ASEXUAL ASSEMBLAGES: THINKING ASEXUALLY
ABOUT SEXUAL (DIGITAL) CITIZENSHIP

by

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Preface

Due to my proximity to this scholarly investigation, which focuses on asexuality and the asexual community online, I begin with a personal preface. Asexuality and the asexual community are both closely tied to my lived experience as a grace or grey ace.¹ Prior to self-identifying under the asexual umbrella, I discovered asexuality online. In late 2012, I stumbled upon a flourishing community of asexual writers, artists, and activists on the microblogging website Tumblr. I became intrigued with the identity and soon followed a number of asexual-oriented blogs and asexual-identified users. In doing so, my Tumblr dashboard (or homepage feed) became a free, open, and scrollable source to learn about asexuality. Some posts featured narratives, memes, or links to documentaries and websites. Other posts offered humourous puns, daily affirmations, or links to politicized discussions surrounding asexual experiences and representations in media. Through text posts, images, and interactions with content creators, I found words to articulate my experiences and a community of welcoming individuals who shared those or similar experiences. In the past five years, I have witnessed the asexual community’s growth, its development of new discourses, and its support of sibling queer identities, like the aromantic spectrum. I now belong to an ever-expanding asexual community on Tumblr, which includes ace people of colour, religious asexuals, pop culture aficionados, and many others. The multitude of asexual-oriented posts on Tumblr allow for self-identified asexuals, our allies, and those browsing Tumblr to engage with asexuality and its vibrant community. My grey ace identity and my participation online have led to a personal investment in asexual politics. This research project serves as a site of my accountability and responsibility to the asexual community as a member, scholar, and activist.

¹ Grace and grey ace are colloquial identity labels for grey asexuality.
This paper’s structural backbone is a critique of sexual normativity. The term originates from a blog post by Andrew Hinderliter in 2009. Sexual normativity denotes the normalization of sex. It is often depicted as analogous to heteronormativity since both are naturalized norms. Each operates as a “universal and privileged way of being” that is “normalized and socially supported” (Chasin “Theoretical Issues” 719). However, as CJ Deluzio Chasin argues, “these analogies are not perfect” (“Making Sense” 169). That is, sexual normativity and heteronormativity work in tandem as two pervasive norms, but are not necessarily comparable (Carrigan “How Do You Know” 17). They are two different systems of regulation. Sexual normativity in particular draws attention to how normality is “tied to the sexual, but not necessarily entirely to the heterosexual” (Gupta “Compulsory Sexuality”135). In their arguments against sexual normativity, asexuality scholars and activists like Julie Sondra Decker highlight how “non-asesexual-spectrum queer individuals” are more likely to “share with heterosexual people the experience of sexual attraction,” sexual desire, and/or sex practices (46). Due to this affinity between queer and heterosexual individuals, sexual normativity can often go “unnoticed by non-asesexual people who have never had to experience the difficulties of being ‘impossible’” (Chasin “Making Sense” 170). The seeming impossibility of asexuality as “a viable lived experience” allows for an easy dismissal of the sexual norm (Milks and Cerankowski 3). Thus, sexual normativity has “avoided widespread recognition or scrutiny” (Carrigan “How Do You Know” 17). When sexual normativity is acknowledged, there tends to be “a defence of sexuality” and a pathologization of asexuality (Przybylo “Crisis” 452). The defense of the sexual norm is very similar to the defense of heterosexuality, but is more pernicious in its complete disregard for the possibility of asexuality.

2 Hinderliter’s blog post “Lexicon Fail” attempted to humorously propose several terms for the asexosphere to take up. See asexystuff.blogspot.ca/2009/01/lexicon-fail.html
To examine and dismantle sexual normativity, we must differentiate the rhetoric and recognize how queer minorities continue to be “neglected and rendered invisible” by those who benefit from and are complicit in the sexual norm (Przybylo and Cooper 299). This differentiation is messy because many of the terms and arguments against sexual normativity mimic terms used to critique heteronormativity. For example, compulsory sexuality (a term I will discuss in detail) is closely related but not analogous to Adrienne Rich’s term compulsory heterosexuality. The parallels between terms and critiques arguably are historically and linguistically bounded. Terminology often depends on the “language provided for us by history” (Chasin “Making Sense” 177). Historically, language about sexuality has been heterosexually-oriented. Even in feminist and queer critiques, “we are limited by what is possible within the discourses we can access” (177). Linguistically, there is a relation between sexuality and asexuality. Ela Przybylo writes that asexuality references and “embeds sexuality into its very structure linguistically” (“Crisis” 452). The two “rely on each other for meaning” and asexuality “functions to stabilize sexuality” (Przybylo “Introducing” 182; “Crisis” 452). Asexual terms are generally bounded to maintaining sexuality’s supremacy. Yet, asexual discourses continue to develop in ways that will move us away from a hetero-lexicon. This scholarly investigation attends to current asexual critique and terminology rather than drawing relations between heteronormativity and homonormativity. Moreover, instead of relying on comparisons this project focuses intentionally on asexual ways of being to open queer discourses. For too long queer minorities like asexuals have been ignored in queer theorizing, despite the many ways asexual theory and practice could potentially shape queer approaches to normativity and

3 They describe two different systems of regulation, see Gupta “Compulsory Sexuality” 133-135.
belonging. Thus, this project offers a queerly asexual mode of theorizing to inform, expand, and trouble feminist and queer theory.

By utilizing asexuality scholarship in conversation with assemblage theory and digital media studies, I attempt to articulate and situate an identity as a theoretical method. However, I acknowledge that there is always a hesitation to use a multifaceted identity as a mode of theorizing. This hesitation arises because theory can dangerously demarcate a rigid universality within academically produced and disseminated writing, which fluid sex and gender identities cannot be nor promise to be. Theory tends not to acknowledge the contingent complicity and responsibility it has to individuals living marginalized experiences. Identity politics attempts to rectify the exclusion of individuals from theory. In her monograph *Feminism is Queer*, Mimi Marinucci defines identity politics as the “political and theoretical activity based on solidarity among members of the same identity category” (81). In regards to asexuality, I argue that asexual identity politics has favoured political action over asexual theory. For instance, asexual activism has focused on visibility movements through “organized events” to promote asexuality (de Lappe 1). These events include “public acts of engagement, protest and/or unity [in order] to promote asexual aims” or lifestyles (1). Such work continues to increase asexuality’s visibility, but it has curtailed (to some extent) the political significance of asexual theoretical explorations. As appealing as it is to move away from theory, asexual political action is not enough. I argue

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4 There is a noticeable and known problem in asexuality scholarship. It replicates a white, able, Global North, and secular asexuality (Przybylo and Cooper 312). As a woman of colour, I am conscious of the pervasive whiteness in some pockets of the asexual community and much of the academic literature. In this paper I attempt to take up a citational practice to (a) balance out the whiteness of my analytical frameworks and (b) to include non-academic sources on asexuality. By doing so, I aim to disrupt (to some degree) the academic norms of what counts as acceptable citation and knowledge.

5 See Alok Vaid-Menon’s “What’s R(ace) Got To Do With It?: White Privilege & (A)sexuality” (2014).
asexual theorizing is also necessary. A holistic asexual identity politics that is concerned with both political and theoretical work can lead to new questions and methods. In her chapter “Radical Identity Politics” Erica Chu writes, “[a]sexual theory raises questions about the ways everyone may experience sexual activity, arousal, sensual attraction, desire, intimacy, romantic attachments, erotic attachments, and kinship” (93). To further Chu’s argument, I assert that asexual theorizing raises questions about socio-political organizing principles, inclusion, citizenship, and digital identity. If, as Sara Ahmed states, theorizing is produced by lived experience and work and is about “producing different ways of understanding and interpreting the world,” then asexuality can offer alternative ways of thinking about sexual practices and institutional practices (99). As I will argue, asexual theorizing is not rigid or universal, but a process, flexibly produced, bounded only by contingencies and diverse forms of being, resisting, and relating. Certainly asexuality is not the only identity to necessitate a revision of queer theorizing. However, it stands out as an active and expansive identity with the potential to enrich and transform “systems opposing oppression” (Chu 93). Incorporating and accounting for lesser-known minority identities in queer theorizing may likely lead us to “reach different

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6 Like Sara Ahmed, I prefer to “use the verb ‘theorizing’ as it makes clear that there is a process involved that does not necessarily lead to an object” (99).
7 Przybylo’s influential work titled “Afterword: some thoughts on asexuality as a dynamic interdisciplinary method” briefly discusses asexuality as an interdisciplinary method, see Carrigan et al 121-122.
8 Julie Rak and Anna Poletti discuss in the introduction of their book *Identity Technologies* that the study of online activity can “take into account ideas about what identity is, how it is formed, and how stories about identity are made” (4). A theoretical analysis of the asexual community online arguably can provide some insight into identity and the “digital forms of participation between individuals” (4).
9 Many identities and movements necessitate an expansion of queer, feminist, and critical sexuality theorizing, including the lives of Indigiqueers, people of colour, trans- and non-binary individuals, and those marginalized due to disability or neurodivergence.
conclusions, but those are conclusions we need to reach consciously, through careful and critical deliberations” for the betterment of challenging norms (Chasin “Defining Asexuality” 7).

