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This thesis takes an approach rooted in asexuality discourses to analyze sex positivity's treatment as an uninterrogated good in sexual liberationist feminism. It breaks down how sex positivity and its practitioners reinforce compulsory sexuality. It looks at the origins of sex positivity in the 1980s Sex Wars and sex-radical movement. It analyzes the impact and representation of sex positivity in various genres and discourse communities including feminist theory, memoirs, television series, and activism. It also discusses the "crisis" surrounding Generation Z "not having enough sex" and "failure" to take up the mantle of the revolution that sex-positive feminism offers.

WANTING MORE: SEX POSITIVITY AND SEXUAL
LIBERATION FROM AN ASEXUAL
FEMINIST LENS

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

How do you approach questions of sexuality as a feminist? At the beginning of my experience with feminism, I found that a lot of the responses were rooted in sex positivity. I read article after article, talked to friends, and reached a consensus that a core tenet of feminism was that everyone should be having great sex whenever they want, especially women, femmes, and people whose sexuality has been systemically and historically controlled by social systems, governmental bodies, and capitalism. I found a direct tie between the radicality of my feminism and the amount of sex I was supposed to be having. I heard all about how great it was to be liberated through sexual activity. I was questioned about why I was not taking advantage of my freedoms as a feminist and atheist in the religious, southern United States. Friends pushed me to participate in high school dating culture; I lost some of them over choosing not to. I felt alien to the world they lived in, but what teenager really felt like they fit in? Feminism, to me, was equality for all people, especially in the face of sexism and the patriarchy, but for many people, the way to enact that equality was by participating in sex-positive culture, to the extent that it often morphed into sex-required feminism, or so that is how it felt to young, feminist me. This culture was then brought into my life as the best, truest way to perform my feminism. I felt that those people who were not on board with active sexual expression were not doing the radical, on-the-ground, everyday work to make change. For many years of my life, I felt like a bad feminist.¹

Asexuality offers a way to consider feminism's goals by stripping away some of the reductive nature of one-size-fits-all paths to liberation. Adding the lens of asexuality to feminism

¹ "I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn't make certain choices for ourselves." Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), xii.

builds space for the critique of compulsory sexuality and the harmful systems it can reproduce. These “systems of sexuality that have been developed to categorize people into sexual personas have historically functioned as systems of colonial imposition and underwritten by desires to keep heterosexuality tethered to whiteness, normality, and ability.”² Compulsory sexuality within feminism at large, and reinforced in sex-positive feminism, is counterproductive to the overarching goal of liberation. Feminism needs to contend with these systems and how they reinforce power, harm, and violence in order to maintain an adaptive interrogative framework. By unpacking the essentialist and assumptive ideals of how sex-positive feminism is predicated on compulsory sexuality, I hope to contribute to the ever-flowing canon of what feminism is becoming. I hope to encourage a step away from collectively defining/selling the actions one must do to be liberated, to be a feminist, and to be a liberated feminist.

Twenty-first-century sex positivity lends itself much more to the asexual lens than it does to compulsory sexuality, despite these representations. Much of the way sex positivity is constructed relies heavily on having sex as a part of the positivity. It is used as the method to help people unpack their sexual shame and free themselves to live fulfilling sexually expressive lives. Asexuality is not the antithesis of sex positivity. It encourages agency in sexual decisions and encourages people to live fulfilling lives—with sex or without it. Asexuality as a lens requires compulsory sexuality to be unpacked throughout the lives of sex-having and non-sex-having people. Many feminists boast a connection to the revolution of sex positivity, but their approaches tend to be based in an unnuanced version of the relationship between feminism and sexual expression. The connection between these two ideas is rooted in a positive relationship

² Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), 5-6.

with the body and with the power inherently involved in that relationship, and “compulsory sexuality allows for a tacit refusal or inability that we all have an inherent right to govern our own bodies and make our own decisions about whether or not to engage in sex.”³ Breaking away from compulsory sexuality would “require radical grounding, alignment, and also an understanding of what sex positivity is *not*,”⁴ and in that breaking, it would allow the relationship to morph into a twenty-first-century sex-positive feminism and become a newly unfinished revolution. I encourage embracing the new and the nuance that asexuality studies can offer the feminist discourses that evoke sex positivity as they pursue a radical liberatory feminism. Sex positivity and asexuality are not the oppositional forces they may appear to be. Rather, they create a web of discussions about sexuality and sexual expression that are inherently reliant on each other as the state of these discussions progresses. Asexuality is the critical framework through which we should be understanding sex and power in feminism, rather than this preconceived notion of sex positivity, where the language of the positive, at times, can encourage compliance in seeking the “best” version of sexual expression. Sex positivity precludes the agency to decide for oneself what the “positive” means. Asexuality as a framework provides space for these discussions and questions outside of shame, which is one of the goals of sex positivity as a movement; it can aid feminism to make space for the same negotiations between the role power plays in sex and sexual expression.

The sources that I plan to engage with span across genres and modalities. Asexuality discourse has foundations outside of traditional means of discourse production within the

³ Sherronda J. Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2022), 7.

⁴ Bianca I. Laurleano, “What is sex-positivity?” *Prism*, September 24, 2020 <https://prismreports.org/2020/09/24/what-is-sex-positivity/>.

confines of academia. Asexuality discourse has its beginnings rooted in many different points of knowledge creation. It can be seen in zines⁵ and blogs. It can be seen in formal caucus collaborative work⁶ and online in informal forum comments between users.⁷ These discussions were primarily occurring as foundational discourse in the late 1990s-early 2000s as the internet began the trajectory of new technology to pocket-sized computers. Social media is in a place to continue the work of the early 2000s asexual activism by connecting not only asexual people (aces) to the information, but also those who may be questioning, curious, or unknowledgeable. Anyone who frequents social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok will offer up information about identities, mental health, and physical health, often unprompted and in an effort to spread awareness of the community.⁸

I provide this information as a personal experience because much of the information I received about asexuality was offered up to me by the internet, despite my being two semesters away from completing a bachelor's degree in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. The culmination of my self-directed sexuality explanation stemmed from an episode of the podcast *Stuff Mom Never Told You* entitled "The ABCs of Being Ace." I listened to this episode while driving back to school after a break; I would not recommend having an asexual awakening while driving—it is quite the distraction, but these are the cards I was dealt at that moment. Due to my personal story of how I came to asexuality, as well as the community-based origins of the topic of asexuality, I felt it necessary to cross a wide range of texts in my analysis, support, and

⁵ Maisha, "Taking the Cake: An Illustrated Primer on Asexuality." [Zine]. 2012
https://acezinearchive.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/taking_the_cake_-_double_sided_printing_fixed.pdf.

⁶ Lisa Orlando, "The Asexual Manifesto," Asexual Caucus, 1972
<https://csclub.uwaterloo.ca/~pbarfuss/Asexual-Manifesto-Lisa-Orlando.pdf>.

⁷ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 4-6.

⁸ @acedadadvice on TikTok and @just_your_local_ace on Instagram were two of the accounts I found community in during my personal research and identity explorations.

critique that helped me chisel out an organic and well-rounded picture of the state of asexuality and sex-positive discourse, as well as the connection between these discourses and the texts at hand. While I may have experienced my realizations about my sexuality while driving, I also plan to show that these multiple forms of knowledge-making are part of the driving force behind conversations that I weave between them and are integral to my research. I explore academic texts, memoirs, semi-scholarly texts, cultural criticism, activist writings, television shows, and less formal sources such as zines, podcasts, blogs, internet articles, and social media. The breadth of these sources is necessary to include and to highlight because the conversations about asexuality and sex positivity are being had at the social and pop cultural level. These discussions are incredibly important as they build the foundation for the societal and social understandings of asexuality and sex positivity, while being an academic point of inquiry and theoretical lenses they have basis in such social discourse. It not only embodies the reach of asexual discourse but also the practical applicability as a lens of academic cultural analysis that displays connective tissue between these sources and the conversation they choose to prioritize.

Asexuality, as previously stated, has been defined through formal and informal sources consistently as the spectrum of asexual identities has developed. In 1972, Lisa Orlando's "Asexual Manifesto" defined asexuality as a "self-contained sexuality."⁹ Inspired by Orlando, Sherronda Brown offers up the straightforward idea that people who often identify with the asexuality spectrum "experience little to no sexual attraction and/or little to no sexual desire, and these things are not evidenced by either the presence or absence of sexual arousal or activity."¹⁰ Brown's definition is not consistent with the standard definition of asexuality offered by many

⁹ Orlando, "The Asexual Manifesto."

¹⁰ Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 2.

educational sources. The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) defines asexuality thus: “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.”¹¹ University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s LGBT Center follows in the same lead describing asexual as “a term used to describe someone who does not experience sexual attraction toward individuals of any gender.”¹² Ela Przybylo interrogates AVEN’s definition directly as it is an “unnuanced rendition of asexual experiences and dispositions. Is asexuality really reducible to the absence of sexual attraction?”¹³ The short answer is no. These authors all explore the question that Przybylo proposes through their individual interrogations. Angela Chen shares her experience finding asexuality through AVEN, where she “misinterpreted ‘a person who does not experience sexual attraction’ to mean ‘a person who hates sex.’”¹⁴ This experience turned her away from the idea of being asexual, at first; in developing *Ace*, however, she “interviewed nearly one hundred aces...the answers they provided were rarely simple.”¹⁵ Chen provides a one-sentence definition for asexuality. She instead chooses to highlight that “aces have developed a new lens that prioritizes what is just over what is supposedly natural.”¹⁶ She pushes back on the need to offer a definition in favor of accepting the nuance.

Asexuality is, of course, based on these sources, not reducible in any way to only an absence of sexual attraction. This definition only works to reinforce the language of lack or deficit that surrounds asexuality and the people who identify with it. The idea that aces are lacking in some way is a consistency throughout acephobic discourse and discourse that claims

¹¹ “Welcome,” *The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network*, <https://www.asexuality.org/>.

¹² “Asexuality, Attraction, and Romantic Orientation” *LGBT Center, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill*, <https://lgbtq.unc.edu/resources/exploring-identities/asexuality-attraction-and-romantic-orientation/>.

¹³ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 2-3.

¹⁴ Chen, *Ace*, 5.

¹⁵ Chen, *Ace*, 6.

¹⁶ Chen, *Ace*, 7.

to be in allyship with asexuality. To dispel some of this language use, the asexual community has shifted to use vocabulary such as allosexual (allos) for people who do not identify with the asexuality spectrum; rather than infer an oppositional binary through the term asexual, allosexual makes room for gray area, shifting identities, and for discovery. It is curious that AVEN, though being one of the first sources to define and connect aces in the early 2000s, has not updated this definition that is posted at the top of their homepage, though they have extended definitions further into the website; these definitions leave much to be desired, stating “just as people will rarely unexpectedly go from being straight to gay, asexual people will rarely unexpectedly become sexual, or vice versa.”¹⁷ The language used by AVEN reinforces the divide often produced between asexuality and other sexual identities, saying that “asexual” is the opposite of “sexual” in the same sentence in which they assert that it is the same as other sexualities. While AVEN is the most well-known source for asexual community connection, other non-asexual specific organizations, such as the Trevor Project, provide an entire page on “Understanding Asexuality,” but do not once give a strict definition of the term “asexual.” They focus on asexuality being an umbrella term and a spectrum of many identities.¹⁸ This is consistently the agreed-upon approach to defining asexuality given the sources I have explored.

As Brown, Przybylo, and Chen have specified, asexuality is not simple; it can be applied as a lens across feminist and sexuality studies by asking questions not restricted by compulsory sexuality. Compulsory sexuality is “the idea that sex is universally desired as a feature of human nature, that we are essentially obligated to participate in sex at some point in life, and that there

¹⁷ “Overview,” *The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network*, <https://www.asexuality.org/>.

¹⁸ “Understanding Asexuality,” *The Trevor Project* <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-asexuality/>.

is something fundamentally wrong with anyone that does not want to.”¹⁹ Compulsory sexuality draws upon the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, in which “sexuality is presumed to be normal or natural”²⁰ and that “people who don’t care about sexuality are missing out on an utterly necessary experience.”²¹ Compulsory sexuality is laced throughout society, marketing, literature, movies, academics, baby clothes, reaching to all corners of life, “make no mistake: sex is political and its meaning is always changing”²² because it reinforces the idea that “people value, privilege, and center sex in many aspects of life -assigning a meaning to sex that they believe is a universally understood truth, but is actually the influence of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist indoctrination.”²³ It is necessary to recognize and unpack the workings of compulsory sexuality in feminism, especially the movement of sex-positive feminism; it can reinforce these norms rather than open up a space of growth toward a sexual liberation not wrapped up in “natural” ideas of sex. Centering it as *the* priority of freedom forces that goal to sidestep and accommodate normalizing forces. In order to pursue these goals of sexual freedom and liberation, there needs to be an acknowledgment that “most people are constricted by sexual norms; aces even more so, at times to the point of exclusion.”²⁴ It is this exclusion that I plan to interrogate, alongside how the texts I explore reinforce compulsory sexuality in their assumptions about the normal and natural centering of sex in their discourse.

Ela Przybylo’s *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (2019) establishes the lack of consideration that feminist and sexuality studies offer to asexuality,

¹⁹ Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 7.

²⁰ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 1.

²¹ Chen, *Ace*, 35.

²² Chen, *Ace*, 35.

²³ Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 57.

