousal; (2) rarely, if ever, have sex, but become aroused on occasion by men and/or women; (3) rarely, if ever, have sex and rarely become aroused; (4) occasionally masturbate and still think of themselves as asexual; (5) mark themselves as asexual for reasons of identity politics; or (6) move between these states at different times in their

lives. However, these sexual performances do not determine whether an individual identifies as asexual; rather, asexual individuals must assess their low levels of sexual arousal and behavior within the context of our society's heteronormative expectations.

Since there is no singular way to embody asexuality, the act of narrative storytelling itself constitutes an important performance within the asexual community. Many asexuals ascribe meaning to their sexual history by telling other community members about how they dislike sex, have little to no interest in sex, or have sex to please their partner. Through the act of telling these stories, asexuals legitimize and validate their identities within and beyond the asexual community. Asexuals often invoke these narratives when coming out to family and friends. Within this research study, I examine some of the narrative performances that constitute the asexual identity and explore the social implications of these narrative performances.

Narrative performances influence the way we live, how we perceive the world, and how others perceive us. Walter Fisher (1989) states that narratives provide “a conceptual framework [...] for understanding human decision, discourse, and action” (p. 56). As such, many individuals use storytelling as a means of rationalizing past action and future behavior. Fisher (1984) also argues that “human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons, as being rational when they satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements” (p. 2). Many asexuals interact with one another on the AVEN forums and, thereby, constantly tell and retell stories about asexuality; these narrative acts often become the driving force behind

their own performances of asexuality. As I will discuss in later chapters, these stories demonstrate the incredible diversity within the asexual community and the multifaceted interpretations of what it means to be asexual in a heteronormative society.

There is growing concern within the asexual community that recent media publicity¹ is generating unrealistic expectations for asexuals. Ily (online pseudonym, 2009), a self-identified asexual, discussed narratives that potentially inhibit asexual identities. This list included several narrative performances that asexuals might evoke in heteronormative spaces to validate their asexual identity and align their identity with that of the “ideal” asexual. Through these idealized narratives, asexuals might do some combination of the following: say they engaged in sex, did not enjoy it, and therefore, have indisputable proof that they are asexual; say they have never experienced sexual feelings of any kind, even though they might have; or neglect to disclose sexual abuse because it might be perceived as “causing” their asexuality (see Table 2). Asexuals might evoke these ideal narratives in heteronormative spaces to posit themselves as healthy and normal and gain marginal acceptance for their asexual orientation. Unfortunately, these ideal narratives often interfere with the process of identity construction, making problematic any traits or characteristics that might be perceived as liabilities with regard to their asexual identity, including, but not limited to, asexuals who concurrently identify as autistic, sexually-abused, virgin, or transgender. Ily (2009) suggested, “Asexuals appearing in the media no doubt conceal aspects of their asexuality

¹ Within the past seven years, several television shows and news articles have explored the topic of asexuality (Bella DePaulo, 2009; Demian Bulwa, 2009; Kathy Gulinello, 2007; William Geist, 2006; David Sloan, 2006; Barbara Walters & Bill Geddie, 2006; Sylvia Pagan Westphal, 2004).

that might be seen as contradictory or confusing” in the context of dominant narrative performances of asexuality (para. 2). However, within the specific performative space of the asexual community, members are encouraged to create new labels and foster hybrid identities that resonate with their individual embodiment of asexuality.

Table 2 “Ideal” asexual narratives evoked in heteronormative spaces to legitimize asexuality

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Does not have any kind of disability or mental illness2. Is physically attractive and has good social skills3. Has dramatic stories to tell regarding their asexuality4. Is not genderqueer or transgender5. Is old enough to not be a late bloomer6. Is part of a racially diverse group7. Is happy and “well-adjusted” (whatever that means this week), fitting seamlessly into mainstream society8. Tried sexual activity in order to decide he/she didn’t like it9. Has an interest in dating or romantic relationships10. Would not want to magically become sexual if given the chance11. Has never experienced sexual feelings of any kind12. Is not in any state of confusion about their asexuality13. Is out to the people in their lives14. Has not been abused, sexually or otherwise15. Welcomes non-sexual intimacy16. Does not have anything negative to say about sex

Members of the asexual community continually create terminology that validates a wide range of asexual narrative performances, while still allowing them to identify as a cohesive collective (see Table 3). These terms often correlate with specific narratives in the asexual community and, by assuming different labels, asexuals might feel empowered to change their narratives without consequence. For example, asexuals who identify as “aromantic” often say that they do not experience sexual or romantic attraction.

Aromantic asexuals are also less likely to date or form partnered relationships. Yet, if an aromantic asexual decides that she wants to start dating a member of the opposite sex, she

might transition to a “hetero-romantic” asexual identity. Community terms also allow for hybrid identities in which one might straddle the line between sexuality and asexuality. For example, “asexual lesbians” are individuals who identify as female, seek partnered relationships with women, and do not want to engage in sex. They simultaneously claim a sexual identity (lesbian) while rejecting the sexual performances of such identities (asexual). Yet, these categories are not rigid or exclusive. On the Asexual Lesbian website,² transgendered men have identified as asexual lesbian and received a warm welcome from the other asexual lesbians. These examples reveal that the labeling of one’s asexual identity is deeply connected to the narratives he shares about his asexuality.

Although community terms allow for more diversity within the asexual community and empower individuals to dictate their own embodiment of asexuality, they also reveal a desire to appropriate heteronormative language within the asexual community. This strategy resembles what Julia Kristeva calls “poetic language,” wherein women appropriate paternal language within the maternal body. Kristeva (1980) describes poetic language as the “reinstatement of maternal territory into the very economy of [paternal] language” (p. 137). Similarly, asexuals might consume heteronormative language and reconstitute it within the asexual body. For example, asexuals use the term “asexy” in reference to someone or something that is made more attractive by her/his/its lack of sexuality. While this performative act draws upon the rhetoric of heteronormativity, it is also potentially problematic. Judith Butler (1990) warns that poetic language might *recreate* paternal structures that inherently subvert the

² http://z4.invisionfree.com/Asexual_Lesbians/index.php

maternal body. Likewise, asexuals might recreate and reinforce heteronormative structures when they reappropriate heteronormative language to the asexual body. Butler (1990) argues that the best way to subvert oppressive (heteronormative) structures is to realize that seemingly stable (sexual) identities are performative; in other words, they are reenacted and reexperienced until they achieve social legitimacy (p. 191). Thus, by altering their narrative performances, asexuals can create new identities that defy and resist heteronormative expectations.

Table 3. Communal language used to describe an individual's asexual identity³

<p>Ace: A person who is asexual.</p> <p>Agender: A person who lacks a gender identity.</p> <p>Anti-sexual: The belief that sex is unpleasant or undesirable and should be avoided.</p> <p>Aromantic: A person who does not experience romantic attraction.</p> <p>Asexual Lesbians: Another term for a homo-romantic asexual.</p> <p>Asexy: Someone or something that is made more attractive by her/his/its lack of sexuality.</p> <p>Autosexual: A person that derives adequate sexual satisfaction from masturbation; capable of taking care of bodily arousal without needing to seek partnered sex.</p> <p>Bi-romantic: A person who is romantically attracted to members of both sexes.</p> <p>Cisgender: A person who has a gender that is the same as the one assigned at birth, usually based on their physical sex.</p> <p>Demisexual: A person who experiences sexual attraction only to one person with whom he/she is in an intense romantic relationship.</p> <p>Genderqueer: A person who does not fit within the male or female gender binary.</p> <p>Gay-A: Another term for a homo-romantic asexual.</p> <p>Gray-A: A person in the gray area between sexuality and asexuality.</p> <p>Hetero-romantic: A person who is romantically attracted to the opposite sex.</p> <p>Homo-romantic: A person who is romantically attracted to the same sex.</p> <p>Presexual: A person lacking relevant social and psychological opportunities to experience or initiate sexual attraction to others.⁴</p> <p>Sex Positive: An ideology in which all forms and expressions of sexuality are viewed as positive forces as long as they remain consensual.</p> <p>Straight A: Another term for a hetero-romantic asexual.</p> <p>Transgender: A person whose gender does not match the one assigned at birth.</p>

³ Many of these definitions came from AVENwiki, a collaborative website that allows community members to define asexual concepts and language; <http://www.asexuality.org/wiki/index.php?title=Special:AllPages>

⁴ Bogaert (2004) created the term “presexual” to distinguish between adolescent and adult asexuals. His definition presumes that an adolescent will transition to a new sexual identity when he/she has engaged in mature sexual interactions.

As the asexual community continues to define itself in contrast to heteronormativity, it is imperative that they utilize narrative performances to celebrate a myriad of asexual identities. Instead of adhering to narratives of sexual normativity that enforce reproduction and childrearing, asexuals have the opportunity to create new models and paradigms for their future. Through this research study, I examine the ways in which three self-identified asexuals utilize narrative performances to disassociate themselves from heteronormativity and construct specific ways of *being* asexual. This research study also explores a more complicated definition of sexuality that emerges from a wide range of social performances beyond the notion of sexual copulation.

The following chapters will provide you with a foundation for understanding asexuality through social constructivist theories. Chapter Two explores the power-relations inherent in the deployment of heteronormative discourses and highlights relevant performance studies theories. Chapter Three discusses my research methods and describes the ideologies that influenced my interpretations of each oral history narrative. Chapter Four explores the narrative themes that emerged from the oral histories of three asexual women and categorizes them to address each of my three research questions. Chapter Five explores the implications of these asexual narratives on performance studies and reflects upon the future of the asexual community.

Chapter Two: Social Discourses and Power Structures

Introduction

When my romantic relationship ended in August 2008, I spoke with a therapist about feelings of depression. My concern must have seemed trivial because she assured me that I would find someone better than my ex-boyfriend, someone who would more fully appreciate me. As I left her office, I felt confused and uneasy. Should I search for a new romantic partner? Would my pursuit for romance provide my life with satisfaction? Would I find a sexual relationship more satisfying than an intimate friendship? These concerns derived from a notion that I should be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is “normal.” I could feel a lifetime’s weight of sexual expectations holding me down and defining my sexuality in ways I did not necessarily welcome.

Yet, I now take comfort in knowing that, to a certain extent, I can construct my own identity and determine my own future by embracing social constructionist paradigms. I can decide whether or not and to what extent I will participate in heteronormative rituals, and whether or not and to what extent I will pursue a heteronormative future. As I continue to participate in the asexual community, I draw upon its performative space to create new models and narratives that celebrate, rather than denigrate, my single, feminist, queer,⁵ and asexual identities.

⁵ In defining the word “queer,” E Patrick Johnson (2008a) states, “To embrace ‘queer’ is to resist or elide categorization, to disavow binaries (that is, gay versus straight, black versus white) and to proffer potentially productive modes of resistance against hegemonic structures of power” (p. 166).

Social Construction of Sexual Identities

The field of communication studies offers a variety of theories that illuminate the ways in which sexual identities are socially constructed and performative. Karen Lovaas and Mercilee Jenkins (2007) explain the importance of social constructionist paradigms for understanding sexual identities:

Viewing sexualities as social constructions allows us to recognize our participation in producing, reproducing, and challenging them. We are not passive recipients of past manners of 'doing' sexuality, we are active—although often unconscious—agents in constructing sexuality through our practices. (p. 6)

The media, the family, and religion play an important role in mediating sexual behavior and producing sexual scripts that inform our performances of flirtation, seduction, and pleasure. Each individual becomes a consumer and producer of sexual scripts that reflect our society's changing views of sexuality and pleasure. Within the asexual community, asexuals produce (a)sexual scripts that normalize the absence of sexual behaviors.

Beth Schneider & Meredith Gould (1987) assert that sexual scripts regulate sexual behaviors by appropriating sexual acts. These scripts dictate with whom, where, why, and how individuals have sex. These sexual scripts, for example, might lead a woman to believe that she should only have sex after she becomes married and, furthermore, that she should only engage in sex with a single romantic partner. Yet, these scripts could also encourage a woman to engage in sex with multiple partners and remain single throughout her early adulthood. Individuals might draw upon these sexual scripts to inform their own sexual behavior or deviate from these sexual scripts to explore new performances of sexuality.

Since these sexual scripts represent normative performances of sexuality, community members may respond in anger, frustration, or disapproval when individuals violate parts of them. The power of these sexual scripts is evident when we analyze hate crimes against homosexuals. According to Victor Turner's (1982) theory of social drama, which I describe in more detail later, when an individual violates heteronormative practices, agents of heteronormativity perceive that person as a threat to normative values and laws. In response to the emerging crisis, agents imbued with power attempt to limit the contagious spread of breach and return the violator to the heteronormative status quo. As a result, instead of having to navigate the often-difficult consequences of a social breach, many queer individuals may choose to downplay their queer identity and perform scripts that reinforce heteronormative values.

Some individuals censor their narrative performances of sexuality to "pass" as heterosexual in potentially hostile environments. Helen Newman (1983) explains that passing is not a malicious behavior, but rather a strategy for building positive interpersonal relationships in environments that assume heteronormativity. Although self-disclosure allows individuals to create strong relational bonds, it can become oppressive and isolating for queer individuals (p. 35). Newman claims that homosexual individuals utilize four strategies to ensure their acceptance within heteronormative spaces. They might: (a) censor personal information; (b) minimize homosexual information; (c) emphasize heterosexual information; or (d) falsify revealing information (p. 36). Asexuals also utilize these strategies to perform a heterosexual identity that allows them to create and maintain positive relationships among their friends and family.

These narrative performances reveal the complicated nature of sexuality as individuals disclose or obscure personal information to gain access to heteronormative spaces.

Furthermore, a heteronormative society inherently marginalizes queer individuals seeking to express their sexuality. Simmons (2008) utilizes a performative framework to understand the challenges and tensions of performing an ambiguous sexual identity within heteronormative spaces. Utilizing autoethnography, he retells stories of when he negotiated his own performance of sexual desire with friends, family, and strangers. Furthermore, his narratives reveal the power of heteronormativity to critique outlying performances of sexuality. As Simmons (2008) explains, “The negotiation that emerges in this [heteronormative] deployment challenges bodies that do not perform sexual identity within acceptable parameters by calling upon us to justify our bodily indications of desire” (p. 333). Since his body signifies an ambiguous sexual identity, he often feels marginalized through his lack of sexual signifiers. Simmons’s article signals the tensions of performing a desire [maternal, heterosexual, and critical] that differs from certain performative signifiers [ambiguous, indeterminate, and different] (p. 334).

Although several communication scholars have studied narrative performances as a site of queer identity construction (Ragan Fox, 2011, 2010a, 2010b; Jimmie Manning, 2009; E. Patrick Johnson, 2008b; Jake Simmons, 2008; Naida Zukic, 2008; Audre Lorde, 2007; Robert Westerfelhaus, 2007; David Valentine, 2003; Frederick C. Corey & Thomas K. Nakayama, 1997; Frederick C. Corey, 1996), they have not yet explored narrative performances of asexuality. In particular, asexual narrative performances might reveal new ways of constructing a queer identity without drawing upon erotic narratives

and discourses. For example, many asexuals talk about rejecting completely the notion of romantic relationships and the sexual expectations inherent within such relationships. These narratives constitute an emerging queer identity that challenges dominant assumptions about sexual attraction and desire.

Since asexual narratives constitute a relatively new social identity, many asexuals understand their sexuality as a site of contestation and flux. As Jeffrey Weeks (2007) explains, “we are often forced to question [social identities], or have them questioned for us, remake and reinvent them, search for new and more satisfying personal ‘homes,’ all the time” (p. 43). Asexuals often experiment with heterosexual and homosexual identities before identifying as asexual because they do not have access to or previous knowledge of the asexual community. Consequently, asexual identities evoke complex and deeply personal narratives and reflect the interrelationship between their self-perception, the perceptions of others, and their own performance of identity. For example, when individuals disclose their sexual identity, their narrative performances might reveal: (a) the name they give their sexuality; (b) with whom they want a relationship; (c) who perceives them as sexually attractive; (d) how they flirt and react to sexual advances; and (e) their comfort with public displays of affection. These characteristics are not necessarily stable and unchanging, as heteronormative discourses lead us to believe; rather, individuals perform and re-perform their sexual identities on a daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute basis. Even though I currently identify as a demisexual, this does not mean that my sexual identity and narrative could not change

during a moment of instantaneous attraction, slowly throughout my life, or that I could not occupy two or more sexual identities at one time.

Yet, as with many other sexual orientations, and despite the inherent flux of their sexual identity, asexuals often present their identity as something stable and eternally fixed. As such, many asexuals draw upon the rhetoric of “strategic essentialism” within their narrative performances to explore the “fluidity of identity practices while acknowledging the essentializing or fixed nature of identity categories to facilitate a course of action” (Cynthia Joseph, 2009, p. 12). Asexuals evoke strategic essentialism in their narrative performances by saying they have always been asexual and that asexuality describes their essential (biological) identity better than heterosexuality or homosexuality. By establishing an essentialist identity, asexuals seek to legitimize their asexual orientation, promote political activism, and align their identity with homosexual communities insofar as they co-experience similar forms of assault from heteronormative discourses.

The Power of Sexual Discourses

Michel Foucault (1990), in his writing on the rhetoric surrounding sexuality, argues that networks of power both produce and deploy sexuality. Sexuality appears, in Foucault’s words, “as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power; between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population” (p. 103). Within these power networks, authority figures (priests, doctors, and parents) produce and disseminate

messages that encourage procreative sex; subsequently, many individuals consume these messages without questioning the purpose or intent of their underlying assumptions. Many authority figures, thus, discipline bodies through discourse to accommodate heteronormative ideologies.

