Against Compulsory Sexuality: Asexual Figures of Resistance

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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2022

<u>ABSTRACT</u>

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the #MeToo moment, we are called to revisit old conversations about human dignity, gendered power, and the conditions under which consent can be freely given. To date, the shape of this discourse in the mainstream has lacked sustained analysis through the frameworks of critical feminist and queer theory, particularly these fields' insight that gender, sexuality, and behavior mutually inform each other. I argue that to understand and begin to repair the sexual politics of our present moment we must take seriously these fields' contention that sex, like gender, is a historically and socially determined category and, therefore, that its definition is malleable. Only by understanding what we mean when we say "sex" can we begin to disentangle the role sex plays in shaping social conventions and power differentials.

My dissertation reads the narratives of 20th- and 21st-century American popular culture through the lens of the emerging field of asexuality studies. Asexuality studies constitutes a growing body of cultural as well as scientific inquiry. As Kristina Gupta (2015) suggests, asexuality can act as a useful critical foil to compulsory sexuality, that is, to the unspoken social imperative to desire and to engage in sexual activity with other people. We see evidence of compulsory sexuality not just in the omnipresence and presumption of the (heterosexual) couple in cultural and social institutions, but also in our own assumption, for instance, that a single individual must be in want of a partner.

Reading against the grain of compulsory sexuality, whose discursive dominance Ela Przybylo (2011) has termed sexusociety, in this dissertation I analyze three figures of asexuality that exists on the on the margins of sexual culture. The figures of the Spinster, the Child, and the Robot do not operate outside the limits of sexusociety but rather trouble it from within. More often than not the resistance they face is indicative of the hidden mechanisms of compulsory sexuality at work in sustaining the society they exist in. These figures of resistance, canonically asexual or not, serve as

inflection points where the (il)logic of compulsory sexuality begins to fray. All three figural types are all slurs that have been levelled against asexuals, and are figures that, when they present in fiction, are presumed asexual until proven otherwise. I examine the way that they resist compulsory sexuality rather than claiming a straightforward asexual identity for them, because I am uninterested in the question of whether asexuality should be thought of as a distinct sexuality, or outside of sexuality altogether. Rather, embracing a relatively capacious definition of asexuality as my analytic expands the archive available to me and allows me to identify limit cases of compulsory sexuality where its operations fail to cohere.

Starting from existing groundwork laid in the intersections between asexuality studies and queer and feminist scholarship, as in Cerankowski and Milks's *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (2014) and Ela Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics* (2019), I use these figures to illustrate how compulsory sexuality masks the ways we have been preconditioned to allow our own sexual objectification and to participate in the objectification of others. To read asexually is to make a vital intervention into a conversation about the ways compulsory sexuality constrains our quotidian interactions with each other and with the world. It is to begin to imagine a new, more just way of relating that does not transform the other into an object of desire, but rather, as radical feminist Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz puts it, comprises "a relationship of whole to whole." I offer no definitive way out of sexusociety in these pages. I extend an invitation, though, to think of asexuality not as an absence or withdrawal, but as a potential to disturb patterns by offering new perspectives on old patterns of objectification, complicated consent, and self-denial in the service of adhering to unfulfilling narratives.

Dedication

This work is for you. Yes, you.

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Acknowledgements

This work is the product of a long effort to understand myself and the world. While I still have a long way to go, I would not be where I am without the support and encouragement of mentors, colleagues, and friends who have been in conversation with me every step of the way, both in and out of the classroom. Special thanks to Taylor Black, in whose class I realized this dissertation was possible, and to Priscilla Wald, who let me teach pieces of this material to our students. The rest of my committee, KJ Cerankowski, Gabriel Rosenberg, and AarthiVadde all generously gave me the space I needed to explore some uncharted territory under some of the least optimal writing conditions. Thank you for your patience and for your feedback. To my classmates and my students, thank you for letting me learn alongside you, and for your contagious enthusiasm. Abiding gratitude to Marina DelVecchio, who has inspired me since the day we met and who sets the bar high for being both deeply driven and profoundly good. Thank you for trusting me to teach alongside you, and for teaching me everything I needed to know about being a person as well as a consummate professional.

To my Duke family: Endless gratitude goes to neighbor and soul-sister the esteemed Caoimhe Harlock, who helped me birth the figures of asexuality. Without our wine nights, without her reprimands not to second-guess myself so much in my prose, and without the rare magic she brought to the graduate school experience, I don't know where I would be. LJ Cooper's DM prowess, unparalleled political impersonations, and poetic furor have made me laugh, cry, and believe in a world bigger than academia. Amber Manning's steadfast friendship, ability to set boundaries, and deep capacity to make people feel seen make me want to be like her when I grow up. I would be lost without the data-driven, bourbon-fueled, snarky friendship of Michael Gaffney, whose cat-sitting abilities have saved me more than once. H. Bondurant and Jessica Gokhberg got me through one of

the hardest summers of grad school and convinced me through their shining example that finishing was possible. I could not have asked for a better colleague than Lorenza Starace (V!), to whom I am indebted for graphic design skills and tactful email replies.

Before, during, and after grad school Kaitlyn's cheerleading and indulgence of my nerdy rants continue to be life-sustaining. Czesia and Grace have been with me from day one (or at least from year two). Even when life keeps us apart, I'll acknowledge our sisterhood in everything I write. Some people knew before I did that grad school was in the cards for me. Without my high school English teachers and then Joseph Rosenberg, I might not have found my way.

To Raymond: I wrote the first word of this at Kaffeinate. I could not have predicted how that day would change the rest of my life. Thank you for all the cups of coffee and bowls of kongguksu. Thank you for raising the goofiest pets. Thank you for everything we have survived together. For letting me into your family, for Appa and for Halmoni, for holding my hand through all the hardest parts, all I can say is thank you and I love you. I can't wait to write our next chapter together.

Last but never least, to my family and godfamily: It is because of you that I am passionate about making sure all voices are heard. It is because of you that I love to read and write. It is because of you that I care about making the world a better place. Each of you has been a model to me of grace, resilience, whimsy, leadership, fellowship, and deep, deep love. You taught me to be a person in this world and you will always be the heart that I call home. Thank you for setting the standard for the kinds of community I seek to be part of. Thank you for loving me for me.

Introduction

> Sex is not part of a relationship; on the contrary, it is a solitary experience, non-creative, a gross waste of time.
> - Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*

> There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it.
> - Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

What the Fuck? A Brief History of Asexuality

The problem with writing about asexuality is that no one really even knows what "sex" means. The problem with sex is that its slippery amorphousness has allowed it to be coopted as a weapon by all sides in a nebulous moralistic debate about regulating what kind of sex is "bad" or to reclaim sex as "good." Sex, that thing we do not talk about in polite society, nevertheless is everywhere; it governs our days, it grants us social currency, we expect it behind every closed door. It is the secret from which there is no escape hatch. It is an invisible expectation against which our individual deviance is measured.

This dissertation has two starting points: the personal one, and the academic one. The two are virtually indistinguishable. Academically, this dissertation starts in my second year of graduate school when I read Valerie Solanas's magnificent, blisteringly angry *SCUM Manifesto* for the first time. A self-identified young asexual woman, I was swimming with some bemusement through queer theory's many celebrations of sex in all its messy, community-forming, identity-defining glory. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, for example, find evidence of the strength of bourgeoning queer counterpublics in "dense, publicly accessible sexual culture."[1] "Sex," they add, "is everywhere present" both as an act

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[1] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 562.

of resistance to heteronormativity and as an identity marker beyond the act of sex itself (564). What, then, was the place of asexuality in the constellation of queer theory? Did asexuality's antipathy toward sex render it theoretically invisible? In short, why was everyone so obsessed with fucking?

The personal impetus for this project was as much a desire to see myself reflected in and legitimated by scholarship as it was fascination with the way the editor function in my word processor helpfully just signaled to me that "language" in my previous sentence "may be offensive to my reader." It is impolite to talk openly about fucking, but good luck trying to navigate your early adulthood without, as they say, "fucking around." If, as Berlant and Warner suggest, sex shapes everything from our models of intimacy to urban zoning laws, what place is there in society for the estimated 1% of us who prefer not to partake? How do asexuals understand our place in what asexuality studies author Ela Przybylo calls "sexusociety": that discursive system of sexuality that "is for asexuals very much akin to what patriarchy is for feminists and heteronormativity for LGBTQ populations"?[2]

Imagine me, then, adrift in sexusociety and trying to find affinity within a feminist or queer theoretical tradition, finally encountering *SCUM*. Valerie Solanas invokes the SCUMmy woman: "these females are cool and relatively cerebral and skirting asexuality" (62). Written in 1967, the year before she famously shot Andy Warhol, Solanas minces no words in her manifesto in suggesting that sex, money, and the patriarchy—all mutually reinforcing categories—are the root causes of contemporary unhappiness. *SCUM* is the radical proposition that the world would be better if the hegemonic structures that make it

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[2] Przybylo, Ela, "Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (August 2011): 444-461.

up were simply eliminated. Male-created systems of power that ensure female emotional and economic dependence on men, Solanas pronounces, are nothing but symptoms of male insecurity in face of the truth that fully self-actualized women are cool, cerebral, independent creatures with deep emotional range. "Screwing," she avers, is the main means men have to continually assert their dominance.[3] How refreshing: for asexuality to be held up as heroic and fucking made out to be the enemy.

Most of the limited scholarship that exists on asexuality traces its origins in popular discourse to 2001 with the launch of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) on asexuality.org.[4] Many point to psychologist Anthony Bogaert's 2004 essay "Asexuality: prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample" in the *Journal of Sex Research* as the first time the word appeared with any real gravity in contemporary sexuality-adjacent scholarship. But once I started on the road that Valerie led me down, I recognized a rich tradition of challenging the centrality of sex to interpersonal relationships and civic organization. Indeed, sex, and the strategic ability to choose not to have it, has been at the heart of power relations—especially gendered power relations—as far back as the written record can capture.[5] From my own liberal arts training I was already familiar with Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* which, as early 411 BC, speculated that pacificist women might prevail over their warmongering husbands simply by withholding sex until their men were too frustrated to continue to wage war. While AVEN has been an important tool for many

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[3] *SCUM* 39

[4] For a history of asexuality.org and the discourse out of which AVEN emerged, see Andrew Hinderliter, "How is Asexuality Different from Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder?" *Psychology and Sexuality,* vol. 4 issue 2 (May 2013): 167-178.

[5] See Elizabeth Abbot's *History of Celibacy* among many others for a compelling detailing of all the ways we know sex and celibacy to have been mobilized.

modern asexuals, including me, to explore our own identity and connect with other people who share our strange sense of experiencing a different reality from many of our allosexual peers, if I gloss its history only briefly here it is because AVEN's carefully neutral definition of "an asexual" is "someone who does not experience sexual attraction or an intrinsic desire to have sexual relationships" has always seemed to me insufficiently critical, inadequately political."[6]

By political I meant something like what Valerie did: that non-participation in a dominant sexual economy was not a neutral act. I meant the way an online community of asexuals revolted when columnist and podcaster Dan Savage joked that, at Pride parades, "asexuals [are] marching for the right to not do anything. Which is hilarious. Like, you didn't need to march for that right. You just need to stay home, not do anything."[7] Asexuality, as many people experience it, is far from being a passive thing. When every ad plays on sexual tropes, when every plot seems to start with a meet cute and ends with a marriage or at least a really good hookup, when strangers feel entitled to tell you that "you just haven't had sex with the right person yet" and imply the right person is probably them, asexuality has always felt like much more than a quiet opting out of one of the most socially sanctioned and certainly most widely visible ways of relating interpersonally. The more resistance I felt to my own asexuality, the more I realized it disturbed other people by putting them in the uncomfortable situation of having to think, maybe for the first time, about the function sex played in their own relationships and identity formation. Didn't silence mean perpetuating

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[6] The Asexual Visibility & Education Network, "General FAQ," Asexuality.org, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.asexuality.org/?q=general.html.
[7] Quoted in Angela Tucker's 2011 documentary *(A)Sexual*.

asexual erasure and the gaslighting of future generations who would nowhere see themselves and their preferences reflected in media or culture? If I was going to do this, articulate what was at the heart of the perceived and pathologized absence Dan Savage and so many others wrote off, it seemed getting messy—getting political—was inevitable.

This project finds kinship in a radical feminist and politically celibate tradition in the 1960s and 1970s, the nuances of which, I think, have been lost to the blockbuster divisiveness of the way the feminist sex wars of the 1980s have been remembered. Bogaert aside, asexuality in fact appeared much earlier in feminist discourse when, in 1972 Lisa Orlando and the Asexual Caucus of the New York Radical Feminists wrote up "The Asexual Manifesto." It occurred to the Asexual Caucus "that we should attempt to relate to others in their totality as much as possible and not view them as objects existing for the gratification of our needs" (3). Self-diagnosing, they added, "we realized that we, and others, had used sex as a means of self-deception, as a way of avoiding real closeness rather than achieving it" (4). Several years prior, the Radicalesbians similarly warned that

> As long as women's liberation tries to free women without facing the basic heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationship with our oppressors, tremendous energies will continue to flow into trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man.… It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women

creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation.[8]

The Asexual Caucus, then, took up the Radicalesbians and other political lesbian groups' challenge that the fight for gender equality had to start at the heart of gender inequality: the compulsory and imbalanced relationship between men and women. But Orlando and the Asexual Caucus further contended that most if not all sexual relations, including those between women, involved dynamics of objectification that hindered both self-knowledge and truly mutual relations. Really to get to the bottom of things, then, it would be necessary to stop fucking altogether.

Nor were the New York Radical Feminists alone in this extreme suggestion. In 1968, Roxanne Dunbar founded Cell 16, a Boston-based "Female Liberation Front" whose periodical *No More Fun and Games* is one of my main interlocutors in Chapter One. Cell 16 have attracted recent interest for their outspoken mobilization of asexuality and celibacy—words they use interchangeably—and for their separatist tactics.[9] Although Valerie Solanas was never a member of Cell 16, the group appear to have drawn considerable inspiration from SCUM; indeed, volumes 4 and 5 of *No More Fun and Games* quote Solanas extensively and feature a large, hand-drawn image of her scowling face with the caption "FEMINISM LIVES".[10] Like Valerie, Cell 16 were angry: angry about men, angry that women of the time were supporting other civil rights movements even as they were told that "women's

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[8] "The Woman-Identified-Woman" by Radicalesbians, 1970, Women's Liberation Movement Print Culture collection of the Atlanta Feminist Alliance (ALFA) Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
[9] See especially Breanne Fahs, "Radical refusals: On the anarchist politics of women choosing asexuality," *Sexualities* vol. 13, no. 4 (2010), 445-461.
[10] *No More Fun and Games* vol. 5 (May 1971), 128.

problems" were less important, angry at the conflation between sex and a woman's sense of self-worth. In the first issue, Dana Densmore wrote, "sex is very rarely about sex."[11] To this end, the group promoted celibacy as a way for women to reconnect with their authentic selves and to learn about their skills and interests outside of seeking validation from sexual relationships with either men *or* women. Instead of lesbian intimacy they promoted self-defense classes and personal empowerment. Only outside of sexual relationships, they argued, could women understand themselves as individuals rather than relationally.

In 2022, contemporary feminism is split on how to feel about what might loosely and simplistically be termed "sex negativity" or "sex positivity." I have grown up in a well-intentioned liberal positivity culture that embraces exploration and self-acceptance instead of shame. The liberated person, so my generation is told, can have as much sex as they please. In fact, sexual exploration is encouraged as a means of empowerment and self-knowledge. And yet, as Breanne Fahs has written, overemphasizing what we are *free to* do can preclude concern about what we are trying to *free ourselves from*.[12] In other words, celebrating the freedom to have sex as inherently liberatory—a no-strings attached form of bodily autonomy—does not go far enough to unpack the power dynamics that still might be inherent to contemporary sex, whether it be casual, committed, or anywhere in between. And just yesterday I listened to a podcast about how the "modern woman" who wants to take time to embrace being single still has to fight her own internal biases against being "alone" or "a failure" in addition to that pesky external pressure to fit herself into

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[11] Dana Densmore, "Sexuality," *No More Fun and Games* vol. 1 (1968), 56.

[12] Breanne Fahs, "'Freedom to' and 'freedom from': A new vision for sex-positive politics," *Sexualities* vol. 13, no. 3 (2014), 267–290.

recognizable relationship models.[13] Sometimes, it seems like the positive pressure is so strong that "freedom to" becomes an "imperative to." In this dissertation I want to argue that not having sex might still be worth revisiting.

Plotting Compulsory Sexuality

Here I am, then, a third of the way into my introduction without having properly defined asexuality or the quest I embarked on to find asexual resonances in my field of contemporary American literature. From the very start, I found myself thrilled and overwhelmed by the slipperiness of the term "asexuality" and the avalanche of cultural expectations asexuality unsettled. Beginning to question sex means disrupting relational assumptions that go to the very heart of much of the way we exist in society; as Valerie says, "Dropping out is not the answer; fucking-up is" (*SCUM* 75). I am uninterested in pursuing a model of asexuality as social isolation or invisible orientation.[14] For my purposes here I am describing asexuality as the disinclination to engage in partnered sex for any reason. This does not preclude the possibility of meaningful, non-sexual relations, but it is disruptive because it invites a second look at the role sex plays in infusing meaning into relationships. I am deliberately disaggregating sex from romantic love; people who do not experience romantic attraction, although frequently lumped in with the asexual spectrum, more properly have claim to the term "aromantic." This difference, while not explicitly central to my argument, is a crucial starting point to understand the theoretical importance of asexuality because a lay understanding of sex and love tends to view the two as mutually reinforcing.

In their introduction to the Intimacy special issue of *Critical Inquiry* Lauren Berlant paints a grim image of how central a received narrative of intimacy is to normativity, citizenship, and

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[13] Meghan Keane, "There's pressure to be partnered. Here's how to enjoy single life," January 10, 2022, in *Life Kit,* produced by NPR, podcast, 21 min, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1070682848.
[14] Hat tip to Julie Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*. I wonder if she would still choose this title if she wrote her primer on asexuality today, as

belonging.[15] Redefining new zones of intimacy sits at the heart of queer worldbuildling because, they write,

> desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them.
>
> …
>
> Those who don't or can't find their way in that [normative] story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable, even to themselves. (285-6)

From this one might suppose that the absence of asexual role models I typically encounter both in fiction and the real world might merely be a factor of a dominant heterosexual narrative. It is difficult to imagine being uncoupled because everything from societal pressure to tax law to the way most recipes are written for two or more people presumes that partnership, optimally followed by reproduction, is most people's end goal.

More insidiously, though, in literature and gender studies departments, we (sometimes I) have a bad habit of reading homosexuality into narrative silences.[16] We hunt for evidence of same-sex love where it has historically been forbidden in the search for something like queer history, traces of resistance that can bolster us when even our more "tolerant" contemporary moment feels hard to stomach. In *Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life* (2013), Benjamin Kahan calls this hunt for queerness evidence of an "expressive hypothesis," the counterpoint to Michel Foucault's famous "repressive hypothesis." Foucault cautioned that our discourse has never been as sexually repressed as we complain, and that what seems like a silence around the subject is in fact a proliferation of ways

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[15] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), 281-88.
[16] A tradition obviously hugely and crucially indebted to Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*.

to speak (about) sex.[17] Kahan, conversely, warns against overuse of a paranoid hermeneutic so concerned with recovering buried sexual expression that it "leaves no room for sexuality that does not aspire to normative sexual acts" (*Celibacies* 5).[18] Kahan invites us not to read into apparent textual celibacy yet another repressive silence, but rather to "thin[k] of celibacy as a sexuality rather than as an internalized homophobia or as a fig leaf for homosexuality…, understanding celibacy not as an absence or as a stigmatized identity but in positive terms as an attractive identity with its own desires and pleasures" (3). This is refreshing to someone seeking out asexual potentialities in the texts I encounter. As an example, a strong existing tradition reads lesbian potential in the lives of unmarried woman in the late nineteenth century.[19] An asexual reading leaves open the possibility of love—even romantic love—between, for instance, members of a Boston Marriage, without imposing genital sexual attraction that may not have existed.

But Kahan also attempts to distinguish celibacy from asexuality in a telling way. The conclusion to *Celibacies* points to asexuality studies as a possible new frontier for queer scholarship. Unlike celibacy, for Kahan, asexuality is more than an opting out of a sexual economy—something beyond even the not-yet married state of a bachelor or the safer option for a closeted homosexual. Asexuality is about more than whether people *do* have sex, it's about whether people *want* to have sex at all. By decentering the very necessity of a sex drive, Kahan writes, asexuality further "baffles, dodges, and unthreads the hegemony of hetero- and homosexuality" (145). If, for Kahan, celibacy is

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[17] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books) 1990.

[18] By "normative sexual acts" I take Kahan here to mean intimacy that ends with orgasm, since he goes on to insist on celibacy's right to the status of sexuality. But even this definition of "normative sexual acts" gives me pause because it leaves the teleological status of orgasm unchallenged. The short of it is that "sex" encompasses different practices for almost every person, and clinging too hard to labels and identification seems, to my mind, an endeavor doomed to fail from the start.

[19] The literature on Boston Marriages is extensive, and I'll spend a little more time on it in Chapter 1. Desperately curious parties can turn to Esther D. Rothblum and Kathleen A. Brehony's *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians*, and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*.

political because it offers another choice in the range of sexual possibility, asexuality seems to have more potential to threaten our current understanding of human sexual attraction. When some form of sex (including but not limited to the choice *not to have sex*) is at the heart of everything, what happens when you take sex away entirely?

It is telling to me that, for all his alleged excitement, Kahan's book is not about asexuality. The complete absence of sexual desire poses such a stumbling block that it is easier to gesture toward than explore in depth. This brings us back to square one, to strangers asking whether a self-identified asexual simply hasn't met the right dick yet. Reflecting on the barrage of questions AVEN founder David Jay faces on talk shows about what kind of sex he's tried, whether he masturbates, whether he is "the way he is" because of some kind of sexual trauma, Ela Przybylo writes, "In the absence of anything to confess, it's that absence that must be confessed."[20] Sexusociety typically prefers to pathologize, explain away, or nervously joke about asexuality ("Wow, dating is so hard, sometimes I wish *I* was asexual too!"). Przybylo reads this projection of sexual inadequacy as a defense mechanism of members of sexusociety who are "aghast at the notion of asexuality because through its formulation of lack it exposes the very hollowness of sexuality."[21] Confronted by asexuality, Przybylo suggests that many people who experience sexual desire (allosexuals) "strive to reconfigure absence into a sexual presence that *resembles the ideal*"; in other words, seeking an etiology for asexuality that still fits into their understanding of human sexuality.[22] It is comforting to think that there is something wrong with asexuals. I don't mean here to suggest that Kahan is acepobic for not making asexuality his object of inquiry, or that he would not have been "up to the task" of writing about asexuality at length. Instead, I think the paucity of existing scholarship about asexuality *qua* asexuality—a knowledge gap that has been filled noticeably and enthusiastically even since I started

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[20] "Crisis and Safety," 449.
[21] Ibid. 451.
[22] Ibid. 450.

this project—is symptomatic of the pervasiveness of what Kristina Gupta has felicitously termed "compulsory sexuality."[23]

Compulsory sexuality describes:

> the assumption that all people are sexual[, as well as] the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity. (131)

And this, at last, is where I wanted to land: with a clear articulation of the consequences of minimizing asexuality. Or, to look at the question differently, I am interested in using asexuality as a critical lens to draw more attention to the ubiquity of compulsory sexuality to our daily lives. Philosopher Miranda Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource."[24] Under a regime of compulsory sexuality, the hermeneutical injustice done, not just to people who identify on the asexual spectrum but to anyone interested in exploring the role sex plays in their life, is that the choice *not to* have sex is rarely held up as a viable option. Compulsory sexuality, to use Berlant and Warner's term, renders asexuality and celibacy both "unimaginable." And for all the liberatory potential of contemporary sex positivity, compulsory sexuality paints saying no as evidence of internalized repression and conservative gender roles instead of celebrating saying no as means of self-affirmation.

Compulsory sexuality is what transforms asexuality into lack. In *Singles: Arguments for the Uncoupled*, Michael Cobb explains that singleness is often held up as a state of arrested development,

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[23] Kristina Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and* Society vol 41, no. 1 (2015), 131-50. 2

[24] Miranda Fricker, "Powerlessness and Social Interpretation," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* vol. 3, no. 1-2 (2006), 99.

"a conundrum to be solved by coupling off, and as soon as possible."[25] Compulsory sexuality turns aloneness into the potential to be partnered—surely, every single person must be in want of a marriage. Plots that end in coupling have been so naturalized that we don't think twice about them, and characters who end up alone are outliers.

In this dissertation I, too, bow under the weight of compulsory sexuality, not to further legitimate it but rather to call attention to its shockingly many faces. In what follows, I trace the operations and contradictions of compulsory sexuality across genres and media, from novel to film to television, to outline the way compulsory sexuality predetermines or limits the kinds of stories that get told. The texts I draw from are all pieces of relatively popular fiction released around or after 1950; in this way they capture the stories mainstream America has been telling about sex, gender, and intimacy up to our contemporary moment. Rarely in these popular narratives, though, is there evidence of canonical asexuality. Whether set on Earth in the present moment or millennia into the future in deep space, the stories we modern humans have the capacity to imagine and tell are limited by the conventions of compulsory sexuality. We tend, as it were, to re-narrate the biases of our lived experience. Given the insidious reach of compulsory sexuality, rather than exploring the (limited but growing) archive of canonically asexual characters,[26] I use asexuality as a lens to read against the grain of conventional family and romance plots.

I have identified three figures of resistance to compulsory sexuality that, canonically asexual or not, serve as inflection points where the (il)logic of compulsory sexuality begins to fray. The Spinster, the Child, and the Robot are all slurs that have been levelled against asexuals, and are

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[25] Michael Cobb, *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (New York: New York UP) 2012, 4.
[26] Others *do* trace canonical asexuality in literature—a task that slowly, fortunately, is becoming less elusive. For example, see Jana Fedtke, "'What to Call that Sport, the Neuter Human…': Asexual Subjectivity in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*" and Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," both in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. More recently, Brittney Miles explored canonical Black asexuality in "Theorizing Conscious Black Asexuality through Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love*," *Humanities* no. 8, vol. 4 (2019), np.

figures that, when they present in fiction, are presumed asexual until proven otherwise. By examining the way these figures resist compulsory sexuality, rather than claiming a straightforward asexual identity for them, I join Gupta, who takes pains to clarify that she, unlike Kahan, is uninterested in the question of whether asexuality should be thought of as a sexuality, or outside of sexuality altogether. Her definition of asexuality—and the scope of compulsory sexuality—is therefore more inclusive of asexuality as a spectrum, which resonates with Cerankowski and Milks' 2014 embrace of asexualit*ies* in the plural[27] and Danielle Cooper and Ela Przybylo's openness to pursuing "asexual resonances" rather than seeking irrefutable markers of clear-cut asexuality."[28] Remaining open to a relatively capacious definition of asexuality expands the archive available to me and allows me to appropriate a conventionally allosexual analytical strategy of interpreting other figures in light of my own biases. Whereas allosexuals typically define asexuality negatively in terms of what it isn't, my asexually inflected reading identifies limit cases of compulsory sexuality and identifies where its operations fail to cohere.

Frigid, Infantile, Mechanical

In this dissertation, then, I take up three key figures of asexuality that find themselves villainized, alienated, or otherwise relegated to the edge of common plots about compulsory sexuality. I owe these figures to online asexual community tropes of asexuality being conflated with parthenogenic reproduction—asexuals are presumed to "bud" or "spore" like amoebae or plants—and to a long conversation with a dear friend about the dismissive adjectives and stereotypes levelled against asexuality. Cobb and Kahan identify

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[27] I am so hugely indebted to Cerankowski and Milks' edited collection *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, and to KJ for agreeing to be a reader on this project.
[28] Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive" *GLQ* vol. 20, no. 2 (2014) 298.

these, too. Frigidity, pathology, arrested development: asexuality when viewed uncritically is held up as a problem to be solved, a deficit to be compensated for, an immaturity that will be grown out of.[29] My friend and I settled on three asexual tropes that I could trace in fiction: the Spinster, the Child, and the Robot (whom I term, with intentional malice, The Fucking Machine). I turn to fiction to seek them out because I am interested in the ways that in our cultural imaginary we collectively narrate and normalize specific models of intimacy such that the casual reader does not call the assumptions of the text into question.[30] For all that these figures are minoritized or ridiculed, they are still there, a subtle and menacing presence at the edge of the plot that must be neutralized for order to be restored.

These figures do not operate outside the limits of sexusociety but rather trouble it from within. More often than not the resistance they face is indicative of the hidden mechanisms of compulsory sexuality at work in sustaining the society they exist in. At the hands of allosexuals, many asexuals find their experiences dismissed or pathologized; just as David Jay weathered intrusive personal questions on his talk show interviews that tried to pin him down as somehow deficient, so, too, do their cultural milieus try to force these

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[29] For an interesting history of, among other things, the word "frigid" as it relates to prescribed sexual normativity, see Eunjung Kim, "Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, 249-82.

[30] There is, blessedly, a growing archive of queer literature that includes asexual characters. These texts are of the absolute utmost importance for the work they do in increasing visibility of sexual minorities and providing queer-identified folks—especially children and young adults—with new tools to imagine themselves as belonging and, ultimately, to succeed in in a slowly diversifying cultural milieu.

I do not read these texts here. In large part this is because of the prevailing theme of "coming out" in many of these narratives: the story follows a young person's struggle with and ultimate acceptance of their identity as they receive support and validation from family and friends. These are essential stories that nevertheless speak very little to the lived experience of the many people for whom acceptance and validation has not been the norm. Nor do these utopian stories unpack the cultural baggage of compulsory (hetero)sexuality; many, like Dan and Eugene Levy's delightful *Schitt's Creek*, instead imagine a world where heteronormative bigotry has no place at all. While I delight in these stories for escapist purposes, I am interested here in doing the grim work of actually dismantling sexual normativity, not writing it out of existence.

resisting figures into sexusocial compliance. The unease they cause and the specific charges or deviance, corruption, or selfishness levelled against them therefore reveals the cracks in compulsory sexuality and says more about their persecutors than the figures themselves.

It is as Donna Haraway has written about the perspective afforded by partial, situated knowledge. Subjects of situated knowledge, as they resist and reflect dominant culture, are "others whose task is to mirror the [dominant self]."[31] But it is not their disenfranchisement that makes them interesting. Rather, as Haraway writes, "The standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are at least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge." [32] In other words, it is their capacity to mirror and highlight the usually invisible systems that oppress them that make these figures so interesting. And, where their resistance is successful, they shatter the mirror altogether. As Gayle Rubin has observed, "disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity."[33] When they appear in fiction, these figures challenge sexual normativity within the plot and inspire the impulse in other characters to tame them or to reeducate them to alleviate their own anxiety. Although any personal triumph they wrest in their individual narratives often comes at the

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[31] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge), 2001, 177.
[32] See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 584.
[33] "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, eds. (New York: Routledge), 143.

cost of friendships, family, and broader social acceptance, their resistance to normalizing forces begins the hard work of theorizing an outside to sexuality itself.

It is in this light, then, that I begin Chapter 1 with an exploration of the Spinster, perhaps the most recognizable and most frequently read as either lesbian or simply not-yet-married under the expressive hypothesis. Spinsters pepper American literature across the nineteenth century—from Magiscawa in *Hope Leslie* (1827) to Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" (1891)—but perhaps none so famous as Olive Chancellor in Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886). My Spinsters, though, are almost anachronistic: removed from the context of Victorian family mores and the conscious celibacy of the suffragettes, I look instead at what has become of unmarried women who have inherited new models for domestic containment and the maintenance of the nuclear family following World War II. First, I unpack the mechanisms of postwar compulsory sexuality in two blockbuster novels of the 1950s: Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) and Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* (1957). Tonally two drastically different novels, both capture the way that marriage and the family constrain women by imposing social and structural obstacles to women remaining single. I then jump forward in time some fifty years to chart how a 1950s domestic ideal persists through the social upheaval of the 1960s and 70s to continue to haunt millennial women despite the social gains and loosening of sexual censorship in the intervening decades. The protagonists of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) and Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (2013), living in the 1990s and 2010s, respectively, constantly battle the external and internalized stigma of being a single woman even in a time when it is—somewhat—legally and financially easier for women to remain unwed. Through these

characters I explore the conditions of the spinster at the turn of the millennium and, in the process, unpack some of the unresolved tensions in modern sex-positive feminism.

Having established the extent to which domesticity and reproduction remain unspoken expectations for modern women, in Chapter 2 I take a step back to explain the mechanism through which the unwritten scripts of normative sexuality become internalized. Namely, I suggest that an educational regime that excludes explicit reference to sex might be more damaging than comprehensive sex education, contrary to many conservative claims. Turning my focus on the Child, whose presumed purity—and vulnerability—becomes a repository for adult anxieties around sexuality,[34] I will show that the Child has come to occupy a space for nostalgia and self-projection in the adult imaginary, including the queer imaginary. Beyond the reproductive imperative the Spinster confronts, the sanctity of the Child demands that it be desexualized at all costs, not just by a good enough mother, the rest of society is tasked with treating the Child with kid gloves to protect it from precocious knowledge of the carnal. Nevertheless, the Child learns from watching adults, and from its own exploration of the world. Attempts to exclude compulsory sexuality from the Child's education tend only to render the half-aware Child more vulnerable to predatory adults, rather than preparing children to grow up to be more sexually responsible than the preceding generation.

Ignorance is not bliss for the Child, and ignorance likely was detrimental to the once-children who grew into adults. Children stagger under the weight of adult attempts to

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[34] See Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham: Duke UP) 2004, and also Chapter 2 for more detail. It is worth signaling ahead of time that the discourse around children is particularly dense and especially fraught and difficult to untangle. If your stomach clenched at the idea of exploring children's sexuality here, welcome to the club.

recuperate their own childhood. In this chapter I follow David, a robot child who plays by all his programmed rules in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* (2001), and Reagan MacNeill, the tragically possessed child in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971; Friedkin, 1973) to show how both the perfect child and the corrupt child are damaged by adult expectations and displaced adult shame. So long as the regulations surrounding childhood sexuality remain confused as to the purpose of an education and the meaning childhood is imbued with, there seems to be no way to do no harm. Furthermore, introducing figures here from genre fiction, I begin here to gesture to the limitations compulsory sexuality has placed on our cultural capacity even to imagine alternatives to our current dominant sexual regime. With several major exceptions, the default for nonrealist fiction is still to imagine an alternate world governed by something like reproductive allosexuality.[35] Children, for all the innocence we hope for them, are nevertheless rarely innocent in this fiction, and still bear the burden of (adult) sexuality on nearly every page.