Yet, I am aware of the asexual community’s anxiety “around becoming objects of scholarly scrutiny by those outside the community” (Milks and Cerankowski 3). Similar to other marginalized groups, the asexual community generates its own information and knowledge. In his brief discussion of asexual activism, Joseph de Lappe writes that the asexual community is keen to “promote better research” on asexuality, which often leads to asexuals “conducting research themselves … promoting such research online, and organizing events such as the Asexuality Conference 2014 in Toronto” (1). The community actively supports asexual researchers by engaging with published articles, participating in studies, and hosting conferences. However, the asexual community is hesitant toward non-asexual outsiders (read: ethnographers). It prefers research conducted by scholars who have some consultation with asexuals or a relation to asexuality. In turn, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which is the community’s online hub, has set rules for researchers. According to the AVEN website, the community implemented the research rule system in order to “protect AVENites” from “serious ethical concerns” and to “promote communication between researchers and the asexual community” (np). The AVEN’s rules for “researchers wanting to use existing data on the AVEN forums” require scholars to obtain permission from community members (np). However, the content on the AVEN’s public pages (such as the main page, its frequently asked questions, or its wiki) does not abide by these rules. Those whose research pertains to the community’s archive (rather than individual accounts, posts, or members) are encouraged only to bring their projects to the attention of the AVEN. Thus, I have contacted the AVEN about this research project.

10 The AVEN’s research “rules” are publicly available online on asexuality.org.
Further, I have adapted the AVEN’s rules to guide my investigation of Tumblr. Since Tumblr is a digital space wherein research ethics cannot be clearly distinguished, I turn to focus on discourses rather than individual online accounts/subjects and have anonymized details in my accompanying screenshots.\footnote{Tumblr accounts are generally anonymous since, as Renninger writes, “users on Tumblr rarely use their real names. Instead, they use pseudonyms or create a name that would make sense aesthetically or pragmatically as a URL. …. profiles are less tied to “singular” identities” (1521). Therefore, I have doubly anonymized users within the accompanying screenshots. I have pixilated Tumblr user accounts and all blog uniform resource locators (URLs) in the screenshots.} In this paper, I concentrate on the accumulation of online posts under shared public hashtags rather the specific contributors of the content.\footnote{I do not take any ownership for any artwork or images featured in the accompanying screenshots.} In doing so, I focus on the collective affordances of Tumblr as a digital platform for the asexual community. I also follow a feminist ethic of care due to my proximity and subjectivity, which complicates the analysis, methods, and ideas proposed throughout this project.\footnote{For a discussion on a feminist ethic of care see Joan Tronto’s chapter “An Ethic of Care” in \textit{Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology} (2005).}

In this preface I have attempted to cautiously and consciously assess the limits of the project. To conclude, I want to note that, in part, feminist-queer writers like Kath Browne and Gloria Anzaldúa influence this project. In their respective works, these scholars encourage a disruption of set definitions and patterns to open up potentialities.\footnote{See Browne 885 and Anzaldúa 79.} Similarly, I aim to disrupt sedimented queer definitions using asexual theorizing and practice(s) to possibly (re)imagine, (re)think, (re)conceptualise, and (re)assemble a different mode of queer enquiry.
Introduction

Queer theorizing creates and questions new ways of investigating and re-imagining the everyday discourses and institutions that situate and reproduce normative notions of sex and sexuality. Conceptions of queer theory have expanded from Teresa de Lauretis’s definition in 1990. Queer now intends to extend to a plurality of sexualities and possibilities that unsettle and resist normative discursive frameworks. For Kath Browne, queer is “an idea … that refutes easy definitions and challenges us to think beyond and through processes of normalization” (888). It is “attributed to actions, writings and activism that deconstruct dichotomies” and account for intersectionality (Browne 889). However, many of these actions and “artefacts” do not “remain ‘queer’ as they ... become orthodoxies and recuperated within [the] ‘normal’” (889). That is, queer contestations tend to become rigidly and normatively oriented. de Lauretis, Lisa Duggan, and Jasbir Puar have outlined the various ways queer over time has given way to forces and institutions of the normal.15 Yet, a rarely acknowledged normalizing notion has always been looming over and regulating queer theorizing.

In recent years, (a)sexuality scholars have identified a normalizing notion that posits and reinforces “sex’s centralized position” within our everyday practices, relationships, and discourses (Przybylo “Asexuality” np). Scholars like Andrew Hinderliter and CJ DeLuzio Chasin define the “treatment of sexuality as an unacknowledged and naturalised norm” as sexual normativity (Chasin “Making Sense” 169). Sexual normativity preserves “the superiority of being sexual” over being non-sexual, and especially over being asexual (Chasin “Defining Asexuality” 7). The sexual norm rules our general conceptions about maturation, health, and

15 In Queer Theory Annamarie Jagose writes that de Lauretis abandoned the term “barely three years later, on the grounds that it had been taken over by those mainstream forces and institutions it was coined to resist” (127). Duggan and Puar have led the critiques of homonormativity and homonationalism, respectively.
relationality. That is, our societal norms deem sex to be a key component of our development into healthy happy adults who can form meaningful relationships. In their 2012 study focused on prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance, and discrimination against asexuals, Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson found that sexuality is perceived to be “a key component of humanness” and that “asexual dehumanization was greater than that characterizing other sexual minorities” (734). Based on their findings, MacInnis and Hodson concluded that “characteristics/emotions representing humanness are clearly intertwined with sexuality and/or sexual desire” (734).

Sexual normativity pervades in our conception of humanness, which in turn filters down into our legal, socio-cultural, economic, and theoretical discourses. Queer theorizing exemplifies an infiltration of sexual normativity into feminist and queer discourses, wherein theory prefers to entertain the concerns and lives of sexual and romantic beings. As a result, there has been an exclusion of sexual minorities from queer theorizing. For instance, as Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper note, there is “a culturally motivated, as well as feminist and queer, disinterest in asexuality,” which has led to an absence of asexuality from queer and feminist scholarship (299). Since queer theorizing clings to the superiority of the sexual norm, the “fluidity and the slippages of queer” and its “possibilities and contestations” have become fixed (Browne 885-888). Queer theorizing struggles to expand its boundaries to include all queer possibilities and people. In this paper, I am concerned with the rigidity of queer and the practices of inclusion and exclusion it replicates.

One field of queer theorizing that remains fixed to sexual normativity is sexual citizenship scholarship, which investigates the sexualized politics of inclusion and exclusion that determine an individual’s “social membership” in a nation state, community, or other socially organized group (Cossman 7). Feminist and queer scholars question and theorize the “access to
rights granted or denied to different social groups on the basis of sexuality, including but not restricted to rights of sexual expression and identity” (Richardson 4). The majority of sexual citizenship critics have challenged the exclusion of sexual others from citizenship rights based on citizenship’s long association with heterosexuality. Yet, the queering of citizenship relies on sexually motivated arguments that continue to centralize sex and sexuality in our conceptions of subjecthood, rights, and relationships. Diane Richardson explains that sexual citizenship “writers who have advanced theoretical critiques” have focused on “the ‘sexual’ in sexual citizenship” instead of “interrogating the normative underpinnings of the concept” (2).16 To extend Richardson’s argument, I assert that queer contestations remain fixed to the sexual norm since citizenship has been and continues to be constituted through discourses of sexual normativity. This fixity poses problems for asexuals who are not imagined into the queer figure of sexual citizen. In this paper, I explore how to queerly rethink the sexual citizen once more by expanding Randi Gressgård’s proposition that the asexual community and asexuality itself “encourages us to imagine other pathways of affiliations … other conceptions of personhood … new configurations … and new meanings for sexual citizenship” (179). Therefore, this paper joins (a)sexuality scholars to emphasize the fluidity and plurality of asexuality to rethink queer contestations of sexual citizenship.

In this paper, I argue that asexuality in theory and in practice can offer avenues to rethink sexual citizenship. In the first section, I explore asexuality in theory. Similarly to Przybylo and Cooper, I theorize with a “blurrier imagining of asexuality” in order to reconceptualize asexuality through assemblage theory (298). In doing so, I bring Przybylo’s call to focus on

16 In her article, Richardson analyzes the normative Euro-North American and homonormative foundations of sexual citizenship scholarship. She notes that lesbian and gay citizenship is now incorporating work on bisexual citizenship, trans citizenship, and intersex citizenship, and concerns from people of colour, see 4.
“what [asexuality] does instead of what it does not” and Puar’s suggestion to turn our attention from “what assemblages are” towards “what assemblages do” into conversation to discuss asexual assemblages and their possibilities (“Crisis” 456; “I Would Rather” 57). I argue that when taken up as a conceptual tool, asexual assemblages offer a mode of theorizing that can challenge sedimented notions. In the second section, I focus on what asexuality does in practice to widen the field of inquiry and to ask questions about “how asexual individuals individually and collectively negotiate the social world” (Carrigan “How Do You Know” 8). Several scholars have noted how self-identified asexuals use the digital world to express themselves and engage with others. Our participation online has formed an active asexual community. Similarly to Bryce J. Renninger, I investigate the asexual community on Tumblr. However, unlike Renninger I turn to explore the asexual community’s discourses on Tumblr and the practices of belonging that emerge from these discourses. I argue that this (web)site of community belonging exemplifies how asexuality itself permits alternative practices of participation and belonging. To conclude, I discuss how asexual assemblages can help to delineate asexual citizenship because in both theory and practice asexuality permits alternative ways of thinking, being, and belonging. From this proposition, I invite further discussion on asexual citizenship and how asexuality can disrupt rigid queer theorizing and rethink queer possibilities.

