

# UC Riverside

## UCR Honors Capstones 2023-2024

### Title

A SOCIAL CONVERSATION ON ASEXUALITY: QUEER SPACES AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06s859f1>

### Author

Gray, Michelle E

### Publication Date

2024-07-24

A SOCIAL CONVERSATION ON ASEXUALITY: QUEER SPACES AND MEDIA  
REPRESENTATION

By

Michelle Elizabeth Gray

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 9, 2024

University Honors  
University of California Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Alicia Arrizón  
Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair  
University Honors

## ABSTRACT

Asexuality is a sexual orientation in which someone may experience little, situational, or no sexual attraction. From its complicated existence in queer spaces to its complete invisibility in society and media representation, why does it continue to lack an understanding even as queer topics continue to enter the mainstream conversation? How is this orientation, seemingly straightforward, shrouded in confusion, mystification, and false stereotypes? As an asexual and aromantic woman, I believe that the cultural obsession with glamorizing sex and romance and portraying it as essential to a fulfilling life plays a part in confusing the general public on how one could live without the desire to participate fully or at all with these cultural norms and expectations. To better represent these points and how they affect the lives of asexual people of varying intersecting identities, I intend to use an ethnographic approach in this study to better understand these shared experiences and the diversity of the asexual subjectivity. My research engages with an individual method, including descriptive survey, interview, interaction, and observation, especially participant observation. My aim in this research is to establish a dialogue on asexuality for a better understanding of an orientation underdeveloped in theory. I identify this as an opportunity to examine and better understand the spectrum of sexuality. In general, I intend to interrogate the ways the mainstream norm of sexuality itself still seeps into media and queer spaces and how to further encourage new forms of asexual inclusivity and acceptance in various areas of society.

*Keywords:* Asexuality, queer spaces, media representation, compulsory sexuality, ace spectrum, ace community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any project, I could not have accomplished it all on my own. First and foremost, I must thank my faculty mentor, Dr. Alicia Arrizón for her unwavering support, encouragement, and guidance since I first introduced the idea of this project. Without her support, I would have never been able to do this project in the first place. Her mentorship has been an invaluable part of my academic career, and one I am immensely grateful for. As they are the heart of this project, I also must sincerely thank the research participants, who so graciously shared their thoughts, stories, and time as a means of connection and understanding of one another's experiences. Getting to know them and being able to hear their stories has been one of the greatest privileges of my academic career and personally as a fellow asexual person. Their efforts and contributions are the reason this work is able to be what it is. I also would like to thank Dr. Cardullo and UCR Honors for initiating my journey into research, as well as being a constant support for my project. Without UCR honors, I would have never thought of myself as capable of doing a research project of this degree as an undergraduate student. Additionally, I owe a great thanks to the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies, who has generously funded this project. I also owe this thanks to the Department of Undergraduate Research for funding this project as well. I am incredibly grateful for their belief in my project, and acknowledgement of my goals to contribute to the field of asexuality studies. Importantly, I most definitely could never have gotten to the place I am without my parents and dog, Bonnie, who have seen me through the best and worst of times. Their love, encouragement, and acceptance are the most valuable support I will ever know.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><u>UNDERSTANDING ASEXUALITY .....</u></b>	<b><u>5</u></b>
<b><u>CRITICAL TERMS .....</u></b>	<b><u>6</u></b>
<b><u>METHODS .....</u></b>	<b><u>9</u></b>
<b><u>SELF-REFLEXIVITY, COMING OUT, AND RESEARCHER VULNERABILITIES .....</u></b>	<b><u>13</u></b>
<b><u>MEDIA REPRESENTATION .....</u></b>	<b><u>25</u></b>
<b><u>QUEERING ASEXUALITY .....</u></b>	<b><u>42</u></b>
<b><u>CONCLUSION .....</u></b>	<b><u>49</u></b>
<b><u>NOTES .....</u></b>	<b><u>52</u></b>
<b><u>REFERENCES .....</u></b>	<b><u>53</u></b>

## Understanding Asexuality

“You are not oppressed for not wanting to participate in sexual activity. You just don’t do it”. These are very common phrases told to ace-spec people. If it was just this simple, or if it was just that normalized- unbothered by a society where sex is so ingrained and glamorized, reinforced and amplified by racism, sexism, and histories of colonialism, there would be no invisible guilt or shame experienced by asexual people. There would be no need to explain, to hide, or to internalize it negatively. There would be no reason to argue for basic legal protections against discrimination of sexual orientation, protection from medicalization and conversion therapy, or simply fight against ostracization and for normalization. People would grow up knowing it’s okay- that asexual people are just as normal as any other person. Yet, common thought and media has led us in another direction.

As many asexual people would tell you, living with an asexual identity means navigating a society so ingrained in sex and romance, even putting words to how you feel can at first feel daunting, attention-grabbing, and vulnerable- until that is, one sees an example of themselves thought of as normal and fully and completely acceptable- not as something other, deficient, or strange. Throughout this paper, I will be speaking about asexuality in terms of social understanding and internal views of people across the asexual spectrum. Through interviews, conversations, and participant observation, I utilized a feminist ethnographic methodology to better understand the diverse experiences of asexual participants, how their experiences differ based on other identities, and their thoughts on asexual representation in media, mainstream society, and queer spaces. For this purpose, I want to clarify important vocabulary to be used extensively.

## CRITICAL TERMS

When using the term *asexual*, it usually means someone who does not experience sexual attraction towards anyone regardless of gender. Frequently, I may also refer to asexuals as their shortened term, “*ace*”. *Allosexual*, or the opposite of asexual, means someone who *does* experience sexual attraction (Decker 88). An allosexual person can be straight, gay/lesbian, pansexual, bisexual, or any other sexual orientation *not* under the asexual umbrella. *Asexual umbrella*, alternatively, can be used simultaneously with “*acespec*”, or on the *asexual spectrum* (Kennon 1). By saying asexual umbrella, one acknowledges the diversity of asexuality, which can consist of asexuals of varying romantic orientations, sexual attitudes (different to attraction), as well as those who are *grey sexual* and *demisexual* (Carrigan, *Difference and Commonality* 470; Przybylo 6; Villarreal). “*Acespec*”, or asexual spectrum, acknowledges that asexuality can also exist on a spectrum from complete asexuality, no sexual attraction- to allosexuality, sexual attraction, with many areas of “grey” in-between. *Grey-asexuality* can affirm those who rarely to sometimes feel sexual attraction or feel as though they exist somewhere between asexuality and allosexuality (AVEN, *Gray Area*; Carrigan, *Difference and Commonality* 470; Przybylo, 6). *Demisexual*, on the other hand, can be a term used for someone who only feels sexual attraction after forming an emotional or romantic connection; contrasting with an allosexual person that can usually begin experiencing sexual attraction at any point (AVEN, *Gray Area*; Carrigan, *Difference and Commonality* 470; Przybylo 6). Demisexuals, like greysexuals, rarely experience sexual attraction, only experiencing it under specific conditions.

Separate to sexuality, the *romantic spectrum* accompanies the asexuality spectrum. One may be on the ace-spectrum, and also have romantic attraction or no romantic attraction to others. Someone who does not experience romantic attraction to anyone, regardless of gender,

may be referred to as *aromantic*, sometimes shortened to “aro” (AVEN, *Romantic Orientations*, Przybylo 3). Oppositely, *alloromantic* can serve as a term to describe someone who does experience romantic attraction (Tessler 3). They can be *heteroromantic* (experiencing romantic attraction towards individuals of the “*opposite*”<sup>1</sup> gender identity, typically man/woman), *homoromantic*, (experiencing romantic attraction toward the same gender identity, typically, but not limited to, man/man, woman/woman), *biromantic*, (ability of experiencing romantic attraction toward anyone within two genders, typically, but not limited to, men and women), *panromantic* (ability of experiencing romantic attraction toward anyone of any gender identity), or any other romantic orientation (these are simply the most prominent) (AVEN, *Romantic Orientations*, Przybylo 3).

Like grey-sexuality, one can identify as *greyromantic*, acknowledging the spectrum of romantic attraction. Between aromantic and alloromantic, there is also a grey area where some may sometimes, though not often, feel romantic attraction. *Demiromantic* also acknowledges the ability to feel romantic attraction once an emotional connection is established. All of these descriptors can be used to fully acknowledge the nuances of sexual and romantic attraction. For instance, one can be demi-pan-romantic asexual; meaning they can potentially experience romantic attraction with someone, regardless of gender, once an emotional connection is formed, though, they never experience sexual attraction. In another instance, one can be a grey-heteroromantic, grey-asexual. This means they sometimes, though very rarely, experience sexual attraction, and only establish romantic attraction (towards the “opposite” gender identity) rarely. Note that romantic and sexual attractions are exclusive and different, meaning one can have one romantic orientation that differs from sexual orientation) (Diamond 173). One can also be



completely aromantic and asexual, who does not experience romantic or sexual attraction towards anyone.

While one may choose to use these labels or not use them, it does not mean one doesn't experience sexuality within their own terms. These labels can be used to understand the complexity of asexuality and empower and affirm asexuals, however, should not be used to police sexuality to fit within these rigid and created categorizations of labeled orientation. For some, these labels are empowering, affirmative, and essential to their personal identity, meaning they may use them extensively. For others, these labels can be imperfect, limiting, or meaningless when describing their experiences or expressions of sexuality. It is important to acknowledge these nuances and use them only to describe a person at their own discretion and will.

Additionally, it is important to note the varying ranges of sexual attitudes experienced by asexuals. (These are not labels or categorizations, but simply further emphasize the complexity and nuance within the asexual identity). Just like any straight, gay/lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual (etc.) person has their own varying attitudes about sexuality, so do acespec people. Commonly, a stereotype exists that asexuals can *only* be sex repulsed or averse. While some are, and are completely valid, there are also those indifferent to sex, meaning they are comfortable with other's sexual expressions but don't feel strongly about it either way, and those who are sex positive (AVEN, *Attitudes Toward Sex*). These individuals are generally very comfortable and even positive while discussing and listening to topics regarding sex. These asexuals may also be more open to experiencing sex or compromising with allosexual partners even though they are not necessarily attracted in that way (AVEN, *Attitudes Toward Sex*). Of course, these are broad understandings, and in no way describing every asexual person who may approach each situation

differently. Alternatively, every acespec person can also have different attitudes around sexuality when it doesn't involve them or involve them with other people. For instance, some asexuals can be interested in sexual activity that only consists of themselves, or interested in media that portrays sexuality or romance. Some asexuals are completely averse, or indifferent to this as well. All are valid and in no way exclude someone from being asexual or acespec. The point is, just because someone is asexual, does not mean they exist within a box- and they should not be treated as if they do. Asexual or acespec, just means they very rarely or never experience sexual *attraction*- or the desire to be sexually intimate with another person; and just like anyone of any sexual orientation, there are vastly different experiences, feelings, and attitudes one can have around sexuality, romance, and relationships.