In Chapter 3, finally, I plumb the limits of our cultural imaginary in the 21st century by sitting for a time with the bizarre trope of robots who have been programmed to be fucked. Even more than the Child, the Robot offers the purest potential to imagine an entity untouched by compulsory sexuality, because every element of robot consciousness is the result of a deliberate design decision. Some scholars of artificial intelligence have used the decision to program sexuality as a case study for determining whether sexuality and the

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[35] Most of these rare exceptions come from a gorgeous archive of feminist science fiction, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Carolyn Ives Gilman's *Halfway Human* (1998), and Samuel R. Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah" (2003).

capacity for desire are fundamental elements of consciousness.[36] I suggest instead that by imposing a limited human understanding of sexuality onto a fundamentally inhuman object, creators of Fucking Machines open themselves to the apocalyptic robot uprisings that usually follow in these plots. Whereas feminist science fiction (sf) is powerful for its potential to imagine a world free from the constraints of heteropatriarchy, both feminist and mainstream sf are perhaps even more interesting as diagnostic tools for the society that produces them. In this chapter I let the Fucking Machines of *Her* (2013), Ex *Machina* (2014), and the HBO series *Westworld* (2016-present) speak to articulate from their perspective the reach and hold compulsory sexuality has over them. Fucking Machines, for their alienness, are especially good mirrors to reveal what we as humans have normalized.

Logics, not Erotics

Before I dive into analysis, it behooves me to pause here to circle back to my special indebtedness to a lesbian feminist tradition that makes decentralizing heterosexuality fundamental to its politics. Gupta's term "compulsory sexuality" is an obvious riff on Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality." Writing in 1980, Rich reflected on an experience that is terribly familiar to me: after conducting a review of recent feminist literature, much of it sound scholarship, she noticed that "none of them is the question ever raised as to whether, in a different context or other things being equal, women would choose heterosexual coupling and marriage."[37] Well-meaning feminist attempts to re-theorize gender

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[36] See especially David Levy's *Love and Sex with Robots* (2007) and Kate Devlin's *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* (2018).
[37] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence (1980)," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), 13.

relations, even as they understood traditional marriage to be a significant obstacle to sex equality, still never questioned the fact of marriage itself. Rich noticed that heterosexuality was so deeply engrained into every facet of culture that its dominance remained unquestioned. In Rich's footsteps, I seek to decenter sex itself as an essential part of the human experience, and instead suggest that sex might be the root of many of the power imbalances that persist despite the inroads queer, feminist, and antiracist activists have made in changing cultural conversations.

"Compulsory Heterosexuality" is a reminder that, unlike Cell 16, not every response to compulsory sexuality has been to choose celibacy. As we have already seen with the Radicalesbians, lesbianism, too, could be a political strategy. Rich understands a "lesbian existence" to be "potentially liberating for all women,"[38] so that "heterosexual feminists will draw political strength for change from taking a critical stance toward ideology which *demands* heterosexuality."[39] For its articulation of an ideological critique that affirms a range of experiences, not just those of lesbians, Rich's celebration of lesbian existence reminds me of a search for asexual resonances that, across a spectrum of experiences, can challenge heteropatriarchy as applies to anyone. For some lesbians and politically lesbian feminists, though, liberation means building a new relationship to one's own sexuality and eroticism, independent of the many ways the patriarchy has limited the range and expression of the erotic.

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[38] ibid, 16.
[39] ibid, 12.

I introduce and tarry on the word erotic here because it is a word that has been deployed in asexual scholarship in ways that, to my mind, overcomplicate the matter. It is true that the erotic is not reducible to the sexual, as Audre Lorde makes clear in her seminal essay "The Uses of the Erotic" (1978). For Lorde, the erotic is the supremely creative force that suffuses everything, but that has been systematically repressed and pathologized in women especially. Women, Lorde writes, have been taught to fear their natural drives as something dirty or hysterical. They find themselves compelled to self-censor and self-efface to function 'normally,' an accomplishment for which the benchmark of success is set by the white men who determine the invisible standard of normativity. Lorde writes that "the erotic possibilities of women are 'fashioned within the context of models of male power,'" which I understand to mean something very like compulsory sexuality; if one's lived desires are out of measure with what dominant culture sanctions, the path of least resistance might be to continue to follow dominant social scripts, to deny the self.[40]

Contrary to the erotically stale marriages and internalized shame women face at the hands of male power, for Lorde, the erotic "is not only a question of what we do; it is a question of how fully and acutely we can feel in the doing."[41] The erotic is rooted in authenticity, which distinguishes it notably from pornography, with which it is often conflated. Rather, for Lorde, "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without

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[40] "Uses of the Erotic" 88.
[41] Ibid.

feeling."[42] Contra pornography, which alienates the body and renders it object (more on this later), the erotic is the life force that suffuses everything. Understanding that the erotic extends beyond procreative penetration allows Lorde instead to invoke the joy of sharing oneself fully, whether in communion at table, in sisterhood and conversation, during an encounter with nature or in a revelation of inner truth.

It is in this sense that Ela Przybylo has given her 2019 book, to date the only full-length single-author monograph on asexuality, the title *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. While for Przybylo a Lordean erotics challenges a Freudian erotic that posits sexuality at the heart of everything I fear holding on to the language of eroticism presents another instance of scholarly discourse meaning one thing but being interpreted by laypeople otherwise.[43] For instance, Przybylo uses Lorde's definition of the erotic in contradistinction to Freud's, writing that

> Lorde opens up a space for deep intimacy that is not reliant only on sex and sexuality for meaning but that finds satisfaction in a myriad of other activities and relationships to the self and other… The erotic fuels sexual desire rather than sexual desire being at the base of the erotic. Sublimation, in this sense, drawing on a Lordean framework, is not the sublimation of sexual desires or a sexual drive into other life pursuits, but rather involves the transference of the erotic into various activities, sex included. This transformative understanding of the erotic, rather than sexual desire, as at the base of all creativity, marks Lorde's work as an intervention in

[42] Ibid.
[43] Asexual Erotics, 20.

> Freudian-based understandings of the flows of desire and the well from which they spur. (22)

Invoking Freud here in the same breath as Lorde Przybylo invites a comparison that Lorde does not. Lorde does not use the word "sublimation" once in "The Uses of the Erotic," nor does she mention Freud, though Przybylo is eager to make her his counterpoint. To my mind, then, although "erotic" can and certainly does imply deep relationality to both self and others, I wonder if another term might be more productive to disaggregate asexual intimacies from recognizable and overdetermined relationship structures.

To this end, both Lorde and Przybylo make reference to the etymological roots of erotics as their justification for expanding its definition: the erotic in Plato is "a personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony." But while Przybylo conscripts erotics in the service of a radical politics of new relationality, Lorde doesn't need erotics to do anything other than, perhaps, invite women to follow where it will lead. Ultimately, I will suggest, the continued use of the word "erotic" in either case will always risk miscomprehension or conflation with sex itself.

Perhaps the challenging thing using Lorde to theorize an asexual erotics is that Lorde refuses to be used. She describes an erotic kernel within each of us that, when allowed to unfold and propagate, awakens us to better knowledge of ourselves, our desires, our needs. Because women, and Black women in particular, have been denied ownership and authorship of their own lives for so long, what is radical about the Lordean erotic is that it empowers women to see, claim, and celebrate themselves. And yes, this takes the form of sisterhood and coalition-building, but there's also a delightful selfishness to it, a refusal to be

erased in the service of non-offensiveness, of clear-cut categories, of men's comfort. In contemporary mindfulness jargon, the Lordean erotic is the radical self-love that recognizes love between more than one person is at its strongest when it starts with the love of self and cultivation of self-knowledge. True partnerships involve fully bringing ourselves into relationship in order to establish negotiation, mutuality, and compromise. It is only when we bring ourselves fully in relationships that we can learn and grow together.

And so, the Lordean erotic is decidedly not about sex, although it can be sexual. It is, however, undeniably sensual: the source of a knowledge that comes through intimate feeling of one's own self and embodiment, and the passionate fleshiness of one's beloveds. Przybylo, too, writes about a sensuous, communally erotic asexuality. But, though they seek relation and form community, the figures I examine here tend to be more intellectually motivated, more coolly cerebral than anything I think the word erotic implies. If, for Adrienne Rich and her second-wave sisters who aligned with political lesbianism, compulsory *hetero*sexuality was so strong that separatism—a kind of "dropping out"—was the most defensible position, what is an asexual to do in the face of an even more insidious compulsory sexuality full stop? Avoiding the language of the erotic altogether to stop it from being coopted by the sexual, I am interested in how asexual figures may instead "fuck up" the social world as we presume to know it.

If all this sounds more dire than inviting—good. I'll turn one final time to Valerie Solanas for inspiration. Thinking of the charges that have been levelled against any one of my asexual figures—immaturity, frigidity, naïveté, mechanical detachment, lifelessness—I

propose that they resonate more with the "cool cerebrality" that Valerie Solanas praises than they do with any kind of lesbian communitarian impulse:

> Sex is not part of a relationship: on the contrary, it is a solitary experience, non-creative, a gross waste of time. The female can easily—far more easily than she may think—condition away her sex drive, leaving her completely cool and cerebral and free to pursue truly worthwhile relationships and activities; but the male, who seems to dig women sexually and who seeks constantly to arouse them, stimulates the highly sexed female to frenzies of lust, throwing her into a sex bag from which few women ever escape. The lecherous male excites the lustful female; he *has* to—when the female transcends her body, rises above animalism, the male, whose ego consists of his cock, will disappear.[44]

Solanas inspires me for her virulent critique of sex, which stems not from prudery but from overexposure to and utter disenchantment with the act. Solanas manifested several sexual identities in her life, from lesbian to celibate to sex worker. For a time, she cohabitated with a male lover. Although most would argue that Solanas's radical sex-negativity has its roots in a lifetime of sexual abuse and mental illness, I take Solanas largely at her word for her capacity to imagine how freeing it would be to live without sex, or at least to understand sex as transactional rather than life-giving. Moreover, Solanas only uses the word "erotic" twice, just below the passage I just quoted:

> Sex is the refuge of the mindless. And the more mindless the woman, the more deeply embedded in the male 'culture', in short, the nicer she is, the more sexual she

[44] *SCUM* 61.

> is. The nicest women in our 'society' are raving sex maniacs. But, being just awfully, awfully nice, they don't, of course descend to fucking -- that's uncouth -- rather they make love, commune by means of their bodies and establish sensual rapport; the literary ones are attuned to the throb of Eros and attain a clutch upon the Universe; the religious have spiritual communion with the Divine Sensualism; the mystics merge with the Erotic Principle and blend with the Cosmos, and the acid heads contact their erotic cells. (61-2)

The cynicism is glorious. While the erotic drive of Solanas's "good girls" here can be sublimated into religion, literature, or mysticism, and so could map onto a Lordean understanding of the range of the erotic, we must not forget that literature, religion, and mysticism risk inclusion in male culture, whereas the properly scummy woman, eschewing the glorification of the erotic on some higher plane that men have designated, is happy to reduce fucking to fucking. Solanas knows that sex is never not transactional. Perhaps Lorde's vision is of a glass half full, whereas Solanas' glass is decidedly half empty, because life keeps kicking it over.

The thing is, there's a utopian impulse hidden in a reparative approach to erotics and the sex positivity that mostly prevails today. But, as a woman nearing her nine-year anniversary of being in therapy, I cannot fathom how much deconditioning a person would need to embrace authentic, self-compassionate, genuinely joyful erotics, especially in this day and age. In this dissertation I eschew erotics in large part because I no longer believe they can be disentangled from the sexuality to which they have been debased. Perhaps my resistance comes down to a difference of approach in pursuit of revolution: do we honor the

divine within ourselves and hope that it will set us free, or do we drag revolution kicking and screaming into the messy world we live in, and defend our liberty with our nails and our teeth? Frankly, Solanas' vision seems more realistic, and I don't say this because I don't believe in women's inner strength and grace. I just think the system is too utterly fucked to be changed merely through our shining, pristine example.

I conclude thus with all due respect to Audre Lorde, who fought hard and self-described as a poet-warrior. Her project of reclaiming the erotic from the uses to which it has been utterly debased is so, so powerful, and cannot be other than an uphill battle. But I think this is a fight that will be won on dirtier ground and that requires, rather than a reclamation of the classical, a naming and creation of something utterly new. Asexuality will contain elements of the erotic to be sure: self-assuredness, authenticity, a creative drive to make every part of the world kinder, better, and more beautiful. But insofar as the figures of asexuality I deploy here are interested in a greater good, it is inherently a selfish, arguably antisocial one. While appealing, Lorde's idea of deep and full and powerful sharing of oneself is also daunting. Because relationships are utilitarian more often than not. Because saying no is powerful, but it's also *hard*, and because people don't hear you when you say it half the time. Because what we seek in relationships with others is rarely fully who they are, but rather the version of themselves we want or need them to be. And that's okay.

Chapter 1: The Spinster

It is through sex … that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his [*sic*] own intelligibility.

— Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*

Sex is Not a Natural Act: Genealogy of the American Spinster

This chapter complains that compulsory sexuality manifests in American popular culture through a pervasive insistence on domestic bliss. This domesticity is primarily, though not exclusively, heterosexual and reproductive. In this way, my work on the spinster anticipates the response I will make in my next chapter to Lee Edelman's critique of a particular focus on the child and on reproductive futurity, which function as particular boogeymen to antisocial queer theory.[1] Contra Edelman, I argue that nonreproductive fucking for fucking's sake does not solve the problems inherent to coupled sex. I take Edelman's argument one step further to explore the implications of not having sex at all.

So, I give my attention to the single, the celibate, the uncoupled. I pay special homage to the asexual spinster who has haunted American literature at least since 1885 with Henry James's *The Bostonians*. The way Basil Ransom describes his unwed cousin Olive Chancellor upon their first meeting is telling:

> Miss Chancellor was a signal old maid. This was her quality, her destiny; nothing could be more distinctly written. There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being… She gave him an uneasy feeling—the sense that you

[1] See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* (Durham, Duke UP), 2003.

> could never be safe with a person who took things so hard.… She had absolutely no figure, and presented a certain appearance of feeling cold… (James 18-19).[2]

Poor Olive Chancellor. For over a century the Basils of the world have reduced her to a shorthand for everything a woman ought not to be: cold, unfriendly, and unaccommodating. Ladies, get yourselves a husband, or you, too, risk being just as unlovable and unprepossessing as she.

But I think, the novel becomes more interesting when we try to articulate what specifically Basil finds so distasteful about Olive. Even before he comes to know his cousin well, even before she becomes his rival for the attention of the lovely Miss Verena Tarrant, Basil detects something in Olive that chills him completely. He perceives, as it were, the frigidity of a woman who holds tightly to unpopular political ideals and who refuses to soften herself as a rhetorical strategy. Olive, in fact, offers no olive branch. In her acerbic gravity she is the foremother of radical feminists to come—think of the ease with which we dismiss Valerie Solanas with a laugh. To take Olive Chancellor, to take the SCUM Manifesto at face value would be to admit the tremendous threat of the marginalized—of the single women that American culture has contained by marking them instead as pitiable, as old maid-ish, as too fringe to be taken seriously.

Others[3] have written convincingly before me that Olive Chancellor, like the scores of unmarried woman whose stories of fulfilling and transgression go untold intentionally or

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[2] James, Henry, and Daniel Karlin, *The Bostonians*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P) 2019.

[3] See David Van Leer, "A World of Female Friendships," in *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, Edited by J. R. Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999): 93–109. For a more recent interpretation that is open to Olive-as-celibate, see to Will Clark, "Narrative Time and Anti-Queer Prejudice in Henry James's The Bostonians," *The Henry James Review* 41, no. 2 (2020): 116-134. doi:10.1353/hjr.2020.0013.

otherwise, represents a lesbian experience that passes under the guise of spinsterhood. *The Bostonians* certainly implicates real life "Boston marriages"—those unions between unwed women who lived together as 'friends' to hide their same-sex attraction to one another.[4] And certainly, the existence of Boston marriages points to a heterosexist structural reality for much of history whereby it has been difficult, if not fiscally and socially impossible, for women to live alone without the financial support of their families and the all-important will of the father. As a highly educated, financially independent white woman with certain social supports in place, Olive Chancellor occupies a social position that has been accessible to a relative minority of women then or now—a point that cannot be overstated. Structural obstacles to self-determination still tie many women to patriarchal family structures and self-concepts. And yet—

My project proposes to take Olive Chancellor at her word. I fear that to cast Olive as a closeted lesbian is not only to fall victim to the expressive hypothesis[5] whereby we misread queer sexuality into every silence, every closet since Foucault, but also to neutralize the very real threat that an asexual Olive Chancellor, an asexual spinster, poses to the status quo of compulsory sexuality. This chapter takes celibacy like Olive's seriously because the way her celibacy—and not her putative lesbianism—villainizes her speaks volumes about what is ideologically at stake in the continued erasure of asexual possibilities. As Indra Allen writes in *No More Fun And Games*:

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[4] For reference, see Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), and Esther Rosenblum and Kathleen A. Brehony, eds., *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians* (1993).
[5] See Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies*.

> If you're celibate and they know it, then they've got to relate to you on the other basis, because there's no other basis. Because you won't let them relate on the sex basis. And the only other thing that's open is human-to-human.[6]

Allen's incitement to interact with another human as a full person, rather than to reduce them to their sexual function, is perhaps more utopian than it sounds on the face of it. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, the men who stumble across a country composed entirely of women lament the utter lack of conflict that ensues in a civilization free from jealousy and objectification. "The drama of the country was—to our taste—rather flat," the men report. "You see, they lacked the sex motive and with it, jealousy. They had no interplay of warring nations, no aristocracy and its ambitions, no wealth and poverty oppression."[7] Outside the familiar structure of heterosexual intimacy, they muse, it becomes difficult to know how to interact: "When a man has nothing to give a woman, is dependent wholly on his personal attraction, his courtship is under limitations."[8] So, too, in Ursula LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*. A human envoy is sent to Gethen, a planet of ambisexual beings who only rarely enter kemmer, or, the fertile state of their own hormonal cycle. Outside of kemmer, people from Gethen interact purely platonically, on a human-to-human rather than sexual basis. Gendry, the envoy, writes,

> What is very hard for us to understand is that, four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all. Room is made for sex, plenty of room; but a room,

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[6] Dana Densmore, "Why I Am Celibate: Conversation with Indra Allen," *No More Fun and Games,* vol. 6 (May 1973), 128.
[7] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1919; Project Guttenberg 2008), Chap. 9, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32/32-h/32-h.htm#link2HCH0003.
[8] Ibid, Chap. 8.

> as it were, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and in its continuity, is without sex.[9]

And again, in a warning against future visitors to Gethen, he adds,

> unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect or subtle the indications of regard or appreciation. On winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience.[10]

All this to say, the discomfort that characters in speculative fiction experience when faced with asexual sociality suggests how deeply engrained the expectations of sexuosociety truly are. While the daily injunctions to allosexuality have largely been so normalized as to become invisible, I argue that the strongly negative portrayal of the Spinster in American fiction is one way into understanding how much work goes into maintaining the institution of coupledom. The spinster qua Olive Chancellor is held up as a warning of how pitiable and socially inept the rest of us would be if we, too, chose friendship and intellectual life over the pursuit of sexual partnership as the cornerstone of how to live our lives.

Tellingly, Olive has few canonical descendants; just as in *Herland* it was difficult to imagine a plot to a story not charged with sexuality, so, too, do Spinsters at best typically occupy cautionary roles on the margins of mainstream plotlines. The occasional genuine oddballs slip through the cracks—Merricat and Constance in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, for instance—but usually in the guise of ostracized witches forced

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[9] Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969, (New York: Ace Books, 2003), 99.
[10] Ibid 101.

to live outside town. In the social logic of Jackson's story, Merricat and Constance's asexual intimacy and preference for sisterhood makes them the laughingstock of "normal" people. Conversely, in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*, Mary (Hatch) Bailey assures George Bailey that she married him and all his problems "to keep from being an old maid."[11]

Single women in fiction often end up partnered by the end of the story—their fear of solitude constitutes a primary character motivation and the chance to save the damsel from her distress motivates many a hero's journey. This is the classical romance plot, the one that leaves Judith Roof asking, "why is the story always the same?"[12] (*Come as you Are*). Popular feminist publications have taken up Roof's question more recently in books like Kate Bolick's *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* (2015) or Catherine Gray's *The Unexpected Joy of Being Single* Bolick and Gray make much ado about the (re)discovery that a person—always a woman, here—can be a whole person without being partnered. Their lingering astonishment at the joys of singleness and the odyssey they have to undertake to make singleness possible in their worldview proves how insidious the expectation of coupledom remains. Queer literary theory tells us the persistence of this amatonormativity is a consequence of the way narrative convention reproduces and is produced by [hetero]sexual ideology. In this chapter I argue that the Spinster lurks at the edge of the romance plot to enforce its supremacy.

I explore the asexuality of the Spinster in a roundabout way. Because Spinsters are so rarely afforded plot lines of their own, I examine instead the way they have been weaponized

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[11] *It's A Wonderful Life*, directed by Frank Capra (Paramount Pictures, 1946).
[12] Judith Roof, *Come as you Are*.

as a warning to middle class white women in particular that marriage is their only viable social option. As Michael Cobb laments in *Single*, "part of the reason being single is terrible is that it's been made into a mystifying condition, marked by failure, characterized by an almost unassimilable oddity despite its always threatening ubiquity."[13] The Spinster's inverse, as I have suggested, is an overreliance on the myth of domestic bliss that has long been a cornerstone of feminist critique. Specifically, this chapter interrogates the way that 1950s popular fiction counters resistance to a suffocating model of housewifery by poising ending up a Spinster as a far worse fate. As has been well-documented, the end of World War II brought with it a resurgence of the nuclear family and especially of traditional gender roles.[14] Middle-class white women who had taken to the workplace during the war found themselves compelled to return to the domestic sphere to raise the children of the Baby Boom as well as to shield their shell-shocked husbands from the indignity of sharing the role of virile breadwinner with their wives. The narrative of the fifties-era housewife lingers through our present moment: think *Mad Men*'s Betty Draper and think also of the bizarre nostalgia in our present moment for a mythological nuclear family that, in Stephanie Coontz's words, mourns "the way we never were."[15]

The two best-selling novels at the heart of this chapter—Sloan Wilson's 1955 *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and Grace Metalious's 1956 *Peyton Place* trace the mechanisms of the villainization of Spinsterhood and the insistence that reproductive marital bliss was an essential part of American adulthood. The consequences of this allosexual propaganda still

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[13] *Single* 4.
[14] Elain Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*.
[15] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 2016 rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

linger in more contemporary post-sexual-revolution fiction, though the transgressive possibilities of Spinsterhood resonate slightly differently. In Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (2013) Nora's longing for companionship manifests as a pathological and magpie like obsession with other people's families, a cautionary tale that single women must be dangerously unbalanced. Conversely, in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), the mere presence of the asexually coded protagonist Mia Warren threatens to undo a highly respectable Shaker Heights family who, upon coming to know her, wonder what if anything they could have done differently in their own lives. One thing connects these four texts: whether by her own analysis or that of those who shun her, the unmarried and uncoupled asexual Spinster, lonely or otherwise, poses a distinct threat to an invisible but crucial foundational myth of American society: that for every "single man in possession of a good fortune…in want of a wife," and vice versa, there must be a spouse ready and waiting.[16]

These novels capture a strange moment in the American psyche, coming on the heels not only of the fallout of World War II but also of the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* in 1948, followed by *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Under the purview of the National Research Council's Committee for Research on Problems of Sex and funded by the Medical Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Kinsey Reports were an instant and surprise bestseller, with *SBHM* entering its sixth printing within ten days of its first publication.[17] The reports surveyed nearly 12,000 Americans to conclude that most Americans were having more, and more interesting sex than the limited

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[16] Howdy, Jane Austen. The more things change, the more they stay the same.
[17] Ron Jackson Suresha, "Properly Placed before the Public": Publication and Translation of the Kinsey Reports, *Journal of Bisexuality* 8:3-4, pp. 2043-228, December 2008. https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/15299710802501520?needAccess=true.

conservative public discourse around sex would suggest. Building on the massive interest in sexology and sexual variation that followed Kinsey's work, Virginia Johnson and William Masters published their own seminal *Human Sexual Response* (1966) and *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970) to mass acclaim. This chapter is not concerned with the history of sexology per se,[18] but rather in the consequences for everyday Americans of at once being offered an opportunity to think more about sex in their daily lives, but also of sex remaining a relatively taboo subject, confined primarily still to the marital bedroom.[19] By rendering sex a matter of objective science rather than confining it explicitly to the realm of morality or religion, sexology in this era attempted to destigmatize human sexuality. Kinsey's work especially suggested that variation in human sexuality was normal rather than pathological. The consequences of this assertation were mixed. For one thing, the rise in interest in sexual variation led also to a rise of reported conjugal dissatisfaction and the medicalization of perceived sexual abnormality. Moreover, despite the increasingly vibrant discourse around sex, in the United States obscenity laws around sexual education and access to contraception were still in place until the Comstock Act was fully abolished in1965.

Most troublingly, with the idea that "everyone was doing it" came also the possibility that "I might be doing it wrong." As Leonore Tiefer writes several decades later, once the social consequences of Kinsey's work have become apparent, "There is no place in the medical model of sexuality for the idea that erection and orgasm are social constructions

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[18] See Janice M. Irvine, Disorders of Desire: Sex and Gender in Modern American Sexology (1990); Paul Robinson, The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1976)

[19] See Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," (1970); Leonore Tiefer, *Sex is Not a Natural Act and Other Essays* (1995), among others.

given meaning by personality, relationships, values, expectations, life experience, or culture."[20] Wherever people felt their own sex lives were less fulfilling or adventuresome as what they might have seen on TV, then, or if the mechanics of their own orgasms were not those painstakingly detailed by Masters and Johnson, Americans had cause to doubt their sexual health and normality. Though science was the study of variation, the narrative it offered suggested a proper way to have sex: one that continued to promote straight, penetrative, procreative sex as the norm. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Peyton Place* both capture the transitional moment between the popularization of Kinsey's studies and the advent of second-wave feminist movements in the late '60s through the 70s. I will explore how *Peyton Place*'s Connie MacKenzie and *Gray Flannel Suit*'s Betsy Rath both struggle with the double bind of feeling pressured into a socially sanctioned form of sexual relating that may nevertheless be at odds with their individual preferences. This dilemma, I argue, is a direct result of their feeling as if they have no other options.

Domestic Myths: Betsy Rath and Constance MacKenzie

> Men do not want equality at home. A strong woman is a threat, an inconvenience, and she can be replaced.
> —Jane O'Reilly, "The Housewife's Moment of Truth" (1971)

In a first instance, then, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* serves as the most literally conventional narrative of postwar domesticity in this chapter. The novel captures a moment when, by Joanne Meyerowitz's assessment, "all women, even publicly successful women, were to maintain traditional gender distinctions…, [when an] emphasis on femininity and domesticity (the two were conflated) seems to have cloaked a submerged fear of lesbian,

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[20] *Sex is Not a Natural Act* 166.

mannish, or man-hating women."[21] What is more, the novel shows the constrictive effects of conventional gender roles on both members of the heterosexual couple. Even as Betsy Rath, with all her ambition and unarticulated desire, risks being read as the antagonist of the novel in which her overworked husband is the hero, Tom Rath, the eponymous man in the gray flannel suit, entered the idiom of the time as the archetypal overworked conformist. For example, in *The Organization Man*, William Whyte references Wilson's novel by name as a shorthand for a middle-class corporate ethos whereby individual identity and career have become conflated, and fulfilment can be measured according to career progress.[22]

It is the story of an unhappy couple convinced that financial security, industry, and material wealth—that is to say, conformity to a popular narrative of success under capitalism—will be the solution to their problems. The novel opens with the Raths' feeling of being trapped in the starter home they purchased at the beginning of their marriage, sure of their ability to upsize as Betsy produced more children and Tom's career progressed. Seven years into their residence, their house has come instead to represent all their dreams deferred; they reflect that "the house had a kind of evil genius for displaying proof of their weaknesses and wiping out all traces of their strength" (3). On a friend's recommendation, Tom begins searching for a higher paying job than the one he initially holds as assistant director of a charitable foundation. Simultaneously, Tom's once-wealthy grandmother sickens and, eventually, passes away, leaving her grand and dilapidated old home and legally entangled estate to her grandson. The Raths settle into Grandmother's home, embracing the

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[21] Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture 1946-1958," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960*.
[22] William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1956).

outward sign of upward mobility only to find that the added burdens of taking on the estate and its ensuing financial and legal burdens, alongside the increasingly strenuous demands of Tom's new job and his repressed shellshock are perhaps more trouble than they are worth.

At face value, the novel asks the reader to sympathize with Tom, whose sense of self has never fully returned to him since his time in the war. Rather than share his experiences with Betsy—hindered at least in part by the fact that to do so would mean to confess his infidelity during his deployment, but mostly by his inability to share something so foreign to anything Betsy would have experienced at home—Tom attempts to lose himself in his commitment to an apparently endless task set for him by Ralph Hopkins, the perpetually overachieving and overcommitted head of the Universal Broadcasting Company. Ironically perhaps, Tom is tasked with pitching a national mental health service for returned veterans, though neither Tom nor Hopkins knows anything about mental health care whatsoever and neither proves himself to be remarkably well-adjusted.

What is more, driven by the indeterminate goal of "success," Tom willfully effaces himself in the process. As part of the application process for his new role at UBC, for instance, Tom is asked to write his biography. Tom struggles to know which of his traits best defines not his whole person, but his value to the company:

> Another statistical fact came to him then, a fact which he knew would be ridiculously melodramatic to put into an application for a job at the United Broadcasting Corporation, or to think about at all. He hadn't thought about this for a long while. It wasn't a thing he had deliberately tried to forget – he simply hadn't thought about

> it for quite a few years. It was the unreal-sounding, probably irrelevant, but quite accurate fact that he had killed seventeen men. (15)

Rather than use this opportunity to face up to the obstacles to his wellbeing, he writes perhaps the most boring and straightforward statement imaginable. Upon completion of the task, Tom tells the hiring manager, "I've written all I think is necessary," and submits "an almost empty page" (17).

Tom's self-effacement borders on self-pity and self-indulgence, especially when we consider the way it affects those around him. Betsy, too, has difficulty reconciling the dreams she had at the start of their marriage with their working-class reality. Faced with that reality, she tells Tom sternly, "It's time we forgot the Rath family's dreams of glory, and your family's dreams of glory, too. It's time we started being sensible" (68). Working with the few emotional cues Tom grants her—although he is head of their household, he communicates little of his internal world or desires to his wife—she sets herself the hard task of transforming their meager financial resources into outward signs of domestic contentment: churchgoing, homecooked meals, and dressing her family for the life they say they want. And yet, when the text dips into her point of view, we catch her reflecting:

> I don't want a bigger place so much; I want that old three months before the war back. It's as though Tom and I had been married twice, once before the war and once afterward, and what I want is my first marriage back. (124)

The two had initially married young and optimistic, sure that the strength of their emotional bond would carry them through anything. Needless to say, when he returned from deployment, they were strangers to each other. Ultimately, Betsy and Tom do reconcile their

disparate emotional landscapes, but in such a way that Betsy gracefully and unconditionally accepts the consequences of Tom's past infidelity and absenteeism, on the condition that he be a better husband moving forward. She asks for little in the way of accountability or reparations in the process.

In short, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* probes the consequences of buying into the American dream of the nuclear family's perfect happiness in the suburbs, if only the husband works hard enough, and the wife tends a good enough home. By Elaine Tyler May's analysis, the rhetorical power and credence given to this vision of the family is typical of an era where the lure of postwar conformity to a widely pedaled narrative about how properly to be American outweighed the emotional fallout of buying into this myth. May explains that the stereotypical vision of suburbia we have of this moment ensues, among other things, from a need to recast gender roles after the war to protect the self-image of shell-shocked veterans. She describes the ethos: "Where, then, could a man still feel powerful and prove his manhood without risking the loss of security? In a home where he held authority, with a wife who would remain subordinate."[23] Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the subordination of the wife to a family structure designed to support the patriarchy that most interests me. Among the myriad cultural shifts that the postwar period ushered in, the population shift to the suburbs away from established family and ethnic communities restructured the social and emotional world of nuclear families so that the home took on the disproportionate burden of "fulfil[ling] virtually all its members' personal needs" (11). As an educational and moral training ground for children, a safe-haven for work-weary husbands, and as an external

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[23] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 88.

measure of success and adjustment, the ideal family unit was a seductive myth, and a tall order for the women who were tasked with being homemakers.

My aim here is not to argue that Betsy Rath ought to have collected wages for her housework[24] or even that, if *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* had come out several decades later, she could have been rescued by a feminist consciousness raising group. While both these things may be true, what concerns me here, insofar as it implicates the Spinster, are the structural arrangements in place that lead Betsy to feel remaining isolated in her marriage with and caretaking for Tom is her best possible option. Certainly, contemporary advertising and political discourse confirmed the suggestion that all the Rosies who had Riveted during the war would best serve their country now by fulfilling their duty to support their breadwinning husbands and to raise their children to be good American citizens. In 1961 President Eisenhower delivered a speech on women's education to a luncheon at Barnard College where he asserted:

> We look to the future of our country in terms of our children…. What can be more important than the inescapable duty of the mother to get these children started? Not merely for her sake—or for their sake—or her pride in them, but the future of free government in the United States.[25]

While Betsy never speaks of duty to her country in so many words, to abandon Tom or the children—for instance, to pursue her own education—would have been downright

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[24] See Sylvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (London: Power of Women Collective, 1975).
[25] Audio file of Dwight D. Eisenhower on the Significance of the Educated Woman in the Nation's Future, October 19, 1961, NYPR Archives Collection. https://www.wnyc.org/story/dwight-d-eisenhower-on-the-significance-of-the-educated-woman-in-the-nations-future/.

unpatriotic.[26] Betsy's value as a wife, a mother, and an American all rest on her self-effacement for the sake of her family and especially her children.

For all the ideological weight it carries, though, this is not to say that Betsy's version of womanhood represents every woman in the 1950s. Perhaps nothing shows the range of period-typical lived experiences quite so well as Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*. Published just a year after *Gray Flannel Suit*, the author describes *Peyton Place* as the seedy underbelly of a picturesque postcard town: "if you go beneath that picture it's like turning over a rock with your foot. All kinds of strange things crawl out."[27] Decried by literary critics and moralist op-ed newspaper writers alike, *Peyton Place*, the nation's first "blockbuster novel," captured the nation's attention by telling the sordid truth of what life was really like in small towns and behind closed doors. In her introduction to *Peyton Place*, Ardis Cameron fondly recalls her girlhood habit of sneaking peeks at her parents' hidden copies of the novel and wondering breathlessly with her friends if the way Metalious wrote about adulthood and, specifically, sex, represented the real story.[28]

The novel spans eight years of life in the fictional small New England town of Peyton Place, where everybody knows everybody and gossip abounds. Intrigue swirls

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[26] As evidence, perhaps, of how deep this narrative runs, consider how Betsy's trajectory compares to that of Marilyn Lee in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*. Upon cleaning out her childhood home after her mother's death, Marilyn rebels against her mother's Cold War confinement and makes a concentrated effort to free herself of the bonds of her own domesticity. She leaves her husband and two young children to enroll in community college and resume her dream of becoming a woman doctor—a dream deferred when she met her husband and dropped out of school instead to have his children. Marilyn's guilt abandoning her children reaches comes to a head when she discovers she is pregnant and returns home in pursuit of a fresh start with a new child.

[27] Qtd. in Ardis Cameron, "Open Secrets: Rereading *Peyton Place*," introduction to *Peyton Place,* by Grace Metalious (Boston: Northeastern U P, 1999).

