Where is ‘A’?!

A Scavenger Hunt for Asexual Traces in Dutch Sexusociety

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September 2022

Research Master Gender Studies

Utrecht University

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts

Utrecht University

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have seen the light of day, if it was not for the support of some wonderful people that I would like to extend a sincere thank you to.

First of all, I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to my supervisor, dr. Ilse Lazaroms, who has supported and encouraged me throughout the last year-and-a-half. What should have been a few months of collaboration, took thrice the time and I cannot express how grateful I am for your continued support and guidance throughout this process. While I am sure you will deny it, I genuinely believe this thesis would not exist without your support. And to both you and dr. Cerankowski, I owe thanks for your flexibility and generosity. You have both defied the rigid structures of the university and the assumptions many might have about the ivory tower, showing compassion and generosity every step of the way. Through your supervision, you have demonstrated queer feminist kinship and kindness that I will take on into the future.

I would also like to thank my previous supervisors who helped me on my way, but due to a change of university, had to hand over responsibilities. Dr. Katrine Smiet, thank you for helping me start up this project and dr. C.L. Quinan for showing me the way to queer feminist writing on asexuality and continuing this queer project.

To my friends and family: thank you for your patience with this slow-going process, your interest in my thesis, as well as, at times, refusing to ask questions about my studies to give me the time and space to work on this without the stressors of outside interest. A special thank you to the best of friends, Annabel de Koning, who not only willingly spend years talking about asexuality and queerness but could also offer matter of fact advice when needed and gave feedback on my writing in progress. Thank you.

And last, but definitely not least, a big thank you to my parents for your patience throughout this process that you had to watch from the sidelines. For always being there to offer kindness and support when needed and for trying not to probe when things were hard. I owe you the world.

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of traces of asexuality in the Netherlands. Drawing on writing within the field of queer theory, feminist studies, and the newly emerging asexuality studies, I will embark on a queer scavenger hunt for traces and resonances of asexuality in the Netherlands. This will be a queer undertaking, that is also deeply personal, taking on the feminist notion that the personal is political. First, we will explore Dutch sexusociety and its specificities, unearthing three dominant normative strains within this sexual discourse: the adherence to the normal, the dominance of the normalized homosexual, and the pervasiveness of homonationalism. Then, we will take on the COC and critically inquire why it refuses to include asexuality in its organization. After this, the queer scavenger hunt continues within the Netherlands, digging through feminist and LGBTQ+ archives for traces and resonances of asexuality, finding these resonances in the spinster and the Boston marriage. Further on this scavenger hunt, I will explore how asexuality is represented in the public domain and is understood amongst the Dutch LGBTQ+ community. Finally, I embark on a quest beyond the horizon, in a search for an asexual futurity that could break with the pervasiveness of sexual futurity. I propose an allegiance of queer and trans grassroots organizations with asexual activists, to reimagine and reconfigure conversations on desires, intimacies, sexuality, and relationships outside of sex.

Keywords: asexuality, queer, sexusociety, activism, representation, asexual traces, LGBTQIA+, queer feminism

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1. Introduction

Let us start at the very beginning, which apparently is a very good place to start. The insurgence of this thesis started years ago, when I took my first introductory course on Gender Studies and got in touch with the concept of 'queer'. This first encounter sparked an interest that I have held on to all throughout my bachelor's degree and into my master's. Within months, this concept got a sibling when I discovered the website of AVEN: 'asexuality'. It has been this duo that has driven my research interest over the past few years, a duo that, to my understanding, is interconnected and intertwined, equally fueling my understanding and conceptualization of society. However, this entanglement apparently is not as clear cut as I perceive it to be. Thus, this thesis departs from a seemingly simple question. Or not even a question: a statement. A conviction. Something that feels so innately true and authentic to me personally, that it is becoming quite frustrating having to explain it. My conviction, something I feel deep in my bones, as well as something that I experience personally in my day-to-day life, is that ***asexuality is queer*** and thus that, by extension, asexuality is and has always been part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Perhaps you, reader, just rolled your eyes at this obvious statement. I can almost hear you think: of course it is, why am I reading this thesis? While I am glad you agree with my experience of asexual queerness and queer asexuality, the reality is that it is not that obvious to everyone. Of course, I can only speak from my own positionality. Growing up in the Netherlands, I will most likely have different experiences and realities from people who live in other countries, such as the United States. Queer people of my millennial generation seem to take the American experience of queerness as an example to define and reflect on their own experiences of queerness. Growing up on the internet and maturing alongside social media platforms, my peers and I have come accustomed to sharing personal stories online and exchanging knowledge beyond national boundaries. This is, arguably, the case for asexuality as well. The term asexuality as it is used today to describe a sexual orientation, was coined on American soil. In time, the term migrated to the Netherlands, relying heavily on online, English conversations on forums and social media to understand and explain asexuality. However, as the term grew and expanded, asexuality has given food for thought to many Dutch people who were given a new vocabulary and understanding to explain their asexual experiences, including myself.

What is Asexuality?

In order not to further frustrate or alienate readers who might be unfamiliar with asexuality and are reading this thesis in an attempt to develop their understanding of the term, I will briefly discuss what my conceptualization of asexuality is, though this will be further discussed throughout this thesis. There is a multitude of ways this question can be answered, but I will start at the first conceptualization of the modern asexual movement. On the website AVEN, the Asexuality Visibility and Educational Network, you will find a practical and seemingly clean-cut definition of asexuality. AVEN is an online community where people have found community and kinship in a shared experience of asexuality. As the website and forum was founded in 2001, it has been one of the first places where asexuality has been discussed in its modern-day understanding as a sexual orientation. On this website, the following definition is given: "An asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction".

While this is a very efficient and useful definition to introduce people to asexuality, the definition offers very little space for variety and fluidity, as well as having a strong focus on self-identification, leaning into the 'born this way' narrative that is still pervasive in the broader LGBTQIA+ community. As KJ Cerankowski[1] and Megan Milks have observed, this has been a strategic move to find alliances with the broader LGBT movement and in order to move asexuality away from pathology: "The asexual movement challenges [the] assumption [that sexuality is either empowered or repressed], working to distance asexuality from pathology" (Cerankowski and Milks, 2010, 656). Through its existence, asexuality questions norms established in society, both by general society, as well as by feminist sexual liberation and gay emancipation.

Within queer feminist research, there have been multiple redefinitions and reconfigurations of asexuality, of which I want to share a few to give you a more fluid and queer understanding of asexuality. In her text on 'Stunted Growth', Megan Milks offers a reflection on Johnson's 1977 essay which describes an asexual person as "someone who "*prefers* not to" have sex" (Milks, 2014, 221). This approach, while taking away the political strategy of asexuality as an orientation, creates space for a more expansive understanding of asexuality. Milks continues to describe asexuality by a means of re-understanding

[1] While he was credited under his old name 'Karli June Cerankowski', I am taking a queer approach in respecting the fluid and temporal possibilities of gender and sexuality, referencing his writing from this point on by his current name: KJ Cerankowski.

relationships and desires, by taking on the idea of asexual disinclination, or "a rejection of normative expectations for achieving personhood" (Milks, 2014, 223). Such a definition is a much queerer and more fluid understanding of asexuality, which could also offer the tools to research asexualities in society from a more expansive understanding. While research shows, as Milks discusses in this text, sexual majority groups still have biases towards asexual people, understanding them as deficient and lacking in terms of human nature (Milks, 2014, 224), a reclaiming of such a rejection of societies norm and naturalization of sexuality is the queer undertaking that asexuality can offer. Thus, I would argue, asexuality can both be defined as a sexual orientation around which people can gather to enact social and political change, as well as a means to radically rethink and restructure societies conceptualizations of relationships, intimacies, desires, and kinship.

Motivated by Asexual Annoyances

The motivation for this thesis came from a place of frustration. Years ago, when I took an 'Introduction to Gender Studies' course by pure accident, my interest was piqued when I learned about feminist theory, intersectionality, and sexuality, and my mind became hungry for more information. During this first encounter with the varied field of Gender Studies, I felt an innate pull towards queer theory. This coincided, as it does for many people, with a personal experience of coming into my own queerness. However, as I was diving deeper into queer theory and learning more, the gaps and voids became more obvious. Where was asexuality? Where was that critical stance queer theory has towards normative patterns when it came to discussing desires, intimacies, and relationships? It was not until I started researching asexuality for my thesis, that I encountered the queer feminist research that had been done by Northern-American queer feminist theorists. Even though I would opt for courses on queer theory whenever possible, writing and presenting on topics linked to queerness, I had not encountered any writings on asexualities throughout my studies until I embarked on this project.

Asexuality might be relatively new to the field of queer feminist research, but there seems to be a lack of interest among queer feminist theorists and thinkers. There are still not many people publishing work on the subject, despite the activist work the community behind this new orientation has been doing for the last twenty years. Additionally, in public discourse, the conversations around asexuality seem to not be able to go beyond a perceived lack of sexuality, a struggle with an absence of desire, a void within relationships. This might explain my intuition of a certain missing piece within the discourse, both in academic and

public conversations on sex, relationships, desires, and sexualities. How does one discuss nothing? How do you explain a sexuality that is defined by a lack? How do you talk about something that is absent? The sexual orientation that is defined by something that is not there, is somehow also nearly void within queer feminist research. I am inspired by Megan Milks and KJ Cerankowski in their insistence on the queerness of asexuality in their book 'Asexualities: Queer and Feminist Perspectives'. While the title already firmly places asexuality within queer feminist research, they also situate their work within this field in their introduction:

> *"We undoubtedly view this project as a queer one: making sense of the social marginalization and pathologization of bodies based on the preference to not have sex, along with exploring new possibilities in intimacy, desire, and kinship structures - how could that not be queer?" (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014, 28)*

Not only do they claim the queer allegiance of asexuality and their critical asexual undertaking, they continue to connect their work to feminist research also, emphasizing "its attention to structures of power and oppression, specifically around gender, as well as sexual object choice" (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014, 28). Furthermore, I draw on Ela Przybylo's writings in this thesis and am equally drawn to the text 'Asexual Resonances', which she wrote with Danielle Cooper. In their introduction, they also turn their eye towards queer feminist exclusion of asexuality, explaining they "draw on asexuality to tug at queerness and its occlusion and exclusion of asexuality." (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014, 298). Przybylo and Cooper also explicitly express their alliances with queer feminist research:

> *"Asexuality encourages us to rethink the centrality of sex to feminist and queer politics, and to consider critically what has been at stake in the neglect of asexual articulations and perspectives by queer theory and the feminist movement." (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014, 298)*

It is critical asexual writing, positioned firmly within queer feminist research, that confirmed my early instincts of the entanglements of asexuality and queerness, as well as the position it should have and the considerations that could be given to asexuality within queer feminist research. The void I sensed was not the constructed 'lack' through which many understand asexuality, but rather an apparent disinterest and negligence of asexuality in the queer feminist exploration of sexuality. Thus, I am motivated by an asexual annoyance of this

negligence and, in line with Milks, Cerankowski, Przybylo, and other asexual academic pioneers, I will claim my asexual space within queer feminism and insist that ***asexuality is queer***.

Personal Allegiance to Asexuality

The nature of a personal thesis such as this one, is that it is very connected to your own life and therefore very vulnerable. The topic of this thesis, asexuality, and the discussion thereof is not only written from a personal standpoint, but also a representation of my most inner self and shares some of my deepest worries and desires. I will leave traces of myself within this text, fabrications of me that exist within these words. This is a most vulnerable task, but it is the most honest and true way I can write about something so deeply linked to me and my understanding of queerness and queer theory. I trust that you, reader, will be critical when reading my theoretical arguments, as well as kind when I share personal anecdotes.

I am, once again, inspired by Megan Milks, KJ Cerankowski, Ela Przybylo, and Danielle Cooper, as well as by journalist and writer Angela Chen, to share some personal experiences and asexual resonances with you to indicate my personal investment in this project. Milks and Cerankowski have stated that: "in true feminist fashion, we are called upon to remember that not only is the personal political, but the scholarly is also personal (as well as political)." (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014, 31). Angela Chen, in her 2020 book 'ACE', shares her journalistic inquiry into asexual stories, but starts the book with her own personal insights and experiences.

For many years, I have identified as asexual. I would never say 'I am asexual', but rather 'I identify as asexual'. It was never a whole-encompassing description of my self, but a tool and framework through which I can understand the world and relationships. It helps me understand certain value people place on relationships, while not valuing other relationships as highly. I resonate with Ela Przybylo's asexual moment, when she writes: "Asexuality manifests itself in the premium I place on friendships, broadly understood as well as on myself." (Przybylo, 2014, 297). Like many asexual people, first relationships, crushes, and sex just did not make sense to me. Even today, I sometimes have moments where I am reminded that people indeed do have sex. Some even quite regularly. It is not something that often occupies my mind.

I feel lucky to have entered the LGBTQIA+ community through the transgender community. Over five years ago, I started volunteering for TranScreen, the Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival. Through these interactions, I was thrust into the queer community

that, so far, I had only studied from a distance. I have never given much thought to my gender identity, though I feel comfortable and welcome in the transgender community. Despite having many conversations on gender and sharing so many stories, I have concluded that I do not need a gender identity label. I am content with the all-encompassing vagueness of 'queer'. Though, if you want to become specific and make me pick from the current assortment of gender identity markers, I will say that gender nonconforming or agender would be the closest fit, as I have no real attachment to my gender, but I am also fine being perceived as a woman as long as it does not limit me. Is this a feminist or queer approach to gender? I would say both. My gender is as queer as my sexuality and as queer as my being.

To be clear, I have nothing against sex. I am just not very interested in having it. Interacting with me along any sexual scripts, such as making sexual connections through flirting, must be similar to flirting with a brick wall. Like a brick wall, I am unable to interpretate and interact with such interaction and will recalibrate them within either a romantic or platonic frame, unconsciously resisting the dominant sexual script the other person is following. I would consider myself to be completely disconnected from any sexual attraction or interaction. For example, I have absolutely no conceptualization of what the word 'sexy' mean, neither do I understand the word 'hot' when applied to a human being's attractiveness. While, from a theoretical, analytical point of view, I understand the ways in which people use these words, personally I cannot fathom what it is like to experience such an attraction, infatuation, or observation. I have never, nor am I likely ever going to use these terms to describe another human being, unless it is in a comical or sarcastic manner.

Next to an allegiance to asexuality as a means to understand and reconfigure societal scripts on sexuality, intimacies, and relationships, I have an allegiance to the transgender community. Before we embark on the chaos of the scavenger hunt within this thesis, I want to extend an apology to any transgender, nonbinary, or otherwise gender diverse person reading this. While I do cite transgender and nonbinary sources, which will obviously be done with attention to their trans identity, there will also be many conversations on sexuality and gender that fall within a binary conceptualization of gender. Especially when discussing traces and resonances of asexuality in the Netherlands, many sources will either be based in feminist activism and thus strongly focus on womanhood, or will come from mainstream media, which does not always take a sensitive approach to the complexity of gender. So, I would like to acknowledge this lack within my thesis. While I wish the entirety of the thesis was as transgender inclusive and gender expansive as possible, this was not always possible within the limitations of the text and the source. I hope you will forgive me.

When in Holland, Do as the Dutch Do

Not only is this thesis fueled by personal frustrations, but it is also deeply queer, as well as a deeply personal endeavor. As someone who was born and raised in the Netherlands, asexuality is an imported term that still has to make its mark within Dutch society and the LGBTI community. Not only did I sense a lack of asexual sensitivity within my studies of queer theory and feminist studies, but I have also experienced an erasure of asexuality within the Netherlands and the national LGBT organizations and awareness. One of the sayings that we have in the Netherlands is: "When in Holland, do as the Dutch do". This insistence on assimilating to the norm is something we will circle back to further on in this thesis. To engage with critical asexuality studies and the emerging asexual activism, I had to find an avenue to explore this further, taking my personal frustration as a departing point. In shaping this thesis, I have come back home quite literally, by focusing my research on the Netherlands and the (lack of) traces of asexuality.

In the theoretical chapter, we will explore the writings on queerness and asexuality that both inspire my research, as well as form the foundation upon which my thinking is based. In the process of writing this thesis, I went through multiple iterations and perspectives before landing on this one. Within the methodological chapter, I will attempt to create some order in this mess of asexual trinkets I have scavenged from everywhere, embracing the chaos by taking on a scavenger methodology and queering the scavenger as a researcher on a quest for information in a barren land. Moving into the analysis, in the fourth chapter we will explore the Dutch sexual context and reflect on the constructions of Dutch sexusociety. After setting the stage, we will investigate the dominant Dutch LGBT discourse and its negligence and occlusion of asexuality by taking on the COC, the largest and most dominant LGBTI organization in the country. You will meet them in the fifth chapter. After discussing the COC's insistence of the newness of asexuality, I will attempt to debunk such claims by unearthing liminal conversations on asexualities, as well as configuring asexual traces and resonances in Dutch media and writing in the sixth chapter. This will not only be an exploration of the media discourse on asexuality in the Netherlands, but it will also take us into the queer and feminist archives of the country. Finally, in the seventh chapter, I will attempt to paint a futuristic imaging of queerly asexual possibilities in the Netherlands, drawing on developments in the United States. To conclude this thesis, I will reflect upon my own research and explore future options for queer asexual research, as well as consider the almost complete absence of asexuality within in European queer feminist writing and research.

Asexuality has migrated and mutated over time, and I think we thus need an open discussion on what asexuality could be, could do, and could become in the context of the Netherlands. This thesis attempts to contribute to this conversation. In the analysis, I will be zooming in on Dutch sexusociety in general, striving to answer the question: "How can we understand Dutch sexusociety?". Then, I will continue to focus on 1the place asexuality does (not) take within the Dutch LGBTQIA+ context and society, focusing on the questions: "Why is asexuality underrepresented within the LGBTI community in the Netherlands?", "How has asexuality been represented and discussed within queer and feminist spaces in the Netherlands?" and "What traces of asexuality can be found in Dutch media?". Additionally, I will attempt to envision what asexuality could be, or even should be in the Netherlands, responding to the question: "How can we imagine a queer asexual future in the Netherlands?". The main research question within this thesis thus is: "What position does asexuality take in Dutch sexusociety?", which will be explored throughout the chapters and there will be an attempt towards an answer in the concluding chapter.

Throughout this thesis, I am aiming to contribute to academic conversations on asexuality, as well as (a lack of) activist conversations in the Netherlands. However, this thesis is not only an academic undertaking, but as much a queer activist project, as it is a personal enterprise. Sometimes, this research for asexual traces and resonances felt like being trapped in the television series 'Pretty Little Liars'. In this series, a group of teenage girls is tormented by an anonymous person who calls themselves 'A'. Throughout the series, the central mystery is: Who is A? Thus, this thesis is a similar investigation into this unknown identity that has haunted my exploration of queer theory and the queer community, while still staying out of the limelight. Simultaneously, 'A' could become the haunter of Dutch LGBTQIA+ communities until they uncover it, only to realize 'A' existed alongside them all along.[2] This thesis, however, does not ask 'Who is A?', but rather 'Where is A?!".

[2] My apologies to anyone who has now been spoiled on the plot twist of 'Pretty Little Liars'.

2. From A to Queer: A Theoretical Exploration of Asexualities and Queerness

My journey exploring the concept of asexuality has a seemingly clear start seven years ago, that was prepositioned by an interest in everything LGBTQIA+. After discovering Gender Studies and developing a strong interest in Queer Theory, I also started reading blog posts and watching informational videos online regarding sexualities and gender diversity. On one of these midnight YouTube binges, I was watching a video by the channel 'sexplanations' on asexuality. The term sparked my interest and I decided to google the term to read up on it. This is how I stumbled upon the website AVEN. Needless to say, I spend the next hours researching the term and reading up on asexualities well into the night. It was an encountered that not only resonated with me but shook me to my core. Ever since this first rendezvous with asexuality, I have never doubted the conceptualization of asexuality and the conversations that start from this point resonated with me and my life experiences.

As I have mentioned in my introduction, this project will be as much a queer one as it is an asexual one. Thus, in this theoretical chapter, I will explore both asexuality and queerness within queer feminist writing. These texts and thinkers are not only what inspires and informs my thinking and writing, but also what forms the theoretical foundation for this thesis. This is by no means an exhaustive exploration of asexualities, nor of queerness, but rather gives a comprehensive oversight of the ways in which I understand and employ these terms, as well as introduce some key writers and thinkers to you.