## METHODS

To perform this research, I utilized various methods including group interviews, individual interviews, group conversations, participant observation and interaction, surveys, media analysis, literature review, autoethnography and self-reflexivity. All of these methods worked within my intended methodology of feminist and queer ethnography. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted around campus informing them of the research and that asexuality was the topic being researched. To participate, one had to identify as asexual or *acespec* (under the asexual umbrella) and confirm this in an entrance survey. During this survey, each participant shared information on demographics as well as what they expected and hoped to see addressed in the research. While research topics were already planned, I still wanted to see if it was properly aligned with the specific concerns asexual people have.

Based on the participant's varying schedules, I allowed everyone participating to choose a time for group conversations and interviews to occur. Based on varying schedules, Zoom was

chosen as the platform to best accommodate everyone, ensure privacy if a participant did not want to out themselves to the group by disclosing their image, and also removed the factor of transportation, which may be costly or too time consuming for participants to participate. On the initial forms for informed consent, I also allowed participants to decide how they would like to be referred to during interviews and in the final work produced. I allowed it to be different, just asking that they entered the Zoom room with the name they wanted to be referred to during the group interviews, whether it was their first name, full name, or a pseudonym. During this paper, I will be referring to some participants by their first names or a pseudonym, based on their expressed preferences on the consent form.

Before interviews began, three icebreaker interviews took place on Zoom. The purpose of icebreakers was for participants and the researcher to gain more comfortability within the space. During these meetings, the group participated in games like Kahoot, Pictionary, and interactive activities such as an ace icon spotlight, where participants shared some information about an asexual public figure or character who has contributed, either positively or negatively to asexual understanding. These meetings were not used to collect information from participants, but more so to allow the group and researcher to get to know one another and try to produce an academic-club-like atmosphere. This was also used to establish participant observation, a key method of the study. Following these three initial meetings, four group interviews occurred in which audio recordings were taken of participants' conversations. These meetings consisted of two media review group conversations, a conversation on experiences in queer spaces, and a group meeting on specific experiences, such as coming out to family, friends, and medical professionals, which sometimes prove challenging for asexual people. Following these meetings, participants signed up for individual meetings. These meetings also occurred on Zoom for flexibility. Afterwards,

participants received a link to complete a final survey, in which they remained anonymous, (even from the researcher) reviewing the research process, their thoughts on what was covered, quality of the interviews, and performance of the researcher. These interviews allowed the methodology to come full circle, as the researcher was also made accountable to participants, in an attempt to lessen the power imbalance between researcher and participants.

Throughout every interview, participants were allowed much control over the direction of the conversation and time allotted to each topic. While I provided guiding questions, participants were allowed to begin and end conversations as they pleased, based on how much concern and/or interest was held over the topic. Just because I, as the researcher, have experienced certain issues or found varying issues persistent during literature review, the same issues may not have been relevant or of concern to participants. This was taken into account and the reason why participants were allowed so much control over conversations. Additionally, I the researcher also shared my own thoughts and experiences. Even when I felt uncomfortable sharing personal aspects of my life in relation to the topics, I made it a point to try and do so in order to hold myself to the same expectation of participants and make myself equally involved in the study as an asexual person. I also did this to decrease power imbalances between myself and the participants, demonstrating that since they are sharing such personal thoughts and experiences, they deserve to know about mine as well. I also hoped that by sharing my experiences in relation to asexuality, it would make participants feel more comfortable sharing their own, as there were some similar experiences we could relate on. I also used this to demonstrate that it was a safe space in which no one would be judged, but alternatively, very much supported and advocated for. From the very first recruitment materials, such as the advertisement and information page, I disclosed to participants I am both aromantic and asexual. Additionally, nothing in this study was

hidden from participant's knowledge or deceptive ahead of consenting to participate. I also made it a point to continuously ask them at the end of meetings and on group announcements if they had any questions or concerns, in which I would be completely transparent about everything, down to the very methodology of the research and why I chose it. In the very first icebreaker meeting, I reviewed everything to be discussed and revisited this during each meeting, reminding participants what we would talk about that day. They were not required to answer anything they were not comfortable answering, reminded of this, and all participation was completely voluntary.

During the process of literature review, I analyzed various papers previously published on asexuality. These were used to define terminology, better understand common issues experienced by diverse asexuals similar and different to myself, and persistent misunderstandings and gaps in previous research.

In regard to self-ethnography and self-reflexivity, a section of this paper is dedicated to my connection to asexuality. As previously mentioned, I am both aromantic and asexual, meaning I experience no romantic or sexual attraction towards anyone, regardless of gender. Because this topic affects my life, or interests me in any way, there is an inherent bias I believe it is important for me to disclose. Like all research, the very fact that I have chosen to research it shows I personally give it importance, or, in my perspective, find it important in regard to better societal understanding, as well as in the field of gender and sexuality studies. From just having interest in this topic to the way I recruited participants, to the topics, method, and methodology I chose, all arise from my specific perception of asexuality, personal experiences, and my particular academic experiences being educated in gender and sexuality studies. All have combined to make me choose these methods and methodologies of research, while another

researcher may have approached the same topic entirely differently. I also discuss my self-reflexivity to disclose the many aspects of my identity and how they have formed my specific perception of the world and understanding of asexuality. Because of societal structuring, there are various aspects of my identity that render me more privileged in some areas and less privileged in others. All of them, along with experiences, have further shaped my perception of the world and what I deem important. I don't share these aspects to take away emphasis from participants, but allow my positionality to be seen, disclosed, and interpreted by readers.

### SELF-REFLEXIVITY, COMING OUT, AND RESEARCHER VULNERABILITIES

As with many researchers of many different fields and disciplines, my interest in what I research comes with a backstory, and particularly, like many in gender and sexuality studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, disability studies, class studies, and religious studies fields, to name a few, come from a deeply personal place. In my perspective, that is what I love about interdisciplinary studies. It recognizes the personal and how personal experiences are mapped out in a complex world. It teaches us about one another, without simplifying our complexities to fit them in a box- but embracing them in understanding why our world creates privileges for some and complicated oppressions for many- on also, deeply complex, relative scales. While I appreciate interdisciplinary studies for helping address the gaps in which much traditional research misses, I also refuse to romanticize why it has come to be so critical in the first place. These fields exist to identify and highlight inequality, injustice, and oppression of people of color, Black, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and several more ethnic minorities in the West, queer people, women, non-binary folks, people with disabilities, those of minority religious identities, those oppressed or impoverished socioeconomically, and several more identities, and particularly, ones that overlap and enmesh experiences of multiple identities.

Even in talking about my experience with asexuality, I could not begin to discuss it without acknowledging the concept of intersectionality<sup>2</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that I do not intend to speak for all asexuals, and could never, because I only arrive with my own experiences and biases, even as much as I try to minimize them in highlighting the experiences of others. This is especially critical when acknowledging the racism within asexual communities, as ace people of color typically experience oppression based on their intersectional identities that often connect to being labeled as the “sexualized others” (Pryzybylo 10). Sherronda J. Brown, author of “Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on our Sex-Obsessed Culture” describes how:

Acephobic violence is often entangled with other forms of bigotry, especially misogyny and racism—like the misogynistic idea that women owe men sex for being “nice guys” or the racist myth that Black people are inherently hypersexual. In this way, misogyny and racism, together with compulsory sexuality<sup>3</sup> and rape culture, help to fuel acephobia (Brown 17).

Because of this, I will be considering how my whiteness renders me more privileged as an asexual person, and why this dynamic within the asexual community must be dismantled. I do wish to share how my interest in forming asexuality formed- not for the purpose of putting attention on myself, but to disclose how I am affected by this subject, and how by just having an interest in it and choosing to research it and seeing it as important enough to dedicate my Honors capstone to, it is already establishing bias. Through this I argue, everything is inherently bias. But in admitting and disclosing the ways we are, we can better understand one another and

where we come from, being a part of the whole of problem solving rather than disconnected.

With this, I will discuss my own self-reflexivity, insight into my connection to asexuality, and in turn, experiences that have sparked my interest in its research.

As I mentioned in the previous section, I cannot possibly speak for all asexual people- simply based on the extensive diversity and intersectionality of such a group. I can only tell my own story, expressing my own positionality, and provide a platform for others to share stories that apply to themselves- so that the wider public may get a better understanding, though not full, understanding of asexual people's experiences. I am a twenty-two year old aromantic/asexual and cisgender woman, and am a descendant of working class Mexican and Irish parents. I am also a student double majoring in Political Science and Gender and Sexuality Studies at UC Riverside, and am part of UCR Honors. In terms of cultural context, I am the daughter of a Mexican immigrant mother and white American citizen father. I experience my own mental health issues, financial issues, and have been through other hardships I will not be discussing here. Because of Mexican cultural influences, family microculture, and need for spiritual strength, especially in times of hardship, my Catholic faith has strengthened in the past four years. And yes- my own aromanticism and asexuality and support of other queer peoples are not isolated from my faith- but in my own heart, completely supported and loved by an all-loving God. And I find it in my heart to make peace between the two, because it is the only way for positive change.

All of these identities heavily affect my positionality, however, and it's something I know I must specify. As the daughter of an immigrant woman of color, I am highly critical of injustices against immigrants of color. As someone with an American citizenship and light skin though, I fully realize how I am privileged within a culture that (very wrongfully, but nevertheless) treats



whiteness as superior and that is heavily based on racism, colorism, and xenophobia. As I have indicated in an earlier study<sup>4</sup>, my intersectional identity renders me incapable of fully understanding the gravity of discrimination experienced by immigrants, especially when combined with racism, even if it is something my own mother has experienced. I carry some personal influence and allyship, but am ultimately indirectly effected.