Critical Frameworks

Since my aim is theory-oriented, I bring several critical frameworks into conversation. These frameworks arise from asexuality scholarship, digital media studies focused on networked publics, and sexual citizenship scholarship. These fields may seem incongruent especially since there is little scholarly interaction between them. However, when brought into direct
conversation they illuminate similarities and connections. For example, the three fields emerged fairly contemporaneously in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their development in academia suggests a juncture at the turn of the millennium that necessitated new discourses for social organizing.\textsuperscript{17} In this section I briefly outline these three fairly contemporaneous research fields, draw affinities between their critical projects, and explore their pertinence to my scholarly investigation in this paper.

Asexuality as a term and identity first appeared in the late 1990s and the term proliferated online thanks to the AVEN’s founder David Jay in the early 2000s.\textsuperscript{18} By the mid 2000s there was a “heightened degree of academic and public interest” in “human asexuality” after psychologist Anthony Bogaert published a 2004 study on what he termed a “relatively understudied phenomenon” (362). From Bogaert’s work a small field of asexuality studies has flourished in the discipline of psychology, and more recently, in critical sexuality studies. For scholars within the field, asexuality “encompasses a broad range of practices, feelings, and self-narratives” (Przybylo “Introducing” 182). Generally asexuality is defined as a sexual identity and orientation for “people who do not experience sexual attraction” or individuals “desiring to not have sex” (Milks and Cerankowski 1-2). If we consider the general definition of asexuality or if we focus on the term’s prefix (a-sexual), an assumed lack of sexual attraction and sexual desire seemingly defines asexuality. The dominant assumption is that asexuality is a “lifelong, absolute, and constant” absence of sexual attraction (Przybylo, “Introducing” 184). However, Przybylo argues that asexuality is problematically “predicated on lack, absence and ‘neverness’” (“Crisis” 445).

\textsuperscript{17} Due to the scope of this project, I will not address historical juncture or suggest reasons for the simultaneous emergence of the fields.
\textsuperscript{18} David Jay first founded the AVEN in March 2001 and slowly asexuality moved into television and print media in the mid-2000s, see wiki.asexuality.org for timelines.
Similar to other sexualities, asexuality is fluid and can change depending on “the conditions and contexts” of life (Przybylo “Introducing” 184). For some asexuals, their sexuality accounts for an innate lack that was “not a ‘choice’” (184). But for others, asexuality is conditional as it oscillates depending on various social situations. Some individuals’ sexual attraction may vary depending on who or what they are attracted towards in a certain circumstance. For example, demisexuals “only experience sexual attraction after developing [an emotional and close] bond with someone” over a period of time (Decker 39). Inherent to asexuality is its possibility to fluctuate depending on a number of variables. Therefore, as Przybylo argues, asexuality “need not define itself reactively as absence, as what it is not and what it does not” (“Crisis” 455). Instead it can define itself by what it does. For example, one’s attitude towards sex contributes (amongst other factors) to how an asexually-identified individual practices their (a)sexuality. In his article “There’s More to Life than Sex? Difference and Commonality within the Asexual Community,” Mark Carrigan offers three attitudes held by asexually identified individuals, which include the asexual attitudes of “sex-positive,” “sex-neutral,” and/or “sex-averse or anti-sex” (469-470). These attitudes are not necessarily linked to an absence. That is, asexuals act upon their individual agency and authority to set their sexual attitude and to claim their identity as each individual sees fit. Moreover, asexuality is “not determined by behaviour” or rather, a lack of behaviour (Chasin “Making Sense” 169). In “Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community,” Chasin notes, “many asexual/ace people are behaviourally celibate, whereas others participate in (often unwanted although, ideally, non-coerced [and consensual]) sexual contact with (non- asexual) partners” (169). Since asexuality is “complexly and variably lived,” it is “enacting ... difference” rather than absence (Przybylo “Crisis” 456). To reproduce static homogenized definitions of “what asexuality entails” or to assume that sexual attraction and
desire are innate capacities imposes a binary logic on a fluid sexuality (Przybylo “Introducing 184”). Therefore, the general definition of asexuality is contested and complicated by the “many ways to define, experience, and identify as asexual” (184).

In recent scholarship and activism, asexual has become an “umbrella term for all individuals who have a disinterest or aversion to sex, sexual practices, and the role of sex in relationships” (182). The umbrella term is “not taken to be an exhaustive description of the attitudes and orientations prevalent amongst asexuals,” because there are “various experiences that are possible” (Carrigan “There’s More To Life” 467; Przybylo 184).\(^\text{19}\) Notably, asexuality “acts as a common point of identification rather than constituting a shared identity per se,” especially since there is an ever-expanding, often overlapping list of identities (Carrigan “There’s More To Life” 467). Some examples of these asexual identity labels include those “who experience some degree of sexual attraction in certain contexts” such as demisexual, sapiosexual, and grey asexual (Chasin “Making Sense” 169).\(^\text{20}\) Thus, there is no one particular way to be asexual. Rather asexuality encompasses a multiplicity of identities that face sexual normativity. Since many asexual individuals navigate “a non-asexual world [that] simply has no place yet for asexual/ace people,” sexual normativity is a term crucial to our self-identification and activism (170). In his paper “Theoretical Issues,” Chasin defines sexual normativity as:

the universal and privileged way of being, which is both normalized and socially supported. Sexual normativity [sic] includes the assumption that people are sexual unless

\(^{19}\) For a list of some asexual-spectrum identities, see the AVEN forum: asexuality.org/en/topic/123256-asexuality-sexual-orientation-lexicon-read-me/
\(^{20}\) Demisexuals generally develop sexual attraction after developing an emotional bond; sapiosexuals are sexually attracted to intelligence, and grey-asexual is an overarching term for those who “primarily live with an asexual experience of the world, but can experience or have experienced [some kind of] sexual attraction and wish to acknowledge it” (Decker 36).
otherwise specified, in addition to the ideological paradigm in which asexuality needs to be explained and possibly treated clinically, while sexuality is merely and often invisibly presumed to be normal (719).

As naturalized and presumed, sexual normativity “enjoys an apparent hegemony within contemporary culture” (Carrigan “How Do You Know” 17). It is, as Kristina Gupta argues in her article “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” part of the “norms and practices that compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity” (134). As such, sexual normativity also determines “the norms and practices that marginalize various forms of nonsexuality,” which includes a “[dis-]interest in sex, ... sexual activity, or a disidentification with sexuality” (134). This system of normalization and regulation relies on a particular imperative, which asexuality scholars have conceptualized as compulsory sexuality, or the sexual imperative.21

Compulsory sexuality is “the assumption that all people are sexual” (135). For Gupta, compulsory sexuality is “a system that regulates the behavior of all people, not just those who identify as asexual” (135). Przybylo summarizes compulsory sexuality in four tiers to explain the “functionality of sex in our culture” (“Asexuality” np). In her chapter “Introducing Asexuality, Unthinking Sex,” Przybylo explains compulsory sexuality to be:

a technique that functions to prioritize both sex and sexuality, through (1) privileging sex over other forms of relating, touch, and other activities, (2) centralizing sexuality in the project of self-making and self-knowledge, (3) affixing sex to health, and (4) hinging sex to the coupled relationship, to love, and to intimacy (185).

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21 Przybylo marks that the sexual imperative originates from critical feminist psychologists Wendy Hollway, Annie Potts, and Nicola Gavey, see “Asexuality and the Feminist Politics of ‘Not Doing It’” (2011)
From Przybylo’s articulation, compulsory sexuality has constituted a set of ideals about human flourishing. As an imperative it has infiltrated our conceptions of maturity, health, and relationships. Compulsory sexuality is implicated through the legal, socio-economic, and cultural discourses in our sexusociety.\textsuperscript{22} Sexusociety is a term coined by Przybylo in her article “Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety.” She uses the term to “somehow textually indicate the diluted omnipresence of sexuality in our western contemporary present” (Przybylo “Crisis” 446). Sexusociety marks the ways “we have come to organize our practices of joy and loving, life and fulfillment as well as institutional structures around conceptualizations of the sexual imperative” (Przybylo “Asexuality” np). Crucially, sexusociety exists as a “massive conglomerate of tangentially repeated sexual language, deeds, desires, and thoughts” (Przybylo “Crisis” 447).

These sexusocial discourses hold precedence because they concretize a ubiquitous value system pertaining to sex that determines what is normal, universal, and natural. Sexusocial discourses “construct sets of possibilities, impossibilities, norms, and standards for how we experience pleasure, intimacy, and our bodies” (Przybylo “Asexuality and the Feminist Politics” 14).

