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"SICK, DEAD, OR LYING:" A CRITICAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF ASEXUALITY IN
POPULAR CULTURE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies

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Spring 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies have been completed.

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May 2017

Terms

Throughout this paper I use certain terms and phrases that, while they may appear to be interchangeable, are in fact not. I'd therefore like to take a moment to define these terms and how they differ from each other, especially in relation to asexuality.

Lesbian women and gay men: When Larry Gross conducted his research on minority sexualities in the media in 1991, he specified that he was specifically discussing "lesbians and gay men (20)." Gross does not elaborate on or mention trans or bisexual identities, therefore, when analyzing Gross' work, it's not appropriate to substitute in any other term for the population he studied other than cis lesbian and gay men.

LGBT: While some use this acronym to refer broadly to anyone who is non-heterosexual or transgender. I will use it to specifically refer members of the lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender communities and their subcategories, but not asexual aromantic (ace acro) individuals. I have chosen to do this because many studies and researchers focus specifically on these four identity categories, and expanding the acronym to include queer or other identities in this case would be inaccurate. In addition, there is conflict on many areas of the internet on whether or not cis asexual aromantics should be allowed in the LGBT community, and therefore this term must be specific to these identities.

Introduction

In 2012, the well-known television show *House* aired an episode called “Better Half.” In the episode, a woman comes in who claims that she and her husband are asexual. Dr. James Wilson (played by Robert Leonard) mentions the fact that one percent of the population identifies as asexual before telling Dr. Gregory House (played by Hugh Laurie) about his patient. The ever caustic House immediately makes a quip about the patient being a “giant pool of algae” and Wilson immediately responds with the statement that it’s “a valid sexual orientation.” However, House is not deterred, and bets Wilson \$100 that he can find a medical reason why she doesn’t want to have sex. Later, House is challenged on why he cares whether or not the patient is asexual and is told that he’ll just have to accept the fact she doesn’t want to have sex. Looking annoyed (although this is not unusual), House responds with the statement that “[sex] is a fundamental drive of our species, sex is healthy. Lots of people don’t have sex. The only people who don’t want it are either are sick, dead, or lying (Better Half).”

Ultimately, the name of the show is meant to refer to the couple—specifically the woman—but it could also just as well refer to the fact only half of the episode is worth watching. If you stop watching this episode midway through, you might come away with the impression that this is one of the few times that House might actually be wrong. Perhaps asexuality is a valid sexual orientation in 1% of the population, perhaps the couple actually are healthy, happy adults in a loving asexual relationship. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case, and in the end House is proven to be right all along. The woman’s husband, it turns out, was sick. He had a heretofore unknown brain tumor in his pituitary gland which was inhibiting his libido, and the woman was lying, keeping her sexual desires hidden from her husband in order to remain with

him. House wins the \$100, and the viewer is once again left with a sense of victory at the intuitiveness of House's medical acuity.

I've chosen to open this paper with this short snapshot from *House* because it so perfectly encapsulates everything that is wrong about the way asexuality is depicted in popular culture today. In many cases the narrative constructed around asexuality—that it's a condition only of the "sick, dead, or lying"—is often the only representation of asexuality most viewers ever witness unless they intentionally seek out shows with asexual characters in them. Despite the relative commonality of asexuality — one percent of the population identifies as asexual ("Prevalence and Associated Factors")—as an identity, asexuality has had zero to almost no representation in popular culture over the years, and the explicit, canonical representation that does exist mirrors the damaging and misleading narratives seen in *House*.

Otherwise, for the most part, asexual characters exist solely in the realm of insinuations, sly remarks, and the imaginative sexual reconstructions of fanfiction—stories about popular fictional characters written by fans. Plenty of characters in pop culture have been assumed to be asexual, but have never explicitly confirmed as such. Therefore, what little media explicitly displays asexuality is extremely important to the development of asexuality as a legitimate identity, both to asexual and non-asexual consumers. Because of asexuality's "symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner & Signorelli) in popular culture, I will use this paper to study the representation of asexuality in contemporary television and film. By discerning how an emerging sexual orientation is represented in popular culture, audiences can gain a greater understanding of how popular culture shapes perceptions of minority sexual identities.

However, before we begin an in-depth analysis of asexual representation in popular media, we need to take a moment to properly define asexuality and provide a breakdown of how it's currently conceptualized by researchers.

What is Asexuality?

As a concept, asexuality is very new to the scientific community, and fitting it into the previously established framework of human behavior requires some “deep philosophical, ethical, historical and cultural debates” (Parente and Albuquerque 1). While Western society is sex negative in many ways, some scholars have argued that “Western society also systematically privileges sexual identifications, desires, and activities while marginalizing different forms of nonsexuality, to the detriment of asexually identified individuals (“And Now I’m Just Different” 2).” Scholars have termed the phrase “sexualnormativity” (Chasin 719) and “compulsory sexuality” (Gupta 132) to describe the basic idea that in Western society, sexuality occupies a normalized, privileged, and socially supported space, much in the way that heteronormativity does. Sexualnormativity creates a space where sexuality is invisible and inherent, a space that assumes people are “sexual unless otherwise specified (Chasin 719),” while asexuality must be justified and possibly treated clinically.

Within this system, it's assumed that for the most part sex is vital for healthy human development, a natural part of human existence that shapes our actions and social practices (Parente and Albuquerque). Even those with marginalized sexual desires operate under sexualnormativity—society views their sexuality as “wrong” or different—but still grants them sexual desire. Many classic principles are based on this notion of compulsory sexuality, such as Abraham Maslow's 1943 theory of the Hierarchy of Basic Human Needs. Maslow placed sex at the bottom of this hierarchy as a condition that must be met before serious psychological and

physiological growth could be accomplished. The natural conclusion to this placement is that 1) all humans have a basic desire for sex alongside and fairly equal to their desire for other basic necessities such as air and water, and 2) the lack of fulfilment of that need negatively impacts a human's life (Parente and Albuquerque).

Because sex and romance are usually inextricably linked in society, alongside the idea of sex being good or natural comes the idea of amatonormativity, or 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 the sense that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types (Brake 5).” With the prevalence of sexualnormativity and amatonormativity, it's no wonder that asexuality took so long to be recognized among researchers and the general population.

Because it was through this framework that scientists studied human behavior for decades, for most of its history, a lack of sexuality has been pathologized as a medical disorder or illness, much like how it was depicted in the *House* episode, or conversely praised as a religious virtue like abstinence. However, it has only been viewed as a legitimate sexual orientation by researchers very recently (*Understanding Asexuality* 87). In 1918, Ralph Werther, one of the earliest transgender people to publish their own autobiography, described “anaphrodites,” or individuals who are “not suffused with adoration for any type of human,” and who, “shudder violently at the very thought of any kind of association grounded on sex differences” (Werther 295). In line with the early pathologization of the lack of sex drive however, he went on to describe anaphroditism as “either an after-effect of an illness in childhood or congenital.” In the middle of the 20th century, Alfred Kinsey conducted his famous sex studies, rating individuals on a scale from 0-6 according to their heterosexuality or

homosexuality. However, 1.5% of the population he studied were categorized in a group he called “X,” for people with “no socio-sexual contacts or reactions” (Kinsey et al. 636-59). Interestingly, modern research into asexual populations has uncovered a remarkably similar percentage to Kinsey’s results. In 2004 Bogaert examined a pre-existing 1994 probability sample survey of United Kingdom households for characteristics associated with asexuality. From this data he concluded from that roughly 1% of U.K residents were asexual. To date, this is the most complete research that has been done into the prevalence of asexuality in society.

Today however, asexuality is generally defined by researchers as individuals with “low or absent sexual desire or attractions, low or absent sexual behaviors, exclusively romantic non-sexual partnerships, or a combination of both absent sexual desires and behaviors (Prause and Graham 342). Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which claims to be the largest online community of asexual individuals in the world, defines asexuality simply as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction,” although many find that definition incomplete or lacking. Today, researchers and asexual people themselves view asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation, distinct from the conscious choice to be celibate as “unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are” (AVEN). Researchers also define asexuality as distinct from a sexual desire dysfunction such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (Brotto et al. 646-660; Hinderliter 167-178).

Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), defined in the DSM-5 by the American Psychiatric Association as, “persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual/erotic thoughts or fantasies and desire for sexual activity.” While this definition may sound almost exactly like that of asexuality, the two are in fact very different. For a lack of sexual desire to be considered a medical disorder, the DSM-5 states it must cause “significant distress in the

individual.” Individuals who identify as asexual however rarely report distress with their situation and are able to function within normal parameters in society (Brotto et al. 646-660) In fact, the DSM-5 includes a note that says if an individual’s low desire can be explained by their self-identification as an asexual, then a diagnosis of HSDD should not be made (American Psychiatric Association).