Clearly, I also do not face the same discriminations experienced by queer people of color, when coming out or even simply existing in society. As an aromantic asexual person, I realize that I have the privilege of becoming invisible in a heterosexist society, where both queer people in non-heterosexual relationships and trans people experience discrimination against their existence *and* visibility. I don't have to worry about being targeted walking down the street with a same-sex partner, because I do not want any partner, and do not have to worry about being targeted because of my race or cis-ness, because I appear fully white and generally adhere to society's ideals of femininity (even though I do experience extreme anxiety outside for my safety as a woman and ultimately hold all responsibility on myself to keep myself safe- even if the danger is not my fault or doing- a sad result of a patriarchal society). Even in terms of asexuality, asexuals of color (especially women) are often far more sexualized in society and the media, creating further stereotypes that make it harder for them to come out and experience acceptance. While not experiencing this degree of sexualization and intersected discrimination puts me in a privileged position, I fully realize that the very existence of such injustice is wrong. On the other hand, though, because I am not a heterosexual person, I do relate to some frustrations queer people have pertaining to the dominance of heteronormativity<sup>5</sup> and heterosexism. This is why as I approach this project, I note that my personal frustrations around how asexual people are misunderstood and misrepresented by society is what first drew me in to these topics. Though I

am fully aware of and plan to approach issues with an intersectional awareness, my personal experiences are ultimately what drove me to the issues in the first place; the very first impressions still holding some weight in how I consider them. Even though we approach research to learn and make it about far more than ourselves, research always begins with something personal, brought upon by our own worldview, experiences, and intersectional identities, removing its objectivity from its very first instance.

My introduction and interest in the interdisciplinary field of gender and sexuality studies began far before I even applied to college- and before I even entered high school. Around 2014-2016, I was first introduced to concepts such as intersectional feminism and expansive queer identities (beyond gay, lesbian, and bisexual) by a then good friend who is nonbinary and pansexual, and another long-time friend who is a gay man. Though we were the same age, they were very aware in many ways and helped me realize aspects of myself through sharing their knowledge. I was raised and still am Catholic in a half-Mexican family, so I was mostly shielded from many subtleties of queerness in society. I was not told queerness was a bad or sinful thing, but I was told that it was a subject only for adults to discuss. As a first grader, I simply remember copying other girls when saying they had a crush on boys. I didn't have the capacity to understand the difference between a good friendship and a crush- because I hadn't realized yet that just wasn't something I experience. For many years, I just lived under the cover of heteroromanticism and said I had a crush on boys who I would later, after much self-reflection, realize were just feelings of good friendship. I would feel the exact same for boy and girl friends, but society sent me messages that the friendship feelings for boys were prioritized and something else entirely, even though I had relatively the same amount of boy and girl friends for the

duration of my childhood. I wouldn't fully come to terms with this until I was a young teenager and friends moved from heteroromanticism to heterosexuality.

What confused me about myself all my life is that I've always loved media with some kind of romantic influence. My favorite show growing up was the *Golden Girls*, and in the last few years I've gotten really into shows like *Schitt's Creek* and *The West Wing*. My favorite films to this day are *Grease*, *Mamma Mia*, and all the *Star Wars* films, being that I am also a Reylo (part of the fan community that ships the characters Rey and Kylo Ren). Heck, some of my favorite music includes pop-rock love ballads from the 1980s and Doo-wop from the 1940s and 1950s. My favorite band of all time is ABBA- a band formerly made up of two heterosexual couples turned friends and known for love and breakup songs. Unfortunately, I have had people who get to know me question my sexuality over the type of media I enjoy. However, part of the ace experience, and to a large extent, the queer experience in general, is being surrounded in a world built by and for heterosexual people- with our experiences seldom being represented. I find that oftentimes, myself, but also queer people in general, take the media that is available to us and make it our own, or just fall into enjoying things for other reasons. I love hearing other people's feelings, regardless of how different they are to mine, especially when they can make it sound or seem poetic and beautifully representative of their thoughts and emotions. As an aromantic and asexual person, there are other feelings to relate to, such as belonging or being loved and cared for by others in ways not romantic or sexual. There is also the factor of appreciating something from afar while being completely detached and uninvolved, such as when watching a movie or listening to music. Sometimes stereotypical interests line up with sexual orientation, and that is perfectly fine. For many, however, they don't align. Both are completely valid and neither one's status affects or invalidates the other. Of course, though, such

as in my case, it complicates the journey of understanding toward self-acceptance and self-actualization.

Before thirteen, I was well used to the idea- subconsciously of course, without the ability to describe it, that having crushes on boys and demonstrating you had what it took to get a boyfriend was the epitome of girlhood- exaggerated by not just peers but media and the culture at large. It was not only essential for fitting in, but felt compulsory for one to prove femininity and maturity. Now I see, though, that it also implies you need to be romantically connected- specifically to a man, or then, boy, to be whole or be taken seriously. Unfortunately, this type of pressure is negative for everyone- regardless of gender and sexuality, as it promotes superficiality, but especially difficult for queer individuals and in my case, an aromantic and asexual girl who was heavily fighting what felt natural to me in order to prove my gender expression and normalcy. Living in this culture, you create a mask of an unreal identity to not only prove what you want people to know or think, but exaggerate specific areas out of self-consciousness. For me, this resulted in pretending to be straight, and dressing in extremely stereotypically feminine ways that did not always serve my comfort to exaggerate something I was unsure about and definitely didn't really feel. The first time I really battled myself over this was at the end of our seventh-grade course on sex education, when I first truly understood what sex was. For months after that, I remember being absolutely horrified that would be something people wanted to do. For a while I thought something was seriously wrong.

Sometime after that class, however, I confided in my friend who is gay. I can't remember all the conversations, but I know he acknowledged I might have been a late-bloomer, which would be completely valid if it had been true, but also suggested that I may be something other than straight. Though I considered his suggestion, I still wasn't sure for a long while. After that

summer, I returned to school in the fall for eighth grade, and during math class I befriended another person who was going through their own understanding of their identity, eventually coming out as nonbinary and pansexual. This friendship was especially important, because they were the first person who introduced me to the word asexual.

At first, I identified as heteroromatic asexual just to bridge the gap in my understanding of myself. At this time, my friends knew, but I couldn't talk to family about it because the distinction would be too taboo. After more time and thinking, I then moved to demi-pan-romantic asexual, meaning I thought I could be romantically attracted to either boys or girls or any gender after establishing an emotional connection. I thought this could have been a correct label because I found no specific difference in genders and attraction. I also was very confused by what romantic attraction meant and was supposed to feel like, which is why I included demi.

Throughout this time, I was adamantly pushing away the aromantic label because I was honestly afraid for what that would mean in terms of social acceptance and my future. People would think I just settled on it because I had never in my entire life been romantically propositioned, or crushed on, even in a juvenile way, or just playing in Kindergarten, which was true. People would think I just accepted the idea that I wasn't attractive or didn't have what it took to be in a romantic relationship. (Which was and is not true). I was also afraid that I would end up alone in life, something I've always had deep trauma about since childhood. It honestly took time to reflect on these issues, and understand that pretending to have a different sexuality was not worth it even if it alleviated my fears about being alone. Being aromantic and asexual means your life may look different from what is typical, but it in no way means you will end up alone. Romantic relationships are not the only ones to exist. I deeply treasure my family, friends, my dog, and hope to be a mother someday; and no, becoming a parent is not something you have

to be with any person in any way or be in a relationship to accomplish, thanks to science but also the option to adopt as well. My life will still be full of people and full of love. While I know this, I still struggle with the fear of loneliness, something not uncommon for some asexual people simply based on the cultural emphasis on romantic relationships as the epitome of all relationships. Anything other is truly deemed less important, though importance is really all subjective.

“I’m questioning *your* sexuality”, “we’re going to record you saying this and show you this again as an adult”, “oh, I understand how you feel, I didn’t start dating until I was thirty, because there were many things I wanted to do first”, “you might change”, “so you don’t want kids?”<sup>6</sup> All quotes from people in my life, who I will not name here, in reaction to my coming out. In all honesty, I wish I did not come out to my parents when I did. I don’t think it was the time for that conversation, because they just didn’t understand. Not that they were specifically negative, but nothing was expressly positive. I remember when trying to explain it to my mother, saying I wasn’t really interested in boys or girls. She just said “what?!” with such a tone I was scared of getting in trouble. At that point I tried my best to deter the conversation and ease her anxiety that maybe I just wasn’t “normal”. When I told my dad, it was more neutral but negative in the way that I was told I could still change. From the time I was fourteen to twenty I felt like I had to keep coming out over and over because I just wasn’t believed. I was even nervous to ever talk about it because I would get neutrality or a negative feeling even without words. Right after I came out at fourteen, as both aromantic and asexual, my psychologist tried to help me explain it to my parents. Unfortunately, they said how much they accepted me however I was to the psychologist, but it took years before they stopped saying I had feelings for certain boys just because we were friends or because I had a male favorite character. It was so uncomfortable and

anxiety-inducing, to the point where I still try not to have or at least talk about male favorite characters or friends. I am still subconsciously so careful about how I talk about men, purely as a reactionary form of shame rather than any feelings. In many ways, I always had to perform a certain way to prove my asexuality- and it's exhausting. While I critique the way they reacted to my coming out, they have done much better in the last two years or so. I understand where they were coming from, even, and blame the culture rather than them. I also love them very much, and we are actually extremely close. However, other family members left far more negative marks- mostly uncles, that are/were just married to my actual blood-aunts of course.

When I came out to one aunt and uncle at fifteen in reaction to the boyfriend interrogation and pressure, stating I just wasn't interested in anyone of any gender, including boys, my aunt simply asked if I was sure I never had feelings for girls, which was a reasonable question. Her then-husband on the other hand though, laughed at me and suggested I be recorded and shown a video of me saying such silliness once I grew up. Along with other jokes I can't even completely remember, that memory still stays with me. I felt so humiliated and shamed, being that someone I respected and trusted with something important to me would take something so serious as a complete joke and humiliate me for it. To top it off, I got told by my parents to stop talking about it and got in trouble for it once they left, because "that's the way he is". What about the way I am?

Anxiety to come out didn't just stop with family however, but has followed me into doing this very research. Specifically, posting fliers that included my name and sexual orientation was a daunting experience. I didn't realize how vulnerable it would be to out myself with every flier, every paper written for my honors research course, speeches made for honors and the Undergraduate Research Symposium, and the very posting of this paper to the UCR Honors

website. While I have willingly consented to all of this, it is not without immense anxiety or fear- but the reason to do so is much bigger than myself- but for my community, and to show other asexual people considering participating that they would be fully accepted and understood by a researcher with the same sexual orientation being researched- that it would be a researcher part of the community with the similar stakes by sharing who they are, not someone researching them out of curiosity or voyeurism. I also worried about how others would view me- who knew my name. Would they be disgusted, or would they see the importance? What would my family think when they eventually knew about my project and read this? Unfortunately, these fears remain throughout the whole research process, born of personal insecurities about my sexual orientation, fears around opening up, major depressive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder.