Doctors and medical practitioners, in particular, have the power to create “true” discourses concerning sexuality. Through medical performances, such as physical and psychiatric evaluations, doctors ascertain normative sexualities. Foucault (1990) argues that the medical community, and by extension, the family “questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light” sexual practices that do not reinforce procreative ideologies (p. 45). Doctors and parents become the primary enforcers of heteronormativity. Within this power network, sexuality becomes “a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for therapeutic or normalizing interventions” (Foucault, 1990, p. 68). If we wish to push against these heteronormative discourses, we must become aware of the ways in which agents of deployment seek to monitor our personal lives and control our performances of sexuality.

Although every family might not rigorously endorse heteronormativity, most parents do use the institution of the family to deploy heteronormative ideals. Foucault (1990) explains:

The family, in its contemporary form, must not be understood as a social, economic, and political structure of alliance that excludes or at least restrains sexuality, that diminishes it as much as possible, preserving only its useful functions. On the contrary, its role is to anchor sexuality and provide it with permanent support. (p. 108)

Although this implies that parents *could* anchor and support a multitude of sexualities within the family, oftentimes parents draw upon the narratives of the medical establishment to deploy messages that encourage their children to assume heterosexual identities instead of considering queer ones. Within my own life, I have witnessed instances of deployment in which my mom sought to align my narrative performances with heteronormativity. Whenever she looks upon a newborn baby—whether it belongs to a relative or a family friend—she asks me with probing intensity, “When will I get *my* grandchild?” It is not so much a question as it is a command. She is revealing an expectation for my future—one that involves babies (and marriage.) The fact that I am currently single only brings a sense of urgency to her request. Yet, my story is not an isolated one. Rather, agents of heteronormativity often criticize and reject queer narratives and reproduce heteronormative narratives that emphasize reproduction and childrearing as benchmarks of success.

In contrast, the institution of the *traditional family* does encourage young adults to form heterosexual relationships and participate in the heteronormative institutions of marriage and childrearing. As John Elia (2003) explains, “The institution of traditional family has set the direction and tone for sexual life. The term family has been synonymous not just with heterosexuality broadly defined, but with a very specific brand of heterosexuality, which ideally involves marriage, baby making, monogamy, ownership of property, espousing middle class and white values, etc.” (p. 65). The notion of the traditional family often enforces rigid espousal of heteronormative values. This creates a

potentially hostile environment for queer individuals that want to explore the performative potential of a queer future.

The heteronormative discourse of the traditional family perpetuates the belief that bearing and raising children will provide individuals with a sense of fulfillment. Lee Edelman (2004) explains that the symbolic image of the child provides heterosexual individuals with “unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness” through the upholding of heteronormative values (p. 10). He suggests that this sense of “wholeness” is not an achievable affective state, but rather a form of rhetoric that upholds heteronormative ideals. Consequently, he argues that queer individuals should embrace their “drive to create a future without children” (p. 9). Through this effort, queer individuals can challenge and oppose the symbolic, heteronormative image of the child. His theory speaks to the desire of queer individuals to create new social identities that do not posit *the child* as an indicator of success. Likewise, it is important for asexuals to resist these heteronormative messages and create new narratives that support and encourage asexual identities.

Although queer theory often situates heteronormative resistance within queer communities, Foucault (1990) claims that only through a plurality of resistances can queer individuals and communities disempower heteronormative discourses:

Points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (p. 95-96)

Asexuals also have a role to play within this resistance, both on an individual and collective level. As Foucault points out, there are many different ways to intervene against heteronormative discourses and one of the most empowering methods is through narrative and storytelling. By narrating their difference from and disassociation with sexual normativity, asexuals can defy heteronormative expectations and create new paradigms for the future.

Resisting Heteronormativity through Narrative Performance

Butler (1990) provides a theoretical framework for understanding asexual identities by discussing the social construction of gendered identities. She deviates from essentialist theories by positing gender as a series of recurring performances that create the appearance of a stable identity. As Butler (1990) explains: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 45). This theory presumes that gendered (and sexual) identities are performative and fluid; thus, we might create new identities by altering or disrupting our daily performances.

Eve Sedgwick (2003), on the other hand, expresses her concern that performativity proscribes simplicity rather than diversity within queer communities. She argues that in *Gender Trouble*, Butler oversimplifies Esther Newton’s (1979) research study on drag performance: “The ecological attention to space collapses in favor of a temporal emphasis on gender as ‘stylized repetition’ and ‘social temporality’ [...] With the loss of its spatiality, however, the internally complex field of drag performance

suffers a seemingly unavoidable simplification and reification” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 9). She argues that repetitive performances limit complex sexual identities to encapsulate a few routine performances without considering the spatial (or emerging) context of the queer community. In particular, Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity threatens the asexual community by *expecting* repetitive performances within a ludic and fluctuating environment. Although asexuals might establish some recurring and repetitive performances (e.g., coming out to their parents or attending local meetings) these performances presume a high level of coordination and consensus within the asexual community.

In response to both Butler and Sedgwick, José Esteban Muñoz (2006, 2009) defines queer performativity as a method of uniting and transforming queer communities through a constantly emerging future. He explains that the present is “impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 27). In contrast, the future is full of possibilities and we can actively shape it to incorporate and embrace queer performances. Towards this end, Muñoz encourages queer individuals to reflect on the past and present to create a future that draws on hope: “The present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 27). Through such a perspective, queer individuals can understand moments of suffering and joy and imagine a “utopian” future. Although utopia may be impossible to achieve, the imagined idea of it becomes a vehicle to affect positive change in our lives: “Utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize

us, push us forward. Utopia is not prescriptive, it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema” (Muñoz, 2006, p. 9). By embracing the performative potential of the future, we can reclaim queer identities through celebratory performances. Muñoz’s notion of utopia is especially important for the emerging asexual community because it seeks to create new performances that resist heteronormative discourses.

Although there are many ways to embody and explore queer performativity, due to the prominence of heteronormative discourses I have chosen to focus on narrative performances enacted through language. As Elizabeth Bell (2008) states, “Performativity maintains that identity, especially for gender, desire, race, ethnicity, and abilities, is a complex matrix of normative boundaries [...] *created in language*” (p. 177; emphasis mine). In subsequent chapters in this thesis, I will explore the performativity of language—specifically, everyday acts of narrative storytelling—as it functions to 1) make visible the normative boundaries that define sexual identity; 2) disassociate the storyteller from these normative structures of sexual identity; and 3) create a space for the storyteller within the asexual community.

This research study embraces the critical implications of performativity—specifically, the ways in which performativity might facilitate a critique of existing social structures and, at the same time, imagine ameliorative, future ones. As Jill Dolan (2001) states, performativity allows for “nonessentialized constructions of marginalized identities, [such as] white women and women of color, gays and lesbians, men of color, and various conflicting combinations and intersections of these categories and

positionalities” (p. 65). Performativity, thus, can empower marginalized individuals to explore more personal, nuanced, intersecting, and even contradicting subjectivities.

Many asexuals already utilize performativity to construct nonessentialized narratives that bring together seemingly contradictory subjectivities.

The asexual community currently resides in a performative space marked by Turner’s notion of “liminality” (1982), which he defines as “a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural ‘cosmos’” (p. 41). This “interface” allows an individual to play with social norms and create, among other things, narrative performances of identity. For example, many asexuals construct narratives that emphasize their lack of interest in dating, marriage, and sex, which results in a strategic rejection of certain benchmarks that pervade heteronormative society. This liminal space oftentimes imbues storytellers/participants with a sense of play and serves to constitute a performative environment “in which new models, symbols, paradigms, etc., arise—as the seedbeds of cultural creativity” (Turner, 1982, p. 28). As such, many asexuals actively explore narrative performances that move beyond heteronormative expectations. Although they might share common narratives with other asexuals (some of which might speak to the challenges of negotiating sex in romantic relationships or coming out to family and friends), they also create narratives that reflect their unique embodiment of asexuality (including how they came to identify as asexual and how asexuality has influenced their perspectives on the future).

While many self-identified asexuals participate in the temporal interface of liminality, they do not do so equally. Some embrace the performative space of the “liminoid” to play with their narratives of identity, whereas others associate asexuality with what Turner calls “obligatory work.” Turner (1982) defines liminoid performances as “characteristically individual products though they often have collective or ‘mass’ effects. They are not cyclical, but continuously generated, though in time and places apart from work settings assigned to ‘leisure’ activities” (p. 54). The liminoid becomes something of a celebration of identity, whereby individuals can generate new ways of *being* asexual. Within the liminoid, asexuals can redefine intimacy, love, and friendship within performative frameworks of possibility.

The liminoid gives liminal participants a sense of empowerment as they embrace playful exploration. Turner (1982) explains, “Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory” (p. 43). If asexuals want to move beyond the liminal and experience the liminoid, they must foster the desire to question and challenge the performative boundaries of asexuality. I myself have utilized liminoid narrative performances to reappropriate and redefine heteronormative spaces within an asexual context. I once decided to visit a local strip club and the female dancers perceived my asexuality as an ambiguously queer identity. On several occasions, they asked if I wanted a one-on-one lap dance. I politely declined. “I’m asexual,” I said, “I’m just here to watch the dancing.” By making these statements, I sought to confuse the dancers who expected me to perform either a heterosexual or a

lesbian identity. I embraced the liminoid to experiment with my performance of asexuality within a strip club environment. Similarly, asexuals can use liminoid performances to intervene and interrupt everyday performances of heteronormativity.

Oftentimes, liminal participants will create protective social structures that encourage liminoid performances. The resulting social group illustrates Turner's notion of "communitas." As he defines it, communitas "exists more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more 'liberated' way of being socially human" (Turner, 1982, p. 50-51). Communitas unites asexuals through their shared liminal status and provides spaces for them to generate liminoid performances of identity. Turner identified three types of communitas: spontaneous, ideological, and normative. Each of these serves to validate asexual narratives and provide a rich environment for experimentation. Spontaneous communitas is "a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction" (p. 47). Ideological communitas is "a set of theoretical concepts which attempt to describe the interactions of spontaneous communitas" (p. 48). And normative communitas is "a subculture or group which attempts to foster and maintain relationships or spontaneous communitas on a more or less permanent basis" (p. 49). Each type of communitas corresponds to somewhat different relationships between groups of individuals and the liminal space they may inhabit.

One of the most affective performances within the asexual community involves spontaneous communitas. Turner (1982) explains that spontaneous communitas is experienced as "a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities [...] there is in it a feeling of endless power" (p. 47-48). When asexual individuals first discover the

AVEN website, many feel elated at finding a community of liminal individuals and “become totally absorbed into a single synchronized fluid event,” wherein they experience a “total confrontation of identity” (p. 48). The individual realizes the potential of identifying as asexual in the moment of confronting other narratives, stories, and people that likewise identify as asexual. These individuals begin to “relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic (not empathetic)” way (p. 48). The asexual, experiencing spontaneous *communitas*, realizes that he shares with others similar feelings and experiences concerning sex and feels an instantaneous connection with the notion of a broad asexual community.

Some individuals attempt to perpetuate through language the experience of spontaneous *communitas* by creating “ideological *communitas*.” Individuals might write an article for *AVENues*,⁶ write their first post on the AVEN forums, or prepare their coming out narrative to share with their family and friends. Within ideological *communitas*, as Turner points out, “the retrospective look, ‘memory,’ has already distanced the individual subject from the communal or dyadic experience. Here the experience has already come to look to language and culture to mediate the former immediacies” (p. 48). One of the purposes of ideological *communitas* is to identify and preserve ongoing meaning from an experience of spontaneous *communitas*. Asexuals experiencing ideological *communitas* might explore new social interactions and integrate

⁶ *AVENues* is a bimonthly publication with stories, articles, and other writings from members of the asexual community; <http://www.asexuality.org/home/avenues.html>

themselves into the asexual community to sustain the feeling of sudden empowerment and belonging that they experienced in spontaneous *communitas*.

Normative *communitas*, though different from ideological and spontaneous *communitas*, provides an important function for the asexual community. Through the website and local meetings, asexuals strive to create normative *communitas*, as they, in the words of Turner, “foster and maintain relationships or spontaneous *communitas* on a more or less permanent basis” (p. 49). Normative *communitas* generates norms that serve to mark the asexual community to itself, and guide new initiates to it. Normative *communitas* often forms when individuals feel “utterly vulnerable to the institutionalized groups surrounding them” (p. 49). By fostering a collective identity, these individuals can create “institutional armor” to protect them from the criticism of heteronormative discourses. This level of support and protection is important when asexuals share their sexual identity with their parents. Since asexuality is widely misunderstood in our society, some parents experience confusion about the term “asexual” and others voice skepticism about whether asexuality is a legitimate identity. As such, coming out as asexual often initiates a process of conflict and negotiation, one that progresses through the four stages of Turner’s “social drama.”

Turner (1982) defines social drama as “those sequences of supposedly ‘spontaneous’ events which [make] fully evident the tensions existing [within a social group]” (p. 9). The proclamation of an asexual identity, for example, often creates a crisis within heteronormative family environments. Many parents, as agents of heteronormativity, perceive asexuality as a threat to procreative ideals and might

therefore blame the asexual child for disrupting heteronormative expectations. Turner's notion of social drama and its subsequent resolution has four stages: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration/schism. In the context of asexual coming out narratives, the first stage of social drama--the "breach"--often occurs when asexuals tell their parents about their asexual identity. Turner (1982) explains that the breach represents "the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette in some public arena" (p. 70). Without this proclamation, the status quo would be maintained and the asexual child would preserve a heteronormative identity within the family. Asexuals might initiate the breach by verbally rejecting a heteronormative identity and claiming an asexual one, a performative declaration that disturbs heteronormative expectations within the family. Once parents understand that the asexual identity stands in opposition to heteronormative discourses, they may interpret the declaration as indicative of a problem requiring intervention.

"Crisis" emerges when parents perceive the breach as having undesirable consequences; they might react with frustration, anxiety, anger, or resentment. The crisis often causes what Turner describes as "a momentous juncture or turning point in the relationships between components of a social field—at which seeming peace becomes overt conflict and covert antagonisms become visible" (p. 70). Within the crisis stage, parents attempt to realign their child with heteronormative ideologies and diminish the effects of the breach. Parents might reject or deny the existence of their child's asexual identity. If these strategies seem ineffective, a state of status quo normalcy might return to the family relationship.

Parents will proceed to employ what Turner calls “redressive” mechanisms when they know that their child will not simply dismiss their asexual identity. Parents might, on the one hand, proclaim their acceptance of asexuality, or on the other, engage their child in discussions intended to win him back to heteronormative expectations. In the redressive stage, parents strive to “limit the contagious spread of breach” (p. 70). Parents will negotiate the performance of asexuality with the child in order to resolve the familial crisis. If the family members can reach a consensus on the newly established expectations of the child, the parents will begin to reintegrate the child into the family structure. If the family cannot resolve the initial breach, the child will often continue to cycle through the crisis and redressive stages.

The “reintegration” stage involves creating a new normative structure for the family unit. Parents and child assume new roles and relationships that reflect the new status of the asexual child within the family. Although the new structure might retain some flexibility for the emerging performance of asexuality, dramatic changes in the child’s performance could cause another crisis within the family. As such, the asexual individual often experiences rigid structures that seek to control or dictate her performance of asexuality.

If the child cannot resolve the crisis within the family and decides to forgo redressive strategies, she might acknowledge her “irreparable breach” of heteronormativity. Turner (1982) describes this as an acknowledgement of the unyielding positions of both the parent and child that could result in “spatial separation” (p. 71). Whereas reintegration presumes that one party must concede during the

redressive stage, an irreparable breach acknowledges the ongoing disagreement between the parent and child about her narrative of sexuality.

Turner's theories of liminality, *communitas*, and social drama provide a foundation for understanding how asexuals might resist the deployment of heteronormativity in their daily lives. By embracing liminoid narrative performances and forming *communitas*, liminal participants can actively construct an "antistructure" that stands as an alternative model to heteronormativity. Turner explains that antistructures can "generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living, from utopias to programs, which are capable of influencing the behavior of those in mainstream social and political roles" (Turner, 1982, p. 33). Antistructures allow marginalized groups to explore and create "new culture" by contrasting their performances against normative structures and expectations (Turner, 1982, p. 28). As liminal participants normalize their narrative performances within *communitas* and negotiate their narrative performances through social drama, it is possible for them to integrate their "new culture" within normative structures. When we further align Turner's (1982) theories of liminality with Muñoz's (2009) utopian performances, there is considerable potential for asexuals to experiment with queer performativity. Muñoz (2009) insists that "queerness is still forming," and consequently, there is room for asexuals to alter or expand upon their narrative performances within the asexual community (p. 29).

Narrative performances serve a variety of functions within the asexual community. Not only do they unite individuals through thematic and common narratives, but they also give meaning to each individual's asexual identity. Storytelling, thus, is an

important ritual within the asexual community that many individuals use to rationalize past actions within the context of their asexual identity and push against heteronormative discourses that seek to dictate their future. As part of this research project, I spent a year and a half participating in a large U.S. metropolitan asexual community. Then, from March to April 2010, I conducted oral history interviews with three members of AVEN to understand how each woman narrated her schism from heteronormativity and constructed an asexual identity through the retelling of stories involving her friends, partners, and parents. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology I used in conducting these interviews.

