“Asexy and we know it”: The Emergence of Asexual Activism as a Sexual and Gender Social Movement

Thesis

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2018 The Author

Version: Version of Record
“Asexy and we know it”
The Emergence of Asexual Activism as a Sexual and Gender Social Movement

By

Joseph De Lappe B.A. Hons, MA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Centre for Research in Education and Ed Technology (CREET)
The Open University
30 April 2018
ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the emerging character of asexual activism in Western societies. It asks what the key factors are impacting on triggering, mobilisation, organisation and performance that motivate asexual-identified individuals into collective activism. It considers the significance of wider LGBT+ and Q activism exemplified by Pride as performed spectacle, as a factor influencing the character of contemporary asexual activism. This is considered both in terms of how the staging, setting and scripting of Pride speaks to asexual activists in the West, and, how they speak back to Pride as actor-activists, audience and bystanders to its political theatre. Methodologically, this thesis is based on 15 months of ethnographic research: online semi-structured interviews with asexual activists in both Europe and North America; auto-ethnographic participant-observation of Pride events in Europe and North America, and, specific case studies of WorldPride 2014 and Berlin Pride 2015. Theoretically, it draws cross-disciplinarily on: insights from Social Movement Theory, particularly recent work which emphasises the significance of emotive, cultural drama in contemporary activism; insights from Sexuality & Gender Studies concerning scripted behaviour and LGBT+ and Q identity-formations, and, emerging research in Asexual Studies concerning asexual orientations, identities and socialised behaviours. The thesis emphasises the work of Goffmann (1971, 1974, 2017), Jasper (2008), Plummer (1994), Rubin (2011), Stallybrass and White (1986) and Tilly (1995) to analyse the presentation of the asexual activist self, the collective activist performances through which that self is embodied, and the interrelated asexual and Pride narratives that are contended. Through auto-ethnography it considers the researcher’s engagement with these contentious repertoires, as academic and participant-observer who is also an actor-activist, audience member and bystander. This analysis reveals a disconnect between the ongoing, framed scripting of
Pride activism in the West and the emerging core-frames of asexual activist scripts; even as asexual activists seek alignment.
The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too.

(Schneiderman quoted in Eisenstein, 1983: 6)

I heard Nell McCafferty use the phrase ‘bread and roses’ on the Irish talk show The Late Late Show in the early 1980s, and it has stayed with me all my life. It inspired my politics when I went to university in Dublin in the mid-1980s, and became involved with Lesbian-Gay and early Queer movements where it felt that the emphasis was on bread not roses. It continued to inspire me when I finally got around to finishing my degree in the late 1990s during the Second Summer of Love in Brighton, and became fully engaged in Queer politics where it now felt that the emphasis was on roses. I continue to be inspired by the Jewish-American Feminist, Trade Unionist and Zionist Rose Schneiderman, her Boston Marriage to the Irish-American Trade Unionist and Suffragist Maud O'Farrell Swartz, despite the contrary contentiousness of her intersecting politics for a modern audience. Because of the direction that my doctoral research took, a regret is that I have not been able to discuss Rose and Maud, but I acknowledge my debt.

This is an Irish working-class male’s long-winded way of saying that it has taken me a while to get here. There are many people, organisations and services that have helped over 30 years, and to whom I am grateful for their support, care and guidance. I cannot acknowledge them all here, or the list would be half as long again as my thesis. Whether they are mentioned or not, I am deeply appreciative to all of them, and hope that they know that they are being thanked as well.

First, I owe a debt of thanks to the asexual community and its activists in Europe and North America for letting an outsider engage with them. I would like to thank Michael Doré for inviting me to take part in the Asexuality Conference at WorldPride 2014, and for taking time to explain the structure of AVEN to me. Thanks to Andrew Hinderliter who introduced me to the concept of the case study. I am eternally grateful to my research participants for their time, insights, and willingness to share their experiences with me. Thank you all so much.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisors who have guided this research with their feedback through its many changes. I would like to thank Mary Jane Kehilly for setting me off on this journey into the West, for the pleasure of her many insights into the role of enduring ethnography, and for the tae. Roger Harrison for constantly making me question my own claims. Heather Montgomery for the glory that is her editing skills without which my rough writing would be a sorry state. I thank Heather for her kindness and support during times of illness, without which I would not have finished this thesis. Thanks to Sarah Earle for picking up the reins and pushing me towards thick description, and Naomi Holford for encouraging me to look around myself in my accounts. I thank Martyn Hammersley for examining my upgrade, and for the privilege of the many emails that flowed from it. I am obliged to the Open University and CREET for supporting my work, particularly at moments of illness. Thanks to Regine Hempel, Ursula Stickler and Tim Lewis. Big thanks to Anne Forward, who is quite simply the best administrator that I have ever had the honour to work alongside.
Thanks to my two Examiners and Chair for agreeing to participate in my exam panel: Jacqui Gabb, Sally Hines and Jan Draper. My thanks go to the organisers of SexGen in the North and the Durham Summer School at the Centre for Sex, Gender and Sexualities, where many of my initial thoughts and ideas formed, and found a platform. Through these events I am grateful to Steve Epstein, Maggie O’Neill and Ken Plummer for taking the time to discuss my research with me. Thanks to Mark McCormack for words of advice that he gave me concerning applying for funding, without which I might not have gone to Toronto, San Francisco and Berlin. Santander Bank offered the funds which made San Francisco and Berlin possible, and I thank them and acknowledge their support. I am grateful to The Humboldt University of Berlin for allowing me to attend as a visiting scholar while in Berlin. I am indebted to Dominic Davies of Pink Therapy, for collaborating with me on the initial project which motivated this research, and to whom I still owe a journal article. Within the field of Asexual Studies, thanks to Mark Carrigan, Matt Dawson and Rita Alcaire for their words of advice. Special thanks go to Meg John Barker and Caroline Walters for the joy of working with them on the Asylum project, and the many words of advice that they gave me.

Thanks in so many ways to Queer Pagan Camp, where I spent nearly a decade as a festivalgoer and organiser. My interest in the hidden rules and performances of sexual and gender social movements comes from this period of my life, for which I thank Lou Hart. Thanks go to Tim Huntley and Deborah Kempson-Wren, friends and fellow culture heads at Sussex University, for their ongoing support. Big thanks go to my logical sister Kirsty McGinn without whom I might not have got into Sussex in the first place, Cal McGinn for their comments which helped prompt this work, and my schoolteacher Pat Scully who was always there for me. Thanks to Lauren Liebling-Davies for the many phone calls where I discussed my work, and Jenny Alexander likewise. My gratitude goes to my schoolteacher Pat Scully. Thanks to Gwilym Roberts, Linda Reagan and Kay Pendle NicNiall for their support, and I am indebted to Ross Nichols for being there at dark moment for me. I am grateful to Dan Inchley for his care and support during the writing of my data analysis chapters. A bipolar researcher is only as good as their doctor, and I thank Amit Rastogi for his care.

Buíochas do mo thuismitheoirí, Lucy agus Micháil, mo dheirfiúr Eibhlín, deartháireacha Micháil agus Colm, as a gcúram agus a dtacaíocht le linn na mblianta. Merci à ma tante et mon oncle, Cynthia et Francis, pour leur amour et leur soutien. The person without whom is my husband Gavin Brown who has been there throughout. I know you love me, because you let me read you so many versions of the same paragraph over and over and over again.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents: Eileen McMahon, Maire Nee, Beartlaidh Ó Lupáin and Patrick Peppard.
Contents

Chapter One: A Personal Journey from Cambridge to Toronto ................. 1
  1.1 Introduction: “an asexual is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.” ................. 1
  1.2 Unthinking Sex ............................................................................................... 7
  1.3 Research Questions and Aims........................................................................ 18
  1.4 Summary of Thesis.......................................................................................... 18

Chapter Two. Mobilising for affect: Literature Review................................. 26
  2.1 Outline of Chapter........................................................................................... 26
  2.1.1 Claiming Newness ...................................................................................... 27
  2.2 Asexual Studies .............................................................................................. 29
  2.2.1 The Individuated Asexual .......................................................................... 29
  2.2.2 A Note on The Celibate Self. ...................................................................... 29
  2.2.3 Psychology of Identity Approaches................................................................. 30
  2.2.4 Sociology of Identity Approaches ................................................................. 34
  2.3 Social Movement Theory .............................................................................. 36
  2.3.1 What is a Social Movement? ...................................................................... 36
  2.3.2 Contentious Politics. .................................................................................. 38
  2.3.3 Frame Theory ............................................................................................. 40
  2.3.4 New Social Movements. ............................................................................ 43
  2.3.5 Passionate Politics: ACT UP. ................................................................. 50
  2.4 Telling Stories of Pride and Pleasure: Gender and Sex. ............................... 55
  2.4.1 Sexual and Gender Narrative and Storytelling........................................ 55
  2.4.2 Inclusive and Exclusive Sexual and Gender Storytelling............................. 60
  2.4.3 The Default Model. ................................................................................... 62
  2.4.4 Telling Sexual and Gender Stories: Sexual and Gendered Scripts. ............... 64
  2.4.5 The Symbolic and Scripted as ‘Face’ ........................................................... 65
  2.5 Telling Asexual Stories: A Chorus Line.......................................................... 66

Chapter Three. Methods and Methodology ................................................. 68
  3.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................... 68
  3.2 An Evolving Multi-Layered Approach................................................................ 71
  3.3 Chapters Four and Five: Semi-Structured Interviews ...................................... 77
  3.4 Chapter Six: Participant-Observation, Autoethnography and Photo Montage.... 82
  3.5 Ethical Issues and Research Ethics .................................................................. 87
  3.5.1 Applying for Ethical Clearance: Confidentiality, Anonymity and Safety ....... 87
Chapter 4. Mobilising A-Pride: Triggering asexual activism ........................................ 95

4.1 The Making of the Modern Asexual Activist .......................................................... 95
4.2 Contention, Lifestyle and Identity Politics .......................................................... 97
4.3 Odd, broken and in need of fixing ....................................................................... 100
4.4 The Asexual Activist of Colour ........................................................................... 103
4.5 The Queer Asexual Activist ................................................................................ 106
4.6 The Normative Asexual Activist ......................................................................... 110
4.7 The Older Asexual Activist ................................................................................ 114
4.8 The Portmanteau Nature of Activist Claims ...................................................... 116

Chapter Five: Organising for Pride/Owning the ‘A’ ........................................... 118

5.1 Differing Audiences ......................................................................................... 118
5.1.1 From #GotYourBack to #GiveItBack ............................................................. 118
5.1.2 Support, Convergence, Co-Option and Divergence ..................................... 120
5.2 Supportive Straight Allies ................................................................................ 122
5.3 Confrontational Queers ................................................................................... 126
5.4 Enthusiastic Aligning LGBT+’s .......................................................................... 132
5.5 Transformational Non-Whites .......................................................................... 137
5.6 Performing Allosexuality ................................................................................... 141

Chapter Six: The Carnival of Pride ........................................................................ 144

6.1 The Carnival of Pride ......................................................................................... 144
6.2 White Angels at CSD Berlin .............................................................................. 147
6.2.1 Myth and Symbolism ................................................................................... 151
6.2.2 The Mythopoetic Context ............................................................................ 157
6.2.3 Whiteness, Allosexuality and Looking Away ............................................. 161
6.3 Selling Out ......................................................................................................... 165
6.4 Enforcing Rules ................................................................................................ 174
6.5 Excluding People ............................................................................................... 179
6.6 Wearing the T-Shirt: Marching with The Asexual Activists .............................. 193

Chapter Seven: Asexual Activism, the popular imaginary and a politics of contrariness ................................................................. 213

7.1 Main Findings and Contributions ...................................................................... 213
7.2 The Visibility of Asexual Activist Stories ......................................................... 214
7.3 The Motivation to be ‘King for A Day’ .............................................................. 224

Bibliography ............................................................................................................ 231
Appendix 1 .................................................................................................................. 258

1.1 Information Pack .................................................................................................. 259
1.2 Research Consent Form .......................................................................................... 264
1.3 Follow-up Feedback Request .................................................................................. 266
1.4 Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Proforma ........................................... 267
# Table of Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>Table of Participants</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.2</td>
<td>Table of Attended and Referenced Pride Events</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1</td>
<td>GLAAD’s original “[A] is for Ally” framing</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.1</td>
<td>The Carnival of Pride</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.2</td>
<td>CSD Berlin</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.3</td>
<td>Reading Pride</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.4</td>
<td>The Dyke March</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.5</td>
<td>Senior Pride at Camp Sunshine</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.6</td>
<td>Kreuzberg Pride</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.7</td>
<td>Carnival at Kreuzberg Pride</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.8</td>
<td>Lesbian and Gay Stadtfest</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.9</td>
<td>Trans* March at WorldPride</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.10</td>
<td>Paint the Town Rainbow</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.11</td>
<td>Birmingham Pride</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.12</td>
<td>A Place at the Table</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.13</td>
<td>Hipster Queer</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.14</td>
<td>Barbershop Murals</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.15</td>
<td>Opening Ceremony at WorldPride</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.16</td>
<td>World AIDS Day Memorial</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.17</td>
<td>Superheroes of Pride</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.18</td>
<td>Wearing the T-shirt</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.19</td>
<td>Kulanu Toronto</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.20</td>
<td>The Start of the March</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.21</td>
<td>On the March</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.22</td>
<td>Every Tableau Tells a Story</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.23</td>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.24</td>
<td>Celebratory Memorialisation</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.25</td>
<td>Becoming Part of the March</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.26</td>
<td>The End of the Road</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.27</td>
<td>The Spectacle of Flags</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: A Personal Journey from Cambridge to Toronto

1.1 Introduction: “an asexual is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.”

Asexuality is an increasingly visible sexual identity claimed by individuals in Western societies. Over the six years since I began my doctorate, that visibility has manifested itself through the expansion and proliferation of communities of individuals who identify as asexual, particularly online (Carrigan, 2011; De Lappe, 2016). AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network), the largest and most visible of the English-speaking online communities, conducts an annual census of its membership which had over 14,000 respondents in 2014 (Ginoza et al, 2014). There is a widening public awareness of asexuality and asexuals, reflected in mainstream media accounts. These accounts draw on and are challenged by the visibility of asexuality in society, and by research within an emerging sub-discipline of asexual studies within gender and sexuality studies. The focus (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018) of asexual studies to date has been to define and measure asexuality (Nurius, 1983; Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2015; Brotto et al, 2010; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013), and to consider asexuality and society (Fahs, 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2011, 2015; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016). There is an increasing consensus within asexual studies that asexuality characterises individuals who do not experience sexual attraction, and which is experienced by between 1% and 2% of the general population in the West (Wellings et al, 1994; Bogaert, 2004; Prah et al, 2014). This argues that this lack of sexual attraction is best understood as a normal sexual orientation exhibited by certain individuals, and which is expressed along a complex spectrum similarly to bisexuality or lesbianism (Brotto et al, 2010; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013). Some asexuals experience no sexual attraction to others, some experience some attraction, or are only attracted under certain conditions such as when they are intellectually aroused (Decker, 2015). By characterising asexuality as a sexual orientation, it is distinguished from celibacy with which it is frequently confused (Kahan, 2013). This is held to be a chosen or enforced period of sexual abstinence by individuals who may or may not experience sexual attraction to others. Many asexuals are celibate while many are not, and there is a widening acknowledgement that celibacy is not the same as asexual orientation. Of interest to my research, there is an expanding understanding of the intersectional and portmanteau character of asexual identities (Kahan, 2013; Decker, 2015; Cuthbert, 2017). Asexuals can identify intersectionally as lesbian, homosexual or bisexual in their affective and romantic relationships, and with some variant of trans* in their gender orientation. This portmanteau mixing of sexual and gender identities is contentious because many asexuals identify as cis-gendered and heterosexual in ways that
complicate understanding of a widening LGBTQ+ umbrella. Throughout my own research, I speak of ‘LGBT+ and Q’ rather than ‘LGBTQ+’, because comments by activists that I spoke to problematised the presumption of widening. For reasons of brevity and clarity, I speak of ‘identity politics’ as shorthand for ‘sexual and gender identity politics in the West’, unless indicated. It does not imply that I believe all identity politics to be sexual and gender in character.

There is less consensus within asexual studies concerning asexuality and society. There is research which argues that Western society views asexuals pejoratively, particularly those who identify intersectionally as LGBT+ and Q, and they feel oppressed by this (Fahs, 2010; Chasin, 2011, 2015). Much of this research has been concerned to challenge what is held to be the allosexual scripting of Western society, and how that manifests itself oppressively through hyper-sexualisation and the sexual imperative (Cerankowski and Milks, 2010, 2014; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016). Allosexuality as a concept argues that Western society has a normative belief that individuals should exhibit sexual attraction to be ‘normal’ or be viewed as dysfunctional. It argues Western society privileges allosexuals who exhibit this over non-allosexuals who do not, including asexuals and others. This manifests in a hyper-sexualised worldview where everything becomes objectified as sexual, and that objectification puts pressure on asexuals and others to be sexual through its sexual imperative. The complexity of allosexuality as a taken for granted norm, and how asexual activists and others challenge and maintain it in unison with other converging and diverging norms, is a critical concern of my research. At the same time, there is a body of research within asexual studies which argues that sexual norms in the West are not pejorative to asexuals, unless they also identify intersectionally as LGBT+ and Q, and they do not feel oppressed as asexuals (Carrigan, 2011; Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018). This research argues for the normalcy of asexuality as a lived experience, and the desire of many asexuals to be viewed as normal and not oppressed, particularly those who identify intersectionally as cis-gendered and heterosexual. It argues (Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018) that asexual activism as presently constituted is not representative of that desire. This argues that activism focuses on asexuals who identify intersectionally as LGBT+ and Q, and ignores asexuals who identify as cis-gendered and heterosexual. This co-opts and is co-opted by challenges to sexual and gender norms which are better understood within ongoing LGBT+ and Q politics lifespan (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978). The issue of co-option in emergent asexual activism, and how that is manifest through the interrelationship to LGBT+ and Q politics, is a critical concern of my research. I draw on both bodies of research because they comment on and reflect the contrariety and contentiousness of identity politics in relation to asexual identity. This was exemplified by asexual activism in my
research, where there could be contrary desires to identify as normal and not, and to challenge and maintain norms simultaneously. I draw on both bodies of research to build on them because, to date, there has been an empirical and theoretical focus on individuated asexual narratives and experiences in research on asexuality and society (Scott and Dawson, 2015). There has been less attention to the collective role that activism plays, and which my research seeks to empirically and theoretically address.

I chose to research collective activism because I believe it is important to understanding the contentious character of identity politics in how it challenges and maintains consensus concerning sexual and gender norms. I believe that it is important to understand how and why emergent collective asexual activism exemplifies and problematises this. ‘Contentious’ and ‘consensus’ are critical conceptual terms in my research, and I have drawn on accounts of them within social movement theory, and gender and sexuality studies. An argument is generally understood to be contentious if it is emotive, heated, provoking dissenting actions and opinions, and generating further argument (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). Any consensus arrived at may be partial and temporary, because the argument remains contentious in character. This was true of politics that I heard espoused and acted upon by asexual activists and others, which drew on and reflected a culture of passionate, contentious argument within identity politics. There is a disciplinary tradition within social movement studies that argues for a culture of contentious socio-political argument informing Western social activism and structuring Western social movements (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2008). Activists are activists, and not merely politically informed individuals, because they believe in and are motivated to act in significant ways upon this culture of argument to affect social change (Buechler, 2011). Social movements are social movements, and not merely groups of politically informed individuals, because they are purposively structured around it to produce social change as an effect. I also draw on a disciplinary tradition within gender and sexuality studies that highlights the narrational content of identity politics. Sexual and gender activists tell sexual and gender stories, but they are not merely telling stories of their own and other identities (Plummer, 1994; Weeks, 2007; Faderman; 2015). They are purposively telling those stories so that in significant ways they will affect the consensus concerning sexual and gender norms. Identity politics in the West reflects this culture of contentious storytelling, and is structured to facilitate it. In practice, as in my own field research, the cultural framing, structural scripting and contextual narratives of identity politics are interwoven, and shift between each other in complex and contrary ways.
By contrariness, I mean that during my field research asexual activists that I spoke to about collective activism, and observed them and others enacting, did this in ways that often seemed contradictory. It felt that they were frequently acting contrary and antagonistic to their own best interests as I understood them (Berlant, 2011). The most cogent example was the account given of the allosexual scripting of Pride spectacle and protest. Activists were critical of how this scripting impacted on asexuals, yet many remained committed to participating. I have drawn on social movement theory, and gender and sexuality studies, to conceptualise this politics of contrariness. Although the disciplinary focus is different, both highlight the significance of audience to politicised cultures of contentious argument and storytelling (Plummer, 1994; Tilly, 1995, 2004; 2008). Social movement theory has a disciplinary tradition of conceptualising political audiences through their understanding of this culture, where the form argument takes is as important as what it argues (Tilly, 2008). Social activists and movements must present their arguments to their audience in a form that is understood and accepted as political by that audience for it to influence them. This should be characteristically done through contentious repertoires (Tilly, 1995, 2004). These are ways of scripting and framing political beliefs and actions that have come over time to characterise Western social activism and validate it, such as petitions, marches and Pride parades. At the same time, there is a disciplinary tradition within gender and sexuality studies which argues that the content of the stories narrated by identity politics must find an audience (Plummer, 1994). That audience must recognise themselves or others in the sexual and gender narrative for it to be listened to. A critical concern of my research is to consider this dual obligation to audience for asexual and other identity politics. The audience must accept the form in which activism is framed, and the content must be scripted to speak directly to them about gender and sexuality. I believe this is important to an understanding of the contrariness of identity politics that I observed, where there were many contradictory and conflicting audiences to satisfy. This was amplified by the intersectionality of asexuality and its observed activism, which had their own contradictory and conflicting audiences.

Exemplified by Pride spectacle and protest, this dual obligation to multiple contrary audiences underpins my conceptualisation of the political theatre of identity politics. This draws on Goffman’s account of the dramaturgical presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1971). I build upon this to argue that asexual and other activists framed and scripted the presentation of their collective activist selves in theatre-like ways to satisfy their various audiences (Goffman, 1955, 1974, 2017; Burke, 1968, 1986; Benford and Hunt, 1992). In doing this, they were drawing on a culture of
contentious political theatre in identity politics, and which is understood to characterise and authenticate identity politics through its storytelling (Plummer, 1994). Because of this, I conceptualise identity politics as dramaturgically constructed and symbolically contended in its political theatre. I build upon the work of Jasper and others (Jasper, 1998, 2004, 2008; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, 2004; Polletta and Jasper, 2001) to conceptualise this as characteristically artful and passionate. This recent work argues that the politicised drama of social activism is better understood as passionate rather than rational, because activists draw on dramatic contentious emotion and are motivated by it (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Jasper and Poulsen, 1995). Nevertheless, activists are artful in their political passions, and seek to frame and script the drama tactically to achieve their aims.

This builds on and challenges historic accounts of collective activism in social movement theory which privilege the rationality of activist strategies and tactics. The artful and passionate nature of identity politics and its theatre is a critical concept in my research. I believe that it is important an understanding of the Overton Window (Lehman, 2014) applied to asexual activism and wider identity politics I observed.

The Overton Window (Lehman, 2014) argues that the window of acceptability in public opinion can be shifted, and that this is a critical concern of social movements and activists. The Overton Window was directly referenced by one of my activist-participants, while others commented indirectly on it. A contentious argument concerning sexual and gender norms may begin as too radical in form and unpalatable in content for its intended audience, such as challenges to allosexuality, hypersexualisation and the sexual imperative (Cerankowski and Milks, 2010, 2014; Fahs, 2010; Chasin, 2011, 2015; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016). The intended audience may reject that form and content as unacceptable and marginal to the current understanding of political argument in identity politics, and public opinion (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2008). However, the effect over time of passionately arguing for that outlier challenge, while artfully making use of current frames and scripts (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Jasper and Poulsen, 1995; Jasper, 2008), can shift the window of acceptability so that challenge is no longer marginal, and finds its audience (Snow et al, 1986; Plummer, 1994). The reverse may also occur; what was accepted can be pushed to the margins and lose its audience. The same-sex marriage debate is an example of the Overton Window shifted by identity politics over the last three decades (Ball, 1996; Hull, 1991; Cahill, 2004; Hackl, Boyer and Galupo, 2013). I use the Overton Window to conceptualise how emerging sexual and gender movements, such as asexual activism, seek to shift the window of acceptability through a culture of contentiously dramaturgical storytelling to challenge norms.
use it to conceptualise why that window is resistant to shifting, even where challenges to norms appear timely and important.

Sexual and gender activists passionately position themselves outside of sexual and gender norms to shift them, by showing through their storytelling that there is a contentious alternative (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Plummer, 1994; Jasper and Poulsen, 1995). For that shift to occur, they may have to accommodate current norms where they converge with their aims, and compromise where they diverge (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978). They do this artfully in the emotive belief that over time norms will shift towards their point of view (Jasper, 2008). However, sexual and gender norms derive much of their socio-political consensus and authority from the force of established habits and traditions (Weber, 1978, 1992). This includes the established habits and traditions of identity politics, and its culture of contentious storytelling. My research is concerned how and why the political theatre of identity politics draws its dramaturgical authority from the established staging, setting and scripting of this storytelling. I believe this is important to understanding the character of asexual activism as it engages with that political theatre, because established authority is resistant to change, however timely and important, unless it is in crisis (Habermas, 1975, 1984, 1987). The same-sex marriage debate and what it shifted emerged from a period of relative crisis in sexual and gender norms in the West; the early onslaught of HIV/AIDS and the identity politics this triggered (Gould, 2009). I discuss in my research how asexual activism emerged from the same period of crisis, and is directly influenced by that identity politics. In turn, that politics maintains its authority through its established frames and scripts (Weber, 1978). Crimp (2004) argues that identity politics now has an established tradition of celebratory memorialisation; its storytelling mourns and celebrates its dead and oppressed as a political act. Browne (2007) argues that Pride spectacle and protest manifests this, and derives its authority from it (Browne and Bakshi, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). I draw on cultural studies to build on this to conceptualise the dramaturgy of celebratory memorialisation I observed at Pride events as political and mythic (Barthes, 1993) in character.

Barthes (1993) argues that mythic spectacle and protest seeks to establish its authority as timeless and universal by what it symbolically signifies, and does this by presenting that spectacle and protest in such a fashion that it “goes-without-saying” (1993:11) that it is authoritative. I conceptualise this as facilitated and amplified by the mythic scripting of celebratory memorialisation, and the mythic staging and setting of Pride as a sexual and gender heterotopia (Foucault, 1986; Cenzatti, 2008; Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008). This draws on established traditions of carnival in political protest as
theatre (Abrahams, 1972; Stamm, 1982; Bakhtin, 1984; Eco, 1984; Ivanov, 1984; Lundberg, 2007, and carnivalesque habits of storytelling in wider identity politics (Cohen, 1993; Plummer, 1994). A concern of my research is how this privileges established identities, and gives authority to established scripts of allosexuality and whiteness at Pride. Stallybrass and White (1986) argue that carnival and the carnivalesque contrarily challenge authority while re-establishing it, through shifting but recurrent patterns of marginality and centrality they enact in the public imaginary. I build upon this to conceptualise the dramaturgy of celebratory memorialisation at the Carnival of Pride, where what was socially peripheral to its politics can shift to become symbolically central to its spectacle (Babcock, 1978). A concern of my research is to consider how effectively artful (Jasper, 2008) this symbolic shifting is in promoting social change. Whether it is representative of and affects shifts in sexual and gender norms, or its recurrent patterns re-establishes their authority by empowering their resistance to change. I believe that this is important to an understanding of the emergent character of asexual activism, and the character of its antagonistic, intersectional relationship to identity politics. Exemplified by Pride in my research, I conceptualise asexual activists engaging with an antagonistic culture of contentious storytelling to challenge the authority of its norms (Judge, 1991; Hutton, 2001; Arnold, 2006), and to re-establish that authority in their own imagined norms (Babcock, 1978; Stallybrass and White, 1986). Initially, like all social activists, they almost inevitably face antagonism because of this. Like all identity politics seeking an audience, they may have to compromise and accommodate (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978), but they do this in the belief (Jasper, 2008) that, if they are steadfast while artful, over time they will redefine what was considered unacceptable (Lehman, 2014). It will become the new established normal (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005). As we shift into another period of antagonistic crisis in identity politics, and Western sexual and gender norms, I believe my research makes a timely and important contribution to understanding the new normal argued for by emergent asexual activism. In making that contribution, I am influenced by Touraine’s (1981, 1983) ethical as much as conceptual admonition that sociologists of social movements, of sexual and gender movements, must consider the light and shade of what they research. I believe emergent asexual activism asks us to critically unthink (Rubin, 2011) our presumptions of sexuality and gender to consider their oppressiveness, but also to consider the oppressiveness of presumptions that it would replace them with.

1.2 Unthinking Sex.

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 must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history. It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution.

(Rubin, 2011:145)

This opening chapter sets out to give an account of my motivations, aims and objectives in undertaking this research. I outline the circumstances which motivated me to undertake research on the increasing visibility of asexual activism and its interrelationship to wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q movements. I give a brief overview of concepts and terms I feel are relevant to an initial understanding of this increasing visibility. I consider the changes that occurred in my own thinking as to asexuality and its activism, and my understanding of how these should be researched. I discuss critical events which impacted upon my thinking. I use my engagement with the CRASSH DSM V CLASSIFYING SEX Conference, at the University of Cambridge in July 2013, as a narrational frame to illustrate its progression.

Gayle Rubin was on my mind as I travelled to the CLASSIFYING SEX event; an interdisciplinary conference organised to discuss changes in the DSM V manual. This is *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) which is considered the psychiatric bible of many American psychiatrists and therapists; its use and impact the subject of heated debates and controversies the conference would illustrate. At that point in my doctorate, there were research questions I was beginning to consider which made attending this conference attractive to me. These research questions, and how I found them reflected at the CRASSH conference, would direct the course of my doctoral project.

Having been a teacher, I had begun a doctorate in September 2012 to research how observation impacts upon teachers in classrooms, centred in the Sociology of Education. Professor Kehily, my principal supervisor at that time, pointed out that this research drew on extremely painful and recent memories that I had of classroom practice. She noted that I perhaps needed to rest that work for later postdoctoral consideration. She suggested that I consider research data that I had collaborated on with Pink Therapy as a starting point, and switch disciplinarity to Sociology of Sexuality & Gender Studies. This research was on gender and sexually diverse couples’ experiences of relationship therapy. While I found this switch productive, I found it challenged my thinking on

---

1 The Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at Cambridge.
2 Pink Therapy is a national LGBT+ and Q organisation which aims to promote better understanding and training amongst therapists of LGBT+ and Q issues surrounding counselling.
sexual and gendered identity-formations. This was due to the nature of the data collected on the Pink Therapy project. Respondents talked about diverse sexual and gendered identities that I barely understood; either as a quare-bisexual\(^3\) man or as a schoolteacher who had researched young people and their sexual and gendered identity-formations. One identity which did not fit any of the boxes I thought I understood were a cohort of respondents who identified as ‘asexual’.

My knowledge of asexuality at that moment stretched no further than the definition I looked up on the AVEN (2016) website that “an asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction.” As I researched asexuality and its activism, I came to understand that AVEN are the Asexual Visibility and Education Network. They are the largest and most visible online community of asexuals and activists in the English-speaking world. The network was founded by David Jay, who I illustrate as a charismatic figurehead (Weber, 1978). AVEN and Jay are key actors in the increasing visibility of mainstream asexual activism, and the direction that it has taken. Drawing on research while influenced by prior LGBT+ and Q politics, it is their definition which has come to frame thinking in the West about contemporary asexuality and its politics. Haven for the Human Amoeba, an extant Yahoo group, was one of the original online activist and community groups (Decker, 2015; AVENwiki, 2018). Its initial, highly active period was characterised by a series of contentious debates between three factions of activists concerning what asexuality was, and what that politics is should imply. These were broadly: anti-sexual activists, who saw no intrinsic difference in asexuality and celibacy to advocate a purist politics of abstinence; hard-line activists, who believed asexuality and its politics should be strictly defined to verify, make visible and privilege individuals who experienced neither attraction, arousal nor romantic desire (‘Aromantic Aces’), and, LGBT+ and Q asexual activists led by Jay who saw self-affirming identity labels as a strategic tool in the visibility of asexuality and education of asexuals, wider LGBT+ and Q movements, and the public. Over time the LGBT+ and Q asexual activists migrated to AVEN where their view has come to dominate mainstream asexual activism. As I illustrate, this does not imply that LGBT+ and Q asexual activists are fully in agreement with each other, or that anti-sexual, hard-line and other strands are not present in contemporary asexual activism. It highlights the significance of the Internet to the emergence of contemporary asexual activism, and the significance of LGBT+ and Q\(^4\) politics to that emergence and the direction that it took (De Lappe, 2016).

\(^3\) I discuss the meaning of ‘quare’ in a following section, where I reflect on relevant aspects of my own biography to my research.

\(^4\) Throughout my text, unless another acronym seemed contextually relevant, I have used ‘LGBT+ and Q’ as my acronym of choice because my research discusses ‘LGBT+’ and ‘Q’ as interlinked but distinct terms.
As I engaged with my research and read about Social Movement Theory and its concerns, I came to understand the significance of framing as an activist tool, such as the single-sentence definition of asexuality used by AVEN, played in activism. I came to engage with how this can short-hand complex and contentious debates in ways that are pragmatic and reductive. At this moment, as I read about asexuality on the AVEN website and researched other websites, my interest was piqued. This was maintained by several responses to the Pink Therapy project that I encountered, and to the data on asexual respondents. When I mentioned to them the Pink Therapy project, I was surprised to find that my teenage godchild in Brighton already had friends who were identifying as asexual. They themselves had considered whether they were asexual. I knew from my time living in Brighton that young people there are often at the vanguard of emerging sexual and gendered identity-formations. My initial thinking had been that the data was an anomaly; it now felt there was something about asexuality as a sexual identity that was emergent in British society and in the West. As I looked deeper into asexuality, it seemed my godchild and their friends were already reflecting what research was suggesting, and asexual activism was promoting.

Asexuality is best understood as an ordinary and healthy sexual orientation like lesbianism, bisexuality and heterosexuality. Like other sexual orientations, it is a spectrum orientation where individuals exhibit a range of responses in relation to a lack of sexual attraction. There are individuals who exhibit no feelings of sexual attraction at all; typically termed ‘Aces’ in asexual activism and communities. There are individuals who exhibit some sexual attraction, particularly under certain circumstances; for example, if they feel an emotional and/or romantic commitment to their sexual partner. These are typically termed ‘Grey’ or ‘Demi-asexuals’. In its range of emotional and romantic responses, asexuality is intersectional to other sexual orientations. Individuals combine asexuality with lesbianism, bisexuality, heterosexuality, et cetera, to identify as ‘Grey Homo-romantic’ for example. There are individuals who experience no emotional or romantic feelings to others who are typically termed ‘Aromantics’. These identities may be intersectionally combined with a range of sexual responses, and a range of other sexual orientations, so that individuals identify as ‘Aromantic Aces’ or ‘Bi-Aromantic’ for example. There is a proliferating range of such intersectional identities linked to the increasing visibility of asexuality in the West, such as ‘Sapiosexuals’ who are aroused by intelligence rather than physical characteristics. As I discuss in my research, the increasing visibility of asexuality and asexual activism challenges many of the conventional boxes by which human sexual response and behaviour are viewed. It challenged my thinking, which had largely imagined

---

5 My godchild, who I have permission to refer to, identifies as non-gender binary and uses the gender-neutral pronouns ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’. I have striven to use individuals’ preferred pronouns throughout if possible.

Asexuality and asexual activism challenge the normative presumption in the West that, irrespective of sexual orientation, there is a ‘normal’ physiological level of sexual attraction and response that humans should display. Often labelled the ‘sexual imperative’, activists and other community members argue that this normative presumption is privileged in Western society so that individuals or relationships (platonic, romantic, sensual, intellectual, et cetera) who do not maintain it are deemed dysfunctional. They are “broken,” “lost” or “in need of fixing;” terms used by my interview participants. As a LGBT+ and Q schoolteacher and sex-positive researcher, I have unthinkingly applied this presumption in the past. Most activists and community members challenge the interrelated presumption that asexuality and celibacy are synonymous. They argue that asexuality is best understood as a sexual orientation, while celibacy is properly understood as a chosen or enforced period of sexual abstinence. Many asexuals are celibate, many are not, and many are celibate only in the sense that their affective relationships preclude physical sexual congress in favour of other commitments. Coming from a background in rural Ireland, where secular and religious celibacy can be both privileged and oppressive, this changed my understanding of asexuality and celibacy. I find myself radically rethinking the meaning when people comment “why can’t they just be celibate,” when they hear about my field of study. Much as ‘cis’ and ‘non-cis’ highlight gendered presumptions in Western society, activists and other community members speak of ‘Allosexuals’. Allosexuals are individuals who have normative sexual attraction orientation which others are unthinkingly presumed to have. As I illustrate in my research, allosexuality is not physiological sexual response; it is a series of complex, intersectional, and largely invisible scripts by which a normative view of attraction, libido and desire are perpetuated and maintained as universal. Akin to whiteness in the performance of its cultural norms, and to which I link it in my research, allosexuality impacts intersectionally upon many individuals and identities as well as asexuality. An activist of colour, one of my participants comments on how the presumption of black masculinity as hyper-sexualised impacts upon him.

The increasing visibility of asexuality and asexual activism is also intersectional to gender. Cis and non-cis, at present many more women than men identity with asexual labels. There is a large presence of trans* and trans*-variant individuals in asexual activism and visible communities. The extent to which this intersectionality represents distinct physiological differences in orientation and/or socialisation is a matter of ongoing research. As I discuss in my literature review, Asexual
Studies is a relatively new sub-discipline which has focused to date in two broad directions. Physiological approaches which seek to measure and moderate asexual orientation as normal, and sociological approaches which consider how various asexual cohorts feel about themselves, others and society. Whether measuring or considering asexuality, its labels and populations, I see value in both approaches. I see how they add to my own thinking on asexuality, asexual activism, and broader considerations concerning the nature of the sexual to the self in society. There has been a theoretical and methodological focus on treating those labels and populations as the sum of individuated experiences; offering insights into how individuals experience asexual orientation and identity-formation, and their interrelationships to society. My research contributes to this by considering collective activist identity-formations, the interrelated collective community identities that they seek to represent, and their significance. As I illustrate, this undertaking is complex because asexual activist identity-formations and collective community identities are themselves intersectional. In the context of research which focuses on activism and its politics, there are diverse asexual activist cohorts and community members who align or desire to align with various iterations of Queer politics and lifestyles, the wider Pride/LGBT+ movements, and who desire straightness. A focus of my research is the alignment and non-alignment with the wider Pride/LGBT+ movements, with attention given to Queer and to straightness.

This focus began with the other significant response to the Pink Therapy data. It concerned LGBT+ and Q professionals engaged in educational and/or relationship counselling who had agreed to evaluate the initial pilot findings of the project. From my time as a teacher I had developed an interest in communal self-policing strategies. What was termed the ‘hidden curriculum’ of the school (Synder, 1973; Lynch, 1989). What interested me was the mode of transmission for this curriculum. From my time as a teacher, I had experienced this transmission occurring through anecdotes and scraps of stories; narratives passed unthinkingly from one cyclical generation of teachers to the next as a collective audience. The Pink Therapy project that I worked on was a national online survey of gender and sexually diverse couples. The survey asked them to comment on their experiences of various forms of relationship counselling: going it alone; friends and family; private, and, public and semi-funded services. There were respondents who identified as asexual, but also intersectionally as ‘asexual and lesbian’ or ‘asexual and BDSM’. They wrote in other terms such as ‘grey’, ‘aromantic’, ‘demi-romantic’, et cetera. It was evident that asexual meant more than celibate; a narrative I had assumed initially. I discussed this with the LGBT+ and Q professionals who had agreed to evaluate our findings. There was a clear group, I would say that it was the majority, who were highly dismissive of asexuality in this context. They appeared to maintain a narrative that the sexual was
core to LGBT+ and Q identities and audiences (Kahan, 2013). So long as asexuality broadly fitted within the same box as celibacy it appeared acceptable but, once it intersected with other LGBT+ and Q identities and their audiences, it offended this unthinking narrative.

Prompted by the Pink Therapy data, I had begun a series of conversations with Dr Meg John Barker who had been exploring their own identity as ‘genderqueer’. Genderqueer is often considered under the umbrella label of ‘non-gender binary’. These emerging intersectional sexual and gendered identity labels, and the linked collective identity politics to which asexual activism feels interrelated, are part of what I have termed ‘emerging sexual and gender social movements’. My discussions with Dr Barker also concerned my ambiguous feelings with ‘queer’; as someone who had identified as a queer bisexual man and queer academic-activist. My engagement with queer is from a distinct activist time and place in the 1990s. My understanding of queer at that time was that it signified a distinct set of oppositional politics and lifestyles to mainstream gay and lesbian lifestyles. There was a sense that it offered an alternative to the crushing commodification and homogenisation afforded by ‘gay’. I find myself less comfortable with queer as a label now, as it feels unthinkingly homogenised and commodified. Echoing Rubin (2011), I find it disturbing how queer activism as I experienced it unthinkingly found new forms to replay similar battles, perpetuate existing hierarchies, and overlook the flaws it shared.

I feel that we as queer activists at the time deliberately overlooked what was positive about gay culture and politics, or what we had in common with it. I helped to run a queer event for ten years. Despite the stated intentions of all involved, it was always the voices of middle-class white men and women which unthinkingly spoke loudest. It is the reason that I identify as a quare bisexual man now. ‘Quare’ has contextually specific meaning for Irish working-class individuals. The most famous use of it in Irish culture is Behan’s (1956) The Quare Fellow, where a heterosexual prisoner on death row is quare because his death sentence sets him apart from the other prisoners, including the homosexual lags who are not quare because they conform to the expectations of prison life. ‘Quare’ signifies ‘odd, or set apart’ which can be both privileging and pejorative. Growing up in rural Ireland it was not unusual to hear middle-aged spinsters and bachelors of the parish described as “quare young ones,” and I return to this in my conclusion. My personal experience of queer as a collective activist identity that I had embraced, fought for, yet increasingly felt ambiguous towards its thinking, is part of what motivates my interest in emergent sexual and gendered activist identities. It is part of what motivates my interest in sexual and gender social movements. The necessity motivates me to understand and celebrate what is changed by protest and activism, but also to cherish and critique
what persists. Barker’s (2012) work on changing codes of sexuality and gender, *Rewriting the Rules*, had a significant effect on my research. It made me consider how overt codes or rules concerning sexuality and gender are challenged precisely because they are visible, while covert rules or codes persist because they remain deliberately overlooked. This led me to the work of Gayle Rubin whose reader *Deviations* (2011) had been recently published.

Reading *Deviations* as I headed to the CLASSIFYING SEX conference influenced what I observed, and my subsequent doctorate. I was influenced by the sense of Rubin as a founding figure in Queer Studies who was an anthropologist, ethnographer and activist. It was not only through her seminal studies of leathermen that Rubin (2011:19) had come to see “Fieldwork as a vocation.” A critical player in the feminist ‘Sex Wars’ of the 1970’s and 1980’s, Rubin writes from those periods and reflects back upon them throughout *Deviations*. She considers intersectional tribes as concerned with unthinkingly fighting each other as seeking to challenge the gender and sexual inequalities of the period. This was quite different from reading Michel Foucault (1990; 1998a; 1998b; 2003) for example; as I read him, a historiographer who outlines how institutional power and the subjective self interrogate each other across relatively prolonged periods of time, including the historical interrogation of the sexual self to power. It was different from reading Judith Butler (1990; 1993), who I read as a philosopher concerned with freeing the subjective self from socio-historical essentialist limits placed upon it in relation to sexuality and gender. I am influenced by Butler and Foucault, but I had moved from a background in English, Critical Theory and Education to the Social Sciences because I was interested in empirical research that focused on collective identities. This was to become focused on how we critically rethink the rules around emerging activist identity-formations to avoid the persistent unthinking battles and inequalities of the past.

I had initially decided to attend the CLASSIFYING SEX conference because it afforded me the opportunity to present a poster on the data I had from the Pink Therapy project. My expectation was that I would receive some feedback which might suggest avenues for further research along the same lines. Reading *Deviations* (2011) and what occurred at the conference changed my thinking. From the moment that I arrived at the University of Cambridge, it felt that that CLASSIFYING SEX had been organised as groups of deeply antagonistic, intersectional tribes. With asexual activism as my illustrative case study, a focus of this doctorate has been to consider this intersectional and typically dramaturgical antagonism; the ways in which I found it framed, staged and scripted to boundary activist-actors’ collective behaviours. At CLASSIFYING SEX I felt this, because of how the *DSM V Manual* and the topic of ‘Classifying Sex’ were being brought together. The *DSM Manual*, from *DSM I*
to DSM V, has been polarising in its diagnoses. Its proponents claim that it brings scientific rigour and clarity to an ever-increasing range of mental health diagnoses for American psychiatrists and their patients (Gotlib, LeMoult, 2014). Its opponents state the opposite, that it is highly subjective as illustrated by the claims made in respect of sexual paraphilia (Moser, 2001; Moser and Keinplatz, 2006). Regarding gender dysmorphia and the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, for many the issue becomes whether the DSM Manual causes more damage than good (Cohen-Kettenis, 2001; Lev, 2006; Cohen-Kettenis, Pfäfflin, 2010).

At the conference, it felt that this polarisation around gender identity disorder was deliberately enhanced by the programming and scheduling. It seemed to suggest pro-DSM Americans versus anti-DSM Europeans. There felt to be a sequence of contentious binaries in play between different academic-activist tribes: developmental psychologist versus social psychologist; biological/determinist versus symbolic interactionist/social constructionist, et cetera. This flowed from the programming and scheduling, and were discernible in conference delegates’ body language, the way organisers introduced speakers, in comments passed backwards and forwards on the floor. It was evident in the most divisive and vocally aggressive binary in play; the European activists versus the North American doctors. This comprised of activists who had come to represent intersex and trans* children impacted upon by decisions supported by reference to diagnoses in the DSM IV and the DSM V. As intersex and trans* activists viewed it, this concerned the matter of performing gender reassignment surgery on intersex children against their wishes or without their knowledge. It was apparent that this was a deeply emotive subject for many. It felt that many of the European academics saw themselves as activists or as coming from an activist background. At CLASSIFYING SEX, the presence of Professor Ken Zucker forcefully represented the North American doctors. He is the editor of the main section of the DSM V concerning gender dysmorphia, and one the world’s leading advocates of gender reassignment in intersex children (Zucker, K. J., 2002; 2002; 2005).

Influenced by my reading of Deviations (2011) I have gone on to attend a wide range of seminars, workshops and conferences over the last six years. I agree with Rubin that research in the field requires critically understanding the often-fraught interrelationships between different tribes of researchers and activists as much as it does one’s own research topic and research cohort. Time and time again I have been present at events where issues, discussions and points of view have become personal and emotive – exposing private feelings. CLASSIFYING SEX is the event that I have attended that bears similarity to Rubin’s accounts of academic-activist battles. It felt like a series of boxing
matches at which CRAASH presented itself as the ‘neutral’ referee. What struck me at Cambridge was how staged these boxing matches felt with recognisable bullies and underdogs. This is in no way to detract from the gravity of the issues that were debated. I recognise how emotive those issues were for conference delegates as academics, activists and community members. It reflects my impressions as someone who was an English teacher and taught drama, that the emotive form debate took felt deliberately and contentiously dramaturgical.

Professor Zucker’s presentation exemplified this for me. It seemed he consistently spoke over the heads of the audience to an imaginary person standing by the back wall. His hands moved backwards and forwards as if dismissing argument. His voice was constantly raised to shout, though he refused to acknowledge the people who were shouting at him. An intersex activist who had been speaking to me minutes before – in a calm, jovial manner – shifted personality and emotional range before Professor Zucker had spoken more than four or five sentences. It felt they were literally baying for his blood. It seemed less than five minutes after the presentation was over, that they were talking to me again in the same calm, jovial manner. There was a European academic who sat at the back of the room, where it felt impossible to hear anything. This did not stop her loudly snorting and then leaving the room, banging the doors loudly behind her only to return two or three minutes later. She repeated these actions three or four times during the talk. On the other side of boxing match, there was an American developmental psychologist who gave a challenging, some found it offensive, account of what she saw as young children’s normative sexual development. I felt she responded to all criticisms with dismissive and dramatic waves of her hand. For the rest of her session she went to sit on her own just outside of the main conference room very publicly reading a bestseller book.

There was a sense of theatre with people arriving in scripted roles. I had begun the initial steps to considering how individuals dramaturgically (Burke, 1968, 1986; Goffman, 1971, 1974) enact collective sexual and gendered activist identities and interlinked academic-activist identities, and to reflect that this felt qualitatively different from researching individual sexual and gendered identity-formations. The most significant event for my research was Dr Graham’s presentation where she thanked AVEN for their help and support. Dr Graham was a member of the DSM Work Group for Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders. As I became aware through my research, AVEN had significant input into this workgroup concerning one of the diagnoses; hypoactive sexual desire disorder, a much-disputed mental disorder based on low or non-existent sexual desire. AVEN activists that I have spoken to since seem ambivalent with the results of the input that they were being thanked for.
at CLASSIFYING SEX. Between the DSM IV and DSM V the diagnosis was changed so that low or nonexistent sexual desire was no longer considered a medical issue unless it caused clear distress to the individual (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As I later came to understand, I was watching Dr Graham thank AVEN activists for what was perhaps the most significant example of contentious engagement then to date in asexual activism. I have no reason to doubt Dr Graham’s comments of appreciation to AVEN activists for their help and support. In the context of the CLASSIFYING SEX conference, with its oppositional line-ups, where it felt that trans* and intersex* activists present were often deliberately ignored, it felt that absent AVEN activists were being awarded a gold star (Cuthbert, 2017).

At that moment I was not aware of ‘contention’ as a social movement concept. I was not aware that the rationalistic contentious strand of Social Movement Theory would be significant to my research (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2008), as would the strand that emphasises emotive moral strategy (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009; Gould, 2009). I seek to contribute to these by considering the significance of the dramaturgical (Burke, 1968, 1986; Goffman, 1971, 1974) and the carnivalesque (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986) in the persistent stylised forms and frames of activism I researched. I was not aware that the remark by Dr Graham would begin a journey for me in Cambridge that would lead to my marching with an asexual contingent in the WorldPride March in Toronto in 2014. In fact, as I reflect now to my chagrin, my unthinking impression was of an absent ‘gold star’ cohort of asexual activists being afforded pre-eminence over trans* and intersex activists at the conference. The drama of the conference affected me as much as I sensed it affected others. I imagined that I was thinking critically about sexuality and gender, as Rubin exhorted researchers to do, but I see that I had only begun to take the first steps to consider “erotic injustice and sexual oppression,” (Rubin, 2011:145). When it came to consider ‘aromantic injustice’ and ‘asexual oppression’, how and why and in what form they might have triggered and justified asexual activism, I have found thinking critically about sex not enough.

Rubin’s (2011) concepts provided an entry point, but they belong pragmatically to a different era; generationally a different millennium. I illustrate that the emerging sex and gender movement I researched has at least partially constructed its narratives, and its hidden curriculums, from the narratives forged by the tribes that Rubin observed, but they are not the same. To build rich descriptions of asexual activism as it has come into view in contemporary society; to grasp and hold such a theoretically dense and yet materially contradictorily subject as a contemporary sexual and
gender social movement; to understand the carnivalesque barbarity and joyfulness of the intertwining interplay of persecution and pleasure, I believe that it is necessary for a radical theory of sex to do more than think critically about it. I believe that Rubin’s work now exhorts ethnographers of sexuality and gender who see fieldwork as vocation as she did, who engage with contemporary sexual and gendered tribes, to critically unthink sex. My research illustrates how I critically engaged with asexual activist tribes, broader LGBT+ and Q tribes, and how I had to critically engage with my unthinking presumptions of them.

1.3 Research Questions and Aims.

Question 1: - How do the narratives of asexual activists give an account of the increasing visibility of asexual activism in Western culture?

Question 2: -What are the motivating factors for asexual activists in mobilising and organising as a sexual and gender social movement; specifically, the interrelationship to the wider Pride movements?

This doctorate is a small-scale qualitative project utilising ethnographic methods. It is situated interdisciplinarily at the intersection of Asexual Studies, Sexuality & Gender Studies and Social Movement Theory. By being so located it is hoped that it yields new insights into the increasing visibility of an emerging sexual and gender social movement in Western society; asexual activism. There is a focus on the interrelationship between this increasing visibility and wider Pride movements. This is a qualitative project where there was no hypothesis. I sought to probe a sequence of questions informed by the literature that I read, and influenced by the empirical data that I collected, but not led by them to its conclusion. Given the size and aims of the project, and the ethnographic methods utilised, this doctorate seeks to be illustrative in its conclusions rather than representative. After a review of the relevant literature, initial data collection and discussions with my supervisors, I formed the above research questions which summed up the direction of my project: The aims are to combine empirical data with insights from the fields of Sexuality & Gender Studies and Social Movement Theory, drawing on and contributing to an emerging field of Asexual Studies.

1.4 Summary of Thesis.

This opening chapter, A Personal Journey from Cambridge to Toronto, gave an account of my motivations, aims and objectives in undertaking this research. I outlined the circumstances which
motivated me to undertake research on the increasing visibility of asexual activism. I gave a brief overview of concepts and terms I feel are relevant to an initial understanding of this increasing visibility. I noted the contribution that Rubin (2011) has made to my theoretical and empirical understanding of sexual and gendered activism and protest, and how that influenced my methodological approaches. I considered how the increasing visibility of asexuality and its politics has had an interrelationship to LGBT+ and Q politics since its inception, to account for why this has become a focus. I offered aspects of my backstory to illustrate my motivation, and demonstrate my suitability, for conducting this research. I discussed my background in education as a secondary teacher of English and Drama which motivates my interest in the dramaturgical, and accounted for my engagement with its modes of performance. I noted my ongoing engagement with sexual and gender research to illustrate my commitment to ethnographic field research. I discussed my ambivalent feelings concerning my own engagement with and commitment to sexual and gender activism. I illustrated initial impactful events concerning asexuality, asexual activism and the contentious display of LGBT+ and Q academic-activism that triggered the direction of this research. I offered a rich account of the events that I observed at CLASSIFYING SEX to illustrate why they motivated my interest in the dramaturgy of protest and activism, why this was directly relevant to an engagement with asexuality and its activism, and why participant observation and thick description are relevant to my engagement with activism and its modes of performance. My objective was to give an account of why a small-scale ethnographic study is relevant, and how and why that draws on and contributes to my fields of research. A further objective was to illustrate how, since its beginning, a characteristic of this research has been my need to ‘unthink sex’; to critically engage with presumptions that I or others may have deliberately overlooked.

Chapter Two, *Mobilising for affect*, is my literature review and considers literatures from Asexual Studies, Sexuality & Gender Studies, and Social Movement Theory. The motivation is to reflect on these as three interrelated but distinct academic and academic-activist traditions of research, and with their own boundary characteristics of relevance to my research. I begin by reflecting on what ‘claiming newness’ might mean in the context of Asexual Studies and asexual activism. The intent is to consider how claims of newness and what they overlook are part of an ongoing contentious dialectic in sexual and gendered activism and academic-activism. I consider Asexual Studies with the aim of highlighting the boundary characteristics it currently displays. I note the focus on distinguishing asexuality and celibacy, and the emphasis in research of individuated asexual identity. I highlight the small body of research which points out the linkages between contemporary asexual activist identity-formations and historic celibate activist identity-formations, with the aim of
considering asexual activism’s genealogical antecedence. I consider the two main approaches that are currently present in Asexual Studies: Psychology of Identity, and Sociology of Identity, approaches. I reflect on how they have developed, what they seek to do, and what they bring to the field. I reflect on the contentious debates that have arisen between both approaches to reflect how these debates engage with prior academic-activist debates which can be both productive and damaging. The objective is to consider how my research approach can draw from these approaches, while offering its own contribution as Sociology of Social Movements.

I consider Sexuality & Gender Studies to locate this contribution in relation to symbolic-interactionist and social-constructionist literatures on minority sexual and gender identity-formations. The aim is to consider the significance of scripted behaviour to asexual and asexual activist identity-formations. I note the influence of Goffman (1971, 1974, 2017) on the presentation of the self, with the aim of highlighting the significance of dramaturgical interpretation. I discuss writings that consider the scripting of sexual and gendered identity-formations in Western cultures. Further relevant writers are added to consider the characteristic scripted behaviours for sexual and gendered activists. I reflect on how these literatures both challenge and maintain mythic narratives of protest and identity, with the aim of highlighting the dramaturgical significance of mythic storytelling to sexual and gender activism and related research. My aim is to consider how Sexuality & Gender Studies academic-activists moderate the scripts of activism and protest they research, while considering how default scripts become mythically maintained. My objective is to understand how I can draw on and contribute to this process of moderatorship in minority sexual and gender research, while being aware of the dangers of overlooking default scripts as mythic.

I emphasise the distinctive and contentious process of moderatorship in Social Movement Theory traditions. I outline a history of Social Movement Theory approaches to show that there is a contended but common presumption that social movement theorists both observe and legitimate the activism and protest that they research; to reflect on what activism and protest is, and what it should be. I note the ongoing influence of Tilly in how this moderatorship privileges certain types of activism and protest as rational and overlooks others. I note the significance of Goffman (1971, 1974, 2017) to dramaturgical framing as a concept within Social Movement Theory. I discuss challenges to rationality which emphasise emotive and cultural protest. I consider the significance of Melucci to understanding the formation of modern collective activist identities. I offer the metaphor of ‘a chorus line’ to suggest how collective activism can be dramaturgical interpreted. I discuss ACT UP as a critical historic case study with relevance to my research. The objective is to consider how
this ongoing process of moderatorship can be a benefit to my research, and how it can be problematic. I conclude by considering what theoretical and methodological insights I might take from all three fields that are relevant to observing and moderating asexual activism as an emerging social movement.

Chapter Three, *Methods and Methodology*, is my methodology and methods chapter. The motivation is to show how my ethnographic study developed and progressed from its initial rationale as my research was impacted upon by my interview participants, my data collection and ongoing analysis, the grounding of theory to this data collection and analysis, and by the practicalities of engaging in semi-structured interviewing and autoethnographic participant observer field research. The aim is to give an account of how rich my data collection was, and why the theory that I grounded to that data collection was appropriate and remained close to my empirical sources. My intention is to show how and why the patterns and codes that I applied to my semi-structured interviews were fitting, and why thick description was appropriate to illustrating my participant-observations. I begin by discussing the methodological developments as my research progressed, and how they impacted upon the ethnographic approaches and direction that my study took. The aim is to consider why I chose semi-structured interviewing, autoethnographic participant observation, and photographic montage to collect data on my research topics. I outline my experiences of engaging with these approaches to illustrate how I found them beneficial, and what methodological limitations I found they imposed on my study. I discuss issues of safeguarding, and what benefits and limitations I felt they imparted to my research. I consider each of my chapters in turn to outline how this is methodologically reflected in my thesis. The objective is to offer a reflective account of the methodological benefits and limitations of these methods to researching the increasing visibility of asexual activism, and its interrelationships to wider Pride/LGBT+ social movements.