Being someone with generalized anxiety disorder, anxiety is something that makes various social actions very difficult for me, especially as I have gotten older, more self-aware, and more self-conscious. Presenting, speaking one-on-one to strangers, speaking to an audience, and leading a conversation are situations I have always been terrified of. When I began planning my ethnographic research, I overlooked the fact that these skills were not just something I had to gain to do this, but skills I would have to execute well for the interviews to be effective. To make participants feel welcome and engaged, I would have to act calmly, smile, and have a warm demeanor. All of these are extremely challenging to a person with social anxiety. It is a balance between acting and creating a façade, while simultaneously trying to self-soothe, remain calm, and not allow your anxiety to distract you completely from the objectives and speaking points. Many with severe anxiety will know that socializing makes you aware of every single thing, but only able to focus and address one aspect at a time without allowing your nerves to show. This can include letting others hear your voice crack from nervousness, emotion, hearing you stutter



over words, notice you are having trouble paraphrasing, using “um”, “yeah” or “like” too often, overusing your hands, or having lapses in memory due to being consumed with anxiety and worrying about how you are being perceived. Sometimes, the best goal is just to get through talking and try to be perceived as semi-normal. At the beginning of my meeting, as part of the self-reflexive process, I let the group know that this was the first time I had ever done research like this or held a group meeting in this matter. I let them know I was nervous but did not go into details about disability for my own comfortability in the first group session. Throughout the first group meeting, I was constantly looking at participants’ faces in the Zoom windows, looking at their expressions and wondering what they were thinking- and if they could possibly be judging my awkwardness. But then I reminded myself that my performance is not and should not be based on how well I can hide a mental disorder. Yes, it poses a challenge to me, but doesn’t define all that I’m capable of when I work with it instead of against it. It emphasizes the importance of transparency, above all, and reminding myself that we are all learning and working through this together. I’m certain I’m not the only participant with disabilities and mental health issues that make it a challenge to interact in this space. By my example though, I realized I’m normalizing having inconvenient feelings of fear and anxiety. Just because you don’t acknowledge them or try to hide them, doesn’t mean they won’t exist. As the researcher, I want them to know I’m a student just like them. I’m figuring out leading a whole research group, but I invite them to help me figure that out as we learn from one another. Above all though, it emphasizes the importance of understanding, empathy, and support for one another. And in one hand, I’m grateful for those uncomfortable feelings, because they humbled me, made me sensitive to what they may be experiencing as well, and motivated me to create the safest

environment possible, so that I could at least, do my part in ensuring participants did not feel, or at least lost, the feeling of anxiety I did at those first few meetings.

At least for myself, as the researcher, the benefits of ethnography became very apparent to me by the fourth meeting or the first session of first interviews. I found myself speaking more confidently, introducing new topics or questions without losing focus, and began sharing more about myself with participants. I felt that after a few hours of talking, I already felt comfortable to open up about more personal subjects. I could only hope that they felt the same, as I usually shared my experiences as an asexual person as well to demonstrate vulnerability and use this as an invitation for them to share in a very safe space where they could only find support, and never judgment. This feeling of ease came from only three icebreaker meetings over Zoom. During these meetings we played Kahoot, played Pictionary, shared notable asexual people or characters with one another, which we lovingly called “Ace Icon Spotlight”, and shared how we were doing that week, what new show we were binging, and fun activities we did during winter break. Seeing each other’s faces also greatly enhanced our openness to one another. We could see one another respond to jokes in laughter, just as a pet took up the screen, begging to be introduced to the very delighted group. Being that this was over Zoom, after only about four total hours of interaction, I can’t imagine how this could have been if it were in person. I decided against this only to make the research as accessible to as many people as possible, but in this case, it does show significant promise in what virtual ethnographic research can do when the researcher and participants take great care in their interactions and vulnerability.

## MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Media, including film, television, books, and pop culture is not only the world’s most powerful source of entertainment, but arguably, it’s most powerful educational and influential

tool. It exposes information to extremely large audiences and draws in audiences from around the world. Knowing this, it would not be a stretch to understand the influence of representation of underrecognized minority groups. Representing them within a narrative that continually misunderstands and/or untruthfully exemplifies their existence is fundamentally harmful because it influences the mass' understanding of a group and replicates and reinforces stereotypes. This is also absolutely the case for queer people, and in the context of this paper, asexual people specifically.

During the interview process, the participants and I discussed representations of asexual people within the media. Being the first set of group interviews, I invited participants to watch various clips from different shows and a movie that explicitly portrayed asexuality. During this study, we watched clips from the TV show *House*, that featured an asexual couple, the Netflix series *BoJack Horseman*, that features asexual character Todd Chavez, Netflix series *Sex Education*, that features the asexual character O on season 4, and the movie *The Olivia Experiment*, that features Olivia, a character that is questioning her sexuality and is leaning towards an asexual identity. Throughout the interview and analysis, I asked participants to bring their own example in to compare and contrast with the ones shown. Importantly, I wanted to know what asexual people genuinely thought about these portrayals, and if they accurately and sensitively portrayed asexual people and asexuality.

*House*. Beginning with the most negatively perceived piece of media, *House*'s episode "Better Half" was everything asexual representation simply shouldn't be. From medicalization to social hostility, this show's thesis claims that asexuality is impossible; either resulting from an illness or lying. As Dr. House (portrayed by Hugh Laurie) states himself, anyone that says they don't want

sex are either “sick, dead, or lying” (“Better Half” 00:17:06-00:17:11). In the episode, a woman is seen in an appointment with her doctor, in which the doctor diagnosis her preliminarily with a bladder infection (“Better Half” 00:04:43-00:05:31). Just to rule out any other possibilities, the doctor tells her they will run some tests, including a pregnancy test. After the woman states she cannot be pregnant, the doctor responds respectfully, saying any contraceptive can fail (“Better Half” 00:04:43-00:05:31). After some further discussion, the woman explains that she and her husband do not have sex (a full proof contraceptive) because they are asexual (“Better Half” 00:04:43-00:05:31). Importantly, the woman states that asexuality is not a choice, or celibacy, but an orientation natural to asexual people (“Better Half” 00:04:43-00:05:31). Though the episode continued to falter in representation after this moment, participants did voice their appreciation of this moment of education being incorporated in the show. The fact that the doctor also seemed accepting of her asexuality and willing to do further research, also demonstrated he was caring enough of his patient to invest in researching asexuality, accepting it as truth and further understanding her, as pointed out by one participant, Alex (“Better Half” 00:07:38-00:08:33; interview 29 January 2024).

It is only after Dr. House himself enters the conversation that the representation of asexuality takes a very upsetting turn. During his conversation with Dr. Wilson, he asks if his patient is a “pool of algae” after learning she is asexual (“Better Half” 00:07:44-00:07:56). Played for laughs to a heterosexual audience, comparing asexuality to the reproductive method is sadly not an uncommon method of teasing experienced by asexuals, especially if they come out during their younger school years. Myself, who came out at 13 (around 2015), to a few people before it spread like wildfire, experienced this kind of teasing in biology class by peers. While it may seem funny coming from an adult man on a TV show, it is embarrassing in a room full of

eighth graders who think you are completely weird, and attention seeking and will take any reason to make a joke of others who are not like them.

Regardless, it was during the “pool of algae” conversation in which Dr. House makes a bet with Dr. Wilson, proclaiming he would find a medical reason for the woman’s asexuality (“Better Half” 00:07:38-00:08:33). Going against all kinds of doctor-patient confidentiality protocol, Dr. House analyzes the woman’s blood results with his team, in which they find no health issue that can explain her lack of sexual desire. Still determined to find a cause, Dr. House then tricks the woman’s husband into getting bloodwork done with the promise of a free flu shot (“Better Half” 00:23:50-00:25:11). In another definite violation of patients’ rights and informed consent, House discovers the husband had a brain tumor which decreased sex drive.

After informing his colleague, Dr. Wilson then informs the couple about the news. In this most disappointing conversation for asexual representation, the wife then admits she was lying about being asexual to be with him, and that if he started having sex drive, they would just figure it out. One participant, Alex, noted the fact that the woman could have still been asexual, just with a more sex-positive attitude in which she was open and willing to adapt to sex for someone she cared about (Interview 29 January 2024). This observation is important, because it addresses the diversity of sexual attitudes among asexual people. The show itself was so determined in debunking asexuality, that they accidentally may have featured a sex-positive asexual character, (that breaks conventional stereotypes) without even intending to, since she herself never explicitly says she has always experienced sexual attraction. All she says is “sex is pretty fun, from what I can remember” and “a girl has needs”, both reasonably existing within the complexity of sex-positive asexuality (“Better Half” 00:36:00-00:37:50). Just because she wasn’t sexually attracted doesn’t mean she could have at one point, been open to try it and enjoyed it

once it happened (note: no asexual has to try sex to know they are asexual) or does not mean she lacked libido; something asexuals can experience independently from attraction and can express in various ways with or without a partner.

Regardless though, I don't think we should give this show that much benefit of the doubt. As Alex describes, "the implication was that it was a mistake that the man was asexual", instead "relat[ing] [his asexuality] to a tumor in his brain" noting that it "did not sit right" with them (Interview, 29 January 2024). Creators of the show were seemingly intending to debunk asexuality, emphasizing their intentions were not good. The intention behind it is critical, because in presenting this hostile view of asexuality to a largely allosexual and heterosexual audience, it makes three claims: that asexuality is impossible; that asexuality is a joke; and that asexuality is a result of a medical issue. It replicates societal misunderstandings around asexuality and is harmful in the fact that this was, for many, the first time they learned about asexuality, appearing on a mainstream TV show in 2012. It demonstrated to the mainstream that people who weren't sexually attracted or typically sexually attracted were medically ill, lying, or delusional. It completely misses the reality of what asexual people go through daily to have their sexuality accepted as normal, let alone understood. It misrepresents the conversion therapy asexuals are still offered today within this country, using a hormone imbalance, that would typically have no other significant medical concerns (except for cosmetic, gender-adhering concerns) as a point of investigation and a brain tumor, a serious medical condition that reinforces all the incorrect and hostile prejudices against asexual people. It makes medicine look benevolent for trying to debunk and "cure" asexuality, as it crafts a fictional narrative to belittle and discredit all asexual people.