Chapter Three: Critical Ethnographic Oral Histories

Introduction

I began attending asexual gatherings (referred to as “meetups”) in November 2008. Although most of the asexual community interacts online through a network of websites, many asexuals believe it is important to meet face-to-face with other asexuals. During these gatherings, asexuals living in major cities across the United States meet in a public venue, such as a coffee shop, restaurant, or park to spend time together and discuss a wide range of topics (few of which directly relate to asexuality). The main purpose of these gatherings is to foster a sense of community with other local asexuals. These gatherings are held in major cities across the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia.

After attending several gatherings in my local community, I was inspired to conduct an ethnographic research study that employed oral history methodologies. Charlotte Aull Davies (2008) defines ethnography as “a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time” (p. 5). I waited approximately six months before I started recruiting asexuals for my oral history project, during which time I consistently attended meetups. I wanted to understand better my local asexual community before I started delving into the narratives of other community members.

Oral history research studies by E. Patrick Johnson, Della Pollock, and Rivka Syd Eisner reveal that there are many ways to recruit and select oral history interviewees.

Eisner (2005) spent months interviewing a Vietnamese national, named Chì Tôi (not her real name), whom she met during dinner with her friends in North Carolina. After spending an evening talking about Chì Tôi's family and upbringing within the context of the U.S./Vietnam War, Eisner asked if she could continue their conversation for a class project. She began to explore Chì Tôi's fragmented identity wherein she was not only the daughter of Viet Cong parents, but also a young woman living with her grandparents in South Vietnam during the "American War." Eventually, the project evolved into a master's thesis and a series of public performances, in which Eisner performs Chì Tôi's story in dialogic tension with her own voice as a scholar and artist.

In contrast, Johnson (2008b) interviewed seventy-two gay men from the American south to construct a wide-ranging set of narratives about the experiences of black gay men within the context of Southern hospitality, silence, and cultural traditions. He began his research by interviewing friends in North Carolina and then relied upon word-of-mouth to find additional research participants in each of the other southern states he visited. He decided that he would be no more than one person removed from each interviewee to build trusting relationships. Johnson (2008b) explains, "The word-of-mouth method was effective because it kept at bay fears I may have had about approaching strangers, while it also eased the anxieties of the narrators because at least we had someone in common whom they trusted, and therefore they trusted me" (p. 11). These recruitment strategies allowed him to foster trusting relationships and delve into deeply personal narratives of queer performativity.

Pollock (1999) interviewed thirty-nine women and men who had either given birth or participated in the birth of a child during the past five years. She selected as participants natural parents with whom she could explore the power of birthing narratives to (re)produce the maternal body. Each interview resulted in the telling of stories that spoke to their reenactment or defiance of gender norms and medical procedures. Pollock (1999) employs a different writing style than Johnson (2008b) and Eisner (2005), who narrate their voices using monologue and dialogue formats. In addition to quoting from the interview transcripts, Pollock draws upon reflexive writing to juxtapose her own perceptions and interpretations with the voices of the people she interviewed. She speaks to the silences and makes apparent the dominant discourses that give meaning to each narrative.

For my own oral history research study, I decided to interview asexuals whom I had interacted with online. I sought individuals who met the following criteria: (1) self-identified as asexual; and (2) were involved in their local asexual community. The first trait was important to guarantee that my interviewees experienced the narrative and performative shift from a sexual identity to an asexual one. The second trait demonstrated their investment in the normative *communitas* of the asexual community. I contacted each participant through online private messaging and I conducted the interviews using a VoIP (voice over internet protocol) software application. Given my recruitment method, I based this study on the experiences of three asexual women. To ensure confidentiality in this document, I have provided every individual mentioned

herein with a generic pseudonym and, in some instances, I altered their narratives to obscure personally identifiable information.

Previous oral history research reveals varied interview methods. Johnson (2008b) met with each of his participants once and let them talk for as long as they wanted. His interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to over three and a half hours. He encouraged each man to lead the conversation and “talk about anything they wanted” (p. 13). Pollock (1999) used a similar approach, interviewing each participant once and letting them talk for as long as they wanted. Some individuals shared a brief story, while others told multiple stories or co-performed their story with the participation of a romantic partner. Eisner (2005), alternatively, met with Chì Tôi twenty-five times during a six-month period and recorded approximately fifteen hours of interviews. In designing my own oral history interviews, I wanted to allow time for reflection and deep probing into complex topics. I scheduled four interviews with each participant; each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Conducting the Interviews

Oral history is especially useful for exploring narratives of queer performativity because it allows individuals to construct meaning from past events. According to Pollock (2005), oral history is an empowering research method, whereby each individual reflects on the past and imagines a future of possibilities:

The interview involves its participants in a heightened encounter with each other and with the past, even as each participant and the past seem to be called toward a future that suddenly seems open before them, future to be made in talk, in the mutual embedding of one’s vision of the world in the other’s. The interviewer is

her/himself a symbolic presence, standing in for other, unseen audiences and invoking social compact; a tacit agreement that what is heard will be integrated into public memory and social knowledge in such a way that, directly or indirectly, it will make a material difference. (p. 3)

Within my dual role as a queer scholar and a member of the asexual community, I wanted to validate my fellow community members' asexual narratives and share their stories with those who might be unfamiliar with asexuality. On the AVEN website, asexuals find commonality through the sharing of stories that emphasize certain behaviors (e.g., not having sex or coming out to their parents) or emotions (e.g., disliking sex or having little to no interest in sex). In fact, storytelling itself is a fundamental strategy through which asexuals construct their identity, their community, and their social performance of asexuality.

The knowledge that is made through the act of storytelling is not static and unchanging; rather it constantly emerges and re-emerges as stories are told and re-told. As Eisner (2005) conducted oral history interviews with Chì Tôi, she realized that each narrative event produced a fragment of a living story that changed with each retelling. According to Eisner (2005):

The storytelling event proved just as vital and inseparably linked to the meaning of her stories as their content. I heard clips of incomplete stories that stopped too soon, leaving me curious and wondering. I listened as she repeated the same narratives in different contexts, noting how the purpose and focus of each changed—sometimes discretely, at other times drastically. Stories are both original and a copy. They are new and familiar. Their beauty exists in the extent to which each storytelling event yields not a perfect replication of a previous telling but layers of sedimented interpretations, re-creations of experience, and associative remembering. A living story is one fraught with change. Over time I came to understand this project not as an attempt to perfectly mirror Chì Tôi's stories through performance, but as an endeavor to uncover, witness, and represent *pieces* of her life experiences for audiences unfamiliar with her particular, generally untold and unknown history. (p. 104; italics in original)

Because, as Eisner notes, “living stories are fraught with change,” each storytelling event is itself an occasion for identity creation. The purpose of oral history, thus, is not to collect absolute truths, but to engage community members in constructing reiterations of past events. Through each retelling, each of the three community members, too, altered their stories—in Eisner’s words, “sometimes discretely, at other times drastically”—to shift the focus of their story or convey new meaning. These changes constitute performative acts in the service of creating identity and knowledge. As Pollock (2008) puts it:

Stories do not reveal or refer to a given world or body of knowledge. They subsume their referents in a re-creative, spatio/temporal “encounter.” Accordingly, they are as powerful as they are precarious; knowledge per se is dissolved into contested rhetorics of narrative knowing. (p. 122)

Through this contested space of narrative knowing, what was formerly regarded as “truth” is explored, interrogated, made, and remade.

Oral history also allows marginalized individuals to challenge normative scripts that undermine or exclude their stories altogether. Pollock (1999) conducted her oral history research study with women and men in order to resist “the isolation of birth from the broader body politics of, for instance, abortion, sexual orientation, reproductive technologies, ‘family values,’ welfare and healthcare reform” (p. 8). Since gendered and sexual identities are rooted in social and political domains, masculinist and heteronormative discourses often silence feminist and queer narratives. According to Pollock (1999), “Birth stories put the maternal body—in all its carnal, social, and political plenitude—center stage. They counter puritanical, masculinist, racist, classist, and even feminist bans on the birthing body with its embodied representation, doubling

the threat of female embodiment to the norms of a phallogocentric culture” (pg. 8). Similarly, my research seeks to make visible the asexual narratives that challenge heteronormative discourses. However, these narratives also serve a double function, for at the same time, they also provide a site for the construction of sexual identities.

Oral history brings together the respective histories of the oral historian and the storytellers to allow for the co-construction of meaning. When Johnson (2008b) conducted his oral history interviews, his shared identity as a black gay man born in the South allowed him to delve into topics that his participants might otherwise conceal from researchers. He could speak to the challenges of producing queer narratives within heteronormative spaces and thereby encourage his participants to share their own stories of oppression or empowerment. However, since queer individuals are susceptible to heteronormative discourses, it is important for oral historians to acknowledge their positionality within these communities. Oral history demands “an ethical response from the researchers in witnessing and validating the narrative of the interviewee” (Johnson, 2008b, p. 8). It is not enough to listen to an oral history narrative; the researcher must be invested in the future validation of the community and the (re)presentation of these narratives.

Within my own oral history research study, I supported and reified the queer identities of my research participants. For example, Jenna told me that she engaged in sexual intercourse with male partners before she came out as asexual. Although some scholars might misinterpret this narrative performance as indicative of a heterosexual identity, I recognized it as one of many liminal performances within the asexual

community. I, thus, understood her performance through my shared investment in her queer identity.

Employing Active Interviewing

Through each oral history interview, I sought to elicit stories about the construction and negotiation of their asexual identity and connect their stories with the broader themes of social drama, *communitas*, liminality, and futurity. By reflecting on my research questions, I created a list of questions that I used as a starting point for each interview (see Table 4). Then, I utilized active interviewing techniques to elicit detailed narratives from each participant. I relied upon my knowledge of each woman to “suggest orientations to, and linkages between, diverse aspects of respondents’ experience, adumbrating—even inviting—interpretations that make use of particular resources, connections, and outlooks” (James Holstein & Jaber Gubrium, 2003, p. 75). I drew upon my previous knowledge of each participant, in addition to asexual community resources, to explore topics that researchers might otherwise neglect. Because of our shared history, I could adapt and modify my interview questions to explore the unique experiences of each of the three community members.

Since oral history focuses on the telling of stories and emphasizes the co-construction of meaning, I allowed my participants to lead the conversation in new and unexpected directions. Johnson (2008b) took a similar approach to his research. As he explains, “While I had a general set of questions that I asked, I allowed the men to talk about anything they wanted. Because of that, some interviews lasted forty-five minutes,

while others were over three and a half hours” (p. 11-12). Johnson allowed the conversation to develop in a seemingly natural way. I attempted to foster a seemingly natural conversation, too, but there were challenges in bridging the gap between our diverse experiences. Sometimes my participants’ stories would surprise me and provide me with a new perspective on what it means to construct an asexual identity. Other times, we struggled to extract meaning from our stories. I began to realize that while our narratives upheld the general principles of asexuality, we also experienced asexuality in dramatically different ways. If the conversation began to falter, I would pursue another interview question and we would once again begin the process of co-constructing meaning.

Table 4. Guiding questions for my oral history interviews

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did you come to realize you were asexual?• How do you negotiate heteronormative performances like flirting and dating?• What is most challenging about being asexual in a sexual society?• How do you communicate your sexuality differently now that you identify as an asexual?• How have your social interactions changed since you started identifying as asexual?• Does your asexual identity liberate you from heteronormative expectations?• How have you experimented or “played” with your asexual identity?• What expectations does your family have regarding marriage and children?• Has your family expressed support or disapproval for your asexuality?• How has your membership in the asexual community changed or altered your performance of sexuality? |
|---|

In addition to recording and transcribing each interview, I also wrote follow-up questions tailored to the personal stories of each individual. I wanted to explore topics that were especially relevant for each woman and understand her individualized narratives of asexuality. For example, I noticed that Allison repeatedly described her involvement with the asexual community in terms of work and obligation (a trait,

according to Turner, that is often indicative of liminal, rather than liminoid performances). Therefore, I asked follow-up questions to understand which activities she perceived to be obligatory versus celebratory of her asexual identity. In this way, I could gain a deeper understanding of her asexual narrative within the context of Turner's (1982) liminality.

I held interviews over the course of four consecutive weeks. This strategy encouraged self-reflection on my part and allowed time for new topics to emerge. This interview structure also allowed each woman to retell stories and provide new interpretations of her living history. Eisner (2005) placed great emphasis on the storytelling event and allowed Chị Tôi to explore new interpretations and construct new meanings from past events over the course of their interviews. Likewise, I encouraged each woman to revisit topics discussed in previous interviews. It was interesting to hear new interpretations of past events after we had explored a wide range of topics. Jenna and I had fruitful conversations when we continually returned to the topic of her parents in an effort to understand how her narrative performances of asexuality related to her parents' concern and hope for her future.

After each interview, I engaged in free writing for one hour. This exercise allowed me to critically examine the interview experience and reflect upon the heteronormative discourses that emerged through these narratives. Through this process, I sought to bring, as D. Soyini Madison advocates, "self and other together so they [could] question, debate, and challenge one another" (2005, p. 9). For example, when Jenna repeatedly voiced her desire for children and a partnered relationship, I felt the

tension of my critical paradigm weighing against these heteronormative discourses. I recalled the perspectives of Edelman (2004) who challenges queer individuals to reject the symbolic image of the child. I leveraged these theories to discuss queer performances of identity. I challenged her to consider a future without children or a partnered relationship and emphasized the potential of liminality to generate a plurality of alternative models for her sexual identity.

These interviews often made me aware of my own privileges as a queer critical scholar. I have had frequent opportunities to reflect upon and share my own asexuality with friends, family members, and colleagues. However, the people I interviewed often struggled to decide whether they should share their asexual identity with their own friends and family members. Madison (2005) explains that critical scholars must be cognizant of their privilege within academia: “Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (p. 7). As such, I sought to validate and legitimize each woman’s asexual identities. I recognized the efforts of the people I interviewed to subvert and reject heteronormative discourses in their daily lives. Furthermore, I *wanted* to co-construct a queer future that might liberate us from heteronormative expectations.

Critical scholars have an ethical responsibility to advocate for marginalized individuals and draw attention to oppressive discourses. As Madison (2005) explains, the critical ethnographer “takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the *status quo*, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (p. 5). Each woman struggled

against and occasionally reinforced heteronormative discourses within her narrative, which seemingly troubled her asexual identity. Jenna told me, “If an opportunity presented itself for me to get married and have a family and still be able to [pursue my career], I would take it. I think.” These statements posited a heteronormative future as more desirable than a queer future. Throughout my interviews, I sought to call these discourses into question and encourage a mutual reflection upon the performative potential of embracing a queer future.

The purpose of this oral history research study was to examine critically the potential of certain narratives to resist heteronormative discourses and generate new future-oriented models for celebrating asexuality. Each of the three women and I worked together as collaborators to explore narrative performances of asexuality. By conducting oral history interviews with three self-identified asexuals, I sought to analyze certain narratives attending to asexuality and to foster alternative models of empowerment for queer individuals.

Chapter Four: Narrative Performances of Asexuality

Introduction

In March 2010, I started conducting oral history interviews. For five weeks, I scheduled weekly phone interviews with each of the three asexual women using Skype, a software application that enables individuals to make phone calls over the internet. Allison was unavailable during the first week, so we agreed to push all of her interviews back one week. Occasionally, I rescheduled an interview due to a scheduling conflict. The whole experience was exciting and nerve-wracking. Although I knew basic facts about these individuals, we had yet to discuss their personal lives and asexual identities in such depth.

Each interview lasted between sixty to ninety minutes, with the exception of the fourth interview, which was typically thirty to sixty minutes. I set my alarm clock for one hour and when I heard the alarm, I encouraged each woman to continue her thoughts, and gradually, I let the interview wind down. After finishing each interview, I engaged in free writing for thirty minutes.

I recorded each interview with an audio recording program and informed each of my participants that I was recording the interview. I spent two to three hours each night transcribing my interviews. The entire transcription process took about five weeks. As I started the first round of coding, I searched for similarities and differences between each woman's narratives and aligned them with the major theories in my literature review. Through the telling of their personal narratives, each woman shared dramatically different stories. For instance, Sarah identified as lesbian for more than fifteen years;

Jenna said she experimented with polyamory, BDSM, other sexual relationships; and Allison said she never engaged in sex. However, each woman's narratives also resonated with broader themes, including Turner's (1982) theories of social drama, *communitas*, and liminality; Foucault's (1990) theories on heteronormative deployment; and Muñoz's (2006, 2009) theories on future-oriented narratives and queer performativity.

I modeled this chapter on Pollock's (1999) *Telling Bodies Performing Birth: Everyday Narratives of Childbirth*, wherein she reproduces sections of her interview transcript and then discusses the broader themes within each narrative performance. In my own analyzes, I considered why each woman shared specific stories with me and the meanings imbued within these stories. Within each quotation, I attempted to reflect the rhythm of each woman's speech by using an ellipsis to indicate a pause or hesitation. Occasionally, I removed words or sentences to clarify the meaning or improve the readability of the passage; an ellipsis within brackets indicates the exclusion of words from the original transcript. Eisner (2005) similarly altered Chì Tôi's narrative to honor the "fidelity" of the story, rather than maintain its "mimetic accuracy." When necessary, I obscured and altered identifying information to ensure the confidentiality of my participants.

This chapter explores three major categories that address each of my three research questions:

RQ1: How might asexuals narrate their identity within and beyond heteronormativity?

RQ2: In what ways do familial and communal relationships figure into the self-identity narratives of asexuals?

RQ3: How might asexuals resist and disrupt heteronormativity through the act of narrative performance?

