

WHEN THE INVISIBLE BECOME VISIBLE: HOW ASEXUALITY IS
REPRESENTED IN POPULAR CULTURE

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
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Master of Arts

In

Human Sexuality Studies

by

Darren Jacob Tokheim

San Francisco, California

May 2018

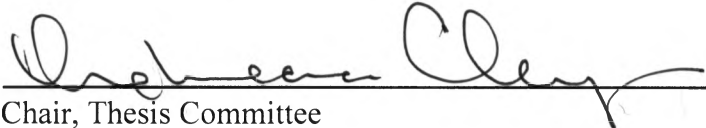
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WHEN THE INVISIBLE BECOME VISIBLE: HOW ASEXUALITY IS
REPRESENTED IN POPULAR CULTURE

Darren Jacob Tokheim
San Francisco, California
2018

Asexuality is largely misunderstood in mainstream society. Part of this misunderstanding is due to how asexuality has been portrayed in popular culture. This thesis is a content analysis of representations of asexual characters in popular culture, including television, film, comics, and podcasts, and how this representation has changed over time. Specifically, this work finds that early depictions of asexual characters, from the mid-2000's, were subjected to common negative stereotypes surrounding asexuality, and that more recent depictions, from the mid-2010's, have treated asexuality as a valid sexual orientation worthy of attention. However, as asexuality has become more accepted, the representations of asexuality remain few and far between.

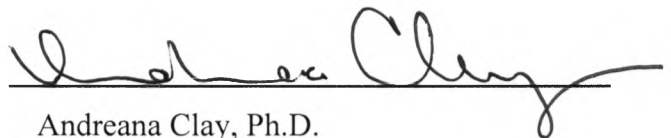
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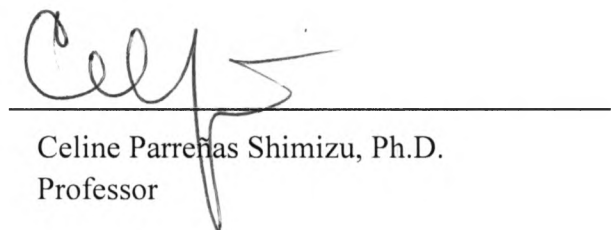
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *When the Invisible Become Visible: How Asexuality is Represented in Popular Culture* by Darren Jacob Tokheim, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andreana Clay", written over a horizontal line.

Andreana Clay, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Celine", written over a horizontal line.

Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Ph.D.
Professor

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Introduction

In an episode of the final season of Fox's medical drama, *House* (2012), entitled "Better Half," Dr. James Wilson, a mild mannered doctor and Head of the Department of Oncology at the Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital (PPTH), is seen giving a standard medical examination to an unnamed female patient. When he says that he's now going to test the patient to see if she's pregnant, she assures him that she is not. Wilson tries to explain to her that all forms of birth control have a chance of failure, but the woman stands her ground and tells him that she and her husband are both asexual and have never had sex. The confused doctor asks cautiously if she means that they are *celibate*, to which the woman responds by saying that "Celibacy is a choice. This is our orientation. We're asexual" (Lingenfelter & Yaitanes, 2012).

Later in the episode, Wilson meets with Dr. Gregory House, the curmudgeonly and narcissistic Head of Diagnostic Medicine at PPTH, and tells him about his asexual patient, to which House expresses extreme skepticism. He jokingly asks if this patient is a "giant pool of algae," and when Wilson insists that asexuality is a valid sexual orientation, House says he recalls reading that in "Fugliness Weekly." House proposes a bet with Wilson that he can find a medical reason for the woman's asexuality, a bet which Wilson accepts. After reviewing her files and testing her blood and urine, House cannot come to any conclusions. He is so confident that sex is the "fundamental drive of our species" that he theorizes that the only reason he can't find any medical evidence to debunk asexuality, is that she *isn't* asexual at all. Instead, he believes that she must be

lying for her husband's sake because "lots of people don't *have* sex. The only people who don't *want* it are either sick, dead, or lying." House calls in the woman's husband, and, after testing him, finds that he has a tumor growing near his pituitary gland, which would cause erectile dysfunction and a lower libido. Wilson then tells the man about his cancer and explains that a side effect of the treatment would be that he would want to have sex. Disgusted by this news, the man refuses treatment, saying that his asexuality has been a part of his identity his whole life. His wife protests, as any spouse would, but also tries to ease his fears by revealing to him that sex "won't be so bad" and is "actually pretty fun, from what I remember." The man is shocked as his wife continues, "I wanted to spend my life with you, and I knew that meant making certain sacrifices." The episode ends with Wilson paying House for losing the bet. *House* is an example of the preconceptions many people have of asexuality, but actualized. It's this kind of thinking that has led to the pathologization of asexual people, and the widespread distribution of this thought process.