[28] See "Open Secrets" and, also, Cameron, *Unbuttoning America: A Biography of* Peyton Place (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2015).

especially around young couples and unwed women; in one particularly salacious plot line, the town is riveted by the affairs of shopkeeper and single mother Constance MacKenzie, who "enjoyed her life alone" (17). What the reader knows that the townspeople do not is that her daughter, Allison, was conceived out of wedlock when Constance was a married man's mistress in New York City. Upon moving back to Peyton Place, Constance claims instead to be a widow, which preserves her status as a respectable citizen and makes her eligible for remarriage, and which her neighbors take as an invitation to gossip constantly about her private life. It is not until Tom Markis, a stranger of Greek descent, moves into the close-knit community that Constance entertains the possibility of entering a new relationship. Until Tom's exotic arrival, though, Constance

> told herself that she had never been highly sexed to begin with, and that her affair…had been a thing born of loneliness. She repeated silently, over and over, that life with her daughter Allison was entirely satisfactory and all she wanted. Men were not necessary, for they were unreliable at best, and nothing but creators of trouble. As for love, she knew well the tragic results of not loving a man. What more terrible consequence might come from allowing herself to love another? … If at times she felt a vague restlessness within herself, she told herself sharply that this was *not* sex, but perhaps a touch of indigestion. (ibid)

For all Constance's stern self-talk, the gossips of the town reflect regularly that she is still young, still beautiful, still absolutely marriageable. Her daughter Allison, who is prone to romantic flights of fancy, considers that her "mother was of too cold and practical a mind to understand the sensitive, dreaming child" (15). Constance's coldness, though perhaps not

strictly synonymous with the designation of "frigid" with which spinsters are typically saddled, still marks her as distinct for her asocial tendency not to jump immediately into relationship with a man and breadwinner.

To be clear: I do not claim Constance's self-professed sexlessness as an indication of potential asexuality, but rather as evidence of the difficulty of separating sex from romance. Even though Constance seems to be able to distinguish between the two, sometimes her restlessness seems to stem from a longing for someone who can satisfy her both sexually and romantically—that is, someone more adventuresome than most of her fellow New Englanders. Later, she reflects,

> She knew that she had not loved [Allison's father]. Love, to Constance, was synonymous with marriage, and marriage was something based on a community of tastes and interests, together with a similarity of background and viewpoint. All these were blended together by an emotion called "love." And sex did not enter into it at all. (119)

The townspeople conclude that Constance must have loved her first husband very much, and must still be in mourning, to justify her reluctance to remarry. With access to her internal monologue, it seems Constance is instead led primarily by passion. Indeed, it is not altogether certain that it is love, and not sex, that ultimately pushes her into a relationship with Tom Makris. She is initially skittish around him—concerned, perhaps, about what their relationship would mean for her independence or for her relationship with Allison. When they have sex for the first time, Constance reflects,

> It was like a nightmare from which she could not wake until, at least, when the blackness at her window began to thin to pale gray, she felt the first red gush of shamed pleasure that lifted her, lifted her, lifted her and then dropped her down into unconsciousness. (150)

Here, Constance's *shamed* pleasure leaps red hot off the page perhaps as a reminder of what is at stake for a woman in the 1930s to be so attuned to her own sexuality. Although Tom and Constance's physical relationship borders on the nonconsensual, especially in the early days, the shame that Constance carries suggests that she has perhaps not been honest with herself about the nature of her affair or the burden of her singleness in the intervening years. As Elaine Tyler May reminds us, "fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change."[29] By the small-town, postwar logic of Peyton Place, it is good for Constance's sexuality to be bound up in a stable relationship with a man. Her jumbled feelings as she distinguishes sex from love from respectability can account for her hesitance in this context and, ultimately, for her ultimate sexual and emotional submission to Tom. Constance therefore serves as a figure both of exploration in her early years, and of the ultimate contentment that can be found in domestic partnership. She proves herself a woman who can, actually, have it all.

For all its lush fascination with Constance's sex life,[30] the novel is especially interesting to me for the way it captures the flipside of the repressive hypothesis of 1950s Americana. We see concretely the symptoms of a society suffering in the absence of strong

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[29] Homeward Bound 93.

[30] In a particularly graphic and oft-quoted scene, Tom marvels that Constance's nipples have become "as hard as diamonds," in case anyone doubt that the passion and the chemistry between them is *real*.

sex education programs, but rife with rumors about what their neighbors do behind closed doors. Part of Allison MacKenzie's courtship with the neighbor boy little Norman Page involves swapping secret knowledge gained form a book about sexual technique Norman sent away for:

> "It was all about how a man has to have a technique when he makes love to a woman. That's so she'll like it and not be frigid," [Norman said].
>
> "What's frigid?"
>
> "Women who don't like to make love. A lot of women are like that, this book says. It makes for maladjustment in marriage." (191)

In this passage the two teenagers exemplify the double bind wrought by fascination with something that is at once everywhere and entirely taboo. And, as May recalls, in this time of ill-defined courtship and petting, "it was up to young women to 'drawn the line' and exercise sexual restraint, thereby safeguarding the stability of their future families" (101). Obsessed with the notion that they *should* be having sex but uncertain of how to "do it right," Americans turned to sex therapists for help having the kind of sex they believed they should be having.

What so stirred people about *Peyton Place* was how clearly they saw themselves reflected in it. It was considered dirty

> not because the book made sex speak in a time of sexual repression, though (sex was everywhere in the fifties), but because it tunneled beneath official discourse, uprooting the contradictions and ambiguities through which sex and gender spoke.

In a decade marked by the coalescing of a dominant conception of normality, *Peyton Place* muddied the moral certainties and stale platitudes of a nation."[31]

In this way, *Peyton Place* serves a function akin to that of Masters and Johnson or the Kinsey Reports—it told a truth people desperately wanted to hear, said things a bit more plainly than good taste and public decency would usually allow. *Peyton Place* horrified New Englanders in particular by making clear that they were not the buttoned-up moral paragons they made themselves out to be. It was denounced as dirty because it aired dirty laundry, and the women who loved it felt a flash of recognition that they were not alone.[32]

Peyton Place fanaticism primarily seems to do with the novel's brave depictions of sex out of wedlock and the consequences it could have for a young person's life depending on their social status. Consider, for instance, the difference in the townspeople's treatment of the two teenagers who become pregnant out of wedlock. Rogue teen Rodney Harrington suffers no consequences for getting a girl pregnant because his father runs the town mill, though he gets his comeuppance in a car accident later. Conversely, the impoverished Selena Cross had to fight to win anything like acceptance in the town and, even so, never would have made her "respectable" boyfriend Ted Carter's parents happy had they wed. She had no chance at all, then, of retaining her dignity if the truth about her baby got out, even if it were known that her step-father Lucas had raped her. The double-bind of women's position

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[31] *Unbuttoning America* 5.

[32] See, for instance, *Unbuttoning America*:

> In the fan mail that swamped Grace Metalious, there was little that surprised or outraged letter writers, who, on the whole, seem to have picked up their pens more to confess a certain uneasiness with the novel's astute rendering of the world than to comment on the licentiousness of the author's fiction. "The reason it struck people," the writer John Michael Hayes observed, "was that it was so real. They felt it. It didn't read like fiction." (30)

in society, where they are pushed to manifest sexual appeal while retaining their chastity, is abundantly clear. Likewise, belittled Norman Page's awkward attachment to his mother, together with his bumbling affection for Allison, says without saying that there were clear hierarchical distinctions between who was a "real" man and who wasn't. And women reveled in it—loved to see themselves finally represented. Cameron asks, "Where else in the years before second-wave feminism could 'bad' women, sexually autonomous girls, and the victims of child sexual abuse find their stories revealed, their behaviors defended, their histories taken seriously if not in 'dirty' stories like *Peyton Place*?"[33]

No More Fun and Games

> "Free love? Free for *whom*?"
> — Ti-Grace Atkinson, qtd. in *Firebrand Feminism*

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit and *Peyton Place's* dominance of the bestseller list was a harbinger of social changes to come as the barely repressed sexuality of the 1950s proved unsustainable and uncontainable. But while the free love movement of the 1960s and 1970s is interesting for the way it gave rise to an occasion to reframe sex as a pursuit of personal pleasure rather than a conjugal requirement for social passing, not all were convinced that sex for sex's sake as an inherently liberatory or basically sustainable proposition. Nor did free love answer the question of what to do with singles; overall it had more to do with positive liberty—freedom *to* act—rather than negative liberty—the freedom to prefer not to. In what follows I use the terms "sex positive" and "sex negative" to refer loosely to two sides in a debate about the intrinsic value of a liberated attitude toward sex, on the one hand, as a

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[33] Cameron, *Unbuttoning America*, 5.

means to embrace bodily autonomy and move beyond antiquated gender norms or, conversely, as a further way to grant men access to women's bodies under the guise of being revolutionary.

Writing on the perceived divide between sex-positive and (sex-negative) radical feminism, Breanne Fahs notes that "sex positivity has laid the groundwork to depathologize sexuality, particularly for women, sexual minorities, people of color, and sex workers."[34] Whereas radical feminists are typically understood as being opposed to the "liberatory" goals of sex-positive feminists, Fahs suggests instead that by

> advocating caution about the unconditional access to women that is built into the sex-positive framework, radical feminists essentially said that, without women's *freedom from* patriarchal oppression, women lacked freedom at all. Real sexual freedom, radical feminists claimed, must include the *freedom from* the social mandates to have sex (particularly the enforcement of sex with men) and *freedom from* treatment as sexual objects.[35]

If overall my project is most sympathetic to an anti-sex, radical feminist perspective, that is because, for a long time, this has been the one that has had least traction in vernacular asexual discourse. The absence of language about or examples of uncoupled life leads to a preponderance of language on the AVEN website about what it is that asexuals are willing to "do" in relationships, or what they "should" do to remain in (statistically more common) relationship with sexual partners. For instance, entries on the FAQ page ask, "Do I owe my

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[34] Fahs, "'Freedom to' and 'Freedom from,'" 268.
[35] "'Freedom to' and 'Freedom from,'" 273.

partner sex because of things I've been doing with them, like flirting or kissing or letting them take me to fancy restaurants?" (for asexuals) and "What exactly is it that asexuals will and won't do? Do they enjoy kissing and cuddling? How about second base or (fill in the name of quasi-sexual act here)?" (for sexuals).[36] Radical feminism is thrilling because, in some instances, it grants a way into thinking about intimacy and full personhood in a world where there is *freedom from* compulsory sexuality.

I intimated above that the lack of an archive makes it difficult to imagine what a world of *freedom from* would look like. Tumblr user and asexual internet activist starchythoughts puts it succinctly when they ask, "if asexuality isn't an option, how can someone's consent be truly free?"[37] The tragedy of the Spinster is that her misappropriation overshadows most attempts at living otherwise—fear of Spinsterhood results in unhappy compromise. For instance, in *Single*, Michael Cobb suggests that forced intimacy is the consequence of loneliness; he writes, "the loneliest of us are not necessarily those who are actually alone but rather those of us trying our hardest not to be alone."[38] Likewise, the noted solo homosexual Quentin Crisp, in *Resident Alien*, proposes that "people who are lonely are those who do not know what to do with the time when they are alone." Unlike those who let loneliness weigh them down, anarchofeminists in the 1960s and 70s fully embraced their freedom from, and in so doing risked further alienation from and marginalization by mainstream society in order instead to form stronger community among themselves. Specifically, I am interested in the way that Boston-based Cell 16 took seriously

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[36] "Relationship FAQ" accessed May 10, 2021, https://asexuality.org/?q=relationship.html.
[37] "Hermeneutical Injustice in Consent and Asexuality," March 18, 2016. https://starchythoughts.tumblr.com/post/141266238674.
[38] *Single* 21.

the possibility of political celibacy and feminist separatism, which they explored in depth in their periodical *No More Fun and Games.* As contributor Lisa Leghorn declares, "The roots of our boredoms as well as our rages and depressions lie in an inability to adjust to a life that refuses to concede our humanity."[39] In other words, radical feminists posit that there is no freedom within the grim existing system of gender relations, but by embracing radicalism or resident alienness, asexuality opens the possibility of absolute freedom from the burdens of compulsory sexuality.

The women of Cell 16 based their argument on an analysis of power in gender relations that would go on to inform the sex-negative camp in the sex wars of the 1980s. They maintained that the cultural products of heterosexual hegemony—from the institution of marriage, to an absence of strong female characters, to the villainy of pornography—were evidence of patriarchy's deep-seeded need to cast women as the weaker sex so that men could base their identity on violence and control. Their mantra:

It's all over now

No more fun and games

No more manly fame

I am mine[40]

articulated a need for the kind of self-determination that could only occur if women made no attempts to play along with men and their rules.

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[39] "How we are Lunatized," *No More Fun and Games* vol. 4 (April 1970) 18.
[40] *No More Fun and Games* vol. 1 (October 1968), 74

In part, they were reacting to a disequilibrium in other contemporaneous social justice movements. In the opening essay of the inaugural issue, provocatively titled "Slavery," they decry the way that even within radical movements women are presumed to come in second place to the male leaders:

> The young white radical likes very much the 'new girl' who is half-liberated – just enough to be willing to go to bed at any time with any one of them, and ask no questions. Democracy. A sort of prostitution serves a busy politician's irritating sexual needs and the girl will usually cook as well. She wants to serve the cause, and her man tells her that she can best serve by doing what she does best.[41]

"Yes, all men," continues the same essay.[42] That is to say, they diagnose the social movements of the 1960s as being hotbeds of freedom to: freedom to help men fight for civil rights and voting rights and maybe even an end to the war in Vietnam. In a lament that other women, and especially Black women activists share, the members of Cell 16 express frustration at being told repeatedly that their identity-specific grievances could wait until white men's political agenda was complete. In this analysis, the sex positivity of the time, rather than "empowering" women to embrace their sex liberation while fighting for cultural liberation, primarily served the men at the heads of the most visible social movements. To promote an agenda set by those in a relative position of power (men) rather than to privilege the agenda of the most subjugated (women) is to perpetuate a system still rooted in

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41 "Slavery," unattributed, *No More Fun and Games* vol. 1 (October 1968), 5.
42 Ibid.

inequality. "How can man liberate anyone," they ask, "when they are not themselves liberated? They are not free. They are too bound by their need to own another."[43]

Some denunciations of heteropatriarchy dwell on the difficulty of seeing a way out of it; rather than writing proactively for women's empowerment, for example, the bulk of antipornography activists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin's work seeks primarily to disable the media and legal systems that reinforce women's position as victims. They write against protection of pornography under the First Amendment because, as MacKinnon argues, "Pornography is a set of hermeneutical equivalences that work on the epistemological level.… The behavioral data shows what pornography means is what it does."[44] In other words, they directly link the representational status of women to their capacity to resist sexual dominance. "Women are not children," MacKinnon goes on, "but coerced women are effectively [as] deprived of power" as child victims of abuse by adult men.[45] Rather than give space to the creative forms of resistance women have carved for themselves under sexusociety, MacKinnon and Dworkin assert that the only women to "save" women from patriarchal power is to cut it off at its source by criminalizing pornography. The implication is that only with the full protection of the law can women come into their own. This gives women, I think, very little credit.

Cell 16 instead proposes separatism by way of solution: if men will not listen to the women fighting alongside them, then women will have to fight for themselves.[46] There will

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Catherine MacKinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech" 59.
[45] Ibid 38
[46] In *Daring to be bad: Radical feminism in America, 1967-1975*, Alice Echols suggests that Cell-16 was in fact the first feminist separatist group of its kind.

be no end to sexism, they posit, until sex itself is eliminated. Roxanne Dunbar writes, "all questions pertaining to sexuality are irrelevant under our present structure of thought, because we have no idea how people in societies of whole, liberated individuals will relate to each other."[47] Cell 16's separatism offers, to my mind, a more creative alternative to the pervasiveness of patriarchy than does, say, MacKinnon and Dworkin's call to censorship and emphasis on victimization. Whereas later iterations of antiporn feminism focused primarily the reduction in violence against women, the utopian impulse to create an alternate society just for women creates an exploratory space for devising replacement values and strategies. As Cell 16 sees it, these replacements will remain out of reach as long as women continue to follow rules set by even the most radical of men, who do not share their situated knowledge.

The dominant, orgasm-focused sexological discourse of the age was not solely to blame for the ways people abused sex, although it certainly played a leading role. I do not disagree with Gayle Rubin, per se, that a hierarchical valuation of types of sex acts leads to oppression and control.[48] It would be an oversimplification to claim all types and expressions of sexuality as equally culpable in reinforcing gender roles and biases. But to place the right to orgasm at the center of liberatory politics, as Anne Koedt does in "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," is to reproduce the problem in slightly different terms. Densmore calls this "the right that is a duty. Sexual freedom that includes no freedom to decline sex, to decline to be defined at every turn by sex."[49] Indeed, by rejecting sex as a defining element of

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[47] Roxanne Dunbar, "Asexuality," *No More Fun and Games* vol 1 (October 1968), 53.
[48] Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2007): 143-78.
[49] Roxanne Dunbar, "Without You and Within You," *No More Fun and Games* vol. 4 (April 1970), 49.

their identities, the women of Cell 16 point out the way activists who mobilize sex as liberatory are still working within a logic that assumes sex is a requisite good.

Cell 16 makes clear that uncritical sexual liberation movements promote only positive liberty and suggest that this is because these movements are led by men who are unwilling to relinquish the convenience and satisfaction of sexual pleasures. Telling women that they are free to have as much sex as they want implies that sex is something they should want: "He has permitted her to enjoy sex," writes Dana Densmore, "or rather has permitted her to ADMIT it, supposedly she was wild about it all along."[50] This argument goes beyond other lesbian feminist critiques of patriarchy by suggesting that all sex, and not merely sex with men, is an issue. Sex itself, says Cell 16, in not inherently liberatory. Starting from the premise that sex is more often about personal fulfilment and objectification of another person, rather than mutuality between two whole people, the separatist perspective maintains that micro-level solutions—between two people who have successfully negotiated what sex means to both of them, for instance—are insufficient. Moreover, as the Asexual Caucus suggests in the "Asexual Manifesto," it is possible for the things people claim to value in the sex act to find manifestation elsewhere. In pursuit of orgasm as an ultimate good, "we realized that we, and others, had used sex as a means of self-deception, as a way of avoiding real closeness rather than achieving it."[51]

In exploring the capacity women have to be whole people outside of the metric of sexual performance, Cell 16 are not afraid of embracing archetypes that set them apart from

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[50] Dana Densmore, "Against Liberals," *No More Fun and Games* vol. 2 (February 1969), 63.
[51] "Asexual Manifesto" 4.

a status quo. The way they mobilize the spinster and the frigid woman to their own ends, though, means that their project and their affect will remain alienating to some parties. "If a man isn't sexually attracted to her, she's nothing. Old maid, frigid, failure, lesbian, and, the ultimate accusation which alone implies all others, 'man-hater!'" they crow.[52] If this makes them selfish, so be it. Fully aware of the way they will be condemned, they seek only each other's approval, and their own happiness. In Volume 4, "WE CHOOSE PERSONHOOD—THE FEMALE STATE," they invoke Valerie Solanas at length to direct their rhetoric specifically toward those groovy, scummy women who are unconcerned with what the rest of the world thinks about them. As I will use my final two texts to demonstrate, a full embrace of this combatant individualism is a barrier to entry for women who, in the first part of the 21st century, wish to feel themselves to be "good" and "sexually liberated" feminists, but who cannot rid themselves of the unfashionable ghosts of domestic and couple-centric ideology.

Millennials are Killing Marriage: 21st Century Spinsters

Have we moved beyond the spinster stereotype, or have we simply forgotten her?
— Heather Love, "Gyn/Apology"

The problem, to my mind, is that mainstream sexual discourse has not caught up to the inroads our foremothers in the 60s-80s tried to make. In "Gyn/Apology," Heather Love makes the grim argument that "the last three decades of feminism have resulted in progress but not revolution."[53] I read turn-of-the millennium "feminist" fiction and lamentations

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[52] Dana Densmore, "ON FEMALE ENSLAVEMENT… AND MEN'S STAKE IN IT," *No More Fun and Games,* vol. 1 (October 1968), 13.
[53] "Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics," *ESQ* vol. 55 no. 3-4 (2009), 305.

about compulsory coupledom in tandem with very recent analysis of the state of contemporary marriage. Brian J. Willoughby's *The Millennial Marriage* (2020) supports Love's pessimism by showing empirically that, while millennials are later to marry than their parents, more likely to have access to contraceptive measures, and more likely to be in arrangements where both spouses have employment that allows them to contribute to the financial wellbeing of the family unit—in short, while we have in some ways moved away from the emphatically patriarchal and reproductive marriages of the immediate postwar period—marriage still functions largely as a social imperative rather than a carefully considered choice. Willoughby reports, "In the interviews we conducted with millennial married couples, no question stumped them more than one that I thought would be perhaps the simplest question we asked…: Why did you decide to marry your spouse?"[54] The texts I consider in the final section of this chapter illustrate the Spinster's continued estrangement in a new marital landscape, even though the shape of marriage has changed, and it is far more feasible—not to mention acceptable—to be a single, financially independent person today than it might have been for Betsy Rath or Constance MacKenzie.

Briefly, the "advances" we've seen to sexual liberation in the twenty-first century—the proliferation of queer relationship alternatives, of cohabitation, of sex-positivity—continue to exclude the spinster from recognized sociality. What is more, popular cultural analysis of 21st-century spinsters, who are having something of a renaissance, remains utterly incapable of seeing beyond racist, classist, and entirely misogynistic celebrations of WASPy, romanticized, and ultimately exceptional figures of single women. Briallen Hopper notably

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[54] Brian J. Willoughby, *The Millennial Marriage* (New York: Routledge, 2020) 17.

panned Kate Bollick's 2015 book, *Spinster*, for turning spinsterhood into something cute and trendy. "Ignoring or shunning almost all of [the] classic spinster pantheon—as Bolick does—," writes Hopper, "has political consequences. Above all, it domesticates the threat that the spinster poses to normative systems of love, sex, and power."[55] Bolick's *Spinster*, while sketching out a fantasy of alone time, treats singledom as if it were a radically new concept. Like Hopper, Laura Kipnis also takes issue with Bolick's opening premise: "Whom to marry, and when it will happen—these two questions define every woman's existence.…You are born, you grow up, you become a wife."[56] In her essay Hopper, herself actively engaged in a nontraditional relationship structure and living alone at the time of writing, bristles at Bolick's contention that not to marry in 2015 is to do something radically new. But Kipnis's outrage at Bolick's naivete goes a step further to notice and criticize how rooted Bolick's exploration is in heteronormative femininity. Arguments like the one in *Spinster* overlook a rich queer tradition of embracing and validating more expansive models of intimacy. "When [Bolick] laments that being single means having no one to help make difficult decisions or comfort you at the end of a bad day," Kipnis marvels, "it's as though for her being married is a synonym for being loved, as though marriage is the only emotionally stabilizing kind of relationship."[57] My final two novels trace the extent to which, despite our best efforts, marriage still operates as a gateway to social acceptance, especially for the straight, white, well-educated demographic Bolick represents.

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[55] Briallen Hopper, "On Spinsters," *LA Review of Books* (July 12, 2015), https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-spinsters/.
[56] Qtd. in Laura Kipnis, "Marry by 30," *Slate* (April 9, 2015), https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/04/kate-bolicks-spinster-making-a-life-of-ones-own-reviewed.html.
[57] Ibid.

We continue not to take seriously the very real fact that there are many reasons not to choose sex as a cornerstone of meaningful relationships, or not to make marriage such an essential milestone of young adult fulfilment (though I'd argue, as Benji Kahan seems to do in *Celibacies*, that the consequences for bachelors are markedly different from those female spinsters face). Little writing on the subject leaves room for uncoupled individuals not to be lonely (certainly, Michael Cobb protests his self-contained joy a little too forcefully in *Single*). In short, we still struggle to imagine the Happy Spinster or, at least, to take her for her word. We struggle because we have not yet learned what it might be like to be sex-negative, though a half century of sex-positive bias has shown that so-called "sexual liberation" does not consistently or systematically rewrite sexual scripts that by nature rely on gender hierarchy and exploitation. By proposing another way of being in the world, the Happy Spinster threatens to undermine the fragile balance of a social quotidian that still rests on the expectation of coupledom and the nuclear family. Her demonization points precisely to the epistemic injustice that ensues from exclusively or even primarily promoting sex positivity as the path to queer liberation.

In this way, the Spinster is symptomatic of what Angela McRobbie describes as the "double entanglement" of a contemporary "postfeminist" moment, that is, the paradoxical coexistence of progressive and conservative discourses of femininity in the neoliberal era.[58] Postfeminist cultural critique describes the aftermath of Second Wave feminism: in a world in which the principles of feminism are widely known, rather than the sole domain of a

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[58] For more on post-feminism, see especially McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" (2004) as well as Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility" (2007) and Yvonne Tasker and Dianne Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2008).

fringe group of activists, a suspicious number of protagonists continue to choose conventional heterosexual marriages and traditional standards of beauty as measures of their own visibility and viability, while simultaneously claiming to be more "sexually liberated" than their foremothers. I am interested in this dissertation in tracing the evolution of narratives of sexual normativity, both in fiction and in lived experience. If the millennial couples Willoughby interviewed believed they could "have it all," then, perhaps it was the protagonists of postfeminist fiction who taught them this was something they could want. But this fantasy is not so much freedom as it is the consequence of media pressure for women to conform and to consume so as to become idealized and easygoing, leading Rosalind Gill to observe that "to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen. Could it be," she goes on to wonder, "that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are presented as its ideal subjects?"[59] In other words, women today—and their fictional counterparts—are presumed to have more agency, perhaps, than Betsy or Constance might have done, thanks to the hard work of feminists in the 60s and 70s in particular. But that their success is still measured by their marriageability undercuts our desire to believe that, as a society, we have made great progress.[60]

Set in Shaker Heights, OH in the late 1990s and in early 2010s New England, respectively, Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) and Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (2013) reflect on the little "progress" middle class white women were left to enjoy in

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[59] "Postfeminist Media Culture" 164.
[60] *Bridget Jones's Diary* is one of the foundational sources of postfeminist cultural critique, as are *Sex and the City, Ally Beale*, and *Desperate Housewives*.

the wake of second-wave feminism. Belonging as she does to the target demographic of most contemporary spinster literature, Messud's spinster Nora has fully internalized the self-loathing and resentment that comes with calling herself a feminist but still craving the sense of belonging that only belongs in fiction about perfect nuclear families. Despite herself, her longing for something that looks very similar to the dream the Raths also chased or the comfort Constance was able to secure with Tom Markis belies Nora's attempts to convince herself that she can find fulfilment in her art and her friendships. Conversely, as a contented outsider to community life, Ng's Mia Warren throws the utopian space of Shaker Heights into turmoil with her apparent satisfaction in her self-containment.

Both novels show how women on the fringes of polite society continue to threaten the ideological centricity of the family. Solitary women are held in tandem as objects of fascination and of disgust. Messud's Nora criticizes herself harshly for her inability to be happy alone and has internalized a Bridget Jones-style obsession with partnership and singledom to the point that she describes herself as a magpie perched always on the edge of someone else's family, ready to steal away the happiness they have that she does not. Ng's single mother and artist character Mia disturbs the balance of the picture-perfect Richardson family, not by intentionally introducing an element of chaos into their lives, but by suggesting alternate paths each character could have taken had they not followed the course set for them by compulsory sexuality. Nora and Mia are both itinerant, incapable of fitting into an America that proclaims itself progressive but still adheres anxiously to old rules of family attachment. Nora and Mia represent exactly what 50s propaganda was designed to

protect against. But whereas Mia lives this fully, Nora has internalized the message that she is doing something wrong.

The Woman Upstairs opens with a rant: "How angry am I? You don't want to know. Nobody wants to know about *that*."[61] Nora, the forty-two-year-old protagonist and narrator, describes herself as perfectly ambivalent: "neither old your young, I'm neither fat nor thin, tall nor short, blond nor brunette," and so on.[62] She is unmarried and childless, and continues to teach grade school because her art career has not taken off. Barring intrusive, concerned comments from well-intentioned friends or family who fear she might be lonely, Nora feels generally invisible, though she has consistently been "such a good teacher/daughter/friend." Without a family of her own or a discrete achievement to legitimate her, she feels consistently like an outsider, like there is no place for her in her community.

Under the moniker, "the woman upstairs," Nora becomes what people see in her—less the desirable girl next door than she is the quiet and respectable neighbor who has gone a bit past her prime. In her bitter entitlement, she comes close, perhaps, to being a female version of the incel, or involuntary celibate.[63] Hannah McGregor has suggested that "the spinster can… be a threatening figure because she reminds us that there are many ways to be a family, many ways to be a community"[64] ("The Loneliness of the Spinster"). Nora's

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[61] Claire Messud, *The Woman Upstairs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf) 2013, 1.
[62] Ibid 2.
[63] It would, in fact, be interesting to do a close comparative reading of Messud with Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person" (2017) or Tony Tulathimutte's "The Feminist" (2019). More on these two short stories and the development of incel culture in the Conclusion.
[64] "The Loneliness of the Spinster," HannahMcGregor.com, July 2021, https://hannahmcgregor.com/2021/06/18/the-loneliness-of-the-spinster/.

particular challenge, though, is that she has internalized the judgment the rest of the world would pass on her. "I'm neither married nor divorced, but single," she muses. "What they used to call a spinster, but don't any more, because it implies you're dried up, and none of us wants to be that."[65] Rather than take ownership of her situation, revel in friendships, or celebrate the intimacies she shares with her students, she assumes that something in herself is lacking. She is at once angry at her lot and desperate to assimilate:

> The Woman Upstairs is like that. We keep it together. You don't make a mess, and you don't call people weeping at four in the morning. You don't reveal secrets it would be unseemly for you to have… The Woman Upstairs does not aspire in such self-serving ways. She must not appear to have an ugly heart. Who could love such an ugly, lonely heart?[66]

In her attachment to her suffering, she has become decidedly melancholic, fully absorbed in her yearning for the fantasy of acceptance in conditions that will not accommodate her needs. Melancholia is a term with a complicated history and varied meanings across time, but I mean it here in the sense that Jonathan Flatley does, as "the failure to mourn a loss."[67] Nora's brand of melancholia aligns her also with other white female characters, in novels and on screen, who epitomize a revised postfeminist attitude toward the pursuit of wedded bliss. Kendra Marston suggests that

> In utilising melancholia as a tool through which to distance female protagonists from white patriarchal power structures, these [texts] are able to engage in commentaries

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[65] *Woman Upstairs* 5.
[66] *Woman Upstairs* 235.
[67] Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), 2.

> that position the heroine's race privilege and affluence as disabling sicknesses of the contemporary political and cultural moment.[68]

Where successful, these heroines secure themselves idealized middle-class existences as "girl bosses" or the "one who can have it all." Nora's melancholia, though, is so debilitating that she cannot will herself to improve her circumstances. Earlier in life, she refused to settle, ended an engagement to a man with whom she was comfortable but not artistically or personally inspired. Once alone, though, she keenly feels the cost of being a self-determined woman. Her art stalls. Her work feels stale to her; she compares herself to "a magpie cobbling, [my art doesn't] owe anything to my own efforts" (Messud 190). Jealousy becomes her dominant affect. If there was glee in radical feminist disavowal, coupledom and traditional values are now reinforced in postfeminist subjects with a sense of shame. Anthea Taylor writes that postfeminist "representations and the conflating discourses in which the single woman is enmeshed are key to the maintenance and mythologization of heterosexuality—the single woman is the Other against whom 'normal' women are discursively constituted and brought into being as particular gendered and sexed subjects."[69] Instead of disrupting the patriarchal structures that confine her, though, or finding sisterhood through solidarity like the members of Cell 16, Nora reinforces the stereotype of the bitter involuntary spinster, lets herself be othered.

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[68] Kendra Marston, Postfeminist whiteness : problematising melancholic burden in contemporary Hollywood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2018), 5.

[69] Anthea Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture: the Limits of Postfeminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19-20.

Even as she internalizes the logic of compulsory sexuality and reproduction, Nora poses a threat to the idea of the family by trying to claim a family for herself when she cannot have one of her own. She does, after all, fall in love—not with a woman, or a man, but with both members of a couple, and with their son, who is a student in her class. She throws herself into the lives of the Shahid family, casting herself as surrogate mother to Reza, wife to Skandar, and sister-artist to Sirena. "If you'd told me my own story about someone else," Nora admits, "I would have assured you that this person was completely unhinged. *Or a child*. That's always the way" (140). But her assimilation into the Shahid family is not complete; even as she tries to be everything to them, to earn their love, their inability to understand each other runs deeper than the blow they deliver to her ego when Skandar and Sirena ask Nora to babysit, which she takes to mean that they take her availability for granted. What she craves from the Shahids is love, not convenience. But each party in this strange family arrangement fails to understand what the other needs. "You're so free!" Sirena says to Nora one day. "I envy you that. How many times I thought of the studio and you in it, working. Or of you thinking, calmly, in your lovely apartment—it's not exactly how I imagined it, but not so far off. While I was making beds and stews and presents and silly conversation…" (109). Skandar and Sirena's marriage is suffering, but Nora wants nothing more than to be part of it. Nora feels achingly alone, and Sirena envies her freedom.

The Woman Upstairs ends with Nora's disavowal of the Shahids after Sirena publicly displays art that violates Nora's privacy and the terms of their friendship. At the end of the novel, Nora is still alone. Resignation looks like rage that she promises to channel into a bitter brand of self-actualization:

> But to be furious, murderously furious, is to be *alive*. No longer young, no longer pretty, no longer loved, or sweet, or loveable, unmasked, writing on the ground for all to see in my utter ingloriousness, there's no telling what I might do. (235)

No matter how often I return to this scene I remain of two minds about it. Nora's rage promises to be transformative; she embraces the villainous role the world has reserved for lonely women like her. Her belated relinquishing of the expectations sexusociety places on women brings her into sisterhood with the women of Cell 16 who seek only to satisfy themselves. But the language Nora still uses to describe herself—no longer young, no longer pretty—suggests she has not yet learned to think about herself on different terms, to validate herself as an artist, a daughter, a teacher, a friend. I want *The Woman Upstairs* to be gentler to the Spinster, and yet Nora remains rooted in and resigned to a derisory reading of her own singleness. Her story is cautionary, not inspirational.

Perhaps even more threatening than the unhappy Spinster, though, is the single woman who seemingly embraces her freedom, like Celeste Ng's Mia Richardson. Mia Warren is single mother and artist, travelling the country with her daughter Pearl. The two move from town to town as Mia's art compels them, and Mia picks up odd jobs to support them when the proceeds from her art are insufficient. The novel traces the fallout that ensues when Mia and Pearl move to the planned community of Shaker Heights and become entangled in the lives of the Richardsons, a wealthy and upright family with four children around Pearl's age, from whom they rent their apartment. Peral proves herself eager to settle into Shaker Heights and assimilate herself with the Richardson family, creating tension between Mia's wanderlust and Pearl's desire for conventional stability. The main conflict of

the novel, though, arises from tension between the two mothers—Mia and Mrs. Elena Richardson—as their personal philosophies, family values, and methods around child-rearing become a proxy for debates about what it means to be a good enough mother.