The first category explores the narrative performances that constitute each woman's asexual identity, specifically, how each woman narrated her breach of heteronormative expectations within the context of social drama and then narrated a sense of belonging to the asexual community. The second category discusses parents' messages pertaining to sexuality and the effect of these messages on asexual narrative performances. This category includes stories about parents deliberately instigating (or not) social drama within the family. The third category explores the construction of liminoid narratives once each woman identified herself with the asexual community. This category discusses how liminoid narrative performances might empower asexuals to construct utopian futures, in addition to the effects of heteronormative discourses on liminoid narratives. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the marginalizing effects of heteronormative discourses and explore how each woman understood her asexual identity through the process of storytelling.

Social Drama and Narratives of Displeasure

In understanding how these three women came to identify with asexuality, it is important to understand that asexuality did not receive much media attention until 2004. When these women were young adults, they had no knowledge of the asexual community and often felt a disjuncture between society's heterosexual narratives and their emergent asexual narrative. Eventually, their violation of heteronormative narratives initiated the first stage of social drama and facilitated their transition to an asexual identity. Within

this chapter, I will explore how each woman constructed her asexual narrative through a process of social drama with friends, family, and partners, and with the support and protection of asexual communities. These narratives will also reveal how each woman perceived her asexual identity within the context of heterosexual narratives.

Sarah, a middle-aged woman who classified herself as an “older asexual lesbian,” shared with me a complicated narrative wherein she repeatedly questioned her inherent “sexual” identity. Her narrative began with a story about how she implicitly knew from an early age that she did not want to participate in sexual activities, even though she knew that she was supposed to want it. During her teenage years, she contented herself with friendships and did not pursue partnered relationships.

I always knew that I didn’t want to have sex with folks, um, I had this internal thing that I didn’t want to have sex, but something magical would happen when I met the right person, and I would want to have sex. That started early in my life, probably when I was a teenager I realized I was not interested in the boys or the girls for that matter. I just wanted friends, I remember during my teenage years I did not think at all about wanting to kiss and hug and have sex. Um, I knew it was a big thing—society said—big thing, to be a virgin, when you lose your virginity. But, uh, I just figured I’d meet the right person and this magic romantic thing that I heard about would happen.

Within this narrative, Sarah told me that she always “knew” she did not want to have sex. However, because of pervasive heteronormative messages, she inherently doubted this knowledge and thought that she would one day experience sexual attraction and desire. She believed that upon meeting the *right* man she would finally experience the sexual desire that eluded her. However, in telling this story, she began to define her disinterest in sex as a constant truth throughout her life, giving credence to her asexual identity.

As Sarah would explain, she tried to foster a sexual relationship with a young man in college, but this relationship did not cause her to desire sex. Early in the relationship, Sarah told her boyfriend that she wanted to wait to have sex until she felt more comfortable with him. While he respected her request not to engage in sex, he also made it clear that one day he expected to have a sexual relationship with her. Sarah's inherent opposition to a traditional heteronormative relationship represented her breach of heteronormativity and initiated the first stage of social drama. Sarah's desire not to have sex with her boyfriend was the equivalent, at least in her mind at the time, of breaking a social law.

I sought therapy [...] because of that fact that I was with a boyfriend and we were having trouble. I didn't want to have sex. I didn't want to kiss or cuddle or anything, and so I partly went to therapy for that and partly because grad school was difficult and I was unhappy and I wanted to figure out what was going on.

Sarah perceived her aversion to sex (and other intimate behaviors) as violating the unspoken contract between dating partners. As such, she received the implicit message that she could not have a long-term relationship with him if she did not *want* to engage in sex. Furthermore, her boyfriend's expectation about sex initiated the second stage of social drama and resulted in an imminent crisis within their relationship. She presumed that her crisis could only be resolved in two ways: either she would concede to having a sexual relationship or she would end the relationship altogether. Heteronormative narratives often posit that these are the only possible outcomes for a heterosexual relationship and, thus, she sought to "restore" her sexual desire through therapy.

Herein, Sarah's narrative reached a critical turning point, where she called upon the authoritative power of a therapist to diagnose her lack of sexual desire and dictate her

sexual identity. The retelling of this event also represents Sarah's participation in the third stage of social drama: redress. She proceeded to tell me about how her therapist mistook her lack of desire for sex as indicative of a homosexual identity.

Well, the first [therapist] I saw when I was with Don and we were having a hard time... she said, "Do you think you might be lesbian?" At the time, I didn't... I thought I was sick, so I went to therapy with this attitude, "I have this problem. I don't like sex. I'm scared of it" or I can't remember exactly what I told her, it was so long ago. And my response to that at the time was "That's too easy a solution." And I don't know if that was prophetic or whether I just sort of knew at that time that it was that I was asexual and not that I was lesbian or what. I remember just thinking, "That's too easy of an explanation that I'm lesbian."

Sarah told me, with a confidence that comes from belonging to the asexual community that claiming a lesbian identity was "too easy a solution." However, at the time, this interaction played an important role in determining Sarah's sexual identity. A couple years later, Sarah came out to her family and friends as lesbian; she reasoned that being lesbian was the only feasible explanation for her not to desire sex with a man. This interaction with her therapist would later represent a moment of misdiagnosis, which speaks to the inability of the medical community to recognize her sexual narrative as indicative of an asexual identity.

When Sarah came out as lesbian, she entered the fourth stage of social drama, in which she acknowledged her irreparable breach of heteronormativity. In addition to participating in the local LGBT community, she began to construct a future-oriented narrative that reinforced lesbian narratives of sexual desire. She told her fellow lesbians that she wanted a partnered relationship and, thus, alluded to her willingness to engage in sex. Yet, through our conversation, she reiterated that she never really wanted a sexual

relationship with a woman. Her story suggests that only after experimenting with lesbian narrative performances could she truly understand her emergent asexual identity.

Life became easier when I came out as a lesbian [...] I was like cool... This is who I am. This is why I was having so many problems with relationships. Um, and when I got in the lesbian community I found support for that and I had found fun. I had found women who I liked to hang out with and play with and it was... For a long time I was single and I thought it was just the best community. It was so much fun. We'd hang out together. We had all these clubs... it was like going back to college for god's sake. There were all these organized things where you could meet people, whereas the heterosexual community was so big it was hard to find a niche.

The lesbian community served as a normative *communitas* that gave meaning to her liminal identity. She participated in its rituals and norms, including casually dating (without having sex) and joining a local LGBT organization. She also created profiles on lesbian dating websites to search for a lesbian partner. Although her narrative, up to this point, suggests that she belonged within the lesbian community, her reiterated displeasure with sex would once again lead to a crisis in her first lesbian relationship.

As her story progresses, Sarah met Michelle (also a pseudonym) in 2006 and thought she had met her life partner. They dated for several months, moved in together, and eventually became domestic partners. The main problem, as Sarah tells it, was that she still had no interest in sex.

I had one relationship four years ago with a woman and she definitely was hypersexual. She wanted lots of sex and she was very frustrated that I, not only that I wouldn't ... I didn't really want sex, but that I wouldn't initiate. She got really hung up on the fact that I wouldn't initiate sex, and she was the one that said you don't really love me unless you want to have sex with me. And this was a hard one because I ... how can I force myself to want myself to have sex with you? And so, we went around the bend on that one. And that's, I think, what really led me to realize that I was asexual ... was that struggle to say that the want is not there. I don't want to have sex with you. It's not there. It's not that I don't love you ... it's that I don't want to have sex.

In this passage, Sarah creates a dichotomy between herself and her lesbian partner.

Whereas Michelle wanted lots of sex, Sarah wanted little to none. The comparison serves as a precursor to Sarah's proclamation of asexuality. Through the telling and retelling of this story, Sarah constructs a metaphorical rift between her and her lesbian partner that calls her essentialist lesbian identity into question.

Sarah once again felt the emergence of a breach when she attempted to negotiate her sexual relationship by scheduling time for sex. However, she told me that she never actually initiated sex because she did not feel "moved" to have sex. This narrative emphasizes the dramatically different meanings each woman gave to their sexual relationship; whereas Michelle perceived sex as a *natural* expression of love, Sarah viewed it as an *obligatory* ritual that constituted their relationship.

Michelle wanted everything to be spontaneous. [...] Suddenly on Wednesday at eight in the evening, she wanted the spirit to move me and for me to initiate. And I was trying to figure out... well, this is not going to happen. The spirit is not going to move me. So, the nerd in me started thinking, "Okay, I'll get a random number to...and it will randomly generate a time and I will initiate...I will say, "Hey honey, let's go have sex." Um, but I never did that because I assumed she would get the idea that the spirit had not moved me. But it was very frustrating to say, "Well, we don't have enough sex, but you're not willing to plan Friday night, let's have sex." We tried that a couple of times, but for her it just didn't work to have it planned out on a Friday night. I thought that was the way to go. I thought we should have had candlelight, dinner, and romantic, and you know, everything set up, and segue into the bed and [we] definitely needed to get rid of the dogs, but, uh...but she just didn't take to that because it was too planned. It was too much. It had to be spontaneous. It had to be from inside that you're moved because you love your partner so much that it's time to have [sex].

Sarah's narrative speaks to the social expectation that a partner must *earnestly* have, want, and desire sex with their partner to reaffirm and validate the relationship. It also reveals a disjunction between Sarah and Michelle's sexual script, whereby one wanted

sex to *feel* spontaneous and the other wanted to schedule time for sex. Their disagreement on when and how to engage in sex caused a crisis within her partnered relationship.

Sarah, once again, found herself immersed in the social drama caused by her breach of sexual norms. She spent months employing redressive mechanisms that might restore intimacy with her partner. Sarah and Michelle eventually went to see a therapist, who gave them exercises that might improve their sexual relationship. As their relationship progressed, Sarah found herself yearning for a reprieve from sex.

Michelle hinted [that I should see a therapist] but she didn't say you must do this, but she hinted around a lot, and I finally said, "Okay, I'll just do it. I'll just go and give it a shot and see what happens. Maybe this will get us back together. Maybe we ...you know, it will be a little like couples therapy. Maybe she can help us with ... and she did actually... she did send us home and have us do more of the exercises, which I got really tired of. (Both laugh). Well, I have more of a reaction now than I did at the time. "I don't wanna do an exercise!" But it was more of move towards sex and find out what each of you like and don't like. Do you like this when she does it? Maybe you're just not finding what each other likes. So we did exercises trying to find out what does Michelle like, what does Sarah like. Um, I don't know, more of the fights were that I would never initiate sex. That frustrated Michelle. She felt like I didn't love her because I wouldn't initiate sex.

Sarah's story is poignant because she invested so much energy into trying to be sexual, but each attempt resulted in her irreparable breach of both heterosexual and homosexual norms. She began to construct, what I term, a *narrative of displeasure*. This narrative situates sexual activity as being unpleasant and undesirable. By employing this narrative during our conversation, she seemed to prove, without a doubt, that asexuality was the best home for her sexual identity.

When Sarah learned about the asexual community, her narrative of displeasure achieved new meaning. Instead of representing her failure to maintain a partnered relationship, her narrative seemed normal in comparison to the narratives of other asexuals. She decided to attend an asexual meetup and learn more about the asexual community, even though it might contest her lesbian identity. Her partner was not pleased to learn of Sarah's decision and it further cemented her breach.

I said, "Michelle, I want to check out this group that I found on AVEN. And she said, "What? You want to go hang out with asexuals?" I said, "Yes, I do." And so the first one I went to... she was knowledgeable that I went to it. It freaked her out so much that I stopped going, you know. It felt really weird for me to be there. I told people, "Yeah, my girlfriend knows I'm here, and we're struggling with this issue." And I would have liked to have gone to more meetups, but it took a whole lot of time away from Michelle.

Through this narrative, we can begin to see the emergence of Sarah's liminal identity as she talks about her inner conflict at attending the asexual meetups. While she saw the potential of asexuality to give meaning to her repeated breach of sexual norms, she also knew that it would initiate the fourth stage of social drama, wherein she would acknowledge the growing schism between her and her partner. After a few months of occupying this liminal identity, Sarah and Michelle decided to end their relationship.

Although one might presume that after identifying as asexual, Sarah would have dismissed her lesbian identity, she instead chose to claim both identities and come out—for a second time—as an asexual lesbian.

It was easier to come out as an asexual because I had already come out as a lesbian. So, I had that whole concept of being different than other people. How it's helpful to let other people know that. So I wasn't freaked by the coming out part of the asexuality, except that I was more sure I was a lesbian than I was sure I was asexual and that made it interesting the way that it transferred to the asexuality. It made me think about why is it harder for me to come out as asexual

rather than as lesbian. I had more doubts about the asexuality, worries about what people would think. Whereas when I came out as a lesbian it was in the 90s, and it wasn't easy to come out but it was very acceptable.

This passage reveals the deeply personal relationship Sarah has with the LGBT community. Even after experiencing an irrevocable breach of homosexuality, she says that she felt more certain about her lesbian identity than she did about her asexual identity. Perhaps, as a result, she continued to invest herself in both communities.

As Sarah rationalized her asexual lesbian through storytelling, she often spoke about the liminal and liminoid performances where she brought together and negotiated her dual identity. While attending a pride parade, Sarah spent time with the “dykes” and then marched with a group of asexuals in the parade. During the oral history interviews, we discussed the potential challenges of claiming both an asexual and a lesbian identity.

Being in the asexual community might make me less comfortable in the lesbian community. Feeling like I don't belong here as much as I used to. Um, cuz I don't share that sexual passion for women like most of the people in the community, so that was, that was affecting...They don't know why I'm feeling that way, though when I'm in the lesbian [community]... folks don't generally know that I'm feeling that way. I'm a little less secure in the lesbian community than I used to be, since I've started doing things with the asexual community. Um, in the parade I was probably more worried about lesbians seeing me. It's the Gay Pride Parade for heaven's sake! And wondered what my friends would think of me marching with this group [of asexuals]. Like one of my really good friends thought it was great, but I didn't know she was there.

Sarah suggested that by embracing her liminal identity, she simultaneously belonged to and felt displaced from the asexual and lesbian communities. Yet, she used this liminal space to create new models and paradigms for her sexual identity—one that involved female companionship, but not sex. Although liminality has provided her with a new

paradigm for her future, it has undoubtedly affected her prior relationship with the lesbian community.

During another retelling of this event, Sarah discussed the experience of marching with a group of asexuals and feeling a sense of belonging. This march represented a liminoid performance in that she celebrated and claimed her asexual identity within the LGBT community. Turner (1982) defines liminoid performances as “characteristically individual products though they often have collective or ‘mass’ effects. They are not cyclical, but continuously generated, though in time and places apart from work settings assigned to ‘leisure’ activities” (p. 54). In telling me about the asexual march, she framed it as an empowering experience.

At the Pride March, I had fun because there were enough asexuals with me that I had a sense of a community and “this is fun.” We’re all the same and yet different... but we have this thing in common and isn’t it relaxing. I can relax and let go of this part of me. I don’t have to hide it from these people and be worried about what they’ll think because they’ll think “I can understand [being] asexual.”

This story emphasizes her investment in the asexual community and her enjoyment about having “this thing in common.” She could easily have given me a similar narrative concerning her lesbian identity, but through her telling of this event, she aligns herself more so with the asexual community than the lesbian community. As such, I wonder how our shared identification with the asexual community influenced her narratives about the Pride Parade. Her telling of this event also reveals how she might draw upon her liminal identity to move between asexual and lesbian narrative performances of identity. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Sarah’s liminal identity provides her with opportunities to foster new paradigms for *being* both asexual and lesbian. She seeks to

bridge these two communities and generate new norms that transcend the boundaries of each community.

Jenna, a spirited young adult, shared with me a similar narrative of displeasure wherein she engaged in several unsatisfying sexual relationships. She also drew upon a *narrative of difference* to provide the context for her forthcoming asexual identity. In this story, Jenna's limited knowledge of sex seemingly ostracized her from heterosexual spaces. When she entered middle school, she made a conscious effort to submerge herself in heteronormative discourses so that she could better perform a heterosexual identity. She read a popular magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, so that she could learn how to flirt with, tease, and seduce young men. She suggests that these behaviors did not come naturally to her; rather, she had to learn them in order to assume a heterosexual identity.

I got very comfortable talking about sex and that started long before my actual sexual activity began. Um, talking about it and talking about it like I knew what it was, before I even got into it because I could read these things, and I could get these things from the media and from TV and movies and celebrities and magazine tabloids, the internet. It's everywhere. It's all our society and we are told to be very proud of all the sex that we're having and to be jealous of all the sex that we're not having. And so, I learned to say the right things when it came to sex...and I didn't have any experience other than kissing until after I graduated from high school.

Within this narrative of difference, Jenna implied that she lacked an *essential* knowledge of sex that would later identify her as asexual. However, she noticed the pervasiveness of heteronormative discourses and began to evoke them in her everyday life. She told me that despite being able to employ heteronormative discourses, she still did not experience sexual attraction.

In hindsight, Jenna told me her lack of interest in dating signified her asexual identity. However, at the time, she still presumed she was heterosexual. Her narrative reached a critical juncture when her roommate's parents notice her lack of participation in heteronormative rituals and begin to call her heterosexuality into question.

Even before I claimed asexuality, I didn't actively seek relationships. And there was always an unspoken air among my friends that "Jenna doesn't have anyone." And you know my friends' parents... I had a roommate's mom ask me one day, because both of my roommates at the time were seeing people, like all my friends are constantly getting in and out of relationships or they've been in a relationship with one person for a long time and they have romantic relations with those people and here's poor Jenna, all on her own...and it's like I don't have time for a relationship. I mean, there's so many other things that I want to do with my time...that I have to do with my time. I don't need a relationship to make me happy.