I like Prause and Graham’s definition of asexuality because it makes it clear that asexuality exists on a wide spectrum with many possible combinations of sexual/romantic desire. In fact, this spectrum is wider than most people might think. A significant percentage of asexuals—50% in one study—report masturbating and having sexual fantasies in the past month, compared to 92% of sexual respondents (Yule 93). However, that same study also found that 11% of asexual respondents reported their sexual fantasies did not involve other people compared to the .5% of sexual respondents. This might seem surprising to some, but asexuals are asexual—not sexually dysfunctional—so asexual individuals still retain the capacity for physical arousal such as erections or vaginal lubrication and can have similar libido levels to other sexual populations. Given this, researchers speculate that masturbation among asexual individuals occurs for non-sexual reasons, such as tension release or as a means of getting to sleep (Yule 93), but would still not be directed at anyone as they do not have a sexual attraction to any gender or sex ("Toward a Conceptual Understanding" 241). Because of this, many researchers are careful to only define asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction to other people, not necessarily a lack of sexual behavior or desire in general.

Prause and Graham’s definitions also draws a distinction between sexuality and romance. While there are times when romance and sex are seen as separate, for the most part, in our society, it’s assumed that they are inextricably linked (*Understanding Asexuality* 11). However,

some theorists believe that although similar and often co-concurring, a desire for sex and a desire for romance are completely separate entities (Fisher 4). So while asexuality is the absence of sexual desire for others, asexuals may still retain a desire for a romantic relationship and in fact, as many as 33% of self-identified asexuals are currently in long term cohabitations or marriages (“Toward a Conceptual Understanding” 242). AVEN also sums up this distinction between romance and sexuality as, “Asexual people have the same emotional needs as everybody else and are just as capable of forming intimate relationships.” Many in the asexual community have created terms to delineate where exactly on the asexual and aromantic spectrum (or a-spec) they fall, such as, “graysexual,” “demiromantic,” “biromantic,” and “demisexual,” among others. This division between sex and romance becomes important to my topic later on when I discuss the television show *Sirens*, where two characters, one asexual and one sexual, enter into a relationship. Ultimately, this is why I find Prause and Graham’s definition of asexuality to be useful, because it allows for asexuality to exist on a spectrum, where asexual people are allowed to experience “low to absent levels of sexual desire or attraction... or a combination of both absent sexual desires and behaviors,” without invalidating ace and aro individuals who might fall on either end of the spectrum.

This thesis began with a review of scholarship surrounding the impact and representation of non-heteronormative sexuality in popular culture, before going into the history of asexuality and establishing a coherent definition of it. And now that asexuality has been adequately defined, I would like to turn to my analysis of asexuality in popular culture. I’ve chosen films and television shows as the medium of my analysis because they are spaces where asexuality is defined as part of the public discourse about sexualities and their place in social life. I will focus my analysis on three works in particular, the television shows *Bojack Horseman*, *Sirens*, and the

film *the Olivia Experiment*. Throughout and after my analysis of my main three works, I will touch on ancillary works like *House*, which depict asexuality in a much more surface level way, and compare and contrast them to my main works.

Asexuality and Popular Culture

In addition to being new to researchers, asexuality is also relatively new to popular culture and mainstream audiences. A quick analysis of Google trends for the search term “asexual” shows that over the past 10 years from 2004 to 2015, the term has more than doubled in popularity. Possibly the first online article mentioning asexuality was published in 1997 by StarNet (O’Reilly). In it, the author Zoe O’Reilly described her experiences living as an asexual person, and her frustrations with finding any sort of information about her existence outside of biology textbooks discussing asexuality in context of single cell organisms (O’Reilly). In 2000, a small Yahoo group called Haven for the Human Amoeba was founded and became the first online community for asexuals. Eventually the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) overtook the Yahoo group in popularity, establishing message boards so that asexual individuals could communicate with each other, and slowly asexuality began to trickle into the public consciousness (AVEN). In 2004, after Bogaert’s widely circulated study was published, a number of news outlets wrote on it. Stories from the *New York Times* and *New York Magazine* quickly followed, and the *New Scientist* wrote that “asexuality is indeed a form of sexual orientation” (Westphal). Since then, asexuality has been a semi-regular topic on newsstands and mainstream blogs.

Today, asexuality has, for the most part, entered the public consciousness: there are thousands of private and public blogs and databases dedicated to categorizing asexual individuals' experiences, and there are organizations similar to AVEN such as whatisasexuality.com, asexualityarchive.com, or asexualadvice.tumblr.com, dedicated to answering questions regarding asexuality and bringing asexual individuals together into a community. There are asexual specific dating sites, and the popular dating site OK Cupid has an option to check asexual as an orientation. There's also Asexual Awareness Week, and in the tradition of marginalized sexualities, an asexual pride flag. However, despite its rising popularity in scientific circles, and online communities, that rising popularity has not been translated into an increase in asexual representation in films and television shows.

As such, there is almost no scholarly literature which explicitly looks at the media representation of impact on asexuality. What little literature there is however does not focus specifically on asexuality, but general themes of gender and sex throughout popular works such as *Sherlock Holmes* (Graham), and *The Big Bang Theory* (Farghaly and Leone). The research that does exist on asexuality is, for the most part, concerned with defining it, separating it from more medicalized definitions, or assessing its prevalence in society. Unfortunately therefore, the closest we come is a general analysis of queer representation in popular culture. Although the ways in which marginalized identities are represented in media vary, asexuality shares many common issues with other non-mainstream sexual identities, and by looking at works which analyze LGBT representation, we can understand a little more of how asexuality has been represented historically, and how non-mainstream sexualities are represented in media.

As I will demonstrate below, the existing research shows a longstanding struggle for non-normative or queer sexualities to move out of the connotative bubble and escape symbolic

annihilation and find authentic depictions of asexuality in popular media. As a recently named sexuality in popular culture, this is a perfect moment for examining how this sexuality is being interpreted in the sparse mediums where it can be found. In order to study these representations, I will conduct a critical textual analysis of three pop culture texts that feature canonically asexual main characters where asexuality is discussed over a significant period of time: the Netflix original show *Bojack Horseman*, USA Network's *Sirens*, and the independent comedy *The Olivia Experiment*.

Through my research I will be answering a range of questions such as, are characters symbolically annihilated, represented, or trivialized in popular culture? Is asexuality framed mainly as an innate and accepted sexual identity, or is it attributed to disease and misfortune, as a medical issue to be solved? Are the asexual representations authentic, do they resonate with asexual audiences, in a way that they are able to see themselves and their stories represented on screen? Are stories of asexuality told from asexual characters and asexual actors, or are they told through another lens? And finally, through what narrative strategies is connotative ambiguity challenged? In order to answer these questions, my method will involve an in-depth content analysis of two television shows, and one film which feature asexual characters. The works will be analyzed for content, theme, framing, presentation, impact, reception, and form. The method also included an analysis of paratexts, or texts connected with the main media texts, such as online fan comments, blogs, and newspaper and magazine articles about these shows and their creators.

Literature Review

In his now classic work on gay and lesbian representation in media from 1991, Larry Gross argues in “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media” that the gendered social system is “supported by the mass media treatment of sexual minorities” and that definitions of what are “normal and “natural” roles for men and women only reinforce the heteronormative power hierarchy (26). He notes that in television, gays, lesbians and other sexual minorities are rarely visible. When they are represented, they are almost exclusively portrayed negatively as villains or other narrow stereotypes, or else they play supporting roles in which they help restore order to the gender hegemony. This process is what he terms “symbolic annihilation” (26), drawing on the work of George Gerbner and others, which he defines to mean the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of a group of people based on their sex, race or gender. According to Gross, “Hardly ever shown in the media are just plain gay folks, used in roles which do not center on their deviance as a threat to the moral order which must be countered through ridicule or physical violence” (65).

Symbolic annihilation in the media isn't unique to sexual identities and has occurred for many marginalized groups of people in media over the years, including women and people of color (Gerbner & Signorelli). However, as Gross notes, in a visual medium like film or television, sexuality is often more subtle than race, allowing television and film studios to code sexuality in a way which race cannot be. These codes alert audiences that the character being shown is gay through dress, speech patterns, arm or hand movements and other mannerisms, while still allowing the studios to officially deny dealing with the topic of sexuality. In 1993 Alexander Doty also focused on queer coding and connotation in media, stating that connotation is “notorious for its ability to suggest things without saying them for certain (*Making Things*

Perfectly Queer, XI),” and allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it.