First Encounter with Asexuality

AVEN is the Asexuality Visibility and Educational Network. When typing the term 'asexuality' into Google, it used to be the first hit. However, due to successful lobbying by asexual activists, nowadays the Wikipedia page explaining the term pops up. AVEN is still, however, one of the starting points for many people when learning about asexuality and the various communities connected to it. As one can read on their website, the network was founded in 2001 to facilitate discussions on asexuality and to offer a way to connect people with asexual experiences. The website is very stern on what asexuality means. "An asexual person does not experience sexual attraction". However, as with many LGBTQIA+ identity markers, there is considerable space for personal identification, definition, and fluidity. Over time, the platform has come to include this plurality in their 'About Asexuality' section, by

discussing asexuality as a spectrum that allows for variation - even though they have slapped the label 'gray' on this, claiming this means you are neither asexual nor allosexual.[3] Additionally, the FAQ page includes a section discussing romantic orientations, offering a variation of experiences regarding romantic attraction, relationships, and desires. There is also a section discussing different attitudes towards sex asexuals may have. While the website certainly does try to include the diversity and fluidity that exists within the asexual community, using a variety of identity markers to cater to the diversity within the community, AVEN still clings heavily onto clearly defined identity markers, boxes, and categories.

While AVEN might have been the 'asexual place to be' online before the era of social media, a quick Google search confirms the term asexuality has migrated throughout the internet, social media platforms, and beyond. Wikipedia nowadays includes 'asexuality' in its list of sexual orientations, the A is regularly included in the longer acronym LGBTQIA+, and you can find a plethora of articles, blogs, and videos on social media platforms such as YouTube, Tumblr, Reddit, or TikTok. While this proliferation of asexual advocacy and community building makes AVEN lose its grip on the imaging of asexuality and its position as a center of knowledge and therefore authority, it also creates a lot of space for exiting new theorization and plurality. One of the ways in which I have noticed this space for fluidity and plurality, is the shift from the stern and somewhat old fashioned AVEN definition of asexuality towards an understanding of asexuality as a spectrum, connecting it to the spectrum of sexuality. Anyone who can find comfort under the umbrella of the asexual spectrum, should be allowed to explore their (a)sexuality there.

My personal journey with asexuality moves alongside this social media discourse and in sync with my growing understanding of queer theory and the nuances of signifying systems such as language, arts, and media. While the clear-cut definitions and diagrams AVEN offers might have been comforting and helpful at the start, especially when discussing (a)sexuality, relationships, and desires with other people, the more I learned about Queer Theory, the more I personally moved away from cookie cutter definitions and boxed in diagrams trying to grasp

[3] Allosexual is a term used to describe the opposite of asexual, e.g., someone who does experience sexual attraction. While this could instill yet another binary opposition, one could also consider the political motivation for a term like allosexual, similar to the use of cisgender versus transgender. It is to ensure that the opposite of asexual is not 'normal', but rather has its own identity marker to create an equal playing field. This does not necessarily devalue asexuality as a spectrum, like the terms cisgender and transgender do not devalue gender as a spectrum.

the nuances of human sexuality. Queer Theory offered me the tools and framework to understand sexuality in a free and fluid way, without carved out categories and with a tendency towards refusing definitions and clear explanations. Simultaneously, the more I learned about Queer Theory, the more I felt an indescribable lack within the discourse. Reading so much material by asexual activists, I recognized a seemingly natural move towards sexual desire in Queer Theory that I also observed in everyday life. Or rather, within the critical narrative of Queer Theory towards the heteronormative patriarchal society, I was missing that similar critical stance towards the sexual normativity that I recognized as being overwhelmingly present in society. The more I submerged myself into Queer Theory, the more I realized the need I personally had for a critical asexual perspective within it.

The Query of Queer Theory

What is queer? That is a question that answers itself by refusing an answer. Queer refuses to be a figural identity, nor is it an opposition to an identity. It is a contradiction in itself, proud to be confusing to those who seek clear answers. While queer can be used as an identity, it might also be a rallying cry. Ask ten people what the term queer means to them, and you will get ten different answers. But perhaps one can attempt to explain the concept of queer by combining various attempts of others to answer the question that refuses to be answered.

For example, in the first edition of Transgender Studies Quarterly, a list of keywords is included at the end. Various keywords and concepts are explained by a variety of writers from different backgrounds. Heather Love has the honor of writing the essay attempting to explain the concept of 'Queer'. Notably, she explains queer by what it is associated with and what it does, rather than providing a definition. She writes how "[…] queer is associated primarily with nonnormative desires and sexual practices". "Queer, with its valences of strange, odd, and perplexing, was also meant to indicate a range of nonnormative sexual practices and gender identifications beyond gay and lesbian." (Love, 2014, 172) While queer is clearly not one thing, it is a way of describing an association with the outliers of the signifying system, that which cannot be shoved in the neat box of homosexuality nor heterosexuality. Siobhan B. Somerville also points out how queer does multiple things at once. It is understood as "an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are 'not straight'", but it simultaneously works as a concept "that calls into question the stability of any such categories of identity based on sexual orientation." (Sommerville, 2007). While to some, queer might be a wonderful umbrella term that can be used in place of the ever growing, so called 'alphabet soup' of LGBTQ+, others might not feel comfortable with the

term or might feel excluded. Heather Love warns: “However, while queer at its most capacious is understood to indicate a wide range of differences and social exclusions, it has often been critiqued for functioning more narrowly in practice.” (Love, 2014, 174)

So, queer can function simultaneously as an umbrella term, as well as a rallying cry, a political project, and an academic field of study. “The word ‘queer’ has always contained the shimmer of multitudes; even etymologists can’t settle on one origin story” Jenna Wortham states in a 2016 New York Times Magazine article titled ‘When Everyone Can Be ‘Queer’, Is Anyone?’. The article asks a poignant question which, as the question of what is ‘queer’, is not answered in a straightforward manner. She ends with Muñoz’ utopian vision of the future: “a complete reimagining of how people could be.” (Wortham, 2016). Therefore, shifting from the question of identity towards the ways in which queer could function. While some might use queer as a comfortably unspecific identity marker, it is also a descriptor with future possibilities to reimagine that which is not yet embedded within today’s system of signification. It remains unclear and that is exactly the point.

Moving away from the more identarian side of queerness, the term also has possibilities to address structural issues within society and politics. It is important to not get lost in the conceptualization of the queer community versus the ‘straight world’. Cathy J. Cohen points out how the focus on a political struggle of us versus them minimizes the impact queer politics could and should have.

> *“The inability of queer politics to effectively challenge heteronormativity rests, in part, on the fact that despite a surrounding discourse which highlights the destabilization and even deconstruction of sexual categories, queer politics has often been built around a simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual.” (Cohen, 1997, 440)*

Here, the focus is once again not on what queer should be, but rather what it should do: challenge heteronormativity and destabilize signifying social structures. To not fall into the trap of opposition, but rather undermine this political game and oppose the logic of opposition. It is a challenge of power that comes from the marginalized and oppressed, rather than a flashy word you put on a t-shirt. Or could it be both? Does queer have the space to encompass both? After all, when attempting to oppose the two, does one not fall into the traps of the logic of opposition we want to avoid with queer?

Circling back to the question: what is queer, what should it do? One thing has become clear, which is that there will not be a clear answer. But queer does a lot. Not only does it

provide shelter under the umbrella for those lost in the world that tries to find a label for clarification but can only find comfort in the vagueness and slippery avoidance of queer. But queer also disturbs anyone that tries to define this 'Other' for their own convenience, for it slips away and refuses the be caught. Some might be scared or unsettled by the unclarity. "Such unsettled and unsettling instances of embodiment, practice, and identification," Heather Love writes, "threaten not only discrete categories of sexual and gender identity but the very distinction between gender and sexuality." (Love, 2014, 173)

First Emergence of Asexuality in Academia

While asexuality is most commonly defined as having a lack of sexual attraction to anyone, as we have already explored in the introduction, asexual people online, as well as academics have been morphing and redefining its meaning and possibilities. One of the first emergences of research on asexuality as a sexual orientation or sexual experience, was within fields of study such as psychology or philosophy. Within the social sciences, the concept of asexuality was first reworked based on experiences of attraction and desire. In this early work, the definition moved from AVEN's rigid 'a person who does not experience sexual attraction', to a broader explanation of asexuality as having low or no sexual attraction, as well as having low to no sexual desire (Bogaert, 2013). Psychologist Anthony F. Bogaert has been fundamental in laying the groundwork for the study of asexuality within the social sciences. In 2004, he published his article in which he sketched the demographical makeup of the asexual community and, based on preexisting questionnaire data, suggested that asexuals make up approximately 1% of the world's population (Bogaert, 2004). While the idea of 'the 1%' has problematic connotations in itself in today's political climate, it does illustrate why the emergence of the internet and social media has been vital in constituting the asexual community and the dialogue regarding normative sexuality.

Most notably, Bogaert's work has been an important first step in distancing asexuality from pathology and redefining it as a sexual orientation, rather than a mental health or medical issue within the social sciences. This issue of pathologizing of asexuality is an issue the community has worked against since its early days and, I would argue, successfully; the DSM-V, the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, has redefined Female Sexual Interest Disorder and Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder to include the possibility of a self-identifying asexual person. While this still asks of the patient to self-identify to 'opt out of' the diagnosis, this could be seen as a first step to disconnect asexuality from this pathologizing path.

Kristin Scherrer's text 'Coming to an Asexual Identity', which was published in 'Sexualities' in 2008, is often quoted and understood as the first queer feminist writing on asexuality that evokes a critical studies perspective to discuss asexuality beyond a mere new orientation and explore the project of identifying as asexual. In this text, Scherrer lays the groundwork for further asexual research to be undertaken within the field of queer feminist studies. To explain this 'coming into asexuality' as such, she writes:

> *"Asexual identity not only reflects an introspective process, but also connects the internal experience of coming to an asexual identity to others, which may in turn motivate social and political action similar to other marginalized sexualities." (Scherrer, 2008, 622)*

Already within this first queer feminist writing on asexuality, we can see not only a reflection on what asexuality is, but moreover what asexuality could do, demonstrating the queerness of such an asexual becoming. Furthermore, Scherrer provides a literary overview to be taken up by future asexual researchers, as well as explain her research on asexual identification which she undertook within the AVEN community. While her research focuses on asexual identifications and the ways in which the participants understood relationships and desires, Scherrer moves beyond mere identification and takes a queer approach to exploring the fluidity and plurality of intimacies and relationships.

In het conclusion, Scherrer sketches the connections between the asexual movement and the broader LGBTQ+ community. Scherrer writes: "asexuality shares an association both historically and presently to medical institutions with other marginalized sexual desires and behaviors." (Scherrer, 2008, 636). In this observation, not only does Scherrer claim a connection with queerness in contemporary times, but also sketches a lineage of interconnectedness through the development of our understanding of sexual minorities. Additionally, Scherrer observes a link within the language used around asexual identification, saying that: "Asexual and LGBTQ groups also share similarities as both have created identity-based communities." (Scherrer, 2008, 637). I will explore this focus on allegiance with the emancipation of other sexual minorities and AVEN's focus on establishing a respectable sexual identity in a later chapter. Regardless, it is notable that even within the first writing and thinking within queer feminist thought and research, connections are made between queerness and asexuality, as well as an emergence of critical asexual thinking in looking past a mere asexual identity.

Asexually Queer and Queerly Asexual

This linkage between asexuality and sexual minorities has been furthermore forged by queer feminist writers that have published in the last decade or so. In the introduction, we have already met some important thinkers, writers, academics: KJ Cerankowski, Megan Milks, and Ela Przybylo are among the critical asexual theorists that you will see pop up throughout this thesis. Together with academics such as Kristin Scherrer, Kristina Gupta, and Danielle Cooper, they are responsible for the establishment of critical asexual studies as an emerging field, though currently dominated by American academics. Thematic in their writing is their queer resistance to normative sexuality and societal scripts on kinship and relationships, as well as a critical awareness of power structures and oppression, something inherently feminist. Throughout their texts, they build on these foundations laid by queer feminist theorists and take on board asexual thinking that is informed by the modern-day asexual movement. Like the emergence of queer theory in the 1990's and later trans studies at the turn of the 21st century, the emergence of this new field that some are calling (critical) asexuality studies (or a/sexuality studies) is mainly based within the United States.

Megan Milks and KJ Cerankowski have quite literally written the book on asexuality by publishing 'Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives' in 2014. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, they place asexuality firmly within queer feminist research. While they do acknowledge their heritage and situate the emergence of the discourse on asexuality along the lines of the lesbian and gay right's movement in the 1990's and the "new era of queer theorizing" in the 21st century, they are also critical of the lack of sensitivity towards asexual experiences. They state that: "These fields [feminist and queer theory] have largely operated with a universal sexual assumption that ignores the possibility of asexuality as a viable lived experience." (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014, 28) In this, they are echoing my personal experience of a general normative assumption of sexuality that can be detected within Queer Theory, as well as feminist scholarly work. While both feminism and queer activism, as well as academia, have focused heavily on sexual freedom, the question from an asexual perspective arises: What is so radical about having sex? In a world so drenched in sex and sexuality, should we not also consider the perspective of people who are radically not having sex? People for whom sex and sexuality is not the epitome of existence, nor the basis of intimate relationships?

Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper reflect on this rethinking of sex in their text 'Asexual Resonances'. They explain:

"Asexuality encourages us to rethink the centrality of sex to feminist and queer politics, and to consider critically what has been at stake in the neglect of asexual articulations and the perspectives by queer theory and the feminist movement. (...) queerness should be reworked and rethought from asexual perspectives." (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014, 298)

This radical undoing of the sex-focused emancipation discourse of modern-day feminism, as well as the celebration of sexual freedoms in the LGBTQ+ community, is the asexual intervention that has been worked on over the past decade. We have had our time of sex-positivity and sexual freedom, perhaps it could be time to consider the un-radical-ness of having sex? Asexuality thus becomes a radical lack of sex, repositioning sex within a normative framework, and undoing the feminist and queer claim of radical sex. Such an intervention could be misunderstood as unqueer and sexually regressive, but I would argue it is an intervention that could be complimentary to the feminist and queer rethinking of sex as we understand it today.

Sexusociety: An Asexual Inquiry on Sexual Normativity and Compulsory Sexuality

Ela Przybylo, in her essay 'Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety', builds on theorizing by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to take a critical look at normative sexuality and the position of asexuality in society. She coins the term sexusociety to explain "a massive conglomerate of tangentially repeated sexual language, deeds, desires, and thoughts, allow(ing) us to account for variations within the system, since it is impossible to repeat exactly and faithfully." (Przybylo, 2011, 447) Sexusociety, Przybylo explains, is the system that we are all part of, and all contribute to; building on Foucault, who wrote on the constructive nature of the way in which we, as a society, understand sexuality. It is not some natural given, but it is made into existence by giving it meaning. This discursive construction is then erased and reduced to a naturalness by favored repetition, as Butler described when theorizing on performativity and the learned behavior that is normalized and naturalized through repetition. Society is, ultimately, man-made. By extension, sexusociety, our Western conceptualization of everything related to sex, sexuality, and sexual normativity, is constructed. Przybylo clarifies:

"To be exact, it is not sexusociety that privileges, but the obsessive repetition of sexual deeds, desires, thoughts which fuels further repetition

and thus acts coercively and in favor of certain deeds at the expense of others." (Przybylo, 2011, 448)

Favored repetition, acting according to the script, both in fiction and in everyday life, are mostly understood in a heteronormative sense, but this normative pattern is often reiterated by same-sex couples in media as well. Repetitions of sex include "the pursuit of pleasure as obligatory" for the liberated sexual subject, "pressure for the sex to be immensely enjoyable", the focus on penetration and "designation of all other sexual acts to the realm of foreplay" (Przybylo, 2011, 448). As a result, "pathologies of non-sexuality become assigned to those individuals who do not repeat sexually or who do not enjoy repeating sexually" (Przybylo, 2011, 448). This, in part, is due to the naturalization of these favored repetitions of sex.

Through the conceptualization of sexusociety, Przybylo restructures and rethinks existing writing and theorizing on compulsory heterosexuality and normative sexuality through an asexual link. Thus, sexusociety becomes a useful tool to further explore a society's sexual normative structures and take these apart through a queerly asexual praxis. Through her writing, Przybylo uncenters sex within feminist and queer discourses, refocusing on questions of normative repetitions of sex which constitute sexusociety, a concept that takes up both asexuality, as well as other sexual minorities and queer sexual practices.

Throughout this theoretical exploration of asexuality and queerness, we have walked along my personal genealogy of becoming queerly asexual, as well as growing into a queer asexual researcher. My understanding of asexuality and queerness is informed by both an online activist education, as well as my academic education in feminist studies and queer theory. While I first encountered asexuality online and queerness within academic theory, over time these two concepts become more entangled and interconnected. The emerging field of asexuality studies is built on these connections between asexuality, queerness, and feminism. It is through these reconfigurations of sexuality, desires, intimacies, relationships, and kinship that we can further explore the state of asexuality within the Netherlands. Furthermore, I will employ the concept of sexusociety to explore the construction of sexual normativity and compulsory heterosexuality in the Netherlands. While the exploration of queerness is most certainly not exhaustive, I would like to acknowledge that it is also thinking and writing by theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Nikki Sullivan, and many more that constitute my understanding of power structures, normative repetitions, and queering of and inquiry to societal assumptions that are foundational to my understanding of

queerness, (a)sexuality, relationships, and kinship. However, I do believe that the theoretical overview of asexuality and queerness as provided in this chapter, will be sufficient in analyzing and understanding asexuality in the Netherlands in the chapters to come.

3. The Queer Scavenger: A Methodology of Chaos

In this chapter, I will reflect on the methodological and empirical considerations and developments that went into the construction of this thesis. As it took me over three years to finally finish this piece of writing, I will employ some means of storytelling to guide you through the process from chaos to an attempt at organization, to finally an embrace of the chaos. Within this thesis, a multitude of methodologies has been taken on to be able to explore asexuality in the Netherlands without limitations. Let me take you through the process of imagining, reconfiguring, and finally writing and constructing my research.

The Challenge of Asexual Research

This thesis developed over time from an aim towards queer critical media analysis to ultimately a scavenger hunt for traces of representation of asexuality within the Netherlands. The development of this thesis has been spread out over multiple years, for it proved to be my most challenging academic endeavor yet. The origin story of this thesis starts early, while taking classes in my first year of the two-year[4] research master. Teachers encouraged us to start thinking and researching topics for our final thesis early on. Since I have had an innate interest in queer theory since I had learned about its existence, as I have previously pointed out, it was clear to me that my thesis had to be developed within this school of thought. However, while learning and studying texts and learning about queer thinkers, I started noticing a gap within the writings provided. My growing interest in queer theory coincided with my developing understanding of my own queerness and, more importantly, my asexuality. While I found kindship and a larger understanding of my position in the world within queer theory, I also missed an awareness and attentiveness to asexuality. Thus, when my teachers encouraged us to start thinking about what subject to write about, I started considering researching asexuality within the context of queer theory. To be honest, I have doubted this endeavor from the start, realizing this would be a particularly personal, as well as challenging and difficult journey. For having a personal interest in your research not only means being vulnerable to whoever ends up reading these words, it also raises the stakes personally: I want to be more than perfect. It is the irony of a lack of representation; the stakes for the stories that do exist are that much higher.

[4] It would take me an additional three years to complete my research master's degree.

Since I have a bachelor's in film theory and wrote a queer film analysis for my bachelor thesis, my initial plan was to write another film analysis researching the discourse around sex and intimacy in LGBTQ+ cinema from a critical asexual perspective. On my journey to research these films, I scoured through the past five years of feature fiction films selected for the GLAAD Awards, an American award ceremony organized by the nonprofit organization GLAAD: the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. Every year, GLAAD organizes a film and media selection to recognize 'fair, accurate and inclusive representation of LGBTQ people and issues'. They are the biggest and, I would argue, most influential LGBTQ award within the Western mainstream media landscape. However, in their 32 editions, there has never been a movie nominated that included asexual characters, storylines, or issues. Furthermore, there has only been a handful of asexual characters in all visual media, of which only the animated tv-series Bojack Horseman seems to be generally celebrated by the community and this therefore is also the example that is almost always given by organizations when pointing out asexual representation in media. While the number of asexual stories in books and comics is very slowly growing, film and television seems to be staying behind with the latest GLAAD report only finding two asexual characters among 637 LGBTQ characters in film and television in early 2022: one in a series that had already been canceled, the other in a series that has not yet been released.[5]

This lack of asexual representation within the LGBTQ context of the GLAAD Awards is one of the countless gaps I have come to realize exist within LGBTQ contexts, but also in society at large. In my personal experience, asexuality is rarely even considered, let alone explicitly represented within LGBTQ organizations and events. While the acronym LGBTQIA+ is coming more and more into fashion, often there are still discussions regarding the meaning of that 'A' at the end. What was that again? For allies? Or was it something else? For me personally, trying to find my place within LGBTQ spaces, I have been confronted continuously with not only the lack of representation, but also with the lack of critical asexual awareness within those contexts. Therefore, my thesis research was aimed at this void that I was sensing, this lack of stories and representations that I was confronted with. Having studied film in my bachelor's, I have come to understand media representation as something vital for a person's understanding of oneself and one's position within the larger context of their life and of society. Films and other forms of fiction are reflections of society and when

[5] https://www.glaad.org/releases/glaad%E2%80%99s-where-we-are-tv-report-lgbtq-representation-broadcast-tv-reaches-record-high

this reflection is incomplete, it gives those missing a sense of loss and feeling as if their lives do not matter, as if their lives are lacking and void.