Asexuality, as defined on the homepage of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), an online community for asexual people and a resource for learning about asexuality, is a sexual orientation describing "a person who does not experience sexual attraction." I first discovered that I was asexual during my third year of college. Before then, I only knew the word "asexual" in two contexts: first, as referring to some species that can reproduce by themselves; and second, as a kind of loser/weirdo who didn't feel emotions. The latter, I believe, was a direct result of having no positive

asexual characters in any of the pop culture media I was consuming. As cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall suggests, cultural meanings “organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Other asexual stereotypes include a complete lack of emotion, being boring, having a superiority complex, being a sign of autism, and missing out on the supposed best experience that life has to offer. Asexual people are also subjected to pity and a feeling of brokenness, and told that they are late bloomers, emotionally immature, simply going through a phase, that they can’t know they’re asexual until they have sex, or that they just haven’t met the right person yet. Having asexual characters only portrayed in these ways, in such television shows as *House*, *Dexter* (2006 – 2013) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007 – present) made it so that I did not associate myself with an asexual identity, and also led other people to think that’s what asexuality means. It is for this reason that I am analyzing how asexuality is being and has been represented in popular culture.

Literature Review

Sarah E. S. Sinwell’s essay, *Aliens and Asexuality: Media Representation, Queerness, and Asexual Visibility*, is split into two sections. In the first section, she analyzes how nonnormative bodies, specifically fat, disabled, Asian, and nerdy bodies, in film and television are coded to be asexual. She argues that “asexuality is typically represented not through whether or not the characters themselves experience sexual desire or attraction...but whether these characters are seen as sexually attractive and desirable” (Sinwell, 2014, p. 335), and that these such bodies are represented in this way.

I agree that such characters are desexualized, but I disagree with the idea of also labeling them as asexual, as desexualization and asexuality are not synonymous. She uses Bonnie Grape from *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (film, 1993), Ray Babbitt from *Rain Man* (film, 1988), and Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*, among others, as examples of characters who cannot be sexual or sexualized because they are not desirable, and are thus rendered asexual. The second section of her essay focuses on *Dexter* and *Mysterious Skin* (film, 2004), both of which have characters who explicitly do not experience sexual attraction, however that lack of attraction is linked to pathology and trauma. Dexter Morgan witnessed the murder of his mother and grew up to be a murderer himself, one who feels no emotion at all, including sexual attraction, and Brian Lackey of *Mysterious Skin* was sexually abused as a child, which acted as the catalyst for his asexuality.

My work differs from Sinwell's in that I focus on characters who describe themselves as asexual, or are otherwise confirmed to be asexual by the creators of that piece of media, and will not look at characters who have been desexualized because society has deemed their bodies to be nonnormative. The self-identification aspect is important because asexuals have been so sorely underrepresented in popular culture. There have been many characters that have been desexualized, as Sinwell points out, but not nearly as many who have been asexual, who have self-identified as such. And in the years since Sinwell's paper was published, more asexual characters have been created, which I focus on in my discussion.

In the introduction to his book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall discusses how all things are represented and given meaning through the use of language. According to Hall, representation is “one of the central practices which produce culture and a key ‘moment’ in what has been called the ‘circuit of culture’” (Hall, p. 1), which is done almost entirely through language. Hall defines language here as not only written and spoken word, but as any and all forms of communication, including music, images, and objects (and in my case, popular culture media). The meanings produced by these and all forms of language “regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed” (Hall, p. 4). These meanings are also not fixed; they are, as Hall describes, “a dialogue – always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange” (Hall, p. 4) because the ways in which they are understood differ from place to place, culture to culture, and person to person. The people who want to learn about, speak on, and create legislature around any given topic look to the rules, norms, and conventions regulated by meaning (i.e. how it is represented) for guidance. These meanings and norms may have, in turn, been influenced by inaccurate or negative representations in popular culture.

Joyce Antler’s *Jewish Women on Television: Too Jewish or Not Enough?* analyzes the ways in which Jewish women have been portrayed on television up until 1998, the year it was originally published. At the time, television had been around for nearly fifty years, yet there had been hardly any representation of Jewish women, and

when there was, they were usually “overblown caricatures and pejorative stereotypes that misrepresent the lifestyles and attitudes of real women” (Antler, 1998, p. 665) She notes that after *The Goldbergs* ended in 1955 after six years on the air, Jewish women were almost completely absent from television roles for fifteen years until the character of Rhoda Morgenstern was introduced with the premier of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1970. Rhoda, however, was played by Valerie Harper, who was not Jewish and was self-deprecating and had low self-esteem when it came to her appearance. The character earned her own spin-off series, *Rhoda*, which lasted four years before it was cancelled, after which came another drought of Jewish women in television. In 1993, *The Nanny*, starring Jewish actress Fran Drescher, premiered on CBS. Antler heavily criticizes the portrayal of Drescher’s character, Fran Fine, for her obsessions with food, getting married to a (Jewish) doctor, and shopping, falling into the stereotype of the Jewish Princess, and describes her as materialistic, coarse, greedy, and selfish. Antler also critiques the show’s sometimes disrespect for Judaism, citing an episode wherein Fran’s mother eats a bacon-lettuce-and-tomato sandwich inside a temple, to which Antler responds that “even Reform Jews, which presumably the Fines are, might well balk at taking pork into the sanctuary” (Antler, p. 667).