Chapter Four, *Mobilising A-Pride: Triggering asexual activism*, is the first of two chapters which focus on my semi-structured interviews with participants who identified as asexual activists. The motivation is to consider how their narratives account for the mobilisation and organisation of asexual activism and protest. The aim is to understand why they have been motivated into activism, what form that activism has taken, and how that might account for the increasing visibility of asexual activism as a contemporary social movement. I note the significance of the Internet as a space for asexual mobilisation and organisation to account for the direction activism has taken. Drawing on my participants’ comments, I consider that direction in terms of contention, identity and lifestyle
strands which interweave in activism. I consider how all three strands challenge issues of visibility and representation, and continue a tradition of emphasising visibility and representation in LGBT+ and Q politics. I differentiate my participants comments into activist patterns they suggested to me: the asexual activist of colour; the queer asexual activist; the normative asexual activist, and the older asexual activist. I note that participants comment directly and indirectly on code-switching as a form of maintaining face. My intention is to show how my participants-activists present shifting collective public faces which draw on many sources. I consider commonality and difference with the aim of showing that these public faces can be both homogenous and heterogeneous. I note that participants comment directly and indirectly on the Overton Window; on shifting the point of view of others to their own, including other asexuals and activists. In my conclusion I reflect on this entangled portmanteau nature of collective activist identity. My objective is to illustrate how the public faces (or chorus lines) of asexual activism has been triggered and maintained, and how that might account for the increasing visibility of asexual activism in the West.

Chapter Five, Organising for Pride/Owning the ‘A’, focuses on my participants comments in relation to the wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q movements. As audience or non-audience members, the motivation is to consider how their narratives comment on the scripting and staging of Pride/LGBT+ and Q protest and spectacle. Both positively and negatively as activist participants or non-participants, the aim is to illustrate how they reflect on the significance of the interrelation of asexual activism and wider movements. I begin by commenting on a recent series of campaigns concerning disputes between asexual activists and LGBT+ as to the contentious framing of visibility and representation. My intention is to illustrate the significance the interrelation has for asexual activism and wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q movements, and how contentious the framing of that interrelationship can be in its scripts. I comment on these campaigns as well with the aim of highlighting the importance shifting the Overton Window (Lehman, 2014) can have for asexual activists. The intention is to show differing activists drawing on a rhetoric of visibility and representation in LGBT+ and Q politics and spectacle, to both challenge and maintain it. As I did with Chapter Four, I differentiate my participants comments into the audience-participant patterns, and the public faces they suggested to me: supportive straight allies; confrontational queers; enthusiastic aligning LGBT+’s, and transformational non-whites. I reflect how these patterns illustrate differing politicised views of LGBT+ and Q politics: support, convergence, co-option and divergence. Whatever their politicised views are, I illustrate that my participants exhibit a contrary contentious ambivalence towards LGBT+ and Q politics and spectacle. In my conclusion I comment on this ambivalence which suggests a common disquiet with the allosexual scripting of LGBT+ and Q politics.
and spectacle. I reflect on participants’ unease that this allosexual scripting, with its public faces, should impact on their own. The objective is to consider how the performance of allosexuality, which my participants’ comments suggest is analogous to and interrelated with the performance of whiteness in LGBT+ and Q movements, impacts in contrary ways upon the interrelationship between asexual activism and wider Pride movements.

Chapter Six, The Carnival of Pride, is an extended piece of auto-ethnographic writing on my field research at Pride events during 2014 and 2015. My motivation is to show how my participant observation at Pride events, drawing on my participants’ interviews, provided me with rich data with which to compile thick descriptions, and generate my grounded theoretically-informed analysis. Through autoethnography and thick description, my motivation is to illustrate a rich sense of what I observed which felt significant to my research topics, and more generally significant concerning Pride events. I offer the metaphor of The Carnival of Pride as a grounded motif with the aim of illustrating the significance of politicised contentious dramaturgy to Pride spectacle and protest, and the contribution that thick dramaturgical description and analysis can play in engaging with it. I note key writers who have informed this grounded analysis: Babcock (1978), Bakhtin (1984), and Stallybrass and White (1986) on modes of Carnival; Barthes (1977, 1993) on mythic display, Goffman on the maintenance of public face (1971, 1974, 2017), and Foucault (1986) on heterotopia.

Grounded in and remaining close to its rich data sources, my intention is to illustrate how and why my thick description engages with Carnival, the carnivalesque and heterotopias. I acknowledge that my description and analysis of my data collection remains fundamentally my impressions of what I observed. I focus on WorldPride 2014 and Berlin Pride 2015 as extended autoethnographic studies that I undertook, but I draw on other events and moments throughout to enrichen my descriptions and analysis. I make use of photographs throughout to emphasise the richness of my data collection.

I begin by discussing Berlin Pride 2015 to focus on context, myth and symbolism. I reflect on the main events that I attended: Berlin CSD, the Dyke March, Kreuzberg Pride and the LGBT+ Stadtfest. My motivation is to illustrate with autoethnography the significance of the mythic and what goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1993) at Pride events I observed. My intention is to illustrate how Pride events I researched enact mythic narratives of allosexuality, idealised identity, whiteness, nationhood, protest and others. Throughout this chapter, I consider how asexual activists that were present engaged with mythic display in ways that felt contradictory and contrary. I consider how and why maintaining public face is reflected in the dramaturgical dynamics of looking down, looking away and ignoring that I observe at Pride events. I move on to consider WorldPride 2014 where I
focus on the commonplace narratives of selling out, enforcing rules and excluding people my attention was drawn to, and the narratives of commerciality, sexualisation and hyper-sexualisation to which they were linked. I focus on events where asexual activists were present such as the Trans* March, the WorldPride Human Rights Conference (WPHRC), Asexuality Conference and the World Pride March. I offer examples throughout of how the dynamic of deliberately overlooking was present to contrarily challenge and maintain mythic narratives and displays. My concluding section is a detailed autoethnographic account of marching with asexual activists on the World Pride March with the intention of illustrating my sense of it as a contrary heterotopic space that activists strategically contended through their understanding of collective public faces. My objective is to offer an account of how and why asexual activists and other actors engage with mythic display and protest at Pride events in ways that seem oppositional to their stated intentions, and despite their own best interests.

Chapter Seven, Asexual Activism, the popular imaginary and a politics of contrariness, offers an account of how my research has addressed my research topics. My motivation is to show the empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions that I have made to my fields of study. I begin by reflecting on the motivations that drew me to this project. I outline the key contributions and findings that my research makes. I move on to consider the increasing visibility of asexual activism, and what contributions I have made in researching it. I then consider the contribution that I have made to understanding the interrelationship between asexual activism and the wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q movements. Throughout, I reflect how my research draws on (often contentious) theorised traditions and methodological approaches to understanding asexuality, collective public identity, and sexual and gendered activism in the West. I reflect on how I draw on a politicised academic tradition of reading public performance and display, which emphasises Carnival, the carnivalesque and the popular imaginary. I show how I build on this with my own contribution by offering the first ethnographic reading of the of contemporary asexual activism which engages with it dramaturgically. I illustrate the contributions that I have made methodologically by engaging with the empirical analysis of this dramaturgy through both semi-structured interviews and participant observer field research. I offer examples of what insights this has brought. Throughout I outline the contribution that I have made to a grounded theoretical understanding of the significance of Carnival, the carnivalesque and the popular imaginary to Pride/LGBT and Q spectacle and protest. I note the theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions that I have made to engaging with the mythic display of sexual and gendered protest; the dynamics of maintaining public faces and the interrelated dynamics of deliberately overlooking which I have termed ‘performative irony’. I
conclude by considering the implications for asexual activism in its engagement with this spectacle and protest. I consider how it privileges idealised forms of identity and protest that may run contrary to the best intentions of asexual activists I interviewed and observed, and against their best interests.
Chapter Two. Mobilising for affect: Literature Review

2.1 Outline of Chapter.

In this literature review, I consider three interrelated but distinct academic and academic-activist literatures which are relevant to my research. These literatures come from Asexual Studies, Sexuality & Gender Studies and Social Movement Theory. There are consecutive sections in my review which consider writings from each of these disciplines. I discuss what is distinctive about theorised approaches taken within each academic discipline, and what the benefits and drawbacks are of those approaches to my own research. I show why I have chosen an interdisciplinary approach, integrating aspects of all three theorised traditions, to ground within my data collection and its approaches.

I begin by discussing ‘claiming newness’, its historic and contemporary implications for Asexual Studies, and my research on activism. I move on to consider writing from Social Movement Theory that reflect on what is a social movement. Further writings are added to consider what a sexual and gendered social movement is or is not within that academic tradition. I reflect on moderatorship; the presumption within Social Movement Theory that social movement theorists not only observe but legitimate certain types of rational social movement behaviour. I outline the strengths of classic social movement theories and theorists: Political Process/Dynamic Frame, Frame Theory and New Social Movement approaches (Melucci, 1979, 1980; Snow and Benford, 1988; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003). I consider how these approaches are problematic for contemporary sexual and gendered social movement researchers such as myself. I conclude by discussing the impact of recent work which emphasises emotive-work and dramaturgical artfulness in activism, that I believe is more productive to an engagement with my own research and participants (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009; Gould, 2009).

Regarding literatures from Sexuality & Gender Studies, I locate my research in relation to symbolic-interactionist and social-constructionist writings on the significance of scripts and scripted behaviour to sexual and gendered identity-formations (Goffman, 1971, 1974; Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Weeks 2002). I consider the influence of Goffman (1974) on the presentation of self and the significance of dramaturgical interpretation on that performed self (2017). A critical concern is that I consider sexual and gendered activists-actors. I discuss writings from Sexuality & Gender Studies to consider the scripted behaviour of minority sexual and gendered identities in Western cultures. Further relevant writers are added to consider the characteristic scripted behaviours for sexual and gendered activists in Western cultures (Plummer, 1994, 2003, 2005, 2015). The dramaturgical
characteristics of sexual and gendered activist scripts are considered. I give attention to writings that illustrate the dramaturgical settings in which sexual and gendered activist scripts are enacted; the Pride staging and interrelated narratives of activism (Weeks, 2007; Faderman, 2015). I reflect on the role Sexuality & Gender Studies academic-activists play in moderating the scripting of activist narratives, and to consider how default scripts become legitimised.

Asexual Studies is an emerging sub-discipline. I begin by outlining the boundary characteristics which have already developed; i.e., I consider the distinctions made between celibacy and asexuality. I allude to research on modern and historical celibate identity-formations to consider the extent to which the distinction between celibacy and asexuality, emerging and prior movements, can and should be framed as absolute (Kahan, 2013). I outline the two main directions that research in Asexual Studies has taken so far. Psychology of Identity approaches, which attempt to define and measure asexual orientation (Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2012, 2015; Broto et al, 2010; Hinderliter, 2009; Yule, Broto, Gorzalka, 2013). Sociology of Identity approaches which seek to illustrate how asexuals are treated in society and/or how they feel they are treated by society (Scherrer, 2008; Carrigan, 2011; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016; Chasin, 2011, 2015). With both approaches I consider why they have developed in relation to emerging asexual identity, what researchers are seeking to moderate with each approach, and what are the benefits and weaknesses from each approach. I consider what both approaches productively offer to my own research. I consider how it diverges from them by being more appropriately defined as a Sociology of Social Movement approach.

2.1.1 Claiming Newness.

Anthony Bogaert’s (2004) Asexuality: Its Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample is the foundational text in Asexual Studies. Bogaert’s text was made possible by the availability of data from a British sample set, the NATSAL-1 (1994), to make generalisable claims about emerging asexual identities. The other salient factor I would suggest was that asexual activists had already created an increasing online ‘front of house’ or ‘onstage’ Internet presence by the time Bogaert wrote his text (De Lappe, 2016). Bogaert implicitly references activist community terms and concepts in his analysis. In turn, that activist community would engage and interact with his research, positively and negatively, to construct and reconstruct how they would present asexual activist and community identities. A relationship was established between Asexual Studies and asexual activism that is dialectical and dramaturgical because activists are selective and tactical in what they choose to present as part of their ‘onstage’ selves. Bogaert (2012:6) developed his research to talk about asexuality as a “new lens, providing new insights into the mysteries of sex.” I have reservations about this. I believe neither sexuality nor gender are mysterious in themselves; we
sometimes frame them as such because of our own roles as scientists and/or activists. I also believe that ‘new’ is a relative term. I think that there is nothing wrong in wanting to produce new research, and to open a new field, but there is a caveat. Claiming newness should not imply that there is something unique about asexuality, its activism and their research from what went before.

It is important to be mind that claiming newness is in the characteristic nature of the dramaturgical dialectic that has grown up around the Gay Revolution, Gay Liberation, the Pride narrative, Queer, et cetera. There is a tradition in minority sexual and gendered activism, and minority sexual and gendered research, of positively and negatively reconstructing the past to represent the present-day in a better light. As LGBT+ historians note, the generation of gay and lesbian activists immediately post-Stonewall did not just espouse ‘be out and proud’ (Faderman, 1991; Duberman, 1993; Carter, 2004; Scaglotti et al. (2010). They actively condemned pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian subcultures and identities; particularly butch-femme, effeminate male and trans* identities, and they were often as oppressive as mainstream opinion (Bronski, 2003; Rivera, 2013). This ignored how pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian spaces and cultures, embedded in difficult and problematic discourses as they were, often operated as the sole liminal safe spaces for the most marginalised community members (FeJes, 2016). As Downs (2016) records, in turn in the great flowering of queer activism and queer research that followed HIV/AIDS, queer activists and researchers would often frame 1970s Gay liberation as a decade of shallow hedonistic promiscuity and drug abuse. This ignored how gay men in that decade forged powerful communities of support despite their mainstream representation. It overlooked how lesbians had developed activist repertoires which were to feed directly into the impact of HIV/AIDS activism in organisations such as ACT UP (Gould, 2009). Consciously or unconsciously, successive waves of activism and academic research have tended to render specific groups and individuals invisible by stigmatising them, often for prolonged periods.

This is significant for my research because, as Kahan (2013) notes, apart from radical lesbian-feminism a characteristic which has remained relatively constant with each successive generational activist and academic-activists wave’s reframing of the past has been the invisibility of the celibate and the proto-asexual (Decker, 2015). Kahan comments that the sexualised dialectic that has evolved between activism and research has mostly treated celibate and proto-asexual identities as an anomaly, assumed that they were religious, or otherwise overlooked them. That is, until the present period. For the first time since the interwar period during the Great Wars, we have an increasingly vocal large-scale movement of secular individuals visibly mobilising and organising around asexual identities that bear comparison to the Spinsters movement. Asexuality and its activism may be emerging in Western society now; in doing so, many of its characteristics and concerns are re-emerging from a century of silence by being drawn attention to.
2.2 Asexual Studies.

2.2.1 The Individuated Asexual.

Asexual Studies is an emerging sub-discipline of research where there are claims of distinction and difference between asexuality and celibacy, and much the research in Asexual Studies has focused on Psychology of Identity or Sociology of Identity approaches (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018). The former seeks to identify modern asexual individuals in physiological terms (Nurius, 1983; Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2015; Brotto et al, 2010; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013), while the latter focuses on how the asexual individual is treated in society or how they feel they are treated by society (Fahs, 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2011, 2015; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016). There are benefits and limitations to both these approaches. Researchers have pointed out that the overall focus in research and popular media on individuated asexuality can be problematic (Carrigan, Gupta and Morrison, 2013; Scott and Dawson, 2015). Przybylo (2012) notes that asexuality becomes framed as a modern medical and social problem for contemporary individuals who achieve restitution and normalisation through their willingness to discuss their identity. I see value in exploring individuated experience, but what can be overlooked is the sense of asexuals and activists negotiating collective socio-cultural and politised identities. The embedded linkages by which the socially constructed presentation of a modern individual asexual is collectively embodied. To echo De Beauvoir (2014), one may be born with an asexual orientation, while one becomes an asexual through historically situated cultural and social practices, and one chooses to become an asexual activist with the collective identities and concerns that entails.

2.2.2 A Note on The Celibate Self.

Kahan’s (2013) Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life is one of the few recent texts to consider celibacy as a distinct sexuality with its own practices and politics. Kahan considers the history of celibacy from a Modernist perspective to argue that it has been ignored and obfuscated by the politics of sex-positivity within Sexuality & Gender Studies, and the politics of sex-as-visible-transgression associated with Queer Theory. Kahan’s work is quite distinct within Asexual Studies, and echoes a body of work from the late 1980s and early 1990s, from radical feminist and lesbian-separatist academics, who wrote about historic celibate identities and their politics in the interwar years between the World Wars (Oram, 1992; Edwards, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997).
Much of this material is concerned with social discourses surrounding spinsters; how others constructed spinsters as unmarried women, and how they constructed their own identities. The research challenges the myth that these women were part of a generation fated to remain unmarried because of the numbers of men who had died in the First World War. It suggests that they were part of a significant trend that had been occurring in British culture since the mid-19th century. This was for increasing groups of women to actively choose not to marry, and to embrace a spinster or bachelor lifestyle (Scharlieb, 1929). The identities that are being claimed have characteristics that we might now recognise as nascent-asexual, and many of these women campaigned for Spinster rights, mobilising and organising in ways that we would recognise as characteristic of contemporary sexual and gender social movements (Oram, 1992: 427). For example, they actively engaged with the dialectic of contemporary Sexology in pursuing their aims; reworking Freudian psychoanalytic precepts to talk about spinsters sublimating libido or desire to pursue education or careers (Oram, 1992: 419).

As my doctorate is not archival in nature I can only briefly allude to this research. It does suggest productive future research on asexual activism’s genealogical antecedence. These historic actors and movements made specific claims that have resonances today. As Kahan (2013) notes, these claims were mostly rendered invisible by the discursive direction that sexological discourse undertook in Western popular media and academia. This has implications for contemporary asexual activists, and contemporary researchers in how we moderate analogous relationships.

2.2.3 Psychology of Identity Approaches.

Broadly speaking, Psychology of Identity approaches have undertaken three main research goals: they have sought to define and measure asexual orientation; they have attempted to map the demographics of asexual orientation in various populations through various methodological approaches, and they have attempted to normalise asexual orientation as a sexual orientation. This has often been as a reparative act from the historic and ongoing pathologisation of asexuality that has occurred in both sexological and psychological discourse. It is important to note that not all Psychology of Identity researchers undertake all three goals, but there are common threads in their goals. The goals have been critiqued that they remain too embedded within the empirical, essentialist, bio-medical model they ostensibly critique (Cerankowski and Megan, 2010, 2014; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016).

Throughout the 20th century asexual orientation was only invisible in the sense that it was theorised as an abnormal or deviant sexuality in comparison to ‘healthy’ sexualities, and overlooked (Kahan,
Freud viewed Oedipal drive, libido, as destiny (1964: 171-180). All else was or would be frigidity, repression neurosis, castration, or at best sublimation (Freud, 2015). Whether lack or excess, those who had unhealthy libidinous desires could channel them through celibacy into productive social goals. Lacan (1966) would draw on and challenge Freud to argue that it is not organic drive, but the psychosexual/psychosocial meaning of Oedipal signification that mattered. Western societies hierarchically privilege men and women through a complex, linguistic set of signifiers that are developmentally learnt. Sexual potency is part of the meta-script, and to be ‘castrated’ signifies on many anxious levels. To happily abjure sexual potency as asexual or nascent-aexual jouissance in the drive to make oneself be seen (Lacan, 1977:180) outside of accepted boundaries, and to disrupt the symbolic order. One therefore cannot be seen symbolically and materially; there are drives in others to only see what is wanted or reflects oneself. Kinsey’s (1948, 1953) ground-breaking surveys had large numbers of men and women who did not respond erotically to others, so he left the data out of his Kinsey Scale. They were catalogueed as ‘Group X’, and to be assigned a healthy sexuality once it emerged. Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970) refused to view asexual responses and low-sex desire as healthy.

The sexual sciences were broadening the boundaries of what was considered healthy sexual and gendered orientation, and they were tightening them. Historical celibate and nascent-aexual identities which were visible at the beginning of the 20th century become suspect in this mapping of the normal and the abnormal. As Kahan (2013) notes, they retreat from view so a dyadic platonic relationship between women which would have read as a “Boston Marriage” (Rothblum and Brehony, 1993: 16) becomes suspect. The consequence of this is that asexual orientation has frequently been treated as a psychological and/or physiological malady. It has been associated with Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), “persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity’ which causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty,” (Bogaert, 2006: 243). HSDD is a disorder which causes many people real distress; it is also a subjective diagnosis within the DSM Manual held to impose ‘compulsory sexuality’ upon people who have asexual orientations or low sex drives (Hinderliter, 2009; Brotto and Yule, 2011; De Lappe, 2016).

The first research since Kinsey’s to discuss asexual orientation, Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups, by Johnson (1977), is framed in the same language as Kahan (2013), but more vehemently. Johnson would portray celibate and asexual women as left behind by both the sexual revolution and sexual science, who were mutually complicit in portraying them as repressed and unhealthy. The first psychological survey to look at asexuality and mental health associated levels of asexual orientation with elevated levels of depression; possibly because it correlated them according
to Kinsey’s (1948) deficit model (Nurius, 1983). Michael Storms (1980) would update Kinsey’s Scale by including additional axes for high and low homo- and hetero-eroticism. While this was an improvement, and it successfully predicted asexual orientation, it failed to account for the prominent levels of gender preferences and variance exhibited in asexual cohorts and other populations. This has set a pattern of researchers seeking to use measurement to improve their generalised claims as to asexual orientation, only to have those claims challenged on their generalisability. These can be and frequently are significant acts of moderatorship but, echoing Savin-Williams (2001, 2009), researchers can appear to be speaking at cross purposes about the portmanteau nature of asexual identity so where one is emphasising physiological orientation, another is emphasising psycho-social behaviour or socio-cultural identity. This may be perfectly reasonable, and in keeping with the research rationale, but it often requires clarity and clarification.

Bogaert’s (2004) Asexuality: Its Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample is the foundational text in psychology of identity approaches. Bogaert drew on the results of one of the largest and most detailed surveys of sexual behaviour and lifestyle undertaken; the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL1) (Wellings et al, 1994). The NATSAL-1 was begun in 1990 in the wake and impact of HIV/AIDS, which drew researchers’ attention to cohorts who were not engaging in sex, and included a question on sexual attraction. Bogaert has been critiqued for making general claims in relation to what was a culturally specific probability sample (Aicken, Mercer and Cassell, 2013). Despite this, the 1% of participants in the NATSAL-1 who defined as having an absence of sexual attraction has been widely appropriated as a general percentage for asexual populations due to Bogaert’s use of it. This should be treated with caution as it has led to presumptions, and contended claims, of who the ‘1%’ are (young, single, white, middle-class and usually female, and always aromantic).

Aicken et al (2013) draw on both the NATSAL1 (Wellings et al, 1994) and NATSAL2 (Prah et al, 2014), arguing that the NATSAL1 had drawn attention to asexuality while the NATSAL2 dealt explicitly with asexual identities because of the prior study. Aicken et al use this more developed data to argue that a lack of sexual attraction alone does not illustrate the lived lives of respondents or their asexual identities; it may conceal as much as it reveals. They arrive at a figure of 0.4% nationally for respondents who feel no sexual attraction in the NATSAL surveys. These respondents are often married or in relationships, and they enjoy sex or feel that they have enough. While Aiken et al found slight variation in gender or age, there were wide variations in class and ethnicity in who declared a lack of sexual attraction. Aicken et al comment upon the effects of social and cultural desirability bias to making claims of generalisability; it may be socially acceptable for specific research cohorts to define themselves as having an absence of sexual attraction. Their argument is
that it may be more socially acceptable for white middle-class women and men to define as having an absence, and by treating their weighting as neutral physiological approaches overlook its significance.

Bogaert analysed the NATSAL1 to consider “a number of independent development pathways, perhaps both biological and psychosocial, leading to asexuality” (Bogaert, 2004: 284). He noted that more women than men defined as having a lack of sexual attraction. Although there are wide differences regarding other factors, this gender imbalance concerning who defines as asexual, or having little or no sexual attraction to others, is a common characteristic in most surveys. This may be because women, particularly cis-gendered white women, have been a focus of research in Asexual Studies and it is more socially acceptable for white cis-gendered women to declare a modern asexual identity at present (Brotto et al, 2010; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013, 2014). This may change as asexuality becomes more visible and asexual researchers expand their field of focus. Bogaert’s emphasis on both the biological and the psychosocial has meant that there has been a concern on addressing the relationship between asexuality and HSDD. Much of the research has been clinically focused on repudiating the association (Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013, 2014), and its impact on white cis-gendered women. Hinderliter (2009) has challenged the highly subjective nature of the diagnosis itself, in the context of an approach where there remains commitment to accounting for some asexual behaviours in terms of psychological malady. Schizoid personality disorder has been postulated as a triggering factor (Brotto et al, 2010), as has a unique paraphilia of identity-less sexuality: ‘autochorissexualism’ (Bogaert, 2012), and poor health has also been suggested (Bogaert, 2004). It is widely agreed within Psychology of Identity approaches that asexual orientation should not be characterised as a sexual dysfunction (Brotto and Yule, 2011).

Crucial to Psychology of Identity approaches are the three measures of asexuality that are used (Bogaert, 2006): self-identification, behaviour (a lack of sexual activity) and desire (low or non-existent attraction towards others). Of these, desire is considered the preferred measure because the etiology of asexual orientation is held to be a more stable enduring measure that is less likely to change over time. This is problematic because, as Bogaert himself noted, identity and behaviour are highly significant in asexual identity-formations. Attempts to map asexual population demographics based on desire have differed widely; from .5% to 6%. AVEN, while foregrounding desire as a measure on its website, “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction (AVEN, 2016),” contrarily maintains an annual Asexual Census which is based on self-definition (Ginoza et al, 2014). As researchers have argued (Hinderliter, 2009; Aicken, Mercer and Cassell, 2013; Scott and Dawson, 2015), there is an ongoing confusion and lack of clarity. There is what has
been clinically researched, physiological asexual orientation, and usually with cis-gendered white women. There is what has been the object of most generic large-scale surveys, attitudes to low or non-existent sexual attraction, and usually culturally specific. There is what has been the focus of community-led surveys such as the Asexual Census; a self-selecting/self-defining, pool-limiting sample that reflects on itself (Scott and Dawson, 2015). Each of these offers knowledge about asexual orientation, beliefs and/or behaviours. None of them in themselves offer a single coherent definition for asexual identity, and a generalisable measuring stick. The Asexual Census (Ginoza et al, 2014) is of interest to a theorist of social movements and activism. Scott and Dawson (2015) critique it for being a badly designed, politically motivated, self-selecting, community-led research project; precisely why I as a symbolic-interactionist I find it meaningful. It is less a type of research than a form of symbolic activism, and a highly dramatic form (De Lappe, 2015). As I discuss in my section of Social Movement theory, it meets the criteria for what Tilly (2004: 53) would call an act of WUNC. As I discuss in my data chapters, it is the public symbolism of the Asexual Census that matters to AVEN far more than its empirical data collection.

2.2.4 Sociology of Identity Approaches.

As discussed, there is a body of work which considered historic celibate identity-formations and nascent asexual identity-formations. This work focused mostly on women, as spinsters (Oram, 1992), and Boston Marriages (Rothblum, 1993) where women who lived together in intimate companionship but not necessarily for sex. Kahan’s (2013) work is partly a continuation of this research, but there is also the work of Breanne Fahs. In Radical refusals: On the anarchist politics of women choosing asexuality, Fahs (2010) redefines asexual activism and politics as a continuation of 1970’s radical feminist ideologies; Solanas’ (1971) SCUM Manifesto and Boston’s Cell 16 (Echols, 1989). Fahs is critical of mainstream asexual activist engagement with wider sexual and gendered movements, and mainstream asexual activism is critical of her. It is important to recognise that she represents a view, partly held by some of my participants. Her research touches on faultlines that other Sociology of Identity researchers allude to, but step back from.

Scherrer (2008) sets out to consider how asexuals negotiate identity when sexuality and selfhood is constructed around an essentialist construction of sex. She considers the importance of romantic orientations as an aspect of orientation, though she notes it is not the only additional form of orientated identification. She expands on this to consider asexual relationships, and finding that our language is limited for relationships that often criss-cross LGBT+ boundaries in multiple ways. Carrigan (2011) would develop this to argue that what defines asexual identity, rather than asexual orientation, is the interplay of heterogeneity and homogeneity; commonality and difference coexist
though he privileges commonality. Asexual communities are made up of individuals and groups who share some common characteristics, but also have diverse identities and opinions. He argues that if there is more commonality than difference these communities can exist.

This brings into view the etiology of asexual orientation that has preoccupied Psychology of Identity approaches. Chasin (2011) argues that much academic research has re-embedded binary norms about healthy and unhealthy sexuality into definitions of asexuality; particularly, the distinction between asexuality, HSDD and low sex drive. They argue that by accepting an essentialist bi-determinist definition of asexuality, as a meta-category, mainstream asexual activism is enabling a distinction between asexuals and non-asaexuals that is unhelpful and harmful. Chasin (2015) develops this to consider why clinicians and academics might make this sexual distinction, similarly to Woodiwiss’s (2008, 2009) concept of ‘compulsory sexuality’ (sexuality as a measure of well-being).

This critique of the mainstream acceptance of the etiology of asexual orientation as biological is evident in Cerankowski and Milks’ work (2010, 2014). They argue that dominant forms of feminism, and the wider Pride movements, construct sexuality as either empowered or repressed in bi-determinist terms because sex is conceived as something innately basic and core. Asexuality, and by implication it’s activism, questions this core script even while it is being asked to uphold it.

Here, asexual identities, orientations, and behaviours, and their relationship to mainstream constructions of sexuality, are being deconstructed by differing amalgamations of post-structuralism, queer-feminism and radical-feminism. Sex-normative assumptions about lesbian lifestyles have been challenged (Gupta, 2013). Disability narratives have been critiqued for perpetuating the myth of universal sexual desire, for enforcing asexuality on targeted disabled individuals (Kim, 2011), and for idealising ‘gold star’ asexuals as normal (Cuthbert, 2017). Gressgård (2013) has attacked neo-liberalism’s privileging of sexual kinship; arguing that asexual identity offers the potential to imagine other social pathways of communal selfhood. Drawing on feminist and post-modern theories, Przybylo considers the extent to which asexuality as an identity category questions sex-normativity in the discursive system of sexusociety (2011). Przybylo argues that asexuality is both a reaction against and a product of a hypersexual society (sexusociety). She expands on this to consider the role that sexual science plays in constructing asexual identity, arguing that there have been two significant recent periods (2012): the late 1970’s to early 1990’s, characterised by radical-lesbian feminist research which had a very limited understanding of asexuality, and the relationship between celibacy and asexuality; the period since Bogaert’s study of 2004 which has made the subject and the identity visible. Przybylo critiques this normalisation of asexuality through scientific study for failing to acknowledge its own cultural underpinnings. In line with Fahs, Przybylo (2012,
2016) argues for the potential for asexual identities to challenge dominant forms of sexuality and intimate relationships.

Przybylo critiques sexual science and its relationship to asexual identity, asexual identity as it is currently constituted, but offers little other than her own culturally and ideologically underpinned subject-position. Unlike Fahs, Przybylo steps back from the conclusions she alludes to. This is characteristic of the strand of post-structuralist, queer, radical-feminist thought which has become woven into sociology of identity approaches within Asexual Studies. This is exasperated because the critique of Psychology of Identity approaches, not without merit, does not have the same empirical richness that Psychology of Identity research has displayed. Przybylo’s own work reflects this paucity of empirical data. We are being told about asexual identity as an imagined and essentialised site for ideological resistance, the Asexual as a theorised category of being, rather than the lives of asexuals or activists who may or may not feel themselves resistant to sex-normative values, or wish it. A point made forcefully by Scott, Dawson and McDonnell whose empirical research on asexuality and intimacy notes that the narratives of asexuals they interviewed reflected the normative values of their society more often than they challenged them (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018).

2.3 Social Movement Theory.

2.3.1 What is a Social Movement?

There is no single agreed definition for what a social movement is in Social Movement Theory. Nevertheless, Diani (1992: 13) states all definitions share the following criteria:

- a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity.

There have been social movements based around civil disobedience and race relations such as the Civil Rights Movement and there have been movements concerned to challenge gender inequality such as The Women’s Movement. There have been movements offering an alternative to sexual norms such as The Gay Liberation Movement, and there have been revolutionary and religious movements such as The Iranian Revolution (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). What each of these share is that they are a form of collective behaviour. For much of the early 20th century, the most influential school of sociologists who studied social movements were the Chicago School (Buechler, 2011). They focused primarily on social movements as collective behaviour, rather than informal organisations.
with a social goal. Park and Burgess’s (1921, 865) definition of collective behaviour, in An Introduction to the Science of Sociology, from almost hundred years ago remains the classic statement of Chicago School beliefs on collective behaviour:

Collective behaviour, then, is the behaviour of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words that is the result of social interaction.

Park and Burgess were pessimistic about informal collective behaviour which they viewed as tantamount to contagious mob rule; it was not contentious actions, but irrational social unrest that was the dominant theme at this point. Blumer (1969) in his overview of collective behaviour theory would build on this to propose a typology of collective behaviour (the crowd, the public, the mass), and arguing that social movements only become legitimate when they acquire a form and structure analogous to more traditional and stable political institutions. Turner and Killian (1957) moved away from irrationality and social unrest to focus on social movements, but still viewed them primarily through collective behaviour theory; as groups where new norms emerged through group interaction.

Turner and Killian have been critiqued for remaining wedded to a psychological scripting of social movements as collective behaviour (Currie and Skolnick, 1970; Tilly, Tilly and Tilly, 1975; McAdam, 1982). As a social constructionist and symbolic-interactionist, who considers the psychosocial scripting of sexual and gendered movements, I find myself sympathetic to their later work and revised statement that:

Social movements fall near the boundary that separates collective behaviour from strictly organised and institutionalised behaviour.

(Turner and Killian, 1987: 230)

The Chicago School established a tradition within Social Movement Theory. The sociologist of social movements was not merely recording their life-cycle; they were moderating and legitimising the movements. The anticipated life-cycle of a social movement would eventually solidify around the classic triumvirate of key works by Blumer (1969), Mauss (1975) and Tilly (1978) to emphasise rational political action because of the Chicago School preoccupation with avoiding mob rule and irrational behaviour (Buechler, 2011). Underpinning this has been Rational Choice Theory (Rudé, 1964; Singer, 1989) to argue that social movements and actors act in predictable, rational, self-interested ways to maximise their own interests. This has influenced Social Movement Theory as a
field for much of its existence, and continues to hold sway with many contemporary social
movement analysts despite being a Downsian model (Downs, 1957; Blais, 2000).

2.3.2 Contentious Politics.

Linking the Chicago School to contemporary Social Movement Theory in the classic triumvirate of
key texts is Charles Tilly. He was the dominant figure in Social Movement Theory for nearly 50 years,
the foundational figure in Political Process Theory, and its modern form Dynamic Frame Theory
which remains the dominant approach in Social Movement Theory today. He is responsible for the
focus on contentious politics as legitimising what is a social movement. Although disputed, it
remains so for many contemporary social movement theorists (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003;
Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2008).

In the 1960s and 1970s, a range of theoretical models were proposed that broke with the Chicago
School preoccupation on irrational collective behaviour. There were Strain, Breakdown and
Deprivation models that emphasised the social circumstances in which social protest occurred
(Davies, 1962; Smelser, 1962; Geschwender, 1968). These focused researches on the extent to which
cohorts of individuals protested due to their sense of deprivation and expectations. There were
Resource Mobilisation models that considered the structural organisation of social movements as
they emerged (Oberschall, 1973, McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977). These approached the success of
social movements in relation to rational choice and how successfully they commandeered strategic
resources to their benefit.

These models were responding to social movements of their day: Civil Rights, student unrest, union
and other labour campaigns. While both approaches offered plausible accounts of aspects of
contemporary social protest, their definitions of social protest and social movements became
untenable because they were historically contextual and culturally specific. Strain, Breakdown and
Deprivation models saw social protest and movements as always revolutionary, when they were
qualitatively often not; Resource Mobilisation models saw social protest and social movements as
always entrepreneurial and business-like, where they were characteristically not (Buechler, 2011).
By considered historical social movements in Britain in the 18th and 19th century (Tilly, 1995, 2004),
Tilly’s approach to and understanding of social movements was quite different.

Tilly argued that social movements and their actors had characteristics, and to argue that simply
being a member of an interest-group or a protest group was not the same as being a member of a
social movement in Western culture:
interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interest, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.

(Tilly, 2008: 5)

Tilly (1995, 2004) argued that social movements in Western cultures have developed characteristic scripts; contentious repertoires by which they can be recognised. They will seek to make claims by way of a campaign, and they will seek to promote their campaign politically through an understood repertoire of actions, i.e. vigils, demonstrations, public meetings, et cetera. They will seek to engage public support for these campaigns through acts of Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment (WUNC) (Tilly, 2004: 53). This frame can seem quite alien in its language, but it describes characteristics recognisable to most researchers of social movements. For example, activists organised an Asexuality Conference at World Pride 2014 to promote their campaign. They congregated together en masse from across the world in an act of WUNC to be seen at that event, and they expressed their commitment publicly. Although Tilly (1975, 1978, 1995, 2004, 2007, 2008) remained a committed political rationalist throughout his work, there is an inherent emotive and dramaturgical presumption to the framing of WUNC and contentious repertoires.

McAdam (1982) built on Tilly’s work to consider how black activists in America used historic contentious repertoires in the Civil Rights movement. Tarrow would expand this to consider contentious politics at grassroots level, at transnational level, and within new social movements (Tarrow, 1989, 1996, 2005; Tarrow and Tollefson 1994; Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow have been significant in establishing contentious action as a key determinant in how social movement theorists distinguish and analyse social movements by how they take advantage of existing repertoires to pursue their aims, and how they become legitimised by what has gone before. A focus of Tilly’s work (1995, 2004) is how social movement theorists legitimate social protest by establishing its historic democratic legitimacy.

Political Process Theory is significant for my research because the strength of its model is that it offers a useful rule of thumb, a qualitative tool of measurement, by which to judge what is a social movement. The emphasis on understanding the significance of historic repertoires offers a bulwark against the discursive thrust in sexual and gender activism that claims newness. The model makes ethical claims for the social movement theorist, who is not viewed as neutral, but legitimates democratic social protest. Political Process Theory has been critiqued for overlooking the significance of personal, social and cultural factors underpinning its model of contentious repertoires; in favour of economic and political factors (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995; Gamson and Meyer, 1996), and state-centred political activism by rational actors (Fireman and Gamson 1979;
Ferree 1992; Crossley, 2002). This overlooks the kinds of factors which are significant and salient for the types of activists and social movement that I am researching.

Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow (2003) sought to answer those critiques by taking account of social and cultural framing in historic cycles of contention, and to develop a more nuanced model of political process as Dynamic Frame Theory. This more nuanced model of Political Process Theory has itself been critiqued for still showing an inherent bias towards state-centred activism and traditional rational choice actors (Snow, 2004; Van Dyke, Soule and Taylor 2004). A useful critique for contemporary social movement theorists might be that Political Process Theory/Dynamic Frame Theory is banded in its application. It offers a set of qualitative analytical tools which are convenient, but one should be aware that those analytical tools are narrow. By privileging rational choice, it moderates and legitimates social movement activism which seeks out political opportunities for intervention and change within the existing political system. It does not offer an account for why social movements emerge, why radically diverse types of social movements emerge, nor why activists are motivated to become involved (Diani, 2003; Rucht, 2003). If social movement theorists overemphasise cycles of contentious repertoires, they run the risk of privileging only state-centred activism.

2.3.3 Frame Theory.

Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow (2003) sought to incorporate framing within their revision of Political Process Theory as Dynamic Frame Theory. Influenced by Goffman (1971, 1974), Frame Theory and Symbolic-Interactionism have contributed a small but significant body of work to the field of Social Movement Theory. If Political Process/Dynamic Frame theories sought to address issues of macromobilisation, and how movements cyclically construct themselves in relation to practices and institutions of power, then Frame Theory in Social Movement Theory has addressed micromobilisation, and how activists interact and present themselves in relationship to others within and without movements (Buechler, 2011).

Of relevance to my research, this body of work implicitly comments on the dramaturgical nature of how activists interact with others and present themselves. As Benford and Hunt (1992:38) note:

Social movements can be described as dramas in which protagonists and antagonists compete to affect audiences’ interpretations of power relations in a variety of domains.

Benford, Snow and Hunt have been the key contributors in this body of work, to consider how movements communicate beliefs, politics and ideologies through frames (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992). They argue that framing enables the various actors involved (activists,
their opponents, the public, politicians, academics, et cetera) to interact and construct meaning around these frames (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Snow et al, 1992; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994).

Although he was speaking directly about media bias during the Bush administration, Kuypers (2006: 7) comments about the rhetoric of framing apply:

Framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner. Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames are often found within a narrative account of an issue or event, and are generally the central organizing idea.

Kuypers’ comments note that political framing is not analogous to belief, politics nor ideology, though it is rooted in them, and this is echoed by Benford and Snow (2000). In relation to movements and activists, frames and framing are the sets of signifying discursive practices through which actor-activists can achieve resonance for their beliefs, politics and ideologies with the frames of others (Snow and Benford, 1988). For example, one of the most powerful frames of 1970s Gay Liberation was ‘be out and proud’ (Faderman, 1991; Duberman, 1993; Carter, 2004). For 1980s HIV/AIDS activism, it was ‘silence equals death’ (Epstein, 1996; Gould, 2009). Snow and Benford (1988, 1992) state that powerful frames induce frame-bridging, frame alignment and frame re-alignment between the social movement and the wider community. This produces frame resonance which, if successful, leads to frame transformation in the wider community. Either a more modest domain-specific transformation may occur, improving the status of the community involved, or a more global transformation may happen, where the wider community partially or fully embraces the beliefs and values of that community (Snow et al, 1986). This is analogous to the Overton Window (Lehman, 2014) of acceptable public opinion, which my participants comment directly upon.

Acceptance is not a one-directional process, and the frame-bridging initiated may lead actors-activists within the social movement to their own process of frame transformation which brings them closer to the beliefs or politics of the wider community in turn. An example of this is early HIV/AIDS activism, which was ostensibly concerned with challenging shame, stigma, homophobia and a lack of medical care in the face of an epidemic. In doing so, activists initiated a resonant process whereby the mainstream frames concerning gay men, particularly white gay men, were transformed in Western cultures (Epstein, 1996; Gould, 2009; France, 2016). Goffman (1974: 45-46) called this process “keying,” where framed models or behaviour can affect often radical understanding and attitudinal change in others, even those hitherto antagonistic. Conversely, many
middle-class white gay men in the West have now been described as “desiring sameness” with a neoliberal heterosexual mainstream (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005: 515). The extent to which this homonormative turn accurately reflects the majority experiences of gay men and lesbians has been challenged (Brown, 2009, 2012).

Echoing Kuypers (2006), for framing to proceed successfully as micromobilisation Snow and Benford (1988) state that certain signifying processes or tasks must be carried out successfully by the frame. The framing must be: diagnostic, identifying a problem and apportioning blame; prognostic, offering solutions, strategies and tactics, and, motivational, encouraging participants to action. One can read in the slogan of ‘silence equals death’ of early HIV/AIDS activism how it fulfilled all three conditions. ‘This imposed silence is killing us. By no longer being silent, we will be saved. We will save ourselves by becoming noisy activists’. Snow and Benford (1988) comment that the frame must be relevant to the participant-activists’ identities. It does not necessarily have to be truthful in a factual sense, but it must be faithful to their experiences and narratives. The frame should be relevant to the wider belief-system that it is seeking to transform, and it should share some value, preferably more, to effect frame bridging leading to frame transformation. One can read how these attributes were also effectively embedded within the slogan ‘silence equals death’.

Frame Theory in Social Movement Theory offers a set of analytical tools to consider the micro-level of social movement activism. It emphasises the social-construction inherent in movements, and the signification of activist participation, presentation and communication (Klandermans, 1984; Klandermans and Oegema, 1987; Taylor, Whittier and Morris, 1992). It considers how movements and activists present themselves through meaningful and signifying frames if they are to successfully interact with others. This is of interest to my own research because Goffman (1971, 1974) directly influenced Frame Theory in Social Movement Theory. The analytical tools that have been developed draw on his emphasis on the presentation of the self and dramaturgical analysis. In my analysis chapters, I draw on Frame Theory to consider my participants narratives, and their interactions with wider movements and beliefs, as framed behaviour. For example, they present themselves in role, and they speak of switching roles and of impression management. They are concerned with alignment and transformation of wider audiences, and how those audiences might be affected through their actions and behaviours. They present activist frames that are relevant to their asexual experiences and narratives: the ‘Invisible Orientation’ and the ‘Broken Orientation’. One can read how these frames are diagnostic, prognostic and motivational. These frames have the benefit of aligning them with others within the Pride continuum and making their identities comprehensible to the wider public. This is significant in terms of my research because it opens the possibility of linking
symbolic-interactionist/social-constructionist texts and research, from Social Movement Theory and Sexuality & Gender Studies, through frame analysis.

There is a widespread acceptance of framing within Social Movement Theory, and proponents of other theoretical models, notably Political Process Theory, have adopted aspects of Frame Theory into their own paradigms to strengthen perceived weaknesses (Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow, 2003). Buechler (2011) notes that compared to other theoretical models, proponents of Frame Theory within Social Movement Theory have set themselves a relatively modest project. They have largely confined their remit to address specific psychosocial behaviours, interactions and their signification, and that is a strength rather than a limitation. Because of this, what Frame Theory within Social Movement Theory does not do, and makes no claim to, is define what a social movement is. My personal criticism concerning frame analysis in Social Movement Theory is that it often runs the risk of reducing complex and organic human interactions to mechanistic and jargonistic processes.

This may be because of the inherent bias for rationalistic actions, even amongst those who ostensibly challenge them within the field. The three main theorists (Snow, Benford and Hunt) all conducted strong ethnographic field research, and there is a belief that frame analysis should be grounded within participant-observation. In my own research I concur, but I find that the proliferation of terms I have recounted above obscure the empirical data. Compare the use of terminology to the account of framing given by Kuyper, who is not a social movement theorist but a popular media analyst. At times this version of Frame Theory seems as process driven as Political Process Theory/Dynamic Frame Theory, and I have only sketched the broadest details of how frame analysis has been applied as a set of dense micro-processes. The rich and interpretative analysis of dramaturgical human behaviour and interaction that was characteristic and central to Goffman’s (1971, 1974) work seems overlooked. I am not dismissing Frame Theory as applied to movements and activism, because it is necessary to be able to understand how and why activists in movement interact with signifying processes, and to have tools that help to qualify those interactions and engagements. At the same time, it is important to be conscious of treating those interactions and engagements too reductively as processes, and risking losing sight of the human activist.

2.3.4 New Social Movements.

Sydney Tarrow would apply Political Process Theory to consider new social movements (NSMs) (Tarrow, 1989, 1996, 2005; Tarrow and Tollefson 1994). New social movements were seen by social movement theorists as signalling a shift in Western social protest brought about by post-industrialisation (Crossley, 2002), and from movements primarily concerned to challenge
materialistic issues in the first half of the 20th century. A shift from movements characterised as working-class, and focused on labour rights and economic well-being, to movements primarily concerned to challenge non-materialistic issues in the second half of the 20th century. These have been characterised as middle-class, and focused on women’s rights, human rights, gay rights, the environment, et cetera. This framing has been disputed as reductive (Crossley, 2002) and, while Tarrow is an American, much of the impetus behind the NSM paradigm has come from European theorists who both draw on and challenge a Marxist tradition of emphasising economic and labour activism (Buechler, 2011).

It has been argued that there is no evidence for such a shift historically in Western society; nor that early Marxist activism solely emphasised economic and labour conditions, nor was it solely comprised of working-class activists (Pichardo, 1997). A movement may be ‘new’ in the sense that it has recently emerged, but that should not imply that it has no genealogical antecedents nor common characteristics with other movements. For example, there have been women’s movements since the 19th century (Rendall, 1985; Ryan, 1992; Calhoun, 1993), there have been other sexual and gender movements since the late-19th/early 20th century including proto-asexual/celibate movements (Oram, 1992, Beachy, 2015), and there have been feminists and environmentalists involved in trade unions and labour movements since their beginnings (Dye, 1975; Freedman, 1979).

Buechler (1995) suggests that what is ‘new’ about the NSM paradigm is the focus being placed upon hitherto overlooked protest and activists. As well as macromobilisation and micromobilisation, social movement theorists returned to collective identity to consider who activists were in modern Western societies, why these identities led to them mobilising and organising in movements, and to comment about protest and its meaning in post-industrial Western society. The concepts of rational choice and political opportunity have not been disregarded, as ‘new’ here means activists and movements hitherto overlooked are considered, but they are often moderated and legitimated by the same criteria as previously.

This is evident in Tarrow’s (1994: 3-4) influential definition of a social movement:

- collective challenges [to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes] by people [my italics] with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities.

Tarrow, since Charles Tilly’s death probably the pre-eminent social movement theorist in the West, is broadening and tightening the definition of what a social movement is. Cultural forms of protest are acceptable, but they must be collective and sustained. Although he notes that people make up
movements, the emphasis is still on collective behaviour rather than collective identity, and the tone suggests a preference for certain types of rationalist contentious engagement on against elites.

The relationships, and tensions, between collective behaviour and collective identity have been explored by European social movement theorists who have engaged with the NSM paradigm. They have focused less on the newness of the movement, and more on what has changed in society and the collective response to it. Castells (1978, 1983) looked at the rise of urban social movements in Spain to consider the changing relationship between urban life and the state. Castell is a neo-Marxist who emphasises collective behaviour and political opportunities, but concedes the significance of contested group identities such as sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity and citizenship (Buechler, 2011). Castell’s work is important for my research because he argues that collective political opportunity strategies for changing political structures remain significant for urban social movements.

Touraine has researched workers’ movements in Europe and Latin America to consider what replaces workers’ solidarity in a “post-industrial society:” a term he coined (Touraine, 1971:1, Touraine, 1985, 1988, 1992; Touraine, Wieviorka and Dubet, 1985). Touraine argues that post-industrial society signalled a shift from social orders of the past, and towards social actors who shape society through more self-reflective struggle and contestation. He maintains that Western society now looks at itself more in a multiplicity of ways rather than having a central signifying conflict, and which he states was historically material production; a concept he terms “historicity.” He argues the extent to which culture and cultural identities can replace material production as a central signifying conflict to unify social protest, and he questions their amorphous, individualistic and oppositional natures to achieve cohesion and solidarity.

Touraine (1981, 1983) is important to my research because, in his classic study of the emergence of the Polish trade union Solidarity, he emphasises sociological intervention and the role of the social movement analyst in legitimating social change through their judgements. In this, Touraine has been critiqued for having an overly optimistic bias as to the extent to which materialistic rationalist actions can produce progressive social change in themselves (Martell and Stammers, 1996). He has been critiqued for applying a post-industrial NSM model of social protest to an Eastern European trade union in an industrial country, which disregarded specific cultural and religious identities which were important (Goldfarb, 1989; Scott, 1991). Touraine’s work is relevant for my research because my participants often express concerns as to how they are judged and viewed by others, whether their activism is seen as merely ‘cultural’ and not sufficiently grounded in materialistic oppression, and express concerns as to whether they can maintain solidarity and cohesion between competing internal identity claims. Touraine’s (1981, 1983) sociological insight is that emerging social movements are a mixture of light and shade; they seek to open some freedoms while maintaining
other repressions. For example, Solidarity as a movement fought for workers’ interests, but defended the nation state and the Catholic church. Touraine’s research raises issues about the role of sociological intervention, and to be mindful of inherent bias in optimistically judging light which is the emancipatory potential of emerging movements, over shade and their repressive potential.

Habermas (1984, 1987) considered how new forms of social control in late modernity require new collective responses, and he has also been at pains to defend these collective responses from post-modern claims he would see invalidating them. Habermas distinguishes between the public and the private sphere (the lifeworld) in contemporary Western society, where he views the public sphere as irrevocably colonised by an increasingly bureaucratic and technocratic form of capitalism, and its attendant politics. In this, Habermas is pessimistic and optimistic about the role that protest can play in explicitly challenging the dominant politics in the public sphere. He breaks with Social Movement Theory’s focus on collective rational action, and a focus on state-centred interventions in the public sphere. He does not believe that social protest can directly challenge the dominant form of capitalism, to instead advocate collective rational consensus, and protest that defends cultural values, self-actualisation and empowerment in the private sphere. Because the public and private sphere are linked, and social protest and social movements sit at their intersection, over time he considers this may have the potential to provoke a legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1975). However powerful technocratic and bureaucratic institutional politics are in Western society, they rely on the legitimisation of private citizens. If institutional politics loses this, by shifts in private consensus to which movements contribute, then there is an opportunity for social transformation because of the attendant crisis in their institutional legitimacy. Habermas’s model has been critiqued for its presumption of collective rational consensus (Plant, 1982), and that the processes of self-actualisation he alludes to will lead to democratic change.

As Weber (1992) noted, it is people’s beliefs, values and ideas that largely establish group cohesion and solidarity rather than their self-interest, including their irrational beliefs about their political self-interests, and their belief in authority and authority figures. Weber (1978) identified three types of authority that citizens, activists and followers attribute to leadership in legitimating them: traditional authority which is based on historical loyalties and customs; rational-legal authority which is established by bureaucratic precedent and structures, and, charismatic authority which is given usually to one individual who is endowed with special powers to transform society. In Weber’s model these forms of authority are often antagonistic in Western societies, but also cyclically interdependent because they are stages in a cycle. Traditional authority establishes its own bureaucratic precedents and structures, often for long relatively stable periods, to maintain its legitimation. Over time, the weight of this increasing bureaucratisation contrarily provokes a crisis
of legitimation, which enables some form of emerging charismatic leadership to incite social revolution and transformation. If successful, in time this emerging charismatic leadership will rely on establishing its own traditions, precedents and structures from its historical loyalties and customs to maintain its authority. For social movement analysts who follow Weber, this charismatic leadership is further bound by the “iron law of oligarchy (Michels, 1958; Hyland, 1995:247).” Even movements which are founded on the most egalitarian ideological basis will, over time, develop traditions, rules and norms that concentrate power in the hands of a bureaucratic elite. Leadership draws power to itself, consciously or unconsciously. There has been one researched exception to this (Lipset, Trow and Coleman, 1956), but it is considered an atypical case. Over time, this concentration of bureaucratic power may provoke another crisis, and the cycle renews itself.

Read within this, the NSM paradigm becomes part of a crisis of legitimation that occurred in progressive left-wing politics concerning social protest and social transformation around the time of the Paris Student Uprising of 1968, (Staricco, 2011, 2012). A fracturing of Marxist certainties: between those who would advocate some form of neo-Marxist modernist rationality (Castells, 1978, 1983; Touraine, 1983, 1985; Habermas, 1984, 1987); those who would argue for a third-way late modernity and transition to social democracy (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1994, 1998; Bauman, 1997, 2000), and, those who would espouse a more radical individualistic post-modernism (Foucault, 1977a, 1980, 1982, 2002, 2012; Melucci, 1980, 1981, 1988,1989). As with Touraine, proponents who have looked at emerging movements from all three perspectives have been critiqued for focusing on the charismatic emerging stages and leadership of what were relatively typical social movements and politics (Tarrow, 1991). Tarrow argues that they romanticised newness, particularly the ‘newness’ of middle-class protest, without considering that that romanticisation itself can be part of the cyclical process that re-embeds autocratic, bureaucratic and moralistic traditions and rules. For example, Foucault (1977b) became caught up in the charisma of the Ayatollah Khomeini and has been heavily critiqued for his writings about the early days of the Iranian Revolution (Afary and Anderson, 2010).

Modern Pride movements have been critiqued for emphasising charismatic leaders while becoming increasingly bureaucratic and autocratic, privileging elites and elite leadership. As I will illustrate in Chapters Four and Five, my own participants reflect on these concerns. As I discussed, contemporary asexual activism emerged from the crisis of legitimation that followed HIV/AIDS and early HIV/AIDS activism, and concerning traditional codes of sexual conduct and emerging liberal/illiberal rules of sexual behaviour and rights. It has a highly charismatic leader in David Jay the founder of AVEN and ipso facto figurehead for the entire asexual activist movement; in Chapter Six I illustrate that charisma. My participants consistently spoke of him as someone special to be deferred
to while contrarily discussing the impact of accrued traditions, rules and bureaucracies. Asexual activism, directly through its own antecedence and indirectly through its alignment with the wider Pride movements, is now implicated in the crisis of legitimation which is affecting Western liberal democracy and identity politics. The NSM paradigm remains important because it offers social movement theorists a set of productive dialogues to engage: how they come to view emerging social movements; how and why they judge the actions of social actors involved, and, what that reveals about contemporary Western society and its patterns of cyclical crisis, stability and leadership.

I have chosen to discuss Alberto Melucci separately from other writers and theorists associated with the NSM paradigm because his focus is quite different although he is associated with it, and wrote about emerging movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s including women’s movements and gay rights movements (1980). Melucci is concerned with how the term ‘new’ can re-embed traditional categories of social protest and analysis, and that misrepresent the kinds of actions in which emerging movements engage. Melucci rejects rational modernity and its preoccupation with state politics; social movement analysis which he views only “register (1996:6)” categories of protest which are already deemed acceptable. As I have discussed, social movement analysis has been characterised by an emphasis on rational collective behaviours with less attention to identity. Melucci argues for a post-modern politics and analysis, and emphasising other aspects of social protest then the traditional state-centred paradigm. He has focused on collective identity, and how it is constructed discursively through networks, practices and cultural signification to both support and resist traditional forms of political engagement.

Melucci’s key text *Nomads of the Present* (1989: 34-35) focuses on the discursively interactive and negotiated characteristics of collective identity:

> Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientation of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place. The process of constructing, maintaining, and altering a collective identity provides the basis for actors to shape their expectations and calculate the costs and benefits of their action... Collective identity is thus a process in which actors produce the common cognitive frameworks that enable them to assess their environment and to calculate the costs and benefits of their action. The definitions which they formulate are in part the result of negotiated interactions and relationships of influence and impact the fruit of emotional recognition.

Melucci views collective identity as something that develops over time when people realise they share common goals and begin to work together. Collective identity is not simply the sum of each
group members’ individual identities, nor is it the sum of each group members’ behaviours. It is the representation that emerges through negotiation and renegotiation of their interactions, and that has a specific socio-cultural context and meaning. He identifies three stages necessary in the development of a collective identity: a cognitive framework involving goals, means and environment; the triggering of an active relationship, and, the recognition that there is an emotional investment between the participants.

Melucci’s work is of significance to my research in Chapter Six, where I consider Pride events and the collective identities they enable. I illustrate collective identity can appear temporary and ephemeral, and at the same time it can be contrarily powerful and impactful. Melucci offers a set of discursive tools to consider why this might be so; particularly, he emphasises the significance of emotional investment in collective identity and social movements. Although his work is foundational to the NSM paradigm, Melucci’s relationship to it and to social movement analysis in general is complex. He has stated that a “social movement is an object created by analysis; it does not coincide with the empirical forms of collective action,” (1981: 173). Melucci is not denying the ontological existence of social movements nor the epistemological usefulness of the term, and he himself has used it. He is questioning modernist and late-modernist social movement analysis of collective action which hide an inherent bias toward traditional categories of collective behaviour and collective identity in their models. He argues that the impetus of post-modern collective action and analysis should be to reveal what was hidden, “rendering power visible (1989: 76),” revealing and destabilising rational power as socially constructed rather than a natural progressive consequence of political action.