Although Gross and Doty focused on gay and lesbian characters specifically, variation of these codes can easily apply to asexual characters as well. Most characters are not explicitly described as asexual, but are instead coded that way through certain mannerisms, which I will explain in more detail in the next section. A further issue arises, however, when you consider the way asexuality is often described—inaccurately—as an “absence” of a sexuality. This ‘absence’ leaves a lot of room for viewer interpretation of a character and has led to the rise of many asexual fandoms surrounding characters who are not explicitly asexual, but nevertheless do not exhibit sexual desire and therefore could be interpreted by viewers as being asexual. This especially happens in children’s shows where sex and gender aren’t heavily discussed topics anyway, such as the Gems from the children’s show *Steven Universe*. Alien beings with no set physical form or human gender, they are often interpreted as metaphors for queer and asexual individuals (Gretchen). This can often receive some negative reactions in fandom circles as fans complain that asexuals are “pushing” their sexuality onto straight characters, however, this just betrays the extent which sexualnormativity invades our society, when even genderless, sexless aliens are presumed straight, or at least sexual.

Without explicit representations of themselves in media, Gross noted that lesbian and gay men must rely on their own personal experiences and those of others close to them, as well as the “narrow and negative stereotypes they encounter as being representative of gay people” (27). Of all the aspects of Gross’ analysis, this is the one that has changed most since 1991. While the concept of symbolic annihilation may not be applicable to gay and lesbian characters today in the way Gross described, it’s very much relevant to today’s media’s portrayal of asexuality.

In pre-internet 1991, Gross focused on the connotative meaning of gay and lesbian representation in texts, and how the rare gay character portrait was “so subtle as to be readily misunderstood by the innocent (Gross 31).” In 1993 when Doty wrote his book, he focused mainly on the connotative rather than denotative meaning of the media texts. That is, he focused on the potential for straight appearing cultural works such as *Lucy and Ethel*, *Jack Benny* and *Rochester*, and *Laverne and Shirley* (Raymond 99), to offer queer, subtextual readings. As Raymond wisely noted, as we move into more explicit portrayals of minority sexualities and away from the ambiguous connotations, a different analysis must be made that doesn’t rely on the assumption that queerness will remain in the connotative closet forever (Dines & Humez, 100).

Gross’ and Doty’s analysis seem to apply just as much, if not more, today given the near-invisibility of canonically asexual people. The desire to find in the connotative aspects of representations what is absent and unnamed spurred, with the rise of the internet, many young individuals to search for their identity and find themselves represented online well before they saw themselves in film or television. The internet has been perhaps the biggest tool in bringing together disparate and isolated LGBT communities, something especially true today for asexuality. AVEN, the largest community of asexuals in the world, is an online database that houses thousands of pages of discussion threads, information, definitions, and links to asexuality in popular culture. However, despite its growing online presence, asexuality has not yet reached a point in popular culture where anything near adequate or explicit representations of it exist. Today, the vast majority of explicitly asexual characters exist online in fanfiction, comics, or other self-created media. Thus while the lack of mainstream media featuring asexual characters continues to be a problem, because of online fan content, young asexual individuals looking to

find themselves no longer feel quite as alone. However, as with all media, the main responsibility for producing it rests on the shoulders of the creators, not the audience, and young asexual viewers shouldn't have to resort to making up their own additions to the work in order to see themselves.

In general, representations of asexuality in modern media fall into the stereotypes and tropes that affected gay and lesbian portrayals several decades ago. The biggest issue is that the vast majority of asexual representation in media has not yet escaped that bubble of connotative ambiguity. Most characters that could exist on the asexual spectrum do so through coded hints, clues and insinuations, not outright statements. For example, Sherlock Holmes, a classic literary figure, has been transformed hundreds of times in radio, film and television, almost always as an "asexual-esque" character interested in only his work to the exclusion of all else. However, his sexuality, or lack thereof however, is never explicitly addressed. Sometimes portrayals of him even edge into a practice known as "queer-baiting," whereby the show or film will insinuate through coded statements or gestures that Sherlock might not be straight, but never actually produce that in the Sherlock movie or television canon (Valentine).

When gay and lesbian characters were shown in film and television in the past, Gross writes they were either portrayed as weak and silly, or evil and corrupt (30). Asexual characters today face a similar battle. The few times that a character is shown in television or film as being uninterested in sex (never explicitly asexual though), they are either a juvenile, child-like character, assumed to be too innocent to know or care about sex, or as an evil villain whose life is too full of world domination to care about lowly pleasures. Another portrayal asexuality has in common with earlier days of gay and lesbians in film and television is the "broken" portrayal. In this scenario, asexual characters are flawed or broken, oftentimes asexuality is shown as a result

of a disease, brain injury or other trauma, and is introduced as a problem to solve. This can be seen as similar to processes of symbolic annihilation of gay and lesbian sexuality, where the sexual orientation is attributed to being the result of a fixable disease, or its pathologizing linkage to AIDS/HIV in the '70s and '80s.

A fourth category that asexuality shares in common with early depictions of gay and lesbian characters is the dehumanization of it. To House, one of the only times someone can be asexual is if they are dead. In this case, we can also easily consider dead to be “not human.” The urge to procreate is often seen as a biological necessity, a natural instinct in human beings, placed alongside food and water in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. If one has no sex drive or desire for sex, oftentimes the inevitable conclusion is that one is therefore not human. Oftentimes the only individual not interested in sex in a film or television show is a robot, android, alien, or some other inhuman creature. Look no further than the robot Data from Star Trek, the alien Doctor from Doctor Who, or the ever clinical and detached Sherlock Holmes who expresses very few “innate” human emotions.

As Raymond notes, in today’s media, when LGBT sexualities are actually shown, they tend to over-emphasize the innateness of sexuality and attraction, an odd over compensation that removes much of the fluidity that is inherent to sexuality. In the television show Will and Grace, Will states that he has “always loved Grace, but that [I have] never had any sexual feelings of any kind for her.” Despite the fact Will has had sex with a woman, the viewer is given the impression that Will can never have feelings for Grace because of his sexuality. In this atmosphere, there is no possibility that Will could be bisexual, a sexuality oftentimes seen as fluid and unstable. In that sense, bisexuals share in common with asexuals, as Judith Butler

stated, the media presumption that they are unthinkable and/or unnameable, not even subjects of discourse (1990), and still very much exist within the ambiguous/invisible connotative bubble.

Because naming is so vital to the representation of asexuality in the media, when discussing asexuality in media, it's important to differentiate the various ways asexuality (and marginalized sexualities in general) depicted and framed. Overall, my analysis of the various media will be broken down into three different categories, each focused on different aspects of naming. Using research from Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, as well as Alexander Doty and Judith Butler, I've created three categories for identifying and placing asexual media in the context of naming, and will discuss how each work fits into the three categories.

Category one is Canonical, which includes the three media which I'll mainly be focusing on. This category includes media where one or more characters are canonically asexual, where either they, or someone else names them as asexual. This category is based on Butler's concept of performativity and naming. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler places a great emphasis on the role naming or failing to name plays in the development of social identities, and the link between unnamability and unthinkableability (89). For Butler, "representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject." For asexuality, the process of naming is perhaps even more vital than other sexualities because for many characters in media whose character development or plot does not revolve around sex or romance, or who never express an explicit desire or lack of desire for a gender, the only difference between an asexual character and a character with another sexuality is the naming of asexuality.

Category two is Implied. As demonstrated by the GLAAD study, explicit representations of lesbian or gay characters are growing in television and film, however, unfortunately for asexual representation in media, the vast majority of it still remains implicit. Doty explored many

aspects of media which, although not explicitly queer, dealt with many issues, themes or characters that queer people identified with (45). Implicit is a category which looks at film and television shows that deal with asexual themes, or where one or more characters are assumed to be asexual by audiences, or whose sexuality is heavily implied but never explicitly confirmed, such as various film and television adaptations of Sherlock Holmes or the television series *Pushing Up Daisies*. Because the characters are not explicitly named as asexual, their sexual identity is basically left up to audience interpretation. Benschhoff and Griffin term this idea “reception,” and state that a work does not necessarily have to explicitly name an identity for an audience to resonate with it. Instead, many works in our culture deal with an individual’s struggle with adversity, which, although not strictly a queer issue, has been picked up and championed by queer advocates. Programs in this category include *the Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *the Golden Girls*, or *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

Category three is Word of God. The Word of God is a slang term used to describe information about a fictional work that comes from a source believed to be the ultimate authority on the matter such as the author, producer, or director, rather than being defined by the audience as in the implied category. Benschhoff and Griffin developed a category they termed “auteurs,” which looked not at the message the work conveyed, but at the creator. They stated that although a product might not deal with queer themes, or feature “queer aesthetics,” if it was created by a queer person, a piece of media can “usually be defined as queer” (44). Using this idea that the creator defines the work, several television shows and film can be seen to fall into this category. Although they don’t have explicitly asexual characters, or even implicitly asexual characters, or include any themes which have been picked up by the asexual community as a whole, their creator has stated that the work does indeed feature an asexual character. This category includes

the work Harry Potter, where author J.K. Rowling stated the character Charlie Weasley was asexual, despite the fact nothing in the actual work itself deals with this topic.