Sexusocial discourses appear in normative everyday expressions, standards, and stories. They perpetuate compulsory sexuality, shape relations between people, and “create an environment that makes asexuality difficult to envisage” (26). For instance, sexusocial discourses inform the representation of asexuality in media. Sarah E.S. Sinwell writes of how asexuality is generally represented by desexualised “bodies and identities that do not fit cultural codes of desirability”

\textsuperscript{22} To provide an example of the “insidious, mundane contexts” where compulsory sexuality has seeped into everyday interactions, I choose to disclose a personal experience (Chasin “Making Sense” 170). In early 2016, I publicly received an unsolicited proposition from a medical professional. They argued that they could ‘fix’ my grey-asexcuality. They proposed a medical solution (through what I assumed to be hormonal treatments) for my health dysfunction. The proposition seemed to be suggested out of care, but actually reinforced anti-asexual discrimination.
That is, asexuality is often linked to “fatness, disability, Asian-ness, and nerdiness,” but also to “sexual trauma, sexual abuse, hormonal imbalance, or sexual dysfunction” (166, 168). Rather than being imagined as a possible thriving identity, asexuality is problematically envisioned through sexusocial discourses that demean an array of subjects. Sexusocial discourses percolate into more than representations of asexuals. Additionally, these discourses determine our organizing principles and institutions, such as engagement on networked publics and our conceptions of (sexual) citizenship.

With the rise of the digital world, normative discourses moved online, and particularly onto social networking sites (SNS). These websites emerged in the late 1990s and include SixDegrees, Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, and Tumblr. By the mid-2000s, scholars from “diverse disciplinary and methodological traditions” began to investigate SNS (boyd and Ellison 219). According to danah boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, SNS are:

- web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (211).

These websites prioritize engagement with others within an individual’s offline social network and with online strangers via a digital platform. Platforms are digital landscapes that serve as sites for “discourse and opinion,” but also arenas “for the formation and enactment of social identities” (boyd 39; Fraser qtd by boyd 39). It is through digital acts that people interact with others on SNS. Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert describe digital acts to be words, “images and

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23 There are many intersectional asexual articles discussing race, crip/disability, etc. See Cerankowski and Milks’s edited collection Asexualities (2014).
24 boyd and Ellison (2008) provide a visual timeline in their discussion of SNSs.
sounds and various actions such as liking, coding, clicking, downloading,” commenting, blogging, tagging, and messaging (13). Scholars have recognized that digital acts have promoted social, cultural, and technological developments, which have “accompanied the growing engagement” of individuals in digital space (Ito 2). These new developments continually configure networked publics.

A networked public, as boyd describes, is a public that is “restructured by networked technologies” and is a network of “imagined collective[s] that [emerge] as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (39). Networked publics “allow [for] people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family” (39). For Mizuko Ito, networked publics are filled with “reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange” (3). I assert that a majority of these online discourses reproduce normative offline discourses, including sexusocial discourses. For instance, some SNS like Facebook ask users to disclose their sexual orientation by clicking on one of two limited options (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A screenshot of Facebook’s profile page options. This feature allows users to define their sexual orientation based on two options.

Facebook’s features limit the possibilities and nuances of sexual identity. Such features on SNS reproduce sexusocial discourses and practices by imposing a target of sexual desire. However, networked publics also allow for alternative discourses because they can be shaped by user participation. As Isin and Ruppert note, “each of these platforms makes possible various actions” that abide by the creation of “obedient subjects to power” and the creation of “submissive
Thus, users can shape both the networked public and the rules for participation on the platform. Users can radically shift away from normative practices and discourses through digital acts, which can reconfigure the networked public. In comparison to Facebook’s features, we can look to another SNS, Tumblr. In her article “Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse,” Abigail Oakley suggests that “the unlikely, somewhat quirky, environment of Tumblr has provided fertile ground” for “users to create more nuanced labels” to describe their sexual identities (1). Unlike Facebook, Tumblr does not ask for such personal disclosure. Instead, users participate on the platform as they see fit. Through their actions, users reveal their identities “through personal bios, labels, and post tagging” (2). For some SNS users, their participation determines which discourses and practices flourish on the networked public. In this way, individuals and their social networks can enact digital acts that involve “citing, iterating, repeating, and resignifying,” wherein “thinking, speaking, and acting differently become possible by resisting and resignifying conventions” (72, 131). In turn, users introduce “new possibilities for interaction,” participation, and belonging (boyd 39). I argue that networked publics, then, can consist of users enacting their own practices and discourses of belonging. That is, users become digital citizens who make claims to being and belonging.

Similarly to offline citizens, digital citizens participate in politicized publics. Citizenship has been a term used “since the 1990s … to describe [the] politics of and on the Internet” (Isin and Ruppert 7). Digital citizens are those who “enact themselves as subjects of power through the Internet and at the same time bring cyberspace into being” (12). As such subjects, digital citizens carry their subjectivities into the digital realm through their practices and rights claims.

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There is a multitude of subjectivities an individual brings to bear on their digital citizenship. Sexuality is an example of such subjectivities since it domineers citizenship online and offline.

In 1993, David T. Evans introduced the term sexual citizenship in a provocative book on sexual rights. By the early 2000s, a burgeoning field of sexual citizenship took shape. Scholars like Richardson, Jeffery Weeks, Ken Plummer, and Lauren Berlant turned their attention to the gendered and sexed nature of citizenship. Their work mobilized a proliferation of scholarship on feminist and LGBT citizenship, which deemed the notion of citizenship “a powerful critical tool — to show the manifold forms of discrimination that face sexual dissidents” (Bell and Binnie 142). Generally, citizenship pertains to a number of socio-political, legal, and cultural practices that enable inclusion or exclusion of subjects from membership. Citizenship, then, is a politics of inclusion and exclusion, even online. It is a process of “normalisation and the production of new ‘others’” in socially organized structures (Richardson 5). Most scholars have noted that belonging depends on an individual’s ability to abide by heteronormative norms and practices (Cossman 7). In response, they have attempted to “radically rethink” the figure of the sexual citizen (Bell and Binnie 8). There has been a proliferation of critique, but scholars have yet to take into consideration the influence of sexual normativity. Our organizing principles for the creation and maintenance of belonging, rights, laws, and inclusion practices still hinge heavily on assumptions and norms of sexuality. In his article “Asexuality: What It Is and Why It Matters,” Bogaert provides an example of sexual normativity in relation to citizenship. Bogaert emphasizes that “[a]t a structural level … many societies’ legal systems privilege sexual over asexual people,” wherein conjugal, sexual (and typically procreative) partnerships often receive “additional rights and benefits,” like marital tax breaks (368). Whether hetero- or

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homonormative, coupled sexual partners tend to receive recognition and inclusion in our legal, social, and economic systems. In networked publics, user participation can reproduce these sexusocial discourses and practices. Both online and offline, the sexual citizen may be expanding to account for other sexualities; however, the sexual citizen remains fixed to sexual normativity. This inelasticity limits which sexualities the figure of the sexual citizen can include, further excluding queer minorities like asexuals in our notions of belonging. To challenge normative notions of citizenship and to rethink the figure of the sexual citizen once more, we can turn to asexuality and its practices online. In the following sections, I explore how asexuality offers an alternative approach to modes of thinking and belonging because of its theoretical potentialities and its online practices.

**Asexual Assemblages: A Mode of Asexual Theorizing**

In “Asexuality: from pathology to identity and beyond” Gressgård proposes that asexuality has the “potential to revitalise queer critique of naturalised gender and sexuality norms” (180). Thinking with Gressgård, I argue that asexual assemblages can provide new avenues to think inclusively about norms of belonging. Therefore, in this section, I momentarily look at asexuality conceptually and not necessarily at the intricacies of the asexual community. I use assemblage theory to describe the flexible shape of asexuality, which functions as an assemblage of pluralities. I conclude this section by expanding upon Puar’s concept of queer assemblages. In her work, Puar highlights the affinities between queer and assemblage theory. Both emphasize fluidity, multiplicity, and relationality. Both compose and encourage “dispersed

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27 I want to emphasize that I am not intending to disregard the discrimination that still exists for homosexual and queer individuals, but thanks to queer neoliberal frameworks there has been wider recognition of homonormative lifestyles.
but mutually implicated and messy networks” (*Terrorist Assemblages* 211). From this discussion, I argue asexual assemblages can act as a conceptual tool to propose alternative queer possibilities.

**Assemblage Theory**

Assemblage theory originates from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari discuss the limitations of an arborescent system, which is a centered, unidirectional, and genealogical structure marked by binarism, dualism, and “pseudomultiplicities” (6-8). They note that an arborescent system orientates thoughts and concepts vertically (like a tree), classifies hierarchically, and permits a traceable route to a root of significance (6-16). In opposition to the rigidity of the arborescent system, Deleuze and Guattari introduce two related concepts: the rhizome and assemblages. Deleuze and Guattari describe a rhizome as an “acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system” of multiplicities (21). A rhizome can assume “very diverse forms,” but can exist without “binary relations ... and biunivocal relationships” between elements (7, 21). It has six characteristics: of connection, of heterogeneity, of multiplicities, of asignifying rupture, of cartography, and of decalcomania (7-12). In brief, a rhizome “ceaselessly establishes connections” and “ceaselessly varies” (Deleuze and Guattari 7, 30). It consists of multiple heterogeneous components that exist individually, but encounter and relate to others within the system. For Deleuze and Guattari, a rhizome can rupture and rebound because it “is not amendable to any structural or generative model” (9, 12). Therefore, a rhizome is “detachable, reversible, [and] susceptible to constant modification” (12). It is a system of becoming, transformation, and oscillation that cannot be traced for pre-existing or pre-conceived notions (505). Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari argue that a rhizome “can be
torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation” since it (re)forms through a constant negotiation with interchanging contexts (12). The constant negotiation of relations by the rhizome operates as an assemblage.