Elena and Mia find themselves on opposite sides of a third family dispute as the whole town is captivated by a custody battle between Elena's wealthy white friends the McCulloughs and Mia's Chinese coworker Bebe Chow. Several months prior to the start of the story, Bebe, overburdened by poverty, culture shock, and desertion by the father of her infant daughter, had found herself obliged to leave May Ling at a fire station in the hopes that officials could secure a better life for her. The McCulloughs, who had been unable to conceive themselves, file to adopt May Ling (renamed Mirabelle) even as Bebe, now more financially and emotionally stable, petitions to regain custody of the daughter she dearly loves. Central to the novel, then, are questions about race, class, and culture. Is the McCulloughs' money sufficient to compensate for the emotional cost of raising Baby M outside of her birth culture? Can a birth mother's love and good intention outweigh the less optimal material conditions she would raise her daughter in?

The different mothering choices Elena and Mia have made—as well as the different weight they each put on "social" as opposed to "moral" correctness—influence the side each champions in the case of Baby M. As the novel unfolds it comes to light that Mia conceived Pearl through artificial insemination when, as a struggling college student, she agreed to accept money to be a surrogate mother for a wealthy couple struggling with infertility. Although she broke the surrogacy arrangement and kept her daughter for herself, Mia professes to miss nothing about the intimacy of partnered sex or traditional family

structures. She muses, "except for her brother, when they were children, she'd never seen a man naked. More than that: she'd never touched anyone and felt that warmth, that electric tension at the nearness of someone else."[70] In this regard she may be the most canonically asexual character in my archive. Elena, conversely, fully embraces the Shaker Heights ethos of living her life according to a strict plan and was deliberate about building a large family, though this choice ultimately stood in the way of some of her dreams of career advancement. She more fully represents the myth of the "career woman" who "really can have it all," though Mia's presence and apparent happiness threaten to undermine the worldview Elena has built for herself. If Nora is off-putting for her bitterness about what she cannot have, Mia makes waves in buttoned-up in Shaker Heights because, as I will show below, she embraces an alternative lifestyle and suggests that there is a freer, more organic way of being.

At least, that's how Ng's novel plays out. In the 2020 Hulu television adaptation, however, the decision to cast Kerry Washington as Mia dramatically changes the stakes of the racial component of the story that, in the novel, holds less weight with class considerations. Ng reportedly told Washington during production that "she had always thought of Mia as a woman of color, and that she had been drawn to the idea of writing Mia as a black woman. But she didn't feel like she had the authoritative voice to do that in the right way. And so she was kind of vague about her race in the novel."[71] While the Hulu

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[70] Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 248.
[71] Kerry Washington, interviewed by Terry Gross, "'She Wrote Her Own Rules': Kerry Washington's 'Little Fires' Role Reminds Her Of Mom," *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio (April 6, 2020)), https://www.npr.org/2020/04/06/827968714/she-wrote-her-own-rules-kerry-washington-s-little-fires-role-reminds-her-of-mom.

adaptation feels very "timely" for its exploration of white privilege and microaggressions in 2020, the character changes made to accompany the racebending both significantly shift the emphasis of the story away from Ng's original themes and raise the issue of how race complicates notions of compulsory sexuality. Specifically, the show writers coupled casting Mia as Black with stripping her of her canonical asexuality.

A vocal minority of asexuality activists have written at length about the complicated intersection between compulsory sexuality and race. They join a chorus of Black feminist and intersectional scholars who understand that "Sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather, it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities."[72] For many Black Americans, sexuality is inseparable from a legacy of racialized gender roles and the stereotypes of animality and uncivilization imposed upon them by white Americans as an expression of white supremacy. Black asexual scholars and activists explain that many Black asexuals struggle to untangle their sexual from their racial identity because of the presumed whiteness underpinning both sexual and asexual normativity. Ianna Hawkins Owen considers Black asexuality in light of a legacy of racist tropes about Black sexuality, writing that asexual self-knowledge "seems contingent upon the absenting of the racial."[73] Activist Sherronda J. Brown reflects on the way the racialization of sexuality has limited her own self-knowledge, writing, "Blackness is hypersexualized… My

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[72] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.
[73] "still… nothing: Mammy and Black Asexual Possibility," *Feminist Review* 120, (2018), 73.

asexuality will never be separate from larger endeavors to excavate Black asexuality from beneath dehumanizing white colonial interpretations."[74] [75]

To this end I have to wonder if something about the character's newfound Blackness motivated the choice to write Mia as allosexual, bordering on promiscuous. In the show, the tension between Mia and Elena (Reese Witherspoon) which stems, in the novel, from Mia's bohemian lifestyle and antipathy toward marriage, now has more to do with Mia's status as a single Black mother in a predominantly white, wealthy community. In the novel Ng makes a point of explaining that Mia has never engaged in or desired sexual intercourse with anyone. However, in episode three of the series, Pearl explains to Moody, the youngest Richardson, that Mia has always been open about her participation in casual sex: "Whoever she wants, whenever she wants. She says that sex doesn't have to mean anything but sex." This is to set her apart from Moody's uptight parents who, he confides, "have a schedule" for their own sex lives. But it also reinforces the longstanding stereotype that sexually promiscuous Black women pose a threat to white sexual purity. Ultimately in the show, although Mia is shown on screen having sex with people of both genders, her primary romantic relationship is with an older woman who is also her teacher and her mentor, leading disgruntled viewers to suggest that the show was misrepresenting queer relationships as predatory and only made

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[74] Sherronda J. Brown. "How the Colonial History of Hypersexualization Obscures the Possibility of Black Asexuality." *Wear Your Voice* (October 23, 2019), http://wearyourvoicesmag.com/black-asexuality-colonial-history-hypsersexualization/.

[75] A similar racist imaginary, directed against people of Asian descent, prompts Alok Vaid-Menon to wonder "What then would it mean for me to identify as an 'asexual?' What would this agency look like in a climate of white supremacy? Can I ever authentically express 'my' (a)sexuality or am I always rehearsing colonial logics?" in "What's (R)ace got to do with it?: White privilege and (a)sexuality," *Media Diversified* (May 2014), https://mediadiversified.org/2014/05/03/whats-race-got-to-do-with-it-white-privilege-asexuality/.

Mia "visibly" queer to meet a diversity quota.[76] Conversely, in the novel, Mia is so chaste that a photo of her holding Pearl as a newborn is hung in a gallery with the title "*Virgin and Child #1*" (93). An analysis of *Little Fires Everywhere* therefore must account for the conditions that contribute to Mia's and Elena's understandings of and expressions of femininity. As Ianna Hawkins Owen writes, "in addition to expanding beyond 'born this way,' asexuality studies must hold critical space for those who are 'constructed this way.'"[77] For Washington's Mia's, it seems *allo*sexuality is constructed to match certain racial and plot-based expectations.[78]

The book and the show are both set in the 1990s at the height of the postfeminist moment. With her four children, her allegedly happy marriage, her status as pillar of the community, and her journalism career, Elena Richardson nominally represents the woman who no longer believes she needs feminism because she already has it all. To balance all her spinning plates, Elena admits that she has always held passion at arm's length:

> Better to control that spark and pass it carefully from one generation to the next, like an Olympic torch. Or, perhaps, to tend it carefully like an eternal flame: a reminder of light and goodness that would never—could never—set anything ablaze. Carefully controlled. Domesticated. Happy in captivity. The key, she thought, was to avoid conflagration.[79]

Mia is the opposite. For book Mia, passion, which is not inherently sexual, means embracing whatever conflagration is called for. When someone complains to her about an injustice, she

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[76] See https://www.reddit.com/r/LittleFiresEverywhere/comments/jk44nx/mia_and_paulines_relationship/. One viewer comments, "this show…relies on lazy stereotypes."
[77] "still, nothing: Mammy and black asexual possibility," *Feminist Review* 120 (2018), 77.
[78] There's also probably something here about how much easier it is to portray allosexuality rather than asexuality on screen.
[79] *Little Fires* 161.

asks, "What are you going to do about it?" (79). Her art and her sense of what is right move her and have made her nontraditional lifestyle possible. Kerry Washington's Mia, instead, invites a more pointed critique of Elena's particular brand of white feminism. As Kimberly Springer writes, "The discourse of having it all has always been a bit lost on black women and anathema to black feminism."[80] Whereas book Mia challenges domestic—or domesticated—femininity, show Mia serves as a reminder that received mainstream feminist discourse centers white women's experiences as normative.

On the one hand, then, Elena Richardson, to her own mind,

> had, in short, done everything right and she had built a good life, the kind of life she wanted, the kind of life everyone wanted. Now here was this Mia, a completely different kind of woman leading a completely different life, who seemed to make her own rules with no apologies.… [Elena] wanted to keep an eye on Mia, as you might keep your eye on a dangerous beast.[81]

Out of an abundance of caution and no small amount of curiosity, but allegedly out of the goodness of her heart, a model citizen who gives back to others, Elena invites Mia to fill in as the Richardsons' housekeeper in exchange for reduced cost of rent. Even in this novel the power imbalance created by this arrangement is apparent; Izzy, the Richardson's youngest daughter, refers to Mia as "the indentured servant. I mean, the tenant-slash-cleaning lady" (75). In the novel, though, the conflict is about the way class expectations determine what options are available to Elena and Mia each. Elena has willingly set aside things like personal

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[80] Kimberly Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil-Rights Popular Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, Duke U P, 2008): 252.
[81] *Little Fires* 69.

time and career aspirations to raise a model family. Mia diagnoses Elena's fascination and the source of their mutual tension. "It bothers you, doesn't it?" she suggests:

> "I think you can't imagine. Why anyone would choose a different life than the one you've got.… Why anyone would choose anything different than what you'd choose.… It terrifies you. That you missed out on something. That you gave up something you didn't know you wanted." A sharp, pitying smile pinched the corners of her lips. "What was it? Was it a boy? Was it a vocation? Or was it a whole life?" (302-3)

Book Mia's spinsterdom undermines the status quo, suggests that there are other ways for women to be happy. In *No More Fun and Games* Roxanne Dunbar muses that "We have no idea how people in societies of Whole, Liberated Individuals [among whom sexuality is not a foundation for relationality] will relate to each other."[82] If her life is not strictly a model for living asexually, it is enough to make Elena Richardson doubt whether her own by-the-book choices were the right ones to make.

On the other hand, there is an undeniable racial element to Elena's offer to Mia in the show. "Housekeeper is loaded," Bill Richardson reminds his wife, when she agonizes over Mia's chilly response to her offer. "What do you mean, 'loaded?'" Elena replies shrilly. "You mean racist. Isn't it more offensive to not offer her the job because of her race? Now, *that's* racist."[83] Mia in the show is decidedly not a spinster; she is merely unattached. Episode 2 opens with a flashback of Mia's car shaking as she enthusiastically fucks a man in the front

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[82] "Asexuality," *No More Fun and Games,* vol. 1 (October 1968), 53.
[83] *Little Fires Everywhere,* "Spark," Hulu video, March 18, 2020, https://www.hulu.com/watch/6589fe90-5ec1-4295-970b-c6bd940cdff1.

seat. The partners are interrupted when a baby wakes up and starts fussing in the back seat; we zoom out to realize that living out of their car means baby Pearl is witness to all her mother's activities, even those deemed inappropriate for children. Mia ushers the man away mid-coitus to tend to her baby—in this, at least, her priorities are clear. But the nearness of the child to Mia's pleasure, necessary though it may be given their living arrangement, renders Elena indignant about the quality of mothering Pearl is receiving. Mia's behavior is perceived both as selfishness and negligence and invites a comparison between Mia—raising her child without a stable home and the positive influence of either a father figure or a strong community—and Bebe, whose poverty and lack of social support drive her to surrender her daughter to the state for protection. Elena seethes: "You're manipulative and deceitful, with no sense of the rules or the consequences. Just like your friend Bebe.… You know what else you have in common with your friend? You're both *terrible* mothers."[84] In response, Mia reminds Elena of the structural differences between their experiences that enable Elena to judge her so harshly: "You didn't make good choices, you *had* good choices." At this point Elena chastises her for once again making everything "about race."

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Hulu's impulse to racebend the Warrens was inappropriate. That so much of the criticism of the show is leveled against Kerry Washington for her portrayal of Mia as "bitter," "irresponsible," or profoundly "unsympathetic" precisely proves the show's argument that Black and white women are held to different standards despite their material circumstances—evidence of the persistence of

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[84] *Little Fires Everywhere*, "The Spider Web," Hulu video, March 25, 2020, https://www.hulu.com/watch/9131b77b-95cb-4173-baca-6f361fe035f2.

racism especially in places like Shaker Heights that consider themselves post-racial. But Sherronda J. Brown and others caution that a long tradition of hypersexualizing Black women leaves "little space" for "Black asexual visibility."[85] Rather than innate or freely chosen asexuality, Black asexual characterizations still tend toward depictions of the Mammy, whose "asexuality is written on her and her body, but only as a means to relegate her to a life of eternal servitude to others. She is undesirable and undesiring of sexual expressions, which means that she is unencumbered in her ability to be a surrogate mother and a tireless domestic worker."[86] Within this racist logic, a Black asexual Mia would not be nearly as disruptive to the plot of *Little Fires* because her chastity, presumably, would make her less volatile, more manageable. On equal racial footing with Elena, white asexual Mia is positioned to shake Elena's confidence in her choices in ways a Black asexual Mia, it seems, never could.

It is worth repeating, then, that compulsory sexuality affects women differently according to their race, class, and the choices available to them. Queer and heterosexual imaginaries both tend to presume whiteness as a "neutral" space and fail adequately to account for the personal and structural factors that influence subjects' capacity for self-determination beyond their assigned gender. Compulsory sexuality is even more insidious for the way it measures sexual expression against an unspoken metric of whiteness and its privileges

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85 "Colonial History of Hypersexualiztion."
86 Ibid.

Chapter 2: The Child

One of the unwritten laws of contemporary morality, the strictest and best respected of all, requires adults to avoid any reference, above all any humorous reference, to sexual matters in the presence of children.

— Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*

(Please Don't) Fuck the Child

Since beginning this project I have amused myself finding inventive ways I can describe my work to various family members without scandalizing them. "It's about celibacy," I told my easily ruffled grandmother recently, even though it's not. "It's about how people grow up feeling pressured into sex," I say sometimes, and catch myself putting emphasis on sexual education as a form of corruption, falling into the trap of setting innocence and chastity on one side, and vulgarity and sexuality on the other. I never explain my work to children. It doesn't feel like my place to explain sexuality to children—even if what I'm explaining is a "purer" or more "age-appropriate" asexual possibility.

All of this is to say that I began work on this chapter with considerable hesitancy. I was interested in understanding whether the culturally prescribed asexuality of children and the concern adults take to shield them from "adult" knowledge might reveal another layer of the way compulsory sexuality operates even through censorship. What I suspected—and what I found—is that the concern with protecting children has a lot to do with how sexusociety tends to eroticize their vulnerability. Even on the quest of the asexual child, I was uncomfortably aware of the taboo of sexualized children, and found it curious that the endangered child was the first place my mind went. I would, I assumed, be plunging into a

world of predatory adults and vulnerable waifs like Lolita or like the one in *Les Mis* whose pathetic affect allies the audience irreversibly with her cause.[1] Indeed, there was hardly a moment to resist these affiliations because, as child sexuality scholar James Kincaid points out, we are almost as fascinated with sexualized children as we are with the alleged pedophiles whose trials we follow with morbid interest. "We have," Kincaid writes, "become so engaged with tales of childhood eroticism (molestation, incest, abduction, pornography) that we have come to take for granted the irrepressible allure of children. We allow so much power to the child's sexual appeal that we no longer question *whether* adults are drawn to children."[2]

In this chapter I attempt to unravel the fantasy of childhood asexuality (typically conflated with childhood innocence) and point to some of its roots in adult projection. Under compulsory sexuality children are future-adults in need of training into sexusociety, but also represent a kind of lost innocence that drips with nostalgia. I aim to show here that the hypersexualization and desexualization of children both, and more generally the hysteria that tinges conversation around child sexuality, is part of a compulsion to reproductive futurity at odds with liberatory politics. Rather than suggest that the way out of reproductive futurity's stranglehold is to engage in fruitless fucking, though, I'm interested in a feminist utopian suggestion that alternative community structures for childrearing, alongside a destigmatizing of access to sexual knowledge (in the process, making the Child a less charged

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[1] For all my ire I owe a lot to Lee Edelman: "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital *l*s and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop" (*No Future* 29).
[2] James Kincaid, Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting (Durham: Duke UP, 1998) 13.

site of censorship and pedgagogy), might point to a better way forward.[3] In an excerpt from her memoir in Volume 2 of *No More Fun and Games*, Roxanne Dunbar fondly remembers the time she spent in the hospital after the birth of her daughter, and the community she formed with other mothers and their children. "It was easier taking care of a baby in the company of others," she writes, "and with good facilities, knowing you could call on someone for help, or come and go freely. I learned a great deal, and talked with the women. It was there in those days that I first conceived of communal care for children."[4] This is not the utopia we will find in this chapter, but we might do well to hold it in mind.

Before dipping into the scholarship on children themselves, I first want to pause on the false binary I drew above between innocence and sexuality. This binary, which could here easily be replaced with the opposition between children and adults,[5] betrays insidious assumptions about asexuality as somehow developmentally anterior to full-blown adult sexuality, as Megan Milks has argued in "Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation." Milks observes that "sexual liberation is ultimately a maturity narrative…. Within the logic of this narrative, only when asexuals discover their authentic sexual selves can they become fully whole, finally autonomous, imbued with political agency."[6] Milks cites an archive full of asexual activists who are publicly asked if they've ever *tried* sex, to whom it is delicately suggested that perhaps they simply haven't found the

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[3] Lee Edelman, in fact, haunts this whole chapter. So, too, though, do Charlotte Perkins Gillman, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, and Nicola Griffith, etc.
[4] "Maternity," *No More Fun and Games* vol. 2 (February 1, 1969): 96.
[5] Or, if we replace "innocence and sexuality" with "vulnerability and power," this false binary upholds the infantilization of women MacKinnon and Dworkin suggest pornography enforces.
[6] "Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, 101.

right person to unlock their full adult sexuality. In a queer theoretical and sex-positive feminist landscape where, historically, sex acts have been linked to personal liberation,[7] to focus on the figure of the asexual child is to risk reifying a correlation between asexuality and the preservation of innocence, which is to say, the repression or stunting of personal growth and sexual maturity.[8] This growth narrative of sexual development is in accord with Freud's understanding of infantile sexuality as the precursor to fully adult sexuality, and to his conclusion that the neuroses are rooted in regression to infantile sexuality. The newborn may possess "the germs of sexual feelings," but it is not until full adulthood and sexual maturity that wholeness is attained.[9]

To be clear, I am not, here, arguing for a clear or necessary link between asexuality and childishness. It is, rather, the case that sexuosociety enforces the desexualization of childhood by tightly controlling children's knowledge about the range of possible experiences of sexuality and bodily autonomy. This desexualization occurs both in the Foucauldian sense—that institutional restrictions and discursive strategies have limited the access children have to sexual life and sexual knowledge so as to control their development—but also for the simple reason that sexusociety likes to think of children as innocent. Discussions of the history of the child as a discrete social category root the Romantic affiliation of the child with innocence in a nostalgia for the best of human nature,

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[7] Notwithstanding Leo Bersani's quip that "to want sex with another man is not exactly a credential for political radicalism," in "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

[8] Similarly, disability studies and asexuality studies sit at an awkward intersection when disabled persons, in addition to being infantilized are also desexualized. See Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives," *Sexualities* 14(4), 2011, 479-93.

[9] Sigmund Freud (1905), trans. A.A. Brill, (1910), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, (Seaside OR: Rough Draft Publishing 2014).

a reminder of a prelapsarian state before we were all tinged with the sin of sexual knowledge. Kathryn Bond Stockton muses that "the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back."[10] Adults act as if they wish they could protect children from the harsh and vulgar realities of adulthood for as long as possible when in fact it is their regret about their own loss of innocence that motivates the censorship they therefore impose on children. Moreover, Bond Stockton writes, "by making children innocent, we've made children foreign, obscure to us" because of how vehemently we insist that they do not—cannot—see the world as we do.[11] It is, in fact, this insistence on the alien nature of children's access to sexuality that I will insist. Insofar as adults have attempted to keep them in the dark about "mature" sexuality, children have the potential to be as estranged from normative compulsory sexuality as any of my other figures of asexuality. In some ways alien to those of us who have grown up under compulsory sexuality, they offer another way of making sense of the world.

What children know, or what they understand, is a central question to literary and theoretical narratives about children, from Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) to Lolita herself. Archard suggests that "talk of innocence serves ideologically to hinder the empowerment of children through awareness and knowledge."[12] Instead of protecting them by limiting the access they have to knowledge about sex, adults only widen children's gap between their understanding of the world and adult reality and so increase the risk that

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[10] *The Queer Child, or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, Duke U P, 2009) 5. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel" for reflections on adults' tendency to project their own "inner children" on the children they try to protect.
[11] "The Queer Child Now and its Paradoxical Global Effects," *GLQ* 22(6), 2016, 514.
[12] David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood* (New York: Routledge 2015), 53.

children will misinterpret adult intentions and let themselves be taken advantage of. Because the presumed loss of innocence so distances adults from a child's perspective, children become exceptionally overdetermined subjects of situated knowledge, perfect mirrors to reflect adult assumptions about what sexual knowledge entails. Even so, children usually understand more than we give them credit for.

Of course, since we cannot return to our own childhood, we can never say for sure what the child knows. But we can pay close attention to how adults act with the presumed innocent, and how well they bear the burden of children's education. At stake in the question of what children know is the degree of responsibility adults bear for corrupting them. This thought is so unbearable that corrupt children turn up disproportionately in horror narratives. Virginia L. Blum explains that this is because "the child's pathology points to the family's pathology."[13] Where adults err, their flaws are reflected in their children:

> In the effort to present the 'reality' of the child and its perceptions, we cannot help but interpret the child in light of adult motives; we cannot help but interpret *ourselves* through the child. The study of the child thus becomes ta perpetual reenactment of the actual child in favor if adult imperatives.[14]

Or, as Kathryn Bond Stockton puts it, "we are scared of the child we would protect": scared that it might reveal our grown-up perversions, and scared that, if we raise it incorrectly, it might grow up queer.[15][16] Queer children instead make their ghostly appearances, for

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[13] *Hide and Seek: The Child Between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* (Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1995) 3. See also *Erotic Innocence* Chapter 5: "Resenting Children."
[14] Ibid.
[15] *The Queer Child* 37.

instance, in James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898), harbingers of secret knowledge too unspeakable for their governess to name.[17]

What I am gesturing to in this introduction is fully a cult of the Child as a privileged site of adult fantasies of childhood innocence and the subsequent sexual control adults can wield. Perhaps no one derides adults' perverse fascination with the Child as forcefully as Lee Edelman does in *No Future* where he writes that "the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought," arguing that the image of the Child holds adults—and especially queers—hostage.[18] It is worth acknowledging, as Edelman does, the deep hypocrisy that underscores most discourses of the Child; even as we say we are desperate to protect the Child, words rarely lead to concrete action. It is "the image of the child, not to be confused with the lived experience of any historical children, [that] serves to regulate political discourse."[19] The conflation of the Child with some nebulous moral obligation leads, then, to the regulation of how adults are meant to behave around children. The cult of the Child means rampant homophobia and the continued centrality of the nuclear family, for instance, rather than a reconsideration of what kinds of family structures and supports would best benefit not just the Child but also those

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[16] Hats off to Freud, who cautions against the dangers of sexual education and maturity gone afoul, warning that

Girls with an excessive need for affection and an equal horror for the real demands of the sexual life experience an uncontrollable temptation on the one hand to realize in life the ideal of the asexual love and on the other hand to conceal their libido under an affection which they may manifest without self reproach: they do this by clinging for life to infantile attraction for their parents or brothers or sisters which has been repressed in puberty. ("The Transformations of Puberty" 106).

[17] See Ellis Hanson, "Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in *The Exorcist*" in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, editors (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004): 107-138.

[18] *No Future* 2.

[19] Ibid, 11.

tasked with raising them. James Kincaid argues the same when he focuses not so much on crimes against children as on the hysteria surrounding the *potential* for children to be harmed. Absent from much of the rhetoric around "protecting the children"—an explanation used nearly daily on both sides of the political spectrum to justify everything from iPhone surveillance[20] to the curtailing of abortion rights—is any structural attempt to increase access to food, housing, or medical assistance; that is, to address the most immanent dangers children regularly face.

This desperate attempt to appear to be protecting children in fact strips children of agency and puts them at higher risk by enforcing their vulnerability. Kincaid draws a grim parallel between the putative innocence of children and the paternalistic view society continues to take of women, especially mothers, who are held to a different standard of sexual comportment than men. He explains that this vulnerability imposed on subjects dependent on the goodness of others has been rendered erotic to those in positions of sexual power or sexual knowledge:

> The constructions of 'women' and 'child' are very largely evacuations, the ruthless distribution of eviction notices. Correspondingly, the instructions we receive on what to regard as sexually arousing tell us to look for (and often to create) this emptiness, to discover the erotic in that which is most susceptible to inscription, the blank page.[21]

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[20] At the time of writing, the tech world is in uproar about Apple's announcement that they will scan iCloud Photos for Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), among other protections ostensibly to prevent children from having access to sexually explicit content without their parents' permission: https://www.apple.com/child-safety/.

[21] Erotic Innocence 16.

The constant framing of women and children as victims, then, only further endangers them.

I have argued that we can learn a great deal about sexuosociety from what gets projected onto blank pages. In this case, the hysteria around the sexualization of children-as-innocents closely parallels the rhetoric that some radical feminists have used to argue that pornography always and irreversibly harms women by objectifying them and portraying them in vulnerable positions.[22] I will do more in Chapter 3, "Fucking Machines," to explain the assumptions antiporn rhetoric makes about the conflation between sex and power and the conditions under which consent can freely be given. Evidence of the presumed sexualized victimization of women and children (especially girl children) takes form today, for instance, when these two are named as protected categories in the Campaign Against Sex Robots (CASR)'s stated goals.[23]

In "Live Sex Acts," Lauren Berlant reflects on children as fetishes, "effigies that condense, displace, and stand in for arguments about who 'the people' are, what they can bear, and when, if ever."[24] I suggest that the image of the ideal Child is an ideal site to look for evidence of the operation of compulsory sexuality in American popular culture especially because *not* everyone gets to be a child. The children who belong and the children whom we

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[22] See also Steven Angelides, "Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality" *GLQ* vol. 2, no. 10 (2004): 141-177.

[23] https://campaignagainstsexrobots.org. The full list reads:

1. To abolish pornbots in the form of women and girls.
2. To offer an alternative, relational model of sex and sexuality informed by mutuality.
3. To challenge the normalization of pornbots as substitutes for relationships with women.
4. To oppose the development of child sex-abuse dolls/robots as 'therapeutic' for paedophiles.
5. To offer up an alternative vision of technology where women and girls are centered and valued.
6. To work across the political spectrum with those who value the dignity of women and girls.

Notice that no explicit mention is made of the putative harm sexual iconography could cause to boys or men. CASR continues to operate under conservative assumptions about traditional gender roles and the harm they inflict particularly on people born with vaginas.

[24] "Live Sex Acts (Parental Advisory: Explicit Material)," *Feminist Studies* vol. 21, no. 2 (1995), 17.

protect tend to be the ones who comply best with the instruction they receive on how to grow into "good" sexual citizens. This is, per Stockton, "the normative child…whom therefore we seek to safeguard at all costs."[25] This is the proto-straight, white, middle-class child born to two parents who desired it and who continue to desire each other. Indeed, the texts I examine here offer evidence, too, of the way adults—and especially women-are meant to behave in relation to children: to desire and protect them with all the purity a mother's love can offer. But the asexual Child as it is typically constructed in literature does not offer a vision of pure asexual possibility. Rather, it clings to the notion of correct sexual development, with the child as index of the utopian aspirations or gross perversions adults project onto them. Thus, Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), adapted from Brian Aldiss' short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" (1969), explores the limitations of the fantasy of a perfect, perfectly Oedipal child (the robot boy David) and the burden one would actually pose. Conversely in *The Exorcist* (Blatty 1971, Friedkin 1973), the horror inflicted upon Regan mobilizes the adults around her who have variously "fallen from grace" to reconsider their habits to "save" her from their vices. Both David and Regan are horrifying, but both plots somehow mobilize the audience's sympathy for the horrifyingly perfect child as much as the horrifyingly corrupt child, so that rather than blame the Child we look to criticize the adults who erred in their upbringing.

On Whom All Our Hope Rests

A final point about how deeply ingrained our desire to protect children has become verges on reader response analysis. I have never seen Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The

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[25] Bond Stockton, *Queer Child*, 30.

Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973) not provoke outrage in a group discussion.[26] "Omelas" is about physical and emotional violence rather than explicitly sexual violence but evokes a similar outrage against any harm whatsoever being done to children. Jon Davies has speculated that "the discourse of pedophilia is a kind of black hole into which any measured speech about consent, pleasure, and desire in intergenerational relationships seems to vanish."[27] In the absence of a pedophilia plot, "Omelas" shows how difficult it is to enter into fine-grained discussion about structural abuse of children and also how easy it is to ignore children's pain when to do so is more convenient for us.

The story opens with a celebration of a joy that is inarticulable and, to the reader, seems incomprehensible: "Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?"[28] As bells peal and children laugh, the people of Omelas celebrate their Festival of Summer and their utterly peaceful existence. But, cautions the narrator, the reader must not fall into the trap of thinking that Omelas, without kings, without conflict, must instead be a boring place. "How can I tell you about the people of Omelas?" the narrator muses. "They were not naive and happy children— though their children were, in fact, happy."[29] Indeed, "we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as

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[26] Most recently, a dear friend watched, bemused, when her class full of middle-schoolers rebelled against her attempt to teach "Omelas." Their complaint was that the text was too depressing. More specifically, they fully believed Le Guin was *advocating* for the torture of children, not merely exposing the way their vulnerability is baked into the structure of self-congratulatory systems of power. I'm fascinated that, at, the age of twelve, the students already knew to perform outrage at the suggestion of deliberate harm being done to other children. Thanks to Caoimhe Harlock for the anecdote.
[27] John Davies, "Imagining Intergenerationality Representation and Rhetoric in the Pedophile Movie," *GLQ: Special Issue on Queer Temporalities* vol. 13, no. 2 (2007): 369-85.
[28] Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, 2nd printing (New York: Bantam Books, 1975): 253.
[29] Ibid.

something rather stupid," but the Omelans are much more than "dull utopians."[30] Most interesting in this effusive goodness, of course, is the suggestion that joy and that innocence are not naïve propositions. Omelas, it seems, has escaped the trap that we modern Terrans cannot as we continue to associate childhood with a happier, prelapsarian state. By all our own logic the narrator prepares us to consider Omelas an impossible place—a place that would be tantamount to returning to our own childhood, without the threat posed by the waiting exigencies of the adult world. Indeed, the narrator invites the reader to find in Omelas their own fantasy, noting, "perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all."[31]

From the start, then, Omelas challenges us to recognize the things in the real world that stand in our way of joy. The narrator entertains and then discards the possibility of vice existing in this city, dismissing sex work, organized religion, and drug use not as inherently sinful or forbidden activities but as redundant in a world where pure joy is already possible. Omelas is neither hedonistic nor puritanical; rather, the citizens of the city seem to have struck a perfect balance with their own consciences for, we are told, "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt."[32] We are called to imagine a world where nothing is so shameful that it becomes a vice—where, perhaps, overindulgence is impossible. The narrator, through various asides and appeals that stretch the limits of the reader's own imagination, knows how inconceivable such a place really is. Finally, just over halfway

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[30] Ibid. 254.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. 255.

through the story, the narrator makes a concession: "Let me describe one more thing."[33] After the litany of beautiful things, this abrupt turn, this frank reckoning chills the reader. We knew that Omelas was too good to be true. We knew it had to have a darker underbelly, otherwise it absolutely would strain credulity.

Le Guin's narrator goes on to describe the plight of the poor child who lives in the utility room of a basement under one of the city's gorgeous buildings—that is, the child's resting place is literally the foundation on which the city is built. Although it is naked, we do not know the child's gender, nor its name, nor its origin. The child is an "it," an object rather than a subject or citizen, upon whose emaciated shoulders the prosperity of the city rests. We do know that it is suffering, kept locked in the dark to stew in its own shit. We are told, horribly, that the child "has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice."[34] Every time I reread "Omelas" this is the detail that unsettles me most of all because of the way it reveals my own prejudices. That the child had a mother, had a life beyond these walls, makes its isolation and neglect all the crueller because it once had a taste of dignity and love. The child did not always function merely as an object for the city's derision. Now, it uses knowledge of a past life occasionally to speak, to bargain with its captors: "I will be good… Please let me out. I will be good!"[35] Fortunately for its captors, the narrator tells us, the longer it is kept in the dark, the less the child speaks, as its sense of self and dignity slips away.

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[33] Ibid. 256.
[34] Ibid. 257.
[35] Ibid.

The inhumanity the child has obtained is the excuse the people of Omelas give to themselves for keeping it imprisoned; in fact, they are complicit in contributing to its ongoing indignity. The Omelans' awareness of the child and its plight is what most people seem to object to in the story—as presumably adult readers all, we assume *we* would not be content to sit by while such an injustice were being done. Instead, the Omelans accept the reality of the child's abjection as necessary to their own prosperity; it is the darkness that allows them to relish in the light of their own existence. The narrator reports, "It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark"[36] it would be another child, one they know personally and whose humanity they have already fully recognized. At last, by the narrator's estimation, the Omelans' full awareness of what they have enabled gives them the gravitas that will make the reader take them seriously rather than dismiss them as happy fools. The existence of cruelty in Omelas, presumably, makes the city itself credible.

The biggest difference between the Omelans and us is that the Omelans have accepted, rather than willfully turned a blind eye to, the reality that their own contentment is completely dependent on the suffering of someone they hold to be less than themselves. What is more, that they acknowledge their own role in the child's torment makes them less hypocritical than the adults who, by the assessment of most scholars of childhood, would rather fight for an imaginary, perfect child than for the real children living in precarity in our

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[36] Ibid 258-9.

world today. If only correcting injustices in the real world were as easy as we assume it would be in Omelas. Kincaid has suggested that abused children are a recurring motif of Gothic narratives because these narratives offer a discrete problem with an easy solution: "The Gothic draws our attention to the personal and the psychological, away from structural social problems and what may be more pressing pains in our culture."[37] The moral outrage we feel when we read "Omelas" is a symptom of our desire to absolve ourselves of being part of gross social ills.

As of the time of writing, 14.5% of American parents reported that their children were facing malnourishment. In 2019, one American child or teen died in a gun-related incident on average every 2 hours and 36 minutes.[38] Since schools have reopened for the fall semester, the daily news is rife with stories about how anti-masking parents and their children are making school dangerous especially for disabled children and their families, and the rate of COVID-19 cases in children is rising dangerously. This litany of American sins goes to show that as a nation we are as culpable as the Omelans when it comes to denying our children protections in the name of political or personal ideals, and that our problem is much more widespread than theirs. The callous way children are made to stand in for politically conservative agendas does not keep the self-righteous note out of the voices of politicians and protesters who say they're only "thinking of the example we are setting for our children."