Antler identifies two problems in the history of Jewish female representation in television: it is rare, and it is often negative. The former can hardly be argued with, as numbers do not lie. But what I think is lacking in Antler’s argument is in regards to the latter, which is that she does not account for (or, perhaps, allow) the sense to laugh at

one's own identity. While I definitely believe that many of the examples she uses are undoubtedly negative and even harmful, I also believe that some of them are light-hearted, virtually harmless jokes appropriate for sitcoms, especially considering *The Nanny* was co-created and often written by Fran Drescher, herself. In *The Celluloid Closet*, a 1995 documentary film about the representation of homosexuality in film, actor Harvey Fierstein says "my view has always been visibility at any cost. I'd rather have negative [representation] than nothing" (Epstein & Friedman, 1995). When it comes to the representation of asexuality, I agree with Fierstein; even in overwhelmingly negative representations of asexuality (i.e. *House*), especially early on, they act as a foot in the door for future, potentially more positive representations. And while many viewers might take that representation at face value, others will take it upon themselves to do their own research and learn, more accurately, what asexuality is.

Method

This thesis is a content analysis of several pieces of popular culture in the forms of television programs, films, comics, and narrative podcasts. The characters I have selected are as follows: Sherlock Holmes in *Sherlock* (BBC One, 2010), an unnamed married couple in an episode of *House* (Fox, 2012), Voodoo Dunacci in *Sirens* (USA Network, 2014), Olivia Howell in *The Olivia Experiment* (Indican Pictures, 2014), Dionysus in *The Wicked + The Divine* (Image Comics, 2014), Chloe Turner in *The Bright Sessions* (2015), and Todd Chavez in *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014). These characters were specifically chosen because they all self-identify as asexual.

For this work, I have grouped these characters into four chronological phases, each describing how asexuality has been represented over time. The first phase, First Exposure, explores the time before any asexual characters were at all present in popular culture, when asexuality was limited to real life asexual people as guests on talk shows. In the second phase, Misrecognition, I discuss how the first fictional asexual characters in the media were written with massive misunderstandings of what asexuality is. The third phase, In-Between, analyzes one piece of media, *Sirens*, and marks a period wherein asexuality is simultaneously treated with dignity *and* insolence. The fourth and final phase, Dignity, includes pieces of media that handle asexuality with care and respect.

First Exposure

Asexuality as an identity was not present in popular culture until the mid-2000's, after psychologist Anthony F. Bogaert's 2004 survey concluded that approximately 1% of the population identified as asexual. Soon after this information was brought to the public's attention, asexuality became a topic of discussion on several talk shows including *The View* (2006), *20/20* (2006), *Showbiz Tonight* (2006), *The Montel Williams Show* (2007), and *MTV News* (2007), all of which had episodes featuring representatives from AVEN. This series of interviews and discussions helped pave the way for asexual characters to be created for television.

Misrecognition

It is around this time, 2006 and 2007, that the shows *Dexter* and *The Big Bang Theory* premiered, featuring the characters Dexter Morgan and Sheldon Cooper, respectively. It should be noted that neither of these characters self-identify as asexual, but as they do have a presence in discussions about asexuality, and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge them. When Dexter was very young, he witnessed his mother's murder and the resulting trauma caused him to develop a disorder which prevents him from feeling emotions, including sexual lust and romantic love. Sheldon is a theoretical physicist with a genius level intellect, and is also known to be emotionally distant and cold. His struggle with feeling emotions and understanding the emotions of others, as well as his issues with social interaction, have been cited as evidence that he could have Asperger syndrome. As sex and sexual attraction are commonly associated with strong emotions like love and ecstasy, people and characters like Dexter Morgan and Sheldon Cooper are automatically labeled as asexual. Their psychoses or disabilities are, in the eyes of the general population, what make them asexual. This assertion is problematic on two fronts because it, by default, marks asexuality as a disability, and also perpetuates the stereotype that people with disabilities, whether mental or physical, cannot be sexual beings.

In 2010, BBC One aired the first episode of *Sherlock*, a modern interpretation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective character, Sherlock Holmes. The titular character, played by actor Benedict Cumberbatch, is a self-described "high-functioning

sociopath” (Moffat & McGuigan, 2010) obsessed with his work and makes little time for anything else, including sexual and romantic relationships. In an interview with Elle UK magazine, Cumberbatch explains that Sherlock is “asexual for a purpose, not because he doesn’t have a sex drive, but because it’s suppressed to do his work” (Brog, 2014). It’s clear that Cumberbatch does not have an understanding of what asexuality is at its core, which is an inexperience of sexual attraction. What he describes in this interview is not asexuality, but celibacy, the act of choosing to abstain from sex for any given reason. If the Sherlock character is actively choosing to suppress his sexuality in favor of his detective work, then he is not asexual. Steven Moffat, creator and executive producer of the series, has also spoken on the possibility of Sherlock being asexual. He explains that Sherlock is not asexual because if he was, “there would be no tension in that, no fun in that – it’s someone who abstains who’s interesting” (Jeffries, 2012). So according to Moffat, asexual people based on nothing but their asexuality, are uninteresting and unworthy of being the center of a story. Additionally, his assumption that “there would be no tension” does not necessarily have to be true. According to medical doctor Alessandra Graziotin, “hormones, in their complex interplay, seem to control the *intensity* of libido and sexual behavior, rather than its direction” (Graziotin, 1996, p. 316). It is hormone levels, not sexual attraction, that causes arousal, therefore sexual tension *can* be something that some (but not all) asexual people experience. I think it would be infinitely more interesting and fresh to explore this kind of tension rather than the tired, often unnecessary, heteronormative sexual tension that is often shown in television and film.