Departing from this frustration, I started looking further. Since there was no asexual representation within Western cinema, I started researching the discourse around sex, sexuality and intimacy represented in LGBT films such as the celebrated 'Call Me by Your Name'. While there is plenty representation of sexuality and intimacy in this film, the story is quite literally dripping with it, the analysis could not bring me what I was seeking. The aim was to write about asexuality and here I was analyzing sex. There is something ironic about asexuality, where there seems to be no way of conversing about this perceived lack without discussing that which should not matter: sex. While I could have continued exploring representations of normative assumptions regarding sex, sexuality, and intimacy, I shifted my attention towards the one thing that did not seem to receive this attention and the subject I needed to explore and discuss further: asexuality.

But how do you research something that does not seem to exist? As mentioned before, the traces of asexuality in media and even in society are far in between. How to research a sexuality characterized by a void of sexuality, as well as a void of representation? That is the question that I was faced with while working on this thesis. How to research and analyze media on asexual representation, or even traces and resonances of asexuality, when it seems nearly impossible to find it? I had to radically switch gears and rethink all academic traditions I had been taught. This is where the queer scavenger hunt begins. For this thesis, I will be on the hunt for any traces of asexuality represented within the Dutch LGBTQ community, as well as in a broader understanding of sexual minorities in Dutch society. To do so, I will be using a queer mixed method approach to unveil the 'A' within LGBTQIA+, even when the acronym seems to end prematurely. I will be combining interviews, critical media analysis and archival research to take a dive into the representation of asexuality and to sketch the position asexuality currently takes within the Netherlands and the possibilities of growth there might be.

Scavenger Methodology

As a queer scavenger, on the hunt for hidden traces of asexuality, I am inspired by Jack[6] Halberstam's conceptualization of the 'scavenger methodology'. He proposes that queer

[6] While he was credited under his old name 'Judith Halberstam', I will reference his writing from this point on by his current name: Jack Halberstam.

methodologies often use seemingly conflicting methods of analysis to uncover information often not accounted for in more traditional strains of academia. He states:

> *"A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior." (Halberstam, 1998, 13)*

While Halberstam uses the term 'scavenger methodology' to describe an 'out of the box' methodology to research subjects often excluded in academia, I propose to stretch this concept even further and claim the queer scavenger as a person looking for overlooked traces of queerness in any field of study. The queer scavenger as the scout who goes off the beaten track to respectively research the wilderness around them to find traces of wildlife, a safe place to camp or a new path towards their end goal. As a methodology, the queer scavenger rummages through whatever they can find, crossing borders their prospective field of study might claim, looking for any traces of new information, new concepts, or a new home for their ideas. In the context of this thesis, this queer scavenger searched within LGBT spaces, spoke with various people, dove into queer and feminist archives, and scoured the internet, hunting for traces of representations of asexuality within the Netherlands. For this, I considered the accessibility of these spaces, especially online. I did not constrict myself to Dutch language platforms and spaces. Considering people in the Netherlands are generally quite proficient in the English language, I ventured out to English information available online. However, media platforms only accessible through loopholes such as VPN's, cannot be considered as accessible information in the Netherlands.

While, as a budding researcher, I have always been told to clearly frame my case studies in my research, the queer scavenger cannot be limited by methodological borders. For this scavenger hunt, I must go wherever the traces lead me. Or when there are no visible markers to indicate where to go, trust my intuition and rummage through any information I can find as to unearth another trace of asexuality. Through this queer scavenger hunt, I hope to offer a sort of map for scavengers to come. To share my nuggets of knowledge regarding asexuality in the Netherlands in hopes of helping other queer scavengers continue this journey wherever it may lead them. This research will not only cross academic and methodological borders, but it will also cross over borders between real life and the online world. As is the case for many people of my generation, my life exists both online and offline, often both at the same time and overlapping. In the same way that my existence cannot be divided clearly

into a virtual and physical life, the hunt for traces of asexual representation cannot take place exclusively in one of these realms either. Since this research is deeply personal, the scavenger hunt is intrinsically tied to this inseparable online and offline life experience. Social media, traditional media, online magazines, archived articles and books, websites, conversations, real life experience, nothing is off limits on this hunt, as long as it is reasonably accessible within the Netherlands.

One queer scavenger who wrote about this chaotic methodology of bringing together seemingly opposing elements within a story of text, is Stacey Waite in her text 'Cultivating the Scavenger: A Queerer Feminist Future for Composition and Rhetoric'. In this text, she discusses ways in which she inspires her students to take on a scavenger research style, in turn inspiring me to let go of the strict boundaries of academic research and writing. She writes:

> *"When I ask students to make essays from scavenged parts, from seemingly unrelated fields, styles, areas of their lives, voices, and so on, I am inviting their contradictions into their essays, rather than creating assignments that help students keep their contractor selves at bay." (Waite, 2015, 64)*

After my attempts at following structured methods, such as film analysis and critical discourse analysis, I had to cast these structures aside to address asexuality and attentiveness to this topic that I need to give it. If I had stuck with only film and discourse analysis, my thesis would not have reflected the years of frustration and seeming contradictions I experienced when learning about queerness and queer theory. Therefore, I am trying to embrace the chaos and keep an open mind, to be open to encounter whatever story or artifact this scavenger thesis needs. As Waite puts it, it's a "way to look around, to scavenge, and to worry about coherence later, or maybe not at all" (Waite, 2015, 62). It is a personal, as much as a political approach to research, one where I am open to finding "connections that maybe no one wants you to see" (Waite, 2015, 62).

The epistemology is as important as my other motivations behind this methodology of chaos that I am asking you to accept. Waite points out the importance of considering "a framework of epistemology, to give careful consideration to what it means to know" (Waite, 2015, 56). The essence of this thesis is talking about what I know, explaining what I know, writing down on paper that which I know: all I know and have learned from living a queer asexual life for almost a decade. This personal archive of knowledge is based on intuition developed over the years of studying Gender Studies and queer theory at Utrecht University, grounded in my activist work within the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community for half a decade.

This thesis is based on what I 'just' know. The challenge is to explain this to the reader, to demonstrate based on concrete examples and case studies, to unearth traces of asexuality I have always known existed but have never been able to demonstrate. The epistemology on which this thesis is based goes against all academic principles and yet it is the truest and most queer project I have undertaken thus far.

Queer Research and the Chaos of a Mixed-Method Approach

According to Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani, one of the patterns apparent in queer theory and its methods, is its connection to grassroots movements. They state:

> *"First, queer social research methods question the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them in an allegedly generalizable variable-oriented paradigm, because these categories do not always align with lived experiences. Second, queer social research methods reject the fetishizing of the observable." (Brim and Ghaziani, 2016, 16).*

Queer theory has a tradition of questioning the normal and rejecting restraining identities and methods. This is reflected in the methods that refuse to reestablish existing categories, but rather question its normativity, its source, and the way in which it affects everyday lives. Brim and Ghaziani state that queer empiricism means to embrace multiplicity, misalignments, and silences (2016, 17). This is why queer theory and methodology are crucial to this research. The asexual community exists within the cracks and crevices of the LGBTQ community, and is often overlooked, unheard and erased. The embrace of multiplicity and misalignments and an attention to the silences, could offer a new perspective to queer theory and create space for asexuality within the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as allowing it to take up space in society. This could provide new opportunities not only for the asexual community, but it could offer possibilities to reimagine the ways in which we establish and understand human relationships.

Next to a queer sensitivity to this research, I am also embedded within feminist research. As other theorists have discussed before me, a feminist understanding of research considers hierarchies of power in society, as well as taking on the personal as political. Sharlene Hesse-Biber writes, in the first chapter within her handbook of feminist research: "Feminists bob and weave their threads of understanding, listening to the experiences of 'the other/s' as legitimate knowledge. Feminist research is mindful of hierarchies of power and authority in the research process." (Hesse-Biber, 2012, 4). This feminist consideration of

personal stories can be found as a thread throughout this research, with both my personal accounts and stories of other people weaving through the research on cultural artifacts and societal systems.

Finally, I am mixing in a feminist approach to interviewing through the construction of an open-ended conversation as a means of producing queer feminist knowledge. As part of this research, I conducted open-ended interviews with people to find additional information and gauge the current position of asexuality within the LGBTQ community. All of these interviews were conducted online via either video call or phone call in the summer of 2021. In total, I had an extended, open-ended conversation with four people: Amber Witsenburg, an asexual activist and founder of NOA, the Netherlands Organization for Asexuality, and Micha Meinderts, a writer and, in his words, a backseat activist for asexuality, as well as a transgender man and active within the transgender community, which is how I have gotten to know him. I have also interviewed two employees of the COC, who have requested to remain anonymous after reading my thesis.[7] From this point on, we will call them Peter and Hidde. Due to their request for anonymity, I cannot mention their job titles. Both have worked at the organization for years and have multiple responsibilities within the organization.

For all the conversations, the main goal was to get an idea of the position they considered asexuality to currently have in the LGBTQ community, and to get an idea of what position they thought asexuality should take. Outside of this central premise, I let the conversation run its course to see where it would lead me. Shulamit Reinharz states that open-ended research explores people's views of reality and allows the research to generate theory (Reinharz, 1992, 18). Reinharz also states that open-ended interview studies frequently rely on the grounded theory perspective (1992, 18). Since I was interviewing people from the LGBTQ community, some of them identifying as asexual, I consider their personal experience as a valuable source of information. There is no published research regarding the position of asexuality within the Dutch discourse on the LGBTQ community and its identities and experiences, so one way to gain knowledge on this, is through personal stories and perspectives, as well as taking my own perspective into account.

[7] Upon reading my final thesis, one of the employees has stated, on behalf of the entire organization, that he does not recognize himself, nor the COC in my writing.

A Dive into the Archives

My scavenger hunt for asexual traces within the Netherlands, took me on a trip to Amsterdam. Here are two archives that are of interest to me: IHLIA and Atria. IHLIA is the LGBTI heritage archive, which was born in 1999 from the fusion of the gay archive and lesbian archive in Amsterdam. It is also the largest LGBTI archive in Europe. Atria is the feminist archive, which started from feminist activity in the 1930's and grew with the addition of personal archives of prominent feminist figures such as Aletta Jacobs. It is one of the oldest women's archives worldwide. These two archives are prominent within the Dutch field of feminist queer studies, and they have some overlap in their material. However, as can be expected, IHLIA has a large chunk of archival material on the history of gay men with a lot of additions of texts on the other identities that fall within the alphabet soup acronym. While Atria, being a feminist archive, also has historical texts where feminist and lesbian activism intertwine.

While the metaphor of the 'queer scavenger hunt' might sound overly dramatic to some, it was truly a quest to be able to find and read through documents that might contain asexual traces in the context of the Dutch society. The search started at home, behind my laptop, on the internet, as you would expect from any self-respecting millennial. While my university offers a lot of texts and books in online editions, this was not the case for these archives. Searching through IHLIA's digital archives, I started with the obvious and searched for 'asexuality'. When visiting the website of Atria, I attempted the same thing. While both of the archives had their own thesaurus, IHLIA naming it homosaurus and Atria women's thesaurus, neither of their systems had an option for asexuality as a key term. While other sexual identities, such has homosexuality, lesbianism, and bisexuality were on offer within their thesauruses, asexuality was not included. IHLIA did have homosaurus options such as sexlessness, abstinence, and celibacy, which I then employed to search for traces of asexuality. With the archive of Atria, I had the option of searching for my own key terms and avoiding the thesaurus structure all together. This meant that neither archive had a neat archival collection of asexuality to draw on, meaning I would have to scavenge through any material that would pop up when searching for various terms.

Within IHLIA, I had the most success when using the homosaurus options for sexlessness and abstinence, while Atria offered me many options when doing an open search on asexuality. However, this first search offered a new challenge, as the majority of both their archives were not accessible online. This meant that I would have to travel to Amsterdam and visit both archives to actually unearth traces of asexuality. At IHLIA, I could make an

appointment and order books and texts I would like to research while I was there. As we were in another covid lockdown in the Netherlands, the rules around such a visit were quite strict. After visiting IHLIA and looking through the provided material, I relocated within Amsterdam to the location of Atria. Here, I was very kindly assisted by the archivist who dug up many older texts and magazines of the Dutch women's movement in the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's. The vast majority of these texts was not yet digitalized and thus had to be researched at the location. In both locations, I took many notes and pictures on the artifacts I encountered, to later look through and sort for a queer feminist analysis of asexual resonances. These archives became part of the explored landscape for this queer scavenger hunt for this thesis.

Within this methodological chapter, I have walked you through the different stages and iterations this research has gone through. From an aim for media analysis, to the chaos of a queer scavenger hunt: it has been an experience arriving at this place. Through taking on queer and feminist approaches to research, when encountered texts, media, or personal stories, I am attempting to uncover traces and resonances of asexuality in the Netherlands, with a focus on the LGBTQ+ community and the general Dutch construction and understanding of this community and these identities and lives. There are no boundaries to what can be considered knowledge on this scavenger hunt, as any traces could offer guidance within the sexual landscape of Dutch sexusociety and plant mileposts for future queer scavengers to come.

4. The Normal Homosexual: Mapping Dutch Sexusociety

On our queer scavenger hunt, we need to level the playing field before we will be able to explore asexuality in the Netherlands together. This hunt for asexual traces, representations, and resonances will be undertaken in the sexusociety of the Netherlands and the social, cultural, and political context of the Netherlands might not be a familiar setting for every reader. So, let me sketch the layout for you and attempt to explain the country in which I grew up. The people of the Netherlands have a particular and peculiar stance towards sex and sexuality where, on the one hand, they consider themselves to be very liberal, tolerant, and open-minded, but on the other hand, sex and sexuality are also considered a private matter, sexual education is expected to be part of an open conversation between parent and child, and the Dutch have raised homonationalism to the highest possible standard. In this chapter, I will explore and explain the context of this thesis and the particularity of the Netherlands.

One of the things that the Netherlands prides itself on, is the fact that it was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. On the 1st of April 2001, at midnight exactly, under a multitude of photography flashes, the first lesbian couple and first three gay couples in the world were married by the mayor of Amsterdam. While there is no denying this was a massive milestone and reflected the liberal stance of the Netherlands at that time, it is quite sad that 21 years later this event is still the only milestone people can drag up when trying to explain why the Netherlands is a gay-friendly country. One could write a thesis on its own discussing all the legislation that could currently improve the lives of LGBTQIA+ people in the Netherlands, such as a legal ban on conversion therapy and legislation regarding multiparent families. In 2021, the Netherlands only scored 61% on the European Rainbow Index, leaving them at a meager 12th place, after all Scandinavian countries, as well as Spain and Portugal. The Netherlands had a particularly bad score regarding their approach (or lack thereof) to hate crimes and hate speech. This seems inconsistent with the first country to legalize gay marriage. What happened to the gay Walhalla of the Netherlands? What is the position of sex and sexuality in Dutch society? How can we understand Dutch sexusociety?

The Reign of the Homosexual

Researchers Jan Willem Duyvendak, Paul Mepschen, and Laurens Buijs are three Dutch researchers who have written a lot of academic texts on Dutch culture and sexuality within sociology and cultural studies and are therefore largely responsible for the body of work on this topic. To explain the Dutch discourse on sex and sexuality to you, I will rely heavily on

their writing. But before I go into this, I need to add that all three are white men. They are also, as far as I know, three gay men. Therefore, the academic discussion of the Dutch discourse on sexuality is written mostly from the perspective of white, gay, cisgender men. Thus, their writing and examples are highly biased towards their personal experiences and center the stories and struggles of white gay men.

However, one could argue that this is a fair representation of the Dutch context, since the imaging and representation of queerness in the Netherlands is also dominated by white, gay, cis men. Especially within the Dutch television worlds, the white, gay man is a well-loved and well represented identity. There are multiple show hosts and actors who are openly gay and have had long television careers, such as André van Duin, Paul de Leeuw, Carlo Boszhard, and Jos Brink. These are household names in the Netherlands, and they have claimed a solid spot within the Dutch media landscape. Additionally, many queer spaces are still dominated by white, gay men. The director of the Amsterdam Pride Foundation, responsible for the world-famous canal parade, is a white, gay man. Utrecht Pride is led by the owner of the largest gay café in Utrecht, who is also a white, gay man. Many queer clubs and bars are, in fact, 'gay bars' and geared mainly towards white, gay men. Thus, the white, gay man, throughout the years, has been the spokesperson for, as well as the face of the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community.

Throughout the last decade, however, I have noticed that things seem to slowly be shifting and marginalized LGBTQIA+ people are claiming more space for themselves. This has not been smooth sailing, as any change brings about troubles. But I have noticed a shift is happening and marginalized queer people are taking up space and fighting for diversity. The COC, the largest and most prominent LGBTI+ organization in the country, has been led by a black, queer woman since 2020. The Amsterdam Pride Foundation has been ordered by the municipality of Amsterdam to collaborate with the Queer Network Amsterdam, a collaboration[8] of 22 queer and trans BIPOC organizations in the city that centers the most marginalized. Change is coming and we can see things changing as we speak. However, it always takes academia some time to catch up to real life, so we will have to wait a couple of years to be able to source academic texts that reflect this intersectional movement and

[8] One of the organizations in this network is TranScreen, the Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival, of which I've been a volunteer and organizing member for five years. Many of our longtime partners are also in the network, Therefore, I am intimately familiar with the network, the organizations, and their people.

organizing of the marginalized amongst the LGBTQIA+. So, for the purpose of these thesis, let's dive into the current research and writing on the Dutch discourse on sexuality.

"Be normal": The Adulation of the Average

Growing up in the Netherlands, there are certain cultural norms and values that seem to indoctrinate you. One of these cultural norms is captured in a saying that any Dutch person will recognize: "Just act normal, that is already crazy enough"[9]. With this saying, people, even children, are discouraged from being extravagant and existing too far outside of the norm. This focus on normativity and "being normal" is permeated throughout every part of society. It was the political slogan adopted by the VVD, the Dutch right-wing, liberal conservatives and largest party within our parliament. Our prime minister, part of the VVD party, has even taken normalcy as one of his one-liners. In 2017, he said in an interview in the AD, a national newspaper: "Just act normal or leave our country". While not stated explicitly, it was aimed to foreigners and refugees who would not adopt to the supposed Dutch cultural norms. In the Netherlands, the highest goal in life seems to be to become the average Joe. Stepping out of line and not adhering to the norm is seen as an extravagance that should be condemned. However, queer people are bound to deviate from the norm. They will never be completely "normal" by virtue of their queerness.

In 2014, Laurens Buijs, Ingrid Geesink, and Sylvia Holla edited the book "The Sex Paradox: The Netherlands after the Sexual Revolution"[10], which was published in Dutch originally. I will be using this Dutch edition for referencing, so all translations will be mine and the original text can be found in the footnotes. Circling back to the focus on "normal", normativity, and normalcy in the Netherlands, this social attitude to conform to the average is reflected in the ways in which the Dutch speak about and understand sex and sexuality. In the second chapter of their book, Marguerite van den Berg writes about her research on sexual education for parents. She researched courses offered by Rutgers, the expertise center for sexuality, to parents of children in elementary school, which focus on tools to help parents educate their child on sex and sexuality. In this research, she observes that talking openly about sex with your children is represented as not only rooted in Dutch culture, but also as the good, healthy, and *normal* way to raise your child. She explains that in the course the parents are told that their loving bond with their child is the most important influence on their healthy

[9] "Doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg"

[10] "De seksparadox: Nederland na de seksuele revolutie"

sexual development (Van den Berg, 2014, 24). The course is even titled “Growing Up with Love”, pointing towards the importance of a loving parent-child relationship as the essence of a healthy sexual development. Moreover, when parents asked questions on how to educate their child on sex and sexuality, the course leader would circle back to “talking about sex”. Thus, to develop sexually in a “normal” way, one has to talk with their parents about sex, as this is the “normal” parent-child relationship in the Netherlands (Van den Berg, 2014, 26). However, it was not only the course leader who would focus on normalcy, the parents seemed to be very concerned about their child’s sexuality being anything but a supposed “normal”. The parents would even inquire with the teacher what would be considered a normal sexual development, so they could measure how “normal” their child is (2014, 21).