He argues that in this way power itself is often shown to be highly irrational, and its faultlines are revealed. This is of importance to my research because I am concerned with how traditional categories of collective sexual and gender identity impact on how I analyse my participants, and the extent to which asexual activism as a collective identity destabilises traditional codes of sexual conduct and behaviour. I want to consider the measure to which it is creating its own rationales of sexual conduct and behaviour. At the same time, I have misgivings concerning Melucci’s post-modernism where collective action is a nomadic, networked identity that only comes together as circumstance requires. The difficulty with such a post-modern approach to collective identity is that it may enable us to deconstruct collective identity, but it is unclear what it enables us to construct in its place? Melucci shows how emotional investment is significant in constructing collective identity, but not why it is meaningful in triggering and maintaining it; the moral dimension of emotion is absent. Like the Frame Theory of Benford, Snow and Hunt (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Snow et al, 1992; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994) with which he has similarities, his emphasis is on process. He stresses the empirical form of collective action, though he is less
concerned to illustrate this. Like frame analysis in social movement analysis, there is little sense in Nomads of the Present of the interpretative, dramaturgical and signifying analysis of empirical data itself that might account for why collective identity is emotionally meaningful. I have no dispute with his caution that social movement theorists have been overly optimistic in their framing of some social movements. It is important to account for why temporary homes, and temporary shelters, hold out such hope of social transformation.

Melucci argues that collective cultural identity can render power visible. My research illustrates how the opposite may be true; collective cultural identity may induce a form of invisibility that aids power. In 1975, the musical *A Chorus Line* opened on Broadway (Hamlisch, 1975). The plot was concerned with Broadway dancers, the nomadic ‘gypsies’, who move from show to show auditioning for parts. In the musical, 19 dancers audition for a chorus line. They do this by reflecting on their individual stories to a powerful unseen director as their audience. The stories reflect not only their personal biographies, but contemporary American socio-politics on class, gender roles, homophobia, education, et cetera. The framing is that it is not just talent, but personal narrative and how it is commodified that matters. At the end of the musical all 19 dancers, those that have successfully auditioned and those that have been cut, re-emerge to perform the finale ‘One’:

“One,” the finale, is Bennett’s masterpiece of style and irony. It begins with an individual bow for each of the nineteen characters, their hodgepodge rehearsal clothes replaced by identical spangled gold costumes. As each dancer joins the group, it is suddenly difficult to distinguish one from the other. Each character who was an individual to the audience is now an anonymous member of an ensemble.

(Mckay, 1998)

Influenced by Melucci, in Chapter Six my research seeks to consider the ‘chorus lines’ of collective activist identities, and what they render visible and invisible.

2.3.5 Passionate Politics: ACT UP.

Jasper (2008) emphasises the importance of emotions, in social protest and its analysis, where this has been lacking in earlier social movement research and analysis. Through his ethnographic research of the Animal Rights Crusade and Anti-Nuclear Campaigns, he emphasises the moral significance of emotionally engaged social protest (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Jasper and Poulsen,
1995). He critiques the structural bias towards Rational Choice Theory in Political Process Theory, and how that structural bias remains as a cognitive bias in subsequent models through a predilection for process (Jasper, 1998, 2004; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, 2004; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Jasper is not discounting the significance of structural factors; he is challenging the dichotomy which has grown up in the field of Social Movement Theory which sees culture and structure as intrinsically separate and to be treated as such. He notes “culture... should not be contrasted with structural factors because it is fused with them,” (2008, xi). In practice ‘cultural’ movements are often directly concerned with fighting the state (Polletta, 1997), while ‘political’ movements depend on their cultural signification for success (Buechler, 2000). Jasper (2008: 67) talks about four dimensions of social protest where, “nothing comes first:” resources, strategy, biography and culture. Social movements are complex, and the role of the social movement theorist is commensurately complex engaging with differing paradigms that account for framing and social construction, identity claims, culture and organisation, political processes, et cetera.

Unlike Mellucci, Jasper (2008) is not willing to dismiss the moderating and legitimising claims of traditional Social Movement Theory, but he is concerned social movement theorists must emphasise the artfulness of social protest. Rather than reducing social movement actors to objects of study for one paradigm, social movement analysts should remain cognisant that they are dealing with human beings who have agency. He considers how and why, once they become engaged in social movements, activists as actors become actively and self reflexively involved in the drama of it on many levels. They shift scripts as needs must between strategies and tactics for intervention, dealing with crises, establishing frames to get their message across, and, developing a collective identity. All of this is part of the political culture and cultural drama of protest and underpinning this is the moral dimension of emotion. It is not merely rational self-interest, it is social movement actors’ interrelated feelings and beliefs that they are doing the right thing.

Echoing Bourdieu (1984) on habitus, Jasper (2008: 237) speaks of how different groups of activists within the same movement can have different “tastes in tactics” because of this. He considers the ways in which culture and biography, and the differing personal capitals which accrue to them, can affect protesters’ predispositions so that strategic habitus changes from one set of activists or activist to another. How and why this often dramatically changes the meaning of protest by shifting what is emotionally and morally framed. In Chapter Six, I illustrate these changes in strategic habitus in my field research. Jasper (2008) notes that moral emotion is a specific combination of affect and reaction. It usually begins with something we feel personally because of our personal biographies, which involve their own scripts, but its political expression is a dramaturgical, socio-cultural construction. Edited with Goodwin and Polletta (2009), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social*
Movements places moral emotion at the centre of contentious politics. They argue all social movements are contentious because all social movement actors contend to achieve their moral aims in a variety of ways. These moral aims are always culturally contextual and distinguished by the presentation of the individual activist self and collective activist identity through dramaturgical moral emotive work.

Gould, one of the contributors to Passionate Politics, has written about the significance of emotional habitus in one of the critical sexual and gender social movements of the last 30 years in Western culture. In Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS, Gould (2009) writes about the moral emotion work of movements. She writes about how a shifting emotional habitus amongst many gay men, from resignation to rage, led to the emergence of early direct-action HIV/AIDS protest. Epstein (1996, 2008) and Patton (1986, 1990, 2005) write about how early HIV/AIDS activism would transform gay and lesbian activism in Western culture, and they write about how this would transform the perception of white gay men, with impact for other sexual and gender minority populations. I consider ACT UP and early HIV/AIDS activism throughout this literature review because, echoing Shepard (2002), I have observed in my field research it’s enduring legacy and impact. In Chapter Four I show how early HIV/AIDS activism and research helped trigger the emergence of asexual activism, and in Chapter Five I reflect ways in which the framing of early HIV/AIDS activism impacts upon the alignment between contemporary Pride movement and an emerging asexual movement. For example, interview participants talk about “gay men coming first because they have suffered more,” while others were keen to challenge this. In Chapter Six I illustrate contemporary Pride events maintained by mythic scripts that flow from earlier HIV/AIDS activism, and the persistence of privileged categories of implied oppression and suffering, though these may bear little relation to contemporary/current life experiences.

I want to pause and step back to consider early HIV/AIDS activism and ACT UP as a critical case of a sexual and gender movement; what was significant, why it has remained significant, and how we can apply it to contemporary sexual and gender movements. Part of the popular framed mythos which has grown up around the early days of ACT UP has been the mythic narrative of a ‘Rise and a Fall and a Final Rescued Triumph’ (France, 2016). This tells a story of dying men and their compatriots who contended with oppressive homophobic church institutions, state bureaucracies and mainstream public opinions, and of indifferent pharmaceutical industries concerned only with their own profits. It frames a movement and activists torn apart and burnt out by their efforts and suffering, only to see their efforts and campaigns rewarded at that moment by the arrival of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), and medication that would transform the lives and life expectancy of many people living with HIV. This popular mythos is resonant (Benford and Snow, 1988, 1992), and it
is part of the frame transformation that occurred in public opinion in Western society at the time concerning white gay men. The shift in the Overton Window (Lehman, 2014) from derided hedonists to suffering campaigners who died because of an illness, and for their sexual politics. I have no desire to challenge that narrative, though inevitably it is a selective and partial framing of events (Gould, 2009). Following Jasper, I am interested in how approaches, insights and paradigms from across the field of Social Movement Theory might gainfully be applied to contextualise and enrich it, and why the models of protest and collective identity so analysed still have relevance for contemporary movements.

Influenced by both Jasper and Bourdieu, Deborah Gould (2009) notes that highly-charged moralistic emotional habitus was a pivotal triggering factor, and part of the ongoing contentious repertoire of ACT UP where scripted framed emotion encouraged collective solidarity. This was notable in ACT UP founder Larry Kramer’s (1989: 173) apocalyptic framed statements which borrowed heavily from Holocaust imagery, i.e. “New York is our Auschwitz.” As anyone who has read his pre-AIDS novel *Faggots* (2007) will be aware, Kramer’s own sexual politics were sex-negative, with its biting dogmatic condemnation of what he considers to be the hedonistic effects of 1970s gay male subcultural promiscuity. Though it will be critiqued (Bolton, 1992; Pendleton and Goldschmidt, 1988; LeJacq, 2011) this dogmatism became a strength as it enabled him to assume the role of the charismatic leader who offered certainty at a time of crisis (Habermas, 1975; Weber, 1978). This moral certainty enabled people to set aside differences in coalition and pool resources: gay men and lesbians; experts and non-experts; experienced activists and newcomers (Schulman, 1994; Epstein, 1996; Schulman and Hubbard, 2009; Gould, 2011; France, 2016). Although ACT UP often acted in the white heat of rage (Gould, 2009), they were always acting artfully (Jasper, 2008), and ACT UP actions were never an irrational mob or a mass in the Chicago School sense (Park and Burgess, 1921; Blumer, 1969). For example, the media zaps (Shephard, 2002: 180) for which ACT UP were infamous were always strategic and indicative of agency, with activists barricading the doors of pharmaceutical companies, while large numbers stood outside chanting accusations in front of waiting film cameras who had been tipped off. These are in the historic tradition of WUNC repertoires that Charles Tilly discusses (1995, 2004, 2007, 2008), and while zaps were occurring other ACT UP members would be engaged in parallel backroom boardroom discussions with the pharmaceutical companies they were zapping (Epstein, 1996). In this, the more rational institutionally-centred interventions (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003) fused with the publicly emotive and morally framed cultural protests (Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009). A crucial frame transformation that occurred was changing the protocols for HIV patient involvement
in medical trials; indeed, how all patient involvement in medical care in Western health systems would evolve (Patton, 2005; Epstein, 1996, 2008).

In its popular mythos, ACT UP would fit Tarrow’s (1994, 3-4) definition of a social movement, as it frames activists fighting elite authority who are condemning them to death. ACT UP in its first incarnation, its period of greatest influence and impact, was primarily made up of two groups who themselves were elite populations: young gay men who had been to elite universities, and educated lesbian activists from the 1970s and early 1980s (Gould, 2009). Both groups drew on significant educational, social and cultural capitals in their activism, as the moral dimension rage. Sexual and gendered activists often appear to have significant capitals to draw on, yet they feel adversely affected by others. ACT UP was impacted by and responding to a crisis in Western society, but it is mindful to remain aware that models of social protest that consider crisis as a fulcrum for emerging protest and movements, and for social transformation at key points in Western history, often remain embedded in traditional concepts of oppression, behaviour and identity (Castells, 1978, 1983; Touraine, 1983; 1985; Touraine, Wieviorka and Dubet, 1987; Habermas, 1975, 1984, 1987).

In considering ACT UP as a critical case, how and why it offers insights for my research on current movements, three points seem salient. ACT UP was a mixture of light and shade (Touraine, 1981, 1983), where its framed narratives focused on challenging oppression, but its collective culture as it evolved perpetuated and maintained oppressive hierarchies that have flowed into the contemporary Pride narrative. ACT UP is often framed as an anarchistic and egalitarian collective of tumbledown protesters, but there were ipso facto leaders and evolving established structures which relied on specific capitals, and these were often damaging and resented. A rage against oppression was part of the mythic framework of ACT UP; challenging oppression is part of the emotive moral framework of most if not all social movement activism. A rage against oppression alone is an inadequate concept to assess the ongoing impact of ACT UP and early HIV/AIDS activism.

As Gould (2009) notes, the rage that drove ACT UP tore it apart as it was unsustainable for more than a brief period. This is often framed in a tragic or melancholic fashion and Gould is melancholic over the acrimonious breakup of the first incarnation of ACT UP. I will return to melancholia in the section focused on Sexuality & Gender Studies and the Pride narrative. The classic work in Social Movement Theory tells us to be mindful that social movements, including sexual and gender social movements, may have a natural lifespan (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978). They exist for a purpose and may be doomed or cyclically programmed to decline. The NSM paradigms and Melucci’s (1980, 1981, 1989) work tells us that modern collective identities of protest are intense but very difficult to hold onto. In their moderation of movements, social movement theorists often
focus on formation and disintegration, the intense charismatic light of emergence and the equally intense cataclysmic shade of decline, rather than on what was productively achieved in between.

2.4 Telling Stories of Pride and Pleasure: Gender and Sex.

2.4.1 Sexual and Gender Narrative and Storytelling.

I begin with two key figures in British Sexuality & Gender Studies, Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks, who have been significant to my understanding of LGBT+ stories and story making, and I also begin with them because both are intensely political gay academics. They were members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) – a coalition of gay and lesbian activists first in North America and then in Britain (Gay Left Collective, 1980, 2016). The GLF was informed by Freudo-Marxism on sexual and gender politics, but was also a reaction to it through their own claims of newness. This is reflected in Plummer’s and Weeks’ work, where they comment on LGBT+ politics, and the Pride narrative in its various incarnations, but also the contribution that Symbolic-Interactionism and Social-Constructionism has made as praxis to that evolving dialectic. That contribution, its praxis on sexual and gender narrative and storytelling, is a focus of this section to which I will be returning as a point of reference.

In *Telling Sexual Stories* (1994), using a symbolic-interactionist approach, Ken Plummer echoes Marcuse (2013, 2015) concerning commodification in contemporary society, but to different ends. For Plummer, sexual and gender activist identity is commodified because we need an audience as consumers for the stories we construct to have symbolic and political value. The issue is to construct the best stories we can to affect the best result. This is of relevance to my research of both the Pride narrative and asexual activists’ relationship to it, and I will illustrate in Chapter Six how the Pride narrative is constantly being framed and reframed, commodified and re-commodified, to maximise its symbolic and political impact with its various audiences. I will consider in Chapter Five how and why asexual activists are part of this iterative, performative and dramaturgical process. Plummer offers his beliefs concerning the symbolic and political importance of sexual stories more forcefully in *Intimate Citizenship* (2003), where he argues for a politics of storytelling that is aware what was once considered part of the private sphere (sexual and gender identity) is increasing a significant narrative in the public sphere. In Chapter Six, I illustrate the increasingly public and visible nature of Pride and Pride citizenship in Western society, and in Chapter Five I consider how asexual activists view the consequences of Pride citizenship and membership. Now moving towards a critical-humanism with *Cosmopolitan Sexualities* (2015), Plummer contends that the playful post-modern plurality of sexual and gender narratives offers us hope in their diversity, rather than offering
pessimism such as Marcuse prophesied. A concern of my data chapters is to consider whether Plummer’s optimism in pluralistic diversity is evidenced. I illustrate faultlines in alignment between: the multiplicity of framed narratives offered by the Pride continuum, the core mythic frames which have evolved in the Pride narrative, and, asexual activist narratives which are already establishing their own core frames.

Weeks is concerned with power and revolution, and how revolution can be made a gay revolution. Both *Sexuality and Its Discontents* (2002) and *Gay Left* (2016) (the short run gay Marxist magazine he was a founding editor of) seek to align gay politics with Marxism, and with a radical sexual pluralism. In *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, he takes issue with what he views as Freudo-Marxism’s (Robinson, 1969) focus on bio-determinist libido, drive and desire. He seeks to reconcile Foucault with Marxism by exploring Foucault’s (1998: 153) analysis of how it is the discursive practices surrounding drives which organise and incite the historical body. For Weeks, “This implies a new centrality for the order of meaning, of social definition – and of language,” (2002: 177). Weeks (2002: 178) is giving social construction an ideological context here:

...struggles around sexuality are, therefore, struggles over meaning... meanings which call on the resources of the body and the flux of desire, but are not dictated by them.

Social construction is more than a way of analysing sexuality, it is a revolutionary act, though whether that makes it a revolutionary Marxist act is debatable. Weeks is convincing at deconstructing the bio-determinist arguments of Freudo-Marxists as he views them, and at arguing the historical centrality of the discourse of power to sexuality. Whether Freudo-Marxism was always innately bio-determinist, and whether the disparate thoughts of Freud (2015), Reich (1962,1970) and Marcuse (2013,2015) on sexual citizenship can be reduced to biological processes and drives is moot.

By *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (2007), the radical sexual pluralism of his earlier work has been ameliorated to a more liberal pluralism. Weeks’ thinking here has transitioned to be in line with that of other authors on the benefits of late-modern liberalisation in Western society: Giddens (1994, 1998), Beck (1992) and Bauman (1997,2000). Although there have been painful sacrifices and there are still incredible risks, for Weeks the discourse of sexual and gender tolerance in neo-liberal capitalism is no longer the enemy as it benefits the clear majority of LGBT+ people. As he acknowledged in his preface (2007: xi) the title of *The World We Have Won* is a play on the title of a book by Laslett *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age* (1965). In contradictory and contrary way, Weeks is arguing for the impact of mythic narratives of Pride, and why they should be dismissed in favour of his (more factual) narrative.
Laslett sought to challenge then popular activist and academic assumptions about pre-industrial Britain; particularly, Marxist assumptions about pre-industrial Britain. Laslett criticised how these constructed a nostalgic story (1965: 232) of loss around industrialisation, and is working with two senses of ‘loss’. With echoes of Touraine (1981, 1983), Laslett cautions against Historical-Materialism’s overemphasis on both light and shade in constructed histories of loss. His concern is our contemporary sense of loss (1965: 237):

In tending to look backwards in this way, in diagnosing the difficulties as an outcome of something which is indeed being lost to our society, those concerned with social welfare are suffering from a false understanding of ourselves and time... Historical knowledge is knowledge to do with ourselves, now.

Laslett’s insight was that in constructing narratives of loss, in constructing any powerful framed narrative of identity, we run the risk of losing (possibly better) versions of ourselves. This was particularly so for historical-materialistic interpretations of Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan society, because they often relied on highly dramatised representations of those societies at face value. Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan political and artistic culture was characteristically dramaturgical (Greenblatt, 2012), and it fashioned and refashioned itself through discourses and practices that can seem close and distant to our own time: Shakespeare, the Virgin Queen, the Glorious Reign and the First Elizabethan Age, et cetera. Laslett sought to address the misconceptions that had built up around these persistent cultural framings by making use of statistical analysis to consider the social history of Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan life. For example, he overturned common beliefs that, unlike Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 2012), women did not usually marry at 14. They married at a similar age to today. This was significant because nuclear families, linked to the Juliet Syndrome, were thought to be a consequence of industrialisation. Factually, nuclear families predated industrialisation and were a likely cause hastening it (Laslett, 1965).

Weeks (2007: ix) draws on Laslett, not to critique Historical-Materialism or Marxist analysis, but to challenge what he views as “nostalgia for a more settled and ordered moral culture then we apparently have today.” Using Laslett’s model of statistical analysis, he seeks to construct an account sheet of wins and losses to show that things have got better for LGBT+ communities in Britain over the preceding 60 years. He challenges what he sees as a series of nostalgic myths (2007:7): the “progressive myth” which only looks nostalgically to change in the future without recognising what has been achieved to bring us to our present circumstances; the “declinist myth” used by moral conservatives to reimagine and celebrate a nostalgic lost history in comparison to an unwanted present, and, the “continuist myth” linked to particular forms of feminism and queer scholarship who are frozen in the present, and nostalgically privileging their own sense of theory.
Weeks is seeking to challenge what he views as overly theoretical models of social change and social stasis which (2007:7):

occlude what seems to me to be the inevitable reality: that the world we have won has made possible ways of life that represent an advance not a decline in human relationships, and that have broken through coils of power to enhance individual economy, freedom of choice and more egalitarian patterns of relationships.

Plummer and Weeks, as elder statesmen of British LGBT+ politics and academia, represent what might be termed the ‘celebrationist’ myth in Western LGBT+ politics. In relation to the Gay Revolution (Faderman, 2015) the war is largely won with only skirmishes left, and LGBT+ and Q lives are mostly better. This myth frames the core Pride narrative of intimate citizenship articulated by Plummer (1994, 2003). We have suffered, survived, surpassed, and we deserve our place at the table (Bawer, 2008), and our right to be heard and seen because of our contribution. In large part, our contribution has been to construct new forms of pluralist sexual and gender citizenship in the face of adversity (Weeks, 2002, 2007; Faderman, 2015; Plummer, 2015). Current reality, particularly recent political events in America and Europe, have cast the light of this celebrationist myth into shade. It nevertheless remains an impactful mythic narrative for LGBT+ and Q populations including asexual activists, and a focus of my data chapters.

I use the term ‘myth’ here as Barthes (Barthes, 1977, 1993) considered it, in the decorative display of what goes-without-saying, to reflect how mythic narratives construct their stories as symbolically and materially timeless and universal. This is not to disparage Plummer, Weeks and others’ writing, though Weeks is disparaging of what he views as the nostalgic myths of others. Another reading would be to say that The World We Have Won is characterised by a melancholic, nostalgic moralism of its own, and that constructs its own narrational mythos. Crimp (2004) has written about how the emotional habitus of mainstream LGBT+ politics changed in Western culture in the mid-1990s, and the emotional moral rage characterised and framed by early HIV/AIDS activism was replaced by a melancholic, celebratory nostalgia for what was won and what had been lost (Crimp, 2004; Gould, 2009). Crimp is concerned to consider the impact this melancholic habitus now has on LGBT+ and Q politics, social protest and activists, and how it impacted upon LGBT+ academics and writers, and their contribution to the evolving, emerging Pride narrative after the early onslaught of HIV/AIDS.

Crimp (2004:7-9) distinguishes this melancholic habitus from psychological melancholy and depression, as he views it as a contradictory denial of loss which gives melancholic habitus its contrary moral dimension. He argues that to be viewed as responsible adult citizens in contemporary Western society, and to have a place at the table (Bawer, 2008), mainstream LGBT+ political
activists, groups and individuals must present themselves as living in a world which has got better. At the same time, Western sexual and gender citizenship draws its affective, signifying impact from its ongoing dialectic of oppression, suffering, loss and death (Bersani, 1987; Nunokawa, 1991; Edelman, 2004). Between celebration and mourning, the presentation of self this induces is fraught, and it induces melancholia. As I illustrate in my field research of Pride events, this is linked to Berlant’s (2011:1-3) concept of “cruel optimism.” This is relational attachment where people pursue the fantasy (the mythos) of “the good life,” even though it is an obstacle to their flourishing, and by pursuing it they may maintain or increase their own sense of inequality or oppression.

As I illustrate in Chapter Six, this relation between nostalgic melancholia and cruel optimism can only be resolved, never entirely satisfactorily and fractiously, through acts which are both celebrations and memorialisations. LGBT+ and Q populations must celebrate their successes, whether they are won or not, and they must at the same time mourn their losses, whether it is the time for grief or not. These are not necessarily antagonistic, though they frequently are. What they are also is intensely dramaturgical, because celebratory memorialisation is. Crimp’s argument is that the contemporary Pride narrative is not merely about articulating an ever-increasing optimistic plurality of sexual and gendered identities, as Plummer (2015) would advocate, and nor can it be reduced to a balance sheet of wins and losses (Weeks, 2007). Both are important material factors in its mythic symbolism and should not be discounted, but he argues that mainstream LGBT+ and Q politics, the contemporary Pride narrative, is framed around acts of moral celebratory memorialisation. These establish LGBT+ and Q citizenship within the Pride continuum, and wider citizenship for in the public domain. This is done by creating meaningful linkages between signifying practices of public celebration and of public mourning.

Celebratory memorialisation, and its interpretative analysis, is a focus of Chapter Six. Crimp’s work is important to my research because he argues that, in the current climate of sexual and gender politics, it is not enough to speak about your sexual and gender identity, and to make it visible. It is not enough to speak about your sense of oppression or liberation, because you must publicly engage in combined acts of celebration and mourning. You must speak of your losses while contradictorily denying them through celebration, in ways that are meaningful to you, other LGBT+ and Q citizens, and the wider public. Otherwise, you will not be included in the “we” who have won (Weeks, 2007). Berlant’s (2011) argument takes this one stage further, to link an optimist myth of The Good Life as one of the core cultural myths of contemporary Western society. She argues this myth is a harmful fantasy for many individuals and communities, and pursuing it can maintain or increase one sense of inequality. For those who manage to move up the ladder, the Sisyphean impetus of the myth may
mean that they can never entirely celebrate where they have arrived or mourn where they left, and it induces melancholia.

It is important to be cautious about Weeks’ (2007) caution concerning myths, and Laslett’s caution that false understanding of the past and present can be remedied through statistical data. Symbolic-Interactionism and Social-Constructionism are theoretical praxes which engage in telling their own commodified stories, and when we look at data as directly confirming true or false facts we run the risk of overlooking myth and the mythopoetic. The Juliet Syndrome may tell us nothing directly about pre-industrial and post-industrial nuclear families in Britain, but it does tell us something about the cultural representation of gender and sublimation, innocence and repression, and, virginity and chastity. How these were being culturally constructed and regulated in the early-modern British social mind, and how that would carry forward to our own period. It suggests to us how the mythopoetic symbolism of chastity, virginity and innocence embedded itself into the British cultural psyche. This is of direct interest for my research, where knowledge of asexuality and asexual activism, and its antecedence and linkages to historical celibacy, is often a matter of inference (Kahan, 2013), and of deduction from what has been presented to what has not been presented. I expand on this in my methodological chapter; to show that activism and its performances can be analytically approached as an inferred interpretative act.

If not, the world that remains lost and yet to win is the world that remains cloaked and overlooked. Dramaturgical presentation can be an illusion, a chorus line of framed myths that obscures that world from our view (Brecht, 1964) or, if we are onstage, clouds the rest of the world from our thoughts. If we understand the rules, dramaturgy and its mythic readings can suggest how we draw back the curtain (Burke, 1966, 1968, 1985; Goffman, 1971, 1974) to step onto the stage and engage reflexively with other actors (Boal, 2008).

2.4.2 Inclusive and Exclusive Sexual and Gender Storytelling.

There are several influential writers that I read who tell stories of sexual and gender identities and politics: Boswell (1980), Foucault (1998), Katz (1976, 1995), D’Emilio (2012), Russo (1987), Altman (1982), Shilts (1982, 1987), Kramer (1989) and Weeks (2007) amongst others. In doing so, they give voice to a marginalised sexual minority with an (ongoing) history of oppression and loss. They also construct a narrative which gives voice to white middle-class, cosmopolitan homosexual men, with cosmopolitan lesbian women as their sometime fellow travellers, to tell a story of their lives and politics in the city (D’Emilio, 2012). Within wider critiques of whiteness this has been challenged: for failing to address often unconscious categories of white privilege (McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004); for
how the homogenisation of whiteness and white communities as equally oppressed perpetuates the victimisation of marginalised white community members (Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001); for consciously or unconsciously overlooking the experiences and narratives of other LGBT+ and Q community members in constructing their accounts (Goldstein, 1984), and for simply excluding these narratives (Gluckman and Reed, 1997).

This can be viewed as damning condemnation, or it can be viewed as an essential act of moderatorship. Over time other voices become clearer, academic and/or activist, adding to the evolving dialectic; women of colour (Lorde, 1984), working-class lesbians (Allison, 1994) and gay men of colour (Hemphill and Bean, 1991), for example. Gay male academics and activists may come to reassess their point of view, which was often never as blinkered as initially presumed. D’Emilio (1995, 2003) has done significant research combining his earlier work on cosmopolitan, gay sexual politics with a reassessment of the life of the major civil rights activist, and closeted homosexual, Bayard Rustin. In doing so, he opened the Pride narrative to the intersectionality of race and sexual politics at a critical juncture in American history. This opening up of the Pride narrative to other voices and reassessment then becomes subject itself to further critique and moderatorship. To further claims for inclusion such as those I research, which I think is beneficial and productive if challenging and contentious. What I think is problematic, in a manner analogous to what critical race theorists critique as ‘colour-blindness’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003, 2006), is when claims for inclusion become downplayed or overlooked because they are already framed as included within the Pride narrative. When LGBT+ and Q participants, particularly emerging groups or individuals in aligning with it, feel that they are encouraged to endorse it rather than moderate its evolving dialectic. The current dialectic may be sufficiently robust to support this endorsement, but it is worth being mindful of how blinkered and marginalising this ‘plurality-blindness’ can be. I want to consider a recent work by Faderman (2015), *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, to clarify my thinking.

Faderman is a renowned, lesbian historian whose work reveals much about American lesbian history that been hidden, particularly white working-class lesbian history (1985, 1991, 2006). She has added to the evolving dialect of the Pride narrative, by giving voice to that which was previously excluded. Faderman’s *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* has been lauded in America as one of the most authoritative accounts of the development of the LGBT+ struggle in American history (Yoshino, 2015). In Touraine’s (1981, 1983) terms, Faderman focuses on the light, the progress that has been made, rather than the shade. Faderman has been quite specific that she chose the title *The Gay Revolution* to be inclusive because “gay is still most widely understood as an umbrella term for a diverse community,” (Faderman cited by De Stafano, 2015). However, her interviews are nearly
entirely with white lesbians and white gay men, and only one black lesbian. Her archival evidence barely refers to the importance of key non-white lesbian and gay social movement actors; Audre Lorde and Baynard Ruskin are mentioned in passing. The historical significance of trans* variant social movement actors or movements feel downplayed or forgotten. *The Gay Revolution* does address the omission of white lesbians from previous storytelling of the gay struggle in America by white gay men, but by claiming to be inclusive it perpetuates an analogous form of marginalisation. As the title suggests, there is the same sense of celebratory memorialisation as Weeks' (2007) *The World That We Have Won*. Faderman utilises historical data, but she is constructing a drama that relies on and demands that its modern audiences respond to its emotive narrative. There is nothing disingenuous in this, but it is mindful to consider that present sexual and gendered history, and audiences, are also being constructed and reconstructed.

D’Emilio has written movingly about the conflict in opening up Baynard Ruskin’s private, closeted sexual history to public scrutiny (1995, 2003). D’Emilio justifies this, rightly I think, because Ruskin was a significant public figure whose historical racialised sexuality opens an otherwise silent period of LGBT+ political and social history, and it casts light on our contemporary presence as an audience. It enables us to understand how our own communities were and are silenced, but also where we were and are complicit in practices of silencing. Faderman (2015) and Weeks (2007) illustrate that, even as we seek to memorialise LGBT+ and Q history, and to give a voice to what had been won and lost, there are ongoing issues. This celebratory memorialisation (Crimp, 2004) impacts upon who is present and not present in the chorus lines, and who is present and not present in the audience. Plummer (2015) optimistically argues that the LGBT+ and Q table (Bawer, 2008) has become so broad that there is a playful place for all plural identities at it. A focus of my research is to consider whether that is cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), and I find myself more in agreement with Plummer’s previous position (1994) that there are some sexual and gender identities and stories that cannot be commodified or told for most audiences, including the mainstream Pride continuum. Plummer gives the example of paedophilia and linked social movements; in some ways, this is a clear and obvious example, and an obvious example to emotionally discount. In my data chapters, I illustrate that the reality is far more complex. That the pluralism of the LGBT+ and Q table, the admission for Pride citizenship past and present, is more boundried then to exclude only paedophilia and/or related identities.

2.4.3 The Default Model.

What this suggests in both *The World We Have Won* (Weeks, 2007) and *The Gay Revolution* (Faderman, 2014) is that, however unconsciously in the discourse of ‘it’s gotten better’, white cis-
gendered educated and middle-class lesbian and gay sexuality is being privileged as the default model for LGBT+ and Q movements. There has been much criticism of Dan Savage’s “It gets better,” YouTube campaign for this reason (Majkowski, 2011; Savage and Miller, 2011; Goltz, 2013). This practice of building and moderating default settings, norms, into Western sexual and gender dialectic has been ongoing. Sometimes a non-norm population is excluded and held up to scorn, and sometimes included and rendered invisible by being marginalised. Sometimes the non-norm is attacked, and sometimes it is idealised to attack to attack other norms of Western culture.

Malinowski’s (1968) *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* and Mead’s (1954) *Coming of Age in Samoa* are classics of early island anthropological field research, and they inform my ethnographic approach. Reading them, it is clear that both writers were as concerned with comparing and critiquing aspects of their own culture as with describing island cultures; Malinowski with the Oedipal complex, and Mead with the sexual development of teenage American girls. That does not impact upon them as anthropological texts, but it does impact upon my understanding of the sexual and gender stories they were framing. This is important for me as an asexual researcher because Malinowski and Mead added to the Western discourse of innocence, repression, sublimation and hyper-sexualisation. With Mead this is also significant because D’Emilio’s (1995, 2003) comments as to Baynard Ruskin apply, that our increasing awareness of what was private sexual history impacts upon the public academic persona (Bateson, 1986; Mead, 2006). That Mead, who was a highly political public academic (Mead and Baldwin, 1971) had romantic friendships with other women which she did not give public voice is significant. In *Coming of Age*, she was involved in critiquing and constructing an idealised default norm that that she herself was cruelly constrained by (Berlant, 2011).

Path-breaking work by Kinsey et al (1948, 1953), and Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970), did much to break down oppressive social conventions regarding sexual and gender identities and responses. Echoing Hirschfeld’s (1948) earlier work, and much of which is lost to us, Kinsey established that sexual orientations and behaviours more fluid than had previously been thought. Masters and Johnson helped dispel myths concerning orgasm, particularly female clitoral orgasm. In the process Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson, helped construct other norms which I illustrate have an ongoing impact on asexuality and its activism. Kinsey saw sexual orientation as more fluid, but his Kinsey Scale (1948: 639) was a rigid single axis running from total homosexuality to total heterosexuality with various bisexual orientations in between. Kinsey came across a number of proto-asexual respondents with “No socio-sexual contacts or reactions,” (1948: 639). As they did not meet the criteria for his Kinsey Scale he crossed them with an ‘X’ and put them in a separate category. His literally framed them as invisible, I illustrate a key concern for contemporary asexual activists, in the
data published. It would be 25 years before asexuality as a potential sexual orientation demographic would be considered through empirical research again (Nurius, 1983). Masters and Johnson have been critiqued for the way their research methodology, and its lab-based scientific setting, hid cultural assumptions about what were healthy normal sexual responses (Robinson, 1976; Hyde and Delamater, 2008; Lloyd, 2009).

2.4.4 Telling Sexual and Gender Stories: Sexual and Gendered Scripts.

Gagnon and Simon’s *Sexual Conduct* (1973) is the sociological work underpinning both Plummer’s and Weeks’ texts. Influenced by Berger and Luckman’s (1966) earlier work on the social construction of reality, it is the landmark text in the social-constructionist approach to the study of sexuality and gender. Using the metaphor of the sexual script, social-constructionists could claim to be free of Freud’s (1924, 171-180) dictum “anatomy is destiny.” Human sexuality, and sexual and gender behaviours, are considered to be a complex psychosocial outcome of diverse scripts, and are mostly learnt. These scripts operated on different levels: the cultural and historical, the interactive-social, and the physio-social. It is not that biology is discounted, nor should it be discounted, but neither should it be privileged.

Sexual Script Theory has been applied to many areas of sexual and gender identity-formation (Jackson, 1978; Wiederman, 2005; Escoffier, 2007). It has been particularly instructive in considering where scripts change as in the case of HIV/AIDS and gay white men, and where scripts are resistant to change (Laumann et al, 1994a, 1994b, 1999). For example, the persistent recurrence of heteronormative chastity discourses in the wake of HIV/AIDS has been productively analysed using the sexual script model (Epstein, 1993). I see my own work as broadly within the remit of Sexual Script Theory and Symbolic-Interactionism with which it is closely related, and adding to this field by considering how sexual and gender scripts concerning activist selves become embodied in framed dramaturgical performances. I gave as examples Malinowski, Mead, Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson, because I wanted to highlight one of the enduring sexual and gender scripts in Western culture; the script of the sexual and gender researcher. As Mellucci (1981: 173) notes, about social movement researchers, researchers create scripts as much as observe them, and this applies to Sexuality & Gender Studies as well.

I admire Plummer’s (1994, 2003, 2015) pluralistic and humanistic vision where he privileges the sexual and gender citizen’s right to tell their story, but he also privileges the sexual and gender researcher’s right to listen and record as a discerning audience, and listen neutrally to stories being told. Foucault (1977a, 1980, 2003) notes that that a discerning audience is bio-political, where we
are making judgements about the stories we hear, and the stories we help to make, that have life-and-death consequences. Butler (1990: 171-190) notes that we cannot just be the ultimate critics of sexual and gender identity watching a performance, as we are part of the performative cast, and a scripted rehearsal that is always ongoing and changing (1993: 95). I illustrate this as significant because, as Rose (1990) argues, scripts including sexual and gender scripts become self-governing through our rehearsal of them. For example, Nayak and Kehily (2013) in *Gender, Youth and Culture: Young Masculinities and Femininities*, show how gender is constantly being produced, consumed and performed in young people’s lives through its rehearsal. Rose is particularly concerned with neoliberalism and its governmentality, but I think the principle holds more generally. When Weeks (2007) speaks of *The World That We Have Won* I reflect that he might also have entitled it ‘The Erotic and Intimate Life That We Have Scripted to Our Governing Taste’.

2.4.5 The Symbolic and Scripted as ‘Face’.

Weeks is not a dramaturgist; one who views social interaction in terms of theatrical performance. Influenced by Laslett (1965), Weeks (2007) is concerned to present the social reconstruction of the erotic and intimate life, and giving voice to the ongoing Pride narrative through historical data. Similarly to Faderman (2015), he reconstructs this data into dramatic and mythic symbolic narrative. I illustrate ‘hard data’ is often marshalled by sexual and gender activists, and asexual activists as particularly fond of this data. This is not to discount it, but data which is presented as hard and factual, while clearly symbolically meaningful, is itself a form of scripting. I show this occurs throughout the Pride narrative, and its dialectical framing, where scientific data and discourse has become part of the sexual script, and a way of maintaining public face. Goffman (1971, 2017) used dramaturgical analysis to consider how people communicated with each other, and to maintain face. Goffman argues that social actors are constantly framing their back stories (their scripts) so that they can be coherently presented front of house to maintain this. He built on this in further texts; particularly, the dramaturgical concept of frame analysis (1974).

Goffman (1974) was concerned with how individuals, groups and society use conceptual frames to organise social experiences in meaningful ways. He used the metaphor of a picture frame to suggest a relational structure that unified and held symbolic content together. I use this metaphor in my dramaturgical description and analysis, as well as others that are suggested by my data and my research topics (chorus line). Echoing Goffman, I illustrate how the content, the hard data, is less important in social performance then that we use the correct frame, and it often a question of persistently and performatively replaying a frame repeatedly. Illustrated by asexual activists and others, I show sexual and gender activist scripts as highly framed and framing. Goffman’s (1963) own
work and the work of Becker (1963) showed minority sexual and gender scripts as associated with frames of shame and stigma. Weeks (2007) argues that for many in Western Europe, these shameful and stigmatised frames have transformed, while Crimp (2004) questions whether frames of celebration and memorialisation are inherently different-in-kind from shame and stigma?

Bourdieu (1984, 112) was influenced by Goffman, but focuses on the macroscale where Goffman focused on the microscale; one-on-one interaction and the total institution. Bourdieu (1984) considers the reproduction of power in society through cultural, social and symbolic capitals, and he offers an account of the meta-scripts through which societies regulate citizens at every level. Bourdieu’s focus was on social class with sexuality, gender and race as secondary, and he has been critiqued for this (Lovell, 2000). Lovell acknowledges the potential his work has for considering sexual and gender identity; particularly, habitus, capital and symbolic violence as embodied practices. In Chapter Five, I consider my participants’ habitus and capitals, as their activist scripting seeks to framed, and is framed through embodied presence and non-presence, within the field of Pride scripting, and I consider the symbolic violence of allosexuality and whiteness. Influenced by Bourdieu, Isaiah Green (2013) has edited a collection, Sexual Fields, which gathers together work by sociologists of sexuality and gender to consider how sexual desire and undesire is regulated and scripted by such macro-level fields.

2.5 Telling Asexual Stories: A Chorus Line.

At the most basic level, asexual activists are engaged in telling asexual activist stories (Plummer, 1994). My reading of relevant literatures, to ground within my field research and analysis, illustrates what they are doing is more complex. Asexual activists are constructing a movement in which they present their activist selves and their collective activist identities through highly emotive dramatic and dramaturgical framed scripts (Burke, 1966, 1968, 1985; Goffman, 1971, 1974; Gagnon and Simon, 1974). This is neither an arbitrary nor unique practice to asexual activism, as it draws on and aligns with an emotive historic Pride narrative which celebrates and memorialises, and has an expectation of the same from those who wish to have a place at the table (Crimp, 2004, Bawer, 2008). I illustrate this wider Pride narrative is moralistic in excluding, or overlooking, those who do not meet its criteria for inclusion, past and present (Weeks, 2007, Faderman, 2015).

This emotive, dramaturgical reading of asexual activism is in keeping with recent theoretical and empirical research in Social Movement Theory, which has challenged the long-standing privileging of rational choice (Jasper, 1998; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999). This emphasises emotive, symbolic, culturally dramatic and moral protest (Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009; Gould,
2009). Nevertheless, the historic traditions of Social Movement Theory offer a series of paradigms by which to consider: how social movements mobilise and organise (Tilly, 1978, 1995; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003); how they engage in historicised cycles of protest at different levels of structure (Tarrow and Tollefson), and how they frame their protest (Snow et al, 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Snow et al, 1992). One must be mindful not to over-privilege the analytical description of process; overlooking, ignoring, or otherwise failing to take account of the necessary interpretive analysis of human interaction. This is important because there is no theory of social movements which takes account of all aspects of contemporary social protest, and this applies forcefully to sexual and gender identity politics, and which is typically presumed not to meet the criteria set by Social Movement Theory as a scripted field of research. Rather, one draws on differing paradigmatic models to cover different stages and levels in the life-cycle of social protest contextually (Habermas, 1975, 1984, 1987; Castells, 1978, 1983; Melucci, 1980, 1981, 1988, 1989, 1996). If one overextends a model, in the act of moderatorship which is central to social movement analysis, one runs the risk of overemphasising that stage or level (Touraine, 1971, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1988).

Asexual Studies offers an asexual dimension, but it has been plagued by a series of debates concerning individuated definitionality; clinical and/or culturally subjective orientation (Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2012, 2015; Brotto et al, 2010) versus ideological and/or idealised individuality (Przybylo, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016; Cerankowski and Milks, 2010, 2014). Some of this is productive, and some of it seems reductive to me as it replays a historic series of debates concerning the libidinous and non-libidinous citizen. These concerns sexualisation, repression, sublimation and narcissistic consumption; yet strangely, except for the work of Hinderliter (2009), Fahs (2010), Kahan (2013) and Cuthbert (2017) there is little or no reference to those debates or the movements and moments that they involved. Contemporary asexuality and asexual activism is often framed as an invisible orientation now becoming visible (Decker, 2015), and this echoes in research. I have no argument with this, but I illustrate invisibility is a complex discursive signification in activism. We desire to be we would be seen, past and present; all else we would leave invisible. We would overlook it ourselves in the chorus lines we present, and have others overlook in the new world we would win framed by those chorus lines. Claims of newness are dramatic, and it is in the characteristic nature of sexual and gender social protest to make claims of newness. Those claims themselves, which academics also engage in, are part of the life-cycle of social protest, and they are part of the emotive framing of collective identity by which it is established and maintained.
Chapter Three. Methods and Methodology

3.1 Introduction.

My doctorate is a small-scale ethnography which captures the narratives of asexual activists as they reflect on their activism, and the intersection of those accounts with the politicised performances of asexual and other activists observed at Pride events. My research is ethnographic in methods and methodological outcomes. It captures those accounts and observations through qualitative data collection appropriate to socialised political beliefs and behaviours, and provides a rich ethnographic interpretation of their cultural and political meaning and significance through thick description. To do this, the research utilises a multi-layered ethnographic methodology (Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey, 2006; Amanda Tracy, 2012), combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation, autoethnography and photo montage. This triangulated approach illustrates the increasing visibility of asexual activism through activists’ own accounts, and the intersections with wider identity politics exemplified by Pride spectacle and protest. It allows me to interpret individual and collective modes of activist this provided me with rich data source to draw proceeding to participant observation at pride events performance in ways that are ethnographically significant to my research (Klandermans and Staggenberg, 2002). Semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madill, 2011) conducted by online Skype interviewing allowed me access to gain a better understanding of asexual activists; their triggered modes of identity, enacted performance and mobilised engagement. This provided me with a rich data source to draw on while proceeding to participant observation of Pride events. Participant observation of Pride events in North America and Europe enabled me to participate in Pride/LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest first-hand (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Spradley, 2016), and to generate thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 2009) of how asexual activists and others engage with this. Autoethnography, “thinking like an ethnographer, writing like a novelist” (Ellis, 2004: 330-337), added to this thick description. It allowed me to capture the scripted storytelling of Pride events I observed, and my own and others’
participation. The collection of photographs added to this rich, interpretive account. Their use as photo montage (Pink, 2008, 2013) enabled me to illuminate critical observations and insights my participant observation drew my attention to.

Below are two tables outlining the demographics of my interview recruitment sample, and the main Pride events that I attended, and which were referenced in my research:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Asexual Orientation</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>Non-gender Binary</td>
<td>Asexual Aromantic and Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual Aromantic</td>
<td>BME</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>Grey-asexual Panromantic</td>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brendan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Demi-sexual Heteroromantic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>A Level</td>
<td>18-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer Heteroromantic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual Aromantic</td>
<td>BME</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>40-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual Aromantic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>40-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Queer Demi-sexual</td>
<td>BME</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual Aromantic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asexual Aromantic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual Heteroromantic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>18-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer Asexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My interview participants were recruited from North America and Britain over a four to six-week period during January/February 2014. They were recruited through online asexual community networks, and Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter. I also set up my own WordPress blog to advertise my recruitment call. I had more than 100 responses of interest to my call, but this quickly whittled down once I sent each of them a copy of my information pack (see appendix 1). This made clear that I was seeking activist participants who were happy to discuss their activist identities, rather than participants who were happy to discuss their asexual identities. I expand on this later in the chapter.
when I discuss semi-structured interviews, but I want to note here some salient points concerning the demographics. After the recruitment call was completed, I was left with 13 activist participants who were happy to discuss their activism. Eight identified as cis-female in gender, three as cis-male, while one identified as non-gender binary and one as genderqueer. Although the sample is small, the prevalence ratio (8:3:2) is broadly in line with current research on the gendered make up of asexual identity. As regards orientation, three identified as grey or demi-sexual while 10 identified as asexual. Significantly for my research, asexual orientation was intersectional to other claimed identities in ways which flowed into their expressed activism. Six identified as aromantic and three as heteroromantic, while four identified as queer. This was complicated because these further claimed identities were often intersectional to each other as well as to asexual orientation. Four identified as BME or mixed-race, and this flowed significantly into their activist accounts. There were clear distinctions between activists who identified as BME or mixed-race, and activists were identified as white. Overall, participants had a high level of education, which may have been more characteristic of activists who answer recruitment calls than asexuality. This may have been compounded by the relative youthfulness of participants, itself a characteristic of emerging identity politics, though those participants who were relatively older spoke about this in ways that felt significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berlin Pride 2015</td>
<td>Berlin, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham Pride 2014</td>
<td>Birmingham, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brighton Pride 2014</td>
<td>Brighton, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brighton Pride 2015</td>
<td>Brighton, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Pride 2014</td>
<td>Reading, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkle (The National Transgender Charity) 2015</td>
<td>Manchester, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Easter Picnic 2015</td>
<td>San Francisco, America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans Pride Brighton 2015</td>
<td>Brighton, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WorldPride 2014</td>
<td>Toronto, Canada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.2 Table of Attended and Referenced Pride Events
My participant observation was conducted over a 15-month period from April 2014 to June 2015 in North America, England and Germany. During this period, I attended many events. The table is a list of the 10 events which were significant to my research, and are referenced in it. A key event was the extended case study that I made of the 14 days of WorldPride 2014 in Toronto, to which asexual activists from across the Western globe came to participate and to organise their own Asexuality Conference. Another key event was an extended case study of Berlin Pride 2015. I was fortunate to receive funding from Santander to attend the entire month of Pride events in Berlin, for which I thank them, and this added immeasurably to my ethnographic understanding of Pride spectacle and protest. Other events noted were attended for a day or a matter of hours, but they spoke directly to points raised in my extended case studies. Reading Pride had a highly visible asexual activist presence, while Birmingham and Brighton Prides spoke to the contradictions of events which are understood as both political and hedonistically celebratory. In differing fashions, Trans Pride Brighton, Sparkle, Oxford Pride and the Easter Picnic spoke to the intersectional antagonism of enacted identity politics.

3.2 An Evolving Multi-Layered Approach.

A multi-layered approach to data collection developed over the course of my research (Coffey, 1999). As a social-constructionist and symbolic-interactionist influenced by Plummer (1994) and Goffman (1971, 1974), research in this project initially began with the aim of collecting data on the presentation of the asexual activist self. The early methodological concern was to capture politically engaged asexuals telling asexual stories about their activist lives through semi-structured interviews. I had discussed this with my supervisors, and we agreed that that was suited to a small-scale ethnographic study focused on targeted activists. The rationale was that such narratives would illustrate the lives of those Western asexual activists; offering insights suggesting how and why asexual activism had visibly emerged now, and an understanding of the interrelationships to wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q movements. As with much inductive ethnographic research, these aims,
objectives and rationales evolved as field research and analysis progressed (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). They were impacted upon: by my interview-participants’ comments, by my emerging observations and analysis, by my application of theory and as theory emerged, and, by the practicalities of field research. I begin by considering that progression and development in my methodological approaches, before considering the specifics of how data was collected and analysed through those methodological approaches, ethical and reflexive issues relating to this, and how it was reflected in the structure of my empirical chapters.

I had come to the interview process with an expectation that my research would be grounded within Plummer’s (1994) concepts of telling sexual stories and intimate citizenship. As someone coming from a background in Education and Sexuality & Gender Studies, this was my understanding and expectation of ethnographic research (Coffey, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). I understood this to be that one listened to groups of people talk about their ordinary lives, and observed them in their ordinary settings. I return to this at the end of this section to outline how my approaches to data collection build on this. The more that I listened to my interview-participants the more it felt to me that they were not recounting narratives of quotidian or ordinary activist lives as I understood these. I am not seeking to imply that any of my interview-participants were disingenuous; as far as I am aware, none were. Over nearly 30 hours of interviews and 300,000+ words, I became aware of dramaturgical recurrent patterns in how they were framing their narratives. These narratives themselves appeared highly scripted and it felt that my participants were always aware they were ‘front-stage’ (Goffman, 1971; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). A striking example of this, which I have not been able to convey in my data chapters due to research ethics, is how many of my participants placed me in the combined role of confidant-informer (Goffman, 1971) to whom acrimonious ‘back-stage’ details about each other could be disclosed without fear of it impacting their own public activist faces. One of my participants spoke explicitly about how they saw this as my role, but others reflected their comments through contentious titbits that I was offered.
I found myself re-evaluating the events at the CLASSIFYING SEX conference which had helped prompt this research. I initially viewed these as a highly contentious, extraordinary moment of sexual and gendered political theatre which on one level, from the vantage point of the audience member that I was, they were. Motivated by my participants’ comments I began to consider whether, on another level, the events at CLASSIFYING SEX might suggest another reading. That what appeared extraordinary, political theatre to me might simply be ordinary and dramaturgical (theatre-like) (Burke, 1966, 1968; Goffman, 1971) to the activist-actors involved. I am not suggesting that actor-activists at CLASSIFYING SEX were disingenuous. It seemed to me that the fractious politics that were enacted there, the passionate political theatre with which it was enacted, was sincere. Drawing on what I was hearing from interview participants I sensed that, as well as a dramaturgical distinction between the back-stories and front-stories of individuated activism that activists told me in confidence (Goffman, 1971; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013), there was an implied distinction between the back-stories and front-stories they were telling of collective activism and its public faces. While semi-structured interviews could give an account of the former, it felt to me that they could only suggest the latter (Diefenbach, 2009). This was influenced by my ongoing reading of research in Asexual Studies; particularly, the sociology of identity strand which has focused on theorised accounts of the asexual which emphasise individual selfhood, and/or ethnographic accounts which privilege individuated asexual experience. I see value in both approaches, but my research became increasingly concerned with the collective selfhood of activism and how it might be researched. I began to consider participant observation as an ethnographic approach, and in what form it might take.

I had begun to read about the characteristic strategies held to be deployed by activists in Social Movement Studies: Contentious Politics (Tilly, 1995, 2008; Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow, 2001; Tilly and Tarrow, 2008), the rational strategies by which they seek to achieve their aims, and Passionate Politics (Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009) the culturally-embedded emotional
strategies by which they seek to sustain their activism. As my research progressed, I began to consider whether as well as these, the sexual and gender activist drew on something more. I began to consider whether there was something innately characteristic about contention itself to the political performance of sexual and gendered activism that gave it value and capital? That the simmering drama, the passionate performances and the angry roles mattered in themselves. In contrary and contradictory ways, they appeared to enable collective activist identities with their own public faces to emerge and coalesce. Influenced by Goffman’s works (1955, 1971, 2017) on maintaining face and dramaturgy, this would become a focus of my research with impact on my methodological approaches. I considered the significance of the staging to what I had and was observing: a boundaried conference at Cambridge University, and online Skype interviews that felt like ‘other spaces’ with their own rules of privacy and intimacy. I would come to consider Foucault’s (1986) work on heterotopias to ground this sense of otherness within as my study progressed.

As I note, these observations and analysis impacted upon how I applied theory and how theory emerged (Coffey, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). They influenced the developments that occurred as I sought to ground theory to my emerging empirical data, and how these then fed back to my research practice (Glaser and Strauss, 2009; Ralph, Birks and Chapman, 2015). I do not want to suggest that I had perfect reflective hindsight at the time or now. That I interviewed several respondents whose narratives made me aware of issues with my theorising. I adjusted my Literature Review to account for this, and those adjustments offered me further theoretical insights into my participants’ narratives confirming my methodological approach. As I suspect happens for many early-career ethnographers, these processes were not a series of relatively simple, linear reflective steps as above. They were time-consuming, repetitive and concurrent with many missteps (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). From my experience, good inductive research practice reflects on those missteps as much as the successful steps. I had read in Social Movement Studies texts that acknowledged the significance of the dramaturgical to activists, and of political theatre
and its staging. This significance felt rendered down as theoretical frames and paradigms to thin
description. It felt to me that thin description to describe the dramaturgical activism I was observing
loses subtle, but significant, qualitative distinctions. The organic human dimension can be lost or
overlooked between what is an activist twitch (the collective or individual act), a blink (the
motivating behaviours), and, a wink (the performed role) (Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 2009). I began to
consider the extent to which my research needed to include participant observation,
autoethnography and thick description to account for what I had observed and heard, and what I
would subsequently observe at Pride events.

I had come to my doctoral research from an academic background in departments at the University
of London at Goldsmiths, and Sussex University, which emphasised interdisciplinary approaches
(Klein, 1990). A belief in integrating and synthesising theory, data and methods from across relevant
disciplines to illustrate new insights. Although I passed my upgrade, my examiners had pointed out
issues, flaws and missteps in my approach to this. Somewhat unconsciously and unreflectively I had
built my Literature Review, and the methodological approaches it was to support, into one
integrated theorised ‘meta-narrative’. That meta-narrative might be summarised as – ‘asexual
activists are a homogenous white and middle-class caucus in the West who are to be considered
through how they contend a discourse of suffering, surviving and surpassing’. This discourse itself
being the main framed narrative of the wider Western LGBT+ social movement. Following my
upgrade, I began to reflect that I had constructed this meta-narrative based on pre-existing data,
some data collection of my own, and grounded within an understanding of interdisciplinarity that
privileged Sexuality & Gender Studies and its concerns. As a quare researcher I have a commitment
to social justice and social change, and to feminist and LGBT+ and Q inspired research which has a
critical awareness of power dynamics at play in relation to gender and sexuality. Despite and
because of this, I had uncritically constructed an ‘asexual story’ that confirmed my own
predispositions and biases (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). I had fallen into the trap
of treating asexuality and its activism as a metaphor for my opinion on larger macro-issues of society. I began to see that I needed to critically examine my research practice, and my understanding of interdisciplinarity.

As I read more critically, I began to see that the disciplines that I was seeking to draw on (Asexual Studies, Sexuality & Gender Studies and Social Movement Studies and) have quite distinct academic boundaries and disciplinary characteristics. ‘Framing’ will typically mean something quite different in Social Movement Studies from Sexuality & Gender Studies, where both can draw on Goffman’s (1974) foundational work. Modern Asexual Studies (Bogaert, 2006, 2015) will usually draw a line around the beginning of the millennium as the starting point of contemporary asexual research and activism; distinguishing what went before as historical Sexology. Sexuality & Gender Studies will typically draw that line for itself much earlier in the 1950s or 1960s (Weeks, 2010). I came to understand that these and other distinctions are significant for my methodological practice, and they are easily lost if academic disciplines are over-integrated into one narrative. Whether physiological or sociological in approach, Asexual Studies offers an account of contemporary asexuality as a sexual orientation to ground my research within, and the scripted narratives and behaviours by which individuated asexual identity-formations are experienced. The Sociology of Identity strand that has emerged emphasises the importance of methodological approaches that listen to contemporary asexuals, and to critically engage with those scripted narratives and behaviours. Sexuality & Gender Studies has a tradition of critically and reflexively engaging with the scripted narratives and behaviours of LGBT+ and Q individuals and communities. It offers a set of conceptual tools and frameworks to compare my research to, and that ground my research within a wider understanding of the scripting of LGBT+ and Q identity, protest and spectacle. Social Movement Theory has developed its own set of conceptual tools and frameworks to research the collective nature of social activism and protest. These ground my research within traditions that emphasise the importance of observing activism through its performance and enactment to gain a
critical understanding of its meaning (Glaser and Strauss, 1966, 2009; Ralph, Birks and Chapman, 2015). My interdisciplinary approach has developed to locate my research at the intersection of all three fields; drawing from all in my grounding of my data and its research approaches, while seeking to privilege none above each other.

I realised semi-structured interviews offered me an account of the everyday lives of asexual activists as activists, and I also needed to give an account of the everyday setting of those activist lives through participant observation at Pride events. Two serendipitous events occurred which added to the richness of the data collection that I would undertake as a participant observer. I became aware that asexual activists from across the globe were mobilising and organising to participate at WorldPride 2014 in Toronto, and I was fortunate to receive funding from the Open University to attend for which I thank them. I was also fortunate to receive funding from Santander Bank to be a visiting scholar at Humboldt University in Berlin during the month of Berlin Pride 2015, for which I thank them as well.