Not to mention other, non-sexual kinds of tension well-suited for crime genre shows like *Sherlock*. Personally, I think Moffat's comments on the viability of asexual characters say more about his skills as a writer than about asexuality.

This is when "Better Half," the episode of *House*, comes into the fold. "Better Half" starts out pretty great, actually. It presents a person who explicitly and confidently states that she is asexual, it gives a brief but accurate description of a type of asexuality, it implies that asexual people can develop romantic relationships even to the point of marriage, and it provides a proxy in Dr. Wilson for viewers who may not understand what asexuality is. However, everything that follows that first scene is atrocious.

House takes every opportunity he can get to bash asexuality, comparing us to algae, calling us "fugly," and objectifying the patient by making her the subject of a wager. The worst part of the episode, is of course when House is proven to be correct, that the woman was never asexual and her husband had a tumor in his brain that caused erectile dysfunction and a lower libido, neither of which are necessarily indicative of asexuality. According to *House*, people who claim to be asexual are either lying, or they have cancer. The real-world ramifications of this conclusion have the potential to be devastating. It could lead to asexual people becoming more hesitant to come out to friends and family than they would have been otherwise, for fear of being accused of lying. It could cause previously supportive friends and family to urge asexual people to see an oncologist. And perhaps worst of all, it could cause asexual people to doubt their

own asexuality, which they probably struggled with coming to terms with in the first place.

In-Between

A few years later, in 2014, the comedy series *Sirens* premiered on the USA Network. Set in Chicago, *Sirens* revolves around the lives of EMT paramedics John Farrell and Hank St. Clare as they train new hire, Brian Czyk. One of the other EMTs working out of their ambulance station is Valentina “Voodoo” Dunacci. Voodoo has a reputation among her coworkers as being a strange and twisted individual, mostly because of her fascination with blood and guts. For example, in the episode “Alcohol Related Injury,” she complains that John wouldn’t let her keep the placenta after delivering a baby, to which another paramedic exclaims that she already had an umbilical cord. Another reason for her reputation as strange and twisted is that she is asexual.

Voodoo’s asexuality is revealed in the sixth episode of the first season. In said episode, entitled “The Finger,” Brian hints to John and Hank that he’s thinking about asking her out, which is something they advise against because she’s asexual and will undoubtedly turn him down. Brian asks them if she really is asexual and Hank responds, “I don’t have the imagination to make up a sexual pathology that strange and that boring.” Brian, not discouraged by his friend’s remarks, does some research on asexuality in order to get an idea about what to expect from a potential relationship with an asexual person. When he finds out that asexuality has a symbol, John guesses that it must be “a

limp penis reading an encyclopedia.” Brian then approaches Voodoo and, in an attempt to impress her with his knowledge of asexuality, mansplains to her, an actual asexual person, about asexuality trivia. Later, he suggests that this whole asexuality thing of hers could just be a phase, and when she insists that it isn’t, he responds, “Oh, I know you don’t *think* it is. I, for instance, for years and years thought I didn’t like olives. Then one day I tried one, now I think olives are tremendous.” The idea that asexuality is a phase is a common thing for asexual people to be told, the logic being that most people start to experience sexual attraction as they mature, so asexual people just haven’t matured yet. Brian’s contribution to this trope is only more insulting with the likening of asexuality to something as trivial as taste in food. At the end of the episode, Brian expresses to Voodoo that he is fine with never having sex with her and that he’s happy to just be around her, and gives her a disembodied finger as an apology gift, signifying his total acceptance of who she is.

By the time the season 2 episode, “Transendual,” comes around, Voodoo and Brian have been in a relationship for a decent amount of time. In the episode, John, Hank, and Brian are called in to a gym to help a man who’s been injured while operating some exercise equipment. Upon arrival, John and Hank can’t focus on anything other than the beautiful, sexy people using the gym’s resources. John even does, as he states, “that thing they do in cartoons where they rub their eyes and open them again just to make sure what they’re looking at is really happening.” While John and Hank are distracted, Brian makes a beeline for the site of the incident and tends to the man’s injuries. Back at the

ambulance station, Hank and John are still talking about all the hot people they saw at the gym, and Brian realizes he didn't notice any of them. He postulates that "all this not having sex with Voo mighta done something to me. [...] I don't know if it's that I've changed my sexuality, or like...*transcended* it? Yeah, I think that's it. I am...a transendual," which, according to him, means that he was "born sexual" and has now graduated to a higher plane of being. When he comes to Voodoo with the good news, she does believe him for a second and immediately takes him to a strip club to prove him wrong. Once there, however, Brian still shows no sign of sexual attraction or even arousal as a woman dances in front of him. The two then go to a diner, where Voodoo is upset because Brian is still convinced that something inside him has changed in this way. Confused, he asks why she doesn't believe him. She theorizes that he didn't become aroused at the strip club because he's cheap and was too distracted by the price of the dance to focus on the woman before him. Back at the gym, too, he had recalled that a membership there was more expensive than rent. She proves her theory by moving her foot up his leg, causing him to lose his cool. There is a stereotype that dictates that asexual people feel a sense of elitism and superiority because they do not waste our time on the trivialities of sexual attraction, and can instead spend it on things that actually matter. Here, Brian somehow manages to perpetuate this stereotype while not actually being asexual, himself. The episode ends with Voodoo breaking up with Brian, despite her still having strong feelings for him, because she can't be in a relationship where she can't give him something he needs (sex). Instead, she encourages him to flirt with their

waitress, who expressed excitement over a coupon. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately, depending on where the writers would have gone with this story), the series is cancelled before the audience can see what happens with Voodoo and Brian's relationship.