Sirens

Simply put, a canon is what is officially accepted as part of a work, be it literature, film or television. Although the *Olivia Experiment* and *Bojack Horseman* both deal with themes of asexuality, only *Sirens* explicitly names the main character as asexual as a canonical part of the story. Many different indicators say that *Bojack Horseman* will eventually name Todd as asexual, and the *Olivia Experiment*'s plot centered on the question of the protagonist's asexuality, but nevertheless, *Sirens* is the only one that actually made it clear.

Sirens is a USA Network comedy show roughly based on the British television series of the same name. The show ran for two seasons on USA Network from March 2014, to April 2015, and is comprised of 23 total episodes, with a 22 minute run time each. The series was created Bob Fisher and Denis Leary, and follows the stories of three emergency medical technician paramedics in Chicago, and the humorous scenarios they often find themselves in. I will specifically be focusing my analysis on episodes 3, 5, 6, 11, 14, 16, and 19, which deal most heavily with the reoccurring character Valentina "Voodoo" Dunacci, a member of the EMT squad who is asexual. The character Voodoo, or Voo, played by Kelly O'Sullivan, is a paramedic for the fictional Eminent Ambulance Company based in Chicago. Voo's asexuality is first brought up in episode six when one of the main characters, Brian, talks to the EMT crew about the possibility of dating her. The other EMT's immediately dismiss this possibility and eventually reveals that she's asexual (The Finger).

There are several ways in which *Sirens* stands out in its depiction of asexuality, but in some areas, I think, it needs more work. The first thing *Sirens* gets right about asexuality is simply naming it. Although the act of naming asexuality might seem inconsequential, the vast majority of many movies, TV shows and books feature characters which, on closer analysis, could be interpreted as asexual, but nevertheless fail to state it in the text, leaving lots of ambiguity. *Sirens* however, removes the requirement of audience interpretation completely by explicitly naming asexuality in the show.

This explicit naming impacted viewers in an overall positive way, and Twitter and Tumblr users took to the web to air their reactions. Some were very enthusiastic, “SIRENS HAS AN ASEXUAL MAIN CHARACTER AND THEY DIDNT MAKE HER A PUNCH LINE. IM SO HAPPY RIGHT NOW I COULD CRY (phoenixfrost).” Others however were still excited but more muted, “@SirensUSA So glad I started watching, can't believe this show is real. Ty & @_kellyosullivan for respectfully portraying an asexual on TV! (@dana_LaBerge),” while others just expressed simple thanks. “@SirensUSA Hey, thanks for Voodoo. Never thought I'd see an explicitly asexual character on TV <3 (@paugeisnotreal).”

It's important to note that the inclusion of an asexual character in *Sirens* was not a faithful adaption of the British material, but an intentional deviation, as the original show had no such character like Voo. Bob Fisher, the creator of the U.S. version of *Sirens*, told *Slate* that when they were adapting the show they thought about friends who identified as asexual, and said, “We did some research, and we thought that it would be an interesting thing to explore.” Fisher stated that they saw an asexual character as a unique twist on the conventional will-they-won't-they relationship plotline. “It's an entirely new spin on that issue, because you have a character who won't. If they feel a strong friendship, how do they navigate that?”

This leads to another interesting aspect of the show, that of the relationship between Brian, a heterosexual man, and Voo, an asexual woman, as well as her later relationship with another asexual man (Screw the One Percent). A show with an asexual person is rare enough, but to have that person shown in two different, relationships, one with a straight man, is completely unheard of. While the majority of *Sirens* deals with canon asexuality, it does dip into implication by not explicitly addressing Voo's potential aromanticism. Although the show never defines aromanticism or separates it from asexuality, based on Voo's interest in dating, as well as her comments about liking "men who act and look like men, (The Finger)," I believe it's safe to assume she is probably not aromantic.

However, as I stated above, I do believe this is one area where *Sirens* missed the mark a little because, although Voo has a relationship with Brian, their relationship ultimately fails. Voo is convinced Brian cannot have a relationship without sex, and although he denies it at first, Brian is also shown to struggle, miserable without sex (Transcendual). In reality, many couples successfully navigate the difficulties of having an asexual and non-asexual relationship, and I think having Brian and Voo break up so soon was a missed opportunity to really show an asexual person in a healthy, long term relationship. Although Voo herself is shown as quite outgoing and sociable, in general asexual people are often viewed as misfits with few social skills (Scherrer), and depicting an asexual character in a longterm relationship could have fought that stereotype. It strikes me that perhaps the show tried so hard to emphasize how necessary sex was to Brian's relationship in order to emphasize how unnecessary it was for Voo, without considering the more nuanced benefits a depiction a relationship between an asexual and a non-asexual person could bring.

I also have an issue with the implications Voo's character creates when combined with her asexuality. On the show, Voo is depicted as having an intense scientific curiosity, almost giddiness about extremely dark, morbid and disgusting things. Her nickname, Voodoo, comes from her interest in the occult. In one episode, Brian gives her a severed human finger as a way of asking her out, which she accepts with delight (The Finger). The other EMT's often remark on this, and call her different, "not like other humans," and, "Darth Vader with tits dark (The Finger)." They joke that if Brian were going to date her, he'd probably end up dismembered or tied up in a dungeon (The Finger). By itself, this aspect of Voo could be seen as a refreshing, feminist take on womanhood; however, when combined with her asexuality, a troubling implication arises, that it's her asexuality that causes her to be less than human.

As was said earlier, often the only character in a work that isn't interested in sex is also the character that is the greatest removed from humanity, and displays the least human like traits. A good example is be the android Data from Star Trek, another human adjacent character that has attempted romance and sex on a few occasions to please other humans, but has no sexual or romantic desire of his own (In Theory). Another example would be the many incarnations of the Doctor from Doctor Who. A human-like alien, he has steadfastly refused to become romantic or sexual with his female or male companions over the years, puzzles over human relationships, sexuality and romance, and generally dislikes any assumption that he's sexually attracted to humans. In fact in an interview, Matt Smith, who at that time was playing the 11th Doctor, actually said that he played the character as asexual. "The Doc's idea of an orgy is playing chess with an ostrich. His brain doesn't work in that way. He would find it weird and peculiar. He finds women peculiar. He is quite asexual (S6 E5)."

Or look at Sherlock Holmes, the detective iconic for his observational skills, but also his inability to express human emotions. In a letter written by Sir Arthor Conan Doyle in 1892 to his mentor Joseph Bell, Doyle discusses Holmes sexuality where he compares him to a machine. "Holmes is as inhuman as a Babbage's Calculating Machine, and just about as likely to fall in love (Conan 1892)," he writes. Or consider this paragraph in the story, where Dr. Watson writes about Holmes admiration of Irene Adler. "All emotions, and [love] particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen... (Doyle 239)." In these short examples, we twice see Doyle compare Holmes to a machine, cold, calculating, and above all unable to love or feel love, and unfortunately fairly representative of the depictions of asexuality in more modern media. So while it's nice that *Sirens* took time to fully develop a nontraditional portrayal of femininity on television, unfortunately this characterization of Voo as "not like other humans" alongside her asexuality, reinforces some troubling ideas.

In this same scene, the characters make several more remarks about Voo's asexuality, calling it a "pathology," "strange," and "boring" (The Finger). So while the EMT's seem to fully grasp and respect the fact Voo will never want sex, and never indicate a desire to "fix" her, they also mock her sexuality for being strange and boring, and medicalize it by calling it a pathology, which plays into the long history of non-heterosexual identities being classified as pathologies, diseases or deviancy. Recent research on the topic of asexual individuals coming out found that the majority of them faced pathologization by partners, friends, family or acquaintances when coming out, and many more reported isolation, unwanted sex and relationship conflict ("What Does Asexuality Teach Us" 7-8; Robbins et al.).

Although authors cannot dictate how an audience receives their message, they can help add certain perspectives that didn't exist before, and while I believe that authorial additions are the weakest part of any work, as and all works can and should stand alone, understanding how the author interprets their own work can lend valuable understanding. True to this, the word of God from *Sirens* creators lends new context to this scene. In the interview for *Slate*, Fisher stated that they introduced the about asexuality for the express purpose of dispelling them for the audience. "In the first episode that we dealt with Voodoo's asexuality, we allowed the guys to make some jokes about it, but that was actually to knock down a series of tropes that you will hear people say about asexuals, (Slate)." He goes on to say that they were also careful to respect Voo's asexuality and not get "cheap laughs" from it. So while Voo's personality still has troubling implications when tied with her asexuality, with the context the interview grants, I believe this particular scene and the one before it can be seen in a new light, as a scene explicitly designed by the writers to educate the audience on asexuality. And indeed, minutes later in the next scene, Brian discusses the intensive research he did on asexuality the night before (The Finger), and talks about the legitimacy of it as a sexuality, as well as the asexual movement and their symbol. However, the notion of her asexuality continues to be mocked by the other EMT's, both gay and straight, despite Brian's best efforts to inform them on the topic.