3.3 Chapters Four and Five: Semi-Structured Interviews.

I conducted 13 semi-structured online Skype interviews with asexual activists between January 2014 and April 2014. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because they allowed me to identify critical research topics as questions while keeping the interview itself conversational in tone (Wengraf, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madill, 2011). It meant that in individual interviews I could shift the order and wording of questions to respond to what participants were saying, or to follow up points that my participants raised as significant to them. This kept the interviews free-flowing while ensuring that I covered the topics of interest, and meant that my participants had significant input into the direction that data collection on those topics and others took. I conducted the interviews by Skype which had benefits and limitations. I found Skype
interviews could be recorded as they are conducted, through a software package called Scribie. Whether interviewing solely through audio and/or video, I found that I could take Sticky Notes directly on my screen as they occurred to me. These notes became the basis of the codes and patterns that I applied to my analysis of interviews. The private nature of Skype interviews emphasised the confidentiality and anonymity of what I was researching. Participants could be interviewed in their own homes, when they had time and privacy to talk. This meant that participants were free to discuss with me, as an ‘objective’ outsider, sensitive or contentious subjects concerning their activism they might not have engaged with through another approach (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

While these were often the subjects that I wanted to discuss, it meant that interviews frequently overran my planned schedule of 60/70 minutes as participants discussed at length. This meant that I had to use a transcription service to type up my interviews as I had a large data resource beyond my typing skills. I found that using Scribie software to record interviews made this process easier as the company offered an integrated transcription service at a reasonable cost. Scribie have a comprehensive confidentiality and privacy policy that I discuss in my section on research ethics. For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, there is substantial data that I was not able to use as one participant directly addressed (often acrimoniously) another participant’s activism in ways that would have acknowledged both their identities. There was also material which directly addressed WorldPride or other subjects in ways that would have revealed the identity of the speaker; particularly in the context of a movement that emerged on the Internet where individuals are aware of each other. As with the use of Scribie, this will be discussed in more detail in my section on research ethics. I was also seeking to interview activists by Skype from across the Western world, which often meant that there were significant delays between one interview from another. Using semi-structured interviews meant that I could maintain some consistency between interviews.
without that need for consistency becoming prescriptive (Wengraf, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madill, 2011).

My participants were recruited in a 4/5-week period over January/February 2014. They were recruited through online asexual community networks: AVEN which required substantial negotiation as it has an established gatekeeper’s policy for working with researchers, and asexual community networks on Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter. I set up my own WordPress blog to advertise my research and recruit for it. I chose to recruit my participants through online self-selected sampling (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) where I advertised my research in relevant places online, and used my linked WordPress blog to describe its ethical guidelines. In doing this, I also made clear what the study was about, the criteria that I was interested in, and allowed participants to self-select (see appendix 1). Like all self-selected sampling my participants reflected a high degree of self-selection bias; for example, participating to anonymously attack other activists. I acknowledge that, but my research topic meant that I was seeking to recruit committed individuals who had opinions and biases about their activism, and were willing to discuss it at length (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This was reflected in my recruitment drive where I had more than 100 initial interested emails from potential participants. To each of them I sent an extensive information pack (see appendix 1). These made it clear that I was interested in discussing asexual activism specifically and not asexuality, and they were also available on my WordPress blog. Most of the contacts at that point chose of their own volition not to continue as respondents. I was left with 13 respondents who self-identified as asexual activists and were willing to discuss what that identity meant. It is for that reason that I make no claims as to generalisability or representationality in my small dataset; only that it is illustrative of the activists that I interviewed and their opinions concerning their activism (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).
With each of these participants, I had them sign and send me an E-consent sheet before confirming a time and date for the interview (see appendix 1). We would then exchange Skype addresses; I would confirm with the respondent whether they wanted the interview to be video or voice only. At the beginning of the interview I would introduce myself, briefly summarise the nature of my research and the goals of the interviews, and thank them for agreeing to take part. I would confirm that they had signed the Consent Sheet and read the information pack; reiterating the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview itself, and confirm that participants were aware the interview was being recorded. I would ask if the participant had any questions, or concerns, before the interview would proceed. At an appropriate point I would thank them and terminate the interview. Approximately one or two days is after interview I would send each respondent a feedback email to check if they had any concerns about the interview.

The interviews themselves were structured in two parts (Wengraf, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madill, 2011). The first part was a short biographical section beginning with a “tell me about you” question followed by a “how would you define your sexual and gender identity at present” question. To some extent these questions were simply to put people at their ease, and to enable conversation to flow, though I collected useful demographic details that fed into the codes and patterns of analysis I developed (see Figure 3.1). The second longer section focused on my research and the questions that I had already emailed to participants. I aimed to ask as few questions as possible, and let my participants do most of the talking. As interviewing participants proceeded, I occasionally made anonymous reference to statements made by other participants, or to research on asexuality and/or activism, to encourage participants to express themselves. There were subjects that became highlighted through this process of verification and validation; for example, the significance of the term ‘cake’ as a subcultural signifier in asexual communities, and the importance of online ‘case studies’ to asexuals and activism as individuals came to question their own asexual orientations. I aimed to respect my participants opinions, to avoid judgements on these, and to
allow them pauses, silences and time for reflection. Nevertheless, I found it easy to keep interview focused on my topics, as my participants seemed motivated to discuss them. I sought to enable this by avoiding closed questions that elicited yes or no answers. Having been a schoolteacher, I asked open questions that reflected the ‘5W’s and H’: who, where, when, what, why and how? This encouraged my participants to speak at length, but my impression is that they were motivated to do so. At an appropriate point when I felt my topics were exhausted, or participants indicated that they had nothing more to say, I would terminate the interview. Asking them if they have anything else to say, I would thank participants for their time and effort. I would briefly reiterate my research aims, how I expected the research to proceed, and mention that the results would be sent to them once my study was completed.

I had initially intended to use Nvivo to classify and code my interviews, and trained in its use. I personally found Nvivo cumbersome for the type of small-scale intensive interviewing that I had undertaken. As dramaturgical interpretation emerged as a theme of my coding and classification, I found the process of engaging with Nvivo hindered the type of fluid and creative interpretation that I was striving for, and this became more of an issue as I began to engage in participant observation, autoethnography and photo collection. I found it more advantageous to manually sort my data; transferring the Sticky Notes I had written on-screen to physical Post-it Notes that I could attach to differing sections of my transcribed interviews (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). These have the advantage that they were easily copied, added to, and transferred to other sections of transcription as codes and patterns emerged. I feel that the benefit of using this method of sorting and classifying for my research is reflected in Chapters Four and Five, which shows the richness of my interview data collection through its use and analysis of my participants’ comments.
3.4 Chapter Six: Participant-Observation, Autoethnography and Photo Montage.

I attended 10 key Pride events as a participant observer over a 15-month period running from April 2014 to June 2015. I chose participant observation because it enabled me to collect rich data about those events by attending as an academic, and as a festivalgoer, an activist and a LGBT+ and Q community member (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Spradley, 2016). It also allowed me to write variously and creatively about those identities and what I observed (Ellis, 2004). I could test the validity of themes that had emerged in my research by seeing for myself how Pride/LGBT and Q spectacle and protest was enacted. I could see for myself how asexual activists who were present engaged with this, and develop insights into their behaviours. I could see for myself how Pride events worked, and what patterns of identity, behaviour and politics were suggested. I could interpret those patterns through my own participation (Ellis, 2004). This was important as I came to focus on the dramaturgical scripting of Pride events, and through their observed patterns of dramaturgy to view them as carnivalesque events which obey the modes of performance and engagement associated with carnivals (Stallybrass and White, 1986).

Participant observation allowed me to experience (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Spradley, 2016), and autoethnography to interpret (Ellis, 2004), modes of cultural-politicised performance which had been suggested by my semi-structured interviews. For example, the interlinked persistence of whiteness and allosexuality at Pride events became a focus of my research through what my participants said, and what I then observed at events. Had I not been drawn to consider the performance of allosexuality by what my participants said generally, and the performance of whiteness by what my participants of colour said specifically, I doubt that I would have engaged as fully as I have with these concepts to understand their significance to asexual activists and others, including myself. This is an example of how my multi-layered approach benefited my research, with participant observation moderating what I had heard in interviews, and autoethnography allowing
me to thickly interpret that moderation. I found that the flexibility that participant observation affords allowed me to follow recurrent patterns already suggested by my research, while remaining open to other patterns and directions emerging as my attention was drawn to them. For example: the mythic significance of carnivalesque decorative display as what goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1993); the importance of differing framings of masculinity and femininity that I observed, and the significance of the dynamics of deliberately overlooking in maintaining face emerged through direct observation.

One of the main advantages of my participant observation was that I could simply be present in public spaces (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Spradley, 2016). I could attend a Pride event as a festivalgoer, a conference as a delegate, and march as a fellow activist without explaining my presence beyond that. I found this advantageous for several reasons. I was seeking to build on the dramaturgical responses I my participants had given me concerning their activism, and the activist faces it suggested, while being aware that some of that presentation of face may have occurred because activists knew that they were speaking to a researcher. Because of the direction that my research took I was often concerned with behaviours and modes of performance where those involved were acting in ways that I found challenging or negative. Where it felt pointless to fully question their actions or behaviours as they would deny them; dramaturgical denial as central to the dynamics of deliberately overlooking was itself a focus of my observations. For example, I consider racist and transphobic actions and behaviours that my attention was drawn to, where it felt anything beyond cursory questioning would have elicited further denials, and impacted upon my presence as a researcher. If someone asked, I was always honest about my presence as a researcher, and my research aims (see appendix 1). I found that that rarely happened because the overt nature of the participant observation that I undertook meant that my presence in public spaces were simply accepted.
This was important because my research has no remit to engage in covert observation, as per my ethics application (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) (see appendix 1). I had no right to lie to anyone about my presence at Pride events to gain their trust, and I had no right to lie to them about what I was observing to elicit further information. I found that there were other limitations that overt participant observation of Pride events imposed. I found the process of collecting data time-consuming, and I found that it less a matter of collecting too little rich data than sifting and sorting through the great amounts of rich data that were generated (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Spradley, 2016). Therefore, I have focused pragmatically on the two large-scale events that I attended, WorldPride 2014 in Toronto and Berlin Pride 2015, while drawing on other events and moments to enrichen my description of them. I chose to focus through autoethnography on thick description of the dramaturgy of Pride events, as an appropriate way of conveying my impressions of them (Ellis, 2004). This selective emphasis on two events means that I cannot make claims of representationality for my observations. My autoethnography and description is illustrative of the subjective impressions that I formed, and what appeared significant to my research topics. I have sought to enrichen and ground those impressions by drawing on other events and appropriate theory, and to convey the theoretical paradigms that emerged for me through my impressions (Geertz, 1973; Glaser and Strauss, 2009; Ryle, 2009; Ellis, 2004; Ralph, Birks and Chapman, 2015).

My account in Chapter Six remains fundamentally my impressions of Pride events and asexual activists and others engagement with them (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). These are affected by my personal biography, my understanding of and commitment to activism, and my predispositions and biases that flow from this. Whereas in Chapters Four and Five I sought to limit my own subjectivity to focus on my activist-participants accounts, in Chapter Six I sought through autoethnography to embrace it and give my own account. In doing this, I sought to reflect on and acknowledge the ‘I’ who was himself speaking as an audience to Pride (Ellis, 2004; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009; Maréchal, 2010). This draws on the messy, ambivalent, emotive and contrary
accounts in Chapter Five through which activist-participants constructed themselves as audiences to Pride spectacle and protest (Adams and Ellis, 2015). It acknowledges and confesses (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009) that the ‘I’ who engaged in participant observation of Pride experienced it subjectively constructed as messy, ambivalent, emotive and contrary (Ellis, 2004; Ellingson and Ellis, 2008; Adams and Ellis, 2015). For example, I reflect on my own ambivalent relationship to the LGBT+ Q activism that I grew up with and was part of, and how that impacted upon my impressions of WorldPride 2014 where that political activism now felt established and dominant in contrary ways. I reflect how my own biography as a white HIV+ man impacted upon my initial, highly emotive observations of the World AIDS Day Memorial event that I attended (Ellis, 2004; Maréchal, 2010).

Chapter Six is structured as a series of ethnographic stories (Herrmann and Fate, 2014) which reflect on and interpret my own journey within Pride as a participant observer and an audience member (Ellis, 2004; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009). I draw on Chapters Four and Five and relevant theory to conceptualise this, but the focus is self-reflection. How the subjective story of that journey itself reflects the messy, ambivalent, emotive and contrary storytelling of Pride (Ellis, 2004; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009; Herrmann and Fate, 2014; Adams and Ellis, 2015).

In order to facilitate this, during my participant-observation I kept a journal of each event, saved many pieces of documentation, and took numerous photographs (numbering over 3000) (Ellis, 2004; Adams and Ellis, 2015). I found all three to be rich data sources which added to my autoethnography. I found that they were invaluable during the long process of self-reflection on initial impressions as I sifted and sorted through them. They helped in considering which initial impressions felt significant to the stories that I wished to tell, and which impressions clearly reflected my own predispositions and biases and how this needed to be accounted for (Ellis, 2004; Adams and Ellis, 2015). I am dyspraxic which affects my writing, and the nature of engaged observation of politicised spectacle and protest is that one is caught up in the moment of its storytelling (Klandermans and Staggenberg, 2002). It is not always easy or appropriate to take notes
until later, so I found the process of taking photographs invaluable. They also added to the creative vividness of the stories that I wished to tell.

When I had time and privacy to jot down proper notes later, photographs prompted my memory as to what I had found significant. They offered supporting illustration of impressions which I felt might otherwise seem arbitrary, and solely based on my own subjective predispositions. This was important because I am not seeking to claim that my subjective storytelling is an accurate account of Pride (Ellis, 2004; Herrmann and Fate, 2014). A part of its rationale is to call into question the accuracy of ‘objective’ accounts of socialised political behaviours and beliefs exemplified by Pride (Bochner, 2001, 2014). At the same time, I had an ethical concern that it should resonate as a valid interpretation of what I subjectively observed (Richardson, 1997, 2000, 2007). I offer a highly autoethnographic account of my largely pejorative feelings concerning white hipster-queer colonisation of a park in Oranienplatz at Kreuzberg Pride during Berlin Pride, that I might not have without supporting photographic data. There were moments when it felt inappropriate to take photographs because of ethical concerns (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), or that taking photographs would impact on my presence as a researcher (Pink, 2008, 2013). Despite my observations taking place in public spaces, I was uncomfortable taking photographs when what was in view strayed too close for me to the boundary between public expression and private emotion, and consent would have been needed. I did not take photographs where it felt that taking them impacted on my presence as a researcher. I did not take photographs at the two conferences that I attended during WorldPride where it felt inappropriate, though luckily in both cases it was appropriate to be seen jotting notes. Given that I was observing Pride events, I did not take photographs of events and people where I felt a hard-copy of their behaviours was ethically inappropriate. For example, I did not take photographs of people who appeared inebriated or drugged, or were engaging in graphically sexualised behaviours.
Nevertheless, I found when reflecting on my participant observation that the photographs that I had taken offered a rich account of critical moment and events I felt I had observed. Much as I had done with Sticky Notes and Post-its, I found the process of sifting and sorting through different sets of photographs from different events added greatly to my coding and classification (Pink, 2008, 2013). I saved my photographs on Google Pic, and I found that the editing software aided this process of coding and classification. One aspect of the editing software which became significant was the ability to construct photo montages as visual representations of the process of coding and classification itself. I found this extremely useful in testing the ethnographic rigour of my observations, and I have included examples of those photo montages in Chapter Six to add to my autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). For example, I discuss the participation of an asexual activist and Reading Pride, where the photo montage illustrates how and why I was making creative connections between her performance and historic mythic protest art. I include single photographs as well where appropriate.

In the context of my research, there are limitations to utilising photographs and photo montage. I found that it captures the dramatics of protest and activism, but not the subtleties of dramaturgical behaviour. It is difficult to capture a photograph at that instant when someone is engaged in the process of deliberately overlooking something, a resonant dynamic I was subjectively drawn to, though I have striven to illustrate this where asexual activists were involved. Despite this, I feel that photographs and photo montage have added to the autoethnography of Chapter Six. They add to the richness and resonance of its thick description, and illustrate that it is as valid an account of my subjective observations, impressions and how they applied to my research topics, as I could give (Richardson, 1997, 2000, 2007; Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

3.5 Ethical Issues and Research Ethics.

3.5.1 Applying for Ethical Clearance: Confidentiality, Anonymity and Safety.
All research was conducted to adhere with the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) guidelines on working with human participants: OU Code of Practice for Research and at the Open University, and OU Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) (see appendix 1). As well, my research project was designed to adhere with the ethical and professional guidelines of the BSA (British Sociological Association) of which I am a member. I am pleased to be able to say that my ethics application was approved by HREC within 48 hours of being received without amendments. I am grateful for the care and attention which my supervisors showed in helping me to draft my application, and I have sought to display the same care and attention in my ethical approach to field research as it developed (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Only one section of my application required overt ethical consent (the online Skype interviews). All the participant observation was to be done in public spaces; that was part of the rationale of researching the public performances of asexual activists and others. As I have discussed, to seek overt consent in such spaces would be both impractical, and more than likely invalidate the research to be conducted. I have discussed in my sections concerning semi-structured interviews, participant observation, autoethnography and photomontage specific ethical challenges that arose in field research. I addressed each of the methodological approaches separately that I deployed to reflect on how they impacted ethically upon my data collection, and why my data collection was still rich despite the challenges of maintaining a reflexive ethical approach. Here, I reflect on the interaction of those four approaches to data collection. The ethical challenges for an ethnographer who interviews activists, engages with public political performances where they may be present, seeks to comment on his own subjective presence, and takes photographs of those public performances. The intention is not to question ethical guidelines for conducting the type of research that I engaged in; rather, to show that the reflexive application of those guidelines had an ongoing impact on my field research and its analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

3.5.2 The Ethics of Multi-Layered Ethnography.
I want to begin with my Skype interviews, and pay more attention to these because the Research Ethics requirements, and ethical concerns that emerged concerning multi-layered ethnography flow into my participant observation, autoethnography and use of photographs (see appendix 1).

Throughout this section, there is a focus on the differing insider-outsider subjective positions that I engaged with as a researcher and audience member, and how this impacted upon my methods, data collection and interpretation. There initially appeared to be nothing about asexual activism that made my participants especially vulnerable. I had to observe the standard requirements for researching with human participants were met (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). All prospective participants were offered a participant information sheet and consent form (see appendix 1). They were guaranteed confidentiality, anonymity and the right of withdrawal. They were offered a copy of this thesis once it was completed. Feedback was solicited from them after interviews to address any concerns that they might have. I kept my recordings of interviews on a separate encrypted external drive, and those recordings were erased once the interviews had been transcribed. The transcription service that I used, Scribie, have a transparent and comprehensive confidentiality policy. Confidentiality agreements contractually bind transcribers, and there was a facility to remove all trace of recordings and transcriptions from the Scribie website once transcription was completed that I used. Throughout the transcription, coding and classification, and analysis of my interview data I have used pseudonyms for my participants to preserve their anonymity and confidentiality. Despite this, I want to address some issues that arose concerning confidentiality, anonymity and safety that arose through the form that interviewing took, and that I have already alluded to in previous sections.

It became evident through the interview process that, as well as knowing more about asexuality and its activism than I did, most of my participants were experienced and motivated activists who understood and engaged with the politics of interviewing in ways that I was only learning.
(Klandermans and Staggenberg, 2002). Many had been interviewed on more than one occasion previously; the online nature of much asexual activism meant that they understood online interviewing. This was significant for my research because I was interested in speaking to motivated and experienced activists, but in practice it meant that they often set their own agendas. They utilised the private nature of Skype interviewing to air personal grievances towards other activists, often activists that I was also interviewing, and they discussed at length details of their own identities that felt private. That was characteristic of the online nature of much asexual identification; I illustrate in my analysis the significance of online personal ‘case studies’ to asexual politics of identity. My recruitment process had successfully engaged precisely those experienced and motivated activists that I was hoping to speak to. Because of the global online nature of their activism, I became aware that this meant that they came from a small cadre of highly motivated activists who know or are aware of each other. It meant that they were often disclosing opinions, biographies and other details whose data collection I could not use because it would compromise the confidentiality and anonymity of them, or of other activists. It also raised issues of safety concerning the extent to which their disclosures made them and others vulnerable by their publication, and the extent to which I as an interviewer could maintain their safety by disclosing on private topics (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

One of the ethical issues as an ethnographer that emerged from this research for me is that, because of my background in education, I am a good interviewer. I draw on the public faces that I have learnt in my interviewing style, my ‘teacher persona’, which is designed to relax individuals and get them to talk. I learnt that interviewing activists is not the same as engaging students, though the same care and concern must be applied to what they disclose. This is not to imply that I did not seek to address this directly in the interviewing process itself (Wengraf, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madill, 2011). When I came to read the transcriptions for coding and classification, I noted how often I had asked one early participant whether they were comfortable with what they were telling
me, and they were. I brought another interview to an early end politely, because I felt that the participant was beginning to disclose aspects of their private life that they might regret afterwards. I noted that there were several interviews where I made participants aware that comments they made about others could not be included in my research. I asked one participant who spoke directly to their experiences of bullying that seemed relevant, whether they were comfortable with this being included, and they were. None of my participants were children or lacked capacity. All were well educated individuals capable of informed consent, and aware of their right of withdrawal (see appendix 1). There was nothing illegal in the disclosures, nor anything that indicated an immediate risk to the participant; I was concerned that I maximise the benefit of their comments while minimising the risks. This was complicated because, in these disclosures, they were often commenting on contentious issues and offering insights that were directly relevant to my research (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). It was further complicated because the dynamics I sensed occurring in this process of disclosure, where I was a ‘safe outsider’ to tell secrets to, drew my attention to the process of maintaining public face in activism that became a focus of my participant observation. Because of this, in my empirical chapters concerning my interviews, there is a range of data that I could not include, only allude to, or be selective in my choice of comments to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of participants and others.

This impacted upon my participant observation where I was often observing activists that I had spoken to, and/or activists that they had discussed (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Klandermans and Staggenberg, 2002; Spradley, 2016). I became aware that my responsibility, and duty of care, as an interviewer extended beyond debriefing my participants, and taking care that their data was anonymised, kept confidential and protected (see appendix 1). Although all my participant observation was conducted in overt public spaces, I became aware that I could not conduct my data collection in such a way that signalled that I had covert knowledge of people I was observing that could only have been gleaned from specific activists. All the activists that I spoke to were aware that
I was a researcher; I was open and transparent about my research and my research aims. It was clear at events that I participated in with activists that many of them knew that I was a researcher, and were probably aware of some of the people that I had interviewed given the cloistered nature of asexual activism in the global West. I could not assume that that gave me permission to profit on the insider-outsider role of Informant-Confidant that had emerged in interviews; to imply that I was now an insider with insider knowledge beyond that of an academic researcher in Asexual Studies (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This reflective concern as to perspective was ethically important in my data collection and my accounts of them.

Reflecting this and responding to it, in my semi-structured interviews and the chapters which flow from them (Chapters Four and Five), my ethical and conceptual point of view is broadly etic. In Chapter Four I focus on comments by my participants which were related to my first research topic, and in Chapter Five I focus on comments relating to my second. In both, I am an outsider looking in on a group I do not belong to, and offering my perspective on what they tell me (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Because of my research interests and who I sought to recruit, this was complicated because I am offering my account on what was meaningful to them (Klandermans and Staggenberg, 2002). While all ethnography is subjective, insofar as possible I seek to give a more objective account of their beliefs rather than my own. This was complicated because there were many characteristics that I shared with some or all my participants: education, class, gender, politics, et cetera, which might have suggested insider status. I had to remain aware that on the critical identity characteristic that I had recruited upon, asexuals who were motivated activists, I remained and remain an outsider. This was important because several of my participants spoke directly and negatively about prior interviews that they had taken part in; where they felt outsider-interviewers had too easily assumed insider status because of a presumed commonality of experience to control the interview process in ways that were directive. One participant spoke of her experiences of being interviewed by a feminist researcher, who drew on a presumption of commonality through gender
to correct my participant’s narratives concerning asexuality. Although my participants frequently placed me in a quasi-insider role, I had to remain ethically aware in my interviewing and my later judgements that I was an outsider (Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Because of this, and other ethical issues already discussed, in Chapters Four and Five I structure my accounts of my participants’ comments so they do not imply any insider status. These chapters describe how activists gave an account of their identities and their activism, and what that suggested to me as an outsider about the increasing visibility of asexual activism in the West.

In my participant observation, autoethnography and use of photographs, in Chapter Six which flows from them my point of view is broadly emic. The ‘I’ is an insider with his own knowledge of and engagement with LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest, and of Pride events (Coffey, 1999; Ellis, 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009; Maréchal, 2010). This is particularly significant for autoethnography and the autoethnographic writing I undertook because, although definitions of autoethnography have broadened (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008), it is still generally understood that in self-reflecting on the researcher ‘I’ one is reflecting on one’s own insider subjectivity (Hayano, 1979). In Chapter Six, I reflect on and interpret moments and events which felt meaningful and significant to me, and my impressions draws on and engages with my subjective biographies of identity and/or protest. In order that that subjective interpretation should resonate as valid to my research, I draw on my etic research already conducted to suggest why my impressions are meaningful and significant to it. By utilising thick description, I seek to combine my etic and emic research to offer a valid interpretation of Pride events I attended, and their relevance to my research (Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 2009). I reflect on my insider status throughout, and my feelings about that insider status, to illustrate that these are the subjective impressions of an insider with his impacting biographies, predispositions and biases (Coffey, 1999; Ellis, 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009; Maréchal, 2010). Because of this, while Chapter Six is an insider account, my duty of care to my participants remained and impacted upon my thick
description. For example, there were events at the Asexuality Conference that I found I could not comment on, because it proved impossible to untangle my impressions from prior ‘insider’
knowledge. My participants of colour, and others, made specific insider statements concerning Tumblr, AVEN and the Asexuality Conference. Their statements were relevant to my research, and impacted on my subjective focus on whiteness as a research interest, but I found that I could not directly comment on those statements beyond what was public knowledge as my duty of care remained. Chapter Six is structured in the form of an extended autoethnographic storytelling (Herrmann and Fate, 2014) on my participation at Pride events that thickly describes my subjective observations and impressions. At the same time, that subjectivity is limited by the reflective concern that I paid to my ongoing ethical relationships with my interview participants, and with asexual activism in general as a researcher in Asexual Studies. A concern that is shown in Chapters Four and Five in my account of my participants’ narratives, the first of which now follows.
Chapter 4. Mobilising A-Pride: Triggering asexual activism

4.1 The Making of the Modern Asexual Activist.

In the space of less than two decades, asexuality has gone from being a zoological term (A Dictionary of Biology, 2004), typically applied to single-cell organisms, to an increasingly claimed sexual orientation by hundreds of thousands of people in the West.

I’ve identified as asexual myself since the ’90s, like long before AVEN existed. I mean, it used to be quite common, by the way. People... You’ve probably come across other people who’ve actually invented the word ‘asexual’ for themselves. I guess, we get it from biology, but different meaning, obviously. Mark

As it proliferates on the Internet, this orientation is colonising other areas of the world as well. It has a variety of identities and behaviours now attached to it which are understood not only by those who identify as asexual, but increasingly by mainstream populations as well (Decker, 2015). If a young person was to say, “I am an amoeba,” I would sense that they meant that they identified as asexual rather than they were making a comment about their intellectual prowess. I suspect more and more young people and others would know as well.

I feel like, with asexually being so new, relatively, like in terms of the community, I think it might take a little bit while for it to be really pushed out. But there are more asexual characters being presented in the media, and online through fan fictions, and things like that. So, I think it is something that’s going to be through a lot of online activity, and maybe some more media inclusion, regarding the asexuality within the LGBT community. I think it will kind of be more visible as the years go by. Jerome

Modern asexuality as a sexual orientation and set of identities arrived at a serendipitous moment in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I use serendipitous in an ironic sense because this can overlook that what was serendipitous for asexuality was tragic in a broader context. Modern asexuality and its emergent identities were facilitated by the social changes that to the way sexuality was perceived in the West, in the wake of HIV/AIDS and early HIV/AIDS activism. Historically, there have been nascent-asexual individuals and groups who defined their identities in terms of celibacy (Kahan, 2013). There have been individuals who constructed their intimate relationships in terms of affectionate friendship rather than erotic desire, and groups who campaigned for their rights as spinsters to be upheld and maintained (Oram, 1992). These groups went against the thrust of 20th
century sexological narrative in the West, and mainstream socio-political debate. They were often lost, overlooked and ridiculed for much of the 20th century. In the wake of HIV/AIDS, space was opened in the crisis of legitimation (Habermas, 1975; Weber, 1975) that occurred around traditional customs of sexual conduct, and emerging codes of sexual behaviour, to begin considering other identities without the same models of dysfunction and deficit.

The Natsal 1 Survey is an exemplar of this (Wellings et al, 1994). The Natsal 1 was a response to the need for information about sexual and non-sexual attitudes and lifestyles in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Consequently, it included a question on sexual attraction. I discussed in my literature review how the results of that question have been much quoted and disputed. Despite those disputes, the results of the Natsal 1 Survey remain significant to the field of Asexual Studies and asexual activism. Anthony Bogaert (2004, 2006, 2015) drew on the survey to establish attraction as the basis for asexual identity. In turn AVEN (the Asexual Visibility and Education Network), the largest and most prominent of all asexual activist groups, drew on Bogaert’s research in constructing their own definition of asexuality: “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction,” (AVEN, 2016). This has become a powerful resonant frame concerning asexual identity within and without the asexual community (Snow and Benford 1988). It enables AVEN and other activists to bridge the complexities of asexual identities for people considering their own asexual identities, and to align asexual identities in ways that make them comprehensible for Pride communities and the wider public (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Snow, 1992). For activists the frame follows Snow and Benford’s (1988: 197-217) and Kuypers’ (2006:7) comments concerning embedding problem, blame and solution: ‘we feel we are being pressurised to have sex despite our lack of attraction, this is because of other people’s expectations, we need to organise to tell them to stop’. Whether that frame is based on empirically sound data is moot; what matters for activists is that it is fateful to their experiences and narratives, and those questioning their own asexual identity (Snow and Benford 1988). ‘Attraction’ as a framed concept has been remarkably successful for asexual activists in growing their community and presenting their activist faces (De Lappe, 2016). It is important to grasp the symbolic and meaningful activist linkages in a definition both bio-determinist and self-affirming.

Asexual activism was also facilitated by the emergence of the Internet (Alcaire, 2014). As D’Emilio (2012) notes, sexual and gender social movements are historically enabled by the spaces in which they congregate. In the early part of the 20th century, increasing numbers of homosexual men and lesbians moved to cosmopolitan areas in North America and Britain. They began to establish gay ghettos and gay identities. They mobilised and organised around a gay politics. Being in a cosmopolitan space helped them to both hide and be visible. It triggered the emergence of gay
politics, but it also meant that gay politics had a cosmopolitan flavour. It told the story of gay life in the city.

The Internet has enabled asexuals and asexual activists to congregate:

I was lurking on AVEN, then I saw that somebody from my university, which was [...] where I was doing my PhD, was not only on, but was in a documentary. I felt I had to get in contact with them. Mark

Well, I was wanting to figure out a way to tell my parents that I was this way, so I started going to AVEN. I went to YouTube and kind of just looked up like how other people came out to tell other people. They kind of just told me, like I got a bunch of different reactions. So it kind of help me mentally prepare for what my parents might say in response or what other friends might say, and they kind of just went through a walkthrough of like, “This is what you can say, this is how you like bring it up.” Shelley

It’s so easy now just to type in “asexuality” and come up with 50 blogs of people who understand what you’re going through. So you now have the support network. Tina

AVEN has over 70,000 registered members at present. The online communities effectively operate as asexual ghettos where asexual identities can establish. They have enabled asexual activists to mobilise and organise around an increasingly diverse asexual politics. It means that asexual politics has a particularly digital flavour. I want to consider the overall flavour of asexual politics, in terms of contention, lifestyle and identity.

4.2 Contention, Lifestyle and Identity Politics.

Contention, identity, and, lifestyle are not discreet terms when describing activist behaviours. In action, the boundaries between them are fuzzy and they are an artificial separation. In practice, activist behaviours are a combination of all three strands. It is moot whether one activist narrative of action is more concerned with identity than it is a contentious act or an act which is about lifestyle. Despite this, I find untangling the strands to consider how activists are describing behaviours is a useful analytical process. My participants comment across all strands to challenge to the sexual imperative (Decker, 2015). They challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that it is impossible to lead a healthy life without a healthy sex life; a characteristic of asexual activism. Echoing Carrigan (2011), this challenge is typically framed in sex-positive, sex-neutral and/or sex-adverse terms.

Asexual identity activism is concerned with the dissemination of information through various means about asexuality and asexual orientation for individuals who might be questioning their own sexual
and/or gender orientations. Much of this occurs online on online communities such as AVEN or Tumblr or YouTube. There are an increasing number of asexual bloggers. Activists give campus talks on asexual identity. Activists give interviews online and in hard-copy; there are a small, significant number of 101 texts written by activists for about asexual identities and politics (Archive, 2012; Maisha, 2012; Decker, 2015; Purdy, 2015).

I think it is like, obviously, AVEN as well, but I think major accessible social networks like Tumblr, and Facebook, and Twitter, where, well Twitter particularly and Tumblr, because Twitter and Tumblr is anyone who has a platform, like there’s no hierarchy of who you can listen to, and you can get re-tweeted if you’re just Joe Bloggs. These places are amazing platforms for lesser understood identities, or identities that aren’t normally given a voice.

Tina

Characteristic to the dissemination of information is the ‘case study’. By this, activists have provided examples of the ever-widening combinations by which asexual orientation can be combined with gendered identity, romantic, sensual and aesthetic attractions, or some sexual attraction. These are usually in the form of personal biographies which serve as comparison case studies by which others who might be questioning their asexual identity can consider this. It is prevalent online where it has enabled many individuals to consider their own potential asexual identification:

I’ve actually had someone share a video. I don’t know what the response is, but I’m just hoping that if it’s even just one person that if they were like me, who they just didn’t feel like they belong, that they can find that video, and say: “Hey, that sounds a lot like me.” Then they can find out that they have somewhere that they belong. They can have people to support them no matter what. So I’m just hoping to educate more people and kind of just make us more visible. Shelley

These case studies comment on individual claimed asexual identity, and do more. They are characterised by detailed qualitative, sometimes quantitative, reflection; cataloguing, classifying and collating the various affective interrelationships that individual’s asexual identity engages them with. This can be done with almost mathematical rigour. There is a noted example in the documentary A(Sexual) (Tucker, 2011) where David Jay explains the various interrelationships in his life utilising a series of graphs. An example from one of my participants, in response to a request for some biographical background details, is below with details left out to preserve their anonymity:

Genderqueer, grey-asexual, panromantic, polyamorous, neuroatypical, chronically ill, invisibly-disabled [ethnic and religious background], living in [...]. Barbara
Within the lifestyle strand activists have organised at local, national and international levels events which enable asexual community members to come together and meet each other. This is done with the intention of promoting an asexual lifestyle as positive and healthy. It can imply an implicit criticism of what many asexuals feel is the overt hyper-sexualisation of contemporary life.

We have a lot of regulars. I’d say we have three or four now. I am close friends with them now just ‘cause they come to almost every meetup. For us, if it’s just us, we will talk about asexuality sometimes, but a lot of the stuff we already established I guess. People are comfortable with their identities. We will talk about it obviously, but I think a lot of it has to do with social and political issues that kind of intersect with our identities. I guess that’s feminism, politics, race, all of that stuff. **Angela**

As I noted previously, ‘cake’ became used as a metaphor for asexuality in the early days of AVEN. It began as an Internet meme when one AVEN user wrote in the forums “What’s better than sex?” to which someone replied “Cake!” This went viral. Not every activist or community member uses it, but it is not unusual to see photographs of individuals theatrically eating cake at asexual events, or people using cake emoji on their online presences. Asexual activism in its community building has developed a lexicon, a subcultural lingo, that is not merely about asexual identities. It promotes an asexual lifestyle, and critiques aspects of Western allosexual lifestyles:

I mean, we had other ones going, like the moon was pink cheese with aardvarks, something pink aardvarks, but that sort of fell below the radar. We also had purple bananas. That also has fallen away, but cake seems to have survived. I think because it’s less esoteric and less bizarre. People can make cake. Cake is easily accessible. You can bake a cake. If you’re gonna have a meeting, you can have cake or cupcakes. It’s doable. It’s fun, it’s good for most people. People like... Food is always a good community building thing. **AD**

Contentious acts by activists have been characterised by public acts of engagement, protest and unity to promote increasingly public awareness and tolerance of asexuals, and to safeguard their rights.

I basically just said, “Well, Asexuality Awareness Week is October. Can we do a campaign for it?” So it was actually the first month I was in university, I was already doing an asexual campaign. **Tina**

Under the contentious strand activists have been concerned with challenging the bio-medical perception of asexual orientation as a pathologised condition. This is particularly linked to a critique of hyper-sexualisation and compulsory sexuality:
Everyone is assumed to be sexual or with the sex-positive movement, it’s assumed that you’re sexual. Just turning negative sex into positive sex. Sort of that idea is something that I think is very much, almost entrenched in a lot of LGBTQ activism and a lot of Pride activism in a lot of ways. When you mix in asexuality with that model, it kinda is a direct challenge to the model that’s been set up. I think in challenging compulsory sexuality, which I think is a lot of the work of asexuality, and kind of what... The identity itself challenges that mode of thought. Jerome

To challenge the perception of asexual orientation as a pathologised condition asexual activists have sought to promote better research, often conducting research themselves. They also do this by promoting research online, and organising events such as the Asexuality Conference 2014 in Toronto that I attended. They seeking to take an active consulting role in relevant research so that the concerns of the asexual community are included. As I discuss in Chapter One, AVEN took a consulting role in changes from the DSM-4 to the DSM-5 concerning hypoactive sexual desire disorder (De Lappe, 2016):

*I became particularly interested in research issues and academic awareness.* Brendan

Over the last decade, activists have been increasingly visible at local, national and international Pride events, particularly in North America and Europe. This will be a focus of Chapters Five and Six.

4.3 Odd, broken and in need of fixing.

I do not want to appear to be describing a bed of roses. An emerging sexual and gender movement that has mainstreamed with very little difficulty. Several of my research participants distressed me with their accounts of isolation and rejection:

*Well, before there were a lot of people who kind of told me that I was a liar about my sexuality. Like, they just didn’t think that it was an actual thing. There was just a lot of negative feedback and they just kept on telling me I was a freak, for lack of better words...* Shelley

“Oh, it’s your hormones, Jean. You can get treatment for that.” I said, “No, it’s not my hormones. I don’t want treatment for it. That’s not what this is about.” “Oh it is,” she says, and, “No, don’t tell me what this is about.” Jean

*I think it’s a common experience for a lot of asexual people, is that they feel broken. That there’s something wrong with them.* Angela
Others spoke of similar experiences and feelings. As Foucault noted (1977a, 201-203), visibility brings its own dangers. What can be tacitly accepted, if ridiculed, while it is silent must be fiercely rejected and policed once it claims a space. Tropes of deviancy and abnormality, deficit and dysfunction, have re-emerged in relation to modern asexuality as it becomes more visible.

Mainstream media representation is a good example. In the TV series *House* (Shore, 2004), *Sirens* (Fisher and Leary, 2014) and the film *The Olivia Experiment* (Schenk, 2012), the same narrative about asexual women is used. Asexuality is a confused, faked condition experienced by conventionally attractive white cis-gendered women. They are portrayed as acting-out because they are frustrated with their own feelings. This frustration acts as a barrier for allosexual men to enjoy sex with them. Asexual women are portrayed as frustrated and frustrating images of desire, reinforcing dominant discourses of femininity. **Angela**, who is conventionally attractive, talked of this ‘frustration’:

> As far as sexuality goes, how do you pass as a straight or gay or whatever? That’s ridiculous. You’re just judging people on appearances, and I think that heteronormativity has a lot to do with that. It’s automatically assumed to be the default unless you wear rainbow colours or something. It’s just ridiculous. I’m approached by men daily. It’s a serious issue for me, I’d say it happens, sometimes it happens three to four times a day. Just yesterday it happened, and people assume I’m straight constantly. It didn’t bother me at first. Then, as I’ve become more comfortable with my identity, I’m like, “Well, that’s not who I am, and you shouldn’t assume as much.” I absolutely get assumed as straight, and I say, “Oh, I’m not really interested in people that way.” People are like, “Oh, so you’re gay, you’re a lesbian.” That’s the only other option in their mind. So absolutely it happens constantly and it’s very frustrating. I wish I could just wear a big sign that says ‘No, I’m not interested’, but that’s how it is. I would say I don’t really benefit from that. I find it more of a... I mean I guess in some ways I do because people don’t target me or anything like that, but as soon as they realize that I’m different I definitely get a lot of distrust and disgust. **Angela**

In *The Celluloid Closet*, Russo (1987) spoke about the widespread contradictory representation of homosexual men at the time. Homosexual men were degenerate and effeminate, but also curiously attractive and predatory. There was something about their effeminacy that endangered real masculinity, that meant they had to be ‘fixed’; usually violently. Times have changed in relation to the mainstream representation of homosexuality, but masculinity is still policed. One can see the same anxieties concerning masculinity emerging in the representation of asexual and quasi-asexual masculinity. In the TV series *House* (Shore, 2004), an asexual man is portrayed as having a tumour in
his brain which is responsible for his lack of a sex life. Medical science fix his asexuality; the inference is made that science can fix all asexual men similarly. On the *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady, 2007) the character of Sheldon is portrayed as a quasi-asexual, and characterised as such because of his alienating intelligence and his dysfunctional family background. The plot is resolved by him having sex with his girlfriend Amy, who is presented in a state of constant sexual frustration. More disturbingly in Von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* (2013), a film which revolves around graphic violent sexual imagery, the character who is shown as attempting rape upon the female protagonist is the male voyeur who has identified as asexual. The diegesis justifies his violent death by her hands, echoing Russo’s (1987) historic comments as to homosexual representation. *Mark* talking about his experiences in school; the difficulty in getting others to take them seriously because he is a white cis-gendered’ male:

> I said something like “Well, I’ve suffered... I have actually been physically assaulted for this,” and then they came back and said, “Oh, when [...] says he hasn’t been physically assaulted for this, well, you have to take in to account he’s a cisgender male.” I was like “Actually I said ‘I had’, not ‘haven’t.’” [chuckle] Yeah, I kind of feel that I might be part of the same thing.

*Mark*

Once it was heterosexual masculine anxieties that had to be supported, and now it is allosexual masculine anxieties. I thought it significant that in a recent interview the film star Michael Douglas, when he wished to accuse younger actors of being too effeminate, did not use the code words ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’. He accused them of being “too asexual (Smith, 2015).”

Of my 13 participants, four identified as BME and/or mixed-race, and nine identified as white. Three identified as male, eight as female, while one was non-binary gender and one was genderqueer. Nearly all had a high standard of education, which I suggest is less illustrative of asexual activists then of activists who respond to research calls. As I discussed in my methodology, the online interviews were loosely semi-structured. They were conversational in tone and dialogic. Themes could emerge though there were a few basic prompting questions. In the next section, I consider the four most vibrant framed presentations of the activist self that were suggested by my interviewing: the asexual activist of colour; the queer asexual activist; the older asexual activist, and, the normative asexual activist. These framed narratives are neither homogenous nor heterogeneous; the same voices can speak from many presentations. The same topics may arise or not, or may have different focus.

---

7 “Designating a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth; of or relating to such persons. Contrasted with transgender (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016).”
4.4 The Asexual Activist of Colour.

Code-switching is a socio-linguistic term (Toribo and Bullock, 2012; Auer, 2013). Code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or dialects, in the same conversation. People who speak more than one language, multilinguals, often code-switch. Code-switching is about understanding the rules; the syntax, phonology and grammar of each language or dialect used. Code-switching is increasingly used to talk about switching between identities for strategic or cultural reasons. Barbara, who is from a mixed-race background, speaking about their activist identity in relation to their other identities, spoke explicitly about code-switching:

Basically, what I would say is that everyone is different. People struggle with trying to find out who they are. Most people grow up either wearing one identity or rejecting a series of them, accepting whatever is thrown at them. Then, eventually, come to a conclusion, which might be... Like one of the books I read said “I’m not half, I’m double.” You know, I’m not half this and half that. I’m just double everything, because half seems to make people seem less. Or there’s some people who just like, they code-shift, basically. Their whole identity code-shifts, not just their language. They just, you know, they’re more Asian when they’re with their white friends, and they’re more white when they’re with their Asian friends, until they really start to embrace themselves and they’re more Asian with their Asian friends and more white with their white friends, or whatever. There’s some interesting stories in there about like people being out in public with a parent they didn’t look like, stuff like that. It’s good stuff. Barbara

‘Passing’ as straight, posing as heterosexual and/or cis-gendered in the mainstream, is different from code-switching (Serano, 2016). With passing, one claims an identity one does not wish to be ‘read’ as false. There may be good strategic reasons for doing this, to avoid persecution for example. Code-switching is moving between differing claimed identities with differing groups and/or in differing spatialities. There may be strategic reasons for many people for code-switching:

[it] is really challenging to say “I am both black and queer”, or something like that. I think being able to do that, in a way, is something that is very, very, very new and very challenging in a way that a lot of people aren’t expecting. For me that helps me, ’cause I like being able to challenge people’s traditional ideas just in general, regardless of what those ideas are. But it can be exhausting. It can be very tiring. I do think there are certain spaces where strategically you have to let go... Jerome
As well as an asexual activist of colour, Jerome is a committed campus activist. Like others, he came to asexual activism from a background in progressive activism and politics:

"I think for me, a lot of it was I was involved with a lot of racial politics, as well as just politics in general, like liberal activism in a lot of ways. Jerome"

I’ve been politically involved in one way or another since high school, starting with joining an Amnesty International chapter Deborah

Jerome has personal reasons for his activism which frame the strategies that he deploys:

"I feel that black men in particular have been hyper-sexualized, so asexuality is sort of a liberation in a lot of ways. It’s those types of things I’m hoping I can make a contribution in looking at that. Because I do identify as demi-sexual, I try to speak about the spectrum a lot and educate a lot of people, a lot of non-asexesuals, about the spectrum in a way that they can understand what asexuality is more, and understand that it’s not this set point. Jerome"

Code-switching can therefore be part of the tactical repertoire of the activist, to speak to different constituencies. One can be an asexual activist in one space, a queer activist in another, and a black activist in a third. One can be all three when the circumstance is propitious. Code-switching is an artful strategy, but it is nevertheless morally truthful (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009). In this context, it is about the enablement of asexual activists of colour to occupy spaces where they feel comfortable to begin to articulate their intersecting identities:

"I was away from my family, so I was free to explore asexuality, my identity and kinda then meet other people because I had never met anybody else like me before. I met up with somebody who was also interested in co-organizing the meet-ups. We talked about a lot of interesting things at the meet-ups, I think, that really helped me to kind of sort myself out and understand how other people are feeling within the same community. There’s definitely the discussion of race and feminism and orientation and all of that stuff. It’s definitely all intersecting. Angela"

Participants were concerned to engage with spaces that enabled them not only to find their identities as asexual activists, but as asexual activists of colour:

"I’m not really on AVEN forums as much. I’m on Tumblr a lot more. I don’t necessarily know if it is getting any better than it has in the rest of the queer community. I’ve been really lucky
that most of the asexuals I know in person are minorities or are of colour. That’s kind of been really helpful for me, being able to navigate it. Jerome

A lot of the solace that I’ve found was not from AVEN, but Tumblr. I use it everyday and I would say that they’re one of the more open minded sites that I can go onto and discuss my identity and talk to other people and just kind of spread visibility and discussions about the meet-ups that I’m going to Angela

I was just gonna say that a lot of Tumblr, I think, grew out of the LiveJournal hiatus, ‘cause on LiveJournal, there were communities, very active communities, where people spoke very directly and confrontationally about race. Deborah

There was an appreciation of the path-breaking work that AVEN had done in the field of asexual activism. One of the participants had worked directly on one of AVEN’s most significant public campaigns and spoke positively about their experiences working with other AVEN members. It should also be noted that one of the other participants spoke very negatively about their experiences of seeking to engage with organising a POC (Persons of Colour) only space at the Asexuality Conference organised during WorldPride 2014:

I think it’s a perceived... It’s a perception of cohesion that necessitates that certain so-called fringe elements, like people of colour stay quiet. Deborah

There was a perception amongst participants that AVEN was representative of a middle-class white asexual activism. Bound up to this, and the use of the Internet, were two quite distinct framings of safety; where already oligarchic tendencies were being perceived (Michels, 1958; Hyland, 1995:247).

Other participants, who not only used AVEN but other online forums, would talk about safe Net use in terms of observing common rules of behaviour. Activists in this section were as minded focusing on having spaces to discuss confrontational issues safely. Three of the four participants here mentioned Tumblr as a safe space for discussing confrontational issues; whereas other participants talked about Tumblr as a distinctly unsafe space where there were no clear rules of behaviour. The qualities that made Tumblr attractive to some activists made it equally unattractive to others. The participants here did not view asexual online spaces as neutral or colour-blind in matters of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003, 2006). Despite the potential of the Internet, all four participants here were tech savvy, there was a sense of dissatisfaction with the Internet and with the structures created:

Hopefully, the ideal right now would just be to have a lot of regulars coming to the meet-ups, on a smaller level. Eventually it growing into a larger community. Like I said, I’m not satisfied
with the way AVEN created their community. I feel like there’s a lot better ways that people can create a community that’s more accepting and more open minded and just, a safe space,

*Angela*

My sense was that participants here were less concerned with being accusatory towards white asexual activists, than in reflecting on the intersectional complexities of combining asexual activist roles with other activist roles in relation to race. There was an acknowledgement that priorities can be different and can lead to problematic relationships:

*I think there’s a long way to go with the broader community online. I think there’s a lot more blogs for asexuals of colour popping up, and I think that’s awesome. But I think, in terms of actually recognizing the intersectionalities within the community, I don’t think we’ve done a good job of that. Part of that, I do believe, might be just because figuring out asexuality and explaining that to the outside world is already confusing enough. I think a lot of white asexuals may not even recognize some of the other issues at play with other identities coming, being involved.* *Jerome*

This sense of intersectionality and interconnectedness was evident amongst the participants that I spoke to. It was not merely about opening asexual spaces to asexuals of colour. It was about reimagining these spaces, how they were constituted and framed, so that they were always and had always not only been white spaces and discourses:

*Also, I’ve been... In terms of race... Like you said, I’ve been writing to try to make those connections of what is the historical implications of asexuality with race and other sorts of identities.* *Jerome*

Code-switching was therefore not only part of the tactical repertoire of the asexual activist of colour; there was an expectation that it could be part of the transformational politics of asexual activism and wider narratives as a whole.

4.5 The Queer Asexual Activist.

While there was a perception of commonality of response amongst those participants who framed asexual activism in terms of race, this was less evident in those participants who framed their activist identities in terms of queerness. This is not to imply that queer and queerness was not significant and meaningful. Participants’ responses here were thoughtful. It was evident that most had reflected on their sense of queer and queerness and their relationships to their asexuality and their activism. Who was queer, who could be queer, and whether it was simply enough to be asexual in
some form to be queer? Participants exemplified Melucci’s (1981, 1981, 1989) comments on nomadic collective identity. The responses were diverse. In attempting to give some sense of how and why these responses were so framed, one must be careful not to over define queer. Melucci’s (1989: 34-35) comments on the interactive, negotiated characteristics of modern collective identity apply. I would suggest that at least some of queer’s success is its elasticity; its ability to be stretched and pulled in various directions while retaining coherence (Hall, 1996a). It retains this coherence because there are certain broad boundaries, I think. As my research participants’ quotes illustrate, queer is being engaged with across three broad interrelated discourses. These are not always antagonistic towards each other, but they can be. Queer is framed as a commitment to an oppositional, activist identity and lifestyle to heteronormativity and homonormativity. Queer can also be an identification of oneself as a sexual and gendered minority outside of mainstream norms. Finally, queer is an umbrella term for sexual and gendered minority identities; often used to be free of the historical baggage carried by prior umbrella terms.

This sense of queer as an oppositional, activist identity and lifestyle was particularly strong for some participants. For them, although it was linked to their sense of asexuality, it was could be quite distinct.

*It’s not just that I feel an affinity toward queer, I am queer. I’m not sure that my asexuality is what makes me queer. I think there are lots of other things about me that make me queer, but queer is at least, somewhat self-consciously, politically existing heteronormativity kind of way. That’s certainly the way that I live my life, that’s who I am, that’s how people treat me as well. I mean, typically, I’m read as a dyke. I mean, that’s incorrect, but it’s still... Non-binary people are not... It’s fairly difficult to pass as non-binary, especially with certain body shapes. But yeah, the kinds of relationships that I do engage in and who I am, and what I’m inclined to do and not do, and what’s important to me, that is something that’s completely outside of the heteronormative, heterosexual matrix thing. It’s even kind of fringe within many queer circles. I’m not part of the homonormative world, either. AD*

There was an expectation of queer carrying a commitment to a radical sexual and gendered politics which would preclude many asexuals from identifying as queer. Although the politics was different, the emphasis on a committed, constructed, politicised identity mirrored Weeks (2007), Faderman (2015) and Jeffreys (1997). Davis, who is a committed radical activist, talked about their experience of identifying as heteroromantic when they first came out as asexual, but still feeling queer compared to many heteroromantic asexuals who would identify as straight:
I used to identify as heteroromantic when I first came out as ace. Even then I still felt queer. I know that there’s some people who are heteroromantic who would see themselves or they’ll call themselves like straight aces. I certainly didn’t identify that way. But certainly, to each their own, but I still felt queer. While I think other people that I’ve talked to have maybe not so much. Davis

Others spoke about their feelings when their right to claim queerness was denied them by other LGBT+ and Q community members. Issues of inclusion and exclusion, within-community and other communities, reflect prior debates (Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Goldstein, 1984; Lewis, 2004; Bawer, 2008):

Then from the LGBT community, you kind of get... Because people are like, “Oh it’s just the same as being straight, or whatever,” and it’s like, “Mmm. No.” Even if... ’Cause if you’re a heteroromantic asexual, they can kind of argue that, “Oh no,” just ‘cause you’re basically straight, and it’s like, “Well, no, no. I’m still queer.” So, I wouldn’t say it’s the same level as the other oppression, but it is definitely a thing that asexual people experience. Tina

For many of the queer asexual activists, their queer and asexual identities intersected with each other, but it was a case of ambiguous coexistence. That was certainly not the case for all. Others felt that there had been productive engagement between asexual activism and queer activism, analogous to historic acts of moderatorship that occurred in the Pride narrative. Jerome, who is a queer demi-sexual, felt that mainstream asexual activism had been more successful in engaging with queer then with issues of race. He noted the many conversations online as to whether simply being asexual makes one queer:

I think the asexual community’s been very good, in my opinion, of recognizing being able to be asexual and queer. I think there’s a lot of debate whether being asexual is a queer identity. So that’s also been another interesting conversation that I’ve been noticing in a lot of communities. Jerome

Pragmatically and symbolically this frames all asexual spaces as queer spaces, which was problematic for some of the queer asexual activists. This ran both ways and was not simply about asexuals viewing themselves as queer, but how non-aseexual queers view asexuality:

If I’m with a bunch of asexual people, meet ups are often really strange and awkward, depending on the group, because they’re my people but in many ways, they’re really not my people, so that’s less likely... It’s a similar thing with groups of non-aseexual queer folk, but in
different ways, but often, groups of asexual people are much more alienating than groups of non-aseXual queer folk. AD

Participants again made mention of the exhaustion that comes from having to constantly explain the specifics of asexual identities in each space. Queer could operate as a form of code-switching, as a shorthand umbrella term that did not carry the historical baggage of earlier umbrella terms. Here Queer here avoided the phallocentricism of much minority sexual politics (Cixious, 1976; Irigaray, 1985). In this sense, queer is not just being used as a radical synonym for LGBT+. It can be a holding term for a point when the person using the identifier is more comfortable expanding upon their sexual and gendered identities:

I’ve got a few friends who are men exclusively attracted to men, but they call themselves “queer” because they want to kind of disassociate themselves with the gay community and some of the negative areas in there, like the misogyny and that kind of thing. So they disconnect themselves from it by saying “queer”. I think that identifying as queer kind of, is a way of showing that you are... You want to be identified as separate from heterosexual, heteronormativity, but at the same time, you kind of are aware of the problematic elements of the community. You kind of need to have your own identity there. When not everyone is educated about asexuality, specifically, it can get a bit exhausting, having to explain it all the time. Tina

Queer asexual activists were therefore framing queer in diverse, heterogeneous ways. What queer meant was contextual and shifted. There was a sense that claiming queer established a critique of both the heteronormative and homonormative. Whether asexuality and asexual activism was queer was a matter of debate:

Because there are certainly lots and lots of asexuals who are queer. Asexuality can be a queer thing but I don’t think it necessarily is. It depends on what kind of queer space and what queer’s meaning in that moment AD

There was a belief amongst participants that queerness, queer communities and queer activism took recognition of emerging sexual and gendered identities in a way that had not yet happened in the mainstream:

So I’d definitely say the... I think maybe another part of it, maybe for the mainstream queer community, for all its flaws, societies in general have been talking more and more about, for better or for worse, about sexualities outside of heterosexuality. Davis
There was an underlying belief the queer activism, and by extension queer asexual activism, concerned themselves with issues that neither heteronormative nor homonormative movements were focused upon:

_It’s kind of interesting. I’ve had it happen to me before where I’ll be talking. It’s usually to a straight person where I’ll tell them that I’m interested in queer activism and queer thought and queer feminism and all this stuff. Then the first thing that comes to their mouth is, “Well, marriage equality, right?” I’m sitting there like, “I couldn’t care less.”_ Davis

The tension was the extent to which queer asexual activism could render power visible (Melucci, 1989:76) within heteronormative and homonormative mainstreems while remaining a nomadic collective identity, or becomes hardened and stratified into another system of rules and customs (Michels, 1958; Hyland, 1995:247).

4.6 The Normative Asexual Activist.

_But there’s also an argument that the more radical factions make that engagement possible. I don’t know if you... Do you remember, there’s some quote in a different context? Malcolm X saying something like, “Well...” Oh god, I’m gonna get this wrong. Yeah, something like, “The reason that people listened to Martin Luther King is because otherwise they’d have to deal with me,” kind of thing. Kind of like, “I’m gonna be the really radical faction, I’m gonna be the bad guy which makes the good guys look good,” or you know what I mean, sort of, approachable, because otherwise you’re gonna have to deal with the really radical faction._ Mark

The Overton Window is named after Joseph P. Overton who originated the concept (Lehman, 2014). His insight was that the window of acceptability in public opinion and socio-political thought can be moved. An idea can start as too unpalatable or radical for public opinion, and politicians may not initially implement them for fear that they are too wacky and risky. However, the effect over time of stating, framing and arguing for these outlier policies may be to shift the window of discourse. The idea crosses over into mainstream opinion. The reverse can also occur; what was mainstream opinion may be pushed to the margins to become seen as unacceptable. The same-sex marriage discourse is an example of a shifting Overton window in many Western cultures over the last three decades (Ball, 1996; Hull, 1991; Cahill, 2004; Hackl, Boyer and Galupo, 2013).
All social movements must shift the Overton window to make progress with their own aims. To do that, they must position themselves outside of public opinion to shift it. Initially, they will almost inevitably suffer ridicule, scorn and anger for this. If they are steadfast and successful, over time they will redefine what was considered unacceptable in the mainstream. It will become the new normal (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005):

*I think that holds true for every single situation, whether it’s disagreements with just religion or politics or economics. If you can relate to someone, it’s easier to get along with them. I think that’s a major improvement for people who are trying to gain equal rights or just trying to become visible as a whole.* **Shelley**

The question then becomes; how far do you need to be standing outside of public opinion to shift it? Or, to echo Plummer (1994, 2003, 2005), whose tales of intimate citizenship might seem unpalatable to a public audience now but are likely to find a willing, commodified stage in the future?