This normal sexual development, Van den Berg found, was defined on three points. First, it was explained that “normal” sex belonged in a loving romantic relationship. A warm and stable home would contribute to the child’s development and understanding of this connection of sex and romantic love. Van den Berg shares a quote from the course material, which I will translate: “Sexuality is more than just making love. For young people, it is also about relationships and feelings, love, being together, being in love, choosing a partner and forming a relationship” (2014, 24). A romantic relationship here seems to be synonymous with having sex, it is considered “normal”, natural, and healthy. The second part of normal sexual development was the earlier discussed talking about sex by parents, as this is considered “normal”, as well as the all-encompassing sex education children need. The third point that Van den Berg highlights, was the heteronormative acceptance of homosexuality. She found that within the course material, homosexuality was explained as something that could *also* be part of a child’s sexual development. It is positioned, she explains, as a situation in which the child must choose from different categories and identify with a prescribed set of identities. Once the parents are confronted with this other sexuality, they must - again - talk about it, but this time the focus will be on homosexuality (2014, 27).

In the course, similarly to what I have personally found in Dutch society, homosexuality is positioned as explicitly normal and by doing so, positioned as a different sort of normal than the actual “normal”: the average Joe. By highlighting and stressing the normalcy of homosexuality, it is almost as if people want to convince themselves that homosexuality does not stray from the norm. If something actually is normal, you do not have to stress over and over how normal it is. Additionally, if there is a “normal” to adhere to; the heterosexual standard, then homosexual couples can attempt to be as normal, or as

heterosexually normative, as they possibly can. You can understand the tension that exists because of this Dutch focus on normalcy and adherence to normativity.

Of course, "normal" can only exist by virtue of the "abnormal". It is an empty category that can only be defined by what it is not. "Just be normal" is only said to those who stray away from the norm. You will never compliment someone on being so perfectly normal. Therefore, Dutch normativity and its use of "normal" as a corrective notion, connects to Ela Przybylo's discussion of sexusociety. Przybylo has stated that: "...it is not sexusociety that privileges, but the obsessive repetition of sexual deeds, desires, thoughts which fuels further repetition and thus acts coercively and in favor of certain deeds at the expense of others." (Przybylo, 2011, 448) The Dutch focus on normalcy and the stress put on being and acting "normal", is one of those obsessive repetitions that coerces people into adhering to the norm, or as closely as they possibly can adhere to the heterosexual standard. By reiterating the importance of normal sexuality for growing children, as well as demanding "normal" behavior from children who might exist in a gender nonconforming way, this aim for normalcy is put on a pedestal and made into the ultimate goal for the "normal" adult. This "normal" adult will then go on to raise their children to be as "normal" as the Dutch should be. The Dutch "normal" becomes a corrective tool for those who deviate from the norms of Dutch sexusociety, leaving very little room for any queerness to grow and flourish in all its glorious extravagance and multiplicity.

The Heterosexual Gays

In the book 'The Sex Paradox', the chapter on homosexuality and gender is written by Tim Savenije and Jan Willem Duyvendak. They mention here that even queer people themselves are hung up on this idea of normalcy, mirroring themselves to the heterosexual standard. Here they explain that the general public, while being accepting of homosexuality, does not want homosexuals to be "too open". It should stay a somewhat private matter and even public displays of intimacy that are very normal for heterosexuals, such as kissing your partner in public, can count on repulsion or even aggression when undertaken by homosexual couples (Savenije & Duyvendak, 2014, 80). However, they have found that some homosexuals also disapprove of public displays of intimacy. In the text, they explain how even gay people have stated that homosexuals in public should, again, "act normal", thus adhering to the norms of the heterosexual majority (2014, 81). The foundation 'The Pink Lion'[11], a right-wing

[11] Stichting 'De Roze Leeuw'

organization that denies the existence of transgender people, has elevated this aim for normalcy to their primary goal, stating on their website they are an organization for "normal, temperate homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals" who live a "normal life". The Pink Lion blames the violence towards queer people on their 'victim attitude' and advocates for a 'victor mindset', as they are normal homosexuals who live in a tolerant, free country. It might be unsurprising that their board exists entirely of white, gay men. The Pink Lion has taken the Dutch "normal homosexuality" to the extreme and they deny anyone who does not adhere to their homosexual standard.

Both gay and straight stress the importance of being "normal" and not straying from the perceived norm, thus the Dutch emphasis on "normal" is even a corrective tool homosexuals impose on themselves, as it permeates ever part of society. Jan Willem Duyvendak, in another text titled "The Pitfalls of Normalization", captures the Dutch stance towards homosexuality quite poignantly, explaining it as: "we accept you as long as we don't have to see that you exist or have to see what you do." (Duyvendak, 2016, 8). The Dutch tolerance is nothing more than a permit to exist, as long as you do not express your queerness or inconvenience the heterosexual in any way. In this text, Duyvendak also writes how the young generation[12] aims to keep their queerness as private and invisible as possible, with young lesbians resisting the traditional 'dyke' styles and opting for a more assimilating style of clothing and the "normal" long hair. He goes on to explain the Dutch tolerance - a word often hackled by queer people - as a vague and empty statement that falls short once you get confronted with actual queer people:

> *"...the Dutch "tolerance" is often limited to the rather general notion that "everybody has the right to choose his or her lifestyle," whereas far less acceptance is shown when homosexuality comes closer to one's personal life." (Duyvendak, 2016, 8)*

[12] As this text was published in 2016, this 'young generation' would roughly be my age group: people in their late 20's. I would like to add that, from my perspective, the long-haired, heterosexual looking lesbian has indeed seemed to become the norm. However, queer people existing outside the homo-hetero binary seem to find more freedom in their expression and regularly experimenting with hairstyles, clothes, and other forms of expression. Additionally, in recent years, there seems to be a shift within this demographic of the LGBTQIA+ community to experiment with gender norms and expressions. The adherence to or resistance of the norm is a never static situation. We will see where this 'young generation' goes next.

This tension between the focus on "being normal" and the reality of queerness shows the cracks in the Dutch self-congratulating identification as the tolerant country and the gay haven that it should be. However, when queer people are visibly queer, act queer, behave queer with their partner, you have crossed the line of the tolerated normal. Dutch sexusociety has no actual space for queerness, for it only accepts homosexuality that can be folded up neatly within heterosexual normalcy.

The Sex Paradox: Individualism vs Community and Equality vs Difference

The earlier mentioned book by Buijs, Geesink, and Hella had the somewhat provocative title "The Sex Paradox". We have already touched on the paradox of "being normal" when you exist as a queer person in Dutch sexusociety; the tensions that exist when a self-proclaimed gay friendly society insists repeatedly on the normalness of homosexuality, and by doing so paradoxically positions anyone who does not fit the mold of cisheteronormativity firmly outside of that "normal". By doing so, it also defines "normal" by that which it is not, as it can only be defined by its outsiders. As Ela Przybylo explained, when discussing sexusociety, it is specifically unspecific "since it is impossible to repeat exactly and faithfully." (Przybylo, 2011, 447) The lack of specificity of the Dutch emphasis on "normal" gives the cisgender heterosexual people the power to define and redefine who the outsiders are and thus structure Dutch sexusociety around cisgender heterosexual normativity and compulsive heterosexuality.

However, the sex paradox that the title of the book refers to, is another paradox of sexuality and sexual emancipation that can be observed in the Netherlands, as well as in other Western countries. Throughout the waves of emancipation, in the Netherlands most notably the feminist emancipation movement and the gay rights movement, Buijs, Geesink, and Holla notice a tension between categories of emancipation that are positioned as opposing one another and then proposed as excluding of each other (Buijs et. al., 2014, 10). They have observed a continuous discussion whether the fight for sexual emancipation should focus on equality or difference, as well as the question whether sexuality is a personal or communal matter (Buijs et. al., 2014, 8). In the Netherlands, this tension between equality and difference, as well as individualism and community, has divided groups where some will focus more on integration and assimilation to the "normal" that is so pervasive in Dutch culture, whereas other groups work towards community building and might claim their differences to enact change. It's important to note that the earlier mentioned conservative-liberal right-wing party VVD has led the Dutch government and parliament for over a decade,

resulting in a right-leaning political atmosphere that advocates individualism at every turn. The earlier discussed political campaign with slogans focusing on "acting normal" as a person's personal responsibility is only one mention of their liberal-conservative political stance. It is thus not surprising that the fight for sexual emancipation has often been focused on equality, as well as individualism. Buijs et. al. have pointed out this Western tendency in their book as well:

> *"The emphasis on equality rather than difference in Western cultures has generally gone hand in hand with emphasizing the individual rather than the group. Emancipation is increasingly seen as a merit of individualism and is often associated with individuals who are capable of making their own choices and who dare to stand up for themselves."*
> *(Buijs et. al., 2014, 11, own translation)*[13]

The gay liberation movement in the Netherlands has often focused on equality, with a goal of personal, *individual* freedom for everyone. Another Dutch saying that embodies this focus on individual choices is "live and let live"[14]. The freedom to exist has become engrained in Dutch society, with a focus on equality of choice: the choice of marriage, the choice to have children, the choice to adhere as closely to the heteronormative standard and be as "normal" as a queer person could possibly be.

Homonationalism, Islamophobia, and the Defense of Sexual Freedom

The Dutch imagine themselves as the country where everyone can live their life the way they want to, where everyone can be who they want to be, where everyone is equal, and you can make your own choice to live your life as your authentic, brave self. This self-identification as the tolerant gay haven is part of the national identity. Buijs, Geesink, and Holla mention that an analysis of sexual nationalism has shown that this logic of sexual freedom is strongly linked to a perceived status as a progressive country, thus claiming their tolerance of homosexuality as reflecting how much further the Dutch have progressed in comparison to

[13] "Het benadrukken van gelijkheid in plaats van verschil in westerse culturen is in algemene zin hand in hand gegaan met het benadrukken van het individu in plaats van de groep. Emancipatie wordt steeds vaker gezien als een verdienste van individualisering, en geassocieerd met individuen die in staat zijn hun eigen keuzes te maken en die voor zichzelf durven op te komen."

[14] Leef en laat leven.

other countries (Buijs et. al., 2014, 12). The Dutch's claim of tolerance does not only affect queer people and the space they are afforded to live outside of the "normal", it has also been part of a deeply islamophobic and xenophobic political discourse. Homonationalism and Islamophobia have been thriving in the Netherlands for over two decades, with verbal Muslim bashing being widely accepted within the public and political discourse. The claim to individual freedom of speech has been abused since the early 2000's to spew hate towards Muslims in the name of protecting homosexuals and women. Even the Dutch's emphasis on "acting normal" is used in this discourse, accusing the Islamic population of not fitting in with the Dutch norms.

Gloria Wekker, a black queer woman who has her roots in Suriname, a former colony of the Netherlands, has observed the Dutch flavor of homonationalism in her book 'White Innocence'. In this book, she critically observes the Dutch culture and the many traces of racism and colonialism still present. One chapter is dedicated to what she calls homo-nostalgia, part of a broader longing for a fictional imagination of the past "when everything was better". She states:

> *"Our times are suffused with nostalgia; from different corners our desires for the past, for better, clearly delineated, and "normal" times, are kindled. […] In gay circles nostalgia is rampant, too: for the times when we were safe, could kiss and hold hands in public, before Muslims came and rained on our parade. When we could still live in our neighborhoods without being harassed by Moroccan boys, when the inexorable march of progress toward sexual liberation could proceed, without being hampered by uncivilized others." (Wekker, 2016, 108)*

When reading her introduction and her description of homo-nostalgia, I was struck by her use of "normal". We seem to be haunted by a Dutch desire for normalcy. While a longing for a fantasy version of the past is nothing new, the longing Wekker describes in her chapter is one that is most certainly nothing more than a fantasy: a longing for a past, free of the constraints of religion, of the chokehold of religious rules that the Muslims have imported. Of course, people are quick to forget the chokehold Christianity used to have on Dutch society and which Christian values are still ingrained in our society today, such as the importance of confession that we still see in our modern coming-out rhetoric. It is not the actual past that matters in homo-nostalgia, but the xenophobia and the hatred towards the Islamic other.

There is one figure in the Dutch political sphere that has impacted the discourse on xenophobic homonationalism like no other: Pim Fortuyn. In the early 2000's, he entered the Dutch political arena and quickly garnered attention for being an openly gay man who "spoke his mind". He ran on an openly Islamophobic campaign, doing so well in the polls he could have been our first gay prime minister. But he was murdered in 2002, only nine days before the parliamentary elections. His party received 17 percent of the national vote, reflecting the unease amongst the white Dutch with the Muslim population. Paul Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Evelien Tonkens, in their 2010 article on sexual politics, reflect on the campaign he ran. Fortuyn used his flamboyant white gay persona as a political tool and claimed that the influx of Muslim migrants and refugees threatened his homosexual existence. He proposed to close the borders and claimed it was the Islam that threatened the progressive culture of the Netherlands, thus threatening him and anyone like him (Mepschen et. al., 2010, 968). He openly described Islam as a backwards culture and stated: 'I refuse to start over again with the emancipation of women and gays' (2010, 968).

Pim Fortuyn's rise and assassination happened when I was a tween and while I do remember some things - his prominence in Dutch politics, the fact that I did not like him, as well as the national shock his assassination brought about - I was too young to really grasp his political stance as well as his rhetorics and charism. When first confronted with the concept of homonationalism and Fortuyn's influence on the Dutch anti-Islam sentiment, I went back to old videos and was struck by how mild he sounds to me nowadays. While he certainly was the one who introduced Islamophobic homonationalism to the political arena, as described by Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Wekker, the banner was taken over by another political player who still spews his hate in the Dutch parliament to date and who has pushed the boundaries of what is acceptable and "normal" to discuss in the Netherlands. Rather than the blatant xenophobia fizzling out after the loss of its charismatic spokesperson, it seems to have started a fire that has been enthusiastically fanned by many others over the last two decades.

In her book, Gloria Wekker mentions the "jolting realization that at the national parliamentary elections on June 9, 2010, white gay men voted overwhelmingly for PVV, the Party for Freedom, under the leadership of Islamophobe and xenophobe Geert Wilders." (Wekker, 2016, 109). After Fortuyn's death, Wilders took over the position as the national Islamophobe. While he is not a charismatic, flamboyant homosexual like Fortuyn was, he is a hateful heterosexual with enough political insight to hijack Fortuyn's Islamophobic agenda and ride the xenophobic wave. As did Fortuyn, Wilders' party opposes multiculturalism, the

Islam, and the supposed influx of Islamic refugees. Wekker captures the stance of the PVV, which is synonymous with Wilders himself, incredibly well:

> *"Apart from its rare, antidemocratic political structure, which concentrates power in the hands of Wilders alone, PVV stands out for an extraordinary coarseness in its political-rhetorical style, "telling things as they are," expressly seeking to insult and humiliate Muslims by using derogatory expressions like* kopvoddentax*, which is a tax on the wearing of headscarves, "hate palaces" to indicate mosques, and "street robbers and bandits" to refer to young Moroccan Dutch men. By constantly proposing ideas for the solution of the "Muslim problem" that are, as Wilders well knows, unconstitutional - such as his often-repeated proposal to send young offenders of Moroccan descent back to Morocco, though they have Dutch citizenship - he effectively helps to produce an atmosphere of fear and exclusion among Moroccan Dutch people, and he feeds the mindset among the white Dutch population that finds Muslims inassimilable in the Netherlands and that favors their deportation." (Wekker, 2016, 110)*

When Trump rose to power in the United States, some people jokingly called him 'Wilders' weird cousin', since his rhetoric sounded incredibly familiar. Gloria Wekker points out that, while in the elections of 2010, lesbians voted mainly for the traditional leftist parties, the PVV was the most popular amongst white gay men.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the prominence of white gay men in the national discourse on homosexuality, as well as in the LGBT activism and activities in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the COC, the largest gay organization in the country and one we'll further discuss in the next chapter, supported the PVV's position as a coalition partner after the elections of 2010. The COC's chairperson at that time, Vera Bergkamp, claimed that this was in the best interest of gay people, since Moroccan - in the Netherlands synonymous with Muslim - boys are responsible for a lot of the violence enacted against gay people (Wekker, 2016, 115). With these statements and the alliance with an openly racist, xenophobic, and

islamophobic party, the COC implicitly paints gay people as white gay men and the victim of violence by Moroccan boys who are fueled by Muslim homophobic, backwards rhetoric.[15]

In conclusion, what makes up the structure of Dutch sexusociety? What is the structure of the wilderness we are exploring, scavenging for traces of asexuality? Does the picture-perfect fantasy of the gay haven of Amsterdam hold up? If you, reader, still believed in this fairytale, I am sorry to have burst that bubble so thoroughly. The Netherlands might have been the first country in the world to have legalized same-sex marriage 21 years ago, but emancipation and progress is not a linear process that continues as time progresses. It ebbs and flows and moves with the social-political tide.

There are three tendencies that I see as instrumental in the fabric of Dutch sexusociety and which I have attempted to highlight and explain in this chapter. First of all, the naturalness of sex that Przybylo describes is tightly wrapped up in the Dutch emphasis on normalcy. The aim for the average has a chokehold on Dutch society and forces LGBTQIA+ people to adhere to the cisgender heterosexual norm as much as they possibly can. Przybylo has cautioned us of the traps of sexusociety, where asexuality, by opposing sexuality, also legitimizes sexusociety. “It incites new discourse of sexuality, coercing us into a defense of sexuality; we become sexuality’s defendants against the potential threat of asexuality.” (Przybylo, 2011, 452) Because of the importance put on adhering to the norm within the Dutch discourse on sexuality, the risk of asexuality being wrapped up in this heterosexual norm looms over the process of asexual representation.

Secondly, the paradox of individualism and community, as well as equality and difference. In the Netherlands, the focus has generally been on individualism, with individual freedom of life decisions as being the driving force behind the aim for equality. Paradoxically, a discussion on difference and diversity is needed to empower and emancipate sexualities outside of the “normal homosexual”. While asexuality as an option amongst the list of sexual possibilities might find its place in the Dutch discourse, a broader conversation on asexualities and multiplicity might be needed to break free of the constraints of sexusociety. Whereas a normative figuration of homosexuality has found its position in the Netherlands, the ever-

[15] After reading my thesis, an employee has responded, on behalf of the COC, that they do not recognize themselves in this passage. Furthermore, he states that they are politically independent and do not support or condemn any political party.

growing acronym of LGBTQIA+ often time still receives backlash. This dynamic of inclusion and exclusion within the Dutch LGBTI community will be discussed in the next chapter.

Finally, the third and, in my opinion, ugliest face of 'our' sexusociety is the Dutch flavor of islamophobic homonationalism that has been firmly cemented within the political arena, as well as the broader discourse in the Netherlands, in part by Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders. Whenever you want to critically discuss sexualities and asexualities in the Netherlands, you run the risk of the conversation being derailed by statements such as "you should be thankful to live in a tolerant gay-friendly country, instead of 'over there'". The Dutch self-congratulatory self-image as the gay haven is becoming emptier, with the Netherlands failing to rank even in the top 10 of European gay friendly countries. However, a complete lack of reflection and a blind trust in our progressive position make for an ugly turn towards the backwards, undeveloped Other that is an easy target to blame when things go wrong.

So, how can we understand Dutch sexusociety? As a contradiction that contains both a strong push towards individualism, but at the same time advocates for normalcy and normativity at every turn. A society that believes in their own fairytale of the gay haven, while restricting queer people within the boundaries of accepted homosexuality. A country where the "real" issues with sexuality lie with the Muslim Other who do not fit within the Dutch narrative of the normal, developed, progressive, sexually liberal Self. Where the political discourse on sexuality has been hijacked by right-wing xenophobes and, more recently, has received an additional disgust of anything 'woke' as being abnormal.