*BoJack Horseman*. In a completely refreshing take for many asexuals, Todd Chavez in *BoJack Horseman* may be the best (alloromantic) asexual representation we currently have in mainstream media. Though not without some flaws, Todd is a three-dimensional character, with likeable qualities, that educates on asexuality without making it his entire personality and without ever discrediting or questioning it. In fact, anytime he comes out, it is met with loving acceptance and encouragement from his friends and romantic interest (“Hooray! Todd Episode!” 00:23:01- 00:24:21; “That Went Well” 00:21:50-00:22:27). In season three episode twelve, “That Went Well”, he is speaking with Emily, a woman he is interested in romantically, who asks him why she feels as though he doesn’t like her but does like her (00:21:50-00:22:27). Importantly, though she is confused, she asks in a sensitive manner, and ensures him he is in a safe space if he wants to come out as something other than straight (“That Went Well” 00:21:50-00:22:27). Though Todd says he isn’t gay, he also explains he isn’t straight either- and follows up with the possibility that he may be “nothing” (“That Went Well” 00:21:50-00:22:27). Heartwarmingly, Emily responds with a loving, “that’s okay” (“That Went Well” 00:21:50-00:22:27). His friendship with Emily (an allosexual, heterosexual woman) and eventually Yolanda, another alloromantic asexual person, demonstrate key issues for asexuals who experience romantic attraction and desire romantic connections and relationships. During another episode entitled “The Lightbulb Scene” (season five episode one) Todd discusses the specific issues alloromantic asexuals experience when trying to date. Sometimes, alloromantic asexuals worry about relationships with allosexual people, worrying they may not be accepted when coming out, and risking relationships never starting or ending quickly. During the show, Todd begins dating a woman named Yolanda, who is also alloromantic and asexual. Importantly though, it discusses how just because two people have compatible sexual and romantic orientations, it does not mean

they are compatible in an actual relationship. Unfortunately, this is a common misconception that has long stereotyped queer people and also puts pressure on alloromantic asexual people who are interested in dating. While Todd and Yolanda are good friends, they simply don't have romantic compatibility. Because of this, Todd comes up with the idea of creating a dating app for asexuals interested in dating; so that aces are able to interact with others who also don't hold the expectation of sex (like allosexuals) and also don't have to compromise on dating possibly the only other alloromantic asexual they might know ("The Lightbulb Scene" 00:10:20-00:11:23).

During our media analysis, one participant, Ryan, noted the very realistic scenario portrayed by Todd and how it was an important representation of something alloromantic asexuals really face. Ryan described that he can't use any dating apps for this fact alone (Interview, 29 January 2024). Another participant, Bailey, also noted the positive conversation Todd addresses in regard to asexuality, as his positionality as an alloromantic, presumably heteroromantic asexual demonstrates "not all asexuals are the same" and "not all asexuals are aromantic" since they are mistakenly "often paired together even though not everyone is both" (Interview, 29 January 2024).

As for Todd's character analysis, participants seemed the most enthusiastic about his portrayal. He isn't an asexual stereotype of a cold, cunning, human-hating tyrant or genius- or some combination of those traits. In many cases, he evades almost all asexual stereotypes. He is notable for his warmth, caring about others and even going out of his way to help his friends in any way he can. Even in his episode where he comes out as ace to his friend, BoJack, and is planning on going to an ace meet-up, he almost runs late since he spends the entire episode running around town trying to solve problems for other characters ("Hooray! Todd Episode!" season four episode three). In another episode, he even builds his romantic interest, Emily, a



poorly constructed intimacy robot so that she might consider dating him again despite his asexual orientation and unwillingness to be intimate (“Ancient History” 00:12:48-00:14:00; 00:19:04-00:20:19). Refreshingly, just as Emily accepts and encourages Todd’s asexual identity, Todd also accepts Emily’s discomfort with the idea, and is never upset with her over her decision to turn down his offer of a relationship (“Ancient History” 00:12:48-00:14:00; 00:19:04-00:20:19). Without it being explicitly said, Todd’s actions show he deeply cares about the feelings of others and gives great importance to what they want out of life. While these situations, (such as building an intimacy robot) are highly dramatized and are written for the type of show, which is an adult comedy animation, it ultimately shows an asexual person with positive and varying traits that don’t restrict him to a box.

These loving traits also acknowledge the loving, caring traits in many asexual people, who rarely get to see portrayals of other caring and sensitive ace people in the media. Experiencing sexual attraction does not change a person from cold to warm, from hating people to caring for and loving people. It is a strange connection for many depictions in media to make- even unknowingly, when there are so many types of love. Yes, one may have specific love or attraction designated to a partner, but as any person would understand, love also exists for friends, family, our pets, people we work with, and people we don’t even know- in drastically different- yet never less important ways. What about the asexual person who is someone’s child, someone’s best friend, someone’s parent, someone’s mentor, an activist? Don’t they too love people in a sense, defending them, empowering them, being there for them, even if it is in absolutely no way sexual or romantic? Many asexual people care deeply about their families and friends, as could just about anyone else. Todd’s representation is a perfect example of showing asexuality and nuances of what love can mean.

Throughout the show, Todd is also depicted wearing a sweatshirt, sweatpants, sandals, and a beanie, demonstrating his chill personality and a love of comfort. Ryan, one of the participants in the study, even noted how cool Todd's character design is, emphasizing the fact that he's just "a regular guy" (Interview, 29 January 2024). This is important to note, as it acts in contrast to another asexual stereotype, making asexuals seem uptight and awkward. One participant, Alex, even cited Sheldon from CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* as mirroring of this trend (Interview, 29 January 2024).

When it comes to Todd, however, the only issue I could really see is that he is not always shown to be mature in some situations. This can be seen in season three episode five, where he attends a dinner with BoJack and Emily, and he does not comprehend Emily is alluding to being her boyfriend (this is before he comes out as asexual) ("Love And/Or Marriage" 00:14:26-00:15:26). While the participants and I discussed the relatability to Todd in at times, not understanding flirting since sometimes, some aces don't think in that regard and can't understand when they are being flirted with, I think once they got to the point of saying boyfriend/girlfriend it would become clear. Because Todd still didn't comprehend it, I personally found it a bit infantilizing, which is another stereotype asexuals typically face. Just because many asexuals are not interested in sex, with some even being averse to it, it is a misconception that aces must be treated like children and be prevented from hearing sexual conversations or topics related to sex. If one is speaking to an ace adult, one need not treat them as if they don't understand sex or that sex simply exists. For instance, if you are friends with an asexual adult and want to tell them about a movie, leaving out parts that deal with sexuality simply because you don't think they can handle it is an infantilizing assumption. Of course, some aces will have varying opinions about what they want to hear in conversations with friends, but generally, asexual adults don't want to

be treated like children, because they aren't. Essentially, writing Todd as oblivious to the flirting in the beginning was very relatable for many aces, but in my view, went into the range of making him seem dumb or infantilizing him when Emily was dropping hints, asking him if he had a girlfriend. It wasn't until BoJack showed up and gave the couple a key to a hotel room, dropping even more hints which finally made it click in Todd and sent him into a flight or fight mode, wondering how to get out of the situation.

Despite that minor issue with how Todd was represented, the group of participants generally found him to be an explicitly positive depiction of an asexual person. Despite some, like Gabby, noting that though she doesn't "think it was necessarily written by ace people [...] [the creators] did a good job in trying to do research to try and represent this character in [a way that way] as accurate and positive [...] as they could" (Interview, 29 January 2024). In this instance, it seems as though the show's thesis is that asexuality just is, asexuals are normal people, and that every asexual person is different. While it may seem obvious to some, most media have unfortunately not reflected this reality. Importantly, his character does not represent all asexuals, but specifically addressing that in the show is why it make his representation so meaningful. It doesn't try and represent all asexuality- it tries to represent Todd- who is an asexual person- and like any person- whose sexuality affects various aspects of their lives in different ways. As the group agreed, showing him going to an ace meetup at the end of season four, episode three was impactful- because it showed other aces too, and importantly, a banner that said, "*all aces welcome*" ("Hooray! Todd Episode!" 00:24:59-00:25:01).

*Sex Education*. In the third piece of media we viewed, Netflix's series *Sex Education*, the character O is followed throughout season four, beginning her story as a rival sex therapist to

series protagonist Otis. In general, people were mixed about this representation. Originally, this portrayal had incredible potential, as creators had been consulted by Yasemin Benoit, a British model and asexual activist. Benoit, a Black, aromantic and asexual woman, consulted Netflix on key issues experienced by asexual women of color, and the rights and wrongs of representation and stereotypes. While Benoit had good intentions, it is said that the network did not follow all of her advice, taking the final representation of O into their own hands. O is an Asian high school student attending Moordale High/Secondary School in the UK. She explicitly comes out as asexual during the show, but presence of any romantic attraction remains vague, though it is implied she may be aromantic. Leaving this ambiguous is arguably the first misdirection, as it doesn't acknowledge the wide variety of experience associated with asexuality, instead implying that all asexuals are the same and simply don't experience any kind of attraction toward anyone, a common misconception, since that would describe aromantic-asexuality and not all asexual identities.

During the show, O and Otis, the show's protagonist, are set up as rivals. They each have a sex therapy clinic set up on campus but determine only one can continue. During their conversations, O is "gaslight-y", using her talent of getting people to open up to her as a means of gaining information about him and distracting him from getting information out of her about her (participant description, Gabby, interview, 5 February 2024). And because the information is usually related to sex or relationships, she uses people's incredibly personal information as a means of psychological manipulation. She then subverts this information against them as a means to emphasize their faults or wrongdoings against her. As one participant, Alex, notes, O is written as a "villain character" who is "confrontational and ruthless" (interview, 5 February 2024). While another participant, Bailey cited O wasn't necessarily their favorite character, they

also explained how “asexuality doesn’t really care about your personality” emphasizing the importance of showing asexual people in a variety of ways in order to dismantle stereotypes that they all have the same or similar personalities, when sexuality is separate (interview, 5 February 2024). While this is very valuable, participants were also vocal about the harmfulness of writing minority characters in the same, stereotypical ways each time, and in particular, the written storylines that questioned their asexuality as a means for other purposes. Questionably, O’s coming out scene is problematic in the sense that she is simultaneously outed but shown as using it in her favor to get back at Otis and make him seem as though he is forcing her out, which gets him “canceled” for a bit (“Episode 5” 00:16:40-00:22:20). Throughout the series, O is built up to be a bully, invading Otis’ territory, until this is not only emphasized, but reinforced in the scene where she is revealed to have bullied another student, Ruby, as a child (“Episode 6” 00:57:38-00:58:46). In a later scene, Otis asks if she really is asexual or if it was just something she said “to make [him] look bad” (“Episode 7” 00:37:41-00:37:55). O takes offense to this comment, which prompts her to finally explain her own story and coming to terms with her asexuality as a young Asian girl who moved to Wye Valley, (a fictional city between Wales and England) from Belfast, Ireland. As a child, she felt so strange and shameful for not experiencing sexual attraction, she invested much time in learning about sexuality and hiding her true feelings and identity in order to blend in as much as she could (“Episode 7” 00:41:00-00:43:18). Unfortunately, she explains this intense effort to blend in also made her do anything to gain acceptance from the white, popular girls, including bullying another girl of color, Ruby. As Alex describes, O’s character seemed like “representation for the sake of representation”, her inclusion being “for a superficial reason”, as many diverse characters unfortunately are when they are not given the proper care, understanding, and attention to voices within that specific group within the writer’s room

(interview, 5 February 2024). O's coming out even felt "ingenuine" to Alex who immediately noted the issues with her asexuality being used as a way to manipulate the situation (interview, 5 February 2024). While this way of writing the show is questionable at the very least, it becomes problematic when one notes this is the first depiction of an aromantic asexual woman of color on a mainstream tv show many allosexual people will watch, many with little or no prior understanding of asexuality. Depicting her as cold, manipulating, cunning, and a bully, plays into many existing tropes about asexuality that essentially portrays asexual people as all having the same personality and fitting within a box. These misconceptions fundamentally misinform non-asexual people.