²⁴ Chen, *Ace*, 6.

spanning across historical feminist movements, television and film analysis, and fiction—all interrogating how they centralize sex. She primarily teaches courses in “feminist and queer studies and critical publishing studies.”²⁵ She maintains an impressive list of accomplishments within the academy and actively contributes to the establishment of asexuality studies as a valuable lens of theoretical interrogation. While Przybylo leans into Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic, she also establishes a method of applying the asexual lens of analysis in new and critically constructive ways. She delves into the connections between asexuality and Lorde’s concept of the erotic, despite how asexuality and asexual theory have been past established as devoid of erotic potential. She works with Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic specifically as she builds an argument for using an asexual lens to analyze the erotic with a focus on the impact of compulsory sexuality in these encounters: “it envisions the erotic as beyond the sexual, evocative of life energies and deep-seated emotional and psychic needs that cannot be enfolded within sexuality.”²⁶ Her work deconstructs the disconnecting of asexuality and erotics, opening up a wide range of possibilities that function in order to further the possible applications of analysis from an asexual lens. As such, it is an integral text for the sake of included content, but also a valuable model for the deconstructive work asexuality theory can lend itself.

As additional support and vision for this project, I will be looking to *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (2021) by Angela Chen. She is a journalist and writer, outside of the academic discourse community surrounding asexuality. *Ace* is an incredibly accessible text compared to some of the academic sources I have reviewed. It is written with a wide audience in mind and can be picked up at many bookstores. Chen begins her

²⁵ “Ela Przybylo” Ela Przybylo Website, <https://przybyloela.wordpress.com>.

²⁶ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 24.

project with an anecdote: “I let Jane pick the restaurant since I was in Silver Spring for the day anyway and she had driven down from Baltimore to see me.”²⁷ She offers this to begin her text by discussing the experience of feeling sexual attraction, or not, with one of her closest friends as a basis for her project. Chen’s text is the first text I read in my individual research and development for this project. I want to highlight the actual first words I read in *Ace*, the inscription “for everyone who has wanted to want more.”²⁸ As far as embodied reactions go, I felt this line throughout my body. I had only recently, within the last year or so begun labeling²⁹ myself as asexual, and at the time of reading it was in the first few weeks of romantic relationship negotiations with my current, wonderful partner. This is all to say, I was exploring and reexploring my sexuality and romance in relationships just to interrogate all of these topics through my academic research as well. It was made abundantly clear to me through this project that, despite my strong background in literature and my stubborn desire to remain mysterious pulling me to remove myself and the first person from my academic writing, this project would be unfinished if I were to allow that to happen. It would be a disservice to these sources, and I think to myself, to not explore my story which brought me to this project and topic.

Sherronda J. Brown, author of *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex Obsessed Culture* (2022) offers up a wonderful metaphor for her experiences with asexuality and allosexual people: “coffee, ice cream, and alcohol. These are three things that always elicit a look of shock, horror, and disbelief or even an audible gasp whenever someone

²⁷ Chen, *Ace*, 1.

²⁸ Chen, *Ace*, inscription.

²⁹ “I do not necessarily believe that I was born asexual but rather that I have asexual tendencies, that I came into asexuality in the way I came into queerness: because it provided me with meaningful self-narratives.” Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 3.

learns that I do not enjoy them.”³⁰ This text is one of the many that I felt seen by, and I will be incorporating it into my research as it sets up foundational definitions for the term and use of compulsory sexuality, as well as the many lenses of inquiry it offers to sexuality studies and feminist studies as a whole. In addition to this, Brown is working with both asexual studies and Black feminist studies to provide a necessary critical stance that has historically been lacking in asexual representation and discourses. These discussions and representations can be exclusionary to non-white analyses, and I found that Brown does an exceptional job of navigating a landscape where “white asexuals often claim asexual queerness as a property, just as whiteness itself is claimed as a property, as a space others are barred from entering into.”³¹ I came to this text later in my research as it was not published until 2022, but I feel that it is an integral text to the kind of asexual analysis I hope to achieve in this work. Upon exploring *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, I believe it acts as clear support for the bones of my project and asexual inquiry as a whole, and in addition to *Ace*, it expands the list of more accessible and approachable texts that are contributing to asexual discourse in the here and now.

I will also be looking to a handful of journal articles to help support my analysis, critiques, and application of asexual discourses. I found Nathan Snaza’s “Asexuality and Erotic Biopolitics,” an application of asexual analysis in his breakdown of Sedgwick’s “The Epistemology of the Closet” to be incredibly informative as a model for critiquing compulsory sexuality in feminist and queer studies in such a way that calls these analyses in and encourages them to go further in their thinking. I have also found Eliza Glick’s “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression” piece to be integral to establishing any sort of

³⁰ Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 1.

³¹ Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 16.

critique for sex positivity, as it is one of the only articles I was able to locate that points its analysis directly at sex positivity. I will be looking at this article as the historical lineage for an analysis and critique of sex positivity as a movement and politic.

Aside from the basis for these sources, I feel it necessary to assert in this introduction—in the energy of these texts—that I am operating outside of the realm of definition/substantiation, and that asexuality and asexuality studies are not only recognized for their worth, but also legitimacy as a sexual identity, lens of interrogation, and point of study.³² I will not be exploring counternarratives or arguments against this point. My goal is to apply the already established methods and language from these sources to my analysis and critiques of sex positivity as it is manifested through some of its practitioners and uninterrogated consequences.

I will also be analyzing recent works written as sex-positive works or evoking the themes of sex positivity. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* is a collection of Srinivasan's feminist essays that have been published in other locations, but all center around sex in discussions of rape, pornography, patriarchal sexual desire, power, and pleasure. Her research is centrally located around the connection between feminism and philosophy, and she claims to “grasp sex in all of its complexity—its deep ambivalences.”³³ Srinivasan's work has been covered and hailed throughout the press as a “brilliant, rigorous book,”³⁴ a “daring feminist collection” that is potentially “a reflection of where academic feminism is right now,”³⁵ and “a truly

³² Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 2.

³³ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), back cover.

³⁴ Jennifer Szalai, “‘The Right to Sex’ Thinks Beyond the Parameters of Consent,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/books/review-right-to-sex-amia-srinivasan.html>.

³⁵ Rafia Zakaria, “The Right to Sex by Amia Srinivasan review – the politics of sexual attraction,” *The Guardian*, August 19, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/19/the-right-to-sex-by-amia-srinivasan-review-the-politics-of-sexual-attraction>.

stunning debut, sure to provoke, unmoor, and inspire many.”³⁶ *The Right to Sex* is seen as a contributor to this “new,” provocative, and what can be only described as an edgy, philosophical approach to feminism with essays around various topics relating to sex and power.

In conjunction with *The Right to Sex*, I will be analyzing Nona Willis Aronowitz’s *Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution* (2022) and her memoir style of navigating theoretical discussions. The text is sold as “an attempt to make sense of feminism’s failure to... prioritize pleasure...”³⁷ Aronowitz discusses her marriage, divorce, feminism, and relationship with her mother as she introduces the text: “In the last few days of 2016, everything in my life in America was in extreme disarray. I was thirty-two years old. My marriage was falling apart.”³⁸ Aronowitz also provides a historical rooting for her discussion of feminism both in the 1980s with the sex radicals, including her mother, Ellen Willis, to represent through her experience with sex, love, and divorce. She builds a lineage of her experiences with sex and feminism that is compelling, yet lacking in her consideration of how her experiences are rooted in compulsory sexuality—which I will parse through more in chapter two. She enacts teachings akin to her sex-radical mother and their specific kind of feminism, but in doing that, she does herself and her feminism a disservice by not unpacking the systems through which she understands power and her relationship with sex/sexual expression.

Among the reviews on the back of both of these texts, revering them for their contributions to feminism, I found it most notable to highlight Srinivasan’s review of

³⁶ Audrey Clare Farley, “The Right to Sex,” *Washington Independent Review of Books*, September 17, 2022 <https://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/index.php/bookreview/the-right-to-sex>.

³⁷ Sophie Gilbert, “How Should Feminists Have Sex Now?” *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2022 <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2022/08/bad-sex-nona-willis-aronowitz-book-review/671123/>.

³⁸ Nona Willis Aronowitz, *Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution*, (United States of America: Plume, 2022), 1.

Aronowitz’s text: “an intelligent and disarmingly honest book about sex, love, marriage, radical feminism, and the yearnings that echo across generations and the true meaning of sexual liberation.”³⁹ While these texts are different in the course of their tones and approaches, they both engage with each other and with the same thematic equation of what makes a radical sex-positive feminist; they agree with each other’s conception that sexual liberation (as they define it) is the future and the failure of feminism. The titles of both of these texts speak to the specific incarnation of sex-positive feminism that I am critiquing. They are both acting within the context that it is “twenty-first-century feminism,”⁴⁰ the “unfinished revolution”⁴¹ that needs to be completed to shepherd forward the movement’s goals of equality and liberation. This revolution is also the future and the failure of the feminism of Generation Z. Both authors, respectively, gesture toward the narrative that members of Generation Z is “later, it should be noted, than teenagers of previous generations” to participate in sex, and therefore the new generation of feminism is shaped by a disconnect from sex.⁴² These discussions are all laced with compulsory sexuality as they advocate for a sex-positive discourse.

In addition to these two publications, I will be including an analysis of a chapter on *Pleasure Activism*, “Liberating Your Fantasies,” and in addition to the impact and representation of sex, pleasure, and sex-positive feminism in *The Sex Lives of College Girls*⁴³—character, Bela Malhotra’s arc specifically. *Pleasure Activism* author, adrienne marie brown, describes herself as “your host in this sensual space, your learning companion on this pleasure journey possibly even

³⁹ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, back cover.

⁴⁰ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*.

⁴¹ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*.

⁴² Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 41.

⁴³ *The Sex Lives of College Girls* is an HBO Max television comedy show that first aired in November 2021. As of November 2023, it has two seasons and has been renewed for a third season. Mindy Kaling and Justin Noble created it. It has currently aired twenty episodes.

an arrow pointing to your erotic awakening.”⁴⁴ She has created a collection of writings that are “deeply rooted in sex-positive references, such as somatic bodywork and Black feminist theory, that both aim to channel the healing properties of pleasure into sociopolitical liberation.”⁴⁵

Pleasure Activism has had a recent rise in popularity with it being taught in college curricula and hailed for its “new approach.” The particular conception of pleasure activism is relatively innocuous, and defined outside of the realm of sexual expression, as brown features Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” in her opening chapter with footnotes about the applications of the work to her inspiration for the book. As I have previously discussed, Lordean eroticism is also a foundation upon which Przybylo conceptualized *Asexual Erotics*. These authors take the texts in opposing directions. In this case, it begged me to consider the malleability of interpretation, but also the application of the sexual where it may otherwise be unnecessary— threading compulsory sexuality into it throughout the text. a. brown defines pleasure activism in many different locations in the text, but they all culminate around the definition that it is “the work we do to reclaim the whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy,” and it “is us learning to make justice and liberation the pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet.”⁴⁶ Inherently, these definitions do not implicate sex or sexual expression as central components of this activist concept, but the first footnote suggests “you have an orgasm before diving into the book at the beginning of each new section.”⁴⁷ While this does not ask readers to participate in partnered sex, it does explicitly

⁴⁴ adrienne marie brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), 3.

⁴⁵ Caitlin Isabella Laughney, “Book Review: Pleasure activism: the politics of feeling good (emergent strategy)” *SAGE Publications* 37, no. 4, (November 2022).

⁴⁶ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 13.

⁴⁷ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, footnote 1.

involve sexual practices as a heavily encouraged part of the text's understanding of pleasure and in doing so reinforces compulsory sexuality as a piece of a brown's conception of activism, pleasure, and liberation.

The *Sex Lives of College Girls* is a comedy-drama set at Essex College, a very fictional (yet very accurate representation of a) private Ivy League-esque university. It is freshman year, and four roommates all meet on move-in day. The audience is introduced to Kimberly, the resident scholarship working student who is at first depicted as the awkward “virgin”⁴⁸ archetype; Whitney, the scholar-athlete with a politically powerful mother and an inappropriate sexual relationship with her coach; Leighton, the wealthy, legacy student and under-the-radar lesbian; and Bela, the aspiring comedy writer, who self-defines as “super sex-positive, in theory more than in experience”⁴⁹ Though all of these coming-of-sexual-age archetypes could be unpacked for their iffy representations of feminist and queer sexuality, I will be focusing on Bela Malhotra's arc in the first season because it begins with her assertion of being sex-positive within the first ten minutes of the series and develops into her being sexually harassed and stuck in what the writers have designated as the “gray area” surrounding sexual harassment and the decision to report it, or not.⁵⁰ This television show is an incredibly popular piece of media that reports to represent the lives of Generation Z, but is being created by, written by, and shaped by a feminism that is not based in Generation Z. It is a specific brand of liberal feminism that does

⁴⁸ “Traditional belief that it is tragic and unfortunate for men and women to die a virgin combines with pity for a virginal life with disability.” Eunjung Kim. “Curing Virginity.” *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 198.

⁴⁹ The Sex Lives of College Girls. “Welcome to Essex.” *HBO* video, 52:15. November 18, 2021. <https://play.max.com/video/watch/aaaf8db1-3d78-4de4-9a34-97a830df9a22/95896fe9-7832-406e-ac80-6a554e0831f6>.

⁵⁰ Alexandra Surprenant, “Review: ‘The Sex Lives of College Girls Offers Witty Take on Freshman Year’” *The Dartmouth*, December 21, 2021 <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2021/12/review-sex-lives-of-college-girls>.

not allow room for the nuance of Generation Z sexuality as it is, but instead sells a version of sex positivity that is rooted in boisterous compulsory sexuality.