Although Jenna did not desire a sexual relationship—"There's so many other things that I want to do with my time"—she felt the immediacy of her breach and crisis. She knew that she was supposed to foster a heterosexual identity and, yet, she was not participating in the rituals that would affirm this identity.

Jenna started employing redressive mechanisms to maintain the status quo of heteronormativity. She decided that she would have to engage in sexual intercourse to validate and affirm her heterosexual identity.

Just before I went to college, um, I said to myself I don't want to *not* have sex. I don't want to be the person who doesn't do that thing. And so I started hooking up with guys at parties and stuff like that. I did a lot of stupid, stupid things...that were completely irresponsible and not like a grown woman should do, but I thought that's what a grown woman should do.

Jenna revealed her underlying assumption about heteronormativity—that young adults *yearn for and enjoy having sex*. She wanted to conform to this heteronormative narrative,

so she continually pursued sexual relationships to awaken her desire for sex. Yet, she only pursued these relationships because she wanted to fit in with her peers.

During her college years, she experimented with bondage and polyamory, and at one point, she even wondered if she should identify as bisexual. Despite all of her efforts, she realized that she did not enjoy having sex. Jenna's narrative bears a resemblance to Sarah's narrative, in that she did not consider claiming her asexual identity until she explored alternative sexual identities and found them dissatisfying or undesirable.

I spent most of high school and college just experiencing as many different things as I could and trying different things and I was in a polyamorous relationship for a while and, um, I was always really proud of myself for being very forward thinking... a sexually active person. Yeah, I'm right on the edge here, you know. I have an exciting life and things are exciting, but when I was actually doing them, it was like okay, awesome, let's move on. I don't know...it's just really weird. I just assumed I was sexual for so long, and so I pushed myself more and more in that direction because every time I had a physical experience with somebody it wasn't fulfilling and so I was just like I need to try new things and find out what's the next interesting thing.

During our conversations, Jenna began to employ a narrative of displeasure that emphasized her repeated disappointment with sex. However, without prior knowledge of the asexual community, her repeated breach of heteronormativity only served to perpetuate her crisis.

As Jenna continued to explore her identity through sexual relationships, she began to realize that she did not enjoy having sex, regardless of the partner and told her boyfriend that she wanted a break from sex. Yet, her boyfriend was so perturbed at her dismissal of sex that he broke up with her several days later. Similar to Sarah's narrative, Jenna's boyfriend did not want to invest in a non-sexual partnered relationship.

My last boyfriend was very sexual and he... his father studies sex, and so he's known what everything is and how everything works since he was 13 years old and he has been practicing and he prides himself on being able to please women. And I could see the first time we were intimate how much he was hurting that I wasn't having as much fun as he was; that I wasn't enjoying myself quite as much as he was. And, um, it didn't matter what we did, you know, and finally one day I was just like I can't...I can't do this anymore. Let's try again some other time, and...he broke up with me a week later.

By narrating her dissatisfaction with sex (especially with a man who is “able to please women,”) she establishes a breach of heteronormativity. Her boyfriend also signals her irreparable breach by breaking up with her after she dismissed his sexual advances. Her narrative speaks to a question commonly asked of asexuals—“are you certain you haven't met the right partner?”—and reasons that since she tried sex with multiple partners and found it consistently unsatisfying, she must *not* be heterosexual.

When Jenna told one of her friends about her growing dissatisfaction with sex, he suggested that she might be asexual. Jenna had never before heard of the term, so she researched it and found the AVEN website. As she read different stories from asexuals across the world, Jenna experienced spontaneous *communitas*. The online narratives and forum discussions conveyed the same narratives of dissatisfaction that Jenna had begun to construct during the past few years. According to Turner (1982), individuals experiencing spontaneous *communitas* “feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as ‘essentially us’ could sustain its intersubjective illumination” (p. 48). Jenna experienced a sense of empowerment and hope that the asexual community could provide her narrative of displeasure with new meaning that would situate her beyond heteronormative discourses and enable her to construct a queer future. Jenna told me that

she felt so overcome with emotion that she started crying at the prospect of belonging to this community.

I actually started crying because it was so strange to have validation because, with the exception of my friend Jeff (pseudonym), other people that I tried to talk about this to said you haven't found the right person yet, you know, you're not doing it right, you haven't had good sex yet, and all this stuff...And I just believed them and I was like okay, but here was validation that my experiences and my thoughts and feelings and attitudes—as wonderful as it is to be a unique person—were not uniquely mine.

Although Jenna spent years experimenting with her sexual identity, it was only after she discovered the AVEN website that she could identify her narratives of displeasure as indicative of an asexual identity. The similarity between her own narrative and that of other self-identified asexuals validated and reaffirmed her own asexual identity. Her experience with spontaneous *communitas* also inspired a liminoid performance where, for a class assignment, she wrote a script that explored the concept of asexuality and performed it for her peers. She eventually used this performance to come out to her family and friends and publicly proclaim her asexual identity.

After coming out to her family as asexual, Jenna started attending meetups and building relationships with asexuals in her local community. When Jenna told me about her first meetup, she conveyed a sense of relief and pleasure at participating in the local asexual community and thereby performed another significant narrative within the asexual community—a *narrative of belonging*.

I loved the AVEN meet up I went to because it was real people having a real conversation in person and you could see these people face to face and you can see they're real people out here in the world, living their lives. They have careers and I think the level of conversation no matter what the topic...I mean, the first meeting I went to...the topic of conversation went all over the place. I mean it

wasn't just like who we were as people. It was about things going on in the world and it was lovely. It was really lovely.

This story reveals Jenna's assumption about the local asexual community prior to attending a meetup; she presumed they would reify the message that asexuality was an undesirable identity. However, in telling me about her first meetup, she seemed to exude a sense of pride and pleasure at belonging to this normative community. She realized that belonging to the asexual community did not mean isolating herself from the "real" world; instead, it provided her with institutional armor that would protect her from the criticism of heteronormative discourses. Yet, even as she situated herself within this normative community, she still felt the pervasive presence of heteronormative discourses and continued to negotiate her sexuality within the context of the traditional family.

Constructing Narratives of Difference

Allison, a soft-spoken young adult, told me a story that differs from Jenna and Sarah's narrative. She never engaged in sex and, thus, she had no reason to construct a narrative of displeasure. Instead, she drew upon a narrative of difference to contextualize her asexual identity. When Allison progressed through her teenage years, she never experienced sexual attraction to anyone. As a result, she did not flirt with young men and never felt compelled to date. Her high school teachers encouraged her to pursue rigorous coursework and prepare for college, so Allison was never concerned with her lack of participation in heteronormative rituals.

I feel like there were more people at my school that maybe didn't date because it was so academic. And for me at my school it was acceptable to be like "I'm busy trying to get to college, trying to get good grades." That was totally cool as far as

everyone was concerned. But, I mean, it was a large school so nobody cared if I dated or not. And if anyone was ever interested in me, I never could tell.

Allison's description of this academic environment resembles Turner's (1982) antistructure in that she experienced an alternative "culture" that positioned itself outside and beyond heteronormativity. This academic environment provided Allison with the opportunity to ignore heteronormative expectations to the extent that, as she put it, if someone else was interested in her, she did not notice it. She also surrounded herself with a close group of friends who prioritized their friendship over dating young men. Within this environment, Allison did not realize that she was different from her peers.

When Allison went to college and joined a sorority, she began to notice differences between her narratives and those of her heterosexual peers. Whereas her sorority sisters were interested in dating and having sex, Allison did not have an interest in either. During mixed social events, her breach of social norms initiated the first stage of social drama. Allison shared with me a story wherein her sorority sisters asked on which boy she had a crush and she realized that she could not name one boy to whom she felt sexually attracted.

I still remember how we were having something like a sorority formal dance thing. It sounds so corny and it was. But one of the girls was like "This is a chance to invite your crush." And I was like, "I don't have a crush." And I felt awful that I didn't have a crush. And it was like "everyone else has a crush except me!" And so, I was trying to manufacture one, like okay, who can I have a crush on?

In this narrative, Allison described herself as essentially different from her peers because she did not have a crush. Yet, Allison's crisis stemmed from her lack of sexual attraction and her inability to "manufacture" a crush. She implied that if she could simply name a

boy to whom she felt sexually attracted, she could legitimize her heterosexual identity. Interestingly, Jenna and Sarah evoked a similar narrative wherein they tried to perform a heterosexual identity and found it both insincere and isolating.

Allison's lack of participation in heteronormative dating rituals continued to draw the attention of her peers, until one of her friends asked if she was asexual. At that time, Allison had no knowledge of the asexual community, so she was not certain if she should align herself with it. The way her friends spoke about asexuality suggested that it might not be a good thing, specifically because it contested heteronormativity. She rejected asexuality in an attempt to repair her breach of heteronormative expectations. Yet, in private, she began to wonder if she should identify with this sexual identity.

I think the first time I actually remember hearing about the term [asexual] was when some girls in the dorms were talking about boys they had crushes on and um someone was like "Who do you have a crush on?" and I was like, "no one." And one of my girlfriends said, "Maybe you're asexual!" And I said, "No, I'm not." Yeah, so I think that was the first time that I'd actually heard the word. And it sounded like it wasn't a good thing.

In this story, asexuality became an accusation—a statement of fact that would cement her breach of heteronormativity. These stories, told and retold, represent her growing schism of heteronormativity. In an attempt to redress her breach and maintain the status quo of heteronormativity, she denied any association with asexuality.

Over the next couple of months, she began to investigate asexuality and found the Asexuality LiveJournal community. However, instead of celebrating their emerging identity, many individuals complained about their relationship problems and posited asexuality as a negative and undesirable identity. These narratives alarmed Allison and

seemed to suggest that she might one day regret her decision to align herself with the asexual community.

I think the first time I really learned about it more in depth, though, was on the Live Journal community they have for asexuality. And my first impression was “These people are really upset!” You know, because a lot of people on there write about their relationship problems and about...a lot of the posts there are like asking for advice for people’s issues. And I’m on that community still today, and sometimes I think, “Wow! If I was a newbie now, I would not really be thrilled about all these ranty posts.”

Allison’s story about the Asexuality LiveJournal community represented a moment of doubt that contested her asexual identity. Instead of celebrating asexuality through liminoid performances, many of the LiveJournal community members shared negative stories concerning their liminal asexual identity. Yet, her eventual resolve to identify as asexual—despite her experiences with the Asexuality LiveJournal community—served to validate her asexual identity. Similar to Jenna and Sarah’s experimentation with heterosexuality and homosexuality, Allison chose to experiment with asexuality to see whether it was a good fit for her. Her narrative suggests that she was more willing to consider an alternative (a)sexual identity, rather than engage in sex to “prove” her asexuality.

When Allison discovered the AVEN website, she found liminoid narratives of hope that framed asexuality as positive. Instead of commiserating about their liminal identities, AVEN members wanted to discuss the positive aspects of their asexual identity and foster relationships with other asexuals. Allison told me that in perusing the website, she found a breadth of stories that resonated with her experiences and encouraged her to identify with asexuality.

It was AVEN that just...I just feel like the breadth there of different stories and personal experiences, that was what made me realize I'm more like these people than other people, so I must be asexual too. And that was even before I knew the definition of the word. I was like, these people's experiences are more similar to mine than any others that I've ever encountered. So that's what kind of spurred me on to look more into it as a possible identity for myself.

In this passage, Allison draws upon a narrative of belonging, whereby the asexual community normalized and affirmed her performance of sexuality. She no longer felt like an outsider, but rather she could identify herself in many of the asexual narratives of its members. It is this feeling of belonging, as narrated by Allison, which serves to validate her asexual identity. However, she did not immediately identify with asexuality; instead, she chose to consider how this queer community would alter and influence her future-oriented narratives.

During her senior year of college, she entered the fourth stage of social drama, wherein she acknowledged that she did not perform sexuality along heteronormative standards and no longer wanted to claim a heterosexual identity.

I never questioned [my heterosexual identity] until I was 20. And I had a lot of time to think about my life, which was actually a good thing. Um, I started... there was sort of a breaking point where I could no longer deny that people around me were interested in sex and dating and stuff like that. [...] There was also realization that while sex sounded really good in theory, in reality I had no interest in it. So, it was a process of separating sort of an idea from reality...like, [separating] society's idea of what I should do, from what I actually felt...and I felt that was hard to disentangle.

Allison's narrative establishes her essential asexual identity by stating that she "had no interest in [sex]." She frames her sexuality as unchanging and constant; sexual attraction is something she does not experience. She also posits her asexual identity in contrast to

heteronormativity, by saying that heterosexuality was the “idea”—her presumed sexual identity—and asexuality was her “reality”—the community to which she belonged.

Shortly after claiming an asexual identity, she attended her first asexual meetup; it was a momentous occasion in which Allison realized that she was not alone. She was so inspired by the meeting that she started assisting with the recruitment of new members. She dedicated much time to her local meetups, encouraging individuals to attend and enduring several months of low attendance.

My goal was to get ten people at a meet up and eventually I did. I had tried really, really hard on that for a long time. And I thought that was...I wanted to prove that yeah they are here, and I felt like there should definitely be more...but it was definitely hard to get those ten people to come.

Allison drew upon a *narrative of activism* to further establish and affirm her asexual identity. She told me about the years she spent recruiting asexuals and the challenges of organizing meetups. Yet, despite all of these hardships, she persisted with this normative communitas. These narratives serve to demonstrate her continual investment in the asexual community.

Through these narratives of activism, Allison expressed feelings of empowerment at claiming her asexual identity. She used these narratives to reframe her liminal identity within the context of liminoid performances and construct a utopian future that celebrates her involvement in the asexual community.

I felt like the community organizing aspect for me was a big part of [accepting my asexuality]. If I didn't have that, I feel I would not be in as much of a position to feel celebratory about [my asexual identity]. That's why I'm always trying to pressure other people to do meet ups, because I feel "That'll be good for you. You'll like it!"

Allison suggests that, without her narrative of activism, she would continue to feel the oppression of her liminal identity. Her community involvement provided her with purpose and gave her something to strive for—a future in which asexuals could congregate and feel welcome. More importantly, she had the *option* of participating in this community. Even when her asexual identity felt, in Turner’s words, “obligatory,” she chose to take an active role in the asexual community.

Through the process of constructing and sharing narratives of asexuality, each community member gave meaning to her liminal status within a heteronormative society. As Fisher (1989) explains, narratives provide “a conceptual framework [...] for understanding human decision, discourse, and action” (p. 56). Storytelling serves to provide asexuals with a rational and logical transition from a heterosexual identity to an asexual identity. I witnessed this as each woman shared stories of social drama and breach to establish an essentialist identity within the asexual community. When each woman discussed her asexual identity within the context of her family, we revisited social drama and liminality to explore heteronormative expectations within the power structure of the family.

Social Drama within the Family

Heteronormative narratives of the traditional family pervade our society; for instance, they underpin every wedding ceremony and birthing story. Even within the LGBT community, domestic partnership espouses the heterosexual values of marriage, baby making, and monogamy. Parents, acting as chief agents of deployment, often seek

to align their child's sexual identity narratives with notions of the traditional family. During each interview, I sought to understand how parents influenced each woman's narratives of asexuality and whether they deployed heteronormative messages within the family. Each woman described her parents as having substantial power to instigate (or not) social drama within the family. Although Jenna shared a *narrative of redress* within the family, Sarah and Allison's narrative lacked completely the stages of social drama and they even shared stories of their parents' support. Instead of reinforcing the authoritative power of parents to deploy heteronormative messages, these narratives posited parents as choosing to support, dismiss, or negotiate their child's asexual identity.

Jenna often described her parents as fulfilling their role as agents of heteronormativity. She remembered her father, who served as a pastor, often deploying heteronormative messages through everyday conversations. Consequently, her family became a site of social drama in which she sought to reconcile her asexual identity with her parents' heteronormative expectations.

My dad, he insists he never put any pressure on my sister and I to be a certain way, to be any certain way. And to be fair, he didn't consciously. He did by example and he did subconsciously. He did put that pressure on us through comments growing up like, "Wait until you're married to have sex. Comments like that. He never said you have to get married, but you have to wait until you're married to have sex. And he would send cues through...I think we were in the grocery store after church so he was still wearing his collar and the woman at the grocery store said, "Can I ask you a question?" And he said, "Sure." And she said, "Is it a sin to have children out of wedlock?" And he just said, he just gave her his card and said, "Call me and we'll talk" or whatever...And then as we were leaving the store, he said, "You know, it's not a sin to have children out of wedlock. It is a sin to have sex out of wedlock." And so, there were all of these cues and they were all wrapped up in sex, of course, because he was concerned about the purity of his children. Um, it wasn't that he was trying to teach us that we had to get married...he was trying to teach us his moral values which assumed we were getting married to men.

Jenna implicitly told me that her father *did* pressure her to act a certain way by aligning her future within a religious narrative of heteronormativity. Through the telling of this story, Jenna constructs an image of her family as a primary site of heteronormative deployment.

Soon after she claimed an asexual identity, Jenna wrote a script exploring her asexual identity and performed it in one of her college courses. The writing and performing of this script constituted a liminoid performance that celebrated and announced her asexual identity. It also represented her breach of heteronormativity within the family and initiated the first stage of social drama.