According to Puar in her article “‘I Would Rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess:’ Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” assemblage is “actually an awkward translation of the French term agencement” (57). Agencement is “a term that means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations” (57). At its most general, an assemblage is a grouping of elements, bodies, and/ideas that are in constant relation to each other. In her article “Feminist Technological Futures: Deleuze and Body/Technology Assemblages,” Dianne Currier discusses assemblage theory as a means of thinking beyond binary oppositions. Currier summarizes:

for Deleuze and Guattari assemblages are functional conglomerations of elements but, importantly, the component elements are not taken to be unified, stable or self-identical entities or objects, that is, they are not grounded on a prior unity. In each assemblage the particles, intensities, forces and flows of components meet with and link with the forces and flows of the other components: the resultant distribution of these meetings constitutes the assemblage (325).

An assemblage consists of “unformed flows and partial fragments of information, matter, ideas, particles, movements and intensities, which coalesce into particular recognizable forms” based on their relation to one another in a given context (Currier 328). It is from “specific connections with” others, “relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning” that each component derives meaning (Puar “I Would Rather” 57). For me, an assemblage is a constellation of contingencies composed of a myriad of interrelated elements and it is “constantly subject to
transformations” (Deleuze and Guattari 82). More crucially, I see an assemblage as a queer concept; assemblages are “always potentially fleeting, recuperated and fluid because of [their] ‘unbounded chaos and uncertainty’” and always “open to their own self-annihilation” (Browne 888; Puar “Q&A” np). It is from this relation between queer and assemblages where I see how asexuality operates as a rhizomatic assemblage.

Asexuality as Rhizomatic Assemblage

When conceptualized through assemblage theory, asexuality resembles a rhizome. To illustrate its rhizomatic qualities, I turn to asexuality’s umbrella definition, which defines asexuality as a “common point” for a diverse number of identities, including abrosexual, acosexual, adfectussexual, ageoisexual, akoisexual, and asexual, amongst many others (Carrigan “There’s More to Life” 467). The umbrella term serves as a point of connectivity “between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and/or circumstances” for this plurality of heterogeneous individuals (Deleuze and Guattari 21). Heterogeneity is a crucial idea to asexuality since it eliminates a “homogenized notion of ‘true asexuality,’” which would “only function to reinscribe ... parameters for asexual belonging and inclusion” (Przybylo and Cooper 302). The broader, all-encompassing, and more flexible conception of asexuality has no definite model or structure. It is amendable. Many “people may move into and out of the category of asexuality” through “multiple entryways” and exits (Carrigan et al 3; Deleuze and Guattari 12). Like a rhizome, which has variables that “come and go,” asexuality accounts for “variation, expansion” and “offshoots” (Deleuze and Guattari 100). It is not static, but fluid and flexible as “a productive heterogeneity” (Gressgård 188). That is, asexuality is always becoming. It is always additive. Unlike other sexualities or identity labels, asexuality continues to evolve
through the possibilities of “the conjunction, ‘and ... and ... and’” (Deleuze and Guttari 25). As asexuality widens to incorporate new identities, the labels are listed in conjunction and relation: “demisexual and grey-asexual; romantic, grey-romantic, and aromantic asexual; and straight-A, gay-A, and bi-A” (Chasin “Making Sense” 177). In turn, the new identities change “the nature” of asexuality as it expands in breadth and dimension (Deleuze and Guattari 8). In “The Ontology of Asexuality: A Genealogical Analysis of Invisibility,” Joshua Price utilizes assemblage theory to argue that asexuality is “a fluid, ever-shifting entity, in constant flux; something which is both shaped by and shapes its context” (13). In this way, asexuality operates as an assemblage by “negotiating multiple ontological complexities” (13). It coalesces non-static, fluid and interconnecting people, ideas, and identities all into relation with one another under an acentered definition. Through its unceasing negotiating, becoming, and reinventing, asexuality anticipates new ways of being, relating, and belonging asexually, which can serve “to destabilise the sexual regime (of truth) that privileges sexual relationships against other affiliations” and alliances (Gressgård 188).

Expanding Queer Assemblages

By following Puar’s suggestion to turn our attention from “what assemblages are” towards “what assemblages do,” we can think with and through asexual assemblages as a critical tool or method (“I Would Rather” 57). In Terrorist Assemblages Puar argues that “[a]ssemblages are ... crucial conceptual tools that allow us to acknowledge and comprehend power beyond disciplinary regulatory models, where ‘particles, and not parts, recombine, where forces, and not categories, clash’” (215). They “allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures,” which turn the focus onto “ontology, affect, ... information” and
contingency (215). As a conceptual tool, queer assemblages allow for a “critical practice” that invites repeated reassessments of “contemporary and historical organizing practices,” principles, and arborescent centres of significance, like sexual normativity (Puar “Q&A” np). According to Puar, the critical practice of assemblage “is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (“Queer Times” 128). That is, assemblage theory “draws attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies,” and the many ways a vertical arborescent system can limit our ability to conceive alternative possibilities (122). Asexual assemblages, then, become a viable mode of theorizing.

A non-sexually motivated understanding of varying circumstantial relations and their potential for transformation is the basis for asexual assemblages. As a conceptual tool, asexual assemblages encourage an analysis of collectivities of people, concepts, and practices by re-reading ways of being, relating, and belonging. Specifically, it encourages elements to form alliances through non-normative practices and discourses in ways that enact difference. Asexual assemblages seek “alternative repetitions” that “interrogat[e] the limits to what ... can ‘be’” (Przybylo “Crisis” 456, Gressgård 188). It then questions how relations disassemble and reassemble depending on context. Similar to Puar’s queer assemblages, asexual assemblages can “open up new avenues of thinking, speaking, organizing, doing politics” (Puar “Q&A” np). However, asexual assemblages further queer assemblages. Unlike queer alone, “asexuality offers an alternative approach to ‘making sense of a world that does not make sense’ ... within the very confines of an unsafe sexusociety” (Przybylo “Crisis”454). Without a rigid or universal definition, asexuality prioritizes a “process of identification” (Scott and Dawson 9). This process has the potential for fluidity and flux. This process encourages the possibility of “repeating
differently” and plurally (Przybylo “Crisis” 456). It is bounded only by a plurality of any possible contingent relations of association and disassociation, of identification and disidentification (9). Asexual assemblages cannot necessarily escape hegemonic restrictions since “assemblages allow for complicities of privilege and the production of new normativities” (Puar Terrorist Assemblages 222). But they can offer “resistance that is not primarily characterized by oppositional stances” (Puar 222). That is, asexual assemblages are not reliant on binaries. They are all-encompassing and determined only by the relations between a plurality of people, practices, and thoughts. Asexual assemblages can help us to identify alternative practices, spaces, and relations that are resistant in their multiplicity, connectivity, and fluidity.

**Asexual Assemblages: A Mode of Belonging Online**

Asexual assemblages can be deployed as an asexual mode of theorizing, but also as a way to understand the formation of the asexual community online. Since asexuals cluster online into a plurality of unique individuals, in this section, I explore asexuality in practice through the intricacies of the asexual community. I argue that asexual online discourses reveal a glimpse into asexual practices of belonging. By historicizing asexuals online, outlining how Tumblr itself is an assemblage platform, and assessing two asexual discourses on Tumblr, I investigate how these discourses promote such practices. I conclude this section by arguing that asexual assemblages can help to delineate this alternative mode of belonging.

**Asexuals Online**

Asexuals have an intimate relation to the Internet due to the World Wide Web’s key role in the articulation of asexuality and the asexual community’s formation. Over the past two
decades, there has been a growing asexual presence online. The first inkling of an asexual community online was in 1997 when Zoe O’Reilly’s online article “My Life as an Amoeba” attracted a number of commenters who were self-identified asexuals.\footnote{O’Reilly’s blog post and the comments are still available, see the AVEN’s wiki archive under “Asexual History.”} According to the AVEN’s founder David Jay in his essay “The Computer in the Closet: Online Collective Identity Formation,” by the early 2000s “asexuals began to use the internet to articulate their individual experiences” (4). This initiated “a wave of personal websites on the topic of asexuality” (4). In 2000, the “Haven for the Human Amoeba” emerged as “one of the first asexual message boards” (4). Asexual forums like the “Haven for the Human Amoeba” featured links to asexual websites for “people looking for information on asexuality” (5). On these forums users were free to discuss asexuality in online community settings. The success of asexual online communities on forums, Jay writes, prompted “the formation of even more websites and more technologically advanced message boards,” including the AVEN (5). The AVEN launched in 2001. It is considered “to be the birthplace of an asexual identity as it is understood today” (Renninger 1515). According to its website, the AVEN “hosts the world's largest online asexual community as well as a large archive of resources on asexuality” (np). The AVEN remains the main hub for the asexual community online despite a rise in adjacent asexual communities. By 2010, the asexual community expanded onto the popular microblogging website Tumblr, where it continues to grow amongst users. Thus, within a short twenty years the Internet has played a considerable role in many aspects of asexuality and its community. In her article “Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire,” Kristin S. Scherrer argues, “the internet has facilitated the discovery... of a language by which to describe [asexual experience]
and a community that offers support and acceptance” (631). The Internet has permitted the cohesion of an (early) asexual “collective identity,” with its own language and online venues for “collective activity” (Jay 1, Renninger 1514). For Jay, the Internet provides:

a new type of social movement: one directed not externally at society or the state but internally at understanding and articulating its own collective identity; a global network of closets, connected by computers, slowly working themselves open (2).