These are some of the texts I plan to engage with a critical eye; I will get more into the details of my critique, or more so yearnings for them, in chapter two of this project as I apply the lenses I build through the introduction and chapter one to posit my call-in for these texts. I wish they would do more to unpack their indirect support for compulsory sexuality through their visions of the feminism of now. These texts all speak of liberation, revolution, “current” ideas of feminism, and sex-positive feminism in most cases. I hope to cover this perception of what feminism should be in this present phase. These texts represent how sex and power are wrapped up in feminism in all different respects, from pop culture television shows to academic essays to activism to memoirs. I want to highlight the current status of the sex-positive narrative of freedom and liberation, while also encouraging a shift to a discussion of sexual and erotic expression free from the restrictions that compulsory sexuality applies to them, that in some part relies on an asexual framework to navigate this nuance.

In my final chapter, I will be detailing my experience with the “crisis” surrounding Generation Z not being sexually active enough through the frame of sex-positive feminists being overtly concerned, shameful toward, and critical of Gen Z and Gen Z feminism. Much of the recent social push to reiterate the necessity of sex-positive feminism has come from the United States being in a post #MeToo, post-Roe political landscape, as well as a pervasive narrative that Generation Z is not having as much sex as generations before it. There is a fascination with discerning the “why” of this trend. This “why” is being interrogated by statisticians, social theorists, feminists, journalists, and the like, the majority of which are not members of Generation Z. The voices in this echo chamber are ones who speculate, critique, and often shame

what they see as a trend contributing to rescinding sexual freedom, and by extension liberation. These arguments are laced with an outsider's critical interpretation that defaults to compulsory sexuality over and over again. This narrative seeks to reinforce control in a way that is inherently oppositional to the stated goal of the discourse which is sexual freedom and sexual liberation. Rather than allow sex and discourse to take on the necessary trajectory, they are working to curtail a generation of feminists into the practice of freedom they deem fit. It is the very act of essentializing that I hope to argue against and caution the danger of. I will bring my perspective as a member of Generation Z who does not remember a time before the internet, who is an active and critical feminist, and a person who identifies as asexual to the thesis and my lenses of interrogation.

I have spent the last several pages establishing the need for an asexual analysis of feminist consciousness and sex-positive feminism. While I am not going to dispute the necessity I have built into my argument, I will even elaborate further to say in my feminism, in the way I hope to act on my goals and my view, this thesis will be an asexual analysis and a feminist analysis. My desire is that feminism and feminist analysis becomes more seamlessly integrated with asexuality discourses and asexual theory rather than a more niche point of interrogation. My feminism and my understanding of my asexual identity are inseparable. I cannot see a world where one operates without the other, and as such my thesis will be built on the premise that they are interwoven and interdependent to the conception of sex and sexuality within feminist liberatory politics.

CHAPTER II: THE TIME HAS COME TO THINK ABOUT SEX: SEX WARS, SEX

RADICALS, SEX POSITIVITY

What is sex positivity? This is one of the overarching questions I had coming into this project. I felt well acquainted with the media narrative that is spun about sex positivity. I had personal experience with the cultural grips that sex positivity had on radical feminism. I even thought I could, to a degree, give an intersectional view of the impact of sex positivity on asexual identities and discourses. One of the pieces of the puzzle I have the least previous exposure to is the history of sex positivity. Did it mostly originate with the sex radical movement of the '70s and '80s? Was it reactionary to restrictive cultural expectations around sex for women? Was there a timeline I had not seen before or a deep basin of journal articles I had yet to discover? This chapter has been the hardest for me to begin because I felt I really did not have the foundation to approach a historical overview of sex positivity in so few pages and with what feels like very little academic discourse to lean on to aid me. When searching the databases for articles discussing sex positivity, it was rare that I was able to find something under that framework. Most articles are framed under the pro-sex movement or the sex-radical movement, and while these are previous incarnations of sex positivity and cleared the way for it to enter mainstream discourses, that is by my understanding the primary locale within which sex positivity is being discussed and defined. Many of the sources I plan to critically engage with in the chapters following this one focus on sex, from one lens or another. Whether that be sex positivity, sex-radicality, asexuality, or just one of critical cultural analysis around sex. Almost all of them discuss the Sex Wars in one way or another, as the focus of a chapter or a mention in the middle of the text. My hope is by synthesizing these texts together, I will be able to paint a

larger picture of the current implications of the Sex Wars for feminist sexual liberation narratives while also highlighting that the oppositional pro-sex/anti-sex binary is unnecessarily alive and well, just wearing a different outfit. So, what are the Sex Wars? My first thought upon hearing about this time in feminist history is that it would make a great title for a reality show (trademark pending). If I were to sift through all the components of the Sex Wars to explain this moment in one or two sentences, I would explain it as a large cultural and political split in feminist views between sex-positive feminists and anti-pornography feminists. One side being depicted as politically radical and the other politically conservative, with its most well referenced debates happening at the Barnard College and Feminist Conference in 1982.⁵¹ While I do not think decades long historical moments should be given a tagline summary, my students asked me for this one day in class, and I felt it helped me prioritize and organize the narrative at hand, which is quite arduous and convoluted if all of the winding roads are to be followed. Nonetheless, as is consistent with any compelling war narrative, there have to be two sides.

Sex-positive, sex-radical, pro-sex feminists⁵² found themselves on one side of the debate that originated with pro-pornography feminism, which believed that porn is a First Amendment right and censoring it was an “uncritical reliance on the state for redress.”⁵³ They saw pornography as a right that should be allowed under the freedom of expression. It acted as a positive mode of expression, perhaps, an inevitable one given the status of sex and media in the

⁵¹ Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 9.

⁵² All of these terms are used to mean relatively the same group of feminist ideals. I will predominantly use sex-positive feminism throughout my analysis, unless I am working with a scholar who designates themselves with a different phrase, such as Ellen Willis who refers to herself as a sex-radical. This phrase is not as commonly used since sex-positive became introduced into the mainstream in the 1990s. However, I feel that using the language the scholars use for themselves is respectful of the political moment in history and of the activists’ efforts.

⁵³ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 14.

United States around this time. “More than that, these feminists often celebrate pornography and women’s involvement in it, arguing that participation in pornography constitutes the epitome of female liberation.”⁵⁴ While pro-pornography feminism is not equivalent to sex-positive feminism, as a square can be a rectangle and a rectangle cannot be a square, they both have four sides, four right angles, and if you divide them at a diagonal they make two triangles. Not the same, not totally disparate either. Anti-pornography feminists sided themselves with the idea that pornography causes more harm to women than it causes liberation. They claimed it is a tool of the patriarchy reinforcing and representing it simultaneously, and “pornography oppresses all women, yet it subordinates women differently based on race.”⁵⁵ These feminists speak to porn normalizing violence against women, centering the male body and perspective, and “[glamorizing] female subordination.”⁵⁶ Their movement as with all political stances, was not without its challenges and missteps. Jennifer Nash, in her introduction to *The Black Body in Ecstasy* elaborates on these issues, and I find that her analysis of the movements is akin to my approach and my thinking. She does a skillful job of reading these movements, their action and reasoning. I am really appreciative of the organization of her work as well as her upfront statements about the methods from all sides of the debates that she feels are positive inclusions in her analysis. Because of this, I will be leaning heavily on her analysis and history of the Sex Wars and sex-radicals to aid me in my research about the origins of sex positivity and the historical moments that lead to it becoming a mainstream, well-beloved, and highly adapted form of feminist sexual liberation. As a part of her analysis, Nash discusses these issues with

⁵⁴ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 15.

⁵⁵ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 10.

⁵⁶ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 10.

“antipornography feminism’s reliance on law as an attempt to safeguard women’s bodily integrity, its wholesale neglect of pleasure, and its symbolic use of black women’s bodies.”⁵⁷ However, she also highlights that “this scholarly tradition shows that pleasure can mask the pernicious workings of the patriarchy. By critically interrogating pleasure rather than simply celebrating it as necessarily positive, anti-pornography feminism shows that hierarchy often wears the guise of pleasure.”⁵⁸ On this side of the battle, feminists are looking to the law to help gain back bodily autonomy, in siding with legal systems that are historically oppressive and “although law tries to negotiate this kind of proximity, it cannot provide the kind of language we need.”⁵⁹ While their interests were not always directed in the way of sexual liberatory practices, and siding with the law is rarely fruitful, these feminists did offer up and ask feminist theory to apply critical lenses to pleasure and the areas where it masks the patriarchy. It would be derivative to say that sex-radicalism is a combination of the high points of anti-pornography and pro-pornography feminism, but to a degree it takes some from both sides. As Nash highlights, sex-radicalism builds on the ideas of pro-pornography feminism, without uncritically accepting porn as feminist sexual liberation. Sex-radicalism is seen as taking a more nuanced and subjective view to pornography and sexual expression. What is good for some may not be good for others, and in this they develop a more individualist mantra, though that individualism still reinforces compulsory sexuality in its self-fulfillment.

Sex-radicals however do not always have the strongest stances of interrogation or critique when it comes to these modes of sexual expression, in part to this more central political location

⁵⁷ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 13.

⁵⁸ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 13-14.

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, “Sexual Consent: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis and Law,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, no. 2, (2011), 27.

that hears and understands pieces of both arguments.⁶⁰ It is this missing layer of critical analysis that I see repeated in modern sex-positive discourses. There is often a heavy emphasis on individualism and the subjectivity of sex, while also a larger policing of the kinds of sex that people should be having, the kinds of pleasure feminists should be pursuing; with those come compulsory sexuality, despite their goal of subjective understanding and nuance of sexual expression that was previously lost on pro-porn and anti-porn debates in the Sex Wars. Several of the texts I analyze in chapter 2 root their analysis in the lineage of sex-radicalism and evoke Ellen Willis, directly referencing her piece “Lust Horizons.” I will discuss these connections more at length, but for now I am looking to this piece as a model of sex-radicalism as it is consistently evoked by modern sex-positive feminists. I will also be looking at Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” due to its central location in feminist discussions after the Barnard conference, as well as its claim to contribute to a radical theory of sexuality.

“Lust Horizons: Is the Women’s Movement Pro-Sex?” debates just that question. Willis claims that the discussion of sex is one of the fastest ways to create an argument in a room of feminists and ends her article having navigated the trajectory of the kinds of questions being asked about sex. She ends her argument with a discussion of whether or not women actually have the autonomy to make decisions about their sexuality and “what would we choose if we had a real choice?”⁶¹ She also critiques the individualist leanings of the sexual liberation movement, but only insofar as they are not radical enough, and only function as a “starting point.”⁶² At no

⁶⁰ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 17.

⁶¹ Ellen Willis, “Lust Horizons: Is the Women’s Movement Pro-Sex?” *Essential Ellen Willis*, Univ of Minnesota Press, 2014. 208.

⁶² Willis, “Lust Horizons: Is the Women’s Movement Pro-Sex?” *Essential Ellen Willis*, 208.

time does her consideration or critique extend to questioning the presumptions of the questions feminists are asking about sex during this era; she even goes so far as to claim that sexual inhibitions are just a normal part of women's relationship with sex.⁶³ Though placing the term "normal" in quotes, this claim still standardizes the idea that "inhibition is the only reason women don't want sex."⁶⁴ These feminists are debating the how, the when, the why, the who, the law, the patriarchy, the heterosexuality, the good, the bad, ad nauseum. They do not enter the conversation from a perspective that allows room for questions that are about not having sex or not wanting sex; they also never acknowledge that there is "no reason that being sexually conservative must prevent one's political radicalism."⁶⁵ Willis's work still relies on these discussions, the sex-negativity or the sex positivity binary, pro-sex/anti-sex, pro-porn/anti-porn—and sex becomes in one way or another a feminist pursuit. Her piece coins the term "pro-sex and in doing so creates a lineage for the sex-positive movement that aids in this divisiveness and does not acknowledge compulsory sexuality. Though Willis is the primary sex-radical name that I found as a pattern across the discourses surrounding sex-radical feminism, she is by no means the only taste maker.

Gayle Rubin's name is also brought into the mix, especially for her essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." Her work came two years after the aforementioned Barnard Conference, and it is widely accepted to be a piece of sex-positive work, a stepstone of the lineage of sex positivity as it has morphed through the decades. Though her presence is not as significant in the lineage of sex-positive discourse I am engaging with, I do see

⁶³ Willis, "Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?" *Essential Ellen Willis*, 204.

⁶⁴ Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press 2020), 54.

⁶⁵ Angela Chen, *Ace*, 60.

it as a foundation of the historical movement and integral to the definition of the Sex Wars. “The time has come to think about sex. To some, it may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation”—Rubin begins her piece with a call to thought.⁶⁶ She claims that the time in history has officially come to think about sex due to the 1950s when the “early gay rights movement began and prospered while bars were being raided and anti-gay laws were being passed.”⁶⁷ Rubin and I do agree on some pieces of the way sex discourses come into the light. There is a cyclical nature to them, and often, discussions of sex, panic about sex, is not necessarily about sex; “disputes over sexual behavior often become vehicles for displacing social anxieties and discharging their attendant emotional intensity.”⁶⁸ In this instance, it stems from the shifting landscape around sex from the standpoint of the queer liberation movement, but previously there has been similar panic—the 1880s in England.⁶⁹ These discussions are, to my understanding of the pattern, rooted in the idea that all people have one thing in common: sex. Rubin says that there is a “pressing task of creating an accurate, humane, and genuinely liberatory body of thought about sexuality.”⁷⁰ In that, I feel that we are aligned. However, where Rubin is centrally located in the problem of the 1980s discussion of sex, I want to call into the conversation an asexual analysis. Rubin highlights the problems with sexual essentialism as a part of her piece—“the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions.”⁷¹ She also calls into question Western systems that do nothing to critique and unpack the ways sex has

⁶⁶ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” 1984, <https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.middlebury.edu/dist/2/3378/files/2015/01/Rubin-Thinking-Sex.pdf>, 143.