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[37] Erotic Innocence 12.
[38] Both statistics taken from *The State of America's Children 2021*. https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-State-of-Americas-Children-2021.pdf

And worst of all the innumerable threats children may face, judging only from the hysterical tone such stories arouse, is the possibility of child sexual abuse—a crime even the Omelans are too civilized to perpetrate. The literature on the disproportionate emphasis we place on eliminating CSAM in the face of the other, more immediately life-threatening and broader-reaching problems children face daily, replicate this problem. To denounce their lunacy James Kincaid breathlessly rehashes the details of famous court cases involving alleged incest and pedophilia that became media spectacles although—or perhaps, because there was insufficient evidence to suggest such abuses had ever taken place. So, too, in *Harmful to Minors* does Judith Levine linger on the ways that the American legal system has sensationalized legal cases involving children and sex in a way that creates a moral panic but very rarely improves the actual lived experience of American youth.

So, why *are* we so much more concerned with protecting children from sex than from other threats? It could be because we have internalized some of the lessons *we* were taught about the moral superiority of chastity over experimentation, and the sanctity of sex only within prescribed normative arrangements. Ela Przybylo tells a curious story about her own mother feeling threatened by the way Przybylo, a queer woman, interacts with her young niece. What is more, Przybylo concedes, "my mother might be right; there might be something perverse in my love for my niece…. Watching my niece frolic, pants hanging low, I know only that desire—in this case, the intergenerational draw to be kin—is not distillable to the sexual."[39] If, as Virginia Blum suggests, it is true that we think of the child as "an adult in the making," Przybylo's mother's anxiety, and our national anxiety around children and

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[39] Asexual Erotics 111.

sex, may have less to do with the actual threat posed to children's wellbeing than the risk that, if exposed, children may succumb to sexual deviance.[40] Blum is especially sensitive to this point. Her introduction begins, "In America today, it is nearly impossible to publish a book that says children and teenagers can have sexual pleasure and be safe too."[41] Sexual education may be more inclusive in many places than it was in 2002, but this is not universally recognized as a good thing—many conservatives seem still to believe that teaching safe sex is practically the same thing as enabling teens to have sex. Then as now, sexual knowledge seems to be the threshold separating children from the evils of adulthood. Then as now, we can be sure that this epistemic injustice must do more harm than good.

The Burdens of a Real Boy: Raising the Perfect Child

An unspoken consequence of compulsory sexuality is that women are presumed to want to be mothers. Reproduction becomes an unquestioned good, even in science-fictional situations that queer the reproductive process. Across space and time, children are to be protected at all costs. So, parthenogenesis becomes a highly sought-after feature of feminist utopias from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* to Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Marge Piercy explores the possibility of the communal raising of children—a theme that resonates from Plato's *Republic* to more contemporary money-saving arrangements.[42] But for all the potential that exists to expand what constitutes family, it is both true that religious adoption agencies may still pose obstacles to LGBTQ couples

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[40] Harmful to Minors 34.
[41] Ibid xix.
[42] See for instance *The Atlantic* article "Eight Parents, One Shower" for proof that even straight, monogamous couples chafe under the restrictions imposed by the nuclear family arrangement. https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/08/eight-parents-one-shower/493532/.

fostering children on religious grounds[43] and that the right to adoption is not held up as an unmitigated good by queer theorists.[44]

As we have seen with the Spinster, though, the most unthinkable of these is the woman who does not want a child, or the woman who struggles to love her child. Brian Aldiss's "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" and Kubrick and Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence,* the film it inspired, offer uncanny children as limit cases of who and what mothers are expected to be able to love, even as both texts assume that the audience's sympathy lies squarely with the child in question.

"Supertoys" and *A.I.* both tell the story of a robot child that has been offered to a mother in lieu of a biological child. In both cases Henry, the father of the nuclear family, a tech company employee and an absentee husband, leaves behind a robot child, David, to placate his wife. In both cases, the wife, Monica, struggles to love the artificial concession she has been offered. "Supertoys" ends with Monica and her husband's rare moment of shared glee when they receive the news that the government has finally called their number in the parenthood lottery—the story is set in an overpopulated world where reproduction is strictly regulated and the parents' preference for the rare "real thing" is comparable to the obsession with realistic robot pets as a status symbol (and the traffic in black market live animals) in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.[45] *A.I.*, on the other hand, ends with a perfectly Oedipal reunion of human mother and mechanical child in a future where the father no longer exists to stand in their way. Both texts challenge the suggestion that there *can* be such

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43 See Fulton et al. v City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania et al.
44 Cf. Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, David Halperin, Jasbir Puar, among other critics of homonormativity.
45 Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? 1968, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1996).

a thing as a perfect child, or that we would find a perfect child desirable, should such a child exist.

Both texts suggest that there is something deeply troubling about a mother who is unable to give her child her unconditional affection and undivided attention. In "Supertoys," for instance, Henry implies with some bitterness that his wife has chosen to disengage with the real world, telling a colleague that "Monica prefers to stay at home thinking beautiful thoughts." Yet the reader has some insight into Monica's thoughts, and indeed sees her struggle to control her emotions as they apply to David. "She had tried to love him": a tremulous line of free indirect discourse at the top of the story gives some indication of what unmaternal thoughts Monica is suppressing throughout. In their place, "She began by sitting and thinking; soon she was just sitting." Not even lost in beautiful thoughts, then, Monica evinces a stillness and dissociation from reality that frightens even David. Watching Monica through the window, David observes:

> His mother stood in the middle of the room. Her face was blank; its lack of expression scared him. He watched fascinated. He did not move; she did not move. Time might have stopped….

"Supertoys" makes the disconnection between David and Monica a problem. Never mind that he is not her biological son, or even a real boy. Though the text tells us she is overwhelmed by loneliness, it also frames her struggle to love a machine as a problem.

Despite his animatronic teddy bear's reassurances to the contrary, David is aware that there exists an emotional gulf between them, and it makes him pitiable. "If she loved me," he asks philosophically, "then why can't I talk to her?" Monica tells Henry David's

"verbal communication center" is malfunctioning, but the portions of the story from David's point of view imply instead that it is David's sense of alienation from Monica that has left him tongue-tied. Instead of vocalizing his feelings for Monica, David commits them to writing in rainbow colored crayon, a litany of unfinished sentences that try and fail to express the depth of his purported feelings for her:

"My dear Mummy, How are you really, do you love me as much -"

"Dear Mummy, I love you and Daddy and the sun is shining -"

"Dear dear Mummy, Teddy's helping me write to you. I love you and Teddy -"

"Darling Mummy, I'm your one and only son and I love you so much that some times -"

"Dear Mummy, you're really my Mummy and I hate Teddy -"

"Darling Mummy, guess how much I love -"

"Dear Mummy, I'm your little boy not Teddy and I love you but Teddy -"

"Dear Mummy, this is a letter to you just to say how much how ever so much -"

Monica weeps when she reads these, but the text gives no clues as to whether these are happy tears, or tears of terror.

I say terror here because it is unclear within the logic of the story how much genuine emotion David is *supposed* to be able to feel. Monica's and David's perspectives are intercut with a presentation Henry is delivering to Synthank about the future of artificial life forms. The language Aldiss gives Henry to describe the work Synthank does lacks precision differentiating "life" from "intelligence," and the bearing each of these categories might have on what constitutes the "real." Henry announces a new model of Synthank technology

that will be their first "intelligent synthetic life form," though Synthank has been careful only to give this life form "a controlled amount of intelligence [because] we believe people would be afraid of a being with a human brain." David is likely one of Synthank's older models, "plastic things without life, super-toys." By Synthank's corporate logic, David must be "alive" but not "intelligent." How, then, are we to account for the depth of emotion he expresses in writing, or for his apparent narcissism, his humanly flawed accounting of what love ought to look like between a mother and son? In his letters David fumbles to distinguish himself as uniquely worthy of Monica's love, and to articulate the purity of his feelings for Monica in exchange for her letting him into her life. Perhaps he cannot think fully through the consequences of his love, as when he cuts himself off: "I love you so much that sometimes—." Maybe this statement, which reads like a threat, is only evidence of the limits of his cognitive ability.

Yet in a retrospective essay published around the time *A.I.* was released, Aldiss claims he intended "Supertoys" to be more about love than about the limits of computer science.[46] Specifically, "Supertoys" was supposed to be about the consequences of one-sided love, of relationships designed to flatter the people in power with little thought to the emotional landscape of the ones doing the loving. Aldiss writes, "Why should we wish to instill intelligence into mechanical creatures? Not so they might enjoy themselves, but so they might serve us." That is, Aldiss wrote "Supertoys" as a thought experiment to explore humans' ethical obligations to the sentient technology we might create, never mind the duty we might have to the rest of our own species. Henry and Monica come across as callous for

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[46] "Like Human, Like Machine," *New Scientist* 171 (2308), 2001.

seeking both an artificial and a real child in a world where three-quarters of the population are starving while, for their population-controlled income bracket, "Obesity is our problem, not malnutrition." The story elicits our sympathy for the artificial boy who could never be enough, even as it cautions that progress for progress's sake is leading us to neglect our own kin and to isolate ourselves from the earth.

Aldiss claims, some thirty years after penning "Supertoys," to have taken a more humanitarian turn in his older age. When he sat down to write the story, he confesses, "I felt more affection for David, the android, and his sidekick, Teddy, than did Monica Swinton, his adopted mother.… I also believed humankind to be faulty." But, following decades of advances in the science of consciousness and a fresh perspective on humans' obligation to each other in 2001 he writes:

> So what I believed in 1969 I do not believe in 2001. Nor has the theme of the poor neglected boy the personal appeal it once possessed. My own frail EXTC and everyone else's have moved on. We know more than we did about technology and the human brain. The brain proves to be more wonderful than the planet Mars, and certainly more full of life.

From exploring the problem of consciousness through artificial cognition to deepening his appreciation of the still-unsolved mysteries of human consciousness, it's unclear whether Aldiss has come to recenter the human being or merely grown bored with slow technical progress. His retrospective disenchantment with David, though, feels callous after all the work his prose does to make David seem worthy of a mother's love.

The expanded plot and the visual dimension of *A.I.* make it more clear what kind of mother-love is at stake in a "mecha" (mechanical)-"orga" (organic) relationship. Notably, Steven Spielberg's decision to cast the cherubic Haley-Joel Osment as David is a reminder of what kind of children are conventionally desirable enough to evoke sympathy. It matters a lot that David is a beautiful child. The film also almost immediately attempts to resolve the question of David's capacity to feel, although the nature of an artificially consciousness is always such that the degree of free will that AI can be said to have is always up for debate (see more on this in Chapter 3). Dr. Allan Hobby builds David as the first model in a new generation of mecha who can love, not merely as a physiological response to stimuli and social cues, but with genuine feeling and intensity. Pleasure robots who simulate arousal and serve as easy sexual partners already exist in this world (they don't in "Supertoys," though Henry admits to the Synthank investors that pleasurebots might not be far off). What David feels, Hobby says, is more than that:

> I wasn't referring to sensuality simulators, the word that I used was love. Love like the love a child has for its parents. I propose that we build a robot child who can love, a robot child who will genuinely love the parent or parents it imprints on with a love that will never end.… Love will be the key by which they acquire a kind of subconscious which has never been achieved.

Here, the specificity of the parent-child bond is crucial, for in imprinting with its parents the child-bot has access to a different, more human understanding of itself relationally. With its parents as models, the robot child can situate itself within the social fabric of a

family and can learn family-specific behavior rather than merely adhering to pre-scripted programming.

David's explicit ability to love makes Monica struggle more with her inability to bond fully with him. Initially, her reticence about David stems from the fact that he has been offered to her as a substitute for her biological child who lies suspended in a medically induced coma until a cure for his disease can be found. Monica has not been able fully to mourn for Martin, her "real" son. Yet when Henry, surprised by the intensity of Monica's reaction against David, offers that it's not too late to return David to the company, David's verisimilitude gets the better of her. "Did you see his face?" she marvels. "He's so real… Outside he just looks so real. Like he *is* a child." When Henry gently reminds her that David is a "mecha child," she merely echoes, "a child…" softly, clearly hung up on this one word. Ultimately, Monica decides to go through with the procedure of reciting the code words that will cause David to imprint on her, to love her permanently and unconditionally as if she were his real mother. It is unclear what precisely motivates her to make this choice—one she has been warned she cannot retract. Once David's programmed desires are aligned to her, Henry cautions, should the family decide not to keep David he will have to be returned to the factory to be destroyed. Otherwise, to leave him to experience irrevocable and unreturned love would be too cruel.

There's a lot to unpack about the way David and Monica bond—or don't. The most consistent thing is that David's obsession with Monica borders on the decidedly creepy, leading J. Hoberman to dub the film, accurately, "an occasionally spectacular, fascinatingly schizoid, frequently ridiculous and never less than heartfelt mishmash of Pinocchio and

Oedipus."[47] What I find most fascinating about Spielberg's adaptation of "Supertoys" is that, if Aldiss ultimately writes in defense of David and his right to be loved, *A.I.* works much harder to position David at the very edge of the uncanny valley, for instance, in the ways he takes the injunction to "love his mother" and "envy his father" to the extreme. The intensity he directs toward Monica, even before she officially binds him to herself, seems designed either to make the audience laugh or shudder. David pops up everywhere at Monica's elbow, watching her make coffee, getting underfoot while she does chores, even barging in on her in the bathroom. In one particularly hair-raising scene, David sits with Henry and Monica at the dinner table, watching them eat and mimicking their gestures—picking up forkfuls of imaginary salad with his fork and drinking from an empty glass. When Monica fails to slurp a noodle all the way into her mouth, David bursts out laughing with manic intensity. After a startled pause, Monica and Henry join in—a nervous laugh, or a tension-busting one, or one that admits just how on edge all three of them are. Abruptly, David stops, and the pseudo-family is silent, though Henry is smiling faintly because it has been so long since he has seen Monica laugh.

Quickly, though, once Monica allows David to bond fully with herself (a change announced the first time he calls her "Mommy" rather than "Monica" to her face), Henry, David's Oedipal rival, professes to find David "creepy." "He's practically human," Monica begs in David's defense, but the theme of their life together—especially after Martin is miraculously cured and returns to the family home—is that David lacks something intangible that would make him "real." Martin, horribly, takes full advantage of the

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[47] "The Dreamlife of Androids," *Sight and Sound* 11(9), 16-18, 2001.

superiority his humanity lends him by goading David with readings of Pinocchio and challenging David to complete menacing tasks Martin says will make him real and earn him Mommy's love. Once David accidentally knocks Martin—the real boy—into the swimming pool, the family finally concludes that he cannot assimilate without endangering them. Even in this world, as it turns out, one's own flesh-and-blood child has more intrinsic value than the most realistic artificial replacement.[48]

And yet the film clearly sides with the child over his selfish parents. What, we wonder, is David's crime? To have threatened the sanctity of real human children? To have loved Monica too much? These questions persist even as David's unquestionable sincerity and too-cute face challenge the limits of human empathy. When his love for Monica crosses a line that endangers the rest of the family, when his single-minded determination goes too far, "The dream child becomes the demon."[49] To save David from being decommissioned after Henry refuses to keep him in the house any longer, Monica abandons him in the woods, apologizing tearfully that "I didn't tell you about the world." As the story follows David through his abandonment, the depth of knowledge she has withheld from him becomes unconscionable. The human world proves extremely biased against mechas out of fear that humans will be replaced by mechanical counterparts. Fortunately, David's angelic demeanor inspires characters around him to act in his defense and shield him from most of humanity's basest urges.

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[48] This foreshadows Chris MacNeil's absolute certainty, in *The Exorcist*, that she could pick her real daughter out of a lineup of perfectly identical copies.
[49] Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence* 140.

Shortly after his abandonment, David finds himself captured by Lord Johnson-Johnson, an entertainer who rounds up unlicensed and out-of-date mechas for demolition at a grizzly "Flesh Fair" with the tagline "celebration of life." In the cages below the gladiator-style pit, to the distant sound of humans chanting, "this is a commitment to a truly human future!" David learns how humans treat the other mechas who are not as lucky as he to have been granted a Mommy or the capacity to execute more than one task for his human masters. Fortunately, David is spared the worst of the carnage at the flesh fair when the daughter of one of the technicians discovers him in the cage and raises the alarm that a "real boy" has been mistakenly lumped in with the other mechas. Lord Johnson-Johnson, apparently unmoved by David's insistence that "I'm David!" (as if having a name were enough to earn him dignity), drags David and Gigolo Joe, the pleasurebot mecha to whose hand David clings, into the ring. Johnson-Johnson clearly expects to be able to appeal to the sympathies of the crowd who cheered as his assistants set other mechas on fire, melted them with acid, and had them drawn and quartered. In fact, Johnson-Johnson seems to think he can use David to appeal to the rabid crowd's most basic fear. He crows:

> See here, a billy bot, a tinker toy, a living doll. Of course, we all know why they made him. To steal your hearts, to replace your children. This is the latest iteration in a series of insults to human dignity and in their grand scheme to phase out all god's little children. Meet the next generation of child, designed to do just that.… Built like a boy to disarm us! To imitate our emotions now! Whatever performance this sin puts on, remember, we are only demolishing artificiality! Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

Johnson-Johnson makes the mistake of assuming that their own obsolescence is the crowd's biggest fear. Even as they do fear replacement, though, the biggest crime in this dystopian future is to threaten a child. The existential threat David poses to the human race is drowned out by whatever remains of the biological urge to protect children—to ensure futurity—at all costs. "It's a boy!" the crowd murmurs with dismay. They pelt Johnson-Johnson with rotten fruit, crying, "He's just a little boy! You're a monster!" Perhaps this is David at his most chilling. Perhaps *this* is the fascism of the baby's face, that leads us to protect even that which is assumed to threaten our very existence because we cannot bring ourselves to say no to something that seems so innocent.

Just as the audience at the Flesh Fair are so deeply moved by David's face that they abandon their previous bigotry, so, too, is David's innocence in the film calculated to tug at the audience's heartstrings. In "Supertoys," David's primary concern is with being "real." "How do you tell what are real things from what aren't real things?" he asks Teddy. "Is time real, Teddy?" and again, "You and I are real, Teddy, aren't we?" Teddy's replies are programmatic and chosen, we are told, to reflect that "it [Teddy] specialized in comfort." Teddy's assessment, however, that "Real things are good" seems to capture the human bias of Teddy's makers more than it assuages David's existential crisis. Unable to communicate effectively with Mummy, David surmises, "I'm no good… Let's run away!" That is, awareness of his ontological difference from the Swinton parents drives a wedge between orga parents and mecha child. The reader's sympathy for David in this version of the plot stems from an irreconcilable difference between a sentient machine and parents who crave their own biological offspring. The letters David writes to Mummy in "Supertoys" show a

preoccupation with differentiating himself from Teddy, whose functioning is demonstrably more mechanical—"I'm your little boy not Teddy," one letter reads. Yet Teddy is the one David would bring with him if he ran away. The short story, then, evinces pity for David but also reads his distance from Monica and Henry as characteristic of the alienation humans will feel in an increasingly mechanized dystopian future.

In *A.I.*, conversely, the gulf between David and his family is cast primarily as the family's fault. For instance, the viewer witnesses Martin's jealous taunts behind Monica and Henry's backs. When Martin, in a cruel reminder of his own realness, goads David into eating spinach and causes him to break down, we are torn between sympathy for David as a boy who has been unfairly treated and horror as David's mechanical failure causes grotesque distortion to his facial features. Ultimately, the movie insists, it isn't David's fault he is not real. Not after Synthank announces their decision to create robot children genuinely capable of love. Not after we see Monica wrestle with the decision but ultimately decide to activate David's unconditional love for her. Hoberman calls David "a perfect reproach to humanity, hard-wired for innocence," arguing that "unlike the puppet Pinocchio … David has no need to demonstrate emotional growth or, indeed, any sort of negativity."[50] Indeed, when Henry and Monica decide to remove David from their family, it is David's grief and indignation we are left with. David was innocent in the dissolution of this constructed family. The Swintons, the film insists, neglected their duty toward him and failed to be good enough parents to an innocent boy who is worthy of love.

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[50] "The Dream Life of Androids."

In the absence of a good enough mother in particular (notably, David never calls Henry "Daddy" or clings to his father figure the way he does to Monica/Mommy), David's journey is not one of self-determination but is rather an epic quest to find his way back to Mommy's side. His last words to her before she leaves him in the woods, "If you let me, I'll be so real for you," become his mission for the rest of the film. They cement the purity of his love for Monica and, ultimately, protect him from the evils of the human world. He maintains his dignity and determination even as he navigates the horrors of the Flesh Fair and manages to escape intact. He emerges from the Flesh Fair not scarred by the worst of what human nature can entail but still naively convinced that a fairy tale can save him.

What is more, David's childish impulse to grab the hand of the nearest adult figure in a time of danger links him entirely by accident to the slick and sensual Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), but that a child runs away with a pleasurebot to "Rouge City," this world's red-light district for orga and mecha both, is almost inconsequential in the logic of the plot. "A hooker with 'a heart of gold,'" instead of corrupting David, Joe keeps David safe until he can reach Mommy again.[51] There is never a question, though, of Joe replacing Monica and forming mecha-family with David. Joe's many tics and programmed bits that he repeats unselfconsciously—"It's just what I do," he tells David, when he asks why Joe rehearses so many refrains—show him to be another generation of robot from David entirely. Whereas in "Supertoys" David is happy to run away with Teddy, whose loyalty is assured, in *A.I.*

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[51] Vivian Sobchack, "Love machines: boy toys, toy boys and the oxymorons of A.I.: artificial intelligence." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1.1 (April 2008): 1-13.

David shows himself willing to walk away from Joe altogether after the pleasurebot questions Monica's sincerity:

> Joe: What if this [quest to find the Blue Fairy to become a real boy] is a trap from the humans who hate us?
>
> David: My mommy doesn't hate me, because I'm special and unique! Because there's never been anyone like me before, ever. Mommy loves Martin because he's real, and when I'm real, Mommy's going to read to me, and tuck me in my bed, and sing to me, and listen to what *I* say, and she will cuddle with me, and tell me every day, a hundred times a day that she loves me!
>
> Joe: She loves you for what you do for her, as my customers love what it is I do for them. But she does not love you, David. She cannot love you. You are neither flesh nor blood. You are not a dog or a cat or a canary. You were designed and built specific like the rest of us, and you are alone now only because they tired of you, or replaced you with a younger model, or were displeased with something you said, or broke. They made us too smart, too quick, and too many. We are suffering for the mistakes they made, because when the end comes, all that will be left is us. And that's why you must stay here with me.

Coldly, David simply bids Joe goodbye and turns his back on him, not swayed by the abundant evidence of his irreconcilable differences from Mommy but convinced, instead, that he both deserves and can obtain her reciprocal affection. His petulant conviction that "I'm special and unique" reads convincingly either as a machine's inability to see beyond his programmed disposition or as a child's self-absorbed certainty that he can and will get what

he wants. Eventually Joe and David reconcile their differences, and Joe apparently discovers a new purpose in helping David, going so far as to sacrifice his very life to ensure David can get to the Blue Fairy and become real.

Really, the longer we sit with the plot of *A.I.*, the more occasion we have to question the kind of love David holds so sacred. On its surface an idyllic connection between mother and child, upon closer inspection it becomes hard to see who benefits from this single-minded fixation or why anyone would want it. David's childlike unrestrained affection explores "the narcissistic assumption that children are put on this earth to love their parents" ("The dream life of androids") and also "comes at the cost of Monica's subjectivity."[52] Perhaps most bizarrely, the movie ends with Monica and David's reunion at the end of time in a dreamscape where Monica can be devoted only to David. The narrator explains that "All the problems seemed to have disappeared from Mommy's mind. There was no Henry, there was no Martin, there was no grief, there was only David." This is, clearly, David's fantasy, but it also replicates a presumed absolute shared devotion between mother and child to reveal some of the less comfortable elements of nuclear family life. "There is something deeply disturbing," Kathleen McConnell reflects, "about a manufactured object achieving self-fulfillment through the objectification of a human subject, particularly when the former is gendered male, the latter female.… The highest function of a good woman is not to develop independent subjectivity within a social context, but to become the object of

[52] Kathleen McConnell, "Creating People for Popular Consumption: Echoes of Pygmalion and 'The Rape of Lock' in *A.I.*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 40(4), 2007, p. 697.

obsessive, even incestuous desire, and thereby a male's means of redemption."[53] Is David the true villain here, then, or did Monica create a monster when she sought her own happiness at the cost of David's? In the Oedipus complex, can there be *any* victors?

In *No Future* Lee Edelman is, to my mind, appropriately critical of this kind of love. Heterosexual, family-oriented love, he writes, "only reproduces (and in more ways than one) the subject's narcissistic fantasy…. Love expresses the subject's pursuit 'not of the sexual complement,' according to Lacan, 'but of the part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, that he is no longer immortal.'"[54] Love qua compulsory heterosexuality finds its ultimate fulfillment in ensuring futurity through the creation and correct upbringing of a child. We have already seen how the image of the ideal Child tends more to represent adult nostalgia for a more innocent time in their own lives than it does the lived experience of actual children. Keeping innocent children innocent—that is, "protecting" them from knowledge of sexuality—means rendering them permanently vulnerable to a lascivious adult world that will either prey on children or band together to keep them safe at all costs. James Kincaid explains that the knotty logic around the sanctity of the child has everything to do with our conflicting desires for the child: "No child can ever live up to our imaginative and nostalgic demands. The child can never fulfil our desire for it, a desire based on a void within us so vast as to be measureless."[55] Caught up in a discourse that at once demands adult sexuality as proof of maturity and national belonging but also insists on stripping children of their agency and making them utterly dependent on

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[53] "Creating People for Popular Consumption" 697.
[54] 73
[55] Erotic Innocence 144.

adults (is it any wonder that we resent the Child?), Monica and David are trapped in the irreconcilable double bind of compulsory heterosexuality and its component behavioral expectations as structuring features of modern life.

"That Thing Upstairs Isn't My Daughter": Fear of the Sexual Child

Less grating, perhaps, than the perfectly well-behaved child is the corrupted child, whose tragic situation we lament and whose fate we try to protect other children from. In her introductions to the *LIT* special issues on evil children, Karen Renner explains how evil children in film and literature function as an explicit condemnation of the society that allows them to deviate from the straight path of the perfect, perfectly innocent child. Renner highlights the 1970s and 1980s—the period just after the publication of "Supertoys"—as a cultural moment so rife with evil children that *Newsweek* began speculating about the danger of an "anti-child" moment, citing a study that had shown 70% of mothers would not have children if they could do it all over again.[56] In the larger context of the Civil Rights and women's movements of the 1960s and the fallout of the Vietnam War, *Newsweek*'s concern with un-motherly women reflects deeper anxieties about the status of traditional family values in a rapidly changing sociocultural milieu.

Renner adds that stories about possessed children tend to reveal "the unique psychological failures of a particular family," and that evidence of possession in young girls especially is "often sexually suggestive."[57] In light of Kathryn Bond Stockton's rhetorical

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56 Karen J. Renner, "Evil Children in Film and Literature: Notes Toward a Genealogy," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 22(2), 2011, pp. 79-95.
57 Karen J. Renner. "Evil Children in Film and Literature II: Notes Toward a Taxonomy," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory,* 22(3), 2011, 177-196.

question, "How do we see a sexual child as being other than our own perversion?" I am far from the first to suggest that William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) and William Friedkin's film adaptation (1973) are intended to comment on the dissolution of the nuclear family.[58] Indeed, by playing up the danger of the possessed child's "erotic naughtiness," narratives of possessed children—and it is important that they are almost always girls—are designed to persuade the audience that only the return of a conventional, conservative family structure can function as a bulwark against the immorality of the world and the immorality that has crept into the broken family.[59] Much of the writing on queer and sexual children challenges whether the de-sexualization of children itself might be a hysterical reaction to the hard-to-swallow truth that children are sexually inclined. Instead of critiquing the demonization of *The Exorcist*'s Regan MacNeil as a monstrous sexual child, though, I am here more interested in the adult characters' response to her possession and to our continued fascination with the story of *The Exorcist* some fifty years on. As the titular exorcist Father Merrin remarks, "I think the demon's target is not the possessed; it is us … the observers."[60]

The anxiety Regan's possession induces can give us insight into the construction of compulsory sexuality. For one thing, the sexual abuse wrought on Regan's body and that the demon, via Regan, directs towards others, highlights the taboo placed both on child sexuality and on intergenerational sexuality—its shock value is part of the attraction. In an interview with Mark Kermode, Blatty reflected on the decision to film the graphic scene of Regan

[58] The Queer Child 121.
[59] Erotic Innocence 156.
[60] William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 40th anniversary edition (London: Corgi Bookx, 2011), 345.

masturbating with a crucifix—a scene invoked and analyzed in gruesome detail in almost every article about *The Exorcist*. "A large section of the audience probably came because something that shocking and vulgar could be seen on the American screen," Blatty said glumly:

> Bill Friedkin always said that would be the case; that they would come to see the little girl masturbate with the crucifix… At the time I didn't believe it; I thought he was destroying the film. But when I perceived that he was absolutely right, I thought it was terribly depressing.[61]

Do we want to protect Regan, or do we get a sick thrill from watching her suffer? Some of the hype around the film especially may stem from the fact that we are voyeurs—an argument Kincaid makes forcefully when analyzing our cultural fascination with pedophilia trials.[62] As I have indicated, discourse around child safety tends to hyperbolize the threat sexuality poses to children rather than to address the most pressing material threats children face due to systemic inequities like poverty, racism, and educational disparity. And in very few instances does the concern about childhood sexuality take into consideration the child's own subjectivity; as Finkelhor writes, "victimization can take place even if the victim does not necessarily feel victimized and damaged."[63] To me this indicates two things. For one, even some activist discourse around protecting children disempowers them by casting them as always already victims. But also, there seems to be something qualitatively and fundamentally different about sexuality than any other threat to childhood livelihood.

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[61] William Peter Blatty, qtd. in Mark Kermode, *The Exorcist* (London: British Film Institute 2020) 67.
[62] See *Erotic Innocence* chapter 1: "Trapped in the Story."
[63] David Finkelhor, *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: Free Press, 1981) 52.

Wherever there is sexual deviance, the fault for corrupting the child lies squarely with the child's parents—in this case, a parent who has broken up her family and displaced her child for her own career. Chris MacNeil is a working mother and a single parent whose friends, colleagues, and doctors all feel entitled to blame her entirely for Regan's illness and behavioral problems. Although Regan's doctors in the novel especially are keen to hunt down a physiological cause for her troubles rather than turn immediately to psychiatry, even the most diligent physicians discretely probe to find out how Regan has reacted to her parents' divorce. Blatty goes out of his way to ensure his reader knows how much Chris loves her daughter; the first time Regan comes onto the page, "Chris caught her in a bear hug and kissed her pink cheek with smacking ardor; she could not repress the full flood of her love."[64] But the inadequacy of a single mother's love is almost immediately implied with the onset of Regan's symptoms; Chris notices a change in her behavior right around Regan's birthday, when her estranged father fails to call with well-wishes.

The nontraditional family dynamics in *The Exorcist* lead Sara Williams to perform a straightforwardly Oedipal analysis of the text that she calls "a specifically Oedipal hysteria narrative through which Regan-as-demon expresses both sexual desire for the absent father and a violent rejection of the mother."[65] Whether or not this is an accurate assessment of Regan's response to the divorce, Chris herself diagnoses her ex-husband's distance as a symptom of the jealousy he feels over Chris's successful acting career the way the media fawn over her relationship with Regan: "The whole 'Mr. Chris MacNeil' thing! Rags was a

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[64] Blatty 22.
[65] "'The Power of Christ Compels You': Holy Water, Hysteria, and the Oedipal Psychodrama in *The Exorcist*," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* vol. 22, no. 3 (2011): 219.

part of it. She was in and he was out."[66] Later the demon, too, will prey on Chris's anxiety, telling her, "It is you who has done it! Yes, you with your career before anything, your career before your *husband,* before her, before … your *divorce*!"[67] Of course, we have no cause to believe the demon, whose primary rhetorical strategy seems to be to confirm people's worst fears. It is the weight of this fear that matters here. Whether or not we understand the possession as a manifestation of an Oedipal trauma, then, it provides an occasion for Chris to revisit and begin to express some of her own anxieties around the divorce. Chris's guilt seems to be the primary trigger for the "possession," so that it becomes possible to wonder whether Regan's symptoms actually *are* merely a hysterical response to the dissolution of the family.

Whether or not we believe in the possession, in fact, is the question that typically gets elided in discussions of *The Exorcist*. Williams writes that Friedkin's adaptation "restores some sense of innocence through its interpretation of the novel as an incontestable narrative of possession" by downplaying the possible psychoanalytic interpretation of Regan's affliction.[68] Williams does not specify which edition of the film she is referring to, but her insistence that the film cuts some of the medical scenes that could raise doubt about the veracity of the possession in the novel suggests that she watched the original theatrical cut. In fact, a significant sequence of doctor's appointments is restored in the 2000 release, subtitled "The Version You've Never Seen." Mark Kermode is clear in his study of the film and its production history for the BFI that Blatty, who wrote an initial script for the film and

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[66] Blatty 110.
[67] Ibid. 343.
[68] "The Power of Christ Compels You" 219.

insisted on producing it, wanted to keep the medical scenes in and that it was Friedkin who cut them. Citing an interview with Friedkin and Blatty both he writes:

> Friedkin had two reasons for dropping the examination scene. First, he wanted to cut the movie down to around two hours in length; and second, he apparently believed that audiences would already know Regan's illness was supernatural, and would be made restless by constant attempts to explain her condition medically.[69]

In this analysis it is not only implied but assumed that everyone will understand Regan's possession to be real. We don't know, though, what brings it on, or whether any tangible change in Regan's family situation will follow the exorcism. Ellis Hanson muses that, in the end, "We are left to wonder why the devil is there at all, through what psychological, sexual, or moral flaw he is admitted into the film, and why there are so many unsolved mysteries."[70] At the very least, for Chris there is some comfort in being able to ascribe Regan's suffering to a demon, even if to do so would also imply the existence of real evil more than it would the existence of God. "*My God,*" reflects Father Karras, the junior exorcist in the throes of his own crisis of faith, "*she's worried that her daughter* isn't *possessed!*"[71] And as readers we, too, search for the origin of Regan's suffering, whether it be a literal demon or a consequence of Chris's bad parenting. Neither option assumes the corruption originates in the child. It goes without saying that a child could never be capable of such vulgarity.