In the early 2000s, the World Wide Web expanded the resources “for people to safely explore their closeted experiences and identities” and produced relations between people whose “experiences ... previously could not be formulated” or articulated (2). Online asexuals are able to participate (predominately) anonymously in a collective community composed of similarly asexual-identified individuals. Some asexuals participate by sharing personal experiences of self-identification and/or discrimination. Many pose questions to others. For example, there are several posts (on online platforms like the AVEN, Tumblr, and Reddit) that ask for advice on how to date when you identify as asexual or on how to come out to your family and friends. Other asexuals participate online by discussing their “annoyance with socially ubiquitous notions of fulfillment through sexuality” or critiquing representations of asexuals in pop culture (Jay 4).

Many of the activities asexuals participate in online revolve around communication; asexuals discuss, relate, and typically rely on some kind of interaction with others online. In his article “‘Where I can be myself ... Where I can Speak my Mind’: Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment,” Bryce J. Renninger writes of asexual communication online, and particularly on Tumblr. He argues:

communication among asexuals and allies about asexuality is both a chance to work out ideas related to identity, community, and relationships, and an opportunity to develop
tactics to assert or adapt identities to configure oneself and asexuals in general within relationships, families, communities, and sexusociety (1516).

Asexuals are generally “actively involved in creative discussion” and continuously “building a community” (Chasin “Making Sense” 173, 176) Online, people attempt to “figur[e] out how to make sense of their experiences of being asexual” and do so by “relating to other people from asexual perspectives” (Chasin “Making Sense” 176). This form of asexual communication and participation has allowed for a diverse asexual community to thrive online, especially on Tumblr.

**Tumblr Assemblages**

Founded in 2007, Tumblr is a popular online platform that mixes blogging with social networking. Renninger explains Tumblr to be a “blogging platform that allows users to post text and media objects” (1519). It is a SNS composed of textual and visual components. In his chapter “Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time” Alexander Cho utilizes assemblage theory to approach queer affect on Tumblr. He notes that Tumblr is very “different from 1990s-era Web 1.0 blogs full of pages of long-form, cathartic HTML text” (44). Tumblr’s confusing functionality and community practices are unlike blogging platforms such as Wordpress and unlike social networking sites like Facebook (Oakley 2). Oakley explains that in comparison to “more traditional blogging platforms,” Tumblr “functions as an intersection of blogging and SNSs” (2). The platform offers “distinctive features and affordances … that shape the way Tumblr is used, the type of information shared there, and the kind of communities encouraged to gather there” (2). 29 As such, Tumblr is a networked public. It is a network of digital elements — users, blogs, and algorithms. But also a network of relations — people, practices, and posts.

29 Renninger (2015) provides an extensive analysis of Tumblr’s affordances in relation to asexual counterpublics, see 1521-1524.
Tumblr consists of individual accounts for personal blogs, which are fairly anonymous and thus, rarely password protected. On their tumblelogs, users can “post text and multimedia in highly customisable and often very artistic blog form” (Bustillos 164). But Tumblr is not just for personal posts. It also involves “follow[ing] other people’s blogs” (164). For scholars Yukari Seko and Stephen P. Lewis, “sociality on Tumblr is, for the most part, expressed by content-based interaction,” instead of “not user-centered interactions” (4). By following others, users compile a lively and catered dashboard, from which they can scroll through, reblog (庞大), and like (投稿) posts. Additionally, users can use and search for (hash-)tags to interact with the wider Tumblr community. The tags are hyperlinks “added by users” and “[w]hen one clicks on a hashtag … one is taken to a reverse chronological feed of the latest viewable posts that include” that particular tag (Renninger 1522). Also, Tumblr offers two different messaging systems (an inbox and an instant messenger). The two systems allow users to directly and privately converse with others users. More complex than a traditional blog and more community driven than social media, Tumblr offers an unpredictable ever-changing online platform with a larger number of users to interact with.

In many ways, Tumblr is an assemblage networked public with a constantly reassembled constellation of 151.3 Billion (and counting) individual posts. For Cho, the platform is “[n]onlinear, incoherent, and impermanent” with a number of interconnected “messy, overlapping, and inseparable” posts (44). These posts are messy configurations of people and digital acts, which oscillate unsystematically as Tumblr users communicate “through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side-to-side” (3). Through the search function,
the posts assemble into a grid or list. For example, when using Tumblr’s search function for the tag #asexual, a long scrollable web page appears with a grid of multiple individual user posts (Figure 2). The collection of posts presents a snapshot of Tumblr’s ecosystem of individual voices, which in this case all speak to asexuality. Like an assemblage, Tumblr “fosters a pluralism or polyvocality of forms of expression” (Deleuze and Guattari 117). The posts align on the topic of asexuality, but offer a diverse range of discussion points as singular elements. For example, an aesthetically driven asexual moodboard is positioned alongside a queer affirmation post, which is adjacent to a post making a claim about asexuality (Figure 2). Each post originates from a different user and possesses its own statement, but when positioned adjacently on Tumblr
each relates to one another – they contrast, complement, and inform the others. Notably, by
default Tumblr organizes the posts by popularity (based on the number of likes, reblogs, and
interactions a post receives) within a particular temporal period. That is, with every search or
refresh, Tumblr recombines posts in a completely new grid. The recombination may be slight,
but posts may shift position and new posts will be added to the arrangement. Its recombination
possibilities allow Tumblr to be fairly unpredictable and flexible (particularly in via its search
function). In this way, Tumblr “prevents any power take over” and permits posts to “coexist
heterogeneously” (117). Moreover, when new posts are added, the dimensions of the assemblage
change, and the assemblage reassembles into a new form of relations. Thinking with Currier’s
definition of assemblage, as Tumblr posts are added, new “components meet with and link with
the forces and flows of the other components” (325). Due to the flux and flow of change on
Tumblr, there is no “clear” or predictable way “to traverse or search” the number of posts, even
with the use of tags (Cho 43). Tumblr, then, is non-linear, decentered, multiplicitous, and always
subject to change. The “nonlinear, atemporal, rhizomal” dynamics “of connection and
interaction” on Tumblr may, as Cho writes, seem like an “alien architecture of affinity and
attunement” (47). However, Tumblr’s alternative, decentered platform emphasizes both
individuality (personal posts, tumblelogs, etc.) and collectivity (tags, messaging systems, links).
With an emphasis on the individual and the collective, Tumblr provides “an opportunity to build
a community by following [and interacting with] other users” (Tiidenberg qtd by Oakley 2).
Tumblr’s community building is a key feature for “members of counterpublics looking to ‘be
themselves’” and for those searching “for in- group communication” (Renninger 1520). The
assemblage-like feature has drawn in many online communities. Tumblr is “used by feminists,
queers, trans* people, and alienated youth to communicate to each other, respectively” (1520).
For the purposes of this paper, I focus on how Tumblr encourages and maintains a vibrant asexual community.

*The Asexual Community on Tumblr*

The asexual community initially referred to a “population of self-identified asexuals” that aligned with the general definition of asexuality (Carrigan “How Do You Know” 6). It now refers to thousands of individuals who identify under the asexual umbrella and their allies, including “those within the community who are questioning whether they are asexual (and might subsequently decide that they are not)” (6).³³ The community is a network of “different individuals in different circumstances” relating to one another based on shared “experiences as they confront socio-cultural contexts which affirm sex and repudiate asexuality” (Carrigan “There’s More To Life” 476). Tumblr’s contribution to the open possibilities of asexual community membership is particularly salient due to its possibilities for decentralized communication and community building. Amongst varieties of other content like fanfiction, porn, and art, there are thousands of posts and “many Tumblelogs specifically devoted to asexual[ity]” (Renninger 1520). Through their individual Tumblelogs (which are not always solely dedicated to asexuality) asexual community members interact with “asexual posts ... next to cat videos and fan art” (5). Renninger briefly summarizes a “sample [of] asexual Tumblelogs” and posts, which include:

Tumblelogs that provide resources for the asexual community and those interested in learning more. The site also hosts several blogs for asexual humor. Many asexual

³³ It is best to heed Carrigan’s argument that there are self-identified asexuals who are “outside the community” who “identify, in someway, as asexual without that identification assuming enough importance within their lives to lead them to seek out the company of other asexual individuals (“How Do You Know” 6).
individuals host their own Tumblelogs to share personal thoughts. Much of the Tumblr content about asexuality includes user-generated images about asexuality, media about asexuality taken from other sites, and text posts with commentary about an aspect of the asexual community or about oneself as an asexual. Tumblr posts tagged #asexuality or #ace also often include participation in a 30-Day Asexuality Challenge, where users post one answer to a 30-day survey per day (Renninger 1520-21).