⁶⁷ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 148.

⁶⁸ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 143.

⁶⁹ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 148.

⁷⁰ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 148.

⁷¹ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 149.

been accepted as an inevitability, positing that there are five concepts, including sexual essentialism, that need to be taken into account to create a larger theory of sex: “sex negativity, the fallacy of the misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sexual acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation.”⁷² In Rubin’s mind, sex negativity is the most pernicious; I see this valuation as not unpacking Western ideas of sex, rather shuffling them around. “Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive negative force...virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established”⁷³ Rubin is attempting to build an equation to define sex on a different scale, while still doing so on the same foundations as the previous scale. She argues that sexuality needs to be radically redefined outside of it being biologically necessary, but by categorizing sex negativity as the priority that needs to be addressed in a radical theory of sexuality opens the door for the compulsory sexuality on the opposite end of the spectrum: sex positivity. The five components she claims are the most important do not take into account compulsory sexuality, which I would argue is the most important component of Western conceptions of sex that needs to be unpacked to create freer and more liberatory sexual practices. Rubin states that “a radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. Such a theory needs refined conceptual tools which can grasp the subject and hold it in view...It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution.”⁷⁴ This call to action cannot be fully fulfilled until compulsory sexuality is accounted for and the foundation of this scholarship is reconsidered.

⁷² Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 150.

⁷³ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 150.

⁷⁴ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 149.

Sex-positive discourse is positioned as a part of this canon, started by this canon. These discourse makers left pillars of sex radicalism that tried to define what radical means and tried to define what sex means. Sex became a central feminist concern during a part of history where the revolution was on minds across the country, but there is also a relatively uncritical adoption of sex positivity as the best of both worlds of the Sex Wars. However, “the theory and activism of the pro-sexuality movement has been shaped by this identitarian logic, which is invested in politicizing self-exploration, lifestyle, and consumption as radical acts.”⁷⁵ Porn is nuanced. Sex is nuanced. To each their own, but this idea in itself, is an act that is masked by the assumption that sex positivity is the one size fits all version of sexually liberatory politics. Rather than accept this as the best version, the most radical, God’s gift to women, version of feminist sexual liberation, it is time that compulsory sexuality is unpacked within these political narratives. There needs to be a rethinking of what liberation looks like, why there is a yet another binary being reinforced, and how pleasure and sex can be deployed in a more intentional and, dare I say, asexual way to allow room for the movement to continue to mold and shape the generations to come. The radical thinking that came out of the Sex Wars and paved the way for current sex positivity is not without its limits, and it is not without its issues—“sexuality experts are still only beginning to challenge the broader idea that not wanting sex is a problem.”⁷⁶ Sex-positive theorists, historically and recently, are also not stepping up to that task despite arguing that the most radical discussions have to embrace this critical language and thinking.

⁷⁵ Eliza Glick, “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression” *Feminist Review*, no. 64, (Spring, 2000), 24.

⁷⁶ Angela Chen, “The Limits of Sex Positivity,” *The Atlantic*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/07/if-you-dont-want-sex-its-not-problem/619547/>.

Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" is a work that was written during the same period in feminism and is integral to many of the alternative conceptions of what pleasure, the erotic, and sex can be when not writing under the framing of compulsory sexuality. I will discuss more about Lordean erotics in the next chapter, but as "Uses of the Erotic" was published in 1984, it is a part of the canon of the shaping of sexual liberation and sexual politics while sex-radicalism was shaping the discourses. Lorde does not centrally locate sex as her point of inquiry, which is oppositional to the trends visible in some other pieces at the time. She focuses on the concept of the erotic, which while it is involved in sex and sexual acts, is not strictly sexual in its existence. "Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from the most vital areas of our lives other than sex."⁷⁷ This framework is free from compulsory sexuality because as a foundation, it requires that sex not be the only, or default, consideration. Lorde opens up ways of connecting that are in contrast to the popular voices of the moment, because she does not see liberation as reliant on sexual freedom, but instead erotic freedom. This erotic is "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."⁷⁸ Lorde relies on a non-sexual sense of satisfaction, fueled by eroticism and fullness. She is not pushing compulsory sexuality by suggesting that that path to satisfaction is based in a fulfilling, liberated sex life.

Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics* details this further, but what I would like to point to directly is a quote offered in the first chapter from a lesbian feminist Sue Katz, part of which says, "For me, coming out meant an end to sex. It's dead and gone in my life. I reject that institution totally.

⁷⁷ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."

⁷⁸ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."

Sex means oppression, it means exploitation. . . Physical contact and feelings have taken a new liberatory form, and we call that ‘sensuality’. . . gay feminism now is a fantastically sensual experience for me. . . Physicalness is now a creative non-institutionalized experience.”⁷⁹ Of course, Przybylo is highlighting the framework of sex here that states that once it is free of the patriarchy, it is free of the institutionalization; “[Katz] grounds erotics in sensuality, in creative and not necessarily sex-based forms for relating to others intimately. These erotics are about the feeling of revolution grounded in spending time with other women toward building communities of resistance.”⁸⁰ As Przybylo describes, this interaction is free to be what it is, not an intimacy reliant on sex or sex reliant on heterosexual norms. Not only viewing non-heterosexual interactions as an example of this, Przybylo also discusses the power of celibacy as a tool: “celibacy is articulated as a means for gaining self-knowledge and, drawing on Lorde, increased awareness of one’s erotic powers.”⁸¹ Celibacy is not only a choice that can be made, nor was it a conservative alignment; “Political asexuality/celibacy, while often understood as a form of ‘anti-sex,’ constituted an energizing practice and theory that fostered, rather than impeded, erotic development in the sixties and seventies, fueling the erotics of revolutionary action for feminists.”⁸² With this analysis Przybylo builds upon Lorde’s eroticism, by showing that the revolution does not have to involve having sex, despite what some sex-radicals and pro-sex feminists would argue. Feminists can be practicing what might be considered “anti-sex” actions, while not aligning with conservative feminism or anti-sex feminism, and it is still a revolutionary action.. These serve as examples for the ways that sex, as in the physical act of sex, can be

⁷⁹ Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), 60.

⁸⁰ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 60.

⁸¹ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 61.

⁸² Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 62.

reworked and decentralized within political movements that are inherently in support of sexual liberation. As Rubin said, sex is made to represent things other than sex, it is politicized and assigned meaning. When freed from these oppressive structures, including compulsory sexuality, there is more space for openness, freedom, and liberation. This is the path toward what these sex-radicals were often calling for in their works while still contributing to compulsory sexuality.

Pleasure is not only a cloud shrouding the patriarchy—it is an integral component of sex positivity as a movement because the base motive is often pitched as the pursuit of liberation through pleasure...and what could be wrong with feeling good? In the following chapters, I analyze how politics centered around pleasure and sexual liberation reinforce compulsory sexuality. I also show that these types of politics reinforce the binary of conservative versus radical feminism well past the 1980s. Keeping in mind Nash's critique of anti-pornography feminists neglecting pleasure, it is not my intent to encourage that with my discussion. I would rather embody, as Przybylo does, Lorde's conception of erotic liberation as not only tied to sex as an action. It is my goal to encourage that pleasure and its uses in liberatory politics are not hailed as the center of the revolution or the mantle of the radical group, but rather that the center be fluid. Pleasure is necessary and finding pleasure is in itself a goal, but sexual liberation cannot be an exclusionary pursuit. Not unpacking sex-positive feminism's allegiance with sex positivity is as harmful to the movement as it is to the opposition, historically and to its descendants. To learn from this feminist history is to make space for the erotic and the radical outside of sexuality and sexual pleasure, and to make room for asexuality discourse and identities.

CHAPTER III: FLIPPING THE SCRIPT: AN ANALYSIS OF RECENT SEX-POSITIVE

WORKS

As I researched background information about the authors I plan to engage with in this section, I stumbled upon Nona Willis Aronowitz's "F*cking Through the Apocalypse" weekly newsletter. I would like to say I found it deep in the trenches of data collection, but in reality, I found it through her *Wikipedia* page. I have not been able to track down more than her inaugural post, "fucking the pain away" from February 2, 2017, in the first month of the Trump presidency. I am sure everyone can appreciate the irony of 2017 being deemed the apocalypse in our current "post" pandemic world,⁸³ but Aronowitz asks us to consider the concept of end-of-the-world sex and whether it is "time to fuck, or not? Is sex a distraction, or part of the solution? Either way, sex itself has become more politicized than ever."⁸⁴ While I would concur that sex has become more politicized (maybe not than ever before), these questions implicate the larger critical frameworks surrounding sex discourse that I hope to unpack. So, she asks, is it time to fuck or not? Presuming there will be a time, later, when it is right. Presuming, "perhaps love and comfort is lower on the priority list at a time when Americans' basic survival is threatened."⁸⁵ These presumptions not only reinforce compulsory sexuality, as I will analyze throughout this chapter, but they also conflate "craving human connection," love, and comfort as categorically involved in sexual energies and attraction.⁸⁶ Aronowitz calls on us to believe in sex as the connective

⁸³ As a person who experienced/experiences long-covid symptoms daily for over two years, and still has to contend with mystery health issues related to it, I do not believe there is a post-pandemic. I think this novel virus will continue to affect us all in novel and unexpected ways, at least, I certainly know it will affect me.

⁸⁴ Nona Willis Aronowitz, "fucking the pain away." F*cking Through the Apocalypse. February 2, 2017, <http://tinyletter.com/nona/letters/fucking-the-pain-away>.

⁸⁵ Aronowitz, "fucking the pain away."

⁸⁶ Aronowitz, "fucking the pain away."

tissue between human beings in times of turmoil, this decision of “will they or won't they”⁸⁷ permeates “Election Night, when pretty much everyone I know was receiving ‘u up?’ texts.”⁸⁸ These broad sweeping assumptions of the way sex is presented as the coping mechanism during times of high stress from a sex-positive radical feminist lens not only reinforces compulsory sexuality but invalidates the extensive network of non-sexual connections that people participate in throughout their lifetimes.

I will unpack how the texts I examine in this chapter evoke the ideas of sex-positive feminism in such a way that they reinforce compulsory sexuality and further increase the constructed binary of “radical” and “conservative” feminist practices. Sex-positive feminism favors one side of that binary, though that radicality is very specific in relation to their feminism, and it is typically attached to sexual liberation. They represent the narrative that I am working to unpack, that sex is a solution, that good sex is a requirement, and that sex is the way to fix any issues with the feminine experience—all that must be done is to fuck the pain away.⁸⁹ Often these texts will approach my critiques with their discussions of sex; they will tiptoe toward the point I am craving that they make, but then they brush past and continue to reinforce the systems of compulsory sexuality that they are enculturated within. These compulsory ideas ask feminists to perpetuate and reiterate systems that bring harm upon their sexual autonomy and the autonomy of others. Therefore, it is necessary to unpack the underpinning of compulsory sexuality throughout sex positivity if these scholars and discourse creators are going to project

⁸⁷ This phrase is often used to reference the unresolved sexual tension between two people who are trying to decide whether or not they are going to pursue a sexual relationship.

⁸⁸ Aronowitz, “fucking the pain away.”

⁸⁹ Aronowitz, “fucking the pain away.”

sex-positive values onto freedom and liberationist feminism without enforcing harm, intentionally or not.

“What do you want to be turned on by? Can you even imagine it? Try. Again. Again. Keep trying until you feel something.”⁹⁰ These are the last questions included in the ‘Hot and Heavy Homework’ that ends some chapters of *Pleasure Activism*. The particular chapter I will be analyzing, and the location of the above homework, is adrienne marie brown’s “Liberating Your Fantasies.” The piece was originally published on February 21, 2018 in *Bitch Media*. In the first footnote of the chapter, brown addresses controversy surrounding the piece, stating “there were a few people who felt this piece was about policing the realm of fantasy and that it was not feminist. I include this piece here because it feels important to examine what we are training our bodies to find pleasurable and to be as intentional as possible about it—that feels very feminist to me.”⁹¹ I do not plan to contribute to the conversation about whether or not brown’s words are policing the realm of fantasy and what fantasy can be. I do, however, want to point out and analyze the ways that this chapter, and by extension the text at large, relies on compulsory sexuality through the version of sex-positive messaging that is thematically integral to pleasure activism.

As I have considered with the Aronowitz and Srinivasan texts in my introduction, I look to the subtitle of the text as an indication of the authors’ connection to sex positivity. brown emphasizes her connection through the idea of “feeling good.” The text, overall, searches for liberation by “making social justice the most pleasurable human experience.”⁹² It begs the

⁹⁰ adrienne marie brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), 224.

⁹¹ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 220.

⁹² brown, *Pleasure Activism*, back cover.

question of why social justice needs to be pleasurable to be liberatory. What happens when liberation is emphasized through the lens of the pleasure it brings us? Why does this pleasure need to be rooted in sexual expression? In the beginning of brown's text, she annotates Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" with her thoughts, as well as the pieces that connect to pleasure activism as a concept and a text. By beginning with Lordean erotics, brown is evoking the core of Lorde's reconsideration of what erotic forces can be. Przybylo offers a definition that is prudent here, saying that "erotics for feminists, and for my own work in particular, are about challenging the conflation of sexual desire with the erotic and thus opening up different paradigms for thinking about relating."⁹³ This is the lineage both authors look to aid them in their arguments about sexuality, pleasure, activism, and feminism. Przybylo views the erotic through an asexual lens that challenges feminist understandings of what eroticism can be when sexual expression is questioned rather than assumed, because "the erotic includes those experiences that are describable as *sexual* but extends much further to include the entire field of haptics, a field that shimmers with joy, connecting humans and nonhumans (like a bookcase or margarine). The erotic is a *question*, which means that it is a site of situational *struggle* over joy."⁹⁴ Lorde calls for an expansion of the erotic rather than synonymizing it with sex and pleasure that is derived from sexual exploration. To begin in the same place, brown seems to be unpacking the connection between the erotic and pleasure, almost leading readers to see that there is pleasure in all things, not only sex. This conclusion parallels Lorde's intentions of expanding the ideas that pleasure encapsulates, but pleasure is not equivalent to the erotic. Lorde asserts that she speaks

⁹³ Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), 21.