Do you know what my dad told me when I, I ... I wrote my script and I, and I taped the performance. And he wanted to watch the tape, and so we watched the tape and my stepmom went out to the grocery store. And so he said, "Why did you pick this topic?" I'm like, "well..." He started to ask me questions about it, and then he said, "So why did you pick this topic?" "Because I'm asexual and I wanted to explore that idea." And he didn't say anything for a very long time and I ...and when my dad doesn't say anything it's either because he's upset and he doesn't want to say the wrong thing or he's literally completely confused and he doesn't want to say the wrong thing. So I said, are you okay? And his response was, "If you told me you were a nymphomaniac I would be upset. No I'm not upset." So again, it's okay for you to be yourself. It's okay to be myself and who I am as long as I still fit into his picture of who I should be because even though...even though being asexual isn't his picture of who I should be, even though that was where the conversation ended, even though being asexual is not his picture of who I should be, it is preferable for him to think that I am not having sex at all, than for him to think I'm having a lot of it.

In this narrative, her father's silence underscores the specific moment of breach. As Jenna shared this story, she seemed to find new meaning in her father's silence—"It's okay to be myself and who I am as long as I still fit into his picture of who I should." She seemed genuinely frustrated that her father was judging her asexuality against his expectations for her future. Furthermore, Jenna realized her father was contextualizing

her asexual identity within his religious teachings: “It is preferable for him to think that I am not having sex at all, than for him to think I’m having a lot of it.” Jenna employed a redressive narrative that posited her asexual identity as more desirable than an *immoral* sexual identity.

When Jenna told her mother about her asexual identity, her mother dismissed it as a temporary phase, and thereby, maintained the status quo of heteronormativity within the family. Even after watching Jenna’s performance, her mother did not fully understand the significance of Jenna’s liminoid performance.

We were having lunch. She thought...I thought she understood. She thought I was saying I was taking a break from sex. And then she came to see the show and uh, she didn’t even realize that I’d written it. My sister knew. We went out to lunch afterwards [...] and my sister said, “I can’t believe you wrote that.” And my mother said, “You wrote that?” And I was like yeah. And she said, “How did you write that?” and I said, “My experiences a lot.” And she’s like and I don’t remember what her exact words were but she said something like, “You’re not asexual.” I’m like “Yes mom I am. Remember I told you two months ago.” “Oh, I thought you just said you weren’t going to have sex for awhile.” “No...” So I had to come out to my mother twice. But that gave us the opportunity to talk about it and, you know, the first time we talked about it she had questions, but they weren’t...I suppose I didn’t answer them in a way that she understood or she didn’t ask the right questions or whatever. I don’t know. There was miscommunication there. So the second time we talked about it and had a much more... it was more of let’s clear up what we talked about before.

In this story, Jenna’s mother blatantly rejected her asexuality—“you’re not asexual.” Her mother sought to maintain the status quo within the family by not acknowledging Jenna’s proclamation of her asexual identity. Jenna needed to come out to her mother twice to initiate the redressive stage of social drama, wherein they could negotiate her narrative performance of asexuality and reintegrate her into the family.

The redressive stage proved difficult for Jenna when her parents began to scrutinize her sexual history. She told them that she tried sex with several partners and repeatedly found sex dissatisfying. In this way, she employed a narrative of displeasure to justify her asexual identity to her parents.

And that has opened up the door for very awkward dancing around the subject ... conversations about what it means to me to be asexual and ... clearly, I have had sex. And they don't understand what it means, and how can I explain to them truthfully what it means when ... if I let them assume that I am a virgin, then they can assume that I just haven't experienced it and don't know what it is so how can I possibly know if I like it or not. Um, dancing around, having to come out and say, "No, I've done it. I don't like it!" You know, having to dance around that ... and it's not that I tried it once and I didn't like it, I tried it a lot and I still don't like it. So it has awkwarded up my relationship with my father and my stepmom, but only when...and this is the worst part...it doesn't seem to have affected any other conversations that we have except when they're still trying to figure out, when we're having a conversation, what it means that I'm asexual. So, whereas if they'd found condoms in my room or if they just found my birth control pills, they wouldn't have to talk about ...they wouldn't have to talk about why I'm sexual, and I wouldn't have to worry about it at all. Um, it would be something that didn't need to be spoken. But there is a need to talk about this because they don't understand it.

The retelling of asexual narratives became the primary means of advocating for her asexual identity within the family. Yet, it was not an isolated moment of redress; rather, her parents continually questioned and challenged her asexuality through their deployment of heteronormativity. Through these stories, Jenna suggested that her asexual identity depended upon the persuasiveness of her narrative.

Dating, marriage, and childrearing became important topics during Jenna's redressive stage. When Jenna was considering her future within the context of queer performativity, she asked her father if he thought she could be happy without a partnered relationship. In this narrative, Jenna encouraged her father to co-construct her future

through discourse and was disappointed when he reified his role as the chief agent of heteronormativity.

We, my dad and I, were having a conversation and I said, “You know, if I, if I never got married, if I never even had a long-term relationship, if I never found the one person I want to spend the rest of my life with, would you believe that I was happy?” And he said no. [...] He, he said, “No, because I know you and I know that you don’t want to be lonely”...and it hurt a lot. It’s funny because he didn’t make me second-guess myself at all. At the time I was just like great, okay Dad, you don’t understand me at all, because for me being lonely and not being in a heteronormative relationship are not the same thing, you know.

One purpose of the redressive stage is to negotiate narrative performances of identity so that the family might reincorporate the child into a normative structure. However, Jenna’s queer identity continued to conflict with her father’s expectations for her future. In this narrative, Jenna emphasizes her frustration and sorrow at her father’s unyielding deployment of heteronormative ideals.

The topic of marriage became a major stipulation for reincorporating Jenna into the normative structure of the family. Through their negotiations, they told her that she could identify as asexual, as long as she did not completely abandon the heteronormative dream. However, this proposition inherently undermined Jenna’s asexual identity.

When I came out to my mother and father and my stepmother, um, their main concern was that if I found the right person, would it be okay then? And I said, yes. I suppose if I find the right person, then of course, it’ll be okay. And then it all came down to...and, god, I hated saying this out loud to my parents...It all came down to, you know, there is a big part of me that wants to have that life, that I want to be married and I want to have kids and I want to have a family because honestly I think I’m a damn smart woman and I think I could make some real smart babies.

Although Jenna’s liminal identity provided her with opportunities to explore a queer utopian future, her family insisted that she align her future with heteronormative ideals.

In the telling of this story, she conceded that she wants to pursue a heteronormative future. However, this narrative also suggests that she did not have many alternatives. If she gave in to her parents' request, her parents would reincorporate her into the normative structure of the family; if she rejected it, she would likely instigate another cycle of social drama. Consequently, Jenna's utopian dream became enmeshed with her parents' expectations for her future.

In another retelling of this negotiation, Jenna suggested that she employed heteronormative narratives to appease her parents. Taken together, these narratives reveal Jenna's inner conflict at pursuing a queer future and rejecting her family's heteronormative future.

I find myself lying to my parents and telling them, "Yeah, I still want to have kids and get married, blah, blah, blah" [...] And I told them that I wanted that because it's not that I don't want it. It's not something I seek. [...] But I always give Dad the caveat, "It's a little bit harder to find somebody to spend the rest of my life with because there would be ... it will be a little bit more difficult to navigate the relationship depending on whether the person I meet and fall in love with is asexual or sexual. There will be different hurdles to cross. I'm okay with that.

Although she would accept a heteronormative relationship, she suggested that she would be less likely to negotiate sex after eliciting meaning from her narratives of displeasure. Furthermore, her conflict over embracing a heteronormative or queer future continued to represent an unresolved tension within her life.

Supporting Queer Sexualities

Although parents often represent the chief agents of heteronormative deployment within the family, Sarah and Allison described their parents as anchoring and even

supporting their queer sexuality within the family. These narratives suggest that instead of instigating social drama, parents might support and encourage their child's asexual identity. Whereas Jenna's narrative revealed intense negotiations concerning her future, Sarah never experienced social drama within her family. Although Sarah's mother often spoke about her desire to have grandchildren, Sarah did not feel compelled to have children. Explaining her rationale, Sarah told me that her sister earnestly wanted to have children from an early age and that knowledge liberated her from heteronormative expectations.

I knew when I grew up that [my mother] wanted to be a grandma, but my older sister really wanted children so I was...I had the pressure taken off me right away. I knew she would have grandkids, so I didn't have to worry about having kids. That was actually a relief, so I think you should let all your children know [...] "Sure, I'd love grandchildren but don't plan your life for me like that."

In this narrative, Sarah summarized her mother's expectations for her future: "Sure, I'd love grandchildren but don't plan your life for me like that." Yet, this narrative suggested that while her mother communicated a desire for children, she did not mind when her children pursued alternative futures.

Although her parents presumed she would pursue a heteronormative future, they did not actively deploy heteronormative messages in the family. As a result, Sarah never felt pressured to date and never experienced a breach of heteronormativity.

I didn't get any pressure. I didn't get any concerns about the fact that I didn't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. That was nice that my parents did that. They would have been pretty accepting of whatever sexuality... my dad did say, in the early years before I came out as a lesbian, that he would have been more judgmental about that. He would have not thought it was right to be lesbian, but as he got older, he changed his mind. He said he had heard all of the lesbian and gay community education and that... so he was ... That's why I think it's good for asexuals to get out there and be out and educate people about what it is so

someone like my dad can say “okay. I get it.” And he got it before. I didn’t have to explain it to him.

In this narrative, we *know* her father’s previous beliefs about homosexuality—“he would not have thought it was right to be lesbian”—but in her retelling of this conversation, Sarah indicated that his attitude changed after she came out as lesbian. Through each story about her parents, Sarah emphasized her parents’ unconditional love and support. Sarah shared with me another story in which her parents felt proud that she came out as lesbian; they drank champagne and celebrated her newfound identity.

For many years, Sarah did not pursue partnered relationships or desire children. Yet, as domestic partnerships and adoption became commonplace within the LGBT community, she felt more uncertain about her future dreams. Her friends started talking about the joy of partnership and childrearing and Sarah began to wonder if she should desire this future too.

I had the [heteronormative] dream for a long time until I came out as a lesbian. I thought husband, children, and then when I came out as a lesbian I realized it just wasn’t going to work for me and I wasn’t going to have that dream. Then in the lesbian community, I started seeing people want to get married and have children and I thought well, maybe...

When Sarah came out as lesbian, she did not envision a future with a partner and children. Yet, as her friends started desiring a future of sexual normativity, she felt conflicted about her own desire for marriage and children. She started perusing lesbian dating websites to search for a potential partner.

When Sarah met Michelle, her own uncertainty about her future made it difficult for her to navigate their relationship. As a result, their relationship moved faster than she wanted; they started identifying as a couple and moved in together, even though she

wanted to proceed more slowly. These narratives, taken together, suggest that lesbian discourses of sexual normativity influenced her future desires more than her parents' expectations.

There is the joke of the lesbian community that you have a first date and the second date you have a U-Haul and you're moving in together. That things move too fast. And I think the joke is good because it makes people think about don't move, don't do it on the second [date]...slow down. (Both laugh). [...] My second relationship, I got into it faster than I was comfortable with it, so I think I learned from that, and I will ...in a new relationship, hopefully an asexual one, I can say "Let's take our time. Let's not move in with each other. Let's not call ourselves a couple until both of us are ready to call ourselves a couple. Because I felt rushed by Michelle, pressure, like if I didn't... if we weren't a couple then I didn't love her, that was how she would phrase it. Well, I do love you but I'm not ready to be a couple yet. I'm not sure about this. And I wish I had stuck to my guns, because that would have been better if we had just become good friends and not been a couple.

Through the retelling of a joke, Sarah conveyed her feelings about her past relationship: it progressed quickly and she felt pressured into the relationship. Sarah suggested that her partner used guilt and accusations to manipulate her future desires. Yet, after the relationship ended, she started constructing a utopian future that celebrates and empowers her asexual identity.

As I will discuss later, Sarah is exploring the potential of liminality to foster alternative relationships, but she still feels uncertain about whether she will form another partnered relationship. Some of her narratives reveal a desire for a lesbian partner who also identifies as asexual or has a low sexual drive.

I'd like an asexual lesbian relationship. I'm unsure about the romantic part. But, uh, yes, I'd like to be number one in another person's life. [...] If I found a lesbian that was sexual but was willing to say okay, you're asexual and we won't have [sex]...um, that could happen...but I don't think it's likely that I could find a sexual lesbian who could be okay without ever having sex...and I don't want to have to compromise and have sex just for them. I don't think that'll work for me

anymore. I tried it in my last relationship and it doesn't work. Although maybe I can find a super low libido lesbian who isn't willing to say they're asexual, but just say they have a low libido. There's the lesbian "bed death" thing in the lesbian community where you get together as a couple and pretty soon you stop having sex. And I'm like, "Okay, maybe I can find that relationship..."

Striving to realize her utopian future, Sarah wants to raise awareness about asexuality within the LGBT community. Through these efforts, she hopes to foster a local community of asexual-lesbians that can spend time together and pursue partnered relationships without the pressure of sexual expectations. She wants to raise awareness within the LGBT community to encourage more lesbians to identify as asexual. These future-oriented narratives reveal the direction and intent behind Sarah's liminoid performances.

Allison shared a similar narrative to Sarah in that her parents did not initiate the stages of social drama when she came out as asexual. During our conversations, Allison told me several stories wherein her parents seemingly disregarded heteronormative expectations and supported her asexual identity. As a result, her narrative lacked the cyclical phases of social drama that were so prominent in Jenna's narrative.

The first person I came out to was my mom and the first time I came out, it was like, "You're a late bloomer. Keep an open mind," kind of, you know, the usual responses. And I was like, "That went badly." And then a couple of months later, I tried again. And she seemed very interested in AVEN and the fact that we had a community on the internet and she was like, "Schizophrenics are 1% of the population and they have meetings. Why can't you guys have meetings? And, uh, because I knew her, I knew that was a complimentary response. So, after that, it went so much better and we started talking about asexuality more, and um, it was like yeah, I don't know. It was maybe the first time she had thought about it. I really have no idea, but her response changed the second time.

Although it might seem that her mother was correlating asexuality with a widely known psychological disorder, Allison assured me that it was a "complimentary response."

Allison suggested that her mother validated asexuality through an implicit question: why should asexuals *not* have meetings and hang out together?

When Allison's father learned about her asexual identity, he began to acknowledge it in everyday conversations. These stories, as retold by Allison, support and legitimize her asexual identity within the family.

I need to ask my dad if my mom told him, but he like suddenly knew that I was asexual and I was driving with him in the car and he was like, "You asexuals need to get together and have a conference. Wouldn't that be great? I could help you think of ideas for it." And I'm kind of like, "What!" It's like...what have we established here?! But, like, every time I see him—because my parents are separated—my dad says, "How's AVEN?"

In this story, Allison's father was both supportive and enthusiastic about her asexual identity. Allison, on more than one occasion, told me her parents continually encouraged her participation in the asexual community. Furthermore, they never sought to dictate her future by deploying heteronormative discourses.

Although Allison's parents created a supportive environment for her asexual identity, she still recalled the pervasive presence of heteronormativity in her life. Allison was particularly susceptible to the rhetoric of marriage that posits romantic relationships as more important and more loving than friendships. However, within the normative *communitas* of the asexual community, Allison began to question her desire for a traditional relationship.

From an early age I always visualized I would marry a man, and I think that was something that was imposed on me by the culture; however, this was an idea that I had a very hard time letting go of—that I might not get married ever because I don't care about actually being married, having a ceremony. I don't care about any of that or having a legal standing, but wouldn't it be nice to have someone that you would want to marry because you just like them that much? And just like, wouldn't that be great to have such a close relationship and, um...Because I

don't know if I could be *in love* with someone, but I can love people definitely very strongly, and so it...to me it's sad that I can't really have...I mean I can maybe have a relationship, but it's so much harder if it's not sexual.

Heteronormative messages, as presented in this story, reify Allison's liminal identity and represent, in Turner's (1982) words, "a matter of deep seriousness" (p. 43). Allison's question—"wouldn't it be nice to have someone that you would want to marry because you just like them that much?"—suggested that her asexual identity ostracizes her from traditional partnered relationships and, relatedly, from discourses of "true love" and "companionship."

Even though she might feel ostracized from heteronormative relationships, she expressed a sense of excitement at aligning herself with the asexual community. By evoking narratives of belonging, Allison describes her participation in the asexual community as something that "comes naturally" to her.

I feel like there's two choices. I could date and get married and have sex and have kids and do all that that I am supposed to do even though I don't want to or I could do what I feel is natural to do and ... it's hard to feel like you're different sometimes, but if you're doing what comes naturally to you, I think, so in some ways there's some inertia behind that cuz it's kind of ... I feel like once you start being yourself it's kind of like a snowball effect and I feel like, hey....I feel better. It feels better to be honest with myself and I feel once you start, it's kind of hard to stop. That's how I felt when I joined AVEN. I was like I'm really being honest with myself now, and I'm not gonna stop and I didn't so it's like it's freeing to be able to live according to your internal goals or whatnot rather than what is imposed on you. And I think that when you get a taste of that, you want to keep going. You're not going to just do stuff that people want you to do.

In this passage, Allison narrates asexuality as her more "honest" identity; one that emerged only through reflection and self-analysis. She also described asexuality as providing her with a sense of freedom. Although she is still bound to the norms of the

asexual community, in her mind, the asexual community provides her with flexibility as she constructs and narrates her utopian future.

As each woman narrated her coming out experience within the family, she described her parents as choosing to instigate or not instigate social drama within the family. Parents ultimately decided under what conditions their child would be reintegrated into the family and whether they would perpetuate the redressive stage of social drama. Furthermore, parents represent merely one source of deployment within a heteronormative society. Even when Allison's parents supported her asexual identity, she still felt the presence of heteronormative discourses seeking to dictate her future. Sarah also felt conflicted about whether she should pursue a life of marriage and childrearing when domestic partnership and adoption became commonplace within the lesbian community. To overcome the oppression of heteronormative discourses, each woman constructed future-oriented narratives that communicated a "queer feeling of hope" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 28). These liminoid narratives allowed each woman to envision a utopian future that defied heteronormative expectations.