The asexual community produces and interacts with a diverse number of users, blogs, and posts that share “personalized or individualized experiences or opinions, ... talk about community issues from a more distant perspective,” or “address issues like systemic sexual privilege” (9). Asexual communication across Tumblr (and the Internet more generally) has led to a number of asexuality scholars investigating how “[a]sexual people are forging their own discourses and ways of being” (Chasin, “Making Sense” 176). Scholars have noted how asexuals have used “discursive ‘tools’ for making sense out of experience” (177). The tools that “comprise asexual discourses” consist of many “new words and ways of talking,” but also practices of inclusion and affirmation (177). Asexual discourse is a term used by the asexual community to mark their own discussions, debates, texts, and terminology, including the proliferation of their own communicative online posts (words, text, image, etc.). These discourses are digital acts that include “[re-]blogging, coding, messaging, tagging, posting,” and liking (Isin and Ruppert 69).

Since Tumblr has “become a main place for online asexual discourse,” I propose that it offers an array of asexual discourses to investigate (Hinderliter 56). Moreover, asexual discourses operate in productive ways on Tumblr despite the fact that many terms and practices originate from other
websites, like the AVEN. I argue this is partly due to Tumblr’s participatory culture.\textsuperscript{34} Henry Jenkins’s concept of participatory culture denotes:

a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge (Jenkins xi).

Tumblr promotes the creation of vibrant posts by users resulting in possibilities for practices of affiliation (membership, online communities), expression (creative forms), collaborative problem solving (development of new knowledge), and circulation (Jenkins xi-xii). Therefore, I seek some insight into the politicized and personal practices of the asexual community on Tumblr by exploring two kinds of asexual discourse in the following sections: the asexual lexicon and asexual education.

\textit{The Ace Lexicon}

The asexual community began to develop “a new vocabulary” early into its formation online (Przybylo “Introducing” 182). The “range of attitudes and orientations toward sex ... within the asexual community” instigated a need for a “vocabulary within which to articulate these differences” (Carrigan “There’s More To Life” 476). Now, the asexual community has an ever-growing lexicon of neologisms that is not necessarily bounded to the AVEN. On several website including Tumblr, asexuals use and generate “a number of unique words, phrases, ways of talking about identities and relationships, and familiar stories of identity-formation and coming out” (Chasin “Making Sense” 177). The asexual lexicon is comprised of identifiers, terms, slang, and symbols.

\textsuperscript{34} See Jenkins, Ito, and boyd’s \textit{Participatory Culture in a Networked Era} (2015).
Asexual-spectrum identifiers include identity labels, but also terms to describe preferences, forces, and relationships. A long list of asexual-spectrum labels has grown “[i]n response to—and in contrast with—ubiquitous sexualnormativity [sic], sexual-centrism, and compulsory sexuality” (177). But, the asexual community continues to develop labels like demisexual, ensenosexual, fraysexual, nebulasexual, etc. due to some asexual spectrum individuals desiring to articulate and “make sense out of their experience” (177). Emergent labels demarcate asexualities decidedly different from those labels already on the list (177). In her

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35 This screenshot features one intersectional discussion of neurodiversity (autism) and asexuality. For scholarly discussions on crip/disability and asexuality see Eunjung Kim (2011).
study on asexual identity, Scherrer notes that one of her participants described “her identity as
unimportant while not in asexual spaces, and important while engaged with asexual
communities” (“Coming” 630). The salient description of the use of identifiers in and outside of
the asexual community emphasizes the role labels play within the community. Some asexuality
terms can operate differently in non-asesexual spaces depending on an individual’s choice to use
and/or disclose their identity. In his paper “Reconsidering Asexuality and its Radical Potential,”
Chasin notes that some asexuals see asexuality primarily as “a disidentification with sexuality”
(407). That is, some asexuals use labels mark their difference from sexual individuals, whereas,
the use of asexual labels within the community marks what Chasin describes as “a positive
identification with other people on the asexual spectrum and with asexual/ace subculture” (407).
In the community, asexual labels are primarily used for interacting and constructing
relationships. The difference may seem minute, but the latter use enables asexuals to form
relationships with each other without sexusocial discourses. In the aspec community (which is a
slang term developed to describe both the asexual spectrum and the aromantic spectrum) there
are also formulated words to describe preference.36 I use “preference” to indicate personalized
significant tendencies or reactions. One example is a set of aspec preferences regarding touch,
which some, but not all community members use. The aspec community created three terms:
touch-averse, touch-neutral or touch-indifferent, and touch-favourable (Figure 3). The terms
outline what level of touch and/or physical contact an individual prefers, which ranges from little
or no physical contact (even if consensual) to a desire for physical contact, like hugs or cuddling.

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36 There is controversy over the term aspec. Some in the neurodivergent community argue that it
is a stolen term taken from the autism spectrum community. However, many neurodivergent
asexuals attempt to debunk the controversy, see vaspider.tumblr.com/post/156076554371/a-spec-
and-appropriation-for-fucks-sake-why-are.
Alongside the long list of asexual-spectrum identity and preference labels, there are several aspec words and concepts that indicate social forces or regulatory norms, like sexual normativity. These concepts include amatonormativity and aphobia. Specifically for the asexual community, our discourses tend to surround experiences of aphobia, which is the discriminatory anti-asexual fear or hatred of asexual people. Individuals write of their interactions with aphobes on- and offline to share experiences, identify discriminatory Tumblr accounts, and discuss tactics for managing discrimination (Figure 4). Further, there are many

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37 See Elizabeth Brake *Minimizing Marriage* (2011) for a discussion on amatonormativity, which is the term denoting the normativity of romantic attraction and assumed universality of romantic relationships.
slang words used to explain aspec relationships. Chasin explains, “asexual/ace people are subject to other people systematically devaluing their most important (romantic and non-romantic) relationships or failing to recognise them altogether” (“Making Sense” 176). In response to the “rigid prototype for romantic relationships,” the aspec community developed words to explain our “ways of being flexible with romantic relationships” (Haefner 133). Some words originate from other queer communities to explain the various “possibilities for romantic relationships,” including “polyamory or open-relationships” (133). However, there are specifically aspec words for asexual and aromantic relationships. For example, the aspec community developed words to define non-sexually and non-romantically driven relationships. The community defines non-sexual or “non-romantic ‘crushes’” as “squishes” and queerplatonic relationships, which are non-sexual or “non-romantic significant-other relationships of ‘partner status,’” are casually defined as “zuchinnis” (177). As Carrigan argues, the “newly generated terminology serves to facilitate forms of relationality which would otherwise be inhibited” or inadequately articulated (“How Do You Know” 16). Thus, the asexual lexicon allows for the articulation of “the web of interpersonal relationships within which asexual individuals move, as well as the ideas and values prevalent within those social networks” (8).

The lexicon also includes symbols that often connect to shared community phrases or terms. For example, two popular terms in the asexual and aromantic communities reference a deck of playing cards. According to the AVENwiki archive, “ace of spades” and “ace of hearts” denote aromantic asexuals and romantic asexuals, respectively (“Asexual Slang” np). The ace playing cards are terms and symbols across the aspec community. On Tumblr, these two terms are often tagged in posts related to asexuality and aromanticism, or more intriguingly, included
in visually communicative posts. Visuals posts including asexual memes, artwork, or pun-motivated graphics necessitate some prior knowledge of asexual identity labels and terms. In particular, terminology becomes key to understanding asexual memes. In “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker,” Limor Shifman defines Internet memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (367). A meme is a digital image or
Asexual memes are generally directed towards the asexual community (Figure 5).38 Whether the meme includes an asexual pun or a rallying cry against discrimination, it often contains an asexually discursive element. For example, the image of a cake plays a significant role in asexual communication and identification. The cake symbol has two references: an asexual joke and an asexual story. The first reference is to an asexual joke from the early days of the AVEN, which humourously states that asexuals would prefer to eat cake rather than to have sex. The second

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38 In “Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential,” Chasin notes related “unique subcultural products” like the aromatic aardvark meme, see 407.
reference is to a community narrative titled “The Legend of the AVEN Cake.” Based on the conclusion of the story, cake is “the greatest gift you can give to wondering, wandering people” so that they “immediately feel welcome” (“Cake” np). Due to its importance in the asexual community as a symbol of the identity and asexual processes of welcoming new community members, cakes are often featured in asexual memes on Tumblr (Figure 6). Without prior knowledge of the symbol, asexual cake memes seem to be stand-alone elements. However, by learning and engaging with the publicly accessible asexual lexicon, individuals gain access to the community by “understanding asexual/ace people” and their discourses (Chasin “Making Sense” 177). Notably, the asexual lexicon gives new meaning to mundane words, like zucchinis, cake, and playing cards. Thinking with an asexual assemblage approach, the asexual community’s value system of signs and symbols prioritizes non-sexually motivated concepts, language, and understanding. That is, the asexual community is slowly creating a new value system of meaning in a way that disrupts (Anglo-centric) language and sexusocial discourses. By “breaking with idealised notions of intimacy, family and kinship,” an asexual lexicon offers an alternative way to explain the world and asexuands’ participation in it (Gressgård 188).