In addition, given the writers' comments, I believe a much bigger significance comes from the fact the pathology statement came from a gay EMT. As asexuality has gained more recognition as a movement and sexuality, it has begun to encounter resistance on whether or not (cisgender) asexual aromantics truly belong in the LGBT community. This argument has mostly played out in online communities, most notably Tumblr, and other microblogging platforms. The argument goes that the LGBT community was founded exclusively to provide safe spaces for

people who have experienced homophobia or transphobia, which means trans people and people who experience same gender attraction. And since cis asexual aromantics experience no attraction, and are not trans, they should not have access to LGBT resources (Radioactive; Tiredofcishets; Aphobiakills). On the other side however is the argument that says, as a marginalized sexuality which does not align with heteronormative practices, asexuals deserve recognition and acceptance in LGBT spaces. This argument also often includes a comparison to the struggle the trans community faced decades ago to be included in the lesbian and gay community, and how they were also met with the argument that their modes of oppression and movement goals were too different from the lesbian and gay community's (Asexuality Archive; Griff). Raymond argues that queer is a "category in flux (98)," and says that while there is no consensus on the term, it should be fluid, politically radical, and reject binary categories such as heterosexual/homosexual. She says queer tends to be more "universalizing" rather than "minoritizing" (98) and that it works to problematize certain questions that have otherwise been standard in gay and lesbian theory. I find this definition (or lack thereof) to be useful in my own work with asexuality, as asexuality often finds itself on the fringes of both queer and straight, and has trouble finding a place in both.

The question of whether asexuals are inherently LGBT, and whether they can claim and use LGBT terms like queer, can and should be its own separate paper, but addressing that issue is not my goal here. The extremely brief and simple arguments I laid out above do not do either side justice and are only intended to give the smallest of contexts in order for you to better understand the deeper conflicts running beneath this scene. Fisher said in the *Slate* interview that he believes it's human nature for people to joke about something they don't really understand, or that makes them uncomfortable. The fact that Fisher deliberately chose a gay EMT to make the

pathologizing remarks on asexuality speaks to how seriously Fisher might view these divides, if he was aware of them, which I believe he was given the amount of research he claimed to do.

Overall, *Sirens* provides one of the first canon depictions of asexuality on mainstream television. Its long term focus on the character's asexuality allows for an in depth analysis of its framing and positioning, and its depiction of a relationship between an asexual and non-asexual character is unique on television.

The Olivia Experiment

Although it had little cultural impact, I chose to analyze *The Olivia Experiment* because it's perhaps the first full length, non-documentary film about asexuality. This provides a unique opportunity because most works that currently feature asexual characters are television shows.

The Olivia Experiment, an independent comedy film which premiered on November 2012, was produced by Mansfield Films and directed by Sonja Schneck. The plot focuses on Olivia, a 27-year-old grad student who is a virgin and suspects she might be asexual but isn't sure. As a grad student in Gender Studies, she decides to make an experiment out of it, and goes about documenting and filming her journey into sex.

Overall, I found *The Olivia Experiment* had a strangely mixed view of sexuality, pairing innovative and progressive depictions of asexuality right alongside harmful stereotypes of not only asexuality, but bisexuality as well, which I will mention but not explore in depth. The film opens with Olivia attending an asexual support group. The audience hears voices of asexual individuals discussing their struggles with being intimate with their partner, trying and failing to achieve arousal through masturbation, or the first time they realized they were asexual. The

support group welcomes Olivia as a new member and encourages her to tell her story. She is hesitant at first, saying that she's not even sure if she's asexual. The group leader reassures her and tells her many of them tried on different identities at first, but that it "wasn't until we found other aces that we could really find a label that fit." The other group members chime in with the labels they tried on and proceed to list gay, bi, straight, and cross dresser. Emboldened, Olivia begins by mentioning that she has struggled with intimacy issues and then goes into a light rant about how society constantly pushes sex at people. She then discusses her difficulties of living in such a world saying, "I can't function normally in society, and I need to work on that."

This scene functions as an intimate and unique look into the daily lives and struggles of asexual people, primarily painting them as fairly average individuals, concerned with things that many other people deal with such as relationship intimacy or issues of identity. Their asexuality is portrayed as natural and like any other sexuality, rather than as a punchline, illness, or deformity. Unfortunately, we never see this support group or members again beyond this three minute scene, but given that a single asexual person shown on screen is so rare—let alone a group—I think this scene is particularly valuable as a way to normalize asexuality for mainstream audiences who might enter into the film with no context for what asexuality is.

However, after such an interesting opening scene, almost all of that progress is undermined by the proceeding interaction. After the meeting is over and as Olivia begins to leave, the group leader approaches her and tells her she should consider trying another support group, saying that sometimes "people use asexuality to hide." Although it's not stated, it's implied that the group leader doesn't quite believe Olivia is asexual, and perhaps thinks that Olivia might just be dealing with some unresolved intimacy issues. I think this is a particularly puzzling and troubling approach for the film to take, especially because of how heavily the film

emphasized the fluidity of sexual identity, exploration and “finding yourself” in the first 5 minutes, only to suggest that Olivia is using asexuality as an excuse or faking it. As Chasin and Emens have noted, Western society privileges sexuality as normative, implying that asexuality is an illegitimate or even nonexistent sexual identity; and this moment in the film reiterates that implication. Of course the main plot revolves around the fact that Olivia herself isn’t quite sure of her sexuality, so I would expect doubt to be a prominent theme in the film, but this is still a troubling way for the film to emphasize the notion of asexuality as potentially “fake,” and the theme of uncertainty could have been expressed in a much more affirming way, such as having Olivia return again and again to the support group to update them on her progress, and have her receive recognition that whatever identity she decides on, even if it isn’t asexuality, is valid.

Interestingly, however, this isn’t the only time that an asexual support group has been shown on screen. *Shortland Street* is New Zealand’s longest running drama and soap opera and one of the most watched television programs in the country. In the show, the character Gerald slowly begins to realize he’s asexual. He eventually attends an asexual support group and the contrasts between the two depictions are immediately evident. *In Shortland Street*, the group is much more casual and more encouraging of exploration and uncertainty. They help Gerald come to terms with his asexuality and let him know it’s okay if he isn’t completely sure. This is a huge contrast with how *The Olivia Experiment* portrays the group, where the group leader almost insists that Olivia must be certain she’s asexual before being allowed to join. Overall, *Shortland Street* is a much healthier depiction of a group whose very nature is supposed to be supportive.

Over the course of the film, the group leader is by far not the only one to question Olivia’s asexuality. As she continues her experiment, parents, friends and colleagues continually doubt her sexuality and continually suggest that she might simply be shy or not well adjusted, a

classic response to asexuality. After the support group, the first reaction the viewers see to the possibility that she might be asexual is one of doubt. It comes from Julian, a gay man who is her roommate and close friend. He tells her he doesn't think she's asexual and that she "might want to try sex as an option." This rhetoric does accurately portray the real life oppression which asexuals can face in the LGBT community, but unlike *Sirens*, the film does not try to refute this harmful idea that asexuals simply need to "try sex" as the whole film is about this very concept. And unlike *Sirens*, there has been no Word of God that could establish this scene as an intentional commentary on how asexuality is viewed in the LGBT community. There is a delicate balance that needs to be toed between encouraging someone's self-exploration into their own sexuality and insisting that the only way for someone's identity to be valid is if they actually engage in sex is crossing it. Unfortunately, given the lack of authorial context and the ambiguity in the film, I believe this film falls on the latter side more than the former. However, to the film's credit, it does seem to finally refute this idea in the extreme end of the film, but even this is vague and requires immense interpretation.

One of the biggest redeeming points for the film is the way in which it frames the experiment. Olivia is filming the experiment for her studies, and a camerawoman follows her around filming everything. At many points in the film Olivia turns directly to the camera and addresses the audience, explaining why she's making certain choices. The framing here is quite clever, as the movie literally turns the camera around and makes Olivia the viewer, not the object. This grants her a much higher level of agency in the movie, and indeed, overall, Olivia herself provides the great majority of the drive to complete the experiment and have sex, rather than any outside influences. After she decides to create the experiment, Olivia speaks directly to her camera saying, "I'm scholar who believes in the close readings to text as a means of

approaching understanding, yet I have repeatedly failed at my own self-analysis, and hope that this effort will enable me to interpret my own situation.” Olivia clearly feels she doesn’t know enough about herself to declare for certain what her sexuality is and this experiment will get her closer to the answers she seeks. There are several times where other characters do indeed suggest she shouldn’t go through with the experiment if she’s truly not comfortable with the idea of having sex, but she remains determined to try. By emphasizing Olivia’s control over the experiment, I believe the film does help to create a narrative of self-exploration rather than outside influences pressuring her into engaging in sex.