Most of the ways in which the characters in *Sirens* talk about asexuality are insulting and invalidating. The only shining light this show has when it comes to asexuality is the character of Voodoo, herself. Some might argue that her quirks, specifically her obsession with gore, reflect negatively on asexuality, that her being associated with such things makes us as a community look bad. I disagree. I believe that allowing Voodoo to have a unique, albeit gross set of interests makes her human, which is not something asexual people have always been called. Voodoo is also a conventionally attractive woman, being thin, white, and blonde. Sinwell argues that asexual characters have usually been portrayed not as people who do not experience sexual attraction, but as people who are not themselves sexually attractive. Also, while Voodoo is not interested in *having* sex, she is very comfortable *talking about* sex and sexual situations, a quality that none of the other characters in this thesis have in common with her. In the episode "Superdick," Brian struggles with how to be in a romantic relationship that is not sexual and awkwardly asks Voodoo if she masturbates. Voodoo smiles and says that she does, sometimes. Brian then asks what she thinks about while masturbating and Voodoo says that she "doesn't really think about anything. It's just for the physical sensation." Most asexual characters have been written as strictly anti-sex

because that's what people automatically assume about asexuality (which leads to more asexual characters being written like that, which leads to more people believing that's all asexuality is, and the cycle continues). That is not to say that asexual characters should not be written in this way. Rather, it's simply nice to have some variety in the kinds of asexuality depicted on screen. There is not one, singular kind of asexuality, and to only see one kind would be inaccurate to reality.

Dignity

The first asexual character to be introduced during this phase was Olivia Howell in the 2014 movie *The Olivia Experiment*, directed by Sonja Schenk. In this indie comedy film, Olivia is a 27-year-old graduate student in Berkeley, California who is struggling with her sexual identity. She thinks she might be asexual, but her friends convince her that she can't know for sure until she loses her virginity. Her advisor notices that her work shows nothing personal and suggests that she "live a little." Olivia's friend, Felisha, offers her the chance to have sex with her boyfriend, Julian, and, remembering her advisor's words, Olivia accepts this offer and decides to turn the whole endeavor into an experiment to research the human sexual experience. She interviews several people on what sex and sexuality mean to them, and films her process of getting ready to have sex for the first time.

The Olivia Experiment opens with Olivia sitting in at a support group for asexuals for the first time. She introduces herself and says she thinks she might be asexual because

she has “an issue with intimacy” and she has never been in a relationship. She vents to the group about her frustration in living “in a society where people are, like, force-fed sex, constantly. Why do we need that much...SEX?” At the end of the group meeting, Olivia leaves happily until the group leader stops her on her way out and tells her to consider looking for a different support group and accuses Olivia of not really being asexual, that some people use the label of asexual as a cover to hide who they really are. Nothing Olivia said during the meeting led me to be skeptical of her asexuality, so I have no idea where this accusation came from.

The next day, Olivia is getting dressed and starts to put on some lipstick, but stops herself and puts it down as if there’s no point in her trying to look nice if she doesn’t want to attract a mate. James, her best friend and roommate, then walks into her room and apropos of nothing says that he doesn’t think she’s asexual. Olivia and James have been living together for quite a while, so I don’t know where he’s been all this time, but I’ve known Olivia for all of ten minutes and I can already tell she’s asexual. But this is something asexual people in real life are often subjected to, being told that we can’t know we’re asexual if we have never tried having sex. I take even more of an issue with this situation because James is a gay man, and I would imagine that he has been told similar things throughout his own life about how he can’t know he’s gay if he hasn’t had sex with a woman. In a later scene, however, when Olivia tells James that she doesn’t think she can go through with having sex with Julian, he comforts her and says that that’s okay.

James goes back and forth between being supportive and not supportive a number of times throughout the film.

In one scene, Olivia sits down in front of a camera to record herself giving the introduction to her experiment, which she has yet to conduct. Her introduction is as follows:

The filming began because I am a scholar who believes in the close reading of texts as a means of approaching understanding. Yet, I have repeatedly failed at my own...self-analysis, and hope that this...effort will enable me to...interpret my own situation. Dating and courtship rituals have fascinated me in my studies, yet confounded me in my life...I have yet to experience a scintilla of love, let alone mutual lust. But I am embracing this potentially...degrading experiment...in hopes that it will shed a light on my...somewhat peculiar nature...And having sex should make me...a somewhat more typical human being...That's it.

She takes several pauses throughout her introduction, represented above by ellipses, and with each pause, she looks increasingly more uncomfortable. By the end of it, she looks as if she's going to cry. Olivia has been convinced by the rest of the world that she has a "somewhat peculiar nature," that she is not a "typical human being." The reaction she has to her own words, words that she has come to believe, is incredibly relatable to the asexual viewer, as many of us, myself included, have at some point or another convinced ourselves that we are not normal.