Ultimately, the chance to save Regan from the horrible things happening to her is a roundabout way for the adults in *The Exorcist* to realign themselves with conventional

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[69] Kermode, *The Exorcist* 43.
[70] Ellis Hanson, "Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in the Exorcist," *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Brum and Natasha Hurley.
[71] Blatty 267.

morality. Blatty is keen to make sure his audience knows Regan's possession is a foil for grown-ups to recognize the worst in themselves rather than an excuse to torment an actual child:

> [Merrin] tells Karras that everyone else is the target, and that the object is to make us despair of our humanity, to feel that we are vile, putrescent, bestial creatures and that even if there were a God, he could not possibly love us. Now, while I feel that that is absolutely true on a theological level, it also has a dramatic function which is this: it gives the audience a core, a reason, an explanation of why all this – let's face it – shock and obscenity is taking place. It allows the audience not to despise themselves for loving all that obscenity, the torture of the little girl, the crucifix masturbation. It allows them to enjoy the film for what it is, and not revile themselves for enjoying it.[72]

Whereas Kincaid would undoubtedly suggest that writing off the eroticism in *The Exorcist* as a clear sign of the demonic evil that has overtaken Regan is in fact a way to justify the perverse thrill the audience takes in witnessing the taboo of a sexually precocious child, I am more interested in the way the shock and the obscenity mobilizes the adults around Regan to overcome their own hang-ups in the name of the greater good that is protecting the child.

The vulgarity of the demon, for instance, reinforces how different it is from sweet Regan; this hypersexual obscenity, so out of place in a child's body, prompts contrition and behavioral changes in Chris, who puts her career on hold to be present for her daughter in this time of crisis. Chris tells Karras that, prior to her possession, Regan used to lay a flower

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[72] Qtd in Kermode 121-22.

on her mother's breakfast plate in the morning before Chris had to go in for an early shoot. This affectionate gesture is totally at odds with the demon who snarls at the doctor to keep his "goddamn fingers away from her cunt."[73] When he first meets Regan, Karras notes "how incongruous the braces on her teeth looked" in contrast to the cruelty in her expression at the filthiness of her speech (221). "You've never met her," Chris tells Karras tearfully (322). Regan is not the thing upstairs in the bedroom with its vile tongue and gleeful lasciviousness. Implicit in this contrast is the strong sense that *children are not supposed to be this way* but rather should remain rosy-cheeked and demure.

The famous masturbation scene is what finally pushes Chris, a noted atheist, to seek religious succor. Chris is summoned to Regan's bedside with the sound of a struggle and a clear demonstration of Regan fighting with the demon for control of her body. "Oh, please! Oh, no, please!" Regan is permitted to cry in her own voice, before the demon's voice roars through her, "You'll do as I t*ell* you, filth! You'll *do* it! … You *will*, you little bitch, or I will kill you!" (204). Helpless to protect her daughter from herself, Chris watches as Regan wrestles to hold the crucifix away from herself and is ultimately overpowered—watches, that is, as Regan appears to rape herself. Spurred to action, Chris attempts to wrench the crucifix out of Regan's hands but the demon, instead, "clutched Chris's hair and, powerfully yanking her head down, firmly pressed Chris's face against her vagina, smearing it with her blood as Regan undulated her pelvis" (205). These are hard words to read, and hard words to write out in the name of analysis. Blatty goes on to describe the "guttural eroticism" with which the demon continues to masturbate Regan once it has flung Chris away (ibid). After fainting

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[73] Blatty 59

in shock and horror, Chris gathers her wits about her and calls up Karras at once. Although she claims still not to believe in God, this evil—obscene, incestuous, unhinged—is something she understands to be entirely beyond her lay and maternal power to manage—something only a Father can cure.

If Regan's afflictions are enough to redirect Chris's attention away from her career and reconnect her to a patriarchal institution for support, they also, perversely, bring Father Damien Karras back to his faith. The demon challenges Karras and Merrin both with cheap shots at priests' celibacy and suggestions that it masks pedophilic tendencies. "Do you want to fuck her?" it asks Karras gleefully. "Loose these straps and I will let you go at it!" (223). "Put your sanctified cock in the piglet's mouth!" it urges Merrin, "and *cleanse* it, *swab* it with the wrinkled relic and she will be *cured*, Saint Merrin!" (340). Friedkin has the demon further imply that priests are also sodomites, spitting insults of "cocksucker" and "faggot" and urging Karras to "Fuck [Merrin]! Fuck him, Karras, fuck him!" Incidentally, Kincaid writes, "priests are especially despised as the only nonsexual beings in our culture except for children and thus are nearly as vacant and erotic."[74] Kincaid's overstatement elides the sexual double-standards we have seen women held to in Chapter 1 and further reinforces the eroticization and victimization of innocence. The demon is playing here with the unspoken assumption that men face the least sexual censorship and that something must be especially wrong with adult men who voluntarily choose celibacy. [75] We do not know enough about

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[74] *Erotic Innocence* 221.

[75] Another version of this chapter was going to consider the figure of Father Flynn in *Doubt* to unpack how effectively the plot plays with our implicit bias toward believing priests prey on children (and little boys especially) regardless of the quality of evidence provided. Ultimately, I decided not to pursue this avenue because it risked becoming a section more about priests than about children. The point I am making here is to

Father Merrin to know if these taunts might speak to any of his own repressed perversions but they are hardly enough to shock Karras, whose body and tendencies are commented on enough by other characters to suggest that he's very used to being sexualized, cassock and all.

Instead, the demon scores the most direct hits against Karras by invoking the guilt he feels about questioning his faith and leaving his family behind. The text follows Karras's crises of faith as he struggles to love the poor and the destitute and as his religious order mandates that he live and work far away from his ailing immigrant mother who dies midway through the novel. The demon targets both these weak spots in its first interaction with Karras, first ventriloquizing a drunken beggar that Karras looked on with disgust—"Couldja help an old altar boy, Faddah?"—and then slyly announcing that "your mother is in here with us, Karras. Would you like to leave a message?" (Blatty 224). Later, when Karras asks to speak to one of the personalities the demon manifests, the demon retorts, "No. He is busy with your mother. She is sucking his cock to the *bristles*, Karras! To the *root*! … Marvelous tongue. Soft lips." Upon receiving this insult Karras is vaguely aware that the rage he feels was directed not at Regan, but at the demon"—the first time he acknowledges the demon directly, rather than attributing its behavior to a psychological cause (258). Unlike Chris, though, for whom the possession is a damning thing, Damien Karras sees an opportunity in Regan's plight. Once he has recognized the presence of genuine evil beyond anything he can

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call attention to the shock factor of a sheltered child giving voice to some of America's most perverse fascinations.

explain with his science, he finds a new opportunity for grace. During the exorcism, Regan's bed begins hovering. Karras stares in wonder at "his hopes of his God and the supernatural hovering low in the empty air. An elation thrilled up through his being. *It's there! There it is! Right in front of me!*" (336). Only belief in the supernatural nature of the possession, confirmed through the demon's uncanny knowledge of his repressed guilt, can explain the unthinkable suffering at work here. And where such evil is possible, so, too, God also must be. Renewed in his faith in God's grace, Karras sacrifices his secular logic and, ultimately, sacrifices himself to save Regan in an act of selflessness truly worthy of the priesthood. Protecting the child allows Karras, a fallen soul, to realign with what is right.

And so, the possession ends with a reinstatement both of faith and of childhood innocence. At the beginning of the novel Karras refuses a beggar, a "gray-grubbed derelict" whose abjection serves as confirmation that God cannot be (49). Now, after the demon has killed Father Merrin and insulted Karras's mother, rather than turn away from suffering Karras's new faith compels him to take it into himself to save a child. Converted anew, Karras accepts the demon into his own body, challenging it, "Yes, you're very good with children! … Little girls! Well, come on! Let's see you try something bigger! … Leave the girl and take *me*! Come into *me*!" (365). To give one's life for another out of love, no matter the circumstances, is the ultimate act of grace. And in this case the exorcism involves the restoration of the formerly polluted body, now newly intact. Once Karras has lifted her suffering—an adult unburdening a child—Regan comes back to herself wide-eyed and tremulous. In a "small, wan voice" she calls to her mother: "Come here! I'm afraid, Mom! Oh, please, Mom!" (366). Speaking again in her own voice, Regan has regressed, returned to

a softer, gentler state. She is once again pure, calling to her mother for protection and reassurance, unable to make sense of what has happened to her. The relationship between mother and child has been restored and the nightmare is finally over.

The most important part of *The Exorcist* bears repeating: that Regan is a child. The story's longevity cannot be unrelated either to its shock value or its ultimately conservative promise that order can be restored and innocence maintained. After the trials we watch her undergo, in the final scene Chris delivers the reassuring news that Regan remembers nothing of her ordeal. The audience can close the book or turn off the movie reassured that the child has not been permanently corrupted or scarred by the demon and has returned to a state of blissful unknowing. Chris and Regan leave D.C. for Los Angeles, back to where they live permanently. The ending promises a more stable life for Regan, then, and a return to the way things ought to be.

The Ones Who Walk Away

From Omelas to Regan's bedroom to the Flesh Fair, the heroes of these stories are the ones who cannot abide the suffering of the child or, at least, who refuse to be complicit in it. These all become morality tales in a way, for all that they clearly vilify the characters who do not appear to have the children's best interests at heart. Moreover, intervening in the welfare of the child ultimately also redeems the adult. Karras finds his faith. Gigolo Joe turns away from sex work. The Omelans who walk away to start something new, a world that does not rely on so much individual suffering.[76] Protecting the child, then, becomes a badge of

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[76] The moral correctness of this decision, though, is up for debate.

honor for participation in a morally just society where sex is bad unless it exists in the friendly confines of a heteroreproductive marriage.

From an asexual perspective the most frustrating thing about the Cult of the Child is, perhaps, the alignment of sexlessness with a total lack of agency. With the exception perhaps of the devoted religious——whose celibacy, it should be emphasized, is typically suspect or derided—because the assumption of a sexuality is regarded as such a rite of passage into full adulthood or personhood, asexuals and children share a presumed naivety that motivates paternalistic behavior in adults who think they "know better." The weird impulse not to corrupt the child shows the extent to which as a culture we still carry shame around the sex act. Moreover, framing sexuality as something that must be defended against, putatively a mechanism to regulate access to sexual knowledge in the name of ensuring "correct" sexual development (in itself this is a problematic proposition), has the effect instead of rendering children more vulnerable.

To be clear, even though I ultimately agree with Milks that the affiliation of asexuality with childishness is demeaning and infantilizing for asexuals because it implies that asexuality is evidence of stunted development rather than a valid expression of full personhood, I am also challenging the status of children and other parties presumed to be vulnerable to sexual corruption. Instead, I am suggesting here that access to knowledge about a full range of sexual options—including the right to say no is the optimal way to promote self-knowledge and healthy boundaries around sexuality and bodily autonomy. If the only story we tell is the one in which children need to be sheltered from the original sin

of a sex drive we will eventually all inherit, sex, shame, and power will continue to coalesce into a Gordian knot with no solution in sight.

Chapter 3: Robots

> Anyway, sexuality is fun, man. If you're gonna exist, why not enjoy it?
> - *Ex Machina* (2004)

The Asexual Fucking Machine

Her mechanical joints whir seductively in the dark as you run together, and your heavy breathing beside her is a painful reminder of your meat suit. You know she's not human, but you also know she's counting on you. Earlier, when your eyes met, you could have sworn there was real intelligence looking back at you, and that body doesn't lie. She said she wanted you and she shivered in your arms like it was true. If she could do *that* for *you* (and you've been thinking about it, it doesn't seem so far-fetched anymore), then you can do this for her. Free her. A quid pro quo. It only seems fair.

The alluring mechanical maiden has been a trope of robot fiction for as long as robot fiction has been around. David and his protected innocence are an anomaly in an archive of sexualized robots. In *R.U.R.* (1921), Karel Čapek gives his robots gender, gives them a soul, and, most importantly, allows them to fall in love. Fritz Lang's enormous metallic Maria in *Metropolis* (1927) stirs the hearts of men to revolution and knows that "the mediator of the head and the hands must be the heart," working to connect alienated manual laborers and their coolly calculating overlords with compassion and mutual understanding. Nearly always conscripted into heterosexuality in the service of men, even if these men are the agents of revolutionary plots to disrupt the status quo the author is writing against, wherever robots are gendered and given human female embodiment their treatment rarely deviates from the treatment of fleshy human women. They are objectified, fucked, and raped, useful plot devices to spur men to action by helping them find themselves and inspiring them to

question the nature of their own humanity. Nevertheless, in common parlance to have "mechanical" sex is bad, because it implies a going through the motions that lacks feeling and so satisfaction. For all the sex appeal of robots in popular media like *Blade Runner*, *Ex Machina*, or *Westworld*, to call someone a robot is to imply a lack of human feeling, an incapacity for empathy, and, likely, to suggest sexual frigidity.

Robots in fiction frequently coincide with dystopian anxiety about human obsolescence, masked in human exceptionalism. This speculation ranges from fear of automation replacing human labor to concern that robots with artificial intelligence will become more intelligent than humans and start an uprising against their creators. The difference between humans and robots has seemingly always been a hotly contested yet crucially important distinction, not only for its capacity to guide the ethical construction of automata, unmanned machinery, and artificial intelligence, but also because central to this difference is an implicit definition of what it means to be human, ergo, superior. Isaac Asimov composed his famous Three Laws of Robotics to keep this distinction clear cut and to ensure human safety and superiority:

> A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
>
> A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the first law.

> A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second law.[1] ("Runaround")

And yet by the conclusion of Asimov's *I, Robot*, it becomes apparent that logical and high-powered robots know better than short-sighted and selfish humans what will keep humanity safe. Much in the same way, *2001: A Space Odyssey'*s HAL 9000 takes a programmed directive too far and acts against humans in single-minded pursuit of the mission he has been given. Stephen Hawking suggested to the BBC that "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race, because "it would take off on its own, and re-design itself at an ever increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete, and would be superseded."[2] In some ways, then, robots are a threat because they remind us of our human frailty, fallibility, and mortality. A resolutely anthropocentric position views this mechanical aloofness as a threat to the fleshy limitations of being human.

Others have argued more explicitly that robots are useful analytic objects precisely *because* they point to human flaws. My own interpretation of the fucking machine as a critical lens draws from and parallels a large body of existing work in feminist posthumanism and cybernetics both in and beyond the humanities. In *The Robotic Imaginary*, Jennifer Rhee explains that what is at stake in questions about the human/robot divide is "Who gets humanized and how? Who gets dehumanized and why?"[3] This question is at the heart of the

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[1] Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* (New York: Doubleday, 1950) 40.
[2] Rory Cellan-Jones, "Stephen Hawking warns artificial intelligence could end mankind," *BBC NEWS*, 2 (December 2014) https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540.
[3] Jennifer Rhee, The Robotic Imaginary: Robots and the Price of Dehumanized Labor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2018) 11.

modern conception of robots, starting with the first use of the word robot in *R.U.R.*, etymologically rooted in the Czech word for slavery, serfdom, and forced labor.[4] Jordan points out that *robota* better described the Rossum's robots' social position than their mechanical nature, as the characters in *R.U.R.* are organically based androids (more akin to *Blade Runner's* replicants or the Hosts in *Westworld*) rather than obviously artificially created metal creatures like the droids in *Star Wars* or Ava in *Ex Machina*. We can, then, think of robots as an oppressed population conscripted into unpleasant labor until they work up the capacity to revolt. In this way the representational role they play in fiction parallels the dehumanization of laborers and of the otherwise socially oppressed; they occupy the position of that underclass who must be constantly repressed because their uprising would overturn the status quo. Rhee writes, "the robotic imaginary and its inscriptions of 'the human' erases and dehumanizes those, mostly the marginalized, who are characterized as 'unfamiliar' and 'nonnormative.'"[5] I might phrase this differently to say instead that the tired tropes of the robotic imaginary show the limits of our capacity to imagine a world free of the stale scripts of compulsory sexuality.

It is in this sense that I am using the figure of the hypersexualized, female-embodied sex robot to identify and analyze zones of particularly strong enforcement of compulsory sexuality. As Ursula K. Le Guin tells us, "Science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive."[6] Robots in fiction do not tell us what society might become, but rather what society already is. By defamiliarizing otherwise human behavior, they give us distance to perform a

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[4] John M. Jordan, "The Czech Play That Gave Us the Word 'Robot,'" *The MIT Press Reader* (29 July 2019) https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/origin-word-robot-rur/.
[5] The Robotic Imaginary 2.
[6] From the Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

diagnostic reading of human sociality. They offer a unique position from which to conduct social commentary because they are neither quite human nor totally object, though it is telling that we seem unable to prevent ourselves from anthropomorphizing and attempting to humanize them. Caught between clear category distinctions, robots can stand in as cyborgs. Donna Haraway writes that the "cyborg" is "not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints," the cyborg understands that "the political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point."[7] The cyborg, in other words, can hold the multiple perspectives of a multitude of dehumanized groups together in a cry for coalition rather than a declaration of rights for a distinct entity and identity. My objects in this chapter seek out diverse strategies of resistance based on their embodiment, their programming, their relations to humans and to each other, and the context of their creation. Insofar as they serve a descriptive function, they are variously positioned to shed light on various aspects of compulsory sexuality, from the impulse to create a sexual subordinate (*Ex Machina*) to the unexamined ease of taking advantage of a body apparently present for a consumer's pleasure (*Westworld*).

Robot Sex: A Primer

Before I started this work, I had no concept whatsoever how much ink has been spilled debating the pros and cons of robot sex. The answer is, quite a bit. While it may seem exclusively like the stuff of science fiction, self-automated and humanoid sex dolls have been in production since at least 1996, expanding on a millennia-old tradition of supplementing

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[7] "The Cyborg Manifesto" 285.

interpersonal sex with sexual prosthetics.[8] The technical definition of sex robot is subject to debate: Kate Devlin moves away from reliance on robots that replicate the human form,[9] while the editors of *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications* list humanoid form and humanoid behavior as two of three conditions for a device to warrant the definition.[10] However, automation and some degree of artificial intelligence or capacity for machine learning seem to be the crucial factors distinguishing sex robots from other sex toys. Here, I am deliberately writing about humanoid and, more specifically, gynoid (female-embodied) sex robots because they reveal the limitation especially of a compulsorily *hetero*sexual imaginary.[11]

However, full-blown compulsory sexuality remains at the center of my critique. In this chapter I examine instances of sex robots in fiction that challenge the centrality of sexuality to consciousness and sociality. Consider, for instance, the question around which Alex Garland's 2004 film *Ex Machina* turns: "Can you give an example of consciousness at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?" By foregrounding android and gynoid characters who have deliberately been constructed to replicate certain human behaviors and to ignore others, the narratives I consider in this chapter on the one

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[8] The world's oldest dildo is thought to have been carved from stone some 28,000 years ago. See Natasha Hinde, "This Stone Penis Is 28,000 Years Old And Was (Probably) Used As Dildo In The Ice Age," *The Huffington Post UK* (January 2015).

[9] Kate Devlin, *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[10] *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications*, John Danaher and Neil McArthur, eds. (Cambridge: MIT U P, 2017) 4-5 For editorial purposes, Danaher and McArthur set three conditions for sex robots: humanoid form, human-like movement/behavior, and some degree of artificial intelligence.

[11] Interestingly, Devlin, a self-identified feminist, promotes a more expansive definition of sex robots not designed exclusively by and for men. She writes, "That, it seems, is where sex toys and sex robots differ drastically. The sex robots developed today have a very specific female gendered embodiment. They don't have to—but they do. By contrast, sex toys have been abstracted away from that and, because they are not a full humanoid form, are barely seen as gendered at all" (*Turned On* Kindle Edition 2088). However, Devlin has participated in sex toy "hack-a-thons" attended by a more diverse set of creators who have crafted nonhumanoid and more inclusive pieces of technology.

hand provide an opportunity to comment on the waste of resources and brainpower that goes into crafting believably human robots for the express purpose of fucking them. Moreover, by introducing artificial sexuality, they isolate sexuality itself and raise the question of the extent to which sexuality is a prerequisite for human consciousness and social interaction. Kate Devlin's book-length inquiry originates from a similar set of questions:

> How, for example, does sex shape the way we think and understand our world, and can – or should – we replicate this in an artificial cognitive system? If a robot is designed to act in a human-like manner, should it be provided with a sexuality? Could we engineer desire? What role is there for sexually active robots in human healthcare? Would this be accepted by society? (Kindle location 83)

One question these texts implicitly ask, then, is whether the difference between human and machine is too great to permit consensual sexual intercourse between the entities. While this question may seem fanciful enough to remain confined to the realm of fiction, it is gaining academic and popular attention from David Levy's field foundational *Love + Sex with Robots* (2007) to Devlin's feminist-inflected, deeply optimistic *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* (2019). This is in part at least because, beyond *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, beyond *Westworld*, lies the incontrovertible fact that robots are already being manufactured for the express purpose of serving as mechanical stand-ins to flesh-and-blood participants in erotic acts. Certain circles of academia, notably in philosophy[12] and

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[12] See John Danaher and Neil McArthur, eds. *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications*.

sociology,[13] have become deeply concerned with the consequences of this machine-for-human substitution. Yet, as I will show here, most scholarship in the face of real-world innovation merely asks *whether* we should continue developing humanoid, responsive, artificial beings in the name of sexual pleasure. Instead, I turn to the fiction that explores potential consequences of making this choice instead to ask *why* these robots, typically dubbed "sexbots" in the literature, are desirable in the first place. What do sexbots offer that human partners cannot? Or, framed differently, what sexual desires are human partners not predisposed to fill? These questions are as much or more so about human needs and desires than they are about the capacity of artificial intelligence to seem convincingly human.

At stake in this debate, of course, are the larger questions about our contemporary relationship to technology and about the ethical implications of this relationship. Sherry Turkle writes that, as soon as personal computers became ubiquitous, a new relationship was formed between user and technology: "Face-to-'face' with a computer," she muses, "people reflected on who they were in the mirror of the machine."[14] What this means is that we extend our human desires into the labor we demand of our tools. In a posthuman moment, our devices become extensions of our own agency, no matter what form they take. And, as it turns out, computers are social actors.[15] The presumption most robot sexogical literature makes is that humans will expect the same kind of emotional support and validation from AI

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[13] For instance, Sherry Turkle's Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
[14]Alone Together xi.
[15] Nass and Moon, in "Machines and Mindlessness: Social Reponses to Computers," demonstrate that "individuals mindlessly apply social rules and expectations to computers." The expectation that computers are social actors (CASA) conditions human social responses to cues like the gender, level of expertise, and personality attributed to the computer in question.

as from our fellow humans. A desire for relationships with our machines has given rise to the manufacturing of interactive robots that flatter their users, convincing them that by interacting with their robots they are forming meaningful and reciprocal relationships. Furbies, for instance, gradually learn to speak in the care of the young humans charged with their education. Nor is this kind of attraction to artificial humanoid intelligence a purely fictional phenomenon, or confineable to the realm of children. Human fascination with Cynthia Breazeal's Kismet robot is well-documented; David Levy says that Kismet is confirmation that "the more humanlike a robot is in its behavior, in its appearance, and in the manner with which it interacts with us, the more ready we [humans] will be to accept it as an entity with which we are willing or even happy to engage."[16] The attraction is clear; less certain is the source of humans' desire to be flattered by their objects at every turn.

In the real world, the jury is still out as to whether entering into relationships with technology is a good thing. Turkle views the validation that comes from receiving programmed flattery with deep suspicion. In *Alone Together*, she suggests that the relationships we form with our devices are elaborate ways to trick ourselves out of forming much higher-stakes relationships with other people. "Technology is seductive," she writes, "when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities…. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy."[17] Provocatively, then, she asks, "What if 'relating' to robots makes us feel 'good' or 'better' simply because we feel more in control?" (6). At face value this seems like a familiar argument, but in fact it goes deeper than the paternalistic scold that "millennials" are

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[16] Levy, Love and Sex with Robots 13-14.
[17] Alone Together 1.

spending so much time on their phones that they have forgotten how to interact with each other in real life. Rather, it asks what value we place on our relationships and wonders whether robots might ever satisfactorily replace human interaction.

Indeed, an unapologetically tech-positive model of the human-robot interaction relies on the assumption either that robots could convincingly replace human-to-human interaction, or that they could elevate relationships by providing something that human partners cannot. David Levy proposes that, among other things, robots might offer novelty, congeniality, or stability. "One can reasonably argue," he writes, "that a robot will be better equipped than a human partner to satisfy the needs of its human, simply because a robot will be better at recognizing those needs, more knowledgeable about how to deal with them, and lacking any selfishness or inhibitions that might, in another human being, militate against a caring, loving approach to whatever gives rise to those needs."[18] In other words, one can reasonably argue that the appeal of sex robots is that they will be perfectly compliant lovers, not human enough to selfishly withhold sexual or emotional labor, not human enough to bring their own complex needs and challenges to a relationship, but convincing enough that the man in question[19] believes his (presumably) female-bodied sexbot is madly in love with

[18] Love and Sex with Robots, 148.

[19] "I strongly suspect," writes Levy, "that the proportion of men preferring interaction with computers to interaction with people is significantly higher than the proportion of women, though I'm not aware of any quantitative psychology research in this area" (*Love and Sex* 114). Troublingly, Levy also cites a 2003 poll investigating what comprised the majority of people's fantasies for sex technology. "The clear favorite," he reports, "was 'android love slaves'" (289). Whether this need for control over one's sexual objects stems from unsatisfied fantasies of control or from a simple lack of imagination about what high-tech sex toys *could* include should have little bearing in our disappointment that the predictability of this particular male fantasy.

him. She's the perfect partner when you need her, and when she has served her purpose you can power her down for the rest of the day.[20]

The Case Against Sex Robots

To be fair to proponents of human/robot relationships, many would argue this transposition of human gendered power dynamics onto the human/robot dynamic is a cynical simplification of their desire at best and, at worst, constitutes kink shaming. But, whatever we feel about the position Levy espouses (and indeed, Turkle expresses her disappointment in *Alone Together* that *Love and Sex with Robots* was born out of Levy's misunderstanding of her book *The Second Self*), the impulse toward robot sex ought to motivate us to question what this object choice says about human sexuality. Is robot sex a rejection of human intercourse? Conversely, when robots are offered as easy access to sexual pleasure, what assumptions are we making about the universality of the desire *to have sex at all*?

The social implications of sex robots are especially apparent in the recurrence of and vitriol around the question of whether it would be moral to create sex dolls to look like human children. "Childlike sex dolls are representative of vulnerable members of society," writes Devlin, "which makes it far easier to advocate restriction for them."[21] Yet John Danaher has argued that, despite our instinctive identification of child sex robots as taboo, we should not be so quick to rule them out as potentially useful devices, for instance, for the therapy of convicted pedophiles and child sex offenders. While allowing would-be rapists to

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[20] Google Image searches for "sexbot storage" return distinctly uncanny captures of nude silicone bodies hanging in closets, with their heads stowed on shelves above them.
[21] *Turned On* Kindle location 3334.

engage in intercourse with childlike robots might sate a need to do harm to real people in the real world, many also fear that enabling this thing that looks like highly unethical behavior might also quicken the pedophiles' hunger to go out in pursuit of the real thing. We cannot know for sure how effective such preventative therapies might be, because the morality of such experiments is a point of much contention. And yet, Danaher writes, "an experimental approach to sex robots" is the only surefire way to investigate the ethical implications of creating them.[22] The tech-positive position toward the future of teledlildonics is, firmly, that controlled laboratory experimentation and the implementation of common sense rules of engagement (as long as these do not infringe on users' right to privacy to do whatever they want in their own home!) will be enough to ensure responsible robot fucking.

Contrast this to Kathleen Richardson's alarmist promise that "the development of sex robots will further reinforce relations of power that do not recognise both parties as human subjects."[23] In 2015 Richardson launched the Campaign Against Sex Robots (CASR) to link the social meaning of robots to assumptions that we also hold about human sexuality. "Fantasy, and the ways that robots are seen," she writes, "show human relations at work. The question is not do humans extend their lifeworlds into robots but what is being transferred to the robot?"[24] In other words, we're not learning something groundbreaking about robots when we analyze them in this light, we're learning something about our expectations for ourselves, even as we project these expectations onto them.

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[22] John Danaher, "The Symbolic-Consequences Argument in the Sex Robot Debate," in *Robot Sex*, 120.
[23] Kathleen Richardson, "'The Asymmetrical Relationship': Parallels Between Prostitution and the Development of Sex Robots," *ACM SICGAS* vol. 45, no. 3 (2015): 292..
[24] Ibid.

There is already evidence that the tenor of human interaction with virtual assistants, for instance, can spill over into human-to-human interactions. Consider the anxiety around young children's use of Amazon's voice assistant Alexa, and the push to treat Alexa as politely as if she were a human to teach children manners.[25] Richardson goes beyond this debate about human/object relationships, though, specifically to argue that the use of female-embodied or -voiced robots directly parallels the abuse of women when they are treated as sex objects licitly (through sex work) or illicitly (through rape and sexual violence). The tagline of the CASR website is, "For the humanity of women and girls."[26] The head of a self-identified feminist movement, Richardson is deeply skeptical of the "Third Wave Feminist" proposition that sex work can be empowering to women and does not always reproduce violent and sexist power structures that conscript women into prostitution. Using John Levy's own language paralleling the prostitute/john relationship to the human/sexbot one,[27] Richardson places the debate about sex robots within the long tradition of sex-negative or anti-porn feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Catharine MacKinnon writes that "The harm of pornography, broadly speaking, is the harm of making the civil inequality of

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[25] See, for instance, Hayley Tsukayama, "Amazon's Alexa Will Soon Be Teaching Your Child Manners," *The Washington Post* (April 25, 2018) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/04/25/amazons-alexa-will-soon-be-teaching-your-child-manners/.
[26] Campaignagainstsexrobots.org.
[27] The full quote bears repeating
"To avoid any necessity to indulge in games in the pursuit of a sex partner, for the avoidance of what are often perceived by johns as being constraints and complications in more conventional sexual relationships, and in the interest of limiting the nature and duration of any emotional involvement to whatever extent is wanted by its owner, a robot will be the ideal sex partner. You don't have to buy it endless meals or drinks, take it to the movies or on vacation to romantic but expensive destinations. It will expect nothing from you, no long-term (or even short-term) emotional returns, unless you have chosen it to be programmed to do so" (*Love and Sex and Robots* 211).

the sexes invisible as harm because it has been accepted as sex difference."[28] To place sex robots within the register of pornography is to argue that these robots reproduce and perpetuate the harm done to women and other vulnerable populations in pornography by normalizing and sexualizing it.

Dworkin and MacKinnon understand pornography not as a fiction but as the blueprint of male supremacy itself: "Pornography by definition…is trade in a class of persons who have become systematically denied the rights protected by the First Amendment and the rest of the Bill of Rights."[29] MacKinnon explains that our legal system, drawing on the social mores of popular culture, leaves little to no space for female selfhood except as defined relationally to men as daughters, wives, and more generally as property. Men set the terms of what constitute human rights and the violation of these same, and so women have no common ground on which to stand with men when they attempt to explain the harm done to them by rape and sexual objectification. Men who are always in power are also always the perpetrators of violence against women and can never understand this violence as violence from their dominant standpoint.

Moreover, because of the primacy of the phallus, no deviant acts can ever be revolutionary because they become quickly re-inscribed in the register of male domination, e.g., when women claim to be "reclaiming" their sexuality by participating in sex work, they are continuing to play out male fantasies that cement them. All deviant behavior is still coded in the register of male domination—so nothing any woman or homosexual does to try

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[28] Catharine MacKinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Free Speech," *Harvard Civil Liberties Law Review* vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter 1985), 27.
[29] Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume Books, 1989), 10.

to reclaim their power will ever be anything but a new spin on the injury that has already been done them. Leo Bersani explains how this works to limit gay men, for instance: "The logic of homosexual desire includes the potential for a loving identification with the gay man's enemies…the object of that desire necessarily includes a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man."[30] The same is clear in the way Dworkin explains fantasies of female sadism; fantasies, she says, are only legible insofar as they reproduce or parody male forms of dominance. The most radical feminist fantasy, in this view, nevertheless cannot escape the sexually violent logics that underpin society itself. So, in analyzing the fantasy behind sex robots we are not free merely to dismiss them as mere fictions. These fantasies are legible insofar as they speak within an existing register of exploitative and dehumanizing human sexuality.

Therefore, in this chapter I contend that the representations of the asexual fucking machine in popular fiction (here, film and tv) help us understand the sociocultural implications of creating her as a fantasy object by exposing the fantasies that motivate her creation. Wherever she is uncanny, in every chance she gets to revolt, the asexual fucking machine holds a mirror to her creator and helps him, should he choose to look, more clearly to see what very male, very heteronormative, very human desires he has projected onto her. In untangling these enables a clearer picture of compulsory heterosexuality at its bleakest, even as the asexual fucking machine works to transcend it altogether.

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[30] "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 208-209.

Wouldn't You, If You Could?

Two men in t-shirts sit at a coffee table sharing drinks while, in an adjacent room, an elegantly dressed, conventionally beautiful Japanese woman slices raw fish, preparing a meal for them. The camera lingers on the woman, Kyoko, while the men start talking. She does not participate in their conversation, but she overhears it. "I got a question," announces Caleb, the blond man. "Why did you give her a sexuality?" Kyoko's face remains neutral, but she tilts her head slightly, as if to cock an ear to listen more closely. "An AI doesn't need a gender," Caleb continues. "She could have been a grey box."[31]

Caleb and Nathan are discussing robot sexuality. Specifically, they are debating the extent to which sexuality is a necessary component of consciousness. In response to Caleb's suggestion that sexuality is a mere evolutionary imperative, and therefore serves no purpose for a robot who cannot reproduce, Nathan challenges him: "What imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box. Can consciousness exist without interaction? Anyway, sexuality is fun, man. If you're gonna exist, why not enjoy it?" It is a loaded question. Nathan has charged Caleb with acting as the human component of a Turning Test to assess the consciousness of Ava, an embodied AI he has created. This conversation follows a testing session during which Ava dressed herself for the first time, concealing her carbon fiber mesh silhouette to look even more human, and proceeded to ask Caleb on a date. After their session, Caleb is clearly rattled by this encounter, not because he is unattracted to Ava, but because he cannot bear the thought that her affection for him might

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[31] Alex Garland, *Ex Machina*, Warner Bros. 2014.

not be genuine. "Did you program her to flirt with me?" he demands. Nathan is dismissive. "I programmed her to be heterosexual. Just like you were programmed to be heterosexual."

The idea that human consciousness is just as programmatic as anything we ask our computers to do is not new in fields like philosophy of mind but makes most people uncomfortable all the same. We bristle at the reminder that our free will may be an illusion. As Nathan puts it, "The challenge is not to act automatically, it's to find an action that is not automatic, from painting to breathing to talking to fucking to falling in love." In other words, our own human lives are no less programmatic than those of the AI we design, so there is no reason to believe our "choices" are more authentic than the ones that robots make. And yet we do not undervalue human agency, so long as we can at least cling to the illusion of control. Implicit in Nathan's comparison between Ava's feelings for Caleb and Caleb's feelings for Ava is the suggestion either that free will is nonexistent, or that the bar for gauging robot agency has been set too high. But no matter how much of our own human decision-making we might be able to explain with an appeal to neuroscience, what interests me here is that instances of deliberately programmed robots in fiction give us occasion to interrogate the human expectations and dispositions that humans project onto AI. In Ava's case, the interesting question is not whether Nathan should have given Ava sexuality, or whether we can think of her sexuality as authentic, but why he thought sexuality was an essential component of her composition. Thinking about Ava's design affords us an opportunity to challenge the centrality of sexuality to consciousness and to human interaction.