But while the film seems to recognize and uphold the idea that asexuality in general is real and valid, it continually re-emphasizes that Olivia’s asexuality might not be. The film leaves it intentionally vague whether or not Olivia is actually asexual, or if she has simply been too awkward and unsociable to ever get a relationship up to this point, a common portrayal of asexuality in the media. In the ending however, she addresses her camera for the last time and states that “every legitimate experiment has a conclusion, and so it follows logically, this experiment might not be entirely legitimate.” As her new, male partner steps into the camera, she looks at him and then addresses the camera with, “However, a gray zone isn’t always a terrible place in which to be,” and the credits roll. While the viewer is left to draw their own conclusions of whether or not Olivia is actually asexual, this ending seems to signal that ultimately it’s not important, and that Olivia is giving up on her official experiment in favor of a more “natural” exploration of her sexuality with the understanding that she might not truly ever know herself. While the idea that sexuality is fluid and not always easily defined or important is a very feminist concept, in this context it still leaves me frustrated. I see a similarity between this attitude and those who claim we live in a post-racial society, that skin color shouldn’t matter and that they

“don’t see color.” While gender, sexuality or skin color should ultimately not factor into how society judges a person, this is not the reality for many queer people. For many asexual people who face discrimination from both their LGBT peers and mainstream heteronormative society, their sexuality is a vital part of their identity, it shapes who they are and how they perceive, and are perceived by, the world. With so few depictions of asexuality in the media already, creating a whole movie about asexuality and then ending it on a note of indifference towards the topic seems counterproductive.

In the end, I believe by choosing to highlight the “will-she-won’t-she” of Olivia’s journey, and ending the film on a purposefully ambiguous note, the film undermines any message it was attempting to convey about the validity and importance of her asexuality, as well as others. With the film ending how it does, I struggled on whether to categorize Olivia’s asexuality into canon or implied. Fittingly, this seemed to parallel the struggle Olivia herself faced for the majority of the film in trying to identify herself. However, once I realized exactly how unsure I was if Olivia ended up identifying as asexual, I knew the film and Olivia herself needed to be sorted as implied. Although the theme of the movie was very exactly asexual, as for canon asexual representation, it’s not. As a viewer, the conclusion I felt forced into by the film was that it ultimately doesn’t matter what your sexuality is. And while this message may be comforting to some, for the majority of asexual people looking for simple representations of themselves on film and television, I believe this ending did more harm than good.

Bojack Horseman

One of the biggest moments in the asexual community came in the summer of 2016 when the final episode of the third season of the popular Netflix original show *Bojack Horseman* premiered. A quick search of Twitter during that time turns up a gamut of emotions, the majority of which ranged from disbelief, “Can you believe Bojack Horseman has a canon ace character because I'm still processing” (@leiaskeywalkers), to admiration, “bojack horseman is the first show i've seen with an explicitly asexual character. heart. eyes” (@takeallofspace), to something a little stronger. "OH MY GOD DID BOJACK HORSEMAN JUST CANONLY CONFIRM TODD AS QUEER AND/OR POSSIBLY ASEXUAL I AM SCREAMING RIGHT NOW THIS IS A GR8 SHOW" (@adelaideclare9).

While a comedic, animated television show featuring an alcoholic, anthropomorphic horse seems like an unusual venue for breaking new ground in the media representation of sexuality, nevertheless that is exactly what *Bojack Horseman* has seemed to accomplish.

Bojack Horseman was not the first show to feature an asexual character on television, but it was perhaps the most popular show to American viewers, and had one of the most widely celebrated. For the asexual community, this moment was huge. For the first time asexual people were able to see themselves and their journey reflected accurately: not as a joke or an illness, but as a legitimate sexuality in a fully developed, main character.

As a story about asexuality, *Bojack Horseman* is all about the implication of asexuality, and not the direct confirmation, and while it left me applauding it, it also left me wishing it had gone even further. There are currently 37 episodes in the show, each with a runtime of 25 minutes, and the show has ended its third season, with a fourth set to premiere mid 2017. Often

called equal parts dark and funny, the show was created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and stars Will Arnett as Bojack, and Aaron Paul as Todd Chavez, an on and off entrepreneurial genius and Bojack's freeloading roommate. *Bojack Horseman* has received high praise from critics for providing some of the most poignant satire of Hollywood, celebrity culture and the film industry on television today. It currently holds 100 percent approval ratings on Rotten Tomatoes and a 90 percent on Metacritic indicating "universal acclaim."

However, despite its witty commentary, the show didn't truly earn the distinction of being groundbreaking until the final episode of its third season. In the episode entitled, "That Went Well," Todd has a discussion with a former girlfriend about his sexuality. In it, Todd comes out as asexual, and in doing so, becomes one of the first leading asexual characters on television. I will be discussing the whole show, however the majority of my analysis will be on season three, as that is where the show begins to explore Todd's asexuality.

Nico W., an asexual individual and writer for the popular women-focused pop culture website The Mary Sue, wrote on how closely the emotions depicted in *Bojack Horseman* mirrored their own real life self-realization and coming out process. "I was bewildered by just how realistic the portrayal was. The very words that Todd used to describe his sexuality (or lack thereof) had escaped my own lips, practically verbatim, on more than one occasion... To not only have my obscure orientation depicted on a mainstream show, but also to have it be an entirely accurate representation of my experience, was nothing short of mind-boggling" (W., 2016).

While searching for commentary on Todd's asexuality, I found a similar idea resurfacing again and again. Asexual viewers were struck by how close to home Todd's journey was to their own. From childhood to young adulthood, unsure of what makes him different and afraid to ask, many viewers, like Nico, saw themselves represented for the first time on television. It's

important however here to note that so far, every asexual character which I have discussed has been white. Despite asexuality in general becoming a more popular topic to explore in television and film, asexual people of color have still not seen themselves represented on screen, and have undergone their own symbolic annihilation. And although a discussion on the sexualities of people of color is its own thesis, I think it's important to touch upon this issue and how it relates to asexuality. A large part of the way brown and black people are dehumanized and oppressed in the Western world is by emasculation and de-sexualization—the sexually unappealing mammy, the stereotype of effeminate Asian men, etc.—or hypersexualization (Compulsory Sexuality 141). In many ways people of color don't get the luxury of being asexual, as they are already struggling to reclaim their sexuality for themselves and have it depicted on screen.

The reveal to Todd's asexuality throughout season 3 is long, subtle and slow. Many viewers didn't pick up on the clues being laid down until immediately before the final scene, and the words asexual are never actually said throughout the show, even in the final episode, which I will discuss later. Because of the intentional framing of his asexuality as a surprise, the majority of the asexual representation in this show is therefore connotative and implied, and requires the viewer to go back to rewatch scenes with the asexual framework in mind to fully grasp the meaning the writers intended.

The first episode that touches on Todd's sexuality is in Season Three, episode two. In this episode, the show flashes back to the year 2007, when Todd was still in high school. We see him talking with his friend Emily. She asks him who he likes and he responds truthfully by saying he doesn't like anyone. Emily is incredulous and says he has to like someone. He stammers and eventually, half-heartedly says the name of a popular female classmate. Emily is disappointed and almost says "I love you" but catches herself. Later, they are shown in a closet at a party for

the classic “game” Seven Minutes in Heaven. Todd is obviously uncomfortable and asks how soon he can leave. Emily takes this to mean that he’d rather be with the other girl he mentioned, but he confesses he’s nervous because he’s never actually kissed anyone. Emily eagerly takes the lead and they kiss.

Flash forward, and we find that Emily and Todd have been dating for two months. Sitting on her parent’s bed after making out, Emily asks Todd if he’d like to have sex. Todd reacts with the same visible hesitation he did to that first kiss in the closet, and Emily immediately backtracks, saying she doesn’t want to pressure him. Despite his discomfort, Todd insists he wants to and slowly begins to take off her clothing while awkwardly babbling. However, before they can continue they are interrupted by the untimely arrival of Emily’s parents. Sometime at an unspecified point they break up for an unspecified reason. At this point Todd’s discomfort with sex and sexual attraction has been clearly established, but without the final revelation in the season finale, Todd’s reactions in this episode could easily be chalked up to the awkward fumbling of an inexperienced and shy teen, which I suspect is exactly what the writers were going for. However, with the asexual framework in mind, the complexities of what was depicted can begin to be uncovered. What is shown here is not simply an awkward, inexperienced teen dealing with sex for the first time, but a young, asexual boy struggling to navigate a world that views sex and sexual desire as inherent and natural.