*The Olivia Experiment*. "Having sex should make me a somewhat more typical human being", encompassing the theme of the film that so critically misses the mark on asexual representation (*The Olivia Experiment* 00:13:02-00:14:00). Olivia is a graduate student of gender and sexuality studies that has never found interest in sex. Because of this, she is questioning her sexuality and leaning toward an asexual identity. Throughout her interactions in the film, all dismiss the possibility of her being asexual, and tell her she cannot decide she is asexual until she experiences sex- an incredibly irritating notion many asexual people are subjected to. This attempt to convert asexual people or disrupt someone's sexual exploration without the express will and desire of the person in question is concerning. Olivia had no desire to have sex, and instead of being assured that it is normal, and fully her choice to partake in it or not, she is pressured to try sex throughout the whole film. The only reason she decides to go ahead with it is because she is pressured to, which is clearly problematic for a plethora of reasons to do with consent.

In the beginning of the film, she goes to an asexual support group in which the organizer later dismisses her, as her experiences essentially don't sound asexual enough to the organizer, a strange assumption since every asexual person is different (*The Olivia Experiment* 00:00:00-00:03:28). It is also strange that an asexual support group would gatekeep the asexual identity and tell someone they are not asexual. Unfortunately, this is an example of asexual elitism, or “an elitist attitude where some asexuals don't consider other people to be asexual because they participate in an activity that the asexual elitist thinks falls outside of the realm of asexuality” (Carrigan, *Asexuality, Identity*). Regardless of whether someone says they are asexual or are simply exploring and considering it, it is no one's place, not even another asexual person's, to tell them they are or are not an identity. It is also strange to write a storyline in which a queer person dismisses another queer person, as demonstrated by her best friend, James, a gay man, who dismisses the possibility of Olivia being asexual (*The Olivia Experiment* 00:03:30-00:05:70). One participant, Gabby, even emphasized the all the character's missteps in reaction to her discussing it, stating, “part of [her reaction] was pure confusion, and the other part of it was just like, ‘it's so wrong’; “that's not what you say, that's not what you do” (interview, 5 February 2024). Bailey also described the oddity of the group, not understanding why they would reject her in any case, especially after a short speech about society's oversexualization that does feel relatable to many asexual people (interview, 5 February 2024). Helen even notes the outright inaccuracies in representing an asexual group, noting in the real world “[aces] are the most supportive people I've ever met in terms of accepting your sexuality and having this big umbrella of what defines asexuality” (interview, 5 February 2024). Upsettingly, the movie also reinforces common acephobic<sup>7</sup> misconceptions such as not being able to know one is asexual until they have tried engaging in sexual activity. As Gabby, humorously, though very tellingly points out, “I

haven't been stabbed either, and I'm not going to want to try it", emphasizing asexual people's ability to know and feel what is right for themselves without social expectations or intervention from others (interview, 5 February 2024). It speaks volumes about our society as a whole, in terms of heteropatriarchy, compulsory sexuality, and rape culture that it is acceptable to instruct another human being what to do with their body as a means to "fix" their sexuality, when sexuality can't be altered by others and should never be intervened on without the explicit consent of the person in question. Additionally, in the strangest of boundary-breaking, it is questionable to write the character of her mentor as viewing her as unable to participate in humanities scholarship without experiencing romantic love and sex. Her mentor sees this as an impediment to her participation in the field since in his view, she doesn't understand what humanities means (*The Olivia Experiment* 00:07:36-00:08:00). While there is primarily the issue of power imbalance and the concerning nature of an older, male, academic mentor suggesting a young woman have sex, there is also troubling implications about the understanding of asexuality. Are the writers implying, through proving this character "right" in the end, that asexual people aren't capable of understanding basic human functions, because they are missing something fundamental to being human? Are they implying they are *less* human- or not their fullest self simply because of an asexual orientation? I am genuinely concerned the writers think this, especially since humanness is such an undefinable, complex idea that must include asexuality and varying types of love and human connection, because of the complexities in which humans connect, think, and exist. On their website the creators state their intent with the film was to discuss "issues of sexual orientation and restrictive labels" (*The Olivia Experiment.com* 2014). While this mission sounds promising at surface level, taking it to the extreme and not allowing for nuance marginalizes some individuals as it dismisses those who are



okay with specific labels or feel they are empowering and affirming. Both understandings of labels can exist at the same time, as they are both restrictive and empowering, but one should not be more enforced than the other.

Additionally, Gabby also comments on the stereotypical wardrobe they give the character, using the conservative clothing and glasses to give her a nerdy and introvert-coded appearance that is the societal antithesis of sexy or sexually open (interview, 5 February 2024). While there is absolutely no issue with dressing conservatively or non-conservatively (so long as the person is not being forced and is doing it out of their own free will), stereotyping asexual people as only being able to dress a specific way reinforces the box of acceptability. Every asexual person is different, and will understandably not want to or be able to live up to society's expectation of what an asexual person should look like to prove their sexual orientation. While some asexual people may dress conservatively, others won't, and both should be represented in variety. As Gabby notes, "they portray it like the person isn't comfortable or ... [doesn't] like their body because of their sexuality", a glaring issue for Gabby when viewing the clips (interview, 5 February 2024).

Finally, at the end of the film, Olivia briefly hints at a "grey area" after she willingly becomes intimate with another grad student (*The Olivia Experiment* 01:28:00-01:30:00). While this film could have been a revolutionary acknowledgment of grey-sexuality, it falls short, and instead makes it look like all asexual people must fit into a specific box, or are therefore not asexual. They fall short because nowhere in this film do they express nuance, or that both asexual and greysexual people can exist. Bailey directly points out that if it "was about grey-sexuality, ... why wouldn't you just say that" rather than leaving viewers "confused" (Bailey, interview, 5 February 2024). Additionally, I can't imagine an asexual group (like the one

portrayed in the beginning of the film) would exclude a greysexual person when they are similarly affected by an allonormative<sup>8</sup> culture, and both under the acespec umbrella at that. Disappointingly, it seems that this movie's thesis is that asexual people cannot exist in variety, do not experience basic humanness, and that "the right person" provides a cure, another irritating notion asexual people are often targeted with. While finding the right person *can* elicit sexual attraction from a greysexual or demisexual person, or some allosexual people, it is not for another person to decide for the person in question. Additionally, nothing should be framed as a "fix" or a "cure", but just a person willingly searching for their own identity, (if they genuinely feel they need to do so; *without* the pressure of others) something Olivia more so did to gain the acceptance of others rather than for herself.

*Good Representation?* Overall, group consensus emphasized the importance of not only diversified, but varying and educationally positive representations of asexual people that move away from consistently negative and engrained tropes or misunderstandings. One participant, Ash, described their understanding of good representation as asexuality "not be[ing] their personality", "the character has to be dynamic and a human being", they explain, with "issues blend[ing] in", positioning asexuality as a "part of the whole of what an individual is" (Ash, Interview, 29 January 2024). Another participant, Gabby, also notes the phenomenon of asexual people consistently being portrayed as "lonely" and "introverted" by default, as mainstream media and understanding treat not having/experiencing some/situational sexual and/or romantic attraction as though they "don't love at all" or are "emotionally inept" (Gabby, interview, 29 January 2024). Importantly, it's not just about the character, but about the context and environment around them. Relatability was also another topic many recognized as important.

Ryan notes after watching the clips from *BoJack Horseman*, he could see a young asexual person positively relating to Todd and doing more research on their own (Ryan, interview, 29 January 2024). While sexual orientation does not inherently relate to personality or character, it is still critical that the mainstream's first and (currently) only representations of asexual people, particularly asexual people of color, as sensitive to longstanding discriminations experienced by these intersecting identities. Painting them in a negative light or misunderstanding their complexities consistently is harmful to a community already experiencing marginalization. That being said, there is no one correct way to represent asexual people. However, it *is* important to validate asexuality, not make it a joke or a medical issue, not inherently relate it to coldness or cruelty, and not express all asexual issues as simplistic- when they are so heavily impacted by intersectionality. Asexuality is a specifically queer identity. An umbrella term that encompasses many experiences and identities that likewise has been severely misunderstood and misrepresented.

## QUEERING ASEXUALITY

In 2023, asexual advocate and British model, Yasemin Benoit, was New York City Pride's first-ever asexual grand marshal. For many asexual people, especially Black asexual women, she is a hero on the frontlines, showing that asexuality is not just white, and does not exist within a small, stereotypical box. Not in despite of- but simply alongside her aromanticism and asexuality, Benoit is a lingerie model, emphasizing the fact that women's bodies- especially Black women's bodies, should be able to be seen without being sexualized and policed. This is especially important as we live in a society that still sees Black women's bodies as needing to be sexually policed, a horrific social effect of slavery, colonization, and heteropatriarchy, in unison throughout history. The intersectionality between her Blackness, gender (ciswoman),

aromanticism, asexuality, and occupation as a model have all been frequent targets of misogynoir and acephobia. (*Misogynoir* meaning the “anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience”, coined by Moya Bailey and Trudy in 2008) (M. Bailey & Trudy 762-768). While a majority of the harassment and bullying has been from heterosexual people of varying races, it is surprising, and disheartening, to see the strong reactions from the queer community, discrediting her identity and gatekeeping her, and asexuality as a whole (unless one fits in a very rigid, stereotypical, acceptable box) from the queer community. For decades now, the ace community has proclaimed asexuality as a specifically queer identity, since asexuality entails an experience fundamentally different from heterosexuality, containing varying experiences that are comparable to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual (etc.) peoples’ such as feeling the need to come out in certain contexts, confusion and shame over their sexual identity brought on by a heterosexually hegemonic society, and the comfort smaller communities bring (Pryzybylo 8). As Frida explains, “I relate to the queer community because at the end of the day, I have to explain to someone how my attraction differs from that which is publicly expected as a norm” (Frida. Interview. 12 February 2024). Throughout this section, I will be describing on a more personal scale, asexual peoples’ experiences in society, by relaying participant experiences.