Asexual Education

The asexual lexicon has provided a vocabulary to explain and disseminate asexual discourses, which has led to an abundance of asexual educational content. In his paper, Jay notes that early asexuals on the Internet were frustrated with “a lack of information publicly available about asexuality” (4). Search engines like Google led those searching for information on human asexuality to “a sea of reports on asexual bacteria and plant life” (4). Since “public knowledge of asexuality is limited and acceptance of asexuality is tenuous at best,” it is more likely to find
support and educational materials within the asexual community and its online spaces (Chasin “Reconsidering” 407). Therefore, education and knowledge circulation has been a priority for the asexual community since the early 2000s. The AVEN continues to produce an asexual magazine, distribute several informational pamphlets, and lead international workshops (“About AVEN” np). Now many asexuals attempt to move asexual discourses into broader realms of public knowledge. To do so, some use Tumblr to share lessons on asexuality. Here I use “lessons” loosely because there are not necessarily organized or institutionalized information sessions or programs on Tumblr. Due to the decentered nature of asexual assemblages and Tumblr itself, much of the information shared is subjective and based on personal knowledge gained from other
community resources and/or personal experience. There are personal narratives, selective glossaries of asexual terms, and resources provided by community members dedicated to spreading information about asexuality and/or “asexual community educational materials” (Chasin “Making Changes” 168). Using the tags #asexual resources, #asexual education, and #asexual discourse, Tumblr users generate their own resources, infographics, and discuss asexual activism, primarily through masterposts (Figure 7). A masterpost is a curated collection of links and blog posts on a particular topic — whether it be on video games, cats, or asexuality, etc. — that is maintained by one user on Tumblr and made accessible to the public. In the asexual community, Tumblr users list resources that range in topic from asexual identity to asexual research to asexuals in pop culture. Some resources include lists of books with asexual representation, asexual documentaries such as the 2011 documentary (A)sexual, and links to BDSM groups for asexuals. Other asexual community members create infographics. These graphics offer general information about asexuality, and sometimes feature demographics taken from the AVEN’s annual census. Infographics often conclude with digital avenues to connect with the asexual community through tags or links to masterposts. Furthermore, Tumblr features information on asexual activism, in-person meet ups across the globe, and what de Lappe describes as “case studies” for those “who might be questioning their own asexual orientation [looking to] compare their own histories” with others (2). Asexual education-oriented discourse on Tumblr disseminates asexually-generated materials and information to those within and outside of the community. That is, there is a messy circulation of new knowledge available on Tumblr that describes, educates, and mobilizes “asexual, a-motivated” language, resistance, and practices (de Lappe 2). Asexual education on Tumblr has “enabled far more people to consider their own potential asexual identities, especially those who might for one reason or
another felt isolated from such information” (2). In doing so, it invites personal and politicized interaction between online asexual Tumblr users, educators, activists, and scholars.

**Asexual Mode of Belonging**

The discourses developed and disseminated on Tumblr by the asexual community reveal practices that “have the potential to fundamentally challenge” the sexual norm and “the marginalizing of asexuality” (Gupta “And Now” 1000). By analyzing these discourses through asexual assemblages, main themes appear that identify alternative modes of thinking, being, and belonging online.

Asexual discourses emphasize practices that account for individuals within the community and the collective as a whole, since both are necessary to the articulation of the other. Carrigan notes that “one of the most curious features of the asexual community” is that it “simultaneously facilitate[s] the articulation of individual difference and the solidification of a communal identity” (“There’s More to Life” 470). That is, the asexual community’s discourses promote practices of individuality (self-identification, self-articulation, etc.) in order to rupture and reform the notion of asexuality (the collective). The asexual lexicon is one discursive tool that exemplifies how the asexual community encourages individual articulation. It invites those within the asexual community to name their difference on their own terms and with their own terminology. Therefore, asexuals ongoingly expand the umbrella term to “clarify the ways in which people within the community [differ] (with regards to sex, romance, object choice, identity and so on) but also things which unite them in spite of these differences” (Carrigan 470-471). Thus, the lexicon invites an asexual practice of an open-ended rethinking of identity,
relationships, and community. By composing neologisms, asexuals challenge the “limitations of language” (Scherrer “What Asexuality” 8). The continual expansion of the lexicon by individuals gives shape to the expansive community. Yet, practices of individuality such as “self-clarification” generally arise once within the asexual community (470). Carrigan argues that the “discovery of an asexual community” and the “acquisition of a communal identity” have a “profound effect on the self-understanding of the individual” (475). As the asexual umbrella widens, it expands to incorporate a number of experiences and “commonalities” that individuals in the asexual community share and the “needs which bring people to the asexual community” (470, 476). Thus, the asexual community enacts simultaneous practices wherein “articulating individual difference” and “participation in the community” necessitates each other (476). The collective relies on the infinite possible relations between asexual spectrum individuals and the individuals rely on the expansive, flexible, and additive collective. These relational practices allow for new articulations between those within and those encountering the community.

Asexual discourses also emphasize practices of belonging based on ontological knowledge, or ways of being. That is, since there is neither a homogenous asexual figure nor a singular governing system to classify who is a member and who is not, asexual belonging is based on ways of being and self-determination. For example, the asexual community does not have guidelines dictating who can be included and excluded. Rather, as Chasin describes, membership is “left for individuals to determine” based on personal feelings and experience (175). Since self-determination is based on personal circumstances, asexual community membership is “potentially fluid, as experiences can change over time” and “people can participate in the asexual/ace community for any (short or long) period, depending on the current

39 Scherrer provides a detailed study on rethinking relationships via asexuality, see “What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion” (2010).
salience of their identification” with asexuality (175). However, the asexual community also insists that individuals do not carelessly apply a definition (175). It encourages prospective asexual community members to engage with asexual discourses and tools such as the lexicon or educational material on Tumblr. These discourses provide those outside of the community multiple entryways (memes, infographics, certain tags, etc.) to encounter asexuality. Prospective asexuals can look to Tumblr content to learn about the community, gain access through language, and then judge if and how they may identity, participate, and relate to the community. Once a “wondering, wandering” person self-identifies as asexual, they are immediately welcomed into the collective (“Cake” np).

As a network of interconnected non-sexually motivated individuals, asexuals discuss and practice alternative ways of being, relating, and belonging collectively. The alternative mode of belonging encourages inclusion based on an individual’s willingness to participate and interact with others in the collective. Unlike sexusocial practices and discourses, it is not necessarily dependent on sexual practices, romantic acts, or blood/kin relations. Instead asexual discourses and practices of belonging depend on encountering the collective. These practices of belonging are about primarily about negotiating a multiplicity of relations between a wide range of individuals. An asexual mode of belonging then reimagines and revaluates our systems of relating.

**Conclusion: Towards an Asexual Citizenship**

Thinking with asexual assemblages in both theory and practice, I suggest that we can begin to delineate and articulate asexual citizenship, which offers us new possibilities for how

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40 The community urges that “nobody can tell you whether or not you are asexual” (Chasin “Making Sense” 176).
we can conceive membership. That is, asexuality in theory allows us to imagine belonging rhizomatically. Asexual assemblages interrogate our conceptions of relationality. This mode of theorizing can shift us from the binaries of inclusion and exclusion towards supporting the fluid and plural processes of being and relating. Asexual citizenship then encompasses a range of people and practices motivated by flexible negotiations rather than strict definitions. Moreover, by being devoid of sexusocial practices and discourses, asexual assemblages are decentered and susceptible to productive change. We can move to favour the inclusion of a multitude of identities, which in turn can shape the collective as a whole. Asexuality in practice offers an example of asexual assemblages on networked publics. Asexual community membership online is made through a continual reformation of asexuality. The plurality of identities “engaging in asexual community building and outreach” demonstrates how asexuals enact alternative sociopolitical presences. They are not dependent on sexusocial discourses, rigid institutional practices, or organizing principles that sustain “societal assumptions” about relations and definitions (Gupta “And Now” 1000). Asexuals have formed alliances with a new language system and fluid belonging practices. As such, asexual assemblages draw new avenues to understand citizenship and participation outside of sexual normativity. As Gressgård argues, asexuality’s alterity “opens up the possibility for re-imagining the human in queer theory and politics” by offering a “potential for different constructions” (187-88). To further Gressgård’s argument, I propose that asexual assemblages can help to rethink the figure of the sexual citizen. It can return fluidity and possibility back to queer contestations, but also reassess who we imagine the figure of the sexual citizen to potentially be – asexual or not. I conclude this paper without a decisive definition of asexual citizenship and without a specific rethought figure of the sexual citizen. To provide such answers or definitions would be to maintain the inflexibility of
queer theorizing, which has been emphasized throughout this paper to be problematic. Instead, I invite scholars to utilize asexual assemblages as a conceptual tool of plurality and fluidity in order to disrupt rigid queer theorizing and to inclusively rethink queer possibilities. Undertaking such theoretical work may only reveal more open-ended questions, but it could also lead to an exciting revitalization of queer thinking that includes a broader range of people, practices, and possibilities.
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