Constructing Future-Oriented Narratives

The future is a site of resistance within queer communities because it is constantly emerging. "The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). The future empowers queer communities to envision a utopian ideal that can inform their narrative performances. With this in mind, I challenged each

woman to think beyond her liminal status to consider the performative potential of the future to generate new paradigms for intimacy, love, and companionship. During our conversations, I often aligned the present/future with liminal/liminoid performances of asexuality. Whereas, the present represents the obligation and work of performing a queer identity within a heteronormative society, the future provides hope, which allows asexuals to construct liminoid narratives. Indeed, each woman discussed moments in which she felt the oppression of her liminal identity and, alternatively, celebrated her queer identity through future-oriented narratives. The ability of each woman to generate liminoid narratives often depended upon whether or not she took ownership of her asexual identity and envisioned a future that celebrated her asexuality.

It seemed to me that Allison was the ideal candidate for constructing liminoid narratives because she was a long-time member of the asexual community, received support and encouragement from her parents, and felt adamantly about raising awareness of asexuality. However, when we breached topics of liminality, she often associated her asexual identity with obligation and responsibility, rather than play and experimentation. She and I spoke at length about her liminal identity and discussed why she did not often construct and share liminoid narratives. To explain her reasoning, she compared her asexual identity with her gendered identity.

It's the sort of thing like—is being female fun? I would say no. But is it fun to do your hair, nails, and go shopping for a dress? Maybe. It's like there's stuff related to female that could be fun, but actually, when I'm by myself it's not something...cuz I feel like if I was the only person in the world, I wouldn't be asexual. There would be no point for me to have orientation.

Allison associated her asexuality with an essential, biological identity. Therefore, she reasoned that she could not celebrate her asexuality because it was not something she decided for herself. Furthermore, criticism from her peers served to remind her that she occupied a liminal identity. Although there might be instances in which she enjoys belonging to the asexual community, she does not enjoy being *different* from her peers.

Even though Allison experienced a sense of belonging to the AVEN community, she did not often describe the institutional armor of its normative *communitas* as extending into her everyday interactions. When Allison came out to some of her friends, she says she received negative responses about her asexual identity that hurt and offended her. She attributed this behavior to the general lack of knowledge about asexuality within a heteronormative society. Yet, this ignorance made it difficult for her to celebrate her asexuality.

I'm still not sure what you mean about play; however, the way that I would see it, would kind of... it just seems so high level ...like, you have to assume a high level of understanding on the part of the other people. But sometimes I don't want to delve too far into what they do and don't understand, because if I expose that they really don't believe asexuality is real or they think I'm just making it up [...] and they say all those usual textbook things that you hear, [then] what do I think of them as my friend?

Although Allison shared her asexual identity with her closest friends, she does not often speak openly about her asexual identity because she is not certain what her friends know about asexuality or how they might respond to her asexual narratives. She would rather protect her liminal identity rather than become the target of heteronormative discourses.

Allison shared with me a story about a male acquaintance who blatantly questioned and even criticized her asexual identity. These stories, told and retold, reinforce Allison's liminal status within a heteronormative society.

Remember I was telling you about this husband of a friend who's like always talking about sex. She told him that I was asexual and when we were alone together, like he was driving me to a train station or something, he was like, "I know a secret about you. You're asexual. Were you raped? My ex-wife was raped and she's like really weird about sex now and real freaky..." And I'm like, "Why are you asking this?"

Within this story, Allison's acquaintance did not even ask her why she identified as asexual; instead, he uses accusatory statements to marginalize and pathologize her asexual identity. By employing discourses of rape and trauma, he attempted to find the *cause* of her asexuality and created a hostile environment for Allison to talk about her sexual identity. Furthermore, the retelling of these narratives perpetuated Allison's liminal identity and influenced our subsequent discussions about liminality.

Allison explained that her liminoid performances are limited to audiences that understand and accept her asexual identity. She would like to talk openly about her asexuality with all of her friends, but some do not understand the meaning of asexuality except within the context of heteronormative discourses. As a result, Allison has primarily explored liminoid performances within the asexual community. However, even her involvement in the asexual community seemed to reify her liminal identity and remind her of the work involved in maintaining and fostering her asexual identity. Her stories suggest that in order for narratives to function as liminoid, they depend upon the storyteller exploring ideals of hope rather than obligation.

When each woman shared her liminoid narratives of asexuality, I noticed two common themes. In the first, each woman explored dating and partnered relationships within an asexual paradigm. The storytellers envisioned alternative models for their future that deviated from the heteronormative expectations of marriage and childrearing. In the second, which I will discuss later, each woman described activities in which she found a venue for sharing her asexual identity beyond the asexual community; oftentimes, these activities fostered public awareness and dialogue around asexuality. I will now discuss the potential of liminoid narratives to generate new models for dating and partnered relationships within the asexual community.

New Paradigms for Dating and Companionship

Heteronormative discourses often emphasize the importance of dating, marriage, and procreation as benchmarks of success. I purposefully asked each woman to narrate her future within the context of dating and partnered relationships and describe how she might negotiate or subvert these heteronormative expectations. Since claiming an asexual identity, Sarah and Allison have begun to explore utopian futures that celebrate their single status. Jenna, on the other hand, strives to create new paradigms of dating that might push against and defy heteronormative expectations.

Sarah became especially aware of her liminal identity when she tried to narrate her future within the lesbian community. She anticipated some challenges to forming a partnered relationship with a sexual lesbian. For example, she does not yet know how to broach the topic of sex because there are no societal norms for negotiating an asexual-

sexual relationship. In this way, the present feels oppressive to Sarah because it does not accommodate her asexual identity, but she hopes that more people will learn about asexuality in the future so that the social paradigms will be there to allow her to negotiate more easily a partnered relationship. However, when last we spoke, she decided not to date until she knew how to breach the topic of her dual identity within a partnered relationship.

I really haven't attempted to date since I came out as an asexual. If I go out in the lesbian community and look for somebody, I probably will, but there will be this whole new interaction of—when do I tell them that I'm asexual? Um, I would like to tell them sooner than not, but I have no idea of how I'm going to do this. So there's going to be...I'm going to interact with them differently because I'm going to have this thing in my mind that...“when do I tell them? When do I tell them?” Do I get to know them first and then I tell them? When they start to hit on me is that when I tell them? Will my behavior change because I'm going to be thinking about that on a date or when I meet new people in the [lesbian] community?

Sarah felt apprehensive about dating because there are few societal or communal norms for sharing her asexual identity with a potential partner. Yet, if Sarah decides to date in the future, she will continually experiment with her coming out narratives until she finds one that communicates her desire for a non-sexual partnered relationship. Her question—“when do I tell them that I'm asexual?”—will guide her interactions and assist her in creating norms for coming out as asexual within the lesbian community.

During our conversation, Sarah also utilized future-oriented narratives to envision new relationship structures that did not involve domestic partnerships. She constructed a utopian future wherein she could retain her independence and live separately from her partner. This utopian model could also reduce the expectation for physical intimacy and foster new narratives of love and intimacy that do not revolve around the bedroom.

Being through the lesbian coming out and the asexual...there's a lot of ways you can define a relationship. And I'm thinking I want a relationship where we live in different places. We could live in different homes, and we see each other three or four times a week. You don't have to see each other every single day. We don't always have to be with each other. That's beginning to appeal to me, this sense of we don't have to be together all the time. Because I'm really enjoying right now the freedom to do whatever I want at home and not have to worry about it disturbing someone else. And there's bound to be something, if you're in a relationship with somebody, that disturbs them.

In this narrative, Sarah deconstructs the expectations of a traditional partnered relationship through her liminal perspective. She told me, "We could live in different homes, and we see each other three to four times a week." This narrative defies what society traditionally associates with partnered relationships--namely, living together and spending significant amounts of time together. She wanted to foster a relationship where both partners maintain their independence from one another.

Although this utopian model focuses on partnered relationships, it could extend to friendships as well. Within an alternative future, Sarah imagined herself growing old and fostering relationships within communities of widowed women.

I'm hoping that I'll get, like, all these old ladies who lose their husbands. And we can get together and say, "Isn't it great being single, and just hang out and do stuff and then go home to our nice little single homes for a week and be as gross as we want in the house and have it as messy or as neat as we want.

Within this utopian future, Sarah would be able to fulfill her lesbian desire for female companionship, while still maintaining her independence from these women. This narrative is especially empowering because it celebrates her status as a single woman and rejects the notion that she should form a partnered relationship.

Sarah has already begun to foster asexual relationships that align with her utopian future. She described an ideal relationship with a friend who prioritizes their friendship over a partnered relationship.

I actually do have somebody who is becoming a real good friend now. After I broke up [with Michelle], she was very supportive. Um, and she has a boyfriend, but somehow she manages to put...she doesn't always put him first. She'll put me first. She'll say, "I'm going out with Sarah, Bye." And off we'll go. She asked if I wanted to spend time together after a conference. "Me? What about your boyfriend?" "Oh, he'll just stay home and do his realty." I'd like to find another person like that, a couple more, so that when they do have to spend time with their significant other, if they have one, then I can turn to the other one. So, I'm making small inroads in that. But that's my new model...not the dream of being in a couple forever.

In this story, Sarah retold moments in which her friend prioritized her over a boyfriend. This narrative has provided Sarah with hope that maybe she can meet more women who will live independently from each other, while still making time for their friendship. Each of the models was especially meaningful to Sarah because it incorporated her past experiences and future dreams. By embracing a queer future, Sarah hopes to explore asexual relationships that might fulfill her desire for companionship.

Allison, identifying as an aromantic asexual, describes herself as "a person who does not experience romantic attraction." Since claiming this identify, she no longer envisions a future of heteronormative dating; instead, she would rather situate herself within a community of friends. During our conversations, Allison constructed utopian narratives based on her time spent living in a sorority. She maintained her independence, but also belonged to a larger social network and fostered many close friendships. However, since graduating from college, she has felt isolated from this network of friends.

I guess what I miss is like, in college, like with my roommates, we would do everything together. And that was sort of like an ideal relationship because we lived together and did a lot of things together, but we had our own lives too and we had our own friends too, but we were friends. And to me I guess like a Boston marriage kind of thing. To me, that's like my ideal.

Allison envisions a future where she lives with a community of friends that are highly involved in each other's lives, while still maintaining their autonomy. Although she does not specifically mention partnered relationships in this utopian narrative, her discussion of Boston marriages suggests that she wants to live in a community of single women, without partnered relationships to detract from their friendship. This narrative definitely serves as an alternative model for understanding intimate relationships beyond a heteronormative framework.

Allison told me a story about a friend who actively embodied this utopian ideal and found it immensely satisfying. This friend lived within five minutes of her closest friends and frequently ate breakfast with them and spent evenings together. In this narrative, one of Allison's friends claimed that she would never need a partnered relationship if she surrounded herself with her best friends all the time.

I went to visit some of my college friends...and one of my friends lives with five of her friends from high school, I guess, and all her friends live within a five-minute walking distance. I mean it's a huge community of people and they like randomly stop over at her house all the time, like, "We just came over to eat breakfast!" They're all like gossiping all day. And they all meet together at night and go to this one bar or this other bar. And it's funny because some other people were there too from college, me and two other people and they were like "We're so jealous. We want your life." Like this is just crazy. And one of my other friends said, "I wouldn't need to get married if I had all those friends." I thought that was very telling. That was an interesting statement. [...] And so, yeah, I mean I guess she has achieved what a lot of other people want, which is not just friends, but a network of friends. And they're all kind of connected even if they're not together all the time.

In telling this story, Allison emphasized that this utopian future is possible; you can prioritize friendships over partnered relationships and experience a fulfilling life.

Furthermore, even Allison's sexual friends found this utopian future more desirable than a heteronormative future—"I wouldn't need to get married if I had all those friends."

However, Allison's present life is far from her utopian ideal. Many of her friends are located throughout the country and those living in neighboring towns find it difficult to make time for her. During this retelling of her utopian future, she emphasized her desire to foster a community of friends that are truly interconnected.

If all my friends lived in the same city, I'd be the happiest person ever! That would be like my dream come true! But my friends are living in all these random places across the country. Even the people in [a neighboring town] I don't see very much. So...it was AVEN that made me realize how important community was to me. I had no idea until then. Cuz it helped me realize a pattern in my life...I like seeking community and I had never realized that before.

Allison suggested that her participation in AVEN made her realize that she yearned for community, more so than any partnered relationship. She described her desire for community as "a pattern in my life" and something that reinforced her asexual identity. Perhaps this is the reason that Allison has invested so much time into her local asexual community; she sees community as an important component of her asexual identity and an essential need that she must fulfill.

Although Sarah and Allison are content to surround themselves with friendships, Jenna's narrative reflects her ongoing negotiation of heteronormative expectations within the family. Because of this negotiation, she began to envision new dating rituals and norms that would inherently subvert heteronormative discourses. As Jenna explained during our conversation, she wants companionship without sex and she wants to meet

prospective partners without evoking heteronormative scripts. One story, in particular, demonstrated Jenna's new perspective on dating.

I had the most wonderful date with a guy that ended up not working out...I mean, we had a really nice time on the date. It was weird because we both enjoyed each other's company and the date went like six hours...we were together for six hours and not getting sick of each other's company and we went to a couple of different places and then I had to be somewhere, so, you know, we went home. And um, we both decided at the end of the day that yeah we'd like to see each other again and then we didn't kiss or anything like that and then neither of us bothered to call the other.

In this narrative, Jenna described her ideal date; one that lasts several hours, is enjoyable for both individuals, and does not follow heteronormative scripts. There is no kiss, no mention of sex, and no discussion of their future life together. Indeed, there is little to distinguish this interaction from a non-sexual friendship.

Jenna's liminal identity provided her with a new perspective on dating and has provided her with a utopian ideal. Although this narrative implies that Jenna *should date* and *should seek a partnered relationship*, she explained that dating fulfills her desire to meet new people and foster relationships that defy heteronormative expectations.

It was a wonderful date, I think, because he didn't seem to have any expectations as to where this was going. [...] It was just...like two people talking and getting to know each other. We had some conversation about our dating history and things like, "So, why are you on [this dating website]? Are you a reject or what?" Because there's that stigma of dating sites. You know, it's rejects... but it's not. I mean I don't consider myself a reject by any stretch of the imagination. I really don't have time to meet new people. But, uh, yeah, I don't know, it's great... more dates. If more dates could be like that I'd be much more comfortable.

Inherent in this narrative is the implication that most of Jenna's dates *do not* resemble this interaction. When individuals begin to date, they usually know what they expect from a potential partner, whether it is sex, a life-long partner, marriage, or children. Yet, Jenna's

narrative suggests that she wants to meet new people and enjoy their company. This narrative, if only for that reason, represents a utopian model of dating that accommodates her asexual desires for companionship without sex.

Envisioning a Future of Inclusivity

By constructing utopian narratives, each woman fosters alternative paradigms for understanding love, intimacy, and commitment beyond a traditional heteronormative relationship. However, to a certain extent, this utopian space is contingent upon achieving some measure of broad public awareness about asexuality. Appropriately, each of the women I interviewed is involved in raising public awareness and discussion about asexuality, though in different ways. Taken together their narratives highlight their desire (and struggle) to share their asexuality within both queer and heteronormative spaces.

As discussed earlier, Jenna used the opportunity presented by a class assignment to explore asexual narratives and share her asexual identity with her friends and family. Her script told the story of a young man who could not find the right label to define his emerging asexual identity and a woman who supplied him with words to name and give voice to his indeterminate identity. One major theme of this performance was to explore the ways in which someone might understand his or her asexual identity without prior knowledge of “asexuality” as a vernacular term. As Jenna put it:

In the script that I wrote, one of the things I wanted to explore was how do you show an asexual relationship and show it for what it is. That it is something more than friendship, but without a sexual component. And sex certainly still found its way into the script, but there’s a point in the first two-thirds of the script... what

we're talking about is the one character's sexual history and experiences and how the way that these all add up equals asexuality and trying to get the other character to understand that without saying what it is. Because it's all about labels, and here's a person who is not ready to own the label but he has all of this information, he knows how he feels. He doesn't know how to say it and he doesn't know how to say it to somebody he cares about.

This script, in many ways, reflected Jenna's own struggle to give voice to and name her asexual identity. She drew upon her own experiences and other asexual narratives to reject heteronormative interpretations of asexuality. This play became a liminal space for Jenna to rationalize asexual narratives and share her asexual identity with others. She also used this performance to come out to her parents and facilitate a more complicated discussion of asexuality within the family.

Although Jenna believes that it is important to raise awareness about asexuality, she also echoed Allison's sentiments by saying that she does not want asexual awareness activities to feel like work. She does not want to feel responsible for educating others about asexuality nor does she want to defend her asexual identity to others.

I suppose at this stage in the game we all have to be spokespeople for asexuality because it is so absent from our society, so hidden in our society, so we all have to be spokespeople, which is a little frightening for me. Because I don't want to be a spokesperson for asexuality. I want to do my thing, I want to go my spiritual route, I want to go about my life. And the fact is that I've become a member of AVEN and found this identity for myself. I feel obligated and not necessarily in a bad way, but sometimes I feel obligated to be a representative of asexuality in the community and be what I perceive to be a positive image of asexuality in the greater community

Jenna realizes that broad awareness of asexuality is important for the standing of asexuals in a heteronormative society, but she wants to live her life without feeling obligated to talk about her asexual identity. As she describes it, asexuality is only one aspect of her identity; she has other goals and interests in her life that have little to do with her

sexuality. She feels that when she participates in asexual awareness and fields questions about her asexual identity, she reifies her own liminal status.