Overall, those I spoke to in the group described their experience in queer spaces (i.e.: clubs, the on-campus LGBT Resource Center, online forums, and friend groups) as generally very positive (Alex, Bailey, Gabby, Interview, 12 February 2024). This was strengthened when participants had another queer identity, such as being biromantic, panromantic, or nonbinary. (Alex, Frida, Bailey). Interview. 12 February 2024). The only groups that felt some disconnect were heteroromantic asexuals and aromantic asexuals to some degree (Helen, Interview. 12 February 2024). Helen, a heteroromantic asexual, clarifies, “I think of myself as straight but

not”, and because of this phenomena, finds it “weird to think of [her]self as queer” because of the area heteroromantic asexual people stand (Helen Interview. 12 February 2024) However, this was extremely dependent on the person, and quite nuanced. For instance, Bailey, an aromantic asexual, noted that when they were “first figuring out [themselves], [they] kind of ... isolated [themselves] from the queer community, because it just didn't feel like [their] asexuality was necessarily as visible” (Bailey. Interview. 12 February 2024). Hannah also points out that her “experiences haven't been as positive as others since my sexuality has either been forgotten before or met with confusion. But at UCR I feel people are a lot more inclusive of aro-aces”, (aromantic-asexuals) (Interview, 12 February 2024). Despite feeling displaced, or as Helen describes, “the middle child” in queer spaces, no participant expressed feelings of discrimination from other queer people, a genuinely hopeful sign that online conflict between asexual people and the rest of the community may not exist as much in in-person settings, specifically college settings such as UCR (Interview, 12 February 2024). One participant, Alex, recounts an experience with their friends where they offered them an ace flag for the first time, noting “from that point ... there [was] a label out there that ... kind of fit [them]” (Alex, Interview, 12 February 2024). Being in a group of queer friends strengthened confidence in their identity, as Alex notes it was “pretty validating to have other queer friends like that; just being really openly accepting and appreciating the flag” (Interview, 12 February 2024). This is supported further by other participants who had different circumstances. Bailey describes it can be difficult to find the ace and/or queer identity without knowing other ace people (Interview, 12 February 2024). Typically, these positive reactions also exist in Pride marches, where asexual people often meet up and are widely accepted by the queer community. Even participants who didn't necessarily feel involved in the queer community though, felt accepted and supported by queer friends who

were notably extremely positive to their coming out (Alex, Helen, Gabby, Interview, 12 February 2024). Though the aces within our study group felt generally positive about other queer people's understanding of their identity, reactions were more varied among people in their personal life.

Coming out has become a staple experience of queerness- not because queerness is rare, but because society deems heterosexuality and being cisgender the natural and default, despite nature constantly trying to demonstrate otherwise, through demonstration of how diverse humans naturally are. Having sexual and romantic feelings is also deemed default and natural by humans, as this is not only supported by culture and media, but the very scientists and medical professionals we are supposed to trust our lives and health with. When they create knowledge that fundamentally dismisses asexual people's experiences however, deeming asexuality as the medical or psychological issue based on *their* experiences and the common experience, and not by learning from the community, it replicates misunderstandings about people who never, rarely, or circumstantially experience sexual and/or romantic attraction, asserting aces are sick and flawed. For asexual people, coming out comes with extra responsibility- to not only express you are something other than straight, mainly, but also gay, lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual, but also educate on what asexuality actually is. For many different reasons, coming out is a never-ending process, but it is ultimately a heavy task for some —as they must navigate coming out under the likelihood of significant misunderstandings and possibly prejudice. For this reason, several participants reported never wanting to come out to families. Cultural reasons were primarily cited as the decision to never share the fact that they are asexual with family. One participant, Ash, explained their parents just wouldn't understand, affecting their decision to never tell them (Interview 21 February 2024). I myself became much more careful and aware of who I shared this information with as I got older, because of rejection and humiliation from family members.

Humiliation was unfortunately not an uncommon theme, as one participant, Alex, noted how their stepmom claimed she was asexual as well after Alex decided to come out, a reaction Alex did not find genuine at all, but as a means to be humiliating and patronizing, and discrediting of their asexuality (Interview, 21 February 2024). Before that, their stepmom also asked them that if they weren't attracted to anyone, were they "attracted to a door" or something (Alex, interview, 21 February 2024). Another participant, Carter, even shared with the group that his best friend rejected him after coming out as asexual, and cut him off completely (Interview, 12 February 2024). For other participants, parents sometimes did not show negativity, but still demonstrated fundamental misunderstandings of asexuality. Mark explains that once they began dating a partner, their mother asked them if that meant they were no longer ace, to which Mark explained that was not indicative of them not being ace anymore (Mark interview 11 March 2024). On a positive note though, there were several participants who did share very positive experiences. Gabby's account highlights the positive effect of having a close family member, her sister, also being asexual- in the way that it was already normalized in her family and genuinely accepted (Interview, 12 February 2024). Being in a family of allies (and other ace-spec people) was also impactful to Gabby's experience, as she knew coming out, once she was ready, would come with understanding and acceptance.

While I share negative and positive coming out experiences, it is important to note how deeply personal coming out is. Each person reserves all the rights to come out or not to come out to whoever they choose, at any time they would like, without owing anyone an explanation. As stated before, the notion of coming out is only necessary because we live in a society entrenched in heterosexism, enforced sex and gender binaries, compulsory heterosexuality<sup>9</sup>, compulsory sexuality, and amatonormativity<sup>10</sup>. Coming out would not be needed if everything was equally

acceptable and normalized. This study does not claim that everyone needs to or should come out, but that based on the current social context in which we live, progress can only be made and measured in positive reactions and acceptance to those who do come out.

Overall, it is common knowledge that one of the most significant reasons for not coming out is socio-cultural, with gender identity also having a significant impact. Alex, a nonbinary participant, explained how mainstream understanding of queer identities and gender stereotypes is limiting. These factors made it so they “spent half of [their] life not knowing that asexuality was an option and like even longer not knowing that nonbinary was an option”. (Alex, interview, 12 February 2024). Alex also shared how they’ve heard coming out as asexual is specifically difficult for men because of gender stereotypes saying “men are the ones who want to initiate sex” and that they’re inherently “more sexual” (Alex, interview, 12 February 2024). Though all aces are met with disbelief or accusations of something being wrong with them, Alex notes that they have spoken to ace men even more significantly impacted by these gender stereotypes and expectations (Alex, interview, 12 February 2024). Among men participants, Ryan notes that though he had a good coming out with his parents, he hasn’t discussed it with the rest of his family. In general, he is “hiding [his] queerness around them” since he is “afraid of how they would react” (Ryan, interview, 21 February 2024). For ace women and feminine AFAB nonbinary people, there is alternative emphasis on relationships, marriage, and family, that deems them wrongful if they do not want to partake in one or more than one of these. Bailey notes that for nonbinary AFAB ace people, realizing they are ace can be more difficult since having less sexual feelings is stereotypically related to femininity, and people will usually just assume they “[don’t know because [they] [haven’t] done anything yet” (Bailey, interview, 12 February 2024). Jennifer notes how some even link non-sexual feelings to “a preference rather



than a sexuality” at times without even understanding the nuances (Jennifer, interview, 12 February 2024). This is especially heightened when combined with cultural-gender expectations.

For participants of color, cultural emphasis on marriage and children complicated their decision to explain their asexual identity to family. This is especially prevalent among women and AFAB nonbinary people of color. Hannah describes, “as an Asian woman, I definitely feel terrified to come out to my parents as aro-ace since in my culture my gender means I’m expected to get married and have kids” (Hannah, Interview. 12 February 2024). This was backed up by other participants as well (Ash, Frida, Interview. 12 February 2024). Ash explains that being part of a family of Mexican immigrants from a small village, they are also choosing to not come out to their parents. “I’m never going to say anything to them,” they explain, “there’s a lot of taboo in certain subjects” and “they’re just not gonna understand” Ash, interview, 21 February 2024). These feelings have followed them elsewhere though, as in other spaces, such as class, they have, in the past, also decided at times to hide their asexuality and describe themselves as heterosexual instead, a perfectly valid means of protecting their feelings and circumstances around others knowing their sexuality (Ash, interview, 21 February 2024).

Additionally, other intersectional factors were also cited as an experience that adds further dimension to asexuality. Jennifer, a demi-panromantic demisexual participant states that being neurodivergent, they sometimes have “a hard time coming to terms with [their] feelings and figuring out what [they’re] feeling” making the experience of understanding attraction and identity a bit more challenging (Jennifer, interview 21 March 2024). They also specified how their path to understanding asexuality was tied with understanding their gender as well as participating in online LGBTQ+ communities where education on identities was more available, sentiments shared by other participants as well (Jennifer, interview 21 March 2024). Greatly

emphasized was also the impact of having an understanding and supportive partner, regardless of their partner's own sexual identity (Alex interview 24 February 2024; Jennifer interview 21 March 2024; Mark interview 11 March 2024). If they wish to be in a relationship, being accepted within a partnership is fundamentally beneficial for alloromantic asexual people.

While the queer community can have extremely positive impacts on asexual people, most participants shared feelings of "sometimes [being] a little bit forgotten" within the queer community at large (Bailey, interview, 12 February 2024). This may be for several reasons, but ultimately, complicating our understanding of queerness could benefit all. If queerness aims to free people from status quos and categories, shouldn't we also free ourselves from the idea of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity, allowing people to know you are a perfect human whether one experiences those feelings or not? That such feelings are wonderful, but absolutely not the expectation- and you can be equally wonderful without any feelings as well. And that a space exists- a queer space- where presence or non-existence of such feelings are completely normalized.

## CONCLUSION

This research process was something I never expected to go the way it went. As the only researcher on the project, the work often became so overwhelming, I questioned its purpose over and over again, and I questioned my ability to take on such an ambitious project with so many moving parts. Every time I spoke to participants though, time went by so quickly. And when the interviews concluded, there was a bit of sadness. Aside from this project's motive to educate the public about asexuality and its overarching societal status and understanding, it was incredibly therapeutic to freely discuss our thoughts, feelings, and experiences with other ace-spec people. Not only did I feel this way, but I was told by multiple participants that the group interviews felt

genuinely valuable. For some, including myself, it was our first time even talking “face-to-face” with other ace-spec people. As is many queer folks, finding a community is significant, and even though nothing is planned to reunite the group, the time we were working within a group setting felt incredibly empowering. Not only were we learning about one another, co-producing an understanding of different asexual experiences, but we were listening and validating those very experiences not typically validated by a society entrenched in sexuality and romanticism. Importantly, while our conversations reiterated various themes common among asexual people, there were also specific experiences grounded in varying other identities. In the future, if I were to revisit research on asexuality, and had other researchers to work with, it could be beneficial to create unique profiles of asexual participants. Additionally, I would also like to further investigate the medicalization of asexuality, a theme that actively perpetuates legal and medical discrimination against ace-spec people.