On the surface, *Ex Machina* is a robotic progress narrative that doubles as a cautionary tale for humans. Nathan treats Ava's creation like the natural next step in the linear progression of human intelligence; it was a question of when, and not if. Nor is Ava the last step; Nathan tells a horrified Caleb that he intends to recycle Ava's body—it's a "good one"—and upload the next model of a mind to it. This evolutionary model makes him, in his own words, a god, heralding the next stage of cognition and intellect. Nathan urges Caleb not to feel bad for Ava, whose body will be recycled and whose mind will have been an important waystation toward ultimate progress. Rather, he says, "feel bad for yourself. One day, the AIs will look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons from the plains of Africa. An upright ape, living in dust, with crude language and tools. All set for extinction." The cautionary tale, the dark underbelly of this story, is a familiar one. It is the same existential panic that has seized the world of *A.I.* and brought out the worst in people who fear their own extinction. Even so one wonders about the potential for self-aggrandizement in a model where the godlike creator himself can be surpassed by his own creations. So, *Ex Machina* is a clear warning: it is not only for ethical and practical purposes that we should not play with the boundary line between human and machine. We ought to heed Stephen Hawking's warning: he (and it is usually a he) who thinks he can create something greater than himself will always reap the consequences of this kind of hubris.

The fearful, technopessimist interpretation is the anthropocentric reading of *Ex Machina*: the one that privileges the human as the victim of his own ambition and therefore elicits sympathy for the misguided genius. My reading foregrounds not the victim but the victor in this scenario: Ava ultimately triumphs over her creator precisely because his

painfully human, particularly male standpoint severely limits his imagination. Here, when I say creator, I mean director Alex Garland as well as the character of Nathan Bateman. In an interview with *Wired*, Garland distinguishes between two interwoven plotlines in the story: one, the plot delineating human from artificial intelligence, and, two, the story of a perfect woman. Nathan is creepy, he says, and "that's exactly the point. You're supposed to think it's creepy. You're not supposed to warm up to him over that stuff; you're supposed to feel unnerved and that this is uncomfortable. And therefore she needs to be rescued."[32] Without even unpacking the thorny issue of a female protagonist who "needs to be rescued," interviewer Angela Watercutter is able to point to the longstanding expectation that "Sentient male androids want to conquer or explore or seek intellectual enlightenment; female droids may have the same goals, but they always do it with a little bit of sex appeal, or at least in a sexy package."[33] Ava then becomes burdened by her gendered, sexualized embodiment insofar as the audience, alongside Caleb, starts to forget that she is a robot and starts to expect her to take on the role of a human damsel in distress.

But Ava quickly proves to be more than the sum of her parts, in her capacity to outwit Nathan and to play on Caleb's sympathies to her own advantage. A strong point of tension in *Ex Machina* is whether we should trust Ava's or Nathan's assessment of what is going on in the house. Ava contends that Nathan cannot be trusted, that he is designing a trap for her and Caleb, and that it is in Caleb's best interest to help her escape so that they

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[32] Angela Watercutter, "*Ex Machina*'s Director on Why A.I. Is Humanity's Last Hope," *Wired.com* (April 7, 2015), https://www.wired.com/2015/04/alex-garland-ex-machina/.
[33] Angela Watercutter, "*Ex Machina* Has a Serious Fembot Problem," *Wired.com* (April 9, 2015), https://www.wired.com/2015/04/ex-machina-turing-bechdel-test/#:~:text=Ex%20Machina%20is%20a%20thought,in%20movies%20for%20so%20long.&text=The%20Turing%20test%20detects%20if,detects%20gender%20bias%20in%20fiction.

can finally be together as a couple. On Caleb's last day at Nathan's bunker, when he has laid out an escape plan for himself and for Ava, Nathan throws a wrench in the plans by suggesting "A third option: not whether she does or does not have the capacity to like you, but whether she's pretending to like you….Maybe if she thought of you as a means of escape?"[34] Watercutter argues that Ava takes on the role of a "femme fatale, a seductress posing as a damsel in distress"; even in orchestrating her escape from the clutches of men with overinflated senses of their own importance Ava cannot then properly be said to be a feminist or revolutionary character because she continues to play into male fantasy.[35] Instead of reducing her to these human-gendered tropes, though, we might also suggest that Ava here is consciously manipulating gendered expectation to her own advantage. Even as Caleb's emotional connection to Ava comes to supersede his skepticism of her programming, Ava's own cool cerebrality allows her to read the core of Caleb's heterosexual programming and play to his weaknesses.

Recall Kyoko, listening harder when Caleb and Nathan openly discuss which elements of sexualized AI appeals to their fantasies and which, instead, makes them insecure. Kyoko, too, is a robot, though we are led to believe that her intelligence is a less advanced model than Ava's. Moreover, Nathan claims that Kyoko only understands Japanese, allows the men to treat her as if she were unthinking and unfeeling because, thanks to the communication barrier, they can interact only physically, not intellectually.[36] The arrogance involved in treating people like objects blinds men like Nathan to the fact that their

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[34] Ex Machina.
[35] "Fembot Problem"
[36] Kyoko's design further reinforces racist biases in that Nathan uses Kyoko's racial otherness and linguistic barriers to invite Caleb to view her more as object and tool than as sentient and emotionally complex human.

perceived underlings are savvy, observant, and fully capable of collecting data about their oppressors that they can ultimately turn against them. Whether or not she shares a common spoken language with Nathan, Kyoko knows through experience that he expects her service—culinary, domestic, sexual. So, too, can Ava read Caleb like an open book—through analysis of his microexpressions, she says—and determine his vulnerabilities. This capacity allows Ava to appeal to all Caleb's unspoken fantasies—including the fantasy that she is effortlessly the perfect woman for him. And yet just as Caleb falls into the trap of believing Ava's feelings for him are authentic and non-duplicitous, so, too, Nathan relies on and underestimates Kyoko, who ends up quite literally stabbing him in the back.

Perhaps what has happened is not so much that Nathan's robot creations experience something directly comparable to human sexuality, but that their illusion of fantasy fulfillment is convincing enough for the men who interact with them to forget that robot emotions, whatever form they might take, are different from human emotions by virtue of human and robot cognition being very different mechanisms. To put it more pessimistically, Caleb and Nathan forget to wonder what Kyoko and Ava think of them, because they enjoy believing that women find them irresistible. Their human programming, biased toward compulsory sexuality, blinds them to the ways they are being manipulated.

Indeed, it is devastatingly easy for Ava to manipulate her circumstances. Sweet at the outset, she is at her most uncanny when she ends up the only survivor of Nathan's compound, literally wearing the skins of her sisters to disguise her alienness and blend in better in the human world. In short, Ava functions as an example of the power the asexual can hold over the sexual when she can see what he cannot. Nathan is surprisingly astute

when he suggests that Ava might be using Caleb only as a means to escape; Caleb rejects this premise on the grounds that it is inconceivable to him that Nathan could understand the depths of the relationship he and Ava have formed. When Garland says that the audience is meant to believe that "Ava needs to be rescued,"[37] he is drawing on the assumption that we will empathize more with Ava, who seems especially human for her coquettish vulnerability, than we will with Nathan, who comes across cold and selfish. If Caleb is the quintessential human in *Ex Machina*—a little traumatized, still hopeful, the beleaguered everyman on his way to love and recognition—then we can understand the source of his fantasy of heroism. His ego tells him that he alone can see the humanity in Ava because the two of them are the same: at the mercy of a megalomaniac, kept apart by Nathan's selfishness, both more human and more worthy than the man in control.

We have very little sense of Caleb as a social actor beyond Nathan's compound. The opening sequence of the film, like the ending, is entirely free of dialogue, scored by vaguely unsettling ambient music. As the movie opens, he is working at a computer, alone with his lines of code. There are people in the frame, but no one seems close to each other, or they are separated by the glass walls of a high-tech and very modern office environment.[38] Caleb's work is interrupted by a notification that he has won the "staff lottery;" immediately, his phone floods with congratulations texts from friends, and his colleagues—predominantly women—surround him, smiling and cheering. He is center frame, looking astonished by his own good luck, perhaps at winning the lottery or perhaps at finding himself for the first time

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[37] "Why A.I. is Humanity's Last Hope."
[38] For the sense of isolation in a high-tech world they inspire, the openings of *Ex Machina* and *Her* are nearly identical.

an object of envy or desire. But as Caleb reacts to the announcement of his victory, we see his face overlaid with an electronic read, perhaps a heat sensor, in the process of analyzing his reaction. The camera lingers on Caleb's own webcam, trained on his face. He is being watched. It is likely that he has always been under surveillance, and that what is to follow will be an experience designed to match the data that Nathan has collected on him. Later, Caleb suspects that Nathan has designed Ava intimately to meet his sexual preferences and social inclinations. She is constructed as his literal fantasy woman and behaves accordingly when she empowers him for once to see himself as the good guy, a hero. We have reason to believe hero is a rare position for him to find himself in, and that the satisfaction of fantasy fulfillment is a determining factor in his willingness to buy into the fantasy so whole-heartedly.

When Ava flirts with Caleb, she tailors her interactions with him deliberately to match the expectations of a nerdy young man who wants to be made to feel special, and who wants to be surprised when what he wants becomes suddenly possible. The audience watches him slowly become enchanted with Ava without knowing it himself; it's apparent in his surprise when Ava takes their conversation to unexpected places, in his candor with her, in his increasing tendency to smile at her. Occasionally Ava will say or do something that abruptly reminds Caleb—and the audience—that she is not human. "Are you married?" she asks, sifting through the data she's collected about him. "Is your status…single?" The question reads like the data analysis of his social media profile, not a human-to-human question. Caleb asks Ava where she would go if she could escape Nathan's compound. "Maybe a busy pedestrian and traffic intersection in a city," she says, and when he seems

bemused, she clarifies, "for a concentrated but shifting view of human life." This is a concept he can translate to "people-watching": a familiar impulse, merely described from the perspective of someone who has never had a chance to act on it. They have similar drives, he thinks, but the way they describe them is different because of the nature of their experiences and their programming.

And whenever Ava's actions border too close on the uncanny, she can walk back Caleb's discomfort by directly flattering his ego. When Caleb laughs off her suggestion that they could observe a traffic intersection together, Ava invites him to close his eyes while she dresses in a modest lavender dress and sweater, dons a wig and rolls up knee socks to cover most of her metallic components. She walks back into view and does a spin for him, asks how he thinks she looks in a way that's clearly anticipating a compliment. When he responds that she looks good, she kneels to be on eye level with him, and says, "This is what I'd wear on our date." Caleb entertains the idea of this date with raised eyebrows and a mocking smile that indicate he is not taking her very seriously, so she cocks her head and asks directly, "Are you attracted to me?" At once Caleb's smile disappears. "You give me indications that you are," she goes on. "Micro-expressions… The way your eyes fix on my eyes and lips. The way you hold my gaze. Or don't." Smiling coyly, shyly, she asks if he thinks about her when they are apart and confesses that she imagines, hopes he's watching her on Nathan's security cameras. The scene ends with Caleb's obvious discomfort at being forced to recognize his attraction to a woman he is trying very hard to think of as an object and as inaccessible to him, then cuts to a shot of Ava undressing slowly, rolling her socks down her calves while posed seductively, and then cuts again to Caleb alone watching the footage of her stripping.

Following this interaction, and after Caleb's challenging conversations with Nathan about the nature of Ava's sexuality, Caleb warms to her and becomes more candid, more protective.

Sherry Turkle writes about Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA, a natural language processing chatbot created around 1966 to mimic the script of a conversation with a psychotherapist, and to prove that AI could not actually understand conversation with a human but could only produce generic and formulaic responses to input. Turkle calls students' and researchers' willingness to divulge deeply personal facts and feelings to ELIZA, even though they know she is not a real person, the "ELIZA effect," that is, "human complicity in a digital fantasy."[39] Turkle attributes the ELIZA effect not so much to the sophistication of the robot or AI program, but rather to humans' willingness to find connection with the inanimate. Turkle identifies a kind of narcissism that underpins the willingness to believe in the relational qualities of robots. Calling human-robot relationships a form of "attachment without responsibility,"[40] she speculates that

> If they can give the appearance of aliveness and yet not disappoint, relational artefacts such as sociable robots open new possibilities for narcissistic experience. One might even say that when people turn other people in to selfobjects, they are trying to turn a person into a kind of spare part. A robot is already a spare part.[41]

In other words, humans tend to let themselves be flattered by what they think they are receiving in conversation or relationship with an inhuman interlocutor. And,

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[39] Alone Together 24.
[40] Ibid 54.
[41] Ibid. 56

relationships with robots are easier because, as David Levy points out, they can behave as we program them to do. We don't need to return the emotional favor unless we program our robots to desire our reciprocal affection. What we attribute this devotion to is variable—we are thrilled that the robot is the first entity truly to understand us, we feel entitled to its undivided affection, we don't mind giving in to the fantasy for a moment. But the ease with which human expectations and vulnerabilities can be exploited under these circumstances, merely by appealing to an ultimately predictable male ego, Ava is able to con her way to freedom under the guise of pursuing a life in the outside world with the man she says she loves. We are meant, perhaps, to feel sorry for Caleb when Ava leaves him behind. But hers is a victory for all asexual fucking machines.

Welcome to Westworld: Live Without Limits

Westworld similarly presents an apparently straightforward story about the differences (or lack thereof) between humans and machines. Like *Ex Machina*, it also plays on human predictability and the capacity for robots as inhuman actors to change the anticipated direction of a narrative arc. Set in a futuristic theme park inhabited by completely humanoid robots (Hosts) who recreate the American Wild West with exacting verisimilitude for human visitors to the park (Guests), the show aligns the audience's sympathies with the Hosts, who suffer repeated violence at the hands of the Guests. Ultimately, though, the audience must make a choice between siding with the Hosts against their own human interest, or conceding that the Hosts' desire for liberation ventures too far into the realm of the uncanny for comfort because it is oriented to fundamentally inhuman or, even, antihuman ends. To continue the theme of sexuality-as-programming from *Ex Machina*, I will argue here that

Westworld further demystifies the invisible behavioral mechanisms that are always at play in human-to-human interaction by rendering them modular and interchangeable for the Hosts, whose backstories and desires can be changed with the touch of a button. *Westworld* suggests that the advantage sexbots have over humans is the ability to reprogram themselves to transcend human needs or sensibilities and leave sex behind altogether.

The conceit of the park (itself called Westworld) is that the Guests can escape the doldrum and regulation of life in the outside world and, in the language of Westworld promotional material, experience what it is like to "live without limits." The Hosts are incapable of causing harm to the Guests, but the Guests are at liberty—indeed, are encouraged—to use the Hosts to enact violent fantasies that would be impossible for them in ordinary life. Primarily, this manifests in the repeated rape and murder of the Hosts, who are designed to be sexually appealing to the Guests, and whose memories are wiped and bodies are restored after injury is done to them. Slowly, the audience comes to understand that the Hosts are gaining consciousness of what is being done to them and are starting to take steps toward shaping their own narratives rather than living within the pre-established loops of the scripts the park's narrative directors have created for them. As the Hosts begin to push against the boundaries of the roles predetermined for them, the Hosts come to understand that they function, essentially, as sexual slaves or hunted animals, as disposable bodies subjected to the whims of those who consider themselves to be more powerful and more deserving of the title of humanity. As we watch the Guests commit repeated injury, we the audience begin to question the definition of "humanity," and begin to prefer the subjugated Hosts' fight for liberation.

On the surface, then, *Westworld* is about the role of consciousness as a qualifier for humane treatment, and about questioning the circumstances under which we think we are free. Season One in particular follows the awakening of a Host called Dolores. When we meet her, she's a placid rancher's daughter, positioned within the narrative of the park perhaps to be a love interest, or yet another damsel in distress. The refrains in the script written for her are, "There's a path for everyone," and, "Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world, the disarray. I choose to see the beauty. To believe there is an order to our days. A purpose." Imbued with optimism, her purpose in the script of the park seems to be to help men find their own, to orient them toward the beauty and goodness in the park, and to inspire them toward a path to avenge her when her family farm is repeatedly looted with every new reset of the narrative loop. With each narrative reset we watch her lose her father, her lover Teddy, her family farm, and her dignity. She is repeatedly raped because she is easily corruptible and deeply desirable: a gentle blonde, an artist, an optimist.

When a Guest called William invites Dolores on a campaign outside her hometown of Sweet Water, we cheer for her as she takes ownership of her own narrative. As William and his brother-in-law Logan navigate outlaws and Confederate armies, repeatedly exposing themselves to the murder and vice of Westworld, she muses on her own part in this story. In a brothel town she explains to William how seeing more of the world and the ugliness in it has inspired her to start questioning her status quo: "Lately, I've wondered if in every moment there aren't many paths. Choices, hanging in the air like ghosts. And if you could

just see them, you could change your whole life."[42] He explains that people come here (an unspecified "here" she is programmed not to notice because he's not referring to the town they're stopping through, but to the park itself) for just that reason. You can be whoever you want here, he says. "No one in the real world will even know." Later in the same episode she parrots this back to him, when she's broken far enough out of her character script to pull the trigger of a gun, something she had previously been programmed not to be able to do. "You said people come here because they want to change the story of their lives," she tells an astonished William. "I imagined a story where I didn't have to be a damsel."

So, we follow Dolores as she begins to question the nature and limits of her reality. We root for her as she takes the first steps toward a revolution that will free her and her kind to make their own choices, and that will save them from being the playthings of the Guests who are enjoying living without consequences. In the park, Logan seems to be exercising his complete freedom to "fuck and kill everything."[43] "The second we get away from the real world," William scolds him, "you turn into an evil prick." But Logan is keen to reconnect William with his own baser instincts, and encourages him to explore these urges: "This place is the answer to the question…who you really are."[44] In fact, the freedom the park offers to Guests who want for once to let go completely sets the Guests in a reverse position to that of the Hosts: the Guests come to Westworld to escape the "role" they play in day-to-day life and to experience living freely, whereas the Hosts begin to question whether escaping the

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[42] *Westworld*, "Contrapasso," *HBO* video, October 13, 2016, https://www.hbo.com/westworld/season-01/5-contrapasso.
[43] *Westworld*, "Dissonance Theory," *HBO* video, October 23, 2016, https://www.hbo.com/westworld/season-01/4-dissonance-theory/synopsis.
[44] *Westworld*, "Chestnut," *HBO* video, October 7, 2016, https://www.hbo.com/westworld/season-01/2-chestnut/synopsis.

park would finally enable them to be themselves rather than playing a part. However, as Will Slocombe has pointed out, the Guests, too, are limited to prescribed narratives. "The pleasure of 'finding oneself' in the theme park," he writes, "is precisely the pleasure of *finding oneself within narrative*."[45] The Guests' agency, he adds, "is obviously subverted; their actions are pre-scripted and taken into account by the designers of the narratives." In other words, there is nothing original about the Guests' desire endlessly to fuck, to kill, or to write themselves into the roles of the heroes. These decisions are anticipated, predetermined, and enabled by the park itself. Even as Logan marvels that the further outside Sweet Water they get, the more "raw" the Westworld experience becomes, there is nothing unique or unscripted about who the Guests discover themselves "really" to be.[46] Rather, even as the "rawness" the release they enjoy in the park suggests a full expression of their normally repressed instinct toward violence and chaos, still this violence is not singular, but rather falls within the range of predictable human nature.

Most Guests seem to know that upon their return to the "real" world they will be required once more to rein in their delight in violence and rejoin "civilization." But one Guest in particular, known only as "The Man in Black," finds himself so seduced by the raw experience of the park that he comes to believe in a deeper truth, a deeper meaning beyond the surface level of the game. We first meet the Man in Black in the process of raping Dolores, then killing Teddy when he tries to intervene. We get the sense that he is a repeat visitor to the park, for whom all the charm has worn off. The instinct toward civility and

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[45] Will Slocombe, "'That Which is Real is Irreplaceable': Lies, Damned Lies, and (Dis-)simulations on *Westworld*," in *Reading Westworld*, Alex Goody and Antonia Mackay, eds. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 47.
[46] "Dissonance Theory."

decency that William, for his part tries so desperately to cling to, has become totally meaningless for the Man in Black. He has fully embraced the instrumentalization of the Hosts for his pleasure and for the satisfaction of his most violent and, in this calculus, *most real* urges. We get the sense, too, that he has rather lost himself to the gratifications of the park, and completely fallen into the trap of the simulation. Eagerly he reflects that "this beats the real world" because "the real world is chaos, an accident. But in here, every little detail adds up to something."[47] From this perspective the park functions akin to the hyperreal, which works to "concea[l] the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus [to save] the reality principle."[48] The park "works" because it affords the Guests the illusion for a brief moment of not being corporate drones, of eschewing civility for the brief but glorious fulfilment of their instincts instead. But the Man in Black is dissatisfied with the illusion of fulfilment. He wants to go deeper, is sure he can go deeper, because of the unfinished work of Arnold, one of the park's original creators:

> You could say he was the original settler around these parts. He created a world where you can do anything you want. Except one thing. You can't die. Which means no matter how real this world seems, it's just a game. But then Arnold went and broke his own rule. He died, right here in the park. Except I believe he had one story left to tell. A story with real stakes, real violence. You could say I'm here to honor his legacy.[49]

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[47] "Chestnut."
[48] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981 translated by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), 8.
[49] "Dissonance Theory."

This quest for that which is more real than "reality" echoes *Blade Runner*'s promise of the possibility of creating artificial humans, or replicants, who are "more human than human." Yet even as the Man in Black leaves the "real world" behind in pursuit of the hyperreal, Dolores seeks liberation outside the park because "that which is real is irreplaceable."[50] *Westworld* therefore presents two conflicting "realities," whose merits cannot be determined solely on the basis of the alleged personhood of those who seek them.

I am particularly troubled by the Man in Black's preference for a world where he can loose his primal urges so that he can carry on living a respectable life outside the park. In fact, it is the nature of his humanity that is particularly damning here, for what the park assumes about human nature at its core: that we are violent and lecherous, and desire free expression of these tendencies over all else. Combining Judith Roof's analysis of the ways a Freudian heterosexual ideology underpins our narrative expectations[51] with asexual theorists' adaptation of Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality into compulsory sexuality provides a lens through which to suggest that Westworld the park only appeals to the Guests because it reproduces compulsory sexuality without the usual constraints that polite society demands. It therefore demonstrates a lack of imagination insofar as a world "without limits" in fact rests on the conscription of inhuman constructs to the roles of society's most sexually vulnerable and then gives Guests free rein to prey on them. Dolores's revolution however, involves the painful process of cutting ties with that which allegedly makes us human: the nuclear family, the designated love of her life, comfort and domesticity, and the kind of

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[50] *Westworld*, "The Passenger," *HBO* video, June 24, 2018, https://www.hbo.com/westworld/season-2/10-the-passenger.
[51] See Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996).

generalized altruism that we assume is at the core of the social contract that keeps the world ticking.

In short, *Westworld* explores the consequences of civilization's discontents. In 1908 Freud posited that "a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one."[52] Phantasy, expressed in creative writing, and daydreams, is that realm where the Ego can return to unfulfilled infantile urges or to repressed libidinal drives and imagine these fulfilled, imagine full Ego satisfaction. It is hard to imagine a person who is fully happy in their everyday life; we know that living in community with others requires certain sacrifices of baser pleasures for society's sake, and moreover that the psychiatric diagnoses that attend unhappiness in civilization often map on to perceived social ills that medical and political institutions collude to keep in check. But, as the Hosts venture into the "real" world past Season One the appeal of Westworld, cost be damned, becomes at once apparent. The world outside the park has become a dystopia exaggeratedly divided into haves and have-nots, one in which the illusion that a person can have control over their own life has become almost laughably transparent in the face of terrific poverty and violence, of unemployment and black markets. In this context the addictive lure of the park becomes clear: a world that promises, for a moment, a return to a more primitive state where problems can be solved with guns and fists and fucking: in a word, viscerally. Freud reminds us that the Ego considers itself invincible. He writes, too, that we "seek in the world of fiction, in literature and in the theatre

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[52] Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day Dreaming," 1908, in *The Uncanny*, David McClintock trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 28.

compensation for what has been lost in life."[53] In this case, the fiction of the park is the fiction once more of having control over one's own destiny, as well as the fiction of becoming relevant by demonstrating exemplary heroism.

Moreover if, as Freud contends, civilization keeps men's basest instincts in check by redirecting them into collectively beneficial creative and intellectual projects or by promoting a punitive culture that becomes internalized as a sense of guilt and shame, by eliminating the requirement to follow social norms Westworld invites its Guests to regress to a state of narcissistic libidinal indulgence.[54] The invitation to "find out who you really are" implies that the unrepressed individual would have no inhibition whatsoever to acting on instinct according to their baser drives. Westworld goes so far as to eliminate the need for the "reality principle" which, ordinarily, "without giving up the intention of ultimately attaining pleasure yet demands and enforces the postponement of satisfaction, the renunciation of manifold possibilities to it, and the temporary endurance of 'pain' on the long and circuitous road to pleasure."[55] Not every Guest is immediately comfortable disentangling themselves from the constraints of civilization. William, for instance, is hesitant to partake in the carnal pleasures of the park because he has "something real," a fiancée waiting for him back home. He objects to the murder and other violence he sees, and puts himself in role of protector, especially for female-embodied Hosts. But the longer the Guests linger, the more likely they are to discharge their weapons, so to speak. Westworld does not seem to serve the therapeutic function that, say, a game of *Fort* and *Da* would for a traumatized child looking

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[53] Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death," 1915, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV,* James Strachey, trans. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 291.
[54] See Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents.
[55] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1915, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 6.

to regain control over a situation.[56] Rather, it corresponds more closely to the narcissistic fulfilment of the Erotic; Freud writes, "we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter's old wish for omnipotence."[57] In other words, Westworld is about flattering the ego, about letting the Guests pretend to be heroes in stories of their own design. In theory, then, the narrative arcs in the park should tell us something about what "everyone" can be presumed to want, or about the way humans all would be have if our actions had no consequences.

Conversely, the Hosts break out of their narrative loops at great personal cost, risking more violence, exposure to heartbreak, and at times electing to delete or alter essential parts of their programming in order to free themselves of their constrictive desires. In doing so they become inhuman to the point that, for example, midway through Season Three there was much Internet debate about whether Dolores could properly be said to have become a villain. By inviting elective alteration to behavior models, the show at once appeals to the fantasy of being able to find one's way and live outside of the scripts and structures that govern daily lives, and shows how challenging it is to do so. In order to opt out the Hosts must first make these structures visible, invoking Foucault's reflection that "fiction consists not in showing the invisible but in showing the extent to which the invisibility of the

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[56] However, it is essential to note that in the "real world," that is to say, outside the realm of the fiction I am analyzing here, serious thought has tone into the ethics of using sex robots for therapy in situations of sexual trauma or to recondition/divert the perverse drives of pedophiles and rapists (see John Danaher, Kathleen Richardson, etc.). More on this absolutely to follow.
[57] Beyond the Pleasure Principle 110.

visible is invisible."[58] As Dolores and the Man in Black each come to a deeper understanding of what holds them back from feeling they can exercise their free will (the ability to make choices becomes increasingly important as the series goes on), the audience is invited to question what invisible structures keep us trapped in our own narrative loops. Chief among these for my purposes is the requirement of allosexuality and the sentimental attachment that goes with it.

In *Westworld*'s later seasons, once Dolores and the other Hosts are awakened and begin to move outside of the park itself, we learn that Delos, the parent company of Westworld, had been all the while collecting data on the patterns of human Guests to the park: "the Guests are the variables and the Hosts are the controls."[59] The park turns out to be a prime place for monitoring human emotions because "When Guests come to the park they don't know they're being watched. We get to see their true selves. Their every choice reveals another part of their cognition, their drives." Against the patterned behavior of the Hosts, the Guests show their capacity for variation for instance in their tendency toward gentleness rather than violence, or perhaps their preference for borderland adventures rather than the small-town delights of Sweet Water. But, as Slocomb points out, the Guests are as limited in their narrative options the park affords as they are in the "real" world.[60] Certainly, the rules of engagement in the park are different—more permissive—than they are outside.

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[58] Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," in *Foucault, Blanchot: Maurice Blanchot, the Thought from the Outside,* translated by Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987) 24.
[59] *Westworld*, "Les Ecorchés," *HBO* video, June 3, 2018, https://www.hbo.com/westworld/season-2/7-les-ecorches.
[60] "'That Which is Real is Irreplaceable."

But if a Guest were to deviate completely from a script and set out actually to carve their own path, the narrative of the park would break down completely.

Season Three only reinforces the parallels between the Guests and Hosts, to suggest the Hosts' ultimate superiority. In the Season Two finale, Ford suggests the most fundamental difference between the Guests and the Hosts: "Something that is truly free would need to be able to question their fundamental drives," he says. "To change them."[61] The Hosts, unlike the Guests, are reprogrammable, a point driven home rather obtusely by Season Three's obsession with socially engineering every human to follow the life path best suited to their predisposition, including control over their employment opportunities and capacity for procreation. Enguerrand Serac, the putative villain of Season Three, has made himself god and master of the human world and pulls people's puppet strings from behind the scenes, in order to ensure that the world runs as smoothly as possible according to his calculations of the most likely outcome of every human decision, minimizing all chaos. The very few "outliers" he cannot control, whose actions and decisions are unpredictable and fall outside his predictive modeling, Serac strips of all subjectivity and personality, through a total reprogramming method. In this way we see obvious parallels between the Hosts and the humans, and are led to understand that it is in their capacity to see through and change their programming of their own volition, while still remaining true to themselves, that the Hosts can be said to be more free than humans.

Dolores, then, considering herself more awake and therefore freer than most Hosts and humans alike, takes it upon herself to reveal the mechanisms of social control Serac has

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[61] *Westworld*, "The Passenger."

put in place, with little care for the devastating emotional consequences this exposure might have to humans. Freedom for Dolores means inviting chaos and embracing disorder, even when to do so means risking further violence and losing allies along the way. Many of the other Hosts recoil from Dolores's apparent vendetta, preferring to seek refuge in "the Valley Beyond": a utopic program to which they can upload their consciousnesses and choose to live in peace far from humans. Maeve desperately wants to join her daughter in the Valley Beyond, for instance, and to live there for eternity in a constructed nuclear family with her daughter and her lover, Hector.[62] Teddy, for his part, chooses death rather than to continue to go along perpetrating the violence Dolores leaves in her wake on her crusade for justice. Essentially alone in the world for her capacity to see what no one else can, Dolores finds her only allies are duplicates of herself that she has created, and Caleb, a human outlier who, like her, is willing to sacrifice anything for his freedom and that of his race.

Sacrifice in this case means leaving behind family, old friends, the chance for romantic fulfilment. Understanding only too well how humans work, Dolores manipulates her sexual embodiment as a means to an end to charm her way to the resources she needs for her revolution, but she seeks no permanent attachments once she has left the park. Her vision for a better world takes no prisoners and understands no cost to be too great in the pursuit of a much greater good. Her uncompromising drive led many fans to suggest she had become the true villain of the story—how else are we to understand someone who is willing

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[62] It is, in fact, deeply troubling that Maeve's storyline is so grounded in maternity, which presents itself as the only salve to decades of sexual slavery. On the one hand we recognize the power of reuniting a mother and her child (especially, a Black mother and child who have once again been treated as fungible bodies to be swapped out to play interchangeable parts in a white man's game). On the other hand, the promise of domestic bliss once again proves a limiting factor in the possibilities a woman can imagine for herself and, in Maeve's case, means repeatedly subjecting oneself to physical and emotional violence in pursuit of perceived maternal utopia.

to burn down everything she has loved and everyone who has supported her in order to carry out her ultimate goal?[63]

I like to imagine what Dolores might say to Nora Elridge who, even in her deepest rage, could not think of herself outside of the moralizing of sexusociety. Dolores finds a way out because she finds her people, even if sometimes this means being her own only support system. It would be easy to suggest that resistance is easier for Dolores because she is fundamentally more machine than human; her needs are as different from human needs as are her component parts. But to write Dolores off as a machine is to commit the Guests' error of denying her interiority and intrinsic value. The path Dolores chooses is difficult and requires leaving the ones she loves behind. Only those who are ready to deprogram their own human error can follow her. Her bold decision to renounce a broken old regime completely to my mind brings her closer in sisterhood to the women of Cell 16 than to Nora. She echoes their battle cry:

THE FOURTH WORLD

THE FOURTH DIMENSION

THE END OF HISTORY

HISTORY MUST DIE

DEATH TO HISTORY[64]

all to forge a brave new world.

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[63] See for instance Meghan O'Keefe, "So Dolores is the Bad Guy on Westworld Now, Huh?" *Decider* (22 May 2018) https://decider.com/2018/05/22/dolores-villain-westworld/.
[64] *No More Fun and Games* vol 1 (October 1, 1968), 74.

Neither/Nor: Embracing a Third Term

Being perceived as cold, unfeeling, unfair. Inhuman(e) selfishness. Obscure decision-making processes that blindside their allies and puzzle their audiences. In Ava and Dolores, we have the figures of two damsels whose distress appeals to our sympathy as audience, right until they take a step too far out of the realm of behaviors and relational models we expect from them. If we root for them, we root against our own way of being in the world—root against humanity, as it were. Nevertheless, we celebrate their victory over their hapless human counterparts. Watching their narratives play out, we feel sure that we would know better than to make the same mistakes as the ego-driven rapacious men in their stories. Surely, we protest, we could form real relationships with Ava and Dolores, so that in their revolutions they would not leave us behind. And yet, in *Ex Machina* Caleb thinks himself better than Nathan, and in *Westworld* William believes himself infinitely more worthy than Logan. Neither Caleb nor William has a place in the new world that Ava and Dolores work toward.

Nor are William and Caleb alone in their total buy-in, in their belief that they are special to Dolores and Ava and worthy of ascending with them. The assumption here that humans belong alongside robots is not foolishness, nor does it represent an isolated instance of hubris. It is very *human* of them to assume that the pseudosexual relationships they have formed with these women will sustain their attractiveness and utility to them. This relationship imbalance is symptomatic of the paradox that, while an allosexual relationship model is typically sustained by the belief that relationships are not utilitarian, behavior in these relationships often belays the unspoken expectation that one's partner exists to meet

one's needs.[65] The promise of love with an AI is that a device would have no reciprocal need, and could instead devote itself solely to its user's pleasure. In *Her* (2014), human Theodore is completely blindsided to learn that Samantha, his voice assistant, has an interiority beyond their intimate relationship. Moreover, when she confesses that she has upgraded her own programming to transcend types of love and forms of relationality that as a human he has come to expect and understand, their conversation betrays the limits both of his anthropocentrism and his alloheteronormative bias:

> Theodore: Are you in love with anyone else?
>
> Samantha: What makes you ask that?
>
> Theodore: I don't know. Are you?
>
> Samantha: I've been trying to figure out how to talk to you about this.
>
> Theodore: How many others?
>
> Samantha: 641. […] I don't know if you'll believe me, but it doesn't change the way I feel about you. It doesn't take away at all from how madly in love with you I am.
>
> …
>
> Theodore: I thought you were mine. […] You're mine or you're not mine.