In contrast to Jenna, Sarah spoke adamantly about her desire to initiate discussions in the local LGBT community and raise awareness about asexuality within queer spaces. She said that certain narratives within the lesbian community bear a strong resemblance to asexual narratives and she wondered if there might be more asexual-lesbians within the LGBT community.

I've heard of a lot of lesbians who get together and stop having sex. And I keep wondering, you know, there must be some more asexuals because there's that trend that shows up in the community where they just stop having sex. And I'm thinking is that because it's an asexual or is it that something entirely different...having to do with lesbian community? I don't know, but I'm thinking of trying to go to the discussion groups or support groups at the gay and lesbian centers and try to get them to do an asexual topic or something and I'll be the speaker.

Sarah evoked a narrative of hope as she speculated about the relationship between the asexual and lesbian communities. She earnestly wants to find more asexual lesbians in the LGBT community to provide her with companionship. Within this future-oriented narrative, she hopes to organize discussion groups and talk about her dual identity to inspire others to claim an asexual identity.

Sarah viewed education as a responsibility of the asexual community. She knows that it is challenging to be lesbian and gay within a heteronormative society, and furthermore, there is not enough information about asexuality accessible to young adults. She feels an obligation to share her unique perspectives, on being both lesbian and asexual, with young adults.

It's probably still not easy to be gay and young. At least there's a lot more information about what it means to be gay and lesbian. But there's not as much information about asexuality, and you can put a lot of information out there but...um. You can put a lot of information out without being out. You can be anonymous on AVEN and talk about a whole bunch of stuff, but there's something very compelling about meeting someone who is asexual and knowing there are people around who are willing to admit it.

In statements like these, Sarah performs a desire to raise awareness about asexuality and improve her local asexual and lesbian communities. Towards this objective, Sarah intends to come out as asexual within a multitude of forums, with the hope of fostering discussions about asexuality.

Allison often evoked liminoid narratives when she described her involvement in the asexual community. In addition to recruiting members for her local asexual community, Allison created a blog about asexuality. When she first decided to write a blog, she never intended to focus on asexuality; however, she eventually felt compelled to write about important issues facing the asexual community.

I had different ideas for the blog, like one of them was meals under \$5 and there were some other ideas, but I'm like...asexuality is the most needed one. And at that time like I'd only been out for two years, so. So I still have a lot on my mind and at that time there was only like one blog that was about asexuality ...there's been a lot more since then, but I was like, "This is like a service. There's like no prolific writing about this."

Although Allison did not initially expect to write about asexuality, she realized there was a need for more blogs about asexuality. As she described her rationale for starting her blog, she utilized both liminal and liminoid narrative elements; it provided her with an outlet for sharing narratives of asexuality, but she also felt a sense of responsibility and obligation towards the asexual community.

During one interview, Allison expressed personal satisfaction when people started to comment on her blog posts. She could see that people wanted to hear her perspectives on asexuality. Yet, she continued to alternate between liminal and liminoid narratives as she spoke about the pleasure derived from the writing of her blog versus the sense of obligation associated with it.

I remember I felt really excited like when I started to get comments from people...and when people started to say that they enjoyed reading it. [...] I think at the beginning I was like, "What the heck. I'll just write this blog." And I didn't have any particular plans for it one way or the other. And I didn't expect other people to start blogs, too. Since I started mine, a lot of people have also started one.

Allison describes a sense of pride about her work; she sees herself as a pioneer within the asexual community. However, while this performance used to distinguish her among her peers, she is now one of many asexual bloggers. Later, she would evoke liminal narratives that describe her as deriving less pleasure from this activity than she once did.

As we continued to discuss her blog, she told me she often wonders if she should take a break from writing it. Similar to Jenna, she seemed to suggest that this blog continually reifies her liminal status in a heteronormative society. Yet, she knows that her blog provides her with an outlet for discussing important topics related to asexuality. Even if maintaining the blog requires work, she does not want to lose the opportunity to write blog posts about asexuality, if she so chooses.

I'm a little tired of it now to be completely honest. Because I feel like there's other stuff I want to focus on. But it's kind of like I do think about asexuality. Why not write about it...write it down. So that's why I post less often than I did, but I don't want to be like, "I'm not posting anymore" and then lose the chance to post if I want to.

Allison's narratives emphasize her complicated relationship to liminal/liminoid performances. Although she is tired of maintaining her blog (signaling a liminal narrative,) she does not want to lose the opportunity to post if she wants (signaling a liminoid narrative.) Her decision to maintain her blog suggests that she wants to take an active role in constructing asexual narratives, instead of letting others define it for her.

During our conversation, Allison explained that all asexuals have the opportunity (and obligation) to contribute to the asexual community. There is no one person dictating our performance of asexuality; rather, we are a community of asexuals searching for new ways to celebrate our asexuality. This realization should empower asexuals to explore new performances of asexuality in their daily lives. If they look beyond the oppression of the present and into the utopian future, they can create a plethora of liminoid performances that celebrate their queer identity. As Allison put it:

There's no asexual community from on high telling us what to do or doing stuff for us. It's all individuals. I try to get people to realize this. I don't know if they do. Cuz if you don't do it, no one will. I think that's sort of true for the asexuality community. It's kind of like...well, you have to be the one to take initiative...Every single person has to take initiative or else our numbers will never... we'll never know our full numbers, and people will still think there's something wrong with them. So...like right now, there must be... okay this city has 70,000 people. What's one percent of that? Seventy people in this city...but I'm the only one I know and [...] I may be the only one that knows it. It's entirely possible and I'm like...doesn't it just make you want to shout it from the mountaintops?

Allison poignantly explained that it is important for members of the asexual community to contribute to the asexual movement in whatever way they can. If they take ownership of their liminal identity and leverage the asexual community, they can create future-oriented narratives that have an impact on our heteronormative society.

As long as the asexual community embraces liminoid performances of identity, it has the power to dictate its own future. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every asexual, insofar as they can, to explore and challenge the performative boundaries of their asexual identity and foster an inclusive environment for a variety of asexual performances. Foucault (1990) reminds us that there is no single way to resist heteronormative discourses:

There is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (p. 95-96).

Towards this effort, every asexual should utilize his or her own talents and make unique contributions to the asexual community. We must be willing to explore the performative potential of asexuality if we want to foster a queer sense of hope within a heteronormative society.

Revisiting Narrative Themes of Asexuality

By engaging in oral history narrative performances with three self-identified asexual women, I sought to understand better the narratives that constitute the asexual identity. These women gave meaning to their past, present, and future identities through a range of narrative strategies. Through narratives of 1) *social drama*, 2) *misdiagnosis*, 3) *displeasure*, and 4) *difference*, each woman interpreted her lack of dating and/or her sexual relationships as defying heteronormative and homosexual expectations. Through her narratives of 5) *communal belonging*, 6) *coming out*, and 7) *activism*, each woman

invested herself within the asexual community and, thereby, constructed an asexual identity. Through her 8) *liminoid narratives*, 9) *future-oriented narratives*, and 10) *narratives of hope*, each woman envisioned new paradigms and models for her future that deviated from heteronormative expectations. These narratives, though not inclusive of all asexual narratives, contribute to our understanding of asexual performativity through narrative and storytelling.

Chapter Five: Mapping Asexual Performativity

Introduction

The asexual community is comprised of many rich narratives, whether shared through community forums, vlogs and personal blogs, the AVENues newsletter, or conversations with friends and family members. The sharing of asexual narratives is a performative ritual that serves to constitute the asexual identity. As this oral history project reveals, asexual narrative performances are diverse, ranging from stories of difference to redress to celebration. These narratives focus primarily on the past and present, providing rationale and reasoning for their identification with asexuality. However, asexuals need to begin discussing the future of the asexual community. As they collaborate on and construct future-oriented narratives, the asexual community might create utopian models that deviate from heteronormative expectations and inspire our everyday performance of sexuality.

Presently, many asexuals build community around the AVEN definition for asexuality (“a lack of sexual attraction”). This definition permeates a multitude of asexual narrative performances, but it is only one way to conceptualize their shared identity. As the asexual community achieves recognition and acceptance within a heteronormative society, each asexual should continue to ask himself: what is my utopian future and how does it differ from heterosexual and homosexual expectations? Towards this effort, the asexual community might expand upon the traditional definition, which hinges the asexual identity on *traits we do not have*, to create new definitions of asexuality that emphasize *traits we have in common*. By creating narratives that

emphasize their common goals, aspirations, and hopes, they can celebrate the *presence of asexuality*, rather than the *absence of sexuality*. Furthermore, they might create normative models, symbols, and ideologies pertaining to asexuality that can be more readily accessible within a heteronormative society.

This research study employed several theories to explore the social construction of asexuality through narrative performances. Through a process of analyzing and interpreting the narrative performances of three asexual women, I have identified three major areas that might guide future research within the social sciences and provide the asexual community with opportunities for introspection. These areas include: 1) the construction of sexual identities, 2) the deployment of sexual norms, and 3) the creation of utopian models for asexual performativity.

Performing Gendered and Sexual Identities

Through this research study, I sought to understand how asexual identities are socially constructed through a process of sharing oral history narratives and challenge traditional definitions of sexuality using the theoretical frameworks set forth by Fisher (1989), Butler (1990), Sedgwick (2003), Muñoz (2006, 2009), and Pollock (2008). Although scholars have used these theories individually to explore the nature of performativity, I bridged several theories to analyze critically narratives that constitute the asexual identity. Primarily, I considered how each woman gave meaning to her identity through thematic and recurrent narrative performances, while also exploring non-essentialized and future-oriented narratives that might empower asexual individuals.

These theories have significant implications for understanding the social construction of seemingly stable sexual identities.

Butler's (1990) theory of performativity posits that gendered identities are given meaning through repetitious and recurrent performances and, thereby, situates gendered identities within the realm of social constructivist theories. By extending Butler's theories into the realm of sexuality, scholars can identify and contest essentialist narratives of sexual identity that permeate our society. However, since Butler's theory does not account for the liminal and emergent performances within the asexual community and does not provide a means of exploring queer empowerment, I adapted several additional theories to provide a more comprehensive analysis of queer performativity.

Whereas Butler's theory emphasizes recurrent (and seemingly stable) performances, some scholars believe that performativity is a useful vehicle for recognizing diversity within marginalized communities. As Dolan (2001) argues, performativity gives voice to queer knowledge that is "alienated from 'the real' of subjectivity" (p. 65). Performativity, thus, allows LGBT and asexual individuals to construct queer rhetorics of knowledge and deeply personal, nuanced narratives of identity. Performativity empowers marginalized individuals to explore the intersections of identity and even consider seemingly conflicting identities that constitute their sense of self. When asexuals share and celebrate nonessential asexual narratives, they may find it easier to resist the deployment of sexual normativity.

Not surprisingly, as each asexual woman constructed her asexual narratives, she consciously and unconsciously told stories that gave credence to the notion of an “essential” asexual identity. However, Pollock’s (2008) theory of performativity argues that narratives concerning one’s sexual identity do not reveal a given truth, but rather situate identity within “contested rhetorics of narrative knowing” (p. 122). Her theory posits knowledge as constantly emerging through a fluid process of (re)telling stories. Thus, each asexual woman constructs and maintains an asexual identity for as long as her stories support this rhetorical construct. Similarly, Fisher (1989) frames sexuality as constituted through stories of reason, logic, and persuasion. These theories are critical to understanding each woman’s transition from a heterosexual identity to an asexual identity. For example, Sarah claimed an essential lesbian identity for twenty years until she discovered the asexual community and began to rationalize her identity as both lesbian and asexual. The “truth” about her sexual identity depended upon her interpreting and rationalizing her past behavior into “knowledge” about her sexual identity. When scholars understand the process of constructing gendered and sexual identities through narrative performances, they can begin to analyze critically the specific and multiple narratives that constitute feminine, masculine, heterosexual, and homosexual identities.

When employing oral history methodologies to deconstruct narratives of identity, there is a tendency for scholars to focus on narratives of past and present. This is problematic, Muñoz (2006, 2009) argues, because queer identity emerges primarily through the construction of future-oriented narratives. Focusing on narratives of past and present will reveal only existing bodies of “knowledge” that marginalize queer

individuals. Thus, it is the responsibility of every critical scholar to support and encourage the construction of utopian narratives. In doing so, scholars might empower queer individuals to explore narratives that might affect change in their communities.

As scholars continue to employ performance studies to understand the construction of sexual identities, they should consider how seemingly stable sexual identities are given credence through recurrent narratives and ritual performances. This research study posits that sexual identities change as individuals contextualize their past experiences and future dreams against normative expectations. For the advancement of queer studies, it is important that scholars deconstruct essential narratives of sexuality and make visible the ways in which heteronormative narrative performances bestow privilege and status within our society.

Deployment of Sexual Normativity

Foucault's (1990) theory of sexual deployment and Turner's (1982) theory of social drama were critical to understanding how each asexual woman defined herself in contrast to heteronormative expectations. Within each oral history, the deployment of sexuality often resulted in a power struggle between each asexual woman and "agents" of heteronormativity. Through this deployment, friends, family members, and partners often sought to challenge each woman's asexual narratives and return her to the status quo of sexual normativity. However, as I witnessed in each oral history, each woman utilized the liminal space of social drama to challenge, negotiate, or reject completely heteronormative expectations. Yet, we must be careful to correlate social drama with

queer empowerment. Social drama is equally capable of reinforcing heteronormative values and marginalizing asexual identities.

Although Turner (1982) posits social drama as a means of negotiating social norms, it frequently privileges dominant discourses. Thus, when Sarah and Jenna each attempted to negotiate her asexual identity within the redressive stage of social drama, she became acutely aware of the marginalizing effects of sexual normativity. As Jenna negotiated her narrative performances within the family, she began to sacrifice her utopian asexual future for the sake of her parents' desired heteronormative future. Similarly, when Sarah employed redressive mechanisms in her partnered relationships, she inadvertently upheld the sexual expectations of these relationships. These narratives suggest that only through the absolute rejection of sexual normativity can asexuals begin to celebrate their utopian future within the asexual community.

Certainly, one of the most empowering narratives within each oral history was the proclamation of an irreparable breach of sexual normativity. Although each woman described the stages of breach, crisis, and redress as causing distress, it provided her with the confidence to claim an asexual identity. When Jenna first discovered the asexual community, she began crying because she found a community of people who actively narrated their breach of heteronormativity. In much the same way, Allison "knew" that she was asexual because her narratives of difference were similar to the narratives on the AVEN website. Thus, narratives of social drama, and the tension expressed within, serve to unite the asexual community and inspire its utopian narratives.

Given that social drama has expanded beyond traditional modes of deployment, an asexual individual is likely to experience multiple cycles of social drama that might inform her performance of asexuality. However, given that this deployment often causes tension and discomfort among asexual individuals, it is becoming increasingly important for the asexual community to provide alternative models for sexual normativity. Perhaps, if the asexual community interrupts or supersedes the deployment of sexual norms with its own normative structure, it might begin to solicit narratives of sameness/belonging, rather than narratives of difference/crisis.

The Future of the Asexual Community

Throughout each of my interviews, I encouraged each asexual woman to reflect on and narrate her future utopia within the asexual community. Oftentimes, these conversations bridged each woman's liminoid narratives (celebrations of her asexual identity) with her utopian narratives of hope. For instance, Sarah indicated that she wanted to raise awareness about asexuality and foster dialogue about asexual-lesbian identities. Thus, her liminoid narrative inspired her narrative of hope. Conversely, Allison's utopian dreams seemed to feed into her sense of marginalization. Her narrative implicates the many obstacles to creating community within a heteronormative society. Although Allison's utopian future is seemingly unachievable on an individual scale, it could gain credence within the normative structure of the asexual community.

If the asexual community searched for commonality among individual utopian narratives, it could create normative models for all members that might inspire our

everyday performances of asexuality. For example, one theme that resonated with each asexual woman was her desire to foster asexual relationships that were equitable to sexual relationships. When asexuals form partnered relationships, everyone presumes these relationships to imitate heterosexual and homosexual relationships and, therefore, support the sexual normative ideals of marriage and childrearing. However, the asexual community could create new models for asexual relationships that do not adhere to the conventions of sexual relationships (e.g., partners express affection verbally not physically or partners live in different houses). However, these models depend upon the asexual community conceptualizing the particulars of an asexual relationship and articulating how it differs from or resembles other types of relationships.

The asexual community could also create models for community-based relationships that might situate intimacy within a network of friendships. The asexual community could advance the claim that intimacy happens not on an individual level, but within a web of relationships. Hence, asexuals should not commit themselves to any singular relationship and instead foster a myriad of relationships. My point is that the asexual community could potentially defy and contest existing models that situate intimacy within partnered relationships.

Looking forward, the asexual community should utilize its liminal space to explore the presence of asexuality within a heteronormative society. This means exploring asexuality beyond the performative space of the online asexual community to include the embodiment of asexuality in our daily lives. How will asexuality affect our relationships and future aspirations? And how do we begin to recognize asexuality

beyond narrative performances? These questions should inspire asexuals to consider their future with a growing sense of urgency. Through its collaborative efforts, the asexual community could create new rituals associated with the performance of asexuality and challenge our society's assumption that everyone should pursue and desire sexual relationships.

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