⁹⁴ Nathan Snaza, "Asexuality and Erotic Biopolitics," *Feminist Formations* 32, no 3, (Winter 2020): 125.

“of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered.”⁹⁵ The erotic then, in the lineage that brown brings throughout the book, is, as a liberatory force, outside of sexually based pleasure. In “Liberating your Fantasies,” brown ends with the aforementioned “Hot and Heavy Homework.” “Hot and heavy” is colloquially used to describe something that is “sexually intense, active, or exciting.”⁹⁶ brown is bookending her arguments with sensation-based sexual language in regard to fantasy, liberations, and the erotic. Lorde emphasizes throughout her many explanations of eros and erotic forces that “the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.”⁹⁷ To begin a text encouraging readers to have an orgasm⁹⁸ before each section, and to end select chapters with homework that can almost only be understood through a sexual lens—well, it is difficult not to follow the sexual connective tissue between pleasure activism and compulsory expectations of sexual expression, as the conflation of brown’s erotic inspiration with sensation and “feeling good” is central in a chapter directly tied to brown’s view on liberatory practices.

As a person who identifies with asexuality, I feel on a personal level this push brown is asking for me to “try. Again. Again. Keep trying until you feel something.”⁹⁹ I spent years of my life stuck in the cycle of the again and again and again...searching for the something that makes me feel the thing that everyone says is so wonderful. The intrinsic sexual desire that every person has, or so that is how I was shown. I failed. Again. Again. Again. brown, in this instance

⁹⁵ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider*, 1978. The Crossing Press, 1984.

⁹⁶ “Hot and heavy definition,” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hot%20and%20heavy>.

⁹⁷ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic.”

⁹⁸ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, footnote 1.

⁹⁹ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 224.

especially, is not asking her readers to try to find something, anything, that brings them pleasure. She is asking for a hunt to find the thing that turns you on. I want to call back to my introduction when I highlighted the inscription in *Ace*: “for everyone who has wanted to want more.”¹⁰⁰ It is an impossibly exhausting experience, living with compulsory sexuality. brown is encouraging the want to want more—the compulsory sexuality as a way of liberation, activism, and pleasure. While she works to open activism up to the concept of pleasure, in this moment she does not open up pleasure to asexual or non-sexual experiences. *Feminist Formations* volume 32, issue 3 focused on asexuality and asexual discourses. This pressure of the “want to want more” that compulsory sexuality applies is well-documented through ace stories, but in this instance I would like to highlight the words from two poets in the issue. These poems strike very different tones, but I think both are worthy of consideration. Jo Teut discusses their feelings about the conversations surrounding the infamous “first time”: “she said *you’ve never done it?* / and I shook my head no / she said, *oh your first time is going to be so bad.*”¹⁰¹ Teut documents the compulsory elements of this experience, but transitions to show “foot snuggles / are freaking magical / a gift sent by the goddesses / to couples like us / who know / that nothing could really be as intimate / as wrapping our legs around each other / letting our feet mingle at the foot of the bed.”¹⁰² In another piece, Sav Schlauderaff says, “I often wonder if my dating and sex life would have looked different if I wasn’t raped / If I hadn’t continually experienced sexual, physical, and domestic violence for so many years of my life / Would I have felt more sure about my unsure

¹⁰⁰ Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press 2020), inscription.

¹⁰¹ Jo Teut, “first time,” *Feminist Formations*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 179.

¹⁰² Teut, “first time,” 179-180.

feelings on love and sex?”¹⁰³ In both of these poems, documenting asexual experiences, the writers highlight the confusion and pain that compulsory sexuality causes when placed on a person, making them want to want more rather than allowing them to live. a. brown does not navigate the implications of compulsory sexuality on her work, as she relies so heavily on sexual expectations in her radical conceptualization of activism.

The “Liberating Your Fantasies” chapter as a whole focuses on unpacking unjust power dynamics that are central to many people’s understandings of fantasy. brown argues that “eventually our desires are woven so thoroughly with these social norm fantasies that we think we desire our own disempowerment or someone else’s.”¹⁰⁴ It is this disempowerment that needs to be unpacked, in sexual fantasies especially. Her approach encourages acknowledgment that fantasies “layer into this our intersecting systems of hierarchy–racism, ableism, classism, etc.– and you have a plethora of fantasies that perpetuate and sustain a janky reality.”¹⁰⁵ Perhaps that is her goal with pleasure activism, to limit the exhaustion. However, another contributor to the janky reality is compulsory sexuality. It, too, deserves the attention of pleasure and sex-positive activists. In addition to the racist, ableist, and classist components of hierarchy, compulsory sexuality further supports the power systems brown is aiding her readers in liberating themselves from. My request of this chapter, and the text as a whole, is to consider these layered systems of power that surround sexuality. Sex positivity at its most positive encourages that “we all have capacity for and must do the hard work to unlearn harm we have been socialized to believe is the best way forward. We are all worthy when sex positivity is in alignment with collective

¹⁰³ Sav Schlauderaff, “Learning to rec-claim my body and my asexuality,” *Feminist Formations*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 178.

¹⁰⁴ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 224.

¹⁰⁵ brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 223.

liberation.”¹⁰⁶ As a contribution and evocation of liberation, pleasure activism—hailed as an integral part of feminist discourse, taught in classroom curriculums—needs to contend with compulsory sexuality as one of the many power dynamics at play as a part of the conversation. It is a necessary critical application of asexual theoretical frameworks, and I encourage choosing a path toward unlearning harm, rather than doubling down and fucking the pain of being an activist away.¹⁰⁷ Activism is, as all activists know, challenging work, impossible work, disheartening work, work that does not leave us feeling good all the time. Chronic pain exists for many people; it is part of my daily life. There is the third act of a global pandemic to contend with. Racial capitalism...on and on. I do not want there to be a discouraging force for activists to be activists; however, this call for it to be pleasurable, is distracting from the liberationist goals that are central to much of the feminist discourse of the moment and reliant on a certain degree of sexual expectation.

The search for liberatory pleasure is an integral theme of Nona Willis Aronowitz’s *Bad Sex*. Though it is not necessarily coming from the place of pleasure activism, Aronowitz does have her feminist foundation in the sex radical movement of the 1970s-80s due to her connections with her mother, Ellen Willis. *Bad Sex* was well received by its readers, reviewed as “courageously frank,”¹⁰⁸ with the historical aspect of the text being “critical, and fascinating, as a framework to interpret society’s views on love and sex in the present.”¹⁰⁹ As mentioned in my

¹⁰⁶ Bianca I. Laurleano, “What is sex-positivity?” *Prism*, September 24, 2020, <https://prismreports.org/2020/09/24/what-is-sex-positivity/>.

¹⁰⁷ Aronowitz. “fucking the pain away.”

¹⁰⁸ “Bad Sex,” *Kirkus Reviews*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/nona-willis-aronowitz/bad-sex-truth-pleasure/>.

¹⁰⁹ Jessica Bennett, “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About ‘Bad Sex’ but Were Afraid to Ask,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/books/review/nona-willis-aronowitz-bad-sex.html>.

introduction, Amia Srinivasan was amid the reviewers on the back cover of the text, in support of the narratives that Aronowitz weaves together. The text has not only gained traction in mainstream feminist academic discourses, but also in the public eye as Aronowitz is catering to both discourses with her often disjointed telling of multiple storylines. I have spoken about the history of the Sex Wars and “pro-sex” versus anti-sex discourses as they are foundational to sex positivity as it is now. Ellen Willis is integral to that lineage and the lineage of Aronowitz’s understanding of her feminist sexuality despite there not being much direct conversation between mother and daughter on this subject. Much of Aronowitz’s connection to her mother’s feminist writings comes from exploring them on her own. Because Aronowitz has intertwined her story with her mother’s in this text as foundational for her, it is, therefore, intertwined in her understanding of sex, feminism, and liberation. I will look at both authors as I proceed with my analysis.

In 1982, Ellen Willis published her piece “Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution.” She rejects a shift she notices in the way sex radicals of the time spoke about sex:

At the heart of this shift is a sweeping social constructivist rejection of any concept of a ‘natural’ sexual drive, and of the idea that the biological dimension of sexuality, if it can be said to exist at all, in any way determines or shapes our actual experience. I do not share this view.

On the contrary, I believe we can’t understand sex as an emotional, moral or social issue, let alone formulate a politics of sexual liberation without some recourse to the idea of sexual satisfaction as a biological need.¹¹⁰

The root of Willis’ critique of social constructivist views of sex actively reinforces compulsory sexuality by claiming that feminist understandings of political sexual liberation have to participate in the idea that sexual satisfaction is compulsory. It is necessary to point out that

¹¹⁰ Ellen Willis, “Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution,” *Essential Ellen Willis*, Univ of Minnesota Press, 2014, 177.

Ellen Willis, a strong voice within the sex-radical, pro-sex movement when speaking about sexual liberation, states outright that sex cannot be understood in any way without the acknowledgment of it being a biological need. Both Willis and Aronowitz evoke Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality as a part of their writings, as an integral part of the systems of power they are looking into, but fall short of seeing outside of their questions of monogamy and heterosexuality to the questions of whether or not sex *has* to be considered as a biological need and the restrictive nature this places on feminist sexual liberation. Aronowitz, in particular, finds herself skirting around the matter, almost flirting with critiquing compulsory sexuality, albeit unnamed, only to never quite reach that stage.

In Chapter 7, "In It for the Dick," Aronowitz is calling on Rich's critique of compulsory heterosexuality which Willis often does in her writing about sex, and in the same paragraph states that "given how much of our sexual preferences are socialized and expected, the only way to know how authentic our sexualities are is to be an active participant...settling into the privilege of the automatic, explanation-free heterosexuality seemed passive, even cowardly."¹¹¹ I feel that this quote evokes some of the critiques that I have of Aronowitz' delving into her life and evoking her mother's work. Both writers settle into the idea of compulsory sexuality as foundational to much of their thinking; *Bad Sex* often toes the line of understanding how compulsory sexuality is involved in Aronowitz's understanding of the location of sex in her relationships and her pursuit of revolution and liberation, but misses that thread. In this chapter particularly she ponders how heterosexuality has steered her life, and if that was inherently the issue with her sex life. She defaults to the idea that her bad experiences with sex, could be solved

¹¹¹ Nona Willis Aronowitz, *Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution*, (United States of America: Plume, 2022), 180.

with—albeit different—more sex. Therefore, my analysis, my yearning for this text, is akin to Nathan Snaza’s analysis of Eve Sedgwick’s “The Epistemology of the Closet” where she discusses Henry James’ “The Beast in the Jungle.” Sedgwick argues that the main character’s secret in the story is his homosexuality. Snaza offers a different reading from an asexual lens saying that, “Sedgwick sees this violence as a product of compulsory heterosexuality and hypothesizes that if Marcher were free to have a sexuality ‘of whatever kind,’ the social/relational violence could be suspended. Because I would argue that the real violence adheres in compulsory sexuality.”¹¹² In Snaza’s analysis, the main character is not shamed by his inability to desire women, as most queer readings would allude to his “closeted” behavior, but instead that he is restricted by compulsory sexuality at large, and the assumption that Sedgwick’s queer reading defaults to the understanding of “if it is not heterosexuality, then it must be homosexuality.” Sedgwick’s analysis fails to unpack the threads of how that analytic choice reinforces compulsory sexuality by participating in it as a system of control and explanation for dissatisfaction in a way that is traveling in the same direction, if not parallel to, Aronowitz’s analysis of her own life, marriage, and experience with sex. For this analysis, and the way that I am employing asexual discourse rather than asexuality as an identity, I do crave that further questioning of sex and its role in her life and in her feminism. I crave the questioning of it in her mother’s life and feminism. Brown discusses this phenomenon in her chapter entitled “Desire,” quoting Myra T. Johnson saying “Individuals ‘discuss’ sexual freedom all too often in terms that will only serve to reinforce the choices *they* have made.”¹¹³ I see this through the lineage of the type of feminist sex analysis both Aronowitz and Willis do. They spend their

¹¹² Snaza, “Asexuality and Erotic Biopolitics,” 128.

¹¹³ Sherronda J. Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2022), 80.

focused energy, to an asexual analysis, missing the forest for the trees. Then that energy becomes sex radicalism and feminist radicalism to them, and to many, as they are well-respected voices and discourse makers.