Finally, to give a queerly asexual perspective on Dutch sexusociety, I want to highlight something Micha discussed in our interview. He talked about his transition and how taking testosterone confirmed his asexuality for him. While in the process of transitioning, everyone told him that after starting hormone replacement therapy and taking testosterone, his libido would be through the roof. This was the experience many of his transgender friends had had, as well as the general understanding in society of the influence of testosterone. Since sexual desires are "normal", especially for men who have a testosterone driven desire to hunt for sexual encounters, Micha's sexual desires were bound to kick in after taking testosterone, or so everybody thought. However, nothing happened. Micha explained that, while the experience of masturbation and orgasm is heightened and more intense due to the testosterone, he is still not interested in having sex with anyone. However much the Dutch want to hold onto their believe in the importance of the average, the "normal" sexuality, the reality is much more diverse, much more nuanced, and much queerer.

5. The COC and the New Applicant: The Position of Asexuality in the Dominant Dutch LGBT Discourse

Within the Netherlands, the most prominent and leading LGBT organization is the COC. Not only is it the oldest LGBT organization in the country, but it is also the oldest one in the world that is still in existence today. The organization was founded not long after the end of World War II. In December 1946, the Shakespeare Club was born. The name was meant to disguise the true purpose of the organization. In 1949, it was renamed to its currently title: the COC. The acronym COC stands for 'Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum', which roughly translates to Center for Culture and Relaxation; still a pseudonym. The COC takes a peculiar place within the Dutch society. The stories of the AIDS crisis in the United States have been told for decades: from the stories of suffering and death to the unwillingness of the state to help the gay men dying, to the families disowning their own children. In the Netherlands, the virus also took many lives within the gay community, but in the 1980's the government started working side by side with the COC to provide healthcare and information to the community. This established a collaboration between the COC and the government, as well as prevent the gay rights organizing that still vibrate through societies such as the United States where this AIDS activism was needed.

The collaboration between the government and the COC shaped the way in which they fight for emancipation: through talking, advocating, and collaboration. To this day, the COC strives to maintain a good relationship with the government to be able to push for progressive legislation on LGBTQIA+ rights and collaborate with politicians and political parties to ensure this is done precisely and carefully. It is also the most prominent LGBTQIA+ organization in the country, responsible for many of the legislative changes through the years and still the most recognized voice for gay rights.

In this chapter, I will scavenge for information within the dominant LGBT(QIA+) discourse in the Netherlands. The position of the COC in the country is unique since politicians and media producers alike will ask the organization for advice and collaboration. It is not an activist organization, but rather one that advocates, informs, and organizes on behalf of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, to this day the COC has not recognized asexuality as part of their community. They sport the unusual acronym LGBTI, sometimes adding a '+' at the end. This made me wonder: what position does asexuality, if any, take within their

organization? Why is asexuality so underrepresented within the dominant LGBTQ discourse in the Netherlands?

The Mechanics of the COC and Why It Excludes Asexuality

The COC is not a hierarchal organization but is formed as a union with members who have a right of say. Furthermore, the COC has multiple regional divisions, each with their own members, board, and volunteers. Anyone can become a member through a paying membership, with discounts for youth and people on government support. When one becomes a member, you do so as part of your regional division. Part of a member's contribution is funneled into the regional division; part goes to the national organization. Members elect their regional board members, who then make decision within the national federation.

Additionally, the COC has a multitude of interest groups that represent the specific wants and needs of their members. These interest groups represent teenagers, seniors, or BIPOC people, but they also have interest groups that focus on safety, religion, or education. Many of the regional divisions organize these interest groups within their respective region. This regional organization that influences the COC at the national level, means that decisions made in the COC are often made democratically: members can provide input for new regulations or projects, and they can vote on proposed changes to statutes. Due to this democratic process, combined with the fragmentation of the regional divisions, decision making can be a long and complicated process.

Through my personal involvement in the LGBTQIA+ community in the Netherlands, I have gotten to know some people who work for the COC and their projects. For this thesis, I have spoken with two employees of the COC, of which I know one personally. Due to their request to stay anonymous, I cannot mention their job titles. For the sake of this thesis, I have renamed them Peter and Hidde. Both have worked for the COC for many years and they explained that they work on many different projects and tasks in the organization. I approached them both with a similar question. On my scavenger hunt for asexual representation, I had revisited the website of the COC to research asexuality on there. You would expect the largest, most prominent LGBTQIA+ organization in the country to have some well-researched information on asexuality accessible on their website. However, I remembered that years back, after growing into awareness and acknowledgement of my own asexual experiences, I had scoured their website for information to find a connection with the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community. Back then, this must have been around 2014 or 2015, I came back empty handed and could not find a trace of asexuality on the website. This time,

unfortunately, was no different. When typing ‘asexuality’ or ‘asexual’ in the search bar, exactly five results pop up and none of them refer to any acknowledgement of asexuality as a sexual orientation, provide information regarding asexuality, or refer to other places to visit for this information. Asexuality seems to be nonexistent in the Dutch queer community, according to the COC’s website. Thus, I approached Peter and Hidde with a seemingly simple request: since I could not find any representation or acknowledgement of asexuality on their website, what place does it take within the COC, if any?

Peter quickly pointed out that asexuality is a ‘new’ orientation that only recently started to emancipate. He then explained how only a decade ago, after years of back-and-forth discussions amongst their members, the ‘T’ was added to the acronym that they use to represent the queer community and thus the group the COC claims to represent. This was done per request of transgender advocacy groups who realized that, by banding together with the COC, they could be stronger in their advocacy work, as well as their educational output. Only recently, after conversations with intersex advocacy groups, was the ‘I’ added to their acronym as well. This, once again, was done through a strenuous democratic process where all members had to weigh in. They currently present themselves as an organization representing the LGBTI community and use this acronym everywhere. We can see the prominence and dominance of the COC and the importance of the language they use in the communication of the mainstream Dutch media. While internationally, LGBTQ+ or LGBTQIA(+) seems to be the most common acronym, most Dutch media outlets use ‘LGBTI’ as their default acronym. Even organizations such as Rutgers, the national expertise center for sexuality, use the LGBTI acronym. Organizations and newspapers will sometimes have the curtesy to add a “+” symbol at the end, to acknowledge any sexual or gender identity that is not included in the acronym, but they seem to generally stick with the ‘COC acronym’. While a critical observer could point out that this is possibly a coincidence, I would argue that the solid status that the COC takes in the Dutch LGBT landscape makes it plausible that others would follow their example. When the COC consequently names the community as the ‘LGBTI community’, journalists, writers, organizations, and politicians will follow suit and assume this is the current and correct way to refer to issues regarding sexuality and gender identity.

So, as both Hidde and Peter quickly acknowledged, asexuality is indeed missing in the COC acronym. They both made a similar claim that it is not missing in their row of letters due to an unwillingness to include them. Rather, they explained, the COC only claims the letters of the groups that they can adequately represent and advocate for. Due to their collaborations

with transgender and intersex organizations, they feel they can now claim those letters as part of their team. Both, individually, expressed that, if an asexual advocacy group were to start a campaign to be included within the organization, they would start a similar process as they have done before when adding the 'T' and 'I' to their acronym. But Peter emphasized that the initiative must come from the asexual community themselves. An asexual action group would need to take the responsibility and put in the work to start this process of inclusion. It seems their 1940's and 1950's grass-roots background could still have an impact on the way their policies are developed and on their assertion that it must be a bottom-up process. On the other hand, one could wonder whether this insistence on self-advocacy is entirely fair.

The COC, with its generous government funding and multiple fulltime employees, might have been born from bottom-up activism by gay men originally, but over the years it has grown into the leading LGBT organization in the country. As cliché as it might sound, with that power does come a responsibility. While the COC, over the last few years, has spent time, money, and attention to diversify their organization and thus respond to the call for intersectionality[16], it seems to still lack an awareness of the minority identities that fall under the broader LGBTQIA+ umbrella. While their aim for long-term dialogue within the political arena, according to Peter, bars them from adding the more activist and radical identity marker Queer to the acronym, the A seems to just be swept under the rug without much regard to the unique struggles and needs of the people represented by this letter. As a professional and prominent organization supported with public funding, I would argue it is their responsibility to take this marginalized sexuality under their wing and provide community representatives the necessary opportunities to work on a true and meaningful inclusion of asexuality within the organization, mission, and projects of the COC. In my opinion, they have a responsibility to be proactive in trying to connect with the asexual community, to reach out and actively seek out partners to work on including this community within their work and their organization's output. It may sound noble and fair to not want to claim to represent a community that you do not work with extensively, but the result of this policy seems to go beyond this philosophy: the 'A' is consistently forgotten and excluded by big media organizations and newspapers and the COC's supposedly inclusive acronym LGBTI is

[16] The COC has subgroups focusing on the intersections of LGBTQIA+ experiences and lived experiences such of those who are BIPOC, have disabilities, have a bicultural background, or are seniors. Recently, they have also made strides to include people from marginalized backgrounds within the organization and amongst the employees themselves.

favored in instances where the broader spectrum of sexualities and gender identities is discussed. For the COC, it should not just be a case of which community can we 'fairly' represent, but they should also honestly and critically regard the question of which communities they find worth representing and investing in. A lack of investment in the asexual community means an erasure of asexuality in the larger narrative.

Hidde was the one to ask a counter question regarding this in/exclusion of the 'A'. He wanted to know what I personally would like the COC to do to somehow include asexuality in their communication, without undeservingly claiming to represent the community. I told him that, from my perspective, I think it is important for people who have some form of power to not sit back and put the responsibility on the minority to fend for themselves. While I understand and appreciate their concern regarding claiming to represent a community that never requested this, I also feel that it is their responsibility to represent the diversity of the community as fully and completely as possible. Being in the established position they are in, they should at least acknowledge and validate the existence of asexuality as an orientation that has a place within the community. So, I suggested to Hidde to at least include a webpage that compiles resources on asexuality on their website, so that in the future, people with asexual experiences who are on their own scavenger hunt for information, will encounter better and more accessible information on the COC's website than I did all those years ago. It might be the bare minimum, but the acknowledgement of the existence and validity of asexuality is an important and urgent first step the COC should take.[17] A next step would be to reach out and establish a relationship with the asexual community in the country and work towards meaningful inclusion in the COC organization.

Asexual Activism for Inclusion

Amber Witsenburg, chairperson of NOA, the Netherlands Organization for Asexuality, confirmed this need for inclusion of the 'A' in the acronym, as well as the need for representation of asexuality within the LGBTQIA+ community. NOA was founded in late 2019 and its aim is to provide education for anyone seeking information on asexuality, whether it is individuals on a personal journey, media creators working on their film script, or journalists writing articles. Amber explained that one of NOA's goals that they established

[17] Due to the extensive writing period of this thesis, I can conclude that there seems to be no real urgency to acknowledge asexuality on their website. It has been over a year since I spoke with Peter and Hidde and the website currently still comes up with the same few hits when searching 'asexuality'.

when the organization was founded, other than to be a Dutch hub for information on asexuality, is to lobby for meaningful inclusion of asexuality at the COC. They have noticed that smaller LGBTQIA+ organization are often already inclusive of asexuality and sometimes had asexual members or volunteers, but the big players were still excluding the 'A'. This includes the COC. Asexuality, they asserted, deserves its place in the community, since it is a very different sexual orientation from the letters that often come before it. There are unique challenges that asexual people face, for which the COC could offer support. Additionally, asexuality brings a new perspective to the broader conversations on sexual and gender diversity, which could provide for new insights and possibilities within the LGBTQIA+ community.

While Peter and Hidde had both claimed that no asexual advocacy group had ever tried to lobby for their inclusion, Amber stated that they had previously made such attempts. They had even given talks on asexuality for members of the COC on their request, as well as giving educational presentations on sexual and gender diversity at schools on behalf of the COC. It seems that they have been a very active member of the COC for years and have been lobbying to try and get asexuality explicitly included within the organization. While Peter and Hidde might claim no asexual representative has stepped forward, it became clear from Amber's story that they had made such attempts but seems to have been ignored. They hope that, after founding NOA and working with a team to represent the asexual community in the Netherlands, they will have more success and the COC will start to work with them to include asexuality in their organization.[18]

Through this research for traces of asexuality, I have encountered other sources that would prove Amber's story right and debunk the claims of Hidde and Peter that asexuality is new and unwilling to emancipate yet. In January of 2015, the NOS, the national public broadcasting network, published an item on asexuality. In this item, they discuss the emergence of the asexuality movement. There, Koen van Dijk, at that time the director of the COC, states that, while the organization currently only represents homosexuals, lesbians, and transgenders, in the future they might be able to add asexuality to that list. These statements were made, by the director of the COC, almost eight years ago! Thus, the COC has either

[18] After reading my thesis, Amber acknowledged that there indeed still is no asexual representation within the COC but did hint at the fact that there have been some developments in the year since the interview. Amber explained that there has been some collaboration between NOA and the COC since this interview and they hoped to restart the conversations soon to, perhaps, work towards an inclusion of asexuality.

continuously claimed asexuality's newness for years, or there has been no constructive internal conversation on the inclusion of asexuality and they have simply brushed it to the side, forgetting its existence until someone brings it up again.

Furthermore, in May 2021, the journalistic magazine OneWorld interviewed the new director of the COC, Marie Ricardo, on her position as director of the organization as both the first non-binary person, as well as the first person of color in this position. In this interview, she is asked about including the 'Q' and the 'A' in the acronym. To this, she responds: "In 2019, the COC was approached by a community of people who identify as asexual. We facilitate their meetings by offering a location. Internally, we are having conversations on our statutes. Do we stay an 'LGBTI' organization, or do we decide to expand with the 'A' for asexual, the 'Q' of queer, or just a '+'?"[19] To paint the timeframe for you, this interview took place a month before I approached Peter and Hidde for an interview for this thesis. Meaning that asexuality, very recently, must have been at the forefront of conversations, at least for the new director. Quite frankly, this search into the exclusion of asexuality within the COC poses more questions than answers. However, I would argue it is fair to claim that there seems to be a lack of urgency, or even a complete disinterest amongst the employees of the COC to work on a constructive dialogue to include asexuality within their policies.

The Confusion of Exclusion

Why does the COC still claim that asexuality is a new orientation that only recently came to the table? Is there any truth to their claim? Especially considering the new director of the COC is aware of asexuality and open to have conversations on its inclusion. Furthermore, if we investigate the internet archives, we can debunk this claim of newness with a simple Google search. The Dutch branch of AVEN, the Asexuality Visibility and Educational Network, was founded in 2005. So, only a few years after the American website was launched and a group of people had organized themselves in the United States, there were already people in the Netherlands doing the same thing: organizing themselves, meeting people with similar experiences, exchanging information and new insights. The original AVEN has had a lively forum where people can discuss any subject they wish to in various threads. In line with

[19] "In 2019 werd het COC benaderd door een gemeenschap van mensen die zich als aseksueel identificeren. We faciliteren hun bijeenkomsten door een locatie voor ze beschikbaar te stellen. Intern voeren we nu discussie over onze statuten. Blijven we een 'lhbti'-organisatie, of kiezen we ervoor uit te breiden we met de 'a' van aseksueel, de 'q' van queer of gewoon een '+'?"

this, the Dutch AVEN website offers the same services and has had an engaged community on the forum since 2005 as well. To this day, despite other social media becoming more prominent in people's lives and services such as Facebook groups taking over the old school forums, the Dutch AVEN forum still has an active community with people posting regularly. There seems to be some consistency of organizing in the Dutch asexual community amongst a, perhaps small, crowd of people who continue to seek out companionship with people who have similar life experiences, to exchange information, and to find kinship.

So, does the claim of the COC of asexuality as a supposedly 'new' phenomenon hold ground? I would argue it is a subjective claim that voids the person of any responsibility they might have towards the asexual community. After all, claiming something is new seems to imply that the phenomenon is not yet fully grown and does not need to be taken seriously. Furthermore, it could reflect an unwillingness to learn about this 'new' sexuality and community, sticking it in a cycle of perpetual newness with no necessity to include it in the larger conversation. The claim that asexuality is 'new' distinguishes it from the 'establishment' of homosexuality, though this would be a false opposition. The discourse around homosexuality, after all, can be traced back to the pathologizing of people with a sexual behavior that differentiated from the norm. By extension, any sexuality that differs from the heterosexual norm should thus automatically be included in conversations on sexual diversity. Even though the current director of the COC seems to be open to including asexuality, based on both Amber's stories and those of Peter and Hidde, it seems there is a complete lack of interest and investment in asexuality within the organization. The COC, with its prominent position in the Dutch LGBTQ+ landscape and generous funding from the government and donors should, in my opinion, take responsibility for the inclusion of asexuality, rather than put the blame on a lack of action from asexual activists and cling onto the claim of newness, when even that claim is hardly new anymore.

To attempt at an answer to the central question "Why is asexuality underrepresented within the LGBTI community in the Netherlands?", I genuinely have ended up with more questions than answers after doing this search into the COC. It seems that there is a complete lack of urgency for asexual inclusion within the organization, it almost seems like they are unwilling to go through all the troubles that comes with including a new group within their organization. Even though the new director has pointed towards efforts of including asexuality within the COC, the responses by Hidde and Peter seem to communicate something else. It is either a complete lack of internal communication, or even worse, looking away and ignoring

asexuality as to not having to deal with this troubling orientation that seems to haunt your organization.[20]

[20] After reading my thesis, Hidde was indignant about my analysis of the mechanism of exclusion of asexuality, stating that the COC is moving "from an LGBTI to an LGBTI+ organization in which there is (even) more space for the broad community".

6. Uncovering Traces of Asexuality in the Netherlands

In previous chapters, we have observed the sexusocietal structure of the Netherlands and its attitude towards non-normative sexuality, though the focus there was mostly on male homosexuality as it is the most recognized queer identity in the Netherlands. We have also explored the lack of representation of asexuality within the dominant Dutch LGBTQ+ discourse, which is also mostly homosexual. However, there is a world outside of the dominant heteronormative and homonormative society. While the complete lack of asexual representation within the popular discourse in the Netherlands has become clear, let's continue our scavenger hunt for asexuality outside these realms. Let's explore outside of the beaten path and investigate the margins, that which exists outside of the dominant discourse.

In the previous chapter, we've already gotten to know the newly founded organization NOA, the Netherlands Organization for Asexuality. While a marginal and volunteer-run organization, they are a symbol and symptom of an emerging, though underrepresented narrative. Of course, there are asexual people in the Netherlands. There must be asexual people navigating queer communities. I should know, as I am one of them and I am always seeking out likeminded queer asexual individuals. So, where are the traces of asexualities in the Netherlands? What representations can we unearth throughout our queer feminist history? Which traces and resonances can we unearth off the beaten path? How has asexuality been represented and discussed within queer and feminist spaces in the Netherlands?

Let's first dive into the archives and search for traces of asexuality in the queer feminist history of the Netherlands. My scavenger hunt led me to two archives in Amsterdam, which were described earlier in the 'Methodology' section of this thesis. In December 2021, amid yet another covid lockdown, I travelled to Amsterdam to explore both IHLIA and Atria and to rummage through their archives. IHLIA is the gay archive that has been broadening its scope to include the entirety of the LGBTQIA+ community by including writings on queer feminism, queer theory, and trans theorizing, while Atria is the feminist women's archive and thus has many documents on the feminist movements and organizations in the Netherlands, which often included lesbian activism as well. While there was some overlap between the two archives, there were also some very distinct differences. As you would expect, within the IHLIA archive I mostly found traces of asexualities amongst discussions of celibacy and sexlessness amongst homosexuals and, surprisingly, within writing on heterosexuality and general discussions of sexuality. Within the Atria archive, these terms were mostly found in the context of lesbianism or the cultural and social study of female sexuality.

The Asexual Resonances of the Spinsters

One of the figures I encountered within both archives was the spinster. This might not be entirely surprising to you either, reader, as it was the figure that I had expected to encounter within the historical context of the LGBTQIA+ community. The spinster plays a significant role in feminist and lesbian history, but it is also a figure that reflects the tensions that exist within female sexuality and lesbianism. I often encountered the spinster as a corrective figure, placing women into one of the pre-assigned boxes found suitable for women in the 19th and 20th century. You either were a wife in a heterosexual marriage, or you were a spinster. Regardless of any relationship they might have with another woman, an adult woman without a husband was situated and understood as a spinster. In this construction, the spinster was assumed to be a sexless being, seeing as sex could only take place within marriage and could only be undertaken by a man, initiated by a man, and had with a man. Ironically, despite a spinster existing firmly outside the realms of any man - whether by feminist choice, due to a preference for female companionship, or a simple lack of a husband - her situation was still defined entirely by her relationship to other men and her lack of marriage.