After listening to participants, I’ve personally developed a new understanding of asexuality that encompasses far more than simply my own experience- and I hope to have translated that here. The asexual experience is not static, but extremely diverse and affected by countless factors that include, but are not limited to: race, gender, ethnicity, culture, ability, academic status, media exposure, and access to a queer or specifically ace-spec community. More representation of asexuality- and importantly, improved and diversified representation would both educate people and normalize asexuality while empowering aces to have confidence in their identity. Speaking about asexuality more within queer spaces not only normalizes the asexual experience, but boldly signals to ace-spec people that their existence and experiences are welcome and valid. And importantly, viewing asexuality as a part of a whole intersectional identity recognizes the individuals often marginalized from the asexual community as is. If these

individuals are not centered within the discourse, the essence of their experiences may be lost in the generalization of it all. While my project may not have lived up to the highest caliber of this notion, maybe because of my limited experience or the normal chaos of school and/or personal life, it is still something I actively tried to infuse in every step of the research process and every question I asked. Importantly, I wasn't just studying with asexual people, but people. The group of people though, are what made this project, and experience as special as it was.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, I use “opposite” as a means of describing society’s general idea of binary and opposite genders being man and woman. This is simply to explain what heteroromantic typically means within society, despite my understanding and field’s understanding of gender not as binaries but as a continuum that encompasses far more than simply man and women and challenges the concept of rigid gender categories all together.

<sup>2</sup> Intersectionality was a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw that specifically recognizes the enmeshed violence and discrimination experienced by women of color, largely ignored by sectors of law that focused on racial discrimination and gender discrimination, see Crenshaw 1242-1244. Since, intersectionality has been used and expanded on to describe how varying identities interact to shape varying experience of marginalization and privilege. For instance, it may describe how racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and classism work within society to marginalize a working-class, black, queer woman while it privileges a white, heterosexual, and wealthy cisgender man. Factors may depend on an unlimited number of identities or experiences. See “Kimberlé Crenshaw: What is Intersectionality?” 00:00:13-00:01:12.

<sup>3</sup> Compulsory sexuality can be understood in a similar way to compulsory heterosexuality, however, has emerged from asexuality studies. Kristina Gupta uses it to “describe the assumption that all people are sexual and to describe 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” see Gupta 132.

<sup>4</sup> The study in which I refer to here was an assignment given in a Gender and Sexuality Studies course entitled “Gender, Technology, and the Body”, instructed by Dr. Jack Cáraves at the University of California Riverside in Winter 2024. For this assignment, I created a research question pertaining to the medicalization of asexuality and conducted a literature review. Part of the assignment was learning how to write a positionality statement. Here, I reiterate the self-reflection process I went through.

<sup>5</sup> Heteronormativity is a “hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices, that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of all sexuality” see Robinson 1. Originally, the term was first used by Michael Warner to describe the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged, see Warner 8.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations are actual reactions from family or friends from when I first came out to them as asexual. I do not name them here simply out of respect for their privacy, though.

<sup>7</sup> Acephobic is used to describe people, concepts, or structures reflecting acephobia, which is “the hatred of and discrimination against asexuals, whether through active targeting, casual gestures, and rhetoric, and otherwise”, “rooted in the fundamental belief that asexuality is a wrong or impossible way to exist in the worlds and that asexual-identified people deserve to be punished, or need to be corrected, or both”, see Brown 17. It can also be used to describe “the stubborn refusal to recognize asexual people as authorities on our own lives, as knowers of our own sexuality”, see Brown 16.

<sup>8</sup> Allonormativity is the “worldview that assumes all people experience sexual and romantic attraction” see Mollet and Lackman 26-30.

<sup>9</sup> Compulsory heterosexuality is a term that was originally used to describe the lack of lesbian perspectives in feminist scholarship, and to “examine heterosexuality as a political institution which disempower women disempowers women” through the “total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men”, see Rich 11. In this piece, I use it as a means to describe the harm enforced heterosexuality can have on all genders within the queer and asexual communities.

<sup>10</sup> According to Elizabeth Brake, amatonormativity means “the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types. The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships”, see Brake 89.

## REFERENCES

- Alex. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 24 February 2024.
- Alex, Ash, Bailey, Carter, Frida, Gabby, Hannah, Helen, Jennifer, Mark, Ryan. Group Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 29 January 2024.
- Alex, Ash, Bailey, Carter, Frida, Gabby, Hannah, Helen, Jennifer, Mark, Ryan. Group Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 05 February 2024.
- Alex, Ash, Bailey, Carter, Frida, Gabby, Hannah, Helen, Jennifer, Mark, Ryan. Group Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 12 February 2024.
- Alex, Ash, Bailey, Carter, Frida, Gabby, Hannah, Helen, Jennifer, Mark, Ryan. Group Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 21 February 2024.
- Ash. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 09 March 2024.
- “Ancient History” *BoJack Horseman*, season 5, episode 9, Netflix, 14 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80125582>.
- “Asexuals and Attitudes towards Sex.” *Asexuals and Attitudes Towards Sex | The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*, [www.asexuality.org/?q=attitudes.html](http://www.asexuality.org/?q=attitudes.html). Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.
- Bailey. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 11 March 2024.
- Bailey, Moya, and Trudy. "On misogynoir: Citation, erasure, and plagiarism." *Feminist Media Studies* 18.4 (2018): 762-768.
- “Better Half.” *House*, written by David Shore and Kath Lingenfelter, directed by Greg Yaitanes, Fox Network, 2012.
- Brake, Elizabeth. *Minimizing marriage: Marriage, morality, and the law*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Brown, Sherronda J. *Refusing compulsory sexuality: A Black asexual lens on our sex-obsessed culture*. North Atlantic Books, 2022.

Carrigan, Mark. "Asexuality, Identity and 'Scratching an Itch.'" *Mark Carrigan*, 12 Feb. 2014, [markcarrigan.net/2013/09/05/asexuality-identity-and-scratching-an-itch/#:~:text=Asexual%20elitism%20is%20an%20elitist,of%20the%20realm%20of%20asexuality.](http://markcarrigan.net/2013/09/05/asexuality-identity-and-scratching-an-itch/#:~:text=Asexual%20elitism%20is%20an%20elitist,of%20the%20realm%20of%20asexuality.)

Carrigan, Mark. "There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community." *Sexualities* 14.4 (2011): 462-478.

Carter. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 11 March 2024.

Clark, Alyssa N., and Corinne Zimmerman. "Concordance between romantic orientations and sexual attitudes: Comparing allosexual and asexual adults." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51.4 (2022): 2147-2157.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Decker, Julie Sondra. *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*. Skyhorse, 2015.

Diamond, Lisa M. "What does sexual orientation orient? A biobehavioral model distinguishing romantic love and sexual desire." *Psychological review* 110.1 (2003): 173.

"Episode 1." *Sex Education*, season 4, episode 1, Netflix, Sept 2023.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80197526>

"Episode 4." *Sex Education*, season 4, episode 4, Netflix, Sept 2023.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80197526>

“Episode 5.” *Sex Education*, season 4, episode 5, Netflix, Sept 2023.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80197526>

“Episode 6.” *Sex Education*, season 4, episode 6, Netflix, Sept 2023.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80197526>

“Episode 7.” *Sex Education*, season 4, episode 7, Netflix, Sept 2023.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80197526>

Frida. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 21 March 2024.

Gabby. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 06 March 2024.

Gupta, Kristina. “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept.” *Signs*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 131–54. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681774>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2024.

Hannah. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 07 March 2024.

Helen. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 07 March 2024.

“Hooray! Todd Episode!” *BoJack Horseman*, season 4, episode 3, Netflix, 8 Sept. 2017.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80125582>.

Jennifer. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 21 March 2024.

Kennon, Patricia. "Asexuality and the potential of young adult literature for disrupting allonormativity." *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 2.1 (2021): 1.

“Kimberlé Crenshaw: What is Intersectionality?” YouTube, uploaded by National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), 22 June 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc>.

“Love And/Or Marriage” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 5, Netflix, 22 July. 2016.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80125582>.

Mark. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 11 March 2024.



- Mollet, Amanda L., and Brian Lackman. "Allonormativity and compulsory sexuality." *Encyclopedia of queer studies in education*. Brill, 2021. 26-30.
- Przybylo, Ela. *Asexual erotics: Intimate readings of compulsory sexuality*. The Ohio State University Press, 2019.
- Rich, Adrienne Cecile. "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence (1980)." *Journal of women's history* 15.3 (2003): 11-48.
- Tessler, Hannah. "Aromanticism, asexuality, and relationship (non-) formation: How a-spec singles challenge romantic norms and reimagine family life." *Sexualities* (2023): 13634607231197061.
- "That Went Well." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 12, Netflix, 22 July. 2016.  
<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80125582>.
- "The Gray Area." *The Gray Area | The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)*, [www.asexuality.org/?q=grayarea](http://www.asexuality.org/?q=grayarea). Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.
- "The Lightbulb Scene" *BoJack Horseman*, season 5, episode 1, Netflix, 14 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80125582>.
- The Olivia Experiment*. Directed by Sonja Schenk, performances by Skye Noel, Jen Lilley, and Brett Baumayr, Indican Pictures, Mansfield Films, 2012.
- Robinson, Brandon Andrew. "Heteronormativity and homonormativity." *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of gender and sexuality studies* (2016): 1-3.
- "Romantic Orientations." *Romantic Orientations | The Asexual Visibility and Education Network*, [www.asexuality.org/?q=romanticorientation](http://www.asexuality.org/?q=romanticorientation). Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.
- Ryan. Interview. Conducted by Michelle Elizabeth Gray. 12 March 2024.

- Villarreal, Daniel. "What is Asexual? Here's the Asexual Spectrum, an Asexual Quiz & Everything Else You're Curious About." *LGBTQ Nation*, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/12/asexual-heres-asexual-spectrum-asexual-quiz-everything-else-youre-curious/>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2024.
- Warner, Michael. "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet." *Social Text*, no. 29, 1991, pp. 3–17. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466295>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.