This type of radical feminism wrapped up in compulsory sexuality is very clear in Willis' writings and is laced throughout the writings of *Bad Sex* as they compile a story of a mother as a sex activist and a daughter struggling with sex in her marriage. In the introduction to her text, Aronowitz discusses the "bad sex" with her husband was "the one con that mattered most" when she was deciding if their marriage was worth saving, if the love she felt was real, if their connection "though real, wasn't strong enough."¹¹⁴ The views she holds of herself and her marriage are so wrapped up in the sex radical/radical feminism narrative, and it exemplifies the more toxic ends of the spectrum that sex-positive discourse can foster. She found herself questioning, "How would it look if I stayed with a person I didn't like to fuck, despite my almost religious devotion to the sexual revolution especially the pockets that focus on female pleasure?"¹¹⁵ Her alignment with her sex positivity is rooted in the having of sex, the having of good sex, great sex even, and it seems as though she is failing the revolution, failing to liberate herself by not adhering to the commandments set out before her. This approach to sex and sexual liberation reinforces compulsory sexuality in sex-positive discourses. Aronowitz's searching for good sex and narrating that journey through her mother's theorizing intertwines their voices so much so that it is difficult to parse through whose is whose. Pro-sex theory and sex-radicalism historically "leaves intact the notion that some sexualities are more liberatory than others, and

¹¹⁴ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex* 12.

the most liberatory ones of all should serve as the foundation for a politics of resistance.”¹¹⁶ By evoking this lineage, Aronowitz has a clear alignment, however intentional, with this version of radical feminism that “reproduce[s] the ideology of personal emancipation within contemporary capitalist society by making the liberation of sex a fundamental feminist goal,”¹¹⁷ and she imposes it not only on herself but the consumers of her texts.

Aronowitz does parse through the implications of “winning” the Sex Wars saying “the pro-sex feminists ultimately prevailed over that of the anti-porn feminists. Women did not trade in their freedom for an illusory sense of protection, porn did not get banned, and casual sex came with fewer and fewer societal consequences. They won because people rarely respond positively to moralistic finger-wagging.”¹¹⁸ Aronowitz even interacts with Angela Chen’s *Ace*¹¹⁹ in her chapter discussing the onset of sex as it is known to her now as an adult and as it was known to her as a teenager. She acknowledges from many angles the problems with sex positivity, though never using this term, and seemingly not stating it outright. She mentions the “compulsory obstacle course”¹²⁰ that is hookup culture, critiques compulsory expectations for monogamy while evoking Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality.”¹²¹ Aronowitz has a clear grasp of the history of sex-radicalism through her mother; compulsory expectations for sex to be monogamous, good, feminist, radical; and she knows what it is like to come-of-age in the time of sex positivity, where “suddenly, any and all sex was good as long as it was consensual.”¹²² I

¹¹⁶ Eliza Glick, “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression” *Feminist Review*, no. 64, (Spring, 2000): 24.

¹¹⁷ Glick, “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression,” 22.

¹¹⁸ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, 96.

¹¹⁹ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, 102.

¹²⁰ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, 103.

¹²¹ Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, 219.

¹²² Aronowitz, *Bad Sex*, 96.

craved for this text to also discuss how all of these ideas are rooted in compulsory sexuality— expectations for sex *and* expectations to have sex. In reading her analysis, history, and personal stories, I felt that this work was straining for that extra level of consideration. If the text is going to be named to document an unfinished revolution...what is more unfinished than not contending with the contribution to and alignment with compulsory sexuality that sex positivity and by extension, this work, leave on the table unquestioned?

Amia Srinivasan evokes a similar sex-positive lineage in her collection of essays *The Right to Sex*, while also not quite entering the conversation from a place that unpacks sex positivity and instead, accepts its lineage. In the titular “The Right to Sex” essay, Srinivasan directly engages Ellen Willis’s piece “Lust Horizons” in her discussion of sex-positive feminism. She analyzes the past and present incarnations of what she categorizes as the sex-positive gaze. Srinivasan highlights in her writing, an idea that she has presented throughout the essay, which is this conception of “fuckability,” within the context of sex positivity:

These facts about ‘fuckability’—not whose bodies are seen as sexually available (in the sense black women, trans women, and disabled women are all *too* fuckable), but whose bodies confer status on those who have sex with them—are political facts. They are facts that a truly intersectional feminism should demand we take seriously. But the sex-positive gaze, unmoored from Willis’s call to ambivalence, threatens to neutralize these facts, treating them as pre-political givens. In other words, the sex-positive gaze risks covering not only misogyny, but for racism, ableism, transphobia, and every other oppressive system that makes its way into the bedroom through the seemingly innocuous mechanism of “personal preference.”¹²³

In this quote specifically, Srinivasan’s argument complements my own thoughts, but as with *Pleasure Activism* and *Bad Sex*, she fails to acknowledge and critically interact with compulsory sexuality. Srinivasan lists out and prioritizes these very real implications of sex

¹²³ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 84.

positivity, but the context from which she is writing from make me want more of an asexual lens on this concept of “fuckability” and Srinivasan’s sex positivity. In her declarations about sex positivity, Srinivasan makes it clear that “it would be disingenuous to make nothing of the convergence however unintentional, between sex positivity and liberalism in their shared reluctance to interrogate the formation of our desires.”¹²⁴ I find in this moment a reluctance on Srinivasan’s part to interrogate the compulsory nature of these desires and of the views of sexuality and sexual expression that she explores in this particular section. She states that there may be a connection, but that is too easy—there has to be more to it. Though she spends her time interested in a different direction of the sex-positive gaze, at times evoking it and at others trying to shave it down, she is still engaging in sex-positive discourse and lineage and sparking positive public conversation about sex positivity rather than critical intervention, because she refuses to engage in the discussion. This is a representation of the phenomenon where sex positivity continues on as an uninterrogated good within discussions of sexual liberation and feminism, in this case from a feminist who leans on sex-radicalism as a framework.

Srinivasan offers readers her conception of the work that Ellen Willis does in “Lust Horizons,” saying that “Willis tells us that a ‘truly radical’ feminism would ask precisely the question that gives rise to ‘authoritarian moralism’: what would women’s sexual choices look like if they were really free?”¹²⁵ I encourage a shift in the line of questioning that is outside of the moralism of sex, which is Srinivasan’s main point of inquiry in the essay and one of the collection’s at-large themes. What would these sexual choices look like if they were free of compulsory sexuality? She states that the “norms of sex are like the norms of capitalist free

¹²⁴ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 83.

¹²⁵ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 83.

exchange. What matters is not what conditions give rise to the dynamics of supply and demand—
...but only that both buyer and seller have agreed to the transfer. It would be too easy, though to
say that sex positivity represents the co-option of feminism by liberalism.”¹²⁶ This failure to
interrogate, and instead choice to complicate sex positivity, shows the exact underpinning of
liberalism within sex positivity that comes from aligning with the lineage of sex-radicalism.
Srinivasan is largely communicating through Ellen Willis’s piece, pointing out how Willis offers
an acknowledgement of the patriarchal control over sexual decisions, while also providing sex as
a liberatory practice. Srinivasan transitions from this point to arguing consent is not as black-
and-white as college orientations make it appear to be. Consent then, and the “sex-positive
gaze,” have to be employed alongside Willis’s “call-to-ambivalence”¹²⁷ While this seems like it
may function to critique sex positivity, and at times, I think Srinivasan truly does, she is still
predicating this argument through the lens of a sex-radical who has claimed the politics around
sex must contend with “sexual satisfaction as a biological need.”¹²⁸ Though such sex-radicals
often “argued that feminism’s purview did not include moral judgments,” they often did so from
the standpoint that sexual liberation is a priority within feminist liberation. Srinivasan’s writing
winds around these critiques and historical theories, but it does not call compulsory sexuality
into the conversation, and therefore misses a critical intervention into the sex positivity that she
is both evoking and parsing through.¹²⁹

Sex-positive discourses are not only seen in written texts and feminist theories, but also
represented in mainstream media that centers itself around sex. *The Sex Lives of College Girls*

¹²⁶ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 82.

¹²⁷ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 84.

¹²⁸ Willis, “Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution,” 177.

¹²⁹ Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 16.

(SLOCG) is the piece of popular visual media I felt best served as a representation of the restrictions of sex positivity. The show is intrinsically funny and features bright characters that are full of color. The college girls in question are all members of Generation Z. There are a multitude of television shows that focus on the sex lives of Gen Z, *SLOCG* not being alone in this narrative taste. The canon of recent television shows that I feel would fall into this category is extensive, and it would be impossible not to miss some, but a few of note are Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019-2023), *Heartstopper* (2022-), and *Heartbreak High* (2022), in addition to HBO's *Genera+ion* (2021), and, of course, *Euphoria* (2019-).¹³⁰ While each of these television series engages with sexual and romantic relationships from different lenses, angles, creators, countries, and tones, the one thing they have in common is that they depict the stories of Gen Z written by people who are not of the generation. They all boast a collection of queer characters from varying genders, classes, ethnicities, races, and neurodivergences; they are fun watches (for the most part) and entertaining shows full of high school drama that was unfathomable before the age of cell phones and social media. If you were to take a moment to look up the *Wikipedia* page of canon (this is more important to some people than others) asexual characters in television shows, you would notice that in the last ten years, only eleven or so-named characters are listed, and five of those come from this selection of television shows that I have listed. While the lack of ace representation is nothing new to the community, it is important to note this shift, trend perhaps, of shows centrally themed around sex, dating, and Gen Z that are beginning the work to

¹³⁰ I will not be further digging into the impact of *Euphoria* on the view of sex within the context of Gen Z from the perspective of millennial writers. While it does depict instances of compulsory sexuality, it does not feature outright assertions of sex positivity or feminism to really any degree. It is however, within this canon of shows that focus on sex and sexual expression in a high school setting that was picked up in a cultural whirlwind fandom so much so that I think it belongs in this list, as it shares a streaming network with *SLOCG*. I am not advocating for the viewing of this show as the creator makes no effort to protect the actors, and in addition to *Euphoria*, is currently working other projects that are heavily misogynistic, to put it kindly.

depict asexual characters. This representation is not always the most positive as with the case of O¹³¹ from season four *Sex Education* having many of her scenes and story arc cut from the season in such a way that skewed audiences' perception of her, despite her character being developed in conjunction with asexual activist, Yasmin Benoit. These representations can lead to very accurate, if disheartening, scenes of relationship challenges and acephobia, as seen through *Heartbreak High*'s Cash¹³² and *Genera+ion*'s Greta.¹³³ They can also find extremely positive reception as with Isaac from *Heartstopper* getting his 'heartstopper moment'¹³⁴ with Angela Chen's *Ace* rather than with another person as he learns what it means to be aromantic and asexual.

My recounting of these characters is intended to set the stage for shows that are in the same thematic and generational range as SLOCG. This is to say, that my call for the show to

¹³¹ “Despite Otis’ own shitty behavior, [O]’s arguably the closest thing the season has to a villain. While people of all demographics should be allowed to be messy and flawed on screen, some viewers have argued that her character feeds into damaging stereotypes of asexual people as inherently cold and unfeeling because they typically feel very little or no sexual attraction.” Abby Montiel, “‘Sex Education’ Asexuality Consultant Says Much of the Shows Ace Storyline Was Cut,” *Them*, October 2, 2023, <https://www.them.us/story/asexual-representation-sex-education-o-yasmin-benoit>.

¹³² Cash explores a relationship with Darren (they/them), who is very sexually active. They have an argument and disconnection over Cash’s physical ability to become aroused and Darren’s misunderstanding of the difference between arousal and attraction, leading them to break up. Darren’s reaction is not based in outright cruelty, but they are rather unkind in their reception to Cash’s explanation of his asexual experiences even if he does not use those words exactly. They eventually come to express their love for each other at the end of the season.

¹³³ Greta’s asexuality is hinted at throughout the season, and the audience is unsure if she is exploring her sexuality outside of heterosexuality or outside of compulsory sexuality. She participates in a wlw (women-loving-women) kiss with one of her close friends who seems like a crush. She also has an argument with said friend where she exclaims that she is not like everyone else, hinting that she will not participate in hookup culture, and later specifying her feelings about partnered sex at large. The reception of this revelation by her friend is one of hurt and confusion as with Cash and Darren’s interaction.

¹³⁴ A “heartstopper moment” is an instance in the show where two characters come together to realize and experience their romantic feelings for each other. It is visually represented by drawn graphic reactions around the characters, as the show is based on a graphic novel. The main characters, Charlie and Nick, can often be seen with sketched leaves drifting around them, sparks, fireworks, pops, etc. Many characters receive these moments of realization throughout the show, but Isaac’s stands as unique as he hugs *Ace* close to his chest on his journey to understanding his feelings about sex and romance. He is also the only one of these characters whose explanation of difference and disinterest to a partner who is sexually and romantically interested in him is not met with diluted hostility at first.

address and enter the conversations happening around compulsory sexuality is specific to SLOCG, as it is one of the shows that more prominently features sex as a part of its title and branding, and centrally locates sex-positive feminism as a part of the exigence for one of its main character's narratives: Bela Malhotra. As I specified in the introduction, I will be focusing my analysis on Bela's character arc in season one. To recap Bela's trajectory in the first episode of the season, she is introduced as trying to reinvent herself in college. Within the first ten minutes of the show, Bela asserts to her roommates, "I didn't come to college to be tethered to some dude I dated in high school. Also, I never really dated anyone in high school, but I'm here, I'm super sex-positive, in theory, more than in experience, and I am ready to smash some Ds."¹³⁵ Immediately, Bela includes herself into the canon of sex positivity. The main goal of her character throughout this episode is to get selected to work on the well-known campus comedy magazine, *The Catullan*, which she learns is also highly misogynistic. Bela then attends a party to network with the current members, upon her roommate, Leighton's advice to make *The Catullan* members like her so she gets accepted. Bela engages with Ryan, one of the people who will be voting to decide her fate, telling him "Ryan, Ryan, I love your work." To which he responds, "Let me guess, freshman." Ryan directs her toward a certain group of *Catullan* men that she needs to get on her side. The scene then cuts back to her dorm room where Bela excitedly recounts to Leighton that she gave "six hand jobs" at *The Catullan* party, "not at the same time or anything, I'm not like a porn star. I talked to each one of them, told them I was a writer, that I loved their work, and if they voted for me I could be into doing some hand stuff. I

¹³⁵ The Sex Lives of College Girls. "Welcome to Essex." *HBO* video, 52:15. November 18, 2021. <https://play.max.com/video/watch/aaaf8db1-3d78-4de4-9a34-97a830df9a22/95896fe9-7832-406e-ac80-6a554e0831f6>.

told them I am a chill girl who knows what guys want.”¹³⁶ Leighton responds incredulously, though not in a way of shaming Bela, more out of concern and confusion; Leighton and Bela then enter into a back-and-forth dialogue:

“Bela traded sex for an opportunity.”