Later in the movie, Olivia's mother finds out about the experiment and decides to leave a video message for her daughter. In her message, she says:

Olivia, look. You know, I don't understand why you're a virgin at 27 years of age. What are you thinking? What were you doing on prom night? Everybody loses their virginity on prom night! Are you insane? Why are you in Gender Studies? Do you think you're ever gonna get a job in Gender Studies? What is Gender Studies? What is it? What is it? I don't understand bisexual, homosexual, asexual, sexual anorexics, sexual, sexual this, sexual that, sexual identity shit! Olivia, everybody blames their mother, all right? All right, you hate me, I understand.

Olivia's mother, here, is laying out societal expectations surrounding sex. There's no real reason for a parent to leave an unprompted message like this for their child. There doesn't seem to be any purpose for it other than to selfishly express her anger and frustration without taking into consideration how it would make Olivia feel, and given the nature of the experiment, she should be able to imagine that Olivia is feeling enough anger and frustration of her own at the moment. The mother's message does nothing but berate and insult Olivia for being an asexual virgin.

The movie ends with Olivia being too nervous and disgusted to ever have sex. She has called off the experiment and instead finds herself on a date in the park with one of her neighbors who admits to having a crush on her. When Olivia tells him that she's "not interested in sex or any of that stuff," he reaches out and holds her hand, prompting Olivia to take a deep breath and smile. In one last monologue to her camera, Olivia explains that "every legitimate experiment has a conclusion, and so it follows logically, this experiment may not be entirely legitimate. However, a gray zone isn't always a terrible place in which to be." Olivia never finds out for certain whether or not she is asexual, and the wording of this closing monologue would imply that she is what's called

a “gray-asexual,” which is an identity within the asexual spectrum that lies somewhere between sexual and asexual, with a definition that is intentionally left open, in order to accommodate more people’s identities.

The Olivia Experiment as a whole raises a lot of red flags when it comes to its treatment of asexuality. Olivia is put through mockery, insults, bullying, and gaslighting because her friends and family, even other asexuals, don’t believe that she could possibly be asexual. However, I do not believe this film comes from a place of malice; instead, I think Schenk was trying to paint Olivia as a sympathetic character. At no point does the audience feel as though the other characters are correct or justified in any way. It is very clear that Olivia is asexual to some degree and she has been placed in some very familiar, very realistic situations.

Another important representation of asexuality comes in the form of a comic book. In 2014, Image Comics released the first issue of their new series, *The Wicked + The Divine*, by writer Kieron Gillen and artist Jamie McKelvie. In this series, 12 random gods (collectively known as the Pantheon) from throughout all the cultures in the world are reincarnated into the bodies of pre-existing young people. This phenomenon is called the Recurrence, and it happens every 90 years. After two years of living in these new bodies, they die. The beginning of the story takes place in 2014, near the start of the current Recurrence, and time continues on from there.

One of the gods in the 2014 Pantheon is Dionysus, the Greek god of theater, ritual madness, and religious ecstasy. Within the fiction of *The Wicked + The Divine*, Dionysus is also known as a “hivemind dancefloor god” (Gillen, 2016b). As with all the gods in the Pantheon, Dionysus is a performer, but his performances are more akin to raves than pop concerts. He has the ability to control his audiences, but he only ever compels them to have good nights filled with happiness and ecstasy. His reasoning for this is that “In two years, I’ll be gone. Even if they forget the details, they’ll remember being happy for a night. That’s not a small thing. To make each other’s lives better. That’s all we can do” (Gillen, 2015). As a result of using his powers as often as he does (all night, almost every night), he goes months at a time without having his mind to himself and does not sleep.

In issue #26 of the series, released in February 2017, Dionysus is confirmed to be asexual. In the issue, the gods of the Pantheon had to split up into groups based on their individual ideologies. Urðr, the Norse god of fate and destiny, was worried that Dionysus had only chosen to be in her group because he wanted to have sex with her. When asked directly about this, Dionysus says “no, that’s not a thing for me” (Gillen, 2017a). Urðr, knowing that to mean he’s asexual, responds simply, “Oh, I didn’t know,” which is all I ever hope for when I come out to people. Later, it’s revealed that Dionysus *does* have *romantic* feelings for Urðr, but chooses not to tell her because he knows that she is a lesbian, and doing so would only make him “a bad friend and a bad person.” On his official Tumblr account, Gillen wrote that Dionysus is “the closest WicDiv has to a saint”

(Gillen, 2016c), which is exemplified here, as he puts the needs and feelings of Urðr above his own.

The same could be said every night as he brings happiness to his fans at the cost of his privacy and rest. This proves to be fatal, however. In an effort to stop Woden, the Norse god of battle and sorcery, from taking control of his hivemind powers, Dionysus's lack of sleep overwhelms him and causes him to collapse and take a severe beating (Gillen, 2017b). He is taken to the hospital, where they are able to keep him breathing, but he is rendered brain dead. Normally, I would call foul on killing off Dionysus, as it is a common trope to kill off LGBTQIA+ folks in any form of media. But nearly every character (if not, indeed, every character) in *The Wicked + The Divine* is queer and/or trans, and according to the rules of the Recurrence, all of the gods in the Pantheon will die by the end anyway. Also, Dionysus is only brain dead and is still on life support, so there's a chance that he could be brought back for a brief time through comic book shenanigans.