Emily’s insistence that Todd must like someone displays the pressure young asexual individuals often face growing up. For Emily, sex and attraction are a part of being human, and so someone not liking another person is almost unthinkable. Again, when they’re in the closet, the assumption from Emily and the viewer is that Todd is a young man who has sexual desires, and is hesitant not because he doesn’t want to kiss her, but because he doesn’t know how to.

Studios in general tend to shy away from depicting teens or children from developing or expecting any sort of queer relationship, instead preferring to stick to older adults. Therefore this intimate look into the development of Todd's identity as a young adult is one that is particularly valuable, not only to an asexual audience, but to anyone who didn't experience traditional heteronormative attraction growing up.

In episode five of the season, Todd and Emily run into each other in the present day at a rehearsal dinner for a wedding. As they catch up Emily casually asks how Todd's girlfriend is and Todd laughs. He tells her he doesn't have a girlfriend, and says she must be so embarrassed for making such a "weird assumption," seemingly oblivious to her attempts to flirt with him. Further, his comments clearly indicate that he doesn't view having a girlfriend to be a natural assumption to make about him. Seeing the two talking, Bojack slips Todd a room key for a hotel room, telling them to go "try out the bed," and Emily is enthusiastic. Todd is now very uncomfortable but agrees nonetheless, saying he first has to have a drink or two and leaves. Later, right as Emily and Todd are about to enter the room, Todd is still agitated and quickly turns to a rather absurd excuse to distract her, asking if she wants to "jump in the laundry cart and pretend we're ghosts." Emily is annoyed with this and tells him she just wants to go have sex, and asks if he still wants to. He says yes but says it's not a good idea because she's drunk. She says she's not drunk at all, and Todd immediately says that actually he's drunk and not feeling well, and enters his room alone, leaving Emily standing in the hallway confused. Later he is shown laying, curled up on the bed looking sad.

In one of the following episodes, Emily ends up sleeping with Bojack, and both of them agree to keep it a secret. When tensions get to high however, Emily sits down with Todd and explains that she can't stay and work on their business venture together with him anymore and

that's she's leaving, in part because of Bojack. Despite her obvious allusions to the fact they had sex, Todd doesn't seem to pick up on this and is later shocked to find out they slept together, further indicating his lack of ability to pick up on social cues involving sex.

In the finale, Todd and Emily are sitting in a diner booth when she finally bluntly asks him if he's gay and tells him it's okay if he is. Todd is shocked and stammers out an answer. "I'm not gay," he says. "I mean, I don't think I am. But I don't think I'm straight, either. I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing." Immediately Emily smiles and tells him it's okay, and they both relax, and soon after the scene cuts. This is all the further development Todd gets on the show as the final credits roll a little later.

This scene struck me as unique for several reasons, the biggest of which is Emily's immediate acceptance of Todd's answer. Very rarely are characters met with that level of acceptance when coming out, and it was very refreshing to see this. In addition, although it was an end of season reveal, it was not played for shock value; there was no drama in the scene and no jokes made about Todd's sexuality. It was framed rather as a simple and heartfelt moment between two friends.

However, my main issue with the scene is that it never actually uses the word asexual. One of the biggest issues facing asexual representation in media is the lack of explicitly named asexuals. Having Todd or Bojack or Emily use the word would have been an enormous accomplishment for mainstream television and a big step for asexual activists. However, I still want to give the show a lot of credit here because while I do sincerely wish they'd used the word, because of the point Todd is at in his journey, it feels natural and fitting to have him express himself in this way. In Season One Todd was a millennial couch potato without a care or ambition in the world. However, over three seasons, he's grown into a 25-year-old who is just

beginning to come into himself as a person and is just on the very fringes of what figuring out his life's goals and dreams. When it comes to his sexuality, therefore, it's not much of a shock for the audience when they realize that maybe he hasn't quite gotten that figured out either. Having Todd unable to completely and accurately articulate exactly what he's feeling, and instead showing him tiptoeing through social interactions, trying to figure out what makes him different, comes off as an authentic portrayal of self-exploration rather than a crude stereotype. For many young asexual people, Todd's journey as shown here mimics much of their own experiences growing up without an exact name to put to what they felt inside.

Perhaps one of the most important things *Bojack Horseman* did for asexuality was humanize it, an ironic thing coming from a show where half the cast is animals. The few rare times asexuality is represented on film, asexuals are usually represented as robots, aliens or given traits like psychopathy or reclusiveness. Todd however is very human. Lovable, weird, flawed, and wonderful, he's perhaps one of the most human characters on the show.

Because this was the last episode of the final season so far, it's anyone's guess where the show will take Todd's story now. And while one can hope the writers handle it with care and dignity, helping him to grow as a character, all we really have to go off of is the Word of God from interviews with the creators and actors. In an interview with *Decider*, the creator of the show, Bob-Waksberg, seemed to indicate that he does eventually plan on labeling Todd, but held off on it for character development reasons, saying, "I guess I'm avoiding putting a label on him at this point because he's yet to put a label on himself." Aaron Paul, Todd's voice actor also said in an interview with the *New York Times* that he believes Todd may be "the first asexual character on television." While this is not true, it heavily suggests that the label they will end up using will in fact be asexual. However, regardless of whatever direction *Bojack Horseman*

eventually goes however, I don't believe it will diminish what the show has accomplished so far. By grounding a story of lack of asexuality—or at least of lack of sexual desire—in a respectful and successful way, the show has given asexual viewers a small bit of the much needed representation they so deserve.

Where Does that Leave Us?

Taken together, these shows paint a complex picture of how asexuality is depicted in popular culture today. However, these three pieces of media are, unfortunately, an exception to the norm. These works, plus the New Zealand show *Shortland Street*, are arguably the only works in popular culture today which deal with themes of asexuality in any meaningful, explicit way. As asexuality has risen to public consciousness, more and more television shows and films have chosen to canonically name characters as asexual. However, those characters are most often either side characters, appearing once and then disappearing forever, or if they are a main character, their asexuality is brought up once and then never addressed again, making any sort of in depth critical analysis almost impossible. Very rarely are asexual characters given their own story lines or allowed any agency in the show. At best the depictions focus on the asexual character and deal with in-depth and nuanced topics like we have seen in *Sirens*, *Shortland Street*, and even *the Olivia Experiment* (despite her reluctance to identify as asexual in the end). These shows allow asexual characters to address complex issues like relationships, desire, and living in a world that seems to be constantly sexualized.

Lower down the ladder are the canonical, less powerful and effective depictions: shows which name characters as asexual in a respectful yet very superficial way, such as Poppy from

Huge (Movie Night), or the random, unnamed extra in *Faking It* (Untitled), or Jughead from *Archie Comics* (Zdarsky and Henderson). At worst are the depictions of asexuality which actively push harmful stereotypes about it, such as the *House* episode.

However, as stated earlier, most asexual ‘representation’ is connotative, falling into the category of implied asexuality. These characters are not explicitly asexual; rather they are covertly coded as such, in ways very reminiscent of Gross’ 1991 analysis of how gay men and lesbian women were coded decades ago. Hinted at through these codes, viewers get to witness characters who just “aren’t interested in sex,” rather than characters who are explicitly asexual. There are no mentions of the word asexuality, just characters who “don’t like sex.” Again, at best they’re engaging and thought provoking like in *Bojack Horseman*, exploring the complications of existing without sexual desire in a sexualnormative world, even if they don’t explicitly use the word asexual. This can also be seen in the fairly neutral depiction of asexuality in *Doctor Who*, a character who is intelligent, brave and generally a positive role model, or the Professor from *Gilligan’s Island*, whose character, in an unusual move for the time, said onscreen that he had no interest in sex or romance, and who was described by the actor as being asexual (Dunham).

At worst, however, these depictions perpetrate the myths that asexuality is a result of lack of empathy or caused by medical issues, such as the eunuch Varys from *Game of Thrones* who says he has never had an interest in women or men (The Laws of Gods and Men). However, there is a debate regarding if this is positive or negative representation given the fact Varys is an eunuch, although Varys does imply he didn’t have sexual desire even before he was castrated. There’s also the serial killer Dexter who, in the very first episode of *Dexter*, makes it clear to the viewer that his apparent interest in sex and romance is all part of his “disguise” to appear more normal. “I don’t understand sex. It’s not in my nature. I don’t have anything against women, and I

certainly have an appropriate sensibility about men, but when it comes to the actual act of sex, it just seems so undignified” (Pilot). Thus the conclusion the viewer is left with is that sexual desire is natural and good and only someone with physical or mental illness would avoid it.