“Just like men have been doing for centuries. I flipped the script!”

“I’m not sure you did!”

“I’m sex-positive y’all. Deal with it!”¹³⁷

This final line from Bela stuck with me for months after watching the show. It felt so decisive and ominous given her trajectory throughout the season. Iconically, one of the roommate’s boyfriends ends the interaction for everyone by saying, “As a feminist, I think female sex positivity is great.”¹³⁸ I would like to highlight he is not a feminist, but he is a nice guyTM.¹³⁹ Bela is voted into *The Catullan* on a sort of intern basis; she is shamed for the six hand jobs by the guys’ girlfriends who are also members. Bela’s relationship with sex positivity shifts but is never reduced to subtlety throughout the episode or the show. Toward the middle of the season, Bela is in *The Catullan* house, where some of the members live, crashing a party. Ryan corrals her into his room and shows her a porn video that he describes as “funny,” and that she did not consent to. All the while, leering over her shoulder as she tries to get him to stop. Bela finds out that she is not the only person Ryan has committed such acts toward. She spends the

¹³⁶ The Sex Lives of College Girls. “Welcome to Essex.”

¹³⁷ The Sex Lives of College Girls. “Welcome to Essex.”

¹³⁸ The Sex Lives of College Girls. “Welcome to Essex.”

¹³⁹ “When used as a noun instead of an adjective, Nice Guy refers to people (men or women) who believe basic social expectations are currency for sex.” “Nice Guy,” *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Nice%20Guy>. Nice GuyTM is specifically used as a meme in feminist popular culture to highlight this exact phenomenon with more punctuality.

rest of the season in the “gray area” of deciding whether or not to report him to the Title IX office and finding out what resources they actually have to help her.¹⁴⁰

My intention behind briefly detailing the canon of shows that focus on sex and relationships in Gen Z and intentional focus on *The Sex Lives of College Girls* Bela Malhotra, is to represent how these larger academic discussions of sex and sexuality can be easily seen in popular culture television. There are shows within this canon that are not actively engaging with and reinforcing compulsory sexuality. They are bringing a critical stance that is not necessarily critical of, but representational of Gen Z relationships. They have asexual characters, even with the at-times flawed representations. They are not all flagrantly boasting a connection to sex positivity. This is not the chorus of voices I once thought existed in media and because of that, I am inclined to believe it is the time to call-in those voices that are reinforcing systems of harm in media representation of sex positivity with a disregard for a critical approach to what it means to evoke that lineage. *SLOCG* does disregard the history and theoretical frameworks of sex positivity. Mindy Kaling and her co-creator/writers intentionally shaped an eighteen-year-old character under an archetype of intense, loud, sex positivity. They then sent said character down a journey where a stop along the way was her being sexually assaulted, and then being failed by the system. This is a narrative most people are well familiar with—there not being enough resources to go around—but to frame Bela as hungry for sex and then punish her for the “reputation” she is stamped with in her time pursuing her sex-positive mantra is, at best, laced with toxicity of shame, and at worst, fear-inducing. Kaling also exists within this sphere, though

¹⁴⁰ Alexandra Surprenant, “Review: ‘The Sex Lives of College Girls Offers Witty Take on Freshman Year’” *The Dartmouth*, December 21, 2021 <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2021/12/review-sex-lives-of-college-girls>.

not self-proclaimed, this radical “brand of feminism that is becoming increasingly important.”¹⁴¹ She developed a television show centered around college girls’ sex lives, that proclaims connection to sex positivity and rooted in her brand of feminism that encourages femininity rather than mocking it.¹⁴² She is hailed as a part of the canon of shows in the mid 2010s that needed to be discussed because of their feminism. While *SLOCG* is a distinctly 2020s television show, focusing on sexuality, race, gender, and so many more intersecting factors, it is still a depiction of sex positivity that is not only enforcing compulsory sexuality within its relationality from one character to another, but it is also missing the mark on what sexual liberation can be when allowed to be free from its historicized problems, rather than accepting it as an entirely positive method of feminist liberation. *SLOCG* does not act in a vacuum. It is a part of a handful of television shows centered around sex and relationships of Generation Z, and it loudly claims a sex positivity that is rooted in performing compulsory sexuality.

All of these authors and creators—of academic texts and memoirs and television shows—have been revered in their respective genres and modalities for doing something that is new, fresh, edgy, and interesting while channeling sex-positive feminism as an uninterrogated good. In each their own way, they have reproduced and reinforced compulsory sexuality through the characters they make, the discourse they create, the feminism they inspire, and the lineage they bring forth. They create liberation as being attached to sexual freedom and sexual freedom as being attached to sex positivity. They do not question the machinations with which they are writing. They all purport to offer a critical intervention or radical depiction while missing the swirling conversations that ask them to unpack their devotion to the “positive” in sex-positive.

¹⁴¹ Neha Chandrachud, “The Unlikely Feminism of Mindy Kaling,” *Huffington Post*, May 15, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/the-unlikely-feminism-of-mindy-kaling_b_5318689.

¹⁴² Chandrachud, “The Unlikely Feminism of Mindy Kaling.”

Sex is not a negative nor bad thing. Sex positivity is also not a negative or bad thing.

Compulsory sexuality is devastatingly negative. Sex positivity, without the critical knowledge needed to unpack this compulsory sexuality, very quickly falls into the history of imposing the one-for-all standard of what sexuality and liberation are ‘supposed’ to look like. They conflate radical actions with this assumption of the sexual needs of all and reinforce the binary of radical/conservative feminism which asexuality discourse asks that feminists reconsider. When it comes to sex positivity, there needs to be more critical analysis applied to when, where, and how it is used—whether that be in academic writing or on television shows. Sex positivity is not just a flat-out positive movement toward sexual liberation, its petitioners need to contend with its reliance on compulsory sexuality if it is going to be employed as a methodology and path to feminist sexual liberation. Without these social and theoretical considerations, the underworking of compulsory sexuality will continue as a pervasive thread through feminist discourse about sex.

CHAPTER IV: A REVOLUTIONARY AFFAIR: GENERATION Z AND SEXUAL

LIBERATION

Generation Z is purportedly having less sex than the generations prior to it. “In 2021, the survey found, the number of young Californians ages 18 to 30 who reported having no sexual partners in the prior year reached a decade high of 38%.”¹⁴³ I like to joke with my mother, who attended college in the 80s, that it is not as if there are not far more activities to pursue now—thousands of television shows, online communities, places to travel, crafts to master, or as I have heard from many a friend, “the game of Tinder is a lot more fun if you never actually meet up with the guy you swiped right on.” Nonetheless, this consistent decline of sexual intercourse is a point of intense speculation to answer “why” this could be happening. Psychologists, journalists, and social commentators offer reason after reason: “She attributed the slowdown in sexual relations most significantly to what she calls the ‘slow-life factor.’ Young people just aren’t growing up as fast as they once did.”¹⁴⁴ “The rise in sexlessness among young adults comes with the cost of not being able to tap into the myriad benefits of sexual activity, including its positive effects on psychological well-being. And this, in part, may be worsening the mental health crisis we’re seeing in Gen Z.”¹⁴⁵ “Considering that most social interactions for this generation...happens through digital screens, in some cases racking up nine hours of screen time

¹⁴³ Hannah Fry, “A failure to launch: Why young people are having less sex,” *LATimes*, August 3, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-08-03/young-adults-less-sex-gen-z-millennials-generations-parents-grandparents#:~:text=The%20broader%20trend%20of%20young,without%20sex%20the%20prior%20year>

¹⁴⁴ Fry, “A failure to launch: Why young people are having less sex.”

¹⁴⁵ Michelle Quirk, “Generation Z is Missing Out on the Benefits of Sex,” *PsychologyToday*, September 8, 2022 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-myths-sex/202209/generation-z-is-missing-out-the-benefits-sex>.

a day, there is no doubt in my mind that this technological disconnect is having a profound impact on sexuality.”¹⁴⁶ Additionally, “the #MeToo movement undoubtedly brought positive social change, but it took workplace dating off the table... Young people now have fewer places to meet a potential partner, and young men fear serious reputational damage in addition to baseline romantic rejection if the other party doesn't appreciate being asked out.”¹⁴⁷ The reasons span the gamut of possibilities. According to these sources, Generation Z's sexual falters are due to and/or encouraging our mental health issues, addiction to our phones, and of course, the rapidly changing landscape surrounding sexual harassment being a bad thing (!). At large, there is a great concern surrounding this sexual shift in the lives of Generation Z.

What does all of this mean within the framework of sex-positive feminism? Many of these reasonings that are posited as to why Gen Z might not be having the same amount of sex as previous generations are rooted in compulsory sexuality. As Rubin explained in “Thinking Sex,” crises around sex are usually not about sex; they are “vehicles for displacing social anxieties.”¹⁴⁸ So what is this concern about, really? What is the anxiety at hand? I can only provide hunches to answer these questions but based on my experience as a member of Generation Z, with my nine hours a day of screen time, I like to think it is because there is change afoot. Gen Z is labelling ourselves with words that have historically been associated with negative social connotations: socialist, queer, leftist, anti-capitalist, communist, neurodivergent, and mentally ill. We are “quiet -quitting” and not acclimating to the 9-to-5 lifestyle. We are doing so with the support of our peers. We are having fewer children than previous generations. We are less religious. We

¹⁴⁶Deborah Soh, “What’s Driving Gen Z’s Aversion to Sex,” *NewsWeek*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/whats-driving-gen-zs-aversion-sex-opinion-1638228>

¹⁴⁷ Soh, “What’s Driving Gen Z’s Aversion to Sex.”

¹⁴⁸Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 143.

lost our right to abortion. All of these components are shifts in some of the more “stable” pillars of social life organization in the United States for the past fifty years. From all political angles, it appears, something is not working. Gen Z is shifting that narrative, and in doing so they seem to be causing social anxieties for previous generations and the media at large. These anxieties are then centralized into this narrative about Gen Z and their sex lives being at a loss. The previously cited articles have the words “failure,” “missing out,” and “aversion,” as their key language in the titles to rope in readers. This language, as I have previously discussed, is the language of lack similarly used surrounding discussions of asexuality. It is also curious to consider why people¹⁴⁹ in the media are so, to a degree, obsessed with this narrative being spun about Gen Z? They spend time discussing the perceived negative effects of this sexlessness but fail to consider how sex is changing and shifting within the new generation. Is there a sex drought or is the weather changing? Sex can be over the phone and still be sex. Sex does not have to be penetrative to be sex. The internet can be a helpful means of building intimacy (though it can be harmful as well). The new generation is challenging what sexual intimacy means in a way that limits the heteronormative and binary restrictions that have so often been defaulted to, because when asked if members of Generation Z have had sex, “‘honestly, that question is a little laughable,’ says Kay, 18, who identifies as queer and attends a public high school near Lansing, Michigan. ‘There’s probably a lot of teenagers who are like, ‘No, I’ve never had sexual intercourse, but I’ve had other kinds of sex.’”¹⁵⁰ Generation Z is more queer than generations before.¹⁵¹ So, in their

¹⁴⁹ Corporations

¹⁵⁰ Jocelyn Gecker and The Associated Press, “From ‘sneaky links’ to ‘situationships,’ here’s how Gen Z is redefining sex,” *FortuneWell*, May 12, 2023 <https://fortune.com/well/2023/05/12/are-teenagers-having-sex-cdc-gen-z-situationships-sneaky-links/>.

¹⁵¹ Erin Doherty, “The number of LGBTQ-identifying adults is soaring,” *Axios*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/02/17/lgbtq-generation-z-gallup>.

focus on this lack of sex that is seemingly happening, the media is missing that the lack is a shift. The shift is a movement. The movement is challenging compulsory sexuality in its existence. The movement is not the revolution that came before it; therefore, it may seem unfinished, or as if Gen Z is failing to find their footing under sex-positive feminism. This mindset is stagnant. It asks what we should be doing for the revolution, rather than what does the revolution needs to become.