Created and written by Lauren Shippen, *The Bright Sessions* is a fictional narrative podcast following the lives of several "atypicals," people with superhuman abilities, as they meet individually with their therapist, Dr. Joan Bright. Some of Dr. Bright's patients include Caleb Michaels, a teenage boy who feels the emotions of the people around him; Sam Barnes, a woman who can travel through time; and Chloe Turner, a mind reader. In their sessions with Dr. Bright, they learn how to control their abilities in order to better function in society.

Chloe's most defining feature is her compassion. For example, when she meets Frank, a young, homeless war veteran with injured hands, she helps him paint by using her telepathic abilities to see the paintings in his mind and paints them herself. Other characters in *The Bright Sessions* have described Chloe as caring "about literally every person in the world" and as having "an unbelievably large heart" (Shippen, 2016c). Though her compassionate nature has been evident since her first appearance, her asexuality was revealed in episode 28, through a conversation between Dr. Bright and Frank. At the time of their conversation, Frank is living in Chloe's apartment:

Frank: There's nothing untoward, ma'am. Chloe's a very beautiful young woman, but I'm not...you don't have to *worry* about me.

Dr. Bright: I wasn't worrying.

Frank: Because Chloe doesn't do that sort of thing.

Dr. Bright: Well, that. But also she's a very good judge of character. If she trusts you, then I do as well.

Frank: That's good. I didn't mean to be offensive, but I don't want you to get the wrong idea. Some of the folks in her studio have...well, they've made some off-color comments about our relationship. I guess they don't know Chloe all that well. Or they just don't get it.

Dr. Bright: Some people find asexuality a difficult concept to grasp. (Shippen, 2016a)

Shippen has stated on the official *Bright Sessions* blog that "this whole exchange is basically Frank being like 'Listen, Doc, I know Chloe is ace and I would never try anything' [...] and Dr. Bright saying 'It hadn't even crossed my mind that you staying in her room would mean sex would be on the table because sex is never on the table with

Chloe” (Shippen, 2016b). It’s important to note that according to Shippen, they were talking about the specifics of Chloe’s asexuality as they understand them, and not about asexuality in general. While I wish we could have learned about Chloe’s asexuality from Chloe, herself, I do like this conversation. Dr. Bright and Frank treat asexuality (and Chloe) with respect, and Shippen acknowledges that asexuality is a spectrum and that it is different for everybody.

Later in the show, however, Chloe receives a blow to the head and suffers from major headaches, which start to interfere with her mind reading abilities. One of the most common shared experiences among asexual people is a feeling of being broken, the idea being that our sexuality is not working the way it should; people are supposed to experience sexual attraction, but for some reason we don’t, so we must be broken in some way. Chloe’s ability, now, is not working the way it is supposed to. She describes this new development as “frustrating and painful” and that it “constantly reminds me of what I’m missing” (Shippen, 2017). We know that Chloe is sensitive to the feeling of being broken, as seen in episode 6, when Dr. Bright suggests that she not get distracted by other people’s problems when she’s trying to fix her own, to which Chloe angrily responds, “I’m not trying to *fix* anything” (Shippen, 2015). I do not believe the parallel between the brokenness asexual people feel and Chloe’s suppressed ability was an intentional design by Shippen, but either way, the symbolism of rendering an asexual body as broken cannot go unnoticed.

The most recent example of asexual representation in popular culture is in *BoJack Horseman*, a 2014 Netflix original animated series that takes place in a world where humans and anthropomorphic animal people coexist. The series centers around BoJack Horseman, an alcoholic horse and washed-up 1990's sitcom star, as he tries to become relevant again by writing a memoir, starring in dramatic films, and other various attention-seeking activities. One of BoJack's only friends is Todd Chavez, a human in his mid-twenties. Todd is lazy and unemployed, but also an optimist and full of childlike wonder.

One of the B-plots of the third season is Todd reconnecting with his high school girlfriend, Emily. In one episode, the two of them are sitting with each other at a hotel bar when BoJack walks up to them and gives Todd a key to a room and encourages them to "go see if the bed works" (Knight & Gonzalez, 2016). Emily is very eager to go upstairs, but Todd is made extremely uncomfortable and makes an excuse to stall the situation as long as he can. Eventually he and Emily make it up to room and he feigns an illness, saying he should probably go to sleep. He goes inside the room, leaving Emily out in the hallway.

In the finale episode of the third season, in a very emotionally charged scene, Todd is all but confirmed to be asexual. He and Emily are sat at a diner, and she asks if she can ask him a question:

Emily: What's your deal? I feel like you like me, but you don't like me, but you like me, and I don't know what that is. Are you gay?

Todd: Whoa. Why would you even—

Emily: You can tell me if you're gay, it's fine. This isn't the 1600's or some places in the present!

Todd: I'm not gay! I mean, I don't think I am, but...I don't think I'm straight, either. I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing.

Emily: Oh. Well, that's okay!

Todd: Yeah?