[talking about discussion with key figurehead in asexual activism] “Okay there are two main approaches to activism. One is advocacy where it’s basically ‘Okay, here’s what I think you should do and we’re going to try to convince you to do that.’ The other approach is more of, we want to raise discussion around this issue. So, we want to get different experts in different fields talking about it, talking about possible ways of improving things and so on.” I don’t remember what term [they] used for that but [they] made... [they] said that what we’re trying to do is the second of these. **Brendan**

I suggest **Mark**, who is an engaged but moderate voice within asexual activism, by combining the example of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King with the Overton window was giving three perspectives on the normalising impact of the window of acceptability. The first and most obvious, is that what may seem unpalatable about asexuality to public opinion now may not always be so. Asexual activism is preparing that shift in the window. The second is that it is not always a question of asexual activists presenting themselves in palatable ways. There is a space for more extreme viewpoints because they have a role to play in shifting the window. The third is that, over time, the role of those radical factions is to feed into the space at the centre. Asexual activism will be influenced and modified by more radical ideas, and more radical activists, but the agenda will still be set by the centre; by the normative activists.

*I think so that means that times are gonna change. I think, certainly with more awareness, more researches, and more people showing an active interest in it, it is gonna progress. I think that as time goes on in the same way as, I’m gonna pick on homosexuality, it has*
moved since where it once was a majority of people being anti-gay, to now the majority of people being pro-gay. Clare

I think our main issue is with our relationships and how we deal with sexuality. That we still need to be treated equal even if we have a different viewpoint. That our needs are just as important as another person’s. Shelley

There is a different sense of space being claimed and maintained here from either activists of colour or queer activists that I interviewed. I am not seeking to imply that the various activists are in opposition to each other, though there are differences of opinion. It felt significant that Mark talked about “good guys” and “bad guys.” At the same time, all are concerned to claim space for asexual identities, but the focus is different. It felt that asexual activists of colour were concerned with finding or reimagining intersectional spaces which were not always white. Queer asexual activists were mostly concerned with being in spaces that committed one to a radical sexual and gendered politics. Normative asexual activists were concerned with finding spaces that brought asexuality into the centre. This was framed as the key issue. Characteristically, the participants that I have included in the section were white and heteroromantic:

I wanted to get married, have children, get a job, that kind of thing. But I was very rarely attracted to anyone and cultural expectations are that the male is supposed to initiate the relationship and if I wasn’t attracted to anybody, that created difficulties. So that’s what got me looking into asexuality. I have since gotten married, so last March, and so the question of trying to find a partner is just not a personally important thing anymore, ‘cause I have one. So just at a personal level, asexuality, it doesn’t feel nearly as relevant as it used to. Also partly from connotations that I get with the directions that some parts of asexual discourse is moving in, especially with Tumblr or some political aspects of it that I’m not really happy about…Brendan

I kind of identify as a heteroromantic asexual. So yeah, I want to be in a romantic relationship with someone of the opposite gender. Sid

I’d say I’m heteroromantic asexual, but I haven’t really made up my mind whether or not I’m attracted to the same sex in any little way because, it’s like that question of, ‘Can anybody, supposedly, be totally straight or totally gay’ for want of a better term? Clare

What was striking was how the participants I have included in this section, although reflective as all the participants were about sexual and gendered identity roles, framed their identities in traditional language. Gayle Rubin’s (2011) comments as to the charmed circle in Western sexual and gendered
thinking seemed apt; how we can tweak language, identity and behaviours but the underlying signifying discourses remain the same for many. Brendan’s comments above are illustrative.

Brendan identifies as a demi-sexual heteroromantic asexual, but is increasingly ambiguous about the terms personally and politically.

> You have a lot of ambivalence about asexual identity. A fact that we really don’t want to make too terribly public, but I think everybody who’s been around a while knows, is asexual identity is not very stable over the time. Brendan

Brendan’s ambivalence was not merely about the transitional or instable nature of much asexual identity as he saw it. His ambivalence was bound up with how he viewed the window of discourse being pulled by more radical activists towards certain frames. He especially connected this with activist groups on Tumblr. His comments were concerned with the capital given to privilege, oppression and the privileging of oppression:

> I think, in community, is this question of like, ‘Are asexuals oppressed?’ I think, it might be probably the single most controversial issue in group. Because in certain political systems valuations, being oppressed gives you higher status. It means people should take you seriously. On the other hand, the evidence for asexuals being oppressed is almost non-existent. Brendan

[later in the interview] I think the fear is that, if asexuals are granted this privilege... This within group privilege status of being oppressed without having much to show for it, it almost like it sort of devalues their own oppression or their own higher status based on issues of oppression. Brendan

Mark, who is also a white cis-gendered male, reiterated the same feelings:

> I mean it’s kind of the whole thing of dividing people up into oppressor classes and... Well, privileged classes and dis-privileged. The privileged classes are dis-entitled to talk and the oppressed classes are entitled to talk. It’s kind of that sort of back story. Mark

I note that Mark, like Brendan in his comments concerning the cultural expectations of males in our society, spoke of the impact of hegemonic masculinity. As I noted previously, Mark was the victim of bullying in school. He tends to downplay it and present himself as a precarious victim for oppressed gay students who he suggests were the real targets. There is a sense that he feels his privilege does not give him the right to speak as a victim. Only Jerome, who I discussed in a prior section, a cis-gendered asexual activist of colour, made the linkage that hegemonic cultural expectations of masculinity could be oppressive of black asexual men even if they were privileged at the same time.
as men. All four of the normative asexual activists that I discuss here, in differing ways, displayed ambivalence where oppression and privilege were concerned. Oppression, positively and negatively, was projected onto others; something that others had a right to claim a space for. Privilege, like whiteness itself, was something that needed to fade into the background. To be present, pulling things towards it, but unobtrusive:

*I kind of feel there is a place for people who might put the point and the strongest possible terms, like asexuals need to get up here, and in order to do that, we need to score some points and make the case as best... As well as possible. I kind of see my own role as a bit more nuanced in that.* **Mark**

4.7 The Older Asexual Activist.

I use the term ‘older’ rather than ‘elderly’ or ‘mature’ quite deliberately. This is because the activists that I am concerned to discuss in this section are not particularly old. None of them are seniors. It is a matter of context. They are the oldest of my research participants. They are older than most of the asexual activists that I have met. Asexual activism has a youthful face; it is an emerging movement. It has a high activist turnover, as one of my participants noted, which is not uncommon with activist movements (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009). That youthful face has been further emphasised because media representation, including that which is ostensibly positive, tends to focus on particular types of asexuals. It seeks young attractive men and women who could be imagined having sex, but do not desire it:

*[In response to a request from a newspaper for interviewees] One sticking point is that they want pictures especially of good looking women. I should say, conventionally good looking women [...] But actually it’s not as bad as that New York publication who the other week asked for... They wanted an attractive, affluent male to be photographed. I was like, “What the hell does affluent got to do with this?”* **Mark**

Watching the film *A(sexual)* (Tucker, 2011), and a lot of the web comics which have emerged featuring asexual characters, one can be left with the impression that asexuality is a lo-fi hipster youth subculture. For example, the web-comic *The Hues* (Heberling, 2016) is about a group of late-adolescent and post-adolescent girls who are special. They practice a pan-chromatic form of magic which is a metaphor for the differing types of asexual identities. They speak in highly jargonistic, subcultural lingo. This emphasis on youth should expand over the coming years and decades as the movement progresses and the visibility of mature asexual identities widens and deepens. That after
all is part of what asexual activism seems concerned with. For the present, I wanted to note here the voices of asexual activists who I interviewed who were contextually older.

All three of the participants here are single and were aware of their asexuality from their teenage years, and all have a high level of education as was common with most of my research participants. Apart from that, their back stories are heterogeneous. What is striking is that all three are engaged organisers who were invigorated or reinvigorated by their engagement with asexual activism.

Deborah came to asexual activism from a background in radical black politics with which she had become disillusioned. Her engagement with asexual activism has reinvigorated her fire for radical black politics and intersectional asexual community building:

*I don’t want it to be a big deal. I would think a lot of asexuals, if not most asexuals, would agree with me, that it’s more... That the desirable outcome would be to be able to just say to your parents or your friends, “No, that’s just not for me. I’m not gonna give you grandchildren. I’ll go with you to the bar, but this isn’t girls night out. I’m not looking for a guy.” It just becomes something that’s no more controversial than my preference in my clothes, or what colour I like, or what religion I am, whatever. I’m Catholic and I’m asexual, or I’m Jewish and asexual, just another part of your identity that really shouldn’t be... That at the most should just kind of bring a nod, and then move on, and it’s not a matter of curiosity or sort of freakish fascination. But and like I said... So that’s in terms of what I would prefer in terms of how non-asexuals see it, but I do recognize the importance for, like children to be able grow up and... Teenagers who are questioning to be able to grow up without thinking that there’s something wrong with them, that they are broken. Deborah*

Mark was triggered by viewing a film on asexuality to begin a journey of discovery not only as an asexual activist, but as an engagement with sexual and gender politics.

*To do that I had to join the forum [AVEN]. I think, for the first few weeks I just posted once every week or so. Really really slow, then just sort of took off, then got more involved in the discussion, eventually ran for a leadership position in the project team which I’m still on nearly four years later. My personal contribution, at least as far as AVEN goes, is [discusses primary role]. And second, organizing, especially [mentions specific actions], I’d say those are my two major contributions. [...] Outside AVEN, I guess, I mean I do the occasional campus talk. Mark*

Jean has a background in evangelical Christian activism working with young people. She underwent not so much a crisis of faith as a change of faith connected to her identification as an asexual:
The two biggest things were one, that I had promised God I would live my life for the sake of the lost, because I thought I knew who the lost were, but I didn’t know who the lost were. Then I felt lost, and I was supposed to be one of the found. So, I’m found but I feel lost... Most of the lost that I know don’t feel lost at all. They’re incredibly found. What is it to be lost and found? Jean

Jean moved to a more LGBT+ friendly church, still not without difficulties in terms of her asexual identity, and took a leading role in terms of asexual activism:

I’m the oldest by at least 30 years or 20 years at all the meetups I go to. Am I... I realise that I’m working quite hard with most of the younger ones to try and get them to talk about their experience because I want to learn. Jean

[Later in the interview] I’m hungry to learn and to know more. So I would love to try and be a catalyst in [regional asexual group], to get them thinking, writing, sharing, supporting one another in a much more conscious way than just meeting up and having some Chinese food, and isn’t this fun? Jean

There is a sense in their engagement with asexual activism they are not just embracing their asexuality. They are drawing on their back stories, and their existing skill sets. It is not simply that they are older asexual activists. Asexual activism has provided a lens through which they have been enabled to bring together their asexual identity and other parts of their lives. This is often missing from the standard media representation of the youthful asexual activist.

4.8 The Portmanteau Nature of Activist Claims.

The most broadly accepted definition of asexual identity is bio-determinist in origin, “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction,” (AVEN, 2016). It is the definition on the first page of the AVEN website. Part of the success of AVEN, of the growth of asexual communities online, has been having such a broad umbrella framed definition (Benford and Snow, 1998, 2000, 2002; Kuypers, 2006). Despite its pragmatic success, the term is problematic. There may be any number of reasons for why one does not experience sexual attraction, either temporarily or permanently. One may not experience sexual attraction and still choose not to define as asexual (Scott and Dawson, 2015). The definition does not reflect on the complexity of the identity strand that I have been outlining above, nor on the complexity of the asexual activists’ identities that I spoke of previously. Behind the definition, asexual activists and asexual communities are engaging with asexual identity as portmanteau (Savin-Williams, 2001, 2009). Bio-determinist and self-affirmed
notions of sexual and gendered identity are used interchangeably, reflecting the array of potential identities afforded. For some activists, this array of potential identities radically challenges the sexual imperative by challenging the pre-eminence of allosexual orientation.

At a panel session I helped organise with him, for Sexual Cultures 2 at the University of Sutherland in London on researching sexual and gendered social movements, Mark Carrigan spoke about “entanglements,” (Carrigan, 2015). The way we treat the public activist and the private person as if they are quite separate when they are deeply entangled with each other. We focus on what the public sexual and gendered citizen is contending by their actions while we focus on what the private sexual and gendered citizen is feeling by their narratives. There is no such arbitrary division. The asexual activists that I interviewed were illustrative of this. They told asexual stories that revealed as much about their private asexual selves as their public activist selves because there was no clear division. The stories themselves were as often as not acts of contention, belief, politicised identity claims or promotions of lifestyles. What they were not were narratives of private asexual lives, however they drew from them as source. Asexual activists certainly draw on their personal biographies, on their asexual orientations, in scripting their activist selves and constructing their collective identities. They also drew on signifying discourses of race, class, age, gender, mainstream popular opinion, political ideology, LGBT+ and Q history, the history of asexuality and the history of sexuality, the Internet as a contested side, et cetera. These have helped to trigger emerging asexual collective identity, the presentation of its public faces, and to maintain them. The focus of this chapter has been to illustrate some of those emerging publics faces. To show the emergence has not been homogenous but heterogeneous; shifting collective identities rather than one relatively fixed stable identity. The focus of the next chapter will be to consider when those collective identities become audiences in themselves. When the activist self seeks, or does not seek, to be members of wider collective identities; particularly, the Pride narrative and wider movement.
Chapter Five: Organising for Pride/Owning the ‘A’

5.1 Differing Audiences

In Chapter Four I focused on the presentation of the asexual activist self and collective asexual identities; their diversity. I found this same diversity in my discussions with my participants about their feelings and relationships to the wider Pride movements. Participants’ responses were varied; ambivalent, enthusiastic, confrontational and antagonistic. It felt that this was because of my participants’ sense of collective self as an audience or non-audience members, and as activist-participants and activist-non-participants to LGBT+ and Q politics. These drew forth differing politicised responses through which they viewed the Pride script. Much as I did with Chapter Four, I have grouped these responses into sections that seemed significant and meaningful. Firstly, I want to discuss recent contentious actions concerning asexual visibility, representation and the wider Pride narrative. They highlight issues concerning framing, alignment, representational power and co-option.

5.1.1 From #GotYourBack to #GiveItBack.

![GOT YOUR BACK][1]

Figure 5.1 GLAAD’s original “[A] is for Ally” framing

In Social Movement Studies, theorists across the discipline talk about frames (Snow et al, 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988, 2000; Melucci, 1989; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003; Jasper, 2008). The ways events, actions or calls for action are structured into stories. This can be as basic as a one-sentence slogan, but it must embed problem, solution and blame (Kuypers, 2006). For example, social protest is typically constructed to have a beginning, middle and end (Tilly, 2004: 53). A call for action, acts of unity, and either victory or defeat. There are heroes who are usually us and villains who are the people that we are protesting against (Benford and Hunt, 1992). Frames are particularly useful to social movements because they are a way of short-handing,
signposting and communicating the core issues the social movement wishes to address to prospective members, powers-that-be and the public. One can literally see GLAAD (formally the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) (2015a) in figure 5.1 using frames as part of its advertising bumf for its #GotYourBack Pledge campaign to encourage heterosexual Americans to become allies of LGBT+ Americans. The complication arises because of how powerful and effective framing and frames can be at simplifying and amplifying a message. It is what can get lost, misrepresented or overlooked in the framing process.

I have no doubt that GLAAD saw their advertising campaign for the #GotYourBack Pledge as an effective way to frame ‘A’ and ‘Ally’, and imprint these on the American consciousness. However, many asexual activists have been working diligently for more than a decade so that ‘A’ frames ‘asexual visibility’ across its diversity. There are activists who are happy for the ‘A’ to represent ‘ally’ for reasons that I will return to. The point is that GLAAD were quite literally boxing in what ‘A’ could mean, in a way that erased asexual visibility and the efforts of asexual activists. The response by asexual activists to GLAAD’s original framing of their campaign was to reframe the campaign online as a #GiveitBack campaign (Fuck Yeah Asexual, 2015). The campaign was led by AVEN (2015) who are often seen as the centrist moderate force in asexual activism, but who took the lead here. The campaign quickly went viral online and generated a lot of publicity.

GLAAD (2015b) issued an apology and retraction. They stated unequivocally:

The ‘A’ in LGBTQIA represents millions of Asexual, Agender, and Aromantic people, who are far too often left out of the conversation about acceptance. It was never, ever our intention to suggest otherwise...

Importantly the frames themselves have been shifted so where there was frame dissonance, alignment and transformation has occurred (Snow et al, 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988, 2000; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Benford and Snow, 2000). It feels significant to see GLAAD as a major American LGBT+ organisation use the term LGBTQIA instead of LGBT. It shows that just as the Overton window (Lehman, 2014) can exist for mainstream public opinion, it can exist for opinion within the wider Pride movement. Here, the window of acceptability about asexual acceptance could be seen to shift in the evolving framed dialectic that occurred between GLAAD and asexual activists. In a concise visual framing, figure 5.1 and the debates around the #GotyourBack and #GiveitBack campaigns show that adding the ‘A’ to the LGBT+ acronym matters to mainstream asexual activism.
5.1.2 Support, Convergence, Co-Option and Divergence.

A large and powerful LGBT+ organisation gets taken to task by upstart asexual activists for A-erasure? A call to arms to take back the ‘A’, a show of unity across the Internet, and, victory snatched from defeat? A framing of heroes and villains? It is far more complex and strategic than that. GLAAD has a history of positively reporting on asexuality. AVEN as an organisation does not typically engage in radical contentious actions, nor was there unanimity across asexual networks on the Internet about the #GiveItBack campaign. Some individuals felt that it was inappropriate to be attacking an LGBT organisation like GLAAD over what was viewed as the contextual use of the letter ‘A’ for ‘Ally’ in this context. Others who already saw themselves as LGBT+ and Q felt that it was inappropriate for heteronormative and/or heteroromantic asexuals, with the term “cishets” (tiredofcishets, 2015) used pejoratively, to be claiming a status with LGBT+ and Q communities other then as allies. Many of these activists, often on Tumblr, saw the #GiveItBack campaigns as an act of co-option. Others felt that GLAAD and mainstream LGBT+ organisations had nothing to do with them. They did not identify as LGBT+ and Q and/or they felt mainstream LGBT+ and Q identities had nothing to do with their lives.

I would suggest that a nuanced interpretation is that AVEN (2015) chose to make a stand on this issue because they wanted to be allied with GLAAD’s history and legacy. I have taken some time to discuss the #GotYourBack and #GiveItBack campaigns because they illustrate a key point. It not just at Pride festivals that asexual activists have sought to be visibly represented. The general thrust of mainstream asexual activism is to align with the wider Pride movement (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1975):

> We hope to work closely with GLAAD in the future, both to ensure better representation of asexuality, aromanticism and agender identities in popular culture, and to act as good allies ourselves for the wider LGBTQ+ movement.

[Talking about the main options in relation to aligning with the wider Pride movement] There seems to be mainly three options. One is that yes, asexuality should be included. Another is asexuality should not be included. Then the third is whatever. So there are plenty of people who take the second opinion of it, it shouldn’t be included, but there are very few of them who are in any way involved, who are very seriously involved in asexual politics. Or doing any kind of visibility or education work off the site sometimes [AVEN forums], but most of the people who are involved in off site, so out of community sorts of work, tend to be in the “yes” category, so it’s pro-LGBT inclusion, as it’s sometimes called. Brendan
AVEN’s response to the apology by GLAAD was telling. There is often ambiguity and ambivalence amongst asexual activists and asexual community members as to whether they experience overt discrimination or persecution because of their asexuality. They feel on far surer ground in relation to representation. A keyword that kept coming up in my interviews was “broken.” Many participants spoke about having felt that there was something wrong or broken about them before they discovered their asexual identities. They related this to the allosexual scripts with which they felt they were constantly bombarded. It is not difficult to see how this should align with GLAAD’s mission, and with its legacy of campaigning for visibility and representation. GLAAD is vulnerable on this legacy, because it has been accused of focusing on increasing privileged gay and lesbian identities as the default setting (Kirchick, 2013; Lowder and Lesperence, 2015; Doyle, 2016). For many the mainstream representation of gay men and lesbians in Western culture has changed; not everything has got better, but there is a perception of improvement (Savage and Miller, 2011). Contrarily, GLAAD derives much of its status from its legacy, from having been founded by people such as Vito Russo who have such iconic status. It is part of the reason that mainstream asexual activist organisations want to align and be allied with them.

Well politically it makes a lot of sense, they’re well organized. If you’re some new small upstart group like asexuals, it is generally a good idea to try to make alliances with more established, more powerful groups. So what are the large sexuality-related, or sexual identity-related, well organized political groups that are out there? Well, pretty much LGBT plus whatever groups are by far the biggest, best organized groups to try to make alliances with, and then to try to piggyback on the success. Purely from a political perspective, it makes sense in order to help to promote asexual visibility. The fact that there’re already...

I think one reason that I’m not opposed to this approach is that A: It makes sense politically, and B: There already is overlap. Brendan

The #GotYourBack and #GiveItBack campaigns’ dialogue is framed around erasure, but it is also a conversation about representational power. How it is shared and how it is maintained. AVEN also has representational power it has built through its audiences and its membership, though whether it represents “millions of Asexual, Agender, and Aromantic people” is moot. Here, AVEN are not simply seeking to own the ‘A’; they are claiming part of the representational legacy of GLAAD. AVEN now present themselves as “good allies,” but what does that mean?

There are issues above of convergence and divergence, of co-option and indifference (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1975), which reflect on the life-cycle and meaning of a social movement. These were reflected in the responses of different asexual activists and community members, different
LGBT+ Q community members, as they commented on the #GotYourBack and #GiveItBack campaigns. I have seen these mirrored in the range of comments articulated by my participants concerning their feelings towards Pride. I have sought to reflect that in the sections that I have grouped my data analysis into: supportive straight allies; confrontational queers; enthusiastic aligning LGBT+’s, and transformational non-whites. As in Chapter Four, the sections are not meant to be discrete from each other. Some participant voices speak in more than one section, others only in one. The groupings are meant to suggest how differing activists reflected on the significance of the interrelationship between A-Pride and Pride.

5.2 Supportive Straight Allies.

I should begin by stating that I am using ‘straight’ in quite a specific sense here. It is not to imply that the research participants selected here viewed themselves as homogenous and heteronormative. There are commonalities between them. All are middle-class, white, educated and cis-gendered, though that is not uncommon in asexual activist communities (Scott and Dawson, 2015). Two define strongly as heteroromantic while one defines as asexual. The striking linkage is that they do not view themselves as LGBT+ or Q because of their identities, lifestyles and back stories. Frustratingly, this can mean that others, including other asexual activists, view them as ‘straight’ (tiredofcishets, 2015). This can imply that they are not part of the audience at all:

“I once had a conversation with a lesbian friend of mine on the train going to work. She kept saying to me, ‘[…] you don’t realize you live in a heteronormative world.’ It kept bugging me that she said that. I thought, ‘I know I live in a heteronormative world. I know that everywhere I look, heterosexuality is the norm. I know that.’ […] ‘But do you know what? I might live in a heteronormative world. You live in a sexual normative world.’” Jean

The sexual normative world which largely ‘performs allosexuality’ will be a focus of my conclusion. All of the participants here mentioned these types of representational conflicts in relation to coming to terms with their asexual identities, and informing their activism. There was no sense that their experience of emerging asexual identity had been any less or any more fraught than other research participants that I spoke to. They did not feel that that made them LGBT+ or Q. For them, there was a sense that those identities existed in parallel alongside asexual identities. At best, it made them an LGBT+ and Q ally:

[Talking about attending LGBT+ meetings at university as an ally] I’m more there as kind of an advocate for some of my friends who are part of the LGBT population, but I think it’s
important for us to be linked to everyone just simply because they’re people who are bi-romantic. That’s part of the bisexual spectrum of the LGBT population. **Shelley**

There were grievances expressed. If activists and community members who did not feel themselves to be part of the Pride umbrella were to be supportive allies, then there needed to be a quid pro quo involved. Members of the Pride umbrella had to be good allies also. It was felt that this was often not the case. This was because of two interlinked discourses: that the asexual identities involved were not LGBT+ and Q as presently constituted, and, the concerns of those asexual identities were not important to LGBT+ and Q community members:

*Part of that is every time I’m faced with LGBT or LGBTQ or LGBTQ+ or whatever it is, I still don’t feel validated by those who I hope most would validate me.* **Jean**

*Well, I believe the LGBT, they’re more on political issues of gaining equal rights. They can say that asexual don’t really have any rights that they need to gain. I’ve heard that, just from looking online from other people, that the LGBT groups weren’t too concerned about asexuality, since they could still get married to whoever they wanted to get married to. Which I think is one of the only negative notions about it.* **Shelley**

**Brendan**, an historically engaged activist, talked about the impact of convergence and co-option. For him, the growing alignment of mainstream asexual activism with certain sections of the Pride movement, marginalised other asexual voices. He felt that it was not simply a case of finding common ground with LGBT+ and Q community members. Asexual activists and community members had to be seen to present the same discourses of oppression and be seen to engage in the same contentious actions (Goffman, 1971; Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992). For him, this triggered distress as activists and community members who had previously identified with an asexual identity became increasingly disenchanted and disenfranchised by the direction that activism was taking, regardless of their own personal orientation:

*A lot of people just sort of assume, “Hey, we’re oppressed, therefore we need to use the same political methods.”* **Brendan**

[later in the interview] *I suspect that there will be a lot of people who want to sort of distance themselves for asexuality. Even if the identity... Even if they feel that they fit the definition [“An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN, 2016).] Just gaining association with Tumblr, basically. Tumblr-style social justice activism, which is just feminism at its absolute worst, pretty much. It leaves a bad taste in people’s mouths. For myself personally, there are times that I just want to have nothing to do*
with asexuality anymore, just because of Tumblr. That’s not how I usually feel but there are
times. I’ve talked to people who even several years ago, that they used to be prominent in
the community, and had done media work, and just didn’t even want... When I asked them
questions later they just, “I don’t even wanna anything to do with asexuality anymore.”

Brendan

None of the participants in this section were entirely positive about potential alignment with LGBT+
and Q politics. At best it was a stepping stone, a way of piggybacking on to a relationship with
mainstream public opinion. This was often expressed in conflicting and contradictory terms:

[talking about working with the Pride movement] I just see it as a positive movement
because if we can work with people who are considered outcasts by society then we can... I
don’t know. It sounds kinda bad, but climb up the ladder and go to the people who are
considered to be the normal Joe. Shelley

There was a sense that more had to change than simply an acceptance of asexuality by LGBT+
community members, and that it had to be more than an acceptance of asexual identified LGBT+
individuals within the Pride umbrella. There had to be an acceptance of the needs of those asexuals
who do not define as LGBT+ and Q in some other fashion than by simply adding the ‘A’ to the LGBT+
acronym. Allosexuality was being viewed and challenged as a persistent, embedded script (Rubin,
2011; Kahan, 2013; Decker, 2015). Contrarily, by those activists whose identities often label them as
the ‘straightest’ community members (tiredofcishets, 2015). ‘LGBT+ and Q’ and ‘Pride’ are often
framed as if they are all-encompassing umbrella terms for minority sexual and gendered identities.

As I discuss in Chapter Six, they operate more as border controls between different clusters of
accepted performed citizenships within the current LGBT+ and Q/Pride discourse; I call this ‘the
United Nations of Pride’. Some identities are given more heft under this. Jean, who is a Christian and
works on projects with LGBT+ Christian activists, spoke of her frustration that ‘LGBT+’ can be used as
a way of filtering agendas to specific identity needs, in particular gay. She articulated her preference
for a broader definition of sexual and gendered identity formation than LGBT+ and Q or Pride
provided:

They must get so fed up with me ‘cause I’m still saying, “Excuse me, it’s really important at
the foundation stages of this project, that we decide, are we about gay issues and faith, or
are we about gender and sexual diversity issues and faith? [...]’Cause if we don’t from the
start, we’ll get lulled into another LGBT thing. If that’s what we wanna do fine, then let’s say
that’s what we’re doing. But if we say that we’re doing this broader thing, then we have to
consciously do the broader thing and legislate for it right from the word ‘go’.” So that’s
something else that is really important to me, that we, whoever we are, society, gets to grips with not just adding more letters onto a string, because whether it’s me with an A or whether it’s somebody else with an I, or with another letter, it’s really hard to feel included when someone has to add your letter on to the list. It’s like, “Oh, you arrived at my party. Okay, we’ll give you a letter then. Yes, you can be here, too.” So that’s why the gender and sexual diversity acronym for me feels really important. Jean

Contrary anxieties were being expressed of co-option and exclusion. There was a fear that those aspects of LGBT+ and Q politics and the wider Pride movement which were being co-opted into asexual activism were not necessarily beneficial to asexual activism and to the wider asexual community. There was a feeling of scripts been learned that were damaging and self-destructive. Brendan, who had previously spoken of oppression discourses, spoke explicitly of corrective or coercive rape. Corrective rape is the concept that allosexuals force or coerce asexuals to have sex to cure them of their asexuality (Chasin, 2015; Decker, 2015). Some asexuals hold that any physical sex, even by consent, is corrective because of the pressure our society puts on asexuals to engage in congressional sex. It is a concept that one sees discussed on online communities, and it has migrated into mainstream discussions of asexuality. There is very little research evidence at present, which is not to imply that asexuals are never sexually assaulted, raped or coerced into sex. If ‘are asexuals oppressed’ and ‘should asexual communities align with the wider Pride movement’ are the two most contested issues in asexual communities at the moment, I would suggest from my research that the next two are ‘are cis-gendered heteroromantic asexuals allies, LGBT+/Pride community members, or nothing at all to do with it ‘and ‘does corrective rape occur to asexuals or does it occur with any more prevalence then in any other communities?’

You get similar things with the politics surrounding corrective rape, which we don’t actually have any evidence to suggest that that’s in any way associated with asexuality, that... There might be... There’s no evidence that that happens at a higher rate among asexuals than anybody else. Brendan

If much of the discussion with these participants was a concern that their stories should be heard, and as an audience they should be included and acknowledged, Brendan was concerned that activism in aligning with the Pride umbrella were learning to tell stories that were not their own, and that were intrinsically damaging:

It’s the worst of queer and feminist politics [...] Because queer politics at its best is joyful. The transgression and subversion [included in] the best of queer politics is joyful. It’s emancipatory. But there is a dark side to it, as there is in all sex and gender politics. There’s a
dark side where it revels in victimhood and takes it to a dark side. Asexuality, actually, the more I see it... There is clearly a dark side to asexuality. I have heard people talk about particularly consent and rape in a way which revels in the same way, I have to say [...] I’m especially bothered by the bad parts of it, because, I don’t think it’s good in general. But with asexuality I see it is as especially, totally unnecessary. In other cases, some of the stuff might a necessary evil, but with asexuality it’s not a necessary evil, it’s just evil. **Brendan**

**Brendan’s** comments should be taken in context, I think. By asexuality he means activism and community building as it is developing rather than all asexual identity. They are the opinions of one activist, though others expressed similar feelings. What they reveal are the faultlines as a sexual and gender social movement repositions itself to align with both more radical and more mainstream LGBT+ thought. As they step backstage, onstage and front of house, framed by the Overton window (Lehman, 2014), to consider what is acceptable and unacceptable both for them and the wider Pride movement. That process can be and is part of the natural cycle of a social movement (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978). It is mindful to consider that the participants here are not only expressing concerns about whether their stories would be heard or welcomed within the Pride umbrella, if they wish to be there. They are expressing concern about the stories that they would have to tell or not tell, not to be excluded (Plummer, 1994).

5.3 Confrontational Queers.

As an audience, the queer participants that I am discussing here displayed a combination of frustration and pragmatic ambivalence towards LGBT+ politics, institutions and the Pride umbrella. The participants in this section are the same participants that I discussed in Chapter Four under the heading of queer asexual activists. There, the focus was on the presentation of the queer activist self and queer collective asexual identities. Here, I am concerned to focus on the interrelationships of those identities to the wider Pride movement. As I noted in Chapter Four, there was a sense of having their own queer politics, their own queer identities and their own need for queer space. There was also a somewhat grudging appreciation that LGBT+ politics and Pride spaces could offer opportunities for queer asexuals that were not available elsewhere. There are the same issues of convergence, co-option, divergence and indifference (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978) as before, but they are reframed by queer asexual activists to different ends:

I’m just really fed up of living in a place where I have to constantly justify myself. But, yeah. The fact that the mainstream LGBT umbrella has achieved a lot, and we need the power behind that, by just starting as a little anarcho-queer group or whatever. As much as it would
be nice to be able to do something like that, you wouldn’t be able to get very much done at all, and you need the big boys. You need the hand up at this point. **Tina**

[talking about the wider Pride umbrella] **Absolutely, I think that asexuality should be included there, should be recognized there. The information should be there. Because if it isn’t there, it’s not gonna be anywhere. That’s where people are gonna go. AD**

[talking about asexuals accessing LGBT+ mental health services] **Well, they found those experiences positive, though they did find that they had to... That they always had to play the role of educator, though they did find that their counsellors or therapists were very amicable to learning. Davis**

Education as a theme came up across all my participants talking about LGBT+ politics and the Pride umbrella, but it was particularly common amongst queer asexual activists. As I discussed in Chapter Four, providing information on asexual identities, asexual representation and asexual needs is a key concern of all asexual activism. The participants that I spoke to often framed queer asexual activism as concerned to speak back (Melucci, 1989: 76) to the wider LGBT+Q communities, and the Pride umbrella, about the potential of queer asexual identity and queer asexual activism:

*We’ve had to make up these words to describe ourselves, to account for ourselves, to make sense of ourselves and our experience. They’re not just useful for us, they’re useful for other people too. AD*

Research participants were hopeful of finding a receptive audience for the types of intersectional sexual and gendered conversations that queer asexual activists had been engaging in. Although the queer values are different from what he conceptualised, this is line with Habermas’ (1984, 1987) view of emerging social protest that advocates and defends cultural values, self-actualisation and empowerment in the private sphere. Most participants viewed themselves as queer-feminists who were interested in contending what they saw as limiting labels in traditional framed identity constructions within mainstream feminist and LGBT+ activism. It suggested convergence and co-option, but co-option where the notional direction was reversed. Their expectation was that their point of view would eventually be co-opted and assimilated by the wider LGBT+ communities and the Pride umbrella:

*We’re starting to, at least, have these really interesting conversations in concert with trans issues, gender/queer issues, racial issues, gender issues, so on and so forth. Like I said, it’s just frustrating to me that I cannot be having those with... Within the feminist community, for instance, or in the greater community [the wider LGBT+ community]. Davis*
I think it’s opening up different ways of relating to people and breaking the expectations and strict boundaries about what relationships are supposed to be that I think would be really beneficial to a lot of people. We also have tremendous gender diversity in the asexual community and going along with that, for example, the word ‘agender’. AD

“Breaking the expectations” suggests an anticipation of the type of legitimation crisis in LGBT+ politics that Habermas (1975) discusses. A scripted staging of the Overton window (Lehman, 2014) as a crucible where radical beliefs can break through and take charge through their charismatic power (Weber, 1978). Because of this, the activists in the section did not necessarily feel that they had to be representative of the wider LGBT+ or Q communities in their point of view. There was a sense that they did not feel they had to be representative of the wider asexual community. The Overton window, the window of acceptability, and where one stands in relation to it felt significant. Here it was being reflected on from the radical margins rather than the moderate centre. The assumption being that if the radical margins, queer asexual activists, held their ground, eventually the window would shift towards them. This brings up a crucial point about queer asexual activists, other participants here, and I suspect most social movement activists. If one fully embraces an activist identity, then one does not necessarily feel the need to be representative:

When you consider the greater LGBTQ community, we’re quite small. So, I think any asexual community, it just comes into a handful of people can make a difference. So I think I would wonder if it’s just a smaller number of people, who are kind of leading the charge, and a lot of the other people. Davis

As an audience, the participants in this section were making no concessions to LGBT+ politics, culture and the wider Pride umbrella. While they saw the pragmatic value in accessing the resources available, they were often highly critical of the way LGBT+ politics and culture privileged particular groups, especially affluent white gay men and lesbians (Goldstein, 1984; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001; McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004). They were highly critical of the sexual cultures of LGB politics which they viewed as framed as emancipatory, but in reality were oppressive and compulsory:

The main hub of the mainstream queer community in LA, unfortunately, there’s West Hollywood which is basically just the centre for gay, white, affluent men. That’s where the actual Pride parade is. I think everyone in... I should say, nobody in the ace community that I’ve spoken to has ever spoken fondly of that event, myself included. Davis
Patriarchy and the men’s issues tend to get dominated. But the whole thing is, pushing this focus on sex. So this compulsory sexuality ideology that is powerful and pervasive was not something that LGB movements challenged at all. AD

Because of histories of LGB movements very, very focused on sex, and the right to sex, and the right to have this kinds of sex that we want to have, and so on and so forth, when so much of this is not about sex at all. AD

This was not just about white gay men having sex, wanting sex or viewing sex as a form of liberation. There was a critique of LG cultures and the Pride umbrella as increasingly homonormative with that homonormativity was increasingly indistinguishable from heteronormativity. The critique was not just about sexual cultures, but about lifestyles that were more and more indistinguishable from types of heterosexual lifestyles (Duggan; 2002; Richardson, 2005; Mills, 2006; Bawer, 2008; Cushman et al, 2008):

There’s a female version of it as well, it’s not just the men. Let’s be clear, lesbians have their own version of it as well. Do you know what I mean? The impossibly skinny lesbian with the two babies... It’s just the same. Davis

Participants were critical of the antagonism they faced from other LGBT+ and Q community members about their queer asexual identities, even if they felt themselves intersectionally LGBT+ and Q. They felt that the Pride umbrella was mostly a celebration of ‘L’ and ‘G’ identities (Gluckman and Reed, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004):

“What have you got to have your day of Pride for?” Not even considering the fact that like, “I am in a same-sex relationship.” Tina

I think particularly since there’s a sense at Pride of the more mainstream gay and lesbian community of like, “We’ve made it.” Davis

These celebratory aspects provoked differing responses amongst participants. One felt that queer asexual activism should remain separate from the wider Pride umbrella which she viewed not only as still preoccupied with LG, but homonormative:

I would say we’re very detached. We’re very separate. I don’t think we have any desire to join up with a greater gay or lesbian activism group. Davis

Another saw some value in inclusion, but was ambivalent about the extent to which inclusion should incur. He argued for a strategic separatism. This was because he felt that there were issues such as
compulsory sexuality (Chasin, 2015; Decker, 2015) that the wider LGBT+ and Q communities would never fully embrace or deal with:

*I’m happy to see that asexuality is being included more in some of these larger conferences and some of these Pride events. I think it will become more inclusive. Like the wider LGBTQ community will become more inclusive of asexuality, but I think it’s also a matter of whether it should be. In a lot of ways, I think asexuality should be included in this community, but it is also kind of separate. Because I think it deals with a lot of other distinctions and issues, regarding just compulsory sexuality in general that often aren’t even challenged.* **Jerome**

A third argued against separatism, but linked it to the wider Pride umbrella changing its values although she was ambivalent if that could happen:

*I think that by separating everything apart, it is causing more division. I think that the big Pride movement needs to really think about the values of what it’s including. Why it is such a problematic thing. Then once the people involved start thinking about that, then more inclusion can happen, but yeah, it’s difficult.* **Tina**


*Asexuality is a marginalized sexual orientation identity, like whether it’s a sexual orientation proper or an umbrella term for multiple sexual orientations. Whether it’s romantic orientation that matters more than sexual. These are all questions of what you’re gonna call asexuality, but they’re kind of a moot point when it comes to, “Where does it fit here?” The point is that people who want to be involved in these things do have a place there. That’s the only place that might make sense for them to be. Struggling with a lot of the same issues of identity. Struggling with a lot of the same issues of figuring out how to do relationships. Of doing relationships that are not recognized and are not accepted. Of having identities that are not recognized and accepted. Facing violence because of their asexuality. AD*

These responses are complex and contradictory, and they cannot easily be drawn into a single thread. There is a preoccupation that Pride, and by extension A-Pride, should be about the most marginal and vulnerable, but Pride is itself marginalising because of its preoccupation with particular communities and particular cultures of sex. All four of the research participants in this section
discussed compulsory sexuality in one form or another. The comments concerning violence towards asexuals by AD, an extremely committed activist, contrast with the comments by Brendan in the previous section. AD spoke explicitly about corrective and coercive rape which they felt was extremely common between allosexuals and asexuals:

There are different kinds of violence. I think there’s a lot more sexual violence between asexual people and non-asexual people that they’re dating that’s often not recognized as sexual violence. Because if people aren’t in a position where they think they can say no, if they grew up thinking that that’s just what dating people are supposed to do, then... It’s not consensual AD

AD felt that, unless the asexual partner was free of all societal pressures and expectations, unconscious as well as conscious, any act of sex however consensually entered was an act of rape.

It’s that even if the person who is not asexual isn’t doing anything to put pressure on the asexual person, there’s still all this social coercion, all the social pressure, all the norms, all the expectations. AD

The emphasis here was not merely on the representation of asexual identity, but on claims of factual oppression and sexual persecution. Asexuals had a right to be in Pride spaces, to access Pride resources, because their bodies were forced into acts against their will, often unconsciously whether they knew it or not. At the same time, queer asexual activists had the right to hold LGB (T was never implicated) politics and the Pride umbrella to account for their part in perpetuating that compulsory sexualisation of asexual bodies. One hears here views which at present in the work of Fahs (2010) and touched on by Przybylo (2012, 2013, 2016) and Cerankowski and Milks (2010, 2014). I should state that in its most radical articulation this was the viewpoint of only one of my research participants. It is a view however that can be commonly found on asexual forums, chat rooms and blogs. It is important to acknowledge it here, as it has weight within asexual activism.

Contrarily, my impression was of queer asexual activists and queer asexual collective identities who were increasingly assimilated into Pride events and Pride discourses. I have no doubt that this has been a fractured and difficult conversation. This is borne out by AD’s comments:

When the first few Pride parades that I was in and organizing asexual groups for, there was a lot of negative reaction. There were people not only asking us “Well, why are you here?” and “What does...” Obviously we’re gonna get “Well, what does this mean?” That’s part of why we’re there, is to do that education. But we’re probably the only group that had people in the parade and people watching the parade telling us we should go see our doctors and get
fixed, telling us we should go to a psychiatrist, telling us we just need to have sex with them. I’ve been offered all sorts of sex at Pride stuff...

And the past few years, it’s been better. And yeah, hasn’t been those kinds of negative reactions, or only one or two AD

Whether this is because the window of acceptability in mainstream LGBT+ opinion has shifted to fully embrace the radical extreme of queer asexual activists scripting is moot. I suspect that mainstream LGBT+ politics, culture and the Pride umbrella may be comfortable with aspects of it that already converge with its own historicity concerning narratives of oppression, persecution and emancipation (Weeks, 2002, 2007; Faderman, 2015). The allosexual cultures of Pride are so embedded within the Pride narrative of oppression and persecution (Rubin, 2011; Kahan, 2013; Decker, 2015) that I cannot imagine the window of acceptability shifting so far as to accommodate AD’s perspective. That is not to say that it will not. True believers play the long game. The history of sexual and gender movements is that the radical edge sometimes wins in the long-term (Hackl, Boyer and Galupo, 2013). Jerome’s point of view is the most likely long-term option; that queer asexual activism requires a strategic separatism to develop discourses both within and in tandem to the Pride umbrella. This is not just a question of some concepts being too challenging, and potentially needing moderating, for the wider Pride community. It is also a question of who identifies as a queer asexual. As in Chapter Four, queer is not a minority sexual and gendered orientation in itself; it is a floating signifier (Hall, 1985, 1996) which broadly connotes a chosen, radical oppositional identification:

I feel like there is still a negative feeling towards asexuals... Asexuals, where asexuals like the main way in which they represent themselves as queer, rather than another... Rather than being gay or lesbian or trans in anyway. If you’re just asexual, it seems like there is a lot of ambivalence towards you. There’s a lot of feelings that you shouldn’t be a part of the community from a lot of people. Jerome

I should say that Pride in this context can include queer LGBT+ asexuals, but it remains moot if it is ready to embrace queer asexuals as an audience solely based on their queerness. These border divisions and boundary politics will be a focus of Chapter Six.

5.4 Enthusiastic Aligning LGBT+-’s.

I use the term LGBT+-’s rather than homonormative. It is not to imply that the research participants here identified as LGBT + asexuals. It is that as an audience they wished for a more uncritical
alignment with LGBT+ politics and the wider Pride umbrella then than queer asexual activists, for example. There is a sense of the participants that I have grouped here “desiring sameness (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005: 515)” with mainstream LGBT+ politics and the wider Pride umbrella. By extension, there is a sense of desiring sameness with wider mainstream populations. That desire for sameness and convergence, the conversations it engenders, is again complex and contradictory. What does it mean to be similar? What values and identities can be shared, and what values and identities cannot? The activists that I have grouped here are not absorbing LGBT+ culture and the narratives of Pride at face value. Using a term such as homonormative would feel imposing and restrictive, I think. The participants were as a rule more comfortable with mainstream LGBT+ cultures, but there are tensions. As an audience, they reflect the same feelings of pragmatic frustration, ideological enthusiasm, critique and hope as others, but in different measures. They are speaking about the same things, but presenting and observing from a different place in the audience (Benford and Hunt, 1992). These participants often used queer as a signifier, but a different signification of queer as an umbrella term free of historic baggage. Common ground and dissent overlap in ways that have to be accounted for:

Also with asexuality you do have the issue that there is non-trivial overlap between asexuals and gay men, lesbians and trans people...Who are bi-something. And so, they do have a non-trivial overlap, so there’s a sense that in some ways asexuals have already been involved in LGBT stuff for quite some time. So, given the way that queerness is often sold... I don’t know if it’s sold, but sort of sold to the public...There is a branding, there is a branding under it. So with that branding, asexuality does fit, I think, reasonably well with some of the way it’s branded. On that basis, you do have a reasonable amount of including, where a lot of people who are quite happy to include asexuality in the list. Brendan

Clare focuses on this overlap largely in terms of celebration and the Carnivale of Pride (a term that I will use in Chapter Six). She imagines minority sexual and gendered communities who should be supporting and celebrating each other in terms of their visible representation. For her, the Pride umbrella is about all the minority communities moving towards acceptance of each other within the wider community. At the same time, she makes it clear that she is not at all certain that acceptance is freely given by some within the Pride umbrella. Her argument is that the moral, celebratory, emotive scripting of Pride identity itself is enough that asexual communities should be included as an audience (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Jasper and Poulsen, 1995; Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009):
I think Pride should at least be viewed as a celebration of who we are and I think for the people who feel similarly, even if they don’t think... You can argue in the same way as asexuality that transgender people shouldn’t be a part of Pride because they’re not a sexuality movement, they’re a gender movement, for argument’s sake. And they may be shunned or a little bit misunderstood, but for that same reason. But they’re not kind of targeted largely speaking by other LGBT movements because we’re all there to celebrate who we are and kind of in some ways tell the world who we are at conferences and things, but be proud of that and also be proud of each other that we’re all kind of moving forward as a whole and for acceptance within society. **Clare**

There was a desire amongst participants not to co-opt what they perceived as other minority communities’ experiences and narratives for their own aims. There was a concern with misrepresentation and appropriation; that asexual activists should not misrepresent themselves, nor the communities they represented, as more oppressed than they were. There was a concern with privilege as with others, but focused to a different end (Goldstein, 1984; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004). There was a concern they should not appropriate the narratives of oppression from others as their own as a Pride audience:

> In terms of the wider LGBTQ movement, I guess there’s not really the same level of organized opposition to us. You don’t have white religious groups who are campaigning against the rights per se of asexual people. Often what they do has a knock-on effect on asexual people, but it just doesn’t quite seem the same somehow. I guess we don’t want to co-opt people’s suffering. We don’t want to say, “We’ve had it just as bad as you.” Because it kind of sounds really as if we’re just making stuff up. We have no idea of what they’ve been through and we just want to say, “Oh, yeah. It’s the same for us.” It’s not really the same for us and I think we should respect that in a sense. **Mark**

There was a concern as to how asexual activists and communities should represent themselves as an audience under the Pride umbrella. ‘Queer’ was strategically marshalled here in quite a different sense from the radical, oppositional signifier that it was for other audiences. It did not have the obligatory sense of commitment to a radical sexual and gendered politics, or identification with a contextual oppressive historicity:

> Some asexual people do identify as queer. Even I’ve identified as a queer in the past. I don’t know whether I would today. I mean I don’t really have a strong opinion on it. I think queer is like a good umbrella term, and so, why not? We get told things like, “Well, how dare you use the term queer because you’re just co-opting it,” but I mean we’re not the ones who invented
the fact that queer can be an umbrella term. That was done by the wider LGBTQ community. In fact, I call them an LGBTQ community, the idea is that the ‘Q’ kind of encompasses everything that we forgot to add as letters at the end. So yeah, I kind of feel... We kind of fit into that. But yeah, it’s sort of confusing because there’s also the radical meaning which we don’t really fit into quite so well. Mark

What was striking was that all the participants were at pains to acknowledge that contextual oppressive historicity (Weeks, 2002, 2007; Faderman, 2015). They deferred to the experiences of other minority communities, to their narratives of suffering and oppression, as holding more value than their own in the Pride narrative. This may be true. It may be that from many asexual activists and for many asexuals that they simply did not feel oppressed in the same sense. Comments that participants made suggested a sense of false consciousness in relation to this:

[Question: Should gay men and lesbian be challenged for their Pride privilege?] Difficult, difficult question to answer, because my instinct there is to say no because they kind of have earned it and they kind of do that. Gay men are, from my experience anyway, put ahead of lesbians in terms of Pride. Clare

[Question: You mean the other groups on the LGBT, they’ve all suffered?] Yeah. [Question: Asexuals haven’t suffered?] Right. Brendan

Yeah, we’ve had bad experiences, but I don’t really think it’s the same. Especially, I mean trans people in particular, I’m just trying to think if I was trans, then it would’ve been much, much harder to come out to my parents for a start. Mark

Mark’s comments illustrate a critical point. As I discuss in Chapter Six, a reading of the Pride narrative is that it about challenging overt and covert forms of oppression through symbolic framings. Certain framings of overt oppression are more easily staged and certain historical framings of overt oppression and of suffering, have become more ceremonially memorialised with the Pride narrative (Crimp, 2004). Intentionally or unintentionally they have accrued more capital while others are overlooked. Covert oppression, in this context the often-unconscious socio-cultural drive to place people into closets with the expectation or presumption that they are or should be normal, is less easy to represent. This is particularly so if it cannot be linked to direct examples of oppression and persecution. That is not to imply that it may not be equally as damaging:

I feel in that sense we’re challenging the idea that it’s one man, one woman, together for life. We present a challenge to that in just the same way as the other parts of the LGBT movement do. So, yeah, I see that that’s the similarity. Sorry I’m going back and forth here.
But on the first point, there are other types of suffering. There’s also lack of visibility. There’s also the fact that often the damage to LGBTQ people is done by well-meaning people who just... They’re not really hostile, but they just assume that you’re straight, and I feel that in that sense that that’s something that asexual people can experience as well and that brings us back to the other points of heteronormativity. Mark

The participants here are concerned with narratives of oppression, but on a different qualitative measure than others. As a Pride audience, they are not making claims of overt oppression. They are quite emphatic that their claims for Pride inclusion should not be based on these. They do not wish to be seen as appropriating the historical suffering of other Pride communities. In doing this, it can seem that they over-privilege other communities’ experiences. Rather they seek overlap, in terms of intersectional LGBT+ identities and also of common ground on representation. However hesitantly, they seek the Pride stage to be a space where A-Pride is primarily expressed as a way of challenging asexual invisibility:

I think if we stopped Pride and we stopped... Asexuals stopped going to Pride, you’d go backwards [as a] movement because being there, having that presence raises awareness and is kind of activist and keeps us in the circle, in the loop and keeps us in some form of being accepted even just by being there is kind of representing yourself. Clare

There are tensions surrounding this because of the sense of ownership belonging to narratives of suffering, surviving and surpassing which participants associated with other communities within LGBT+ politics and Pride spaces. There was a sense that communities had to earn their place there. It was not enough to come out and identify as an asexual. It was felt that you had to identify as someone who had suffered; a victim or a survivor (Plummer, 1994):

[Talking about attending Pride events and the perceptions of other attendees] I think part of it is that, among many, there is this sense of, “We’ve had to suffer a lot in order to get this valued attribute of Pride and you haven’t. You don’t deserve to have the benefits that go along” Brendan

Whether that is true for all LGBT+ communities within the Pride umbrella, or remains always true, is moot. What matters, I think, is that there is a tension here. Melucci (1989:76) argues that modern social protest renders authoritarian power visible; what it marginalises, oppresses and how we may be emancipated from it by collective action. The flaw in this, which these participants illustrate, is what protest renders invisible as it aligns to systems of protest that wield their own authoritarian power.
5.5 Transformational Non-Whites.

In Chapter Four, when I discussed the asexual activist of colour, I noted the tactical repertoire of code-switching (Toribo, 2012; Auer, 2013); how this illustrated both the interconnectedness, and intersectional complexities, of combining differing activist identities for asexuals of colour. Asexual activists of colour spoke of the transformational potential of imagining asexual activist spaces so that they had not always been white spaces. In relation to Pride/LGBT+ and Q activist spaces and BME activist spaces, there was the same sense of transformational potential, but participants acknowledge that it has not been achieved yet; hence the requirement for further code-switching. Strategically, asexual activists of colour may need to present a more BME face in BME activist spaces even as they seek to challenge them; a ‘whiter face’ in LGBT+ and Q spaces even as they seek their transformation. This is not solely about the privileging of identities in specific activist spaces, and the beliefs and prejudices that accompany them. Participants here acknowledge differing, historic traditions and models of social protest which have evolved in heterogeneous activist spaces (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1991; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003). These are linked to identity, and to whiteness and non-whiteness, but they are also about the solidifying of traditions, customs and rules around many factors. Deborah, who came from a background in black American Civil Rights, spoke about her ambiguous feelings towards the model it had evolved towards:

Not just gay identity but also civil rights. I think that might come out of there. There’s definitely... There’s a lingering sense that... I don’t know what you would call it now. I’ll call it civil rights for lack of a better phrase. But where civil rights movements are now that the groups like NAACP have just been stuck in that 1960s model of uplift, that’s really about making us more like white people. Ignoring lower class, poor, low income people in the process, that was one of the sort of a rude awakenings for me was going to college and learning about... I grew up with this idea that civil rights was successful ‘cause look at where black people are now, look how visible we are and then learning that it really only benefited middle class people. Deborah

Jerome, a student activist with a foot in many camps, outlined the differences and the similarities between anti-racism work and asexual activism. Jerome’s comments illustrate that, apart from that anti-racism work and asexual activism are differing social protest with different missions, a key distinction is that they are protests at dissimilar stages in their life-cycles (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1991; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003). Whether direct activism, representational advocacy, et cetera, diverse types of actions will be strategically emphasised:
I’ve done a lot of anti-racism activism through protesting and demonstrations or those types of things. I think what is slightly different about those things is it’s making people more aware of the problem and taking a problem more seriously. Whereas I feel if... it’s making them more... Yeah. So with other, like with racism or bullying, it’s making them aware of a problem and making them take it seriously than pushing for change, to kind of overcome those issues. Where I feel with asexual activism, it’s been more about educating people about, sort of the nuances of sexuality and what asexuality is. Less about change, though there’s still a lot of change that I think needs to happen, but more about awareness and acceptance than actual structural changes. Jerome

As activists of colour engage in differing activist spaces with differing traditions of protest, they learn the rules and traditions of those spaces, and the accompanying activist predispositions and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Jasper, 2008: 237). This is to some extent part of the emerging presentation of the activist self; one acquires activist capital by learning to engage with the rules of protest (Blee, 2012). There danger is that those rules harden and become tradition-bound in ways which are counter-productive for activists negotiating intersectional, but distinct activist spaces and identities (Michels, 1958; Hyland, 1995:247):

[…] and I were having the conversation about becoming politically involved I said, “Well, asexuality is not a civil rights issue.” So it is kind of hard to, for me, that was another reason why I was reluctant to get involved. That was something I said months and months ago. I understand it more now as an awareness and visibility issue, but yeah, nobody’s actually impinging on my right to not have sex. Deborah

Activists of colour were acutely aware that Pride had its own set of activist scripts, and its own historic narratives (Weeks, 2002, 2007; Crimp, 2004; Faderman, 2015). They were acutely concerned that they could not simply be a ‘white eye’ for those scripts narratives; a passive audience that reflected them back. It is important to note that they are not talking here about strategic code-switching. Much like Deborah’s comments concerning middle-class civil-rights activism, they reflect on what they are being asked to endorse. A staging of Pride which is both historic and historicising; repeating the same scripts with similar casts with little room for other actors to play a part (Benford and Hunt, 1992:38). As they note, this staging is not static. The cast has changed, which colours the whole performance:

There’s this huge history behind gays and lesbians having violence thrown into their community and being oppressed. Absolutely. You can’t deny that they have been and that they continue to be, in some senses. But you have to make room for people, you know what I
mean? You have to really make room for people as they’re exploring identities and as more identities are gaining visibility. Angela

[Later in the interview] You can’t just say, “Oh, well, there’s this huge history.” Well, we may not have been as visible, but we’re still going to build history too. So I definitely think that they’ve become like... They seem to have the same entitlement as like cis-white straight people, you know what I mean? Angela

Angela, a Latino asexual activist in a highly multi-ethnic city, is reflecting on complex, intersectional discourses concerning asexuality and representation, asexual activism and LGBT+ and Q alignment, and, LGBT+ and Q politics and the Pride narrative. Crucially for most of the participants, race and white privilege has become embedded in this; particularly white L and G (Goldstein, 1984; McIntosh, 1998; Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Lewis, 2004):

I don’t think it’s the entire community. I would say it’s certain individuals who are white cisgendered privileged queers. Right? People who are gay or lesbian, rather than for example the trans community which has their own oppression shit to deal with. That we’re all actually sexually repressed straight people, or lesbians in denial, or gay people in denial, or whatever. Like the same things we hear from other people but because of those reasons we should not be part of the queer community, or, because nobody is trying to deny us rights, we don’t have a reason to organize, and it’s all very silly, and why are we there. Barbara

Barbara is reflecting on how activists of colour are expected to be an audience for historic pride narratives, and to endorse them. Although they mention privilege, the focus here is on oppression and marginalisation. As with Angela, Barbara’s is a complex intersectional discourse. They view certain LGBT+ populations, white cisgendered L and G, as essentially straight and homonormative (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005: 515); no longer oppressed because of the privilege they enjoy. It is still these communities who impose their narratives of oppression on communities still suffering. This white homonormativity is also framed through an allosexual script; which leaves little space for the representation of asexuals.