This conceptualization of spinsterhood is akin to modern day definitions of asexuality, which is often also identified and described by this perceived lack of something that is understood as essential, by doing so losing all sight of the richness such an 'unconventional' life could have. While feminists and lesbians alike have reclaimed spinsters as their foremothers, recognizing the variety, fullness, and freedom that spinsterhood could bring women in the 19th and 20th century, asexuals nowadays often still have to defend their lives, which are perceived as lacking something essential and being void of that around which relationships and society are build. Could we also reclaim spinsterhood within the context of asexualities? I do not think it would be such a leap to do so. Moreover, as soon as I personally learned about the spinster and spinsterhood, even though I did so within the context of lesbian history, I recognized a kinship beyond same-sex relationships. For me personally, the asexual connection with spinsterhood has been quite obvious. While I completely understand the feminist argumentation that spinsterhood did not have to be sexless, even though patriarchal society assumed them to be due to an understanding of female sexuality as only existing in response to male sexuality, I also recognize that these relationships were not as strongly defined by sex as many relationships are nowadays, queer and conventional alike.

The 1997 book 'The Spinster and Her Enemies' by Sheila Jeffreys[21] reflects on the figure of the spinster and her place within feminist sexual history. Through its discussion of spinsterhood, the book includes many resonances of asexuality, despite the term 'asexual' appearing only once in the book, in the chapter of 'the frigid woman'. A male expert is discussed, a so called 'Freudian analysist', who did research on sexual impotence. The term asexual is thus used as a stand-in for 'sexless' to describe an issue with, what he assumes is, a woman's inherent sexual nature: "He asserted that there was no such thing as an 'asexual' being and that frigidity was the result of repression." (Jeffreys, 1997, 170). The use of the term 'asexual' in this context has very little to do with our current day understanding of asexualities, but rather is used as another corrective tool to force women within a subordinate relationship with a man. It only resonates with a modern day misunderstanding of asexuality, an assumption many still need to debunk: the idea that asexuality comes from either trauma, repression, or both. I do not mean to delegitimize people who identify with asexuality and have had to deal with a traumatic past, however it is not the basis of asexuality and does not define every single person who identifies with it. The use of 'asexual' as done by this Freudian analysist uses asexuality only to describe (lack of) sexual behavior, something many modern day queer emancipation groups, including asexual activists, have attempted to move away from.

However, while the terminology of asexualities might not be used within the book, it does contain many resonances of asexuality and critical reflections on normative sexuality that are akin to current day discussions within the emerging field of asexuality studies, as well as within activist asexual spaces. I encountered one such reflection in the introduction in which Sheila Jeffreys discusses the history of sexuality and its development in the late 19th and early 20th century from a feminist perspective. In the introduction, Jeffreys reflects on assumptions of linearity regarding the historical development of sexuality, which must be overturned in order to progress the fight for women's equality. One such assumption is that there is a natural progression within sexual liberation which moves from repressive prudery towards sexual freedom in a natural, essentialist trajectory.

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[21] After assessing my thesis, KJ Cerankowski made me aware of later work by Sheila Jeffreys, which is nothing short of controversial. I regret to say that I did not look into her more recent writings earlier. Apparently, she has been writing on 'transgenderism', publishing blatant transphobic texts for decades. While I wish I would have been more critical towards her in my writing, it delights me to realize she would probably hate my asexual reading of her work and my reclaiming of the spinster. I am always happy to infuriate transphobes.

"Implicit in this view is the idea that there is an essence of sexuality which, though repressed at times in the past, is gradually fighting its way free of the restrictions placed upon it. […] Despite the wealth of work by sociologists and feminists on the social construction of sexuality, the idea remains that a natural essence of sexuality exists." (Jeffreys, 1997, 2)

In this introduction, through the figure of the spinster, Jeffrey reflects on the social construction of sexuality as a natural essence, something that resonates with Pryzyblo's writing on sexusociety. In her text 'Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety', Przybylo tackles the supposed naturalness of (hetero)sex and takes on Butler's approach to favored repetition to discuss the mechanism of uncloaking that asexualities, by repeating differently, can do to the naturalized system of sexusociety:

"…alternative repetitions are powerful because they suggest to other actors that repeating differently is possible, and most importantly, that the most frequently repeated sequences are not by any means 'natural' or 'innate'." (Przybylo, 2011, 456)

In a similar fashion, the existence of the spinster and her status both inside heteronormative society, as well as outside of it, questioned the naturalness and essentialism of heterosexuality and marriage. In the book, Jeffreys discusses spinsterhood and celibacy in the fifth chapter, reflecting on the accounts of historians who discussed spinsterhood as being excruciating and very difficult for women, as they were desperate for a husband (1997, 88). However, Jeffreys nuances this, explaining that it was often a deliberate choice to abstain from marriage, sometimes because they felt a marriage would trap them, others did so because they wanted to focus on a career. Some suffragettes would even claim complete abstinence from men, as they were not 'good enough' with their violent nature (1997, 91). From this feminist fueled abstinence grew a different sort of relationship, as described by Jeffreys:

"Re-Bartlett states that the 'new' woman 'loves instinctively her sister woman' and that this phenomenon was to be seen most frequently among the suffragettes." (Jeffreys, 1997, 91)

While Jeffreys is correct when stating that it "cannot be assumed that those spinsters who were defending their right not to engage in sexual intercourse with men, were sexually inactive" (1997, 100), looking through the asexual looking glass, neither can sex be assumed. There are resonances of asexualities to be found in these alternative relationships. Rather than

defining these suffragette women by the lack of husband, we can reclaim their position as a full alternative to the norm. These relationships, while often times intimate and deeply involved, where in no way defined by sex or sexuality, but rather by their companionship and lifelong commitment. Perhaps the asexual community could share this historical resonance of kinship with the lesbian and feminist communities who have reclaimed and sometimes cherished these queer ancestors.

Boston Marriages: Asexual Relationships?!

While I was already familiar with the spinster, as previously discussed, there was another concept that I encountered on my queer scavenger hunt into the archives, which took me by surprise: the Boston Marriage. While this concept might be familiar to you, reader, it was a new encounter for me. This was one of those delightful encounters, which shifted and enriched my understanding of the history of asexualities for me. It has some links with the conceptualization of the spinster in the 19th and 20th century and, as was the case with the spinster, could only exist in peace until the figure of 'the lesbian' entered society. As Sheila Jeffreys shared in her book: "When lesbians are stigmatised and reviled, so, also, are all women who live independently of men." (Jeffreys, 1997, 100). However, while the spinster is a solitary, man-less figure that might have a female companion, the Boston Marriage is a conceptualization of a committed, though assumed sexless, relationship between two women that is perceived as resembling a 'real' marriage.

On my search through the archives of Atria, a book popped up called 'Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians'. The book was edited by Esther D. Rothblum, a professor of Psychology, and Kathleen A. Brehony, a psychotherapist. It was published in 1993 and archived by either Atria, or one of its predecessors. After finding the book, I searched for it within the university library of Utrecht and was surprised to find it in their collection as well. While this was convenient from a practical point, as I could loan it for a long period free of charge, it was astonishing that I had not encountered the book before at any point through all of my searches for asexuality within the university library, seeing as 'asexual' is even in the title. The accessibility of the library, or lack thereof due to cataloging and prioritization, would be another point of access to discuss the access to information on asexuality, but alas, we only have so many words to write and time to spare.

Circling back to my first encounter with the concept of the Boston marriage, I was positively surprised to find such a seemingly obvious historical thread of asexualities within

Western history. Furthermore, when I shared my delight of finding this concept with one of my queer friends, who I met up with after visiting the archives, she responded something along the lines of: “Yeah, such a crazy concept, right?!”, underlining her familiarity with the concept. Truthfully, I was baffled by this. Should I have encountered the concept before? Or perhaps within my education at the Gender Studies program at Utrecht University, a lesson on spinsterhood and Boston Marriages should have been included? To this day, I am still unsure why it never made it into the curriculum. Nevertheless, the concept and its connection to asexuality is one of the most glaringly obvious, yet apparently hidden traces of asexuality that I unearthed on my scavenger hunt.

Like the asexual resonances I could recognize within spinsterhood, as well as in Sheila Jeffreys’ book on the spinster, these echoes also appear with the Boston marriage and the book by Esther Rothblum and Kathleen Brehony. The development of the book begins with Rothblum and her interest in writing a chapter on asexual, but romantic relationships among lesbians. In the process, she learns that these relationships used to be called Boston Marriages; supposedly the term ‘Boston’ refers to the (presumed) puritan and asexual nature of these relationships (Rothblum and Brehony, 1993, 5). In the introduction to the book, Esther Rothblum reflects on the conversations she had with her lesbian friends regarding their relationships, to let the reader know where the idea for the book originally came from. She writes: “What we never did was talk about sex. We assumed that couples were sexual.” (1993, 4). It is this tension between the assumes sexual nature of contemporary lesbian relationships and the sexual reality of these relationships that piqued her interest in writing and researching these asexual lesbian relationships. Her departure, from a place of questioning the normative assumption that sex must be a part of a romantic relationship, seems like a very critical asexual undertaking. Further in the introduction, the writers go on to even question ‘what is sex?’. They discuss that many women in their research wondered what they would define as sex. Rothblum and Brehony go on to explain that, for many of these women, the definition of their sexual status had a lot of influence on their relationship and how it was perceived: “When a couple’s definition of sex differs from that of the lesbian community, their relationship may be invalidated by current friends or by future lovers” (1993, 10).

Why do I understand these discussions of sex and sexual activity as asexual resonances? Because, to me, they reflect not only a critical stance towards the normative assumption that sex has to be part of any healthy, mature, and intimate relationship, but also because these open discussions offer space for redefinitions of what relationships could be regardless of sex. When sex is taken out of the equation, how do you define your relationship?

The reconceptualization of the Boston marriage in a contemporary context, as Rothblum and Brehony discuss in this book, creates such a space. Moreover, I would argue, it is a queer reclaiming of relationships. As Rothblum and Brehony discuss in their book, heterosexual couples are defined by their marital status: not-yet-married, engaged, married, divorced, widowed. However, all other forms of relationships "are defined by the presence of sexual activity." (1993, 6). By changing the conversation and not centering sex in a relationship, we could level the playing field for any intimate relationship, whether platonic, romantic, sexual, or a combination of those. Brehony opens this conversation by asking "What is a 'relationship' anyway?" in her introductory chapter. In this chapter, she questions the language available to discuss 'love', or the person we love. She writes: "Perhaps we are so limited by language that we will never come to any precise way to categorize any relationship" (1993, 21). This questioning and queering of normative relationship structures and the perceived hierarchy that exists between 'just friends' and 'partner', again, seems like a very queerly asexual project.

As Kathleen Brehony puts forward, we are limited by the language available to us to create our reality. In this sense, a modern-day conceptualization of the Boston marriage would only be another effort to categorize something uncategorizable. However, the reality is that people need words to learn, to express, to communicate, and to understand. The Boston marriage could be a useful lineage for understanding intimate, committed relationships beyond sex and compulsive sexual activity. Intercourse as an option to express intimacy, instead of a compulsory need for a relationship to be healthy and legitimate. In a way, the Boston marriage reminds me of the ways in which some asexual people nowadays redefine such intimate companionship as a queer platonic relationship, often shortened to QPR. The use of a term like this is to question people's perceived hierarchal system that puts a (sexual) partner above someone who is "just a friend". With the limited use that language can offer, a QPR could help people express their commitment to 'their person' in a similar way that the Boston marriage helped define non-normative intimate relationships a century ago.

The Historical Echoes of Asexualities within Dutch Feminist History

To the critical reader, who has read the chapter so far and has raised an eyebrow thinking: "was she not supposed to talk about the Netherlands?", you are correct. So, why do these English books from the 1990's matter? First of all, I encountered them within the archive of Atria within the Netherlands, which suggests that someone felt it necessary to include these books and to discuss spinsterhood and the Boston marriage. It suggests that there was an

awareness of asexuality within feminist spaces in the Netherlands, perhaps even discussions, well before the birth of the contemporary asexual movement in the early 2000's.

Digging further in the archive, I encountered many more mentions of asexuality, even in pieces dating as far back as the 1980's. The earliest mention of asexuality I could find within Atria's archive, comes from a collection of Socialist Feminist Texts from 1981. These were a collection of texts, which were only available at the archive in printing. Included in this collection, was a translation of Adrienne Rich's text 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' to Dutch. Presumably, the necessity of reading and understanding this text was important enough to translate and distribute the text amongst other socialist feminist people. Another asexual resonance that generously predates the launch of the AVEN website, is the discussion of lesbianism at a congress in March 1985 in Groningen. At Atria, there is a folder that includes all the notes and talks of this congress, which is titled 'Women's worlds'[22]. Within this folder, a text is included by Mineke Bosch, who nowadays is a professor at the university of Groningen, but in the 1970's and 1980's was very active within the women's movement, worked at IAV, the predecessor of Atria, and was an editor for a feminist magazine 'Lust & Gratie'. A young Mineke Bosch was also present at this congress in 1985 and that is how I encountered her. A text is included, crediting her as the author, titled 'The Pastor and the Horse'[23], which criticizes the ways in which women's history and lesbian history has been constructed so far and she argues for using the term 'lesbian' as an umbrella term for 'women among each other'. She argues that, while lesbian would be a good term to use, it often still has bad connotations for many. Bosch explains that, when women discuss women's business, they do so in a private sphere, as women among each other, thus fitting with the term lesbian.

This argumentation nowadays, almost forty years later, sound pretty wild to me as the term lesbian has settled as an identity marker, broadly describing women who are attracted to women. Nevertheless, it seems to lay within the realms of the earlier discussions of spinsterhood and Boston marriage that try to stretch and diversify the understanding of intimate relationships between women. Bosch's argumentation and, supposedly, the discussion that grew from it, seems to confirm my assumption that conversations on asexualities, whether they were called in such a way or not, where taking place within queer feminist spaces in the Netherlands, dating as far back as the 1980's. Furthermore, Mineke

[22] Vrouwenwerelden

[23] "De dominee en het paard"

Bosch even explicitly mentions asexuality in her text, which is the reason I unearthed it in the first place. She writes:

> *"Additional arguments for a less rigid interpretation of the concept of 'lesbian' (and with it the 'corresponding' field of research) provided the research into the medical discourse in which purport was given to a lesbian identity, using, among other things, existing concepts that express the aversion to managed to arouse. In the Netherlands at the end of 1900, for example, in the discussion about women's studies, feminists, learned women, asexuality, sterility, genderlessness, and third sex were placed in a very simple scheme. With little sense of nuance perhaps, but certainly not without reason!" (Bosch, 1985, 14, own translation)*[24]

In this part of the text, Bosch discusses a development she has noticed within lesbian history towards a focus on identification with women among each other, rather than sexuality as their core identity. From this, she argues, 'lesbian' could thus be used to indicate a space in which women are among each other, separating it from what she calls 'female homosexuality' as the core principle of their alliance. In the earlier translated quote, she sums up other categories that have been discussed with disdain in the Netherlands, which includes asexuality as well.

Not only does Bosch argue for an expansive understanding of intimate relations outside of sexuality, incidentally she also mentions there were conversations already on asexuality as well. Combined with the earlier discussed translation of Adrienne Rich's text and the archived books on spinsterhood and Boston marriages, I would argue there were, though perhaps liminal, but certainly to some degree discussions on asexualities taking place in the Netherlands in the late 20th century. It is not just important to find traces of asexuality within the feminist history of the Netherlands, as it creates a sense of ancestry or even legacy, it also completely undermines arguments nowadays that asexuality is something 'new' that has only just recently showed up in conversations on sexuality and relationships in the

[24] "Bijkomende argumenten voor een minder steile invulling van het begrip 'lesbisch' (en daarmede het 'bijbehorende' onderzoeksterrein) leverde het onderzoek naar 'het' medische vertoog waarin inhoud werd gegeven aan een lesbische identiteit, met behulp van onder andere bestaande begrippen die de afkeer wisten op te wekken. Zo werden in Nederland eind 1900 in de discussie over vrouwenstudie, feministen, geleerde vrouwen, aseksualiteit, steriliteit, geslachtsloosheid en derde geslacht in een zeer simpel schema ondergebracht. Met weinig gevoel voor nuance misschien, maar in ieder geval niet zonder reden!"

Netherlands. As we have explored in the previous chapter, the COC has used this argumentation to explain their lack of investment in the asexual community in the Netherlands. In a way, 'proving' we have been having conversations such as this in the Netherlands for decades is, for me, the icing on the cake in this exploration. The conceptualization of the contemporary asexual activist movement did not appear out of thin air, of course there were already conversations on sexuality and relationships beyond sexuality on which the asexual movement, in the US, as well as in the Netherlands, could build. Apparently, Dutch sexusociety was not such a barren and unexplored land for the queer asexual scavenger after all. With some exploration, I have dusted off goalposts that have stood there since before I was born. Imagine what else other queer asexual scavengers could find on their own scavenger hunt?

Sexlessness within Homosexuality

In exploring traces and resonances of asexualities in the queer feminist movements in the Netherlands, I have stumbled upon many more traces than I had anticipated. However, I have not just visited the feminist archive, but also went to IHLIA, the LGBTQIA+ archive in the Netherlands. While Atria stems from the archives of feminist and lesbian groups, IHLIA was based mainly on archives by lesbians and gay men, but over time has been archiving materials about bisexual, transgender, and queer life as well. It was actually within the archive of IHLIA that I first stumbled on the book on spinsterhood; the 1997 book by Sheila Jeffreys which I discussed earlier in the text. However, Atria also had a copy stashed away, the earlier version of the book, which was published in 1985. Thus, within the archive of Atria, these traces of asexualities start showing up in the 1980's. As I have said before, there is some overlap between the two archives, such as psychological and sexuological texts from the 21st century on the contemporary asexual movement, as well as the book on spinsterhood. However, Atria had some distinct queer feminist artifacts which discussed relationships outside of sexuality, as well as asexuality.

The gay archive of IHLIA has its own signature as well. While Atria's distinct identity came forward in a multitude of texts, magazines, and other artifacts connected to feminist and lesbian groups, one of the remarkable components of the IHLIA archive is its collection of texts on sexual abstinence, sexlessness, and celibacy. Part of its archive is a collection of Dutch books from the 1910's on abstinence, celibacy, and libido. While I could not find any writings of conferences or notes from conversations that could confirm conversations on a sexless life were had, nor do I have any idea when these texts were catalogued, this does

suggest that, among homosexuals, there were conversations taking place in the 20th century that resonate with asexualities as well.

Other traces of sexlessness and celibate living situations that I encountered in the IHLIA archive, compliment the earlier mentioned traces of asexuality within the Atria archive. On my quest for asexual resonances, I also included searches on celibacy and abstinence to ensure I would not be restricted by modern-day conceptualizations of asexualities. A book that popped up within the IHLIA archive on this search, was a Dutch translation of the 1980 book 'The New Celibacy' by Gabriëlle Brown. It was translated to Dutch by F. van Oostenbosch and published in 1982 by publishing house Elsevier under the title 'Sex in the Ice Chest'[25]. The book contains many conversations on a contemporary reclaiming or re-understanding of celibacy. On the second page of the introduction, there are observations of popular discourse around celibacy in the United States that resonate with the media discourse on asexuality nowadays. It mentions an article in the New York Times in 1978 that discusses 'a flood of asexuality', which according to the writer, is happening in response to the sexual revolution. People have supposedly lost their interest in sex (Brown, 1982, 8). Another example Brown gives, is that of a 1979 article discussing how it is fashionable to 'come out' as celibate, naming Mick Jagger and Andy Warhol as so-called 'trendsetters' (1982, 8), positioning 'celibate' as a similar identity to being gay, for which one also is supposed to 'come out' and claim this identity. Furthermore, in the same introduction, Brown debunks the notion that sex is a healthy, natural, and necessary part of life, explaining that it is biologically incorrect and that most people will keep their sexual abilities, regardless of how much sex they have (1982, 13). These three examples echo ideas which are very similar to the contemporary discourse on asexuality, 'celibate' within these conversations resonates with the ways in which we discuss and understand asexuality.