The lowest and least effective or meaningful level is the Word of God, where representations of asexuality aren't made explicitly canonical or even hinted at in the show. The only evidence they exist is because the creators, the auteurs, the producers—the Gods of the fictional universe—have stated they are. *Bojack Horseman* falls into this category because although the show itself never confirmed Todd as asexual, interviews done with Todd's actor and the show's writer confirm that he is indeed asexual. However, as argued above, in addition to being in the Word of God category, the show also falls into the Implied category because it does deal with themes of asexuality, even though the character himself isn't canonical yet. Alan from the *Hangover* franchise also falls into this category, confirmed by the director as asexual (Vineyard), as well as Misty Day from *American Horror Story*, confirmed by the creator and producer of the show (Stack). However, these two shows would not fall into the Implied category as defined here, because they don't deal with asexual themes at all.

Oftentimes it isn't the characters who are explicitly described as not having a libido that are as interesting as the ones who are naturally assumed not to. No analysis of asexuality in the media can occur without inspecting the ways in which asexuality intersects with other identities. Sexualnormativity is a useful tool to identify how the “desexualization of particular groups can be used as a method of social control (Gupta “Compulsory Sexuality”). Sexualnormativity assumes most people have sexual desire, but there are certain bodies which do not fall within sexualnormative bounds and which society has forcibly removed or refused to grant sexuality in the first place. When the asexual body presented on camera aligns with the sexualnormative

assumptions about which bodies “should” be sexual, people actively demand explanations for a character’s lack of sexual desire in a way that they do not if the body falls outside of sexualnormative norms, such as trans, disabled or elderly bodies. And unfortunately, when these bodies are granted sexuality, it’s usually as a joke, as a surprise to the audience.

However, this is not always the case: we occasionally do see pushback against sexualnormativity, like when 60-year-old Golden Girl Blanche catches 80-year-old Sophia watching a dirty movie and declares, “I did that once!... it was his birthday (Isn’t It Romantic?).” Or when 79-year-old Jane Fonda and 77-year-old Lily Tomlin, spend the entirety of the third season of *Grace and Frankie* openly discussing their sex lives and starting a vibrator business for older women, and when questioned about it, yell in exasperation that “Older women masturbate too... and we have vaginas!” (The Coup) Apart from older people, people with physical disabilities are also frequent targets of asexualization in media—especially since age and disability are often conflated—as well as people of color (Collins 2004; Shimizu 2007, Shimizu 2012), people with mental disabilities (Milligan and Neufeldt 2001), and fat people (Ashill 2009).

However, when the people to whom society usually grants sexuality (white, young, able-bodied, cis) are shown as being asexual, narratives and characters demand an explanation, a justification, because surely there must be some reason why this otherwise healthy person would eschew sex. For House, it was his patient’s illness, for Olivia it her extreme social awkwardness, for Voo, it was her “weirdness,” for the Doctor it was his literal inhumanity. For viewers, these characters must be justified in order to be accepted as without sexual desire because it’s inconceivable that “normal” people exist without sexual desire. This begs the question, would House have embarked on such a quest if his asexual patients had been 60 years old? Perhaps if

they'd been obese, or in a wheelchair, would he have just assumed that a sexless life was appropriate for that identity? In this way, asexuality helps to push the bounds of sexualnormativity, deconstructing the notion that sexual desire is natural and inherent to certain humans.

Throughout this analysis, we have seen many different interpretations of asexuality. From *House's* view of asexuality as a medical condition, to *Siren's* view of asexuality as innate and unchanging, to Olivia's emphasis on the malleability of sexuality, to *Bojack Horseman's* thoughtful look into the struggles of navigating a sexual world as an asexual teen. Each one of these depictions has provided different positives and negatives for asexual representation, but the biggest difference I would like to emphasize between the shows is the way they go about the process of naming. Because asexuality is often seen as a "lack" of sexuality, theoretically every character that expresses no desire or romantic interest can be asexual or aromantic without changing anything about the story (especially in the realm of children's media where characters often have no specified sexuality, like *Stephen Universe*). The only difference then, between an asexual character and a character that just doesn't pursue sex, is that one of them is named. Because naming is so vital to asexual representation, it's vitally important to differentiate between the works which canonically name their characters as asexual and those that leave it implied. There might be only a one word difference between Canonical and Implied, but saying that one word—aseexual—offers a progressive intervention into legitimating this identity position.

As noted earlier, *Sirens* is the only one of the three works that explicitly—and repeatedly—names the character as asexual, and while *the Olivia Experiment* does deal with themes of asexuality and feature tertiary asexual characters, the title character ultimately does not

identify (or at least reveal to the viewer) as asexual. *The Olivia Experiment*, much like *Sirens*, presents the viewer with a body that falls within sexualnormative bounds (white, presumptively cis, attractive, young, able-bodied, etc.). However, where *Sirens* attempts to justify Voo's asexuality by emphasizing her dark tendencies, eccentricities, and disconnect from humanity, *the Olivia Experiment* justifies Olivia's asexuality by emphasizing her lack of social skills, suggesting that perhaps Olivia isn't asexual, but instead just extremely social inept. And while *Bojack Horseman* does neglect to name Todd as asexual, it isn't out of ignorance of what asexuality is, but a conscious choice on the creator's part to replicate the realistic journey of self-realization and actualization which so many asexual people experience. *Bojack Horseman* does not attempt to justify Todd's asexuality by medicalizing it or hinting that it's because of a lack of social skills or a disconnect with humanity.

One interesting aspect to note is that all three of the main works that I analyzed are comedies, something which I don't believe is a coincidence. Raymond states that LGBT people more often appear in comedies than dramas because of two reasons. The first is that as traditional family comedies began to disappear, space opened up for alternative narratives, including those of nontraditional "families" such as *Friends* (101). This allowed room for characters to take on positions outside of their traditional gender roles, and slowly television and film began to shift. Reason two is that situation comedies do not claim to show the audience "real life" and this lack of reality may allow them to play with themes under the cover of humor when those themes might be too controversial or sensitive to another audience. This echoes Gross's argument that studios coded lesbian and gay characters through dress or speech patterns in ways which allowed heteronormative studios to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it.

Although all three shows are comedies, the type of comedy they portray is vastly different. *Sirens* fits the stereotypical situational comedy genre much more tightly than either *Bojack Horseman* or *the Olivia Experiment*, and also emphasizes the familial bond between the members of the EMT crew, which, as Raymond said, could allow for more characters to transgress their traditional gender roles. This however, can also be limiting in that light hearted situational comedy often provides fewer opportunities for character growth and development, so in *Sirens* we see Voo, firmly established in her identity in a way that is not true of the other shows. She does not question her identity or seem to struggle with navigating a sexualized world, she is comfortable with sexual topics, and even her relationship with Brian causes her minimal anxiety. This is not true of *Bojack Horseman* and *the Olivia Experiment*, both which focus much more heavily on the journey of their asexual character, emphasizing their relationship with the sexualized world they live in as they try to find their place in it. *The Olivia Experiment* repeatedly emphasizes Olivia's inability to understand certain social cues, and in fact much of the comedy of the show derives from this as well as her discomfort with sex, relationships or her own body. Of the three shows, *Bojack Horseman* is the darkest, and it doesn't shy away from employing humor on tough subjects like depression, abuse, alcoholism and disillusionment. This style is very introspective, and it places a heavy focus on character journey, something which allows the show to depict Todd struggling with his own identity in a way that seems very real.

That's a Wrap

Although much of what I've written about has been doom and gloom for asexual representation, things are getting better. More and more asexual artists are gaining influence in media creation and beginning to add asexual characters to existing works or create their own.

Given the accessibility and cheapness of web content for creators without a lot of resources, web media including web comics and web video series in particular has seen a surge of asexual characters as people seek to create representations of themselves where mainstream media fails. As Grace from *Grace and Frankie* says (about recognizing sexuality in older women), “We're making things for people like us, because we are sick and tired of being dismissed by people like you” (The Coup).

Although in-depth, accurate depictions of asexuality are still rare in mainstream media, casual representation of asexuality is improving. Even though we don't know their name, the random extra in *Faking It*, screaming their asexual pride out loud on camera, points to a small step forward for the representation of this developing sexuality, as does every Poppy from *Huge*. Even Jughead from Archie Comics—despite the recent controversy with the television show erasing his asexuality (Alexander)—the mere fact that he was canonically confirmed as asexual last year by writers after just being the goofy sidekick more interested in hamburgers than girls for the last 80 years is a huge accomplishment. However, whatever the future holds, asexuality has undeniably made its mark on popular culture, in a way that has paved the way for increased awareness of this small but growing community, proving to mainstream society that asexuality is in fact not just for those who are sick, dead or lying.

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