This tension between the pressure to endorse a white, allosexual homonormativity as an audience, and the desire to present their own narratives as activists, provokes conflicting feelings. Deborah spoke of strategic convenience in alignment (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978), but was highly ambiguous about it:

I don’t feel like I’ve heard a compelling reason to be a part of Pride other than it’s convenient. Nobody actually says it’s convenient but that I feel like that’s what it comes
down to, certainly more convenient than trying to set up our own separate Pride parades, which... With the proverbial only five people marching down a sidewalk. Deborah

Jerome felt distanced from Pride by its allosexual narratives, particularly in their more sexualised hypersexual staging. There was less of a concern with sex-negative criticism in his comments; more that he should locate a space, as an audience member, with which he was comfortable and with which other people were comfortable with him

[talking about Pride events] they’re very much portrayed to show this one type of gay or lesbian person., and this very sexual idea of what it means to be queer. I think that’s very interesting, just from an outside perspective, that that’s kind of what is shown by the media. ‘Cause I know Pride is more than that. And so I’ve just been disconnected in a lot of ways from those movements, and feeling in a place where I could take part in those movements without taking up space or being uncomfortable, or making other people uncomfortable. Jerome

Acknowledging the difficulties, Angela was firmly committed to the transformational potential of participation and alignment. Angela’s critique, her comments, offer a steadfast model of cyclical change (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1991; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003) which has to battle against the entrenched, powerful scripts of white, allosexual homonormativity (Gagnon and Simon, 1973, Goldstein, 1984; McIntosh, 1998; Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Lewis, 2004; Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005: 515):

I strongly believe that we should be included in this community. I think all the people who argue against it, who are LGBT, whatever. Usually gay men, actually, tend to say, “There’s just something wrong with you. You don’t belong here.” Just like bisexuals don’t belong here, or trans-people don’t belong here, or whatever, or people who are confused, clearly. So, I strongly believe, like I said, that we should be involved in this community. I think it’s just a matter of them trying to push us out, and try to exclude people, for whatever reason. I think there’s a sense of power there, or like, “We’re the only true identity other than straight,” that people seem to think is appropriate. Angela

Deborah takes this further, by combining queer as an oppositional and radical political identity intersectionally with race and asexuality, she considers whether any queer-alliance to which activists of colour might join must find a different staging than Pride. She is not only reflecting on activists of colour excluding themselves from Pride; by implication, she is considering the exclusion of white, allosexual Pride members from her definition of queer:
What I don’t understand is how can you identify as queer and also have this huge desire to go to Pride. Because queer is not for me, maybe this is just because in my generation of queer. Queer is about to some extent rejecting that. Maybe that’s just the particular generation of queer I’m from and queer has come to me as something more broad and more general and bland. Whereas I come from something where I come from a generation who saw queer as being quite in an antagonism to LGBT. Deborah

Participants reflected on white privilege and Pride in other ways. Angela, speaking about a friend, reflected on the way that discourses of white privilege can become enculturated and learned as scripts by activists of colour (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003, 2006). Privilege may become part of your unconscious framing, or privilege may render you immobile through your fear of imprinting its discourses and practices:

I was so shocked that she said this, you know. She’s a black woman, clearly is queer, but although I don’t think she feels comfortable with that label, but she’s asexual at least. I feel like she’s so afraid of using your privilege to step all over people, but I don’t think that we share that privilege, I don’t think we have... I don’t think we have straight privilege at all.

Angela

A final thought which leads into my conclusion to the chapter. If, asexual activists of colour must negotiate all these challenges and these conflicting scripts, to participate in LGBT+ and Q politics and the Pride arena, why should they bother? If they must deal with this powerful, hegemonic, White, allosexual homonormativity, why should they care to be an audience at all? Jerome’s comments, which apply more generally to most asexual activists, suggest that it is because of the challenge to the whiteness, the allosexuality and the homonormativity. This challenge to Pride, even as they seek engagement, defines asexual activism as significant and signifying sexual social protest (Tarrow, 1994, 3-4):

[advocacy and activism] I feel like in my asexual activism it’s been more about this awareness, this advocacy and this acceptance, rather than revolutionary thought or change. Even though it is revolutionary thought and it is change. Jerome

5.6 Performing Allosexuality.
Although one is concerned with race and the other is concerned with sexuality, whiteness and allosexuality have many analogies with each other as signifying discourses. Whiteness is not about biological race; there is no ‘white race’ in that sense (Frankenberg, 1988). It is a historical, socio-political construction that privileges certain populations of fair-skinned people, though not all. It does this by defining who is white and who is not white, who is whiter and who is less, through specific ideological scripts that embed cultural norms about race in Western society (Frye, 1983; Goldberg, 1990; Thandeka, 1999). Whiteness is performed, but this performance is largely invisible and relational (hooks, 1996). It speaks from and maintains a position of power where its effects are largely known through their impact on others. Part of its power is that whiteness is difficult to define; we largely come to know and understand it through how it defines others. This makes whiteness difficult to challenge, because even those who enjoy the full benefits of white privilege can be unconscious of the discourse that has profited them. This is intensified because whiteness perpetuates its own cultural norms as universal, and that they are not socio-politically and culturally constructed (Gotanda, 1991). It maintains a way of speaking about the world where race is unimportant unless it challenges the cultural norms of whiteness, but that world is always defined as if it was white.

Linking my participants’ comments in this chapter is an underlying preoccupation with allosexuality, and with the sexual imperative (Decker, 2015). A concern with how they will be required to maintain or perform it as they align with LGBT+ and Q politics and step onto the Pride stage. Allosexuality is not physiological sexual response; its measurement and categorisation into sets of typical, atypical, normal and abnormal orientations (Nurius, 1983; Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2015; Brotto et al, 2010; Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013, 2014). These form part of the discourse, often against the researcher’s intentions (Brotto and Yule, 2011; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013, 2014), and help maintain it. Allosexuality is a historical, socio-political construction that privileges certain individuals, groups and populations for their sexualised expressions of identity over others. It does this by maintaining who is appropriately sexualised and who is not, through specific sexual scripts that embed Western cultural norms about libido, sexual drive and power (Kahan, 2013). It is a performance, but that performance is largely invisible and relational. We understand allosexuality largely through its effects; how ourselves and others come to be defined as appropriately sexualised or not, and as more or less appropriately sexualised or not. It is difficult to challenge because even those that clearly benefit from being seen as appropriately sexualised can remain entirely unconscious to the discourses that have benefitted them. Allosexuality perpetuates its own view of sexuality as universal. Increasingly, it maintains a way of speaking about the world where the differences between sexual orientations are unimportant, but those orientations are defined as if
they have always been allosexual and preoccupied with libido and drive (Cerankowski and Megan, 2010, 2014; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016).

Like whiteness allosexuality is not one static discourse; it is a set of fluid, evolving scripts around key ideological beliefs concerning sexual desire (Hall, 1985, 1996). As my participants’ comments illustrate, Pride and LGBT+ and Q politics have their own fluid, allosexual scripting. They were concerned with how this impacted upon them. Supportive straight allies were concerned with whether they would be included or excluded from Pride spaces and LGBT+ and Q politics because of how they identified. They were also concerned with the type of allosexual scripts that they would have to endorse if they were included, which would not reflect their own lives and experiences. Confrontation queers reflected on the potential to transform the allosexual scripting of Pride and LGBT+ politics. They were clear that it was not sexual orientations or behaviours that they were critiquing. It was the allosexual privileging which they saw as benefiting specific cohorts of the Pride audience, and having impact for asexuals. Enthusiastic aligning LGBT+’s sought overlap; pragmatically, they saw value in the celebratory staging of Pride. A difficulty for them was how this celebratory, and sexualised, staging of Pride is also a memorialisation (Crimp, 2004). It has historic and ongoing meanings in terms of sexual politics and protest. The challenge of finding overlaps and common ground with a framed script that largely views sexual celebration as not only meaningful but moral, is reflected in their comments. Finally, transformational non-whites reflected on the ways allosexuality is not a discrete, homogenous discourse. It is constructed of a wide set of heterogeneous practices and beliefs, and it is part of a wider set of intersectional, discourses through which power relations are maintained. Race was a focus and its intersections with whiteness, but issues of class, gender, political ideology, et cetera were noted and commented on. Having looked at how asexuals view the scripting and staging of the Pride stage, I will now move on in Chapter Six to consider my own impressions of that scripting and staging.
Chapter Six: The Carnival of Pride

6.1 The Carnival of Pride.

In Chapter Five, I considered my participant-activists’ ambiguous feelings towards LGBT+ politics as they came to view themselves as members or non-members of the Pride audience. Their impressions of Pride’s staging as they came to interpret, reimagine and reconstruct its scripts to their own aims (Benford and Hunt, 1992). The contradictions they felt that the Pride stage made of them that they should reimagine and reconstruct their own scripts to its theatre. Here, I am speaking directly to the performance of those scripts. The staging and setting of those scripts in the theatre.
which is the most emblematic of LGBT+ stages. The Pride stage as exemplified by Pride festivals (Johnston, 2007, 1-3).

Building on the previous two chapters, the broad thematic focus of this chapter will be the Carnival of Pride. Contemporary Pride festivals which incorporate elements from the dramaturgical repertoires of historical carnival (Browne, 2007; Van der Wal, 2012), and the contentious and culturally-artful repertoires of social movement activism (Tarrow, 2008; Tilly 2008). This chapter illustrates how these stitch and sew the rich dialectical tapestry that is the modern Pride pageant. My experience of such pageantry is that it is contradictory, contrary and inevitably contentious. This pageantry increasingly includes elements from asexual activism, asexual community-building and asexual everyday experience.

I illustrate my field research as a participant-observer who attended 18 Pride-related events during 2014 and 2015. I focus on WorldPride Toronto 2014, where I met up and marched with asexual activists, and Berlin Pride 2015, where I attended three parades, though I draw on other events and moments. Given the level of data that I collected, what is presented here can only be impressions. I would not wish it to be otherwise. As befits small-scale ethnographic studies of politicised spectacle (Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002), I am not seeking to render an authoritative account of the politics of Pride display. So that I give a description that would be of necessity ‘thinner’ (Geertz, 1973); an account of how many times I saw or heard a performance or action, read a statement on a poster. I make use of thinner description; for example, using photographs to indicate my comments are not arbitrary. The overall emphasis is on thicker description (Geertz, 1973) to convey my impressions. My interest is often on moments that occurred before, during and around political spectacle and display. What is suggested for why participants were there and what they were doing.

These impressions pay attention to the mythopoetic bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966) that I observed enacted. I consider its political signification in ways that engages with my understanding of Social Movement Studies, Sexuality & Gender Studies, Sexology and Asexual Studies. I draw on my background in English Literature and Cultural Studies to engage with reading the cultural semiotics of political performance and its performativity. Directly or indirectly, I draw on Saussure (1983), Barthes (1977, 1993), Foucault (1986) and Bakhtin (1984) to illustrate how sign, symbol, myth, and border are performed continuously as political spectacle through the Carnival of Pride. I draw on

---

8 ‘Carnival’ is typically an annual festival involving processions, music, dancing, stalls, entertainment and the use of masquerade. It is a public event or celebration held outdoors. There are an exciting or riotous mixture of elements which include elements from funfairs or circuses. Entomologically, the term derives from the mid-16th century. From Italian carnevale, carnovale, from medieval Latin carnelevamen, carnelevarium ‘Shrovetide’, from Latin caro, carn - ‘flesh’ and levare ‘put away’ (OED, 2018).
Stallybrass and White (1986) to understand why carnival spaces are innately contradictory, contrary and contentious. At the same time, these accounts remain fundamentally my impressions as a participant-observer; influenced by my thoughts, my emotions, my beliefs and my biography. I am drawing on my capitals as a LGBT+ and Q community member in the West with an awareness of Pride politics and spectacle. Given the highly emotive, politicised nature of Pride spectacle, another participant-observer seeking to render a thick description would as likely offer a completely different account from mine. Yet, as Geertz (1973) notes, it would as likely be equally valid and equally contentious. It might be more so.

The pageantry of Pride spectacle is complex. It is perhaps most routinely contrarian (Kates and Belk, 2001). The contradictions of the framed social theatre it evokes are not easily resolved. It was evident from the comments of the asexual activists that I interviewed that they found this to be so. Much of their activism in relation to the spectacle of Pride, its Carnival, seems concerned with seeking contrary resolution. This search for resolution seemed destined to yield further contention. It felt at times that I was listening to activists speak of being swamped as they sought to resolve incompatible demands. Why attend Prides, WorldPride, when such events and those that attend them are routinely accused of selling out, of enforcing rules and excluding people (Marsh and Galbraith, 1995; Johnston and Waitt, 2015; de Jong, 2017)? The riddles posed by this was present in my participants’ comments. I heard similar, context-specific, statements made at every Pride event that I attended. As Browne and Bakshi (2011, 2013a, 2013b) note, understanding activism is a matter of understanding context. These accusations of selling out, enforcing rules and excluding people were invariably linked to further accusations of commerciality, sexualisation and hyper-sexualisation (Waitt and Stapel, 2011). These were felt to privilege and entitle specific community groups (Markwell, 2002).

These felt like a riddle because the statements were often contradictory or contrary as to what they expressed. At Brighton Pride 2014 and 2015, it was routine to hear festivalgoers accuse the organisers of “selling out,” because the organisers had introduced an entry fee in 2011 to avoid bankruptcy (Geen, 2011), while the same festivalgoers were on their way to the dance tents and main stage paid for with that entry fee. At Sparkle 2015, the National Transgender Festival in Manchester, I chatted to three trans* men who felt that the event focused on trans* women and femme identities. They dismissed the event as “one for the girls and their blokes” and “too commercial,” despite there being a series of workshops on accessing services in the event of a transphobic attack. Whether they appeared to be sex-positive, sex-neutral or sex-adverse (Carrigan, 2011, 2012), I had sensed in my participants a shared discomfort with allosexuality at Pride events. A
discomfort with the sexualisation with which it can be expressed. My field research routinely found asexual activists committing themselves to events which in some fashion celebrated that sexualisation. This riddle felt significant. Why did asexual activists want a place at the table (Bawer, 2008), when they seemed unhappy with what was on offer?

In the sections that follows I begin by discussing my impressions of Berlin Pride 2015. The emphasis is on the three marches that I observed (CSD Berlin, the Dyke March and is) though I draw on moments from other events. The focus is on context, myth and symbolism. I then move on to WorldPride Toronto 2014, again drawing on moments from other events. The focus is on the narratives of selling out, enforcing rules and excluding people. There is a separate section on each of these. Throughout the sections, I discuss my impressions of asexual activists at events where I engaged with them (the Trans* Pride is March, the WorldPride Human Rights Conference (WPHRC) and the Asexuality Conference). This leads into my concluding section where I discuss my experiences of marching with the asexual cohort in the Pride March at WorldPride. I consider my impressions of them and of Kulanu Toronto, a Jewish LGBT+ and Q organisation, who marched directly behind. This feeds into my concluding chapter where I consider Carnival and the carnivalesque. I use this to show why the Carnival of Pride, and asexual activism, as I observed them were so innately and contrarily contentious. While neither dismissing contentious actions nor artful strategies, I argue one must engage with a politic of contrariness to understand contemporary sexual and gender movements such as asexual activism.

6.2 White Angels at CSD Berlin.

Staying in Berlin for the month of Berlin Pride 2015, it was usual to hear radical or marginalised LGBT+ activists and community members critique CSD Berlin, the main march, as “too commercial,” “selling out” or “excluding people,” (nohomonationalism, 2010; Petzen, 2012; Di Feliciantonio, 2016). It was commonplace to hear Berliners differentiate between the three main marches that occurred during the festival month. CSD Berlin was a party; commercial and hedonistic. The Dyke March was political, but just for women. Kreuzberg Pride or Kreuzberg Pride CSD was political, alternative, countercultural, but smaller. CSD Berlin itself runs through some of the most affluent, white, residential and shopping areas in central Berlin. This route takes in important, historic LGBT+ areas of central Berlin (Charlottenburg and Nollendorfplatz). These are associated since the Cold War with gay male Berliners (Beachy, 2015).
After World War II, gay men and lesbians in Berlin led increasingly separate lives. Some of this was economic. Lesbians typically did not earn as much as gay men and could not live in the same affluent areas. Some of it was an ongoing historic schism caused by the war. Gay men had had suffered harshly under the Nazi regime, as offending against their ideals of Nazi masculinity (Haeberle, 1981; Setterington, 2010; Beachy, 2015). The incoming West German government did not repeal Nazi legislation on homosexuality, § 175 StGB (Germany) or Paragraph 175 (Beachy, 2015). Gay men were viewed as offending Germanic ideals of masculinity (Moeller, 2010; Plant, 2011) while lesbians were discriminated against through another equally gendered narrative of femininity (Blaustein and Neumann, 2018). Paragraph 175 was only fully repealed in 1988. Successive generations of gay men and lesbians in Berlin, in Germany, have dealt with the cultural trauma of this history. Who was treated harshly, who continued be treated harshly, and, who continues to be so (von Wahl, 2012).

The march route maps a trajectory to significant, mythopoetic symbols of Berlin’s and Germany’s reunification (the Angel in the Tiergarten and the Brandenburg Gate) (CSD Berlin Pride, 2014). It maps the political and activist framing of the reunification process in its idealist symbolism. This occurred concurrently with the latter stages of the first onslaught of HIV/AIDS in the West. The period of politicisation of gay white Western men in the face of death. For many gay white Berliners of that generation, their period of political and activist idealism. Their reaching out to other communities but, contradictorily, their increasing dominance and visibility. A dominance and visibility that did not dissipate as death receded, with the advent of HARRT (highly active antiretroviral therapy). Across the West, in Berlin, gay white men with AIDS rose Lazarus-like and Christ-like from their beds (Schindler, 1999; Gould, 2009). The symbolism of this was even more powerful, because earlier HIV/AIDS activism and art had drawn on the apocalyptic imagery of Judaeo-Christian ceremony and ritual. Of Angels in America (Kushner, 1991) who tell a gay man (typically cast white) that through his abjection, sublimation and redemption, the coming millennium will see a great work of healing. A new gay perestroika.
Figure 6.2 CSD Berlin

Idealism can segue into idealisation. CSD Berlin enacts many narratives. Despite the claims of commerciality, selling out and excluding people, there were many community groups marching in the parade. There were asexual activists marching, handing out leaflets as they invariably do. They like most people at CSD Berlin were fair-skinned. Watching the parade along its route, it struck me how powerful this idealised narrative of reunification, resurrection and redemption was. Of beautiful, healthy, fair-skinned, gay German masculinity to Germanic ideals of masculinity. An ideal masculine type, though precarious in its idealisation. One had to fit the audience (Plummer, 1994). It was in small but significant details.

There was a young white German man on the parade. He was athletically-built, and he was naked. He was in a jocular mood. Drawing on Carnival traditions I would suggest that he was in the role of ‘The Fool Who Is King for a Day’ (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993,
His whole body was painted in the colours of the German flag. His face and shoulders were black, his torso and legs were red, and, his penis and scrotum were gold. On his head he had a Barcelona football cap as a crown. Barcelona had played Juventus in the European Cup in Berlin just before the beginning of Berlin Pride. I suspect he was a Berliner. Draped around his shoulders he had a rainbow flag as a robe. What interested me was his entourage, his audience. It was entirely young white German children and their encouraging parents. These parents appeared, to my eyes, to consist of some lesbian couples but the majority from their behaviour were heterosexual couples. The young children were giggling, making comments and pointing at the young man’s penis. Two of them pressed their fingers into it to make it swing. I felt uncomfortable about taking a photograph of what I was observing with children in the picture. I asked a bystander to translate what the children were saying. The main joke was “look at the great German sausage.”

CSD Berlin crystallised thoughts that had come to me during my field research. The first significant thought was that I observed organised asexual activism on this march in Berlin. I observed individuals with flags or badges at the other marches in Berlin, but nothing organised. At other events which might be typically viewed as protest marches rather than just parades (Tilly, 1995, 2008; Snow, Soule and Kriesi, 2004), the Trans* March 2015 in Toronto or Trans Pride Brighton 2015, asexual cohorts I observed were still fair-skinned. I had spoken to asexuals of colour during my interviews. Except for the Asexuality Conference at WorldPride, which had set aside time and space for asexuals of colour because they asked for it, there was no sense of their presence during my field research. Here, I observed fair-skinned activists on a march that is traditionally viewed as commercial, hedonistic and sexualised. Asexual activism as I observed it felt mostly white. My overall impression was that I was observing white asexual activists making accommodation with white LGBT+ and Q forms of protest and spectacle that they were not entirely comfortable with. I felt this at CSD Berlin. The asexual cohort were on the march, but they did not feel present in it. Unlike other groups, their body language was not open. Their shoulders were often hunched. They mostly looked down or at each other (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). It appeared that they only looked up to scan the bystanders, to select someone to give them a leaflet. They seemed there to work and to ignore everything else.

This discomfort between protest and spectacle struck me forcefully at Reading Pride 2014. The march at Reading had involved the noteworthy participation of an asexual activist. Because of this,

---

9 In a paper that considers the intersections of asexuality and disability, Cuthbert (2017) notes the symbolic construction of a ‘gold star asexual’ that maintains pre-existing perceptions of normality.
on entering the main park area, I had expected the asexual activist cohort to be fully integrated. They were in an out-of-the-way corner. The stall was on its own. It was my impression that the activists there preferred this. That they often went into the stall, which had covered sides, to be away from the rest of the event. This was a typical Pride park event. Loud, colourful and boisterous. One of the activists visibly ‘steeled’ himself up to walk through the main park event with an asexual flag draped around his shoulders. Reflecting on him and the young man in Berlin what is interesting is that, as he paraded in his asexual robe and people responded positively, he became more playful and confident. He took on more of the characteristics of ‘The Fool Who Is King for a Day’ (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997).

6.2.1 Myth and Symbolism.

This highlights my second thought, which is the power of enacted myth and symbolism to LGBT+ protest, politics and spectacle. The power of enacted myth and symbolism to asexual activism. CSD Berlin is a commercialised event. It is difficult to imagine how any event which is regularly attended by 500,000/600,000 festivalgoers would not need to be commercial to be sustaining to some extent (CSD Berlin, 2014). I cannot imagine that any event that I attended did not seek to cover its costs. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the level of commerciality is another matter. What drew me to large-scale commercialised events such as WorldPride Toronto, and CSD Berlin, was not my preference for such events. It was that asexual activists are drawn to them (De Lappe, 2016). Asexual activists and community members are an increasing presence at many Pride festivals and events. But, they try to mobilise and organise for certain events. They organise an Asexuality Conference to coincide with each WorldPride. The asexual activist cohort at CSD Berlin may have appeared detached, ambivalent and not present to the overall myth and symbolism of the parade. That they were there implied that they were not indifferent to it. It reflects comments by my own participants in Chapter Six.

Reflecting on the young naked man at CSD Berlin, who combined flags from sport, nationhood and LGBT+ identity politics, I am mindful of Barthes’ comments concerning the mythic deployment of flags (Saussure, 1983; Barthes, 1993: 116-117). That mythic iconography seeks to naturalise its own worldview, its frames of reference, as the only possible reading. It largely does this through the decorative display of “what-goes-without-saying,” (Barthes, 1993: 11). Mythic spectacle and protest derive its power from whether it can maintain its worldview as mythic. The extent to which it can suggest that its worldview is the only possible reading. The mythic symbolism of flags, their iconic
power and deployment at Pride events, brought this home to me. Asexual activism has its own flag. The flag was designed in 2012 by mainstream asexual activists (AsexualityArchive, 2012). It is made up of four stripes which represent asexuals, grey or demi-sexuals, sexuality and community. The flag was intentionally designed to resemble other extant flags in the wider LGBT+/Pride umbrella. The flag denotes asexual communities, but on a deeper level it connotes the political desire to be part of the wider Pride community. On a yet deeper mythic level, its decorative display suggests that it goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1977, 1993) that asexual activists and community members are already part of that wider Pride community.

Figure 6.3 Reading Pride

At Reading Pride 2014, this sense of the surface, the political and the mythic meaning of Pride spectacle and protest struck me. The decorative deployment of flags illustrated this. I saw an asexual activist lead the Pride March at Reading with an asexual flag. That was striking. What felt just as striking was the way that she led the march. The way that she marched in front, how she was...
dressed and the angle at which she held her flag. The way that she stomped her feet as she gestured to marchers to follow her. It felt to me that she was referencing popular mythic images of protest (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996). I was reminded of Eugène Delacroix’s image of *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). Beyond the surface denotation, an asexual activist leading a march, and the political connotation, asexuality included within the LGBT+/Pride umbrella, I sensed that I was observing a mythic enactment by the asexual activist. I imagined that I was watching ‘Asexual Liberty Leading the People of Pride’.

It enacted the transgressive power of carnival, the mythic power of the Carnival of Pride (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). Asexual activism can be viewed by other people as something that is white and middle-class, that is therefore not revolutionary or protest-like. That being white and/or middle-class means you cannot act in solidarity with others, or that your mode of protest is now largely confined to the cultural. Asexual women are often portrayed in popular media as dysfunctional, neurotic and timid. Here, an asexual activist was subverting this simply by how present she was in the march. I felt this was because of how aware she seemed to the iconic codes of protest and of Carnival. I thought of Bakhtin’s “world turned upside down,” (Hall, 1996: 290; Stallybrass and White, 1986: 4). I thought of the asexual activist while attending my favourite march in Berlin, the Dyke March. The Dyke March had a large rainbow banner in front with words “die lesben kommen” (the lesbians are coming), on it. In context, it felt non-aggressive. It captured the playful, transgressive, party atmosphere of the march. Dykes on bikes (motor bicycles) leading the march with rainbow-costumed fairies sitting side-saddle. At the same time, the banner made a political point (Barthes, 1993).
Gay, bi- and queer men are very welcome on the march, but they are there as guests. There is the same narrative of reunification here as CSD Berlin, but it is deployed differently (Jenson, 2002). Lesbian and gay Berliners are coming together from their historic sexual and gender Cold War schism (Moeller, 2010; Beachy, 2015), but gay men are not taking the lead for once (Blaustein and Neumann, 2018). Lesbian Berliners use the iconic codes of Carnival and protest to subvert Germanic narratives of gender, of femininity and masculinity (Abrahams, 1972; Stamm, 1982; Bakhtin, 1984; Eco, 1984; Ivanov, 1984; Lundberg, 2007). They take the lead. I was not surprised that there were so many gay, bi- and queer men at the Dyke March. They were nearly all fair-skinned as were nearly all the women. From their manner, the men seemed exhilarated to be there. To be present in the march as guests. I felt joyful as well. Watching the Dykes on Bikes and the Rainbow Fairies, listening to appreciative roars from women in the audience, felt joyful.

It felt exhilarating to put down the hyper-masculine, the hyper-sexualised and the hyper-political faces I feel I wear in many LGBT+ spaces, whether I wish to or not. To code-switch to a supportive, a softer masculine face (Toribo and Bullock, 2012; Auer, 2013). On a personal level, the most transgressive spaces that I encountered during my field research were spaces that afforded me this
opportunity. To be present as white cis-gendered, but softly supportive. I remember the Asexuality Conference at WorldPride watching David Jay, to all intents the key figurehead in mainstream asexual activism, preparing and handing out food during lunch to delegates. Other male delegates at the conference presented the same softer, supportive face. It seemed to me that there was an expectation from asexual women, cis and non-cis, that this was the face of white middle-class male asexuality. This was at odds with much of what I saw during the rest of WorldPride, on my field research, where middle-class white cis-gendered men delegate. They do not support, they take charge (Goldstein, 1984; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004).

This was not unproblematic. The delegates at the Asexuality Conference, cis and non-cis, appeared to be nearly all fair-skinned, well-educated and middle-class. I overheard conversations at lunchtime that revolved as much around the same cluster of gender studies programs, at prestige universities, as they did around asexuality. But, I enjoy the opportunity to put down so much that has become baggage about my own LGBT+ identity. I find it liberating and empowering. At the Asexuality Conference, David Jay spoke about how “we must unvelcro the sexual from the self.” It seems to me that he was challenging the powerful allosexual myth I discuss in the conclusion to Chapter Six. That it goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1977, 1993) that one cannot be truly human if one is not sexual and sexualised (MacInnis and Hodson, 2012; Kahan, 2013; Decker, 2015). It seems to me that the baggage of this myth does not only fall on asexuals.

Because it had been very hot in Toronto during WorldPride, my partner and I decided to take a ferry trip to the islands in the harbour. It was a beautiful day and the islands were much cooler than the city. The islands’ inhabitants are a mixture of bohemian, gentrified residents and day-trippers. On Ward’s Island, where we visited, there is a holiday centre (Camp Sunshine) for low-income and at-risk seniors run by the Sunshine Centres for Seniors. As we approached it, we could see that they had rainbow umbrellas as flags in the trees. They were setting up for an event. I spoke to the centre’s executive, who told me that they were organising their own Senior Pride the next day for their LGBT+ clients. Most of their LGBT+ clients did not identify with Toronto Pride or WorldPride. It was “too loud,” “too sexual” and “too aggressively young.” She invited us to come back to the event.
Eating home-made burger and chips at Senior Pride at Camp Sunshine felt liberating and empowering (Bourdieu, 1984; Jasper, 2008: 237). Watching young LGBT+ volunteers act in soft, supportive ways to the most marginalised members of Toronto’s senior LGBT+ communities felt transgressive (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). Sitting midway between the ages of most of the volunteers and the clients, I had a sense of generational reunification. In my experience as a quare-bisexual man, unless men of different ages are having sex with each other, this typically does not occur. I watched volunteers and clients gently ‘jazzercize’ to a piano rendition of Lady Gaga’s ‘Born This Way’. I have no doubt that there were clients at Senior Pride who were sexually active, or desirous to be so. But, the Carnival of Senior Pride gently subverted the pressure of the allosexual myth one typically finds in LGBT+ and Q spaces. That one must be sexual, youthful and active to be intimate (Gabb et al, 2013), and fully LGBT+ and Q (Kahan, 2013). I thought of Davis’ comments about the “impossibly skinny lesbian with the two babies.” I do not dispute Davis’s comments, but I considered the context. The baggage one is obliged to carry, especially as one feels the encroachment of age. I wonder how willing heterosexual couples might have been to engage at CSD Berlin, if one added 30/40/50 years to the age of the young naked Berliner making the mythic display.
6.2.2 The Mythopoetic Context.

This brings me to my third thought, which was how contextually specific I found the marshalling of myth and symbolism at events such as CSD Berlin. When I speak of context, myth and symbolism, I am mindful that context in LGBT+ and Q spectacle has three parts for me. There is the surface, there is the political and there is the mythic. In considering CSD Berlin I chose to focus on the myths surrounding white gay German men. This was not due to my own preference. My participants discuss white gay men as ideal and idealised victims, as mythic figures, both positively and negatively. That it goes-without-saying they have power (Barthes, 1993). It seems to me that part of the attraction for mainstream asexual activism in aligning with the wider LGBT+ and Q/Pride umbrella is this mythic power. The visibility it brings in the mainstream (Russo, 1987). Whether to share it or to contend for it. I think of the #GivelItBack campaign (AVEN, 2015; GLAAD, 2015a, 2015b) that I noted in Chapter Five. The example of Berlin Pride illustrates this may not be unproblematic.

Figure 6.6 Kreuzberg Pride
On the surface, the three main marches at Berlin Pride can appear dissimilar. Arriving at Kreuzberg Pride, my initial impression was of a queer political event. The event was beginning at Oranienplatz. A park square that sits interstitially between gentrified, hipster-queer areas of Kreuzberg and working-class, immigrant areas. Oranienplatz was the centre of refugee camp/immigrant protests in Berlin during 2012-2014 (Coldwell, 2015). My sense was that the organisers were taking advantage of this mythic framing and resonance (Goffman, 1974; Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Snow et al, 1992; Barthes, 1993; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994). On arriving at the park square it was occupied with, to my eyes and ears, older working-class Berliners and younger immigrant mothers with their children. There were LGBT+ posters up that emphasised anti-racism. People arrived for the event carrying banners that challenged racism, supported immigrants and refugees, rather than rainbow flags. They were nearly all fair-skinned. Kreuzberg Pride felt as white as CSD Berlin or the Dyke March. A point made forcefully by NOHOMONATIONALISM (2010) who see all three marches as addressing the same audience.

In context, CSD Berlin is political. There are community groups who only march there, such as the asexual activist cohort. In context, the Dyke March is also a party. Both CSD Berlin and the Dyke March draw their politics and their Carnival from the same mythic cultural well, of redemption and reunification, but they are deployed differently (Moeller, 2010; Beachy, 2015; Blaustein and Neumann, 2018). Kreuzberg Pride was also a hedonistic party, a Carnival (Browne, 2007). Walking around the gentrified areas of Kreuzberg, where much of the event was to take place, it was apparent that Kreuzberg Pride was as much of a countercultural tourist event as a political event. It felt far more commercial than the Dyke March. At the same time, it seeks to draw its politics from a disparate mythic cultural well of anti-racist and anti-establishment protest. This made what I observed at Oranienplatz more disturbing for me.
As I noted, when I arrived the park was already occupied with older working-class Germans and younger immigrant mothers. Organisers, activists and festivalgoers arriving at the park made no attempt to engage with the people who were already there. During 45 minutes of watching, I only saw one young woman talk to an older man to tell him “Ja, ich bin lesbisch (Yes, I’m a lesbian).” During that 45 minutes, it appeared to me that a youthful white cohort colonised a space that had previously been intergenerational and multi-ethnic. Their body language simply encroached upon the previous park inhabitants and pushed them out, without discussion. At one point, the only visibly non-white person that I could view was the DJ playing North African dance tracks. I noticed how many of the festivalgoers I had seen previously on the Dyke March and CSD Berlin. Many of them were wearing the same costumes. When I asked festivalgoers about what I have observed, they denied it. They said, “were there other people at Oranienplatz, I didn’t see them,” (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Levinson and Brown, 1987). Despite the anti-racist banners, I did not feel I had seen a challenge to white privilege. I felt I had watched it in operation (Goldstein, 1984; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004).
In context, Berlin Pride told me a mythic story (Barthes, 1993; Plummer, 1994). The myth of white gay male power. This myth was particularly powerful in Berlin because it aligned with two other powerful cultural Germanic myths. The myths of nationhood that surrounds the fall of the Berlin Wall, and, the largely silent shameful myths many Germans still carry regarding the events of World War II (Beachy, 2015). It is striking how little pre-1980s German LGBT+ history is mentioned during Berlin Pride, or by Berliners, compared to Pride events in other countries. I heard more discussion of Magnus Hirschfeld in Toronto and San Francisco than in Berlin. It seemed significant that both CSD Berlin and Kreuzberg Pride CSD are named after historic events in America (Christopher Street Day), rather than historic events in Germany. It felt that white gay Germans had power so long as they maintained these myths of nationhood and historic silence.

However attractive this might appear to others, to gay white German men, it has baggage. It appeared to me that gay white Germans were presenting themselves as an idealised masculine type to a largely heterosexual audience (Moeller, 2010). They were contradictorily attempting to be both an abject victim and a perfected type (Stallybrass and White, 1986). I felt the contradictions of this myself. The Dyke March offered a respite from this, but it suggested that white power, privilege and entitlement should be shared between white genders. This was more equitable, but still problematic. Kreuzberg Pride sought to challenge white power and racism in others but did not question its own white privilege Goldstein, 1984; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2004). It perpetuated the myth of white gay male power. It struck me how many of the organisers were fair-skinned men. They also maintained the myths of historic silence and nationhood while ostensibly rejecting them. Although it felt contextually different to slacktivism10 (Kristofferson, White and Peloza, 2013), I felt a similar unease about the feelgood anti-racist branding and partying (Browne, 2007). I imagined that I was watching Germanic ‘white saviours’ virtue signal their right to party (Edmondson, 2012; Lee and Hsieh, 2013). I have no doubt that many of those festivalgoers had

---

10 A portmanteau of ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’, ‘slacktivism’ is a pejorative term for feel-good actions, typically online, in support of a cause but regarded as requiring little time, effort or thoughtful response, e.g. signing an online petition. Petitions in themselves are an accepted form of political engagement, part of the contentious repertoires of social movement activism (Tilly, 1995, 2004), as can be attending a public demonstration such a Pride march or festival event. Observing social movement actions, it is often difficult to disentangle what is a slacktivist or slacktivist-like response, slack activism where one is only peripherally engaged with or committed to espoused social or political change, and committed political engagement. Engaged political engagement can arise out of responses initially deemed slack activism, while actions initially viewed as engaged can transition into it. As well as showing support for the causes espoused, the proselyting rationale for both petitions and public demonstrations argues that they enable slack activism to transition into more engaged activism. This was commented upon by my own participants, and evidenced by my observations at Pride events. The distinguishing characteristic of slacktivism is held to be that these actions, and responses, remain primarily focused in boosting the egos of those involved rather than developing and/or any meaningful political engagement beyond the shallow.
personal narratives of oppression and disenfranchisement with heteronormative white German society (Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001). I met many white Berliners during my time there with such accounts (Brown, 2009, 2012). What interests me here is the collective chorus line (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989). What was taken for granted in the enactment.

6.2.3 Whiteness, Allosexuality and Looking Away.

This brings me to my final thought which is concerning whiteness, allosexuality and looking away. What we choose to see and what we choose to ignore (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). Dealing as I do with an asexual movement that is typically viewed as white, what interests me is the persistence of whiteness and allosexuality. Whether gay white masculinity was being celebrated, subverted or challenged, at Berlin Pride it felt whiteness (Frye, 1983; Goldberg, 1990; Thandeka, 1999) and allosexuality (MacInnis and Hodson, 2012; Kahan, 2013; Decker, 2015) were maintained with their myths and symbolism. As I previously discussed, whiteness and allosexuality maintain their power by operating at a mythic level. It goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1977, 1993) that fair-skinned European and North American cultures are innately superior. It goes-without-saying that the sexual and the sexualised are intrinsic to the human self. At Berlin Pride, I felt that whiteness and allosexuality were intersectionally linked. It appeared to me that this was intersectionally linked to the masculine myth. My participants comment on this in Chapter Five, both challenging and endorsing it. That it goes-without-saying that a white cis-gendered gay male is to be preferred, as a Pride model of victimhood and success, over all others.

This was complicated because, as my participants noted, white cis-gendered gay men have their own traumatic histories of oppression, silence and denial from which this myth in context draws power (Shepherd, 2002; Gould, 2009; Schulman, 2009; France, 2012, 2016). That cannot be simply swept aside. I met many white cis-gendered gay men who felt contemporary Pride politics and spectacle had not improved their lives (Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001). Listening to them, often older, HIV+, less educated, working-class or not conventionally attractive (Brown, 2009, 2012), what still struck me was the trajectory of the myths that I encountered at Berlin Pride. Alongside redemption, resurrection and reunification; whiteness, allosexuality and masculinity mapped an aspirational route. This was to the “average Joe,” as Sid commented, to a heterosexual audience and heteronormativity (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Weeks, 2007). It appeared that asexual activists were uncomfortably following a model of gay white male power that had its basis in a history of victimhood and oppression. It now felt commodified, sexualised and increasingly normalised for
public opinion (Marcuse, 2013, 2015). I attended the Lesbian and Gay Stadtfest during Berlin Pride, the street fair in the gay district of Schöneberg. There were many political and community stalls. Again, there was little pre-1980s German LGBT+ history on display. There were a lot of German HIV/AIDS organisations present. There was a lot of information about the history of HIV/AIDS in Germany. There were many rubbermen and leatherwomen, often in fetish lederhosen. What struck me was how much of the event was simply about eating German sausage, drinking German beer, and making Germanic toasts.

Figure 6.8 Lesbian and Gay Stadtfest

I imagined this as gay sex, life and death being normalised in a German context (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Weeks, 2007). This may be the endgame, but it seemed to me that it left much silent or silenced, and it silenced many. Observing, to my eyes, older affluent white gay men and lesbians at the Stadtfest, it occurred to me that mainstream asexual activism may be optimistically chasing a model of power that is an obstacle to its own progress (Berlant, 2011). It ignores or look away from how much that affluent cohort has made its own accommodation with aspects of wider allosexual society that asexual communities find difficult (Cerankowski and Megan, 2010, 2014; Przybylo, 2012, 2013, 2016). That they find oppressive. I suspect this is why I observed asexual
activists at nearly every Pride event they attended look down or look away (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987).

This process of looking down, looking away or ignoring was not unique to asexual activists. In the sections which follow on WorldPride I refer to it on several occasions. As a former secondary school teacher, I am aware that one of the most powerful forms of control schoolchildren and teachers have is the ability to deliberately ignore something (Rivers and Smith, 1994; Rivers, 2001; Rivers and Noret, 2010, 2010; Rivers and Duncan, 2013). To say afterwards, 'I didn’t see it'. Having read Goffman, I now understand it is about the maintenance of face (Goffman, 1955, 2017). It begins early in one’s socialisation. The asexual activists’ behaviour reminded me of young people who I had taught. The young people had looked away when other people’s faces, masks, slipped in some fashion and they wanted to maintain their own face or mask (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). I remember a young man having an epileptic fit in class. Two girls had helped, but the rest of the class had simply stared out of windows or read. My experience of activism, its collective face or chorus line, is that similar social dynamics occur (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989). Ken Plummer (1984) notes that we need an audience to hear our sexual stories. I would say from my experience of Pride, that it is equally important to have an audience that ignores our sexual stories. That looks away from the contradictions when our mask slips.

I most remember my time at Berlin Pride as the time of the three-painted naked white men. The first was the young, well-built Berliner at Berlin Pride CSD. Everybody saw him, especially his main audience. His face and the face of heterosexual couples at the event seemed in alignment. The nudity of this face, his “German sausage,” seemed part of the ritual, carnivalesque performance of ‘The Fool who is King for a Day’ (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). The second naked, painted white man I saw was that evening in Kreuzberg. I was having dinner outside at a restaurant. There was a gasp from the table next to mine. A young, slim naked man in his twenties was walking by. His body and face were painted blue and silver. He had a garland of red and white roses in his shoulder length hair. His eyes looked dilated. In Carnival traditions, he looked like ‘The Lost Prince’. Given the area, it is likely that he was queer. The German girl who had gasped picked up her phone. I could physically see her shift her public face to the appropriate response, from shock to concern (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). She did not ignore the young man, she rang the police. They came to help him. The third naked, painted white man that I saw was two days later at Hermannplatz. This is a busy U-Bahn station at Neukölln, an increasingly gentrified hipster-queer/immigrant area of Berlin. This was an older Roma man about
my age. Apart from some sports joggers around his knees he was naked. He had the words ‘Roma’ painted many times in large black letters all over his body. He had a nearly empty vodka bottle and he was gently urinating as he walked up and down outside of the U-Bahn station. In Carnival traditions, he looked like ‘The Truthteller’. I watched for about half an hour as people looked down, looked away or ignored him. Their body language resembled that of the asexual activists. They maintained their face. I watched three police cars going by. I am sure eventually he moved, or the police came back.

I think of the three naked men whenever I reflect on the process of looking away (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). Whether consciously or not, each of them had drawn attention to whiteness, to the sexual and the masculine. They did not present the same face regarding these. They were thrown into sharp relief because what typically goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1993), fair skin and its whiteness or non-whiteness, was painted. It was wearing its myth and symbolism as a public display. This sense of the mythopoetic as public display is significant to my research. Foucault (1986) introduced the concept of ‘heterotopias’. ‘Other places’ which have their own symbolic rules and boundaries (Cenzatti, 2008; Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008). They reflect the quotidian, but they are not the quotidian itself. They are a stylised, symbolic mirror-image of it. At Berlin Pride, I imagined I was listening to a face in the looking glass tell me a Germanic wonder tale: rainbow-costumed fairies, Christ-like princes and white saviours. That face in the looking glass was present at all three marches, which were all wondrous carnival events with problematic politics (Toussaint and Decrop, 2013). I sensed it most powerfully at the Lesbian and Gay Stadtfest. I am reminded of Russo (1987) on the significance of visibility and Wilde (2003, preface) on Caliban’s reflection. We wish the face in the looking glass be our own and we wish it not to be our own (Sontag, 1966; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Said, 1994). We desire the ‘here and now’ reflected in the mirror to make present our performances; we desire that the ‘there and then’ reflect something other (Butler, 1990, 1993; Fabian, 2014). When caught by the contradictions of this duality, its baggage, it seems to me that much like the asexual activists I observed, we look down, look away or ignore.
6.3 Selling Out.

Figure 6.9 Trans* March at WorldPride

How can the Carnival of Pride be a site of authentic activism when it is equally a site of shallow hedonism? I was conflicted about the mixing of serious partying with serious politics at Pride events (Browne, 2007). I was drawn in, bored, annoyed and enchanted by the constant ‘thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music at nearly every parade and park event that I attended (Kates and Belk, 2001). There were times when the singing, dancing and chanting moved me, and I felt the underlying political intent (Marsh and Galbraith, 1995; Johnston and Waitt, 2015; de Jong, 2017). I remember this at the Trans* March at WorldPride. It was the first time that I had physically met up with asexual activists, who were marching. They were meeting there from across the world, with Toronto activists, to begin their presence at WorldPride. Watching them arrive, one by one, get behind the banners, join the march and the chorus line (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989), I felt I had arrived. I had been reading asexual activists’ and other community members’ online discussions for months. These concerned WorldPride 2014 where activists were marching, WPHRC where activists were speaking,
and, the Asexuality Conference that activists were organising. Building on their presence at WorldPride 2012 London, activists were coming from across the globe to make this the most public expression of asexual identity, public association with the wider Pride/LGBT+ umbrella, yet.

We marched through downtown twilight Toronto. The streets were a mixture of tall office buildings and fluorescent-coloured, noisy shops. We were flanked by an idiosyncratic assortment of, to my eye, queerish bystanders, somewhat indifferent passers-by and taciturn police. The Trans* March in Toronto has a fractious history with the City of Toronto and with Toronto Pride. It was almost certainly not deliberate, but it did not feel coincidental that the official sanctioned time for the Trans* March was the same scheduled time as the Lieutenant Governor’s Reception. This was being hosted for VIPs, visiting dignitaries to WorldPride and conference delegates to WPHRC. This included trans* delegates. If one was a conference delegate, one had to make a choice. To attend the party or the protest. This choice felt political. I chatted to an older trans* activist from Nova Scotia, who was also a conference delegate like me. I had bumped into her at different events and had come to admire her. She was disappointed by the lack of trans* delegates from WPHRC at the Trans* March but was sanguine about it. Echoing Bawer (2008) she pointed out that trans* communities, trans* activists, were so often excluded from the main table “it’s only human that they should want to be there.”

Something occurred to me, in the chorus line. It was the differing moods of the asexual cohort. I had assumed that meeting on the Trans* March was a political statement. I sensed it was for the Toronto activist contingent. Their presence and their politics felt integrated into the march. They had banners that, although humorous, framed a queer radical-feminist view, ‘Asexuals against the Cis-tem’. They had T-shirts. There was disagreement amongst the asexual contingent as to whether I should wear a T-shirt. I was uncomfortable wearing a T-shirt and I said so politely. As an Irish Traveller I had participated in a discussion of indigenous people at WPHRC earlier that day. My fair skin and masculinity had not been an issue for Two-Spirit activists who were present. I had found the same in conversations with Black activists in San Francisco and Gypsy/Roma activists in Berlin. In other spaces, I am typically pigeonholed as a cis-gendered white middle-class male (Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001). I do not dispute these identities. I acknowledge both my masculinity and my whiteness, the privileges and entitlements they bring whether I want them or not. I identify with comments made by my participants who I categorised as asexuals of colour. The exhaustion that comes from having to constantly explain other, more hidden, often off-white aspects of one’s
identity, and that brings the need to strategically code-switch (Toribo and Bullock, 2012; Auer, 2013).

I felt the same on the Trans* March. I wanted to support the march. I wanted to support the Two-Spirit activists I had spoken to earlier. I felt uncomfortable with how I thought I was being perceived. I was uncertain about the framing, the mixing of queer-feminist asexual and trans* politics I was observing (Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Snow et al, 1992; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Kuypers, 2006). It was a trans* march, it was their prerogative, but it felt at odds with much of mainstream asexual activism as I understood it. I felt that I was observing a white non-gender binary cohort as much as I was observing a white asexual cohort. I thought of James Jasper’s (2008:237) comments about “tastes in tactics.” How the moral and political meaning of protest, it’s strategic habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), can shift simply by who is present. The whiteness struck me. I have no doubt that asexuals in our society are discriminated against. This is true for trans* community members. It is true for non-gender binary community members. Conflating all three identities so that cis-oppression became a synecdoche for the experiences of all asexuals felt problematic (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018). To my best knowledge, our understanding of asexuality is that most asexuals identify as cis-gendered (Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2015). I thought of comments made by Brendan. It felt that oppression was being claimed with no sentiment of the privileges and entitlements that accrue to whiteness.

These thoughts felt challenging and contradictory. It felt easier and safer to code-switch (Toribo and Bullock, 2012; Auer, 2013) and slip into the detached, ambivalent role of the white, male researcher. Other activists, meeting up, appeared detached and ambivalent. They appeared detached and ambivalent from what the Toronto contingent were doing. They were excited to meet each other, but their body language suggested that they were not present in the march. When I questioned some people about this later, they said that the Trans* March had largely passed them by though they had been on it. They were already focused on being with other asexuals at the Asexuality Conference, though they were marching with other asexuals in the Trans* March. I do not think that this contradiction is unique to asexual activists nor to WorldPride. The need to be publicly visible while at the same time the desire to individually or collectively keep one’s own company. Divisions, suggested in my interviews, were present in the activists that I was meeting.

The Trans* March, sometimes colourful with singing and chanting, sometimes solemn and memorial (Crimp, 2004), rejects the increasing commercialisation that has overtaken the wider Toronto Pride
festival. The commercialisation that was reflected in WorldPride itself. The branding impetus to “paint the town rainbow” (CBS News, 2014a) that saw rainbow cakes, rainbow underwear and, memorably, a rainbow ATM machine. A nine-day rainbow collage of ceremonies, conferences, exhibitions, marches and parties (CBS News, 2014b, 2014c). This had culminated in the Pride Parade with approximately 12,000 marchers, 280 floats and over one million bystanders. It was estimated that nearly two million tourists visited Toronto for WorldPride, generating C$790 million (Clarke, 2014; Watson, 2014). The Trans* March organisers, and other queer-radical activists, did not view this commercialisation as neutral. They viewed it as privileging the needs of middle-class white gay men above others.

Kouri-Towe: ...WorldPride was introduced in 2000 as part of a new liberal project. It’s about access to homogenous idea of sexuality and primarily access to a global marketing and global tourism. It’s about gay tourists being able to travel and access cultural events and nightlife that they can consume and feel comfortable accessing. WorldPride assumes a kind of universal global idea of what sexuality is.

(Milan et al, 2016:4)
WorldPride was set up to promote LGBT+ Pride at an international level through parades, festivals and other events (Interpride, 2017). Although on a grander level, it is designed from the typical set list of components as most Pride events. Depending on how these components are put together, each Pride will be viewed as having its own political and commercial flavour. Contemporary Pride festivals can appear to celebrate or ignore their roots in earlier Pride marches, which often ended with a party in a park (Altman, 1979, 1982, 1999; Weeks, 2002, 2007; Faderman, 2015). There are typically marches and parades where one person’s march is often another person’s parade. The choice of route is nearly always significant as at CSD Berlin. There is generally a main stage, in a park, which doubles up for speeches, opening and closing ceremonies, and for entertainment. There will be people, community groups, organisations and activists giving talks, organising exhibitions. At larger Prides, there will be conferences such as the Asexuality Conference. As was common with early Pride marches, there will be arguments concerning selling out (Fejes, 2016). There will be disagreements as to who is enforcing the rules (Faderman, 1991; Duberman, 1993; Carter, 2004). There will be contention regarding who is excluded and included (Bronski, 2003; Rivera, 2013).

Since its inception, each WorldPride has had to address issues regarding commercialisation, sexualisation and politicisation. What has often been most politically contentious about WorldPrides is that an international expression of LGBT+ sexuality and gendered diversity is enacted in specific locations. WorldPride Rome 2000 fought off attacks by the Vatican and conservative Italians (Allesandra, 2000; BBC News, 2000; Stanley, 2000; Di Feliciantonio, 2016). With the support of the Italian Progressive-Left, the event went on to stage a spectacular show in Rome in the same year that the Vatican was staging its own Jubilee spectacular. WorldPride Jerusalem 2006 was attacked by the Israeli Religious-Right and pro-Palestinian LGBT+ activists and groups (Kaufman, 2005; Buchanan, 2006). Conferences, exhibitions and political events proceeded, but the City of Jerusalem cancelled the main parade. The justification used was that the Israeli-Lebanese conflict meant that tourists could not be protected. A scaled-down version of the parade went ahead that, unlike the original parade, avoided the concrete wall separating different sections of the city. WorldPride London 2012, acknowledged as the least successful, was critiqued for being mismanaged commercially by organisers. It was attacked by activists for not being spectacular enough (Harper, 2012; Pride London WorldPride, 2012) who argued it did not meet the political or cultural needs of local or international LGBT+ communities (Gray, 2012). With WorldPride Toronto 2014 the pendulum swung the other way. The event was critiqued for being too commercial and too spectacular, rainbow-washing the
politics out, “turned into this like corporate masquerade of forgetting,” (Milan et al, 2016: 4). I am not in disagreement with this sentiment, but I suggest that there is another potential reading.

WorldPrides, Pride festivals, are unruly events (Stallybrass and White, 1986). The more that WorldPride and Prides are pinned and framed to one meaning (political, sexual-gendered or commercial) (Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Kuypers, 2006) the more they open themselves to intervention and interruption (Bakhtin, 1984; Eco, 1984; Lundberg, 2007). Conversations, disputes, can surface which are painful, but often necessary. At WorldPride Toronto, one highly public dispute was between Kulanu Toronto, a mainstream Jewish LGBT+ organisation, and Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA), a pro-Palestinian Toronto-based activist group (Burnstein, 2012; Haaretz, 2014; Kaminer, 2014). Another dispute flowed from the event, between Black Lives Matters Toronto and Toronto Pride, the City of Toronto and Toronto police (Lang, 2016; Warmington, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Grant, 2017). The Trans* March itself reflected another set of political conversations, tensions, thrown into sharp relief by the spectacle and commerciality of WorldPride. The contentious question of whether one sat at the main table or at the margins (Bawer, 2008; Rivera, 2013). I paused to consider where the asexual activists I was meeting sat in this. Was it only human that they should want a place at the main table with its commerciality and sexualisation? Should they sit in solidarity with other marginalised groups as the Toronto contingent suggested? Should they want a table of their own?

The Trans* March in Toronto began with a fiery speech from a Canadian Two-Spirit activist. They had sought to unify assorted community members who were present. Indigenous, Canadian and global trans* activists; activists of colour; mental health and disabled rights activists, and, queer activists (including the asexual activists). Listening to them speak, I realised that I had done to the Toronto asexual contingent the same thing that exhausted me. I had expected them to account for the presence of their white asexual trans* and gender-variant identities. I had questioned that presence when they had every right to be there. I decided that I would carry a banner. The activists were comfortable with this as well, ‘Agender Asexuals Exist’. The Two-Spirit activist’s speech emphasised unity in the face of disunity, “they want to keep us fighting with each other.”

This was significant because up until the march’s beginning, two sets of trans* activists in Toronto had been in disunity as to where to march. To follow an officially sanctioned route, or to march an unsanctioned route that would bring marchers into conflict with the City of Toronto (Donato, 2016). Talking to marchers before the march, it was largely felt that this disagreement between activists
had reached a point where it drew away from the real-life issues that the visibility of the march highlighted. Time and time again, I have seen this tension at Pride events. My own participants speak of it. The need to be collectively in agreement, a chorus line (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989), to make visible one’s aims when what is rendered invisible is one’s personal feelings about those aims. The Two-Spirit activist had sought to draw a line under this disunity. Their ‘view from the bottom’ speech focused on marginalised groups claiming a space, rather than having a space offered to them.

This was an entirely different view of Canadian LGBT+/Two-Spirit/Human Rights from the one that was being presented by WorldPride organisers and the City of Toronto. This second view was evident at WPHRC. I had attended this because three asexual activists were giving a paper but was struck by the contradictions in many presentations. It felt that many Canadian and global presenters were as concerned to maintain whiteness and nationhood, cis-genderism and existing sexual hierarchies, established rules and orders, as with rejecting them. Canadian academics and activists at the conference would acknowledge issues, but the conversations would cement around “it’s worse elsewhere,” “look at the good Canada does” and “this conference and WorldPride prove we’re doing something right.”

Craig Scott: What people don’t really realize is that we still have on the books in Canada, in the Criminal Code, a provision that criminalizes anal intercourse. Section 159. [In the process of being repealed] We’ve actually been living with a hypocrisy for quite some time because we do criticize the criminalization of homosexual activity around the world and never once mentioned that it wasn’t so long ago that we had this awful provision actively being enforced...

(Milan et al, 2016: 12)

Depending on the point of view expressed, it felt that Canada was presented as a great white saviour, or a great queer saviour, who was nicer than its North American sibling because it knew how to party (Foucault, 1977a). I raised what were for me disquieting issues. Two years after Kony 2012 (Russell, 2012), Ugandan conference delegates to WPHRC were initially denied visas for fear that they would seek asylum (Keung, 2014a, 2014b). The ongoing criminalisation in Canada of HIV+ persons engaged in consensual acts deemed ‘significant risk’ (Jürgens et al, 2009; Symington, 2009; Adam et al, 2014). The sheer disparity in Toronto between the homeless and the scale of commodification on display at WorldPride (Milan et al, 2016). The refrain from most Canadians at
WPHRC was “at least we’re not Americans.” In San Francisco, I went to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Easter Picnic in Golden Gate Park. On the bus there, I listened to two attending older white gay American men become racist to a Latino family. I had chatted to these men in the queue for the bus. We had shared battle stories of nuns in drag, HIV/AIDS, Haight-Ashbury and the Castro; Brighton and San Francisco as tolerant cities. Watching them being asked to get off the bus had shocked me. When I commented on this to many San Franciscans, the dislocating sentence shifted to “it could be worse, at least we’re not in Russia.”

On the Trans* March, I thought about my own sense of dislocation and detachment at Birmingham Pride 2014. I had attended this a few months before WorldPride. It was, for once, wet, cold and windy. As well as rainbow flags, the parade was awash with rainbow umbrellas. Alongside dog whistles, flags and T-shirts, the street vendors seemed to have produced umbrellas with the first drop of rain. I had not realised how irritated the sight of nearly naked men could make me until they were combined with ‘thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music, dog whistles, rain and rainbow umbrellas. There were other people marching, political statements were being made, but it felt shallow and trite. I can now admit that I was disappointed because I did not see any asexual activists present at one of my home Prides. I was detached, and the event’s face was not reflecting what I wanted to see (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Foucault, 1986; Brown and Levinson, 1987). My mood did not lift having to queue in the rain to get into the main event, in an enclosed section of central Birmingham. For a moment, three girls dancing in the rain made me smile...Once I entered the main event all I again saw were food stalls, vendors selling more rainbow goods, and dance spaces with temporary beer licences.

There were some of the usual suspects in out of the way corners: the Terence Higgins Trust, police, local football clubs and Stonewall. The event appeared nothing more than an excuse by clubs and bars from Birmingham’s Gay Village to advertise their venues and get people to come and buy beer. This was justified with some LGBT+ community-interest signalling. I was ready to leave when my partner noticed that there was a sign to an area that said, ‘Community Area’. In my disinterestedness, I had overlooked it. It was in an out of the way corner. Part of the community area was an old industrial warehouse which was being used as an ad hoc performance area. As I walked in, a local LGBT+ youth group were putting on a performance mime in front of a large audience of mostly young people. Their mime was one of the most moving, and political, performances that I saw during my field research. It spoke of emergence, hope of acceptance and fear of rejection. That youthful shift between elation and depression. It reminded me of my younger participants.
It reminded me of Sid who felt a “freak” growing up because of how people had treated her due to her asexuality (Decker, 2015). She was a comics geek that I identified with. Although we were unlike, in age, orientation and biography, we had read the same teenage comics; the X-Men. Superhero mutant outcasts who fought for acceptance not to be freaks. Sid had talked of her local Pride event as an almost magical space where “people dressed up as superheroes wearing rainbow outfits.” A Pride that she never attended. Sid seemed apprehensive that the rules of Pride meant that her emerging identity (heteroromantic asexual) was not included. When the performance mime was over, I watched the young people in the audience run back out to the bars, the stalls and the dance spaces with the ‘thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music. I thought of the three girls dancing and singing in the rain. I remembered when my early Prides had felt like that for me. When burgers and vegan sausages, music and costumes, had not left me detached, but seemed magical.
6.4 Enforcing Rules.