Another echo of asexualities can be found in the third chapter of the book titled 'Celibacy and Love', which discusses different iterations of love. It splits love up in (1) primary love, the love a person has for themselves, (2) romantic love, which is passionate but celibate, (3) platonic love, which the writer describes as ideal love, and (4) spiritual love, which is described as the most pure, limitless, almost godly love, which is the source of all other loves (Brown, 1982, 60-67). While these conversations on various forms of love, disconnected from sex, sound vague and, at times, even seem to entail some form of intellectual superiority, to a reader familiar with conversations on asexualities, they may

[25] "Seks in de ijskast"

sound familiar. They are akin to the conceptualization of the Split Attraction Model, often used within the asexual community. In order to conceptualize asexuality to an allosexual person, this model has been developed within the community to explain relationships in which sex is not one of the foundational elements, but rather only an option. While it is hard to trace who originally coined the Split Attraction Model, since it emerged within community conversations, discussions on this model on the AVEN forum date back to early 2013. While there are various iterations of the model, the following four categories are most often used: (1) sexual attraction, meaning a desire for engaging in sexual acts with another person, (2) romantic attraction, meaning desiring a romantic relationship with another person, (3) sensual or physical attraction, meaning a desire for engaging in sensual, physical acts with another person, and finally (4) aesthetic attraction, the appreciation of someone's appearance. Other categories that people might include, are platonic or intellectual attraction. Regardless of the exact words of definitions used, the basis of the model is to redefine attraction and question normative assumptions in relationships. It also offers more space in between marriage and friendship.

Being familiar with the Split Attraction Model, I found a resonance with the discussions within this book, as well as previously mentioned texts and conversations that were taking place regarding redefining relationships that exists outside of societies understanding of marriage or friendship. The Split Attraction Model offers another way of understanding relationships and can also be used as a helpful tool when discussing asexuality with friends and family for the first time. I know that it was incredibly helpful in explaining my own understanding of and identification with asexuality when I first started 'coming out' to friends and family. However, there seems to be nothing new or radical about new conceptualizations of sexuality and relationships, as I have found that these sorts of conversations can be traces back for decades. These resonances of asexuality can be found in both lesbian and gay history in the Netherlands, illustrating that asexuality, or its predecessors in other linguistic cloaks, has been part of the LGBTQIA+ community well before the A was added to the acronym.

News on the 'New' Sexuality

Now that we have an emerging understanding of the historical traces of asexuality within the queer history of the Netherlands, let's shift our focus to a more contemporary context. Many people, including the COC employees that I spoke with, claim asexuality is still very new and unknown in the Netherlands. In my personal experience, the general consensus seems to be

that you should not expect too much from people, as they are hardly aware of asexuality, let alone understand it. However, how much truth is there to this claim? As I have already discussed, I encountered multiple traces of asexuality within the lesbian and gay archives. While this was a pleasant surprise to me, I am familiar with articles and media representations of asexuality within the Netherlands that people could be aware of. While it is true that these stories are far and few between, the media landscape is not completely void of asexual representations.

Within my open-ended interview with Micha Meinderts, the topic of asexual representation in media also came up. As a writer, he is very aware of the representations of asexualities in newspapers, magazines, and other media outlets. He observed a slow change in the representation of asexuality, an interest which he understood as being driven by American films, television series, and books focusing on asexuality. As a writer, he hoped this budding interest would grow into something which producers would want to invest money in. Micha observed that we need an interest from allosexual people to be able to sell these stories. Without a broader interest in asexuality, he explained, nobody wants to publish a book or produce a series on it. He continued to explain that in his own semi-autobiographical novel, 'According to Sybren'[26], there were resonances of asexuality, but only in between the lines. It would be recognizable for asexual people, he said, but was never made explicit.

One liminal representation of asexuality is the article that Micha wrote for Trans Magazine, a yearly magazine written and published by transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse volunteers. In this article, he tells the story of his transition and the rising libido that was supposed to come with the testosterone treatment, but never came. Since Trans Magazine is a community magazine that is mainly read by trans people, it is a very queer story that highlights the entanglements of gender and sexuality. Micha had heard from other transgender men that testosterone would heighten his libido and thus 'fix' his 'problem' with his sexuality, or his lack of interest in sex. However, even though Micha hoped it would, the change never happened, and he remained uninterested. He describes how finding 'asexuality' as an explanation for his existence and experience was a relieve and helped him realize nothing needed to change. Micha also acknowledges the privilege he has found in his asexuality, as he sees transgender friends of his struggling with sex and intimacy. Because it has never been of importance to him, he never had such struggles. He finishes the article with a beautiful quote that creates space to understand the fullness of asexuality:

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[26] "Aldus Sybren"

"But in the end, even without the benefits of asexuality, becoming allosexual would have made me a different person. So, while testosterone has changed my body in a great way, the best result is that my soul has stayed the same." (Meinderts, 2022)[27]

Articles such as Micha's who are written by asexual people themselves, are still very rare. Especially in popular media, I observed a tendency towards 'observational' articles. Let us move away from the realm of community conversations, magazines, and stories and explore the mainstream media to see what traces of asexuality already do exist.

At the start of my scavenger hunt for asexual trace, I was already aware of a handful of articles on asexuality. I had encountered one or two journalistic portraits of asexual people, as well as an article in OneWorld on asexuality. On this journey of queerly asexual scavenging, I collected a random collection of articles from a variety of media outlets. My collection currently has about thirty articles, of which the vast majority are accessible online. To create some order in this chaos of information, I categorized them by year and described the type of article. By doing so, I started observing a pattern in this seemingly random pile of journalistic output. Almost all of the items could be categorized as one of these two categories: either a portrait or collection of portraits of asexual individuals, or an asexuality 101, which often includes a sexologist to speak on behalf of asexuals. A few of them did two for the price of one and included both journalistic portraits, as well as some basics told by a sexologist. What these two categories have in common, from my perspective, is an approach to asexuality that falls within the realms of 'a cabinet of rarities'. The asexual as an undiscovered species, to be further inspected and researched in one of two presubscribed ways. Another element that stood out to me once I organized these articles, was a slight increase of articles in recent years. Of the thirty articles I collected in this scavenger hunt, roughly two were published yearly from 2012 onwards. However, in 2021 this suddenly spikes to a total of eight articles, which is in line with both Micha Meinderts' and Amber Witsenburg's observations of an increased media interest in asexuality. However, a grant total of eight articles on asexuality is not really the media break through needed to launch asexuality into the general consciousness.

[27] Maar uiteindelijk, zelfs zonder de voordelen van aseksualiteit, zou alloseksueel worden me een ander mens hebben gemaakt. Dus hoewel testosteron mijn lichaam op een geweldige manier heeft veranderd, is het beste resultaat dat mijn ziel hetzelfde is gebleven.

Something else that stands out to me, is the fact that in two of the articles, both published in 2021 around Amsterdam Pride, asexuality is included within a list of rainbow identities. One of the articles, I found on Nu.nl, the first online news platform in the country that provided 24/7 news updates, which is still a much-used site for news updates for many people. In this article, Nu.nl discusses definitions within the LGBTQIA+ community, in the context of Amsterdam Pride. In this list, though briefly, asexuality is included in the list as 'People without a need for sex with others'[28] The self-evident nature with which asexuality is included within this list, is striking. Another similar article from 2021, is one by Nieuwsuur which can be found on the website of the NOS, the publicly funded national broadcasting society. In this article, the progress pride flag, its controversy, and its aim are discussed. The article also includes other pride flags, including the asexual pride flag. Another instance in which asexuality is seemingly self-evidently included within the LGBTQIA+ community. While these two instances are nice, they were also the only two instances in which I encountered asexuality included within the LGBTQIA+ community, in an article which does not specifically discuss asexuality.

A news outlet that stands out within this collection, is the magazine OneWorld. The other newspapers, magazines, and news websites are all well-know, either national newspapers, such as Volkskrant, NRC, or AD, or they are part of the Dutch public broadcasting system, such as Radio1, BNNVara, or NOS, or part of a large commercial media company, such as RTL News or Margriet. OneWorld is an outlier in this collection of asexual media output, since it is an independently published magazine which centers marginalized perspectives. While they do not state this explicitly on their site, they are a progressive, left-leaning magazine with activist undertones. Even though OneWorld also does not have a plethora of articles on asexuality, of the three articles they have published, only their first one, published in 2018, falls within the 'portraits' category. In this 2018 article, we also meet a familiar face: Amber. Of the thirty articles in my collection, they are prominently present in three of them: a 2022 portrait in the newspaper 'De Volkskrant', the 2018 collection of asexual portraits in OneWorld, as well as their own opinion piece in OneWorld magazine, which was first published in 2020. Of all the articles and news items I found, only one is a so-called 'own perspective' piece: an article on asexuality, written by an asexual person.

In this opinion piece, Amber reflects on the structures of sexusociety, though they use the term compulsory sexuality as an academic reference point. They highlight a few points,

[28] "Mensen zonder behoefte aan seks met anderen."

which resonate with earlier passages in this thesis. At first, they focus on the assumption that everyone has sex, needs sex even. They describe experiences they had during guest lessons that they give at schools on sexuality and gender on behalf of the COC. In these lessons, students are often baffled learning that Amber does not want sex, sometimes even pitying them. They connect this discourse to the notion of compulsory sexuality. Further on, they mention slut shaming and virgin shaming, explaining how women are often trapped in between these notions, never able to do it exactly right. Finally, they end the opinion piece reflecting on people's assumptions of how one's sex life should be: "I always say: you can compare sex to rock climbing. For some, this is the summit, while others would not think about it. And sex, that would be too high a mountain to climb."[29] (Witsenburg, 2021).

Circling back to traces of asexuality in journalistic outlets, such as newspapers, magazines, and news outlets, I would conclude that there are representations on asexuality which mainly aim to inform the general public on this rare and new sexual orientation. There are some instances in which the story goes beyond a first observation of asexuality, though these outlets usually exist in the more activist sphere or within the LGBTQIA+ community. While it would be nice to finish this paragraph with a positive note, stating that there seems to be an increase in asexual representations as well as own-perspective storytelling, the truth is that I do not see this continued explosive growth of asexual stories in 2022. In my collection, there are only four articles on asexuality that came out this year, all of them falling within the portrait or explanation-by-sexology category. However, to not end on a sour note, I do recognize that the self-evident inclusion of asexuality when discussing the LGBTQIA+ community in media is something I am quite happy to see. While these two instances were also taking place in 2021, I do sincerely hope more journalists will start to include the A in both their acronym and their storytelling when talking about the LGBTQIA+ community.

Asexuality in the Picture

Finally, I would like to shift our focus to the representation of asexuality in Dutch television, series, and films. For this, I can be quite brief. The representation in fiction in the Netherlands is non-existence. Next paragraph.

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[29] The original Dutch quote works better because it includes the proper 'mountain pun'. In Dutch, to 'look up to something as a mountain' means that you definitely do not look forward to it. Original quote: "Ik zeg altijd dat je seks kunt vergelijken met bergbeklimmen. Voor de een is dat het summum, terwijl de ander er niet aan moet denken. En seks, daar zou ik nou als een berg tegenop zien."

Truth be told, this is a disappointing paragraph to write. You would expect there to be at least one fictional asexual character in all of Dutch media, but alas, at this point in time, there is not. When talking to Amber, we also discussed media representation and they reflected on the complete lack of asexual representation in Dutch media. In recent years, the self-produced, queer made television series Anne+ grabbed the attention of the general public and created its own success, even leading to a full-length fiction film which can be found on Netflix. The series was made by three lesbian friends who wanted to create the kind of media they wished they had when they were younger. The series focusses on Anne, a twenty-something year old in Amsterdam, and her everyday troubles. In the series, we also meet Anne's friend group, which consists mostly of queer people, of which the majority are also lesbians. The series and film are heralded by the LGBTQIA+ community as fun, light-hearted, and realistic portrayals of queer life in Amsterdam. It has been such a success, that any conversation on queer media in the Netherlands nowadays seems to lead to Anne+ in one way or another. In my conversation with Amber on the representation of asexuality in media, this was also the case. Amber mentioned that a series such as Anne+, which does include a transgender and a nonbinary character, should have also included an asexual character. Or any future queer series that might be developed in the future, should be aware of the existence of asexuality and its position within the LGBTQIA+ community. While I truly enjoyed watching the Anne+ series and film, and it has been quite remarkable to watch it grow from a small, self-funded series, to a full-fledged Netflix film, the inclusion of an asexual character would indeed have been the icing on the cake.

Luckily, Netflix does offer many series from a plethora of different countries. Even though the representation of asexualities is scarce in these realms as well, it is not as void of asexuality as the Dutch media landscape. The most well-known and generally celebrated fictional asexual character, is that of Todd Chavez in Netflix' 'Bojack Horseman'. In the fourth season of this animated series, one of the main characters in the series, Todd, the best friend of Bojack, comes out as asexual. The series does not end its conversations on asexuality there but continues to address this throughout the next seasons. When Todd starts dating someone, he explains to her that he is asexual, after which we find out that she is ace as well. Throughout their developing relationship through the seasons, they continuously discuss asexuality. However, it does not become Todd's defining characteristic. He just is asexual, sometimes that means he has uncomfortable, as well as funny, interactions with the world, but overall, he is still just Todd who gets into his usual shenanigans. I can understand why so many asexual people can relate to a character that is not defined solely by his asexuality.

On my queerly asexual quest for resonances of asexuality, I also put out a request on my personal Facebook for any asexual representation in films, documentaries, series, truly anything. The only suggestion I received, was the Netflix series 'Sex Education'. While I have watched the series, the scene my friend mentioned had slipped my mind. In the series, we follow our main character Otis, the son of a sex therapist, who borrows his mom's tricks to start a little business by giving sex therapy to his school mates. In one of his sessions, he encounters Florence who is confused by her lack of interest in sex. The response she gets from Otis is similar to what many asexual people hear: you just are not ready yet, but you will find the right person. While this, of course, is meant as a reassurance, it only confuses Florence more. Incidentally, Otis' mom is working as a sex therapist at the school and luckily, we see Florence visiting her to ask for advice. It is in this scene that Otis' mom, Jean, brings up asexuality. While in the scene, Jean explains asexuality perfectly and ensures Florence that there is nothing wrong with her, this scene last for less than two minutes. Perhaps you would expect this to be the start of a new storyline within the series, but we never return to Florence and her exploration of her asexuality. Furthermore, the way the scene is set up is reminiscent of the earlier discussed representations of asexuality within Dutch journalism: asexuality is explained by a sexologist. There is no development beyond asexuality, like we see in Bojack Horseman. It is almost as if the writers just wanted to check that box and be done with it.

Furthermore, when discussing media representations of asexualities with Amber, they also brought up the example of Sex Education, but in a different way. They were not very impressed by the one-and-a-half minute of asexual representation in the second season, but there was something else that bothered them much more. Within the first season, we meet Otis, a social outcast who realizes that everyone in his school is obsessed with sex, except him. Amber pointed out how this could be understood as Otis being asexual and would have been a great point from which to explore both Otis' asexuality, as well as his classmates' developing sexuality. However, throughout the season, it is revealed that Otis is actually traumatized from walking in on his father having sex with someone other than his mother. After this is resolved, we see Otis develope into an overly sexual teenager who is too horny to contain his sexual enthusiasm. Amber was incredibly disappointed by this representation, where a lack of interest in sex is something that can and should be fixed. The tiny snipped of sex therapy in which Jean explained asexuality and consolidated Florence, just could not do it for them. To them, it felt like the writers wanted a quick fix after they received negative feedback from asexual people on Otis' arc in the first season.

To conclude this elaborate chapter on the traces and resonances of asexuality that I could unearth in the Netherlands, mostly within either feminist or gay contexts, I would argue there are certainly traces to be found in the Netherlands. Both within feminist and queer contexts, conversations on asexualities and sexless but intimate relationships date back decades, illustrating a continuous awareness of asexuality and a foundation on which the modern asexual activists can build. However, within the media in general, asexuality is hardly talked about, let alone facilitating conversations on sexual orientations and relationships that do not center sex. There needs to be a certain urgency to discuss asexuality in a way that moves beyond mere explanations of this new sexual orientation. As I have said before: when there are hardly any representations, the stakes will be that much higher for any new stories coming out. Thus, first we simply need more stories and representations of asexuality, so that we can then expand on the fluidity and multiplicity of asexual experiences.

7. Asexual Futurity and the Gay Afterlife

While asexuality has largely been rendered invisible within Dutch society, media, and the public discourse, in the previous chapters we have explored the landscape of Dutch sexusociety, unearthed resonances of asexuality, explored the lack of representation in dominant LGBT discourses, and excavated asexual traces through the last few decades. I would argue that I have demonstrated that, while many people would claim otherwise, (resonances of) asexualities can be found scattered in the somewhat barren land that is Dutch sexusociety. In recent years, asexuality has even started popping up in some mainstream media, though these representations are still few and far between. There is still so much that could be done, so many more stories to be told, so many more conversations to be had, so much more space to be created. When the representations are scarce and the community is starved for stories, conversations, and even acknowledgement, the stakes will be that much higher for anyone wanting to contribute to this conversation.

In my previous chapters, I have worked on placing goal posts to mark a path for future queer scavengers to reference and explore further. But also, for anyone, asexual or not, to rethink and reimagine their life, their story, their relationships, and their desires. In this chapter, we will daydream about how the future could be. I will attempt to draw a map of unexplored worlds, despite the fact that it will never be the way I imagine it to be, even if I have the ideas and writings of other explorers to give me some guidance. Asexuality is starting to get its footing in the Netherlands and claiming their space in the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as in society as a whole. Activists have been working on this for years, with NOA's foundation as another milestone on the way. Now, it is time for Dutch queer feminist academia to catch up. So, where do we go from here? How can we imagine a queer asexual future in the Netherlands?

The American Asexuals and What We Can Learn from Them

Even though no idea or conversation starts within a vacuum, the birth of the modern asexual movement is often located at the launch of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) in 2001. On its website, AVEN clearly states their goal: "creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community." As Megan Milks and KJ Cerankowski conclude in their introductory chapter to 'Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives': "The asexual movement emerged in the early 2000s with the political goal of establishing asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity." (Milks and

Cerankowski, 2014, 25). The online asexual community on AVEN slowly grew to a few thousand members, when in 2006 the media in the United States suddenly got wind of this fascinating new orientation, catapulting founder David Jay into the limelight with him visiting multiple talk shows and news channels. In these early media interviews, David Jay mirrors the language of gay activists by invoking a 'born this way' narrative on asexuality, claiming that he has always known he is asexual. This insistence on the unchanging status of asexuality was often times necessary to convince the interviewers that they could not convince him otherwise. In an interview on ABC talk show 'The View' in January of 2006, the women interviewing David Jay prod and probe him with many inappropriate questions and try to convert him to normative sexuality, wondering whether he repressed his sexuality. Within the dramatic spectacle created by such a talk show, Jay's insistence on the unchangeability of his asexuality could be understood as strategic essentialism in an attempt to establish asexuality as the fourth sexuality, next in line to heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality.

While these often-sensationalized representations introduced the conceptualization of asexuality to a wider audience and made David Jay into a spokesperson for this emerging community, not everyone was entirely content with these representations. Ela Przybylo has criticized the early asexual activist movement's, as well as David Jay's conceptualizations of asexuality as deeply unqueer, critiquing the emphasize on the unchangeability of asexuality and as "a naturally occurring (if unusual) state of the body *beyond* choice" (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014, 300). On the earlier definitions of asexuality, Przybylo and Cooper comment: "The effects of this are to render asexuality as relatively *unqueer*, in that it is routinely attached to both heteronormativity and self-declaration/identification." (2014, 300). Even though I do understand their hesitations towards this rigid definition of asexuality, I can also understand the strategy behind creating an allegiance with homosexuality, which often operates on a similar naturalization of sexuality. Through AVEN's definition of asexuality, many people had terminology which they could employ to explain their asexual experiences to others and even 'come out' as non-heterosexual. Furthermore, as Milks and Cerankowski have observed and discussed, the asexual community has migrated throughout the internet and into the 'real world', stating that "this community exceeds AVEN, and its politics are not monolithic. Numerous other groups devoted to asexuality, both on- and offline, have grown and exist alongside AVEN, some with different understandings of what it means to be asexual." (Milks and Cerankowski, 2014, 26).

Within the Netherlands, asexuality has not made such a dramatic splash. There were no appearances in talk shows, no media spectacles on these sexless beings. In a way, there is

not a singular spokesperson for the asexual community. As observed in the previous chapter, the media has hardly taken notice of asexuality. Even though asexuality's arrival in the Netherlands could be traced back to 2005, when the Dutch branch of AVEN was launched, it seems that asexuality has mainly spread online and hardly migrated outside of LGBTQIA+ activist spaces. When discussing asexuality with Micha Meinderts, he reminisced on formerly active Facebook groups of asexual activists in the Netherlands, attempting to organize a more comprehensive community outside of the online fora. He admitted to being a 'backseat activist' himself, not keen to take the wheel, but rather ride along with the developments within the asexual community. Amber Witsenburg also mentioned wanting to join a workgroup on asexuality but finding that it had already fallen apart. According to Micha, there is not a very pressing need among asexual people organize. He recognized this in himself, as he sought out transgender peers rather than asexual peers, as he did not feel a need to exchange experiences with other asexual people.