This trend bleeds into discussion of Gen Z sex lives by feminists of different generations and previous movements. Throughout my analysis, I have gestured toward and mentioned the binary between sex-positive and conservative feminism. On one hand, sex-positive feminism being seen as on one side, radical, game-changing, edgy, and asking the hard questions; this being inspired by the sex-radical lineage as I discussed in chapter one. On the other hand, conservative feminism is seen as conformist, aligning with the law, and not seeking of true change, rather a band aid on the system. When boiled down, it seems to the observer that sex is the line to cross for liberation and not having sex is unliberated. These ideals are positioned as oppositional, each one side of the linear spectrum. It is a battle between needing to “be modern instead of old-fashioned, a good feminist...and to not be oppressed.”¹⁵² There has been a precedent set that radical, transformative, liberated feminism belongs to the feminists that are sex-positive, sex-radical, and sex-having. Therefore, delegating that conservative feminism is the opposite of this; compulsory sexuality is deeply ingrained in this version of radical feminism; asexuality-based feminism is excluded from participation in such radical feminist liberation, implying an alignment of asexual discourse with more “conservative” political stances when

¹⁵² Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press 2020), 49.

placed into that binary. The binary is, well, similar to most binaries in sexuality and gender studies, not worth the weight of the judgment it places on the oppositional parties, and it is a miscategorization of asexuality discourses and feminisms. These binary implications limit the applications of sex positivity, and actively work to separate a before and after of the sexual revolution, against the advice of Ellen Willis. In “Lust Horizons,” she highlights that it is “dangerous to assume that certain kinds of behavior will disappear ‘after the revolution’ (as dangerous as assuming that the ‘revolution’ is a discrete event).”¹⁵³ So, at this moment, with my intervention in this conversation from an asexual lens, which I feel is in line with Willis’s understanding of revolution, I want to acknowledge that the sexual revolution is not complete, or discrete. The sexual revolution is entering a moment where it needs to contend with its reinforcement of compulsory sexuality. These feminists who look forward and see a generation failing to take up the mantle are not making space for the growth of the revolution that they may claim as unfinished or out of fashion. The sexual revolution and sex-positive feminism need to make room for growth within, because “true sexual freedom must celebrate consensual sex for those who want it and avoid pathologizing those who are not interested,”¹⁵⁴ and in the case at hand, to shame, invalidate, or deradicalize whole movements of feminism is based in a stagnant understanding of the relationship between sex, freedom, and liberation; this behavior works to backtrack the larger goals of feminist sexual liberation.

Lorna Bracewell in her book, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era*, breaks down sex positivity as having stronger connections to liberalism (and conservative

¹⁵³ Ellen Willis, “Lust Horizons: Is the Women’s Movement Pro-Sex?,” *Essential Ellen Willis*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 207.

¹⁵⁴ Angela Chen, “The Limits of Sex Positivity,” *The Atlantic*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/07/if-you-dont-want-sex-its-not-problem/619547/>.

feminism) than it tends to realize. Given sex positivity's claim to a certain kind of radicality that is posed as oppositional to conservative feminism, this is important to note when breaking down the relationships between sex positivity and asexuality. While asexual discourses and theories are not conservative ones, sex positivity is preferential toward its self-perceived radicality.

Bracewell says, “#MeToo's sex-positive critics share with conservatives a concern that the #MeToo movement is riding roughshod over due process rights and civil liberties.”¹⁵⁵ These political alignments are not so oppositional on the spectrum as they have commonalities that are obvious when you break down what they are advocating *for* rather than what they are advocating *against*.

This convergence of conservatives and sex-positive progressives on the question of #MeToo's relationship to due process rights and civil liberties is telling; it points toward a deep commonality uniting segments of the progressive left with the conservative right in our present political moment. What these seemingly disparate political forces have in common is a deep attachment to the core tenets of classical liberalism, particularly the belief that individual liberty is of paramount concern, taking precedence over goals like dismantling entrenched structural inequalities of race, gender, class, and sexuality...the basic ideological posture of conservatives and sex-positive progressives vis-à-vis #MeToo is the same: Potent collective challenges to normalized and institutionally entrenched practices of sexual oppression and domination threaten individual liberty.¹⁵⁶

As Bracewell eloquently breaks down, the connective tissue between these two parties is their underlying alignment with liberalism—this alignment also supports the compulsory sexuality within their beliefs. Asexuality theory does not align with this framing of feminism and sex positivity, because asexuality theory requires an unpacking of compulsory sexuality, and by extension liberalism, as they work hand-in-hand: “white upper-class women, less affected by racism and classism, are also less likely to see the need for a broader vision of feminism...and,

¹⁵⁵ Lorna Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2021), 3.

¹⁵⁶ Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*, 4.

therefore, are more likely to center this narrow vision of sexual liberation as female liberation.”¹⁵⁷ This narrowing view of liberation is extensively limiting to the shape and form that it could take, that perhaps it needs to take. Sex does not have to be the center of the story. It does not have to be the solution. Not only are these writers who are participating in the discourse limiting what sexual freedom could be, through their underlying stance alongside liberalism, but this is also restricting the application of the liberation of all women being directly attached to sex itself—an inadequate call-to-action from my standpoint.

In an example of the liberalist alignment, Michelle Goldberg, an opinion columnist for the *New York Times*, reviews Amia Srinivasan’s previously discussed book in the article, “Why Sex-Positive Feminism is Falling Out of Fashion.” Goldberg is one such sex-positive aligned feminist that Bracewell provides a critique of. Goldberg does the full sweep in her short two-page review displaying acephobia, Gen Z criticality, sex-positive advocacy, and #MeToo concerns. Goldberg ruminates on the portions Srinivasan’s *The Right to Sex but* focuses two-thirds of her article on the discussions of sex positivity: “The idea that feminism should privilege sexual pleasure and fight sexual repression—has dominated feminism for most of my life.”¹⁵⁸ Goldberg uses Srinivasan’s text as a jumping-off point to chart the trajectory of sex-positive feminism as it has grown and been shaped by the culture around it. She ends her article by saying that “sex-positive feminism became a cause of some of the same suffering it was meant to remedy.”¹⁵⁹ Similar to Srinivasan, Goldberg at times seems to be offering a critical analysis of sex-positive feminism, but she does not contend with acknowledging how their discourses

¹⁵⁷ Chen, *Ace*, 61.

¹⁵⁸ Michelle Goldberg, “Why Sex-Positive Feminism is Falling out of Fashion.” *New York Times*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/opinion/sex-positivity-feminism.html>.

¹⁵⁹ Goldberg, “Why Sex-Positive Feminism is Falling out of Fashion.”

default to enforcing compulsory sexuality; they find themselves more aligned with systems of harm than they would like to acknowledge, or are aware of. For Goldberg, this comes out in her assessment of the policing of “radical feminism” within Generation Z and flat-out acephobic language:

Post #MeToo, feminists have expanded the types of sex that are considered coercive to include not just assault, but situations in which there are significant power differentials. Others are using new terms for what seems like old proclivities. The word “demisexual” refers to those attracted only to people with whom they share an emotional connection. Before the sexual revolution, of course, many people thought that most women were like this. Now an aversion to casual sex has become a bona fide sexual orientation.¹⁶⁰

As I have established in my introduction, I am not making a case for the validity of asexuality as an identity, or the various identities included under the ace umbrella such as demisexual. Goldberg is motioning with her language here, through her discussion of sex positivity, the sexual revolution, and #MeToo, that demisexuality is a term that belongs in scare quotes. It is impossible for this to be an actual valid identity. Goldberg also says, “it is no longer radical, or even really necessary, to proclaim that women take pleasure in sex. If anything, taking pleasure in sex seems, to some, vaguely obligatory.”¹⁶¹ While Goldberg frames this vague obligation through a tone of shaming the new generation, I choose to look at that as a perhaps unintentional acknowledgment of her awareness that compulsory sexuality does have its grip on her interpretation of radical sex-positive feminism. It is the obligation that applies pressure to people and feminists to view sexual freedom (within their rules) as the path to feminist liberation and a method to critique younger generational politics.

¹⁶⁰ Goldberg, “Why Sex-Positive Feminism is Falling out of Fashion.”

¹⁶¹ Goldberg, “Why Sex-Positive Feminism is Falling out of Fashion.”

Goldberg is also quoted in Srinivasan's chapter "The Conspiracy Against Men" as having said "that she 'feel[s] bad for a lot of the men caught out by the #MeToo movement.' Not she explains the really egregious men¹⁶² like Harvey Weinstein...Goldberg writes, 'How disorienting it must be to have the rules change on you so fast.'"¹⁶³ Goldberg's stances are very clear in that she is pro-sex positivity, sympathetic to men who did not know to not sexually harass people because no one told them not to, and critical of Generation Z feminism. Goldberg and Srinivasan are engaging in a web of discourses that are all wrapped around sex positivity and each other's words, with another topic of discussion from Srinivasan's essays entitled "Talking to My Students About Porn." There is a consistent grab for the edgy title, the edgy phrasing that Srinivasan, Goldberg, and Aronowitz all lean into. This is a consistency throughout these sex-positive texts, with the reverence often going to writings and discussions that have what might be considered "uncomfortable honesty" to them. That framework is what allows them to approach and embody the radical alignment because they appear to be pushing outside of the box and transforming feminist thinking, all the while, as Bracewell shows, aligning themselves with neoliberalist ideals through compulsory sexuality.

Srinivasan's "Talking to My Students About Porn" is an essay that details the current landscape of porn's impact on Generation Z's understanding of sex. Her larger argument is that sex is restricted by its representations in porn, and that it needs to be freed of these preconceived notions, because in her experience "sex for my students is what porn says it is."¹⁶⁴ Srinivasan, in this essay in particular, is embodying this outsider fascination with the intersection of technology

¹⁶² Oh, thankfully not the *really egregious* men are worthy of our feminist sympathies.

¹⁶³ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 20.

¹⁶⁴ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 41.

and the sex lives of Generation Z. She briefly mentions the “late-bloomer” narrative but focuses her energy providing critical analysis of the impact porn has on the sexual psyche of a generation with a lack of access to formal sex education and too much access to the informal education of the internet. She critiques how porn sets a “normative standard for sex”¹⁶⁵ and questions whether “it is porn’s responsibility to tell people, especially young people, the truth about sex?”¹⁶⁶ She ends her essay with a call for sex education to formalize that it needs to “remind young people that the authority on what sex is, and could become, lies with them” and that “perhaps the sexual imagination could be coaxed, even briefly, to recall its lost power.”¹⁶⁷ While I think these sentiments are not unusual, I do think that it is important to note the centering of sex and sexual expression—the call for the things young people are lacking in their sex lives because of porn and technology, among other things. The idea that there is something to be recalled from the past that we, Gen Z, are lacking in our lives now, even though we are not the authority to decide it for ourselves. Srinivasan is offering this authority, but negating its potential creative and liberationist power by calling backward to an understanding of the empowerment of sex that has been long lost and forgotten by this generation. I would like to offer an addition to the idea that sexual expression can be “something more joyful, more equal, freer”¹⁶⁸ only when its alignment with compulsory sexuality is unearthed, unwound, and unpacked. From the framework of radical sexual expression and liberation that Srinivasan is aligned with,¹⁶⁹ there is a need for an asexual lens of critique here that asks these purveyors of the ideals to dig further into the dirt. It is not

¹⁶⁵ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 44

¹⁶⁶ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 45.

¹⁶⁷ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 71.

¹⁶⁸ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 71.

¹⁶⁹ An alignment that Bracewell and I have already established as more in tune with conservative feminism and liberalism that it would care to acknowledge.

just that the new generation is missing something, failing to take up the mantle, needing to look backward to move forward, or falling short of their sexual liberation; perhaps, it is that the standards set for sex, sex positivity, radicalism, liberation, and revolution are too narrow a tunnel that Generation Z does not have to proceed through in order to be deemed worthy of respect. I feel as though there is a call to build a new road, or climb the mountain for fun, or to stay at home spending time with friends online, choosing not to travel the road at all. That is the revolution; all of these choices being equally validated and radically revolutionary.

The revolution...I have heard about it for as long as I can remember. When I was younger, the revolution was in books. I cannot count how many revolutionizing dystopian novels dominated my bookshelves, television and movie screens. Generation Z was raised by “the revolution.” Maybe it was a girl with a bow, a girl with a tattoo, or a boy in a maze. Maybe it was in space, the future, or the past. The most beloved stories of the times when Generation Z was growing into consciousness showed a broken world that leads to a revolution. Generations before us should not expect for us to follow in their footsteps when the media they gave us to fall in love with offered us powerful, strong protagonists who break the systems they are given, the problems they are stuck with, or the cards they are dealt. Why play an unwinnable game when you could change the rules? I bring this up to say, this revolution that sex-positive feminists are trying to pass off to Generation Z, and then claiming we are failing to take up the challenge...well, it is not our revolution to a degree. Revolutions are not fashion trends, cycling back through the decades to find a classic style to sell or pass off as new. Gen Z is not failing at the revolution. We are not failing revolutionaries. I would argue the action of going in the direction that is the best for us, we are being exactly the revolutionists we were raised to be, or at least exactly the revolutionists we need to be.

The world often seems like it is falling apart. It seems like the rules need to change. So, while sex-radicalism was the movement that fit the 80s and sex positivity fit the 90s-00s, it is okay to question how that fits into feminism now. It is not a failure to reshape and remold the revolution. Gen Z is finding new and nuanced ways to relate to each other. It does not have to be through sex and romance. It does not have to be in person. It does not have to be the way it was before. It is naive to think a generation that does not remember airports before we had to take our shoes off at security, is going to have the same revolutionary needs as the ones before it. It is naive to think that a generation who knows they will likely not be able to afford a house, need one to three years of experience for an entry level job, live in a world where the master's degree is the new bachelor's, aren't going to have a different idea of what parts of their lives need liberation. Sex-positive feminism expects that sex is a solution; sex is transcendence. Pleasure can mask the crumbling infrastructure. Sex can liberate the pain. That is a compulsory expectation. It is not enough to consider sexual liberation as the goal of a feminist revolution. But instead to do work similar to that of *Heartstopper*, with Isaac's positive representation or asexual activist, Yasmin Benoit, who models and provides consistent cultural education on what it is to be asexual and to evoke positivity around sex and sexiness free from compulsory sexuality. These things are possible and actively being done, despite acephobic cultural commentary. I want to see a feminism that pursues sexual liberation not at the cost of asexuality as an identity and discourse, but instead works in partnership with it to reshape what the positive in "sex-positive" can mean.

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