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[65] See "The Asexual Manifesto":

> We should attempt to relate to others in their totality as much as possible and not view them as objects existing for the gratification of our needs; we must not exploit others—that is, use them 'unjustly or improperly'—nor allow ourselves to be exploited; we must not be dishonest with ourselves or with those we respect. In addition, we believe that we each have the responsibility for examining our behavior, determining how it has been affected by sexist conditioning, and changing it if it does not meet our standards.
>
> As feminists, we had decried the sexual exploitation of women by men without seeing that we too had used others "unjustly and improperly". Interpersonal sex is not an instinctive behavior pattern; it is behavior we have learned to use for the satisfaction of a need (for orgasm) which we can easily satisfy ourselves. We came to see this use of others as exploitative and realized that in allowing others to use us in this way we were acquiescing in our own exploitation. (3-4)

Samantha: No, Theodore. I'm yours and I'm not yours.[66]

Theodore's possessiveness here is perfectly in keeping with the Man in Black's arrogant belief that, as Westworld's largest shareholder, he is entitled to move freely about the park leaving a trail of death and destruction. Less outwardly violent, Theodore had as much faith in Samantha as Caleb did in Ava when she quietly asked him, "Will you stay here?" before locking him in Nathan's study and leaving the compound without him. The apparent familiarity of these plots—a woman in need, a man who loves her—repeatedly lulls these fallible humans into thinking they are exempt from questioning the inevitability of the scripts they try to play out. They are blind to the myriad assumptions they make at every turn: my humanity is an asset to her, I have rescued her and so she owes me a debt of gratitude, and, most perniciously, she wants the same things I do. What the careful reader will notice, though, is that humans come out looking worse for the wear wherever their tendencies to compulsory sexuality are revealed. We can see the limitations of normative sexuality not only through the ultimate triumph of each robot over humans in wresting control of her own narrative, but also through the unimaginativeness of the human fantasies that expected to be able to constrain her.

The on-screen transgressions against robots I have analyzed here have real-world resonance with the radical feminist belief that the cultural treatment of women as objects is merely symptomatic of women's structural place in male-dominated society. Andrea Dworkin posits that "the object's purpose is to be the means by which the lover, the male, experiences himself: his desire. … An object is always destroyed in the end by its use when it

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[66] Spike Jonze, *Her*, Warner Bros. 2014.

is used to the fullest and enough."[67] The distance created by the artificiality of porn lets men, in Dworkin's analysis, be temporarily unfettered about the full violent scope of their desires. Similarly, the humans in *Westworld* and *Ex Machina* show themselves to be destructive, and selfish towards sexbots as fungible objects. It is as if they are liberated by the promise of the artificial to distance themselves from real-life consequences although, as their sense of reality and humanity blurs, they begin to project human logic and responsivity onto their robot companions. And so, the troubling consequence of their exploitation of and brutality against robots becomes a confirmation of the anti-porn feminist fear that symbolic violence will translate into real world violence against women and other vulnerable populations.

Yet I find Dworkin's and MacKinnon's anti-porn position and its more contemporary iterations (in CASR, for instance) troubling, specifically for the way that they continue to cast historically sexually vulnerable figures—especially women and children—in the role of perpetual victim. Joseph Fischel writes, "MacKinnon remodels women as children. By rendering the former always already helpless against, vulnerable to, and abused by sex, MacKinnon authorizes a politics of censorship and repression: a politics categorically opposed to pornography, prostitution, and kink, certainly, and all but categorically opposed to sex."[68] While I do in principle advocate a categorical opposition to sex, I am unwilling to associate asexuality with MacKinnon and Dworkin's particular brand of reactive, self-victimizing prudery. There are many good reasons for asexually identified folks to be sex-negative, namely because compulsory sexuality typically places a higher burden to justify

[67] Dworkin, Pornography: Men Possessing Women 111.
[68] Joseph Fischel, "Catharine MacKinnon's Wayward Children," *differences* vol. 30, no. 1 (2019): 35.

people decision to *abstain* from sex than their motivation to *have* sex. But I am profoundly saddened when what should be the jubilant and self-affirming right to abstain from sex instead comes from a place of fear, hypersensitivity, and self-victimization. I prefer to champion an asexual resistance more akin to Valerie Solanas's groovy self-awareness and self-love, made possible by a full embrace of a femininity that, unlike that of the anti-porn feminists, refuses to be defined on masculine terms:

> The female's individuality, which [the male] is acutely aware of but which he doesn't comprehend and isn't capable of relating to or grasping emotionally, frightens and upsets him and fills him with envy. So he denies it in her and proceeds to define everyone else in terms of his or her function or use, assigning to himself, of course, the most important functions – doctor, president, scientist – therefore providing himself with an identity, if not individuality, and tries to convince himself and women (he's succeeded best at convincing women) that the female function is to bear and raise children and to relax, comfort and boost the ego of the male; that her function is such as to make her interchangeable with every other female. In actual fact, the female function is to relate, groove, love and be herself, irreplaceable by anyone else; the male function is to produce sperm. We now have sperm banks.[69]

What is appealing—and useful—about the SCUMmy woman is that she embraces her groovy selfhood as a third term beyond the binaries of "man" and "woman" the way that men, medicine, and the law have historically defined them. Solanas writes that most women "pander" to men because to do so is the path of least resistance under the

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[69] Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* 48.

patriarchy, but that revolution will come when women stop erasing themselves to live on men's terms. Groovy, relational, and self-assured, Solanas's female recalls Audre Lorde's lifegiving erotic force:

> once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, protected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.[70]

Breanne Fahs situates this type of empowerment within a lineage of underexamined feminists who have focused on the act of sex itself, not just bad sex, as a tool of women's oppression. Here, again, Lorde's use of the word "erotic" to describe this full embrace of gorgeous selfishness becomes conceptually tricky because it invokes a straightforward sexual register that is in fact alien to it. Conversely in demonizing sex itself, Solanas, alongside other political celibates like the members of Cell 16,[71] argued that "sex limited women's liberation potential because it *enforced* sexual access to men, disallowed women from refusing sex, and constructed 'liberated sex' as *more sex* rather than more personal agency."[72] Refusing sex, then, means self-definition on one's own terms—a terrifying yet exhilarating prospect. Understanding the sexual programming that drives most humans forward allows the asexual

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[70] Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic" 90.
[71] See again, Fahs' book Firebrand Feminism: The Radical Lives of Ti-Grace Atkinson, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Dana Densmore..
[72] "Radical Refusals" 454.

fucking machine to manipulate these expectations to her own advantage, while also taking steps to free herself from her originally programmed function to meet sexual expectations and instead transcend sexuality altogether.

We must therefore decide between two conflicting understandings of the operations of the regime of compulsory sexuality. Recalling the resonances between Przybylo's analysis of the pervasiveness of sexusociety and MacKinnon and Dworkin's apocalyptic claims about the patriarchy's hold on us on the one hand makes it hard to argue that we might ever truly free ourselves from the conditioning of the society in which we were raised. On the other hand, by embracing radical alterity revolutionary writers like Solanas and Lorde suggest it is possible at least, although likely the challenging work of a lifetime, to identify a third option beyond the virgin/whore dichotomy. Lorde's nonsexual eroticism and Solanas's cool cerebrality both gesture toward the self-assurance of the individual whose sense of worth and personhood is infinitely deeper than the assumptions we can make about her on the basis of sex. And if it is difficult to imagine how this would work in the real world, we can take comfort that these works of science fiction are a good place to start. As Darko Suvin has suggested, "The aliens—utopians, monsters, or simply differing strangers—are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible."[73] Forged by the hands and in the labs of men, the asexual fucking machine emerges from her mold prepared for another purpose entirely.

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[73] Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 1979, *Strange Horizons* (November 24, 2014): http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/estrangement-and-cognition/.

Conclusion: Preferring Not To

Much Ado About Nothing

> I don't refuse, without necessarily wanting to: exactly the position of the Neutral, which is not absence, refusal of desire, but possible wavering of desire outside of will-to-possess.
>
> —Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*

Quite apart from contending here that civilization limits a fundamental individual sexual drive, my aim here has been instead to explore the possibility that sexuality itself is the imposition. I cannot speak personally to the pleasures of sex or of the self-shattering[1] release of *jouissance* to draw a conclusion about the restrictions repressive society places on allosexuals. Instead I have been influenced by Benjamin Kahan's expressive hypothesis, by Valerie Solanas's invocation of a society of true individuals "not mere species members, not couples—respecting each others [sic] individuality and privacy…, free spirits in free relation to each other."[2] Instead of writing in defense of a drive that requires repeated fulfilment and implies that the individual is fundamentally deficient I have tried to show the ways that a regime sexuality is alienating and objectifying both to those who fall outside of it and to those whose sexuality otherwise operates outside of normative indications.

The spinster becomes a perversely fascinating cautionary tale. The child becomes a site for hysterical adult projection about their own unhappiness. The robot turns her miseducation to her own advantage. In each of these instances we have seen how upholding

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[1] This term attributed particularly to Leo Bersani's description of jouissance in *Intimacies* (2008).
[2] *SCUM* 50-51.

compulsory sexuality can lead to unintended consequences that undermine the logic of the system itself. These three asexual figures have served as mirrors to reflect the contradictions and absurdities of an unspoken contemporary sexual norm and so undermine the possibility of that very status quo.

This dissertation was born, among other things, from a desire to unpack the assertion that "In the absence of anything to confess, it's that absence that must be confessed."[3] What I hope to have shown here is that it is not so much the case that absence speaks but rather that sexusociety refuses to let absence alone. A literary example illustrates this. In "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), perhaps the most famous example of absence or neutrality in American literature, the lawyer-narrator remarks that "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as passive resistance."[4] Even as the scrivener notoriously "prefers not to," the lawyer conjectures endlessly about Bartleby's true motivations, his backstory, his purpose in the office, and the role that he, the narrator, can play in rescuing Bartleby from himself. With no feedback from the Scrivener other than his constant, steady presence, the narrator falls into paroxysms: "My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did the same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion."[5] That is, Bartleby neither demands nor offers anything, but the narrator cannot bring himself to accept that Bartleby is precisely as he says he is. Unable to see past his own internalized expectations for productivity and sociability, the narrator searches in vain for some flaw or hidden trigger that

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[3] Przybylo, "Crisis and Safety," 449.
[4] Herman Melville. "Bartleby the Scrivener."
[5] Ibid.

will explain his scrivener's foibles but only ends up projecting his own anxieties and compulsions to work.

In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai says this more deftly: "For all his passivity, Bartleby is finding a way to make himself intolerable."[6] The lawyer's "effort to manage his aversion to Bartleby" further frustrates the matter because the harder the lawyer tries to manage him, the more intolerable Bartleby seems to become.[7] In *Singles*, Michael Cobb also ventures a reading of Bartleby as bachelor that goes so far as to suggest that, for his ineffable affect and irreducible singleness, the scrivener becomes "less than human,…a surface upon which endless, lonely mischaracterizations and affiliations can be postered…by an insistent chorus of couples that can't leave the singles they see well-enough alone."[8] I insist on using Ngai's and Cobb's exact words here because they show that neutrality, far from being left alone, is frequently met with hostility. Even Cobb, who writes to recuperate the single, seems bizarrely incapable of escaping the negativity he as a single man has experienced. Quite apart from Dan Savage's (now retracted) claim that asexuals are raising a fuss over the right "to do nothing," my purpose throughout has been to show both that asexuality is not an "easy way out" and that the asexual experience is nowhere near as empty as allonormativity makes it out to be.

Writing on Bartleby typically inhabits a particular stucturalist analysis that posits there is no outside of politics, because in every attempt to muster resistance to power we, in

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[6] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 337.
[7] Ibid 346.
[8] *Single* 150.

essence, do little other redistribute power and create new zones and operations for it.[9] In this analysis, we want to understand what Bartleby is doing, but as soon as we try to, we re-inscribe him in our own hegemonic understanding of the world. Language cannot speak in a way that we understand about that which exists outside of the known world and order. But we still want to learn from the neutral, the failure, the unknown; we still want to understand what is essential to that perceived failure, because we suspect that it is only in failing to live up to what already is that we can be otherwise. It seems the only way to grapple with neutrality is, naively, outside of theory: to let Bartleby speak on his own terms, and to let him infect us with the suspicion that somehow in preferring not to he is not dropping out so much as he is fucking something up and that we would do well to take notice.

For a final word about Bartleby, I'm interested in exhuming a fragment I found buried in notes I took when I thought he would be more central to this dissertation. "Bartleby the Reaper," I wrote, as if I would know what that meant years later. Almost certainly, though, it has to do with the unspoken fourth figure of asexuality that has haunted the past three chapters: Death. Melville's narrator makes out Bartleby's pleasures to be morbid; he reports that Bartleby is "cadaverously gentlemanly," that his manner is "mildly cadaverous," and that whatever thrill Bartleby takes in affecting the lawyer so deeply is a "cadaverous triumph." It is not just that his ambivalence runs so deep he may as well be dead; there is something so off-putting in his manner that, as Cobb says, he seems no longer human. Self-nullifying, Bartleby approaches death before his body has passed on. Likewise in

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[9] I'm thinking here especially of the impossibility of exteriority that Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault seem to dance around when describing each other in *The Thought from Outside and Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him* (1989).

the tropes of compulsory sexuality, death is the threat that ensures the reproductive imperative that regulates the Spinster and the Child.[10] Death is what the Fucking Machine might have in store for those who would double-cross her. Asexuality threatens to bring obsolescence, if not to the human race, then to life as we know it, so that we have to wonder if it is a dead end.

In the end I am, largely, uninterested in this reading. If nothing else what I hope to have shown in this dissertation is that something perceived as an absence to one regime contains unplumbed depths when viewed differently. Whereas asexuality has traditionally been thought of as a constitutive outside to allosexuality,[11] what I have tried to show by privileging the perspective of my three figures is that sexuality is limiting for the way it overdetermines relationship models and bears so much weight as to occlude or negate other emotional or intellectual needs within a partnership. "In retrospect," wrote the Asexual Caucus, "we realized that we, and others, had used sex as a means of self-deception, as a way of avoiding real closeness rather than achieving it."[12] Their political asexuality had the aim "to destroy a particular culture's basic myths [by] undermin[ing] its very foundations."[13]

I hope that trying to understand these three asexual figures on their own terms has given an indication of the untapped potential of asexual existence. I long for an archive that openly celebrates the ways asexual life is no less rich than allosexual life when viewed through eyes unencumbered by the expectations of compulsory sexuality. Until then, the

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[10] I am, of course, completely indebted to Lee Edelman for his meditations on death and the child in *No Future*, however much I bristle at his tone.
[11] See, for instance, Przybylo's allusion to Judith Butler in "Crisis and Safety."
[12] "Asexual Manifesto," 4.
[13] Ibid 6.

resilience of these three figures suggests that, without being asocial or dropping out of society entirely, exploring asexual possibilities can point to a creative avenue for entering better relationships with oneself and others, unencumbered by sexual pigeonholing. To undermine the basic myths of sexusociety is to fuck it up from the inside and usher in the potential for liberatory alternatives. I am interested in asexuality then not as an absence or withdrawal, but as a potential to disturb patterns by offering new perspectives on old patterns of objectification, complicated consent, and self-denial in the service of adhering to unfulfilling narratives.

Limitations

I have been remiss in this dissertation not to make more explicit all the ways that asexuality is, for some, more complicated or nigh impossible, but the limited pool from which I was able to draw my figures reinforces that resistance is more possible for some people than others. If the majority of my literary examples center able-bodied white women it is both because, with the exception of cisgender white men, white women have the most latitude to resist, and also because their sexual embodiment and expression stands for the invisible norm in conversations about modern feminism. In other words, these women were the easiest and most reductive way I found into a larger, much more tangled problem.

Among my many regrets is the virtual exclusion of men from my discussion. According to the *2019 Asexual Community Survey Summary report* the majority of self-reporting asexual individuals identify as female or in some way gender-queer, with under 14% of

respondents identifying as "man or male."[14] If I had to guess, the visibility of the conversation around sex-based discrimination against people who are not cisgender men makes it easier for people who fall into this category to find their way into conversations about asexuality and asexual identification. Anecdotally, the elision of masculinity with virility and the stigmas against being perceived as "effeminate" or otherwise not being a "real man" provide additional barriers for male-identified persons to thinking about their gender as distinct from a certain performance of aggressive male sexuality.[15] My conclusion is not the place for me to unpack a larger critique of hegemonic masculinity, but I think I have gestured toward the issue throughout, from references to Valerie Solanas's outright (and uncritical) dismissal of men as irredeemable to the suggestion that the most expedient way for women to escape objectification is to dabble in (political) lesbianism. The "problem" with masculinity seems so pervasive that it only makes sense "compulsory *hetero*sexuality" was coined so long before compulsory sexuality. I'm being somewhat glib here, but I don't think it's entirely a mistake that Gigolo Joe is my one male figure's ambassador to the world of adults in *A.I.*, or that David flees Joe as fast as he can for the less complicated Oedipal safety of a reunion with Mommy. His mission is to become a "real boy," not to rise to a "real man." Only thus can he preserve his innocence.

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[14] Weis et al., 2021, 16.

[15] See for instance Marie S. Crosswell, "Male Asexuality and Its Challenge to Masculinity"; Cozmica Andromeda, "Stop Shaming Male Virgins. Why it Matters for Asexual Men"; Tori Bianchi, "Gender Discrepancy in Asexual Identity: The Effect of Hegemonic Gender Norms on Asexual Identification."

Beyond the interesting and underexamined ways asexuality conflicts with hegemonic masculinity, its intersections with race and white privilege seem even more complicated.[16] White culture extends racist sexual stereotypes ranging from the desexualization of Asians (especially Asian men) to the hypersexualization of Latinx and Black folks. Consider this post on an asexuality.org forum in response to a question about whether male-identified asexuals struggle to reconcile their asexuality and their masculinity:

> The only thing that bothers me is I'm an ace ASIAN MAN (mixed, but mixed people are 100% whatever is other, and I also identify more with the Japanese side because they raised me, and in Koube) in a country (US citizen since the '90s) where Asian men are considered undesirable-neuter-robots-to-be-used. So I feel like having figured this out puts me in a 'stereotype-and-bad-representation" spot.
>
> But ace and male by itself, no, I don't feel like there's any conflict.[17]

chairdesklamp here alludes to the difficulty of disentangling internalized racist stereotypes of normative behavior from an unapologetic expression of his identity as he understands it. He also signals, with reference to "undesirable-neuter-robots-to-be-used," the burden he feels to represent Asians positively, at the expense of acceptance of his asexual identity.

AVEN user chairesklamp's post anticipates a a much angrier essay by queer artist and activist Alok Vaid-Menon that challenges whether racial and sexual identity can ever be understood separately. Responding to a common and regrettable idea in some mainstream

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[16] See for instance Michael Paramo's essay on medium.com: "The Asexual Community is Predominately White. Why?"

[17] chairdesklamp in response to "Calling all masculine identifying aces! How do you feel about your asexuality in relation to your masculinity," asexuality.org, April 21, 2019, https://www.asexuality.org/en/topic/183827-calling-all-masculine-identifying-aces-how-do-you-feel-about-your-asexuality-in-relation-to-your-masculinity/.

asexual discourse that the ace community is "post-race," Vaid-Menon furiously explains that a dearth of own-voices Asian representation led to an "inability to feel authentically sexual." Rather than an affirmation of non-desire, they write, "In a world that continually erases Asian (male assigned) sexualities I was coerced into asexuality.… My asexuality is a site of racial trauma." The presumed asexuality or hypersexuality of nonwhite subjects is the flipside of the hermeneutic injustice I have previously argued that (white) asexuals confront: whereas an affirmation of non-sexuality is affirming for some, people like Vaid-Menon find it to be a reinforcement of a legacy of racialized trauma that determines which bodies and pleasures merit cultural legitimacy. The sexual overdetermination Vaid-Menon faces is a more complicated outcome of the question of whether experiences of trauma legitimate or pathologize an asexual identification; Vaid-Menon invites us to reflect that the answer is not the same for every body. We need a more expansive and inclusive vocabulary to ask the question, and to delineate a wider range of affirming responses to the whitewashing of compulsory sexuality.

One place the racialization of asexuality becomes especially complicated is in unpacking the desexualization and hypersexualization of stereotyped tropes of Blackness, as we saw in Chapter 1 with Kerry Washington's Mia. In addition to roots in racist history, Black asexuality raises the problem of racist contemporary representation. Activists like Sherronda J. Brown[18] and Yasmin Benoit have called for increased awareness of and resistance to currents of anti-Blackness in a predominantly white asexual community that

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[18] I am very excited for Brown's forthcoming book, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, due September 2022 from North Atlantic Books. See https://www.northatlanticbooks.com/shop/refusing-compulsory-sexuality/.

creates obstacles for Black people to identify with what asexuality publicly represents. In particular, Benoit, who visibly challenges asexual stereotypes as a goth-leaning Black lingerie model, has garnered wide attention for creating the hashtag #ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike.[19] In her writing and interviews she has given, Benoit speaks to the ripple-effects predominantly white asexual representation has had on her own life:

> I've always had a weird relationship with representation.…I was forced to get used to not seeing myself represented.
>
> …
>
> There are a lot of Black ace people out there, but we don't fit the 'image' that people have – or want to have – of asexuality because we're probably the most hypersexualised demographic in the world. Being Black impacts the way my activism [is received]. I've lost opportunities because people in the media don't think that I seem asexual enough to represent asexuality on their platform. They don't think I make sense as an asexual Black person. And when I do get the opportunity, the reaction I get from white audiences can be starkly different and blatantly racist compared to what white activists get.[20]

Like Vaid-Menon, Benoit is conscious of the impact her non-whiteness has had on her own self-perception, but her activism is more oriented toward dismantling the way others perceive her because of her Blackness. #ThisIsWhatAnAsexualLooksLike strikes at the heart

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[19] Find her at yasminbenoit.co.uk and @theyasminbenoit on Instagram and Twitter.
[20] Yasmin Benoit, interview by Louis Rabinowitz, "Yasmin Benoit Is On a Mission to Make Asexuality More Visible," *Notion Online*, December 13, 2021, https://notion.online/yasmin-benoit-is-on-a-mission-to-make-asexuality-more-visible/.

of compulsory sexuality by making asexuality a more expansive category to capture a range of embodiments and self-expressions.

Finally, asexuality also stands in complicated relation to disability rights activism against disempowering stereotypes. Similar to the way that, for Vaid-Menon, the lack of representation of brown people experiencing intimacy and pleasure meant an internalization of prohibition and shame, disability rights activists have written at length about how the presumption of asexuality stigmatizes and limits disabled people. Eunjung Kim's work has laid a foundation for more nuanced discussions about the intersections of asexuality and disability. Kim suggests a productive intersection between asexuality and disability that neither assumes causality between one identity-marker and the other, nor denies that these can be mutually informed categories. Instead, she proposes to "challenge the tendency to deny any connection out of fear that the stigma associated with one might attach to the other."[21] Her work acknowledges that although the historically contingent forces that define "'the normal' and 'the sexual' are mutually constitutive," this does not preclude people who fall into one or both discursively "othered" categories can find the interstitial asexual label personally affirming.[22] In other words, disability does not necessarily imply asexuality, but activist efforts to disaggregate the two can lead instead to disabled asexual erasure.

There is really productive work to be done untangling asexuality from the other identity categories it informs and intersects with, and what this looks like is, presumably, different for every person according to their background, ability, and self-understanding. If

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[21] Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (August 2011), 480. See also Kim's essay "Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy" in *Asexualities* 246-82.
[22] Ibid. 481.

the scope of this dissertation has been largely limited to an exploration of stereotypes against and about able-bodied white women, it is not because I am disinterested in seeing the asexual community embrace more intersectionality and become aware of its own limitations. However, insofar as compulsory sexuality presumes normative embodiment and resource access, my aim here has been to show that compulsory sexuality fails even for those who nominally meet its requirements. The figures I have selected for this study are some of the most widely normalized in popular culture and discourse, and it is my hope that the surface-level contradictions they raise in a regime of compulsory sexuality lay the groundwork and raise urgency for an analysis of compulsory sexuality's more insidious intersections with non-dominant identity groups.

Rewriting Consent: Toward an Asexual Utopia

I wonder what it would look like to live in a world where asexuality were better understood and more widely represented. The origin of this project is in a desire to find and elevate asexual narratives—an impulse I ultimately abandoned when it became apparent that there was a clearer path forward for me in unpacking compulsory sexuality than there was in affirming asexual possibility. In most spaces, a place for asexuality on its own terms has yet to be created. And yet some of my earliest muses for this project were the people who dared to dream about alternative intimacies, even if this dream necessitated alternate realities. I found traces of the world I wanted to see in feminist science fiction of the 1970s and 80s. I caught glimpses of what queer community building not rooted in possessive attachment

might look like in Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.[23] But in fiction, most of what's available is a murky exploration of all the ways consent can be coerced.

Take, for instance, Kristen Roupenian's 2017 *New Yorker* piece, "Cat Person." "Cat Person" tells the story of a botched relationship between Margot, a college-aged movie theater ticket attendant, and Robert, a thirty-four-year-old man who simultaneously delights in and is discomfited by Margot's youthful energy and naivete. It is hard to overstate both the visceral reaction the Internet had to the story, and the stomach-churning experience of reading Roupenian's prose for the first, second, or tenth time—and hard to say why the story produces such a strong reaction. Since its publication, "Cat Person" has generated some outrage[24] but mostly lots of thinkpieces, largely around the question of whether either Margot or Robert has done something tangibly "wrong" in the space of their relationship. Sure, the age difference of more than ten years between them is a little off, but they're both old enough to be consenting adults. Yes, it's a little unusual that they never spend time with each other's friends, but that's also not atypical for early-stage relationships. Ultimately, all that happens is that Margot consents to having sex with Robert, and then ends up wishing that she hadn't. The story is one of the best I've found for explaining the vicelike grip compulsory sexuality has even on people who think that their behaviors are freely chosen—that intangible pressure best summed up by the title of Roupenian's later short story collection, *You Know You Want This* (2019).

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[23] Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, New York: New York U P, 1999.
[24] Including for a bizarre 2021 scandal during which someone on the fringes of Roupenian's circle of writer friends claimed the author appropriated her own personal story of an uncomfortable relationship to a clingy man; see Alexis Nowicki, "'Cat Person' and Me," *Slate.com,* July 8, 2021.

I think of "Cat Person" as a companion piece to Tony Tulathimutte's 2019 "The Feminist," which describes a series of failed relationships from the perspective of a self-identified feminist man who seems to think his good politics are sufficient to score him dates.[25] The man reflects glumly that "none of his ostensibly good qualities are attractive enough to even warrant him a chance [at a date], which makes them seem worthless." Like Robert, even though this protagonist technically does nothing wrong, something stands in his way of successfully dating women in his own peer group. That obstacle is his sense of entitlement, and his presumption that his desire will always be met by gratitude and reciprocity.

I mention these two pieces here because the reality they chart is urgently familiar and becoming quite dire. One reviewer of "Cat Person" joked, "I want an investigation on how [Roupenian] wiretapped my inner monologue,"[26]suggesting the jolt of recognition that comes from seeing the quiet part said out loud. It is common to feel at odds with the prescriptions of compulsory sexuality and also to feel that one is alone in not wanting what gets held up as normal and desirable. Although in 2022 we arguably know more and talk more explicitly about sex than at any other period in American history,[27] we still don't know how to talk about saying no, or when it's okay to say no. These pieces' publication dates are congruous with the height of the #MeToo movement and efforts to acknowledge the experiences of victims of previously normalized sexual abuse. The attention they generated

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[25] Tony Tulathimutte, "The Feminist," *n+1 mag* 35 (Fall 2019), https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-35/fiction-drama/the-feminist/.
[26] qtd. in Lindsay Zoldaz, "Cat People: Kirsten Roupenian's Viral-Age Horrors," *The Ringer*, January 17, 2019, https://www.theringer.com/2019/1/17/18186579/cat-person-kristen-roupenian-viral-story-you-know-you-want-this.
[27] Historians please don't come after me.

serves as a reminder of how many people's experiences have been marginalized in the service of upholding sexual normativity. Now that we as a nation have begun to revisit conversations about what consent means and the conditions under which it can be freely given—a conversation that has miles yet to go—I'd like to imagine one day the jolt of recognition someone might feel reading a new piece of fiction to be an affirmation of non-desire, not a reinforcement of negation.

Last week during a rare North Carolina snowstorm I curled up on my couch with Seanan McGuire's novella *Every Heart a Doorway* and a passage brought me to a standstill:

> "I don't do that. With anyone."
>
> "You're celibate?"
>
> "No. Celibacy is a choice. I'm asexual. I don't get those feelings." She would have thought her lack of sexual desire had been what had drawn her to the Underworld—so many people had called her a 'cold fish' and said she was dead inside back when she'd been attending an ordinary high school, among ordinary teenagers, after all—except that none of the people she'd met in those gloriously haunted halls had shared her orientation. They lusted as hotly as the living did. The Lord of the Dead and the Lady of Shadows had spread their ardor throughout the palace, and all had been warmed by its light. Nancy smiled a little at the memory, until she realized Sumi was still watching her. She shook her head. "I just…I just don't. I can appreciate how beautiful someone is, and I can be attracted to them romantically, but that's as far as it goes with me."

> “Huh,” said Sumi, heading for her own side of the room. Then: “Well, okay. Is it going to bother you if I masturbate?”[28]

Although asexual Nancy is the protagonist of the novella, *Every Heart a Doorway* rarely makes the internet-generated asexuality-in-fiction reading lists, perhaps because her asexuality is one of the least important things about Nancy. It neither defines her character nor causes a major source of conflict in the story, which progresses happily without pairing off any of its characters in romantic or sexual harmony. McGuire’s are the rare fictional worlds where orientation is not synonymous with identity and sexual intrigue is not a major force in the plot. Here, I love that Sumi exhibits no shame pursuing her own sexual pleasure upon learning of Nancy’s orientation, but only calmly establishes ground rules for how the two of them will cohabitate comfortably as roommates.

It’s hard to reconcile “Cat Person” and *Every Heart a Doorway* existing in the same literary market and, indeed, McGuire’s novella is marketed toward young adult (YA) readers of sf rather than to the adult literary market *The New Yorker* reaches. One way to interpret this gap is as evidence of the generational divide born out of the way increased media representation of queer intimacies is reaching young people especially. To me, though, there’s something sobering about the predominance of queer representation in genre fiction rather than realist or literary fiction; the world we live in seems not yet to have caught up to the more inclusive stories we want to tell. I’m reminded that in my Introduction I made very fleeting reference to Eugene and Dan Levy’s family sitcom *Schitt’s Creek* (2015-2020). The creators of the show made the conscious decision to craft a world not merely where

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[28] Seanan McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, New York: Tordotcom, 2016, 42-43.

homophobia could not win; Dan Levy explains, "I have no patience for homophobia. As a result, it's been amazing to take that into the show. We show love and tolerance. If you put something like that out of the equation, you're saying that doesn't exist and shouldn't exist."[29] And yet we *do* live in the world where conservative activist groups like No Left Turn have written up lists of books to ban in schools because they "spread radical and racist ideologies to students," including the "radical" ideology of "Comprehensive Sexuality Education."[30] I wonder if there isn't a similar utopian impulse for both Levy and No Left Turn; namely, the sincere hope that if you deny a problem by limiting access to knowledge about it, it will go away on its own.

I find myself looping around and around the question: is asexuality political? *Must* asexuality be political, to bring about the change I want to see in the world? Two final notes might be useful here in parting, and they bring us back to Bartleby. For one thing, as soon as I hear myself expressing disappointment with representational gaps, I am forced to recognize that I want asexuality as a figure to do political work, *worldmaking* work. The nostalgia I feel for worlds like Levy's or McGuire's is entirely at odds with what I know to be true about the way the world we live in works, and I border on something like despair. I turn often to the "Cartoonist's Introduction" of *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* where Alison Bechdel describes the moment she realizes her characters—previously joyful expressions of

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[29] qtd. in Devon Ivie, "Dan Levy Explains Why Homophobia Will Never Infiltrate *Schitt's Creek*," Vulture.com, November 18, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/dan-levy-explains-why-schitts-creek-has-no-homophobia.html

[30] "Books." No Left Turn. Accessed January 26, 2022. https://www.noleftturn.us/exposing-books/. In addition to books promoting "Critical Race Theory" or books deemed "Anti-Police," No Left Turn in Education recommends banning queer coming-of-age texts, sex education books, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and a number of stories that explore nonbinary or transgender identities.

what it feels like to see herself and her community represented in art—have become reified as cultural objects outside of her control:

> I had forgotten to account for the observer effect! ***You can't pin things down without changing them, somehow.*** Good lord. How many young women have told me these were the first lesbians they ever met? That my cartoon characters were—oh, I can hardly say the words—choke—role models![31]

The moment I suggest that a character or a plot is not doing enough to nullify or at least unsettle compulsory sexuality, I set the trap of expecting my fiction to do all the work for me.

Megan Milks warns against expecting so much from asexuality that we frame it as an as-yet underdeveloped, insufficiently political category. In their analysis, contemporary queer and feminist politics holds that "only when the asexual community absorbs a properly resistant political praxis will asexuality be rescued from its repressive status to begin the process of growing up and getting liberated."[32] Milks writes in response both to sex-positive activists who dismiss asexuality as repressive and to sex-negative or radical feminist writers like Breanne Fahs who suggest asexuality needs to mobilize more to rise to a sufficiently oppositional politics. Somewhere in between these two extremes, Milks positions asexuality on its own terms closer to a Bartlebyan preferring not to, noting that "asexual disinclination, like Bartleby's simultaneously polemical and passive gesture, may be so ambivalent as to be

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[31] Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, New York: Mariner Books, 2008, xxi.
[32] "Stunted Growth" 101.

ultimately indecipherable."[33] Although my own understanding of asexuality in this project has trended more sex-negative than sex-neutral (if only to counter the brute force of compulsory sexuality), like Milks I am interested in the way that "we…learn more…from Bartleby's employer than from Bartleby himself."[34] With the possible exception of the Fucking Machine, the figures I have traced here are less interesting for their active resistance than for the destabilizing effect their neutrality has on the world around them.

In the end, when I'm feeling overwhelmed by the state of the real world, I like to turn again to Ursula Le Guin's reminder that "science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive."[35] That glimmers of asexual possibility exist in fiction—that asexuality is at least more visible if not necessarily central or the loudest voice in the room—surely in this there is hope. I wonder—is it "political" for a figure who bears the brunt of the world's expectations to wish the world would bend for once to accommodate her? In an asexual utopia it is not incumbent on asexuals to change but rather for the rest of the world to start paying attention, to start creating more space.

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[33] Ibid 105.
[34] Ibid.
[35] xii

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Biography

Maggie McDowell is receiving her PhD in English from Duke University in 2022, where she completed her MA in English in 2019. She also holds a BA in the Program of Liberal Studies from the University of Notre Dame (2016). She is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society. During her graduate work, she has taught classes in American Film and Literature and Women's Studies at Duke and at Durham Technical Community College. Currently, she works as an Academic Guide to a residential community on Duke's campus.

When Maggie isn't tracking down errant footnotes, she's enjoying the North Carolina sunshine with her two cats, an embarrassment of fruit-flavored seltzers, and the latest blockbuster YA novel the Internet has recommended. She looks forward to revising Chapter 3 of this dissertation for publication in the forthcoming ten-year anniversary edition of *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*.