With the establishment of NOA, the Netherlands Organization for Asexuality in late 2019, there is a new initiative for community organizing in the Netherlands, with Amber indicating that their main purpose is to create more visibility and education on asexuality, essentially attempting to enact similar changes as AVEN did back in the early 2000's. However, when observing NOA's website, it is clear that the founders of the organization have learned from the early days of AVEN and are more aware of the diversity and ambiguity of asexuality. While they do mirror AVEN's stern definition of asexuality and place it among its 'sexual siblings' homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality, they also create more space for fluidity and multiplicity in their explanatory texts. For example, they make sure to not equate asexuality with celibacy or lack of libido, but also create space for variety by stating that someone can identify as asexual and either have a libido or not, as well as being celibate or not. In addition to this, they also explain the Split Attraction Model and have included sections on aromanticism and the asexual spectrum as well. By doing so, they have dodged the heteronormative bullet and defined asexuality as a fluid orientation existing on a spectrum. Additionally, they have cited their sources at the bottom of the webpage. By doing this, we can see that they have based their conceptualization of asexuality and the asexual spectrum on American texts and websites. Thus, NOA seems to mainly be a continuation of the work that AVEN has done so far, walking in its footsteps.

Even though NOA is only a young organization, they are coming up on their third birthday, I hope they will grow into an organization that will find allegiance in the queer community and outside the dominant LGBT discourse as described in earlier chapters. The

tools for disruptive thinking that queerness can offer, could become an enriching exchange for new conversations on intimacy, relationships, kinship, and community. In line with the structure of the AVEN website, NOA still focusses very much on definitions and explanations of identity markers, with their section on personal stories mainly discussing topics such as coming out, personal interpretations of identity markers, and challenges with prejudice. Including a queerly asexual reimagining of intimacy and relationships could open the conversation on sexual normativity and compulsory heterosexuality in new and asexual ways. Or, as Sarah Sinwell mentions in her text when talking about the discussions asexual people are having online: "asexuality [can put] into question the links between sexuality, sexual attraction, and desire, and it also challenges the meanings of intimacy, romance, sexual acts, and sexual relationships." (Sinwell, 2016, 329). By seeking alliances with queer and feminist groups, such exchanges can be made and perhaps we can open the conversation on the queerness of asexuality and how it queers all assumptions of sexuality and intimate relationships in the Netherlands as well.

During our conversation, Amber mentioned how smaller queer organizations were already aware and inclusive of asexuality, while larger organizations such as COC and Pride Amsterdam still largely ignore it. This indicates that at NOA, they are aware of the willingness to learn and openness to include asexuality within smaller queer organizations. While it is important to lobby the COC for the inclusion of asexuality for it to enter the national discourse and awareness, forging an allegiance with other queer organizations could enrich dialogues on intimacy, desires, and relationships amongst queer activists. Additionally, to enter asexuality and asexual thinking into the mainstream media and societal discourse in the Netherlands, NOA and asexual activists need theoretical and conversational tools to break with the Dutch insistence on conforming to the average, the pervasiveness of which was discussed in an earlier chapter. Since the Dutch discourse on homosexuality is based on an assumed notion of being 'done' with gay emancipation, as it has been folded up neatly within the heteronormative standard of the Dutch 'normal', queers will need to break this reign of the average by questioning its normative sexual and gender assumptions on which it is build. Dutch asexual activists could use the tools and theoretical thinking developed in the United States to question these norms from a queerly asexual perspective, forging allegiances with queer and transgender communities who have attempted to include asexuality for years. Such an allegiance of queers that fall outside of the framework of the acceptable normal homosexuals could break open Dutch sexusociety and start a conversation on gender normativity, sexual diversity, and queer relationships that could include queerly asexual

thinking and introduce asexualities into society's discourse on sex and sexuality. Thus, I would argue, asexual activists such as the people running NOA should not just lobby the COC for asexual inclusion but should also focus on building communities and relationships within the queer community. Both Amber and I have observed and experienced an awareness of and even acceptance of asexuality within smaller queer organizations. This could be a starting point to build further allegiances within the community to further not only the emancipation of asexuals, but to queer queerness by questioning it asexually. Then, maybe, we could move past the fairytale of the gay haven of the Netherlands and envision a queerly asexual future. But that is perhaps just a fairytale.

From Sexual Immaturity to Asexual Futurity

Let us build an asexual castle on a queer cloud and daydream about a queerly asexual future. So far, we have explored and scavenged through Dutch sexusociety, now we refocus to that which could be beyond the horizon. An immature person could perhaps add: "to Neverland!". The place where you never grow up and you are trapped in perpetual childhood. Which resonates with the way in which asexual people are still often constructed in society; stuck in perpetual pre-sexuality, only waiting to finally grow into a real sexual being. Earlier, I mentioned a television show in which David Jay was subjected to such attempts of forced sexual maturing. In het chapter 'Stunted Growth' in 'Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives', Megan Milks writes on this perception of the asexual as suffering from 'stunted growth'. She reflects on the sexual revolution and the feminist construction of sex positivity and writes that sex positive theory and politics, which has become the main feminist approach to sex and sexuality, tends to not "recognize asexuality at all, instead "explaining it away" as the repressive negative to a transgressive, liberated sexuality." (Milks, 2014, 215). In this chapter, Milks discusses common responses heterosexuals have to asexual people, giving the example of a bingo card with the most common reactions to asexual identities (2014, 224). These responses will sound familiar to any asexual reader. "You just haven't found the right person yet", "You're just a late bloomer", "Don't worry, you'll grow out of it". These reactions, Milks observes, "invalidate asexual identities and experiences, and they rely on the logic of sexual futurity to do so." (2014, 224). Within this logic, asexual people "are simply in a pre-sexual state" (Milks, 2014, 225). Thus, asexuals are trapped in a strange heteronormative reiteration of Neverland, trapped in perpetual, pre-sexual immaturity, always assumed to grow up at some point and fulfill their sexual potential by maturing into the sexual being they were always supposed to be.

To rethink this insistence on sexual futurity into a queer reimagining of asexual futurity, we need to move beyond this conceptualization of the asexual as pre-sexual and immature. The normative assumption that everyone must desire sex, is so incredibly pervasive in the Netherlands, this constructed developmental path that must lead to a sexual life has to be reconsidered and reimagined. Kristian Kahn, in his chapter within 'Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspective', writes on this restructuring of asexuality within, or beyond societal structures of society. He writes: "Like queerness, asexuality, as a marginalized category outside the norm of heterosexuality, also rejects what Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" and the reproductive teleology at the heart of heteronormativity's life instincts". (Kahn, 2014, 144). Kahn proposes a queer alliance, to understand asexuality as akin to queerness, existing in liminal spaces where it rejects the sex drive of the heterosexuals. Both sexual queers and asexuals share a kinship in their rejection of productive sex and the possibility of offspring. Kahn evokes Lacan to further develop his understanding of the liminality of asexuality, exploring the specificity of asexuality and its queering of sex.

> *"Asexuality can best be considered at this juncture, in these in-between or liminal spaces where - as a sexuality or* non-*sexuality that deviates from heterosexuality and also as a dissident identity that has the capability of queering and disrupting binary systems based on power, knowledge, and symbolic meaning - the asexual does not actively strive for jouissance and thus rejects the notion that pleasure or life instincts dominate an individual's physical and sexual life." (Kahn, 2014, 148)*

The queerness of asexuality is in the disruption of these binary systems of sexual being and immature to-be-sexual, to claim the space within the rejection of the notion that sex, sexual intimacy, and sexual pleasure are healthy, natural, and innate parts of mature life.

Perhaps, we could reconfigure the notion of Neverland as an imagining of queer asexual futurity beyond the current horizon. A place where you never have to grow up, are never forced to grow into a sexual being, where the focus is not on sex, but on all the other things that could enrich a person's life. Instead of resisting the notion of the immaturity of asexuality, we can harness it to imagine an asexual future where we can resist the notion of sexual futurity through the perpetual sexlessness of the immature being in Neverland. We will need to completely disrupt Dutch sexusociety, its normative assumptions of good, normal sex, and its insistence on growing into a normal sexual being.

An Asexual Assignment for Queer and Feminist Thinkers

At this moment in time, as I am writing this, there is no academic writing on asexualities or even a comprehensive journalistic enquiry into asexuality in the Netherlands that I am aware of, other than the handful of singular news items that have been discussed earlier. Therefore, for the entirety of this thesis, I have had to solely base my writing, my thinking, my argumentation regarding asexualities on texts written in English, produced in North America. In this final paragraph, I would like to call on all queer and feminist writers, academics, thinkers to include critical asexuality studies within your writing and discussions, to include texts on asexuality in your syllabus, to actively rethink the structures of Dutch sexusociety, and to question your assumptions on sex, sexuality, intimacy, desires, and relationships. Luckily, we can turn to our American colleagues and, as I have done, find our foundational footing in their writing to imagine not only a queer futurity, but an asexual futurity.

To wrap up this chapter, how can we imagine a queerly asexual futurity in the context of the Netherlands and what can we learn from the American asexual discourse that has been developing over the last two decades? I would argue, we need to move beyond being included within the COC and forge alliances with queer and transgender organizations to open up a conversation to radically reconsider intimacies, sexuality, relationships, and desires in the Netherlands. Furthermore, we could move beyond the drive for futurity that we often still encounter in society, perhaps even high jacking the Dutch's love for individuality. If sex is not the central piece of your existence, imagine in how many ways one could develop one's individualism. Somehow, we need to create a Neverland in which you never need to have sex if you do not wish to do so. Perhaps we can start and continue the conversation on asexualities in the Dutch context, if more queer and feminist thinkers, writers, and researchers take up this project and move into a queer asexual futurity.

8. Conclusion

We have come to the end of our queer scavenger hunt through the Netherlands, on our search for asexual traces and resonances. Along the way, I have uncovered many goalposts that were dusted throughout the years, but who show a lineage of conversations on relationships that did not center sex, but rather other forms of intimacies. So, what are the most important findings on these explorations of this queer scavenger hunt?

After having explored the theoretical frameworks of asexuality and queerness, as well as picking up the tools for the queer scavenger hunt, we dove into Dutch sexusociety within our first chapter. In this chapter on the constructiveness of Dutch sexusociety, I have demonstrated the pervasiveness of the focus on the norm in the Netherlands. "Just be normal, that is already crazy enough". This restrictive frame used against everyone who strays from the norm is a tool often used to correct queer people and get them in line with the heteronormative structure. Within this frame of the normal, a certain type of homosexual man has been folded up within Dutch sexual normativity. As long as you exist within the boundaries of the acceptable, normal gay, you will be tolerated. This restrictive framework limits queer people who cannot or will not adhere to the sexual normativity as lauded in the country. The prominence of homosexual men in Dutch discourse had also added to this construction of the acceptable homosexual. Furthermore, the Dutch have swapped their former glory as the gay capital of the world with a pervasive, racist, xenophobic homonationalist narrative that constructs 'our homosexuals' against those Others. Thus, through multiple frameworks, the acceptable homosexual is created and held as a standard to which other queers have to adhere. There is a complete lack of awareness of asexuality within this construct, silently assuming that everyone will eventually grow into a sexual being, as a normal person should.

In the next chapter, I took on the COC and questioned their exclusion of asexuality within their organization, on their website, and in their communications to newspapers, magazines, and other media. The influence of the COC cannot be understated, seeing as their acronym LGBTI has become the golden standard within the country for many media outlets, even though the acronym stems from an exclusion of asexuality and refusal to align themselves with the more activist notions of queerness. Throughout the conversations I had with Peter and Hidde, two prominent employees of the COC, I found out that they still construct and understand asexuality as a new sexual orientation, disregarding the many attempts done over the years to include asexuality in the organization. While even the new

director stated her willingness to include asexuality within their organization and add it to the acronym, Peter and Hidde seemed to be completely unaware of such a development, begging the question whether it is negligence or willful ignorance. Amber of NOA explained their attempts at having constructive conversations with the COC, even founding the organization in an attempt to legitimize them as an asexual movement. While Marie Ricardo, the new director of the COC seemed to be aware of NOA's attempts, Peter and Hidde perhaps represent the employees at the office who, somehow, completely missed this development. Seeing as the COC is a slow-moving organism, with its complicated democratic system, it will likely take years before asexuality will be included within the organization.

Bewildered by the contradictory comments and information with regards to the mechanics of the COC, I moved on to explore and unearth traces and resonances of asexuality within Dutch feminist and LGBTQ+ archives, as well as branching out and exploring the general media conversations on asexuality. Within the archives, I encountered the figure of the spinster, as well as the concept of the Boston marriage, both concepts that could be recognized for their asexual resonances and awareness of relationships outside of sex. To compliment these asexually resonated historical figures, I also unearth traces of conversations about relationships without sex within Dutch feminist movements, dating as far back as the 1980's. There are asexual foremothers to be found within the feminist archives. Within the LGBTQ+ archives, I encountered more conversations on sexlessness, both within homosexuality, as well as in general society. All these traces point towards an awareness of asexuality that predates the birth of the modern-day asexual movement. However, these traces seemed to end after the 1990's, perhaps being rendered senseless by the upcoming sex-positive feminist and queer streams, situating sex as fundamental to their feminist and queer existence. Within the general media, asexuality seems to start popping up in the 2010's again, but only sporadically, and usually focusing either on a portrait of an asexual person and their struggles with asexuality, or by putting the attention to asexuality as a phenomenon by letting a sexologist discuss it. Only very recently, in 2021, we can see the magazine OneWorld publishing articles beyond this very basic understanding of asexuality. However, they have published just one opinion piece written by an asexual person. It is clear we need developments in the media towards a discussion on asexuality beyond its understanding as a sexual orientation. Rather, we could refer back to the conversations being had in the 20th century on relationships constructed outside of sex, discussing asexuality from a standpoint that takes on the multiplicity and fluidity of it.

Finally, I have tried at imagining an asexual queer futurity in the Netherlands, by taking on American writing and theorizing on asexuality. I propose an allegiance between queer, transgender, and asexual communities to break with the sexual normative standard in the Netherlands that encapsulates both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Through such an allegiance, an organization such as NOA could move beyond only representation within the COC and other dominant LGBT organizations, but rather start a broader conversation on desires, intimacies, and relationships outside of sex. Moving beyond a resistance of the immaturity discourse on asexuality and reclaiming such a position outside of the acceptable norm of sexual being to break with the narrative of sexual futurity.

To wrap up this queer scavenger hunt for traces and resonances of asexuality in the Netherlands, let us return to our central research question: "What position does asexuality take in Dutch sexusociety?". Currently, I would argue, asexuality is hardly considered within Dutch sexusociety. With its focus on sexual normativity and the adulation of the average, there currently seems to be hardly any space for asexuality within this narrative of sexual futurity. Furthermore, within the dominant LGBTQ+ community, asexuality seems to either be forgotten, or actively rejects, it is hard to claim either of these options, but I sincerely hope it is only 'just' forgotten. Even though attempts have been made by asexual activists to include asexuality within the COC and thus open the way towards more awareness in the general sexual discourse, there seems to be no significant developments regarding asexuality in the last decade. However, asexuality can be traced throughout the recent history of Dutch sexusociety, be it in more liminal spaces. I would argue, asexuality has always had a place within feminist and queer communities but has largely been pushed aside by the pervasive sex-positive sexual freedom that has been prominent in these spaces for the past few decades. Thus, the modern asexual movement seems to be a response to this sex-centered narrative, even though it has been included in feminist and queer spaces for decades. Asexuality could take another position within Dutch society, as the haunting sexuality that attempts to break open its restrictive normativity. Queerly asexual allegiances could be made among Dutch queer, transgender, and asexual communities. Such allegiances would have the possibility to reshape queer thinking on relationships, desires, intimacies, and intimately: sex.

Recommendations For Future Research

In early 2018, before I had even started working on my research proposal for this thesis, my teacher forwarded and email to all the students in the Research Masters in which a deadline extension for the Call for Papers for the 10th European Feminist Research Conference was

announced. So, without any knowledge about what a research conference would even entail, I applied. As my father sometimes says: unhindered by a lack of knowledge. This youthful bravado ended well, as my chaotic proposal was accepted and I took part in the conference in fall 2018 in Göttingen, Germany. In this conference, I presented some very preliminary ideas for my thesis, which I had given the presumptuous title 'Theorizing Asexuality: Creating an Inclusive Queer Epistemology'. Luckily for me, the other researchers at the conference were kind enough to offer constructive feedback and encouraged me to develop this further.

I'm not bringing this story up as some humble brag, being accepted into one of the largest feminist research conferences at my first attempt, but because this conference was an important milestone in my road to this thesis, and moreover the focus, intent, and importance of this thesis. At this conference, where hundreds of researchers were presenting their work, which supposedly represents cutting-edge research within Gender Studies happening in Europe, which presents all the contemporary conversations that are deemed importance, there were only two people presenting feminist research on asexuality, including myself. The other one was another young researcher from Italy, who was presenting her master thesis, which she had just finished that summer.

Within my conclusion, as per the rules and regulations of the university, I am expected to give my recommendations on further research on this subject. But how am I supposed to give such recommendations, when there seems to be a complete lack of interest in this topic within the European field of Gender Studies? Back in 2018, I was incredibly excited to find anyone who was also working on asexuality within a queer or feminist context, but nowadays I am just disappointed by the lack of urgency regarding this field. Furthermore, at this conference, I met up with that young Italian researcher after visiting her panel. She was very excited about her research and gave me some wonderful recommendations and encouragements. She also told me how she was working on developing her thesis into a PhD, to make sure her work got published. After the conference, we connected on LinkedIn. To this day, she has not been successful at publishing any of her research or securing a PhD, despite graduating summa cum laude. She now works as a librarian and translator.

Examples like this make it hard to be positive about a possibility of future European research on asexuality or even envision it. It has been such a pleasure to get familiar with the work being done on the other side of the ocean in Canada and the US by researchers such as Ela Przybylo, Megan Milks, Kristina Gupta, and KJ Cerankowski. However, I would like to see such work being done by European researchers and from a European perspective as well. Moreover, I would like to see more research being done by Dutch researchers and from a

Dutch perspective. On my scavenger hunt, I have not been able to locate a single Dutch researcher working on asexuality.

So, what are my recommendations for future research? Honestly, just more research. We need more people working on this subject, thinking about it, exchanging ideas. The more stories and research on asexuality we have, the less pressure we'll experience as writers and researchers tackling these subjects. One of the largest obstacles for me writing this research, next to the lack of representation of asexuality in the public discourse, was the pressure I felt to do things well. Ironically, I do believe it is better to do a mediocre job than to not do it at all, but there was a lot of pressure and responsibility that I have felt while working on this and writing this thesis. I feel there is an urgent need for more academic research, as well as more stories in the public discourse, within films, series, documentaries, books, newspapers, magazines, anywhere. We need to talk about asexuality, and we need to critically reflect on the ways in which sexusociety has a chokehold on us all.

Finally, I will say there are some fields of research within critical asexuality studies that I hope people will work on, perhaps someone already is. First of all, I would argue that my first chapter on Dutch sexusociety could use a lot more time, research, and writing. I would recommend that Dutch researchers, such as Mepschen and Duyvendak, who I have discussed in that chapter, will take asexualities as a critical perspective to strengthen and diversify their writing on sexuality. And while we are at it, I would also recommend a broadening of the scope from a focus on homosexual men, to a more encompassing awareness of the entirety of the LGBTQIA+ community. I would also hope for more research on the intersections of asexualities and other identities and experiences. There appears to be a significant overlap within the asexual community with non-binary identities. This would be an intersection with trans studies that could use more writing; KJ Cerankowski has been working in this field. Additionally, there also seems to be some concurrence between autism and asexuality, although this is only anecdotal so far, as there seems to not have been any research done on this intersection. Even though it would be challenging to avoid conflations with a pathologization of asexuality, the intersections of neurodiversity and asexuality could be an exciting new endeavor for researchers. But overall, I would like to see more writing on asexuality and more people working within asexuality studies. The more stories and perspectives we have, the more we can broaden and stretch our understanding of asexuality and sexuality and the less we will need the simplified definition of asexuality proposed by AVEN.

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