_How can the Carnival of Pride be a space where rules are unmade when it is also a space where rules are enforced?_ There were times when the constant ‘thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music troubled me, regardless of the political message being framed. At World Pride, the official song and slogan of the festival was ‘Rise Up’ by The Parachute Club (Keung, 2014c). It is a pro-peace, pro-feminist, pro-LGBT+ classic of early 1980s Canadian new wave. It was remixed and given an electronic drum beat to make it more contemporary. Both the song and the band are associated with mainstream left-wing and liberal politics in Canada. The band were friends with Jack Layton, the leader of the centre-left New Democratic Party. ‘Rise Up’ was sung at his wedding, his funeral and was his campaign song (Takeuchi, 2015). WorldPride occurred less than a year before a Canadian general election. I listened to the song lyrics while watching the original video. In it, fair-skinned musicians play world-music inflected rhythms parading through Toronto on a lorry, exhorting multicultural dancers on the street to “rise up” against oppression. I was struck by how much it reflected the liberal-progressive activism that I had come of age with in the 1980s. The Western youthful idealism that, good or bad, would find its time in the sun in the flawed spectacle of Live Aid, the moral journey of HIV/AIDS and Act Up, and the globally unifying symbolism of Mandela, _perestroika_ and the Berlin Wall. It felt uncomfortable at WorldPride and other events, to sense that idealism entrenched dogmatically. As the youthful activists of my generation, white gay men and lesbians, became the organisers. I imagined they were no longer rising in solidarity but enforcing the rules.

If ‘Rise Up’ was the official song and slogan of WorldPride, then ‘Happy’ by Pharrell Williams was the unofficial song and slogan. It was the unofficial song and slogan of nearly every event that I attended during 2014 and 2015. People sung it at one point on the Trans* March. At Birmingham Pride 2014, the three young girls had sung it, badly but wonderfully, in the rain in the queue for tickets. At WPHRC a group of young Indian LGBT+ activists had presented an inspiring and funny presentation (Gaysi Family, 2014). It detailed how they had replicated the video for the song on YouTube; miming to its lyrics as they danced and paraded through Mumbai. There is a blissful version of ‘Happy’ by 6-Pack, India’s only pop _hijra_ band (Nayak, 2016). ‘6-Pack’ is a derogatory term in India which is applied to _hijras_. The accompanying video subverts this (Bakhtin, 1984; Eco, 1984; Lundberg, 2007). Camp bodybuilders flex their muscles while 6-Pack takes centre stage. It felt that the original song...
and video, which exhorts listeners to dance and be happy regardless, resonated for certain generations and communities (Snow and Benford, 1988). For a time, the contradictions between ‘Rise Up’ and ‘Happy’ caught me. The former felt political, though dogmatic, while the latter was joyous, but seemed apolitical (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). I thought about comments by my own research cohort to be present at Pride events, and to speak for themselves. I realised in this context, ‘Happy’ was not apolitical. It was differently political from what I was used to, and it was spectacularly political. The lyrics and the video resonated directly with activists and communities who wished to oversee their own destiny. They did not want rules enforced. Good or bad, they wanted their day in the sun.

During WorldPride, I attended an event at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. One of the speakers was Richard Lusimbo, a Ugandan delegate to WPHRC who had initially been denied a visa into Canada. His speech impacted upon me. It has impacted upon much of the thinking in this chapter. Many of the other speakers were from Canadian/Global NGOs and donor aid organisations. They offered apologies but framed them in the same dislocating language commented upon earlier. They focused on “what the American churches do in Africa and what Canadians could do to help.” Richard Lusimbo listened to this. He then said, “whatever the consequences, it is our turn to drive the bus in the sun.” WorldPride was particularly hot and sunny, as were nearly all the events that I attended. I often reflected on Lusimbo’s comments as I watched parades/marches. If Pride can be a journey into the sunlight, an apt analogy I think, it is not enough to offer a place at the table (Bawer, 2008) at journey’s end with all the rules that conveys. One must be happy that in rising up, others will take their turn in driving the bus in the sun.
There are rules applied to those who are offered or denied a place at the table, I have no doubt. My experience is that the easiest rule to challenge or accept is one that was on the table and transparent. Either the Trans* March took one route or another. By the time of the march, both views had mostly arrived at compromise. The march was the largest expression of Trans* unity that Toronto had then seen. What was more complicated was when the rules were largely unspoken and opaque. Similarly to Berlin Pride, I felt at WorldPride the most powerful, opaque rule was that one should maintain face because one was at the table (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). That one had an obligation to look away when others’ individual, collective and/or public faces slipped. I sensed this throughout my field research. I remember being at Oxford Pride 2015 in a middle-class group. Three white gay members made loud racist remarks about an African LGBT+ refugee group marching. “You know, they’re just immigrant blacks. They shouldn’t be here.” When I questioned other group members, the response was, “did they say that? I didn’t hear it.” It felt that
the most contentious and contrary rule was simply to be ‘in the know’ not to acknowledge anything too contentious or too contrary. To ignore it and look away.

The morning after the Trans* March, I attended WPHRC to hear a paper by three asexual activists on ‘From bananas to zucchinis: How talking about asexuality can contribute to queer and trans* positive, comprehensive, sexual education’. Banana plants are reproduced asexually, while a ‘zucchini’ is a queerplatonic relationship. Reading the abstract, the paper was designed to be a non-threatening introductory asexual 101 for an interested, largely positive, but uninformed LGBTQ+ audience. At the Asexuality Conference, activist figureheads such as David Jay spoke directly to this. I feel that this is mainstream asexual activism’s chorus line. To present a non-threatening ‘getting to know us’ face (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). This public face informs about asexuality, the ubiquitous leaflets, that allows asexuals to blend into the wider LGBT+/Pride umbrella. I saw this at Reading Pride 2014, Oxford Pride 2015 and CSD Berlin 2015.

Because of this, how contentious the activists’ remarks seemed surprised me. They spoke over each other, they contradicted each other, and they flatly disagreed. They did not present a chorus line (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989; Butler, 1990, 1993; Fabian, 2014); they seemed at pains to emphasise what was different in each other’s opinion. They discussed coercive sexualisation and its relationship to asexuals having sexual relationships with allosexuals. This is a highly contentious issue within asexual communities, as comments by my own participants illustrate. They offered views widely at variance with each other, often rejecting and interjecting on each other’s points. As someone with some knowledge of asexuality, I was confused by what I was hearing. The overall impression was that there were three presenters because no one trusted the others to speak on the subject alone. As I gazed around the rest of the room, the rest of the audience sat and nodded throughout this. They maintained a face of polite interest, which was reflected in the question-and-answer period. I sensed that they could not challenge this confusion, because it was asexual activists talking about asexuality, although those activists contradicted each other (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987).

After the asexual paper, there were two separate talks on HIV/AIDS and homophobia in Jamaica and Russia. I went to the talk on Jamaica, while my partner went to the talk on Russia. The talk’s speaker was introduced by an official, a white man, from UNAIDS. By introduced, I mean that he spoke for nearly a third of the allotted time. He put up PowerPoint slides. He framed a narrative in which Jamaican homophobia was the root cause of HIV/AIDS in Jamaica (Benford and Hunt, 1992; Snow et
al, 1992; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Kuypers, 2006). His solution was co-option (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1979; Tilly, 1978); the intervention of Western/Global organisations such as UNAIDS. They could then force Jamaicans to address their homophobia. His final slide was of homeless Jamaican LGBT+ youth in a derelict shelter. He asked the question, “can you imagine this?” I could. I had seen homeless youth similarly sheltered throughout my time in Toronto, some of whom from their behaviour appeared LGBT+. I had watched as police moved them along from areas where WorldPride tourists congregated.

De Matos: TAVIS [Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy] is a police pilot project. Their goal is to “clean up the streets,” and I put that in quotes, just for WorldPride so Toronto can look good when it gets up to the world stage.

(Milan et al, 2016: 14)

The UNAIDS official left this slide up while introducing the speaker, “and now, were going to have this brave young man tell us what it’s like to live in these conditions.” The speaker got up. In a relatively well-educated voice he began by saying, “... I come from a privileged background. So, I have very little personal experience of homophobia.” He went on to frame a different portrait of Jamaican homophobia and of HIV/AIDS in Jamaica (Benford and Hunt, 1992; Kuypers, 2006). He did not paint a rosy picture of Jamaican homophobia. He argued that Jamaican activist challenges to it needed to be culturally appropriate to be effective. They could not be framed by Western approaches. In a similar fashion, he claimed that Jamaica’s initial response to HIV/AIDS had been one of the better responses in the West Indies. He argued that had been undone by economic and social issues related to Jamaica’s vassalage to Western interests. The whole time that the Jamaican speaker spoke, the UNAIDS official sat by his side pointing to the slide. Every few minutes he would nod and say “shocking, shocking, shocking.”

I do not think that he thought he was contradicting or confirming the speaker. I think that he was maintaining his narrative, his face, regardless of what facts were presented (Goffman, 1955, 1974, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Kuypers). This was helped, because by this point the audience was ignoring him and the slide. People were staring out windows, looking at their fingers and reading their notes. They were maintaining their face and looking away (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). From this older white man who saw nothing shocking in imposing his rules on a younger Jamaican activist because, as he had put it, his version had the power to bully people to do the right thing. I thought about how similar in age I was to the UNAIDS
official. How we had probably grown up on the same youthful activist narratives of Live Aid, HIV/AIDS, Mandela, perestroika and the Berlin Wall; how powerful that idealism was, and how dogmatic it could be. When I spoke to my partner, he felt much the same thing had happened at the talk about Russia. I wondered about the asexual activists I had met: what they must ignore, look away from, and, what they need others to ignore on their behalf?

6.5 Excluding People.

*How can one be an audience to the inclusive carnivalesque theatre of Pride when there are exclusions?* Although my early Prides were often magical, they were often painful. As a quare-bisexual man, it felt I was pulled in many directions. I had to deny or dampen down distinct aspects of my being depending on who I was with. Echoing AD’s comments in Chapter Five, I had to erase my quareness and bisexuality with gay friends, and, erase my gayness with queer-bisexual friends. Reflecting on my time as a young bisexual man attending Prides, I now have an awareness of Freud’s (2015) ‘narcissism of small differences’ and of microaggressions and microassaults (Sue, 2010a, 2010b; Nadal et al, 2016). I can see that the most bi-phobic behaviour that I experienced, that I should erase my bi-ness, was often from people I was in closest proximity to. It felt inclusion carried with it the obligation to excise, exclude aspects of one’s own identity (Barker et al, 2012; Boccone, 2016; Gonzalez, Ramirez and Galupo, 2017).

I stop coming to Prides because I felt that my full identity was not on the accepted setlist. From my field research, bi-erasure and trans*-erasure are not historic anomalies (Weiss, 2004; Sreedhar and Hand, 2006; Nikki, 2006; Hines, 2014). London Pride 2017 blew up over the issue of bi-erasure (Nissim, 2017). Events such as the Trans* March at WorldPride, Sparkle in Manchester and Trans Pride Brighton feel at least partially motivated by ongoing trans*-erasure in mainstream events. I attended Trans Pride Brighton in 2015. Marching up St James’s Street, the heart of the gay village in Brighton, it was disturbing to experience the reaction of some of the people sitting outside at bars and cafes. Gay men and lesbians that I had marched alongside on earlier Pride marches in Brighton. It was only a small group of them, but they booed and hissed. What was also notable was how other people sitting beside them looked away, maintained their faces, as this was occurring (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Inclusion and exclusion at Pride events and within LGBT+ politics are complex issues. The Carnival of Pride draws on older traditions of Carnival and the carnivalesque which have their own legacies of
inclusion and exclusion (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986). The traditions of Carnival were reimported into Britain by immigrants from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s, who set up the Notting Hill and Leeds Carnivals (Cohen, 1993; Dabydeen, 2010). Caribbean carnivals spread, particularly during the 1980s and early 1990s; a time of high racial tension in Britain. Caribbean carnivals were never just parties (Alleyne, 2002). They reflected the strains between diaspora and national identity, cultural inclusion and social exclusion (Connor and Farrar, 2003; Ferris, 2010). British Caribbean carnival symbolised both optimism (two-edged for the good life in the new country) and nostalgia (for the life lost in the old) (Crimp, 1984; Berlant, 2011). Immigrant Caribbean urban cultural politics and protest influenced the subsequent trajectory of Pride Mardi Gras and LGBT+ urban public protest and spectacle (Cohen, 1993). Despite how obvious this seems at Pride events, it feels downplayed or unacknowledged. Much like Pride events today, it felt at one time that there were Caribbean carnivals organised in every large town and city in Britain. I remember during my time at the University of Sussex, a white lecturer who saw nothing incongruous in discussing an all-white Caribbean carnival to a lecture hall of mostly white students.

There is a successful Caribbean carnival in Leicester, where I live. It is a multicultural city with a large Caribbean population. The event sits well within the political, social and cultural landscape of the city (Winstone, 1996; Singh, 2003). It has relatively transparent borders. Festivalgoers understand those borders when they attend. Leicester Caribbean Carnival is a multicultural event which celebrates Caribbean culture. These borders may be transparent, but they are not static. Leicester Caribbean Carnival is not the same festival as Notting Hill or Leeds in the 1960s. In recent years, Leicester Caribbean Carnival has increasingly embraced Black-British LGBT+ identities and subcultures. Although the event is multicultural, if I attend the carnival, I do not expect to see my ethnic identity onstage (Baumann, 2002). Though my ethnicity is mixed (Irish and Irish Traveller), these ethnicities are typically viewed as white. I think ‘multicultural’ is being used to signify here, as it often does in Britain, ‘black minority-ethnic’ (Nayak, 2012). Here, whiteness is an audience. I do not view that as a form of erasure; I am there as an audience member. When my partner whose ethnicity is white Irish-Trinidadian attends, the issue is more complex. Members of his family have designed carnival floats for Notting Hill and in Trinidad. If he attends Leicester just as an audience member, is he erasing aspects of his own ethnic identity. The festival’s borders are open, but there are controls. If he attends as a white Trinidadian with a background in carnival, is he attending an event which may not be yet ready to fully embrace him onstage. It is not that the border controls close, but they become opaquer.
When I reflect on my field research, on inclusion and exclusion, erasure and non-erasure, it is mostly border controls that I consider. The subtle and not so subtle ways in which people and communities are made to feel invisible, second-best or simply ignored. This is complicated because I accept the need for border controls at Pride events and within LGBT+ politics. David Jay, who founded AVEN, once stated that his sense of queerness had “…been shaped by a struggle with a social norm around sexuality. (Bahler, 2013)” This is a utopian framing. It opens the borders of Pride and LGBTQ+ politics to any asexual community member who feels they have struggled with social sexual norms. Who wishes to come sit at the table. Ken Plummer (1984) in his foundational work pointed out the inherent risks in utopian narratives of struggle. It opens the borders of Pride to any heterosexual or hetero-identified community that feel they have struggled with society’s sexual norms. That may be positive, the borders of Pride are not static. I feel that increased visibility of trans*, bi- and asexual activist community members at Pride events is about rewriting the rules (Sreedhar and Hand, 2006; Barker, 2012, Barker et al; De Lappe, 2016). Claiming a space, widening the borders, and letting someone else drive the bus. The issue becomes, how wide (Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Gamson, 1997)? There are individuals and groups, such as the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), who were included historically. NAMBLA would see itself as struggling with society’s sexual norms. NAMBLA’s historic expulsion from mainstream LGBT+ politics and spectacle, which I endorse as necessary, caused bitter contention (Gamson, 1997; Plummer, 1999). Its repercussions seem felt today (Whittier, 2009).

I am not comparing asexual activism to NAMBLA. I am seeking to contrast them. I am suggesting that utopian framings of identity-politics can fail to take account of the context. The pragmatic need to distinguish one struggle from another, one period from another, and, one collective identity from another (Melucci, 1989). There may be need to impose borders, but to recognise that mistakes will be made. It seems to me that LGBT+ politics, spectacle and community building has always involved rewriting rules (Bronski, 2003; Rivera, 2013). This has always been painful, but what has been most painful is the pressure to look away (Faderman, 1991; Duberman, 1993; Carter, 2004). To leave unacknowledged the erasure and exclusions of the past (Altman, 1979, 1982, 1999; Weeks, 2002, 2007; Faderman, 2015). To treat the present as an aspirational clean slate on which inspirational rainbow pastels can write. This image struck me walking down Queen Street West in Toronto. A gentrified, hipster-queer area of the city. Nearly all the shops had small, discreet, rainbow pastel lozenges in their windows, advertising their support for WorldPride. I saw similar branding in a comparable area of Kreuzberg in Berlin before Kreuzberg Pride CSD. A branding that increasingly
seems to signpost, border, the new hipster-queer from the old traditional gay (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, 2015).

Figure 6.13 Hipster Queer
I had my hair cut by a young woman who worked in the Gay Village. Her comments captured this contrary sense of inclusion and exclusion I found at WorldPride. This aspirational sense of exclusiveness, the purity of keeping one’s own company I found expressed in LGBT+ spaces that nominally sought to inspire inclusiveness. She was from an immigrant South-Asian background. She did not like Toronto Pride or WorldPride which were “too commercial.” She preferred Montréal Pride which was “more ethnic.” She did not like to hang out in the Gay Village after work as she did not identify with it. She identified as non-gender binary. The barbershop itself had a striking political mural on its side of historic LGBT+ communities and identities. Incongruously, this was directly opposite the rainbow ATM machine. She liked to party at the Drake Hotel, where I was staying, and the Gladstone Hotel nearby. Both are on Queen Street West. She wanted to “finish school” and live in that area. There was a high degree of aspiration in her comments. I found that I could not reduce these to someone else’s setlist. It felt she was choosing to be included or excluded mostly on her own terms. What struck me was how judgemental she was. She told me that there were “only three coffee shops to go to” in the city centre. But, it felt that she had agency and power over her choices. That was not the same for others. The Trans* March felt about that lack of agency, that right to choose to be included or not included.
That choice was not just symbolic. It felt that it had aspirational and material significance for those who were included or left off the setlist. Both the Gay Village and the Hipster Queer neighbourhoods in Toronto felt exclusive (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, 2015). Their respective LGBT+ communities, with many border crossings, had differing generational backstories of oppression, identity and community building. There was a different mix of race. What was striking was how similar the sense of exclusiveness felt. It felt middle-class white and aspirational middle-class. Throughout my field research, despite the beer, nearly naked bodies and ‘thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music, I had sensed this undercurrent of aspirational middle-class whiteness. It was not only the protesters on the Tran* March. I had listened to working-class white HIV+ men in a coffee shop off Church and Wellesley in the Gay Village. They had appeared as uncomfortable with WorldPride as the young barber. They did not seem to feel that the increasingly gentrified Gay Village reflected their needs (Bérubé et al, 1997; Bérubé, 2001). Yet, they still sat in a coffee shop in that Gay Village (Berlant, 2011)?

I thought of Mark. Of all my participants, Mark gave the most personal and direct account of having been physically attacked and brutalised because of his identity. It feels evident to me from Mark’s comments how much this still impacts upon him. But Mark cannot seem to fully claim this. It is not merely that as a white cis-gendered middle-class man Mark believes that other more marginalised identities would have suffered more. It is that the space on the setlist for cis-gendered male victims has already been filled, by white middle-class gay men (Shepherd, 2002; Gould, 2009; Schulman, 2009; France, 2012, 2016). Mark appears to believe at best he is a vicarious substitute for a more deserving idealised gay victim. It appears to me that this idealised gay victim is increasingly sanitised and made aspirational at events such as WorldPride (Milan et al, 2016).

During the Opening Ceremony at WorldPride, the originator of the Rainbow Flag, Gilbert Baker, spoke about Harvey Milk as its historic and symbolic motivation and provenance (Baker and Albin, 2010; CBS News, 2014c). Harvey Milk is an iconic, Christ-like figure of North American gay and lesbian politics (Shilts, 1992). The physical rainbow flag itself was symbolically presented to historic gay victims of what is considered to have been the most iconic example of homophobia and police oppression in Canada’s history, Operation Soap (McKenna, 1981). It was in effect an apology by the City of Toronto to these men (Murphy, 2016). I should have found this iconic enactment moving, but I could not. This was largely because, as an audience member, I could not see it. It took place behind a large VIP marquee that was bordered off. What I could see were images of it intermingled with
images of American same-sex marriage activist Edith Windsor. These were interspersed on the large video screen with the words ‘Global Human Rights for Queers’ (Barthes, 1993; Kuypers, 2006). The presentation of the rainbow flag was relayed through a tannoy system. It felt that the City of Toronto, WorldPride, were enacting a symbolic apology for something that they were still uncomfortable with. Gay men who had sex in bathhouses. I had almost no sense of Operation Soap, nor did I learn a lot about Edith Windsor.

Conrad: In the Defense of Marriage Act case, Edith Windsor was sort of chosen as this ideal candidate because she's this very kind widow who appears very gentle and nice and appealing to the viewer. But what no one wanted to talk about is that she’s really wealthy.

(Milan et al, 2016:17)
Operation Soap appeared sanitised and made aspirational. Others have critiqued this whitewashing and rainbow washing of Canadian LGBT+ history. It has been seen as leading directly into the symbolic interventions by Black Lives Matters Toronto in subsequent Toronto Prides (Lang, 2016; Warmington, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Grant, 2017). They viewed it as sanitising ongoing intersectional racism by the City of Toronto and its police on behalf of a historically oppressed, but now largely privileged, aspirational white gay middle-class male cohort.

I thought of Jean. Jean works in an LGBT+ supportive environment, yet is made to feel second-best by her (mostly) white, male gay colleagues. Jean commented on similar attitudes in women that she knew. It does not appear to be a matter of exclusion or inclusion, but exclusiveness. Asexuality is not being left off the set list. It is not just a matter of having a good or bad identity. There are simply better identities to aspire to. I was struck by the inspirational quality in Jean’s Judeo-Christian language of “the lost,” but it is present in many of my other participant’s secular comments. In sentiments of being “broken” or “in need of fixing,” echoing Decker (2015). Decker rejects these sentiments, but what is consciously rejected is often unconsciously maintained as an idealised form in the imaginary (Stallybrass and White, 1986). This feels evident online, in the case studies that I discussed in previous chapters. I sensed it in the narrative of self-improvement that I noted is often maintained with purist mathematical rigour (Tucker, 2011); the example of David Jay’s graphs of his personal relationships. I sensed these same sentiments, watching activists hand out leaflets to others. I felt those sentiments towards self-affirmation and self-improvement translate into proselytising acts which were also inspirational and evangelical-like. Although Prides are secular events, it seems to me that they draw on the inspirational religiosity embedded in our cultural psyche. This is most evident at larger events such as WorldPride. When one considers WorldPride Rome, it can appear that the Vatican was as concerned with what was culturally similar between its Jubilee spectacular, and the LGBT+ spectacular that was to be staged in Rome, as what was dissimilar. I am not suggesting that Pride spectacle and politics is religious. I am suggesting that it draws on affective cultural myths in the shared imaginary which are religiose-like (Stallybrass and White, 1986).
I attended the World AIDS Day Memorial during WorldPride. I did not want to feel anything towards it. I imagine I was thinking similarly to many of the HIV+ men I had listened to the coffee shop. This was exasperated because my antiretrovirals and other medications had reacted badly with the intense heat and sunshine that characterised WorldPride Toronto. I felt bloated, I could not walk properly, and it was colouring my mood towards the event. I felt detached, excluded and not present. I could not see myself, or people I knew, reflected in the newly-painted mural beside the AIDS Memorial Park where the event was taking place. In my mind, I had already code-switched to the role of an observer (Toribo and Bullock, 2012; Auer, 2013). I can see now that this observer was highly judgemental. He initially saw reflected at the event his own sense of detachment and exclusion (Foucault, 1986; Russo, 1987; Wilde, 2003, preface). He saw indigenous community members, trans* community members and women. Clearly from the pictures I took, there were white HIV+ men there also. He rejected the religiosity of the event and the mural; how it reflected the secular religiosity of LGBT+ celebratory memorialisation which Douglas Crimp (2004) alludes to,
but never directly states. This sense of detached, wrathful melancholia remained until four women came onstage and sang Four Non-Blondes ‘What’s Up’. I was present then.

As the singer sang “what’s going on,” Sean came to me. We had played the song at his memorial. Sean had died quite soon after the advent of HAART. He had initially responded well. We, his friends, were hopeful when he rose Lazarus-like from his deathbed. That changed when it became clear that it was a temporary respite. His viral load was reduced to undetectable levels, but he succumbed to HIV-related leukaemia. The optimism which had been so necessary, so inspiring, during his illness, bit back during the final stages. It became an obstacle to many friendships as recriminations settled in (Berlant, 2011). I found myself crying, sobbing. I was not sure if it was for Sean or myself. That he was dead and I was alive. I looked around because I was embarrassed by my public display of grief. Everybody was in solidarity in sorrow and joy. I remember a woman hugging me while she sobbed with a photograph pinned to her cardigan.

Secular graphic novel narratives often draw from the same cultural well of religion and religiosity. Humans against god-like beings, humans with angelic-like powers. Humans to be feared because something daemon-like has made them different. I thought of Sid who imagined the Pride she never attended as an inspiring magical space full of superheroes. At the same time, she viewed Pride as an aspirational stepping stone to the average Joe. The X-Men comic superhero that Sid most identified with was the anti-hero Wolverine. Wolverine was Sid’s father’s favourite character, who had given her the comics. Wolverine is an alternative paternal figure in the X-Men comics’ pantheon. Sid’s other favoured comic superhero was another anti-hero and alternative paternal figure, Batman. Sid talked about Batman in ways that were both aspirational and inspirational. Batman was “more relatable” and aspirational to Sid; like all anti-heroes he was not “too social.” Unlike heroes who are “just kind of too positive for the world that they’re facing,” Sid found inspiration in the fact that “Batman goes against the corruption that's found...”
When I was leaving Birmingham Pride 2014, I bumped into someone who was dressed in a Wolverine costume. Impulsively, I took a photo of them and emailed it to Sid with the caption “There are superheroes here!” At that moment, beginning my field research, I thought of it simply as saying to Sid that she should be welcome at Pride if she wished to be there. Now, I would still welcome her, but I would say more about superheroes and supervillains. I would say why I think freaks and average Joes are more important. It appears to me that nearly everybody at Pride can feel like a freak, a supervillain, a superhero and an average Joe. On any given day, anyone can be either Lex Luthor or Wonder Woman. Stan Lee says, “with great power comes great responsibility,” (Lee cited in Genter, 2007: 953), by which he means the mask Peter Parker wears becomes his public face as Spiderman. Peter remains responsible for that public face; for the optimism and hope it
brings, for what follows when that optimism and hope is let down. When Peter as Spiderman looks away as a crime is occurring, the consequence is the murder of his uncle Ben. It is why so much of the narrative of classic Spiderman tales, the relentlessly ‘too positive’ heterosexual teenage superhero, concerns someone who is weighed down by the baggage of his own public face. It seems to me that baggage is something you allow to happen. Freakdom is imposed by others, as Sid, Jean, Mark and other participants illustrate. Take away the masks and the X-Men are still freaks because of how people would treat them. Some of them are privileged freaks. They are responsible for their baggage, but they are freaks. Take away the masks, the baggage of their response to parental loss, and Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker become average Joes. Bruce and Peter are not the same average Joes, one is working-class and one is highly privileged, but they are not freaks.

My final comments in this section are when I imagined I was watching the freaks maintaining the border controls of WorldPride, myself included. When what I saw and heard seemed to me internalised the processes of erasure and non-erasure. They perpetuated and (not so) subtly codified the purist dynamics of aspiration and exclusiveness. My partner and I had gone to the nearby Gladstone Hotel, queer but hipster-friendly to the Drake Hotel’s hipster but queer-friendly ambiance. It was hosting a number of events as part of its ‘WorldPride at the Gaystone’ schedule (WorldPride at The GayStone, 2014). I had wanted to attend ‘Steers & Queers – Night of 1000 Dollys’, billed as “a tribute to the world’s greatest drag queen! Dolly Parton.” As well as hosting LGBTQ-related club events the Gladstone has a history of hosting art exhibitions in its ‘galleries’, the corridors between the hotel rooms on the second to fourth floors. Two of these exhibitions were hosting opening night drinks receptions that evening. These were: ‘That’s So Gay 2014: On the Edge’ on the second floor, “a celebration of new projects created by LGBTTI2QQ artists about their experiences of disability, radicalization, class, and other intersectional experiences of identity,” and, ‘The 10×10 Photography Project’ on the third and fourth floors, “proud to return to the Gladstone Hotel this year to feature the photographic work of ten new Canadian queer photographers and 100 new portraits celebrating LGBTI Canadians in the arts,” (WorldPride at The GayStone, 2014).

I do not think that the schedulers at the Gladstone intentionally planned the night’s events, and placed them where they did to have the effect I observed (Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Gamson, 1995, 1997). Nevertheless, it seemed that people sorted themselves out across the various floors into groups that not only reflected sexual and gender identity-formations but hierarchies (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989; Bourdieu, 1984). On the fourth floor, the top, were mostly well-dressed slightly older white gay men with a smattering of women who registered as straight. On the third floor were
mostly well-dressed slightly older white women who registered as lesbians. The second floor was queerer. People of colour were more visible as were trans* individuals. There were more obviously one or two people with physical disabilities. Listening to people talk, it became clear that most people on the second floor had gone to the same good schools, the same decent universities and lived in the same up-and-coming areas. This was queer in its gentrified mode (Warner, 1993; Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, 2015). There was traffic between the floors but, as I wandered back and forward for an hour or so, what was striking was how consistently this sexual and gender self-segregation was maintained. People quickly sorted themselves and settled on one floor or another.

What was as striking was that the radical queer space, which I felt was how the exhibition on the second floor had positioned itself, seemed as gatekept as the other two floors. The exhibition corridors were located through open alcoves that were situated directly beside the stairs. One could simply walk off the stairs through the alcove into the exhibition. My partner and I had placed ourselves about three metres in from the open alcove which was a good place to watch people coming up the stairs. Some people continued on up to the third and fourth floors, some popped their heads in, then continued up and some came in. There was also quite a few who walked up to the open alcove and walked away as if there was an invisible barrier across the space (Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Gamson, 1995, 1997). A line they could not pass. I sensed a pattern to the people with whom this was happening. Less affluently dressed trans* women, drag queens, and, queer/queer-variant younger people (Warner, 1993; Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, 2015). I assumed initially that they were self-selecting not to enter. That would have felt significant in itself. I sensed watching that there were other threshold/boundaries dynamics at play (Goffman, 1955, 1971, 1974, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Beside the open alcove a table had been set up as a beer counter. A group of people had congregated around this including, I assumed, some of the organisers. On first eyeballing this group, I assumed that their behaviour was relatively neutral. They were there to sell beer and hand out leaflets. As time went by, I felt that the group was responding differently to people as they approached. I noticed small, significant gestures (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). Some approaching people got smiling faces of recognition. Others got polite faces of welcome.

Others got a blank face, while the chilled eyes of the bouncers went up and down the bodies of the would-be gate-crashers. There were tiny, but perceptible shoulder shrugs. It seemed that the most
powerful response was to visibly look down, look away or ignore. Gatekeeping was occurring on a subtle, but powerful register.

When I went downstairs to the ground floor, the gatekeeping, self-filtering and segregation continued. In the Arts Bar, in the foyer of the hotel, the younger queer/queer-variant group had colonised the back of the bar. The same body language I observed on the second floor was modelled here. The majority of the trans* women and drag queens had gone to occupy the sidewalk outside of the hotel. This intersectional sexual and gendered vertical scaling reminded me of the social and racial vertical scaling in Mitchell Duneier’s (2001) Sidewalk. How in the same small area of New York Greenwich real estate, a sidewalk and accompanying office building, separate groups of people learn to accommodate each other, ignore each other and sometimes get along. Duneier argues that these social and racial hierarchies are not just imposed from the top. They are sustained and maintained at each stage. Duneier’s ethnography of the sidewalk focuses on homeless black street vendors. It has been critiqued for mythologizing, romanticising the sidewalk lives lived by those vendors in his account (Wacquant, 2002). I suspect this is because he treats those vendor’s ‘view from the bottom’ worldview as if it has agency. I suggest that Duneier is illustrating something characteristically more unromantic. Wherever individuals or groups typically find themselves within the ecology of an intersectional social scale (top, middle or bottom), they will gatekeep to defend that position even if it is against their own interests (Bourdieu, 1984; Berlant, 2011).

This may include maintaining entry-face; a gatekeeping where there was no conscious intention of defending implied codes and rules (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). I had found the art exhibitions at the Gladstone uncomfortable. The corridors were hot and stuffy. The air conditioning for in a Canadian building was not working for once. I was uncomfortable with how easily my face fitted on the second floor. I had come dressed appropriately for the ‘Steers & Queers – Night of 1000 Dollys’ club event, in queer redneck daddy drag (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Hebdige, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996). People on the second floor did not ignore or look away from me. It felt that simply being present helped to maintain the second floor’s social dynamics; the hierarchal scaling I sensed across the hotel’s levels. This sense of being present, complicit but detached, to another’s public face, runs throughout my field research. It is a focus of my final section on the WorldPride March. I wanted to be in the sun given how stuffy it felt inside the Gladstone Hotel. To sit on the sidewalk. I could not bring myself to do that. This inhibition did not feel solely my internalised boundaries and rules (Goffman, 1955, 1971, 1974, 2017; Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Brown and Levinson, 1987). I sensed gatekeeping and face maintenance occurring on the sidewalk as
it had occurred on every other level. The dynamics of hierarchal scaling I observed at the Gladstone Hotel threw into sharp relief the often-circumspect feelings of exclusiveness and aspiration that I sensed at WorldPride. These feelings stayed with me during the WorldPride March.

6.6 Wearing the T-Shirt: Marching with The Asexual Activists.

I remember that it was very hot on the morning of the WorldPride March. It was the hottest, sunniest day during my time in Toronto. My medications were playing up, I was feeling bloated. I was tired because my partner and I had been to A Club Called Rhonda at the Drake Hotel the night before. A Club Called Rhonda was the Drake’s major event in support of WorldPride. A Club Called Rhonda sold itself as a pansexual event for “party people of every orientation, so long as they’re fabulous enough to get through the door,” (Hebdige, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996; Bain, 2014). I had sat in the bar drinking a lemon martini, listening to the ‘thumpa…thumpa…thumpa…’ music. It reminded me of Thurber’s (2013) “ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa,” in The Secret Life of Walter Mitty. Through the bar’s front window, I could see the queue for the club. As an ex-clubber, I admit that I can enjoy the false frisson of elitism that comes from staying at a hip hotel and not having to queue (Hebdige, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996; Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, 2015). “Party people of every orientation” (Bain, 2014) appeared to be similar, youthful, conventionally attractive people in fabulous T-shirts. Once they were inside, many of these fabulous Walter Mittys had a ritual that they followed (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Hebdige, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996). They queued to get a cocktail. They queued at the bottom of the stairs where a gate had been put to go upstairs. Once upstairs, they queued for another cocktail. Then they went downstairs and began the cycle again. Insofar as I could see, there was no difference between levels. Upstairs was not a VIP lounge, downstairs was never so busy that the crowd needed to be managed. Putting a gate between levels seemed exclusive, and people queued (Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996).

With my slightly rough state, and the heat of the day, I was worried that we would not arrive at Sherbourne Station in time. We would not get to Church and Bloor St. in time to catch up with the asexual contingent. This anxiety intensified when we got to Sherbourne Station on time, but rushed. Sherbourne Station is the centre of the gentrification of the Gay Village in Toronto (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, 2015). All we seemed to see were half-finished office buildings and worksites. We had no idea how to get to Yonge St. Suddenly, I imagined I saw two giant road runners, one iridescent blue and the other super-nova orange, race by up the road.
from us. It was Mardi Gras festivalgoers. My partner and I quickly followed them like Wile E Coyote. As they lead us towards Church and Bloor St., this sense of being in a cartoon intensified. The carnival of the WorldPride March revealed itself with everything becoming more hyperreal and surreal (Foucault, 1986; Baudrillard, 1994). ‘Thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music, bright primary colours, costumes and big-lettered logos everywhere. At Yonge St., I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the asexual contingent. Their purple T-shirts and flags stood out against all the rainbow glitter around them. Many of the purple T-shirts had stickers attached (Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996). Smiling skull and crossbones with the logo ‘Asexual Pirates Don’t Want Your Booty’.

![Figure 6.18 Wearing the T-shirt](image)

Almost directly behind the asexual contingent were Kulanu Toronto, a mainstream Jewish LGBT+ organisation. It felt Kulanu Toronto had entered into the rainbow glitter of the march. They had a lot of rainbow logos on their banners and flags. These were mixed with Canadian, Jewish and Israeli
imagery. Canadian or Israeli flags with a rainbow Star of David, for example. As someone about to
march close to them, I found this mixing uncomfortable. Having been in Toronto for ten days, it was
difficult not to be aware that Kulanu Toronto were having a bitterly contentious dispute with Queers
Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA) (Burnstein, 2012; Haaretz, 2014; Kaminer, 2014). This was about
who should have the right to march, and who should not. The accusations on both sides, of
homonationalism and pink-washing, anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish sentiment, had reached what felt
like defamatory levels (Paur, 2007, 2013). These felt like issues that were connected to the spectacle
and politics of WorldPride, but were in danger of taking WorldPride hostage. Whichever side one
agreed or disagreed with, that point of view became a synecdoche for WorldPride. It drove the bus.
This discomfort was intensified because Kulanu Toronto’s public face at this point fitted the hyper-
surreal carnival of the march (Foucault, 1986; Benford and Snow, 1988, 2000; Barthes, 1993;
Baudrillard, 1994). The surreal incongruity of this face to the ongoing backstory with QuAIA felt
jarring. Kulanu Toronto’s body language was open and playful (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and
Levinson, 1987). Their mixing of national, religious/spiritual and LGBT+ imagery was similar to other
groups. There was a joyful, carnavalesque sense of mixing Jewish humour and LGBT+ politics
(Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). One of their banners read
‘I knished to girl and I liked it’.
The asexual contingent seemed oblivious to this. They seemed detached in their own bubble. I assumed that many of them must have read the same Toronto newspapers that I had. There had been a large article about asexuality in the Toronto Star (Forani, 2014), which had been mentioned a lot at the Asexuality Conference. The asexual activists seemed detached from the nudity, the glitter and the hyper-surreal atmosphere. At the start of the march, members of Kulanu Toronto were already facing outwards towards other marchers and bystanders (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). The asexual contingent was mostly in a corner, in a circle and facing inwards (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989). By detached, I do not mean that they seemed blasé about the displays of nudity and sexuality onstage at the march. This struck me when I was asked if I wanted to wear a purple T-shirt. I felt more comfortable about this than I had on the Trans* March. I had taken part in the Asexuality Conference. I felt that I had gained personally as well as professionally from being there. I had valued the example of softer masculinity I felt I was offered there. I wanted to show both my support and my appreciation.
In a different space and temporality, that softer masculinity felt more obviously fragile and ill-at-ease (Butler, 1990, 1993; Fabian, 2014). While I was being offered a T-shirt to wear, two male asexual activists were debating putting on T-shirts themselves. Much of this debate seem to revolve around having their naked torsos in public, if briefly (Goffman, 1955, 1971, 1974, 2017; Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Brown and Levinson, 1987). I felt the same though I suspect my reasons were different. My stomach was bloated from medication and the heat. I listened as female asexual activists gently joked with us to put on the T-shirts. It seemed both encouraging and protective. It occurred to me that I had seen and heard much the same behaviour at the Asexuality Conference, and at Reading Pride 2014. It felt that, if there is an expectation that male asexual activists will present a softer masculine face, there is an expectation for many female activists that they will be protective of those men (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Levinson and Brown, 1987). There are gendered issues to this scripting (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Wiederman, 2005; Green, 2013). It does not seem to apply all male and female asexual activists. It is a thread, a narrative, that runs through mainstream asexual activism as I experienced it. I spoke to a female asexual activist at the end of the march about my discomfort with large marches. She assumed from my comments and my behaviour that I was asexual myself. Echoing Wiederman (2005), she said, “You’re just like the rest. Clever nerds who can’t be left on their own.”
Figure 6.20 The Start of the March

Figure 6.21 On the March
Insofar as I could tell, not everyone had chosen to wear a purple T-shirt. It appeared that members of Ace Toronto, the Toronto asexual contingent, were marching in their own T-shirts. They were choosing to march besides, but not within the larger cohort of asexual activists on the march. They had brought their homemade banners from the Trans* March. These were left for anyone from either asexual cohort to carry. I thought again of Jasper’s (2008:237) comments about “tastes in tactics.” It felt that the Toronto contingent were taking strategic advantage of the larger asexual cohort being there, but claiming their own space in the WorldPride sun. This felt significant. I felt I was again observing an asexual cohort who appeared homogenously fair-skinned. The purple T-shirts highlighted that homogeneity. Part of that fair-skinned cohort were emphasising their heterogeneity, but not entirely disassociating themselves from the larger cohort.

Asexual orientation is not homogenous (Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2015). It is a spectrum (Brotto et al, 2011; Brotto and Yule, 2012; Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka, 2013, 2014). Asexual identities are heterogeneous and intersectional to many factors (Gupta, 2013; Scherrer, 2008; Aiken, Mercer and Cassell, 2013; Galupo et al, 2014; Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018). My participants comment on orientation, identity and intersectionality. Asexual activism mobilises and organises for the visibility and representation of diverse asexual orientations and identities (Carrigan, 2011; De Lappe, 2016). It is a core tenant of sexual and gender identity politics (Russo, 1987). The paradox for collective asexual activism, as for any identity politics, is how to be collectively diverse along its axes of representation while remaining sufficiently homogenous to be effective. On the WorldPride March, it seemed to me that the collective asexual activist-identities presented were diverse along the axes of asexual orientations, gender-variance and asexual identities. Along other intersectional axes it felt there was homogeneity, particularly whiteness. As in relation to Berlin Pride, this seemed significant because whiteness does not feel distinct from allosexuality. It appeared at times that the public face of asexual activism was challenging one public face of WorldPride while surreptitiously maintaining another public face. In doing so, they were maintaining an obstacle to their own progress.
There is a photograph that my partner took of the asexual cohort on the march, which has resonated for many people who have seen it at conferences (Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow et al, 1992; Barthes, 1993; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994). I feel this is because the chorus line it frames is one typically associated with protest (Burke, 1968, 1985; Goffman, 1974; Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989; Benford and Hunt, 1992). It portrays activists protesting loudly and energetically about oppression. It depicts iconic activism and protest which is fully integrated into WorldPride March (Barthes, 1993). My experience of being present is that the photograph itself is a stylised, symbolic mirror-image of the moment it reflects (Foucault, 1986, Butler, 1990, 1993; Fabian, 2014). I feel that the collective ‘here and now’ face in the looking glass it presents is as much a tableau as the murals beside the barbershop at Church and Wellesley, or in the AIDS Memorial Park. As someone who was in the
chorus line, hidden within the photograph, my experience of the ‘there and then’ moment it frames is quite different.

I remember standing expectantly in my purple T-shirt for the march to begin. At this point, the asexual contingent still seemed detached from the overall march to me. It was then that I noticed the change in David Jay. He had been quiet, supportive and softly masculine at the Asexuality Conference. The change in his manner and his body language was pronounced. His body language was charged, energetic and fully engaged with the march. For the first time at a Pride event, I watched an asexual activist fully engage with the ‘thumpa… thumpa…thumpa…’ music. He set about motivating the entire asexual contingent. He drew them with him. There were two female activists who did the same, but it was striking how much revolved around him. His presence at that moment suggested to me Weber’s (1978) charismatic Christ-like leader. I sensed that this motivational effort on his behalf was not simply to fire people up. As we began to march, it felt to me that there were many activists marching who might not have marched without this ongoing effort by David Jay and others. Their body language was still hesitant and remained somewhat throughout (Brown and Levinson, 1987).
We began to march down Bloor St. East., behind a BDSM float playing loud gay classics. I was in the middle of the main asexual contingent, behind the large banner. David Jay and the other two activists were out in front. They were dancing and moving from side to side like great purple butterflies. They had already begun to sing “Asexy and we know it, asexy and we know it!” However frantic their performance became, it seemed to me that it had artful strategy and purpose (Jasper, 2008; Polletta and Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009). Intermittently, the trio would nod to others to hand out leaflets to bystanders and to encourage them to sing along. It was at the WorldPride march that I began to consider that handing out leaflets was as concerned with the activists as with bystanders (Plummer, 1994). That it gave them a purpose for being there to overcome their reticence. I sensed that most activists behind the banner were more reticent. They
did not seem entirely engaged, though they felt more present then many activists had at the Trans* March. I was still feeling ill and not entirely present myself. The most surreal event for me was the conversation that I had with an activist who was marching beside me. In the middle of what was occurring, we chose to ignore our mutual discomfort with marching by discussing allusions to classical Rome in Michel Foucault’s work (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987).

As the march turned onto Yonge St., the sheer scale of the march hit me. It became clear that there were hundreds of thousands of people lining the streets. It felt that everywhere one looked, there was a Rainbow Flag (Barthes, 1993; CBS News, 2014a; Milan et al, 2016). At first, in the heat and sun, I imagined there was a Mexican wave of Rainbow Flags running down both sides of the procession. It took a moment to process anything but rainbow. I noticed at the barricades there were other
banners and signs. Most of these were handmade and handwritten. It felt that the person holding the banner to the barricade wanted to impress how significant its meaning was for them. Many of these memorialised friends, lovers or relatives who had died of HIV/AIDS (Crimp, 2004). The people holding these banners and signs were mostly silent. I noticed that there were other banners and signs. These banners and signs referenced Israel and Palestine. It felt apparent from what was written on the signs that the people holding them were aware of and engaged in the acrimony between Kulanu Toronto and QuAIA (Burnstein, 2012; Haaretz, 2014; Kaminer, 2014).

As we passed by these sign-holders, with Kulanu Toronto coming behind us, the sign-holders were not silent. They shouted invective at each other. They shouted invective or praise at Kulanu Toronto who looked away or acknowledged the sign-holders. Looking backwards towards Kulanu Toronto, and forwards at the asexual contingent, at this point in the march, what was striking was the contrast in their respective public faces. Their shifting chorus lines (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989). At the beginning of the march, Kulanu Toronto’s public face had been open, playful and typically carnivalesque (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). Many of the media representations that I have seen of them from the day focus on this part of the march. Now, it seemed Kulanu Toronto had withdrawn into a tighter shell (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). They were still carnivalesque, but their body language felt focused inwardly. Although not entirely, the asexual contingent felt like it was beginning to emerge from their shell. This seemed under the influence of David Jay and the other dancing activists (Weber, 1978). Some of the asexual contingent were joining in with the singing and dancing. Their public face felt more open, playful and inviting than it had (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997).

It was arresting how unaware the asexual contingent appeared to be about what was occurring directly behind them with Kulanu Toronto. Echoing Barthes (1993) about decorative display, I questioned one of the asexual activists afterwards; he said that all he had noticed was “rainbow flags.” At first, I thought that this was simply another example of looking down, looking away or ignoring. That felt unfair to the asexual contingent. What I had observed occurred just as the march went fully onstage; the moment that the asexual contingent became more engaged, and there were distractions. Marches and protests have emotional ebbs and tides. It was easy to be caught up in the shifting, swelling rainbow kaleidoscope (Barthes, 1993). It occurred to me that that might be the point (Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009; Polletta and Jasper, 2008). I had found the three marches at Berlin Pride were not separate. They seemed the same Carnival of Pride enacted in
three distinct symbolic and politicised Berlin temporal spaces. I had found the vertical social scaling at the Gladstone Hotel subtle and powerful with echoes of Duneier’s (2001) work. Why should horizontal activist scaling at a march be any less subtle and powerful?

It appeared to me that the WorldPride March had distinct temporal spaces to its material and symbolic route through the Gay Village (Foucault, 1986; Barthes, 1993; Butler, 1990, 1993; Fabian, 2014). It had distinct spaces at different points along that route. Unconsciously or not, the march felt designed to facilitate this. It began with marchers onstage to each other and media in the relatively open intersection of Church St. and Bloor St. The march moved fully onstage down the length of Yonge St. to meet packed audiences along the crowd control barriers. Unlike Berlin Pride, these barriers felt like barricades. It seemed every juncture between one section of barrier and another was manned with diligent volunteers who were stopping cross-traffic between marchers and audience-bystanders. That audience was itself in distinct groupings. At points along Yonge St., small stages had been set up with emcees and emergency aid staff. It felt that different groups of WorldPride festivalgoers congregated, queued in different spaces. That partying by a stage or standing by the barricades had their own exclusive meaning (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989; Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1996). I imagined that it did for those people who were engaging in acts of celebratory memorialisation for loved ones who had died (Crimp, 2004). It felt significant that where they were standing, other people were engaging in acts of acrimonious memorialisation to a different end (Foucault, 1986, Butler, 1990, 1993; Fabian, 2014). The march ended by coming offstage at Yonge and Dundas Square. This section of the march was cordoned off and relatively long.

I imagined the WorldPride March as a looking glass (Foucault, 1986). It seemed that both Kulanu Toronto and the asexual contingent were taking advantage of that looking glass. The asexual contingent felt as if it was seeking to present a largely unified face in the mirror to the onstage WorldPride audience. This told an asexual story of unity, integration and presence in the wider Pride/LGBT+ umbrella (Plummer, 1984). I found this contradictory and contrary. The more the larger asexual group felt integrated into the wider march to me, the less they and the smaller group from Toronto felt integrated with each other. Their body language and their public faces diverged (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). It felt Kulanu Toronto was using the looking glass to present alternate faces to different audiences at disparate moments and spaces. At the beginning of the march, there was no overt sense of the fractious dispute with QuAIA (Burnstein, 2012; Haaretz, 2014; Kaminer, 2014). It felt Kulanu Toronto’s face in the looking glass told the story of
Canadian-Jewish LGBT+ integration into the wider Pride/LGBT+ umbrella (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). I sensed later in on the march, that dispute was less opaque. It felt the face in the looking glass, speaking from other spaces, overtly told a story of Israel and Palestine. This seemed as artful a strategy as that of the asexual contingent (Jasper, 2008; Polletta and Jasper, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009).

It felt contrary. It felt contradictory that the same looking glass, the WorldPride March stage, was deployed by both sets of marchers (Foucault, 1986; Stallybrass and White, 1986). I found it uncomfortable watching it deployed by both in close proximity to each other to such different ends. Although on a different register, it mirrored my misgivings on the second floor at the Gladstone Hotel. Whatever my personal feelings about Israel and Palestine, it felt being closely present to Kulanu Toronto’s made one a party to their shifts in public face (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994; Brown and Levinson, 1987). As being closely present to the asexual contingent, or the BDSM float, made one a party to their public faces. There was always the option to look down, look away or ignore (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Brown and Levinson, 1987). I felt many marchers and festivalgoers were doing this. I remember one person standing with a banner who was loud in his disdain for QuAIA and Palestinians. I watched nearby bystanders ignore him and look away. I felt this was more than just the distractions of the Carnival of Pride, their body language suggested some deliberation. I watched festivalgoers cheer the BDSM float, dance along to the gay classics (Barthes, 1993). When two men on the float in full fetish gear mimicked sexualised BDSM behaviour to one song, I watched some of those festivalgoers look away.
I sensed the asexual contingent come into view in the looking glass for festivalgoers as they became more integrated into the WorldPride March. It felt to me that festivalgoers were viewing three performing purple butterflies with their sometimes reticent, sometimes engaged, backing singers and dancers. To me, the incongruity between what was framed by the handmade banners they carried, and, what was those butterflies performed seemed largely overlooked. The performance fitted the broader chorus line of the staged event the festivalgoers were participating in (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989; Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Hunt, 1992; Barthes, 1993). At the same time, it felt that the two men simulating sex were as much part of the chorus line of the BDSM float as the gay classics being played. The activists standing by the barricades felt as part of the chorus line of Kulanu Toronto as the carnivalesque humour. The handmade banners were as part of the chorus line of the asexual contingent as the singing, dancing and handing out of leaflets. I sensed that overlooking them did not diminish their presence (Stallybrass and White, 1986). Overlooking
felt a form of sublimation that maintained them, gave them breathing space (Eagleton, 1976, 1988; Cohen; Freud, 2015).

I realised the discomfort I was experiencing was not simply being on a large march. My medications were reacting to the sun and the heat. My bloat was getting worse. I realised that I needed to leave the march and find a toilet. I found getting through the barricades proved difficult. The young volunteer at the juncture seemed focused on keeping marchers on the route. When I explained that my HIV medication was interacting with the heat, he became determined that I should attend emergency health aid. I realised I would not return to the asexual contingent. As he spoke into his walkie-talkie, my partner and I quickly ran through the juncture in the opposite direction. It took some time to find a toilet and return to the march. We had to wait for a volunteer to move away from a barricade juncture to sneak back on. We ran almost the length of the march along Yonge St. to catch up. It was the strangest moment of an often-surreal day for me.

We passed one brightly-coloured float after another. Sets of drummers followed in rapid succession. A group of drag queens in full ballgown costumes segued into a women’s football team in full uniform. Logos and banners blended into each other. As I was still feeling ill, this all felt intensified and magnified. It seemed that everyone with singing, chanting, dancing and drumming simultaneously. What was most distracting was the ‘thumpa... thumpa...thumpa...’ music. It sounded like the beat permeated the entire run down the march, but the music was irritatingly varied. Sometimes it was Kylie Minogue, sometimes it was the Parachute Club. At other times, it was simply a beat that made it difficult to listen for the sound of the asexual contingent singing. I was worried that I would miss them in the ruckus noise. I found I had to stop and zone everything else out, to focus on what I wanted to hear.
This worked. Ahead of us, I could hear the asexual contingent singing and see brief glimpses of purple T-shirts. We ran faster towards these. We arrived at the asexual contingent just as they arrived at the final emcee\textsuperscript{11} stage. They were far more present in the march at this point. Nearly all the contingent was loudly singing “Asexy and we know it, asexy and we know it!” I sensed an energy to the body language of the entire contingent. As we caught up to them, I heard the drag queen who was emceeing the stage say over the tannoy, “A big shout out to the asexuals.” At this, the asexual contingent sang louder and more energetically. I heard festivalgoers in the audience begin to sing with them. It was not only David Jay and the two other activists out in front. Most of the contingent felt engaged and ecstatic at this point. I remembered the asexual activist leading the march at Reading Pride. How powerful and confident she had seemed taking the controls at that moment.

\textsuperscript{11} The MC (Master of Ceremonies) or emcee is the compère of a ceremony or event, in this case the differing stages upon the route. Emcee and emceeing are used to suggest that the role is more informal than that of a traditional MC.
Here, with a large group of activists, that felt many times amplified. I imagined that I was watching these activists drive the bus in the sun.

It seemed to me that the effort of building to this public expression, this chorus line (Melucci, 1981, 1988, 1989), quickly broke upon the asexual contingent. As we moved towards the end of the march, I felt that most of the asexual contingent returned to their initial detached, reticent face. I remember the activist who had chatted to me about Foucault taking up the conversation as if there had been no break in it, and there had been no break in my presence. David Jay and the two other activists who had been so motivational appeared drained by their efforts. Although he looked tired, David Jay felt similar to the activist figurehead that I had observed the Asexuality Conference. As we moved offstage at Yonge and Dundas Square, I noted him make constant checks that everyone was okay. It felt that the asexual contingent had moved from its public Pride face to the face that it wore in its own company. That I had seen at the conference. My final memory of the asexual contingent on the march is directly after a photograph being taken before they dispersed. David Jay turned and asked, “does anyone want to go for frozen yoghurt?”
Looking backwards towards Kulanu Toronto, it appeared to me they had moved from a public Pride face to an offstage face. As Kulanu Toronto had moved offstage, the hybrid Rainbow/Jewish and LGBT+/Israeli flags and banners had been largely replaced with Israeli flags. Their body language felt strident. It still seemed celebratory, but stridently so. I felt the political intent that had been initially covert, then opaque, was now transparent. It felt challenging to march so close to them. At this point, for me this was not solely about the issues between Kulanu Toronto and QuAIa. It was not about Israel and Palestine. It felt it was about how they had driven the Pride bus. It appeared to me that Kulanu Toronto had an acute sense of what could be publicly seen and not seen at different points, in different spaces, along the march. I felt they understood what would be ignored and what would be overlooked. Irrespective of what one might feel concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I did not feel their understanding of Pride protest dynamics were atavistic. The context felt challenging, but their actions were similar-in-kind to other groups on the WorldPride March. I felt
their actions illustrated how well they understood the rules of the road. The same rules that I had watched asexual activists align with.
Chapter Seven: Asexual Activism, the popular imaginary and a politics of contrariness.

7.1 Main Findings and Contributions.

International in its scope, this thesis offers the first ethnographic study of contemporary asexual activism in the West. I consider collective activism to address a significant lacuna in prior research on asexual identity-formations within Asexual Studies, which have hitherto focused on individuated asexual identities and experiences (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018). In Chapter Four, I consider the account that asexual activist-participants gave of their own collective activism. I highlight the contentious, intersectional and portmanteau scripting of that account, adding an awareness of socialised activist identities, behaviours and beliefs to extend understanding of asexual orientations and identities. The ambiguity of intersections with LGBT+ and Q identities is highlighted to reflect on how this problematises those intersections, and to advance and challenge an understanding of emergent asexuality and its activism within a wider LGBTQ+ umbrella. The account given by activist-participants of colour and older activists is highlighted, to advance and challenge an understanding of emergent asexuality and its activism as solely white and youthful in character. I reflect on code-switching (Toribo and Bullock, 2012; Auer, 2013) and the Overton Window (Lehman, 2014) as key artful repertoires in what was expressed, to advance and challenge an understanding of how sexual and gender activists are motivated to act strategically in collective activism. I consider why asexual activists are motivated to act collectively with others with whom they may not fully identify, to argue that they do so with the emotive belief that their point of view will come to dominate (Jasper, 2008). In Chapter Five, I consider the account that activist-participants gave of their interrelationship to other LGBT+ and Q movements. I reflect on the contradictions expressed to extend an understanding of the ongoing character of Western sexual and gender activism, and add an awareness of its impact upon asexual activism. I highlight cohorts of activist-participants contrarily seeking to converge with and diverge from other LGBT+ and Q movements, and each other. Concerns expressed regarding alignment and co-option are highlighted to extend an understanding of minority sexual and gender activism as iteratively constructed and contested, and add an awareness of this dynamic in asexual activism. I reflect on critical faultlines discussed concerning this dynamic, to advance an understanding of the ongoing dominance of established (white) G and L identities and politics, and to add an awareness of this dominance as contrarily maintained by asexual activists while they challenge its allosexual scripting. In Chapter Six, I draw on and extend the accounts given in Chapters Four and Five to consider asexual, LGBT+ and Q
activism observed within the wider Pride arena. I highlight the emotive, cultural drama of what I observed staged to advance understanding of Pride spectacle and protest, by adding an awareness of the dramaturgy of contentious repertoires (Tilly, 2008) that script and frame it. I advance an understanding of the methodological role dramaturgical analysis can play in considering Pride spectacle and its politics, and to add interdisciplinary insights through this analysis in the sociology of social movements, and of sexuality and gender. These insights concern the staging of Pride spectacle that I observed, to highlight and ground this as set within a carnivalesque heterotopia (Foucault, 1986; Stallybrass and White, 1986). I reflect on this heterotopia as the Carnival of Pride, to extend understanding within Cultural Studies of Carnival and carnivalesque modes in sexual and gender spectacle and protest. I highlight asexual and other activists engaging with these modes to extend understanding of how activists at Pride both challenge and maintain mythic narratives concerning allosexuality, celebratory memorialisation (Crimp, 2004) and whiteness. I reflect on how I observed asexual and other activists contest these narratives through symbolic enactment which simultaneously and contrarily maintained them as timeless and universal, adding to an awareness of how such a politics of contrariety can coalesce and maintain collective activism. I highlight this contrariety in what I observed where differing activist cohorts acted in unison with those who shared significant commonality of identity and purpose, but also fractiously with others with whom there was significant difference. This advances understanding of why asexual, LGBT+ and Q activists’ emotive sense that they were acting artfully in their collective activism was as important as rational or strategic agreement with others, to argue for and add an awareness of how that artfulness required that they deliberately overlook how they might also be acting against their own best interests (Berlant, 2011).