Emily: Yeah. Of course. (Bob-Waksberg & Winfrey, 2016)

No words have ever resonated with me the way Todd saying “I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing” has. That is truly (and unfortunately) the asexual experience. To hear those words on a popular, mainstream show struck a major chord with me and every other asexual person in the world, if the Internet is any indication.

The fourth season of *BoJack* has a large focus on Todd, and his asexuality is confirmed in the third episode. After learning more about what asexuality is, he comes out to BoJack (and to himself):

Todd: I think I'm...a...sexual.

BoJack: A sexual what? Dynamo? Deviant? Harassment lawsuit waiting to happen?

Todd: No! Asexual! Not sexual.

BoJack: Oh!

Todd: I'm sure you think that's weird.

BoJack: Are you kidding? That's amazing! Sometimes I wish I was asexual! Maybe then I wouldn't have *a* strain of herpes.

[...]

Todd: It actually feels nice to finally say it out loud. I am an asexual person! I am asexual! (Aron, Young, & Long, 2017)

Again, Todd's experience here is incredibly relatable. After some soul searching, he is finally able to accept, embrace, and be proud of his asexuality, and it still has me smiling eight months later. And BoJack's complete and instantaneous support is heartwarming, if not slightly surprising (he's known to be very sexually active, so I was expecting him to be at least a little confused at first). The first time I watched this scene, I was annoyed at BoJack's herpes joke, but after re-watching it, I see that he was trying to defuse the tension and make Todd laugh in what is certainly a stressful and confusing time in his life. BoJack, at least in this scene, acts like any friend of an asexual should.

At the end of the same episode, Todd walks nervously into a bar, where we see sign that reads "ASEXUAL MEET-UP" and "ALL ACES WELCOME!" The sign is decorated in black, gray, white, and purple trim, the colors of the asexual pride flag, and two of the patrons in the bar are an anthropomorphic anteater and axolotl, two animals that have become pseudo-mascots for asexuality. Todd waves to a group and they welcome him in with a wave back. All of this might not sound like a lot, but the writers and animators for *BoJack Horseman* have in this episode, even just this scene alone, made me feel more welcomed and visible as an asexual person than any other piece of media has before. They have taken the time and energy to include things here that only

asexual people will be in on (the colors, the animals) in a way that feels like we are being catered to, that we are worth entertaining.

Discussion

Asexual representation has changed significantly in a short amount of time. The contrast between how asexuality was handled in *House* in 2012 and how Todd Chavez's asexuality was treated in 2017 is noteworthy, and hopefully the team behind *BoJack Horseman* will maintain that level of care in future seasons. Even more remarkable is the short amount of time between these two examples; only five years passed between the airing of "Better Half" and the release of *BoJack*'s fourth season. This may be an indication that cultural representations are having an impact on identity or vice versa. Maybe someday soon someone will be inspired by *BoJack* and create an asexual character as equally compelling as Todd Chavez, indicating that the dialectic relationship between identity and representation will continue to grow.

However, the writers of *BoJack Horseman* are not completely infallible when it comes to asexuality. In season 4, episode 6, "Stupid Piece of Sh*t," one of the people Todd meets at the bar explains to him the difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction. Todd is surprised to hear that two of his new asexual friends are married to each other. One of them says, "'Asexual' just means you're not interested in sex. Some asexuals are also aromantic, but others have relationships like anyone else" (Tafel & Farrell, 2017). This definition of asexuality is not completely accurate.

Asexuality is only determined by one's sexual *attraction*, and has nothing to do with sexual *behavior*. Author Julie Sondra Decker conducted a survey from September to October 2011 and found that 6.9% of the 3,436 asexual participants said that they enjoy having sex (Decker, 32), so while the majority of asexual people may not enjoy having sex, that is not a requirement for asexuality.

Another significant finding from my research is the lack of diversity among the asexual characters. Out of the eight characters I analyzed for this thesis, five of them were white (Sherlock, the couple from *House*, Voodoo, and Olivia). Two of the characters were more racially ambiguous. Due to the auditory nature of podcasts, there is no official image of what Chloe looks like, and since *The Bright Sessions* hasn't explored her racial background, and even though the woman who plays her is white, it remains open to interpretation. Todd has very light skin, but his surname is also Chavez. He could be of Latinx or Filipinx descent, or he could be European. The only confirmed person of color in my list of characters was Dionysus, who has a Desi background (Gillen, 2016a). Hopefully, more racially diverse asexual characters will start to appear in pop culture in the near future, so that more real-world asexual people can see representations of themselves in the media they consume.

Furthermore, while asexual representation has become more positive over time, the visibility and number of asexual characters in popular culture are still very low. *BoJack Horseman* is by far the most popular piece of media analyzed in this thesis, but it is also a Netflix original series, meaning only people who are willing and able to pay for

a Netflix membership can watch it. The other pieces of media I've analyzed are not as culturally relevant today, so their visibility has diminished. For example, *House*'s final episode aired in 2012, *Sirens* was cancelled after two seasons in 2015, and *The Olivia Experiment* is an indie movie that didn't get much attention upon release. However, I am hopeful that more positive representations of asexuality will coincide with the growth of asexual identity, as more individuals influence and consume popular media representations.

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