This rest of this chapter is in two sections: the former focuses on the contributions that I have made to my fields of study by addressing my first research question, how do the narratives of asexual activists give an account of the increasing visibility of asexual activism in Western culture; while the latter focuses on the contributions made by addressing the second, what are the motivating factors for asexual activists in mobilising and organising as a sexual and gender social movement; specifically, the interrelationship to the wider Pride movements.

7.2 The Visibility of Asexual Activist Stories.

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(Yeats, 1989)

Initially, I thought that I would listen to asexual activists tell asexual activist stories, and then observe how those stories were enacted on the wider Pride/LGBT+ stage. These aims remain the core of my doctoral research. They were prompted by what I observed at the CLASSIFYING SEX conference at the University of Cambridge; the contradictory impressions that I had of the conference. The sense that it was as much a staged battle between two opposing sides as an academic conference. The feeling that conference delegates entered the contrary politicised dramatics of this; one moment in activist battle mode, the next wearing a calm conference face. The impression that space mattered, and that the conference was contained at the University of Cambridge seeming to amplify the dramatic contention. The significance of asexuality as an emerging sexual orientation, and ‘gold star’ asexual activism, to what was occurring despite the non-visibility of asexual activists at the conference.

This led me to conduct the first ethnographic study of asexual activists, and their interrelationship to the wider Pride/LGBT+ movements. That led me to interview a cohort of online asexual activists, and, to research Pride events in Toronto, Berlin, San Francisco and across England. Those ethnographic studies suggested a series of interrelated empirical, methodological and theoretical insights which I feel have contributed to the fields in which I research. Coming from a background in Education and Sexuality & Gender Studies, I initially failed to take account of how significantly different it was to interview and observe asexual activists about their activism and their activist selves (Coffey, 1999; Wengraf, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madill, 2011). How qualitatively different it was compared to my previous experiences of interviewing minority sexual and gendered cohorts about their everyday lives including their politics. This is not about privileging activist experience over everyday life or, contrariwise, everyday life over activism. That creates its forms of binary oppositions and contentions that I find unhelpful, and were not supported by my participants’ comments. I found listening to my participants, observing Pride events, researching Social Movement Theory and Sexuality & Gender Studies, changed my understanding of what it meant to be a sexual and gender social movement researcher. I found myself engaged with the duality between sexual and gender activism and everyday experience. Without discounting the quotidian, my empirical research seeks to contribute to a theoretical understanding that sexual and gender activism as it comes into view has its own faces and voices which require their own methods of research to be seen and heard. The sense that sexual and gender activists are ordinary people.
with everyday lives, now speaking with this voice in this place that must be accounted for. Roseneil’s (2000) *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham*, captures this for me. It is a conversation about and with activists, who were also and always remain ordinary women. The ordinary woman and the activist nevertheless speak from different places, moments and with differing faces. Part of the rationale that emerged for this project is to contribute to that sense of conversation. I believe it is important for researching the visibility of asexual activism, and for researching wider sexual and gender activism.

I believe there are differences in researching sexual and gender activists and activism, offering a theoretically grounded view on the activist meaning of a sexual and gendered identity-formation in society, and, researching sexual and gendered identity-formations which may comment on activism. I see value in all three, but I do not think that they are the same. My experience is that they imply differing ethical and political viewpoints, theoretical commitments and methodological approaches. They draw on different empirical data sources, or use the same data to differing ends, to make visible or comment on the visibility of diverse aspects of asexual identity. This should be advantageous as Asexual Studies in the West is a relatively new sub-discipline. It seems to me that a variety of approaches and viewpoints in research enriches our understanding of asexuality as it becomes increasingly visible in contemporary Western society. It can appear that Asexual Studies is already engaged in a series of contentious polarised debates between: physiological and sociological approaches; theoretical and empirical methodologies, Critical Humanists and Queer Feminists (Scott and Dawson, 2015; Dawson, Scott and McDonnell, 2018). These debates may be productive and beneficial in themselves. I drew from these debates, and the associated research, throughout my field research. I drew on theoretically grounded meanings in society, and identity-formations that comment on asexual activism, in my analysis. My focus is on the increasing visibility of asexual activists and activism, on visibility within broader sexual and gender activism. My contribution is to an empirical and theoretical understanding of sexual and gender activism as illustrated by asexual activism.

In my literature review I sketch how contentious debate is not novel to Asexual Studies because it is a new discipline. I outline how a polarised framing of contention is part of the historic dialectic, the interrelationship between sexual and gender research and activism. In researching asexual activism and broader activism, I contribute to an understanding that there is a damaging cycle of replicating polarised debates in contemporary forms while claiming newness. I illustrate how contemporary LGBT+ protest and spectacle reproduce this. Empirically through my own research, and theoretically
through the work of others, I show that this may be valuable; a process of moderatorship and holding to account the errors of the past. I show that the cycle of debates may simply overlook and perpetuate the same errors. Patterns of visibility and invisibility, of erasure and non-erasure, may be perpetuated with methodological issues for researchers and how they approach cohorts framed as homogenous or heterogenous. My research contributes to an understanding that whiteness is worthy of critical analysis in sexual and gendered activism; neither accepted nor dismissed as an invisible background. I illustrate that the mostly middle-class white asexual activists I recruited, and observed at Pride events, were not homogenous. I show there was commonality, necessary for collective activist identity to coalesce, but there were differences. I illustrate there are significant difference between the visible pathways that asexual activism influenced by Queer Feminism, and asexual activism influenced by mainstream LGBT+ politics, are taking. There are differences between the experiences of younger asexual activists and older asexual activists. Asexual activists of colour were not hard to reach in my interviews. They offered their perspectives, which had commonality and difference to other activists and to each other. That did not resolve, it highlighted the contentious question that the visible asexual activism I observed felt overwhelmingly white. My research contributes to a broader conversation about how whiteness is maintained in LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest in the West.

Except for Hinderliter (2009), Fahs (2010), Kahan (2013) and Cuthbert (2017), few contemporary asexual researchers pay regard to the fact that asexuality and asexual activism is not new. The terms may change; one might be speaking of bachelor men and women, of spinsters and their movements, and of Boston marriages in the past. I find myself reading von Krafft-Ebing’s (2013) pejorative accounts of neurotic anaesthesia where nascent asexual identities are suggested in many of the accounts. My research has made me mindful while we measure and judge asexuality, analyse the interrelationships between asexuals and society, and consider the role that asexual activism plays, we should acknowledge academia has been a (largely invisible) fellow traveller in the historic silencing and erasure of nascent asexual voices and proto-asexual movements. My research seeks to contribute to an awareness that, if sexual and gendered activism has its own faces and voices, sexual and gendered research views those faces and voices through its own filters. This is complicated because minority sexual and gendered activism, and sexual and gendered research, have been historically mutually interdependent for visibility. I illustrate how asexual activists maintain this, often fraught, cyclical interdependence while at times it entraps them. I reflect how there has been debate in Asexual Studies that it represents a “new lens” with which to consider asexual identity-formations; suggesting a before-and-after, a boundary between historic sexology and contemporary
Asexual Studies. That may be useful, but I consider that it can replicate a series of unhelpful debates in Social Movement Studies concerning collective urban identities and their associated movements. These movements were uncritically labelled as New Social Movements (Calhoun, 1993; Pichardo, 1997; Buechler, 2011) largely on the basis that academics were viewing these movements for what appeared novel, and overlooking what persisted from prior historic moments. Through my analysis of my empirical data, my theoretical grounding and my methodological approach, I have sought to contribute to a critical awareness of what the role of the field researcher is in exploring contemporary sexual and gender movements. The scripted parts that we play as moderators in the visibility of sexual and gendered activism.

‘Asexuality’ as a term has increasingly come to signify a contemporary sexual orientation in the West. I contribute to an awareness of how asexual activism as an emerging sexual and gender social movement has played a part in this use of the term; mobilising and organising for the visibility and representation of the identities and communities associated with it. In doing this, I illustrate how my participants and the activists I observed drew on and committed themselves to a broader history of minority sexual and gender activism, and associated sexual and gender research. My empirical research contributes to an awareness that a key characteristic of this commitment is a visible obligation to public contentious actions. It contributes to a theoretical understanding that this broader cyclical commitment to contention extends beyond rational strategic intervention or emotive artful strategy, though they are visibly present. I illustrate how that may be triggered by a desire for visibility and representation of community members, but in practice it extends beyond these aims. My data collection and analysis of LGBT+ spectacle and protest illustrate how participants are caught in the drama, the carnivalesque contention, and obey its invisible scripts. A key contribution my research makes is to the empirical analysis of the dramaturgy of sexual and gender activism, grounded in a theoretical understanding of the codes of Carnival and the carnivalesque, and illustrated by asexual activism and other LGBT+ movements.

I contribute to the broader conversation questioning the representationality of a sexual and gendered activist cohort to communities it seeks to represent, as I have done throughout my grounded analysis. I sketch how the history of sexual and gender activism suggests that sexual and gendered activists are rarely fully representative of communities they seek to speak for at that moment. However rational or irrational their point of view may appear at present, I illustrate sexual and gender activists as motivated individuals who believe their point of view will become representative through their actions. Directly or indirectly with reference to the Overton Window
I illustrate the significance for my participants of shifting hearts and minds to their point of view. I consider how this significance is modelled as they seek to shift the viewpoints of the invisible hinterland of asexuals who do not identify as activists, mainstream public opinion, and the wider LGBT+ and Q/Pride movements and communities. I focus on the shifts in points of opinion illustrated by wider LGBT+ and Q/Pride movements and communities. In this, I contribute to an understanding that differing asexual activist cohorts, differing sexual and gender activist cohorts, are primarily representing their own visibility.

As a critical historic case study, ACT UP were a relatively small and unrepresentative cohort of motivated activists (Gould, 2009). It is important to question the representationality of their legacy. I add to a broader conversation about how we consider that representationality, because there is a legacy positive and negative. Their activism, in its visibly contrary mixture of carnivalesque protest on the streets and compromise behind committee doors, had impact. They shifted the Overton Window in public opinion, in how LGBT+ and Q protest and spectacle should be viewed. My grounded analysis illustrates a critical point about the Overton Window (Lehman, 2014); activists seek to shift the window of opinion, but they can never be entirely sure what the consequences of this will be. I seek to contribute to an awareness that ACT UP perpetuated idealised forms of sexual and gendered identity, victimhood and activism I illustrate are still visible on the wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q stage. I chose to focus on extended field research concerning the interrelationships between asexual activism and that wider Pride/LGBT+ and Q stage. This reflected my preference for ethnographic participant observation, and my interest in cross disciplinary research between Sexuality & Gender Studies and Social Movement Theory. It reflected my methodological commitment and contribution to an awareness that contemporary sexual and gender protest is best researched first-hand, by visibly engaging with what activists say and do (Klandermans and Staggenberg, 2002). These methodological preferences and commitments set boundaries on what I could achieve. Had there been more time, I might have conducted detailed work on asexual activism and educational campaigns, digital activism, media campaigns, online and off-line publication. I feel these are productive areas for further research. Nevertheless, my research illustrates a salient point.

My grounded analysis contributes to an awareness that asexual activist cohorts and others present visible public faces (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Levinson and Brown, 1987). They seek to present chorus lines. I illustrate that these are not always internally unified, but they aim towards external unity. They tell asexual activist stories, but they are focused on telling other activist stories as well. This was notable once I began my field research at Pride events, but it was evident in my participants’
interviews. I show that some of this was accounted for by the intersectional nature of collective activist identity, but certain stories felt that they had more persistence. They had an audience for their visibility which gave them traction. I illustrate how these narratives constellated around LGBT+ and Q frames of contention, oppression, aspiration, assimilation, normalcy, idealisation and optimism. I contribute to an understanding that these narratives were maintained or challenged by the chorus lines to suit the audiences’ expectations. I show how these multiple concurrent narratives often felt inconsistent with each other. I illustrate that the chorus lines, the unifying faces these multiple narratives presented at Pride events, fought or slipped because of the inconsistencies. When that happened, I outline how watched as asexual activists, other activists and festivalgoers looked down, looked away or ignored this. I convey the sense that this rendered the public face invisible. This could be a matter of ignoring something overtly sexualised, it could be denying that one had overheard someone being explicitly racist. Through thick description, I highlight how prevalent this process of overlooking and rendering invisible what was visible was. I feel that this contributes to an understanding of the dramaturgy of sexual and gender activism, and to the need for ethnographic participant observation to offer accounts for that dramaturgy.

Once my participant observation made me mindful to this phenomenon of overlooking, I outline how prevalent a behaviour it was as a boundary-threshold mechanism (Goffman, 1955, 2017; Levinson and Brown, 1987). I illustrate that it did not only occur in LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest, and related asexual activism. I show that the dynamics involved are part of the socialisation of people in the West; how we learn to maintain face in public spaces. In my analysis, I contribute to a theoretical understanding of how LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest as heterotopias amplify this process. I acknowledge my own experiences where there were many occasions when I found it uncomfortable and challenging not to look away, and I felt the need to obey the boundary-threshold mechanism. I acknowledge there were other occasions where, upon reflection, I realised that I had quickly but deliberately ignored some aspect of what I was observing because of my predispositions. Although typically associated with humour and sarcasm, irony is the expression of one’s meaning to signify the opposite, my impression of the dynamics of overlooking was that it was ironical. I suggest how deliberate an action it felt that activists were not seeing events in full view, festivalgoers were not hearing comments made beside them, and bystanders were not acknowledging each other’s presence. I convey how significant the power to be present or not present as an audience member to LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest seemed, and to asexual activism’s engagement with that spectacle and protest. Through participant observation, I contribute to an understanding of that present-yet-not-present dynamic, its performative irony. As a former schoolteacher who taught
dramatic irony to young people and watched them engage in teenage irony amongst themselves, I am aware that the ironical mode infers capital. Individuals must be ‘in the know’ to understand its largely invisible rules. I illustrate how those rules can be subversive, transgressive or reactionary in action. I show that this sense of capital can appear to be dramaturgical artifice; nevertheless, my research contributes to an awareness of how its performance implies hierarchies of power and control. This could be through the vertical hierarchal sexual and gender scaling suggested at art exhibitions in a hotel (Duneier, 2001); it could be through the strategic horizontal performance of politicised display suggested by Kaluna Toronto at WorldPride.

Looking back, I reflect that this project has always returned to the CLASSIFYING SEX conference. I have sought to contribute to an understanding of the dramaturgical behaviours I observed there; the contrary, contentious framing of antagonists and protagonists that I felt were enacted. I illustrate how this hinted at a “recurrent pattern” (Stallybass and White, 1986: 5) that I recognised from my own background. Growing up in rural Ireland in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was not unusual to see a Corpus Christi peace parade the week after a march in support of the IRA. A Legion of Mary procession condemning abortion in the same week as a pro-choice rally. These were the most visible protest events of my adolescence, and visibly in contention. They were all culturally specific political events in rural Irish society, but they were also staged moments of high drama. Their politics and their significance spoke to each other as dramaturgical scripts, Irish carnival, that were contrarily understood through invisible but recognised codes of performance (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). It felt Irish rural audiences had an expectation public protest dramatised and made visible the dynamics of unspoken contentious relationships. Individual actors often took on recognisable roles which personified those relationships. This interest in the dramaturgy of Carnival and carnivalesque protest has remained with me. Through my data collection, theoretical grounding and methodological approach, this research seeks to highlight the significance of Carnival, and the carnivalesque, to the visibility of sexual and gender activism. Through my participant observation, I contribute to a contextual awareness of the significance of myth and symbol to the staging of LGBT+ and Q, and asexual, activist spectacle and protest. I highlight this by drawing on my interviews of participants’ accounts of their activist selves; their scripting. I illustrate my impressions of the, disparate, audiences' expectations for that staging and scripting. By combining these, I contribute a grounded theoretical understanding that there is an expectation that, to be visible, sexual and gender public spectacle and protest dramatize and make visible the dynamics of unspoken contentious relationships. I add to our awareness of how asexual
activists, while seeking to represent themselves, try to personify those audience expectations with the expectation that in doing so their viewpoint will become accepted.

The politics, ideologies and identities expressed in Irish rural political processionals were often highly contentious to each other. On the visible surface, on the political level, it felt these were dissimilar events. A group of veiled women praying in procession against the right to choose abortion seemed different in kind to a group of women marching to defend that right. It felt to outward appearances that a Corpus Christi parade was different from an IRA march. It felt that they were telling different stories to different audiences. Observing asexual activists and other actor-activists at Pride events, my initial impressions were often to contrast them as different in kind from each other as to what was visibly portrayed and politically conveyed. To view them as enacting different stories for different audiences which, on a surface and political level, they are. There are differences between an asexual activist in the developed West campaigning for public acceptance and understanding of their asexual identity, and a Jamaican LGBT+ activist campaigning for legislative change; despite the commonality of attending the same conference at WorldPride in Toronto. Building on my own prior experiences, my interest in dramaturgical protest in Ireland, what struck me forcefully throughout my field observations was the significance of the mythic in contrarily maintaining both commonality and difference.

On a mythic level, it seemed to me that the events in Ireland drew on a shared popular imaginary well of Irish rurality embedded within the wider Irish cultural psyche. Pro-life and pro-choice marches in Ireland often drew on the same Marion themes; purity, innocence and veneration of an idealised female subject. Corpus Christi parades typically drew on a Christian narrative of battle and struggle, while IRA marches in the 1980s often began with prayers to Christ-like hunger strikers. When these are considered, protest which appeared visibly at odds during my adolescence can contrarily appear to maintain each other’s shared though circumspect mythic narratives. Throughout my field research and analysis, I have noted how LGBT+ and Q protest and spectacle that I observed draws on a contextually different but similar dynamic. That is, a shared popular imaginary of LGBT+ and Q activism and protest embedded within the wider cultural psyche of Western society. In my grounded analysis of Pride events, I contribute to our understanding of how LGBT+ and Q, and asexual, activists enact this popular imaginary through their own mythic spectacle and protest. I illustrate that what goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1977, 1993) can accommodate narratives (religiose, nationalistic, aspirational, hierarchical, et cetera) oppositional to, or contentious with, what is presented on a visible surface or political level. Through thick description, I highlight the
significance of this mythic level to the visibility of sexual and gender activism. I illustrate how sexual and gender activism draws on narratives which are presented in its popular imaginary as timeless and natural. When this timelessness and naturalness is critiqued, my grounded analysis suggests LGBT+ and Q, and asexual activist cohorts, draw on mythic narratives, including mythic narratives of contention, that can reveal themselves as contrary to what they appear to challenge. I contribute to a grounded understanding of the mythic performance of whiteness, and its relationship to allosexuality, in LGBT+ and Q protest and spectacle. I show this challenged and maintained by the increasing visibility of asexual activism’s presence.

If one removed the veils that Legion of Mary members wore, to outward appearances it seemed visibly the same rural Irish women who were taking part in pro-choice rallies. That is not to imply that they were the same, that those individuals taking part felt that they were similar. There is clearly a distinction between espousing a belief in peaceful resolution and armed struggle, and between pro-life and pro-choice gender politics. It feels evident that there are differences between those who choose one side or another. Nevertheless, tourists at the time often remarked it felt like the same visible white Irish villagers fighting with each other. Those fights dominated the seemingly homogenous Irish rural society of the 1970s and 80s, and continue to dominate the more obviously heterogeneous Irish society of today. It felt the symbolism of mythic protest dominated Irish rural society since the inception of the modern Irish state; the small differences it contends hiding grave injustices and making visible great liberties. In my grounded analysis, I contribute to an understanding that this contrary mythopoetic duality of protest is present in LGBT+ spectacle and activism. I illustrate how, with small differences, the same events and performances can bring to the surface feelings of hope and despair, transgression and conformity, aspiration and rejection, et cetera. I acknowledge that I experienced these feelings myself. I illustrate that the most significant mythopoetic duality expressed was the desire to be visibly part of something greater while simultaneously desiring to keep one’s own company; to be included and yet exclusive, visibly present and invisibly apart. I illustrate how asexual activist cohorts model this mythopoetic duality, and are trapped by it. I am building on work by Stallybrass and White (1986: 5) to offer a grounded awareness that this dualistic framing of mythic protest imposes a recurrent pattern, a persistent form on the popular imaginary of sexual and gender activism as it seeks increasing visibility.

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, it felt that as well as the politics, ideologies and identities expressed, Irish rural society was engaged in an ongoing conversation with its popular imagination of protest. When I return home, it feels Irish rural society continues to test the visible and invisible
boundaries of its popular imagination: what it views as heterogeneous and homogenous, what is normal and abnormal to it, what is seen and unseen, and what is excluded and excluded. In the 1970s and 1980s, it felt that this conversation with the Irish rural popular imaginary impacted as much on the subject, activism and its hierarchies, as the political aims and objectives contended. It seemed that movements concerned with armed struggle and peace were understood as more significant than movements concerned with women’s issues. From the chorus lines enacted, one imagined that male activists were visibly idealised as ‘Kings for a Day’ (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986, 1993, 1997). It was not that the Irish rural imaginary did not award gold crowns, gold stars, to women but it felt understood that ‘Queens for a Day’ were mythically and visibly mothers-of-men and/or symbolically mothers-to-be. In this, one sensed that gold crowns were heavy, and they brought invisible baggage. My grounded analysis contributes to an ongoing conversation concerning the popular imaginary of sexual and gendered public protest and spectacle as illustrated by the visibility of asexual activism and other LGBT+ and Q movements. I illustrate how these conversations with the popular imagination can be (strategically) framed in binary narratives of mythic antagonists and protagonists (Barthes, 1977, 1993). I engage with that ongoing conversation to highlight how this may be useful, but it risks overlooking the duality of the popular imaginary. I illustrate the persistence and entrapment of its recurrent patterns; the ways that they moderate movements and activists to render them visible. One of the factors which drew me to Asexual Studies was growing up in a rural Ireland visibly preoccupied with religious and secular celibacy, spinsterhood and bachelordom. It felt that these were all visibly afforded gold crowns, but they carried heavy baggage that had to be kept invisible. As a quare-bisexual academic returning to the new rural Ireland of today, I find that the spinsters and bachelors of yesteryear have not vanished. Some of the contemporary gold star (Cuthbert, 2017) spinsters and bachelors I meet are openly gay and lesbian, some are ethnically Polish and Nigerian, but people persist in calling them “quare young ones.” How the popular imaginary in rural Ireland maintains its visible and invisible borders concerning spinsterhood and bachelordom, while accommodating change, is an area of research that I hope to engage upon.

7.3 The Motivation to be ‘King for A Day’.

A recurrent pattern emerges: the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other (in the classic way that Hegel describes in the master-slave
section of the Phenomenology), but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticised constituent of its own fantasy life.

(Stallybrass and White, 1986: 5)

As Hall (1996) noted, Allon White transformed British Cultural and Literary Studies in the 1980s. This was through his collaboration with Peter Stallybass (1986) on The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. This has been a key text in my analysis of the Carnival of Pride, how it draws on the popular imaginary of protest and activism. This text built on and expanded Bakhtin’s (1984) ideas concerning medieval popular carnival and 19th century bourgeois realism. It also challenged them by incorporating concepts from Hegel (1977) regarding the interdependence between high-low hierarchies, the abiding influence of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham (CCCS) on encoding and decoding (Hoggart, 1957; Hall, 1980) and, significantly, work that was occurring within Cultural Studies at Sussex and what would become the Centre for Sexual Dissidence (Sinfield, 1992; Dollimore, 1994). This extended Raymond and Joy Williams’ work on Cultural Materialism (Williams, 1983, 2014), challenging the belief that literary texts and performances should be read (solely) as part of a trans-historical Great Tradition (Leavis, 2011) or artistic canon. Literary texts and performances were to be read as historical documentation, often against the grain to suggest what they might disclose about power, race, class or economic relationships of their time. There was a focus on how texts and performances both revealed, and concealed, historical eroticised motivations with relations of sexuality and gender. My research builds on this approach, to contribute suggestions on how we might read the motivation for the public performances of sexual and gender activism.

In writing their text, Stallybrass and White stood at the epicentre, the faultline (Sinfield, 1992), of an argument still reverberating between two influential politicised traditions about Carnival and carnivals. I illustrate how I draw from this debate in my understanding of contemporary Pride festivals and asexual activists’ engagement with them. I contribute my own insights to an ongoing debate as to what carnivals meant and mean culturally and what they meant and should mean politically. There are those who advocate various iterations of Bakhtin’s “world turned upside down (Hall, 1996: 290; Stallybrass and White, 1986: 4).” That Carnival is motivated by challenging authority (Abrahams, 1972; Stamm, 1982; Eco, 1984; Ivanov, 1984; Lundberg, 2007), and giving a voice to the oppressed, the silenced and the weak. Cocking a finger at the powers that be. The Bakhtinite tradition, or perspective of Carnival, is evident at Pride festivals today as I illustrate. I illustrate how asexual activists and others at Pride events engage with the Bakhtinite tradition. This tradition has
been critiqued, often by critics from the Left (Eagleton, 1976, 1988; Cohen, 1993), as a form of false consciousness, a delusional dream-making lacking any true political motivation or intervention for change. This can infer that the symbolism of the Bakhtinite tradition of Carnival is meaningless and apolitical, or that it preserves a reactionary status quo. Through my grounded analysis I read the Carnival of Pride as political, but the symbolic inversion (Babcock, 1978) it affords to the oppressed, the silenced and the weak can be both transgressive and reactionary in motivation.

Influenced by Matthew Arnold (2006), there has been F. R. Leavis’ vision of Carnival motivated by historical pageantry; epitomised by “Merrie England (Judge, 1991)”, the street fair and the village green fete. This emphasises continuity of order, hierarchical social structures and established authority. This has been equally influential to the Carnival of Pride as I illustrate at Pride festivals. I illustrate asexual activists and others at Pride events engaging with this tradition. The Leavisite tradition of Carnival has been critiqued for having no foundation in historical facts; for being an Arcadian, mythopoetic, reconstruction of English social pageantry that never existed (Judge, 1991; Hutton, 2001). I illustrate that it is because it is mythopoetic, and held to speak to deeper truths than mere facts, that the Leavisite tradition has such motivational sway at the Carnival of Pride. My grounded analysis reads LGBT+ borders, boundaries and rules as more rigid because they have the motivating force of idealised custom. This contributes to a debate where, despite their apparent differences, both the Bakhtinite and the Leavisite traditions of Carnival are similarly critiqued. This is, they are mythopoetic re-imaginations of Carnival, idealised fantasy dreamscapes, rather than accurate representations of carnivals and their political and cultural concerns.

Using the Carnival of Pride as a metaphor for modern Pride events and their cultural-political spectacle, I build on Stallybrass and White (1986) to suggest that these fantastical imaginings, and the criticisms of them, are almost inevitably so. My reading is that what remains most characteristic about Carnival, the Carnival of Pride, is not what is culturally portrayed on the surface nor politically conveyed just beneath that surface. These are significant, and I have illustrated that significance in my grounded analysis. I show that it is the contentious, contrary, mythopoetic and dualistic symbolism of Carnival itself, and how this symbolism imposes a recurrent pattern (Stallybass and White, 1986: 5) which motivates what is culturally portrayed and politically conveyed. Rule and Misrule, Order and Disorder, Identity and Mis-identity, Perfection and Imperfection, and other mythopoetic dualisms; contending and yet somehow shifting contrariwise into each other. I am offering a reading of LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest, illustrated by asexual activism, where the Bakhtinite and the Leavisite traditions are not different traditions of Carnival. They are strands of an
ongoing conversation in the popular imaginary motivated to contend the transgressive meaning of mythopoetic spectacle and protest. This conversation frames and moulds how political spectacle and public protest is viewed or not viewed in the public arena. I illustrate how this ongoing conversation motivates LGBT+ spectacle and protest and asexual activist engagement with it.

I illustrate how mythopoetic transgression (Stallybass and White, 1986: 24) is representative of the carnivalesque at Pride events where symbolic and ritual inversions abound. Traditionally, at carnivals, the ‘rule-less’ (the thief, the outcast, the prostitute, the gypsy) are motivated to take the symbolic power of the ‘rule-bound’ (the King, the teacher, the nun, the lawgiver). As Babcock (1978: 32) notes, “what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central.” I show how the Bakhtinite strand is motivated to celebrate mythopoetic transgression while the Leavisite seeks to control it. Through my reading I illustrate this at The Carnival of Pride, where carnivalesque sexual and gender Order and Disorder contend with each other for meaning. As Stallybass and White (1986) note, I illustrate that they are always to some extent trapped contrarywise by this sexual and gendered contention; Rule and Misrule shifting and inverting into each other. I show that what can be presented as peripheral, yet feel symbolically central, at Pride events is a mythic preoccupation with whiteness, the allosexual and the normative. As each other’s audiences, I am offering a reading of contemporary Pride events as motivational and aspirational spaces where the ideal average Joes get to act like idealised freaks, while the ideal freaks get to act like idealised average Joes.

Bakhtin (1984: 164) noted that contention within the carnivalesque is typically framed as ‘praise’ and ‘abuse’ which are highly ambivalent terms to each other in the types of grotesque (incongruous or contrary) realisms portrayed. I illustrate how, when my research participants set out to praise Pride events, they feel motivated to also critique and to abuse. When they set out to critique and to abuse, they are motivated to also praise. These symbolic and ritual inversions can be mirrored materially. Mardi Gras can be as rule-bound and authoritarian as any historical pageant; a village fete can be as licentious and hedonistic as any Pride event. Through my grounded analysis, I contribute to a broader reading of Pride events as mythic parties with politics (Browne, 2007; Markwell and Waitt, 2009; Ammaturo, 2016). I illustrate my participants’ and other asexual activists’ ambivalent, contrary feelings towards those parties with politics; yet, they are motivated to participate. Through a broader grounded analysis of Pride events, I offer a reading of asexual activists’ and others’ participation which highlights the contradictions of that participation. I illustrate how actors at Pride Events can seem motivated to participate despite their best intentions, and seemingly contrary to their best interests. I am contributing to an awareness of how grounded
dramaturgical analysis enables us to read a contentious politics of contrariness in Pride events, and in how it motivates LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest illustrated by asexual activism and others.

I illustrate how grounded dramaturgical analysis might read the contrary ambivalence of that spectacle and protest for its motivated. I show the dramatised signs of LGBT+ activism and protest are both complex and deceptively simple (Pierce, 1931-1958; Saussure 1983) with differing layers of representation (Hjelmslev, 1961; Barthes, 1977, 1993; Willemen, 1994). I build on Barthes (1993: 11) to contribute a reading of LGBT+ activism and protest as a mythic language. I show that there is the surface, there is the political and there is the mythic. Through my thick description and grounded analysis, I illustrate the performed signs; the denoted forms of activism and protest one appears to literally see, hear and read. I show that there is the physical Asexual Flag and any number of other flags at Pride events. I illustrate what is signified by their performance; the coded, connoted contextual meanings one associates with those forms (Hall, 1980: 131). I contribute readings as to what was suggested by the Asexual Flag and others’ presence for activists and festivalgoers. My analysis moves beyond this to contributes to an awareness that another layer of encoded representation exists in LGBT+ spectacle and protest (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Hayward, 1996).

Through thick description, I consider what motivated those who utilised flags as activists. Drawing on grounded analysis, I offer mythic readings which suggest the meanings that they were motivated to present flowing naturally by having the Asexual Flag and others presented as part of the Carnival of Pride. Utilising grounded dramaturgical analysis, I am building on the approaches noted at the beginning of this section. I am contributing a reading of asexual and other LGBT+ and Q activists at Pride events where they seek to resonate their framed cultural politics as natural and universal for all festivalgoers. This draws on approaches in Social Movement Studies concerning strategic intervention, emotive artful strategy and collective activist identity, but seeks to move beyond them. My dramaturgical analysis contributes to an awareness that emotive dramatic contention, often contrary, is a significant motivating factor for collective asexual and LGBT+ activist participation. Like all thick description and dramaturgical analysis, I acknowledge that this reading is subjective. It draws on my biography, predispositions, capitals and privileges. Nevertheless, I feel that my reading contributes to an understanding of how and why LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest motivates asexual activist cohorts, and to an understanding of the underlying motivations of LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest.
I offer a richly descriptive reading of Pride events as the Carnival of Pride, of LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest as carnivalesque. I illustrate how this accounts for their contrary, contradictory dramaturgical power. I am building on Foucault (1986) to show that Pride events can be imagined as heterotopias of sexual and gendered Order and Disorder (Hetherington, 1997; Johnson, 2013). ‘Other spaces’ which have their own borders and rules, stages and schedules, actors and audiences, aspirations and motivations. My grounded analysis suggests that central to this reading are the processes of mythopoetic symbolism, mythopoetic transgression, and symbolic and ritual inversions (Babcock, 1978; Bakhtin, 1984). I show these enacted within Pride spaces and motivating them. Foucault (1986) uses the analogy of a mirror. I illustrate Pride events presenting their own motivational mirror to the world. Because the ‘mirror’ (the ‘frame’ and ‘glass’: the physicality of the Pride Event itself) is material, I illustrate the assumption that the images of the world that we are being shown are material. My grounded analysis suggests the images are highly staged, and they cannot exist outside of the frame and glass. I offer a reading of LGBT+ and Q spectacle and protest that is to all intents and purposes motivational and aspirational utopian and/or dystopian tableau; offering praise, abuse or contrarily both.

My research analysis is mindful that these shifting ambiguities, this motivating politics of contrariness with its recurrent patterns, though contextual to my data, are not novel to asexual activism. These patterns cannot be claimed as new to its visible emergence. I show how they have roots in the historical dialectic of minority sexual and gender activism in the West discussed in my Literature Review. My research builds on Stallybass and White (1986) to suggest these roots extend further back, into the popular imaginary of the Western cultural psyche motivated by its myths of social protest and activism. Through thick description, I offer a reading of how this is enacted by the carnivalesque, surreal heterotopia of Pride events, where asexual activists and others are motivated to see gold crowns in the looking glass and become ‘Kings and Queens for a Day’ (St John, 2001). My research seeks to contribute to an awareness of how powerful a motivating factor this is, and its risks. It goes-without-saying (Barthes, 1977, 1993) that myths, and mythic framing, of Kings and Queens are contentious; those who wear the crown carry its baggage. Through my mythic reading of Pride events, and LGBT+ protest, I argue that the asexual activists and other activists that I observed were motivated to portray idealised versions of themselves and others as liberators and oppressors. I consider how these idealised forms were evidentially interlinked to the real-life concerns and issues my participants discuss, but I show that participation at Pride events demanded that its myths and patterns held sway.
An exemplar, carnivalesque framing of this recurrent pattern is through the lens of celebratory memorialisation (Crimp, 2004). As Browne notes (2007: 63), this is about reading the significance of Carnival to Pride spectacle and Pride audiences (Plummer, 1994) where “hedonism and enjoyment are read as central to a party with politics. [my italics]” Browne’s, deliberately ambiguous I think, comments as to the discursive centrality and aspirational commodification of hedonism and enjoyment to the political carnival of Pride seems to me as significant as Crimp’s (2004) discourse of celebratory memorialisation. I show the spectacle of hedonism and enjoyment is often ambiguously justified by the motivations of politicised celebratory memorialisation at the Carnival of Pride. As Crimp notes (2004), this contrarily traps LGBT+ populations into contentious cycles of melancholic guilt, ideological moralism and blame apportionment (Berlant, 2011). By considering how asexual activists are motivated to rationally and irrationally claim a gold crown at Pride events, my research contributes to an awareness how this dramaturgical cycle of politicised performance can trap them in its politics of contrariness.
Bibliography


Barker, M., et al. (2012). The bisexuality report: Bisexual inclusion in LGBT equality and diversity, Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance (CCIG), The Open University, UK.


Irigaray, L. (1985). This sex which is not one, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press.


Laslett, P. (1965). The world we have lost: England before the industrial age, New York, Scribner.


Prah, P., et al. (2014). "Consistency in reporting sensitive sexual behaviours in Britain: change in reporting bias in the second and third National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-2 and Natsal-3)." Sexually Transmitted infections 90: 90-93


253


Tarrow, S. (1996). "States and opportunities: The political structuring of social movements." Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings: 41-61, D. McAdam, J D. McCarthy and M. N. Zald, Mayer (Eds.), Cambridge University Press.


Williams, R. (2014). Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Oxford University Press.


Appendix 1

Information pack, research consent form, follow-up feedback request and human research ethics committee (HREC) proforma.

Information Pack..................................................................................................................................................259

Research Consent Form......................................................................................................................................264

Follow-Up Feedback Request............................................................................................................................266

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Proforma.........................................................................................267
1.1 Information Pack

Research study: **Newer Sexual & Gender Social Movements – Asexual Activism**

I am a doctoral student at the Open University at Milton Keynes who is carrying out a study on Newer Sexual and Gender Social Movements, with a focus on asexual activism, such as AVEN. To take part in the study, you will need to meet the following criteria:

1. Have some engagement with asexual activism, however small. I am particularly interested in participants who engage with Pride events, especially the forthcoming World Pride 2014.
2. Be a member of an asexual network such as AVEN
3. Are prepared to be interviewed either in person or by Skype

Taking part in the study involves doing an interview with me (Joseph De Lappe, the researcher) which usually lasts approximately 60/90 minutes. You will be asked about the things that prompted you to become involved in asexual activism (please see the attached Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form). It is envisioned that the interviews will be mostly done by Skype or, if possible, by person at a time suited to the participant and researcher

What you talk about in the interview will be kept anonymous, private and confidential

The results of the study will be written up as part of a Doctorate degree which the researcher is undertaking

If you like to ask any questions about this study and/or would like to take part, please contact the researcher on the following contact details:

Email: [Joseph.De-Lappe@open.ac.uk](mailto:Joseph.De-Lappe@open.ac.uk)
Phone: +44 7549 423 402
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title: Newer Sexual & Gender Social Movements – Asexual Activism

Name of Researcher: Joseph De Lappe

Invitation to participate in the study

We would like you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If you would like to ask any further questions, have more information on the study or if something is not clear, please contact me using the contact details at the end of this sheet.

What is the purpose of this study?

The main aim of this study is to understand the main factors (such as personal, cultural, social and political) for why someone who identifies as asexual might then wish to participate in a sexual as gender movement organised around asexuality as an identifying label. It aims to explore and understand how these factors may motivate different people to express their participation over time in different ways.

Who is organising and conducting the research?

The research is being overseen by Dr Mary Jane Kehily, Professor of Gender and Education, and Dr Roger Harrison, Senior Lecturer in Education, both at the Open University at Milton Keynes, England. The study is being carried out by Joseph De Lappe who is a doctoral candidate at the Open University at Milton Keynes.

Why have I been invited to take part?

We have invited you to take part because you identify as asexual (it doesn’t matter if that identification is public or not). We would also like to speak to you because at the same time you have also chosen to participate in an asexual social movement. Your level of engagement with this may be very slight or very deep; the factors that influence this are part of the reasons we’re interested in speaking to you.

Do I have to take part?

No. Taking part in this study is entirely your decision. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed to take part and you will be given a copy of this. You can change your mind about taking part in the study at any time and stop participating in the study. You do not need to give a reason for this.

What will happen I agree to take part?

If you decide that you would like to take part, you will need to have an interview on one occasion, either in person or by Skype, for approximately 60 to 90 minutes with the researcher (Joseph De Lappe). The length of the interview will vary depending on how much you wish to say. The interview,
whether in person or by Skype, will take place at a time and place that suits both you and the researcher.

At the interview, you will be given the opportunity to ask any further questions and will need to complete the consent form if you have not already done so. Then you will be asked some brief questions about your background (e.g. education, country of birth, relationship status) and how you would currently label your gender and sexual identity (do you simply identify as asexual or is it more specific?). Then the interview will take place in which you will be asked questions about your experiences of being involved in an asexual social movement - from the point at which you began to identify as an asexual to the point at which you joined to the present. There are no right or wrong answers; you are free to not answer any question that you do not feel happy to answer. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. The recording is used to help the researcher remember what has been said so that nothing is missed and will be destroyed after the research is finished. Some of your comments may be directly quoted when that research is written up for doctoral thesis or journal article; however, each comment will be completely anonymised such that it cannot be identified as coming from you. You can choose on the consent form if you would like to be sent a summary of the results of the study. This is anticipated to be when the study has finished in December 2015.

Will what I talk about be kept confidential?

What you talk about in your interview is private and will be kept confidential. If the researcher has any worries for your safety, worries for other people’s safety, or you tell the researcher something that is against the law, they have a responsibility to tell someone about this. They will try to talk to you about this first to explain their reasons. They may encourage you to speak to your GP or relevant health professional if they have any concerns about your well-being.

Expenses and Payments

Taking part is voluntary and no reimbursements are involved.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

Risks:

There are no direct risks from taking part in this study although some participants may become upset when recalling difficult times or experiences. However, this is understandable and the study is as likely to engage with positive experiences as negative. You do not have to say anything that you do not want to. If you become distressed at any time, you can decide to take a break or stop the interview altogether. If this was the case you could continue the interview at another time or withdraw from the study. The researcher, Joseph, is a qualified teacher and trained LGBTQ+ youth worker with experience of talking to people about sensitive issues of sexual and gender identity. He will give you some time at the end of the interview to compose yourself, if needed. If you feel you need to speak to someone after the interview, suggestions will be made to help you with this.

Benefits:
We cannot promise you that the study will help you directly, but it is hoped that by taking part in this research you will be adding to the knowledge that we have of when and why newer gender and sexual social movements (such as AVEN) emerge. It is also hoped that you add to the knowledge we have of reasons why people join newer gender and sexual social movements such as AVEN and other asexual movements. People often find taking part in research is a useful and interesting experience as they get their experiences ‘heard’. Finding out about your experiences would be very beneficial and important to us because the purpose of our study is to analyse the personal and social benefits for participants of newer gender and sexual social movements. We believe that this may impact on a range of areas such as education, social policy, etc.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to either Joseph De Lappe (researcher) or Professor Mary Jane Kehily (supervisor) who will do their best to answer your questions (contact details at the end of this information sheet).

Will my taking part in this study be kept strictly confidential?

All the information collected is kept strictly confidential is accordance with the English Data Protection Act (1998). All of the data (e.g. notes, audio recordings, transcribed recordings) during the study will be anonymised and identifiable only by a number and not your name. All information used in any future publications, including the use of participant quotes, will also be anonymous with no identifying details included in any publication of this research. Any information collected in this study will be stored on a secure network drive that is encrypted. On completion of transcription the audio recordings will be destroyed.

What happens to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will be written up as part of a Doctorate degree. Anonymised quotes from your interview may be used in the final report to help explain the key findings. The research may also be published in journal articles or presented at conferences. You will not be able to be identified in any of these. You will be able to get a summary of the findings from the researcher if you wish to see these.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee, England

Contact details for further information:

Joseph De Lappe
Doctoral Candidate
Email: Joseph.De-Lappe@open.ac.uk or Telephone +44 7549 423402 or Skype joseph.de.lappe

Dr Mary Jane Kehily
Professor of Gender and Education
If you are interested in taking part?

If you wish to take part in the study you can:

Contact the researcher (Joseph De Lappe) on the above contact details to answer any questions that you may have and to potentially arrange a time and a date to take part should you wish to. You can email, Skype or text Joseph and the researcher will get back to you.
1.2 Research Consent Form

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATION AND EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY (CREET)

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Name of Researcher: Joseph De Lappe

Title of Study: Newer Sexual and Gender Social Movements – Asexual Activism

Agreement to Participate

I. ………………………………………………………………………………………………………… (print name)

agree to take part in this research project.

I have had the purposes of the research project explained to me.

I have been informed that I may refuse to participate at any point by simply saying so.

I have been assured that my confidentiality will be protected as specified in the information letter.

I agree that the information that I provide can be used for educational or research purposes, including publication.

I understanding if I have any concerns or difficulties I can contact the (researcher):

Joseph De Lappe

Email: Joseph.De-Lappe@open.ac.uk or Telephone: +44 7549 423402

If I want to talk to someone else about the project I can contact the (supervisor):

Dr Mary Jane Kehily

Email: Maryjane.Kehily@open.ac.uk or Telephone: +44 1908 659260

I assign the copyright for my contribution to CREET for use in education, research and publication.

Signed: …………………………………………………………………………………………….. Date: ………………………………

I would like a summary of the result sent to me once the research is completed. Yes/No

My contact details are as follows: ………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
Thanks again for agreeing to take part in my study on asexual activism.

This email is to give you some more information about my project, the proposed structure of the interview, and, to begin to agree a date for an interview.

I’m a social movement theorist and anthropologist. I’m interested in newer sexual and gender social movements (such as have formed around asexuality). I especially interested in the reasons people have for getting involved or not; what they feel that they gain or they themselves have to offer to the movements. I’m also interested in the way asexual movements are similar and different from other sexual and gender minority movements within the LGBTIQQA+* umbrella (or if that’s considered to be relevant at all).

I imagine that the interview, as mentioned in the participant information sheet, would take 60 to 90 minutes. The interview would consist of two sections. The first shorter section would be a ‘Tell me about you’ question followed by a ‘How would you define your sexual and gender identity at present’ question. Please remember that this biographical information will be anonymised in transcription: this section is meant to be quite short and provide brief details to compare participants (however, if you do wish to talk at more length I’m happy to listen). The second longer section would be a discussion of your asexual activism. The questions here would be led by your answers and I have only planned five at present. If you feel that there is any question that I should also be asking that is relevant, please let me know. The questions that I have planned are as follows:

1. How would you describe your involvement with asexual activism?
2. How do you feel that you have benefited personally?
3. What do you feel you have contributed?
4. What do you feel is your ongoing role within asexual activism?
5. What do you feel is the relationship of asexual activism to the wider LGBTIQQA+* community?

I have attached a copy of my participant consent form to this email. I would ask that you complete it and return it with some dates that you might be free to be interviewed (I’m assuming at the moment that you are available by Skype to be interviewed, if not please let me know and I will sort something else out).

I hope that all of this is suitable. If there is anything else that you need to know, please contact me and I will try to answer your questions.
1.3 Follow-up Feedback Request

Hi ......

This is just a quick email to say thank you for taking part in my study and to check that you were happy with how the interview went?

Regards

Joseph De Lappe
Research Student
Faculty of Child & Youth Studies
The Open University
1.4 Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Proforma

Open University research involving human participants or materials has to be reviewed and where appropriate, approved by the HREC. To apply to HREC, please complete and email this proforma to research-rec-review@open.ac.uk. You will need to attach any related documents such as a consent form or information sheet so that a full application can be considered by the HREC Review Panel. Omitting any documents may result in a delay to the review process.

If you have any queries about completing the proforma please look at the Research Ethics website, in particular the FAQs - http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-FAQs.shtml which include a set of Generic Protocols and Templates. You can also contact the HREC Chair or Secretary.

The submission deadline for applications is every Thursday at 5.30pm when they will be assessed for completeness and then sent to the HREC Review Panel. Once an application has been passed for review you should receive a response within 10 working days.

All general research ethics queries should be sent to Research-Ethics@open.ac.uk, or call the HREC Secretary on 01908 654858.

Please complete all the sections below – deleting the inserted instructions.

Project identification and rationale

Title of project

Newer Sexual and Gender Social Movements – AVEN (The Asexual Visibility and Equality Network)

Abstract

Over the last two decades there has been an increasing expansion of the sexual minority umbrella. From movements which principally articulated the identities and needs of lesbians and gay men (LG) to movements which also or separately concerned bisexual and transsexuals (LGBT). To today, where the sexual minority umbrella (LGBTQQIA+) is still expanding as newer gender and sexual social movements are still being added.

However, for many participants, this expansion has been problematic. Not all cohorts may share the same sexual, gender politics or indeed support each other. It is often held that the LGBTQQIA+ umbrella implies a hierarchical seniority that privileges gay and lesbian identities above others.
Others critique the ethnocentric bias of the umbrella; that it embeds a Western liberal discourse of tolerance while maintaining inequalities of status, social mobility and ethnicity. Nevertheless, newer sexual and gender social movements continues to seek to align themselves.

Located at the intersection between the sociology of social movements, the sociology of sexuality and gender, and, social and cultural anthropology; this project seeks through an ethnographic, critical case study of an emerging sexual and gender social movement (AVEN) to consider questions of the sexual minority umbrella and AVEN’s participation under it.

**Project personnel and collaborators**

**Investigators**

Give names and institutional attachments of all persons involved in the collection and handling of individual data and name one person as Principal Investigator (PI). Research students should name themselves as Principal Investigator and it is a requirement that a separate supervisor endorsement is sent to Research-Rec-Review@open.ac.uk to support the application. The endorsement needs to be received with the application or shortly after, as the application cannot be processed without it. Please include the relevant HREC reference number if possible (see note for supervisors).

Principal Investigator/ (or Research Student): Joseph De Lappe

Other researcher(s):

Primary Supervisor (if applicable):

Professor Mary Jane Kehily

**Research protocol**

**Literature review**

Asexuality Studies is an emerging field. Some indication of that can be given by that fact that, at present, there are two different collections (a reader and an anthology; the first available to academics) going to publication, but not yet available, so that I cannot comment directly on them here.

The actual published literature on asexuality is quite small and focuses on two distinct approaches (Chaslin 2011): the sociology of identity (attempts to define asexuals; either by them or others, and, how those labels interpolate with wider social concerns) or the psychology of identity (attempts to construct asexual populations as a specific sexual orientation based around lack of desire, however defined).
Within the psychology of identity Anthony Bogaert (Bogaert 2004, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2013) has been the most prominent researcher presenting a view of asexuality as a minority sexual orientation. Bogaert set out to carefully define and describe asexual orientation using a four-part approach to help categorize the processes of sexuality: A (attraction and arousal), B (behavior), C (cognition), and D (desire). In *Understanding Asexuality* Bogaert describes asexuality as a sexual orientation that is perhaps statistically as prevalent as homosexuality (Bogaert 2012). Indeed, one of the main aims of psychology of identity approaches has been cohort identification by modifying the physiological and psychological criteria applied (Brotto & Yule 2009, 2011; Brotto *et al* 2010; Aiken *et al* 2013).

Although the literature on sociology of identity approaches is even smaller, than psychology of identity approaches, a recurring focus has been to emphasize the diversity of identities covered by the term ‘asexual’, “difference than commonality” (Carrigan *et al* 2013). A concern has been the narratives offered by these disparate identities and their relation to broader concerns as to wider social issues of intimacy, desire, hyper-sexuality and sexualisation, coupledom, singlehood (Carrigan *et al* 2013). A particular concern has been to consider how these asexual identities relate to various iterations of the LGBTQIA+* umbrella (Fahls 2010; Kim 2011; Hughes 2011; Gubta 2013). Other researchers have sought to consider how asexual identities challenge standard theoretical positions or methodological assumptions held within academia (Cerenkowski 2013; Chaslin 2013; Emen 2014).

My project seeks to build on this recent history of research, but take it in an original direction. Up until now, almost all research has focused on categorizing asexual identities as recounted above. My research is concerned with how, for some, those asexual identities become mobilized thorough contentious repertoires into collective actions (Tilly, 1975, 1978, 1995); why at this moment in time increasing numbers of aseasuals may be choosing to join organisations such as AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Equality Network) and become activists for Asexual Pride. My research seeks to explore the socio-historical scripts embedded in those collective actions (Gagnon & Simon 1973); the sexual/non-sexual stories these group actions are seeking to tell (Plummer 1995). Therefore, rather than the psychology of identity or sociology of identity, my research is located at the intersection between the sociology of social movements, the sociology of sexuality and gender, and, social and cultural anthropology. It is hoped that so located it will bring new insights to the emerging field of asexual studies.

**Methodology**

This research employs a mix of qualitative methods so as to aim for triangulation. The research combines: (1) discourse analysis of AVEN’s, and specific AVEN members’, public online presences; (2) participant observation of World Pride 2014, the World Pride Human Rights Conference 2014, the Asexuality Conference, and, AVEN’s participation in all three related
events, and, (3) semi-structured interviews with key AVEN members concerning their membership of AVEN.

1. As a sexual and gender movement AVEN has an extremely active online presence; particularly through its members’ engagement with YouTube. High-profile members of AVEN utilize YouTube to speak publicly with their opinions about asexual issues. Using Nvivo, a qualitative software package, my intention is to undertake a discursive analysis of a descriptive sample of these clips to consider the underlying narratives. The samples will be chosen from people who have all appeared recently in the documentary Asexual and, if not fully representative, are all members of and considered figureheads in AVEN. All clips are in the public domain.

2. Following on from what was commonly held to be a disastrously apolitical World Pride London 2012, World Pride Toronto 2014 has refocused (with its theme of ‘Rise Up’), attendances by major world human rights figures, and, a World Human Rights Conference scheduled as part of the festival. AVEN members from across the world are planning to attend both the festival and the conference (they are presenting a paper). They will also be taking part in events over the festival such as the parade, and, are organizing their own separate one-day conference on asexual rights to follow the human rights conference. As a participant-observer, to World Pride 2014 (particularly its iteration of the LGBTQ2IA+ Umbrella), the Human Rights Conference, and the Asexuality Conference, I shall be aiming to consider the linkages between all as collective assemblages. This will also offer a rare opportunity to observe the differing networks engaged, the repertoires called upon, and, to view the group dynamics at first hand. It also affords the opportunity to interview a number of the most activist members of AVEN ‘in the flesh’ while they are engaged in WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) displays (Tilly 1995) (I will be carrying copies of my participant information sheet and consent form, copies attached).

3. As part of my research, I aim to conduct approximately 12 interviews with AVEN members as to their membership of, and activities within, AVEN. These interviews will be semi-structured with the focus on asexual identity, asexual rights and its relationship to the LGBT* Umbrella (please see the attached participant information sheet and related consent form). As detailed above, it is hoped that some of these participants may be engaged directly at Word Pride 2014; however it is envisioned that the majority will be engaged through the AVEN website.

Participants

I will be targeting asexuals who are AVEN members with a focus on those who are active in campaigning for asexual rights. I will be particularly interested to speak to those members who present themselves as figureheads, or are seen as figureheads, within the AVEN community. A particular focus will be to interview AVEN members who are planning to attend and participate in World Pride 2014, The Human Rights Conference 2014, and the Asexuality Conference. Given my research question, my population sample aims to be descriptive rather than diverse; they are a critical case rather than broadly representative.
Recruitment procedures

AVEN has a very specific gatekeeping policy for researchers. Once ethics approval has been given, all relevant documentation is passed to them for approval. Once that is given, there are specific campaigning, and research threads, on the AVEN website aimed at interested members.

Consent

Please see attached participant information sheet and consent form.

Location(s) of data collection

1. YouTube data will be collected from the internet because this is where it is published. April to May 2014. This data is in the public domain and no specific consent is required.

2. Participant observation will occur in Toronto during 20th June – 31st 2014. During this period, the following related events are taking place there (and crucial to my research): World Pride 2014, the World Human Rights Conference 2014, and, The Asexuality Conference. I will observe AVEN members’ participation in all three events. All three events are public events and my participant observation will be of them as such. Should the opportunity arise to interview members of AVEN separately, I will have copies of my participant information sheet and consent form with me.

3. I will be seeking to conduct approximately 12 semi-structured interviews with AVEN members, accessed through the AVEN website from their research and activist network threads. April 2014 – August 2014. AVEN have a gatekeeping policy for working with researchers (but provided there is a clear research question, clear participant information sheet and consent form, and, confirmation of ethics approval – they have a history of seeking to work with researchers). Accessing through the AVEN website is also necessary because many of the most active members of the Asexual community (who are also members and figureheads within AVEN) are geographically distant from each other. It is envisioned that most of the interviews will be conducted by Skype.

Schedule
Time frame for the research and its data collection phase(s).

1. YouTube Data Collection: April 2014 – May 2014
2. Participant Observation World Pride 2014: June 21st - June 31st 2014
3. Semi-Structured Interviews AVEN: April 2014 - Aug 2014 (12 interviews @ 90 minutes each)

Key Ethics considerations

Published ethics and legal guidelines to be followed

BSA

Data Protection

Data will be protected in accordance with the DP Act. All data will be stored on encrypted hard drives. All recorded interviews will be erased once transcribed.

Recompense to participants

Participants will be offered no recompense

Deception

There will be no withholding of information from participants, misrepresentation or deception in the research process.

Risk of harm to participants
No participant will be approached if they indicate that they do not wish to take part. Any potential participant whose background gives doubt or reason to suppose participation will be harmful for psychological wellbeing will be rejected as unsuitable and not approached under any circumstances.

Debriefing

At the end of each interview participants will be asked if they have any questions about the study. They will also be reminded that, if they want it, they can have a copy of the summary results sent to them at the end of the project (see same on consent form).

Project Management

Research organisation and Funding

OU Funded Studentship

Red Form Ref No.:

Other project-related risks

OU Travel Insurance to cover period of field work (June 20th-June 31st 2014) is with AIG Insurance under Policy Number 0015901880.

Benefits and knowledge transfer

Although there is no specific benefit intended from the project to the participants it may be that they, as many others have, will accrue a personal benefit from the experience of speaking their narratives. It is also the case from the AVEN website that AVEN see a benefit in engaging with researchers as part of asexual pride and visibility.
It is hoped that the research will have a general benefit to society of increasing our understanding of sexual and gender social movements.

Declaration

I declare that the research will conform to the above protocol and that any significant changes or new ethics issues will be raised with the HREC before they are implemented.

I declare that I have read and will adhere to the following two OU documents:

- OU Code Of Practice For Research and at the Open University
- OU Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants

http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/index.shtml

In order to conform with OU governance guidelines, brief information on OU research approved by the HREC will be added to the Research Ethics website. The HREC will assume that you agree that the following data from your research can be made public via the website unless you tick the box below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HREC reference number</th>
<th>Project title</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Approval date</th>
<th>Type of HREC approval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HREC/2013/1494/deLappe/1</td>
<td>Newer Sexual and Gender Social Movements – AVEN (The Asexual Visibility and Equality Network)</td>
<td>CREET/FELS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

☐ No, I do not wish for details of my HREC approved research to be publicised.

Name:

Joseph De Lappe

Unit/Faculty:

CREASET/FELS

Telephone

01908 655649

E-mail

Joseph.De-Lappe@open.ac.uk
Signature(s)
(this can be the typed name(s) of investigator(s) if an electronic copy is submitted (which is preferred)

Joseph De Lappe

Date:

10/03/2014

End of project final report

Proposed date for final report:

December 2015